CHECKLIST

Albrecht Altdorfer, German, 1480–1538
Judith with the Head of Holophernes, about 1520–26, engraving on laid paper
Gift of Dr. Franz H. Hirschland, Class of 1935P and 1939P; PR.948.52.2

Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch, 1606–1669
Adam and Eve, 1638, etching on laid paper
Gift of Jean K. Weil in memory of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; PR.997.5.88

The Little Jewish Bride (Saskia as Saint Catherine), 1638, etching and drypoint on laid paper
Gift of Jean K. Weil in memory of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; PR.997.5.114

Master of the Legend of the Magdalen, Netherlandish, active about 1483–1530
Virgin and Child, about 1490, oil on panel
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Robert J. Strasenburgh II 1942 Fund; P.985.53

Conrad Meit, German, 1480–1550
Eve, about 1525, bronze
Collection of Roger Arvid Anderson, Class of 1968; EL.S.987.54.5

Hans Sebald Beham, German, 1500–1550
Judith Seated in an Arch, 1547, engraving on laid paper
Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; PR.2002.13

Adam and Eve Transgress Divine Law, about 1540, woodcut on laid paper
Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.973.273

Heinrich Sintzenich, German, 1752–1812, after Domenichino, Italian, 1581–1641
Saint Cecilia, 1782, color engraving on paper
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; PR.2002.21

Unknown, Austrian
Saint Barbara, 15th century, polychrome wood and gesso
Bequest of Anton Adolph Raven, Class of 1937H; S.966.163

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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CREATING THE FEMININE
Representations of Biblical Women from Sixteenth-Century Germany

Many artists in sixteenth-century Germany created images of biblical women and female saints. The ultimate woman, Eve, brought life and, through her sin, death to the entire world. Biblical accounts also describe an alternative female trope, the virgin martyr or saint. These two ends of the spectrum did not constitute the only ways women could be depicted, and images varied depending on what an artist chose to emphasize. Germany itself was changing in the sixteenth century. It was the height of the German Renaissance, a time of individualism and enlightenment influenced by the Italian Renaissance, as well as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. With the invention of the printing press the century before, Germany was also experiencing the rise of literacy, which gave many artists work creating prints to accompany the printed word. Printmaking flourished, and prints like those in this exhibition were widely available. Depictions of women as either powerful or passive would have been seen as manifestations of temptation or pious exemplars.

Eve is frequently represented as an active figure in Christian art—for example, handing the fatal apple to Adam, the act that brought about the fall of man—and she is often hyper-sexualized nude body tempts the male viewer, just as she tempts Adam with the apple. Eve appears doubly powerful, the agent of Original Sin, which introduced death to the world, but also the ultimate woman, Eve, created in prelapsarian perfection to give life. Eve also exerts power through her control of the narrative within some images. Her sexuality, primarily shown through her nude body, is generative but dangerous, alluring yet deadly. It is her ultimate sin.

Conrad Meit’s sculptural Eve (about 1525) takes the form of a Renaissance Venus figure. She is an ideal nude, just like the ancient Roman goddess of love. This Eve, like Venus, is seductive, an object of male desire. Her gentle pose invites the viewer to look at both her body and the apple that she holds and nods her head towards. Her s-curve stance, also seen in ideal beauties like the nudes of Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Baldung, is typical of German sculpture during this time period. Her body is elongated and exposed; she is a nude, a picture of seduction. Eve transfigures the original story of a sinful woman to an ideal figure that stimulates the imagination. However, she still perpetuates the biblical narrative by offering the apple to the viewer. Within this context Eve becomes not just a biblical figure but a contemporary fantasy.

Similarly, Hans Sebald Beham’s figure of Eve in the engraving Adam and Eve Transgress Divine Law (about 1540) displays Eve’s body as an object. Her genitals are obscured, though they are alluded to through her nudity. Unlike Meit’s sculpture, Adam and Eve Transgress Divine Law very clearly details the temptation of Adam. Eve literally acts the temptress as she offers the apple to Adam, who reaches out for it, seemingly unaware of the snake between them coiled around the tree. Yet Eve remains in control of the narrative because she holds the apple. This image stands in stark contrast to Rembrandt’s Adam and Eve (1638) made a century later.

Rembrandt’s engraving depicts Adam taking the apple from Eve as he points upwards in an orating gesture, giving him the power within the narrative. Eve’s body is not idealized and her face is far from the sweet, beautiful features of Meit’s Eve. Rembrandt often eschewed the ideal body when depicting women. His Eve is squat, not slender, with emphasis on her rounded belly and large legs. Instead of her hair being controlled, it cascades down her back in an unbound mess. Her stomach and genitalia are cast in the shadow from certain defeat. Beham’s Judith Seated in an Arch effectively illustrates these two sides of Judith. Framed by the arch, she looks down humbly. Like Saint Barbara she holds her attributes in her hands, but hers are a sword and the head of Holofernes rather than the instruments of her martyrdom. She is also pictured nude, objectifying her and emphasizing her seductiveness rather than her heroic action.

Sixteenth-century artists’ depictions of female biblical characters varied depending on the narrative portrayed, the intended viewers, and the artist’s medium. As exemplars of sinfulness or saintliness, biblical women often wielded power and authority that was unexpected for females in sixteenth-century society, and their proliferation in religious art gave them a significant role among the characters in the Bible, effectively sealing their importance within religious history.

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