Visual Depictions of Lucretia: Exploring Assault in Art through Myth

Curated by Isabella Sorrenti
A sincere thank you to Connecticut College for allowing me to pursue this project and supplying me with a multitude of indispensable resources. Thank you specifically to Professor Gonzalez-Rice my honors thesis advisor, Professor Alchermes my Art History major advisor, Professor Phillips my Classical studies major advisor, Professor Morelli my Italian Studies minor advisor, and Professor Jacobs for giving me continual feedback and supporting me throughout the entirety of my project. Lastly, thank you to my peers and friends for believing in my project and ideas every step of the way.
Introduction

The story of Lucretia is one of myth, a myth that tells of the catalyst for the transition from the Roman Monarchy to the Roman Empire. The version of this story that is explored in this exhibition is based on Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* (From the Founding of the City) in which he argues that the morals of Rome decline from its founding to the time in which he is writing. This story became popular once again in the 14th century after the manuscripts of Livy were compiled by Francesco Petrarca and popularized by the likes of Machiavelli.

In the 15th century, the rise of humanism also contributed to this story's popularity with the idea of the chaste mind versus the violated body. A fundamental theme of this story was Lucretia's chaste mind despite the violation of her body, a contrast that drives her to suicide after she was assaulted. Lucretia’s story, however, is not just about the assault and suicide, but the foundation of a new political system justified through these heinous acts.

In Livy, Lucretia is helpless before she takes back her power to speak to her father and husband to implicate Sextus Tarquinius, the son of Tarquinius Superbus the king of Rome. Instead of Sextus Tarquinius killing Lucretia and blaming her, she reclaims her power by taking her own life. As a result, Brutus and other elites are given the reason they need to topple the monarchy. Lucretia’s assault and oppression are the catalysts for the Roman Republic and her story, from the Ancient Roman perspective, is one of a martyr and an exemplum (exemplar) of a good Roman woman. This story appears in large-scale and smaller-scale prints, paintings, and even cassoni, or chests. These cassoni were given to women by their fathers or husbands before marriage, suggesting that Lucretia’s examples are ones they should follow (an example of this is *The Story of Lucretia* by Sandro Boticelli).
Today, Lucretia’s story is told mainly in Classics classes, and these visual works focus mainly on her suicide and assault this exhibition aims to bring a new 21st century perspective on this influential story. But how does this story translate into today’s world? With movements such as “Me too” and pushes to raise awareness about sexual assault, how does this ancient story inform where we are today? This story has been discussed for hundreds of years, each period interpreting the myth to fit its own narrative. How do we see it today?

Please check out the virtual exhibition:
https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/node/8367266
The Story

Long before Caesar, Augustus or Nero there was a time when Rome was ruled by kings. Under the leadership of King Tarquinius Superbus, war was raging in Ardea between the Romans and the Rutuli. In the tent of the son of the king, Sextus Tarquinius, the men began to talk about women and their wives. They began to argue about who had the best wife, when Lucretia’s husband, Collatinus suggested they ride to see what their wives were doing while the men were gone. When they arrived, some of the men's wives were at banquets or partying with their friends, but Lucretia sat with her slaves weaving. She wove as a good Roman woman would, taking care of her household and performing her wifely duties while her husband was away. When Lucretia was chosen as the winner of the contest, Sextus Tarquinius was seized by desire for her beauty and chastity. The men then rode back to camp, and Sextus Tarquinius decided he would return for Lucretia.

After a few days, without telling anyone, Sextus sneaked away and rode to Rome. He was welcomed into her home and given dinner and then a guest room. He snuck out, sword in hand, and came upon the sleeping Lucretia. Threatening her with his sword she startles awake, Lucretia repulsed his advances, refusing to submit. However, Sextus threatened to frame her for adultery by killing a slave and placing him beside her as evidence of her crime. Left with no options, she conceded. Sextus raped her and left her alone. In pain and desperation, she sent a letter to her husband and father, asking each to bring a confidant with them to Rome.
They pledged themselves and reassured her that it was the mind, not the body that had sinned, and she was not to blame for the forced assault by Sextus. She responded that although she absolved herself of sin, she did not absolve herself of punishment. Calling out she said, “In no time, let an unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.” With a knife from under her dress, she plunged a dagger into her chest and fell dead.

"...though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia" - Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*
Title: Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia
Artist: Lorenzo Lotto
Artist life period: 1480-1556/7
Date for art: c. 1530-3
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 96.5 x 110.6 cm
Repository: The National Gallery, London UK
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Guido Reni
Artist life period: 1575- 1642
Date for art: ca. 1625
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 108.6 x 98.1 cm
Repository: Rhode Island School of Design Museum

Title: The Suicide of Lucretia
Artist: Guido Reni
Artist life period: 1575-1642
Date for art: 1625-1640
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 113 x 91 cm
Repository: Unknown
Title: The Story of Lucretia
Artist: Sandro Botticelli
Artist life period: 1444/5-1510
Date for art: c.1500
Country: Italy
Medium: Tempera and oil on panel
Dimensions: 83.8 x 176.8 cm
Repository: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Title: The Death of Lucretia
Artist: The Master of Marradi
Artist life period: late 15th/early 16th century
Date for art: late 15th–early 16th century
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil and tempera on panel
Dimensions: Overall 15 3/4 x 27 3/4 in. (40 x 70.5 cm); painted surface 15 1/8 x 27 1/2 in. (38.4 x 69.9 cm)
Repository: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Title: The Death of Lucretia
Artist: Luca Cambiaso
Artist life period: 1527-1585
Date for art: Last third of 16th century
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 111.3 x 100.3 cm
Repository: Museo del Prado, Madrid

Title: The Death of Lucretia
Artist: Ludovico Mazzanti
Artist life period: 1686-1775
Date for art: c.1730
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 180.3 x 142.2 cm
Repository: Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Rembrandt van Rijn
Artist life period: 1606-1669
Date for art: 1664
Country: Dutch
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 120 x 101 cm; Framed: 159.1 x 139.4 x 16.5 cm
Repository: The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C

Title: Lucretia
Artist: Rembrandt van Rijn
Artist life period: 1606-1669
Date for art: 1666
Country: Dutch
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 110.7 x 92.28 cm; Framed: 150.5 x 132.87 x 11.43 cm
Repository: Minneapolis Insitute of Art, Minnesota
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Joos van Cleve
Artist life period: c.1485-1540
Date for art: 1520-25
Country: Netherlands
Material: Oakwood
Dimensions: 75.7 cm x 53.9 cm x 3.2 cm; Framed: 90.7 x 68.2 x 5 cm
Repository: Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie
Title: Lucretia  
Artist: Raphael  
Artist life period: 1483-1520  
Date for art: 1508-1510  
Country: Italian  
Medium: Pen and brown ink over black chalk  
Dimensions: 39.7 x 29.2 cm  
Repository: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Title: Lucretia  
Artist: Roger Fenton  
Artist life period: 1819-1869  
Date for art: 1858  
Country: England  
Medium: Salted paper print  
Dimensions: 21.7 x 13.7 cm  
Repository: The J. Paul Getty Museum, California
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Workshop of Carl von Egri
Artist life period: 1561
Date for art: 1561
Country: Switzerland
Medium: Pot-metal and colorless glass, vitreous paint, and silver stain; led came
Dimensions: 33 x 23 cm
Repository: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Title: Lucrezia Romana
Creator: Neue Photographische Gesellschaft AG (German publisher and photographic studio, 1894-1948); The artwork depicted attributed to Guido Reni
Date for art: ca. 1907-1914
Country: Germany
Work Type: Postcard
Dimensions: 14 x 9 cm
Repository: Trinity College, Connecticut

Title: Lucretia (with a knife and cable release)
Artist: Vanessa Jane Phaff
Artist life period: b. 1665
Date for art: 1998
Country: Britain
Medium: Acrylic and linocut on canvas
Dimensions: 135.63 x 70.1 cm
Repository: Larry Qualls Archive
Title: The Death of Lucretia
Artist: Rembrandt van Rijn
Artist life period: 1606-1669
Date for art: mid 1640s
Country: Dutch
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 68.5 x 86.8 cm; Framed 81.5 x 100 ¾ x 5 ¾ cm
Repository: Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan

Image: Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan

Title: Tarquinius Finding Lucretia at Work
Artist: Willem de Poorter
Artist life period: 1607/08- 1648
Date for art: 1633
Country: Netherlands
Medium: Oil on panel
Dimensions: 44 x 54 cm
Repository: Musée des Augstins, Toulouse

Image: Musée des Augstins, Toulouse
Title: The Death of Lucretia
Artist: Eduardo Rosales Gallinas
Artist life period: 1836-1873
Date for art: 1891
Country: Spain
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 257 cm x 347 cm
Repository: Museo Nacional de Prado
Gentileschi and De Rosa's Depictions of Lucretia

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) was born in Rome to Orazio Gentileschi, himself a famous painter who trained his daughter in painting. During her career, Gentileschi was raped by a fellow artist and colleague of her father, Agostino Tassi, who was brought to trial by the Gentileschis in 1612. In many of her artworks, Gentileschi explores themes of rape and assault as she herself relates to these subjects. Gentileschi portrays Lucretia alone against an indistinct background with light flooding over her body, drawing the viewer's attention to this tragic central and solitary figure.

In each portrayal, Lucretia looks away from the viewer, making one feel as though they have walked in on Lucretia in this moment of tragedy. Artemisia's dynamic and vivid depiction of the suicide of Lucretia highlights her own tragic position, by removing the Classical heroine from her original context in which she is surrounded by her husband, her father, and their comrades.

Within this group of paintings is also one by Diana De Rosa (1601-1634) who learned to paint from her uncle and like Artemisia explores femininity through her depiction of Lucretia. In both the women’s paintings, Lucretia is pictured with forlorn and anguished expressions on her face, as compared to some male artistic representations in which Lucretia’s pain is glorified through calm and serene expressions.
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Artemisia Gentileschi
Artist life period: 1593-1652
Date for art: 1623-1625
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 100 x 77 cm
Repository: Collection of Gerolamo Etro
Title: Lucretia
Artist: Diana De Rosa
Artist life period: 1602-1643
Date for art: 1613-34
Country: Italian
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 129 x 103 cm
Repository: Unknown

Title: Lucrece
Artist: Artemisia Gentileschi
Artist life period: 1593-1652
Date for art: late 1620’s
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: unknown
Repository: J.Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Depictions of Violence Against Lucretia

The story of Lucretia in Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* was written at the time of the institution in 18 BC, the *Lex Julia de Adultereis* (The Julian Law of Adultery) by Augustus along with other mandates, this law made the previous private act of adultery a public offense. In these paintings, the violence against Lucretia would be considered adultery (*stuprum*) which under the new law would have been a public offense. Throughout the visual depictions of violence, the artists similarly make the violation of Lucretia public. The viewer of these works is placed below the figures or in their direct line of sight as if they have entered the room themselves and become a witness to the crime.

Each artist shows Lucretia stripped and naked, exposing her to the viewer. Sexualizing her pain as well as placing the figure of Sextus over her, visually emphasizing the figurative and literal power which he holds over her. At the end of the story, Lucretia’s body is carried out into the street to show the Roman public the atrocious behavior of the monarchy, which is mirrored in these public representations of Lucretia.

The idea of Lucretia’s story as a catalyst for a new political system would have appealed to his ancient Roman readers who were under the rule of Augustus, who brought a new peace to Rome after a century of civil wars. This would have also been relatable to the people of Florence in 1400, when this story became popular once again, as political struggles raged against Milan.
Title: Tarquin and Lucretia
Artist: Titian
Artist life period: 1488/90-1576
Date for art: 1571
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 188.9 cm x 145.1 cm
Repository: The Fitzwilliam Museum
Title: Death of Lucretia
Artist: Jean-Honoré Fragonard
Artist life period: 1732-1806
Date for art: 2nd half of 18th cent. - early 19th cent.
Country: France
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: Unknown
Repository: Musée Fragonard

Title: The Rape of Lucretia
Artist: Hans Von Aachen
Artist life period: 1552-1615
Date for art: 1600
Country: German
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 120 x 185 cm
Repository: Kunsthistoriches Museum, Austria
Title: Tarquin and Lucretia
Artist: Tintoretto, Jacopo Robusti
Artist life period: c. 1518 -1594
Date for art: 1578-80
Country: Italy
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 175 x 151.5 cm
Repository: Art Institute of Chicago
Giuseppe Maria Crespi, Italian, 1665-1747
Italy
Tarquin and Lucretia, 1530-3
Oil on canvas
The National Gallery of Art
Overall: 193 x 171.5 cm (76 3/4 x 67 1/2 in.)
Framed: 222.9 x 201.9 x 14.3 cm (87 3/4 x 79 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.)
Title: Tarquin and Lucretia
Artist: Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo
Artist life period: 1727-1804
Date for art: 18th cent
Country: Italian
Medium: Etching
Dimensions: Unknown
Repository: The Cleveland Museum of Art

Title: Tarquin and Lucretia
Artist: Johann Peter Pichler
Artist life period: 1765-1807
Date for art: 1792
Country: Austria
Medium: Mezzotint
Dimensions: 35.8 x 43.8 cm
Repository: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Title: The Rape of Lucrece
Artist: Thomas Rowlandson
Artist life period: 1756-1827
Date for art: n.d
Country: Britain
Medium: Pen and watercolor
Dimensions: 27.3 x 24.1 cm
Repository: The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

Title: The Story of Lucretia
Artist: Hendrik Goltzius
Artist life period:
Date for art: c.1578
Country: Dutch
Medium: Paper
Dimensions: 21 x 24.8 cm
Repository: The British Museum
Curators Reflection

I was inspired to create this exhibition after researching the story of Lucretia and finding a plethora of visual depictions of her and her story. It made me wonder why such violent images were so popular, and how they relate to our world today. By collecting these images and being able to compare them in a virtual space, I feel as though I am able to share my ideas and make people aware of Lucretia's story.

In the future, I would like to expand upon this project and write detailed descriptive labels for each piece, as well as add some more pieces that I was not able to include in this exhibition. I would also like to work on educational programming for this exhibition to make it more accessible to the public. I have not lost the passion or drive for exploring Lucretia's story. I have recently translated the story myself and found even more to explore. I'm excited about where the future of this project takes me. Thank you to everyone for taking the time to virtually walk through my gallery space.
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