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Rubenesque v/s Boterismo Fat Fetishism: Cultural Rationalization of Women's Body Image over time

Pooja Sunil
Post-Graduate Student
National Institute of Technology
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu
ORCID ID 0009-0001-3540-9311

Abstract

This paper examines the evolving representation of the female body in art, focusing on the contrasts between the 'Rubenesque' style of Peter Paul Rubens and Fernando Botero's 'Boterismo.' During the Baroque era, Rubens celebrated curvaceous bodies as symbols of fertility, wealth, and sensuality, reflecting the era's ideals of female beauty. In contrast, Botero's modern depictions challenge contemporary beauty standards that favor slimness. His 'Boterismo' style features exaggeratedly plump figures often perceived as satirical, promotes body positivity and questions societal norms that equate thinness with worth. This paper argues that while Rubens' work reflects historical attitudes of beauty linked to social status and fertility, Botero's paintings subvert these ideals, advocating for an inclusive representation of body image that resists prevailing standards of thinness.

Keywords: Rubenesque, Boterismo, Body Image, Feminine Beauty, Cultural Rationalization, Body Positivity

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1. Introduction

Since time immemorial, the question of what constitutes the feminine beauty ideal or whether it lies in the 'eye of the beholder' has haunted women belonging to diverse races, socio-economic statuses, and cultural backgrounds. From a period in history typifying the curvaceous female body as the epitome of beauty to the modern-day 'thin ideal' framing the fat body as undesirable, there is no fixed image of an ideal physique. The perception of women's ideal body type varies temporally. The paintings of 'Rubenesque' women, a term associated with the creations of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, who painted women with wide hips and big bellies, reflect the established standards of feminine beauty during the Baroque age. The full-figured bodies emphasize the subject's high social status along with sensuality and fertility. On the other hand, the contemporary Colombian artist Fernando Botero's plus-sized figures, painted in his signature style known as 'Boterismo', have become icons of self-love, evoking attention and admiration in a powerfully irresistible way. This has endorsed body positivity and fat acceptance. This paper aims to analyze the depiction of the fat female body through selected paintings by examining the term 'Rubenesque' - an adjective used to positively describe plump women of the elite class - and 'Boterismo' a style that challenges contemporary thin-body privilege. This analysis highlights how Rubens accepted the cultural ideals of women's body image in his time, while Botero critically reflects on and rejects the negative stigmatization of the fat body in the present.

2. The Idolizing of Fat bodies in Peter Paul Rubens' Paintings

After ages of the fat body being frowned upon, the Baroque period began to glorify heavier figures. The term 'baroque' was named after the popular ornate architectural style spanning the 17th and 18th centuries, marking a rebellion against the high renaissance art. Since "femininity is not a descriptor, but rather an ideological system in which all people participate" (Rothblum and Solovay 148), it became fashionable for women to carry bodily weight during the Baroque age because society perceived fat as beautiful. Rubens contributed to the idealization of stout figures by deliberately portraying thin women from Classical and Christian history as 'bulky.' This is evident in his painting *The Three Graces* where Baroque traits such as voluptuousness and fertility are embodied by the figures of minor deities (Aglaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia) from

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classical antiquity standing in a circle (Fig.1). The painting establishes a bond between the charming nude graces and the garden with its lush landscape, fountain and, blooming white and red roses, often used to represent femininity and fertility. One can easily trace the smaller folds on all of their skin and a dimple at the back of the middle figure, undeniably contributing to a great sense of naturality. The intricate detailing of their bodies and the garden symbolizes the greater fertility attributed to voluptuous women of the time.

It is quite evident that the artist admires the bulky female bodies as they slightly tilt their head, hold each other's hands seeming to embrace or mimic a dance, their two knees touching each other and their heels raised, forming graceful postures. Furthermore, their head jewellery indicates prosperity and wealth establishing the fact that these woman figures do not belong to the lower strata of the society. *The Three Graces* is therefore an acute reflection of the elite strata of women from the Baroque age with their round bodies as manifested signs of fertility, sexual appeal, and riches.

Fig.1. Peter Paul Rubens' *The Three Graces*, 1630, Museo Del Prado, Madrid.

Yet another example of the Rubenesque style is *Venus in Front of the Mirror*, in which Rubens painted his Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, as sitting in front of a mirror held up by Cupid (Fig 2). Her smooth skin, and lustrous blonde hair enhanced by the

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contrast with the dull backdrop and the dark-complexioned maidservant fixing Venus's hair, highlights her beautiful plump white body. The Venus figurines of the Paleolithic times evidence obesity in women (Fig 3). This is a shared similarity in the representation of women in both the Paleolithic and Baroque periods. Since Venus is shown wearing costly accessories like an armlet and an earring, it is perspicuous that the woman belongs to the nobility. Moreover, she puts on a neutral expression on her countenance as she looks directly at the spectator through the reflection in the mirror. The viewer thus becomes enchanted by the charming, elegant, and angular visage of the goddess. On that account, Ruben's *Venus in Front of the Mirror* projects a realistic portrayal of the beautiful Baroque women whom William Sanderson in the treatise *Graphice*, published in 1658, defines as ones with "a noble neck, round rising, full and fat" (Wind).

Fig.2. Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus in Front of the Mirror*, 1615, Liechtenstein The Princely Collections, Austria.

Fig.3. Venus of Willendorf (Venus in a casket), 24000 BCE to 22000 BCE, Museum of Natural History, Vienna, Austria.

Venus makes her appearance in several paintings done by Ruben. *Venus and Adonis* is one such artwork inspired by the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Fig.4). The tragic love story between Venus and Adonis begins when the Roman goddess is wounded by Cupid's arrow.

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Before it could heal, she catches sight of Adonis, a handsome hunter, and begins courting him. She stays by him and even disguises herself as the huntress, Diana. Eventually, ignoring the goddess's warnings of danger, Adonis goes hunting for a wild boar and meets his death.

Fig.4. Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus and Adonis*, 1630,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Ruben's portrait depicts a curvy figure of Venus leaning into Adonis' arms calling attention to an instance of intense passion that is perceptible from the way they have held their bodies against each other. In outlining the shape of the figures, the artist paints the twists and turns of the bodies frozen in motion. Further investigation of the complex particulars of the work illuminates the round curves of Venus' legs. Her left leg is used as a support to reach Adonis and grab his arm so that she can prevent him from taking leave. The tonal contrast between light and dark help define her voluptuous curves against the shadows. Delporte's interpretation of the Venus statues shed light on the general characterization of the triumphant goddess. He remarks on the statues of Venus during the Paleolithic age as "realistic depictions of actual women" who exhibit "ideal representations of female beauty" and "represent fertility symbols" (Dixson and Dixson 1). From both paintings, *Venus in Front of the Mirror* and *Venus and Adonis*, it is clear that Rubens' Venus represents women of the upper strata of society with the realistic body sizes of their time and curvy childbearing hips that define beauty.

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3. Fernando Botero's 'voluminous' women

Peter Paul Rubens' artistic creations are naturalistic and true to life depictions of the Baroque period, which celebrated the popularity and vogue of women with fuller figures as indicators of higher social status, fertility, and beauty. On the flip side, being skinny was considered to be its antithesis. This exposes and validates the fact that cultural standards of beauty mostly reflect how the society's wealthy looked. "By the beginning of the 20th century, fatness for women became associated less with prosperity, healthful fertility, or attractive sensuality" (Rothblum and Solovay 313). This transition meant that, for the elites:

> Slimness, together with speed, productivity and efficiency, were beginning to be advocated as a new aesthetic and cultural model. A new Puritanism, which shared obvious traits with traditional Christian penitence, re-launched the image of a lean, slender and productive body; the bourgeois body which 'sacrifices itself' to the production of goods and wealth. (Montanari 167)

Another reason for this shift is medical science's contribution towards the BMI which proposed that Obesity exposes the individual to health issues making them more vulnerable to a variety of diseases. Moreover, the ideal figure for women became associated with "thin bodies, in particular in professions where there is a strong pressure to control body weight such as athletics and dance" (Bonafini and Pozzilli 65). Fernando Botero, with his love for full-figured forms, ridicules this very thought through his painting *Dancers at the Bar* wherein he renders a version of a buxom ballerina, confident and comfortable in her body, dancing (Fig.5). Even though the picture at first glance seems satirical, one can gauge the riotous tone underneath the humour.

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Fig.5. Fernando Botero's *Dancers at the Bar*, 2001.

The painting mocks the societal expectation of women to be slim in order to be acknowledged in the traditional dance industry. The ballet dancer in this artwork is standing on pointe with one leg and one arm upended, at the ballet bar. Her ballet costume, a white multi-layered skirt, known as the tutu, creates a sense of lightness and flight. This allows her the freedom of movement. The subject's face exudes confidence and strength as opposed to the notion that ballet dancers must be graceful and beautiful. Despite her bulky figure, she is able to lift her right leg straight up and stand on her left pink ballet shoe which denotes that her body is flexible. Her choice to become a dancer despite the larger build defies the societal construction that the art of dance demands a fit and trim physique. Botero thus paints the picture of a burly ballet dancer as 'belonging' in the dance industry. The image indisputably proves that something that is seemingly comical on the surface can draw an ironic and sharp commentary on societal stereotypes that write off overweight women as unworthy.

Transforming the gracefully thin and slender body of women into inflated figures occupying the entirety of the canvas, Botero brings with his art an air of rebellion against those who find the fat body ugly and repugnant. His subversion of the famous portrait in the world, Da Vinci's *The*

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Mona Lisa, is one such example. In painting her the way he did, Botero almost created a childhood image of Mona Lisa with round cheeks and a face that is sincere, simple, and adorable (Fig 6). This was far removed from the original painting, the quintessence of Renaissance masterwork, limned with female beauty at that time (Fig.7).

Fig.6. Fernando Botero's *Mona Lisa*, 1978, Botero Museum, Bogotá.

Fig.7. Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa*, 1500s, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Botero's Mona Lisa is a parody of Pythagoras and the ancient Greeks who attempted a mathematic-aesthetical explanation of beauty as "a matter of having the right proportions. And because these proportions – or 'golden ratios' – were universal, the secret to beauty was the same whether we consider the human face or the dimensions of a building or even music and literature" (Swami and Furnham 4). Additionally, they believed that Da Vinci "designed the proportions of Mona Lisa according to Pythagorean notions of beauty;" (Swami and Furnham 4). The magical charm of Da Vinci's portrait of Mona Lisa who is depicted as a beautiful young woman, modest and mysterious, maintaining a dignified poise and unswerving gaze is revamped by Botero to create an image of Mona Lisa as a rounded and overweight figure thus bringing in a pompous absurdity. When Higgins describes the 'ought' self as reflective of "the attributes that

the individual believes she or he has an obligation or duty to possess" (Vartanian 711), Da Vinci's Mona Lisa becomes the 'obligation' while Botero's Mona Lisa befits the counter movement defying societal beauty standards that women believe is their 'duty to possess'.

It is interesting to note that, Botero in his interview with the Spanish daily El Mundo, reveals that he is not an advocate of the fat acceptance movement. He says, "I don't paint fat women. Nobody believes me but it is true. What I paint are volumes. When I paint a still life I also paint with volume, if I paint an animal it is volumetric, a landscape as well" (Betancourt). However, it is quite evident through his paintings and sculptors that in all these years, he has held on to his trademark, the Boterismo style, and has refused to conform to other's standards of taste and beauty. Therefore, indirectly his 'volumetric' figures unmistakeably support those women who are overlooked, humiliated, and treated with disregard for possessing a fleshy body.

4. Conclusion

Observing the art of these two different eras, it is evident that there have been substantial and sizeable changes in what is considered an ideal feminine body. From being recognized as a symbol of fertility responding to men's sexual desires, to one of mathematically calculated proportions and, to thickness and hefty rolls of flab, the accepted female body image is a product of the social context of each period in history. Peter Paul Rubens' portrayal of the curvy Baroque women is synonymous with wealth, strength, success, and elevated social status. Unfortunately, today, beauty and perfect body shape are not exactly in the eye of the beholder, but in the image set forth by the media and sold to a pliable society. Consequently, Fernando Botero, the most Colombian of Colombian artists, transforms modern and classical women into chunky versions of themselves therefore completely disregarding the sexualizing of thick women and in turn idolizing them. Even though body dissatisfaction is seen as being "operationalized as the difference between how a woman sees herself and how she would ideally like to be" (Vartanian 713), it is the society that pushes the female population into it. In conclusion, the conceptualization of the ideal feminine body permeating 'Rubenesque' and 'Boterismo' paintings elucidates that while the former embraces the Baroque view of women's body, attempting to justify the presence of fat as representative of beauty, luxury and fertility, the latter outright rejects the modern outlook of the feminine body as attractive only if fragile and thin.

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