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Dave Dallas

Old Master Specialist

THE NUDE

For the next in my series of articles on what inspires artist to paint, I have chosen The Nude. This is such a vast subject, that I intend to look at Western Art, exploring only paintings from the Renaissance to the present day. Of course sculpture has a very important part to play in the history of The Nude, but for the most part, I am going to ignore it for brevity's sake.

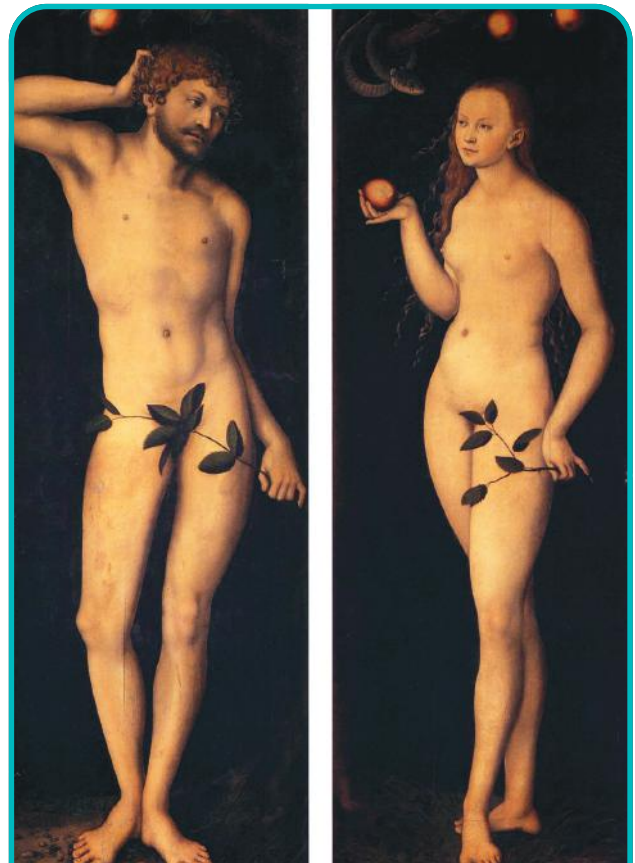
Sir Kenneth Clark, as he was then, in his brilliant book "The Nude", (published by John Murray 1956), begins chapter one thus:

"The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguished between the naked and the nude. Naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed."

Since classical antiquity, the human body has been central to art. We are mostly familiar with sculpture, as so little painting has survived. During the Renaissance, excavations of ancient sites in Rome, Naples and elsewhere unearthed a vast treasure trove of naked gods and goddesses.

These antiquities invited scholars, collectors and artists alike to embrace a classical notion of ideal beauty and Diana, Venus, Danae, Sea Nymphs and various other creations of Greek and Roman mythology became a rich seam for admirers of the nude to mine. Gods and goddesses seldom wore clothes!

The Bible, too has a store of subjects involving the nude from Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden to Lot and his daughters and Bathsheba.



Lucas Cranach
Adam and Eve (1528)

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The obvious potential for eroticism, was reduced by certain conventions in depicting the nude. The bodies, although adult, were hairless and had the look of polished marble rather than flesh – the look of a classical statue, as opposed to a “page 3” girl. This anodyne look, with a few subtle variations, lasted until the mid-19th Century.



Cavaliere d'Arpino
Perseus Rescuing Andromeda (1593 – 94)

There was a convention that allowed little boys to be painted completely naked and they are, frequently, as Cupid and Putti (winged cherubs). Little girls, however, have their lower abdomens covered by draperies. Sometimes adult females are draped too but the folds in the draperies often merely accentuate what is hidden.

The 17th Century ushers in a new aesthetic in Western painting. The dramatic light and shade of Caravaggio's art in Italy found its way to the North of Europe, via Utrecht artists who worked in Rome. Rembrandt was one who embraced this new realism. When he painted his mistress, Hendrikje Stoffels, as “Bathsheba at Her Bath”, she is very much a woman of flesh and blood. Rembrandt records her rather large feet and hands and slightly tubby torso. He also includes the lump in her left breast, which may have been the cause of her death, aged 39, but her death

may have been caused by the Plague, which killed thousands in Amsterdam in 1663. In any event, she is nothing like the classical ideal nude of a century earlier.



Rembrandt van Rijn
Bathsheba at Her Bath (1654)

With the painting of François Boucher in 18th Century Paris, we return to a notion of ideal beauty. Against a background of political and social turmoil, Boucher depicts a world where elegant and beautiful gods and goddesses float and frolic blissfully.



François Boucher
The Triumph of Venus (1740)

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In the 19th Century painters had a new and potentially devastating invention to contend with, photography. What could a painter do, that a photograph could not? The answer is, interpret the object in front of it, rather than merely record it, which is why, nearly 200 years after the invention of photography we still have war artists.

Édouard Manet's "Olympia", exhibited at The Paris Salon in 1865, is partly a return to the ideal, with Olympia's marmoreal body, but it is also a snapshot of the moment her maid arrives with a bunch of flowers.



Édouard Manet
Olympia (1863 – 65)

In England, three decades after Olympia, John William Godward is painting Campaspe as a living sculpture. She is not as pale as Olympia, but she is definitely statuesque and conventional, to conform with Victorian sensibilities. It is worth remembering that some Victorians draped the legs of their pianos, as legs were suggestive – of what I wonder? Furthermore, librarians separated books by male and female authors, lest they jostle against one another on the bookshelves – I think I know what they are getting at, the possibility of two books turning into a library.



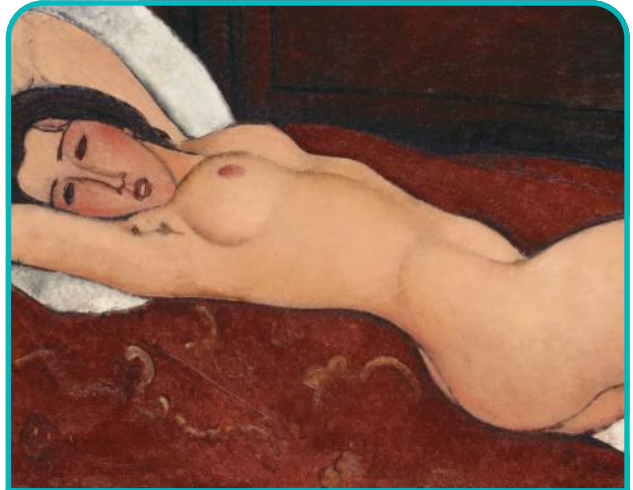
John William Godward
Study Of Campaspe (1896)

Now we come to the 20th Century, when, as we all know, the rule book is thrown out of the window. There is no norm. Whilst Amadeo Modigliani, is painting an ideal nude, inspired by Italian Renaissance painting, Picasso is producing Cubist nudes in strokes of muted grey and Egon Schiele is producing sexually explicit nudes, which still have the power to shock profoundly and are the subject of censorship in many parts of the world. I'm not going to illustrate one!

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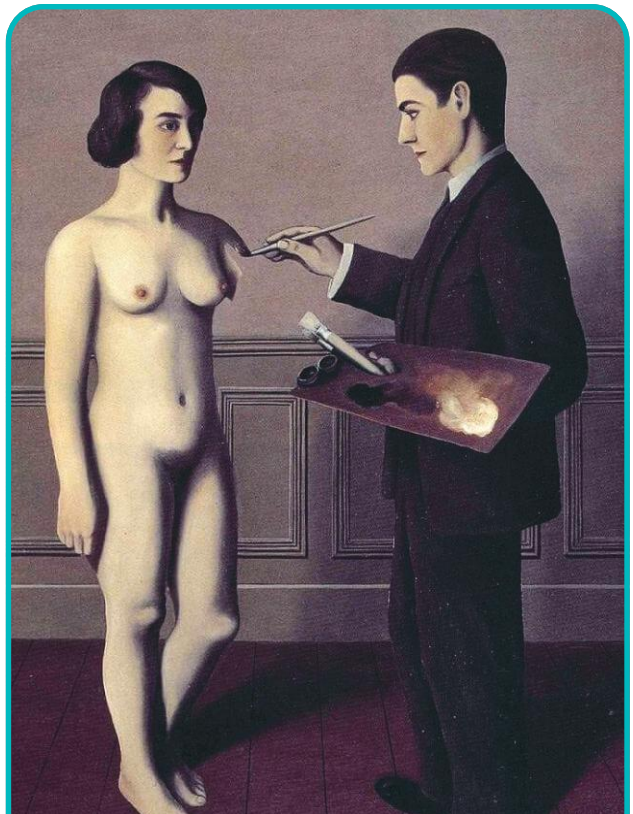


Pablo Picasso
Nude Woman (1910)



Amedeo Modigliani
Reclining Nude (1917)

Surrealism, of course, has its own take on the nude and Rene Magritte's "Attempting the Impossible" of 1928 has the artist wearing a brown suit painting a living female nude model in 3-D, standing in the same space that he occupies. It is a witty take on Art imitating Art. The model is little more than a painted statue.



Rene Magritte
Attempting The Impossible (1928)

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No Study of The Nude is complete without an in depth look at the work of Lucian Freud, a man obsessed with the nude, although he hated the word. In his maturity, he possessed a technique which uses thick impasto (paint) with light scumbles (like light washes) over the top to create a sense of the colour and texture of living flesh. Freud's sitters are as far removed from the ideal as it is possible to be. The men often appear vulnerable and awkward, as do many of his women.



Lucian Freud
Leigh Bowery (1991)



Lucian Freud
Benefits Supervisor Sleeping (1995)

Sue Tilley, the model for one of his most famous nude portraits, "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping", became a muse for him in the 1990s. The painting of her asleep on a sofa in Freud's studio is a masterpiece of observation, empathy and reportage. She is seen from above, lying on his sofa, and the sense of her volume and the space she occupies is breathtaking. She sold at Christie's for \$33.6M, which, at the time, was the world record for a living artist.

The Nude has provoked much thought and inspired the spilling of litres of ink over the centuries. The Guerilla Girls, a group of anonymous American female artists produced a poster of Ingres' "Grande Odalisque", a white-skinned female nude seen from behind, with a gorilla's head and in bold type posed the question: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" It went on to say "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female".

Through all the convulsions and twists that art has taken from the Renaissance, through Abstraction to the modern day, it is interesting to reflect that Life Classes, drawing the human body using a live model, still go on in every corner of the globe. There are three within a five mile radius of where I live ! To be able to draw the human form is clearly the starting point of all art.

World record prices at auction for the artists mentioned:

Lucas Cranach	£9.43M
Cavaliere d'Arpino	£325,000
Rembrandt van Rijn	£20.2M
François Boucher	\$2.4M
Édouard Manet	\$65.126M
John William Godward	£1.3M
Amadeo Modigliani	\$170M
Pablo Picasso	\$179M
Rene Magritte	£59.4M
Lucian Freud	\$86.2M

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