

Naked vs Nude

Art historian Kenneth Clark directly states that the “nude is an art form invented by the Greeks in the 5th century BC (...) The conclusion is certainly too abrupt, but it has the merit of emphasizing that the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art” ⁴, and it cannot be explored excluding the broader context of its relationship with various forms of mass culture. According to art critic John Berger, “the nude is always conventionalized and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art.” ⁵

4. Kenneth Clark, *The nude: a study of ideal art*, London: Penguin, 1960, p. 1.

5. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 53.

Today in general media the focus of attention is still on the female body and art has surely played a large part in reinforcing this. The continuously rising female nudity and sexually explicit imagery in film, television, and internet have accustomed our eyes to the images of undressing, an act of uncovering, exposing, revealing secret sexual self; therefore representations of female nudity seldom offend. A similar demonstration of male nudity, on the other hand, is still considered to be a public threat. The male nude is seldom to be seen in the mainstream art world too. A portrait of a beautiful male nude seems to equal gay icon for most, and vice versa, the sight of a more macho naked man is troubling because he has been linked with aggression.

The existing gendered double standards in how nudity represented and understood are apparent, but has it always been this way? Have the conventions regarding the subject changed since the first representations of the naked body? And are we going to continue using red bands, accordingly guarding the viewer, and the artist, from the disconcerting vulnerability of the naked male form?



Leopold Museum, Vienna (2012)

Lynda Nead writes, that “anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any subject, the female nude connotes ‘Art’. The framed image of a female body hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment.”³

3: Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 1.

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Pierre & Gilles 'Vive la France (Serge, Moussa, Robert)' (2006)

Assuming the sincerity of its statements, the museum was perhaps naive in its expectations. An obvious point set by the contrived controversy over the French footballers about this cultural distinction is why the naked male is so much more controversial than the naked female. And museum's choice to place the red band, quasi-modern fig leaf, across three penises had only brought extra attention.

Nearly every civilization has created sexually explicit imagery, often in the context of spirituality or fertility rituals, to express cultural ideals of beauty and virtue, or in the case of pornography, for the express purpose of viewers' arousal. For Susan Bordo, the body is engraved by history and cultural conventions about gender and sexuality: "When we look at bodies (including our own in the mirror) we don't just see biological nature at work, but values and ideals, differences and similarities that culture has 'written,' so to speak, on those bodies."² But often we envision the female when speculating of the heavy meanings placed on bodies.

²Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: a new look at men in public and in private*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 169.

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Dicks in Public

On Wednesday, October 17, 2012, Reuters reported that a prominent Vienna museum had decided to cover the “intimate parts of three naked male football players on big posters put up in the Austrian capital after they had caused an outcry.”¹

The controversial photograph was made by French artists Pierre & Gilles. ‘Vive la France (Serge, Moussa, Robert)’ depicts three athletes with different ethnic backgrounds standing in a stadium filled with celebratory confetti and spectators, and wearing nothing but silver shoes and socks corresponding to the French flag. The work was meant to be a celebration of France’s cultural diversity, openness, and tolerance, since an ethnically diverse national football team won France its very first FIFA World Cup in 1998 and the team became an instant symbol of national multiculturalism.

1. Fredrik Dahl, “Vienna museum to cover nude male posters after outcry”, 17 October 2012, Reuters, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/oukoe-uk-austria-men-naked/vienna-museum-to-cover-nude-male-posters-after-outcry-idUKBRE89G0VM20121017> (accessed 23 September 2019).

Offended religious groups, to protect their children, warned the Leopold museum to take destructive actions themselves and argued that children in public should not be exposed to such explicit male nudity. The prude decision of the museum was ironic considering the featured exhibition was titled ‘Naked Men’ and was designed to show how the depiction of male nudity had evolved in art history.

The museum issued a couple of statements explaining that the anger and fear generated by the poster had not been expected in the city filled with Klimt and Schiele nudes. The curators were struck by shock as if a flashback to the distant past due to the fact that their self censorship turned out necessary in contemporary world.

Inventing Male Gaze

The penis in Greek art was represented in the same straightforward manner that any other body part was, having no special claim to our attention, thus a male's sensuality was defined by the gracefulness and coherence of his body, in its entirety rather than by explicit reference to any particular body part.

After three centuries of dominating male nudes and their penises in Greek art, the first monumental female cult statue of a naked goddess was made in the 4th century BC by Praxiteles. His introduction of the monumental female nude Knidia occurred at least three centuries after the introduction of its counterpart, the monumental male nude statue, and the way its nudity was represented was very different. Knidia stood with most of her body weight on the right foot, as if stepping out of her bath. Her head was modestly turned left, she had her drapery in the right hand while shielding her private parts with the left one. As there had been no much female nudes in

Clark distinguishes the naked from the nude, explaining that "to be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed."⁶

J. Berger adds that "to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress."⁷

6. Kenneth Clark, *The nude: a study of ideal art*, London: Penguin, 1960, p. 1.

7. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 54.



Lucas CRanach the Elder 'Judgement of Paris' (1537-1540)



Peplos Korai (c. 530 BC)



Anavysos Kouros (c. 525 BC)

Nanette Salomon claims that “the practice of preserving an idealized concept of youthful nudity exclusively for the masculine subject had a strong historical relationship with the Greek definition of beauty, which was defined specifically as a male attribute and ultimately with Greek homoerotic desire. For the Greeks, as in nearly all cases where the object of aesthetic admiration is the male form, the enjoyment of the male body is conjoined with homoerotic desire.”¹⁰ Homoerotic impulses were considered natural in ancient Greece, and that socially legitimate desire contributed to the forming of the male nude as an ideal.

A double standard, where male and female nudity was concerned, persisted right up to modern times, though its terms of reference frequently changed.

10. Nanette Salomon, *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: feminist readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 90.



Victoria's Secret underwear advertisement poster (2012)

Clark considered art to be the most commonplace opposition of pornographic one, thus, not to cross the line between artistic and pornographic depiction, the nude requires a narrative justifying its existence. As Clark remarks: “The female nude marks both the internal limit of art and the external limit of obscenity... It is the internal structural link that holds art and obscenity and an entire system of meaning together. And whilst the female nude can behave well, it involves a risk and threatens to destabilise the very foundations of our sense of order.”⁸

8. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 25.



Unknown artist 'Barberini Faun' (c. 220 BC)

The Nude as an art form was born from its relationship to philosophical and cultural formal ideals. Social and legal inequities between men and women in ancient Athens explain the misogynistic treatment of the nude male and clothed female in Greek art. In the formation of the polis, women were legally positioned somewhere between slaves and citizens, under the law, they fell closer to slaves than to citizens. Thus the male body was dynamically explored as an internally logical, the female body was treated as an external surface for decoration. The athletic male youth (Kouroi) statues of the archaic period were fabrications of idealized humanity defined as male, youthful and heroically nude, when the female (Korai) ones were systematically draped, thus readily revealing the strong differentiation along gender lines.



Agasias of Ephesus 'Borghese Gladiator' (c. 100 BC)

Greeks to Blame

Despite popular misconceptions that the female nude was always the classical subject par excellence, it was the male nude that was celebrated in a manner since unparalleled in the early artistic avant-garde of the archaic and classical periods, providing the background for the sexual and erotic definition of the female nude in Greek art and the advent of female nudity in the mainstream of western culture.

Following Clark, the history of the nude in art begins with the heroic male sculpture of the classical Greek period (6th - 5th century BC), when distinctive ideals of human beauty and architectural design were developed, lasting and exerting profound influence till today. Due to the development of Athenian democracy and Western humanism, the Greeks became the pioneers of portraying and appreciating nudity as an art form. The Greek approach towards the nakedness of the body contrasted remarkably with attitudes prevalent in other areas of the ancient world, where undress was often associated with disgrace promised morality. Using nudity as a display of power and liberty by inspiring rather than inviting lustful glances, became a method for Greeks to distinguish themselves as a noble civilization from other ancient societies whom they deemed barbaric.

Nudity, as a form of power and liberty, only applied to nude portrayals of male bodies. The Greeks associated the male nudity with triumph, glory, and even moral excellence, thus, men's bodies were the norm and standard of perfection and beauty, a symbol of athleticism, therefore completely desexualized. It was natural to see masculine nudity in art because men's bodies were revealed all the time within society. The heroic male nude - a figure of ideal proportions was used both as a portrayal of Gods, godlike mythical heroes and as a way to memorialize real characters, who often were the champions at the Olympic games.



Unknown artist 'Pankration' (c. 300 BC)

9. Kenneth Clark, *The nude: a study of ideal art*, London: Penguin, 1960, p. 8.

According to Clark, idealization is the hallmark of the 'true' male nude, as opposed to more descriptive or realistic representations. His emphasis on idealization points to an essential issue: seductive and appealing as nudes in art may be, they are meant to stir the mind as well as the passions. He underlines that "no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even although it be only the faintest shadow - and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals. The desire to grasp and be united with another human body is so fundamental a part of our nature, that our judgment of what is known as 'pure form' is inevitably influenced by it; and one of the difficulties of the nude as a subject for art is that these instincts cannot lie hidden,(...). Even so, the amount of erotic content which a work of art can hold in solution is very high."⁹



Titian 'Venus of Urbino' (1534)

Berger points out that most nudes in the history of European art are in the reclining pose and almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal- either literally or metaphorically- because the sexual protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it. "In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger- with his clothes still on." ²³

23. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 54.

Greek art before, the sculpture was provoking and an erotic tension arose with it. The sexuality that the sculpture was coded with had to do with both the body language and the way the woman hid her pubis. Also, it was given the name *pudica*, which meant modest pose. Salomon argues that the hand that covers, might be pointing toward her fertility, but is anyhow mostly covering herself. "In either case, we are directed to her pubis, which we are not permitted to see." ¹¹

The gesture constructs a sexual narrative of protective fear that is conveyed by her body language as a whole: while stepping out of her bath the goddess had been caught in a momentary state of complete surprise and in modesty and fear urgently protected herself. Salomon claims that Praxiteles' Aphrodite is more naked than nude, thus in the condition of both complete nudity and self-conscious nakedness. Praxiteles has created a goddess vulnerable in the exhibition, whose primary definition is as one who does not wish to be seen, but by covering her pubis, Praxiteles made it the most desirable thing to see. The viewer's shameful desire to see matches the sculpture's modest desire to not be seen. We, however, as habitual viewers of an art tradition that is so saturated with this gesture, ingest but no longer see Aphrodite's pubis.

The Knidia of Praxiteles can be seen as the starting point of a new history in art, the one that privileges the female, defined by her pubis, over the male nude.

“Its immediate and longterm popularity was expressed (...) in the accolades of ancient writers, (...) in the (...) Hellenistic and Roman (...) derivations ‘inspired’ by Praxiteles’ concept. After the middle of the fourth century BC the female nude indexing her pubis was the most represented artistic configuration in the western world.”¹²

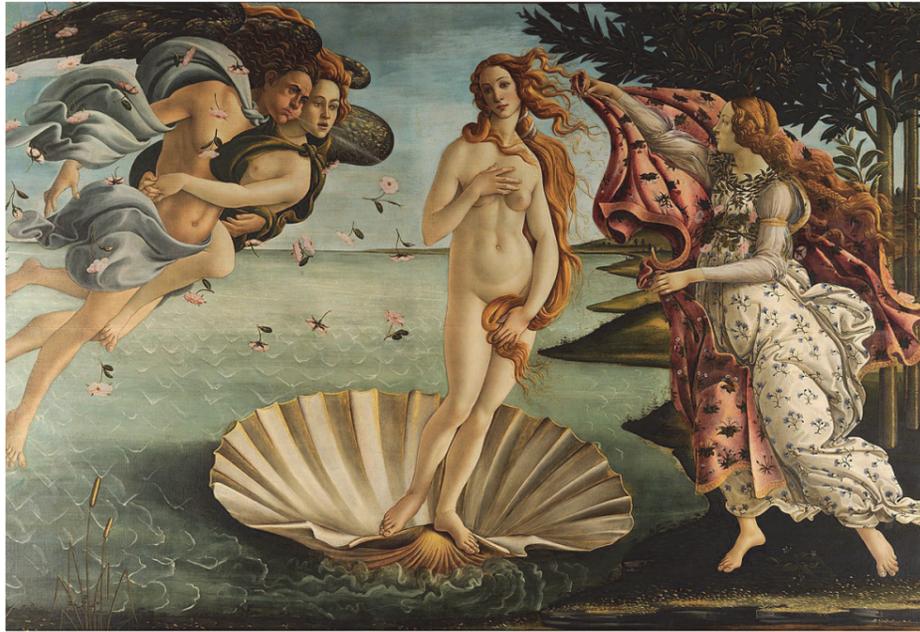
12. Nanette Salomon, *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: feminist readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 89.

But in most paintings, the implication remained that a woman, like Titian's Venus, is aware of being seen by a spectator. “She is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her.”²⁰ “This nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both woman and painting.)”²¹ In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the wealthy patrons often fully owned both the object they purchased and its erotic content. Frequently they specified its subject and even designated its model, whose services they might also own. The work reflected not the artist's, but the patron's sexual fantasies and libertine lifestyle. The artist at that time could hardly afford such luxuries. “The erotic works commissioned by famous eighteenth-century courtesans were equally addressed to their male benefactors”.²² Therefore, this fact showcase that it is not only the cultural context of the spectator that defines the meaning of the nude but also the artist and the social context in which the work was made.

20. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 50.

21. *ibid.*, p. 52.

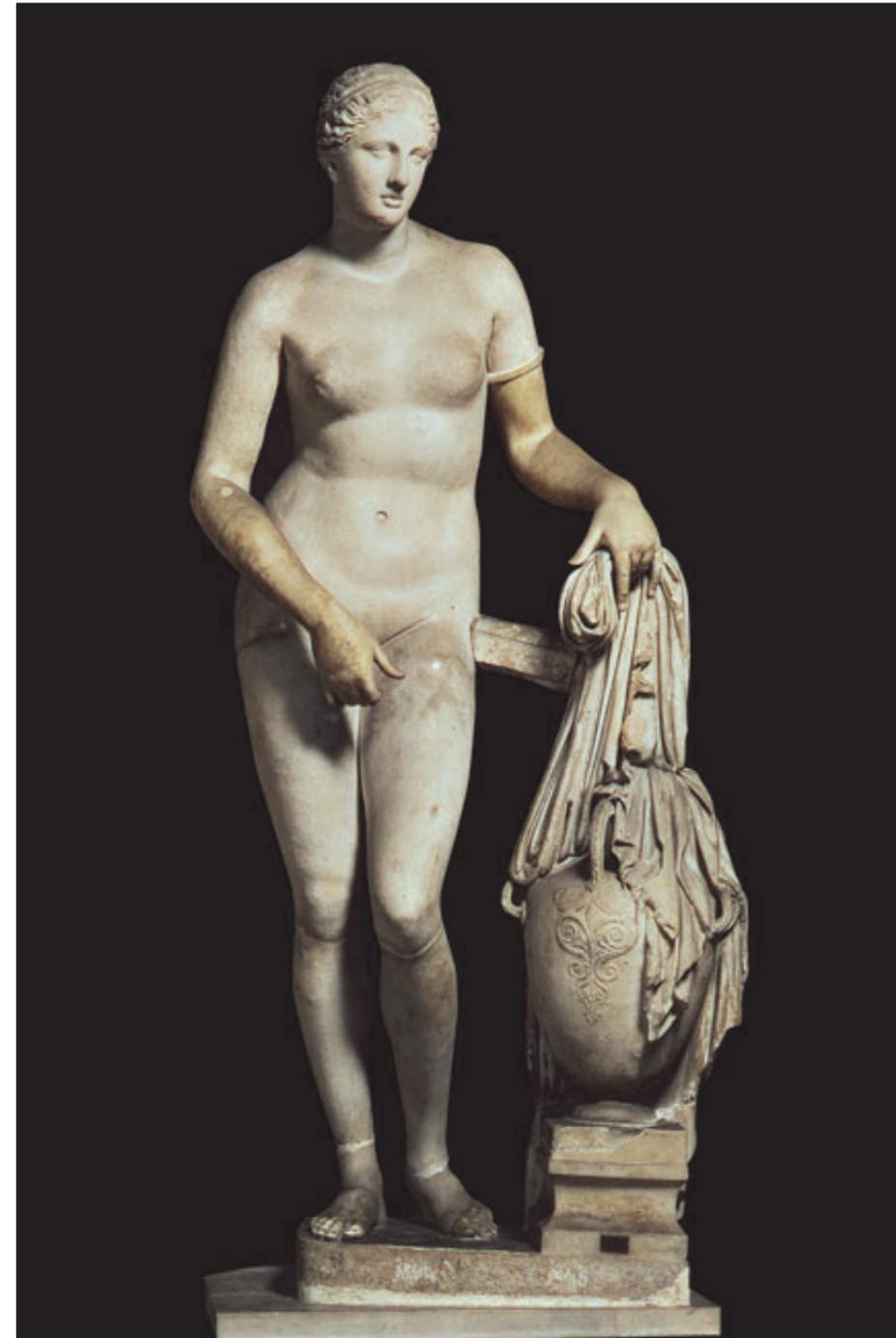
22. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 312.



Sandro Botticelli 'The Birth of Venus' (1485-1486)

In many cases, artists subsumed the separate cultures and histories of these countries into a generic vision of the Orient. According to prof. Edward Said, "the Orient was almost a European invention...a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences".¹⁹

19. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Randon House, Inc., 1994, p. 1.



Praxiteles 'Aphrodite of Knidos' (c. 330 BC)

Inventing Shame

The heroic nude statues of Greek antiquity became a symbol of a pagan past within medieval Europe and the Byzantine Empire, frequently serving as signifiers of idolatry. Within western medieval art, nudity played a lesser role, and even though certain biblical scenes, such as the crucifixion or Adam and Eve stories, had depicted nudity in them, the shift to the use of clothing was a sign of modesty that took root. The fall of Rome and the dissemination of supreme virginal Christianity in late antiquity censored the image of the nude. Unlike paganism, Christianity required no representation of naked divinities, thus the significance of the human body was being reconsidered. Due to changing values toward chastity and celibacy of artists and patrons the portrayal of nudity in western art has decreased.

An interest in mythological subject arose amongst artists, creating more possibilities to bring nudity back to life. The nudes were often depicted in relation to classical Greek mythology, though Renaissance representations were painted in more dramatic poses while discarding the context of everyday life. Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' marks the shift away from the medieval disdain for the female nudes. It was the first full-scale painting based on a classical theme while depicting the female nude as its principal subject rather than evoking any religious meaning. The nudity of the love goddess represented the Renaissance idea of 'divine love'.

Many artists of the period obscured the nude embracing Orientalism- a way of depicting other races and cultures as timeless, unchanging, static, undeveloped, in contrast to superior, rational, and civilized West. The desire and power of male Western artists functioned jointly in Orientalist paintings, controlling the whole authority of the artwork and making nudity of the Eastern woman unusual, different and deviant. Whilst demonstrating women as submissive, idle, thus transforming them into the objects of desire, they both established their authority and hegemony over the whole Oriental world and the Eastern women.

Obscured Renaissance

The artists of the Renaissance were not yet ready to confront eroticism with everyday reality, though the period marked new ways to make the nude paintings more acceptable. In order to get through religious gatekeepers and their condemnation, artists required to create a range of subject matter, which would enable the expression of erotic feelings, but would distance them at the same time. In academic art, female nudity was only permissible within the context of a recognizable narrative in an imaginary, biblical or mythological landscape. The portrayal of nudity through the reference of religion was a method to challenge the norm while borrowing subjects from the Bible and the lives of the saints.

According to Berger, the Christian narrative reveals that nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder, for “they became aware of being naked because, as a result of eating the apple, each saw the other differently.”¹³ However, only “the woman gets blamed and punished by being made subservient to man. In relation to the woman, the man becomes the agent of God.”¹⁴

The misogynistic reasoning of ancient female nudity corresponded perfectly with the Christian disdain for the human body, thus it was a suitable stencil to picture weak and sinful Eve. Hand covering genitals gesture is not assigned by the Bible, but is “a successful form of culturally produced ideological artifice. It is taken from the Greeks and Romans for the work it does in defining the female nude as essentially sexual and, on that account, in a state of perpetual fear and vulnerability.”¹⁵

13. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 48.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Nanette Salomon, *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: feminist readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 99.



Hugo van der Goes 'The Fall of Man and The Lamentation' (1479)

"And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." 3.7 Genesis

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." 3.16 Genesis



The Ghent Altarpiece by Hubert and Jan van Eyck (1432)

According to Salomon, the Christian period art capitalized on the sign of sexual vulnerability and shame, but because the classical narratives of art history define the medieval as a rejection of classicism, the word *pubica* was never applied in traditional art history to Eve. "Nevertheless, the *pubica* pose is the one classical trope which is maintained without break throughout the medieval period." ¹⁶ We unthinkingly accept it as the natural way to illustrate certain Christian texts and the Christian appropriation of biblical narratives, which in turn seem to substantiate misogynist agendas.

Nead agrees that woman has occupied a secondary or supplementary role in western religion. "As Eve, formed from one of Adam's ribs, woman was created to fill Adam's own insufficiency" ¹⁷ She points out that the man and woman pairing is the founding opposition within western metaphysics.

16. Nanette Salomon, *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 98.
17. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

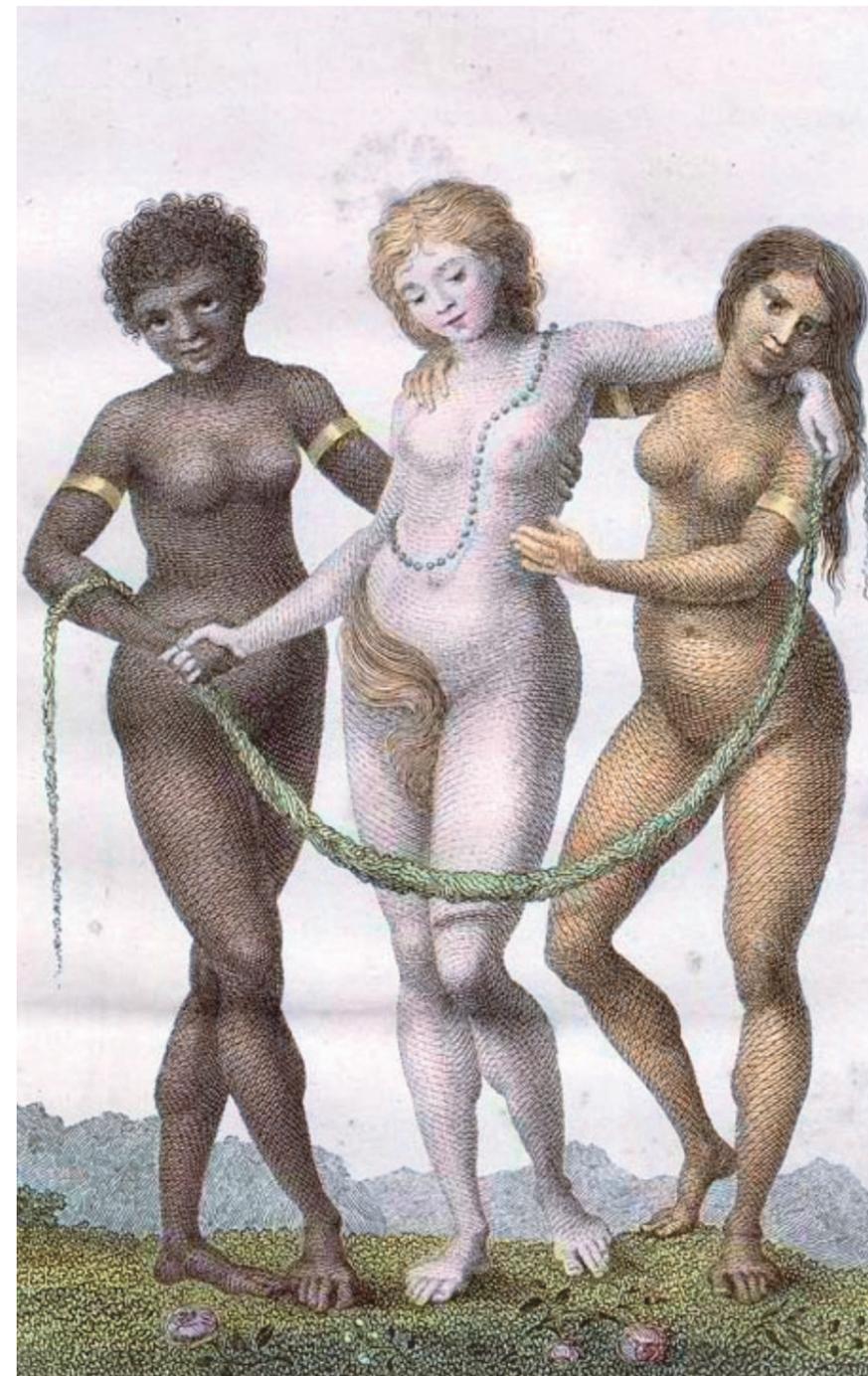
"The two terms share a structural link (that is Adam's rib) but they are not equal. The primary subject is Adam; Eve has a supplementary function, secondary but threatening since her existence always testifies to the original lack in Adam, the primary term." ¹⁸ She adds that culture/nature value opposition can be mapped on to the man/woman pairing, while man represents culture, order and geometry, female stands for nature and physicality.

Medieval Europe gradually rejected naked idols, the ideal forms of Greek nudes were turned into an impotent man and a shameful woman during the hegemony of Christianity.

18. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

Olympia - The Founding Monument of Modern Art

Édouard Manet painted Olympia in 1862-1863. Her slender adolescent body was in striking contrast to the nudes, which exemplified the accepted form of bourgeois femininity and sexuality of the time. She was not full-bosomed, narrow-waisted, wide-hipped, on the contrary- a young woman, completely nude except for her slipper, a bracelet and a choker around her neck, reclining on a disheveled bed.



William Blake 'Europe Supported by Africa and America' (1796)

The Pleasures of Enlightenment

The enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement during the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The ideas of the Enlightenment undermined the authority of the monarchy and the Church and paved the way for the political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beginning the eighteenth century, Western bourgeois culture increasingly recognized the real and important role of women. While the basic sexual dichotomy was maintained and people still insisted on the difference between male and female spheres, women's greater participation in culture was acknowledged.



Julien Vallou de Villeneuve 'Female Nude, Reclining, In Profile' (1853)



Julien Vallou de Villeneuve 'Nude Study' (1854)

In France, a male-dominated Academy had established certain acceptable standards and norms to be followed in artistic representation of the female nude. Artists, depicting the female nude had to scrupulously observe these standards because the formal presentation of these paintings and the success of these artists depended on them being exhibited in salons, which executed those Academy norms. One of the main rules held by the Academy was their rejection of female nudity elements that could invoke notions of prostitution or sexual commodification. But French painting in the middle of the nineteenth century was transforming from the academic, neoclassical style to more innovative and progressive types. The idealized nude goddess was gradually replaced by modern varieties, in which avant-garde painters chose the female nude as a shield to challenge the accepted standards of the Academy. Near the mid and latter end of the nineteenth century, the portrayal of female nudity became more provocative and not limited to mythological or oriental subjects. Painters shifted attention away from the female body as an object of erotic desire and onto artistic concerns of technique and composition. This transformation played an important role in the emergence of modernism and abstraction of the twentieth century. Forward-thinking artists portrayed women in a naturalistic form, engaged in everyday activities, undermining established clichés of femininity and eliminating the voyeurism associated with traditional nudes of the period.

“Michel Foucault (...) has argued that in the Enlightenment we find a shift from a theology of sex that understood sexual behavior as ‘the meeting line of the body and the soul’ and which conceptualized perceived aberrant behaviors as sinful, towards a secular rational ethics of sex that would eventually replace God with Nature and hence associate sexual deviancy, not with sinfulness but unnaturalness. Part of the process of secularising sex was, according to Foucault, the need to articulate sex, ‘to “tell everything”’ so that desire could be rendered ‘morally acceptable and technically useful.’”²⁴ As Felicity Nussbaum has explained, the eighteenth-century is the period, “when sexual and racial differences evolve into their modern shapes within emergent notions of national identity.”²⁵

24. Heike Bauer, *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Enlightenment*, ed. Julie Peakman, London: Bec Publishers, 2011, p. 160.

25. Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long ...*, Cambridge: University Press, 2003, p. 1.



Illustration by Marquis de Sade (Eighteenth Century)

“Enlightenment vernacularised and dispersed itself, finding new ways into new public spheres, organizing itself into a variety of practices of the body, contributing to regimes of gendered identity, defining the limits of European culture in colonial contexts, and joining the culture of commerce and entrepreneurship which was so important to the period.”²⁶ The ethics of the sexual body had become a debatable subject by the close of the eighteenth century. The rational minds of the Enlightenment tried to realize the physicality of sex, moreover, the existence and function of pleasure puzzled philosophers, seeking to understand human nature. Writings about sex spread rapidly in societies, consequently, the interest in public politics of sex increased; sex became a political metaphor.

26. Peter Cryle, Lisa O’Connell, *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex Liberty and Licence in the Eighteenth Century*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 2.

“Photographic studies made for painters also served as a form of soft-core pornography, purchased by non-artists and used as objects of voyeurism. The twinned purpose- combining art and eroticism, or even hiding eroticism within art- was typical of Second Empire art.”²⁸ Photography speeded up the spread of visual sexually explicit imagery during the nineteenth century among the mass culture, extending the market to meet the needs of those who could not read, but could afford to buy photographs. “For the elite of previous centuries, the medium for pornography had generally been the written word.”²⁹ Pornography and erotica predated the camera, but the new image-capture technology increased the supply and demand for both. The specific role of photography in the production of visual sexually explicit imagery is inherent in truthfulness and aim to document, qualities constitutional to nineteenth-century photography. “The same conventions that produced photographs as evidence of reality were at work here; pornographic photographs did not satisfy through the narrative richness, as had written texts, but by their apparent truthfulness.”³⁰

28. John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present*, London: Calmann and King, 1995, p. 38.

29. *Ibid*

30. *Ibid*, p. 39.

The New Medium

A decisive moment in the history of nude came in 1839 with Louis Daguerre's invention of the photograph, transforming the availability and realism of sexual imagery. Photography instantly became a popular medium for nude. Its pioneers, many of whom had first been painters or printmakers, chose women as subjects for their nude photographs, capturing them in poses which corresponded to the archetypical nude paintings, thus continuing to present the female body as an aesthetic and erotic object. According to John Pultz, "their photographs, made ostensibly as studies to be used by their fellow artists, were part of a shift in French culture."²⁷

Although nineteenth century painters often substituted live models for photographs, the best of these photographs were also intended as works of art on their own, thus establishing photography as a fine art medium came to question.

27. John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present*, London: Calmann and King, 1995, p. 38.

Despite the proliferation of alcoholism and prostitution, which was one of the most visible manifestations of sex in society, people also turned their attention to a more ordered public pursuit of pleasure as a fashion for parks and pleasure gardens appeared in the eighteenth-century European cities.

Writings of Immanuel Kant and Marquis de Sade serve as examples of concern with the nature of sexual conduct. In a cultural climate where the new knowledge about sex was important in political debate, Sade developed the idea of a-ethical sexual pleasure, causing an outcry. For him, nobility was a fraud, cruelty was natural, immorality was the only morality, therefore- the only virtue. Sade's law of desire, which conceived the body as an instrument of desire, constituted perhaps the most famous legacy of eighteenth century discourses of sex. Sade developed a complex philosophy of pleasure, which argued for the naturalness of perverse sexual behavior. Sade re-appropriated John Locke's argument that there exist no innate ideas but that all cognition is based on material sensation, according to which the body is the site of all knowledge. Sade interpreted this idea to deduce that the sexual body is a blank canvas upon which natural instincts are acted out, stretching the limits of the new legal and philosophical attempts that sought to rationalize sex.

Sade's notion of pleasure juxtaposed to Kant's ethical reading of the sexual body, which explored the idea of the mind controlling the body, and argued, in contrast to Sade, that reason should control desire. Kant tried to locate sexual pleasure within the natural order and to understand its place within a Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. For him, the discussion of sexual conduct provided a way for testing the principles of rational moral philosophy. Kant argued that perverse sexual behavior was against nature because they did not serve the future of humanity.

The Enlightenment triumphed the scientific rationality over sacred revelation. To sum up the effect and consequence of it on God's concept centrality within Western Europe, Nietzsche claimed that the Enlightenment had eliminated the possibility of the existence of God, thus announced Him dead. The Enlightenment produced a new perception of carnal pleasures, turning the rational human into the sexual subject.

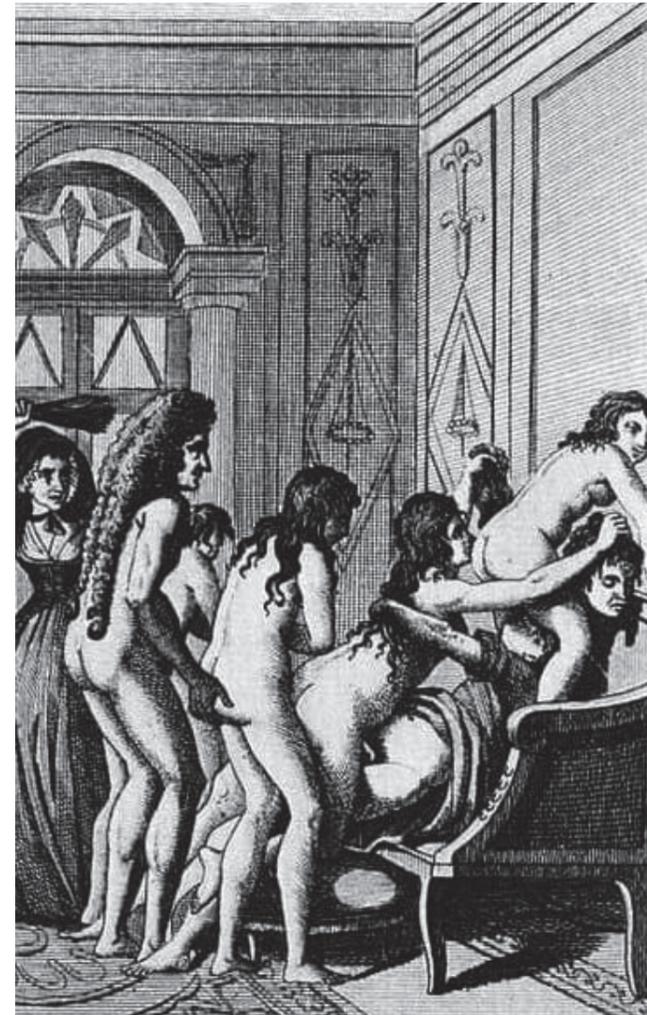


Illustration by Marquis de Sade (Eighteenth Century)

Demoiselles d'Avignon - The Beginnings of Modern Art

According to Janet Hobhouse, it was around 1905 “that Picasso stopped telling stories in his painting, however, imbued with mystery, and began to concentrate on non-psychological, non-poetic aspects of his female figures, therefore female appearance rather than behavior or literary association begins to be the subject of his paintings of women.”⁴⁵ The change in his work seemed so conclusive that there has been a tendency to date the beginnings of modern art as we understand it from *The Demoiselles d'Avignon*, yet another painting deliberately subverting the conventional idealizing representation as well as viewers' expectations of female nudity.

45. Janet Hobhouse *The bride stripped bare: The artist and the nude in the twentieth century*, London: Cape, 1988, p.112.

Referencing Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and probing the conventions, Manet made some crucial changes: instead of modestly covering her sex, his *Olympia* presses firmly on it, the dog, symbolizing fidelity in Titian's *Venus*, was replaced with the promiscuity symbolizing cat arching its back at the feet of *Olympia*. Also, whilst the identity of Titian's *Venus* remains unclear, the subject of Manet's painting was a recognizable portrait of a prostitute Victorine Meurent, acted out deliberately in a pose of reclining nude of the tradition, but with the model looking out defiantly at the viewers, thus taking the gaze back from the beholder.

Manet displaced the spectator from his accustomed imaginary possession of the work. The public was astounded by the gaze of *Olympia's* unblinking stare. “Never has a painting excited so much laughter, mockery or catcalls,”³¹ one critic remarked. “Manet's treatment of the pictorial conventions of the female nude and his handling of the painted surface transgressed the expectations of Salon critics in the 1860s, who read the image in terms of dirt and disease, of working-class identity and blatantly commodified sex.”³² Many critics ridiculed the painting in the press, complaining of the way it was painted as well as of the embarrassingly provocative and explicitly modern subject. The basic controversial point of *Olympia* arose from the way it invoked such associations of sexual commodification through its depiction. Manet deliberately used nudity to shock rather than to idealize.

31. Monica Bohm-Duchen, *The Private Life of a Masterpiece*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, p. 98.
32. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 146.

According to Sophie Berribi, in Olympia Manet developed a dialogue between photography and painting, whilst adopting a monumental format and making an explicit reference to Titian's Venus d'Urbino at the same time. It becomes more evident when comparing Olympia with early photographs of the female nude. "The features of the painting that attracted the scorn of critics are precisely those that characterize photographic nudes from the 1850s: the 'dirty skin', the model's proportions, and graceless feet emerging from house slippers."³³ "Olympia is literally flesh for sale, and in that context, her self-assertiveness appears wilful and brash- a contradiction to the usual modesty of the nude. As a comment on bourgeois male-female relationships, the Olympia is both subversive and anti sexist; it is, however, consciously posed as male experience and aimed, with deadly accuracy, at the smug and sexist male bourgeoisie."³⁴ Clark stated that "although no longer shocking, the Olympia remains exceptional. To place on a naked body a head with so much individual character is to jeopardize the whole premise of the nude."³⁵

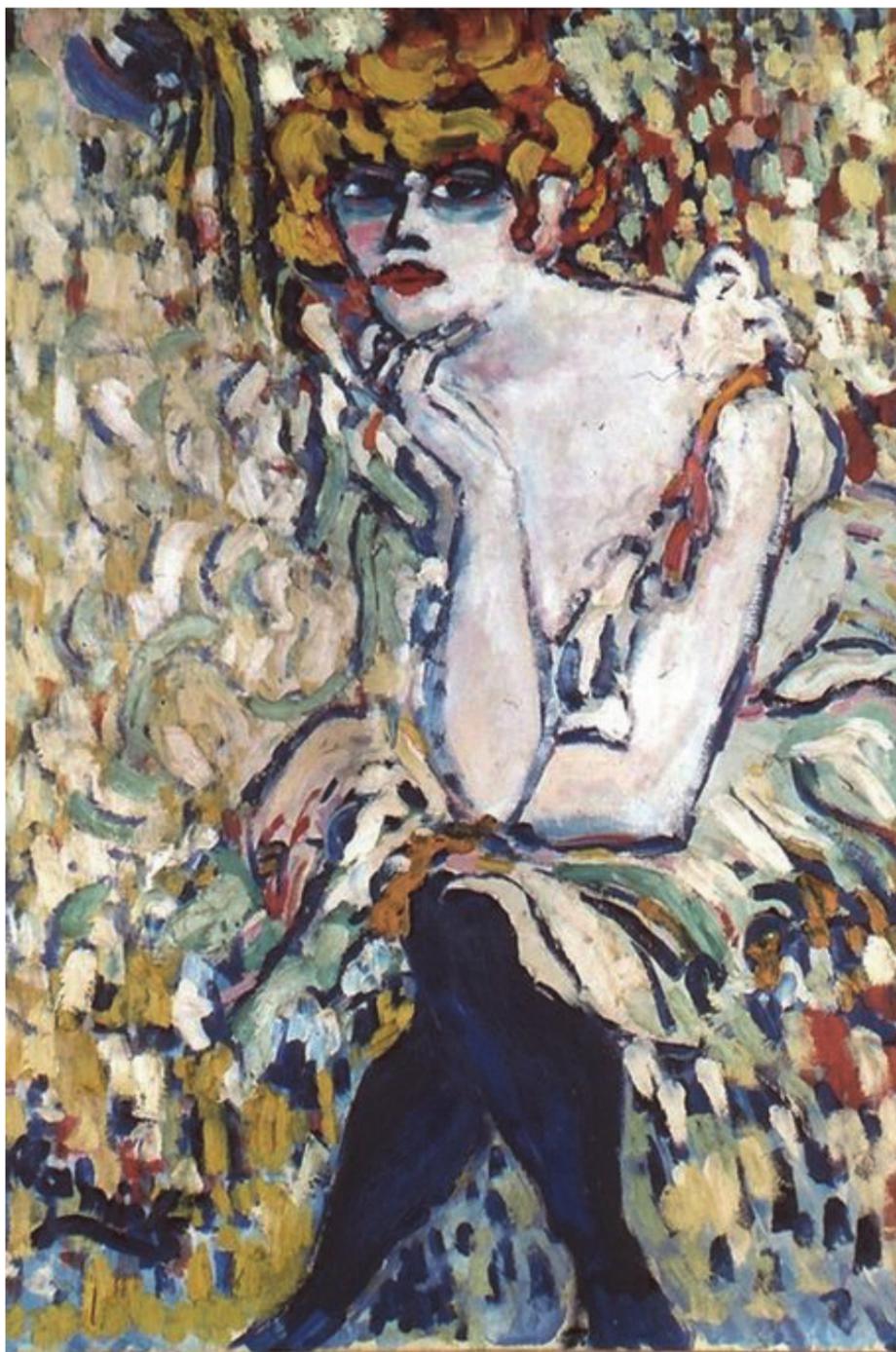
33. Sophie Berribi, *The Shape of Evidence: Contemporary Art and the Document*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2014, p. 33.

34. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 302.

35. Kenneth Clark, *The nude: a study of ideal art*, London: Penguin, 1960, p. 153.

The models in those pictures appeared as disreputable, living off their bodies lower-class women, reclining in the artist studio, unlike classical nudes. Modern, industrialized societies produced the whole population of flirtatious, tarty, interchangeable and socially faceless women, who were instantly recognized in the paintings by the audience of the time: "mistresses of poor artists drawn from hand-to-mouth street world of bohemia, whores, models (usually semiprofessional whores), and an assortment of low-life entertainers and barflies."⁴³ Thus the new artist defined his liberation by stressing the social plight of his models and his own willingness to exploit them sexually.

"Far from contesting the established social order, the male-female relationship that these paintings imply- the drastic reduction of women to objects specialized male interests- embodies on a sexual level the basic class relationships of capitalist society."⁴⁴ The collector's relationship to the nude was mediated by the artist's sense of sexual identity and superiority, thus ostensibly he was purchasing and sharing another man's sexual-aesthetic experience. These nudes were not merely high-culture versions of pornography or erotica, for they were more about power than pleasure.



Maurice de Vlaminck 'The Dancer at Rat Mort' (1906)



Edouard Manet 'Olympia' (1865)

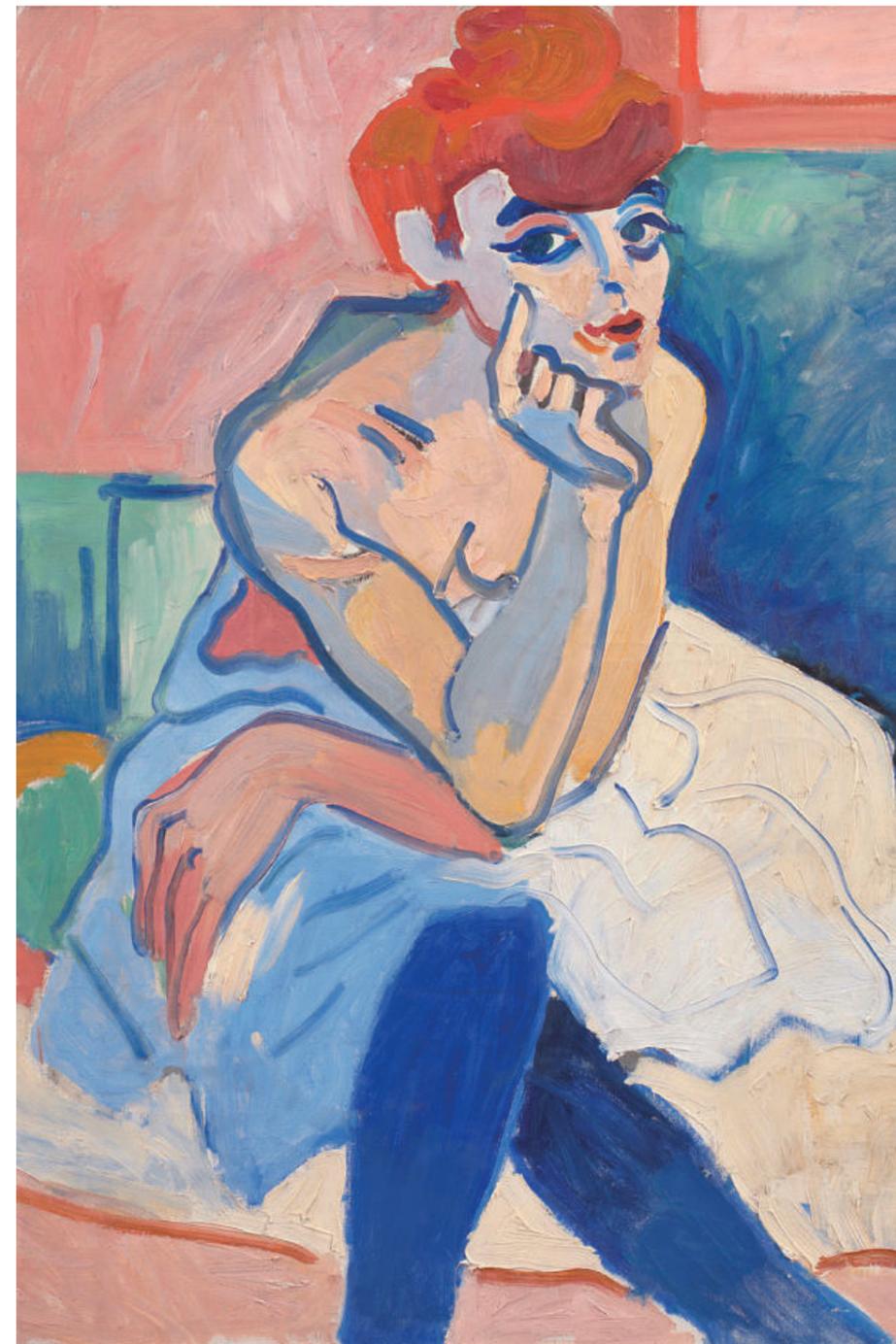
36. John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 63.

As in ancient Greece, a shift in the economics of art in France towards a freer market allowed for artists such as Manet, who rejected Academy norms and traditional techniques in the depictions of the female nude, to flourish and become more prominent. "The ideal was broken. But there was little to replace it except the 'realism' of the prostitute- who became the quintessential woman of early avant-garde twentieth-century painting."³⁶ The female nude no longer referenced classical beauty and proportion, but rather revealed the underbelly of society, thus subverting art historical convention.

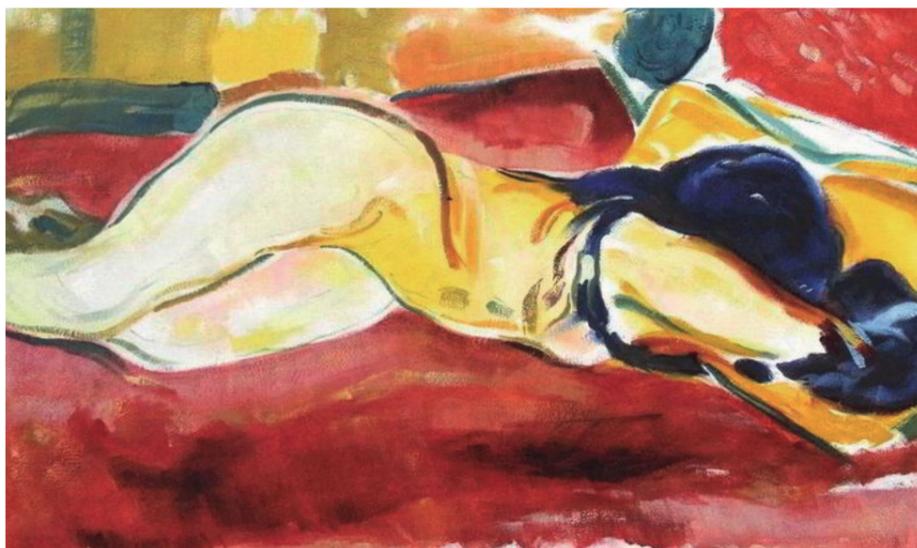
The New Artist

In the late nineteenth century, European high cultures were counting the male-female relationship as the central problem of human existence. The nature of love and the complexion of sexual desire occupied significant content of art and literature of the time. But, according to Carol Duncan, “while progressive literature and theater gave expression to feminist voices, vanguard painting continued to be largely a male preserve.”³⁷ Thus, she believes, that the perception of serious and profound art was likely to be about what men think of women. One of the most ancient ideas ever invented by men- the dichotomy identifying women with nature and men with culture was weakened as the importance of women’s role in domestic, economic and social life was gradually increasing.

37. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 294.



André Derain 'Woman in Chemise' (1906)



Edward Munch 'Reclining Nude' (1905)

By often depicting and glorifying what was unique in the life of the artist- his studio, his vanguard friends, his special perception of nature, early vanguard art defined a new artist type as the earthy but poetic male, whose life was organized around his instinctual needs. According to Duncan, "pictures of studios, the inner sanctum of the art world, reinforce more than any other genre the social expectation that 'the artist' is categorically a male who is more consciously in touch with his libido than other men and satisfies its purely physical demands more frequently."⁴¹ Although continuing the innovative attitude of the nineteenth century, he was more consciously anti-intellectual-more hostile to reason and theory-and more aggressive than any of his predecessors. The new artist "not only experiences his instinctual nature with more intensity than those trapped in the conventional guilt-ridden world; his bohemian life offers him more opportunities to gratify his purely physical needs."⁴²

41. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 310.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

In the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie educated their daughters more than ever before, depended on their social and economic cooperation and valued their human companionship. Duncan concludes that despite all that "so many nineteenth-and twentieth-century vanguard nudes is the absoluteness with which women were pushed back to the extremity of the nature side of the dichotomy, and the insistence with which they were ranked in total opposition to all that is civilized and human."³⁸ Following Manet, who referenced Titian, other artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century probed the tradition of female nudity to create both formally and content-wise incendiary works.

38. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 204.

In the twentieth century artists finally managed to get rid of mythological, religious and the oriental trappings of their predecessors, and started presenting sexuality more frankly. Though, their depiction of the subject was complicated by Freud's psychoanalytic theories disclosing of repressed subconscious drives in the context of art production. His theoretical and scientific base of the sublimation concept allowed the thoughts of the unconscious to become more acceptable to the conscious, linking art and male sexuality, thus the sexual desire was turned into a cultural manifestation.

According to Duncan, "By justifying scientifically the source of creativity in male sexuality, Freud acted in concert with young, avant-garde artists, giving new ideological shape and force to traditional sexist biases."³⁹ She notes that "In the decade before World War I, a number of European artists began painting pictures with similar and distinctive content. In both imagery and style, these paintings forcefully assert the virile, vigorous and uninhibited sexual appetite of the artist."⁴⁰ Referring to hundreds of nudes produced by the vanguard artists, she claims that, portraying women as powerless, sexually subjugated beings, the artist asserted his sexual domination, even if he himself did not appear in the picture.

39. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 308.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 293.



Kees van Dongen 'Femme Nue Blonde' (1906)

In contrast to sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when patron owned outright both the object he purchased and its erotic content, in these twentieth century images of nudes the painter had more agency while the wilfully assertive presence of the artist stood between the patron and the erotic situation represented. It was clearly the artist's life situation that had been depicted and it was for him that those women undressed and reclined. And the image itself, rendered in deliberately individual and spontaneous style, was saturated with the artist's unique personality.

Inventing Female Gaze

Today the mainstream responses to several important exhibits from the seventies would probably embarrass the critics who wrote about them when they opened. Some of them, finding the naked male unnervingly sexual, dismissed the entire genre of male nude photography with the sexist statements like: "Nude women seem to be in their natural state; men, for some reason, merely look undressed... When is a nude not a nude? When it is male."⁵⁷ To understand how offensive it sounds today, she offers to substitute "blacks" and "whites" for "women" and "men". Other reviewers thought that "there is something disconcerting about the sight of a man's naked body being presented as a sexual object" and as long as its depiction was erotic in emphasis, it will "remain half-private, slightly awkward, an art form cast from its traditions and in search of some niche to call its home."⁵⁸ In the next decades, they were all proven wrong, once the consumer culture discovered its commercial potency.

57. Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: a new look at men in public and in private*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 179.
58. *Ibid.*

46. Janet Hobhouse *The bride stripped bare: The artist and the nude in the twentieth century*, London: Cape, 1988, p.119.

47. John Berger *Success and failure of Picasso*, London: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 72.

48. *Ibid.*

"It was Picasso's first depiction of- and, more important, artistic response to- female sexual aggression."⁴⁶ The five naked prostitutes, standing in provocative poses in the setting of a brothel, were "painted more brutally than any woman had been painted since the eleventh or twelve century, since that time when woman was seen as a symbol of the flesh, of the physical purgatory in which man was condemned to suffer until he died."⁴⁷ "A brothel may not in itself be shocking. But women painted without charm or sadness, without irony or social comment, women painted like the palings of a stockade through which eyes look out as at a death- that is shocking."⁴⁸ Although the figures in the painting are standing tall and their arms are raised in a traditional gesture of accessibility, the cold stares and emotionless faces contradict their stance.

The shallow space of the composition in this massive painting was threatening the contemporary viewer- it was probably the main reason for the painting to be not exhibited until 1937. Picasso's friends who saw it in the studio were at first shocked, and it was meant to shock, for it was a raging attack, not against sexual immorality, but against wasteful, diseased, ugly, ruthless life. Whilst making distorted, monstrous, and sexually threatening figures in abnormal outlines, Picasso was concerned with challenging civilization and not in the least with formal problems of the painting. "The dislocations in this picture are the result of aggression, not aesthetics; it is the nearest you can get in a painting to an outrage."⁴⁹ The artist used his sense of the primitive to violate and shock the civilized and this violence had transformed his style. Berger writes that *Les Femmes d'Alger*, unlike any previous painting by Picasso, offers no evidence of skill. On the contrary, it is clumsy, overworked, unfinished.

49. John Berger *Success and Failure of Picasso*. London: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 73.



Robert Mapplethorpe 'Lou, N.Y.C.' (1978)

The rituals of aesthetic, sexual and spiritual submission, become indistinguishable when blended in the same image, for their potential derives from exactly the same rhetorical language and iconographic display, as in Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*. The proclivity of the beholder is crucial in sorting them out. For many years artists have created mysterious rhetorical strategies of humble image-making, but when they are actually employed to propose spiritual or sexual submission, the spectator cannot distinguish the form from the content anymore. "The categories are our own, and our culture's- and the images themselves, under the pressure of our categories, don't seem to be anything in particular. They just seem to be too much. (...) It is a nothing image, really, not even an idea- but so palpably corporeal on the one hand, and so technically extravagant on the other, that it seems on the verge of exploding from its own internal contradictions."⁵⁶

56. D. Hickey, *The invisible dragon: Essays on Beauty*, Revised and Expanded, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 33.



Robert Mapplethorpe 'Self Portrait with Whip.' (1978)

Hickey wrote that the entire affair had signified a stunning rhetorical triumph, since a single artist with his single collection of images had overcome the aura of moral isolation, gentrification, and mystification that surrounded the practice of contemporary art. And this celebration of marginality directly threatened those in actual power. "Robert Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio collapse and conflate the hierarchies of our response to sex, art, and religion and, in the process, generate considerable anxiety."⁵⁴ The artist positioned his image at the intersection of religion, sexuality and formalist aesthetics, therefore "these images are too full of art to be 'about' it. (...) they are 'about' some broader and more vertiginous category of experience to which art belongs."⁵⁵ Mapplethorpe directly probed the idea that we look at art, however banal because looking at art is somehow good for us while ignoring any specific good that the individual work or artist might propose to us.

54. D. Hickey, *The Invisible dragon: Essays on Beauty, Revised and Expanded*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 19.
55. *Ibid.*

According to scholars, visual sources in the painting ranged from ancient Greek statues to Iberian art to African masks and served to highlight both ferocity and playfulness. Though Duncan thinks that, while wearing the faces of ancient Iberian sculpture and grotesque African masks, "the *Demoiselles* pursues and recapitulates the Western European history of the woman/nature phantom back to her historical and primal sisters in Egypt, ancient Europe, and Africa in order to reveal their oneness. Only in primitive art is a woman as sub- and superhuman as this."⁵⁰

"No painting of this decade better articulates the male-female dichotomy and the ambivalence men experience before it than Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. What is so remarkable of this work is the way it manifests the structural foundation underlying both the femme fatale and the new, primitive woman. Picasso did not merely combine these into one horrible image; he dredged up from his psyche the terrifying and fascinating beast that gave birth to both of them. The *Demoiselles* prismatically mirrors her many opposing faces: whore and deity, decadent and savage, tempting and repelling, awesome and obscene, looming and crouching, masked and naked, threatening and powerless. In that jungle-brothel are womankind in all her past and present metamorphoses, concealing and revealing herself before the male. With sham and real reverence, Picasso presents her in the form of a desecrated icon already slashed and torn to bits."⁵¹

50. Carol Duncan, *Feminism And Art History: Questioning The Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 305.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

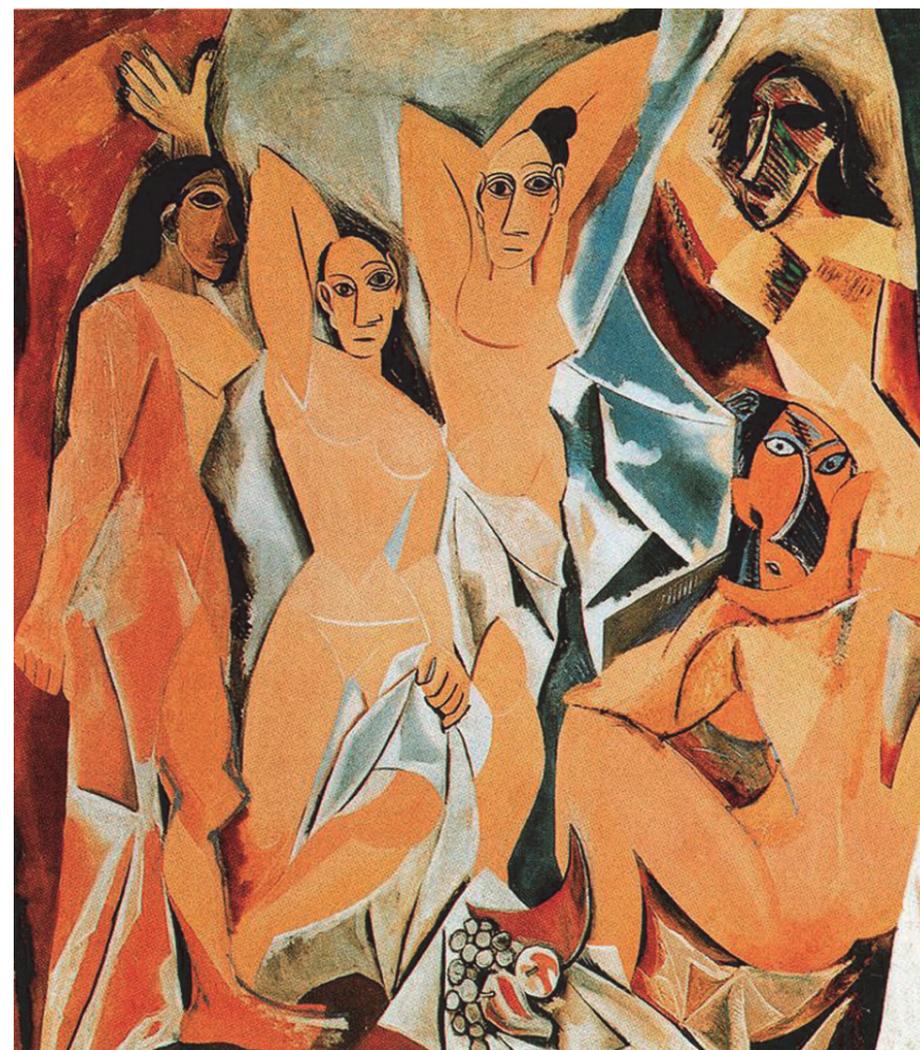
The rejection of academic manners in pursuit of a new form of truth diminished the cultural supremacy of the classical tradition in the twentieth century. The attraction to Venus was reduced, but the appeal of the unpretentious private life nudes remained strong. The convention of the mainstream nude stayed unchallenged until the second part of the century.

Throughout the century, gay photographers have created a rich, sensuous, and dramatic tradition which is daring in eroticizing the male body, male sensuousness, and male potency, including penises. But until recently, such representations have been kept largely in the closet. Now that men were taking off their clothes in a mainstream gallery, the culture was suddenly going too far. According to Hickey, it was not the marginality, the fact that men were depicted having sex, that had caused the outrage. At the time, they were regularly portrayed doing so on the walls of private galleries and publicly funded alternative spaces all over the country. It was the celebration of the marginality that made those images dangerous. "It was their rhetorical acuity and their direct enfranchisement of the secular beholder."⁵³ The American art community chose to ignore the specific legal transgressions celebrated in Robert's photographs in favor of the 'higher politics' and did so under the banner of 'free expression', anxious about their pleasure and fearful of being manipulated to sexual rather than cultural ends by the scandalous image, suspicious that the formal qualities of the imagery have been somehow tainted by its origins in situational erotics.



Robert Mapplethorpe 'John, N.Y.C.' (1978)

When “The Perfect Moment” retrospective opened in April 1990 in Cincinnati, prosecutors charged Contemporary Arts Center director and the museum itself with obscenity. It was the historic trial, because for the first time ever the museum and its director faced criminal charges because of an art exhibition. “One of the most significant ways in which pornography is historically defined is in relation to other forms of cultural production; we know the pornographic in terms of its difference, in terms of what it is not.”⁵² The defense during the trial, with the help of art experts from across the country testifying about the artist’s technique, focused on convincing the jury that Mapplethorpe’s work was art, accordingly discarding the matter of pornographic depiction. The prosecution countered that it was pornography, shouting that the pictures would speak for themselves. Sadly for them, there were no experts in the art world saying this was pornography, thus the defendant party was acquitted.



Pablo Picasso 'Demoiselles d'Avignon' (1907)

52. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 324.

Out of the Closet

The United States of America in the second half of the twentieth century found itself mixed up in upheaval, caused by speedily changing social moral values, as the nation pursued heady freedom from censorship, from received ideas about gender, race, and sexual orientation. Though even after ambitious struggles of the Black Power movement, the second wave of feminism, the civil rights movement and Gay Liberation Front, after the advent of drug culture, the hippies and rock and roll, the American art community was still under pressures of the religious right, surrounded by the anxiety and stigma associated with Aids.

In 1989, just after Robert Mapplethorpe's death, his retrospective 'The Perfect Moment', partly financed by the National Endowment for the Arts, brought national attention to the subject of public funding for the arts, as well as arts censorship. June 14, 1989, The New York Times wrote that anticipating that its content would trigger a political storm in Washington, the Corcoran Gallery of Art had canceled a planned retrospective.

Robert Mapplethorpe's ambition to raise gay male pornography to the level of high art pushed him into the center of turbulent and quickly changing conventions of moral and aesthetic values of the time. His naked and eroticized images of male bodies at the heart of the culture wars provoked anxiety over sexual politics and artistic freedom. On the other hand, the main reason why his pictures became celebrated was exactly that they corresponded to contemporary political events. A strategy of Mapplethorpe's career was to be intentionally provocative. Though provocation was also typical of the late 1970s and 1980s art, Mapplethorpe had his own religiously metaphorical vision of S&M as modern theatre. Mapplethorpe saw culture as systems of desire dominated by submission, characterizing our participation in 'high art', 'high religion' and 'classical masochism'. This common attribute was the centerpiece of his art.

Mapplethorpe's many alter egos, explored over the years in a variety of self-portraits, reveal a committed exploration of Catholic themes familiar throughout art history: the debasement and transcendence of the flesh; transgression, punishment, and confession; agony and ecstasy. His work expressed the urgency of a political climate in which cities were failing, lives were being lost to Aids, and the government response was to turn a blind eye or to be openly antagonistic.

The naked female body first became an object of mainstream consumption in Playboy and similar magazines, then in movies, and only then in fashion photographs. The trajectory of the male body was reverse. Fashion has taken the lead, violating really powerful taboos against the explicit depiction of penises and male bottoms and against the admission of all sorts of forbidden feminine qualities into mainstream conceptions of manliness.

In the early 80's the designer Calvin Klein made a bold move, stepping into an industry that up to that point had been dominated by cheap, utility garments focusing on hygiene and comfort. Klein's move would shape the men's underwear industry into sexualized, branded and premium quality. His goal was to convert men's underwear into a fashion garment to show off, not merely a hygiene product. His own bisexuality enabled him to see that the phallic body, as much as any female figure, is an enduring sex object within Western culture. In America, at that time only gay culture unashamedly sexualized the lean, fit body. Klein, of course, knew that sex sells, moreover- that gay sex would not sell to straight men. But the athletic gay male bodies, that Klein admired, did not advertise their sexual preference through the feminine codes, which the straight world then identified with homosexuality. Rather, they embodied a highly masculine aesthetic that would scream "heterosexual" to clueless straights and be exciting for gay men at the same time.



Calvin Klein underwear advertisement poster (90's)

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Advertisements showed the model standing in his form-fitting Calvin Klein briefs, hip cocked in quite a feminine curve, head lowered, eyes downcast but not closed, hair loosely falling over his eyes, his body projecting strength, solidity, but his finely muscled chest being not overdeveloped; there was, undoubtedly, something very "feminized" about him. He didn't stare at the viewer challenging, belligerently, as it was common in ads for male underwear. Model's inactive body posture, his averted look signalled of will to be subordinate. He offered himself to be gazed on, he gave off a seductive consciousness of his erotic allure. Gay theorist Ron Long, describing gay sexual aesthetics, points out that stiff, engorged Schwarzenegger bodies lack dynamic tension- as if surrogate penises- with nowhere to go and nothing to do but stand there looking massive, whereas lean, taut, sinuous muscles seem to be designed for movement and sex. Klein model's body didn't resemble mobile phallus, rather the body had a real penis, breathtakingly outlined through the fabric of the briefs, and its substantial presence was palpable and very male.

Sexually supplicating male, not taking into account its classical antecedents, was very new to contemporary mainstream representations, for homophobia was at work in this taboo. A sense of self-worth of many men would block the idea of being passively dependent on the gaze of another because the 'real' men are not supposed to enjoy being surveyed, for it is women to be on display. Despite this argument, Klein understood, that images of masculinity were not difficult to create in a culture, which had a rich aesthetic history of the muscular male body. He also recognized the buying power of gay men.

Falling Fig Leaf

Sex in art has been around for centuries, though conventions of representing it differed depending on place and time. Commenting on the depiction of The Nude in the exhibition, described in the first chapter of this thesis, art historian Eva Kernbauer provided some valuable insights into Western society's differing attitudes to the male and female body. She said that male nudity was closely linked to strength, invulnerability, and heroism. This classical model is still powerful today when male nudity is very often linked to the exposure of sexual organs and this is often done corresponding to the classical model of aggression and strength. The female nude, on the other hand, was linked to beauty and erotics. The pudica was already developed in ancient Greece, thus the depictions of female chastity and female nudity are historically deeply interlinked. The female nude is not threatening at all, on the contrary, it is vulnerable because it acknowledges the gaze of the beholder.



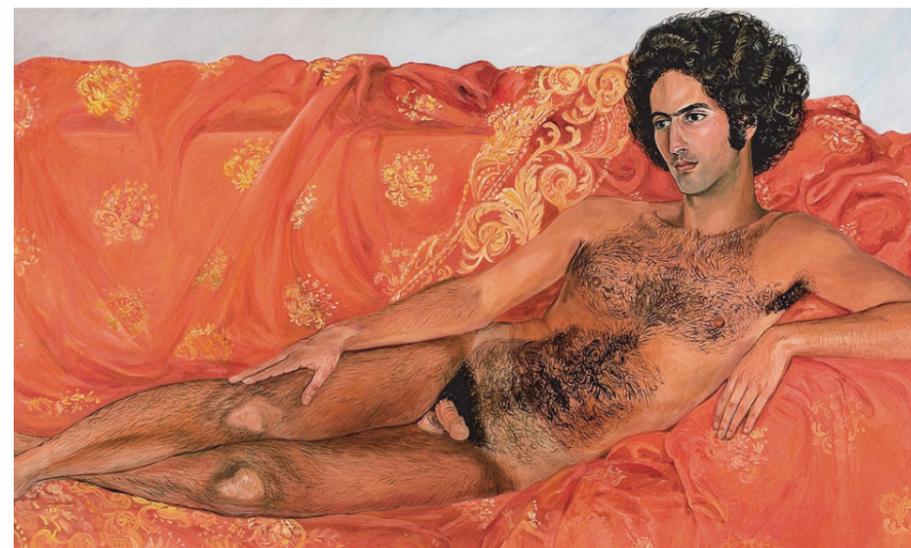
Alexandra Rubinstein 'The Origin of The World's Problems' (2018)

While the naked human body was presented and received as a messenger of spiritual themes in classical art, the male bodies sculpted by the Greeks were not exactly nonerotic. The male body, the same as the female body, is layered with histories and values. The most menacing visual taboo about male nakedness was first mentioned in Genesis, when post-flood Noah cursed the youngest son for witnessing his drunk father naked. A father's nakedness- defencelessness- is slowly losing its legacy in the contemporary West. The phallus, being a metaphor of male power, the penis, after all, is just a fallible and vulnerable mass of blood and tissue, and therefore its image should not be the cause for concern at all.



Lynda Benglis in her advertisement in the 1974 issue of 'Artforum'

The recent rise of mass societies and rapid global communication has brought along a rapid social change. Though male artists have never been too shy of expressing their fantasies as visual art, it was only in the seventies that female artists started using sexually explicit images in their work. The feminist art movement pushed the concept of women as creators, not just subjects of art. Many artists, using their own bodies and embodied experiences as the form and content of their art, contributed to the development of the postmodern practice of body art. Liberated by feminism, certain artists probed ownership of sexual imagery, specifically pornography, in order to push a political message. These artists chose to use pornography in their work instead of shouting about its offensiveness. Some of them directed their attention to the penis to express erotic feelings in the same way that the female nude has been used, as a way to demystify the male body, as well as to encourage the realities of sexual encounters. Critically objective artworks forced viewers to question the standpoint on the source material, choosing between exploitation or liberation.



Sylvia Sleigh 'Imperial Nude' (1977)

It took ages of struggle by women, for women, to fight not only for equality but to reclaim their bodies for themselves, to subvert the male gaze and thus to try and repair the imbalance of power between the sexes in life and art. With the rise in consumption of pornography, sexually explicit imagery is slowly losing its shaming value among young generations. The sensation of the male body has returned with the rise of female artists in art, as well as with the influence of the media, the societal pressure to have a worked-out gym body. Today, with the spiritual interpretation of the body no longer a convention, nude became a platform for expression for marginalized young artists who do not see themselves reflected in conventional canons of art history. Contemporary art and eroticism find themselves in an oddly ambiguous relationship, with innumerable artists addressing the subject in new ways.