

Reimagining the *Tableau Vivant*; “Living Pictures” in K-Pop Music Videos

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Abstract

South Korean popular music, known colloquially as “K-pop,” began gaining popularity with international audiences in the 1990s, a part of *hallyu*, “the Korean Wave,” and has since become a global phenomenon. Fans are drawn to K-pop’s catchy music, blended lyrics, and wealth of audio-visual elements like carefully choreographed live performances and well-produced music videos. K-pop is considered an audio-visual genre, meant to engage with audiences optically as well as auditorily, and their music videos are no exception. Art history is a popular visual theme in these videos, appearing in set design and dressing, costumes, choreography, and in the centuries-old art form of the *tableau vivant*, or “living picture.” Popular Western artworks are frequently referenced, although there has been a shift in recent years towards incorporating more elements from traditional South Korean art and culture as well. While there has been scholarship surrounding the audio-visual elements of K-pop in general, this thesis focuses more specifically on the intersection of K-pop music videos and *tableaux vivants*. From boy group Stray Kids’ instantly-recognizable recreation of Michelangelo’s famous *Creation of Adam* in their music video “Back Door,” to girl group Red Velvet’s many references to Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in “Feel My Rhythm,” K-pop artists have utilized the *tableau vivant* in diverse ways, for different

purposes. This paper explains how *tableaux vivants* are not only aesthetically-pleasing, but can also be narratively significant, helping viewers try to understand and interpret the sometimes straightforward, but often purposefully-ambiguous, visual storytelling in K-pop music videos.

Introduction

One minute and forty-three seconds into the music video for South Korean boy group Stray Kids' 2020 song "Back Door," a young, dark-haired man dressed in black—Seungmin—sits on the ground, one knee raised, reaching his left arm diagonally upwards. His fingertips stretch towards another young man, his pink-haired groupmate Hyunjin, whose body is draped elegantly over three of the group's other members, who support him. As Hyunjin stretches his right arm gracefully back towards Seungmin, his index finger ever so slightly raised, the two men nearly touch (Figure 1). An exciting, brief moment of tension is created between them before they continue the choreography and the music video moves on. Most people watching "Back Door" will recognize the artwork that Stray Kids are recreating: Italian artist Michelangelo's famous *Creation of Adam* (Fig. 1.A).

The inclusion of this classical masterpiece is not necessarily unusual; art history is a popular visual theme in K-pop music videos, appearing in set design and dressing, costumes, choreography, and in the centuries-old art form of the *tableau vivant*, or "living picture."¹ While there has been scholarship surrounding the audio-visual elements of K-pop in general, this thesis focuses more specifically on the intersection of K-pop music videos and *tableaux vivants*.² From Stray Kids' instantly-recognizable recreation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in "Back Door," to girl group Red Velvet's many references to Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in "Feel My Rhythm," K-pop artists have utilized the *tableau vivant* in diverse ways, for different purposes. Similar to the classical music they sometimes sample, there is an international recognizability to many of the artworks that groups choose to recreate. This paper explains how *tableaux vivants* are not only aesthetically-pleasing, beautiful homages to the original artworks, but can also be narratively significant, helping viewers try to understand and interpret the sometimes straightforward, but often purposefully-ambiguous, visual storytelling in K-pop music videos.

What are *Tableaux Vivants*?

Originating in France, *tableaux vivants* first became popular amongst the eighteenth-century European aristocracy, who had ample leisure time and access to

¹ *Tableau vivant* is a French term which literally translates to "living painting" but has also come to be translated to mean "living picture" as the art form recreated images from other mediums like literature and sculpture.

² The plural of *tableau vivant*.

great works of art.³ These *images performées* involved people arranging themselves in a way which, when viewed from an audience, created a specific, recognizable image.⁴ These recreated images could be from popular works of art, stories, poems, historical events, or of important people, and were seen as inhabiting “a new space created between theater and painting.”⁵ They would utilize ordinary household items and clothing as props and costumes, sometimes even constructing a makeshift stage and curtains for the event.⁶

France introduced the public to the modern museum in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century, and the public finally had access to many of the great works of art they were not privy to before museums. As visiting museums became more and more popular, perhaps uncoincidentally, so did *tableaux vivants*.⁷ The theatricality of *tableaux vivants* increased with their popularity; in 1839 a recreation of French painter Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* opened in theatres (Fig. 2). Julie Ramos describes critics' excited reactions to the piece, saying they no longer felt as if they were looking at a set, or even a recreation of a painting, but that “it is the raft itself, it is the immensity of the ocean, the violence of the waves...”⁸ People felt these images were transportative. This theatricality, sociality, and community involvement was just as important to the *tableau vivant* as the painting that was being recreated, Ramos argues; rather than silent works, *tableaux vivants* were closer to “*actes verbaux*”—verbal acts.⁹

At the peak of their popularity in the nineteenth century they were indeed a popular social event, still being performed as a parlor activity meant to teach about fine art in a fun accessible way.¹⁰ Middle and lower classes in the broader Western world were now taking part in the trend.¹¹ The invention of photography made the art form even more accessible, presenting more possibilities for artists (as well as amateur *tableau vivant* enthusiasts), allowing them to record their theatrical assemblages.¹² Photographers like Englishwoman Julia Margaret Cameron photographed familiar faces—family members, servants, neighbors—to create her dreamy photographs. She embraced the theatricality of her *tableaux vivants*, sometimes adding additional visual elements like whimsical shapes scratched onto her glass negatives (see Fig. 3).

Tableaux vivants remained a popular subject with photographers moving into the early twentieth century. Young, attractive women like German artist Olga Desmond were favorite subjects, often presented in various states of undress under the guise of artistic

³ Rachel Rossner, “tableaux vivants,” The Chicago School of Media Theory, The University of Chicago, 2004, https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/tableaux_vivants.htm.

⁴ French synonym for *tableaux vivants*, meaning “performed images.”

⁵ Rachel Rossner, “tableaux vivants.”

⁶ Marthine Satris, “Live Victorian Nudes! The rich cultural history of tableaux vivants,” *Medium*, April 4, 2017, <https://medium.com/the-hairpin/live-victorian-nudes-8dffe1ea8eeb>.

⁷ Léonard Pouy, Julie Ramos. *Le tableau vivant: ou l'image performée* (France: Mare & Martin, 2014.), page 165.

⁸ Translated from French to English; Pouy, Ramos, *Le tableau vivant*, Page 190.

⁹ Pouy, Ramos, *Le tableau vivant*, Pages 175-176.

¹⁰ William Smith, “Tableaux Vivants Are Giving Us Life During the Pandemic,” *Art in America*, ARTnews, May 8, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/tableaux-vivants-replicate-art-masterpieces-during-covid-19-quarantine-1202686492/>.

¹¹ Rachel Rossner, “tableaux vivants.”

¹² Ibid.

education (Fig. 4-4.A).¹³ Conversely, they could be used as a means of political protest, with participants dressing up as figures like Lady Liberty (Fig. 5). We can see how *tableaux vivants* begin to branch out beyond just art education, and entertainment. They are being used in different ways towards different ends, a testimony to the medium's versatility.

Though interest in *tableaux vivants* has waxed and waned through the years, they have continued to attract artists and audiences. The custom of these artistic recreations doubling as social events has also endured; in 2006, photographer Mark Preuschl organized and photographed a group of volunteers in Beloit, Wisconsin, recreating *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by nineteenth century French artist Georges Seurat (Fig. 6-6.A). Preuschl and his volunteers created the image to promote the Friends of the Riverfront's kickoff event. They chose to keep the styling modern; participants wore their regular clothes, and carried umbrellas instead of parasols, another instance exemplifying the versatility of the *tableau vivant*. Like Cameron's earlier photographs, the community could see familiar faces, faces of people they knew, in the final piece.

Though Preuschl's photograph was a local hit with the Beloit Friends of the Riverfront, it found viral success on social media fourteen years later, during the next big revival of interest in *tableaux vivants*.¹⁴ The revival came during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with social media enabling people to once again explore and revitalize the art form. Museums, closed because of the pandemic, encouraged their followers on social media to create their own *tableaux vivants* from home, finding that they were an easy and accessible way for people to engage with the museums' artworks.¹⁵ The public excitedly embraced the new trend, recreating well-known works of art from their homes. Like their predecessors, they used things that were available to them in their homes as costumes and props, and they were able to share their creations with worldwide audiences via social media (see Fig. 7).¹⁶ *Tableaux vivants* have continued to bring people together, whether in nineteenth-century French theaters or on the internet in the 2020s, to share their creations, art, stories, and ideas.

K-Pop, YouTube, and Audio-Visual Art

South Korean popular music, known colloquially as "K-pop," is one of the most popular music genres in the world.¹⁷ K-pop fans are drawn to its cultural hybridity, catchy music, blended lyrics, and wealth of audio-visual media.¹⁸ K-pop began gaining popularity internationally in the 1990s, when artists started participating more in

¹³ Satris, "Live Victorian Nudes!"

¹⁴ Jessica Stewart, "Art Lovers and Volunteers Recreate Georges Seurat's Famous Painting in Real Life," *My Modern Met*, February 14, 2020, <https://mymodernmet.com/seurat-recreation-beloit/>.

¹⁵ Smith, "Tableaux Vivants Are Giving Us Life."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "IFPI Global Music Report 2024, State of the Industry," The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), 2024, https://ifpi-website-cms.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/IFPI_GMR_2024_State_of_the_Industry_db92a1c9c1.pdf.

¹⁸ Although called "pop" music, K-pop often includes elements from genres like R&B, hip-hop, rock, etc.

Western fashion trends, which increased their relatability with international audiences.¹⁹ As K-pop's popularity spread, international audiences became increasingly interested in everything South Korean—not only their popular music, but also their food, their fashion, their dramas and their movies.²⁰ This interest in K-pop and South Korean culture continued to grow, and in 2000 the *Shanghai Evening Post* coined the now-popular term *hallyu*; “the Korean wave.”²¹

By the 2010s, K-pop's global popularity was ever-expanding, fuelled by online video sharing platforms like YouTube, which artists rely on to reach larger foreign audiences.²² In 2013, South Korean rapper Psy's 2012 music video “Gangnam Style” became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views, launching Psy into international stardom.²³ Today, “Gangnam Style” has over five billion views, the ninth most-viewed video on YouTube. In *The Media Swirl: Politics, Audiovisuality, and Aesthetics*, Carol Vernallis explains how important music videos are to contemporary audiences: “Today, more young people find out about new music by watching music videos on YouTube than any other venue, including radio.”²⁴ Globally-beloved K-pop groups like BTS and Blackpink can at least partially attribute their success to their incredibly popular music videos.²⁵

Given their importance in the contemporary online music scene, K-pop agencies invest a lot of resources into their group's music videos, and music videos for popular groups are big budget productions.²⁶ When it comes to the themes of these videos, the subject matter varies, but the trend in recent years has been moving away from straightforward visual explanations of the songs, and focusing on the aesthetics of the music video.²⁷ In a 2022 interview with K-pop music video producers Kim Young-jo and Yoo Seung-woo for *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Kim Young-jo discusses the various prompts producers may be given by K-pop agencies for their music videos:

In the past, agencies usually asked us for a storyline-focused music video. Nowadays, each agency asks for different things. Some simply give us the song and say, “We'll leave everything up to you,” while some just throw us

¹⁹ Chakraborty, “The Art of Korean Music Videos.”

²⁰ Chung Min Lee, “The Global Reach of South Korean Soft Power,” *The Future of K-Power: What South Korea Must Do After Peaking*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep62655.8>.

²¹ Tim Adams, “K-everything: the rise and rise of Korean culture,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/korea-culture-k-pop-music-film-tv-hallyu-v-and-a>.

²² Blythe Worthy, Steve Choe, Sangjoon Lee, Benjamin Nickl, Emma Rayward, and Lee Sung-Ae. “The Appeal of Korea: Transnational Korean Screen Culture,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 1 (2020): 163. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26973006>.

²³ Adams, “K-everything: the rise and rise of Korean culture.”

²⁴ Carol Vernallis, “Music Video's Multisensory,” In *The Media Swirl: Politics, Audiovisuality, and Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2023), 310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv37c06v9.20>.

²⁵ Park Kun, “Music video producers feel the pressure in the visually-evolving K-pop industry,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 13, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/09/13/entertainment/kpop/kpop-kpop-music-video-kpop-mv/20220913141752290.html>.

²⁶ Park, “Music video producers feel the pressure...”

²⁷ Ibid.

keywords like “We want it to be ‘young.’” Some give us the specific storyline and ask us to exactly recreate it.²⁸

The involvement of the artists themselves in the vision, planning, and behind-the-scenes of these videos varies. Many K-pop artists take part in production in some way, contributing to the creative direction and saving their management companies from having to spend money hiring from outside the company.²⁹ Oftentimes, however, music videos will have huge teams with multiple producers, choreographers, stylists, makeup artists, etc. contributing to the finished product.³⁰

This focus on, and response to, K-pop music videos emphasises the importance that visual media plays in K-pop’s global popularity. Emma Rayward describes K-pop as an audio-visual genre, meaning it is meant to engage audiences optically as well as auditorily.³¹ K-pop groups produce more music more frequently than most Western artists, and there is often a great deal of visual media that accompanies it.³² When a new K-pop song is released they may also release accompanying visual media like carefully choreographed dance practices, live stage performances, fancams, facecams, dance challenges and, of course, music videos, all with the intent of engaging with fans and growing the artist or group’s popularity. Visual content helps make songs and artists more memorable, contributing to their virality.³³ Music video producers like Kim and Yoo are tasked with creating moments that engage with fans, and they are successful; out of everything that accompanies an artist or group’s new music, music videos are the “most-consumed” content.³⁴

Stray Kids’ “Back Door” (2020)

*It’s most important to make the group choreography look cool.
- K-pop music video producer Kim Young-jo³⁵*

For many K-pop consumers, a song’s visual elements like choreography are as important as the song’s music and lyrics.³⁶ For some K-pop fans, dance is even more important. Small moments from a song’s choreography can go viral on social media, engaging with fans, leading to increased attention for the original artist or group. Music

²⁸ Park, “Music video producers feel the pressure...”

²⁹ Worthy, Choe, Lee, Nickl, Rayward, and Sung-Ae, “The Appeal of Korea,” page 174-175.

³⁰ For the purposes of this paper, when I use an artist or group’s name, or refer to “the group,” I’m also including the creative team who contributed to the music video.

³¹ Worthy, Choe, Lee, Nickl, Rayward, and Sung-Ae, “The Appeal of Korea,” page 174.

³² Ibid, 175.

³³ Carol Vernallis, “Music Video’s Multisensory.”

³⁴ Park, “Music video producers feel the pressure...”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dal Yong Jin, “Critical Discourse of K-Pop within Globalization,” in *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*, 111–30, University of Illinois Press, 2016.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wkv.9>.

videos can provide the perfect opportunity to highlight choreography, allowing artists to showcase their dancing skills.³⁷

Stray Kids (Fig. 8) are an eight-member boy group who debuted in 2018 under JYP Entertainment. The largely self-produced group consists of members Bang Chan (their oldest member and leader), Lee Know, Changbin, Hyunjin, Han, Felix, Seungmin, and I.N (the group's youngest member, or *maknae*), and are known for their dynamic, high-energy music and creative—sometimes acrobatic—choreography.³⁸ Their sub-unit “DANCERACHA,” made up of Lee Know, Hyunjin, and Felix, is particularly popular with K-pop dance enthusiasts.³⁹ Stray Kids' dances frequently go viral online, with professional dancers and amateur fans uploading videos of themselves covering their choreography.

In 2020 Stray Kids released their repackage album *IN LIFE*. The album's title track, a new song called “Back Door,” was an instant hit.⁴⁰ The accompanying music video, which currently has over three hundred million views on YouTube, captivated fans with its rich visual elements, including the song's intricate, challenging, choreography.⁴¹ The video opens on a dimly-lit space with framed paintings on the walls—a museum. Lee Know wanders through the space nonchalantly, his hands in his pockets, before flipping a large switch in the center of the room. The video cuts to black, then Hyunjin appears, beginning the choreography, in a new, second setting—an underground parking garage. In a moment the background behind him briefly flashes to white before all the members are back in the museum, dancing. “Hey, you wanna come in?” Felix sings in English, starting the song's lyrics.

The members cycle through these spaces, their energy palpable as they launch themselves—and each other—across the screen. We start to see other people hanging around in the background, dressed as students, chefs, white-hoodied figures; possible callbacks to Stray Kids' earlier music videos like “Miroh” and “God's Menu.”⁴² There is a break in this chaos as we are introduced to another new space, and Seungmin, one of the group's vocalists, begins to sing, his voice beautifully light and clear. This new, softer space has a liminal feeling, and is lit softly from above. The walls are a brownish gray color, maybe concrete, divided into large squares by thick lines. There is a ladder leading up into the unknown, a rusty door behind them, and the same on/off switch we saw Lee Know pull at the start of the video.

³⁷ Charlene Louise, “The Storyline K-Pop Music Video: Ambiguous Narratives and the Viewing Experience,” Medium, May 2, 2021, <https://charloucreates.medium.com/the-narrative-k-pop-music-video-ambiguous-storytelling-and-the-viewing-experience>.

³⁸ Most K-pop groups members have official and/or unofficial positions, like “leader,” “lead dancer,” “main vocalist,” and “visual” (the member considered by the company to be the best looking). Most groups do not adhere strictly to these categorizations; Stray Kids considers all its members multi-talented, allowing them to explore and take part in different aspects of production and performance.

³⁹ K-pop groups may contain “sub-units,” or smaller groups within the main group. Stray Kids original subunit is their producer team “3RACHA,” which later inspired other subunits like “DANCERACHA” and “VOCALRACHA” (Seungmin and I.N).

⁴⁰ “Back Door” was included in *Time* magazine's best 10 songs of 2020, among other accolades.

⁴¹ JYP Entertainment, “Stray Kids “Back Door” M/V,” September 14, 2020, *YouTube video*, https://youtu.be/X-uJtV8ScYk?si=RjKx_xTjil0Swoz6.

⁴² For an official, complete playlist of Stray Kids' music and performance videos see https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2HLJ87twWI3H5CwvG_xTOiHJ-muq8vvrq&si=sL_a8BAbn3NmtvTI.

We see the members dancing again across the blank white background, through the parking garage, and in the museum. As unknown characters flip the switch to turn the lights back off, Stray Kids switch them back on, and as they go back and forth the museum space fills with more and more people. “It’s like they’re inviting you to the party but there’s something a little bit off about the party.” commented popular K-pop reaction and review YouTuber Form of Therapy when reacting to “Back Door.”⁴³ The camera moves quickly, following the members’ movements, and the energy is contagious.

The *tableau vivant* in “Back Door” is performed when we see the liminal space with the rusted door again, at 1:43 (Fig. 1). A few moments earlier we see Seungmin again, singing (in Korean) “Everything looks different, and at this moment, everything turns out to be perfect” as he sits down and reaches out one arm. As the camera pans out, we see Seungmin is forming half of a very recognizable image; Michelangelo’s well-known *Creation of Adam* (Fig. 1.A). The moment when God gives Adam life. Pausing in this moment, the frame is mostly filled by five of Stray Kids’ eight members: Seungmin, Hyunjin, I.N, Lee Know, and Changbin. Our eyes are drawn to the singer, Seungmin, first. Seungmin, in the position of Adam in the original *Creation of Adam* fresco, sits on the floor, his left knee raised at an angle, his left arm reaching diagonally towards the center of the frame, his pale face framed in profile by his black hair and sleeve. His intense gaze follows the path of his arm, and as our eyes move in the same direction we see he is reaching upwards towards Hyunjin.

Hyunjin, sporting bright, eye-catching pink hair, is being held semi-aloft by the remaining three members in-frame.⁴⁴ I.N, his face obscured by Hyunjin’s arm, supports him from behind. Lee Know bends forward, supporting his groupmate’s weight from below—Lee Know steadies Hyunjin’s body with his left arm while steadying himself against the floor with his right. Changbin, the last member featured, stands to Hyunjin’s side, holding onto Hyunjin’s left to stabilize him. While these three supporting members all look down, Hyunjin looks back in Seungmin’s direction, a serene expression on his face. While other members are present, they act as supporting characters; the moment really highlights the intensity of Seungmin’s expression and the physical serenity of Hyunjin.

Hyunjin’s body stretches out gracefully as he leans on Lee Know’s back. His right leg is straight and lifted, the lower half of his shin and foot disappearing out of frame. This extension balances his right arm, which extends elegantly towards Seungmin’s outstretched left. While Seungmin’s arm is straight, his hand reaching, Hyunjin’s arm is slightly bent, his fingers more relaxed, a hair tie hanging casually from his wrist. His index finger is lifted slightly, creating an invisible line between the two men’s fingertips. Though they reach for each other, they do not quite touch. Instead, a significant point of negative space is created at the center of the image, creating a sense of tension and excitement.

These lines created by Seungmin and Hyunjin’s bodies, which lead the viewers’ eyes to the centermost point of the frame, are the composition’s most important. The image’s axis draws attention to this point, as it could be interpreted as running

⁴³ Form of Therapy, “The Kulture Study: Stray Kids 'Back Door' MV,” September 15, 2020, *YouTube video*, 7:30, <https://youtu.be/mccd69rHtJQ?si=LcXFEjkC9PZsPUqRp>.

⁴⁴ The fact that Hyunjin’s hair is so eye-catching in this music video is not accidental; K-pop artists’ hair colors are often carefully chosen by stylists.

diagonally along Seungmin's outstretched left arm, through the negative space between their hands, then along Hyunjin's right index finger. This creates a triangle of mostly wall above them, with the group members in the triangular space below. This lower space can then be bisected into two halves; Seungmin on the left, and the other four men on the right. Behind Hyunjin, I.N, Lee Know, and Changbin, we can also see the ladder on the wall, as well as the rusted metal door with peeling paint.

The image is well balanced; The negative space surrounding Seungmin also lends him an air of importance that the supporting group members give to Hyunjin. Hyunjin, I.N, Lee Know, and Changbin interweave aesthetically on the right side, making their *tableau* look graceful, effortless. There is an artistic, dancerly quality to their movements that comes through, even while still.

The color palette is relatively reserved; in addition to the muted, liminal setting, the group members are wearing mostly black, browns, navy blue, and white. There are occasional bits of color or patterns in their outfits, like the leopard print accents on Lee Know's pants.⁴⁵ This color palette does not dim the overall effect of the *tableau*, but enhances it. The viewers focus on the men's positioning and facial expressions, especially Seungmin and Hyunjin's. Seungmin's dark black hair stands out against the light-colored wall behind him, and on the other side of the frame Hyunjin's pink hair stands out, highlighting his face as he looks towards their hands. The scene is illuminated nicely, particularly the centermost portion, by the unseen light source.

Although the moment is brief, it is effective in highlighting both men's physical strengths, an important part of music video production.⁴⁶ Like the original *Creation of Adam*, this tension between the two men is what grips viewers, the moment of life being passed from one man to the other.⁴⁷ Art historian Paul Barolsky says this moment sometimes surpasses the original fresco's religious intent, connecting with religious and secular viewers.⁴⁸ The audience does not need to have a faith-based connection to the original artwork to sense the tension between the two men, and viewers wonder, for a moment, what will happen next. In "Back Door," Seungmin and Hyunjin's fingers never touch; The two men pull away from each other, continuing the song's choreography. Stray Kids continue to dance, the energy increasing, culminating in a crowded, confetti-filled finale in which a huge banner bearing the album's title "*IN*生."⁴⁹ The museum space empties, and the members finish the choreography before disappearing behind Felix who, just like at the start of the song, sings (in English) "Hey, you wanna come in?" before disappearing himself.

The fact that the *tableau vivant* in the "Back Door" music video is included in the choreography itself, given how important choreography is in K-pop, is meaningful. It means not only is it performed during the music video, but during stage performances. When the group performs their *Creation of Adam tableau vivant* live, all the members

⁴⁵ Though not visible in the *tableau vivant*, Lee Know is also wearing a shirt with an angel on it—a subtle visual nod to the artwork they are recreating?

⁴⁶ Park, "Music video producers feel the pressure..."

⁴⁷ Paul Barolsky, "THE GENIUS OF MICHELANGELO'S 'CREATION OF ADAM' AND THE BLINDNESS OF ART HISTORY," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 33, no. 1 (2013): 24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23595750>.

⁴⁸ Barolsky, "THE GENIUS OF MICHELANGELO, 24.

⁴⁹ Hybrid titles mixing English and Korean lettering are not uncommon in K-pop, a reflection of its cultural hybridity and popularity with Western audiences; "*IN*生" translates to "*IN LIFE*" in English.

take part, creating a cloud of bodies and limbs beneath Hyunjin (Fig. 9). The pivotal moment in the recreation can be adapted to send playful messages of love and support to fans (Fig. 10), or used to highlight the absence of a member (Fig. 11). Stray Kids songs are often covered by other groups, and when other groups cover “Back Door” they can adapt the choreography to better fit their group’s concept, like K-pop girl group Kep1er, who altered the physical arrangement significantly but kept the moment where two members’ hands nearly touch (Fig. 12).

“Back Door” certainly does an excellent job making “the group choreography look cool.” But its presence does more than just aesthetically enhance that moment in the music video. The inclusion of a *tableau vivant* also engages with viewers in a unique way; for example, as dancer and YouTuber Elliott New Village watched “Back Door” he paused, saying “that looked very familiar.”⁵⁰ He rewound the video, paused, and looked closer, exclaiming “Is that supposed to be the Sistine Chapel?”⁵¹ Even though the YouTuber did not immediately recall the name of the painting, he immediately recognized the famous arrangement, causing him to rewind, replay, and engage further with the music video.

Elliott New Village, and Form of Therapy, are part of an expansive, global, online community who react to, analyze, and review K-pop content. This community thrives on the online video sharing platform YouTube, where K-pop fans flock to learn more about their favorite artists’ content.⁵² As K-pop has grown as a genre, so has this community of reaction channels and their fans. Because of their visually and narratively-interesting music videos and performances, Stray Kids are a popular group for channels to make content about. The group’s popularity brings their fans to the YouTuber’s channel, leading to increased engagement and visibility for the YouTuber, and fans in turn enjoy hearing their favorite YouTuber’s perspectives on their favorite artists.

K-pop artists are well-aware of this community, and know that discourse and discussion can be good for engagement for themselves as well. Because of this, some artists and groups intentionally embrace visual ambiguity in their music videos, encouraging fans to engage and interact with the groups’ content.⁵³ Viewers unfamiliar with K-pop might find these music videos strange and nonsensical, but most K-pop fans embrace this visual chaos. K-music journalist Riddhi Chakraborty, writing for *Rolling Stone India*, explains:

*Korean artists often choose not to explain what their videos mean, allowing audiences the freedom to create their own interpretation of their work—this leeway inevitably creates a unique bond between the artist and the audience who are free to take what they need from the story to make themselves happy.*⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Elliott New Village, “Dancer Reacts to #STRAYKIDS - BACK DOOR Dance Practice Video,” October 4, 2020, *YouTube video*, 5:52, <https://youtu.be/5odvxlSfYuk?si=OzojXOh4F9RIQgDN>.

⁵¹ Elliott New Village, “Dancer Reacts to #STRAYKIDS - BACK DOOR Dance Practice Video,” 6:32.

⁵² Because YouTube is such a contemporary hub for K-pop analysis and commentary, I cite several of these YouTubers throughout my paper as contemporary critical commentary.

⁵³ Worthy, Choe, Lee, Nickl, Rayward, and Sung-Ae, “The Appeal of Korea,” 174.

⁵⁴ Chakraborty, “The Art of Korean Music Videos.”

K-pop fans have come to expect narrative Easter eggs hidden in music videos by their favorite artists and groups.⁵⁵ Emma Rayward says that fans “hunt for clues, speculate on symbolism and lore, and predict future stories.”⁵⁶ Sometimes the lore, or the overarching story, developed by fans is what the artist or group intended, other times artists let fans create worlds of their own out of seemingly innocuous visual elements that they decided carry narrative significance. Neither of these approaches is necessarily right or wrong; the openness to interpretation is one of the reasons K-pop music videos are so engaging.

In the case of Stray Kids “Back Door” *tableau vivant*, the “clue” is fairly straightforward. The group has said “Back Door” is meant to be about welcoming anyone at any time—anyone who knocks on their door can join them.⁵⁷ We see this as the museum space gradually fills with more and more people, and eventually turns into a celebration. The banner that unfurls, bearing the album’s title, *IN LIFE*, reminding us why Stray Kids can welcome so many people in; they have created a space where they can be themselves, to live their lives how they want to, in their own style.⁵⁸ With the music video then being about creating a life, living your life, it is easy to see how the *Creation of Adam tableau vivant* fits easily into this narrative, as the original fresco is literally God bestowing life on his creation, Adam.⁵⁹ YouTuber Bookish Theories says Stray Kids act in “Back Door” as “both god and men, both creator and creation, both artists and art.”⁶⁰ We can see how seriously fans take music video lore, often interpreting deep messages from what other viewers might see as innocuous visuals.

Not all K-pop music videos, however, are as visually straightforward as “Back Door.” The longer the group has been producing music, the more music videos fans have to link together. Groups have more and more Easter eggs to leave as clues for their fans, and fans have more content to form their theories. When it comes to groups who embrace ambiguous narrative visuals, their music videos can be complicated to understand. In these videos, there may not be an explanation from the group themselves for what we are seeing, and the visuals like *tableaux vivants* and the lyrics may seemingly not relate to one another. There might not be a “right” or “wrong” interpretation of the stories these music videos are telling. Maybe there is no meaning, or maybe there are multiple interpretations, all each as valid as the last.

⁵⁵ An “Easter egg” in the context of a fan community—or “fandom”—refers to a hidden reference, message, or inside joke left for fans by the artist(s).

⁵⁶ Worthy, Choe, Lee, Nickl, Rayward, and Sung-Ae, “The Appeal of Korea,” page 174.

⁵⁷ ReacttotheK, “Classical & Jazz Musicians (ft. dancers) React: Stray Kids 'Back Door,’” November 16, 2020, *YouTube video*, 1:50, <https://youtu.be/kPPtakL2fWg?si=SOzWNXP-Vnx6ZUaW>.

⁵⁸ ReacttotheK, “Classical & Jazz Musicians (ft. dancers) React: Stray Kids 'Back Door,’” 2:12.

⁵⁹ Stray Kids’ *Creation of Adam tableau vivant* would not be their last; in 2022 they recreated Marina Abramović and Ulay’s 1980 *Rest Energy* at timestamp 1:02 in their music video for their song “Venom,” using the image, perhaps, to illustrate the trust Bang Chan has in his group’s members, including his youngest member I.N. View that music video here https://youtu.be/pM-iOfy_1jM?si=Lcy-Y8uaNblJaJan.

⁶⁰ Bookish Theories, “Stray Kids BACK DOOR Explained: Connections to the Storyline + Lyrics and MV Breakdown & Analysis,” September 19, 2020, *YouTube video*, 2:50, https://youtu.be/VYIELAh_tk4?si=9OJHRv7R0hMNt-EG.

Red Velvet's "Feel My Rhythm" (2020)

Red Velvet (Fig. 13) is a South Korean girl group who debuted in 2014, and are known for their visually-rich, narratively-enticing music videos. The group is made up of five members; Irene (the group's leader), Seulgi, Wendy, Joy, and Yeri (the group's *maknae*). Their music videos range from bright and bubbly, like their 2018 video for "Power Up," to darker concepts like their *Black Swan* (2010)-inspired music video "Psycho" (also released in 2018).⁶¹ In 2022 the group released their song "Feel My Rhythm," a bright, upbeat track which Irene described in an interview for MusicBank as a "joyful imaginary trip crossing time and space."⁶² Living up to Irene's description, the music video for "Feel My Rhythm" brings together multiple art history references from across genres and time periods that create a cacophony of delightful, visually-engaging and intriguing imagery.

"Feel My Rhythm" starts right away with the sound of an old film reel being played, but the music video begins slightly earlier, with a few moments of birdsong, the sound of a babbling brook, and the light creaking of a swing hanging from a tree branch. Already, audibly, the music video has set the scene sensorily for a calming, outdoorsy feeling. Then, before the music starts, within 10 seconds, we are shown our first four *tableaux vivants*. These first, brief scenes are edited in a painterly aesthetic, the sides of the screen resembling a canvas, the background moving as if it were an animated Impressionism painting, with messy, earth-colored strokes shifting and wriggling around the group members. With these visual clues, viewers are already led to understand the music video is referencing paintings, even if they are unable to recognize or name the specific pieces that members are mimicking.

Seulgi, the group's main dancer and lead vocalist, is the first group member we see during these initial few moments.⁶³ We see her from the side, climbing a wooden ladder, leaning against a brick wall, brushstrokes swimming around her (Fig. 14). She then peers over the wall, standing on her toes to get a better look. She is costumed in a light pink dress, its big pink bow hanging down her back, accessorized with matching elbow-length light pink gloves, and a light straw hat ornamented with a long strand of pearls that hangs down her front. The overall effect is quite delicate, notably different than she will appear later in the video.

This first shot, of Seulgi on the ladder, could be a reference to multiple paintings; French artist Paul Philippoteaux's painting *The Spy* (Fig. 14.A), for example, and/or Italian artist Eugene de Blaas' 1892 painting *Curiosity* (Fig. 14.B). Right before the song begins to play, after the other members make their appearances, this beginning scene ends with Seulgi on her ladder again, this time looking directly into the camera instead of over the wall (Fig. 15), mirroring another painting, French artist Camille Corot's *The Curious Little Girl* (Fig. 15.A).

⁶¹ For an official playlist of Red Velvet music videos and performances https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQCakH1gpYY8XQCN0DZ668XGZ-m7WUI7M&si=nFfuVw_5md1_ZQG8.

⁶² MusicBank is a televised South Korean music program; KBSKpop, "(ENG SUB)[MusicBank Interview Cam] 레드벨벳 (Red Velvet Interview) @MusicBank KBS 220325," March 25, 2022, *YouTube video*, 0:55, <https://youtu.be/hpPpnJAn9N8?si=eMN4gwzPMMSAA5ix>.

⁶³ carly zee, "A Deep Dive into Red Velvet (2024 Extensive Guide)," *YouTube video*, December 27, 2024, 1:38:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SatFaMlb7Sg>.

Between these two brief appearances of Seulgi on her ladder, the other Red Velvet members make their appearances in their own quick *tableaux vivants*. Although these *tableaux* interact with each other in small ways, these members are representing three separate paintings. The first member we are visually introduced to after Seulgi is the group's leader, Irene.⁶⁴ She is the source of the sound of the creaky swing, and as she glides into frame, her white gown floating around her like a cloud (Fig. 16). This is an obvious homage to the famous Rococo painting *The Swing*, by French artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard (Fig. 16.A). The airy, Rococo-inspired image of Irene swinging by adds to the light, garden-like, whimsical aesthetic started by Seulgi in her pink dress and straw hat.

After Irene floats by on her swing we see, laying in the gently rippling, animated water, Red Velvet's lead rapper and sub-vocalist, Joy.⁶⁵ She reclines, supine, the palms of her hands resting on the water's surface, facing upwards (Fig. 17). Like Irene and *The Swing*, Joy is copying another famous work of art, Sir John Everett Millais' 1852 painting *Ophelia* (Fig. 17.A). Although the subject matter of the original painting is quite tragic, the composition of the painting is undeniably pretty, with flowers surrounding the soon-to-be dead Ophelia.⁶⁶ Unlike poor Ophelia in Millais' painting, however, we know that Joy is conscious and alert, as her eyes shift towards the viewer.

Finally Yeri, the group's sub-rapper and sub-vocalist, and Wendy, their lead vocalist, are shown sitting demurely on the rocks above Joy, a small waterfall trickling between them. They are both dressed in pink dresses, similar to Seulgi's, decorated in sparkles and ruffles and bows. Yeri holds one hand to her chest as they look down at Joy, still floating Ophelia-like in the water below them (Fig. 18). Little painted butterflies flutter lazily around the flowers behind them, and after a moment they both look off to one side, perhaps towards Seulgi on her ladder. This is the first of two pieces by English artist John William Waterhouse that are referenced in "Feel My Rhythm," his 1900 painting *Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus* (Fig. 18.A).

After Seulgi stares into the camera, the nature sounds stop and we hear the sound of the old film reel playing, which lets us know the track is starting. There is a flurry of orange animated brushstrokes, matching the sky behind Seulgi in the previous frame, and then we see the group members in their ballerina-inspired choreography costumes, arranged "like fairies on a silver plate."⁶⁷ German Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach's "Air On The G String" begins to play, and Wendy vocalizes sweetly along with it, the first member we hear sing. Seulgi sings next, a pretty, lyricless accompaniment to the sampling from Bach. As they dance, the video cuts to scenes of Seulgi in another setting, dressed in a darker, scarier costume, wearing a black crown of thorns and holding a thin sword. Strange dark figures dance in the peripherals of the scenes. Thirty-five seconds into the video, we see a giant pink flower, which blooms to reveal Joy, who says the group's name—"Red Velvet"—and then the song's lyrics, sung in a mixture of Korean and English, begin.

⁶⁴ Irene is also Red Velvet's main rapper, visual, center, sub-vocalist, and lead dancer.

⁶⁵ Carly Zee, "A Deep Dive into Red Velvet."

⁶⁶ In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia has a mental breakdown and drowns (possibly intentionally) in a brook.

⁶⁷ Red Velvet, "Red Velvet 레드벨벳 'Feel My Rhythm' MV Reaction | RV Collection," March 24, 2022, YouTube video, 22:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUHe5nqlb-M>.

These first few moments set the tone for the rest of the music video, establishing a whimsical, yet slightly unnervingly sinister feeling. The music mirrors this classical, whimsical feeling, described by one musician in “Classical & Jazz Musicians React: Red Velvet ‘Feel My Rhythm’” as having “an angelic quality to it. Light, airy, Rococo.”⁶⁸ Although the art pieces they are referencing are all beautiful, paintings like Millais’ *Ophelia* add something darker. As the music video progresses we see more *tableaux vivants* of the group members in their whimsical garden; Irene and Seulgi as Monet’s *Woman with a Parasol - Madame Monet and Her Son*, (Fig. 19-19.A) Yeri as Venus in Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, (Fig. 20-20.A), and Joy picking flowers referencing the music video’s second Waterhouse painting, *Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May* (Fig. 21-21.A). Fans of the group who are familiar with the original paintings may recognize Irene, the “mom” of the group, in the position of Madame Monet in *Woman with a Parasol - Madame Monet and Her Son*.⁶⁹

Snaking through these scenes, however, are darker images, and an ever-presence of strawberries. The first time we see strawberries in “Feel My Rhythm” are in the hands of one of the dancers dressed in strange, bird-like costumes (Fig. 22), then crowning the head of Yeri, who we see sitting in a large pink egg, surrounded by more dancing bird people (Fig. 23-23.A).⁷⁰ Strawberries continue as a visual theme throughout the video, as we see the black-crowned Seulgi eating one off of her sword (Fig. 24), and Joy being offered a round red berry on a mysterious skewer (Fig. 24.A). These strawberries—along with the bird-like dancers and many other visual elements of “Feel My Rhythm”—are a reference to *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a hauntingly-strange painting by Hieronymus Bosch (Fig. 25-25.B). While not everyone recognizes the famous painting right away, viewers like YouTuber and video editor Jordan Orme became familiar with *The Garden of Earthly Delights* after researching the music video’s artistic influences.⁷¹ These references reinforce the underlying eerie feeling of the music video. As Walter S. Gibson points out, “his [Bosch’s] garden, however fair seeming, is no earthly or celestial paradise but a deceitful garden, an illusion whose alluring forms conceal death and damnation.”⁷² YouTube channel Emily and Abby describe *The Garden of Earthly Delights* “world” in their reaction video as “nightmarish” and “unsettling.”⁷³

The through line of strawberries has been interpreted by fans in many ways; historically, strawberries have popularly represented both virginity (perceived purity), and sexuality in art.⁷⁴ “If the strawberry was the fruit of the Virgin, it was also the fruit of

⁶⁸ ReacttotheK, “Classical & Jazz Musicians React: Red Velvet ‘Feel My Rhythm’,” April 5, 2022, *YouTube video*, 16:50, <https://youtu.be/v1w3DS1IE0s?si=8uMQEnXzo1RplXX>.

⁶⁹ carly zee, “A Deep Dive into Red Velvet”

⁷⁰ This crown of strawberries was Yeri’s idea, an example of how K-pop artists are involved in the behind-the-scenes artistic production.

⁷¹ Jordan Orme (YouTube channel), “Editor Reacts to Red Velvet ‘Feel My Rhythm’ *WHAT YOU MISSED*,” March 22, 2022, *YouTube video*, 3:01, https://youtu.be/jUGo_HTYoBA?si=KW8MF0aI9LN_9OaU.

⁷² Walter S. Gibson, “The Strawberries of Hieronymus Bosch,” *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 8 (2003): 30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20079728>.

⁷³ Emily and Abby (YouTube channel), “Art Historian reacts to Red Velvet 레드벨벳 ‘Feel My Rhythm’ MV,” March 21, 2022, *YouTube video*, 6:20. <https://youtu.be/OH6ykVFNjLM?si=1zfoLLw4C2Fs7C3p>.

⁷⁴ Gibson, “The Strawberries of Hieronymus Bosch,” 24–33.

Venus” writes Gibson.⁷⁵ This dichotomy is one that K-pop artists would not be unfamiliar with, working in the entertainment industry. Like in the original Bosch painting, they may represent temptation.⁷⁶ The meaning of the strawberries is discussed and debated within the fan community. Bookish Theories thinks the music video represents the struggle between winter and spring, represented by the dark Seulgi and Joy in her flower.⁷⁷ According to Bookish Theories, the seasonal fruit represents the temptation for Seulgi to embrace spring, which she eventually does—in Bookish Theories’ interpretation.⁷⁸ Others, like Form of Therapy, theorize the berries may represent something more primal, a way to represent graphic violence without actually showing anything violent. During his reaction video he comments that a piece of strawberry a member is holding resembles a beating heart, or a chunk of liver.⁷⁹

The scenes do not progress, perhaps, in a straightforward sense, and they culminate in a visually-rich crescendo, a painterly montage featuring the group members recreating different details from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The music video ends with a structure from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Fig. 26), but instead of an owl we see Seulgi gazing out at us (Fig. 26.A-26.B). This focus on, and lasting last image of, Seulgi has led to many fan theories, from the above—that Joy seduces Seulgi with strawberries to embrace spring—to darker theories. YouTuber KOOKIELIT draws on fan-created lore from previous music videos to theorize that Seulgi’s character is, in fact, the devil, intent on dragging the other members down to Hell with her.⁸⁰ In this interpretation Seulgi may triumph over the flowery Joy, purposing that Joy’s position as Ophelia at the beginning of the music video may have been a form of sinister foreshadowing.⁸¹

Ambiguousness like this leads to fan engagement. While these two fan theories may seem conflicting, part of the appeal of music videos like “Feel My Rhythm” is the debate about the music video’s meaning. And these are only a few fan interpretations—there are numerous others. Of course, in the end, the music video may not have a deep, deep meaning. Maybe they chose to highlight the strawberries from Bosch’s painting for purely aesthetic reasons. Or maybe simply because, as Seulgi points out in the “Feel My Rhythm” behind-the-scenes video, strawberries are her favorite fruit. For fans of groups like Red Velvet, the mystery is part of the fun. Fans are free to build their own theories, engage with the online reactor and commentary community, or to simply enjoy the music videos and *tableaux vivants* as standalone pieces of audio-visual art.

⁷⁵ Gibson, “The Strawberries of Hieronymus Bosch,” 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 24–33.

⁷⁷ Bookish Theories. “RED VELVET FEEL MY RHYTHM Art + Story Explained: The ReVe Festival Concept, Lyrics & MV Explored,” March 25, 2022, *YouTube video*, 16:19, <https://youtu.be/7ZC1bhwb1zM?si=dRrIF2MrHT1kGBU>.

⁷⁸ Bookish Theories. “RED VELVET FEEL MY RHYTHM Art + Story Explained: The ReVe Festival Concept, Lyrics & MV Explored,” 16:19.

⁷⁹ Form of Therapy, “The Kulture Study: Red Velvet 'Feel My Rhythm' MV REACTION & REVIEW,” March 22, 2022, *YouTube video*, 12:21, <https://youtu.be/aQmkRlv0hDo?si=N82aL6JUCjExYY9F>.

⁸⁰ KOOKIELIT, “The Dark Red Velvet Theory Continues,” March 27, 2022, *YouTube video*, 8:04, https://youtu.be/ErAlXJ-kHpK?si=e--TNm_fJ4ogVnsg.

⁸¹ KOOKIELIT, “The Dark Red Velvet Theory Continues,” 7:45.

Conclusion

In recent years, perhaps inspired by this string of *tableaux vivants* in music videos, some K-pop artists and groups have opted for an interesting twist on the centuries-old art form. Instead of recreating a specific piece of art, some artists have created original scenes that look like *tableaux vivants*. Last year, in August of 2024, Thai artist BamBam, from K-pop boy group Got7, released his solo song “LAST PARADE.”⁸² The music video for “LAST PARADE” is cinematic, the story of an authoritarian version of BamBam and a rebel version of BamBam, which culminates with them meeting each other in a Neoclassically-inspired face-off (Fig. 27-27.A). Like Stray Kids’ “Back Door,” BamBam uses elements from classical art to represent self-expression in the face of oppressive control. Continuing the art-inspired theme to the end, the music video finishes with its credits laid out across the screen like a triptych, the figures still moving through the clouds to the last notes of music (Fig. 28).

Later in 2024 the boy group Ateez released their song “Ice On My Teeth,” and its accompanying music video.⁸³ For a brief moment in the music video, the group’s leader Hongjoong floats in front of fluffy clouds and angels wearing ski masks, before the camera zooms in and he winks cheekily at the audience (Fig. 29-29.A). The backdrop calls to mind angelic scenes like *The Apotheosis of Hercules*, where otherworldly figures float amongst the sun-drenched clouds (Fig. 29.B). Fans of the group understand the irony of this cherubic image; Hongjoong, in addition to being the group’s leader, is part of the group’s sub-unit known as the “Demon Line,” given their name for their possessed appearances while dancing to particularly intense choreography.⁸⁴ Knowing this, his cheeky wink makes more sense.

Mixed-gender group AllDay Project released their song and music “FAMOUS” earlier this year.⁸⁵ AllDay Project are a new group, who debuted a few months before “FAMOUS” was released, so they did not have established lore to reference in their music videos for fans. Instead, they used art to introduce one of their members, Annie, who we see riding a mechanical horse in a room surrounded by attendants (Fig. 30). It is clear the scene is inspired by classical art, as digital images of paintings of wealthy Western ladies on horseback—and, if you look closely, motorcycles and big cats—stand around the space. We as viewers can take away that Annie is someone of status, who commands the attention of others. She goes on to smash the digital backdrop, maybe hinting towards a more rebellious side. The *tableau vivant*-inspired introduction to Annie in “FAMOUS” also includes a series of painterly images of Annie dressed in various outfits, including traditional Korean clothing (Fig. 31-32). While K-pop has always been a mixture of different cultures, there has recently been a push in towards including more South Korean arts and culture—like Annie’s traditional outfits—in its music videos and

⁸² BamBam Official, “뱅크 (BamBam) 'LAST PARADE' MV,” August 8, 2024, *YouTube video*, 3:15, <https://youtu.be/quNtPI4bmPA?si=8gloDk5TleZOBHP2>.

⁸³ KQ ENTERTAINMENT, “ATEEZ(에이티즈) - 'Ice On My Teeth' Official MV,” November 15, 2024, *YouTube video*, 3:22, <https://youtu.be/5OfIOLcHLb8?si=Q0FiDwINi6-rmX3G>.

⁸⁴ The sub-unit is made up of Hongjoong, as well as members Seonghwa and San.

⁸⁵ THEBLACKLABEL, “ALLDAY PROJECT - 'FAMOUS' M/V,” June 16, 2025, *YouTube video*, 3:08, <https://youtu.be/VjvzYjU1mY0?si=Wy4ZEQ7MKhlwA8B9>.

other visual content, using K-pop's hybridity and influence to help advance *hallyu.2*, or "The New Korean Wave."⁸⁶

Hallyu.2 aims to introduce wider audiences to authentic elements of South Korean arts and culture. Emma Rayward explains how platforms like YouTube are contributing to this cultural exchange:

*Converse to external appropriation, we are seeing an increase in traditional Korean elements in music, costume, set design and narrative. Hanbok, both traditional and modern interpretations, are being styled outside of Chuseok message videos, and traditional instrumentation is being mixed with contemporary genres. K-pop has commonly been described as a hybrid product of globalization, blending western and Korean components to create something distinct from both, though still contained within the same capitalist structures. I would suggest that as K-pop has achieved greater global visibility, these large platforms are being used to share aspects of Korean culture not commonly seen outside of local spaces. So while western genres and the English language are used to appeal to western audiences, Korean elements are being included to introduce western audiences to Korean culture.*⁸⁷

Other platforms like Netflix are also playing their part; recently the animated musical film *KPop Demon Hunters* was named "the most popular Netflix film of all time."⁸⁸ It is evident how important K-pop is in spreading South Korean culture, through music, costumes, and visual arts.

This paper has focused on *tableaux vivant* inspired by Western art, because popular, internationally-recognizable pieces like *The Creation of Adam* are more often than not what we see being recreated. But South Korea has its own rich visual arts history, and K-pop idols are a significant presence in the South Korean art world. Popular K-pop groups BTS' RM and BigBang's G-Dragon are two of the country's largest art collectors.⁸⁹ BTS' agency, HYBE, very recently partnered with the National Museum of Korea to push Korean arts and culture through K-pop.⁹⁰

So what does this mean for the future of the *tableau vivant* in K-pop? The *tableau vivant* has certainly already established itself as a creative artistic tool within the audio-visual medium of K-pop. They have proven themselves to be adaptable, and engaging. Groups like Stray Kids and Red Velvet have found ways to utilize *tableaux vivants* in their music videos to narratively enhance their visual storytelling. Sometimes

⁸⁶ Dal Yong Jin, "Critical Discourse of K-Pop within Globalization," 118.

⁸⁷ Worthy, Choe, Lee, Nickl, Rayward, and Sung-Ae, "The Appeal of Korea," 178.

⁸⁸ Keisha Hatchett, "KPop Demon Hunters Reaches a Golden Milestone: Most Popular Netflix Film Ever," *Tudum by Netflix*, August 26, 2025, <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/kpop-demon-hunters-most-popular-netflix-film>.

⁸⁹ Redkar, Riddhi, "K-Pop Stars With the Most Impressive Art Collections: BTS Leader RM, BIGBANG's G-Dragon and More," *PrestigeOnline*, Mar 25, 2025, <https://www.prestigeonline.com/hk/lifestyle/art-plus-design/k-pop-stars-with-the-most-impressive-art-collections-bts-leader-rm-bigbangs-g-dragon-and-more/>.

⁹⁰ Hwang Dong-hee, "National Museum of Korea partners with Hybe to bring Korean heritage to the world," *The Korea Herald*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10589167>.

this is done more straightforwardly, like the choreographed recreation of *The Creation of Adam*, and sometimes the messages are more ambiguous, like the eerie yet beautiful image of Joy as *Ophelia*. And while they can be consumed purely aesthetically, these familiar-looking scenes are also clues to the fascinating world of sometimes canonical, but oftentimes uncanonical, K-pop artist or group lore. Even indirectly, we can see their influence in videos like BamBam's "LAST PARADE." With *hallyu.2* growing ever bigger, and K-pop artists so involved in South Korea's visual arts scene, it is exciting to think about the imaginative and innovative mediums that South Korean visual art history may appear in, going forward, in K-pop music videos; hopefully, among them, will be the *tableau vivant*.

Figures



Figure 1: Stray Kids' 2020 music video for "Back Door," timestamp 1:43
<https://youtu.be/X-uJtV8ScYk?si=T0TATmy2BUeHyYU5>

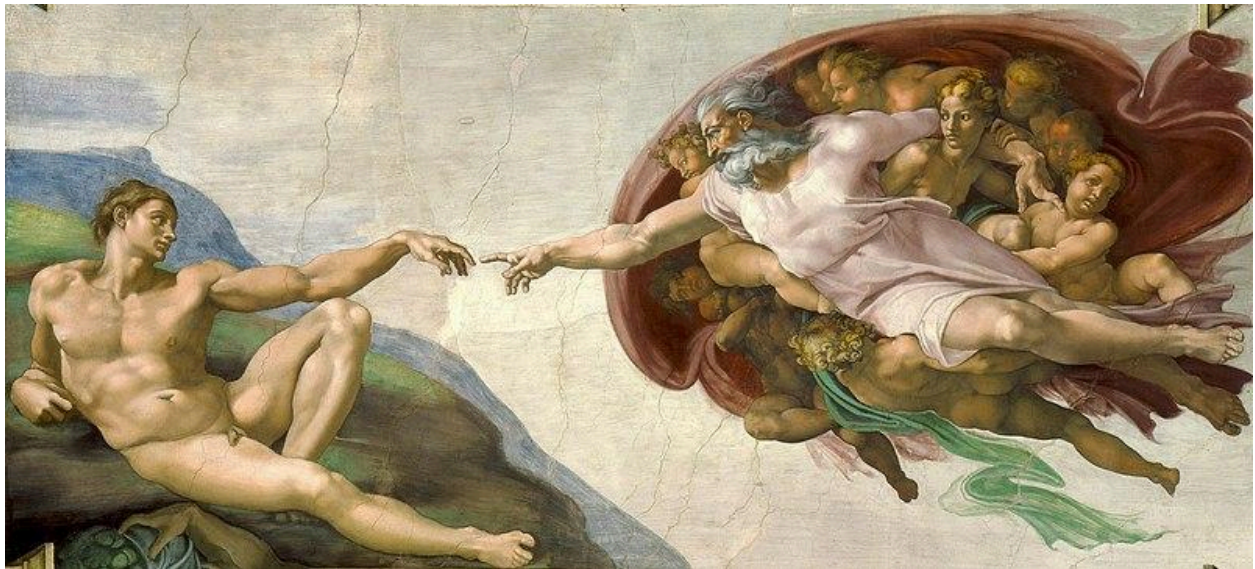


Fig. 1.A: Michelangelo (1475-1564), *Creation of Adam*, c. 1512.
Ceiling fresco, the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City

<https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/volta/storie-centrali/creazione-di-adamo.html>



X. 5 Affiche du *Naufrage de la Méduse*
au théâtre du Châtelet
Lithographie en noir collée sur
planche typographique, 80 x 60 cm
Paris, BnF.

Fig. 2: X. 5 Poster for *The Shipwreck of the Medusa* at the Théâtre du Châtelet.
Black lithograph mounted on a typographic plate, 80 x 60 cm Paris, BnF.
From Léonard Pouy and Julie Ramos' *Le tableau vivant: ou l'image performée*, page 189



Fig. 3: Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), ‘*So like a shatter'd Column lay the King*’ or *The Passing of Arthur*, c. 1875, photograph; albumen print from wet collodion glass negative, 13.39in × 10.63in, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1098303/so-like-a-shatterd-column-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/>

An example of a nineteenth century tableau vivant by English photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. Cameron shows viewers a wounded King Arthur, from Lord Alfred Tennyson’s series of narrative poems titled *Idylls of the King*.⁹¹

⁹¹ “So like a shatter'd Column lay the King.” Victoria and Albert Museum. July 1, 2009.
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1098303/so-like-a-shatterd-column-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/>.



Fig. 4: Julius Staudt (1873–1928), *Rape of the Sabine Women*, performed by German artist Olga Desmond (1890-1964, being held aloft) as Venus, with two other members of the variety artist group The Seldoms, 1906, photograph, the Berlinische Galerie (formerly at Das Verborgene Museum) <https://dasverborgenemuseum.de/kuenstlerinnen/desmond-olga>



Fig. 4.A: Giambologna (1529-1608), *Abduction of a Sabine Woman*, 1581-83, marble, 161.42 in high, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence

<https://smarthistory.org/giambologna-abduction-of-a-sabine-woman/>



Fig. 5: *Liberty and her Attendants - (Suffragette's Tableau) in Front of Treasury Bldg. March 3, 1913 - Washington, D.C., 1913, postcard, 3.5in × 5.5in, the Library of Congress*
<https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000279/>



Fig. 6: Mark Preuschl, recreation of *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by the Beloit, Wisconsin's Friends of the Riverfront, 2006 <https://flic.kr/s/aHsiDd5oW8>



Fig. 6.A: Georges Seurat (1859-1891), *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886, oil on canvas, 81.7in × 121.25in, the The Art Institute of Chicago
<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/27992/a-sunday-on-la-grande-jatte-1884>



Fig. 7: Olesya Malyugina/Izoizolyacia/Facebook via <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/tableaux-vivants-replicate-art-masterpieces-during-covid-19-quarantine-1202686492/>

Russian social media user Olesya Malyugina's COVID-19 quarantine-era tableau vivant, recreating British artist John Everett Millais's painting Ophelia. Malyugina shows herself in her bathtub, surrounded by stockpiled food.⁹²

⁹² Smith. "Tableaux Vivants Are Giving Us Life."



Fig. 8: Stray Kids promoting “Back Door” on Inkigayo in 2020.
From left to right: Hyunjin, Lee Know, Changbin, Felix, Han, I.N, Seungmin, and Bang Chan
https://x.com/kpop_sbs/status/1310086767324749824



Fig. 9: “Stray Kids' ‘Back Door’ Dance Practice Video,” timestamp: 1:28
https://youtu.be/WAGlb7u9nqE?si=3H6IEztxAzyC_5TZ



Fig. 10: “Stray Kids' ‘Back Door’ Dance Practice Video (Lovestay 한복 ver.),” timestamp: 1:28
https://youtu.be/6uIR1hix_wg?si=IQ4XrSrCyFmgMair



Fig. 11: Stray Kids perform “Back Door” without Hyunjin at the MBNY forum in 2021. “MBNY FORUM 2021 STRAY KIDS GOD’S MENU+BACK DOOR+SPEECH (ENG SUBS),” timestamp: 7:32 <https://youtu.be/5xloYSvL7t0?si=B5hg1WDo1BiboKhf>



Fig. 12: K-pop girl group Kep1er covers “Back Door” at KCON LA 2024. “[KCON LA 2024] Kep1er - Back Door (원곡: Stray Kids) | Mnet 240813 방송,” timestamp: 1:25 https://youtu.be/_1lmGCo2MZM?si=8kGWsWVArGO117oo



Fig. 13: Red Velvet promoting The ReVe Festival 2022 – Feel My Rhythm, wearing bodices decorated with paintings recreated in the “Feel My Rhythm” music video.

From left to right: Joy, Yeri, Irene, Seulgi, and Wendy

<https://x.com/RVsmtown/status/1507674913124937730>

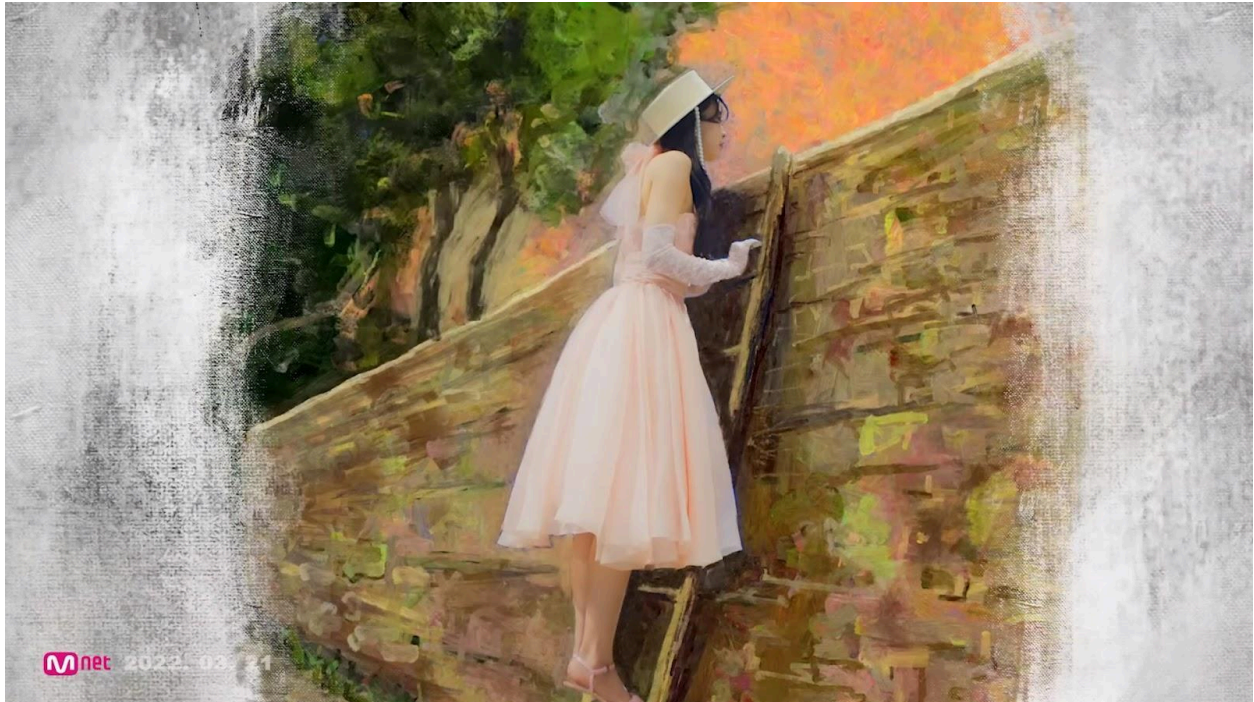


Fig. 14: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:02
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 14.A: Paul Philippoteaux (1846–1923), "The Spy," oil on canvas, private collection



Fig. 14.B: Eugene de Blaas (1843-1931), *Curiosity*, 1891, oil on canvas, 58.46in × 29.13in (painting), the Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery at Pukenuamu, Queen's Park Whanganui <https://collection.sarjeant.org.nz/objects/43356/curiosity>



Fig. 15: Red Velvet's 2022 music video "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:09
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 15.A: Camille Corot (1796-1875), *The Curious Little Girl*, 1860-64, oil on cardboard, laid down on wood, 16.25in × 11.25in, the Met <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437991>



Fig. 16: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp 0:05
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 16.A: Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), *The Swing*,
c. 1767-8, oil on canvas, 31.89in × 25.28in, the Wallace Collection

[https://www.wallacecollection.org/explore/collection/search-the-collection/les-hazards-heureux-d
e-lescarpolette-swing/](https://www.wallacecollection.org/explore/collection/search-the-collection/les-hazards-heureux-de-lescarpolette-swing/)



Fig. 17: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:05
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 17.A: Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Ophelia*, 1852, oil on canvas, the Tate
<https://www.tate-images.com/preview.asp?image=N01506&wwwflag=3&imagepos=2>



Fig. 18: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:07
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 18.A: John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), *Nymphs finding the Head of Orpheus*, 1900, oil on canvas, private collection



Fig. 19: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 1:00
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 19.A: Claude Monet (1840–1926), *Woman with a Parasol - Madame Monet and Her Son*, 1875, oil on canvas, the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.)
<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/61379-woman-parasol-madame-monet-and-her-son>



Fig. 20: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 1:54
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 20.A: Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510), *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1485, tempera on canvas, the Uffizi <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>



Fig. 21: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 2:00
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2lCm4LQ>



Fig. 21.A: John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), *Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May*, 1909, oil on canvas, private collection



Fig. 22: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:45
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 23: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:50
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 23.A: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 0:51
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2ICm4LQ>



Fig. 24: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 2:45
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2lCm4LQ>



Fig. 24.A: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 2:57
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2lCm4LQ>



Fig. 25: Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted between 1480 and 1505, oil on oak panels, the Museo del Prado
<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609>



Fig. 25.A: Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail), painted between 1480 and 1505, oil on oak panels, the Museo del Prado
<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609>



Fig. 25.B: Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail), painted between 1480 and 1505, oil on oak panels, the Museo del Prado
<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609>



Fig. 26: Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail), painted between 1480 and 1505, oil on oak panels, the Museo del Prado
<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609>



Fig. 26.A: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 3:45
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2lCm4LQ>



Fig. 26.B: Red Velvet's 2022 music video for "Feel My Rhythm," timestamp: 3:50
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9At2lCm4LQ>



Fig. 27: BamBam's 2024 music video for "Last Parade," timestamp: 2:45
<https://youtu.be/quNtPI4bmPA?si=IjGMWrK76HjExSV>



Fig. 27.A: Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1802, oil on canvas, the Palace of Versailles, France



Fig. 28: BamBam's 2024 music video for "Last Parade," timestamp: 3:08

<https://youtu.be/quNtPI4bmPA?si=IjGMWrK76HjExSV>

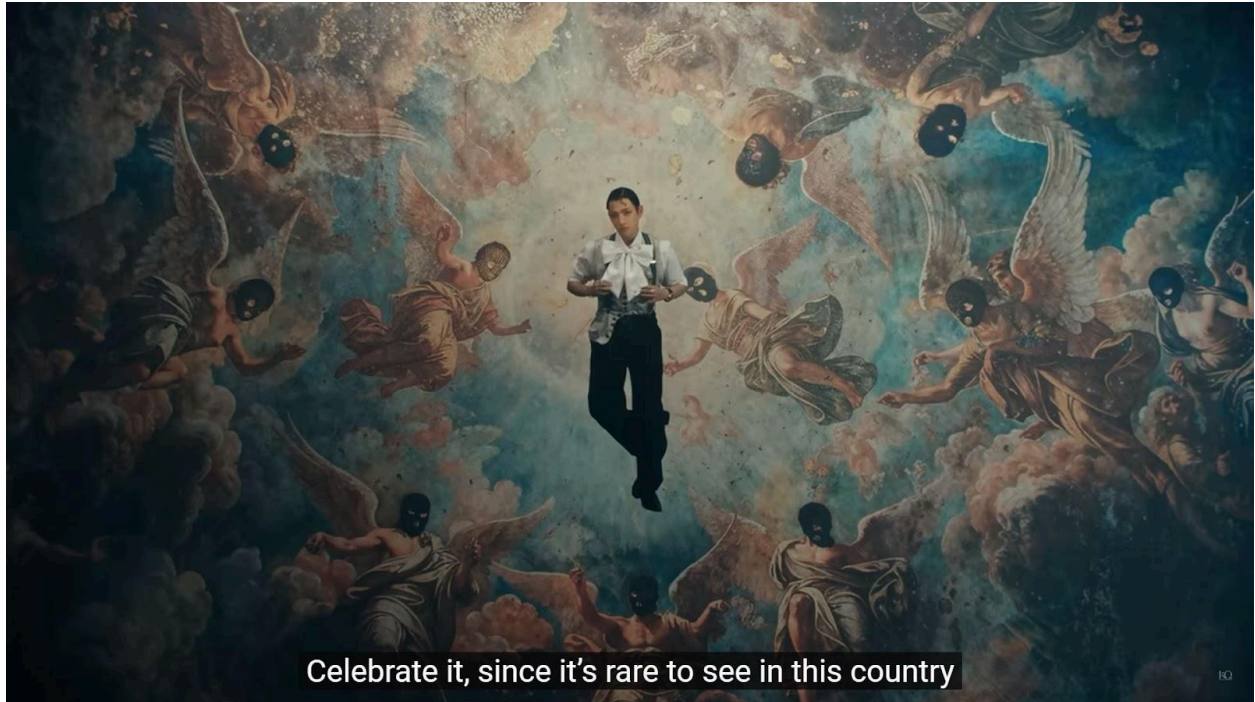


Fig. 29: Ateez's 2024 music video for "Ice On My Teeth," timestamp: 1:59
<https://youtu.be/5OfIOLcHLb8?si=3hcwxu3gktLA5gsD>



Fig. 29.A: Ateez's 2024 music video for "Ice On My Teeth," timestamp: 2:00
<https://youtu.be/5OfIOLcHLb8?si=3hcwxu3gktLA5gsD>

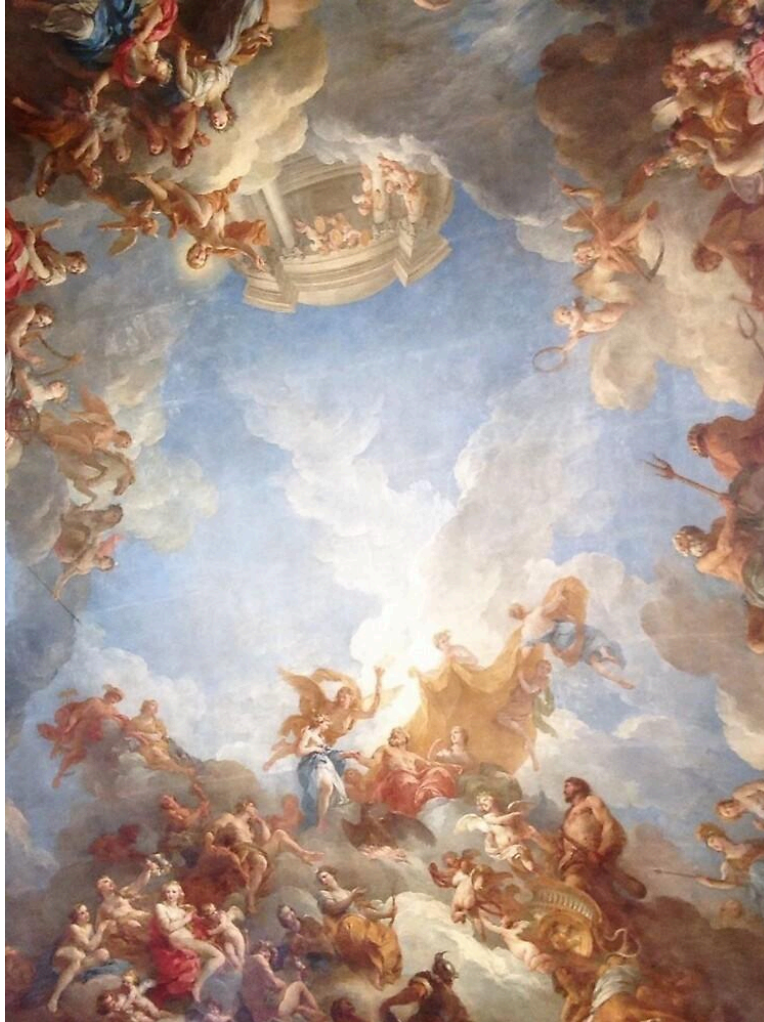


Fig. 29.B: François Lemoyne (1688–1737), *The Apotheosis of Hercules* (detail), 1733–1736, ceiling fresco, the Palace of Versailles, France



Bum no bigger than the girl nextdoor

Fig. 30: AllDay Project's 2025 music video for "FAMOUS," timestamp: 0:20
<https://youtu.be/VjvzYjU1mY0?si=EHS0ILFxInl-YKU4>



Fig. 31: AllDay Project's 2025 music video for "FAMOUS," timestamp: 0:23
<https://youtu.be/VjvzYjU1mY0?si=EHS0ILFxInI-YKU4>



Fig. 32: AllDay Project's 2025 music video for "FAMOUS," timestamp: 0:23
<https://youtu.be/VjvzYjU1mY0?si=EHS0ILFxInI-YKU4>

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