What About the Male Nude?

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In post-Renaissance western art the male nude appears less frequently as a subject than the female nude. This paper explores the role of the naked man in the history of art during this time frame. I attempt to understand by examining specific works of art from a variety of art movements and time periods with the male nude as the subject. Additionally, I seek to understand why the male nude fell out of favor, and how we as a society look at the male nude.

The female nude occupies an engaging and all-consuming portion within the history of art. From the Venus of Willendorf to the Venus de Milo to Titian’s Venus of Urbino to Ingres’ Grande Odalisque to Manet’s Olympia to Alice Neel’s Pregnant Maria. No doubt that the study of female imagery in art is fascinating and reveals much about society. Indeed, images of naked women are so intriguing that one can almost forget about another type of nude: the male nude.

The male nude occurs frequently in pre-Renaissance art, specifically in classical art. Even the novice art historian can enthusiastically name the Greek statues of kouros (youth) and the discobolus (discus-thrower). Then, in the Renaissance, we have Donatello’s David, which is acknowledged as the first freestanding nude since antiquity. All this is well and good, but what about the male nude after the Renaissance?

While seeking inspiration in the library I happened upon The Golden Age of Danish Painting. I flipped through and was surprised to find some 19th century paintings of naked men. The astonishment that I felt at the full frontal nude men captured my attention. Naked women have lost their shock power. We see them constantly on HBO, in films, magazines, and of course in art. So why was this painting of a naked Danish man from the 19th century so compelling to me? This paper aims to answer that question by exploring the role of the male nude in post-Renaissance art.

The Male Nude in Academic Study

The paintings of the nude men from The Golden Age of Danish Painting, also known as the inspiration for this project, turned out to be less exciting than I thought, although no less interesting. The paintings did not turn out to represent some unexplored eighteenth century Danish fascination with the male body as I had hoped. Rather, the nudes came from an academic setting.

During the sixteenth century, art academies started popping up all over Europe, and in the Renaissance, the study of the male nude became the foundation of the European art education1. Female models were uncommon, and nude male models turned out to be a useful excuse to keep women artists out of academy classes until the twentieth century.
The nude model was meant to bring together art and science. Students were able to study the “effects of lighting, the sequence of movements, and the play of the muscles, along with proportions and volumes.”

While the nude model can be an excellent tool for the study of art, the life drawing class can potentially produce a stiff or awkward figure. The model, after all, must hold the same pose for hours. The viewer may feel voyeuristic while staring at images of the Academic male nude, for the figure does not return the gaze. There are many surviving examples of academic male nude studies from different centuries, and different parts of the world.

Male Model Sitting on a Box, by Constantin Hansen is the image that first inspired me to think about the role of the male nude in western art. Male Model was painted in 1833 at the Royal Academy of Art. The model appears quite uncomfortable and stiff in his pose, and yet provides an appropriate challenge to the artist. Hansen has included details in the figure that make him stand out from the painterly background. Interesting to me is the lack of hair on the model. Does the model’s lack of pubic hair, chest hair, and armpit hair represent Hansen’s idealization of the male figure, or is the model just relatively hairless?

While fully nude males models were common in Europe, American academies tended to have stricter rules. In Jonathan Weinberg’s essay Stripped Bare but not Exposed, the Male Nude in American Art, the author shares an amusing story about Thomas Eakins as a teacher at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. During a life drawing class in 1886, Eakins ripped off the loincloth of the male model even though his students included women. Eakins was fired, but his act demonstrates his frustration surrounding the prudish approach to the male body. A year earlier, Eakins had painted Swimming Hole, based off a photograph of his male students romping by a water hole. In the photograph, the genitals of the figures are visible, but in the painting, Eakins obscures the penises either with shadows, or by turning the figures. It appears...
that Eakins became fed up with the charade and eventually revealed his true feelings about the absurdity of hiding the penis behind shadows or loincloths.

How does the nude male make us feel?
In the forward to *Nude Men from 1800 to the Present Day*, Austrian art historian Tobias G. Natter recounts a humorous story episode involving Michelangelo’s *David*. Supposedly, Queen Victoria was so shocked to see such “a blatant display of male nudity” at the opening of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, that the directors of the museum ordered a fig leaf to be clipped over the statue’s private parts. Pretty funny, right? The story might sound silly to us today because the male nude that we are accustomed to is the classical Greek or Roman statue, or the classical revival figures. We can so readily accept classical style images as art. They are as palatable as an image of the female nude. But imagine being confronted with other genres of naked men. How do images of naked men make people feel?

In society, there can be no doubt that the nude male is scarcer, and brings about different feelings than the nude female. Beth A. Eck of James Madison University conducted interviews with 45 people in order to better understand how heterosexual women and men react to nude images of both genders. The participants of the study consisted of 22 women, and 23 men, all around the age of 37, and mostly white and heterosexual. Eck writes that the prevalence of female nudes has influenced the way that both men and women perceive them. In other words, because images of naked women are so common in the West, we have the cultural and societal intuition to understand and discuss the nude female. For the heterosexual man, an image of a naked woman accepts his gaze, which makes the male viewer feel more masculine. When women see images of the female nude, they receive a lesson on the way a woman is supposed to look. Many of the women that Eck interviewed compared their own bodies to the bodies of the unclothed women. So, men and women both feel comfortable with images of nude females, although they respond differently.

The same cannot be said for the nude male. Eck explains that images of naked men are “less available for objectification.” Even when heterosexual women are given the opportunity to “gaze” at pictures of naked men, the author found that the viewers felt nervous, ashamed, uncomfortable, unsure, or found the images to be absurd. For heterosexual males, rather than enhancing their feelings of masculinity, looking at nude men can cause them to worry about their perceived heterosexuality. The men that Eck interviewed did not tend to compare their bodies to the men they were shown. Rather, the men either rejected the images, or emphasized their indifference (possibly to distance themselves from homosexuality). Eck found that it was simply much harder for both genders to talk about images of the male nude. It is no wonder that the nude male is more obscure than the female nude! We simply do not know what to make with him. But almost certainly our discomfort with the male nude, and the apparent lack of well known male nudes in post-Renaissance Western art is intertwined, and probably even cyclical.

So, perhaps we should explore why male nudes fell out of favor in the first place.

The Decline of the Male Nude
The decrease in male nudes within the western art historical perspective can be understood by the increase in imagery of the female nude during the nineteenth century Salons. In *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*, Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains that the male nude came to represent the outdated ideals of the Academy. The birth of modernism arguably occurred...
during the nineteenth century, and given that modernism represents the anti-Academy, it is understandable that artists began to grow weary of the Salon-friendly male nude narrative.

Solomon-Godeau goes on to suggest that while the male nudes exhibited at the Academy tended to be part of narratives, their nudity representative of heroism and the ideal man, the female nude became increasingly detached from story and developed into its own genre. For example, consider Ingres’ (1780-1867) paintings *Achilles Receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon* (1801) and *Grande Odalisque* (1814). In *Achilles*, the nude males are embedded in a narrative. Although their nudity might seem unnecessary to our contemporary eyes, the figures are still part of a story. In *Grande Odalisque*, the nude female occupies the vast majority of the picture plane, and rather than making her part of a narrative, Ingres paints her as the narrative. So, the female nude seems to have become so relevant that narrative is deemed unnecessary. While male figures need a reason to be naked, nude women require no explanation. As the female nude gained popularity as a subject, the male nude as part of narrative art did not simply vanish. What happened to the naked man in western art is what Solomon-Godeau refers to as “male trouble” and “a crisis in representation.” In other words, images of men, specifically male nudes, underwent a change.

**The Feminine Man**

The period in which the female nude steadily began to replace the male nude was approximately the thirty-year period between the French Revolution and the July Monarchy. Solomon-Godeau argues that the revolution, and counter-revolution caused a cultural transformation, which shifted gender ideologies. This “post-revolutionary crisis in masculinity” is represented in a multitude of images from well-known artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Before the female nude seemingly overpowered the male nude as a genre in western art, a more “feminine” male nude enjoyed a heyday. I use the term feminine to describe the typical connotations of femininity, though not the term feminine is not as relevant in this day and age. The lack of a better substitute for the word “feminine” is restrictive.

Let us return to Ingres’ painting, *Achilles receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon* as an example of nineteenth century imagery that harkens back to the Greco-Roman ideal of man. Actually, Solomon-
Godeau refers to this type of interaction as homosociality, which can be distinguished from homosexuality because the “relations between men are doubly charged, both along the vertical axis of hierarchy and the horizontal one of peer relations.” So, the interactions between the men in Achilles are distinguished by varied distributions of power, and also by a sense of male community. The only woman in the painting is practically hidden in a dark room on the left, but the feminine stances of the two naked men on the left part of the painting, as well as their silky white skin and rosy cheeks replace the need for reclining woman. The muscular man to the far right of Achilles dominates the other men both in physique and height. Ingres reveals a variety of masculine appeal, including the feminine masculine, which makes the female obsolete in the case of Achilles. The image celebrates male strength, and his power over women by omitting the female altogether. Ingres certainly did not create this array of idealized men in a vacuum. Why were artists inspired in the first place to celebrate the idealized man in favor of women?

The Romanticized Man
During the eighteenth century, the German art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) published a book that encouraged contemporary artists to model their work on the sculptures of Ancient Greece. Classical Greek sculptures represent an idealized man, balanced and free of emotion, so Neoclassicism was popularized. Neoclassical paintings, such as the aforementioned Achilles Receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon, emphasize the heroic, balanced, rational, and idealized man by emulating Ancient Greek figures.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, as a push against Neoclassicism, the art and literary movement called Romanticism came about. Romanticism rejected the idea of harmony and the ideal, and instead focused on nature, emotion, passion, and the inner self. Artists were able to express their deepest sensations of self, and their relationship to the world like never before. Needless to say, this movement affected artists’ relationship with the male nude. Now, the male nude could embody expression rather than represent balance, intellect, and perfection.

The French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) created male nude sculptures, which mark the shift away from Neoclassicism. Rodin’s figures are expressive and “create powerful evocations of human desire, despair, and passion.” His sculpture Adam: The Creation of Man, from 1880 represents a new understanding of human emotion and torment, absent from Neoclassical art. Adam points to the ground, with a look of sorrow, as if burdened by his ties to Earth. His sinuous musculature reminds us of his strength, but also of his mortality. Instead of the classical contrapposto pose, common in Classical Greek sculpture, Adam slouches, and recoils at the weight of the world. Rodin does not attempt to disguise the struggle of man, and instead emphasizes life’s inevitable torment. The acceptance of feeling and unrest probably goes hand in hand with the rise of the female nude, and the decline of the Academic male nude, since women are associated with irrationality, emotion, and mystery.

The Romanticized male nude is no doubt an exaggerated version the human condition, but is arguably more realistic than the idealized
Neoclassical male nude. Because while the intellectual and beautiful Neoclassical man fools us into thinking that we can exist without emotion, the twisted and expressive Romanticized male reminds us of the reality of being alive. Rodin’s sculptures must give us insight on the artist’s relationship with the world but the fact that his sculptures are not self-portraits reveals a distance between Rodin and his subjects. The self-portrait, or better yet, the nude self-portrait can provide excellent insight into an artist’s inner world.

A Different Sort of Man
While Solomon-Godeau argues that the crisis in masculinity began during the eighteenth century, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat writes that this crisis began in the late nineteenth century, when “we see the traditional concept of the rational, autonomous male slowly but surely fragmenting.” So, the idea of the independent, balanced, perfect male was an acceptable concept until the nineteenth century, until changes started to occur. Hammer-Tugendhat believes that the crisis in masculinity has roots in industrialization, the call for women’s rights, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and new branches of science, such as the study of sex.

The author goes on to write:

*Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud all showed, each in a different way, that man is not a rational, autonomous being, but is rather sexually and socially conditioned, and that since he is driven by his subconscious and by his desires, he cannot even be described as master of his own house. The “denaturing of man, meaning the removal of the causality of biology and sexual desire, and the blurring of the dividing line between normal and the sick, shattered the hegemonic understanding of the man’s role.”*

So, during the nineteenth century the role of the man was no longer understood due to further cultural and social shifts. Artists provided imagery that provided visual exploration of this concept.

The Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890-1918) was influenced by Gustave Klimt but developed a unique, wild, expressionistic style. Schiele was determined to create new and provocative work, and frequently painted nude portraits with erotic undertones (or perhaps overtones). Schiele often used himself as a model, and depicts himself in the throes of despair, vulnerability, and self-examination. In his nude self-portraits, Schiele explores “the power of sexuality questions of bodily identity, and carnal experience.” What better way to learn about a new identity in “manhood” than by tapping into one’s own soul?

In Schiele’s *Nude Self-Portrait* from 1910, the artist depicts himself full frontal, emaciated, and hairy, with no feet or hands, and his red eye mirrored by his nipples, navel, and penis. The image is in striking contrast to the calm and collected Neoclassical men, and even to Rodin’s emotional sculptures. Schiele goes in the direct opposite route of idealization, and instead abstracts himself to the point of the grotesque. The artist is tortured and intense as he attempts to grasp his inner self. Egon Schiele
completely broke away from the European tradition of the nude by attempting to capture the truth of his own psychology.

So far, the nude self-portrait appears to be an efficient way to depict one’s private turmoil, but this method is of course by no means the only way to give dimension to questions, desires, or societal shifts. Throughout the twentieth century, artists continued to use the male nude to give visual language to the changing world.

The Changing Man
During the 1960s, in postwar American society, the code of masculinity continued to change. In his article *Social Nudism, Masculinity, and the Male Nude in the Work of William Theo Brown and Wynn Chamberlain in the 1960s*, David McCarthy explains that these two artists offered alternative imagery of the male condition. During the twentieth century, an increasing culture of the free body increased the popularity of social nudism as a utopian concept.20 Nudist magazines provided imagery of the great freedom and fun that could be had as a nudist. These magazines depicted people relaxing, playing sports, and interacting with each other just like in a regular magazine, except that the people were entirely naked. The American artist William Theo Brown (1919-2012) used Scandinavian nudist magazines as inspiration for his paintings. McCarthy believes that Brown’s male nudes demonstrate a homoeroticism that was considered inappropriate (if actualized in real life) during the time that the artist produced the images.21 So, Brown painted male nudes interacting together in order to give visual language to his own homosexual desires. Because the bather as a subject has such history in western art, Brown was able to express his desires in a manner that could be deemed “appropriate.”

In Brown’s painting *Muscatine Diver*, from 1962-1963, the artist depicts two naked male bathers, both in motion (influenced by the magazines). The artist’s interest in painting nudes in the outdoors expresses his desire to reconnect the body to nature, and perhaps gain the viewer’s subconscious acceptance of the natural desires of homosexuality. McCarthy explains that Brown tried to illustrate the lifestyle that he believed in.

Similar to the “crisis in masculinity” that both Solomon-Godeau and Hammer-Tugendhat describe, the 1960s postwar society grappled with the evolving idea of manhood, and artists continued to attach imagery to their perceptions of themselves, and others as men. So far, we have only looked at images of nude men by other men! Surely, there must be another perspective on the nude male, besides from that of his own gender.

The Female Gaze
The idea of the gaze is most often associated with a male gaze directed towards a female. During the 1970s, feminist artists
adopted “representational strategies to challenge phallocentrism and the male gaze, illuminate female sexuality and eroticism, critique visual economies that limit women to heterosexual and maternal identities, and celebrate modes of existence that transcend patriarchy and white supremacy.”

Even just the works discussed in this paper demonstrate how western art and its history have been dominated by the white male. As previously discussed, the genre of the female nude is widespread, which brings us back to the essence of this paper, “What About the Male Nude?” Now we know that there have been male nudes in post-Renaissance art, but male artists generated all of them. So, what about male nudes created by female artists? Feminist artists addressed precisely this issue by creating images of naked men, so that the idea of the gaze might be shaken up.

Feminist artists such used the male nude to express erotic feelings in the same way that the female nude has been used. In *Sexual Imagery in Women’s Art*, Joan Semmel and April Kingsley describe female artists attention to the penis as a way to invite women to “demystify the male anatomy” and encourage the realities of sexual encounters. The artist Eunice Golden explains that the work was meant to celebrate sexuality, and that the images of naked men should not be confused with pornography. Golden believes that sexual art is political art, as it “challenges widely-held, age old, frequently distorted perceptions and systems about psycho-sexual problems, sociological attitudes, and economic precepts based on notions of propriety and property.” In other words, when examining feminist imagery of the male nude, we must realize the broad implications. A male nude painted by a woman artist creates an entirely different dialogue from a nude (male or female) by a male artist.

During the 1970s, Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010) explored the aforementioned role reversal by painting portraits of nude males. Semmel and Kingsley write that, “Sleigh’s attention to detail in her male portraits is like that of a woman stroking her lover’s body.” In *Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano*, the model poses in the classic style of the reclining female nude. In contrast to most of the male nudes I have examined, I find Paul Rosano to be refreshingly hairy. Sleigh has not attempted to idealize her subject, and instead appreciates every aspect of his body, from his curly mop of hair, to his under eye circles, to his unintimidating penis. The model appears willing, and yet like so many reclining female nudes, does not return the viewer’s (male or female) gaze.

**In Conclusion**

This paper in no way attempts to give a complete history of the post-Renaissance male nude, but instead aims to examine a handful of artists and their depictions of naked men over several centuries. The male nude in art can help give visual language to our perceptions of masculinity and femininity (both constructed concepts anyway) throughout time. Even just by acknowledging the terminology, “naked man” vs. “male nude” we can gain insight into our
relationship to this imagery. “Male nude” sounds subdued and associated with high art, while “naked man” sounds practically vulgar. I purposely scattered both terms throughout this paper, in order to help the reader (and myself) get over the fear of the naked man. Important art historian Kenneth Clark describes this divergence by explaining that the English language distinguishes the term naked as “deprived of our clothes, and the world implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carried, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtones.”2

My foray into the imagery of post-Renaissance male nudes has confirmed my suspicion that our relationship to the male nude is completely different from our relationship to the female nude, but still complex. The naked man in western art represents the ever-evolving ideal of manhood, as well as the actuality of existing as a man. Artists can use the male nude as a vessel to showcase their true selves, without actually admitting anything. Or, artists can create an idealized, if unrealistic version of manhood.

The most acceptable and widespread imagery of the male nude occurs in academic settings because studies of the human body are considered to be essential practice for the artist’s education. During the Neoclassical period, as the popularity of the male nude began to decline in favor of female nude imagery, a feminized man emerged, in response to the first crisis in masculinity. Then, the torment and mystery of life was acknowledged with the romanticized, emotional man in the sculptures of Rodin. During the twentieth century, Egon Schiele responded to a second, or perhaps continued crisis in masculinity by examining his psychological self as a grotesque nude body. Then, during the 1960s, William Theo Brown attempted to assign a visual language to his sexual preference and desire. Finally in the 1970s, feminist artists adopted the subject of the male nude as a way to question art and society’s gender politics.

In the end, it turns out there are many exceptional examples of the male nude in post-Renaissance western art. So, why is this male nude so underrepresented in, say, art history survey courses? I believe that there is a cycle in place. When imagery of naked men started to decline, and females became the preferred nude, society got used to naked women, and unaccustomed to naked men. As a result, the male body is mysterious and confusing to our culture. I would like to see our culture represent naked men as frequently as we do naked women as a way to remove the shock value of the nude male.

End Notes


2 Ibid.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


25 Semmel, 4.