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MYTH OF THE ‘MUSE’:

A History of the Gender Roles Conceptualised in Art

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The muse has been historically defined as a source of divine inspiration to the artist, a passive and voiceless object art is made in reflection to but not about. The dynamic is almost always gendered with the female counterpart of the muse being frequently left silent. She takes on a sexualised role, posing nude, as often the relationship between muse and artist extends to romantic one. An erotised and romanticised version of womanhood litters nude paintings of the past, highlighting how the role frequently stripped women of their identity as they were portrayed through the eyes of the male artist. However, there are artists who have challenged these assumptions. Tracing the life of artist Lee Miller and the work of Shigeyuki Kihara reveals how the binaries between the roles of artist and muse are not as rigid as previously thought but are influenced by societal constructs limiting how we perceive and use the role of the muse.

As is the case with many women throughout history Lee Millers name has often been overshadowed by that of a man. Her relationship with famous artist Man Ray has left her traditionally categorised as a muse within art history. Even as Miller's fame has grown in recent years independent of this relationship with a greater focus on her work as a surrealist war photographer, it seems that biographers often shape her story around the men in her life (Blumberg, 2024). Womens' value is often viewed by their proximity to the men in their lives, such as playing the role of wife, mother, sister etc. In Miller's case it seems we view her life as reduced to that of her relationships with men. The first thought would be to re-assert Millers independent creative agency in the face of these reductive narratives, by highlighting her own work as an artist. However, it is possible that it is not how we have categorised Miller as a muse which limits our perspective of her but instead our understanding of the term muse itself. Instead of scrapping muse-hood altogether we need to take a closer look at what this term actually means and analyse how we understand it today. Millers time spent as a muse was also valuable given that her own creative agency was present due to the collaborative nature of the work the two artists produced. It could ultimately be that we need to rethink the passive image of muse as a product of a world overlooking the work of women. Women's prevalence within art has largely been through their perceived image, and there is a question of whether the muse can ever really be separated from its reductive and passive nature. Indeed, throughout art history women have played the role of a model objectified and reduced to the performance of appearance. As John Berger famously wrote on the subject; 'men act, and women appear' (Berger, 2008, p.47).

The inherent sexualisation of the woman as a muse is exemplified in the work of Paul Gauguin: his paintings from his time in Tahiti depict a fetishised view of island life and his muses who occupied it. A primary muse Gauguin frequently painted was his 'native wife' Teha'amana, whom he married when she was just thirteen after leaving behind a life in Paris (Tuuhia, 2021). The paintings feel exploitative and there is no sense of collaboration as in Millers work with Man Ray. Instead, her role of muse is tied to her identity as a Tahitian; Gauguin sought to capture the exotic world of the French colony and Teha'amana is used as an erotised aesthetic object to signify this (Tuuhia, 2021). Colonial exploitation is embedded throughout these paintings; Tahiti was a French colony at the time and the power imbalance is notable in Teha'amana's role of muse. We have no records of her life beyond the writings of Gauguin, nor about her views on the art that Gauguin created of her. Particularly haunting is Spirit of the Dead Watching, painted in 1892, which depicts Teha'amana lying awake supposedly afraid of the island spirits. The exhibitionist nature of the painting feels as though we are violating the privacy of the young girl, the viewer can't help but wonder if

she is in fact afraid of her husband (Tuuhia, 2021). It seems the role of the muse for women of colour is also inherently tied to a secondary sense of objectification as they come to represent not just the other of womanhood but also the other of their culture, of which they become an eroticised symbol for. Gauguin's muses fall into the 'dusky maiden' trope, a representation of Polynesian women popularised throughout a history of colonial encounters with the region. It embodies the perspective of them as the exotic other, a romantic construction of 'the sexually receptive and alluring Polynesian maiden' (Tamaira, 2010, p.1). Many of the early European depictions of the region conjure an 'Edenic wonderland', which Gauguin sought to capture on a mission to reconnect with nature, and early depictions establish a sexualised version of Polynesian women (Tamaira, 2010, p.1).

This reductive and fetishised pattern of muse hood is something the Samoan Japanese artist Shigeyuki Kihara seeks to challenge and explore in her work 'Fa'afine: In the Manner of a Woman'. The photographs recreate 19th century images where women posed partially clothed among props and backdrops of 'exotic' scenery. These themes hark back to Gauguin's use of muses as props, depicting a fetishised version of Tahiti life in his paintings. In assuming the role of model in her work Kihara takes on this conception of muse as an eroticised object and novel spectacle of the foreign and unknown. The piece is a triptych which adheres to the 'dusky maiden' trope; however, Kihara subverts this by taking control of her own image. The first photograph sees her topless dressed in a stereotypical grass skirt surrounded by standard props such as tropical foliage and a woven mat used in the 19th century to evoke the exotic (Tamaira, 2010, p.20). In the second her skirt is removed and 'to all intents and purposes she appears to the viewer as the quintessential dusky maiden' (Tamaira, 2010, p.20).

However the final photograph flips this expectation as she now reveals an unexpected side of her identity – her penis. Kihara identifies as transgender, as a Fa'afafine she challenges the rigid binaries of gender in the western world. Fa'afafine translates to 'in the manner of a woman' and describes individuals who are neither male nor female - best categorised in western notions as a third gender (The Met, 2024). In using her body and reclaiming the muse trope of 'dusky maiden' she crosses the boundary of the colonial gaze re-asserting her identity outside of this stereotype. These reductive categories of muse and artist, go hand in hand with the gendered conception pushed by colonial forces. The imposition of a gender binary which doesn't account for Fa'afafine people also enforces a lack of nuance in the relationship between muse and artist, imposing gender roles. Kihara's work foregrounds the indigenous identities lost in the conceptions of muse hood assumed by a colonial power. By referencing these muses of the past through the agency of her own work she is able to reclaim her identity. Furthermore, it could be argued that female artists identifying muses as sources of inspiration for themselves today can actually be used as a means of empowerment. By portraying the likes of Teha'amana in herself and not the exoticised version conceived by Gaugin, this highlights the women who have been overlooked and forgotten in the past in a new light.

Both Miller and Kihara are able to some extent to become their own muse and in doing so remove the harmful forces of patriarchal and colonial powers shaping their image. This suggests the inequalities in the role of muse aren't inherent but have been limited by the audience's expectation of what a muse should be. The original nine Greek muses can be seen as creators rather than objects of art, they inspired the creation of the arts literature and the sciences (Antoniou, 2022). The muses represent

creativity and inspiration within Greek mythology, each one aligning with a creative pursuit such as poetry or music. A case could be made that the original creative power in the figure of the muse was removed by an art history dominated by men, and in fact the role is not inherently that of a powerless object. Kihara and Miller both re-assert the power in the legacy of the Greek muses through taking creative agency. On the other hand, it seems that agency was only granted to both women when they assumed the role of artist. Indeed, Miller's work as a muse is something she is hardly credited for.

As both muse and artist, Miller transcended the border between these two roles raising questions about how we view each participant of this dynamic. The story goes that her career first began after a chance encounter on the streets of New York with the head of Vogue (Davis, 2006, p.3). She was saved after walking into busy traffic by Conde Nast who soon put her on the 1927 cover, impressed with how she seemed to encapsulate the modern fashionable woman (Davis, 2006, p.3). From the start Miller had ambitions to be behind the camera and not just in front of it, however it is telling that her way into this field was through her image. As a woman Miller was not entitled immediately to creative agency but only afforded this after proving valuable as a source of beauty. However, as a wealthy white woman the luxury to make this seemingly sudden jump into fashion and art is also evident. Indeed, biographers often gloss over the leap Miller then makes to study under Man Ray in Paris. Now an established model she decided in 1929 to begin a career in photography and picked who she claimed to be the best photographer at the time, Man Ray, as her teacher. It's during this period that the two began a romantic relationship and Miller assumed the role of muse, inspiring much of the work he produced.

This was to the extent that Ray's art was often in fact collaborative and can be read as a coming together of two creative minds. Miller fell in with surrealist circles during this period, drawing creative inspiration and working with other artists. She was cast in the lead role in Jean Cocteau's film 'Blood of a Poet' in 1930 and worked alongside Man Ray. Indeed, Ray's famous solarization technique where black and white hues are reversed to create a halo effect is something that Miller is credited as being involved with discovering by accident turning on lights in a dark room (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Her role as a surrealist muse was one where she had creative agency, and she claimed her established role as model but with intention. Works like Observatory Time – The Lovers from 1931 which feature Millers lips are the result of a mutual creative relationship (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024).

It is telling, however, that Miller's narrative begins in a shadow cast by two men, Naste appears like a fairy godmother whisking her away into the world of fashion while Man Ray is depicted as an introduction to her artistic ambitions. This narrative overlooks the many pursuits into the art world Miller had already made. She had previously studied in Paris on past trips in 1925 as well as across Italy and attended classes in New York (Lawson, 2014, p.185). Omitting these earlier studies from her biography in the past has created a false myth that her identity as an artist was something to come out of her time spent in Man Ray's studio (Lawson, 2014, p.185). In fact, from an early age Miller had creative ambitions, and describes how she had almost given up on them by her early twenties after struggling to find the right medium (Lawson, 2014, p.186). Diary entries from her youth reveal that Miller herself struggled with the gendered binaries of creativity that she would one day transcend. She describes thinking that to her it seems to be a female artist would be a contradiction of terms, wondering whether genius was a solely masculine trait which she could never claim (Lawson, 2014, p.184).

This conception of genius Miller seemed to hold refers to an established stereotype of the solitary masochistic genius working alone to create impressive artwork (Nochlin, 1988, p.153). It's this archetype that also feeds into the relationship of muse as the passive counterpart to the active artist, creator and inspirator. It leaves no room for collaboration since all artistic genius is seen to be down to one lone figure. The only version of collaboration for a long time was a kind of co-ownership, both parties seen to be working actively together (Lawson, 2014, p.18). Rethinking this approach allows for inclusion for the forgotten collaboration within art, such as discussing a work in early phases, proof reading etc (Lawson, 2014, p.18). Inclusion of these layers can also mean an inclusion of the active role of muse as opposed to the co-existent but independent spheres of artist and muse.

However, Miller's time as muse was a role defined by patriarchal norms among the surrealists. Though the group sought to push the boundaries of social conventions and question the establishment it often retained gendered structures. Intended to be a kind of celebration of beauty in the unconventional, the movement had philosophical roots. It sought to find a crossover between the real and the imagined, seeking to look beyond the everyday and challenge social hierarchies (Breton, 1924, p.1). However, in reality it upheld lots of social norms, and was blind to its own gender politics; the movement was dominated by men and often saw women as a kind of erotic object (Orenstein, 1975, p.34). Indeed, some works feature the female body as a symbol of fantasy removing personal identity to present an image of commodified beauty. Work from this period describes women as muses, 'child women', 'dream women' and romanticises their virginity (Orenstein, 1975, p.32). In this context it seems hard to make the case that Miller was a muse with her own autonomy, however she did later go on to forge a clear path of her own as an artist in her own right.

Miller soon left Man Ray stifled by his control of the work they were producing together and opened her own studio, first in Paris and then New York. She had established friendships with photographers during her time at Vogue and became a commercial photographer herself for them in Paris and London. One marriage later Miller found herself living in England with surrealist lover Roland Penrose as war broke out. Her fashion photographs take on the unconventional with remaining surrealist tendencies and Miller went on to become a war correspondent for Vogue, producing her most famous work as a war photographer. Photographs like 'Fire Masks' for example taken for Vogue shows two women modelling new masks designed to protect the wearer from bombs. The calm glamour of the women juxtaposed with the ruins they pose in have clear surrealist references (Davis, 2006, p.4). It's this work which has gained more appreciation in its own right cementing Miller as an artist herself. This clear establishment from muse to artist is a fascinating dual narrative within Miller's life. It could be charted as an ascension from the lesser role of passive muse to artist assuming their own creativity after breaking free of this image.

Arguably, however, Miller's creativity was being showcased all along; it was just that our narrow definition of what it meant to be a muse confined how we see her value in these respective roles. Millers' life may challenge the traditional version of muse, but it seems that she stands as the exception in an art history which has often left many women simply erased, such as Teha'amana. Millers' privilege to assert herself as an artist and create room for her own voice is notable, and something not often afforded to women of colour. Her upper-class background also meant she didn't face many of the same hurdles in order to get to each point in her journey. There are many muses whose voices

are still left unheard, Teha'amana remains defined by her objectified image in Gauguin's work.

The nature of the term 'muse' is one bound up in gender dynamics, the forces of power at play on a wider social scale are reflected through the relationship between artist and muse. We have gendered the two and in doing so created a dynamic of inequality. Kihara's work reveals the colonial imposition of these gender dynamics that are not inherent in the figure of muse when looked at plainly as a source of creative inspiration. A chicken and egg scenario emerges- is it that we place power in the hands of the artist because this is a role traditionally held by a man or does the man assume this role as it is where the power lies? It seems looking at Miller's life and time spent in both roles of artist and muse that the two are not so binary. The very assumption of this gendered structure sexualises and others women problematising what could be an innocent relationship between inspirator and creator. It is only when muse hood becomes a mythologised version of a woman's identity that the dynamic becomes a a problem. This leads to an erasure of women defined by a sexualised and stereotyped version of their race and gender. Through the reclamation works of Kihara, as well as the agency displayed in Miller's role as muse, we need to evaluate our own perception of what it means to be a muse, acknowledging the often-hidden work of women that has taken place throughout art history by highlighting it with this title. By using this as a label where we recognise the nuance in the role, we can come to consider muse hood as a place of creative agency in its own right.

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