

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

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, Oct 08, 2025

Registration deadline: Oct 8, 2025

henry-moore.org/discover-and-research/sculpture-research-programme/calls-for-papers/embodied-ideals/

Kirstie Gregory, Henry Moore Institute

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

This workshop investigates the representation of women in European public sculpture from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of the Second World War. Throughout this period, monuments were key in shaping national, republican, imperial, and civic identities. However, this commemorative landscape reveals a persistent contradiction: while artists and commissioners often portray women as allegories of abstract ideals, they seldom honour actual women as historical figures worthy of commemoration.

Building on foundational scholarship – from Maurice Agulhon’s seminal work on Marianne (1979) to Christel Sniter’s research on gendered commemoration in France (2012) and Anne Lafont’s analysis of race and allegory (2019) – this workshop endeavours to reassess the sculptural representation of women through both established and emerging perspectives. Pioneering feminist studies by Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock have shown that women’s exclusion – or selective inclusion – in visual culture reflects deeper power structures.

From François Rude’s *Le Départ des Volontaires* (1833-36) to Vera Mukhina’s *The Worker and the Peasant Woman* (1937), female figures in public sculpture were predominantly cast in allegorical roles as embodiments of liberty, nationhood, justice, or political entities. These representations drew on enduring classical models while adapting to local artistic traditions, political imperatives, and urban contexts. The transformation of France’s Marianne into Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi’s *Statue of Liberty* (1886) vividly illustrates how feminine forms transcended national boundaries and accrued new political and cultural meanings.

At the same time, exceptions such as Joan of Arc in France or Anita Garibaldi in Italy raise crucial questions about when real women were deemed suitable subjects for monumentalisation. How did artists adapt the visual schemes traditionally reserved for male heroism? What new iconographic or narrative strategies emerged to depict female agency, and how were these shaped by the gender, social status, and political affiliations of both artists and patrons? As Linda Nochlin famously asked, what systemic structures determined who was deemed ‘great’ enough to be immortalised, and by whom?

The workshop also addresses how colonial frameworks informed the representation of women, especially in the exoticised depictions of Africa and Asia that served to justify European imperial imaginaries. It explores how cultural, artistic, and political forces channelled broader anxieties about nation, race, and modernity onto the gendered body.

To structure this inquiry, the workshop focuses on three main lines of investigation: the construction of visual imaginaries of femininity, including those influenced by women artists; the use of female imagery to construct or challenge narratives of nationhood; and the tensions inherent in allegorical representations of women, particularly in their urban display and critical renegotiation in everyday contexts.

Bringing together case studies from across Europe – including Denmark, England, France, Hungary, Italy, Norway, and the former Yugoslavia – the workshop adopts a comparative perspective to identify both shared patterns and local specificities in how female figures, whether allegorical or historical, have been represented in public sculpture. Employing diverse methodological approaches, we aim to illuminate how women's (in)visibility in monuments has reflected past sociopolitical tensions and continues to shape present-day cultural imaginaries. In doing so, the workshop seeks to contribute to broader critical debates on the hierarchies of memory, visibility, and power that underpin the very notion of the monumental.

Programme:

Arrival and registration

10:00

Welcome and introduction

11:00

Chiara Pazzaglia, PhD candidate, Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa/Université Paris Nanterre

Dr Alberto Pirro, Bibliotheca Hertziana/Max Planck Institute, Rome

Session 1: Shaping the Female Gaze: Women Sculptors and their Subjects

11:15

Chair Dr Melissa Gustin, National Museums Liverpool

'Queens of the Studio: Harriet Hosmer's Sculpture as Public Art in mid-19th-Century Rome'

Dr Daniel Belasco, Al Held Foundation, New York

'Women Sculptures by Women Sculptors in Public Space (France, 1890-1914)'

Eva Belgherbi, PhD candidate, Université de Poitiers (CRIHAM)/École du Louvre

'Sculptural Ballet: Malvina Hoffman's Russian Bacchanale'

Isla Stewart, PhD candidate, Rutgers University – New Brunswick

'Standing Apart: Astrid Noack's Anna Ancher (1939) and the Embodiment of Female Creativity in the Middelheim Museum's Sculpture Collection'

Veerle Meul, Research Lead, Middelheim Museum

Lunch

13:00

Served in The Studio on the second floor

Session 2: Monumentalizing Women: Staging the Nation through Female Figures

14:00

Chaired by Chiara Pazzaglia

'Anita Garibaldi: Between Absence and Allusion. Struggles towards a monument after Italian unification'

Claudio Tongiorgi, PhD candidate, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

'Victorious Monuments: Representation of Women in Ivan Meštrović's Sculptures'

Dr Barbara Vujanović, Chief Curator, Ivan Meštrović Museums – Meštrović Atelier, Zagreb

'The Statue of Hungarian Pain and her English Sister, 'Dirty Gerty''

Dr Zsóka Leposa, Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland

Break

15:15

Session 3: Allegory in Tension: Femininity, Urban Sculpture and the Politics of Display

15:30

Chaired by Dr Alberto Pirro

'Norwegian women and statues – Between the strongwoman and the nurturing mother: ambivalences of the woman representation in interwar Oslo public sculpture'

Dr Louis Gavert, art critic (AICA-France)

'Classical, Medieval, or Modern? Representations of femininity and the role of reception within late 19th and early 20th century civic sculpture in Leeds'

Thomas Matthew Dunwell, PhD candidate, University of Leeds

Roundtable discussion

16:15

Drinks reception

17:00

Refreshments served in The Studio on the second floor

Finish

18:30

Reference:

CONF: The Representation of Women in European Public Sculpture (Leeds, 8 Oct 25). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 10, 2025 (accessed Sep 16, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50528>>.