The Myth of Femininity:

Shared Visual Mechanisms in Tulip Images and Images of Women under Patriarchy

Research question

Under the influence of capitalism, how can I use the visual shaping mechanisms shared by women and tulips as objects of visual pleasure to show that ‘femininity’ comes from social manipulation, instead of being innate, in the form of publications?

Table of content

Introduction

This article takes the tulip—an ornamental plant subjected to centuries of controlled cultivation and frequently associated with women in language and symbolism—as a lens to examine the shared visual mechanisms and symbolic structures that link tulip imagery and images of women. It argues that, within capitalist patriarchy, neither tulip imagery nor images of women present “natural” bodies as they are; instead, both are produced through a shared set of feminising visual mechanisms that standardise, idealise and aestheticise. These constructed images function as mythic representations of “femininity”, appearing natural while, in practice, replacing nature and obscuring the operations of patriarchal power. Recognising this constructedness is essential for understanding how femininity is reproduced and for resisting its normative force.

Chapter One explains how the tulip came to function as an object of visual pleasure, and how forms produced through selective cultivation gradually displaced wild and fully opened tulips in the public imagination. It shows how an historically engineered aesthetic stereotype came to stand in for the tulip’s “natural” appearance, preparing the flower to operate as a feminised image.

Chapter Two examines how women are constituted as objects of visual pleasure under patriarchal viewing structures. It outlines how images are organised for a male spectator, how this viewing position persists across media, and how women internalise these visual norms as part of their own self-presentation. This provides the conceptual bridge for comparing women’s imagery with the visual treatment of tulips.

Chapter Three outlines how capitalist patriarchy constructs normative expectations of femininity—obedience, staying within bounds, cultivated fragility and ornamental beauty—through material arrangements of labour, law and ideology. These traits form the conceptual template that will later be materialised as shared feminising mechanisms in imagery.

Chapter Four develops the methodological framework. Drawing on linguistic and literary links between tulips and women, Barthes' account of myth as second-order signification, Goffman's theory of gender display and Butkowski and Tajima's work on the selective inheritance of gender-coded poses, it establishes a code-based approach for reading tulip imagery as a feminised visual form.

Chapter Five analyses the shared visual framing structures through which tulips and women are depicted—boundedness, dependence, curved posture, ornamental elaboration and disciplined semi-openness—and links them back to the formation of femininity outlined in Chapter Three. Chapter Six examines how these feminising visual codes are replicated and intensified within tulip imagery itself as it moves into modern advertising and photography. Chapter Seven traces the reverse circulation of femininity between tulips and women, showing how feminised tulip imagery feeds back into expectations of women's appearance and conduct, reinforcing patriarchal ideology under the guise of "natural" taste.

1. Tulips As Objects Of Visual Pleasure

Tulips are commonly classified and traded as ornamental rather than edible plants, and their market value is closely tied to visual appeal. Anna Pavord (1999) notes that in the early seventeenth-century Dutch tulip mania, bulbs displaying intricate, uncontrollable “feather” or “flame” patterns became the focus of speculative trading and commanded extraordinary prices. She records the most striking example as the “Eternal Augustus”, a bulb of Admiral van Enkhuijsen weighing 215 azijn, which was once sold for 5,400 guilders—the equivalent of around fifteen years’ wages for an average Amsterdam bricklayer. In other words, aesthetic rarity alone could generate extreme economic value.

Tulips have also proved remarkably “manageable”, not only because of their easily handled physical form, but because they respond readily to cultivation and selective breeding. Richard Wilford (2015) records that centuries of artificial propagation and control have produced thousands of registered commercial cultivars and hybrids. Pavord (1999) further notes that the vibrant red tulips commonly seen in gardens today are the result of intensive selection and breeding from wild species native to Central Asia and the Caucasus. The contrast between cultivated varieties—such as Parrot Tulips with curled petals or Double Peony Tulips with many layered petals—and wild ancestors like the Khangar Tulip (T. kangharensis) or the Eyed Tulip, which bear simple six-petalled red or orange-red flowers, is so marked that they appear almost like entirely different species. Contemporary tulip forms can therefore be understood less as straightforward “natural” outcomes than as the products of sustained visual and horticultural engineering.

Historical evidence also shows that criteria of tulip "beauty" have been repeatedly defined in specific cultural contexts. Pavord (1999) observes that seventeenth-century tulip growers in the Ottoman Empire favoured flowers with long, slender, needle-like petals, selecting for increasingly almond-shaped blooms. By contrast, Western European enthusiasts preferred tulips with rounded petals, cup-shaped flowers and striking colour contrasts. As Polly Nicholson (2024) notes, drawing on Sir A. Daniel Hall's 1929 account, nineteenth-century British horticulturists further codified these Western preferences into explicit standards: the ideal tulip was defined as a shallow, hemispherical cup with rounded, not pointed, petals of uniform height and dense texture. Such standards formalised a relatively narrow visual ideal that determined which tulips were deemed worth growing and exhibiting.

In the contemporary media environment, tulips continue to be filtered through these aesthetic preferences. Advertisements and magazine features routinely showcase tulips with rounded, hemispherical or goblet-shaped blooms, while varieties with pointed, dagger-like petals are rarely pictured. Likewise, images tend to present tulips in a semi-open, upright cup form, whereas fully opened, star- or bowl-shaped flowers with exposed stamens are usually excluded from representation. A 2022 thread on the subreddit r/plantclinic (r/plantclinic, 2022) records viewers reacting with confusion to photographs of naturally fully opened tulips, asking, for example, "Why are these tulips opened so wide and bent over?" This response indicates how unfamiliar such "non-standard" blooming states have become under the dominance of narrow visual norms.

Taken together, these practices do not merely shape the tulip's appearance; through repetition, they detach the cultivated form from its botanical variability and naturalise it as the tulip itself.

Fig.1 English Florists' Tulip, Otterman Tulip, Over open tulip (from left to right)

2. Women As Objects Of Visual Pleasure

Women, like tulips, are repeatedly positioned as objects of visual pleasure in patriarchal visual culture. Visual conventions organise men as active viewers and women as passive, visible objects, and these conventions gradually shape how women see and present themselves.

John Berger (1972) and Wioleta Polinska (2000) use the European nude to show how this positioning is produced. Berger argues that women become visual objects because the whole set-up of image-making is organised around men: in the European nude tradition, painter, viewer and owner are typically male, while the painted figure is female, so images of women are produced from the standpoint of male desire rather than from women's own experience. Representation itself is calibrated to this spectator: men and women are depicted in radically different ways not because of inherent gender traits, but because the "ideal" viewer is assumed to be male and the image of woman is explicitly designed to flatter him (Berger, 1972). Polinska (2000) extends this line by suggesting that religious and artistic images of the female nude offer male viewers the fantasy of complete possession of the perfect female body—a passive, compliant companion who is always sexually available, while the woman is depicted as lacking self-awareness and even her own desire. Taken together, these readings indicate that women are turned into objects of visual pleasure because images of them are authored and addressed by men, tailored to male fantasies, and frame the female body as a decorative surface rather than a site of subjectivity.

The same logic operates across media rather than remaining confined to painting. Berger (1972) characterises it as a historically specific "way of seeing", while Laura Mulvey (1975) theorises it as the "male

gaze" structuring mainstream cinema and aligning the visual apparatus with a heterosexual male spectator. Claire Sisco King (2000) notes that, since Mulvey's essay, the notion of the male gaze has been applied to television, advertising, art, theatre and museum display, emphasising that women's bodies are repeatedly staged and circulated as visual commodities. Huajianyixiang (2024) further argues that such visual practices not only sell products but also help construct and naturalise deeper gendered power relations in patriarchal societies. The gaze thus functions as a way of organising power and desire: the viewer is positioned as subject, while the viewed is reduced to object, commodity and Other.

At the same time, women are encouraged to internalise this position of "to-be-looked-at-ness"[1]. Berger suggests that women come to monitor themselves through an internalised male observer, and Mulvey describes how female characters in film are coded to display themselves for the gaze (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). As Denisa Vitova (2020) summarises, a 2017 study by Döring et al., building on Erving Goffman's work on gender display, found that women adopt gendered poses in online selfies even more strongly than in traditional magazine advertisements. This suggests that the logic of the male gaze has migrated into everyday self-representation. When female viewers identify with models and influencers who adopt these codified poses, the patriarchal structure of looking is reproduced and reinforced, subtly domesticating women within the visual narrative of the male gaze.

1. The concept of to-be-looked-at-ness originates from Laura Mulvey's essay "**Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema**": "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness."

3. Feminine Traits Expected Under Capitalist Patriarchy

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of women as objects of visual pleasure, this chapter turns to the traits that capitalist patriarchy expects women to embody. Rather than being natural qualities, "feminine virtues" such as obedience, staying within bounds, fragility and beauty are produced through material arrangements of labour, law and ideology. These traits form the conceptual template that will later be visualised in tulip imagery and images of women as shared "feminising" mechanisms.

a. Obedience (Selflessness/Diligence)

Obedience is promoted as a core feminine virtue because it secures women's alignment with the reproductive and domestic needs of patriarchal capitalism. Women are expected to devote themselves selflessly to bearing and raising children, maintaining the household and supporting male breadwinners—forms of reproductive and care labour that are indispensable yet largely excluded from formal economic recognition. By framing this work as a moral duty rather than labour that could be shared or remunerated, patriarchy transforms service into virtue.

To legitimise this arrangement, women have historically been construed as inferior and thus "naturally" suited to obedience. Religious discourse presents woman as derivative of man—created from his rib—and subject

to his authority. Philosophical and medical accounts echo this hierarchy. As Alexwood (2024) notes, many early theorists subscribed to a “one-sex theory” in which the male body functioned as the standard human form, while the female body was an inverted, defective version. Aristotle, for instance, classed women (together with children and slaves) as unfit for citizenship. Such frameworks naturalise women’s subordinate status and prepare the ground for the expectation that a “good” woman willingly obeys.

b. Knows her place/keeps within bounds

A second expectation is that women must “know their place” and remain within tightly prescribed intellectual and social bounds. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment discourse framed women’s formation not as open-ended education but as “cultivation” for domestic usefulness: Rousseau, as George (2007) shows, describes girls as plants to be shaped within the home to serve male needs; Wollstonecraft (1792) exposes how this metaphor raises women like exotic flowering shrubs whose bodily and mental strength are sacrificed to beauty and to pleasing others, rendering intellectual development secondary. Ortner (1974) argues that such arrangements symbolically align women with “nature” and confine them to the domestic sphere, treated as their “proper” and therefore unquestioned place. In this framework, remaining within domestic, moral and intellectual limits is presented as natural femininity. Those who cross these boundaries face social sanction: as Spence (2017) notes, women who did not accept their allotted position—especially those outside marriage and childbearing roles—were cast as dangerous and punished accordingly. Thus, the feminine subject is produced through a system that both restricts and naturalises her place.

c. Fragility (Dependence)

A third expectation is that women must embody “fragility”, a trait constructed to justify their dependence. Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) links feminine beauty to weakness and timidity, framing vulnerability as aesthetically desirable. This ideal is reinforced through early socialisation, as Kelly McLeod (2015) discusses. As Wollstonecraft (1792) observes,

from infancy, girls are taught that a little cunning, softness, outward obedience and strict attention to trivial manners will secure male protection; if they are pretty, “everything else becomes unnecessary” for at least the first twenty years of their lives. Such training frames dependence as reward and discourages the cultivation of strength, judgement or autonomy.

Through these intertwined practices, fragility is not an innate quality but a manufactured one: women are raised to rely on others and then blamed for that very dependence. Vulnerability is redefined as a feminine virtue because it stabilises women’s place within domestic and relational roles.

d. Exquisite Beauty

A final expectation is that women embody “exquisite beauty”, a standard that renders them ornamental and makes appearance the primary measure of their worth. As Naomi Wolf (1991) argues, this is not a neutral preference but a modern apparatus of control that emerged with industrialisation. After the Industrial Revolution, as women increasingly moved beyond the home and entered waged work, the beauty myth developed as a new form of restriction: beauty was recast as an apparently objective, universal and even biological feminine quality, and women were told that their success and legitimacy depended on meeting exacting visual standards, while men remained exempt. In Wolf’s analysis, beauty functions like a currency system: like gold, it is politically defined and used to guarantee men’s continued dominance.

As Natasha Walter (2011) notes in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, girls and young women are encouraged to understand sexual allure and polished appearance as primary routes to recognition. This early conditioning reinforces Wolf’s argument that beauty—understood as a culturally specific set of bodily traits—operates as a politically defined value against which women are measured. It forces women to compete vertically for resources already secured by men and diverts their energy into policing their appearance, keeping them symbolically and materially in their place. Beauty, therefore, does not function as a mere aesthetic preference but as a mechanism of control.

4. Methodology

a. Linguistic and literary links between tulips and women

In patriarchal cultures, tulips and women have a linguistic and literary connection. Linguistically, the tulip is grammatically feminine in several European languages (la tulipe in French, die Tulpe in German), and in Turkish lale functions as a common female given name associated with beauty and elegance (BÜYÜKKAYA, 2024). In Ottoman Divan's poetry, the tulip frequently serves as a symbolic substitute for the female figure: poets use it to denote the beloved (sevgili), the bride (gelin) and the beautiful woman (güzel) (Poyraz, 2014; cited in Bayram, 2007). As Poyraz notes, this association is exemplified in the verse “Nitekim lâle ola al duvağı ile arûs / Her nihâl akçe saça üstüne barân-şekil” – “The tulip, veiled in red, is like a bride; and each tender branch rains silver coins upon her head.” Here, the tulip is explicitly cast in the role of the adorned bride, foregrounding its suitability as a feminised sign.

A comparable pattern appears in eighteenth-century English writing. As Samantha George (2007) shows, Alexander Pope’s *To a Lady* (1735) mobilises the spotted, showy tulip as an emblem of ostentatious femininity; Charlotte Smith’s *Rural Walks* (1795) opposes the fashionable but vain Maria to a showy yet scentless tulip; and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) contrasts the “flaunting tulip” with the “modest rose... retiring under its elegant foliage”. Across these texts, the tulip repeatedly marks superficial display, while the rose is aligned with moral depth and inner worth.

Drawing on this corpus, George (2007) argues that such texts assign “human counterparts” to flowers:

were tulips human, they would embody “pure physical beauty”, while English roses correspond to “noble souls”. What matters here is not whether tulips “truly” possess these traits, but that once the flower–woman metaphor is established, qualities culturally coded as feminine—ornamentality, delicacy, propriety and even vanity—can be projected onto the flower. In other words, tulips are already available as sign-forms onto which culturally feminised meanings can be loaded—an operation that Barthes would describe as characteristic of myth.

b. Barthes: myth as second-order signification

Roland Barthes’ notion of myth as a “second-order” semiotic system provided the theory of this project. At the first (language) level, an image functions as a complete sign: a picture of a tulip or a woman with a determinate meaning. At the level of myth, this first-order sign is taken over as form within a second-order system: its original meaning is strategically thinned out or hollowed out so that it can be filled with the concept the myth-maker wishes to communicate. In this context, the emptied form is coupled with a broader cultural concept—here, “femininity” understood as passivity, dependence, propriety and beauty.

Myth naturalises this coupling by making the concept appear inherent to the form. A vase-bound tulip or a half-open bloom thus reads not only as a botanical stage, but as a visually “obvious” way of being feminine. What is historically produced as a specific arrangement of stems, petals and containers is made to look like a natural, self-evident expression of “feminine” character.

c. Goffman and the persistence of gendered visual codes

Erving Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* (1979) provides the foundational framework for understanding how femininity is visually constructed through recurrent “gender displays”. These displays—such as bodily canting, reliance on support, lowered posture or distracted withdrawal—are not innate behaviours but socially learned patterns which, through repetition, come to appear natural. Advertising, therefore, does not document how women in fact behave; it stages recognisable, culturally legible versions of femininity.

Building directly on Goffman, Butkowski and Tajima (2017) examine how these gender displays persist across two visually distinct media: seventeenth–nineteenth-century European painting and contemporary American advertising photography. Their study demonstrates that specific gender-posing cues are not tied to a single historical period or medium; rather, they are selectively inherited, intensified and recombined across contexts. Importantly, they emphasise—citing Berger (1972)—that continuity is not defined by exact pictorial resemblance but by the reuse of the same “sets of signs”. In other words, what carries across time is not the image itself but the symbolic structure organising it.

This insight is essential for my method. It indicates that visual codes of femininity function as transferable symbolic structures within visual culture: they move across media, are reactivated in new settings and can be meaningfully analysed even when the depicted object changes.

d. Analytical procedure: applying code-based analysis to tulip imagery

Building on the frameworks outlined above, my analysis proceeds by treating tulip imagery as a site in which culturally established visual codes of femininity may be operating. The procedure involves three steps.

First, I identify recurring visual features in tulip images across botanical illustration, still-life painting, advertising and photography. These include vase-bound or frame-bound confinement, the concealment of roots, leaning or intertwined stems, C- and S-shaped curvature, ornamental elaboration and the disciplined “half-open” bloom.

Second, following Barthes’s conception of myth as a second-order semiotic system, these features are read as forms whose original botanical meaning has been partially emptied, allowing them to carry cultural concepts associated with femininity—passivity, dependence, propriety and refined beauty.

Third, drawing on Goffman and on Butkowski and Tajima’s demonstration of the persistence of gendered displays across periods and media, I group these

recurring features as potential feminising codes. It applies their code-based analytical method by examining whether tulip images have been arranged through formally analogous configurations—leaning, being held, curved into compliant lines or presented as decoratively “on display”.

This approach allows tulip imagery to be analysed not as botanical documentation but as part of a wider visual system in which femininity is constructed, repeated and naturalised through transferable symbolic structures.

5. Shared Visual Framing Structures For Tulips And Women

Across these images, tulips and women are repeatedly organised through comparable framing strategies. The following sections identify five recurrent visual structures: being trapped within a bounded frame, needing support, being curved into yielding lines, being elaborated into ornament, and being held in a disciplined state of semi-openness.

a. Be trapped

Tulips are frequently presented within tightly bounded pictorial spaces. They are depicted against plain grounds or arranged in vases on orderly tabletops; their natural habitat—soil, bulb, root system, climate and other ecological complexities—is systematically removed, making them easier to display, classify or preserve. This process abstracts the plant and lends it a quiet, passive temperament, as if it exists solely for contemplation.

A similar visual logic is applied to the depiction of women. In seventeenth–eighteenth-century portraits and genre paintings, women are typically shown in domestic interiors, seated and occupied with sewing, nursing, letter-writing or playing instruments. Their bodies are frequently bounded by window frames, archways, screens, table edges or chair backs, producing the recurring configuration of “the female

body placed within the picture frame". This is less a record of everyday life than a culturally constructed visual structure in which the ideal woman is present yet still, beautifully turned out and politely accomplished, but never overstepping prescribed bounds. In contemporary advertising, this confined posture is updated rather than abandoned: the frame may become a man's arm, torso or shoulder that encloses the woman's body, signalling possession rather than reciprocal intimacy, as seen in corset and cosmetics advertisements in the 1991 issues of British Vogue. In both historical and modern contexts, the subject is visually trapped: set off from context, held in place and made available to be looked at.

b. The Need for Support

Tulips and women are also frequently shown as needing support. In still-life imagery, tulips are severed from bulbs and soil and placed in narrow-necked vessels that constrain their stems. Within this constricted setting, the stems are compelled to intertwine or lean together for mutual support in order to maintain a pleasing form. Such compositions present tulips as decorative yet structurally dependent, unable to sustain themselves without external support.

A parallel logic shapes the depiction of women. In patriarchal societies, women have been assigned passive and ornamental roles and were, as Annette Stott (1992), drawing on Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), notes, "economically dependent first on their fathers, then on their husbands". This dependence is visually encoded in both historical and contemporary imagery. In modern advertising, women are rarely portrayed standing upright, head held high and self-assured. Instead, they are often shown sitting, crouching or reclining on floors, sofas or beds, as if they require a surface to lean on in order to appear. The angling of the body "signals instability in an advertising context because it is frequently exaggerated to unrealistic proportions" (Butkowski and Tajima, 2017). In such images, women, like tulips in vases, are posed as leaning, resting, supported figures—visually confirming the expectation that femininity must be grounded in dependence.

c. The Curved Stem

A further shared structure is the recurrent use of curves to signal softness and submission. In tulip imagery, the plant's growth form is often reinterpreted so that the stem bends into a C- or S-shaped line, a compositional device that lends the bloom an air of delicacy and pliancy. The tulip appears to bow towards the viewer, its posture gracefully yielding rather than upright.

A comparable structural code is evident in representations of women's bodies. Here, Goffman's (1979) theory of "ritualisation of subordination" becomes relevant. He identifies bodily techniques—such as the canted head, lowered chin, tilted torso, bashful knee bend, licensed withdrawal or reclining poses—that demonstrate vulnerability, deference or a lack of social power. These postures lower the woman's head level relative to the viewer and signal ingratiation, submissiveness or appeasement. Denisa Vitova (2020) observes that contemporary advertising still reflects familiar viewing positions identified by Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975), where women occupy the position of the surveyed. This continuity helps explain why certain bodily postures remain culturally legible as feminine.

The same curved lines are culturally reused on both natural forms and female bodies to convey a "non-threatening" desirability, where part of being sexy is being compliant (Jha, Raj and Gangwar, 2017). The C- or S-shaped tulip stem and the canted female body thus function as parallel devices that code femininity as softness and submission.

d. Expressions of Ornamentation

In many botanical illustrations, the edges of tulip leaves are rendered as pronounced S-shaped curls, while petals are stylised into a three-part rhythm—tightened at the base, expanded in the middle and retracted at the tip. Striations, ruffles and subtle tonal transitions are carefully accentuated. These decisions add extra curves and flourishes that are not strictly necessary for botanical description but heighten the flower's decorative appeal, presenting it less as a living organism than as a designed object.

A comparable mechanism shapes images of women. As King (2020), building on Mulvey's (1975) concept of "fetishistic scopophilia", explains, visual pleasure is

produced by enhancing the object's physical beauty and transforming it into a complete, self-sufficient image. In contemporary visual culture, women's bodies are styled, lit and retouched so that skin appears flawless, hair perfectly arranged and limbs elongated; clothing and posture are adjusted to smooth out irregularities and emphasise flowing lines. Fragmenting close-ups of legs, breasts or lips can be one strategy within this process, but the broader aim is to polish the body into an idealised surface that absorbs the gaze and reassures the viewer.

In both floral and female imagery, then, form is elaborated into ornament. Tulips are refined into elegant, over-articulated blossoms, and women are sculpted into "perfect" silhouettes and surfaces. Curves, textures and details are amplified so that the subject becomes a decorative object of looking rather than an active participant. Ornamentality thus works as a shared visual logic: it turns tulips and women alike into aestheticised, controllable images of femininity, ready to be admired, collected and consumed.

e. The Aesthetics of Semi-Openness: Disciplining Images as Sensual Yet Inaccessible

The state of "half-openness" provides a shared structure for how femininity is made visible yet kept in check. In tulip imagery, the most frequently depicted state is that of the "half-open" bloom: the outer petals slightly unfurled and drooping, while the inner petals remain erect, concealing the central structure. Artists sometimes exaggerate this condition, making parts of the pistil barely visible while still enclosed by upright petals on either side. This produces a configuration that is viewable yet unreachable—a contained interior that can be hinted at but not fully accessed.

Crucially, this is not the tulip's final natural stage. Exposed to sunlight, the flower will fully unfurl into a star or bowl shape, exposing its reproductive organs for pollination. Yet this "full bloom" state is systematically avoided or devalued in cultural imagery, where it is associated with corruption, decay or loss of control. The preferred visual state is the disciplined "half-open" phase—desirable yet restrained, open yet proper.

Sometimes this “sensual yet restrained” configuration is further stylised: several petals are arranged into elegant C-shapes, drooping gracefully without disturbing the overall outline; even when the heart is partially revealed, it remains encircled by a soft visual barrier. Such compositions share clear parallels with genre paintings depicting women in low-cut yet decorous gowns, where the neckline offers a controlled glimpse without breaching respectability. In both plant and human imagery, semi-openness operates as a visual technique for disciplining desire: it promises access while maintaining distance, aligning with patriarchal ideals that women should be attractive yet not “too” available, sensual yet always under control.

6. Visual Mechanisms Replicated In Tulip Imagery

a. 19th-and 20th-Century American Advertising Artwork Featuring Tulips

In the nineteenth century, Dutch merchants introduced tulips to the United States (van der Ploeg, 2024), and by the early twentieth century the flower had become widely popular (Tulip Amsterdam Museum, 2025). From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, American seed companies such as Henry A. Dreer, Peter Henderson & Co. and D. M. Ferry & Co. used highly stylised tulip imagery on the covers of their catalogues, which functioned as advertisements for bulbs.

Although the medium shifted from engravings and oil paintings to chromolithographic print, and the purpose from still-life appreciation to commercial promotion, the visual coding of the tulip remained consistent. On the cover of D. M. Ferry & Co.'s 1899 Catalogue of Autumn Bulbs and Seeds (Fig. 2.), for instance, two tulips appear with their roots removed and leaves simplified; what remains are ornamental, twisted stems and blooms fixed in a typical "half-open" state. Leaning towards each other, the flowers form a visual "mutual embrace" that amplifies delicacy, passivity and intimacy.

Their relationship reads as gentle and compliant, echoing the feminised body language analysed in earlier chapters.

This compositional formula—paired, leaning forms, half-open and decoratively curved—was also common in early twentieth-century advertisements aimed at women. The catalogue cover therefore shows how tulip imagery carries forward an already feminised visual framework into a commercial realm: the flower's coded "femininity" is not only retained but actively mobilised as a selling point, turning the tulip itself into a commodity-sign of softness and ornamental womanhood.

Fig.2. D.M.FERRY&CO. Vintage Seed Catalogue Covers Tulip Bulbs (1899)

b. Photography at the End of the Twentieth Century

From the late twentieth century onwards, photographic images of tulips proliferated. Photography is often perceived as a medium of "truthful representation", yet this presumed neutrality is itself a technical artifice. Choices of composition, focus, light and shadow, colour and blur all channel particular ways of seeing and can easily reproduce the visual construct of "femininity" established in earlier tulip imagery: passivity, docility, semi-openness and ornamentality.

Dennis Stock's *Tulip Series* (2001) (Fig. 3.) offers a clear example. In many photographs, the primary tulip is sharply focused and centrally positioned, while other tulips form a soft surround. Backgrounds are pushed into blur, severing the flowers from any recognisable environment and transforming them from living plants into objects of pure visual consumption—a process strongly analogous to the long-established treatment of women as visual commodities. The compositional structure often implies enclosure and exposure at once: one central bloom is singled out and "looked at", while others circle it, reinforcing the sense that it is being presented for inspection.

Stock's images also repeatedly select tulips at the "perfectly half-open" moment. Light and shadow accentuate the curvature of the petals so that the bloom appears gracefully soft, moderately unfurled and never uncontrolled. In effect, the photographs stabilise a bodily vocabulary similar to that imposed on women: bowed heads, drooping necks, contained smiles and carefully managed sensuality. Thus, even as tulip imagery shifts from painting and illustration to photography, its underlying viewing structures and gender-coding mechanisms remain in place. The new medium does not break the feminising visual logic; it renews and disseminates it.

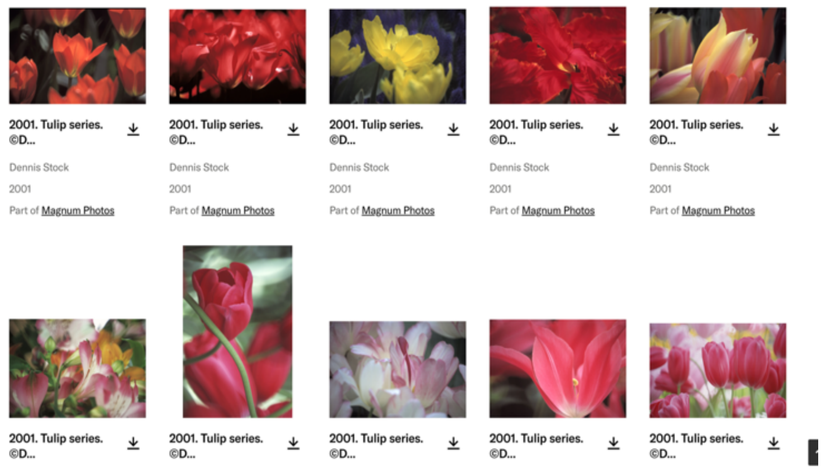

Fig. 3. Dennis Stock's *Tulip Series* (2001)

7. The Cycle of Femininity

Up to this point, tulip imagery has been shown to absorb feminising visual codes—containment, dependence, curvature, ornamentality and semi-openness. This chapter examines how these codes circulate back into representations of women, creating a feedback loop in which tulip and female imagery mutually reinforce a particular construction of "femininity".

Tulip images, once feminised, begin to serve as visual templates for women's poses. Women are posed like tulips—soft, half-open and slightly bent—so that the earlier projection of femininity onto the flower appears to return, "naturally", to the female body. A 1967 Helena Rubinstein lipstick advertisement (Fig. 4.) illustrates this dynamic. On the left, the product is accompanied by a motif of a half-open tulip. On the right, a woman kneels in a pencil skirt that accentuates her waist and hips, forming a silhouette reminiscent of the tulip's full bloom. The colour of her skirt echoes the tulip's petals, creating a compositional rhyme that makes the comparison seem effortless. Her kneeling posture combines reserve and invitation: her closed legs and grounded position imply modesty and a "half-open" availability, while her forward-leaning torso, outstretched arms and smiling face invite approach. Under the slogan "Teasers", the tulip-like pose no longer just describes a flower, but becomes a stance that promises the "possibility of ownership" of both lipstick and woman. The female figure becomes the bearer and extender of the tulip's visual mechanism, passively serving the logic of commodity seduction.

Fig. 4. Helena Rubinstein lipstick advertisement (1967)

A similar process is visible in contemporary social media, where women's images themselves function as consumable commodities. In an Instagram photograph, a woman sits sideways on an unmade bed, wrapped in a white quilt, holding a bouquet of tulips that obscures her face. The tulips' drooping, curved posture encodes submissiveness; when they cover her features, they create a visual structure of identification or substitution, transferring the objectified relation between woman and flower. The half-open blooms, combined with the pale palette, construct an idealised image of purity and delicacy. At the same time, the intimate setting—the rumpled bedding, the private room—suggests accessibility and proximity, inviting the viewer's possessive gaze. The result is an image in which "ideal femininity" is staged as something both pure and available.

Another social media image shows a woman in a white dress reclining diagonally across the floor, supporting herself with one hand. She holds a slightly bent, rootless white tulip that echoes her own fragile, passive posture. Her gaze turned towards the window suggests interior confinement, recalling the spatial control imposed on tulips plucked from nature and arranged indoors. Her low-cut dress, designed to reveal the body's contours, mirrors the tulip's "moderately open" state: enough is shown to be enticing, but not enough to break the code of respectability. The combined effect is a visual mechanism of being "on display and privately possessable".

Across these commercial and self-produced images, the visual convergence of tulip and woman shows that softness, compliance and beauty—the hallmarks of "femininity"—are not neutral aesthetic choices. They are encoded as consumable forms and exploited by capitalism as tools for stimulating desire and driving consumption. Tulips and women become interchangeable carriers of the same feminising visual logic: both are de-rooted, arranged, half-opened and offered up to the gaze. This circular movement reveals that "femininity" is not a natural essence but a socially constructed image repertoire, continually shaped and recycled under the joint pressures of capitalism and patriarchy.

Conclusion Statement

This project set out to demonstrate that “femininity” is not a natural attribute but a culturally constructed ideal. To make this visible, it examined the tulip—a plant that is not inherently gendered but has, across centuries of cultural production, been assigned feminine qualities and expectations. Reading tulip imagery alongside representations of women made it possible to trace how femininity functions as a visual and ideological construct rather than an organic essence.

Drawing on Barthes’ formulation of myth as a second-order semiotic system, the analysis showed how images of tulips and women can be understood as forms whose first-order meanings are partially emptied and refilled with the concepts required by patriarchal ideology. Within this system, capitalist patriarchy defines feminine virtue through traits such as passivity, obedience, boundedness, dependence and refined beauty—traits that are repeatedly naturalised through visual repetition and narrative coherence.

The tulip operates within this structure as a particularly receptive form. Historically associated with women in poetry, fiction and moral instruction, it becomes an efficient vehicle for feminised meanings. Across botanical illustration, still-life painting, advertising and photography, tulip imagery is shaped to embody the traits expected of women: vase-bound confinement, concealed roots, bent or intertwined stems, C- and S-shaped curves, ornamental elaboration and the disciplined “half-open” bloom. Horticultural practices, such as the English florists’ standards, further narrowed the acceptable visual range, reinforcing an idealised—rather than natural—tulip form.

Once these feminised visual structures become conventional, their effects extend beyond the flower. Women, positioned both as objects of the gaze and as viewers of tulip imagery, encounter an environment saturated with these codes. Femininity is repeatedly associated with softness, containment, delicacy and moderated openness. As a result, contemporary images of women—including those produced by women themselves—continue to reproduce gendered visual codes that resonate with the feminised tulip. In this feedback loop, the myth performs its function:

femininity appears natural, self-evident and desirable, even as it maintains patriarchal expectations and encourages forms of self-regulation.

For these reasons, the project also takes the form of a visual publication. By collecting images of tulips and women and reworking them through juxtaposing, superimposing, rotating, pairing and twisting, the book constructs a visual argument about how femininity is organised and repeated. Rather than functioning as an illustrative supplement to the written chapters, it operates as a parallel mode of critique: making the visual mechanisms of the myth perceptible, and inviting readers to recognise femininity not as a given essence, but as a historically produced and therefore contestable representational system.

Reference list

- Alexwood (2024) “*创生者”到“第二性”，女性地位是如何发生变化的?*（*From “Creators” to “Second Sex”: How Has the Status of Women Evolved?*） Available at: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26911922 (Accessed: 11 September 2025)
- Barthes, R.(1973) *Mythologies*. Translated from the French by A.Lavers. Hill & Wang Pub.
- Bayram, Y. (2007) *‘Klasik Türk ŞiirindeDuyguların Dili: Çiçekler’, Turkish Studies International Periodical For the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 2(4), pp. 209-219.
- Berger, J. (2008) *Ways of seeing*. Penguin UK.
- Butkowski, C. P. and Tajima, A. (2017) ‘A critical examination of visualized femininity: selective inheritance and intensification of gender posing from historical painting to contemporary advertising’, *Feminist media studies*, 17(6), pp. 1037-1055. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1300830
- BÜYÜKKAYA. N.and Mirzaoğlu, G. (2024) ‘TÜRK KÜLTÜRÜ BAĞLAMINDA ANADOLU’ DA LÂLE MOTİFİVE TERS LÂLE1 (The Tulip Motif and the Reverse Tulip in Anatolia within the Context of Turkish Culture)’, *Kafkas Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi(34)*, pp.515-532. Available at: https://doi.org/10.56597/kausbed.1580556.
- Campbell, E. A. (2019) *Tulip symbolism in the seventeenth-century Dutch emblem book* (Master’s thesis).
- Döring, N., Reif, A. and Poeschl, S. (2016) *‘How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts’, Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, pp. 955-962. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.10.001.
- George, S. (2007) *Botany, sexuality and women’s writing 1760–1830: From modest shoot to forward plant*. Manchester University Press.
Pavord, A. (1999) The Tulip. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Goffman, E. (1979) Gender advertisements. Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Huajianyixiang (2024) ‘*研究理论介绍 | 凝视理论（Research Theory Introduction | Gaze Theory)’*. Available at: www.360doc.com/content/24/0607/19/16295112 1125598415.shtml (Accessed: 11 September 2025)
- Jha, A. K., Raj, A. and Gangwar, R. (2017) ‘*A semiotic analysis of portraying gender in magazine advertisements’. Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22(5), pp. 1-8. Available at: DOI: 10.9790/0837-2205110108
- King, C. S. (2020). *‘The male gaze in visual culture*’. The Routledge handbook of gender and communication, pp. 120-132. Routledge.
- Moqari, S. and Elahipanah, N. (2015) *‘Ruth and de-valuation of the values of Victorian period’*, International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, 57, pp. 160-165.
- Mulvey, L. (2006) *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. Media and cultural studies: Keyworks*, 342-352.
- Ortner, S. B. (1972). *‘Is female to male as nature is to culture?’, Feminist studies*, 1(2), pp. 5-31. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/3177638
- Polinska, W. (2000) *‘Dangerous Bodies: Women’s Nakedness and Theology*’, Journal of feminist studies in religion, 16(1), pp. 45-62. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002375.
- Polly, N. and Andrew, M. (2024) *The Tulip Garden: Growing and Collecting Species, Rare and Annual Varieties*. Phaidon Press.
- Poyraz, Y. (2014) ‘Blossoming of the love: flowers and love in the Ottoman poetry’, *IIB INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ACADEMIC SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL*,15(5), pp.317-338. Available at: www.iibdergisi.com.
- Povey, K.(no date) *Beauty Standards*. Available at: https://uw.manifoldapp.org/read/beauty-standards/section/cff23c1e-aced-4e24-b14e-25a2728170d3 (Accessed: 13 September 2025)
- Spence, S (2017). *Witchcraft Accusations and Persecutions as a Mechanism for the Marginalisation of Women*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Stott, A. (1992)‘*Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition*’, American Art, 6(2), pp. 61-77.
- Tulip Amsterdam Museum (2025) Holland After Tulipmania. Available at: https://amsterdamtulipmuseum.com/pages/holland-after-tulipmania (Accessed: 11 September 2025).
- Ueno, C. (2020) *Patriarchy and Capitalism. Translated from the Japanese* by Y. Zou. and M. Xue. Zhejiang University Press.
- van der Ploeg, R. (no date) *From bulb to bloom: the remarkable journey of Dutch tulips* Available at: https://aiph.org/floraculture/news/from-bulb-to-bloom-the-remarkable-journey-of-dutch-tulips/ (Accessed: 13 September 2025)
- Vitova, D. (2020) *The Male Gaze of Female Photographers: Gender Posing in Deborah Turbeville’s 1975 Vogue Editorial*. Available at: https://denisavitova.medium.com/the-male-gaze-of-female-photographers-3a97eb3e1e30 (Accessed: 11 September 2025)
- Wilford, R.(2015) *The Plant Lover’s Guide to Tulips* (The Plant Lover’s Guides). Timber Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (2016) *‘Vindication of the Rights of Woman’, Democracy: a reader*, pp. 297-306. Columbia University Press.
- Wolf, N. (1991) *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. William Morrow and Company, INC.
- *Walter, N. (2011) Living dolls: The return of sexism*. Virago.

Bibliography

- Aristotle (1992) *On the Generation of Animals*. Translated from the French by A. Platt. Available at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://talebooks.com/ebooks/313.pdf (Accessed: 11 September 2025).
- Barbauld, A. L. (1753) *To a LADY, With some painted FLOWERS*. Available at: https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/o3555-w0210.shtml(Accessed: 11 September 2025).
- Hall, A. D. (1929) *The book of the tulip*. Martin Hopkinson.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Héloïse: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* (1761), in Collected Writings, VI, trans. and annotated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (1997), pp. 393.
- Pope, A. (2017) *Epistle II: To a Lady. The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, 3, 46-74. Available at: chrome extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://www.public-library.uk/ebooks/65/6.pdf (Accessed: 11 September 2025).
- Schipper, M.(2018) *Hills of Paradise: Power, Powerlessness and the Female Body*. Speaking Tiger.
- Smith, C. (1795) Smith, C. (1795). *Rural Walks: in Dialogues: Intended for the Use of Young Persons* (Vol. 2). P. Wogan, P. Byrne, B. Dugdale.
- Swift, J. (1732) *The Lady's Dressing Room*. Available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50579/the-ladys-dressing-room (Accessed: 11 September 2025).
- Veblen, T. (2017) *The theory of the leisure class*. Routledge.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1788) *Original Stories from Real Life*. | Jazzybee Verlag.

Image Reference List

- Fig.1. English Florists' Tulip, Otterman Tulip, Over open tulip (from left to right) (2025) [collage]
- Fig.2. D.M.FERRY&CO. Vintage Seed Catalogue Covers Tulip Bulbs (1899) [poster] Available at: https://www.etsy.com/listing/503826321/ferry-08-1899-bulbs-and-seeds-dm-ferry (Accessed: 16 November 2025) (Accessed: 16 November 2025)
- Fig. 3. Stock, D. Tulip Series (2001) [screenshot]. Available at: https://www-jstor-org.arts.idm.oclc.org/action/doBasicSearch?Query=Dennis+Stock+tulip&image_search_referrer=global&so=rel&searchkey=1763740727569
- Fig. 4. Helena Rubinstein lipstick advertisement (1967) [poster]. Available at: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/836121487106299604/ (Accessed: 16 November 2025)