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What’s Wrong with the (Female) Nude?

A Feminist Perspective on Art and Pornography

A. W. Eaton

In her study on the female nude, Lynda Nead recounts the following story:

On 10 March 1914, shortly after 10:00 a.m., a small woman, neatly dressed in a grey suit, made her way through the imposing entrance of the National Gallery, London. It was a Tuesday and so one of the Gallery’s ‘free’ days. . . . The woman made her way through the Gallery’s succession of rooms, pausing now and then to examine a painting more closely or to make a sketch in her sketch book. Eventually she made her way to a far corner of Room 17, where she stood, apparently in rapt contemplation, before a picture on an easel. By now it was approaching lunch-time and the room was beginning to empty of the crowds who filled the gallery on its ‘free’ days. Suddenly, the tranquility of the museum was broken by the sound of smashing glass. . . . The woman in grey was Mary Richardson, a well-known and highly active militant suffragist; the painting she attacked was Velázquez’s ‘Rokeby Venus’.  

Richardson was brought to court and tried. At her defense, she explained that the attack was meant as retribution for the Government’s imprisonment

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1 A distant ancestor of this chapter was presented at the American Society of Aesthetics annual meeting in 2002 where it received helpful comments from Ivan Gaskell, Paul Guyer, and Alexander Nehamas. I presented a substantially revised version at the University of Illinois-Chicago where members of the philosophy department offered challenging comments. Faith Hart and Mary Strood read the paper carefully and gave lots of good advice. Finally, I am grateful to Hans Maes and Jerry Levinson for their thoughtful and detailed comments. Thank you all for helping me to make this a better chapter.

2 Lynda Nead, The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality (Routledge, 1992), 34.

of Emmeline Pankhurst, also a militant suffragist and founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union. But for the purposes of retribution and drawing attention to her cause, any treasured artwork would have been a suitable candidate for attack. Why wind her way deep into the museum to go after this particular painting? What Richardson did not explain until much later, in an interview in 1952, was that she ‘didn’t like the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at [the Rokeby Venus] all day.’

Even before Richardson made the connection explicit, you’d probably guessed that there was some relationship between her fight against sexism and her disapproval, to put it mildly, of Velasquez’s painting. But how, exactly, should we formulate this connection? What, after all, is wrong with gaping at a picture of a beautiful naked woman? How else are you supposed to look at this painting, which, after all, almost asks to be looked upon with open-mouthed desire?

Richardson’s actions, less than her remarks, indicate that the problem was not so much with the gaping museum patrons as it was with the picture itself. In addition to her motives of retribution and gaining notoriety for her cause, she appears to have found fault with the picture for so candidly catering to the carnal appetites of heterosexual men. But just what is the problem here? Although there are arguments against licentious images in general, puritanical iconoclasm was not the motive in this case. Behind Richardson’s attack on Velasquez’s painting was, I suggest, a specifically feminist critique of the female nude.

My task in this chapter will be to offer a clear and persuasive formulation of that critique. My aim is neither to uncover Richardson’s specific psychological motives, nor to justify her actions. (Just to be clear, I do not advocate the physical destruction of great artworks!) Rather, I aim to explain why the female nude—by which I mean the genre of artistic representations that take the unclothed female body as their primary subject matter—has been a target of feminist criticism for nearly a century.

One might ask, How is what has come to be known as ‘the problem of the female nude’ in need of explanation? After all, in feminist circles it is now taken as an established fact that there is something wrong, ethically speaking, with representing the unclothed female body in the manner that has dominated Western art as far back as one cares to look. But what is self-evident to

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feminists is not always clear to those who are not familiar with or not convinced by feminist arguments.

This is especially true in the case of the female nude. After all, some of the finest treasures of Western art fall into this genre, from the Venus de Milo to Titian’s Venus of Urbino to Ingres’s Grande Odalisque to Matisse’s Blue Nude. If these are deeply problematic works, as many feminists contend, their flaw is far from self-evident. Human beings take erotic pleasure in looking at representations of bodies that they find attractive. If there’s nothing wrong with this interest—a compelling argument against it has yet to present itself—then what’s wrong with pictures that cater to it? Of course, different people will find different kinds of bodies attractive and so, to be fair to all, the artistic tradition should gratify these many different tastes and orientations. But, one might argue, this is the situation in the history of European art: there are hard-bodied Apollo’s and David’s as well as voluptuous Venuses of all shapes and sizes. On this view it is easier to see why one might think that there’s something wrong with representing nudity per se than it is to understand singling out the female nude as problematic. If heterosexual women should not feel bad about the pleasures they take in representations of unclothed men, why should heterosexual men feel bad about the pleasures they take in representations of unclothed women? They are, after all, just representations.

These are just some of the objections that one unconvincingly by feminist arguments might raise against a feminist critique of the female nude. Since it is these unconvincing whom we must need to address, it is important for feminists to speak to such worries. Unfortunately, feminist work on the female nude tends to ‘preach to the choir’; that is, it tends to address feminists who are already predisposed to accept the view. Not only will this do little to change the minds of the unconvincing, but it is also bad for feminism because it leaves too much unsupported. We need to continually respond to the kind of critical pressure that is often best formulated by the unconvincing in order to support our views with the best arguments.

My aim in this chapter is to offer a precise, compelling, and jargon-free articulation of the problem, from a feminist perspective, with the female nude. At times this will mean providing new arguments to fill in gaps that have not been addressed; at other times I will simply be making explicit what others have left implicit. I aim throughout to earnestly consider other sides of the issue and, in particular, to take seriously the possibility that there might not
be anything at all wrong with the female nude. (I ultimately do not think that this is so, but I intend to give the view its due.) Finally, I also mean to avoid what I take to be a common failing in the philosophy of art, namely allowing one's theory to hover at such a level of abstraction that it's difficult to see how it speaks to actual works of art. Instead, my account of the problems with the female nude will be grounded in the material and historical specificity of the artworks in question. (On this last point I should note that I discuss lots of particular works that cannot be reproduced here. To follow my arguments it will be important to see how they are supported by the art. To this end I strongly recommend consulting a visual arts database.)

My account proceeds as follows. Section 1 outlines the general shape of the feminist critique. Section 2, drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton, explains how pictures can sexually objectify. Section 3 lends some much-needed precision to the concept of a paradigmatic form of sexual objectification, namely the male gaze. Section 4 explains how works of visual art could be said to sexually objectify a type, such as 'women,' rather than merely sexually objectify specific women. Section 5 explains what exactly is wrong, from a feminist point of view, with the sexual objectification of women. Section 6 concludes by discussing the implications of this critique for thinking about the relationship between art and pornography.

1. Basic Formulation of the Feminist Critique

Here, in a nutshell, is the most fundamental formulation of the feminist critique of the female nude. Women's subordination has several sources and components, one of the most significant being the sexualization of traditional gender hierarchy; that is, the way in which dominance and related active traits are eroticized for males whereas the contraries are eroticized for females. Insofar as it makes male dominance and female subordination sexy, the female nude is one important source of this eroticization and in this way is a significant part of the complex mechanism that sustains sex inequality.

* An excellent and stable database of high quality images of European art from the eleventh to the mid-nineteenth centuries is the Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu>. (Note that to search this database, you must use artist's names in their original languages, so, for instance, 'Titian' = 'Tiziano'.) In addition, most major museums now offer online databases of their collections.
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Stripping things down in this way makes it clear what the female nude has
in common with pornography, at least from one kind of feminist perspec-
tive, namely one that has its roots in J. S. Mill and is more fully developed by
Catharine MacKinnon. The basic idea here is that the eroticization of gender
hierarchy lies at the heart of women's subordinate position in society.\(^5\) In
particular, people's—both men's and women's—experience of sexual desire
and standards of sexual attractiveness have been systematically shaped in a
way that renders women's subordination and men's dominance sexy. Erotic
representations, according to this line of thought, have a powerful influence
over our erotic tastes and are an important source of this eroticization of sex
hierarchy. The female nude and pornography—in particular what I have
called *egalitarian pornography*—are two important kinds of erotic represen-
tation that feminists single out for criticism on these grounds.

Despite this important similarity between the female nude and pornogra-
phy, there are significant differences between the female nude and inequali-
tarian pornography in terms of their roles in promoting and sustaining the
sexual objectification of women, as I shall suggest in the final sections of this
chapter. Before we can explore these similarities and differences, however,
we need to clarify the terms of the feminist critique of the female nude and
anticipate some objections.

First, as briefly mentioned above, by 'female nude' I mean the genre of
artistic representations that take the unclothed female body as their primary

\(^5\) Mill observed that 'a means of holding women in subjection [is] representing to them meekness,
submissiveness and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual
attractiveness' (The Subjection of Women [1869], ed. Susan Okin [Hackett, 1988]), 16. Mill mentions
this only in passing, but the idea that the eroticization of gender hierarchy plays a significant role in sustaining
that hierarchy has been developed most fully and notably by Catharine MacKinnon in *Toward a Feminist
Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989), chs. 6 and 7 and in *Female Sexuality Unmodified* (Harvard
University Press, 1987), chs. 2 and 3, although she does not, to my knowledge, see Mill as a source.
MacKinnon argues convincingly that gender difference itself is the effect of power imbalance: 'Male and
female are created through the eroticization of dominance and submission' (*Toward a Feminist Theory of the
State*, 113, my emphasis). Pornography, she famously argues, plays an integral role in this eroticization.
Where I agree with this as a characterization of what I call *egalitarian pornography*—which, I should note,
characterizes mainstream heterosexual pornography for men, as well as some other—I think it a grave
mistake for MacKinnon to cast this as a feature of pornography per se. Her refusal to acknowledge that
some forms of pornography can sidestep—much less *shun*—the eroticization of male dominance and
female subordination is what leads many to suspect—woefully, I think—that sex-negativity motivates her
feminism. I develop this point in 'A Sex-Positive Antiporn Feminism' (forthcoming).

\(^6\) Prompted by an interesting essay by Larry May, I make the distinction between *egalitarian* and
*egalitarian pornography* in 'A Sensible Antiporn Feminism,' *Ethics* 117(4) (July 2007), 674–715.
subject matter. As with antiporn feminism, the feminist critique of the female nude depends on a generalization about the dominant mode of this genre, namely that it sexually objectifies women. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization, some of which I discuss below. This is to say that not all artistic representations of the female nude sexually objectify, just as not all pornography sexually objectifies women. But the predominant form of heterosexual pornography, like the predominant form of the female nude in the European artistic tradition, are both deeply sexually objectifying of women. Indeed, the fact of the predominance of this way of representing the unclothed female body is itself part of the problem from a feminist perspective, as I argue in the final section of this chapter.

Second, in saying that the female nude promotes and sustains sex inequality I in no way mean to suggest that it, or even sexual objectification generally, is single-handedly responsible for gender inequality. Rather, gender inequality should be understood as systemic in nature, which is to say that there is no single element sufficient for the injustices women suffer. In the form it takes today, gender inequality is a complex whole sustained by a functionally related group of interacting, interrelated, interdependent, and diverse elements: exploitation in the workplace, everyday practices and rituals, representations of various sorts, rules and regulations, mores and customs, violence and the threat thereof, and so forth. Singling out any one element for critical analysis risks giving the false impression that one is holding it solely responsible for women’s oppression. This is what I mean to dispel here. The female nude as I describe it below is but one element in a system of oppression; it is, however, a significant element.

Third, I do not mean to suggest that the female nude is or was ever responsible for women’s lack of rights. But feminists have long realized that there is much more than lack of rights underpinning women’s subordin-

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7 I stand by this generalization for nearly all artistic traditions in human history. In this chapter, however, I shall be concerned with the European artistic tradition.

8 Elsewhere I make the case that only a subset of all pornography is problematic from a feminist perspective. However, this subset, which I dub ‘unequalitarian porn’, is by far the dominant form of pornography. See my ‘A Sensible Antiporn Feminism’.

A feminist critique of the dominant nude of this text. There are, of course, and sustaining sex inequality in sexual objectification. Rather, it is in nature, which is to injustices women suffer.plex whole sustained by red, interdependent, and everyday practices and regulations, mores and forth.9 Singling out any sex impression that one is n. This is what I mean to is but one element in a lention.

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ation.10 In addition to its economic and legal dimensions, sex oppression also has significant social and psychological dimensions. One such significant dimension, which many feminists have gone to great lengths to articulate with subtlety and detail, is men’s and women’s internalization of an erotic taste that manifests, promotes, and sustains male dominance.11 In particular, women and men both learn to eroticize men’s ascendance over women. (Consider, for instance, the very common preference—on the part of both heterosexual men and women—that a man be taller than her female mate. This is just one example of the eroticization of a subtle form of male dominance and female subordination that permeates our everyday experience.) Because erotic desire plays such an important role in most peoples’ lives, the eroticization of sex inequality is a significant way that this inequality is sustained and reproduced.

But what, one might wonder, does any of this have to do with pictures and other representations of unclothed women? The short answer is that representations of various sorts shape our erotic taste by making gender inequality sexy. Advertising, television, movies, popular music and videos, pornography, and high art encourage and entice us to connect sexual desire with women’s inferiority to men. Although the nude is just one among many such representations, it plays a special role in the eroticization of sex inequality, as explained in the final section below.

At this point one might object that the source of the eroticization of male dominance and female submissiveness evident in the female nude and pornography is natural rather than cultural.12 The general idea at work here is familiar: our female ancestors who chose dominant males (and vice versa) enjoyed greater reproductive success. The taste for male dominance and female passivity were advantageous for early hominids as they faced a host of challenges in their environment. In this way, the egalitarian shape of the dominant mode of erotic taste, which so many feminists decry, is an evolutionary adaptation that has become hardwired into our

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10 See Ann E. Cudd, Analyzing Oppression (Oxford University Press, 2006) for an excellent summary and also compelling original arguments.
12 This kind of objection to a feminist critique is common but this particular formulation in relation to the female nude comes from Jerrold Levinson.
basic physiological and psychological makeup. As evolutionary psychologist David Barash puts the point, 'There is good reason to believe that we are (genetically) primed to be much less sexually egalitarian than we appear to be.'

A full response to this kind of sociobiological objection deserves a study of its own and I can only gesture at a response here. First, an enormous amount of work must be done to make the point scientifically viable: a specific trait must be isolated, it must be shown to be genetically heritable, and it must be demonstrated to be an adaptation rather than the result of drift, mutation, or recombination. This is a tall order that few, if any, sociobiological accounts have filled. But let us assume that our erotic tastes and sexual behaviors are 'natural' in the sense that they evolved through a process of natural selection, as the objection maintains. First, we must distinguish between what selection favors and what is morally right and just. Whether natural or not, eroticizing women's subordination to men is morally wrong—at least wherever women as a group are subordinate to men, which is the context in which we find ourselves today—and should be thwarted as much as is reasonable given other constraints. But, our objector might protest, if these preferences and tendencies are hardwired in the sense just described then they are inevitable and so it is senseless to speak of a moral obligation to override it. This brings me to my second point, namely that genes do not determine human behavior. For one thing, phenotypes often differ under varying conditions, and for another, cultural transmission of ideas, values, skills, and tastes is a significant source of human behavior.

12 David Barash, The Whisperings Within (Harper and Row, 1979), 47.
13 See Philip Kitcher, Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature (MIT Press, 1983) for a strong doubt that sociobiology could ever fill this order.
14 Sociobiologists whose work might be cited as support for the above objection themselves acknowledge this very point. For instance, in their controversial A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion (MIT Press, 2000) Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer argue that rape is either the by-product of an adaptation or an adaptation itself. However, they insist that rape can be prevented when its evolutionary causes are taken into account. For criticisms of this book, see Cheryl Brown Travis (ed.), Evolution, Gender and Rape (MIT Press, 2001).
15 Anne Fausto-Sterling puts the point this way: 'in animals and humans alike, male-female interactions around sex and the resting of offspring are variable matters. Depending on their environments, both sexes can exhibit a wide range of behaviors. Changing the environment can change a set of behaviors.' Beyond Difference: Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology, in Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (eds.), Atlas, Peer Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology (Jonathan Cape, 2000), 184.
16 Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd are long-standing proponents of this view. See, for instance, Culture and the Evolutionary Process (University of Chicago Press, 1985) and Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution (University of Chicago Press, 2005).
The latter is the focus of the critique presented here where the idea is not, to repeat myself, that a particular cultural form is single-handedly responsible for sexist attitudes and conduct. Rather, the feminist critique presented here maintains that in its sexual objectification of the unclothed female body, the female nude is one significant source of the values that sustain and perpetuate male dominance.

In making this case we encounter three difficulties. First, it is not so easy to spell out exactly what it means for a visual representation to sexually objectify anyone. People objectify people, but can a picture do this? If so, how are we to distinguish sexually objectifying pictures from, for instance, anatomical renderings of the unclothed female body, on the one hand, and avowedly feminist representations of the same, on the other? Second, it is far from obvious that there is anything wrong with sexual objectification in the first place. After all, many consider objectification to be a normal and even healthy part of human sexuality. If it is acceptable for women to objectify men, for men to objectify men, and for women to objectify women, what is the problem with men sexually objectifying women? If there is a problem with sexual objectification in general, what is it? Third and finally, even if one can explain how pictures sexually objectify and explain what is wrong with this in the case of the female nude, there remains the problem of explaining how a picture can be said to sexually objectify woman in general. With few exceptions, visual representations appear to trade in tokens, not types. Pictures, so it would seem, do not have access to the concept ‘woman’ in general; rather, pictures appear to depict only particular naked women. Even if you thought that the sexual objectification of the woman in, for instance, Ingres’s Ruggiero Rescuing Angelica (1819, Musée du Louvre) were obvious, it might still seem a stretch to say that the picture comments on women in general, and so an even further stretch to claim that it harms women as a group.

These are the sorts of questions that a compelling feminist critique of the female nude must address. I mean to put these worries to rest by answering each of these questions below.

2. Sexually Objectifying Pictures

We shall make our way through some of the questions just raised by starting with the claim that representations of the female nude sexually objectify women.
Even if you do not agree that the genre of the female nude is marked by a predominant tendency to sexually objectify women, the meaning of the claim may at first blush seem clear and unproblematic: a group of pictures and other representational works represent something that is not an object—namely a woman—as if she were an object, and in particular a sexual object. But this seemingly straightforward formulation of the purported problem raises questions. What exactly is involved in depicting a person as if she were an object? This question is particularly tricky in the case of purely visual representations (by which I mean: paintings, photographs, drawings, engravings, and sculpture) because they are non-verbal and do not have recourse to, for instance, similes as one does in language. One can use language, as Balzac did, to express the thought that a 'woman is like a lyre which gives up its secret only to him who knows how to play it.' But how could you paint, sculpt, or draw a figure in such a way that she seemed both 'like a lyre' and like a woman?

Before I begin my explanation of the mechanisms of objectification available to the visual arts, we need to get clear about two things. First, objectifying pictures need not represent objectifying acts or states of objectification. Second, not all pictures representing objectifying acts or states of objectification are themselves objectifying pictures. On this last point, imagine, for instance, a picture that simply documented an act of rape.

With these clarifications in mind, let us begin our examination of objectifying pictures with the concept objectification. To objectify is to treat a mere thing something that is in fact not a thing. Martha Nussbaum has persuasively shown that there are a variety of conceptually distinct ways to treat a person as a thing. (Note that in practice several of these may overlap in a single instance of objectification). Since her analysis is well known, I shall only briefly summarize the different things that may be involved in treating a person as an object.  

1. Instrumentality: to treat a person as a tool for her purposes
2. Denial of autonomy: to treat a person as lacking autonomy and self-determination

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18 Quoted in Simone de Beauvoir, Second Sex, 397. The Balzac quote comes from Physiologie du mariage.
7 Her outline of these seven dimensions of objectification begins on p. 218.
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3. Inertness: to treat a person as lacking agency and perhaps also activity
4. Fungibility: to treat a person as interchangeable with (a) other objects
   of the same type and/or (b) objects of other types
5. Violability: to treat a person as lacking boundary integrity, as something
   that it is permissible to smash up or break into
6. Ownership: to treat someone as a thing that is owned and that can
   perhaps be bought, sold, traded, given away, or acquired
7. Denial of subjectivity: to treat someone as something whose experi-
   ence and feelings need not be taken into account.

To this list Rae Langton has recently added a few more:

8. Reduction to body: to treat a person as identified with her body or
   body parts
9. Reduction to appearance: to treat a person primarily in terms of how
   she appears to the senses.
10. Silencing: to treat a person as silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

Taking these ten 'faces' of objectification as a starting point, I suggest that
there are nine ways in which artworks belonging to the genre of the female
nude objectify the person or people represented. Each of these incorporates
several of the different modes of objectification outlined by Nussbaum and
Langton. As with Nussbaum's and Langton's lists, my list aims to make
explicit the conceptually distinct visual means of objectification, means that
are not mutually exclusive and are even sometimes mutually entailing. In
practice, as we shall see, a single artwork can objectify the unclothed female
body in several of the ways described here.

2.1. Visual metaphor

The work suggests an analogy between a person and an inert thing through
visual similarity and proximity. Often the inert thing to which the woman is
compared is an object to be consumed or used as a means to some end. Exampes:

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20 Rae Langton, 'Autonomy-Denial in Objectification,' from Sexual Solicitation: Philosophical Essays on
A. Woman as musical instrument: Titian’s various ‘Venus and Musician’ paintings or Man Ray, Le Violon d’Ingres (1924, Getty Collection).
B. Woman as vessel: Ingres, La Source (1820, Musée d’Orsay, Paris).
C. Woman’s body or body-part as fruit: Paul Gaugin, Two Tahitian Women (1899, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

2.2. Erotization of violation

The work makes the physical violation of a woman sexy. Examples:

A. Erotization of rape: Titian, Rape of Europa (1559–62, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston); Rubens, Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus (1670, Alte Pinakothek, Munich).
B. Erotization of physical destruction: Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus (1827, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

2.3. Foregrounding of erogenous zones

Figure is posed so as to make breasts, pubis, and/or buttocks the focus, often while minimizing or even erasing any traces of subjectivity. Examples:

A. Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus (c. 1510, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) is the prototype for a whole tradition of recumbent nudes. The figure’s bodily position is marked by a noticeable vulnerability and availability that cannot be explained by sleep; rather, the function of the pose is to emphasize vulnerability and to provide maximal visual access to erogenous zones. (The so-called pudica gesture, by the way, calls attention to that which it supposedly hides, and the shape of the hand itself

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21. Titian and his workshop produced several paintings representing a nude Venus reclining on a luxuriously draped couch in the company of a male musician fully dressed in contemporaneous patrician clothing playing a lute or an organ. In several cases, the musician stands directly at Venus’ crotch or breasts, as in the most famous of these examples, Venus with Organist and Cupid (1548, Museo del Prado, Madrid).

22. ‘Violon d’Ingres’ is a French idiom that means ‘hobby,’ especially an artistic hobby. Not only does this photograph objectively by turning the amorous female torso into a musical instrument, but the title suggests that this female model, Kiki, was a ‘hobby’ of Man Ray’s.

23. The eroticizing representations of rape from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries are too numerous to even begin to enumerate here. During the mid- to late Renaissance, such fantasies were protected from moral scrutiny by a mythological veneer: the eroticized and violated unclothed bodies were lent moral and cultural respectability by being represented as Danaid, Leda, Io, Europa, or a generic nymph. For a good analysis, see Diane Wolkthal, Images of Rape: The ‘Heroic’ Tradition and Its Alternatives (Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 1, especially “‘Heroic’ Rape Imagery.” See also A. W. Eaton, “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet,” in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy (Winter 2003), 139–88.
is a visual metaphor for the genitals ‘concealed’ below it.) Her subjectivity is important only insofar as her loss of consciousness emphasizes her utter passivity and vulnerability.

2.4. Divided into sexual parts

A more extreme version of 2.3 above, the work does not even represent the entire person but only erogenous parts.

A. Courbet, L’Origine du monde (1866, Musée d’Orsay, Paris)
B. L’Action enchantée (Enchained Action) (1906), a larger-than-life headless and limbless unclothed torso by Maillol that for many years was the centerpiece of the grand staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago.

2.5. Generic body

Typically the female nude is a generic figure that lacks any suggestion of a unique personality, particular identity, or distinctive qualities. Rather, the nude is simply one of the many sexually available bodies that constitute the type. While this feature is best seen with the entire genre or even an oeuvre taken into consideration—e.g. all of Titian’s unclothed women are virtually identical—there are a few famous single works offering a superabundance of generic docile soft bodies that make this point:

Examples:

A. Ingres, Le Bain turc (Turkish Bath) (1862, Musée du Louvre, Paris) or Bouguereau, Les Oréades (1902).
B. ‘Bathers,’ a favorite modernist theme, offered an opportunity to cram into a single canvas many female nudes in various poses of sexual availability. Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, and Seurat, for instance, made several versions.

2.6. Eroticization of passivity, powerlessness, and lack of autonomy

Some already mentioned do this (e.g. Giorgione, Titian, Rubens, Delacroix), but also consider the popular theme of 'nymph and satyr'; e.g. Correggio's famous version (1524-5, Musée du Louvre, Paris) and the many versions produced by Picasso.

2.7. Diegetic surveillance or self-surveillance

The work makes the unclothed female the object of someone's gaze within the diegetic world of the work, thereby thematizing her function as a means to the end of the viewer's erotic visual gratification. We have already seen some works that do this like Gauguin's Tahitian Women. But the unclothed female is often also the object of her own gaze, demonstrating her internalization of 'the male gaze' (more on this in the next section).

A. Velázquez's Rokeby Venus or Titian's many representations of Venus with a mirror.25

B. Hans Memling, Vanity (1485, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg).

As John Berger notes, such works not only sexually objectify women but also morally condemn them for it.26

2.8. Gratuitous nudity

By this I mean two things:

A. First, nudity can be gratuitous in the sense that it is not called for by the narrative circumstances in the picture. Consider, for instance, Titian's famous Bacchanal of the Andrians (1523-4, Museo del Prado, Madrid), where the nude strikes a familiar vulnerable and revealing pose while playing no role in diegetic events and remaining utterly unintegrated into the composition. As in so many works in this genre, the nude is there to serve as sexual eye candy and nothing more.

B. Nudity can also be gratuitous in the sense that even when there is a narrative motivation for the figure's state of undress, this only thinly disguises the real point of such pictures which, once again, is to offer a

25 Titian and his workshop did several versions of this, the most famous of which is from 1555 and now hangs in the National Gallery, Washington DC.
of autonony
tic, Titian, Rubens, Dela-
'nuft and satyr'; e.g.
Louvre, Paris) and the
tillivating view of an unclothed female body. In fifteenth- and
sixteenth-century Europe, for instance, an artist couldn't get away with
the bold and unapologetic display of the female body for the
sake of the viewer's erotic pleasure alone, so she was Venus, or some
other figure revived from ancient mythology. This pretext was evident as such to artists and patrons from the beginning. This
need for a mythological pretext persisted through the mid-nine-
teenth century — consider the Birth of Venus by Cabanel (1865) and
Bouguereau (1879), both in the Musée d'Orsay — although it is
plainly obvious that the mythological veneration hardly explains the
writhing poses of utter surrender and availability. Although Venus
was just born, you might say that she comes into the world ready for
immediate use.

2.9. Passive poses of availability and surrender
The classic pose for the female nude is (a) recumbent, (b) frontal (so that
pubis and breasts are in full view), and (c) often with one arm raised above

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27 Consider the following famous example. The Duke of Urbino, the eponymous first owner of
Titian's famous painting, in a letter from March 9, 1538, referred to it not as 'Venus' (la Venere) but, rather,
as 'the naked lady' or 'the nude lady'; the words are the same in Italian — le donne nuda (Georg Grumau,
The same phrase was used in 1598 by a man writing to the Duke to ask for a copy, to which the Duke
responded that he preferred not to be identified as the painting's owner, explaining that he only kept this
'licentious work' in his collection because it was by Titian (see Charles Hope, "Poesie" and Painted
Titian himself acknowledged the real point of some of his most important mythological paintings in a
letter to his patron, Philip II of Spain, who commissioned a set of mythological paintings featuring
unclothed women. After having sent the first painting in the series, the Danae, Titian wrote to Philip to
announce the shipment of the second painting which was to be a pendant of the Danae, namely the Venus
and Adonis. Titian writes: 'And at the Danae which I have already sent to Your Majesty is seen entirely
from the front; I want to vary it in this other [painting], showing the figure from the opposite side; thus
the room in which they are to hang will be more appealing' (Raccolta di lettere sulla pitura, scultura ed
architettura, Rome, 1759, ii. 23). This letter makes it clear that the woman's posture in these pictures is
explained not by some narrative event in the painting but, rather, by the desire to provide maximal visual
access to the unclothed female body, and in particular to erogenous zones which are foregrounded and
highlighted through a variety of compositional devices. I mean to suggest that what is driving these
pictures is not the mythological narrative but rather the viewer's erotic titillation; this is their function,
their raison d'être. For a compelling account of Titian's mythological paintings along these lines, see
Charles Hope, 'Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings', in Massimo Genoni and Gian-
nantonio Paladini (eds.), Titian e Venezia, Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, 1978 (Venice,
1980), 11-24. For a sophisticated treatment of these issues with respect to the Venus of Urbino in particular,
see the essays in Rena Gofen (ed.), Titian's Venus of Urbino (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
head. The pose is passive, unprotected, vulnerable, and suggests sexual availability.  
Examples:

A. Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, mentioned above, is the prototype for this pose whose influence one can still see in twentieth-century masterpieces such as Matisse, *Blue Nude (Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra, 1907, Baltimore Museum of Art)* and Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

3. The Male Gaze

My brief analysis of the various means by which a work of visual art can sexually objectify makes it clear that the primary function of the female nude is to provide visual erotic pleasure. But, many feminists hasten to remind us, this erotic pleasure is of a gendered sort. This brings us to the familiar concept of ‘the male gaze’.  

The term ‘male gaze’ was first coined in Laura Mulvey’s now classic and widely reproduced essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16(3) (Autumn 1975), 6–18.

28 Sociologist Erving Goffman makes a similar observation with respect to the ubiquity of this pose for women in advertising: ‘a recumbent position is one from which physical defense of oneself can best well be initiated and therefore which renders one very dependent on the benignness of the surround. (Of course, lying on the floor or on a sofa or bed seems also to be a conventionalized expression of sexual availability.)’ Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (Harper Torchbooks, 1979), 41.

29 The term ‘male gaze’ was first coined in Laura Mulvey’s now classic and widely reproduced essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16(3) (Autumn 1975), 6–18.
object of the male gaze than it is of, say, the female gaze, or better, the lesbian gaze. 30

However well-meaning, such questions are misguided. 31 This is because 'the male gaze' is best construed not as an empirical concept meant to describe actual viewing practices on the part of audiences, even in cases where a description of this sort is accurate. Rather, 'the male gaze' should be understood as normative, referring to the sexually objectifying 'way of seeing,' to use John Berger's term, that the work in question solicits. 32 To say that a work embodies the male gaze is to say that it calls upon its audience to 'see' (whether literally or figuratively 33) the woman represented—in this case the unclothed female body—as primarily a sex object. To describe this 'way of seeing' as 'male' is not to claim anything about how all, or even most, men respond to such pictures; rather, it is to note that this is the 'way of seeing' proper to someone in the masculine social role, a role which, it should be noted, is avowedly heterosexual. (For this reason it would be more fitting to call this ideal viewing position the masculine gaze.)

A related common but misguided conception of 'the male gaze' is the assumption that works embodying this way of seeing address men exclusively. This is understandable since works like those we have been considering have the obvious function of arousing the erotic desires of heterosexual men. As art historian Charles Hope puts the point about Venus of Urbino and similar paintings by Titian, 'The implication is that these pictures were for the most part mere pinups, and that the girls were seen as little more than sex objects.' 34 However, I suggest that both pinups and high art nudes address women as well, although the function of these representations is importantly different in each case. The nude is one of those cultural forms that teaches


31 I mean that these questions misunderstand the normative nature of the concept male gaze. I deliberately do not mean that inquirers into female spectatorship are misguided. In film theory, Mary Ann Doane was one of the first to raise the question of female spectatorship with her essay 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', Screen 23(3–4) (September–October 1982), 74–87.

32 I first made this case in 'Feminist Philosophy of Art', Philosophy Compass 3(5) (September 2008), 873–93. One could correctly apply the concept 'male gaze' to a work that had never been viewed by a single man. What one would mean, in such a case, is that the work prescribes to its viewers a particular 'way of seeing', namely seeing the woman represented as primarily a sex object.

33 I mean to leave open the possibility that a verbal description could embody the male gaze.

34 Charles Hope, 'Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings', 179.
women to see themselves in terms of masculine interests. As Mill might have put the point, the female nude is an important part of how women learn that "meekness, submissiveness and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, [are] an essential part of [their] sexual attractiveness." By representing inertness, passivity, violability, and lack of autonomy as sexually attractive characteristics in females, the nude eroticizes objectification and subordination. And insofar as the nude is one of those cultural forms that emphasizes our appearance and sexual appeal above all other characteristics, it offers an ideal of feminine self-understanding in which our sexual appeal to men becomes, as Mill puts it, "the polar star" of our identity.\footnote{John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. Susan M. Okin (Indiana: Hackett, 1988 [1869]), 15.}

The narcissism that results from this learned obsession with our appearance and sexual attractiveness itself becomes a theme of the genre, as noted in number 7 in my list above. The nude is not just a sight for the masculine gaze; she is a thing to be looked at *even by herself*, although always evaluated through masculine eyes. As art historian John Berger astutely puts the point,\footnote{Ibid. Sandra Bartky makes a similar point: "Subject to the evaluating eye of the male connoisseur, women learn to evaluate themselves first and best" (Bartky, *On Psychological Oppression*, 48).}

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.\footnote{Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46. It is worth noting that Berger's point is part of a larger observation about the role of "double consciousness" in oppression. The term "double consciousness" comes to us from DuBois in describing the situation of African-Americans as: "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (CreateSpace, 2011; original 1903). Bartky assimilates the concept to sex oppression ("On Psychological Oppression") and although Berger does not explicitly use the term, I take him to be making a similar point about the female nude and the male gaze.}

The male gaze is to be internalized by men and women alike. It is for this reason that I say that the female nude's target audience, then, is both sexes.

This is not to say, however, that the nude's male and female audiences are somehow *forced* to take up the male gaze. A viewer could be either *unable* or *unwilling*, perhaps for ethical reasons, to look upon the nude in the way that
As Mill might have said, women do not have of their own how women learn that individual will into the sexual attractiveness. By the autonomy as sexually objectifies the image and objectifies the male gaze, but such resistance is bound to interfere with one’s appreciation of the work in question. A viewer who refuses to inhabit the male gaze would be unable to properly appreciate, for instance, Velázquez’s painting, and there are deep questions, that I cannot explore here, about how and what is to blame for this failure: the painting or the viewer.

For the moment, let us consider the question of whether all representations of the female nude are necessarily marked by the male gaze. Is it possible to represent the unclothed female figure in a manner that does not sexualize objectify?

I’ll address this question by way of an example: Artemisia Gentileschi’s Susanna and the Elders (1610, Pommersfelden). In the Apocryphal story from the Book of Daniel, Susanna is in her garden bathing when attacked by two elders of her community who plan to rape her. They threaten her but she does not give in and, after a series of complicated events, they are tried and convicted for their crime. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the story provided a pretext for displaying the unclothed female body, much like Lucretia or Venus or Danaé, but unlike these others, the Susanna story was (1) sanctioned by its Christianity and, more important for our purposes, (2) offered heightened erotic appeal by its inclusion of two lecherous men.

Artists before and after Artemisia’s time typically represented the moment before Susanna notices the elders, when she is calmly going about her bath,

39 To get started on this very interesting question, see the debate between Berys Gaut and Daniel Jacobson. Gaut, I think, would say about such a case that the picture in question is at fault and, further, that this kind of moral failing is of an aesthetic sort. See Berys Gaut, ‘The Ethical Criticism of Art’, in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Interface (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193–203; ‘Art and Ethics’ in B. Gaut and D. Lopes (eds.), The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics, 2nd edn., pp. 431–43; and Berys Gaut, Art, Emotions and Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially ch. 6. Daniel Jacobson, by contrast, would argue that in such a case the audience would be at fault for lack of imaginative delicacy. See Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, Philosophical Topics 25 (1997), 172ff.
40 I owe this observation to Mary Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi (Princeton University Press, 1989), 191. As evidence, Garrard cites the following description of Rubens’ several representations of Susanna by the Belgian writer, literature critic, and curator of the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Max Rooses: ‘Il est permis de croire que, pour lui, le charme du sujet n’était pas tant la chasteté de l’héroïne biblique que l’occasion de montrer une belle femme nue, de ces audaces qui trouvent une exquise galiante, et les émotions fort diverses qui en émanent pour chacun de personages’ (my emphasis), Max Rooses, L’Oeuvre de P. P. Rubens: Histoire et description de ses toiles et des airs, 3 volumes (Antwerp: J. Maes, 1886–92), i. 171. Cited in Garrard, p. 330 n. 21.
with little to distract us from the visual center of the picture, namely her voluptuous and opalescent body. Consider, for instance, Tintoretto’s version Susanna and the Elders, (c.1555–6, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). By contrast, the core of Artemisia’s painting is, as Mary Garrard aptly puts it, ‘the heroine’s plight, not the villain’s anticipated pleasure.’ In Artemisia’s picture Susanna’s body is not idealized by contemporaneous standards: notice the groin wrinkle, the lines in her neck, her hanging breast, and her awkwardly proportioned legs and reddish feet. Further, unlike many of the nudes we’ve seen thus far, Susanna’s subjectivity is foregrounded in the psychological anguish expressed on her face, in her unusually well-defined gesture of resistance and hiding, and in her contorted posture. In contrast to the weak, passive, positively limp nudes we’ve seen thus far, Artemisia’s Susanna is a figura serpentinata, an artistic term for this type of energetic spiral pose characteristic of Mannerist art. The pose conveys the potential energy of a wound coil about to spring, and for this reason was in this period typically reserved for male figures. In these ways, Artemisia’s Susanna is shown as heroic in her struggle against forces of evil. Although the picture represents her unclothed and represents her sexual objectification, it does so without sexually objectifying her.

Here we have an example of the point made at the start of section 2 that there is an important conceptual distinction between a representation of sexual objectification and a sexually objectifying representation. Whereas the latter prescribes the male gaze, the former could register the male gaze without endorsing it; this, I argue, is how Artemisia’s Susanna works. (This is not to say that a representation cannot both sexually objectify and represent sexual objectification: Tintoretto’s Susanna and Titian’s Rape of Europa, mentioned above, do both.)

4. Types, not Tokens

Thus far I have made the case for a peculiarly pictorial means of sexual objectification. I wager that this constitutes the dominant mode of representing the unclothed female body in the Western artistic tradition. It is in this way that the genre of the nude perpetuates and promotes a damaging

41 Garrard, ibid. 189.
of the picture, namely her
stance, Tintoretto’s version
ches Museum, Vienna). By
ny Garrard aptly puts it, ‘the
sure.’41 In Artemisia’s pic-
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and Titian’s Rape of Europa,
gender stereotype, namely that women are first and foremost sex objects;
that is, that a woman’s sexuality, and in particular her sexual appeal to men, is
a primary feature of her identity.

At this point a serious objection arises. While it is clear that all of the
artworks mentioned thus far objectify an individual woman or women,
what licenses the conclusion that a picture can objectify women in general?
A stereotype, after all, is a demeaning and restrictive generalization about a
group, but none of the artworks we’ve seen so far depict women as a group.
Even when a picture offers a swarm of docile and voluptuous unclad
bodies, as we saw in Ingres’s Turkish Bath, it would seem that at most one is
entitled to say that the picture sexually objectifies these women, not the
entire class of women.

Indeed, with few exceptions, visual representations appear unavoidably
bound up with details,42 Putting something in visible form makes it concrete
and specifies particular traits: representing a woman requires making deci-
sions about all of her visible physical features, from the shape of her nose to
the size of her feet. The more abstract the representation, of course, the less
information conveyed about particularities, and so the claim about object-
ification of women in general might hold for abstract nudes. But the case
made here has relied heavily upon pre-modern and early modern works—
for reasons to be made clear—and with few exceptions these would seem to
represent individual women in all their particularity; that is, they seem to
offer us tokens, not types. So how can a visual representation stereotype
women as a whole?

This is an important question that, to my knowledge, finds no answer in
the literature. My answer has two parts: the female nude in the European
tradition is almost always both generic and idealized.

As mentioned in section 2.5 from my list above, by ‘generic’ I mean that
the individual unclad females comprising the genre tend to lack distinct-
ive qualities that suggest individuality and set each apart from the rest.
Instead, there is a strong tendency for nudes to exhibit qualities common
to a group, where this is defined by a particular oeuvre, a period style, and
the genre itself. (This is an important point to which I return in the final
section of this chapter: in order to see that a particular figure is generic, you
must appeal to the group of which it is a part.) One such commonality is

42 Visual symbols for abstract notions—such as light as a symbol of knowledge—is one exception.
posture. As noted in section 2.9 from my list above, female nudes tend to strike very similar poses of surrender and availability that highlight breasts, pubis, and/or buttocks. Whether recumbent (à la Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*) or standing (à la Bouguereau’s *Birth of Venus*), these poses are peculiar to female nudes and are rarely used for unclothed males. But it is not simply pose that makes female nudes generic: female nudes tend to share physiognomic qualities as well. Regardless of time period, nudes are regularly pale and without any trace of body hair, with full round breasts and erect nipples. Facial features are also quite similar, particularly within the context of an oeuvre: for instance, all of Titian’s nudes, whether Venus or Danaé or some other goddess, have the same facial features, the same skin tone, the same long blondish wavy hair, and even almost always wear the same pearl earrings. This is not simply a point about artistic style, for despite the fact that Titian’s men are recognizably in the artist’s style, they nevertheless exhibit individuating features. Female nudes are rarely represented as unique personalities distinguishable from others; rather, all peculiarities are left out in favor of a sameness that renders the figures interchangeable or, as Nussbaum would put it, fungible.

There are good reasons why the unclothed females represented throughout the tradition do not lend themselves to being identified as particular individuals. First, this would undercut their ‘pinup function’ (see remark by Charles Hope in section 3 above). Generic figures are better suited to serve the fantasies of a wide audience of male viewers. But individuality would also undercut the *nomative* function of the nude where the women depicted serve as ideals of female beauty and erotic excellence. (To repeat a point made earlier, this is an ideal for both male and female audiences.)

This idea that the nude is both generic and ideal—both a model of and a model for women—was theorized in humanistic treatises on painting at the time that painters like Botticelli, Giorgione, and Titian were developing their prototypes. Most notably, Leon Battista Alberti spells out his method of what one might call ‘ideal imitation’ in his treatise on painting, *Della Pittura*. Like so many of his contemporaries, Alberti firmly believed both that paintings should copy nature and be beautiful. This presents the artist

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43 First written in Latin (*De Pictura*) and then translated into Italian by Alberti himself in 1435–6, *Della Pittura* is arguably the first modern theoretical treatise of painting. It had considerable influence on both artists and other treatises on art.
What’s Wrong with the (Female) Nude?

5. What’s Wrong with Sexual Objectification?

We’ve now seen how the female nude sexually objectifies, and how through genericization and idealization the object of that sexual objectification is ‘woman’ as a type rather than a particular token woman or women. But none of this explains why feminists have a problem with the female nude. An important question still remains, namely: What is wrong with sexual objectification? After all, many would agree that some form and degree of objectification constitutes a normal, and even salutary, dimension of human sexual activity.

Against such a view, some, most notably Kant, have disparaged all sexual objectification as the practice of making oneself into a thing to be used by another, a mere means to an end that degrades one’s humanity and reduces one to the level of (other) animals. If this is the kind of concern that feminists mean to adduce against sexual objectification, then the concern ought to apply to the sexual objectification of men as well. From such a view

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45 The story is recounted by Pliny (The Natural History XXXV, xxxvi, 61) and Cicero (De inventione II. i, 2–3) and by many after Alberti.
46 On Painting, 93.
one should expect sexually objectifying representations of male nudes to come under fire. Consider the following list of famous examples of beefcake—that is, sexually objectified unclothed males—from the European tradition:

- Michelangelo, so-called Dying Slave (c.1513, Louvre, Paris)
- Rodin, Age of Bronze, also known as The Vanquished (modeled 1867, cast c.1906)
- Mantegna, St. Sebastian, (c.1458, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)
- El Greco, Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (c.1577–8, Museo Catedralico, Palencia)
- Titian, Three Ages of Man (1511–12, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) (Note, by the way, that in this picture the partially clothed youth's sex organ is compared to an instrument to be played by the (mostly) clothed young woman.)

Each of these figures is accurately characterized by at least some combination of the concepts from Nussbaum's and Langton's list: they are inert, fungible, violable, silenced, anonymous, passive, subjectivity-less, enslaved, sexually violated, and/or reduced to their bodies and appearance. Why do feminists not criticize these? Is there a double standard at work here? I don't think so. The feminist critique of the female nude does not object to sexual objectification per se; it is not Kantian in this regard.

In order to see why the female nude is singled out as specially problematic, we need to understand a key methodological aspect of the feminist critique of the female nude—this is often left inexplicit, namely that the critique cannot be framed adequately from the perspective of methodological individualism. Here I am importing the term 'methodological individualism' to aesthetics and art criticism to refer to the view that all artistically relevant features of an artwork can be explained by appeal to individual works alone. Methodologically individualist accounts hold, either explicitly or

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48 The 1450 version in the Louvre and the 1506 version in the Galleria Franchetti in Venice are also good examples.
49 The later version, from c.1610–14, now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, is also a good example.
50 The term 'methodological individualism' comes to us from political philosophy that is often of a feminist bent. The following two essays provide a good introduction to and critique of the concept. Marilyn Friedman and Eary May, 'Harming Women as a Group', Social Theory and Practice 11(4) (1985), 207–34. Iris Marion Young, 'Five Faces of Oppression', Philosophical Forum 19(4) (1988), 270–90.
What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?

1. There are a large number of works where a sexually objectified female nude appears with clothed and active men who are not sexually objectified. Consider, for instance, the many famous works where a sexually objectified female nude is featured with fully dressed men who are engaging in some artistic or intellectual activity.

- Titian's six paintings of Venus with Musician.
- Giorgione, Fête champêtre (1508–9, Musée du Louvre, Paris)
- Manet, Déjeuner sur l'herbe (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

Frye argues that in order to understand how particular practices can be oppressive, one must take a macroscopic view of the larger system in which the particular practices are embedded. She writes: 'One cannot see the meanings of these rituals [such as the man's opening the door for the woman] if one's focus is riveted upon the individual even in all its particularity ... The oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and diverse lives is a macroscopic phenomenon ... [which you can see] when you look macroscopically.' Politics of Reality (The Crossing Press, 1983), 6–7.

For instance: several pictures of Venus with Cupid and Ceres (1548–9, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; 1548 Museo del Prado, Madrid; Venus with Ceres and Little Dog c.1550, Galleria degli Uffizi); Venus and Love Player (1560, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; 1565–70, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
A sub-genre of these are countless pictures that explicitly thematize the role of the female nude in the practice of making art. In many of these works the model's gaze is averted or downcast, de-emphasizing her subjectivity—and her supple posture is one of vulnerability—her arms often pulled back in an exposed, unguarded, and revealing gesture. He, on the other hand, is not just clothed but deeply absorbed in the artistic act. She is the object of his gaze, the passive material for his creative intelligence, and sometimes also his inspiration and muse. His job: make great art. Her job: sit and look pretty. Here are just a few examples from different periods:

- Albrecht Dürrer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Nude* (1525, woodcut).
  [Here the nude woman plays the role of the artist's inspiration and muse rather than subject matter.]
- Matisse, *Artist and Model* (c.1919, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)

These works illustrate the way that the female nude has come to stand as the archetypal artwork. When artists represent themselves at work, the default subject matter is often an unclothed female body. It's not surprising then, that a nude is often the first thing one sees upon entering some of the great museums in the European world. 53

This is rarely the case with male nudes. I know of very few works in which unclothed, docile men consort with clothed, actively engaged women. This disparity in the visual treatment of females and males, with an egregiously disproportionate emphasis placed on the docile sexuality of the former, is an important element of the feminist critique. It becomes even more apparent when one moves to consider the aggregate category of the genre itself.

2. The second thing one must consider to fully understand the feminist critique is the sheer prevalence of the female nude in the Western tradition

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53 Here are two examples. Until very recently, Maillol's *L'Action enchantée*—a larger-than-life headless and limbless bustam tone with arched back to enhance buttocks and breasts—stood smack in the middle of the grand staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago and was the very first work a visitor saw upon entering the museum. One of the very first works one sees upon entering the Musée d'Orsay in Paris—and of the first works, the one that is most prominently displayed—is Schoeneweck's *Femme Tintinette* (1874), a sculpture of a nude woman in a back-breaking reclining pose with pelvis thrust above the chest so as to highlight her perky nipples and pubic region. *Femme Tintinette* is displayed on a pedestal about 1.5 feet above the floor so that the viewer cannot but help looking down onto her splayed body.
when compared with male nudes. The female nude is omnipresent in most major periods of European art (medieval art being a notable exception), and while representations of unclothed males exist, their numbers do not approach the female nude through all styles and periods. It is due to this widespread and uneven preoccupation with sexually objectified unclothed female bodies that the term 'nude,' in art circles, has come to designate female nudes exclusively and it is only when the unclothed body in question is male that one must specify gender. Comparing the two genres (female nudes vs. male nudes) allows us to see the glaringly uneven importance placed on women's appearance and sexual appeal.

This is yet another way in which the nude can be said to stereotype women. Stereotyping is achieved not simply through the generic but ideal types offered up by individual works; the stereotype of woman-as-sex-object is also achieved by the genre itself in its insistent, repeated, pervasive sexual objectification of women's unclothed bodies throughout much of the Western artistic tradition.

3. Third is the manner in which unclothed female bodies are typically represented compared with that of unclothed male bodies. The problem is not simply that the unclothed female body is almost always sexually objectified in the ways described throughout this chapter; an important part of the problem is that male nudes typically are not. Although sexually objectified male nudes exist in the European tradition—consider, for instance, Thomas Eakins's Adria (c. 1883, Metropolitan Museum of Art)—they are exceptional in this regard. Typically, male nudes are represented as active, strong, heroic, and unassailable figures engaged in combat, thinking, or other 'manly' activities. Consider the following famous works:

- Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes (Engraving, 1470s, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)
- Ingres, Oedipus Answering the Sphinx's Riddle (1808–20, Musée du Louvre)
- Michelangelo, David (1504, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence)
- Rodin, The Thinker (Bronze, first casting 1902)

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54 Thanks to Hans Masse for this example.
The feminist critique does not focus simply on the fact that female nudes are represented as passive, vulnerable, weak, fungible, and lacking subjectivity. Indeed, I would argue that there’s nothing *intrinsically* wrong with an individual picture of an unclothed woman that sexually objectifies her in these ways. The problem, from a feminist perspective, is that the overwhelming majority of female nudes have traditionally been represented this way while the majority of male nudes (and here we should keep in mind the first point, that this total number is considerably smaller) are not. There are very few active, strong, psychologically engaging, heroic female nudes and I know of no female counterparts to *The Thinker*, the Pollaiuolo engraving, or *David*. To make this point vivid, try the thought experiment of imagining a work like Ingres’s *Turkish Bath* with men rather than women, or Pollaiuolo’s *Battle* with women rather than men. The results, I think you’ll find, will seem so foreign as to border on the absurd.

4. Fourth, let us conjoin this imbalance—this one-sided abundance of objectified female flesh—with women’s cultural, and especially artistic, disenfranchisement, by which I mean women’s exclusion from the artistic canon. This exclusion takes two forms. First, although women make up roughly one-half of the human population, they are almost entirely absent from the pantheon of great artists, including modern and contemporary artists. Second, the kinds of artefacts traditionally produced by women—e.g. clothing, quilts, pottery, needlework, and weaving—have not been taken seriously as *art* but, instead, have been relegated to the diminished categories of ‘decorative arts’ or ‘crafts’. The problem, then, is not that this or that particular representation of the female nude was produced by a man,

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55 To make this point, in 1972 Linda Nochlin made a photograph entitled *Bunny My Banana* of an unclothed man holding a tray of bananas just below his penis. A visual metaphor that is unremarkable when the subject is an unclothed woman becomes absurd when it is an unclothed man who offers the fruit. Feminist artists like Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Semmel, and Judy Chicago have also engaged in ‘turn the tables’ projects where male nudes are eroticized. Sleigh, as Hans Madsen has reminded me, even produced her own all-male *Turkish Bath* (1973), although the picture does not come close to offering as many unclothed male bodies as Ingres’s.


but that men are overwhelmingly responsible for the entire genre. *Pace* Foucault and intentional fallacy theorists,\(^56\) it does matter who's speaking: the message one gets strolling through the great museums of the world, or even just flipping through an art history textbook, is that women are connected to great art not as its creators, but simply as bodies, as the raw material out of which men forge masterpieces. (Here I remind you of the theme of artist-and-model discussed earlier.)

This point is humorously captured in a 1989 poster by the Guerilla Girls, an artist activist group. The poster features a gorilla mask atop the body of Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* and reads: 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less [sic] than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.'\(^59\) On September 1, 2004, the Guerilla Girls returned to the Met with another survey to find that the situation had only worsened: a mere 3 per cent of the artists in the modern and contemporary section are women, and 83% per cent of the nudes are female.

To sum up, I have argued that the female nude sexually objectifies women, and that this is achieved through the use of ideal types in individual representations and also through the sheer omnipresence of such images in the Western tradition. But this raised the question, What's wrong with sexual objectification, anyway? After having briefly compared the genre of the female nude with that of the male nude and considered its place within the broader artistic tradition, we are now in a position to see the answer.

Isolated instances of sexual objectification are not necessarily any more problematic for women than for men. Indeed, in some cases sexual objectification is most welcome; it makes sense at certain appropriate times for a woman to want to be a sexual object for her lover rather than, say, a challenging intellectual sparring partner. The problem is that women do not have this choice because we live under the umbrella of sexual objectification.\(^60\) The most extreme and violent form of this sexual objectification

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\(^56\) Such as Barthes, and Baudrillard and Wimsatt in analytic tradition.

\(^59\) This poster can be seen on the Guerilla Girls website at <http://www.guerillagirls.com/>.

\(^60\) Sandra Blyth put this point well: 'But surely there are times, in the sexual embrace perhaps, when a woman might want to be regarded as nothing but a sexually intoxicating body and when attention paid to some other aspect of her person—say, to her mathematical ability—would be absurdly out of place. If sexual relations involve some sexual objectification, then it becomes necessary to distinguish situations in which sexual objectification is oppressive from the sorts of situations in which it is not. The identification
can be seen in the fact that women live with the constant threat of rape and are not safe on the streets or at home. But a less extreme example is the persistent preoccupation with women’s bodies, appearance, and erotic appeal. The constant emphasis on women’s appearance and sex appeal at the expense of any other important aspect of our identity extends to almost every aspect of our lives. This is not merely something that is done to us. Women have come to internalize ‘the male gaze’, to see ourselves through objectifying eyes and in terms of male interests.

If we lived in a world where everyone, men and women alike, lived under this umbrella of sexual objectification, that might be weird but to my mind not unjust or otherwise morally problematic (unless, of course, sexual objectification were unwelcome). The injustice that concerns feminists arises from the fact that men do not live under this umbrella. Men get to choose when to play the role of sex object whereas women have no such choice. It is this asymmetry—where women are continually reduced to objects of men’s pleasure but not the converse—that underpins gender injustice. The nude, I have shown, is one of the means of perpetuating this injustice.

6. Concluding Thoughts about Art and Pornography

Pornography becomes difficult to distinguish from art and ads once it is clear that what is degrading to women is the same as what is compelling to the consumer.

Catharine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State

What’s wrong with the female nude, to put the point succinctly, is that it promotes sex inequality by eroticizing it. To those familiar with the literature, this will sound an awful lot like one dimension of a certain kind of feminist critique of pornography. According to that critique, standard heterosexual pornography—what I have elsewhere called inequitarian

of a person with her sexuality becomes oppressive, one might venture, when such an identification becomes habitually extended into every area of her experience.” ‘On Psychological Oppression’, 26.

61 P. 113.

62 I say ‘one dimension’ because antiporn feminists are also concerned with the harms incurred to women in the production of pornography. Although this may have an analogue in the realm of high art, I do not discuss it here.
What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?

Pomography—eroticizes women's subordination to men and this, antiporn feminists charge, can have a host of harmful effects on real women's lives. Similar worries have also been leveled against mainstream advertising, music and music videos, and various other aspects of popular culture, as seen in the quote from MacKinnon above. The similarity that feminist critique brings to light between the nude and other cultural forms could make it seem as if, from a feminist perspective, the nude is just another of the many elements of our culture that make sexism sexy. This is sometimes thought to render the distinctions between 'art' and 'pornography' or 'advertising' irrelevant from the viewpoint of feminist critique.

This, however, overlooks the important way in which these distinctions do matter from a feminist perspective, and a reason why the female nude should have a special place in our account of the role of representations in bending our erotic taste toward sex inequality. The female nude not only eroticizes but also aestheticizes the sexual objectification of women, and it does so from on high. These two features, which I shall explain in turn, serve well the nude's function of promoting sex inequality and so should make it a cultural form of primary concern to feminists.

The female nude aestheticizes sexual objectification of women insofar as all of the works discussed in this chapter display considerable attention to the formal and material dimensions of the representations. Pacé Charles Hope, this is an important difference between the nude and the average pornographic photo: the nude demands to be looked at as art, to be appreciated for its composition, textures, portrayal of light and shadow, and other formal and material features. Many of the works discussed in this chapter are quite beautiful and compelling and display dazzling skill and creativity. This not only makes the message of female inferiority and male superiority more compelling, but insofar as one considers art to be immune to moral scrutiny—a common enough view in the history of Western thought—the
nude's aestheticization protects it from feminist criticism. As feminists we may be uncomfortable with the eroticization of sex inequality, but as appreciators of art qua art (on this view) we should be ignoring artworks' moral failings and attending instead to the aesthetic dimension of the work.

Unlike most contemporary philosophical discussions of art and pornography, I have deliberately focused on older works, many of which are uncontested masterpieces. Many of these works are prominently featured in almost any survey of Western art history: they are canonical. The artistic canon is generally thought of as the repository of our highest and most enduring values. Art with a capital 'A' is a hallowed category of works that demands our undivided attention, respect, special care and maintenance. I have shown that some of the gems of the Western canon offer not (or not just) beautiful and profound truths about the human condition, but actively promote women's subordination to men. Art's venerated status invests this message of male superiority and female inferiority with special authority, making it an especially effective way of promoting sex inequality. As art historian Carol Duncan eloquently puts it, 'as sanctified a category as any our society offers, art silently but ritually validates and invests with mystifying authority the ideals that sustain existing social relations.'

In short, unlike pornographic works, the 'artistic gems' I've been discussing (a) make sex inequality not just sexy but also beautiful, (2) lend sex inequality special authority, and (c) and present themselves as immune to, or at the very least resistant to, moral and political scrutiny. This gives feminists good reason to worry about the nude at least as much as we worry about pornography, and perhaps even more, since the nude's appeal is more insidious.

overview of the position as well as responses to it, see Noël Carroll, 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions in Research', *Ethics* (2000), 350–87, particularly section II. For an astute analysis of Carroll's take on autonomism, see Daniel Jacobson, 'Ethical Criticism and the Vice of Moderation', in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Blackwell, 2000), 343–6.


67 Thanks to Jerry Levinson for pushing me to complete this thought.