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The Nude in Art

The release of my nude drawings, “Liz II” and “Liz III” as limited edition prints by Solomon & Whitehead, Ltd. in England presents the perfect opportunity to take a fun quick glance at the nude in art.

Since the dawn of man’s creative powers, artists have felt the need to depict the human form. Prehistoric sculptures were fertility symbols with exaggerated attributes that leave us no doubt as to their purpose. As civilizations began to take care of man’s basic needs, the artist attained the freedom and financial support to study and advance in expressing the beauty of the body in various images: gods and goddesses, Adam and Eve, and eventually the nude for its own sake. After the re-emergence of classical realism during the Renaissance, no serious figurative artist would fail to pursue anatomy and life drawing. Only by understanding the form beneath the clothes could the artist consistently render the structure of a figure and thereby drape the clothing accurately. As with all aspects of art, once the basics were learned, knowledge allowed the choice for deliberate distortion rather than misconstruction resulting from ignorance.

A good example would be Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) who was an adamant proponent of the importance of anatomy, even though he chose to play pretty loose with the subject, despite the appearance of tight realism. Many of his nudes seem to have two or three extra vertebrae in the lower back like the impossible torso of his magnificent “Grand Odalisque” (Louvre). And how is that leg on top even attached to the body and the arms seem not to have bones? Shown in the Salon of 1819, this now celebrated piece was attacked by critics and his fellow neoclassical artists alike for being grossly unrealistic. Looking at this work and his other nudes, especially the interesting curve of some throats, it’s apparent that that Ingres was considerably more interested in the sensuous line than absolute realism in his own work despite his dictum “ Drawing is the probity of art.” He blended Raphael, mannerism, and Neoclassicism into a style that can only be called Ingres.

I was intrigued to see an exhibition of his drawings at a show sponsored by EDF in Paris that displayed some of the preliminary sketches to his paintings. Most revealing was the fact that he drew many of his subjects nude (including Joan of Arc!) before clothing them in subsequent drawings. He even used the female nude in sketches for drawing the clothes on some figures that were portrayed as men in the final phases. That last revelation seemed a bit bizarre, considering the differences in structure, especially in the placement of the waist in the torso (see *The Real Difference Between Men & Women* on page 2 [*separately presented on this website]). Obviously Ingres had much more interest in the female body than the male. But don’t jump to the cliché about artists and their models; there is no whiff of his having strayed from the marital bed.

Religious art has given us marvelous nudes, but not without instances of censorship. Who can forget the one of the best-known controversies: Michelangelo’s (1475-1564) “Last Judgement” (1536-1541) in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. Pope Paul III (Pope 1534 – 1549), who had commissioned it, was so affected by this masterpiece, that he said, “Lord, charge me not with my sins when Thou shalt come on the Day of Judgement.” However, this huge fresco, rife with nudes and facing the viewer, was pretty

overwhelming to the subsequent Popes and believers in that period of the Counter-reformation. N. Sernini wrote "…the Very Reverend Order of the Chietini are the first who say the nudes do not look right in such a place, that show their bareness…" and Pietro Aretino wrote scathingly to Michelangelo that "your figures would have been better in a delicious bath." Surprisingly, at the same time as the action against Paolo Veronese's (1528-1588) "Feast in Levi's House" (which did not have nudity), the tribunal of the Roman Catholic Church found "The Last Judgement" to be "correct in as much as humanity will have to appear naked before Christ the Judge." Despite that endorsement, the sheer density of the nudity had so disturbed subsequent Popes that by the time of Michelangelo's death, they had Michelangelo's own follower, Daniele de Volterra, among other artists, cover the offending areas with ridiculous little drapes of cloth. Volterra became known as "Il Braghettone" (The Breeches Maker) for his part. One can only hope that with the restoration of the chapel's ceiling now complete, the Vatican will turn to "The Last Judgement" and, just as they found Michelangelo's original colors in the former, they will find his original figures in the latter. But then again, maybe even the faithful today would more than a bit disconcerted facing a whole wall of nudes, as opposed to a whole ceiling of nudes that are a little more difficult to take in fully.

Some nudity for Last Judgements (though in heaven, all are presumed to be sexless) was already well represented in medieval art, particularly in the tympanums of Gothic cathedrals. The sculptures often depict angels blowing horns, summoning the dead to be judged by Christ in Heaven who holds a scale to weigh the souls. Sometimes, an angel holds the scale for Christ. Pushing back the lids of their coffins, you see the departed clambering out to join the others who are already on their way to heaven or hell. The figures ascending to heaven are unaccompanied by worldly goods (naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither – Job 1:21). The sweetness and inventiveness of medieval art is well illustrated by the righteous souls sometimes portrayed as little children gathered in or sheltered by the cloak of an angel or Mary. Sinners are dragged dramatically to hell by fantastic demons. Some are still sporting their crowns and even bishop mitres, some are naked and others are still clinging to their earthly goods. A man hanging from his own purse strings is not unusual, while in Chartres Cathedral, one demon holds a nude condemned woman upside down, using her hair to sweep the ground.

For the most part throughout history, the nude was portrayed in a credible environment such as the Last Judgement, Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden before the Fall, Bathsheba bathing, Greek and Roman deities, divinities and subjects from other religions and civilizations, figure studies, and eventually anyone in involved in personal hygiene or intimate pleasures, etc. But when nudes were portrayed in inappropriate settings, especially if there was no moral attached, they became the subject of public outcry. Just as often, changes in artistic styles depicting the nude spawned harsh criticism. Edouard Manet (1832-1883) unintentionally combined both offenses with two of his most famous paintings.

Manet's "Luncheon of the Grass," was inspired by an engraving of Raphael's (1483-1520) "Judgement of Paris" and a young Titian's (1477-1576) "Concert in the Countryside" (originally attributed to Giorgione). With two other paintings by Manet, it was exhibited in the famous Salon des Refusés consisting of rejects from the official salon in 1863. By drawing from the Raphael composition so closely, Manet has created some odd aspects in his painting, such as a feeling of detachment among the characters with none looking at one another. And the man on the right really misses that urn that supports the arm of the River God in Raphael's piece, while the background has the appearance of a stage scene. Titian's creation portrays nude women with clothed men, but the women are unseen muses giving inspiration to male musicians in a pastoral setting. By contrast, Manet shows one naked and another partially clothed woman having a picnic in the woods with two men in stylish modern dress. The public outrage was further fueled by the disarray of clothing and food in the foreground, the bold stare and slight smile by the nude woman directed toward the viewer, and Manet's bold flat style compared to the popular romantic and academic styles. In essence, the painting presented no credible reason for the nudity and the women's comportments could only indicate loose morals.

Though Manet never planned to be a protagonist, his “Olympia,” based on Titian’s Urbino Venus, and exhibited in the Salon of 1865, fared even worse than its predecessor. Two policemen had to guard the painting to keep it from being physically attacked by irate spectators (the French are never mundane in their opinions on art). The model, with the black cat and the maid presenting flowers from an admirer, was perceived as a prostitute and common looking (unthinkable). Edmond About demanded the “gallery be fumigated to free it from the painting’s corruption.” Once again, Manet’s style was a favorite theme of the critics who blasted him for his lack of modeling and color. Paul Mantz described the outline of the body as having been “drawn with soot.” Halfway through the exhibition the painting was removed from its prominent position and rehung in an inconspicuous area above a huge door.

Certainly Manet’s “Olympia” was no redolent Venus as in Alexandre Cabanel’s (1823-1889) “Birth of Venus” which was exhibited in the Salon of 1863 (the same year as Manet’s “Luncheon”) and purchased by Napoleon III. It’s ironic that while Manet is a household name today, the immensely successful French Academic painters like Cabanel, Adolphe William Bouguereau (1825-1905) and Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1836-1912), are almost unknown in the USA. Fortunately, the 19th Century realists, with their traditional emphasis on accurate drawing, have been experiencing a recent revival, especially as the auction houses find a dearth of available impressionist work to sell.

Another piece that survived the storm of controversy and is recognized as a masterpiece today is Jean Baptiste Carpeaux’s (1827-1875) sculpture group “The Dance.” It is now in the Musée d’Orsay with a copy by Paul Belmondo in the original location. Created for Garnier’s Opera in Paris, it is an extraordinary celebration of movement, beauty and joy. The public viewed it somewhat differently upon it’s unveiling. One spectator even threw a pot of ink at it, hitting the thigh of one of the offending figures. C. A. de Salelles, representing the “associations in favor of morality and philanthropy,” wrote in a diatribe against the piece that though he admitted it was an artistic tour de force, the women cavorting about “…smell of vice… (and) reek of wine.” Standing in front of the Opera today and looking at the four sculpture groupings, one only notices the vivacious “Dance,” while the other classical compositions seem stilted and bland.

What about nudity in paintings that did not stir as much controversy at the time, but seem still quite strange upon reflection. Though I am an enthusiast of Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), I am amused by his heroic “Rape of the Sabines” in the Louvre. Perhaps he anticipated this response because he published a booklet with the painting stating “the importance of deriving inspiration from ancient art and of representing the nude in painting.” Even so, I can’t imagine any self “protecting” warrior clad solely in a helmet, arm shield and sword.

As I take friends around Paris, sharing the wealth of artwork, I often find a perfect moment to ask my companions if they know the difference between the terms nude and naked. That moment usually comes while standing in front of Gustave Courbet’s (1819-1877) “Origin of the World” at the Musée d’Orsay. This unusual piece, acquired by the museum only a few years ago, has meant that Courbet’s paintings hanging on either side of it have never been so scrutinized by American wives, while many bored husbands find renewed interest in the “arts.” Kenneth Clark offers the explanation that most people perceive nudes in the classical manner, idealized with no body hair…otherwise the image seems naked.

Not long ago, I was repeating this gem of wisdom to my uncle, Tom Moore, who had been a cartoonist with Archie Comics. He confided to me that **he** knew of the perfect example of the difference between nude and naked. In 1936, the new stadium built specifically for the Olympics in Rome was enhanced with nude statues depicting all the sports: discus, javelin, running, etc. One of the modern sports participating in the Olympics that year was baseball. Laughing, Tom said, “The discus thrower was obviously a nude, but that baseball player was naked!”

The passage of time and our familiarity with the controversial artwork of the past have allowed us to accept and appreciate masterpieces and popular works without question. Somehow, I just feel that for me, the statue of the baseball player will never transform into a nude. But then again, time will tell.