

# Self-Guide

## Femmes Fatales

Seductive yet dangerous, beautiful yet deadly—the femme fatale has captured the artistic imagination from biblical times to the modern-day cinema. Discover the empowering strength behind their mysterious charm as this tour visits a few of these legendary ladies.



GALLERY 207

### *Judith* (c. 1540) by Jan Sanders van Hemessen

“Though my face lured him to destruction, he committed no sin by me,” proclaims the Jewish heroine Judith in the apocryphal text that bears her name. After an Assyrian army led by the general Holofernes lays siege to her village, the beautiful and devout widow dresses herself in finery and ingratiates herself with the general by promising military secrets. “Filled with an ardent longing to possess her,” Holofernes invites Judith to his tent but is beheaded by the brave woman when he falls into a drunken sleep. In this 16th-century painting, Flemish artist Van Hemessen emphasized Judith’s morality and heroism, capturing her solemn yet directed gaze and emphasizing her muscular and dynamic form. However, by choosing to depict her nude, he also hinted at her sensuality.



GALLERY 211

### *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1639/42) by Guido Reni

Infamous for a dance so seductive that her stepfather Herod Antipas granted her wish for the head of Saint John the Baptist, Salome has been a frequent subject of painting, theater, and opera. Though it was actually her vengeful mother who pressed the young dancer into her murderous request, Salome is often portrayed as the embodiment of beauty, desire, and sin—a classic femme fatale. Yet she has also been conceived of as a redeemed figure, especially when depicted offering the saint’s head to the viewer as if for veneration. With his graceful and refined style, Baroque painter Guido Reni seems to combine these two interpretations, creating a beautiful and seductive Salome reverently presenting the saint’s head for worship.



GALLERY 219

### *Head of Medusa* (c. 1801) by Antonio Canova

Once a beautiful maiden with a bevy of solicitous suitors, Medusa was transformed from gorgeous to Gorgon by an angry Athena. Myths dispute what exactly outraged the Greek goddess of wisdom, but the end result was the same—Medusa’s beautiful ringlets were turned to writhing snakes and her alluring eyes became a paralyzing gaze. Despite her fearsome features, many depictions of Medusa, including this one by neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, retain some of her early loveliness. Captured at the moment of her death, Canova’s Medusa expresses both despair and resignation within a classically handsome countenance.



GALLERY 155

### ***Coin with Portraits of Cleopatra and Mark Antony*** (c. 36 B.C.), Greco-Roman

Though a gifted scholar, clever politician, and beloved queen, Cleopatra is popularly remembered as the sultry seductress of the ancient world. Even before Shakespeare and Hollywood cemented the Egyptian queen's femme fatale status, the emperor Augustus literally rewrote Roman history to diminish Cleopatra's role to that of a predatory foreign temptress of noble Roman men. The queen's legendary beauty, however, has come into question due to contemporary depictions, such as that on this silver tetradrachm. With a thick neck, thin lips, and a hook nose, Cleopatra more closely resembles Mark Antony, shown on the reverse of the coin, than screen siren Elizabeth Taylor. Perhaps her famous suitors were captivated by her mind after all.



REGENSTEIN HALL

### ***Jane Avril*** (1893) by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

The popular cabaret performer Jane Avril might not have been as “deadly” as the classic femme fatale, but with her infamous red dresses and petticoat-bearing can-can dances, she certainly dominated the stages of Paris's most famous nightclubs, exuding sexual allure. In this 1893 lithograph promoting Avril's provocative act, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec emphasized Avril as a titillating object, creating a frame that emerges from the neck of the contrabass and directs the musician and viewer's gaze up at her open skirts. Avril, however, was very much in control of her enticing onstage persona. In fact, it was Avril herself who commissioned this and other publicity images from Toulouse-Lautrec, a close friend; she credited this poster with launching her career.



REGENSTEIN HALL

### ***Madonna*** (1895) by Edvard Munch

More reminiscent of today's infamous pop star than the biblical figure, Munch's sensual *Madonna* is just one of the many femmes fatales the artist explored. With her arms bent behind her head and back, she appears to abandon herself fully to her lover, a position in which Munch places the viewer. Yet rather than becoming vulnerable, this eroticized Madonna is a force of both life and death. The sperm swimming around the frame and the fetus in the lower left represent life, while the woman and her formidable beauty can be seen to embody death. As Munch himself described this woman's dual powers, “Your lips, as red as ripening fruit, gently part as if in pain. It is the smile of a corpse. Now the hand of death touches life. The chain is forged that links the thousand families that are dead to the thousand generations to come.”

## ***Visit more femmes fatales at Becoming Edvard Munch!***

From mermaids to vampires, harpies to contemporized Salomes, Norwegian artist Edvard Munch portrayed the femme fatale in nearly all of her various guises. Explore this and other of the artist's frequent subjects in the exhibition *Becoming Edvard Munch*, shown exclusively at the Art Institute through April 26.