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# The Understanding of Time and Place: Baroque vs. Contemporary Art

## Transcending Time and Place: Baroque and Contemporary Art

If not to convey the author's way of seeing, then what is art? Some artists leave a meaningful impression with their viewpoints on certain themes. Two such artists who have left their mark through their artwork are Shirin Neshat and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Shirin Neshat is one of the most famous contemporary artists to come from Iran. Her artwork reflects the Islamic society of Iran, especially the women. Due to her explicit attacks on sexual, political, and religious issues in Iran, she has been exiled from her birth nation. Primarily a photographer, one of Neshat's most famous work is *Rebellious Silence* from the *Women of Allah* series (1994). Utilizing a stark black-and-white contrast, its medium is chromogenic print. Although a contemporary piece seemingly has no connection with an archetype of Baroque sculpture, Bernini explores similar themes to Neshat. Gian Lorenzo Bernini was an Italian sculptor and architect who is attributed with creating the Baroque style of sculpture. He created his *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* sculpture in 1647-1652 and it dwells in the Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Its medium consists of marble, stucco, and gilt bronze. Although from different times and places and utilizing different mediums, both Neshat and Bernini expressed themes of individualization, religion and sexuality in a changing cultural landscape.

A digital contemporary piece and a classic exemplar of Baroque sculpture seemingly have no common thread to tie them together, but Neshat and Bernini both relate the individual to religion in their works. Bernini was Catholic and Neshat was Muslim; both depicted elements of their respective religions in their works. Bernini's sculpture pictures Saint Teresa of Ávila, who received visions from God. In her writings about these visions, Theresa describes how she would feel suddenly consumed by the love of God, feel the bodily presence of Christ or of angels, and be lifted to an exalted state of ecstasy. Bernini's knowledge of Teresa and her writings are evident in *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. His sculptural group portrays a swooning Teresa with her head thrown back, mouth open, and eyes closed. There is also an angel resembling a cupid holding a gold arrow towards her heart. Teresa is visibly overcome with the amazing sensation of God's love; Bernini cleverly demonstrates Teresa's agitation by adorning her with heavy robes. Bernini infuses this scene with gold rays, seemingly from God. This adds a divine presence and illustrates how Bernini relates a moment from an individual's life with religion. Bernini captured Teresa's desire to spiritually unite with God. Compared to Bernini's theatrical display, Neshat's *Rebellious Silence* is a much more stark representation of individualization versus religion due to its black-and-white nature. A Muslim woman is wearing a hijab and

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holding the barrel of a rifle, which symmetrically divides her face. In addition, there is Farsi poetry written on the woman's face, which makes it seem like she is wearing a niqab (a headscarf covering the entire face except for the eyes). Her gaze is straight; she is courageous as well as confident. Her gaze also addresses the woman's sexuality, but not in the conventional sense. She is veiled and "oppressed", but she directly looks at the viewer. There is no denying that this woman is in control of her life and she is not oppressed. Neshat served to deconstruct the Western notion that the Islamic women are oppressed. Thus, the veiled woman holds a weapon, demonstrating her power in the situation (presumably war). Neshat strategically uses this mysterious individual to highlight how women are not oppressed because of their headscarves and their religion, Islam. Therefore, Bernini and Neshat both display the relationship between the individual and their religion in their respective works, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* and *Rebellious Silence*.

The historical context of these pieces influenced Bernini's and Neshat's aforementioned "way of seeing". When *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* was revealed to the public during the Middle Ages, Europe was experiencing the end of the Counter Reformation. The Counter Reformation was the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation; Catholics resurged and revitalized their religion. Bernini was a devout Catholic, so therefore he boldly depicted Catholicism in *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Teresa's joy and ecstasy of being spiritually one with God is a spirited extension of Bernini's own purpose to respond to critics of the Catholic Church. In essence, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* was a sensational and vivid embodiment of a Catholic story. On the other hand, Neshat imbued *Rebellious Silence* with feminist undertones. *Rebellious Silence* highlights the changes that have occurred in Iranian society since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini protested the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza under the Pahlavi Dynasty. Revolutionaries overthrew the monarchy and Khomeini became the new leader of a conservative theocracy. During the Pahlavi era, Iranian women made considerable progress. For example, education was free for both girls and boys. Iran's first university admitted both men and women. In 1963, women acquired the right to vote and run for parliament. However, the new theocracy reversed all that progress. Although donning the hijab was now forcibly imposed, it was not a sign of oppression for many Iranian women because they were following their religion. But the West viewed this as blatant oppression of women's rights. Neshat addressed this misunderstanding with the veiled woman and her captivating gaze. Despite the effect of Khomeini's regime on women, the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) had an energizing influence on the status of women. The war necessitated that women do more work outside of the home while their husbands were fighting. Neshat also addressed this newfound equality Iranian women possessed with the rifle. Neshat juxtaposes the traditional headscarf that is seen as feminine with a gun across the lady's face that represents masculinity. This shows that men and woman are both equals and shouldn't be treated differently. Through this juxtaposition, Neshat challenges the gender norms in her country. It is evident that both Bernini and Neshat were responding to religious and societal changes that ultimately shaped their

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unique viewpoints on the themes of Ecstasy of Saint Teresa and Rebellious Silence.

All in all, Neshat's Rebellious Silence and Bernini's Ecstasy of Saint Teresa explore universal themes that transcend time and place. Neshat and Bernini both focus on an individual and their sexuality, while also responding to criticisms about their religion. In addition, it should be noted that Neshat and Bernini both worked in a dynamic cultural landscape that greatly influenced their work. Bernini and Neshat were from different time periods and different places. However, comparing their pieces has shown that societies are always experiencing change and artists will always exist to document that change with their own lens. This comparison has also shown that the relationship an individual has with their religion has and still is an extremely significant theme throughout different civilizations.

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