

Evolving iconography of the Great Goddess in art: The social and cultural impact of the 20th-century Goddess movement on art

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Abstract: The Goddess movement that emerged in the 1960s at the intersection of third-wave feminism and neoliberal religious movements has left an indelible mark on the artistic and cultural representations of gender-spirituality associations of the time. Artists like Mary Beth Edelson, Judy Chicago, and Monica Sjoo attempted to reclaim the ancient pre-patriarchal mother goddess iconography to signify the emergence of a 'divine feminine' counter-narrative, and many subsequent artists actively engaged with the images of the Great Goddess as a potent means of re-imagining and re-empowering women in contemporary society. This paper intends to explore the impact of the Goddess movement on artistic expressions of the time by analysing three aspects: (i) the role of the movement in contributing a corpus of imagery and symbolism of the Great Goddess to contemporary art; (ii) the evolution of the goddess iconography and its transference to contemporary artists; and (iii) how the artists used the goddess imagery to build parallel counter-narratives of feminist spirituality. Thus, this paper aims to understand the evolving iconography of the Great Goddess in art, foregrounding the social and cultural impact of the Goddess movement on feminist artistic practices.

Keywords: Goddess movement, iconography, Great Goddess, feminist art, reclamation, contemporary art

Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century was a tumultuous era that witnessed profound political and social upheavals and a revolutionary wave in the literary, artistic, and popular culture spheres. This was a time that was marked by the evolution of avant-garde movements in art like abstract expressionism, the blooming of counter-cultural movements like punk and hippie movements, the deconstruction of traditional narrative

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structures in literature, and the popularisation of mass culture through the expansion of television and other media, all of which left an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the population. This time witnessed a remarkable blurring of boundaries between different art forms, which gave way to an interdisciplinary approach to creative expression. Artists and writers were swept by the spirit of experimentation and the urge to transcend boundaries by intentionally merging different art and literary forms and integrating multiple mediums into creating a multisensory experience, which is very much in the spirit of this era. This era was also characterised by a fundamental shift in the consciousness of the population. Inspired by the legacy of the previous social and political movements like the feminist movement, civil rights movement, and anti-war movements, people had a heightened sense of urgency to question and challenge the conventional norms that ruled society. These movements fueled radical transformations in collective thinking and paved the way for new paradigms that could address pressing societal issues.

The emergence of radical feminism and third wave feminist movement towards the end of the nineteenth century infused the spirit of feminist spirituality into art, literature, and popular culture that brought in a transformative re-envisioning of the 'divine feminine' in an attempt to provide a spiritual reservoir for the future generation of women to tap into. The period spanning from 1960 to 1990 was particularly significant in this context because this period witnessed a significant proliferation and radicalisation of counter-cultural and reconstructionist movements within the United States. This movement was identified as the Goddess Movement primarily because the followers used the image of the pre-patriarchal pagan mother goddess to create a counter-narrative against the patriarchal narratives of religions and spirituality.

Feminist artists and writers, influenced by the radical principles to challenge existing power structures and empower women, actively engaged with the images of the Great Goddess to re-imagine and re-empower women in contemporary society. They explored the political implications of the Great Goddess, her representations in the past, and the socio-political dynamics surrounding power, gender and spirituality. Many artists and scholars drew inspiration from ancient mythologies and archetypes of the Great Goddess. In visual art, feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Mary Beth Edelson created large-scale installations and paintings that centred on the image of the Great Goddess. Their works often incorporated symbols and imagery from a variety of cultures and

mythologies, creating a cross-cultural iconography. In literature, feminist authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison explored similar themes, weaving in elements of spirituality and mythology. Their work continues to inspire and influence contemporary artists and writers and has left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of late twentieth-century America.

This paper intends to study the evolving iconography of the Goddess through the artworks of the pioneers of the Goddess movement, like Mary Beth Edelson, Judy Chicago, Monica Sjoo, and Buffie Johnson. The social impact of the Goddess movement on the artistic landscape of the time can be assessed and understood through a visual and semiotic analysis of the representation of the Goddess. The scope of the article extends to understanding the transference of the Goddess iconography to the later feminist artists, thus leading to an understanding of how the iconography of the Goddess became a powerful image and is still evolving with time to being transferred from artist to artist. The aim of this paper is to understand the formulation of an evolving iconography of the 'divine feminine' in art narratives as a means to challenge patriarchal norms and promote spiritual liberation for women. The study will contribute to the fields of art history and gender studies by providing insights into the ways in which women artists and authors have reimagined the divine feminine and its significance in contemporary culture.

Contributions of the Goddess Movement to contemporary art

The Goddess movement and feminist spirituality primarily began as feminist movements, which envisioned a change in the religious roles of women framed by patriarchal societies. They began using goddess archetypes as a new metaphoric language to refer to their inner power and spirituality within, and also to explore and envision their roles outside the existing dominant and restrictive constructs. This growing interest in the use of goddess imagery and allusions to the prehistoric mother Goddess was heavily influenced by the archaeological excavations of Marija Gimbutas into the Neolithic sites in Southeastern Europe. She expanded the scope of archaeology beyond anthropology, combining linguistics, history, comparative religion, and mythology, and called it 'archaeomythology' (Marler 1996, 45). Her first book, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 7000 - 3500 BC*, was published in 1974, followed by *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). These books extensively discuss the cultural elements in

the Neolithic worship systems and study the small figurines of the Goddess that Gimbutas excavated from the archaeological sites, thus laying a factual foundation for many artists and authors to situate their works on. As Jennie Klein writes,

Women's spirituality was very appealing to visual artists for several reasons. First, evidence for the existence of ancient matrifocal cultures existed in the form of small, anthropomorphic sculptures, cave paintings, and monumental stone structures from the prehistoric era that appeared to be female and that cultural feminists assumed were priestesses and Goddess figures, giving many artists an already existing bank of nonpatriarchal images to tap into. (Klein 2009, 580)

The pioneers of the Goddess movement in art, like Mary Beth Edelson, Judy Chicago, Monica Sjoo, and Lucy Stein, intended to reclaim and recontextualise the Goddess within the landscape of contemporary art, to create a corpus of goddess imagery in art. These efforts established a visual language that subsequent generations of artists could draw upon, making the goddess a recurring symbol of empowerment in contemporary art. If we look at the kind of imagery and symbols that these artists have used to refer to the goddess and her agency, it can be found that they rely heavily on historical and mythical representations of the goddess. The earth as mother goddess; the cycles of birth, regeneration and death; the resurrection of the body; ecological and environmental symbolism; and the feminine body as the temple of the goddess are the recurring motives that the early goddess artists relied on. However, it can be observed that the later goddess artists panned their symbolism and imagery to broader themes, thus widening the thematic and symbolic dimensions of Goddess imagery in art.

Judy Chicago's art, particularly her most celebrated *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) (Figure 1), shows how goddess images fit into feminist ideas. She made a symbolic dinner table with spots for women from myths and history, putting women at the center of human culture. The vulva and flower shapes that fill her work remind us of old goddesses like Ishtar and Inanna, showing the strength and holiness of women's bodies. This way, Chicago's art fights against the stories told by men that have shaped religious and cultural images for a long time. Mary Beth Edelson's art also uses goddess images, but in a more outspoken and political way. Edelson's well-known piece *Some Living American Women Artists / Last Supper* (1972) (Figure 2) puts the faces of women artists on Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, with Georgia O'Keeffe in Jesus' place. By taking one of the most famous pictures in Western Christian art and

swapping out the men for women, Edelson points out problems with both religious male power and how women have been left out of art history. It is the pre-patriarchal representations of female deities that Edelson often narrows her use of goddess imagery to. Her use of these figures thus proceeds beyond simple aestheticism: it represents a political gesture to subvert the patriarchal control over religious and cultural symbols. Her use of the iconography of ancient fertility goddesses in work such as her Goddess Head series lets Edelson tap into a continuity of female power which predates and goes far beyond the patriarchal religion.



Figure 1. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, ceramic, porcelain, textile, 1974–79. © Judy Chicago



Figure 2. Mary Beth Edelson, *Some Living American Women Artists*, collage, 1972. © Mary Beth Edelson

Monica Sjoö was highly influenced by ecofeminism and the wider feminist spiritual movement of the 1970s. These movements revived women's connection with ancient matriarchal traditions and reattached

them to the earth. For Sjöo, the goddess was not only an archaic figure or a myth but something active, symbolising women's struggle against all the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonialism, and environmental exploitation. One of Sjöo's most widely known works is *God Giving Birth* (1968), where a cosmic mother gives birth to the universe in a primal, powerful image. The painting was revolutionary at the time, touching taboos about the body of the female, childbirth and the sacred. Such a goddess depiction was deliberately provoking in its intent to problematise the prevailing Western religious discourse of that time, that of the Christian patriarchy. Sjöo's goddess is shown as an independent force of creation, power, and autonomy, exemplifying the life-giving and life-sustaining powers of women. The painting was considered provocative- even blasphemous when it first came out, almost enough to make one wonder how society would be so irate with depictions of female deities and the savage, untamed properties of the feminine.

In the article "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s", Jennie Klein notes that the advent of cultural feminism in the 1970s, with its emphasis on feminist spirituality, made the Goddess movement prominent in literary and artistic circles (Klein 2009, 580). The reclamation of pre-patriarchal goddesses was directly expressed in the art and performances of artists like Betsy Damon and Cheri Gaulke. Betsy Damon's performance art, *The 7,000 Year Old Woman* (1977), marks a very crucial point in the influence of the Goddess movement in re-interpreting and rejuvenating old feminine archetypes through contemporary artistic expression. This artistic performance, grounded in Damon's dream and her personal ties to the goddess tradition, was inspired by the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus—a deity linked to fertility and abundance, associated with a Neolithic goddess site located in Turkey. Damon's execution of the piece, staged in the financial heart of Wall Street, included her body being adorned with small pouches filled with coloured flour, which she ritualistically punctured throughout the public ceremony. Through the visual image of Diana of Ephesus and placing her performance within a modern, urban, and capitalist context, she challenged the erasure of the feminine from history and its position in current power structures.



Figure 3. Betsy Damon, *The 7,000 Year Old Woman*, Performance art, 1977. © Betsy Damon

The early goddess artists like Buffie Johnson, Betsy Damon, and Cheri Gaulke worked extensively with the representations of the divine feminine found in Palaeolithic depictions, which are characterised by self-referential images, such as those used in the Venus of Willendorf forms. Such imagery serves, for both spiritual feminists and goddess artists, as a historic touchstone as well as a visionary tool to contest the erasure of matriarchal traditions within patriarchal narratives. With such ancient forms, the early goddess artists created a dialogic space between the past and the present through which contemporary gender dynamics were critiqued while there was a renewal of a spiritual connection with the feminine. It reflects something of the much larger cultural initiative of which the Goddess movement has been a part: the imagination of the divine feminine both as an archetypal influence and as an instrument for visioning the future as more just and spiritually inclusive.

The latter goddess artists, who drew inspiration from the goddess movement and their predecessors, however, attempted and envisioned a more radical and diverse discourse through their art. Their representations were characterised by more intersectional and inclusive imageries, trying to bridge diverse cultural, racial and spiritual traditions. On one hand, it expanded the scope of the Goddess movement to a global level, promoting transnational dialogue, and on the other hand, it situated the Great Goddess as a universal symbol of resistance and regeneration.

Evolution and transference of Goddess iconography

The legacy of the Goddess movement from the 1960s has powerfully influenced a new generation of artists, many of whom today continue to engage with goddess imagery as a tool for feminist expression, spiritual exploration, and critiques of patriarchal structures. These artists have expanded and interpreted the god-goddess motifs into today's social, political, and cultural conflicts. Contemporary artist Kiki Smith draws upon themes of female embodiment and transformation that are central to goddess mythology for the female body as both sacred and subversive. Examples of this include her installation *Lilith* (1994), in which she takes ancient figures and gives them expression in line with contemporary feminist concerns over autonomy, resistance, and empowerment. This imagery also resonates with the goddess imagery in Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series, where she merged her body into the earth to revitalise ancient fertility goddesses. Her work relates spiritualism to ecology and is an ecofeminist theme of the Goddess movement.



Figure 4. Kiki Smith, *Lilith*, silicon bronze and glass, 1994. © Kiki Smith

In the exploration of the divine feminine by Kara Walker through her work, there runs an intertwining so deep in that she becomes that person drawing race and gender and, so importantly, historical memory, especially as it relates to the African American experience. Walker re-imagines the goddess motif in her iconic silhouettes and large-scale installations to address the questions of power, race and sexuality. In many of her works, women characters often serve as both victims and aggressors, recycling myth and history that describe black women as hyper-sexualised, yet again, negatively defined. A fine example is A

Subtlety, or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), where Walker utilises a monolithic sphinx, sugar-covered, as a rhetorical device to merge the mammy stereotype with once-revered fertility goddesses of old. Here, the iconography of the goddess is loaded with historical and social content, referring to the exploitative labour of black women in the sugar plantations through the sugar medium, while the excess features of the body of the sphinx refer to the commodification of black female bodies. Walker's conception of divine femininity thus critiques and re-appropriates the old goddess imagery, which is that the goddess is not only an emblem of mystical power but also an emblem of both violence and subjugation. This iconography thus derails the idealised, Eurocentric vision of the goddess as a pure or nurturing figure and places the divine feminine in lines of struggle, power poles, and reclamation that live in and through the hopes and desperation of marginalised women.

British contemporary artist Lucy Stein continues in the tradition of feminist artists like Monica Sjoo but infuses the reclaiming of goddess imagery with a distinctive modern and critical sensibility. Some of her work centres on feminist, mythical or folkloric themes, but more generally explores the nexus of relationships between gender, power, and spirituality through the goddess. One of Stein's most powerful critical uses of goddess imagery can be found in her art, *The Corn Goddess Goes Back on Instagram* (2021) (Figure 5). In this work, she employs the figure of the corn goddess, one who exemplifies fertility, agriculture, and cycles of life and death. The corn goddess Stein envisions is as far removed from serene, idealised figures commonly associated with goddess imagery as earthy and raw-tempered, perhaps even disruptive, the countercultural challenge to review quite safely, well-guaranteed assumptions about femininity, fertility, and nature.



Figure 5. Lucy Stein, *The Corn Goddess Goes Back on Instagram*, canvas, 2021 © Lucy Stein

Today, artists such as Bharti Kher continue to interpret goddess symbolism in the context of issues related to postcolonial and cultural identity. In the iconography of feminine power and tradition/contemporary concerns, Kher imbues such traditional symbols as bindi into her work to show how goddess imagery remains a powerful tool to challenge patriarchal structures globally. Her sculpture, *Ancestor* (2023), exemplifies the Goddess as a universal figure of motherhood. About the sculpture, Kher says, “children are from everywhere, all countries, all religions, all genders, all peoples: she embodies multiculturalism, pluralism, and interconnectedness” (Gilliam 2022). These artists and their art are examples of the long-term influence of the Goddess movement because they extend and evolve its iconography to reflect contemporary feminist, political, and cultural concerns. Contemporary reinterpretations go well beyond the primarily West-centric view of the 1960s by including diverse cultural and spiritual practices: for instance, Shirin Neshat’s works combine Islamic spiritual themes and feminist interpretations of the feminine divine in analyses of anti-patriarchy in both Western and non-Western cultures. In doing so, these artists illustrate how the iconography of the goddess has developed into a representative of multiple identities, thus challenging notions of gender and spirituality as essentialist categories.



Figure 6. Bharti Kher, *Ancestor*, painted bronze, 2023. © Bharti Kher

The appropriation of goddess representations by modern artists such as Saya Woolfalk, Chitra Ganesh, and Lina Iris Viktor exemplifies the transformation and reconfiguration of the divine feminine in reaction to

changing cultural, political, and aesthetic frameworks. Saya Woolfalk's *Empathics* initiative reconceptualises the goddess as an emblem of hybridity and communal change, using speculative fiction and posthumanist theories to examine the confluence of race, gender, and identity. She translates the goddess into a trope for change and transformation, thereby working through modern issues of assimilation and coexistence.

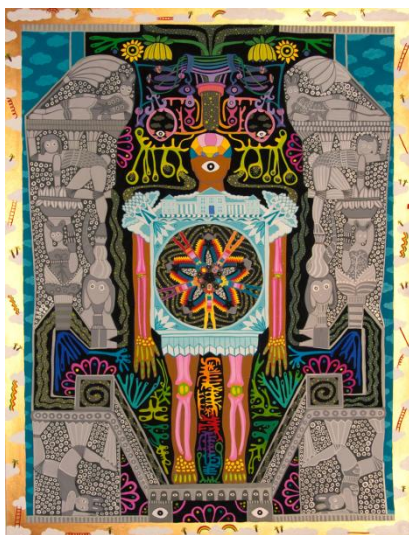


Figure 7. Saya Woolfalk, *Plant Alchemy 4*, Excerpt from *Empathics*, gouache on paper, 2009.
© Saya Woolfalk

Chitra Ganesh's work is based on South Asian mythological traditions but injects them with feminist and queer critiques. Lina Iris Viktor uses her powerful visual language of gold and deep black to evoke the goddess as a figure of both historical and cosmic importance. She works through West African spiritualities and Afrofuturism to construct the feminine as the epicentre of creation and power, simultaneously criticising the marginalisation of African participation in global art and culture. Together, these artists further the legacy of the Goddess movement by incorporating its fundamental themes- feminist spirituality, reclamation of marginalised identities, and deconstruction of hegemonic structures within contemporary contexts. Their methods pay tribute to the historical underpinnings of goddess iconography while at the same time stretching its boundaries, keeping it relevant in the face of 21st-century complexities.

Building counter-narratives of feminist spirituality

Across the works of Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, Monica Sjoo, Kara Walker, and many others, the reclaiming of the goddess imagery for female power is both a critical move against patriarchal and colonial structures and an attempt to rethink women's spiritual and social roles. From the reclaimed ancient goddess imagery, these artists create alternative narratives challenging the religious and cultural depictions of women, emphasising autonomy and creation in resisting oppressive systems.

For example, in Judy Chicago and Mary Beth Edelson, goddess symbolism was deeply connected with feminist spirituality in reconnecting with the pre-patriarchal histories and myths for women. Examples can be seen in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, while some works were formed and made by Mary Beth Edelson into *Some Living American Women Artists*; both of which demonstrate how the iconography of the goddess became an instrument in celebrating women's contributions and placing them within a very historic and large context. It was all about women's restoration of spiritual authority and also creating a visual language that links the past with contemporary feminist struggles. Monica Sjoo's works further illustrate the way the goddess can be a radical symbol of rebellion against both patriarchs and institutionalised religion. In *God Giving Birth* and other such works, Sjoo successfully extricates a goddess presentation from the liberal connotations which characterise most aspects of the spiritual and thus introduces a triumphant, creative, and integral part of life to the notion of divine feminine. Her art questions patriarchal connotations associated with a similar religious narration and affirms that the divine feminine is an origin and an essence of creation. The evolution of goddess iconography into the work of artists such as Kara Walker and Kiki Smith shows how the symbolism of the goddess became a vehicle to communicate issues that exceeded gender. Walker's use of goddess-like figures in works such as *A Subtlety* complicates the goddess narrative by merging it with the violent histories of race and colonialism. The goddess icon, especially in Walker's work, is at once a figure of strength and a reminder of the historical exploitation of black women's bodies, so it can be said that goddess iconography can sometimes be used as a critique of both racial and gender oppression.

The goddess iconography used by feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, and Monica Sjoo, far from merely female spirituality, was part of a larger feminist revitalisation movement that

was defined by Anthony F. C. Wallace. This work belongs to the feminist theology critique of patriarchal religious institutions and supports the idea of Louise B. Silverstein that feminist theology is literature for survival, where the divine feminine is resistance in unison with the natural. The reclaiming of goddess images was the exaltation of a liberation symbol, like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's idea about feminist theology, that it is a radically transformative force. These artists, through art, did not work for the mere inclusion of the female gender within male art domination but rather for reinterpretation through placement and emphasis of the divine feminine as a source of strength to survive and fight for social change.

Conclusion

Women's liberation movements have encompassed all the realms of our society and aspects of life. The arguments for the cultural, racial and sexual liberation of women started in the early 19th century and progressed over the years through radically criticising the structure of society and the construction of myths and religious stereotypes. Feminist theology developed as a movement to reform the androcentric edifices of several religions, like Christianity and Judaism. It lays emphasis on the revival of the Mother Goddess cult that prevailed before the establishment of Abrahamic religions, stressing the feminine aspects of divinity, concepts of Mother Nature and feminist archaeology. The reclaiming of pre-patriarchal goddess iconography in the 1960s provided a starting point for feminist explorations of spirituality and divinity in art. Mary Beth Edelson and Judy Chicago, among others, reinvigorated ancient goddess iconography but also gave it a narrative that challenged patriarchal norms and celebrated feminine power. This visual language corpus has inspired contemporary artists to continue drawing on the symbolism of the Great Goddess. The principles of the movement have been expanded by artists such as Kiki Smith and Ana Mendieta, who have incorporated themes of ecology, bodily autonomy, and cultural identity into their work. These works exemplify how the 1960s Goddess movement remains a touchstone for exploring new dimensions of feminist spirituality.

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