

Representation of Women in European Public Sculpture (Leeds, 8 Oct 25)

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, Oct 08, 2025

Deadline: Jun 2, 2025

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Embodied Ideals: The Representation of Women in European Public Sculpture (1836-1937).

Sculptural depictions of women in European public spaces during the 19th and 20th centuries were rare. When such figures did appear, they often served as allegories, embodying abstract values, ideas, and human archetypes. This reflects a long-standing tradition, which associates representations of women with impersonal, collective concepts such as liberty, republicanism, equality, and national identities. The allegorical use of a conventionally 'female' form soon assumed a transnational dimension, most famously exemplified by the transformation of France's Marianne into the Statue of Liberty (1886) by Auguste Bartholdi in New York.

With few exceptions – such as Joan of Arc in France and Anita Garibaldi in Italy – women rarely emerged as autonomous, equal subjects alongside the grands hommes of the French Republican statuary tradition. This latter category consisted almost exclusively of representations of men, and stemmed from the political recognition of exemplary individuals in national patriotic rituals. As Christel Sniter's research on the glorification of women in the French Third Republic has shown, the rare public appearance of women as subjects for sculpture required a reconsideration of the visual and representational modes employed: should artists adhere to traditional stylistic frameworks, or reimagine them entirely? What defines the codes and construction of the representation of women in this context?

Amid growing international interest in the representation of women in public sculpture, this workshop will assess the state of the field of sculpture studies on this topic from a transnational and European perspective, while fostering new collaborative networks. We welcome contributions – particularly from early-career scholars – that explore gender, art, and public memory through new methodological approaches to public sculpture. Submissions may include case studies, comparative analyses, or interdisciplinary inquiries on the cultural and political impact of women's marginality in sculptural monuments.

The workshop will range from the 1830s to the 1930s, a period marked by significant semantic and formal diversity in depictions of women, exemplified by François Rude's "Le Départ des Volontaires" (Paris, 1833-36) to Vera Mukhina's "The Worker and the Peasant Woman" (1937, exhibited in Paris, now in Moscow). As critical discourse increasingly recognises, the (in)visibility of women in public monuments not only reflects the cultural and political tensions of the 19th century but also shapes and challenges our contemporary views on gender. This enduring relevance makes

the topic even more significant today.

Subjects which may be addressed include the following:

1. Visual conventions in representing women

What visual clichés have historically shaped public sculptural representations of women? Do specific iconographic elements – such as poses, roles, attributes, or spatial arrangements – set them apart, or do they derive from dominant male models?

How do representations of women in relief sculpture compare to those in freestanding statues? Does this medium offer them greater prominence within the same historical period?

What patterns emerge when women are depicted in group compositions, such as allegorical figures (i.e. The Republic)?

To what extent are these visual conventions shaped by European art school traditions or nostalgia for antiquity?

2. Geographical and architectural influences on representation

How do national, regional, and local traditions influence the representation of women in public sculpture? Do geographical, urban, and architectural settings – such as public squares, private homes, gardens, or religious spaces – affect these depictions?

What role did colonial perspectives play in shaping representations of the ‘other’ in public sculpture, particularly in depictions of Africa and Asia? Why was the female figure frequently used to embody an unfamiliar and stereotyped identity?

3. The role of artists and patrons

Which women did institutions of power – such as the Church or the Monarchy – choose to commemorate, and how were they portrayed?

How do the gender, social status, and political affiliations of artists or patrons shape the visual language and narrative of their works? Are there notable differences in how female figures are depicted when the artist is a woman?

Applicants are kindly asked to submit:

a brief abstract (no more than 250 words)

a short biographical note (100 words)

The deadline to apply is Monday 2 June 2025, 17:00

Please email your proposals to: research@henry-moore.org

Submissions are also welcome in alternative formats.

Speakers will receive an honorarium of £100, and travel and accommodation costs within the UK will be reimbursed.

Reference:

CFP: Representation of Women in European Public Sculpture (Leeds, 8 Oct 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 14, 2025 (accessed Apr 16, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43947>>.