

Maidenhood and Motherhood Emily White

What does it mean to be a woman? What does a woman do? The answers to these questions differ greatly across cultural lines. The Dallas Museum of Art's *Portrait of the Comtesse du Montsoreau and Sister as Diana and an Attendant* and the Yombe *Seated Figure with Child (Pfemba)* might seem completely different from each other; however, they both share the theme of the feminine ideal in their respective cultures.

The *Portrait of the Comtesse du Montsoreau* was painted by Nicolas de Largillière, a French Rococo painter.¹ It depicts the countess, raven-haired and reclining, as the virginal Roman goddess Diana and the countess's sister, wearing a rosy dress and fetching Diana's quiver, as a nymph. The depiction is naturalistic but idealized, as it was the duty of the painter to portray his patron as flatteringly as possible. The women are depicted with smooth and pearly complexions, graceful hands, curvaceous figures, and flowing hair and garments – appealing features which reflect the early 18th-century European standard of beauty. The countess wears a crescent moon ornament over her brow and cradles a lapdog; as symbols of Diana,² these elements emphasize the countess's association with the goddess.

The *Seated Female Figure with Child*, a wooden sculpture with glass or mica eyes, was created by an unnamed artist of the Yombe group (a subset of the Kongo people), during the late 19th to early 20th century in the Lower Congo.³ It depicts a calm-faced woman seated cross-legged on a platform, cradling a child. This icon of the mother and child is called *pfemba* by the Yombe; the name derives from a Kikongo word referring to the white earth (kaolin) that symbolizes fertility in the Lower Congo.⁴ Although the depiction is stylized, it is still idealized: the mother's teeth are filed and her neck and shoulders bear the marks of scarification, both elements of beauty in the Yombe culture.⁵ The child lies passive in the mother's lap; the infant's vitality is an issue of some contention, but its stiffness and inactivity may indicate that it is dead.⁶

As different as these works seem, they both present the feminine ideal as it was conceived in their respective cultures. Aesthetically, just as the perfect French woman had a pale complexion and graceful limbs, so the exemplary Yombe woman bore cosmetic keloid scars and teeth filed to points. Conceptually, chastity was a virtue in Rococo France, hence the countess's wish to be depicted as the virgin goddess Diana, while to the Yombe, to abstain from marriage and maternity was to go against the social order.⁷ They pose a contrast between maidenhood and motherhood. Furthermore, the media chosen for the works reflect these paradigms. The subject of a two-dimensional painting is untouchable: the flat canvas prevents viewers from making physical contact. In the same way, one could not touch a virgin goddess or a chaste woman in early 18th-century France. In contrast, the subject of a sculpture is corporeal: were one to lay hands on the *pfemba*, he or she would feel the figures' bodies. To be used, a ritual object must be tangible. Unlike a virgin goddess, a mother can be touched.

The differences between these works reflect the different norms and ideals of their respective cultures, but the artists' goals were the same: to depict the feminine ideal as it manifested itself to them. French women of the early 18th century might have differed from Yombe women of the late 19th century, but in essence, they were all women.

¹ Heather McDonald, "The Comtesse de Montsoreau and Her Sister as Diana and an Attendant," in *From the Private Collections of North Texas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 182.

² James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row, rev. ed. 1979), 101-102.

³ Dallas Museum of Art, *Dallas Museum of Art: A Guide to the Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 82.

⁴ Herbert Cole, *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Roslyn A. Walker, *The Arts of Africa at the Dallas Museum of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 114.

⁷ Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 10.