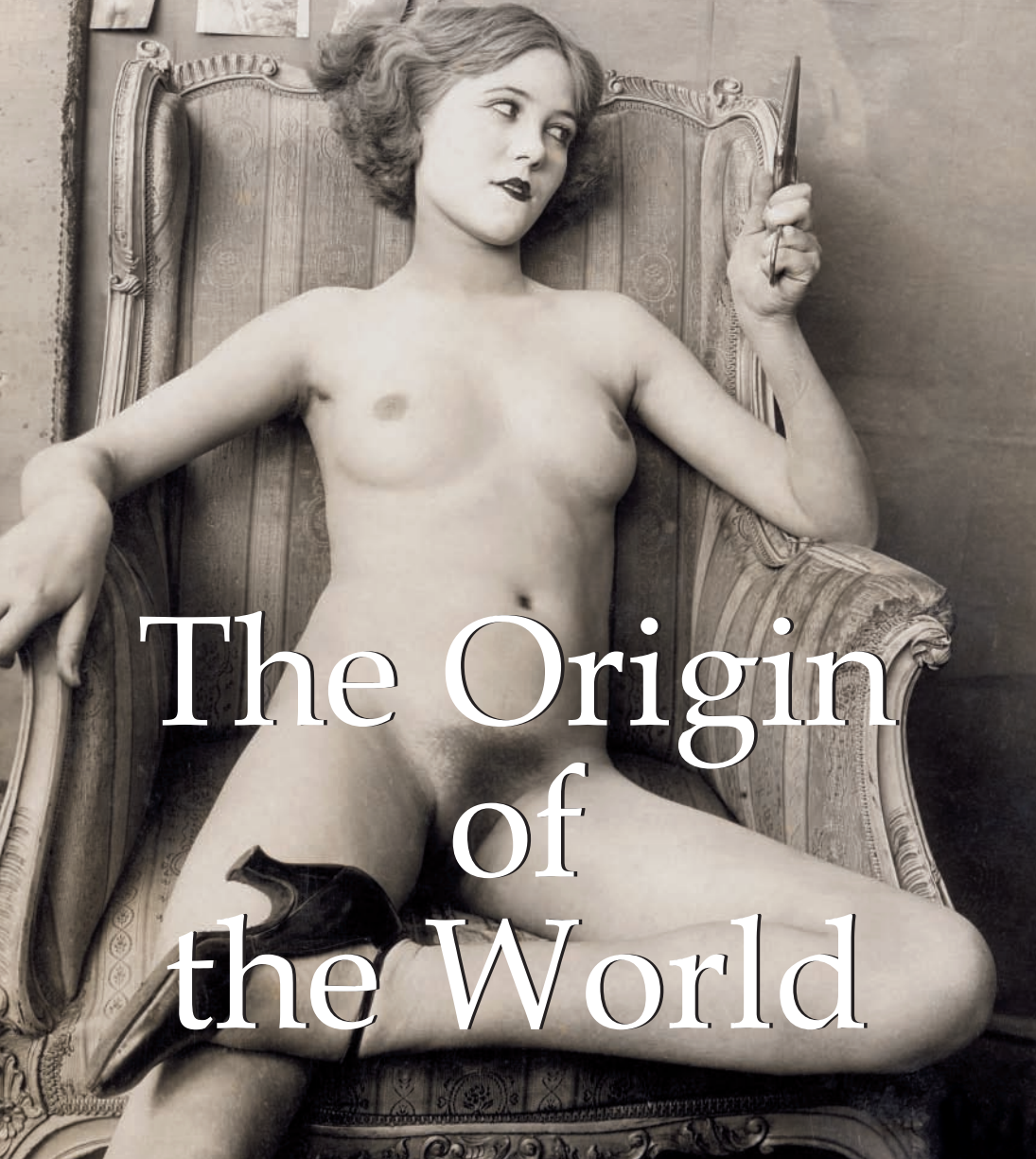

The Origin of the World

Page 4:
Gustave Moreau, *Cleopatra*, 1887.
Watercolour and gouache highlights, 39.5 x 25 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Authors:
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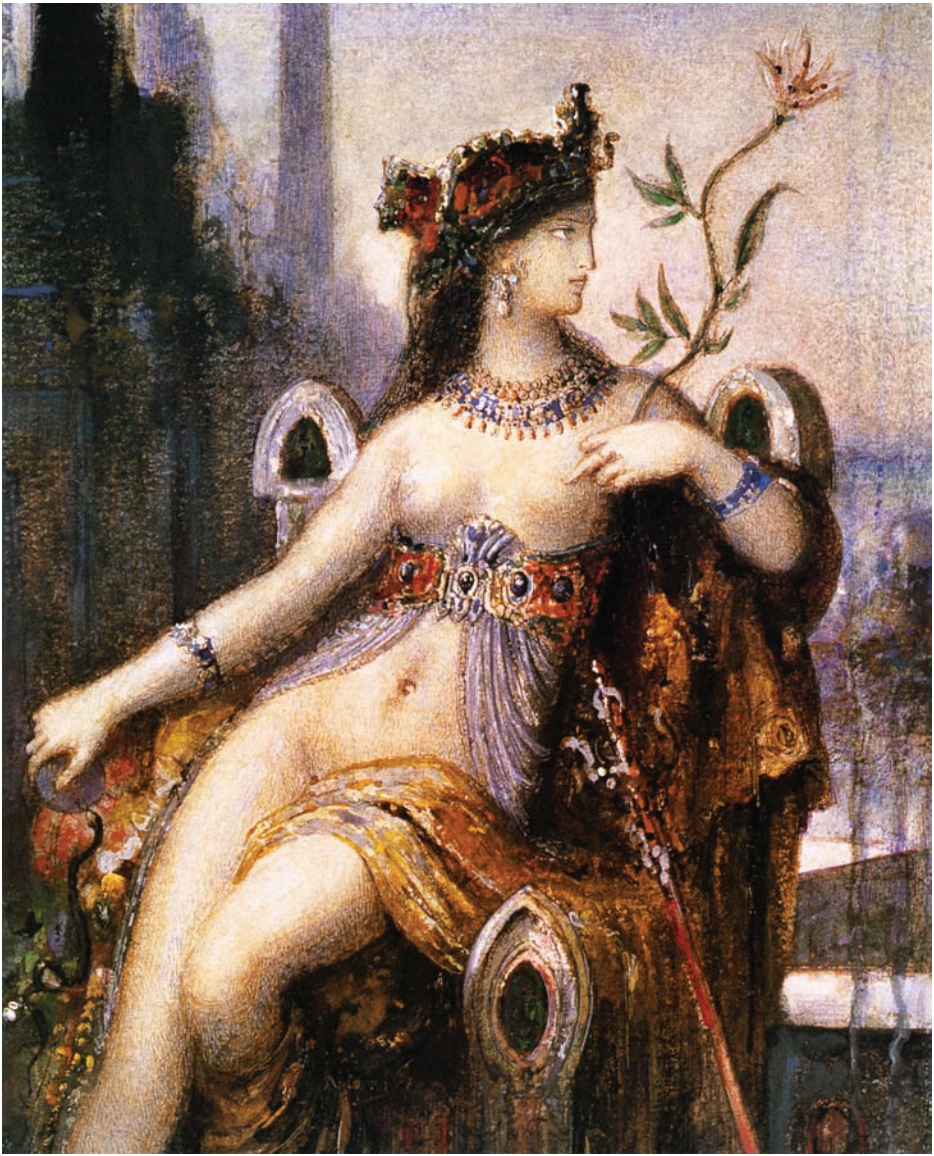
ISBN: 978-1-78310-011-8

The famous psychologist, professor Lacan,was the last owner of Courbet's *The Origin of the World*. He loved the painting so much that he couldn't even bring himself to look at it. Instead, he hid it behind a "safer" painting.

The Chinese called it the "valley of the roses" (watch out for the thorns!), the Persians, the "honey-pot" (watch out for the bees!), and the Greeks, "the mound of Venus" (mind the steep climb!); to each era its fantasies and its theories about the feminine mystique. Then there are the testimonies of poets, painters, and even of some famous psychiatrists. *The Origin of the World* is a work of art only suitable for lovers of intrigue.



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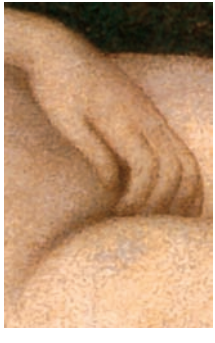
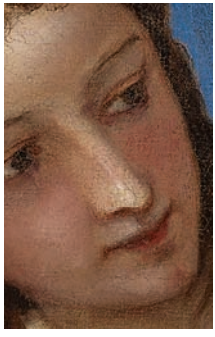


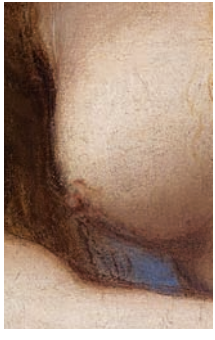
Song of Songs

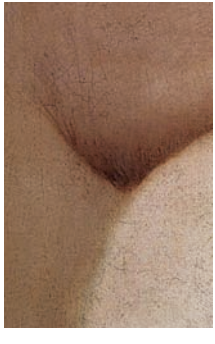
3 All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.
2 I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.

Sleeping Venus

Giorgione, c. 1508-1510
Oil on canvas, 108.5 x 175 cm
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden







[3] The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
"have you seen the one my heart loves?"
[4] Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother's house,
to the room of the one who conceived me.
[5] Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:

Venus Rising from the Sea
("Venus Anadyomene")

Titian, c. 1520
Oil on canvas, 75.8 x 57.6 cm
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.
6 Who is this coming up from the wilderness
like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and incense
made from all the spices of the merchant?
7 Look! It is Solomon's carriage,
escorted by sixty warriors,
the noblest of Israel,
8 all of them wearing the sword,
all experienced in battle,

The Nymph at the Fountain

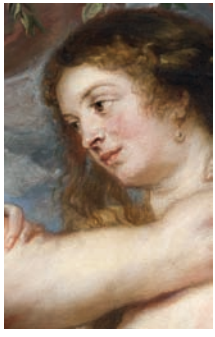
Lucas Cranach the Elder, c. 1530-1534
Oil on wood, 75 x 120 cm
Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

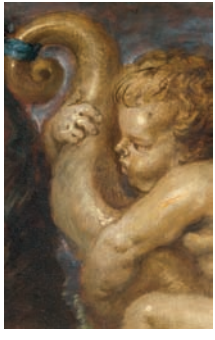
FONTIS NYMPHA SACRI SOMNVM
NE RVMPE QVIESCO.

each with his sword at his side,
prepared for the terrors of the night.
9 King Solomon made for himself the carriage;
he made it of wood from Lebanon.
10 Its posts he made of silver,
its base of gold.
Its seat was upholstered with purple,
its interior inlaid with love.
Daughters of Jerusalem, 11 come out,
and look, you daughters of Zion.

Venus of Urbino

Titian, 1538
Oil on canvas, 119 x 165 cm
Galleria deglia Uffizi, Florence





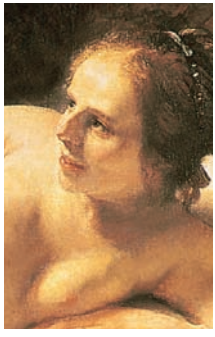
Look on King Solomon wearing a crown,
the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
the day his heart rejoiced.

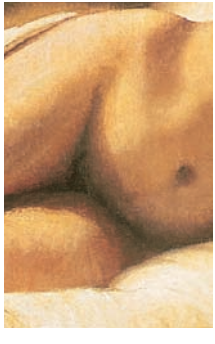
He

4 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from the hills of Gilead.

The Three Graces

Peter Paul Rubens, 1630-1635
Oil on wood, 220.5 x 182 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

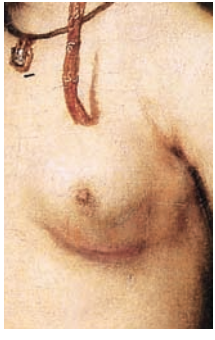


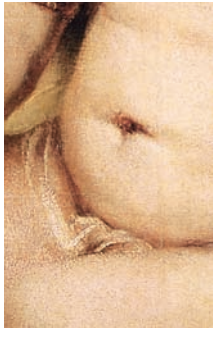


2 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.
3 Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with courses of stone;

Danaë

Rembrandt, 1636
Oil on canvas, 185 x 202.5 cm
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

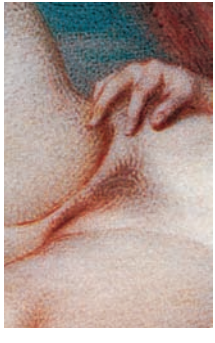




on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.
5 Your breasts are like two fawns,
like twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.
6 Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense.
7 You are altogether beautiful, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.

Bathsheba with King David's Letter
or Bathsheba Bathing

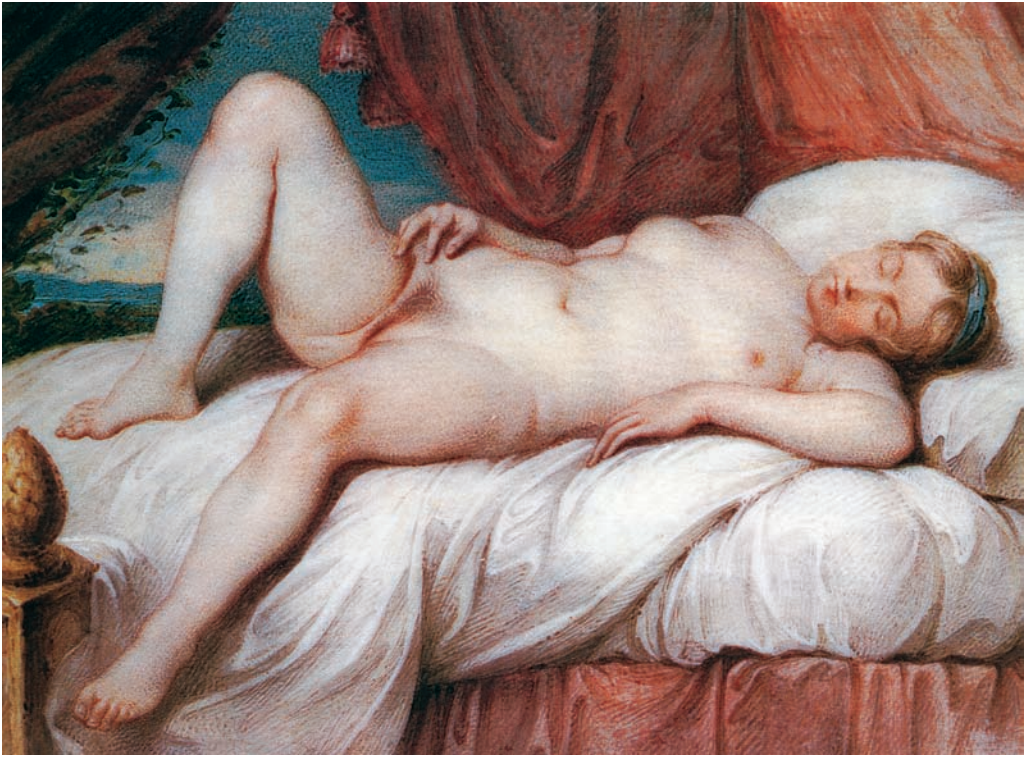
Rembrandt, 1654
Oil on canvas, 142 x 142 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris



[8] Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
come with me from Lebanon.
Descend from the crest of Amana,
from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon,
from the lions' dens
and the mountain haunts of leopards.
[9] You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.

Young Woman Sleeping

Anonymous, 18th century
French miniature painted on ivory



10 How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your perfume
more than any spice!
11 Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb,
my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments
is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

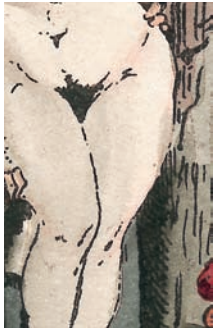
Nude Maja

Francisco de Goya, 1797-1800
Oil on canvas, 98 x 191 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

12 You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.
13 Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
with choice fruits,
with henna and nard,
14 nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,
with myrrh and aloes
and all the finest spices.

The Woman with White Stockings

Eugène Delacroix, 1830
Oil on canvas, 26 x 33 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris



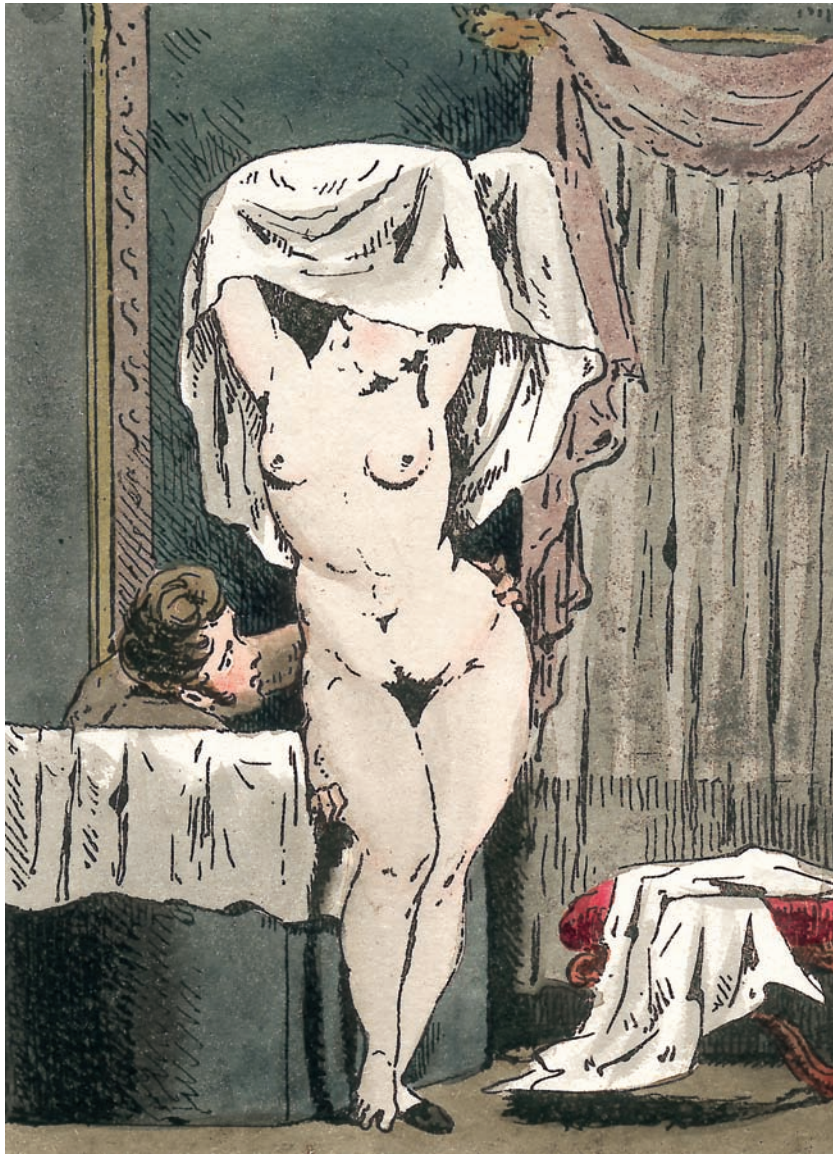
15 You are a garden fountain,
a well of flowing water
streaming down from Lebanon.

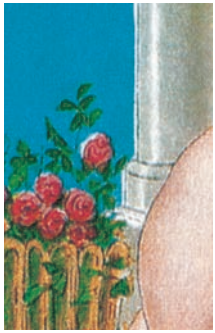
She

16 Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.

Untitled

Henri Monnier, c. 1835
Coloured lithograph





He

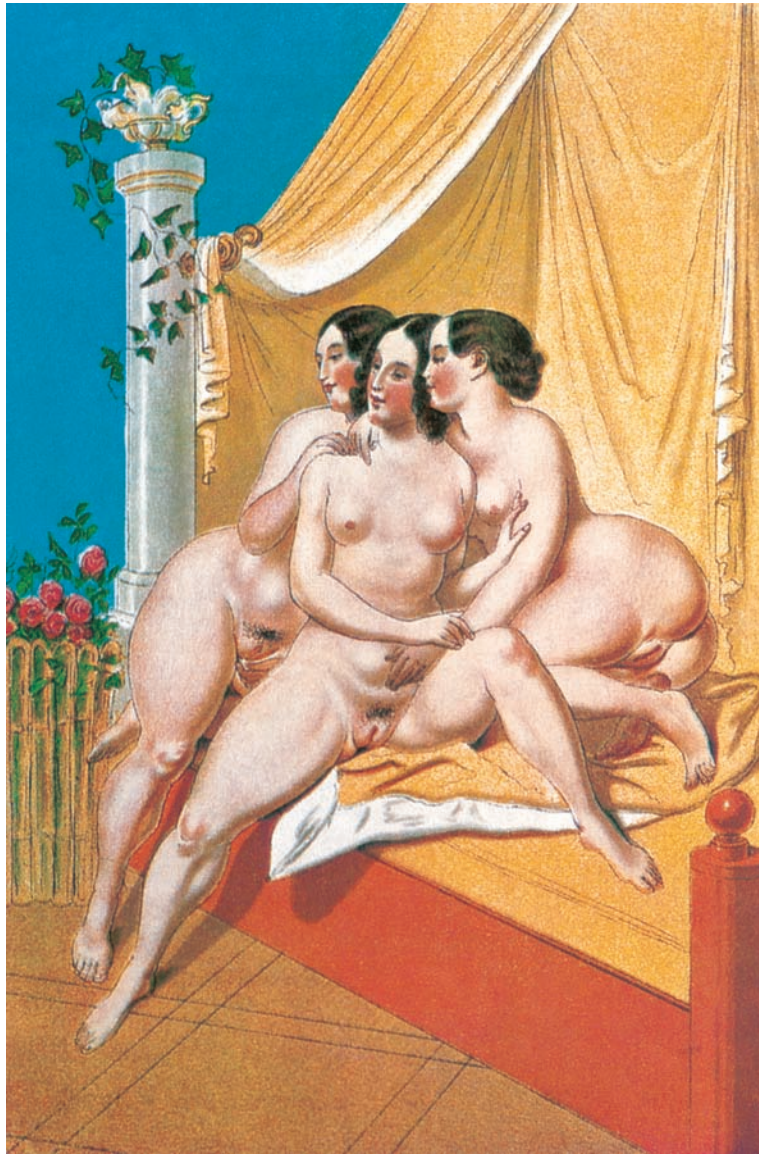
[5] I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
  I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
  I have drunk my wine and my milk.

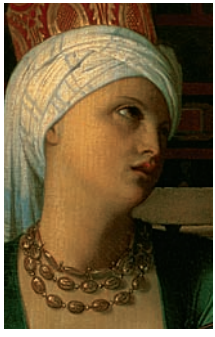
Friends

Eat, friends, and drink;
  drink your fill of love.

Lesbian Scene

Peter Fendi, 1835
Colour lithograph
Prvate collection



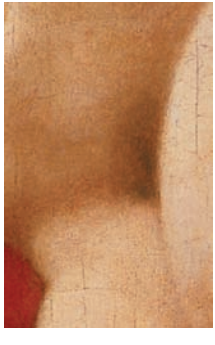


She

[2] I slept but my heart was awake.
Listen! My beloved is knocking:
"Open to me, my sister, my darling,
my dove, my flawless one.
My head is drenched with dew,
my hair with the dampness of the night."
[3] I have taken off my robe
must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet
must I soil them again?

Odalisque with Slave

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Paul Flandrin, 1842
Oil on canvas, 76 x 105 cm
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore



4 My beloved thrust his hand through the
latch-opening;
my heart began to pound for him.
5 I arose to open for my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with flowing myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.
6 I opened for my beloved,
but my beloved had left; he was gone.

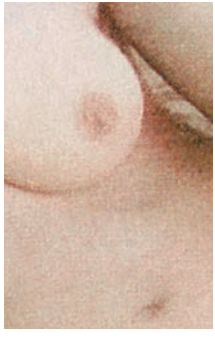
The Bacchante

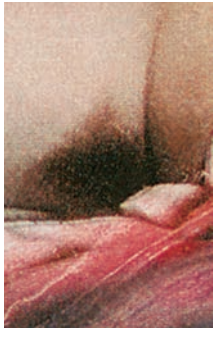
Gustave Courbet, c. 1844-1847
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm
Rau Foundation, Cologne

My heart sank at his departure.
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer.
7 The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls!
8 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
if you find my beloved,

Provocative Nude Woman

Anonymous, c. 1850
Hand-dyed stereoscopic daguerreotype





what will you tell him?
Tell him I am faint with love.

Friends

[9] How is your beloved better than others,
most beautiful of women?
How is your beloved better than others,
that you so charge us?

She

[10] My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
outstanding among ten thousand.

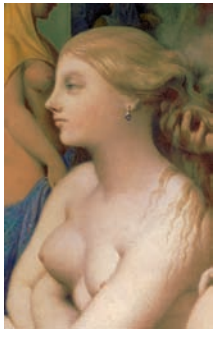
Reclining Nude

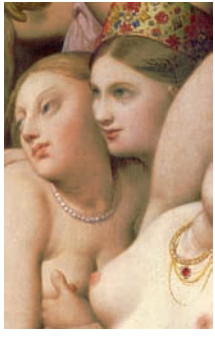
Alexis Gouin, c. 1850
Daguerreotype

11 His head is purest gold;
his hair is wavy
and black as a raven.
12 His eyes are like doves
by the water streams,
washed in milk,
mounted like jewels.
13 His cheeks are like beds of spice
yielding perfume.
His lips are like lilies
dripping with myrrh.

Wedding

Auguste Belloc, c. 1855
Print on salt paper from collodion humide negative
20.7 x 15.5 cm





14 His arms are rods of gold
set with topaz.
His body is like polished ivory
decorated with lapis lazuli.
15 His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as its cedars.
16 His mouth is sweetness itself;
he is altogether lovely.

The Turkish Bath

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1862
Oil on canvas, 108 x 110 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

This is my beloved, this is my friend,
daughters of Jerusalem.

The Bible, Old Testament,
New International Version (NIV)

Elegy 5

In summer's heat, and mid-time of the day,
To rest my limbs upon a bed I lay;

Nude Woman Facing Front

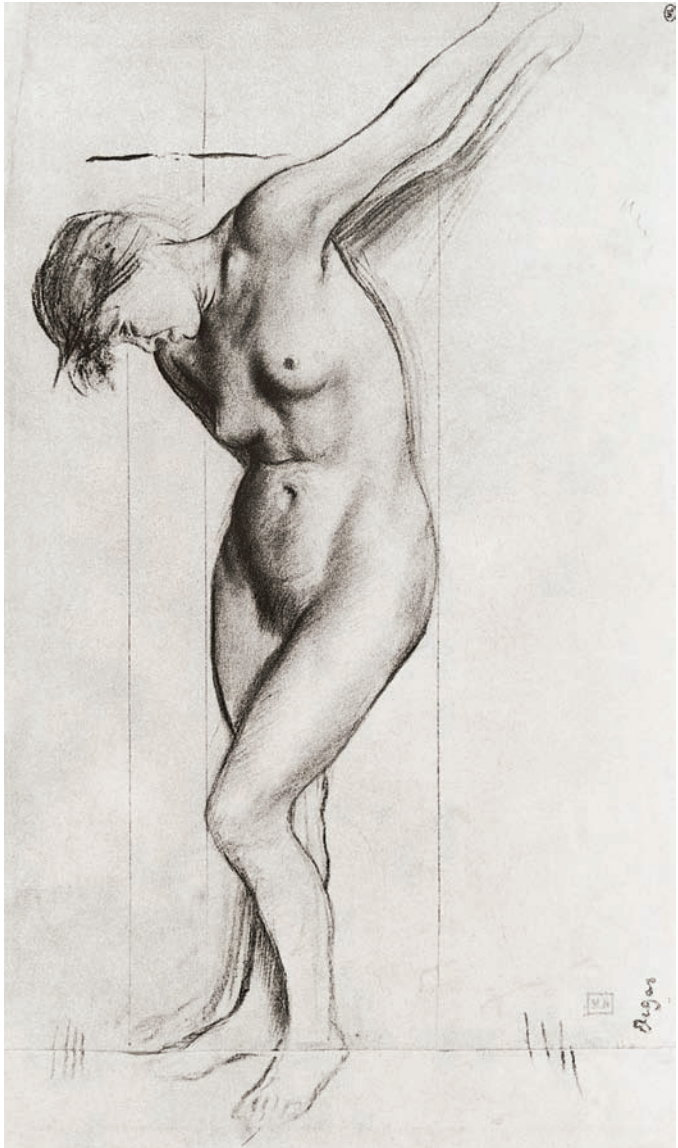
Edgar Degas
Pencil, 31.3 x 27.6 cm
Cabinet of Drawings, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Degas

One window shut, the other open stood,
Which gave such light as twinkles in a wood,
Like twilight glimpse at the setting sun,
Or night being past, and yet not day begun.
Such light to shamefaced maidens must be shown,
Where they may sport, and seem to be unknown.
Then came Corinna in a long, loose gown,
Her white neck hid with tresses hanging down,

Nude Woman Lying, Head to the Right,
Left Arm Removed

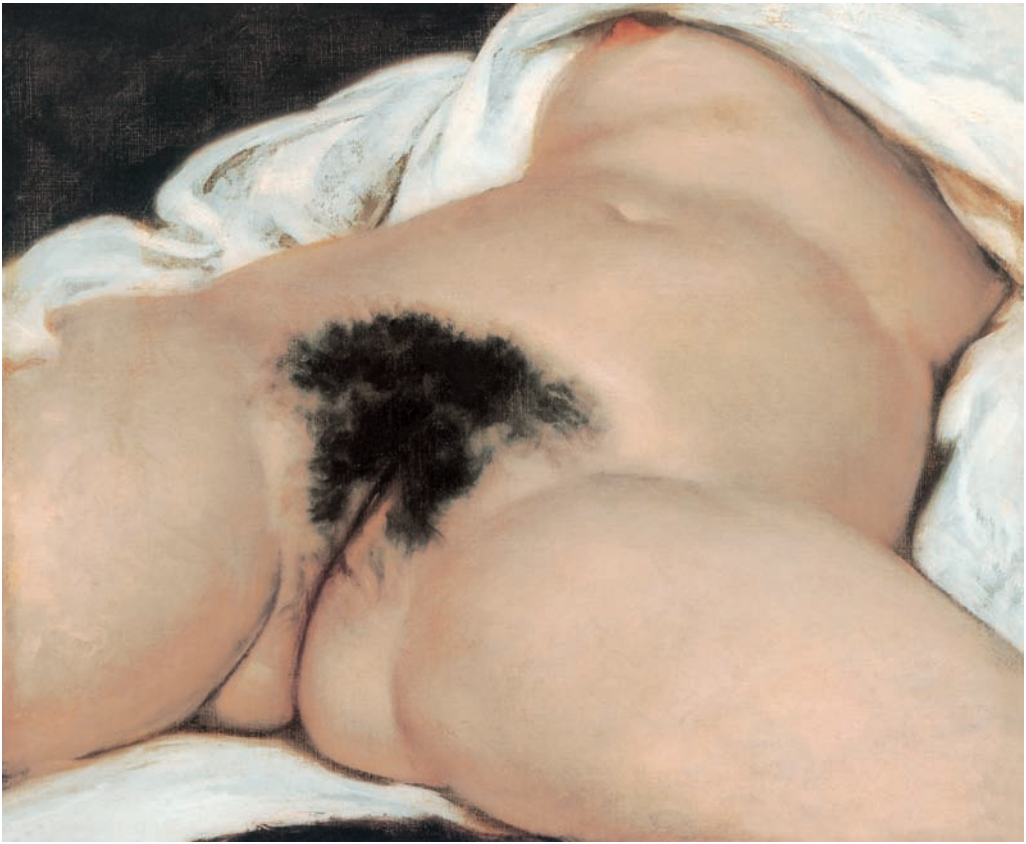
Edgar Degas
Pencil, 23 x 35.8 cm
Cabinet of Drawings, Musée du Louvre, Paris

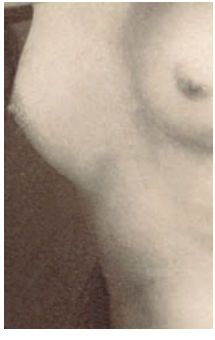

Degas

Resembling fair Semiramis going to bed
Or Lais of a thousand wooers sped.
I snatched her gown: being thin, the harm
was small,
Yet strived she to be covered there withal.
And striving thus, as one that would be cast,
Betrayed herself, and yielded at the last.
Stark naked as she stood before mine eye,
Not one wen in her body could I spy.

The Origin of the World

Gustave Courbet, 1866
Oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris





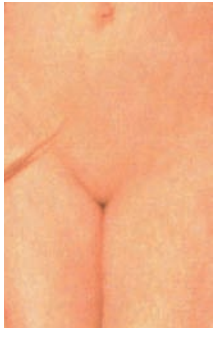
What arms and shoulders did I touch and see!
How apt her breasts were to be pressed by me!
How smooth a belly under her waist saw I,
How large a leg, and what a lusty thigh!
To leave the rest, all liked me passing well,
I clinged her naked body, down she fell:
Judge you the rest; being tired she bade me kiss;
Jove send me more such afternoons as this!

Written by Ovid before 1593,
printed posthumously c. 1602.
Translated by Christopher Marlowe

Nº 563

Gaudenzio Marconi, c. 1870
Albumen print, 21.8 x 16 cm

563.



XIII

I think about your sex.
My heart simplified, I think about your sex,
before the ripe daughterloin of day.
I touch the bud of joy, it is in season.
And an ancient sentiment dies
degenerated into brains.

The Sculptor's Model (Venus Esquilina)

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1877
Oil on canvas, 195.6 x 84 cm
Peter Nahum at the Leicester Galleries, London

I think about your sex, furrow more prolific
and harmonious than the belly of the Shadow,
though Death conceives and bears
from God himself.
Oh Conscience,
I am thinking, yes, about the free beast
who takes pleasure where he wants, where he can.
Oh, scandal of the honey of twilights.
Oh mute thunder.
Rednuhtetum!

Written by César Vallejo, c. 1922;
translated by Clayton Eshleman

Impudence

Felicien Rops, c. 1878
Coloured pencil, 18 x 12 cm
Royal Mariemont Museum, Morlanwelz

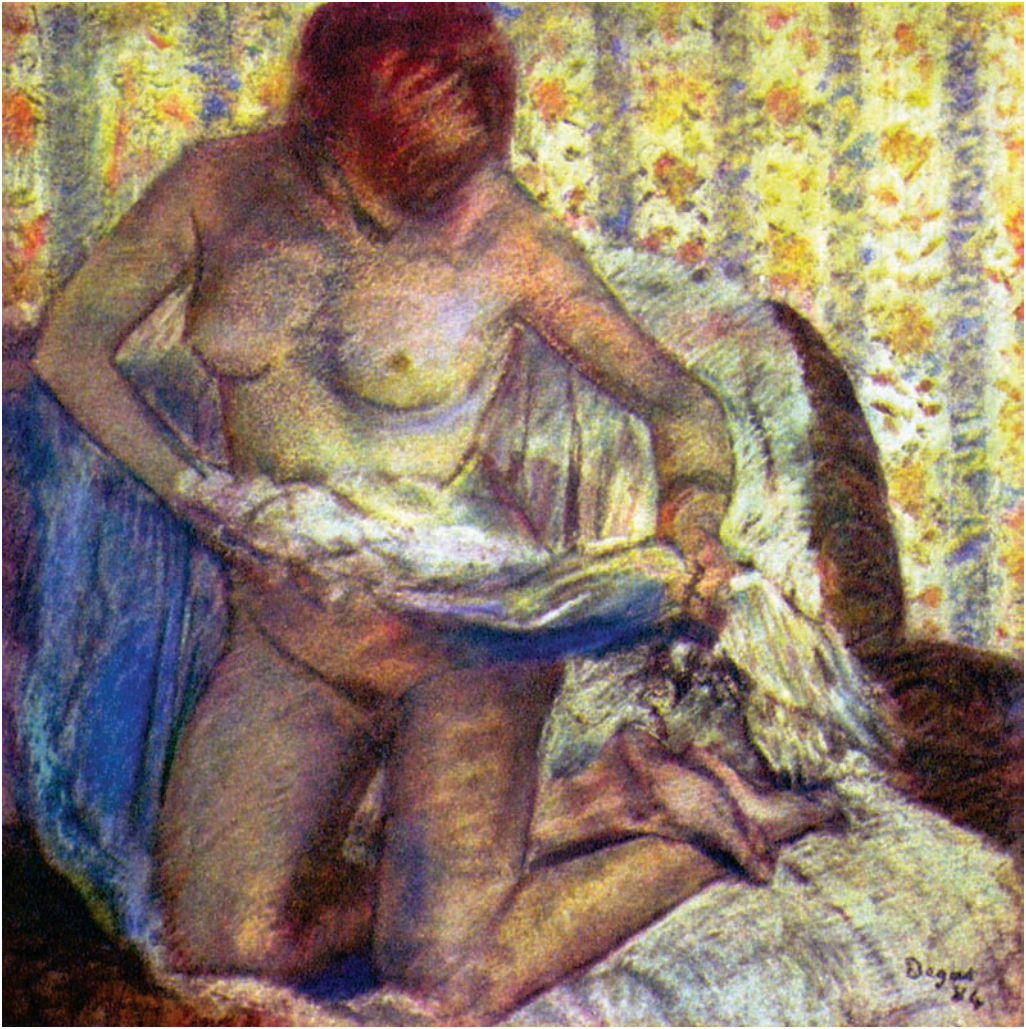
A Woman Waits for Me

A woman waits for me,
she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking,
or if the moisture of the
right man were lacking.

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies,
results, promulgations,

Kneeling Woman

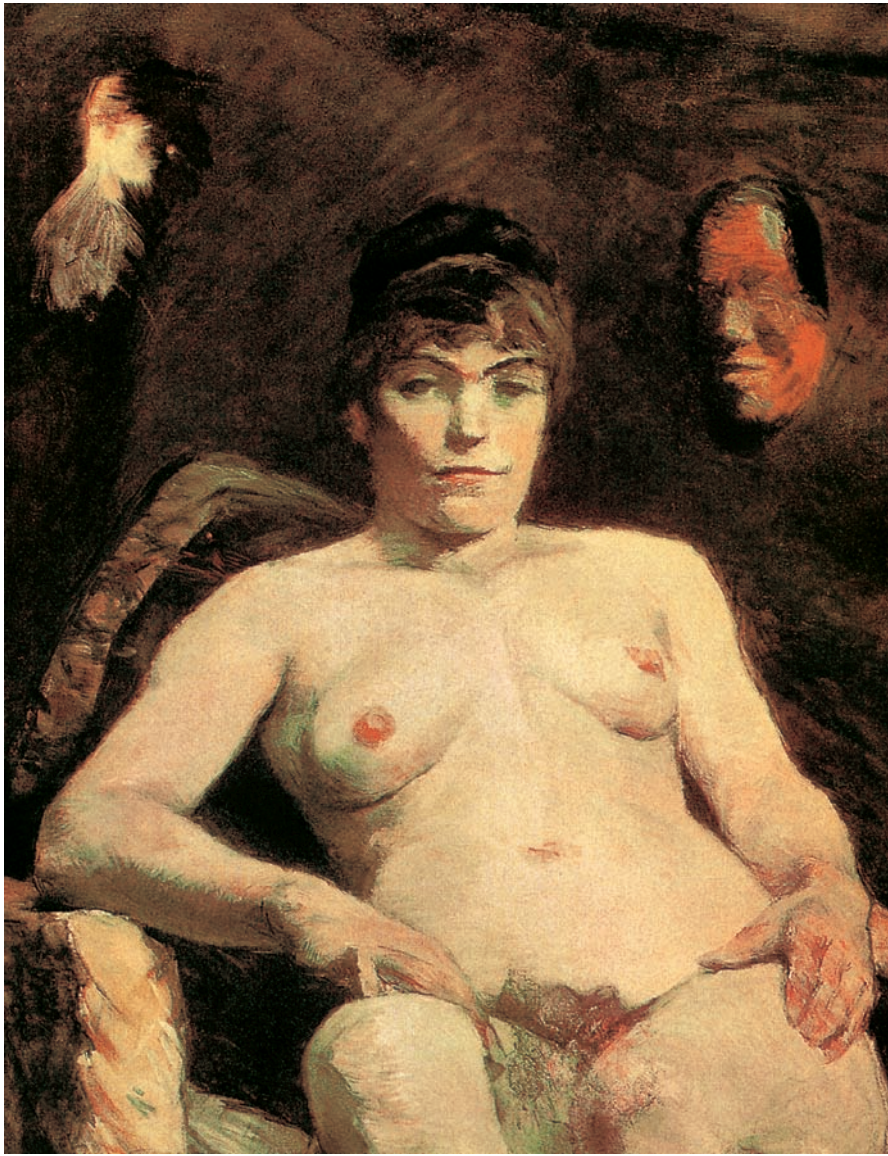
Edgar Degas, 1884
Pastel on paper, 50 x 50 cm
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg


Degas

Songs, commands, health, pride,
the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals,
all the passions, loves,
beauties, delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods,
followed persons of the earth,
These are contained in sex
as parts of itself and justifications of itself.

Voluptuous Mary, Venus of Montmartre

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, c. 1885
Oil on canvas, 80.7 x 64.8 cm
Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal



Without shame the man I like knows and avows
the deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the woman I like knows and
avows hers.

Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
I will go stay with her who waits for me, and
with those women that
are warm-blooded and sufficient for me,
I see that they understand me and do not deny me,

Pensive Nude

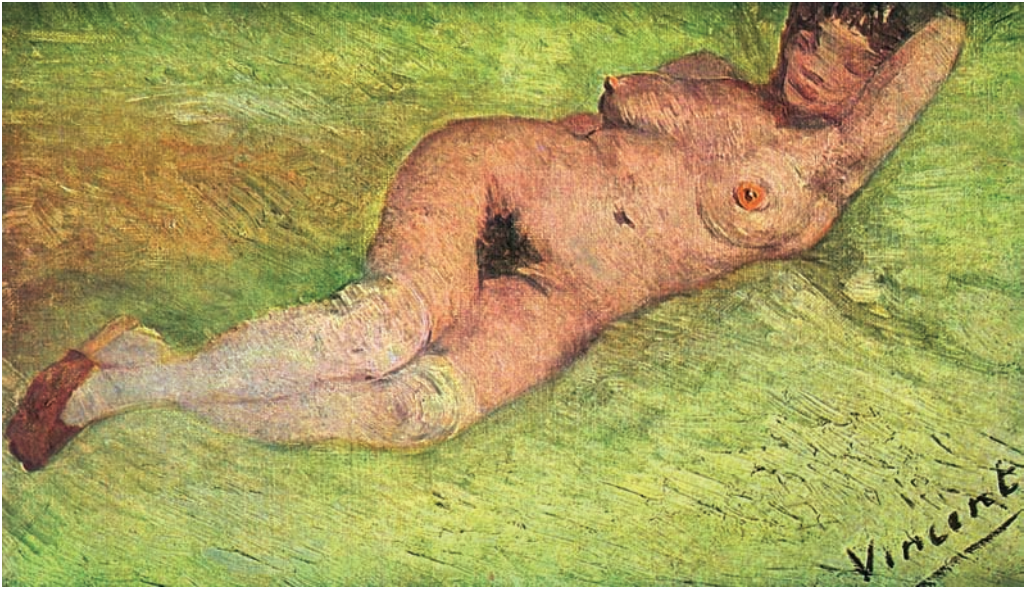
Anonymous, c. 1885
Hand-dyed stereographic daguerreotype

I see that they are worthy of me, I will be the robust husband of
those women.

They are not one jot less than I am,
They are tanned in the face by shining suns and blowing winds,
Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,
They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike,

Nude Woman Reclining

Vincent van Gogh, 1887
Oil on canvas, 24 x 41 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo


Vincent

retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,
They are ultimate in their own right – they are
calm, clear,
well-possessed of themselves.

I draw you close to me, you women,
I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
I am for you, and you are for me, not only for
our own sake, but for
others' sakes,
Enveloped in you sleep greater heroes and bards,

Female Nude Lying Down,
study for the Altar of Dionysos

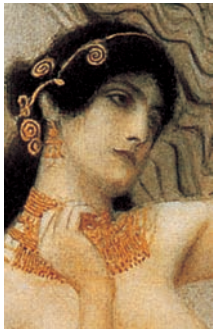
Gustav Klimt, 1887-1888
Black pencil with white highlights, 28.8 x 42.4 cm
Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna

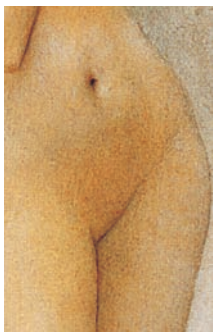
They refuse to awake at the touch of any man
but me.

It is I, you women, I make my way,
I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but
I love you,
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary
for you,
I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for
these States,
I press with slow rude muscle,

Young Woman Bathing

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1888
Oil on canvas, 85 x 66 cm
Private collection



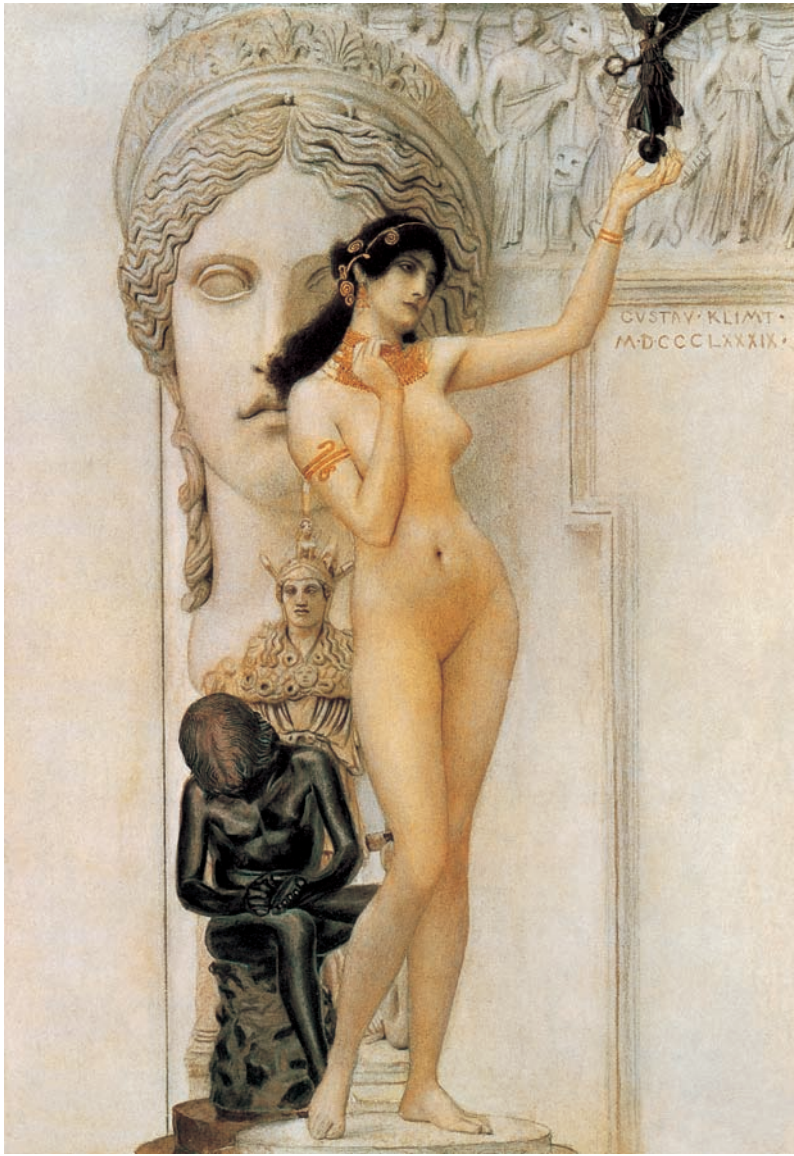


I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long
accumulated within me.

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of
me and America,
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and
athletic girls,
new artists, musicians, and singers,

Allegory of Sculpture

Gustav Klimt, 1889
Pencil and watercolour, 44 x 30 cm
Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna

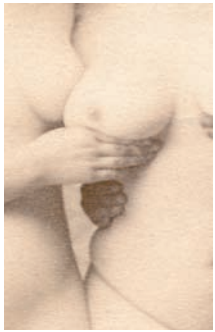

GVSTAV·KLIMT·
M·D·C·C·C·L·X·X·X·I·X·

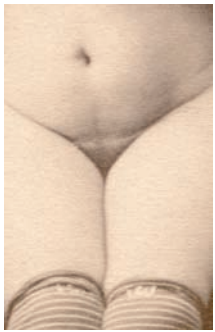
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes
in their turn,
I shall demand perfect men and women out of
my love-spendings,
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,
as I and you
interpenetrate now,
I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers
of them, as I
count on the fruits of the gushing showers I
give now,

Nº 555

Anonymous, c. 1890
Albumen print, 20.7 x 13.7 cm

555





I shall look for loving crops from the birth,
life, death,
immortality, I plant so lovingly now.

Written by Walt Whitman,
from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

A Love Song

Let him fond of fibbing invoke which he'll choose,
Mars, Bacchus, Apollo, or Madam the Muse;

Untitled

Anonymous, c. 1890
Albumen print, 20.7 x 13.7 cm

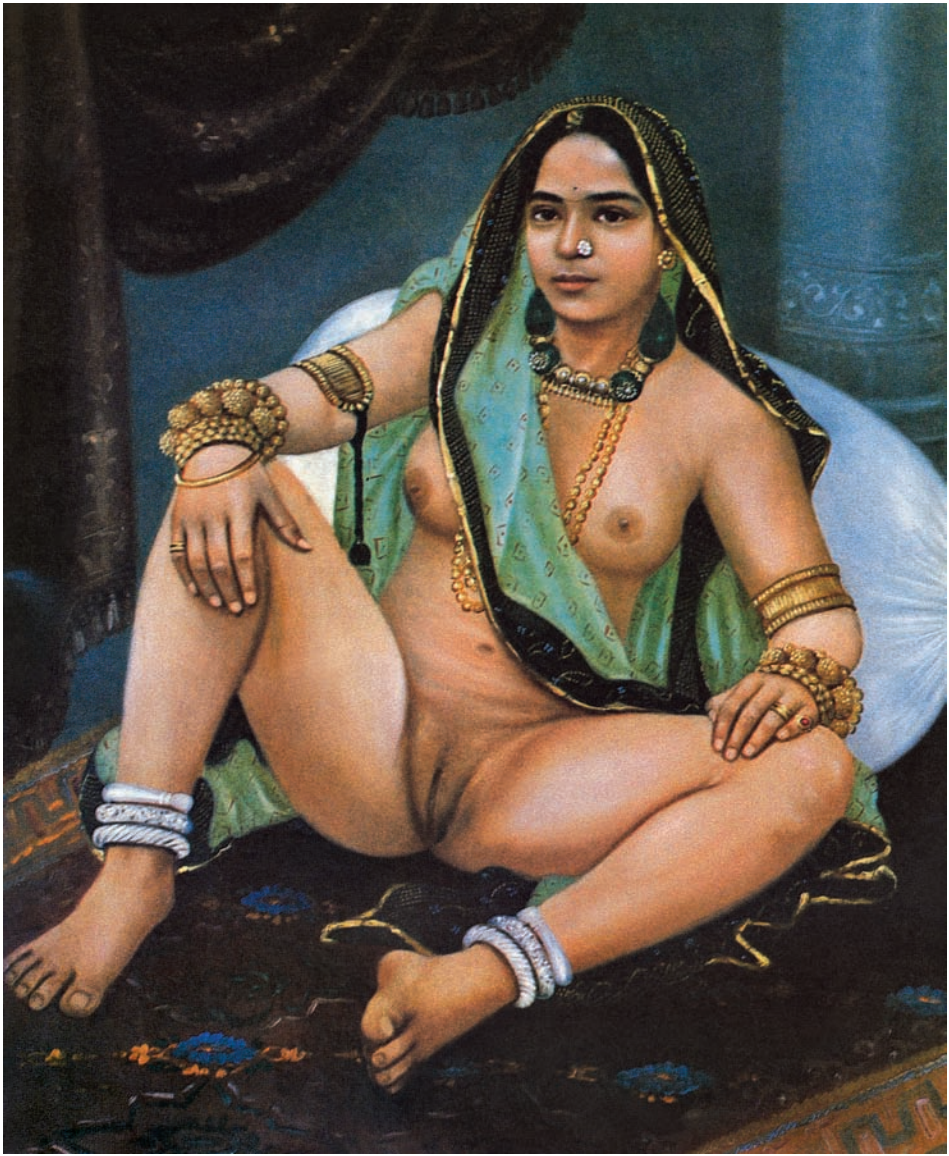
53c

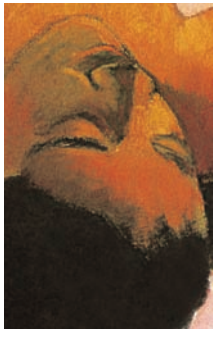
Great names in the classical kingdom of letters,
But poets are apt to make free with their betters.

I scorn to say aught, save the thing which is true,
No Beauties I'll plunder, yet give mine her due;
She has charms upon charms,
such charms as can't plague you,
She has charms for the tooth-ache,
and eke for the ague.

The Majaraja's Favourite

Anonymous, end of 19th century





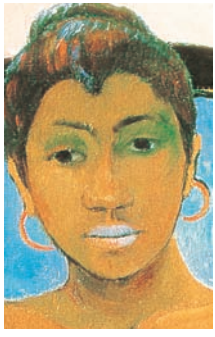
Her lips; – she has two,
and her teeth they are white,
And what she puts into her mouth they can bite;
Black and all black her eyes, but what's
worthy remark,
They are shut when she sleeps,
and she's blind in the dark.

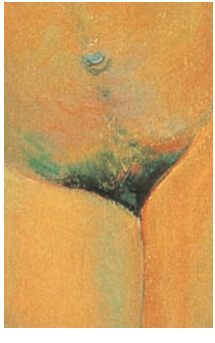
Her ears from her cheeks equal distance
are bearing,

Aha oe feii? (What? Are You Jealous?)

Paul Gauguin, 1892
Oil on canvas, 66 x 89 cm
Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Aha oe feii?



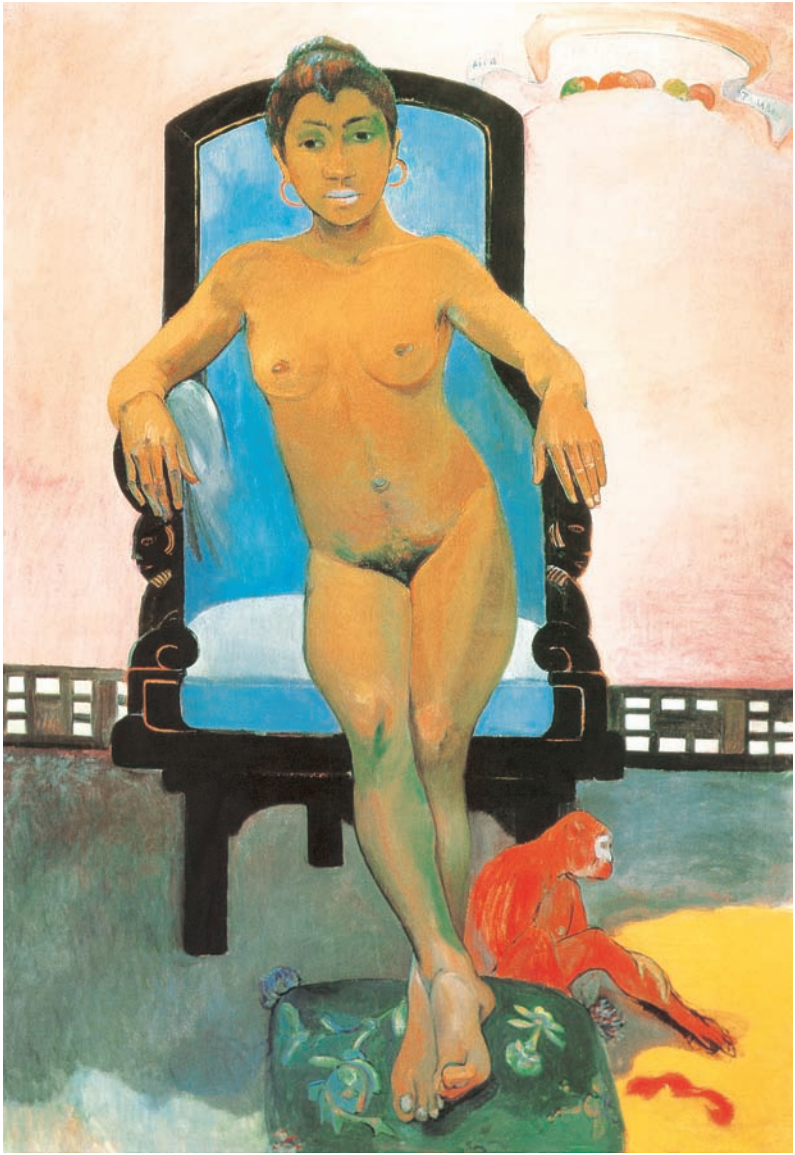


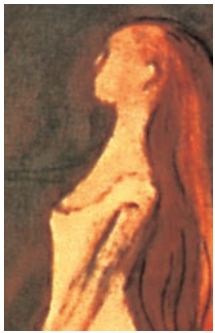
'Cause each side of her head should go partners
in hearing;
The fall of her neck's the downfall of beholders,
Love tumbles them in by the head and
the shoulders.

Her waist is so-so, so waste no words about it,
Her heart is within it, her stays are without it;
Her breasts are so paired – two such breasts
when you see,

Aïta tamari vahine Judith te parari
(Annah the Javanese)

Paul Gauguin, 1893-1894
Oil on canvas, 116 x 81 cm
Private collection





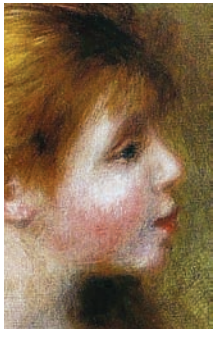
You'll swear that no woman yet born ever
had three.

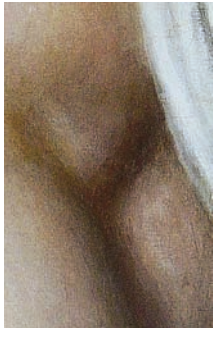
Her voice neither nightingales, no! nor canaries,
Nor all the winged warblers wild
whistling vagaries;
Nor shall I to instrument music compare it,
'Tis likely, if you were not deaf you might hear it.

Her legs are proportioned to bear what
they've carried,

Woman in Three Stages (Sphinx)

Edvard Munch, c. 1894
Oil on canvas, 164 x 250 cm
Rasmus Meyers Collection, Bergen Kunstmuseum, Bergen



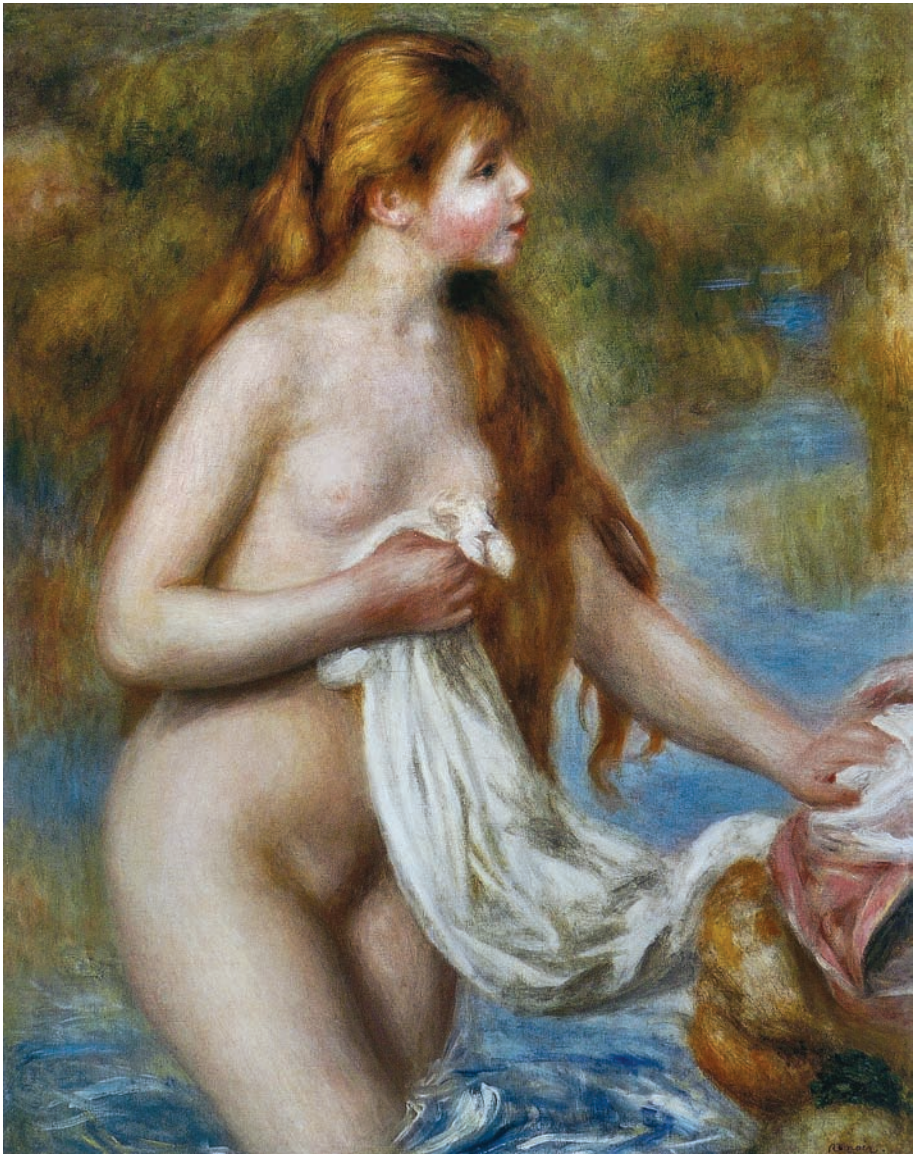


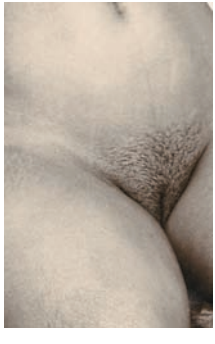
And equally paired, as if happily married;
But wedlock will sometimes the best friends divide,
By her spouse so she's served
when he throws them aside.
Not too tall, nor too short, but I'll venture to say,
She's a very good size – in a middling way.
She's – aye, that she is, – she is all, – but
I'm wrong,
Her All I can't say, for I've sung All my song.

Anonymous (from *Songs, Comic, and Satyrical*
by George Alexander Stevens, 1782)

Bather with Long Hair

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, c. 1895-1896
Oil on canvas, 82 x 65 cm
Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris



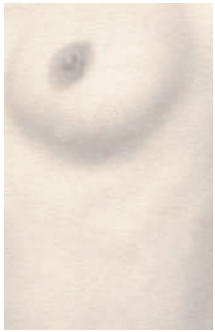


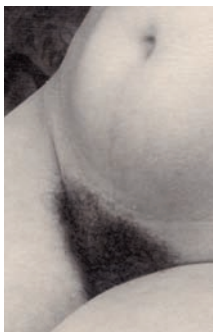
Sonnet: "I am most lovely, fair beyond desire"

And every movement flows by instinct right:
Full well I know my touch doth burn like fire,
That my voice stings the sense like smitten lyre;
I am the queen of sensuous delight;
Past years are sealed with the signet of my might;
And at my feet pale present kneels a buyer.

Naked Woman

Anonymous, c. 1895
Gelatin silver print, 23 x 16.5 cm



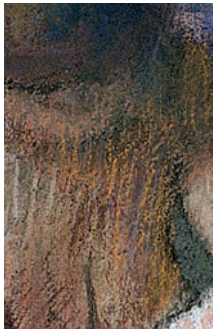


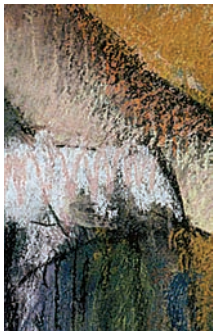
My beds are odorous with soft-shed scent,
And strange moon flowers a tremulous twilight air
Weave over all; and here, alone I sing
My siren songs, until all souls are bent
Within the subtle sweet melodious snare.
God, making love, made me love's grievous sting.

Written by George Moore,
from *Flowers of Passion*, 1878

Nº 11664

Guglielmo Plüschow, c. 1895
Albumen print, 23 x 16.5 cm



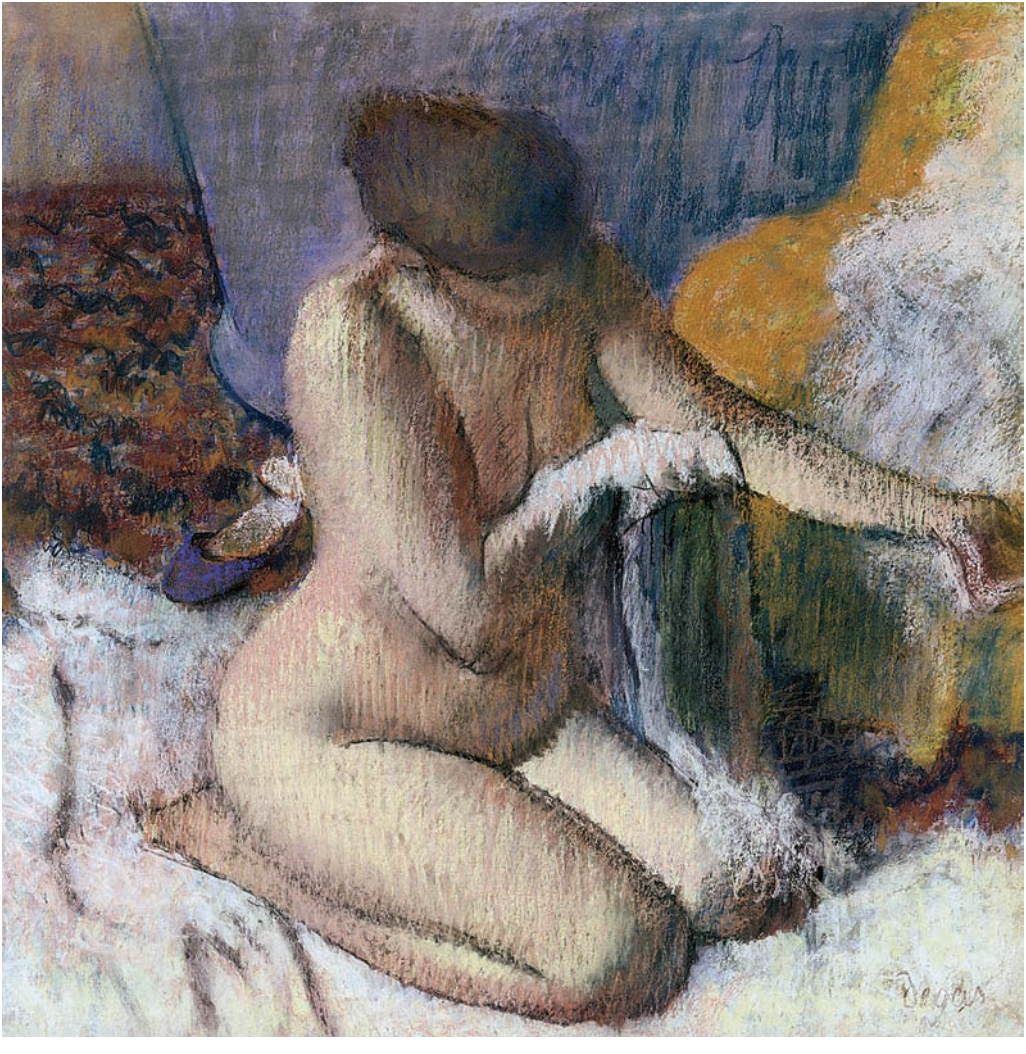


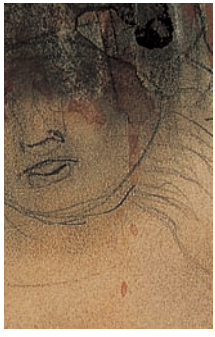
Sonnet LVI. True Woman: I. Herself

A bodily beauty more acceptable
Than the wild rose-tree's arch that crowns the fell;
To be an essence more environing
Than wine's drained juice; a music ravishing
    More than the passionate pulse of Philomel;—
    To be all this 'neath one soft bosom's swell
That is the flower of life:—how strange a thing!
How strange a thing to be what Man can know
    But as a sacred secret! Heaven's own screen
Hides her soul's purest depth and loveliest glow;

After the Bath

Edgar Degas, c. 1895-1898
Pastel, 70 x 70 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris


Degas



Closely withheld, as all things most unseen,—
The wave-bowered pearl,—the heart-shaped seal of green
That flecks the snowdrop underneath the snow.

Written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti,
from *The House of Life*, 1881

I Sing the Body Electric

To stop in company with the rest at evening
is enough,

Garden of Pain

Auguste Rodin, 1898
Graphite, stump and watercolour on buff paper
Musée Rodin, Paris

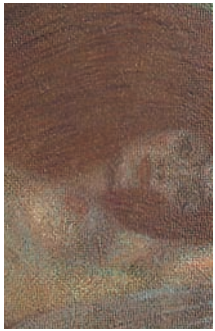
M.R
4258

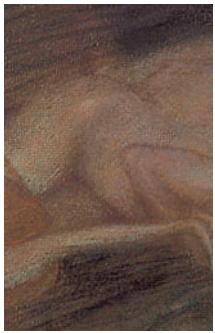
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not seek any more delight; I swim in it as in a sea.

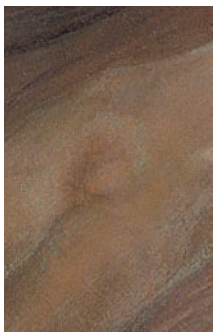
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odour of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

Fish Blood

Gustav Klimt, 1898
Illustration for the magazine *Ver Sacrum*
Ink on paper



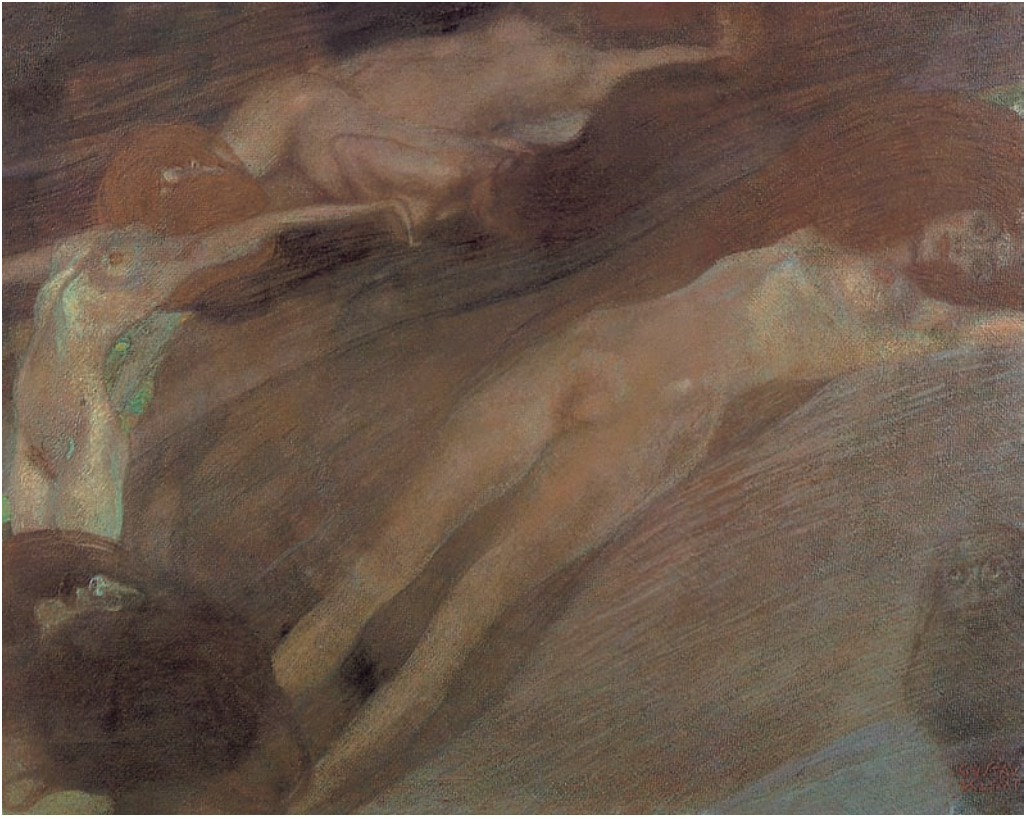


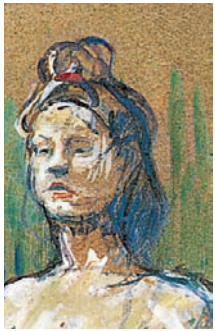


This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction!
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapour, all falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, the atmosphere and the clouds, and what was expected of heaven or feared of hell, are now consumed,

Flowing Water

Gustav Klimt, 1898
Oil on canvas, 52 x 65 cm
Private collection

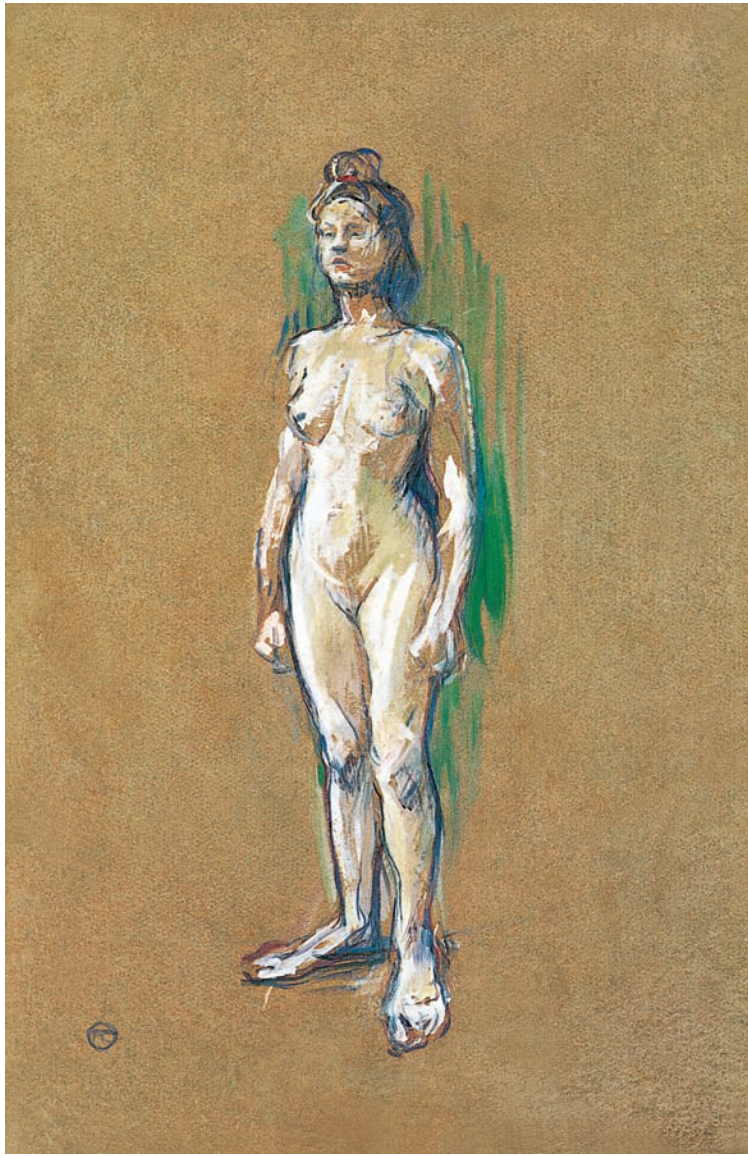


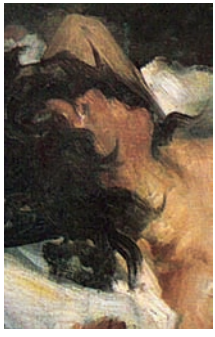


Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of
it, the response likewise ungovernable,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling
hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow and flow, stung by the
ebb, love flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,
quivering jelly of love, white blow and
delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and

Standing Female Nude

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1898
Oil on cardboard, 80 x 53 cm
Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi





softly into the prostrate dawn;
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-
fleshed day.

This is the nucleus—after the child is born of
woman, man is born of woman,
This is the bath of birth, this is the merge of small
and large, and the outlet again.
Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses
the rest, and is the exit of the rest,

Reclining Nude

Lovis Corinth, 1899
Oil on canvas, 75 x 120 cm
Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen

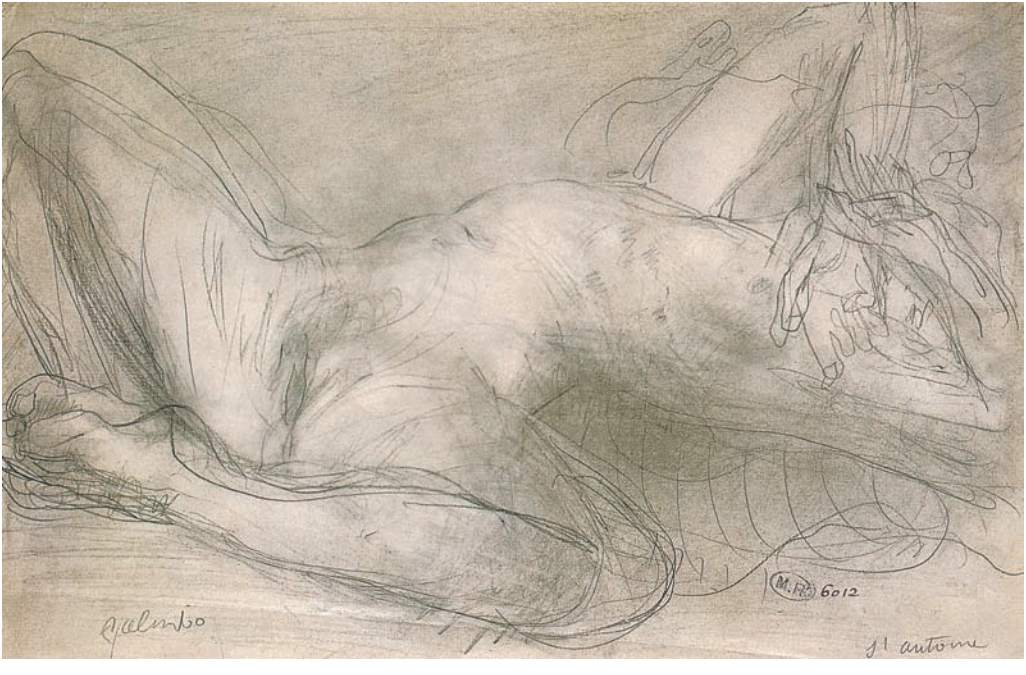
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.

The female contains all qualities and tempers them, she is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veiled, she is both passive and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible

Salammbô

Auguste Rodin, c. 1900
Pencil and stump on paper
Private collection

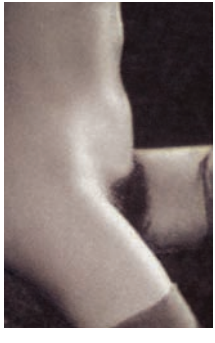

M.P.P. 6012

completeness and beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the
breast, the Female I see.

Written by Walt Whitman,
from *Leaves of Grass*, 1860

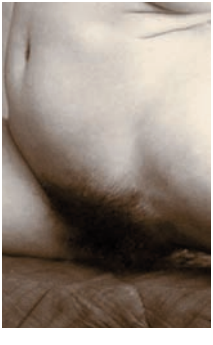
Hymn to Venus

Oh, listen gracious to my prayer,
And free my mind from anxious care.
If ever you heard my ardent vow,
Propitious goddess, hear me now!



Young Parisian Girl

Anonymous, c. 1900
Photograph



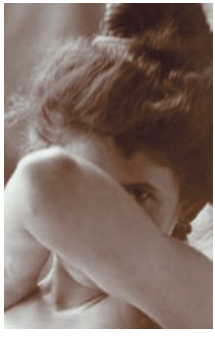
And oft my ardent vow you've heard,
By Cupid's friendly aid preferred,
Oft left the golden courts of Jove
To listen to my tales of love.

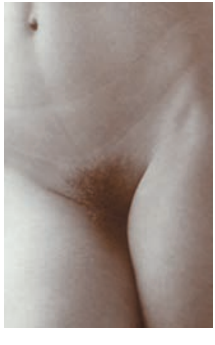
The radiant car your sparrows drew;
You gave the word, and swift they flew,
Through liquid air they winged their way,
I saw their quivering pinions play:
To my plain roof they bore their queen,
Of aspect mild and look serene.

Nº 192

Henri Oltramare, c. 1900
Gelatin silver print, 11.7 x 15.7 cm

H.O
192





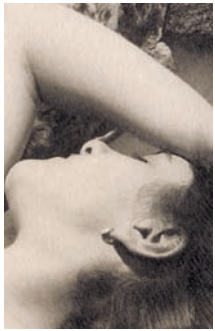
Soon as you came by your command,
Back flew the wantoned, feathered band,
Then, with a sweet enchanting look,
Divinely smiling, thus you spoke;
"Why didst thou call me to thy cell?
Tell me, my gentle Sappho, tell.

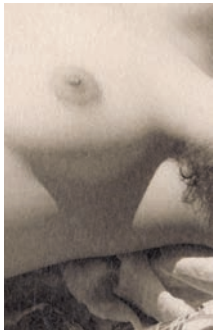
"What healing medicine shall I find
To cure thy love-distempered mind?
Say, shall I lend thee all my charms
To win young Phaon to thy arms?

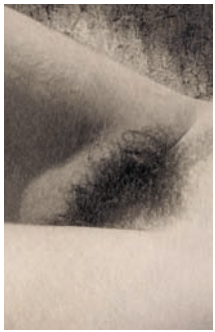
Nº 3039

Anonymous, c. 1900
Albumen print, 10 x 13.5 cm

387







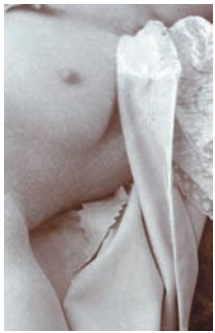
Or does some other swain subdue
Thy heart? my Sappho, tell me, who?

"Though now, averse, thy charms he slight,
He soon shall view thee with delight:
Though now he scorns thy gifts to take,
He soon to thee shall offerings make;
Though now thy beauties fail to move,
He soon shall melt with equal love."

Once more, O Venus! hear my prayer,
And ease my mind of anxious care;
Again vouchsafe to be my guest,

Female Nude

Vincenzo Galdi, c. 1900
Photograph, 16.4 x 22.5 cm



And calm this tempest in my breast!
To thee, bright queen, my vows aspire;
O grant me all my heart's desire!

Written by Sappho, translated by Francis Fawkes;
from *The Festival of Love*, 1789

Ecstasy

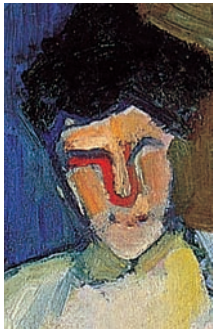
by Hans-Jürgen Döpp

There is nothing more exciting for a man than the face of a beautiful woman in the throes of passion. For a red-blooded male, after all, beauty represents

Nº P194

Anonymous, c. 1900
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 13.7 cm

P.194.

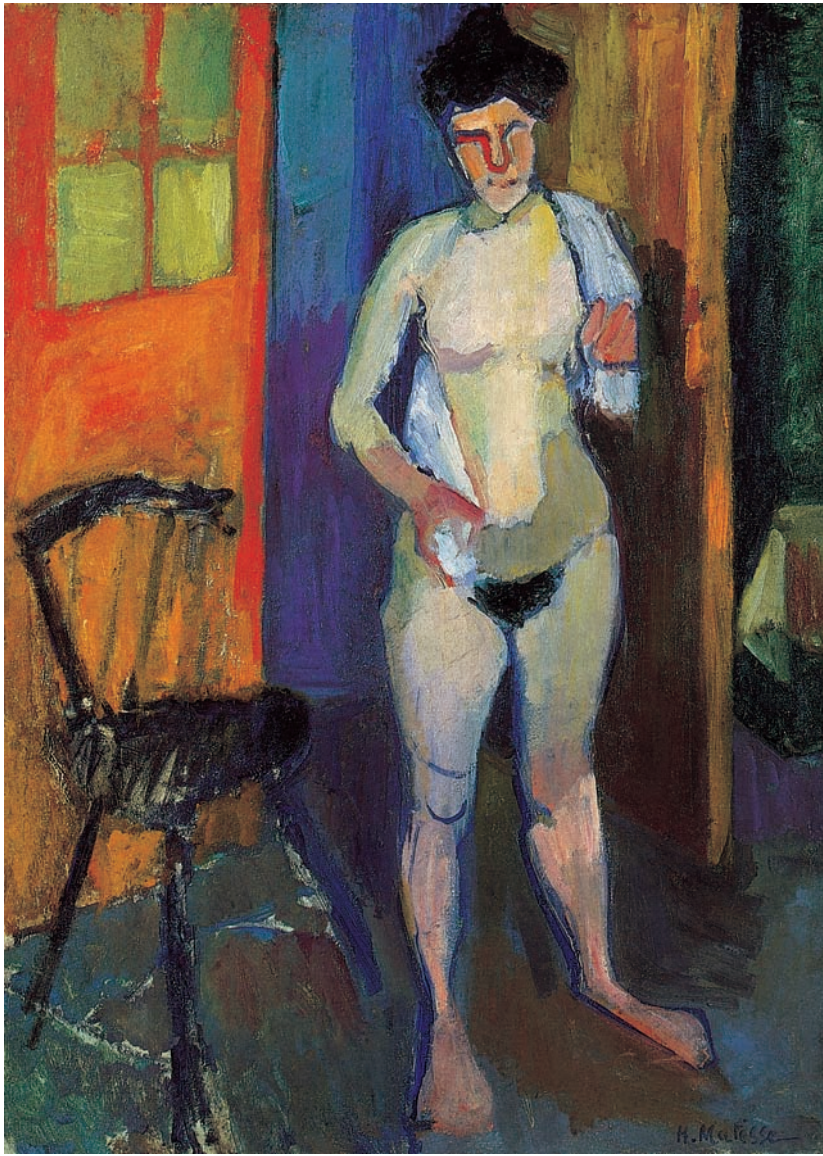


the ultimate lure, an irresistible attraction. Conveyed by the eyes, beauty can inflame his desire and arouse him to the very depths of his being. "Beauty," said Bataille, "is that aspect of the beheld that arouses desire." In his *Satyricon*, Petronius describes the subtle devices that were considered essential to stimulate the libido in ancient Rome. Even a goddess might not be able to relight the dying embers of passion –

> Her hair fell in natural ringlets over her shoulders.
> Her high forehead was bespotted with drops

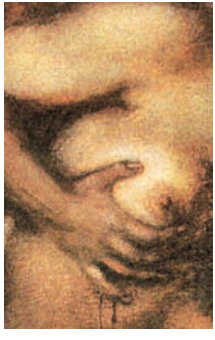
Nude with a White Towel

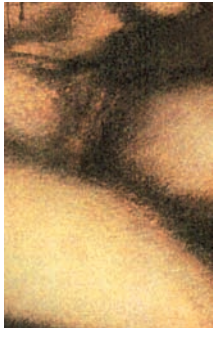
Henri Matisse, c. 1901-1903
Oil on canvas, 80.7 x 59.2 cm
Private collection


H. Matisse

of gold. Beneath, her eyebrows extended to the line of her cheeks, which became finer and finer until it disappeared altogether. And from between her eyes – which shone with a clarity never otherwise seen in a sky without a moon – her nose sloped down from her forehead at a superb gradient. Her mouth was such as the sculptor Praxiteles might have conjured up as his dream for the face of the goddess of the

Erotic Victorian postcard



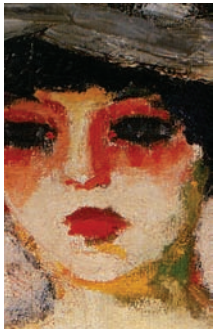


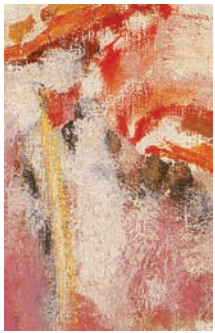
> tree-nymphs in ecstasy. Her chin, her neckline, her hand, and her foot surpassed in all respects the most beautiful of all sculpted marble.

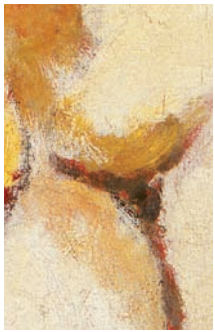
What is considered the epitome of beauty has been seriously influenced by the passage of time. The ideal of beauty in the Middle Ages reposed in the figure of the Blessed Virgin. One of the Fathers of the Church in the 4th century strikingly described what he imagined as the beauty of the Mother of Christ:

Wounded Amazon

Franz von Stuck, 1903
Oil on Canvas, 65 x 76 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



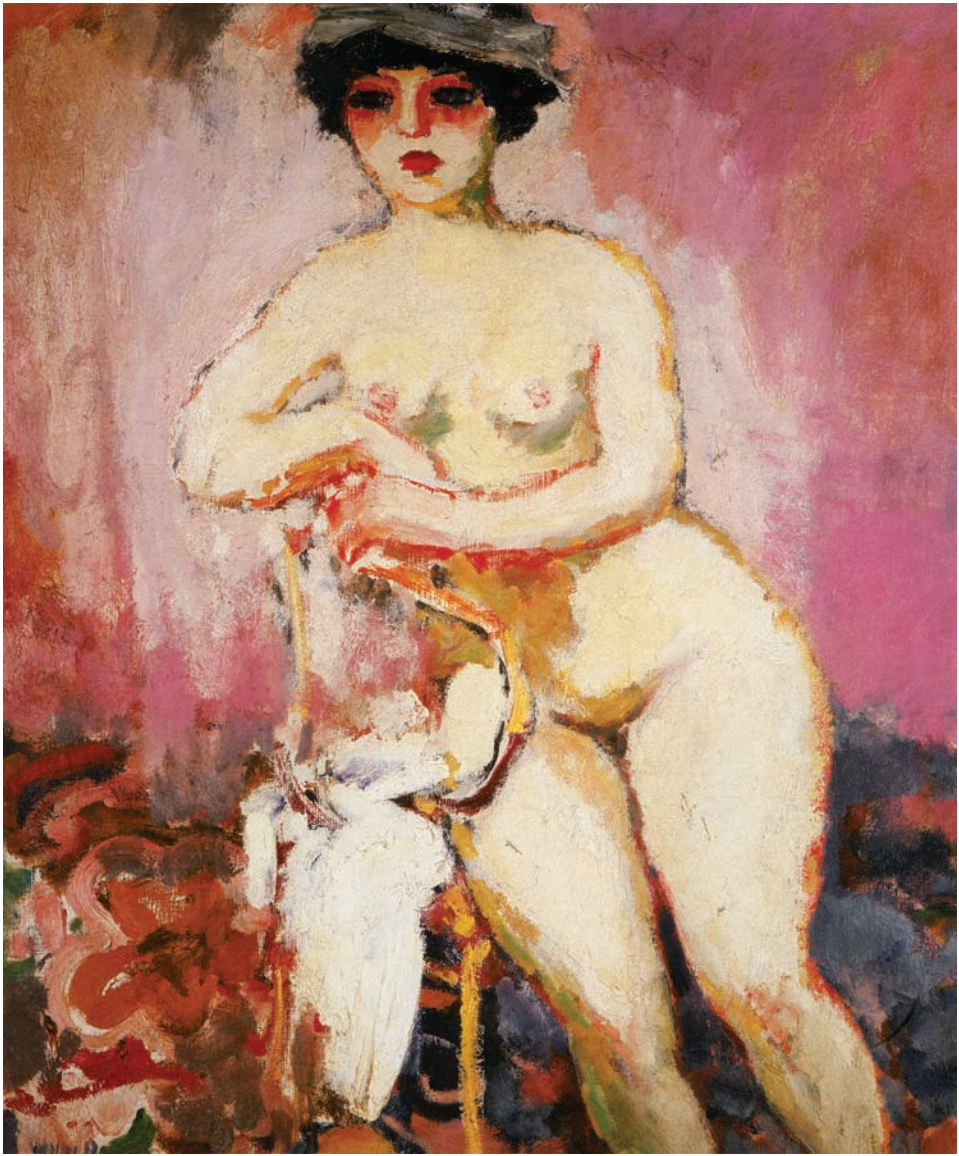


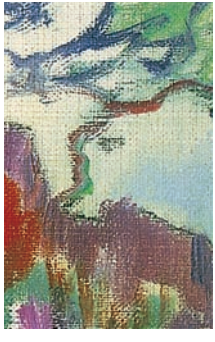


Most well-made in body, she was the most beautiful of women. Fair, not too short but of excellent height. Her skin was pale but of a pleasant hue, and unblemished. Her hair was of the colour of gold, its tresses long and lissome. Her mouth was gentle, and pleasing to behold. Her lips were red, rose-coloured, and without fault. Her teeth were perfectly aligned, white and spotless like new-fallen snow. Her cheeks radiated the colour of valerian, combining the hues of a red rose and of pure white snow – indeed,

Seated Nude

Kees van Dongen, 1905
Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Didier Imbert, Paris





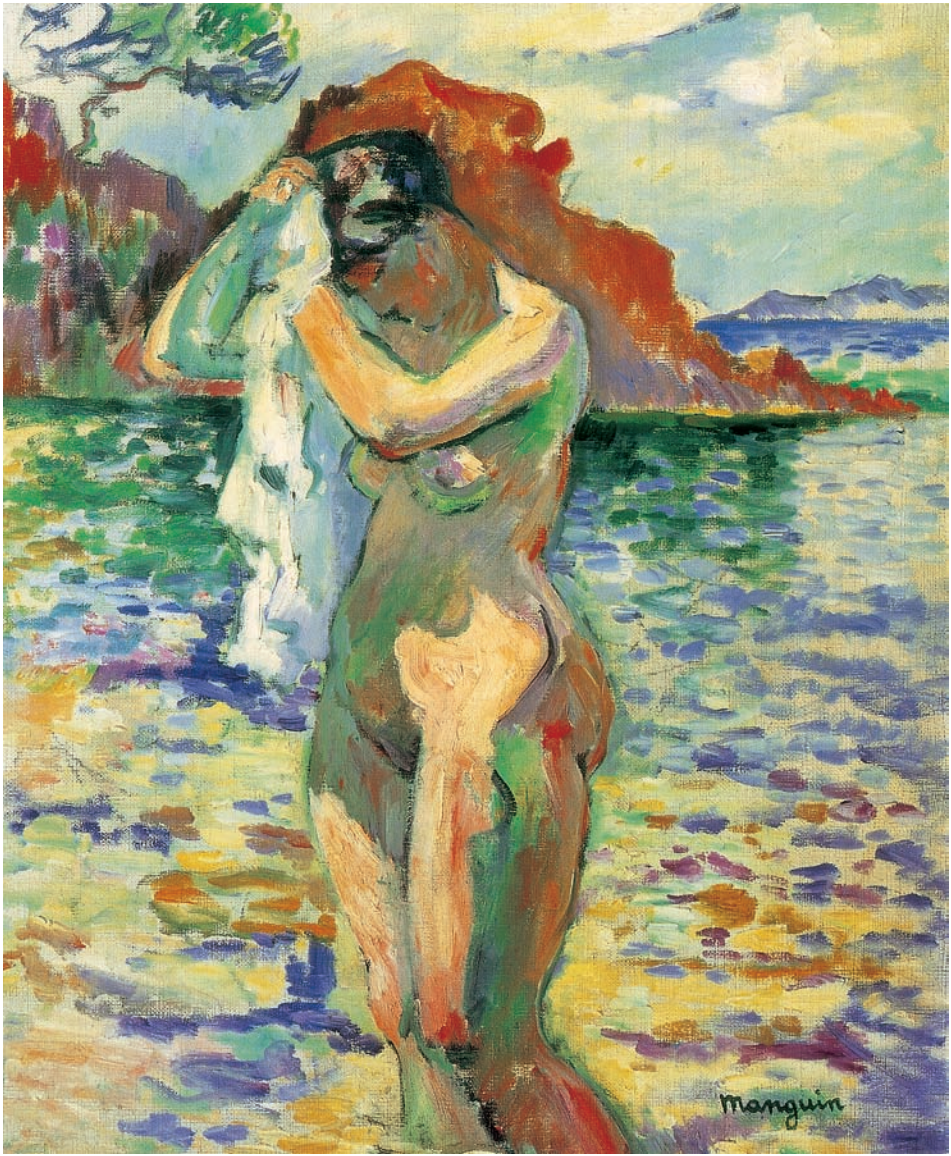
just as if her cheeks had actually been decorated with a lilac flower and a sweet-smelling rose. Her throat was white and smooth, her neck neither heavy nor long, but just right.

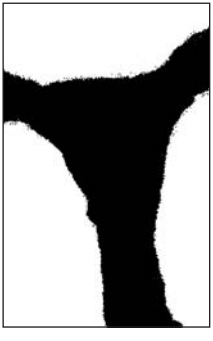
For a holy man to imagine the charms of the Virgin Mary in such a way – both profane and pious – and for him then to describe them with "all the internal passion of a troubadour" is simply astonishing.

This image of the Blessed Virgin prefigures the ideal of beauty for an entire epoch. Most cultures

Woman Bather

Henri Manguin, 1906
Oil on canvas, 61 x 49 cm
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow


Manguin



agree on what makes a mouth beautiful. Already by the Middle Ages the consensus was that lips had to be "soft, dainty, small, quick to smile, pleasant to caress, and of a rosy red colour".

In medieval French poetry, the ideal was depicted by the rogue troubadour François Villon, in his *Grand Testament*. The wife of a helmet-smith bemoans the fading of her former good looks and sings of her delight in her erstwhile beauty.

At the Brothel

Maurice de Vlaminck, c. 1906
Wood, 22.5 x 18 cm
Private collection

The moment of ecstasy is difficult to describe. It defies verbal representation. It is beyond telling in words. To try to give a detailed account of the instant of sexual climax is like trying to catch a lizard. At best, you end up with its tail while the lizard makes a rapid escape. Yet we ought to have a go at least at listing the personal events and feelings experienced during this "petit-mal seizure" that is orgasm.

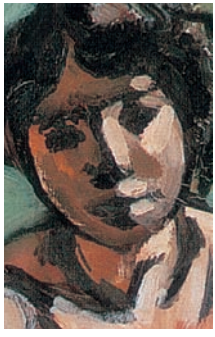
Rosa Meissner at the Hotel Rohn, Warnemünde

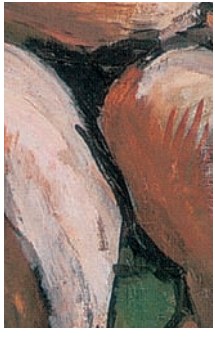
Photo by Edvard Munch, 1907
Gelatin silver print, 8.7 x 7.3 cm

It is the precise moment when the antagonism between "beauty" and the "animal" (the "beast") breaks down. The effects on the body of the flows of mental energy are set free and given sway. These mental currents have themselves become themes of representational art. In the most subtle works, representation of bodily gestures enables an observer, almost through mimetic intuition, to perceive in them "movements of the soul".

Summer Interior

Edward Hopper, 1909
Oil on canvas, 61 x 73.7 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Josephine N. Hopper Bequest





Changes in facial expression are well known to be produced by the involuntary contraction and relaxation of specific muscle groups. Such changes can certainly result from sexual stimulation – and of course from fear, grief, or rage.

Before the investigations of Masters and Johnson, bodily reactions during such sexual activities as masturbation and intercourse were never systematically observed, described or studied.

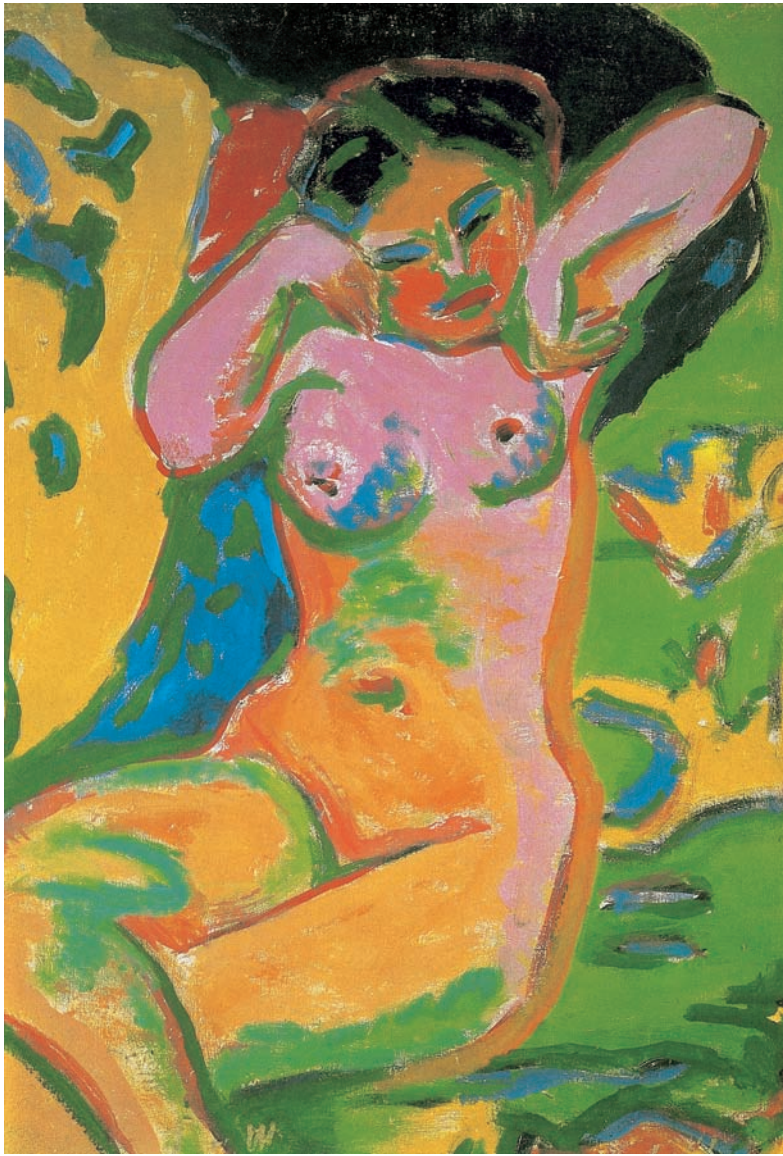
Seated Woman

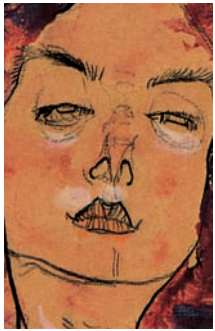
Henri Matisse, 1908
Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 52 cm
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

As a direct measure of sexual tension in a woman, the scientists established the "sexflush", the reddening of the skin surface, which peaked in intensity at the point of orgasm. (In a man, such a flush manifests itself during the "plateau phase" and not in the stages of initial excitement or when approaching climax.) That is why a woman's face strained and taut expresses, as an image, by itself, the muscular tension that is active over her whole body.

Naked Girl in a Meadow in Bloom

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1909
Oil on canvas, 89 x 63 cm
Lothar-Günther Buchheim Collection, Feldafing



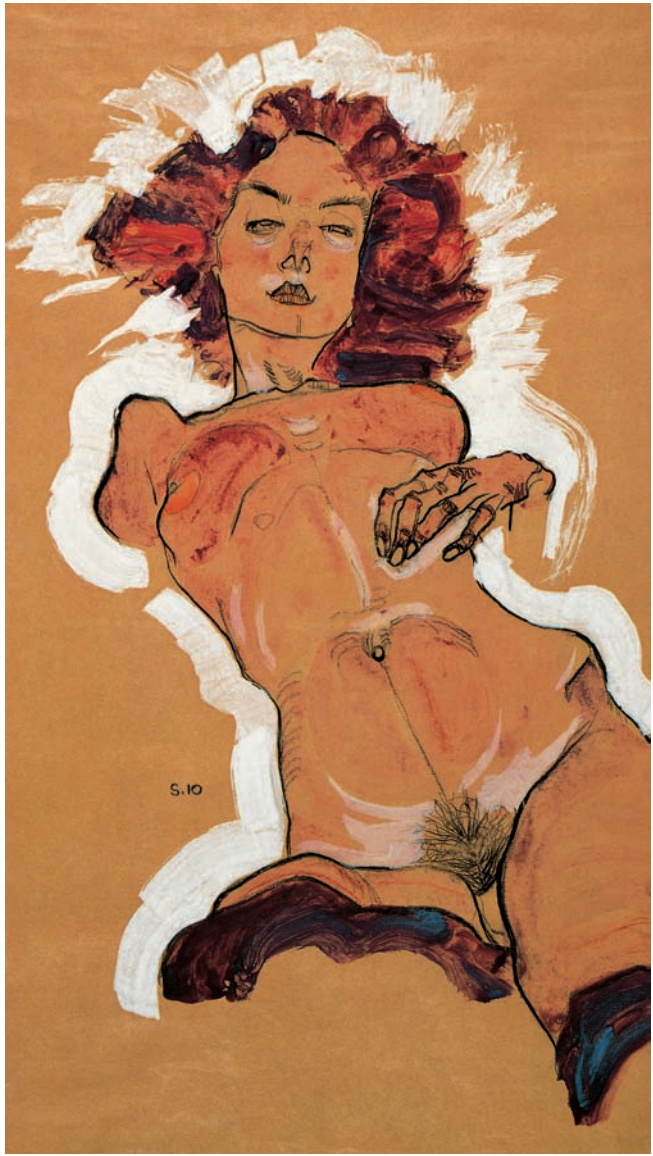


Unlike a man, a woman can sustain this state of orgasm for a long period of time. A strong and accelerated heartbeat – described as a "vaginal pulse" – is often an apparent effect of sexual climax.

Sexual desire, and its satisfying, may be accompanied by various feelings and emotions. But in order to study how sexual stimulation really works, we must stop looking at the matter from a coldly scientific, analytical point of view and bring in the scope of the imagination.

Female Nude

Egon Schiele, 1910
Gouache, watercolour, and black crayon, 44.3 x 30.6 cm
Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna


S.10

In her book *The Sexual Fantasies of Women* (1973), Nancy Friday notes that many of the longer fantasies are in fact made up of lots of little fantasies, which all contribute to the build-up of excitement. At the same time she rejects the notion that the fantasies themselves represent a sublimated form of frustration.

Some women who are perfectly happy and sexually fulfilled nonetheless enjoy fantasies. And the

Untitled

Attila Sassy, c. 1910

fantasies may even afford them more satisfaction than do their sexual partners. … It is not only a lack of sex that may inspire such fantasies, but the sex itself. For certain women there is even a sort of chain reaction between real-life sex and the fantasies they create for themselves. One fosters the other.

It would seem that the imagination can attribute a sort of "extra interest" to even the most banal

Nude Woman with Hat

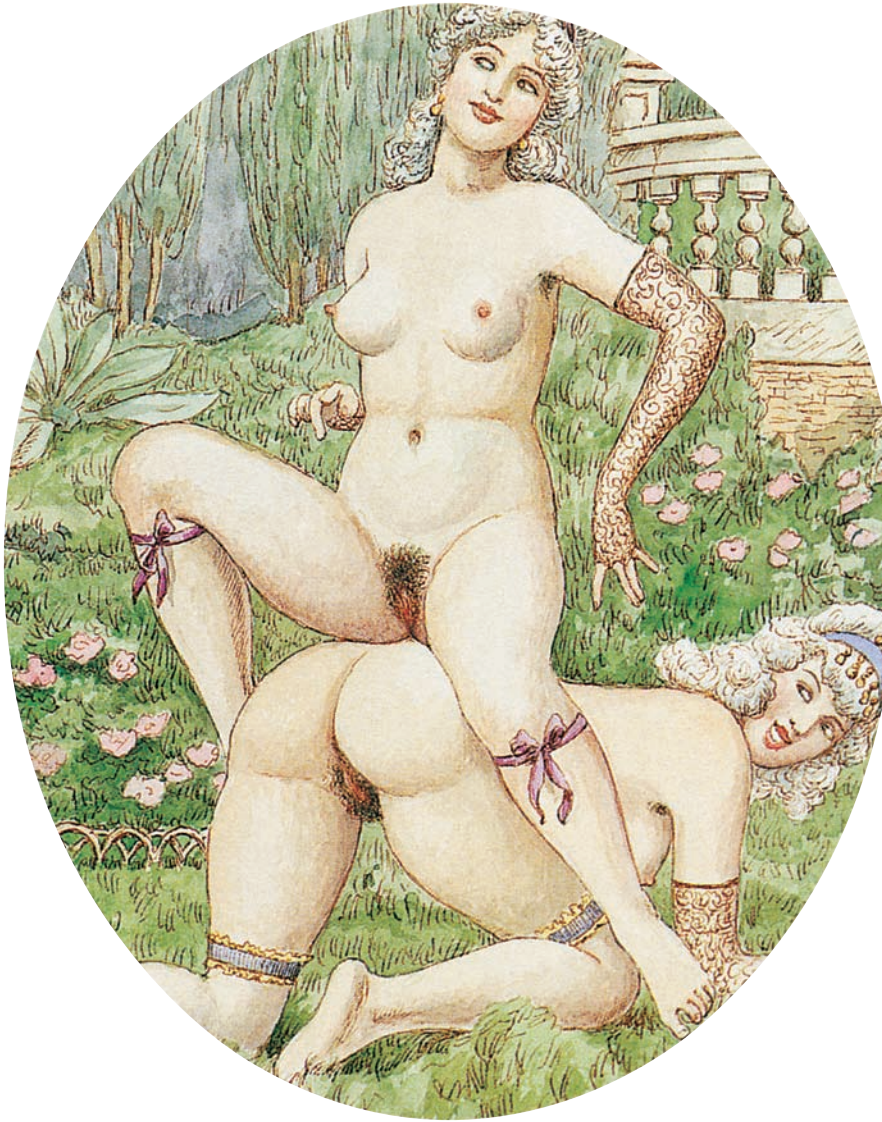
Anonymous, early 20th century
Photograph

objects of everyday life. It is not only dildos that are used as phallic substitutes for masturbation, according to Nancy Friday, but cucumbers, vacuum-cleaner tubes, electric toothbrushes, the silver-plated handles of hairbrushes, or no more or less than running water.

Total unfamiliarity with a sexual partner would seem to constitute a stimulus of comparable potency.

Women in the Garden

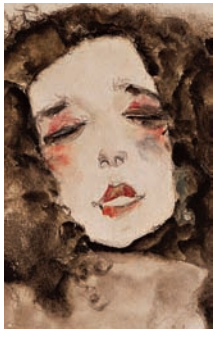
Anonymous, early 20th century
Watercolour

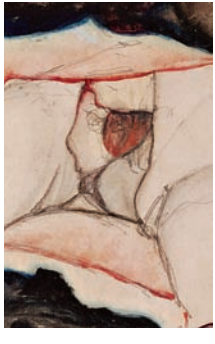


How significant violence in fantasies is for evoking excitement is demonstrated in a study by Isabelle Azoulay called Abîmes fantastiques: *La violence dans l´imaginaire sexuel féminin* ("The Abysses of Fantasy: Violence in the Sexual Imaginations of Women"). Desire can be associated with pain, and so increase the intensity of the sexual act. But remember – violence in fantasy need have nothing to do with violence in real life.

Nana, Female Nude

Lovis Corinth, 1911
Oil on canvas, 121.3 x 90.8 cm
Saint Louis Art Museum, St Louis



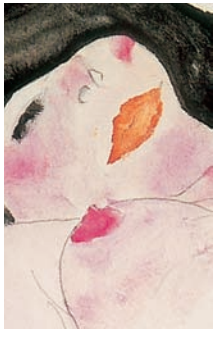


Specific scenes tend to be integrated into such fantasies. Every depiction of a sexual act tells a story, and every sexual act has its own dynamic. Every woman sees the sexual act in an entirely personal context that also naturally involves her own problems and aspirations. (Mind you, men do that too.) The central focus for this introspection is the orgasm. All the fantasies that have led up to it pale beside this "paradisal" instant. The entire fantasy-construction built up so carefully with

Black-Haired Girl with Lifted Skirt

Egon Schiele, 1911
Pencil, gouache on paper, 21.8 x 14.74 cm
Leopold Museum, Vienna

E SCHIELE



different tools and techniques, gradually putting together a unique assemblage of factors for excitement and tension, abruptly unravels at the moment of the "petit-mal seizure".

To some, sex may seem a means to combine intimacy with an easy-going familiarity in relation to the sexual partner. Skin-on-skin contact is an experience that has calming propensities, reducing fears about coming together more closely still.

Observed in a Dream

Egon Schiele, 1911
Watercolour and pencil, 48 x 32 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

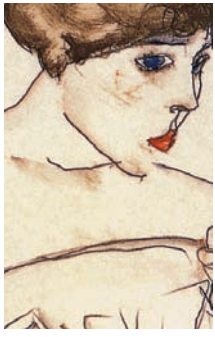
DIE TRAUM
BESCHÄNDE

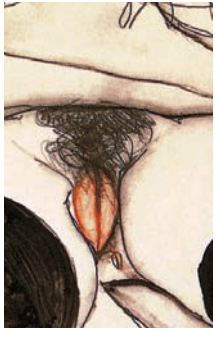
For most people, it is above all the orgasm that is the premier experience – and an almost hallucinatory one at that. Together with the momentary sensation of unbeing, of losing one's personality and one's identity, it may even feel like a religious or mystical experience.

The inability of language to keep pace with understanding, however, prompts us to turn again to reference sources in literature. There is a delightful

Woman in Black Stockings (Valerie Neuzil)

Egon Schiele, 1913
Gouache, watercolour, and pencil, 32.2 x 48 cm
Private collection





passage in the works of the ancient Greek poetess Sappho (c. 612–550 BCE):

> I love a pretty girl.
> She knows nothing of it yet,
> and I strongly want to tell her;
> but when I see her
> and I want to go and talk to her,
> looking at her face
> I feel a tautening of my senses
> that I have no control over.

Woman with Black Stockings

Egon Schiele, 1913
Gouache, watercolour and pencil, 48.3 x 31.8 cm
Private collection

A blazing fire lights under my skin.
My eyes no longer see anything.
There is a buzzing in my ears.
From my heart to my arms and legs
pounds a frantic throbbing.
My breathing is rapid and rough,and I
collapse to the ground, for in
my infatuation
I am close to swooning away.

Inside a Parisian Brothel

Anonymous, early 20th century
Photograph

The momentary experience of unbeing, even of the non-existence of the world, is to be found also in *La Légende de Tristan et Iseult* ("The Legend of Tristan and Isolde").

O bring sleep,
night of love:
make me forget
that I live.

Reclining Nude with Legs Spread Apart

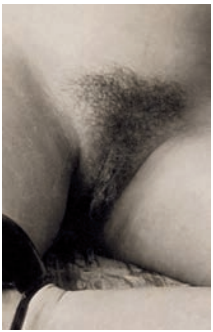
Egon Schiele, 1914
Gouache and pencil, 30.4 x 47.2 cm
Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna

Take me
in your arms,
and remove me
from the world!

The sexual fantasies of quite ordinary women, as collected and published by Seymour Fisher in his book *The Female Orgasm* (1973), demonstrate the same elements. The question he put to the women in his survey was:

Semi-Nude Lying Down

Gustav Klimt, 1914
Blue pencil, 37 x 56 cm
Historisches Museum, Vienna



> Could you describe to us precisely how you reach orgasm, including bodily sensations and the thoughts that come into your head, your feelings, your overall sense of wellbeing, and any problems or distractions you experience at the time?

In this way he managed to establish impressively objective descriptions of subjective states of excitement.

Untitled

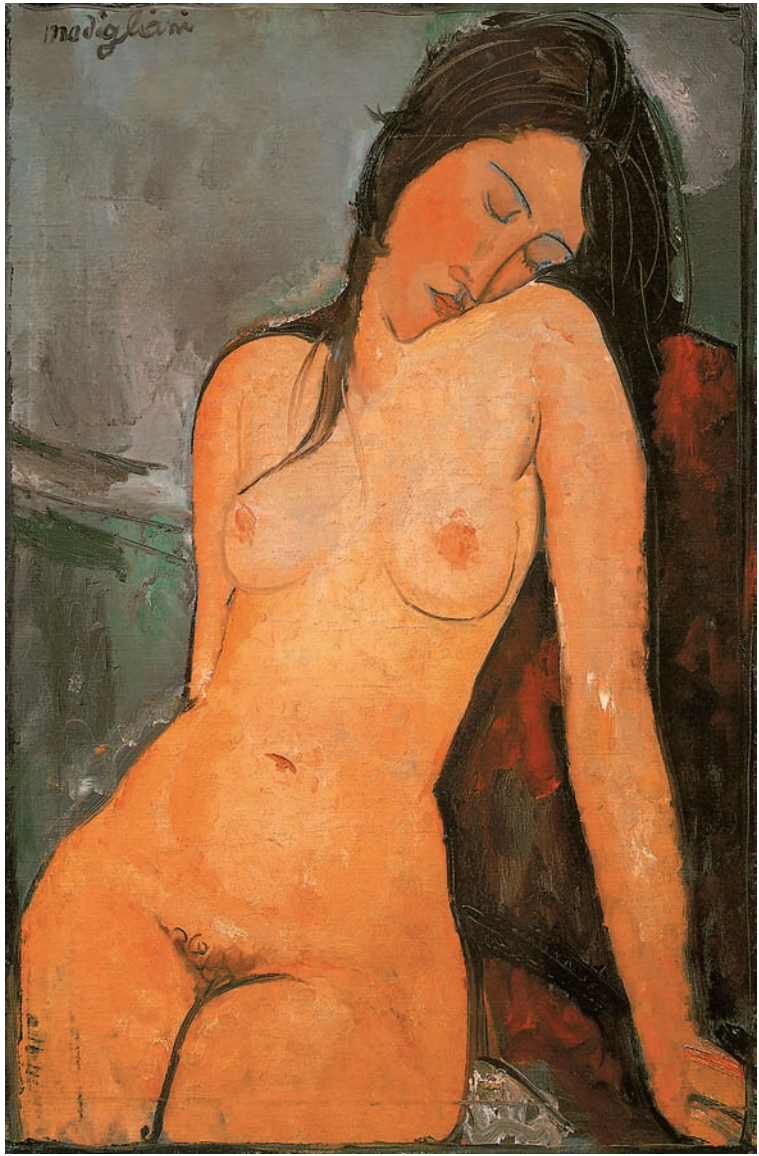
Anonymous, 1915
Photograph

I was soaring above a field with flowers. I felt quite light, as if I need never again come down to earth. In a way I felt like a goddess. It was as if there was only one single body – as if the whole world was just that one body.

I imagined myself as the most notorious whore in the whole of history.

Female Nude

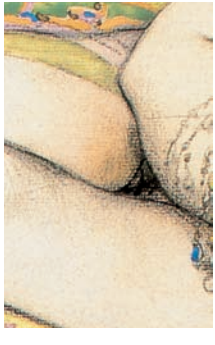
Amedeo Modigliani, c. 1916
Oil on canvas, 92.4 x 59.8 cm
The Courtauld Gallery, London


modigliani

I have no conscious knowledge of my body movements or even of orgasm. I feel as if I am directed solely by desire. The only description I can give as to how I feel during these moments, during orgasm, is of a blurred darkness in which red or white points of light sparkle. … Orgasm gives me a feeling of vertigo. I lose all sensation.

Woman Seated with Open Thighs

Gustav Klimt, 1916
Graphite, white highlights, red pencil, 57 x 38 cm
Private collection

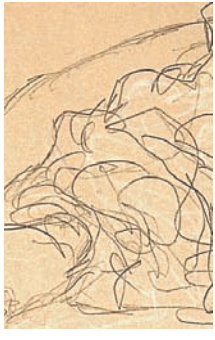


It's almost as if I no longer existed in bodily form, but only as an emotion.

Lightness and being able to fly, the impression of immortality, of great size, of the disappearance of the conscious self, of the loss of both self and the world, the feeling of merging and becoming one with the world – this is almost as much as to suggest that "the end is no more or less than the beginning".

The Yellow Sultana

Léon Bakst, 1916
Charcoal, watercolour, and gouache, heightened with gold on two joined sheets of paper, 46.5 x 68 cm

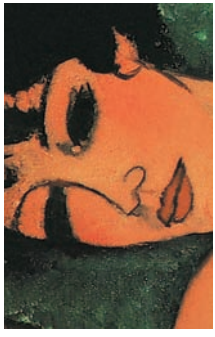


Such impressions seem to put us right back into the intra-uterine state before our birth – a state that first gave us such impressions as an inheritance we might make use of for the rest of our lives. It was surely to get away from such narcissistic sentiments that religions were developed.

Life after birth requires everybody to do what they can to resist tensions. The sexual impulse tends thus to re-establish a situation from an

Female Nude Wearing Lingerie

Gustav Klimt, 1916-1917
Graphite, 37 x 56.4 cm
Vienna

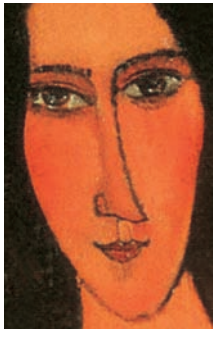


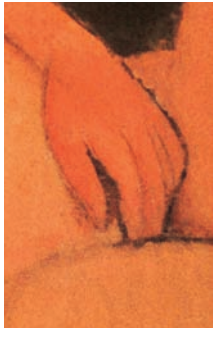
earlier existence, in which a guaranteed absence of tension reigned. From the beginning of time, humankind has looked to the sexual act to find "an ephemeral instant of happiness".

Ferenczi, the *enfant terrible* of psychoanalysis, suggests a parallel between our human origins in amniotic fluid within the womb and the beginning of all life on earth in the sea. Organic biological development thus mirrors the cataclysmic events

Sleeping Nude with Arms Open (Red Nude)

Amedeo Modigliani, 1917
Oil on canvas, 60 x 92 cm
Private collection



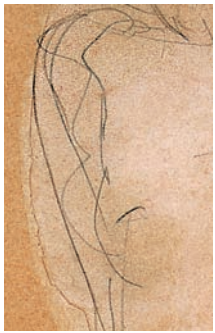


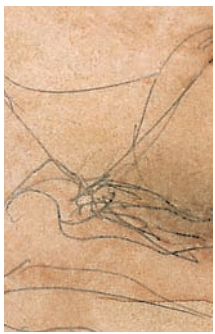
of evolution, and gives us reason to believe that our sexual maturity, at puberty, represents an endeavour to reestablish not only intra-uterine life but palaeontological marine life.

According to Ferenczi, the goal of the sexual act is nothing other than an attempt that is at first tentative and awkward, then more and more assured, and finally partly successful in reintegrating the self with the maternal body – the maternal

Reclining Nude with Loose Hair

Amedeo Modigliani, 1917
Oil on canvas, 60 x 92.2 cm
Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, Osaka





body inside which, yet to come out into the world, there did not yet exist this painful division between the self and the world.

In this "thalassic" retrogression we express nostalgia for the marine world we left in the dark aeons of prehistory. The goal of the sexual act thus becomes the elimination of the difference, the reconstruction of an environment in which there are very few stimuli or inconveniences.

Seated Woman

Auguste Rodin, before 1917
Pencil, watercolour, and stump on paper, 31.3 x 20 cm
Musée Rodin, Paris

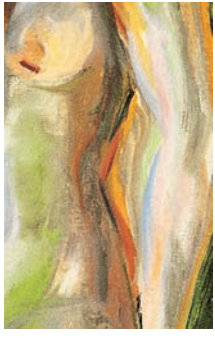
Rodin

Ferenczi refers, then, to a force of narcissistic desires that is not entirely accounted for by the psychoanalytical doctrine of "sexual pulses". Sexuality during the genital stage is influenced by a double desire: for the satisfying of the sexual pulses and for narcissistic union.

So sexual ecstasy is at the same time the entrance to and the exit from a divine world. At the point that is the culmination of the sexual climax,

Study from the Anita Berber portfolio

Charlotte Berend, c. 1919

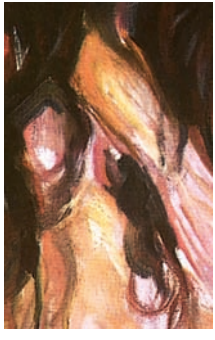


all fixations projected onto the external world are abandoned. They sink back into the "night of love" that is perceptible only with eyes closed. That certain statues portray the saints with their eyes turned instead towards the sky might then suggest an expression of eroticism that has been repressed.

Let us venture to interpret the instinctual cry of joy uttered by women at orgasm as a "threshold phenomenon". To the cry of the new-born at leaving

Model by the Wicker Chair

Edvard Munch, 1919-1921
Oil on canvas, 122.5 x 100 cm
Munch-museet, Oslo



the comfort of its maternal place of peaceful security responds the cry of the mature, adult woman at the instant – and for the instant – she regains the paradisal world from whence she came.

In refuting the hypothesis that women's sexual fantasies represent a sublimated form of frustration, Nancy Friday also rejects the notion that every human being is subject to the opposition between satisfaction and denial that constitutes the

Kneeling Female Nude (Anna)

Edvard Munch, 1920
Oil on canvas, 150 x 106 cm
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston

E. Munch 1924

formational process of individuation. It is in this problematical context that "nostalgia for paradise lost" makes its appearance. Without equivalent "retrogressions serving the interests of my secret self", life for a human would be unbearable. No joy without denial or delay.

"Nature has no true understanding of joy; it stops short at doing simply what has to be done," write Adorno and Horkheimer.

Free and Easy

Rudolf Schlichter, 1920s

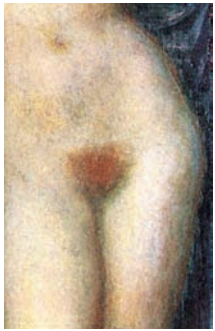
"Joy is a social phenomenon, as indeed are all feelings and emotions, whether sublimated or not. Essentially, joy derives from alienation. After an orgasm I feel much less tense, much more at peace, more relaxed," declared one of Seymour Fisher's respondants. "I almost always fall asleep."

Another admitted, "When we've finished, I stretch out in his arms. I am so much less tense,

L'Heure exquise (The Exquisite Hour)

Marcel Vertès, 1920
Etching

3



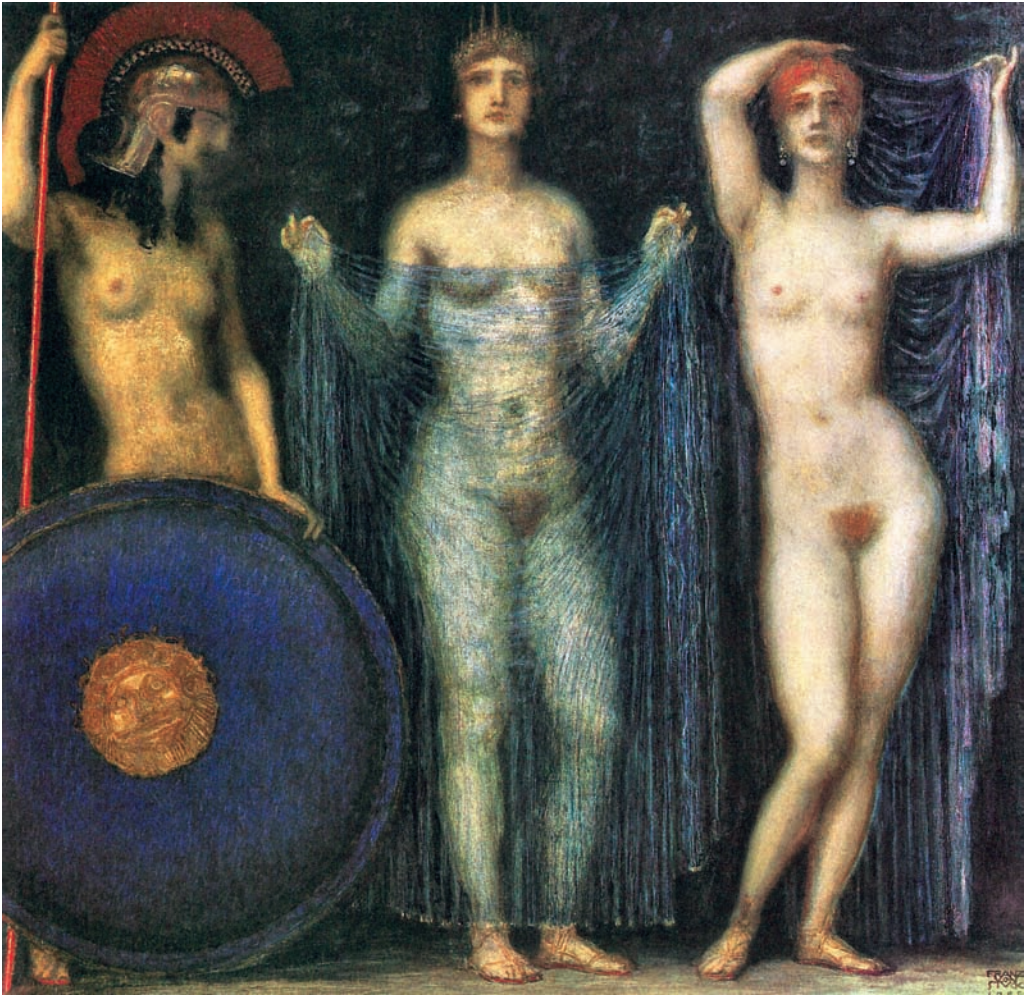
in such a good mood, and so full of love for my man – but not in a passionate way, not with desire or lust."

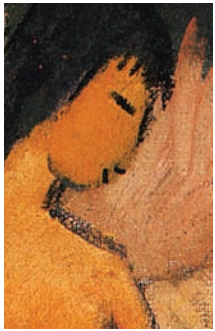
We may again discern in these words the echo of an older mode of fulfilment. The first joy of the infant is the nipple of its mother when being nursed at the breast.

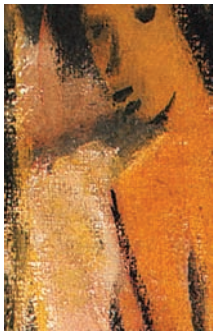
As Freud noted, sexual activity is primarily based on a function that ensures survival. Only much later has it freed itself and become independent.

The Three Goddesses Athena, Hera and Aphrodite

Franz von Stuck, 1922
Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 74 cm
Private collection





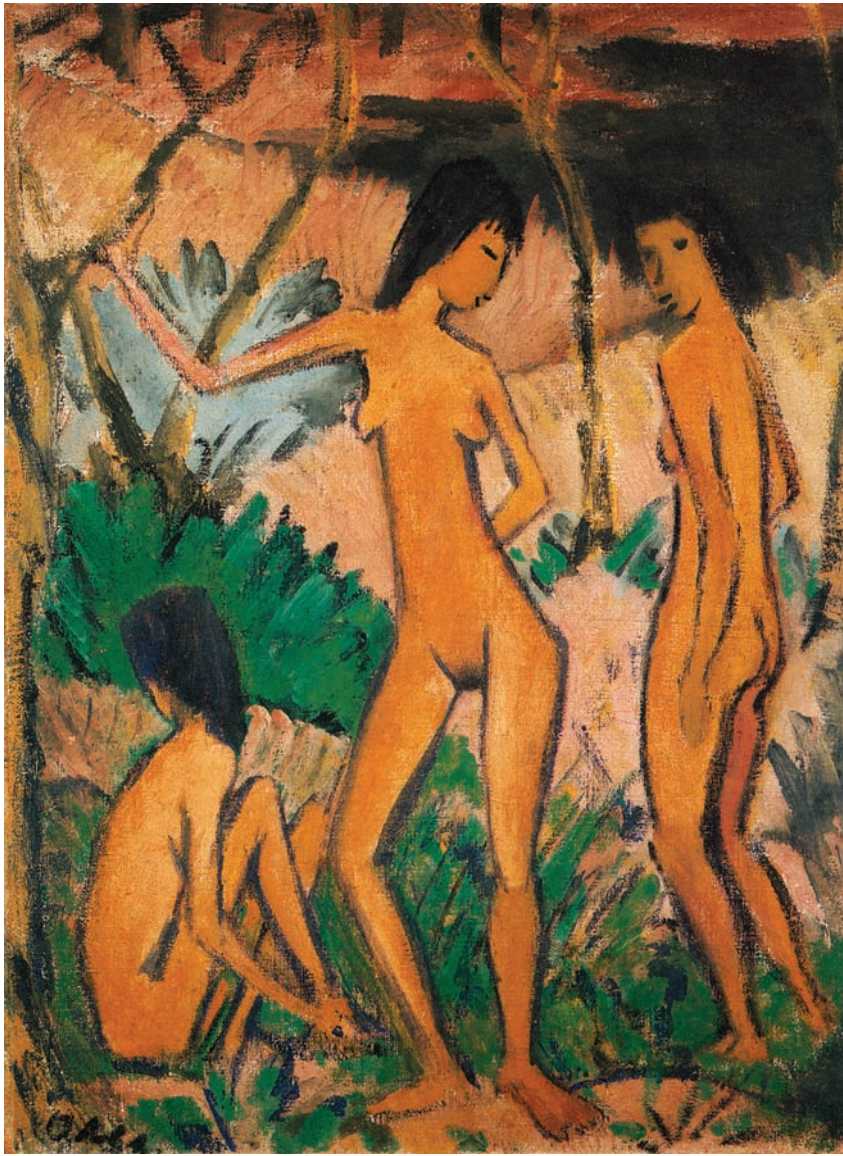


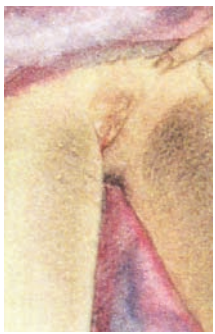
To see a babe at the maternal breast give up sucking, sated, and fall back, with red cheeks and a placidly content smile, and begin snoozing, is surely to remark how comparable such a scene is with the sexual satisfaction experienced by an adult.

The loving kiss represents a vestigial form of the archaic reflex that causes a baby to suck at its mother's nipple. In this way even the action of sucking familiarises an infant with joy, with ecstasy.

Three Nudes in a Landscape

Otto Muller, 1922
Distemper on cardboard, 119.5 x 88.5 cm
Brücke-Museum Berlin, Berlin

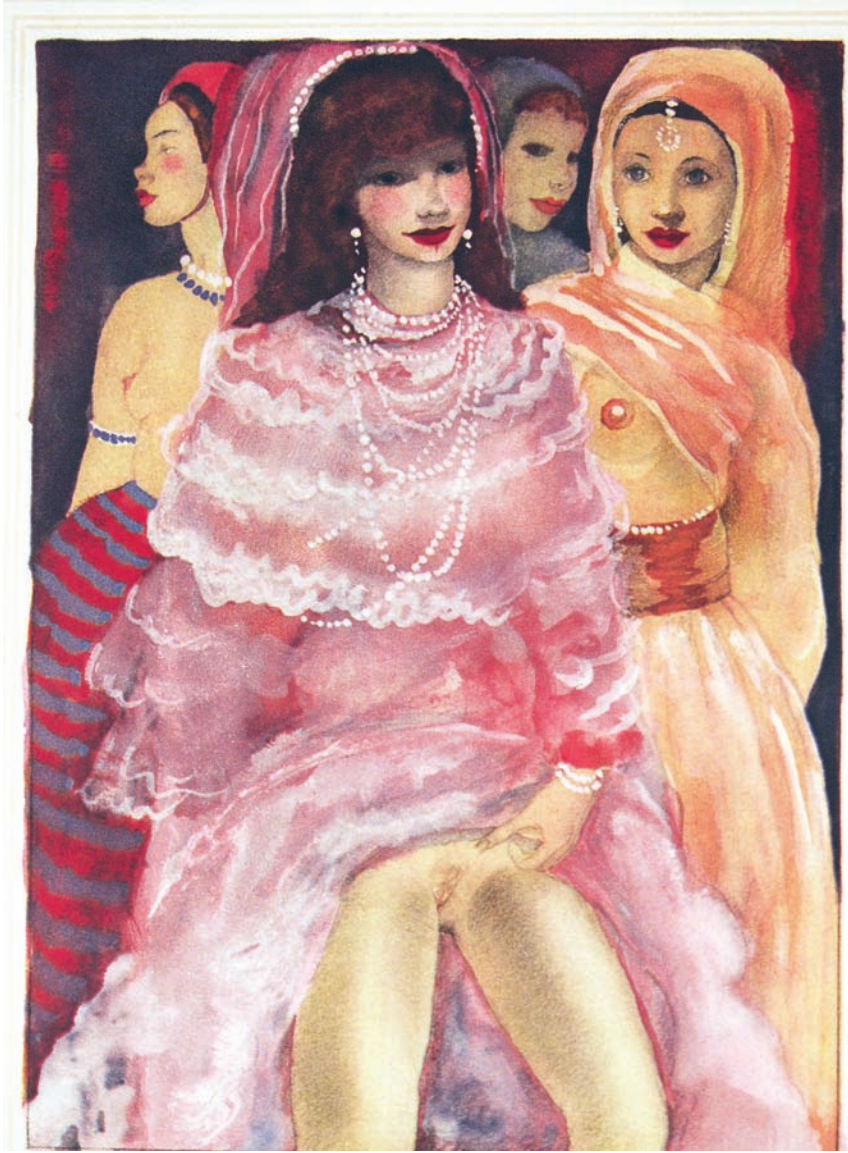


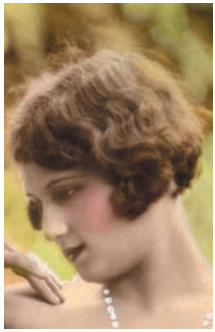


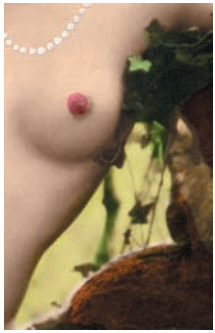
Up to now, we have been little concerned with sexual reactivity – the capacity to reach orgasm. It is therefore appropriate here to inquire why women's sexual excitement has been "stretched", extended over time. After all, for most men, reaching orgasm is a progressive development of tensions and stimulations. The climax is a unique experience represented by a momentary loss of the conscious will, a momentary lack of the awareness of *self*.

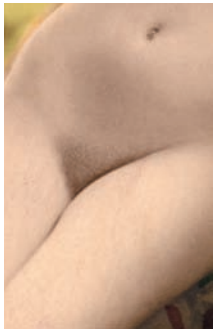
Untitled

Léon Bakst, 1925









Seymour Fisher in his book *The Female Orgasm* has utterly discounted all the standard contemporary explanations of an incapacity to reach orgasm. Religion, education, even traumatic experiences during puberty and adolescence – none of these factors has any genuine effect on *the ability to successfully achieve* orgasm.

Yet the ability to reach orgasm is nonetheless considerably reduced in women who have

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Anonymous, 1925

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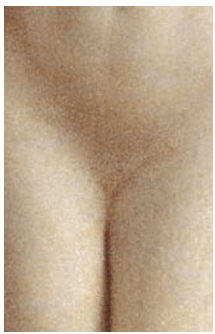


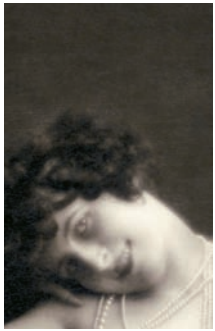
personal histories of being left, being rejected, or being separated from a loved one.

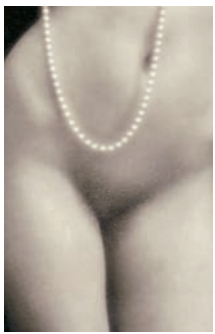
We note that all those women who found difficulty in achieving orgasm spoke to us frequently of deprivations they had suffered during their childhood. … Conversely, those women who had no problem at all in reaching orgasm often referred specifically to the consistent presence of their fathers during their childhood.

Nº 3117

Lehnert & Landrock, c. 1925
Heliograve, 23 x 16.5 cm

3117





It would seem that for a woman the capacity to reach orgasm is seriously influenced by how secure she feels in the constancy of her environment. The retaining around her of people and objects she loves is an additional factor in favour of orgasm.

If these background elements are not there for a woman having sex, and if she is already fearful of failure or loss, the overall experience

Nº 103

Yvélaw, c. 1925
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 18 cm

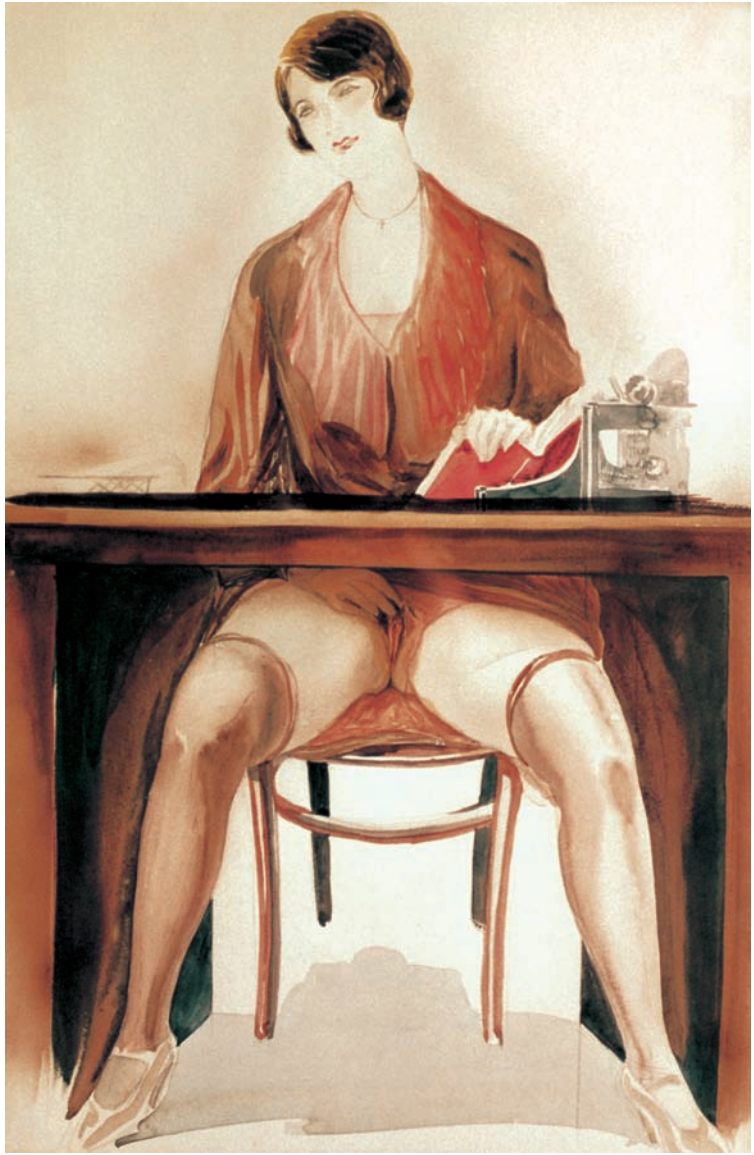
Yvelaw
103

may become so upsetting that sexual excitement thereafter may become altogether impossible. Anxiety over the failure or loss may increase to the point of mental disturbance.

We ought also to look at the possible consequences, for certain adults, of a parent-child relationship that is not constant – and at the gap in a child's emotional development that may result. A lack of balance resulting from inconstancy is surely

Untitled

Feodor Rojankovsky, 1925
Watercolour



what the Greek *ecstasis*, our word *ecstasy*, is all about – not by any means the prerogative only of neurotics and saints.

Sexual intimacy means taking a risk. It is an adventure that presupposes a personality strong enough for it. Only a person who has conquered the fear of possibly losing his or her identity can dare to let go entirely and drift freely.

But sexual intimacy can also reinforce identity. As E.H. Erikson wrote,

Nostalgia

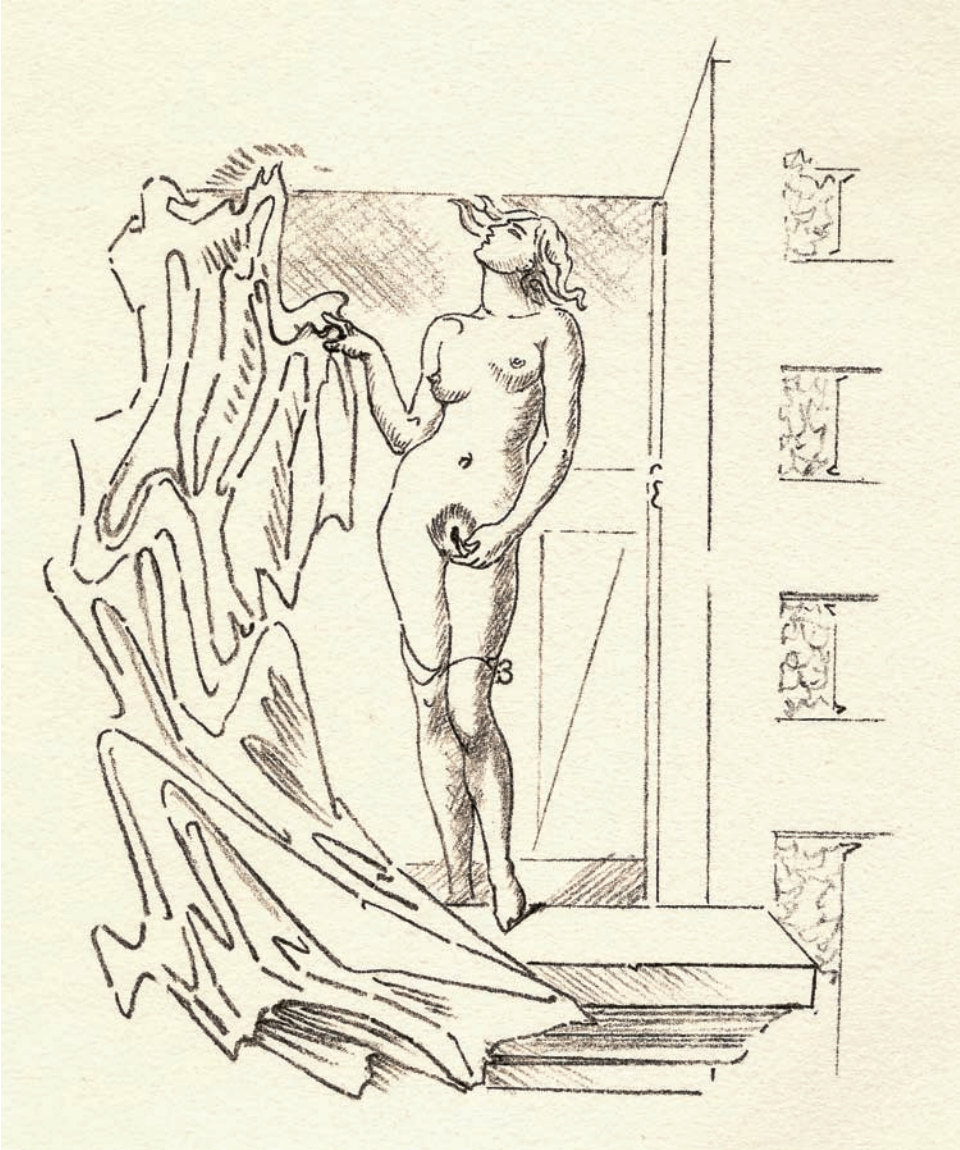
Jules Pascin, 1928
Pencil, 47 x 62 cm
Collection of Mr and Mrs Abel Rambert

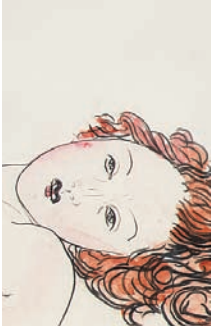
The fact that two human beings united in sexual congress undergo at the same moment of orgasm a mutual experience of a uniform kind can additionally soften or reduce antagonisms and the potential for anger inherent in the ever-continuous opposition of male-and-female, real-and-imagined, love-and-hate.

Intimacy thus reduces destructive potential, even if it threatens the unity of the individual or the

Untitled, from Story of the Eye

André Masson, c. 1928
Lithograph





cohesion of a society. The lover thus uses intimacy as a means of overcoming isolation and alienation.

Ultimately, then, every instance of participation in the sexual act is equivalent to a rebellion against pain or separation or, at the extreme, against death. This may explain the facial expression of pain at the moment of climax. On the face of an aroused woman we perceive not desire, joy or happiness, but effort, labour, and pain.

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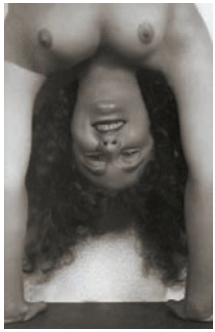
Mario Tauzin, c. 1928
Watercolour-style drawing



So what we once saw as *beauty* we might now see as an invitation to a game that swallows and destroys everything. In that instant of emotional paroxysm that is the orgasm, everything is both beautiful and ugly at the same time! For a microsecond, actual reality triumphs over learned conceptions of reality – "nature" triumphs over "nurture".

However, as we know from paintings and sculptures in Europe, even the facial expression of

Untitled

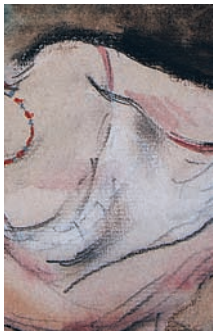
Anonymous, c. 1930
Gelatin silver print, 18 x 24 cm

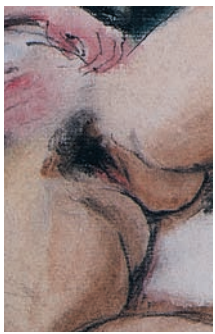
passion has an aspect to it of the cultural, of the way people in the area have been brought up to behave. Of course, the people of the area firmly believe that their expression is the "natural" expression of passion, just as *we* believe *our* expression of passion is the natural one.

This is quite different from oriental art, in which – in both religious art and erotic art (and especially in the Japanese *shunga*, or "Images of Springtime") – faces tend to remain as expressionless as masks. Their unique method of depicting

Nude of Frida Kahlo

Diego Rivera, 1930
Lithography, 44 x 30 cm
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, Mexico City





internal agitation is for a person to be biting a handkerchief, or for his or her toes to be tightly clenched together.

The Tibetan and Nepalese peoples are excellent at portraying the sexual act in art. The eyes are opened very wide, suggesting the opening wide of the consciousness. Far from sex being an instinctual animal practice, it thus becomes the mark of a much more highly developed culture.

Girl, Reclining

Otto Schoff, c. 1930
Pencil and watercolours

Scholz

But let's go back to Bataille. For him, the beauty of a woman may be likened to a display of the animal elements of a sexual act.

There is nothing more depressing to a man than the ugliness of a woman who no longer allows the ugliness either of her genital area or of the whole act to be seen. The primary function of beauty is to be there to be dirtied, while ugliness

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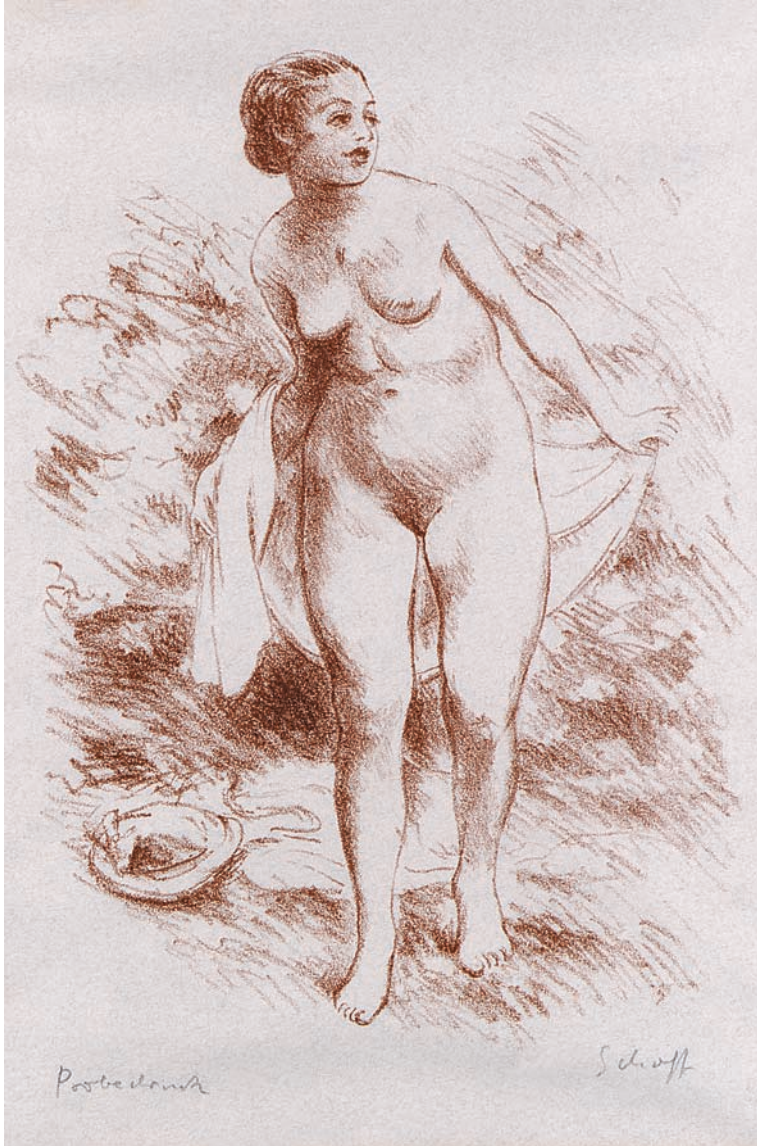
Otto Schoff, c. 1930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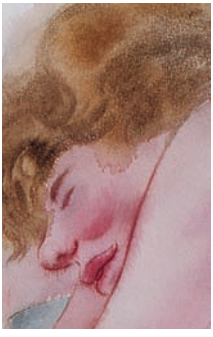
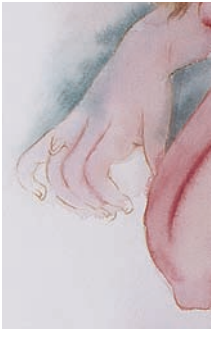
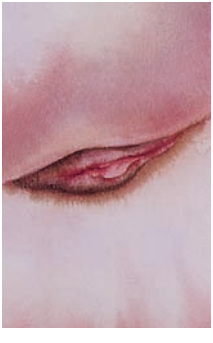




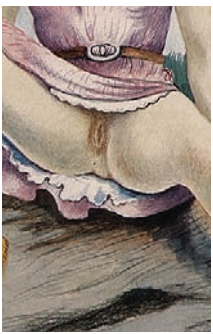


prevents what is the actual core substance of eroticism from the possibility of being dirtied. … The more dazzling the beauty, the greater the opportunity for dirtying.

Modern sex therapy endeavours to enable certain women to come to terms with bodies they think of as ugly and "dirty". It teaches also that nothing should obstruct the image of the sexual exchange. But all that is no more than a therapeutic exorcism service designed to facilitate

Sleepers

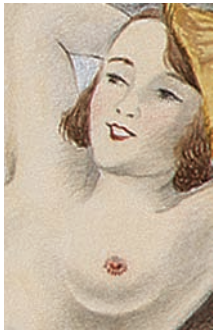
George Grosz, c. 1930
Watercolour on deckled paper



the continued denial of the fundamental antagonism inherent in the tension between the sexes. Have sex, and be fit for life! It might then possibly prove that those who regard sexuality as something distinctly "dirty" do in fact understand sexuality rather more accurately. But what these women are simply incapable of accepting, deep down, is precisely that paradoxical experience to which they surrender themselves.

Voyeur

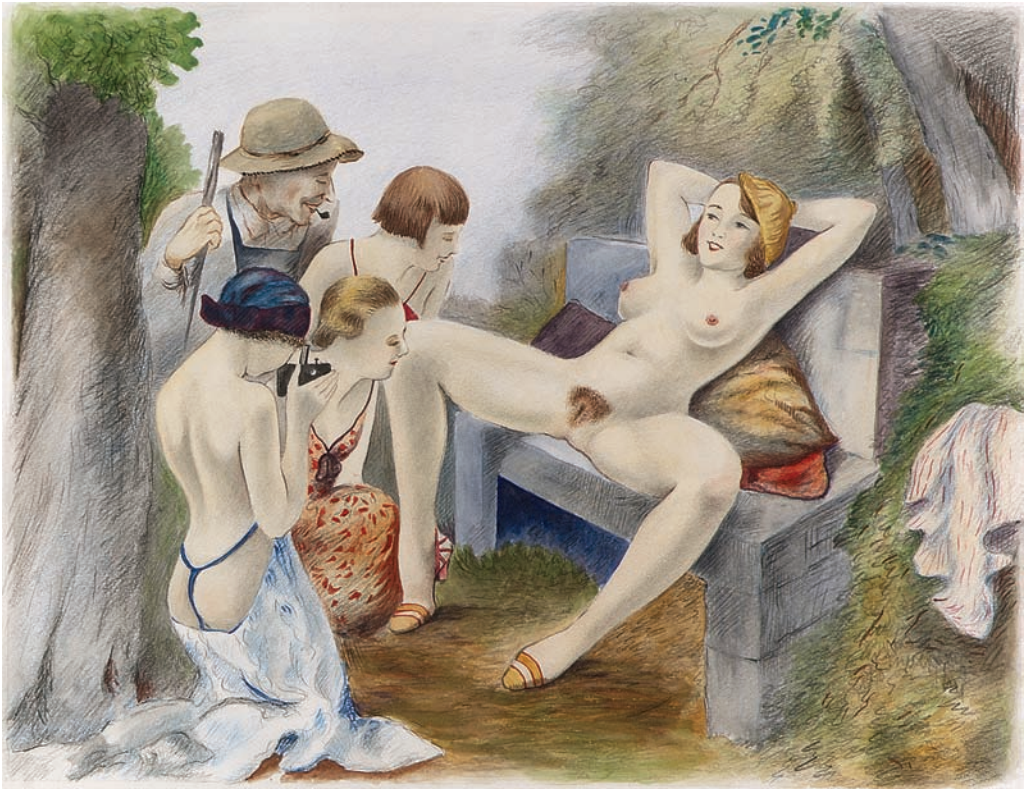
Feodor Rojankovsky, 1930

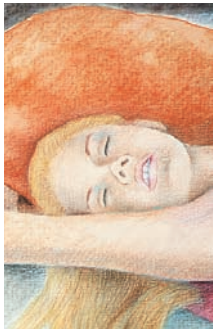


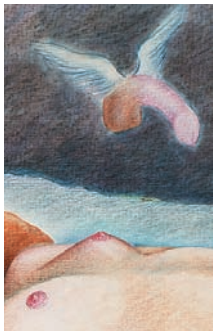
Central to Bataille's understanding of eroticism is the notion of "transgression". According to him, the very neutrality of a reasoned and reasonable sexuality such as is practised today is suspect because there are no longer any limits to burst free from. There is – as much for women as for men – an "economic" position in relation to sex, when the sexual act becomes a routine thing,

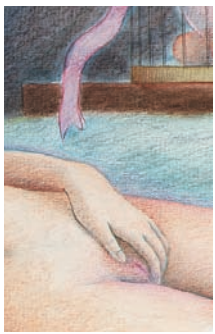
Untitled

Feodor Rojankovsky, 1930









an event that may certainly produce pleasure but that is merely one activity among many others. As "recreation" pure and simple, it takes second place to work.

Once the act has become so clinical, there can be no transgressions, no ugliness or dirtiness – just as there can be no face beautiful enough to provoke a paroxysm of emotion.

Untitled

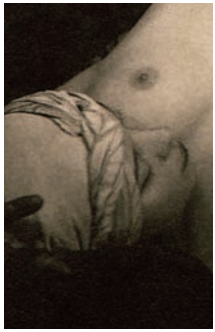
Feodor Rojankovsky, c. 1930
Coloured drawing

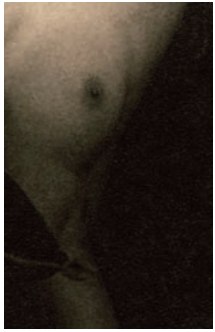
52

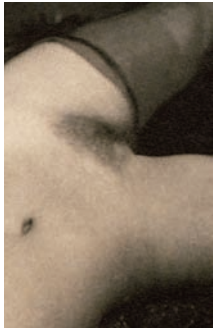
Where now is that smooth forehead,
The blonde hair, those arched eyebrows,
[...], that pretty look
Which so subtly betokened so much,
That fine nose, straight if not small,
Those daintily aligned ears,
The dimpled chin, [...]
And those beautiful scarlet lips?

Reclining Nude Woman with Legs Open

Anonymous, c. 1930
Photograph





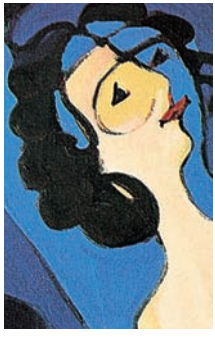


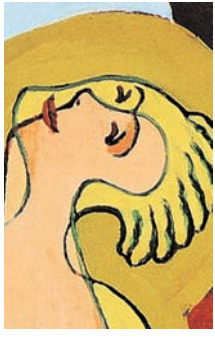
53

Those gracefully slender shoulders,
Those long arms and those tapering hands,
Small breasts, shapely hips,
Held high, and quite perfectly made
For use in the lists of love,
Those wide loins, that honeypot
Set between large, firm thighs
Inside its own little bower?

Nude at Rest

Anonymous, c. 1930
Photograph





Why do some faces seem more beautiful to us than others? Georges Bataille stated that a man or woman might be thought handsome according to how far removed their overall shape seemed to be from that of a mere animal.

For a human being, there cannot be but a certain distaste for anything that in any way resembles the animalian. Particularly disliked is any characteristic that suggests something of the simian.

Dance of the Colours II

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1932-1934
Oil on canvas, 195 x 148.5 cm
Private collection

The erotic quality of the female form, it appears to me, is linked to a toning down of the naturally heavy awkwardness rendered inevitable through the purely evolutionary and logistical assemblage of the bones that make up the skeleton. When vital statistics are distanced from physical and animal realities, from the evolutionary requirements of the human body, they depart from perceptions of reality to correspond more or less to the universal image of the desirable woman.

Le petit chat est mort

Édouard Chimot, 1932

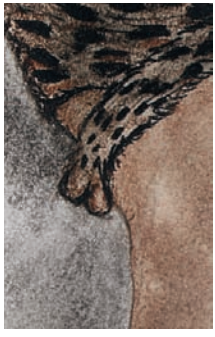
"Le petit chat est mort"

It is thus the neat, the trimly pretty aspect of a woman that affords her greatest charms. The German poet Johann Georg Scheffner, in his *Catalogue of Dora's Charms*, describes beauty in terms of hearty ancient Greek verse – a nose that is "mildly retroussé", eyes "as blue as violets", small "dimples in the cheeks", teeth "like a string of pearls", a "springy bosom", "rounded knees" and thighs that are "soft and lissome". But then,

Le chat noir

Édouard Chimot, 1932

Le chat noir



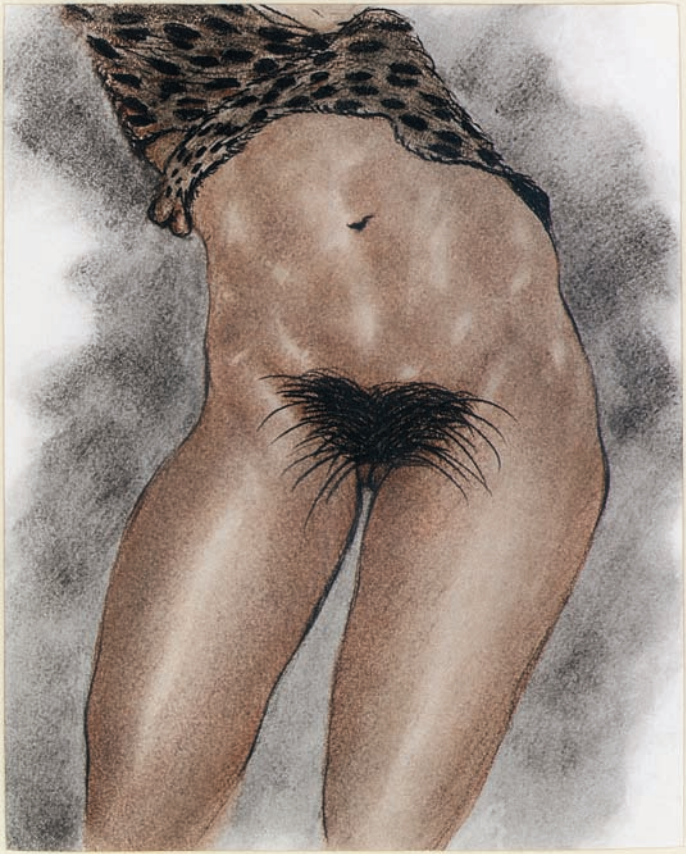
rather than the act of love, his pleasure was a lively enjoyment of the female nude.

Yet the image of a desirable woman was not simply of one who aroused that desire, but of one who at the same time also betrayed some hidden animal quality. As Georges Bataille wrote in his major work on erotic philosophy, *Eroticism* (1957):

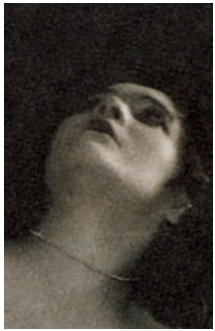
> The perceived beauty of a woman who is desired centres on the genital areas – notably

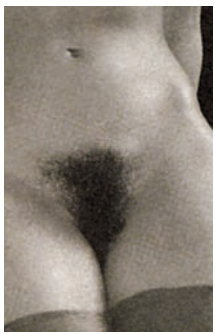
Le chat sauvage

Édouard Chimot, 1932



Le chat sauvage



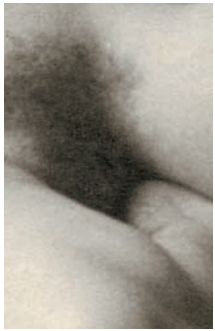


the areas that have hair, the "animal" areas. It is instinct that arouses our desire for such parts of the body … Beauty that rejects the animal and awakens desire releases a surge in excitement and heat in "animal" parts of the body!

We do not desire beauty for itself, therefore, but for the extreme pleasure it gives us to foresee its approaching profanation.

Leaning Nude

Anonymous, Photograph



Beauty that manages somehow to reduce its animal aspect to a minimum is the focus of intense desire that it should be well and truly "sullied" by the animal instinct at the moment of possession. Beauty seems to be desired in order to be "dirtied".

Specifically, it is the animal that manifests itself violently at the moment of orgasm.

Everyone knows of people renowned for their beauty who nonetheless do not arouse in them any form of sexual passion. Even those described as

Woman with Crossed Legs

Monsieur X, c. 1935
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 18 cm

the most gorgeous models may seem sculpted from utterly sterile clay. Their beauty has no actual being, is entirely superficial. They have no erotic mystique whatever. This is why women photographed by Helmut Newton are often described as "ice maidens" – perfect, but occasioning no emotional reaction at all.

What makes a woman alluring? Is it knowing something special, something secret about her?

Illustration for an edition of Fanny Hill

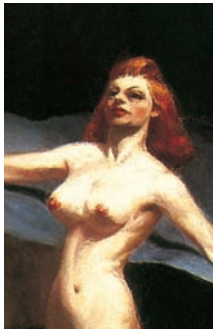
Paul-Emile Bécat, 1935
Coloured lithograph

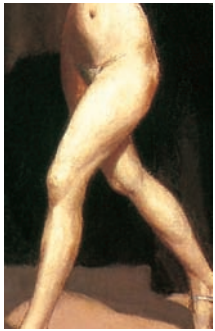
Such knowledge of her may be revealed subtly, in a single instant – but enough to activate the instincts.

The hidden purpose of beauty is disclosed within a mutual liking that, according to Franz von Baader's celebrated description, is "silver-plated" – meaning a liking that simultaneously has both internal and external elements. A "silver-plated" mutual regard of this kind turns the spark of

Illustration for Vers Libres,
(Free Verses), by Radiguet

Feodor Rojankovsky, 1936





beauty into a brilliant flame. A man who experiences it is irresistibly attracted by it – attracted by desiring it.

It was the surrealists who were especially sensitive to expressing notions of beauty in "emotional" terms. In his novel *Nadja*, André Breton defined beauty within such parameters: "Beauty should lead to a paroxysm of emotion; if it doesn't, it isn't beauty." The key term here is

Girlie Show

Edward Hopper, 1941
Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 96.5 cm
Private collection

"paroxysm of emotion" which suggests a psychological condition equivalent to a physical attack of cramp. Such beauty "in the service of desire", directly linking passion, emotions, and physical reactions, could be described in psychological terms as tantamount to actual sexual activity.

In Breton's *L'Amour Fou*, the author exapnds on his central theme of beauty, love, and madness:

Contemporary Erotic Icon

Anonymous

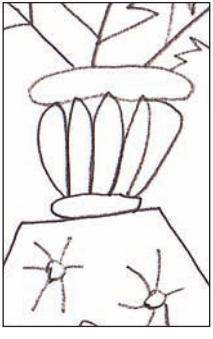
Roldán
75

"Beauty that leads to a paroxysm of emotion must be experienced as erotic but kept private, must be explosive but lasting, and must be magical but based in reality – or it isn't beauty."

The notion that beauty should at the same time be "explosive but lasting" not only recalls the "paroxysm of emotion" but also suggests something like a grand-mal epileptic seizure. The stiffening as body muscles tauten is followed,

Scene from Dévergondages (Wantonness)

Feodor Rojankovsky, 1948
Lithography



in the final stages of such an episode, by jerky movements, and by shuddering and trembling of the whole body.

Part of the paradox of an epileptic attack, however, is that it comprises both specific movements and an absence of movement. An "attack" of beauty, on the other hand – as described in *Nadja* – is neither dynamic nor static.

Erotic Scene

Pablo Picasso, 1971
Sketchbook drawing

10.12.71.VI

No work of sculpture expresses the paroxysm of emotion that is desire more powerfully than *The Ecstasy of St Theresa*, by Gianlorenzo Bernini (Sta Maria della Vittoria). It represents being "pierced by a golden arrow" – feelings exactly those of sexual congress, even if the Roman Catholic Church has always insisted on believing that its themes and observances incorporate no sexual connotations whatsoever.

Untitled

Grundworth, c. 1935
Gelatin silver print, 18 x 24 cm

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