

About Endometriosis in History and History of arts

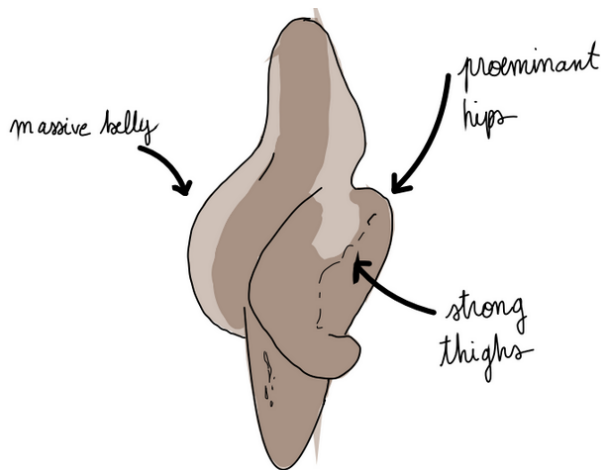
Endometriosis is a disease that affects the female sexual organs but spreads to other parts of the body. For a long time, endometriosis has been largely unknown and ignored by a section of the medical profession, even if it affects a significant proportion of women, about one in ten. For the iGEM competition 2021, the project of our team, GO Paris-Saclay, is to work on a diagnosis tool of endometriosis. It is not only a question of proposing a new methods, but also taking an interest in the social and human dimension of the disease, with the Human Practices part of the project, through interviews, explanatory videos, panel discussion and articles.

This article aims to show endometriosis and its representation in art, under different research axes. First, to show its visibility, or on the contrary, its invisibility, in the history of Western and non-Western art, we will briefly address the representation of women in history. Then, we will see the representation of endometriosis, particularly in contemporary art, and what are the approaches of artists who depict it in their works.

Feminine representation in Arts

If we must briefly summarize the representation of the female figure in art, it is often synonymous with sensuality, eroticism and fantasy, or holiness and religion. People sometimes depict popular representations, but often as part of the art of portraiture that reflects the psyche, or to testify to a social reality of peasant, worker or noble people.

The first female pictorial representations agree to represent a pregnant and fertile state of the woman. The National Museum of Saint-Germain-en-Laye holds a collection of anthropomorphic female figurines, commonly known as “Venus.” These are stylized representations of a broad pelvis, hips, strong thighs, protruding buttocks, and a bulky, massive belly. The figuration then accentuates the characteristics of a pregnant woman and emphasizes the theme of fertility.



“Vénus” de Tursac, Paléolithique, Gravettian era around 25 000 B-C, stone, 3,9cm ; 8.1cm : 2.3cm

These testimonies of gravid representations can be found not only in Western Europe but also much earlier in the Near East. Female figures, painted or sculpted, are often linked to the theme of hunting and agriculture

During Ancient Egypt, medicine is an important part of life, as you need to have a healthy body in order to enter the afterworld. Papyri are used as a support for literature, liturgical text, important administration papers and medicine papers.

One of the first medical paper about endometriosis

The Kahun gynaecological papyrus is one of the oldest writing linked with endometriosis. It was written around 1825 BC, around the reign of Amenemhat and discovered in 1889 by the British archeologist Flinders Petrie. This papyrus is divided in 34 paragraphs dealing with a specific medical complaint. In one of them, menstrual pain and precisely the mention of womb pain are referred to by terms as « womb discharge », « terror of the womb » or « wandering womb ». Treatments like massages with oil, fumigation or ingestion of organs like liver are suggested, but no indications of surgery proceedings were made.



For female representation in ancient Greece, Polykleitos, author of a book entitled *The canon of Polykleitos*, which links art and mathematics, worked on an idealized representation, although endowed with a certain realism. But it is above all one of those contemporaries, Praxiteles, who induced a novelty in Greek statuary with an even more sensual representation of the female figure naked. A copy of his Aphrodite of Cnidus is preserved in the Louvre and known as Kaufmann's head. The original statue was intended for the inhabitants of the island of Cos who found the work so shocking that they refused it. This statue influenced Greek art

up to the Hellenistic era, notably with the famous Venus de Milo, but this first nude in classical Greek sculpture opens the way to a great tradition, to this day. This representation then reveals an image of the woman as a goddess, divine and idealized. The characteristics of the material also give us an image of purity (although it was not the case in reality).

Doctors from Classical Antiquity made some progress in gynaecological health but not specifically about endometriosis. In some of their texts Hippocrates and Plato seem to see the uterus as an animal living “down there”. They believed that if women did not have a child, her womb would begin to wander, leading to illnesses. We can put forward that endometriosis is one of the illnesses that they thought about. But in a way, Hippocrate illuminated facts about endometriosis :menstrual dysfunction, the infertility that the disease can lead to, and a pregnancy as a possible cure for the disease. The recommended treatments were made of anti-inflammatory substances.

With the medieval area, diseases (the most-known is plague) during that time of history were often associated with sin. In this case, Endometriosis, which is a feminine pathology, was then associated with the sin of a demonic possession and a punishment for the original sin committed by Eve. The representation of women during this time of History is mostly associated with religion. Women are not represented naked unless for the figure of Eve and sinners. In addition, from the 13th century onwards, we see the development of a Marian cult and the multiplication of works representing Christian martyrs, all in a vision of putting the Church in the foreground and affirming it. The woman par excellence is therefore Mary, a pure virgin who has been preserved from original sin. The representation of gynecological diseases and endometriosis in art is also linked to the role of women in medieval and modern society. It is favoured by the omnipresence of the Christian religion, where the woman is fertile and destined to bear the offspring begotten by the man. The representation of women then revolves around fertility, a phenomenon that is problematic for people with endometriosis because the disease causes fertility problems. Representing a female pathology is synonymous for shame and sin

As for medicine, Aetius of Amida promoted treatments for this « hysteria » that included a firm choking and torture. Despite different treatments during antiquity, he made a good hypothesis supposing that the pain was linked with contraction of the womb. It is pertinent to add that during that time doctors could not study the body because carrying out a postmortem examination was not allowed by the Church.

The first mention of a famous word : hysteria.

During the Renaissance, the hazy words such as suffocating womb, terror of the womb were pushed aside. All of this was replaced by another Greek term : *hysteria*. “Hyst” is a common word in Greek and in Latin to refer to the womb.

Unfortunately, the 17th and 18th centuries tended to show a deterioration in which hysteria was a sign of demonic possession and was treated harshly. The painting of Johann Heinrich Füssli, realised in 1781 and titled the Nightmare, is usually seen as a prequel of Freudian theory and subscient. A beautiful and sensual woman is lying on a bed and a

creature that looks like a demon is sitting on her belly while looking at the spectator. But this picture can also be seen as a representation of a woman possessed by a demon.



The 19th century saw an improvement in the understanding of endometriosis thanks to medical progress, particularly with the first oophorectomy. The various symptoms are combined to form a disease, the catamenial hematoceles. Physicians notice that organs such as the pelvic wall, fallopian tubes, bowel etc... may be affected. A physician in particular, Karl von Rokitansky is the first to identify endometriosis with the assistance of a microscope. Despite improvements, endometriosis treatment has not improved as much, due to social norms and ideology. Patients are often given morphine or hot showers. But some treatments had a high lethal rate like the one consisting in puncturing nodules and scraping the contents of the uterus with scissors or fingernail.

A painting depicts Jean-Martin Charcot who set up a clinic for hysterics at La Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris. More recently, a film called *le Bal des Folles* depicts the medical world of La Salpêtrière in which sick and unhealthy women were locked up. The movie gives us a glimpse through a ball organised every year and which mixes the committed women and people from the bourgeoisie which has a kind of fascination for hysteria. It is interesting to see that in the 19th century and before, mental illness, sexual illness and female illness were associated together. These associations are accentuated with the fact that people attributed a psychological origin when they found no symptoms. The phenomenon was in a way caused by the assumption of Sigmund Freud, a neurologist known to be the “father of psychoanalysis”. His hypothesis about the cause of hysteria was a sexual traumatic experience notably during childhood. Treatments were massages to induce an orgasm including vibration made by electronic devices.



BROUILLET, Pierre Aristide André, a Clinical lesson at the Salpêtrière, 1887, 290cm X 430 cm, Paris, Paris Descartes University

It is only in 1925 that the word Endometriosis appears, in a publication from the American gynaecologist John Sampson. *Endo* means within ; *metri* uterus and *osis* diseased condition. With the medical progress of the 20th century and even more of the 21th century, Endometriosis has been more known.

Women affected by endometriosis and artists create artwork to educate more people towards endometriosis. Through her work entitled *Break out my pelvic sorcery*, Australian artist Eugenie Lee presents an immersive work with a device in the shape of a belt : it causes sensations mimicking pelvic pain, the main and one of the many chronic symptoms of endometriosis. The title is evocative here with a link between the pain caused and witchcraft, an inexplicable phenomenon, with mostly negative connotations, but also little known and feared which is another comparison with the way in which the disease is swept from the diagnosis by some health professionals. The artwork thus combines installation, science and feeling for the spectator, who is here the subject of the experience that leads him to the sensation of chronic pain. The device used by the artist was originally used for therapeutic purposes, but it was reconfigured with the aim of causing pain.



Photography from the webarticle ABC arts

Most recently, in march 2021, a virtual exhibition titled *#painstories* of fourteen artists took place commissioned by AMV BBDO. Some of the artists are actually suffering from endometriosis and explain that the creative process for this exhibition was a therapeutic way. Artists produced various works dealing personally with their ideas and feeling about the disease. The artwork created by Selby Hurst is named *Misery Roulette*. We can see the representation of a lower belly open and a roulette which includes screw, nail, eye tearing blood, knife and cells. The medium used here is wool and gives the impression of a softness



Credits © Selby Hurst

which is paradoxical in case of endometriosis. The entire artwork is made in red and pink shades, symbolizing cells from the endometrium. These are the same colours used in the artwork of the photographers Anaïs Morisset Desmond and Martin Straub in their exhibition named *The Invisible*. They took photographs of different women dealing with endometriosis with a pink background which is actually a microscopic observation of the endometrium cells.



Photo Credits © Anaïs Morisset Desmond/Martin Straub

Contemporary art explores endometriosis not only by depicting patients, but more deeply and intimately than with portraiture alone. These artists make the choice to describe the pain, specific to each one, by trying to make them felt in brutal and violent works that sometimes put the spectator at the very heart of the experience.

There is a phenomenon that feeds between the exposure by health professionals who no longer reject this diagnosis and the liberation of women's voices linked to the issues and instigated by movements on social networks. Another area that seems to emerge and that it would be appropriate to address in the near future, is the impact of the medias and mainly social networks on endometriosis.

Eve DO ESPIRITO SANTO

Bibliography

<https://arts.konbini.com/photo/pour-rendre-visible-lendometriose-une-expo-met-des-visages-sur-une-souffrance-tue>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-03/artist-eugenie-lee-chronic-pain-of-endometriosis-vr-installation/12989868>

<https://arts.konbini.com/photo/lendometriose-et-la-misogynie-medicale-explorees-dans-une-serie-artistique-puissante>

Laura Pennanec’h, « Rendre le mal visible ? », *Les chantiers de la création* [En ligne], 12 | 2020, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2020, consulté le 14 août 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lcc/2696> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/lcc.2696>

Monachesi Ribeiro Alessandra, « Le corps et le féminin dans l'art contemporain », *Recherches en psychanalyse*, 2010/1 (n° 9), p. 113-131. DOI : 10.3917/rep.009.0113. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherches-en-psychanalyse1-2010-1-page-113.htm>

<https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/collection/objet/la-venus-de-tursac>

<https://endometriosisnetwork.com/blog/a-history-of-endometriosis-part-ii-the-20th-century-and-beyond>

<https://endometriosisnetwork.com/blog/a-history-of-endometriosis-part-i-from-ancient-egypt-to-hysteria>

<https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/endometriosis-awareness-month>

<https://adage.com/creativity/work/libresse-turns-its-attention-endometriosis-pain-dictionary-and-virtual-museum/2317946>