

Sex Sells. More Than Ever.
By Ana Tajder

Art history is crowded with images of women, pictured, painted, sculptured. Remember Venus of Willendorf? The Egyptian Queen Nefertiti? The Greek Goddess Nike? Da Vinci's Mona Lisa? Delacroix's *Freedom Guiding the People*? Klimt's *Judith*?

Sometimes, they were glorified for their beauty, power or status. Sometimes, they symbolise larger ideas such as freedom or love or glory. And sometimes, they were adored simply for what they were - women. Naked women, beautiful women, average women, powerful women, struggling women. Mothers, daughters, lovers, wives. Flattering, isn't it?

Yes, flattering. It was, at least sometimes. But not anymore. Something scary has happened: Advertising swallowed art, and with it, women's dignity. It has taken away art's power and confiscated its most beloved theme. With the rise of modern art, female beauty has disappeared from artwork and appeared instead on ads for vaults, cars and guns. And with it, women have moved from being a cherished object of appreciation to just being an object. And one of manipulation and abuse.

Last winter, driving through Vienna, the city was, as always in winter, grey and sad. Suddenly, I was brutally awakened from my hibernation by a huge poster covering the whole façade of a building. This jumbo poster couldn't be missed - its size and its sparkly whiteness dominated Vienna's grey scenery. It pictured a Barbie look-alike lying in white snow in a position usually reserved for a gynaecologic chair, wearing pink shorts, hugging a pink bunny and smiling invitingly into the camera. She had to smile over her shoulder because she couldn't move - she was wearing pink skis which were stuck in snow.

Translation: This woman was freezing, naked in the snow, stuck into the ultimately vulnerable position, but smiling happily an invitation to be taken. Everything about it was wrong. And the wrong has a name – sexist advertising.

This is what got me thinking about sexism in Austrian advertising: The picturing of women as sex objects, turning them into products, items for consumption, in subordinate roles or as manipulators to sell products.

In today's world of strong, independent women who finally have the possibility to live the equality fought for by previous generations, you might think that times would have changed, that the time of using women as objects, be it as slaves, low-paid workers, or sex objects, would be past.

But it seems we are far from it. It seems that along with the emancipation's empowerment of woman, a citadel of opinion makers have fought back with another female archetype – the Bimbo.

A bimbo feeds today's a man with the illusion their modern real-life wives do not: she is a doll with no mind of her own, who is there to serve. To please. So here she is: In the snow, tied, so she cannot escape. Bimbos can be found in two places: Hanging on the arm of a very rich man or – in advertising. In either case, she is unattainable for the average man. And in every case she is virtual, her looks manipulated by a knife or by airbrush.

Advertising's sexist craze with the Bimbo is dangerous.

For one thing, the image of this plastic and overly sexual woman is a powerful source of frustration. In men, her unnatural sexuality builds expectations which cannot be fulfilled. In women, her manipulated beauty builds complexes which cannot be healed.

Second, she is turning human's strongest primal instinct – his sexual instinct - against women, and manipulating us into spending money in the hopeless quest for unreal beauty. And finally, it is keeping alive the idea which should by now have been forgotten – the idea that a woman as nothing but an object to be raped, beaten or forced to give pleasure for free.

What rich men do, we cannot control. But can we control what advertising does? Today's advertising is being "controlled" in two ways; one is relying on self-regulation and the other on complaints to advertising complaint boards.

Self-regulation is tricky: In times flooded by images and messages, when nothing can shock anymore, the war for attention is getting tougher. Today, any publicity is good – even when it is bad. As American circus tycoon P.T. Barnum said, "I don't care what you say about me, as long as you spell my name right." Banned commercials can be found on YouTube where they are sometimes consciously placed by advertisers. This so called "viral marketing" relies on many people's strange habit to send their friends ads that are not shown on TV. And it works.

Another problem with self-regulation is that, as long as decision makers in companies and advertising agencies are men, the rules are totally one-sided. "Women represent 60-70% of the employees in advertising agencies, but only 30% on the decision making level," said Goran Golik, Creative Director of TBWA Vienna.

And given the number of complaints sent to Austrian complaint board Werberat, one has to wonder if self-regulation is really working. The number of complaints to Werberat doubled in 2008, with 110 in the first half of 2008 alone, up from 113 for all of 2007. Complaints regarding discrimination against women and sexist advertising currently make 55% of the total. What is happening? Do we like to complain more or is there more to complain about? None of both, believes Adrea Stodl, General Manager of Werberat "As a part of recent re-organisation, we have placed more focus on Public Relations. This means, we brought attention to Werberat and automatically increased the awareness." In short, we now finally know that we *can* complain. And whom we can complain to.

The effectiveness of complaint boards is questionable. For one thing, they are reactive which means, they react when it is too late – after the public has already seen the ad and complained about it. Second, these bodies do not have real enforcement power. All they can do is warn the company that the image should be changed, removed or not used in the next campaign. My favourite warning on Werberat's website says that "next time, the company should approach the topic with more sensitivity."

If a company does not react to the warning, the most Werberat can do is to warn the public about the company's advertising policy. The public, which has, let's not forget, already warned Werberat about this very problem.

Although European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) launched an International Council, set up to foster worldwide exchange of self-regulation best practice, the current tango being danced between politics and business shows that we cannot expect better regulation. We can only hope that soon, a larger number of strong women will occupy decision-making positions and ban the *Bimboisation* of women in advertising. And maybe, artists will finally wake up from their deconstructive dream and rediscover the power of female beauty.

Like Zeus stealing Europe, art should steal the woman back from advertising to love her as she should be loved, pictured her in the full glory of her existence. Not only in her capability to arouse the lowest instincts. And sell asparagus - as in the latest campaign Werberat has asked to be stopped.

Unfortunately too late. Again.