

The Art of Justice: Woman Holding a Balance

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Abstract

The Roman goddess of Iustitia (Justice), the blindfolded woman equipped with sword and scales, who impartially delivers human fate in this life and the next, seems almost a timeless figure. And as the image of order in judgment, she is the most universally recognized icon of fair rule and good government. The origins of the goddess and the symbolic use of the scales predate the Roman world, deep in the ancient world, in the Egyptian divinities of Maat and Isis and the myths of the Book of the Dead. The Roman allegory is equally indebted to the Greek deities of Themis and Dike.

The continued importance of Roman law in the modern world is incontestable, while in contrast, the allegorical figure of Justice which characteristically still adorns public buildings and courthouses, does not feature strongly in contemporary iconography. To encounter the image of Justice as a modern virtue, this paper looks to Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, to Johannes Vermeer's work, *Woman Holding a Balance*. His composition places the solitary young woman, who weighs gold on a delicate set of scales, between the viewer and the backdrop, a painting within a painting of the Last Judgment. This discussion explores the persona through a range of iconographic schema that resonates on also ritualistic and philosophical levels. Is Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* the first modern figure of Justice?

Keywords: Justice, Vermeer, art, history, Dutch Golden Age, iconography

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The pervasiveness of the sign of Justice, the ancient goddess who holds the scale in one hand and a mighty sword in the other, suggests the continued influence of Roman Law as a foundation of contemporary constitutional and juridical systems. The contemporary figure of Justice adopts quite faithfully the Roman portrayal goddess of Iustitia (Justice), the blindfolded figure equipped with sword and scales, impartially delivering human fate in this life and the next. As the image of natural and divine order that begets earthly judgment between humans, and as the most universally recognized icon of fair rule and good government, she seems a timeless figure. She is a visualization of the law, communicating the essence of the legal system to the public at an intimate level, as an image, bypassing the rationality of the books and statutes.

Since Roman times, in the context of the tribunal, the elements of the allegory have remained remarkably resilient—the figure of the goddess is a constant through which the essence of the law is embodied. Statues and plaques of the goddess grace the law courts and the halls of justice for all variants of government—institutions that draw on this sign as a guarantee of the authenticity of a legal model, in a reference to antiquity, itself a testimony to the gravity, consistency and legitimacy of systems of criminal judgment.

Her presence, traced across the ancient worlds, suggests that the goddess is at least 3000 years old. Her persona predates both the Roman world and Roman law. Her origins and the ritual use of the scales can be located deep in the New Kingdom of Pharaonic Egypt and in the divinities of Isis and Maat, goddesses both associated with justice and natural law, both pictured in the Book of the Dead, the instructional manual for the Egyptian afterlife. In one instance, illustrated on the papyrus scrolls of the Book of the Dead, the heart of a deceased scribe, an important man, is weighed on a balance against a feather in a ceremony overseen by the goddess. His heart is revealed lighter than the feather, his life is as result judged worthy and his quest to enter the afterlife is successful.

The Romans, who often used the blindfold to indicate both the goddess's impartiality and intuitive aspect, were in fact indebted to the Greek version of the same allegory, in the deities of Themis and her children. Themis was an Oracle priestess and giver of natural law and order while her daughter Dike judged, personifying Justice. The other three daughter-deities of Themis were the Moraie (the Fates), the spinners of the thread of life, governing the destiny of humans from birth to the grave.

Just as the continued importance of Roman law in the modern world is incontestable, it can be said that the Lady of Justice, as she is now more commonly known, remains an intransigent figure. She consistently features in many neo-classical as well as more modernist-styled monuments that adorn public buildings and monuments worldwide. Within the institutional context, her role is formal, anachronistic, attached only to the rhetoric of institutions. Stone statues and bronze plaques remember other similar statues and plaques—her function is ceremonial. Even though lifeless, she must be there: detached, featureless, expressionless, she transmits the seeming immutability of the law.

She is as important as the books. She is the visual guarantee that the law she represents is of divine providence, a device that naturalizes and disavows the cultural

origins and the discursive processes of the law at large. In myth, Justice is as natural as woman, as truthful and precise in judgment as the scales, and authoritative and awe-inspiring like her oversized sword. In the face of this embodiment of the essence of the law, the lawyers, crime victims and defendants, all submit unconsciously—they don't engage. One does not linger over her image in contemplation, she is recognized. Nor is there a spiritual dimension—no one prays to the goddess of Justice, although she can be feared, like one might fear the grim reaper. This is the institutional function of the icon.

While some modification can be contained within the codification of the figure (she might be seen with or without a sword or blindfold), her iconography is more or less static. Similarly, variations may be made in her stylistic or aesthetic treatment, that they might better engage the figure in a reflection of the spirit of the time. Within the institutional context however, whether Rococo or Cubist, the goddess of Justice remains always herself and her meaning is fixed.

Beyond the walls of government and the courts of law, unofficial and popular images of justice abound, found for example in the heavy metal sub-cult of Lady of Justice tattooing. But a casual Web search for images of justice will more characteristically return an endless series of images of injustice, the lack of justice, in a photographic vernacular that reports on human suffering and its protest. While it lacks the universalizing capacity of the official sign, documentary photography, so-called concerned photography, indicates the limits of law through an engagement with alternative models of justice, based in human rights and/or social justice agendas.

Complementing the rigidity and singularity of the official signs of justice that can only denote, such images of Justice lie beyond the legal frame of the state. Popular images of the goddess of Justice are, in contrast, unlimited in how and what they narrate and connote. The vernacular use of the figure ranges across painting, sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts, illustration and literature, in a cultural panorama where the sign is explored. As a popular figure, rather than a precise and paired down icon, Justice has been elaborated in varied and hybridized narratives, allegories and metaphors. Within Christian iconography, for example, Justice has been a fluid entity, at times embodied as an angel, the Madonna, the Byzantine Saint Michael, Christ and even God himself—each time the divine judge has weighed human souls. No allegorical scene seems quite complete without her. At times the figure of Justice is found amongst a chorus line of Christian virtues, alongside Faith, Hope, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude. At other times she is the sum of all these attributes, as a totalized authority—like the vengeful God, with his arm raised in fury, towering over the Last Judgment of the Sistine chapel. It is as if across art history where a critical mass is required, Justice can be found - alongside the other sibyls, saints and heroes of frescoes, worked in mosaic, carved in stone capitals, decorating illuminated manuscripts, and populating coats of arms and tarot packs.

Figure 1. Johannes Vermeer (c.1662). *Woman Holding a Balance* [Painting].

The remaining discussion focuses on this ancient figure of Justice, in what is arguably her first modern guise, amidst the flowering of the humanist philosophy of the Netherlands and at the height of the Golden Age of Dutch painting. In the mid-

seventeenth century in Delft, a city of northern Netherlands central to the history of Dutch independence, Johannes Vermeer painted *Woman Holding A Balance*, on a relatively small canvas, one of his series of studies of women portrayed within a tranquil and ordered domestic interior. The year was 1662 and Delft was the city of the artist's birth. It was in his actual home that he paints a young woman poised in a contemplative moment, holding a delicate set of scales that are empty.

Figure 2. Detail. Johannes Vermeer (c.1662). *Woman Holding a Balance* [Painting].

A demure young woman, seemingly pregnant, faces a mirror and also a window from where enters a diffuse golden light, filtered by a curtain to dimly light the room. Strings of pearls and gold pieces lie on the table before her. The rather indistinct and Italianate painting on the wall behind her is a Last Judgment, the biblical apocalypse: in this painting within a painting, in an aureole is Christ, who judges from above over saved souls and damned souls, in a universal struggle between good and evil. Vermeer's composition is carefully balanced, a geometrically precise organization of space. In what has been called 'a dream of domestic peace' (Graham-Dixon) the work famously exudes an almost spiritual calm. The theme is generally interpreted as a Vanitas, a warning against earthly pleasures, suggested in the pearls, gold pieces and the mirror, a reminder of the judgment that awaits all, the destiny that awaits also the woman's unborn child. It is a memento of the insignificance of human concerns and the importance of turning to God (Vergara & Westermann, 2003, p.254). The woman portrayed has been interpreted as the personification of Vanitas and as simultaneously embodying, like a Madonna, the appropriate temperance that allows her to transcend the desire for riches and other earthly pleasures. Justice, in the Christian iconography, is then transformed from her ancient role to a religious state of grace, one of a list of Christian virtues, often depicted together with the above-mentioned fortitude, prudence and temperance.

Figure 3. Clara Peeters (attributed) (c.1618). *Vanitas or Self Portrait* [Painting].

Among the precious 35 surviving paintings of his oeuvre, the majority are studies of women: women engaged in simple activities from private contemplations to flirtatious conversation. *Woman Holding a Balance* is one of this series of Vermeer's studies of women depicted in Dutch domestic interiors, many of them posed and painted in the same room on the upper level of his home in Delft. Vermeer made paintings of ladies and maids, many of them involved in quite mundane daily tasks or pastimes, often absorbed in solitary moments. This series includes *The Lacemaker*, *The Milkmaid*, *The Glass of Wine*, *Officer with a Laughing Girl*, *Lady with Her Maidservant Holding a Letter*, *Woman in Blue Reading the Letter*, *Lady Standing at a Virginal* and *The Music Lesson*. His *Allegory of Art* depicts the artist working on a canvas, a painting of the life model before him, a young woman dressed as a classical muse, suggesting that art itself lies in a relationship of artist with woman as subject.

Figure 4. Johannes Vermeer (1666-1667). *The Allegory of Painting* [Painting].

If, for Vermeer, woman is the very allegory of art, his subject matter also conforms closely to the genre painting of the Dutch Golden Age of the 1600s, a genre that contrasts the naturalistic treatment of characters with the formal geometry of the architectural forms that frame those characters. Studies of women that served as vehicles for moral/ethical and even political and philosophical questions of the day became a staple of the genre. Women were generally cast as the protagonists of moral lessons that counseled against various excesses, such as drunkenness, debauchery and idleness. Simple devout acts of daily domestic life were shown to offer the potential for transcendence towards spiritual states. As experimentation in the pursuit of higher values and vision, genre painting defined itself in its secular subject matter, holding a mirror to the mundane of the society to explore the potential for great art in minor subject matter.

Simon Schama, in his study of the Dutch Golden Age, argues that the single burning ethical question that the nouveau-riche citizenry of the Dutch republic strove to resolve was: how much wealth was enough wealth? (Schama, p.323) He points to the tension between the puritanism of the culture and the exponential growth in wealth that the country generated through mercantile capitalism—the Netherlands peaking at the mid-seventeenth century as the dominant trade economy worldwide. While Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*, might appear to recite the Protestant puritanism and the Lutheran work ethic of the period, the range of possible interpretations offered by the work arises directly from the conflation of the thematic of Vanitas with the sign of Justice, in a secularized vision of the human as divine. The balance, besides a reference to the weighing of human worth and the judging of fates, also recalls the instrument used from prehistoric times for measurement (initially using seeds) and in Mycenae associated with stewardship, discernment and social order (Seidenberg & Casey, p.196).

Edward Snow argues that to propose this painting as an allegory of Vanitas is to 'is to opt for a meaning that is at direct odds with the immediate spiritual impact of the painting' (Snow, p.179). He describes that impact:

Woman Holding a Balance provides us not with a warning but with comfort and reassurance; it makes us feel not the vanity of life but its preciousness. Against the violent baroque agitation of the painting behind her, the woman asserts a quiet, imperturbable calm, the quintessence of Vermeer's vision. Against its lurid drama of apocalyptic judgment, and the dialectic of omnipotence and despair it generates, she poses a feminine judiciousness, a sense of well-being predicated on balance, equanimity, and a pleasure in the finest distinctions. Against a demonic, emaciated fiction of transcendence, she exists as a moving embodiment of life itself, and what is given to us in it. (p.179)

Where Justice is a state of grace and she, like an ancient Oracle, weighs life itself, the allegory of Vanitas is rewritten and the Manichean struggle between good and evil is resolved. Vermeer reduces the narrative to an episode, inverts the symbols and subverts the signs. Pearls are symbols of purity rather than vanity, and the mirror is no longer the sign of self-absorption but of consciousness and self-knowledge.

Much has been written about Vermeer's modernity, that discusses his depiction of the fashions and the popular pursuits of the 'dandies and damsels' of the era (Blankert,

1995), his devotion to 'nature' over classical themes, as well as his presumed use of optical devices, such as the camera obscura, in his pursuit of verisimilitude (Penn, J & Ziegler, 2013). In *Woman Holding a Balance* however, it is the gentle humanity mapped onto the divine attributes of the figure of Justice that suggests an interiority associated with a modern subjectivity. Vermeer's modernity in this work lies in the sense that the question of judgment has become philosophical and no longer exclusively a theological investigation. *Woman Holding a Balance* offers jurisprudence, a philosophical reading of law, rather than the law itself. As Snow suggests, she stands between the viewer and the receding and blurred baroque vision of the apocalypse behind her, in a recognition of a shared humanity as the moral bond of human society in the early Enlightenment.

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