

Women's Undergarments

Cristina Nelson

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing a business/gender dissertation in US History, titled "Figuring the American Woman: The Business of Constructing, Marketing and Purchasing Women's Undergarments, 1945-1970" In part, I look at the role of foundation garments (brassieres, girdles, etc, and even hosiery) in helping to construct a hyperfeminine female silhouette in the 50's and a "liberated" silhouette in the 60's, grounding these events in a political context.

One point I make is about the construction of (in this case) female bodies as synechdoches for state ideology. I note that this is a long-held practice, from Sparta on into Fascist / Nazi body iconography and into 20th C US.

What I am looking for are examples of visual representations of "the state" between ancient Greece and the 20th C. Since I am not an art historian, I am turning to your collective expertise in this area.

First, are there easily accessible materials/ articles that talk about the visual representation of the body as symbol of the state - from ancient history on?

Second, what are some easily accessible visual representations of same. The only one I could think of was France's "Marianne" (spelling?) -- is she considered a synechtode for France, for instance? My understanding is that she arose during or immediately after the French Revolution.

Third, are there specific paintings &/o sculptures that use the figure as a symbol of the state. I don't mean paintings and sculptures of, say, kings and queens (necessarily) but something more in the vein of "the Aryan man" of the Nazi era.

I realize this may be a simplistic and imperfect gloss over a large body of work, but I ask for your indulgence and a few references.

Thank you in advance,

Cristina R. Nelson
History Dept.

ArtHist.net

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
USA

Reference:

Q: Women's Undergarments. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 23, 2004 (accessed Jul 30, 2025),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/26205>>.