

From “Goddesses” to “Women” --

An Analysis of Four Paintings of The Three Graces

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Abstract

The Three Graces, representing beauty, joy, and happiness in Greek mythology, have been portrayed in various forms throughout art history. This paper explores the transformation of these goddesses from divine symbols to humanized representations, using four works by Botticelli, Raphael, Rubens, and Boucher as case studies. By examining these artworks within their historical and social contexts, the paper highlights how each artist reinterprets The Three Graces in line with the evolving cultural values of their time. Botticelli's depiction in *Spring* portrays the goddesses as youthful and sensual, while Raphael's version balances their humanity and divinity. Rubens presents a more naturalistic portrayal, emphasizing fuller, mature figures with personal elements. Boucher, in the Rococo style, reimagines them as symbols of maternal love. These transformations reflect a broader trend in Western art, where the divine gradually gave way to more human-centered, secular depictions. The shift from "goddesses" to "women" in these artworks not only mirrors the secularization of art but also demonstrates the growing emphasis on personal, emotional, and humanistic themes over religious and mythological representations.

Keywords

the three grace; secularization; divinity; humanity.

1. Introduction

The Three Graces are three goddesses from Greek mythology, typically symbolizing beauty, joy, and happiness. There are many descriptions of them. In *The Dialogue of the Gods*, Mr. Zhou Zuoren made the following annotation: “The three Graces (Kharites) are named Joy, Richness, and Beauty. They represent the pleasures and happiness of life. Originally, they probably served the role of Aphrodite, but later she took over, and they became her attendants” [1]. The Graces, referred to here as *Kharites*, were originally the goddesses of love but later became assistants to Aphrodite. A detailed description of the three goddesses first appears in *Theogony*: “Eurynome, the daughter of the sea god Oceanus, gave birth to The three Graces—Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and the charming Thalia. Loving affection radiates from their gaze, and their beautiful looks are reflected in their soft glance” [2]. Among them, Aglaia (the Radiant) is the youngest, Euphrosyne (the Joyous) is in the middle, and Thalia (the Blooming) is the eldest.

In both ancient Greek and Roman art, many artists created sculptures of The Three Graces. Since the Renaissance, numerous artists have drawn inspiration from classical depictions of The Three Graces, resulting in many works of art. In paintings, the three goddesses are often shown embracing or dancing together, with their arms around each other, their bodies turned inward, and the central goddess always facing away from the viewer. However, the depictions of these goddesses vary greatly across different artists. In the following, I will analyze the

transformation of The Three Graces from “goddesses” to “women” by examining four works from different periods and artists.

2. The Three Grace In Botticelli's Primavera

2.1. Botticelli's Painting Style and the Meaning of Primavera

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) was an Italian painter of the Florence School during the Renaissance. His works blend the humanistic elements of the period with the mystical undertones of the Middle Ages, making him a representative of the fusion between humanism and classical style. His masterpiece Primavera is one such example. During his lifetime, the Renaissance movement rose, and Florence became the center of art and culture in Europe. Religious and mythological themes regained prominence, and Botticelli often focused on these themes in his art. Most artworks involving The Three Graces center on them as the main figures, but in Primavera, The Three Graces are only a part of the overall composition. Scholars have debated the meaning behind Primavera. Some believe Botticelli was influenced by the poet Poliziano's *The Rusticus*, while others argue that his work reflects influences from Landino's *Divine Comedy Commentary*. This paper does not delve into the background story of Primavera but focuses on the depiction of The Three Graces within the painting.

2.2. The Fusion of Humanism and Mystical Classicism —The Three Graces in Botticelli's Primavera

Botticelli served the Medici family during his youth and was accustomed to interacting with the upper classes. On the one hand, his wealth of experience with nobility allowed him to excel in depicting luxurious and grand scenes, such as the divine gathering depicted in Primavera. On the other hand, Florence was the cradle of early Renaissance art, and under the influence of the Renaissance, Botticelli's goddesses took on more “earthly” characteristics, with human-like expressions and vitality. Unlike previous works, Botticelli innovatively positioned the arms of The Three Graces at different levels, giving the whole composition a sense of fluidity. The rhythmic quality of their dance steps is emphasized. Botticelli did not rely on chiaroscuro or intense colors to convey liveliness; instead, “He focused on the strict organization of form and character traits, achieving a refined and unified image” [473]. The use of flowing lines and precise structure to express character traits is one of Botticelli's hallmarks.

The graceful long hair, rosy cheeks, and pearl necklaces all suggest that The Three Graces are portrayed as young girls. However, “From another perspective, although The Three Graces are depicted as pure, unmarried virgins, Botticelli portrays them as dancing gracefully in sheer, semi-nude transparent garments. The Graces expose their arms, shoulders, and backs, and the flowing transparent fabric clings to their bodies in the breeze. The delicate depiction of their bodies beneath the fabric imbues the entire painting with a seductive sensuality. This sensual expression is one of the key points for interpreting the painting” [4]. Above, Cupid's arrow directly points to The Three Graces, implying that they not only symbolize purity but also the temptation of love. Although the painting is based on Greek mythology, it differs from earlier medieval works. Botticelli's Three Graces are alive, full of vitality, and yet also imbued with melancholy—a defining characteristic of his portrayal of women. The folds of the flowing fabric swirl as they dance, covering the goddesses' curvaceous bodies. Both their expressions and postures emphasize the humanistic features of the Renaissance. In Botticelli's view, The Three Graces are pure, lively, and somewhat melancholic young women, yet they retain the mysterious classical aura of ancient goddesses.

3. The Three Grace by Raphael

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, a renowned Italian painter from the Renaissance period, was a prominent figure in Florence, Italy. He, alongside Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, is often referred to as one of the “three greats of the Renaissance”. Raphael excelled in reinterpreting religious themes, with his iconic works such as “*The Madonna*” and “*Madonna and Child*.”

3.1. Raphael's Painting Style

He inherited the painting style of his teacher Perugino and further refined it. His works are particularly praised for their “pure beauty of human figures,” which reflect his ideal concept of beauty. According to Gombrich, “No matter how idealized, his works maintain their vividness and realism” [5], which is what contributes to the greatness of his paintings.

3.2. The Balance Between “Humanity” and “Divinity”—Raphael's “The Three Graces”

Unlike Botticelli, in Raphael's *The Three Graces*, the goddesses are depicted without clothing, except for a sheer veil wrapped around the thigh of the goddess on the left. The curves of their bodies are fully outlined, yet the artist cleverly conceals their private parts. The distant landscape is tranquil, with blue and yellow being the predominant colors in the background. “Their towering bodies radiate a rose-colored vitality, swaying gently, in contrast with the green, gray, and soft blue of the vertical horizon behind them, forming the softest of contrasts” [5]. The three goddesses are serene and dignified, each holding an apple in one hand while their other arm rests on the shoulder of a sister. The arms holding the apples are extended outward, and each goddess gazes silently at the golden apple in her hand. The three arms resting on their shoulders suggest stability.

3.3. The Golden Apple in the Painting

The golden apple held by the goddesses is an image not seen in earlier depictions of *The Three Graces*. Scholar Panofsky suggests that the goddesses in the painting are “the Hesperides holding the golden apples stolen by Heracles” [6]. However, Cole argues that the goddesses represent “Venus’s attendants, holding the golden apple, affirming the connection between love and virtue.” In my opinion, the golden apple here symbolizes primal desire. The three goddesses are adorned with jewelry typical of mortal women, hinting at their earthly identities. However, their expressions make it clear that their focus is not on themselves but on the golden apple in their hands. Raphael uses the golden apple skillfully to balance the “humanity” and “divinity” in the three goddesses—although they possess desires like humans, they are not consumed by them because they embody beauty, happiness, and joy. Compared to Botticelli’s depiction, Raphael’s *Three Graces* convey more “humanity,” yet Raphael still emphasizes the grandeur of ancient Greek mythology, allowing us to feel the majesty of the goddesses.

4. The Three Grace by Rubens

Peter Paul Rubens, a Flemish painter, is a representative figure of the early Baroque movement. During this period, painting gradually became more “secular,” with a growing focus on the self and the use of personal life as a subject.

4.1. Rubens's Painting Style

Influenced by the Renaissance, Rubens often chose religious and Greco-Roman mythological themes for his works. “In his oil painting technique, he combined the advantages of the traditional Flemish school with those of the Italian Venetian school” [7]. The bold use of color is one of the prominent characteristics of Rubens' paintings. In this oil painting, the color scheme is similar to that of Raphael, with yellow and blue as dominant hues. However, Rubens

boldly applied intense colors, giving the entire composition a more everyday, lively atmosphere. Since The Three Graces symbolize prosperity and blossoming, Rubens incorporated related imagery: pale pink flowers hanging at the top of the painting, a classical-style Cupid fountain on the right, and a tree on the left with a white silk scarf hanging from it. The appearance of silk, flowers, and the fountain not only emphasizes the symbolic meaning of the goddesses but also highlights the opulence and grandeur characteristic of Baroque style.

4.2. “Secularization”——The Three Graces in Rubens’ Work

Compared to the earlier works of other artists, Rubens’ portrayal of *The Three Graces* presents them as fuller and more mature. Some critics argue that they appear “too plump,” but this is precisely a hallmark of Rubens’ work. He did not view slenderness as the ideal beauty but embraced naturalism, which was also characteristic of the Flemish region at the time. Rubens highlighted the natural texture of the skin, giving the goddesses a radiant glow, which makes viewers perceive them as living, breathing beings who exist among us, not as distant, elevated deities. “This is Rubens’ greatest artistic secret—his magical technique that makes everything come to life, vibrant and joyful” [8]. This shows that Rubens’ paintings carry a strong humanistic tone. The three goddesses in the painting appear to dance with vitality, as if they are participating in a grand ball. In addition to their linked arms, Rubens cleverly uses flowing sheer fabric to bring them closer together. The central goddess has fabric wrapped around her left arm and thigh, and this fabric transitions onto the left goddess’ arm, ultimately reaching the thigh of the right goddess.

The goddess in Rubens’ paintings also has another identity, that is, his wife. The left and right goddesses represent Rubens’ two wives—the left goddess symbolizes his second wife, while the right goddess represents his first wife, Isabella. This personalized creation reveals that Rubens painted the work based on his own interests and life, making it highly individualized, rather than a piece rich in classical themes like those of Botticelli or Raphael. Thus, Rubens’ painting is anti-traditional and anti-classical.

5. The Three Graces by Rubens

François Boucher, a representative painter of the 18th-century French Rococo style, was renowned for his lavish and delicate style.

5.1. Boucher’s Painting Style

The Rococo style, derived from the Baroque, retained the exquisite and opulent qualities of Baroque art but was lighter in tone and emphasized various “feminine” traits [8]. As a result, the female figure became a central theme in Boucher’s work. His women were not only charming and lively but also rich in emotional depth. “The works that best represent Boucher’s style are his mythological paintings. Unlike the mythological history paintings of the Renaissance and Classical periods, Boucher shifted focus to themes of love and the pleasures of life” [9]. Therefore, Boucher’s *The Three Graces* strongly reflects his personal style, “overflowing with luxury, brightness, delicacy, and sensuous decoration, yet equally filled with the artist’s rich emotions” [8].

5.2. “Mother” and “Maternal Love”——The Three Graces in Boucher’s Painting

In Boucher’s *The Three Graces*, both the form and imagery significantly differ from previous interpretations. The painting is unusually oval-shaped, unlike the typical rectangular oil paintings, which softens the overall composition and makes it appear more delicate. Viewers are naturally drawn to the center of the painting, where the figure of Cupid stands. In Boucher’s version, The Three Graces no longer link arms, but instead lift Cupid with one arm, with Cupid holding a torch in each hand, waving them energetically. The goddesses’ postures are

reminiscent of Raphael's works, with the goddesses on the left and right facing outward, each holding an object, while the central goddess's face is turned slightly inward and outward. The color scheme is also similar to Raphael's, dominated by yellow and blue, but Boucher introduces clouds in the background, giving the painting a more dreamlike quality. Unlike earlier depictions, Boucher emphasizes the strength of the goddesses' forms: one foot is raised slightly, and their arms no longer gently rest on one another but firmly hold Cupid aloft. The left goddess holds a quiver of arrows, which is a new element not seen in previous works.

In this painting, The Three Graces are no longer just goddesses but mothers. The term "mother" fits them perfectly. Although in other works The Three Graces typically represent happiness, joy, and beauty, in this portrayal they symbolize maternal love, which ties into their purity as symbols of motherhood—the purest form of love. From Rubens' "wives" to Boucher's "mothers," these two identities are significant phases in a woman's life. This evolution of the depiction of The Three Graces reveals a shift from goddesses to ordinary women, reflecting the changing perspectives of artists over time.

6. Conclusion

From Humanism to the Rococo style, we can observe how different painters of various periods have interpreted the mythological theme of The Three Graces. What remains consistent is that the "divinity" of the goddesses in these paintings has been gradually diminished, while their "humanity" has been increasingly emphasized. From "maiden" to "woman," and then to "mother," the secular identity of the goddesses has continuously evolved. The artists shifted their focus from religious mythology to secular life, which also reflects the broader trend of the secularization of painting.

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