

Women, Art and Antiquity. Breaking Clichés through Archaeological Research

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Presentation

Women, Art, and Antiquity: Breaking Clichés is a project developed by the Arsmaya Research Group of the University of Valencia to highlight the roles assumed by women from diverse cultural, age, and social strata during the period of Antiquity.

Despite their historical eminence, many of these women have been systematically rendered invisible or relegated to a secondary role by History.

This has led us to craft historical recreations developed through the joint work of the Arsmaya team and artist Érika Meijide Jansen. These aim to present new interpretations of the past that are more faithful to reality, based on recent research carried out by Arsmaya and by other colleagues. An example of this are the scenes shown in this work, which focus on women's participation in ritual activities.



Women and Ritual

Through the creation of the images we present in this work, we have explored different ways of depicting female participation in ritual life, across various social strata, ages, and cultures. Firstly, the prominent role of women in the blessing rituals of the newly constructed Maya traditional house stands out. This is an aspect of Pre-Hispanic Maya daily life that is rarely discussed and even less frequently represented. This is especially true when compared to the rituals of the elite, which we also highlight in the following image. The prominent role of women in bloodletting rituals in ancient Maya society was crucial for understanding their position in the court, as evidenced by iconographic and epigraphic sources. With this historical recreation, we aim to make this significant topic more accessible to a broader audience. Similarly, other less-explored aspects of rituality are highlighted, such as the participation of women in the performance of music as part of ritual actions. This is depicted in our portrayal of the pilgrimage scene at the Punic sanctuary cave of Es Culleram, which also shows the connection with the landscape and the social heterogeneity of this Mediterranean culture.

Methodology

In the development of historical recreations, our methodology is rooted in the results of our research on Pre-Hispanic American and Ancient Mediterranean cultures, which we then conveyed to the artist. The process unfolds in several phases, starting with research team meetings to decide the specific themes for each new series of images. This is followed by various meetings between the artist and the research team to present the concept and outline the work plan. This collaboration leads to the artist creating sketches, which are then discussed with the research team until a final consensus on the artistic production is reached. In-depth research is conducted on different topics, which always revolve around women's contributions to the development of diplomatic, political, intellectual, artistic, economic, and domestic activities, with the aim of highlighting their importance. We draw inspiration from various sources: archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic. The final phases involve the development of dissemination materials, such as printed calendars illustrated with these images, which have been positively embraced by the public.



Development and Results

The Project promotes various activities to disseminate these historical recreations of past culture from a gender perspective. Firstly, these illustrations are being used to create the *Women, Art, and Antiquity: Breaking Clichés* calendars. So far, four calendars have been produced for the years 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, while the 2025 calendar is currently in progress. The illustrations are educational and feature representations of women from different cultures, both from the Ancient Mediterranean and Pre-Hispanic America. They cover various themes, including women's relationship with art, writing, and architecture, as well as their connections with political and military power, among others. The calendars also highlight women's productive pursuits, encompassing commonly recognized activities such as weaving, maintenance, and caregiving, along with lesser-known activities such as perfume making or their leadership in performing rituals, as shown in the scenes presented here.

These representations are accompanied by explanatory texts that, along with the images, help to mitigate traditional stereotypes associated with women of the past while also emphasizing the value of these activities. Additionally, the research findings and critical reflections on the creation of these historical recreations are presented and discussed in the Annual Permanent Seminar *Women, Art, and Antiquity: Breaking Clichés*. This seminar is closely linked to the gender-related content that Arsmaya researchers teach in our university courses.



More information:
<https://www.uv.es/arsmaya/calendar>