

## IMAGES OF WOMEN

Leeds City Art Gallery  
6 October-7 January

If the intention of this exhibition is to provoke a re-consideration of familiar images by changing their context, a neat example greets the visitor at the front door. Outside is a huge banner proclaiming *Images of Women*. Inside is a statue of a Roman goddess, cradling lightly in one hand an hairy great man (he would stand eighteen inches tall in his socks, were he wearing any). Read the label, and you find that the goddess is *Anne Seymour Damer (posing) as Sculpture* by one Joseph Ceracchi, c. 1777; consult the catalogue and you learn further that Anne Damer was herself a sculptor, and she is portrayed here, by her teacher, holding one of her own works. She comes from the opening section of the current exhibition, entitled *Woman as Artist and Muse*. Besides this portrait there are four earlier self-portraits of women artists. Artemisia Gentileschi portrays herself as *Painting*, Mary Beale and Elizabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun as well-dressed ladies with palette and brushes, and Angelica Kauffman as *The Artist Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting*. In all of these the artist is trying to establish a view of herself as a professional, none more forcefully than in Kauffman's picture — her allegory underlines the idea that only so would a person need to choose between her talents. A lady amateur could carry on with both, at amateur standards, and nobody would complain. All of these examples contrast with present-day autobiographical works by women who, while taking the idea of 'women as artist' as a starting point, extend it to include the problems of women generally. (Angelica Kauffman is unlikely to have done her own housework.) Rose Garrard's *La Pittura* is about images of women in the context of art history; Jo Spence treats the same subject in photography and the mass media.

There are five more sections in the exhibition, which, though it spans two and a half thousand years in time, is not an historical survey. The works are grouped by themes. In the second called *Woman and Child* the oldest exhibit is a small Egyptian bronze; there is a Nigerian wood-carving of a mother with three children, a 14th-century French illuminated manuscript, an 18th century formal English portrait, and an oriental fantasy by Frederic Leighton (a sweetly cloying picture; we are not surprised to learn that he was against women being allowed to vote). A *Madonna* by Giovanni Bellini, idealised and contemplative, is placed close by Stanley Spencer's intimate and troubled portrait of his wife and young daughter; these two paintings would seem to have little in common, until we have to compare them with Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* just round the corner, which is about the experience of being a mother, something neither Bellini nor Spencer could ever have had.

The *Women at Home and Work* section has

The 17th century Dutch were the first to celebrate housework. They are represented by a nice *Interior with Woman Washing Pots*. This can be contrasted with an 18th century lady with her tatting, and even more so with the Victorian ladies washing their best china in the drawing room.

There are also interesting pictures of women at work during the two world wars, and what must be one of the first truly Feminist pictures, by Sylvia Pankhurst. It shows two pottery workers. Using a Baroque perspective, she has contrived to make the man look twice as tall as his girl assistant, reflecting their respective status in the factory hierarchy.

Perhaps the most interesting section (and in some ways the least satisfactory) is the one entitled *Woman and Power*. In the paintings by 19th century artists especially, depicting figures from mythology or history, there is a kind of uncertainty about what they are dealing with, that does not appear in images with a clearly pre-conceived purpose: the Egyptian goddess, the mother-figure from Guinea, even the Elizabethan 'icon' of the sovereign queen — the artists who made these knew exactly what was being asked of them.

But Rossetti's witch-goddess *Astarte Syriaca*, presumably embodying all that is fearful in female sexuality, is not quite terrible enough; Collier's *Clytemnestra* looks as if she were modelled on a man. This could be for historical reasons — in the Greek theatre all the actors were men or boys (but surely they wore masks?). Even if this is so, the message is clear: killing is a man's job, so a murderess must be unwomanly. Murder being the ultimate exercise of power by one person over another, power is unwomanly.

The oddest work in this group (apart from a portrait of Margaret Thatcher amid some faintly distracted-looking members of Government) is a full-scale fantasy in bronze of Elizabeth I playing chess with Philip of Spain, using warships as pieces. Looking for all the world like a tomb whose bored occupants have got up in the night to play with toy boats, this work is more about Imperial than female power. Or is it by any chance saying: any Briton, even a woman, is superior to a non-Britain? If so Sutapa Biswas' authentically powerful *Housewives with Steakknives* (a complex re-working of the Kali image) comes as a welcome counter-offensive.

Theme exhibitions of this kind inevitably contain some fairly awful art, so it should be stressed that there is much that is sheerly good to look at — Artemisia Gentileschi's *La Pittura*, the Nimba mask from Guinea, Helen Chadwick's *Ego Geometria Sum* and much more.