Susanna and the Elders by Sir Peter Lely

This is a biblical story in which Susanna, young wife of Joakim, is secretly desired by two elders of the community. They spy on her and one day, when it is very hot, they see her come out into her garden to bathe. She dismisses her servants as she is about to prepare for her bath. The two elders seize their opportunity and emerge from hiding, threatening Susanna that they will tell everyone that they caught her in the act of adultery with a young man unless she consents to sleep with them.

Susanna refuses to go along with them so they carry out their threat and publicly accuse her of adultery. She is tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. But then Daniel speaks up and says that an injustice has been done and demands to question the witnesses. When he cross-examines the elders separately large discrepancies in their story emerge. Susanna is cleared and the elders themselves are sentenced to death for their false accusations.

This painting, by Sir Peter Lely, tells the story at the moment when the two elders surprise Susanna at her bath and issue their threats. The two men approach Susanna, one about to touch her elbow, the other seeming to pull her cloak away. They both lean in on her. In his depiction of the scene Lely concentrates the viewer’s attention on to the faces of the three characters. These are well lit whereas the rest of the scene, apart from Susanna’s upper body and arms, are dull and dimly lit. Susanna's face has an expression of anguish, as if only just realising what is happening, one hand clasps her cloak to her chest, the other points away from the scene. The expression on the faces of the elders is leering.

There are many versions of this story by numerous artists. Smith (1993) records frescos illustrating the story from around the year 250. These early interpretations illustrate various scenes from the story. Van Miegrot (No Date) notes “As the 16th century progressed, various biblical scenes became popular, such as the Judgement of Solomon, Susanna and the Elders, and Esther and Ahasuerus”. In these later interpretations of the story, however, it is one scene that dominates all others – that where Susanna is about to bathe and is accosted by the elders. Danto (2005 p175) gives his opinion
as to why this is a popular subject “The viewer is given an eyeful of Susanna's nakedness, with the excuse that the story after all is from the bible”.

Daughtery (2014) asserts that “While the Biblical story has moral, theological and judicial themes depicted in the Christian centuries, the male artists that painted Susanna in the later centuries used the inspirational moral story as an excuse to depict a beautiful young female as the subject of sexual opportunity”.

Lindgren in Roberts (1998 p151) takes up this theme by contrasting the version by a female artist (Artemisia Gentileschi) with those interpretations of the scene by male artists. She states “The prominent artists who chose this subject matter, including Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt van Rijn and those of the Carracci circle, presented the work in such a manner as to nullify the ending of the tale as given in the ancestral writings and continue the slander by depicting Susanna as a temptress”.

She contrasts Gentileschi’s work with that of Tintoretto. She considers that Tintoretto’s version is similar in intent to many other male artists. She believes the portrayal of the setting, body position and drapery slanders Susanna and that “she appears to be provocative and anxious for sexual activity”. In the Gentileschi version Lindgren believes that Susanna appears “frightened and awkward”. She goes on to explain how this is achieved “by isolating the figure of Susanna and compressing it into the rigid geometry of the shallow space of a frieze .... as well as by emphasising the conspiratorial attitude of the elders”. She concludes that the difference with the other artists mentioned is that Gentileschi portrays Susanna “as a victim and the slanderous implications about her in other representations are missing”.

But I found the Lely version a little different from the depictions by Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Rubens etc. Hunter (2013) compares Lely’s painting with the Tintoretto whose “numerous renderings of the theme consistently harness the diagonals of the canvas to strafe Susanna’s full-length figure with the Elder’s lurid gazes” whereas Lely “compresses his scene into a tightly cropped, self enclosed study of fomenting reaction and recognition”.

The Web Gallery of Art ([http://www.wga.hu/index.html](http://www.wga.hu/index.html)) lists some 28 versions, and this is not complete as there are some paintings of the subject that I know which are not listed there (Hayez and Picasso are not listed there). The majority of these would probably fit the descriptions of Daughtery and Lindgren. To my mind the Lely painting is different and I believe this is because the artist has tried to capture something different. I think that he is portraying the moment at which the full horror of what is happening is finally being realised by Susanna. This is why Susanna is fully clothed, this is why the focus is on the faces and expressions of the three characters. The elders are
leaning in on Susanna, touching her, pulling her clothes. This conveys the sense of the violation that is happening and Susanna’s face shows that she has just realised what is happening.

Bibliography


Van Miegroet, H., (No Date). Oxford Art Online. *Justice Scenes*. Available from: 