

19

The Nude Figure in Renaissance Art

Thomas Martin

The establishment of the nude as an independent and vital subject in post-antique western art occurred during the Renaissance and is, along with the use of perspective, one of the most important markers differentiating Renaissance art from medieval art. One factor driving these innovations was the desire to portray a world that conforms to visual reality, where objects decrease in size as they move away from the picture plane, and where human anatomy is rigorously understood. Just as Renaissance artists employed perspective to portray naturalistic spaces, so they also populated those spaces with proportional, anatomically accurate figures and, during the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the occasions when those figures were depicted nude occurred more and more frequently. Naturalism, however, was but one motive for the increased use of the nude, and by the first half of the 1500s, the naked body had achieved a wider and more varied presence in art than had been the case in the Middle Ages or even in antiquity where, with few exceptions, its use was confined to male athletes, heroes, and divinities. This essay will focus on two issues: where is the nude used – i.e., what are its locations – and what are the meanings of its uses?

As it is today, the body in the Renaissance was multivalent. European Christian society believed that as a cause of lust and sin, the body was fearful and needed to be covered up. Yet at the same time it was the form the Savior, Jesus Christ, took during his lifetime, and the Catholic Church taught that it is in our very own earthly bodies that, after the last trumpet, we will spend eternity either in bliss in Heaven or in despair in Hell. The nude body thus incorporates various, even - contradictory, meanings in which gender is often a major factor (see chapter 6).¹

Such diversity of meaning already appears in two examples by the Pisano family: Nicola's statuette of *Strength* (or *Fortitude*; ca. 1255–59; Pisa Baptistry; <http://www.wga.hu>) and his son Giovanni's *Prudence* (also identified as *Temperance* or *Charity*; ca. 1302–10; Pisa Cathedral; <http://www.wga.hu>). While *Strength*, inspired by ancient Roman statues of the mythological hero Hercules, stands confidently in his total frontal nudity, *Prudence*, based on ancient statues of the “modest” Venus (*Venus pudica*), cowers while trying to cover herself. That the nude can have radically different meanings, indicating strength or weakness, is a dichotomy that reaches back to Mesopotamian art. The contrast between Nicola's powerful male *Strength* and Giovanni's fearful female *Prudence* confirms the role that gender plays in the representation of the unclothed body.

Medieval iconography includes a limited number of subjects where the depiction of nudity was accepted: Adam and Eve, the Baptism and the Passion of Jesus, the saints during their martyrdoms. In late medieval art, nakedness generally carried negative meanings and its most common location was in depictions of the damned in Last Judgment scenes, where the lost, naked souls exemplify what theologians condemned as *nuditas criminalis*: nudity as an avenue to lust, vanity, and sin. Nonetheless, a new development in positive nudity first appeared on a regular basis in Renaissance art in a religious context.

Sacred Nudity

That sacred context is the nudity of the Christ Child. Because Mary and her child is the most popular subject in Renaissance art, the convention of depicting baby Jesus naked played a key role in the development of the genre. Although traditional depictions of a clothed Christ Child continued during the fourteenth century, in many pictures from the same time period, baby Jesus has shed his garments and appears naked. Leo Steinberg rightly challenged the traditional, naturalistic - explanations for this change in the representation of the Christ Child, pointing instead to theological reasons, principally the focus on Christ's "humanation," that is, the privileging in late medieval and Renaissance theology of the doctrine of the Incarnation (that with the birth of Jesus Christ, God took human form), much of it fired by the Franciscan emphasis on Christ's humanity.² We the viewers, just like the Magi, want to be assured that God is also truly man, in all his members, and the revelation of his naked body proves his human nature. There was no attempt here to emulate antiquity, or to incorporate "realism" into art.

In Trecento Italy and elsewhere, the nude Christ Child appeared widely, primarily in small pictures made for domestic settings. During the Quattrocento, the motif emerged in monumental art; Masaccio's Pisa altarpiece (1426; National Gallery, London; <http://www.wga.hu>) is one example. Vasari reports that Masaccio had a special interest in the nude, and he regularly depicts a nude Christ Child. By the second half of the fifteenth century throughout Italy, a clothed baby Jesus, in either small-scale or monumental format, is relatively rare. Across the Alps, a nude baby Jesus was also standard in the art of both Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden.

By roughly 1450, then, the nude in the form of baby Jesus had an accepted, fixed place in southern and northern Renaissance art, both in public altarpieces as well as in domestic art, in both monumental and small-scale works. If the most sacred body in history can be shown completely nude, even exposing the genitals, could not other bodies be shown nude as well?

The meaning of the naked Baby Jesus is traditional: he embodies *nuditas virtualis*, symbolizing innocence and purity, like the youthful Isaac bound and awaiting sacrifice on Ghiberti's competition relief for the Baptistery doors in Florence (1401; Bargello, Florence; <http://www.wga.hu>), whose nudity manifests his vulnerability and helplessness. Allegorical figures also fall into this category; an example in small-scale media is the half-naked female posed next to the unicorn on the reverse of Pisanello's medal of Cecilia Gonzaga (1447): she represents innocence and chastity.

But these are isolated examples. Ghiberti never made an independent nude figure. Donatello was a more innovative artist; his bronze *David* (ca. 1440–60; [fig. 6.3](#)) remains the only totally nude sculptured David until Michelangelo's (1501–04). Nonetheless, the nude plays only a minor role in Donatello's art, nor did his *David* foster the making of large-scale nude statues.

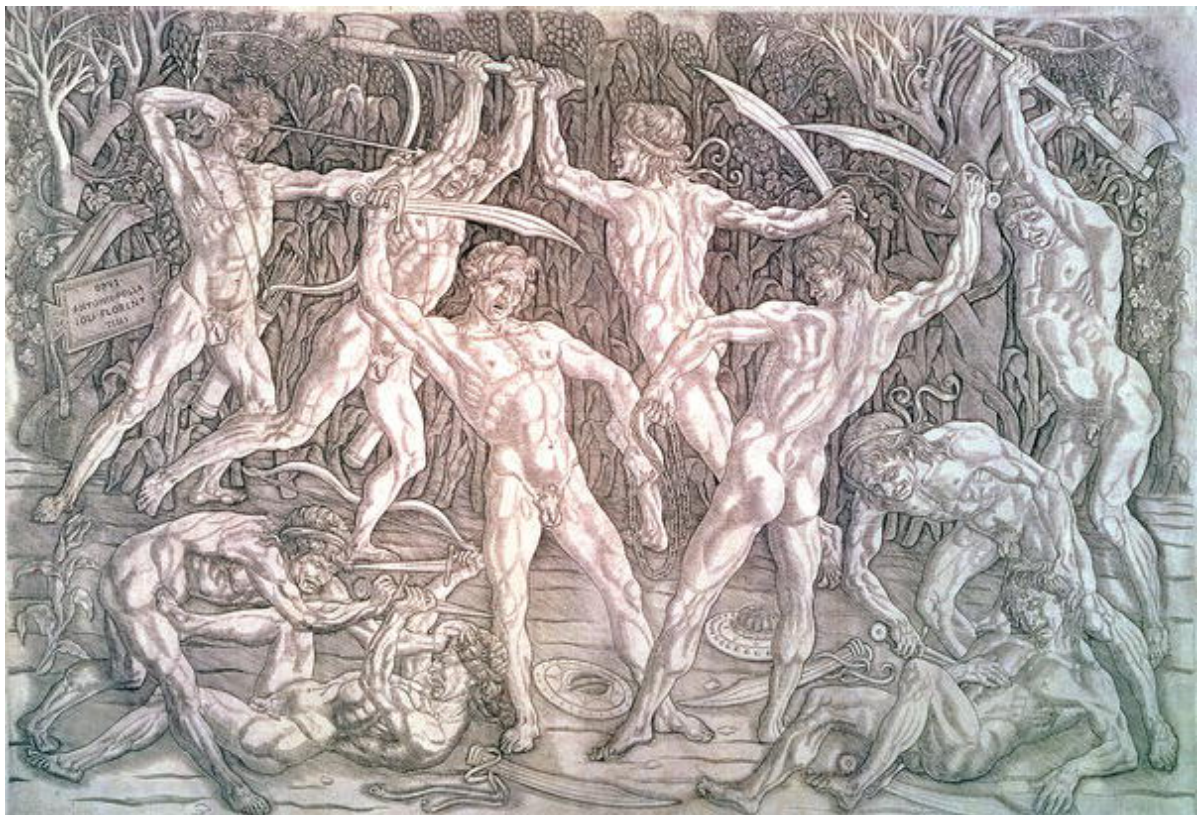
By 1450, there were still few locations for the nude besides the Christ Child and an occasional, usually allegorical figure. Things changed, however, in the second half of the century with the advent of Antonio Pollaiuolo (ca. 1432–98). As part of his program to treat the human figure in a newly dynamic and emotional way, he was the first artist to specialize in the nude, depicting the male nude in painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts.

His most important public painting was the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (ca. 1475; National Gallery, London; <http://www.wga.hu>), commissioned by the Pucci family for the Oratory of St. Sebastian in the Florentine church of the Santissima Annunziata. One of the largest altarpieces of its time, it features at its apex a St. Sebastian dressed only in a loincloth. Pollaiuolo's most

important private paintings were the three *Labors of Hercules* (ca. 1460?); now lost, they were the largest paintings in the Medici palace – like *St. Sebastian*, around nine feet high – and presumably resembled the two small-scale *Labors* by the artist that survive in the Uffizi and feature semi-naked men. His one surviving fresco, the *Dancing Nudes* (1470s?) from the Lanfredini villa in Arcetri outside Florence (like the Pucci, the Lanfredini were Medici allies), shows a unique subject of anonymous, nude, dancing men and women.

Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* (ca. 1470; [fig. 19.1](#)), his only print, is a landmark in Italian printmaking. Its large size (over a foot high and two feet wide), its medium (an engraving, not a humble woodcut), and its prominent signature (it is the very first signed Italian print), all demonstrate that the artist wanted to make a big splash in a medium barely fifty years old that was not yet known for its artistic sophistication; and he succeeded. Although the subject matter of this print remains unresolved, its wide dissemination shows the appeal of the nude and how, by the 1470s, it was already associated with antiquity.³ (The offspring of Pollaiuolo's invention of battling naked men – such as Jacopo de' Barbari's large-scale *Triumph of Men over Satyrs* [1490s] – demonstrate that nudity sometimes also signifies primitive humanity.) In another new medium, that of small bronzes, Pollaiuolo continued the association of nudity with antiquity in works such as the *Hercules and Antaeus* (1470s?), which depicts the two muscular male nudes in a death struggle.

FIGURE 19.1 Antonio Pollaiuolo, *The Battle of the Ten Nudes*, engraving, ca. 1470–75. Private collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.



These examples in different media carry notably different meanings. Like Isaac on Ghiberti's competition relief, *St. Sebastian* is another *nudus virtualis*, innocent and vulnerable. In *Hercules and Antaeus*, however, the heroic male body struggles and fights. As in antiquity, the nude is a focus of *agon*, or heroic struggle: the naked form embodies the struggle itself, and we see the inner strength of the hero's spirit in the outer tension and flexing of his muscles. The meaning is similar to that of Nicola Pisano's *Strength*, but now with intense emotion and pathos. In a Christian context, Hercules would be "the athlete of virtue."⁴

The *Dancing Nudes* of Arcetri, by contrast, are Arcadian, depicting a kind of rural, earthly paradise: they show the “joy of life,” whereas the *Battle of the Nudes* is brutal and violent.⁵ So Antonio Pollaiuolo not only broadened the locations of the nude to different media, but also widened the range of meanings and emotions that the unclothed body can convey.

Pollaiuolo's efforts were aided by patronage and technique. The Medici and their allies were important patrons for Pollaiuolo: did they actively encourage him to depict nudes or simply provide support for his own ambition to do so? Although this topic needs further research, they certainly did the latter and probably also the former (see chapter 1). And a new artistic practice, life drawing, provided technical support for the new approaches to the nude. Surviving drawings by Pollaiuolo demonstrate that he and his studio drew after the nude model in a programmatic way that had not been done before. The result was that not only did the nude appear more prominently in his art than previously, but the study and representation of the naked body was now also an integral part of the artist's training (see chapter 8).

New Media

The advent of the “artistic” print after 1450, however, was of far greater importance for the development and diffusion of the nude in Renaissance art than were Pollaiuolo's individual efforts (see chapter 12). Because making a print costs much less than making a painting (or statue), prints allowed artists to explore unusual subject matter unlikely to be commissioned for more monumental media. Prints hence became the place where the Renaissance artist, often constricted by patronal control, could exert his creative freedom and even invent his own subjects, as Pollaiuolo did in the *Battle of the Nudes*.

Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1431–1506) in Mantua responded quickly to Pollaiuolo's pioneering efforts. His three prints that depict non-religious subject matter, all from the early 1470s – the *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*, the *Bacchanal with Silenus*, and the *Battle of the Sea Gods* (the last sometimes interpreted as a satirical reply to Pollaiuolo; <http://www.wga.hu>) – share striking similarities with Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes*. All four are engravings in large format, demonstrating their intent to compete with paintings. Furthermore, all four are inventions by the artist and depict a naked cast of characters.

Significantly, these images by Pollaiuolo and Mantegna do not fit into the traditional, theological categories of *nuditas criminalis* or *nuditas virtualis*, showing that the artistic depiction of nudity had reached a new autonomy, usually through the evocation of antiquity. In a dialogue by Angelo Decembrio (ca. 1450s), Leonello d'Este, ruler of Ferrara, remarks more than once on how the greatest works of antiquity depict nude figures. Why? It is because the nude shows the artist's mastery of nature, which clothes would only obscure: “the artifice of Nature is supreme, no period fashions change it.”⁶ Renaissance artists sometimes pushed that legacy even further, depicting scenes from antiquity in which the characters are nude although, in antiquity, those characters would have been clothed.

The freedom to invent offered by the medium of prints allowed artists to explore and recreate antiquity, and to display their mastery of the naked human figure in ways that otherwise would have been difficult. Nudes set in the ancient world avoided the incongruity of depicting contemporary nudity, and a mythological/pagan setting also evoked a sexual freedom and oneness with nature conducive to the depiction of nudity. Perhaps the greatest statement of this kind is Raphael and Marcantonio Raimondi's engraved *Judgment of Paris* (ca. 1517–20; <http://www.wga.hu>), which, according to Vasari, “stunned” all of Rome. (Raphael used a relief in the Villa Medici as his chief source; in the ancient relief, the goddesses are clothed.)

Nudity quickly became the norm in the small bronze as well. Although the chronology of early bronzes is very approximate, several that are commonly dated between 1450 and 1500 depict naked figures. Bertoldo de' Giovanni, a member of Lorenzo de' Medici's circle, made several small bronzes of nudes. Here again, a Medici role in encouraging the revival of antiquity – and thus of the nude – seems probable.

Because prints and bronzes are small-scale media that a collector examines in the privacy of his or her *studiolo* (personal office), the demands of decorum are looser and the depiction of pagan, naked figures is safe from public scrutiny or censure. As Carlo Ginzburg has pointed out, there were two distinct “iconic circuits” during the Renaissance. One was public and cut across social classes: statues, frescoes, and paintings in churches and other public places. The second was private and restricted to the social elite: small paintings, gems, bronzes, and medals in homes of the wealthy and the educated.⁷

By the last third of the 1400s, then, the depiction of nudity had found new locations, uses, and meanings in Italian art. From this time comes the body type that still today reigns supreme in western visual culture (particularly in underwear ads): young and classically inspired, hence fit, and generically idealized. It can appear in various subjects and situations, not solely in those iconographically sanctioned by ecclesiastical tradition. The rise of the nude paralleled and accompanied the growing secularization of western art and the increasing importance of the secular patron⁸ (see chapter 1). Critics of this development were not wanting, however, for even humanists like Erasmus, in his *Dialogus Ciceronianus* (1528), excoriated the self-professed classical purists (“Ciceronians”) who want everything in the antique style.

The Netherlandish Fifteenth-Century Nude

The founder of northern Renaissance art, Jan van Eyck, vividly expressed his interest in the nude with the figures of Adam and Eve on the Ghent altarpiece (1426?; St. Bavo, Ghent; <http://www.wga.hu>). Although a nude Adam and Eve shown after the Fall is a traditional subject, their startling physicality is new, testifying to close study of actual models.

Also important is the gender difference. Whereas Adam's foot steps beyond the frame of his niche, Eve's hugs the border; though both of Adam's legs are visible, only Eve's front leg can be seen, making her pose more unstable; Adam's bone and muscle structure are well defined, while the surface of Eve's flesh is highlighted. Like the contrasts noted above between Nicola Pisano's *Strength* and Giovanni Pisano's *Prudence*, those between van Eyck's first man and first woman imply a concern with gender differences: men are active, women passive; men are strong, women beautiful.⁹

Van Eyck also explored the nude in secular settings. In 1456, Bartolomeo Fazio, a Neapolitan humanist, published a book about *Famous Men*, in which he describes a painting by van Eyck of a women's bathhouse. The painting's most wonderful feature, he states, was a mirror that revealed the back of one of the women, even though only her upper body was visible from the front.¹⁰ The *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434; National Gallery, London; <http://www.wga.hu>) confirms van Eyck's special affinity for mirrors that not only proclaim the mimetic power of the artist but also show how the art of painting itself mirrors reality. The mirror in the bathhouse picture must have functioned in a similar way. It is lost, but a copy survives of another lost painting by van Eyck of a nude.

The copy, called *Woman at Her Toilet* (Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA; http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUAM:49152_mddl), shows a frontally nude woman in a domestic interior, accompanied by a clothed woman on the right. The nude woman holds a washcloth over her genitals with her left hand, while her right hand reaches for a wash basin on her right. A convex mirror, like the one in the *Arnolfini Wedding*, hangs on the window above the basin and reflects both women. An important issue here is the relationship between viewer and subject. One of the most powerful effects of perspective is that the viewer can seem to

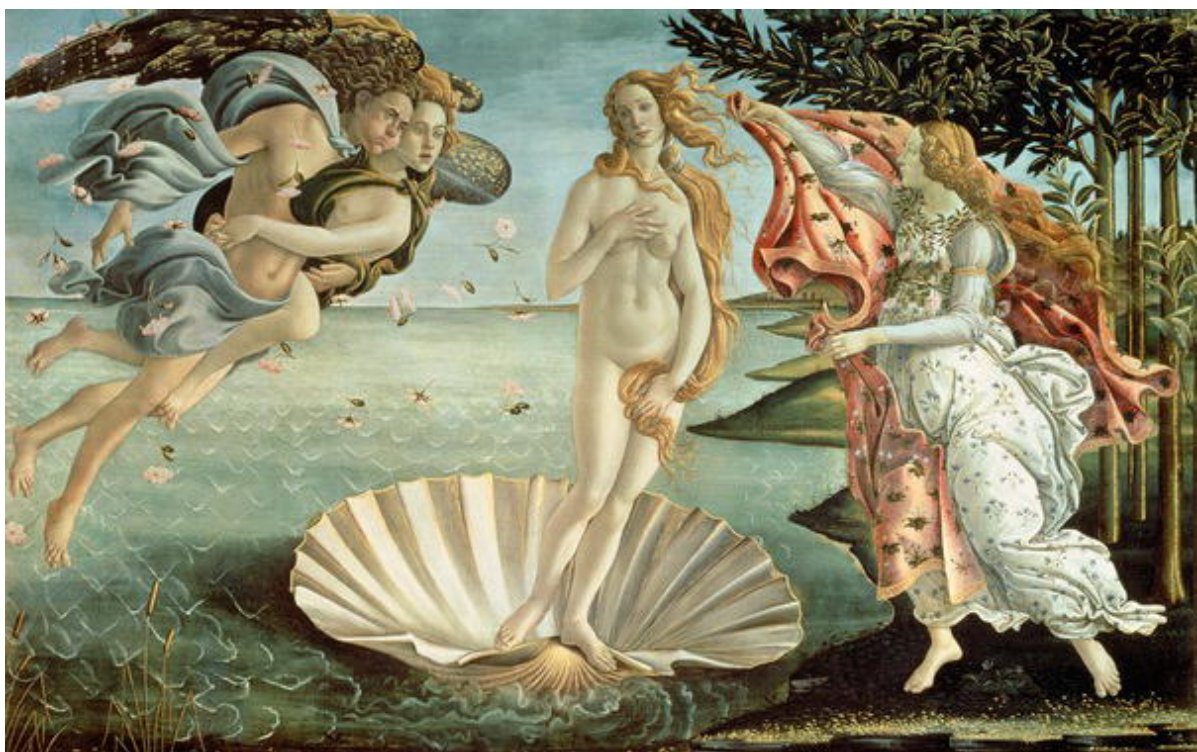
be placed in the space of the picture. Just as the viewer witnesses the *Arnolfini Wedding* by being in the same room as its occupants, so is the viewer present in the *Woman at Her Toilet*. That the viewer is a voyeur is inherent in the very nature of representational, naturalistic art. When, however, does the voyeurism become manipulative or exploitative? Such issues have been raised and explored only in the last fifty years, especially in the work of feminist critics. Van Eyck's *Woman at Her Toilet* could be considered an early example of what has been called the male gaze: a painting commissioned by a man in which the patron gets to see, and implicitly to possess, a naked woman exposed to his view (see chapter 6).

In most northern art of the 1400s, the location of the nude remains in traditional, religious subjects. In medieval art, however, the bathhouse or fountain of youth was already a secular category where sex and eroticism ruled. Van Eyck's *Woman at Her Toilet* comes out of this tradition, with the innovation that whereas earlier bathhouse images always showed men and women cavorting together, his picture isolates the female nude. Indeed, van Eyck's pictures and the emulation they inspired were one of the factors leading to the depiction of the female nude in Italian art.¹¹

The Female Nude in Italy

In Italy, the focus on the male nude spearheaded by Pollaiuolo shifted to a new attention to the female nude. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1480 s?; [fig. 19.2](#)) with its centralized, frontal, almost life-size nude goddess is one example. Its subject derives from verses in the *Stanze* by the Florentine humanist Angelo Poliziano that describe a relief on the doors of the palace of Venus depicting the new-born goddess of love and beauty arriving on the shore of Cyprus. Hence the nudity is appropriate to the subject: Venus was born naked and then clothed by nymphs on her arrival at Cyprus. She also conforms to the established convention that antiquity equals nudity, reinforced by the derivation of her pose from the ancient statue known as the "modest" Venus (*Venus pudica*).

FIGURE 19.2 Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1480s. Uffizi, Florence. Photo Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.



But while Botticelli's original undoubtedly had allegorical meaning, such as the birth of beauty in the world, it spawned variations with clearly different purposes. Three pictures survive from Botticelli's workshop (there surely were many more) that lift the figure of Venus out of any context and isolate her against a plain black background.¹² Shorn of narrative trappings as well as her clothing, the figure here is not Venus but an anonymous, beautiful, naked woman, presented in an openly erotic way. Such pictures must have been what Vasari was talking about when he noted the many images of naked women ("femmine ignude assai") produced by Botticelli.¹³ That their purpose was for a market in erotica is clear not only from the images themselves but also from how they were made. In the variants in Berlin and Turin, the contours of the body of "Venus" are identical from the neck downwards, and match the contours of their source figure in the *Birth of Venus*, indicating that a cartoon (or stencil) was used, i.e., these variants were meant to be reproduced easily, indicating that demand for them was high.

These variants are the origin of the standing, isolated female nude, further examples of which are seen in the "Venuses" by Lorenzo di Credi (early 1500s?; Uffizi, Florence; <http://www.wga.hu>) and Brescianino (1520s?; Borghese Gallery, Rome; <http://www.wga.hu>). Even though the works just mentioned seem to have been made for the titillation of the male patron, they differ in significant ways. The pictures from Botticelli's workshop and Brescianino show idealized, generic nobodies, whereas Credi's figure bears individualized features clearly taken from a model. So even in pictures seemingly made for the same market and belonging to the same genre, the approach can differ significantly. Hence, caution should be observed before lumping such images simplistically into the same category, and interpreting them in an identical way, especially when, as is usually the case, we know nothing about the commissions (or dates) of these works.

The female nude also came to prominence in Venice at the beginning of the 1500s, spearheaded by Giorgione (ca. 1478–1510). Despite the attributional problems around this artist's oeuvre, nudity or partial nudity appears in four of the very few works universally given to him: the *Laura* (1506), the *Tempest* (1506?), the ruined frescoes for the Fondaco dei Tedeschi (1507–08), and the *Sleeping Venus* (1510?; Gemäldegalerie, Dresden; <http://www.wga.hu>). Giorgione's special interest in the nude led to innovations, the most important of which is the *Sleeping Venus* (probably finished by Titian) where he invented the reclining female nude in a landscape.¹⁴

Her total nudity, her passivity in relation to the viewer, her identification with nature, have all spawned numerous important legacies in art and in gender typologies. While the *Sleeping Venus* may have been commissioned for the 1507 marriage of Gerolamo Marcello, variants with different meanings appeared quickly, such as Palma Vecchio's *Venus* (ca. 1520s; Gemäldegalerie, Dresden; <http://www.wga.hu>). While Giorgione's *Venus* was originally accompanied by Cupid (painted out of the right corner in the 1830s), and lies on splendid satins as befits a goddess, Palma's "Venus" is a mortal woman who has gone into the woods and taken her clothes off; she clearly lies on the garment she has just removed and looks out at the viewer. The sequence of events is like that seen with the *Birth of Venus*: the custom-made example provides the model for the variants fashioned for different purposes and aimed at a broader market. Additional eroticization of Giorgione's model appears when the nude is taken out of the landscape and placed in her bedroom; this happened in 1538 with Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, the interpretation of which is much contested ([fig. 6.2](#)).¹⁵

Overtly erotic female nudity was furthered in Venice (and elsewhere) in the early sixteenth century with the appearance of the so-called "courtesan portrait" that frequently featured nude, or partially nude, women. An early example is Giorgione's *Laura* who bares her right breast. It is unclear whether the Venetian images spawned by *Laura* relate to the most influential example of this type, which was an unfinished work by Leonardo, now known only through copies: a portrait of Giuliano de' Medici's mistress shown topless in a pose and format derived from the *Mona Lisa*. Because Leonardo took this painting to France at the end of his life, it provided the model for the genre, particularly associated with the School of Fontainebleau, of

the nude woman in her bath, seen half-length. A significant example is François Clouet's *Woman in Her Bath* (ca. 1570; National Gallery of Art, Washington; <http://www.wga.hu>). Similar images were produced in Rome as evidenced by Raphael's *Fornarina* (1518–19). Zerner has given the most thoughtful treatment of this subject, concluding that, at least in France, the genre seems confined to women who were royal mistresses, and hence was “reserved for very particular circumstances.”¹⁶

Nude Portraits

Most of these females in the “courtesan” pictures bear features that are so generic – and often so similar – that it seems unlikely that they depict historical people. Nonetheless, there are some clearly identifiable nude portraits in the Renaissance that yet again demonstrate how varied the meaning of bare flesh can be.

Nude portraits first appear in medals, in emulation of ancient numismatic practice; the earliest depicts the profile and bust of Francesco II Carrara of Padua (ca. 1390), whose shoulders are bare, just like those of the Emperor Vitellius in its ancient model. The intent is straightforward: to appropriate imagery from the past, thereby investing the modern-day rulers with an aura of imperial *romanitas*. Similar appropriation of the glories of antiquity was again the goal when artists like Giovanni Boldù (1458) and Donato Bramante (1505) depicted themselves on medals as if nude. Andrea Guacialoti's medal of Bishop Niccolo Palmieri (1467) aims at a different meaning, as shown by the verse from the book of Job that encircles his profile: “Naked came I from my mother's womb and naked will I return,” i.e., the emphasis is on the humility of the sitter before God rather than on appropriation of secular vainglory.¹⁷

Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* relates that in ancient Rome a portrait sometimes depicted a person “as” someone else, a practice followed in the Renaissance; Bronzino's *Cosimo I as Orpheus* (ca. 1537–39) and *Andrea Doria as Neptune* (1530s–40s) are examples. Because the bodies in both of the above cases are muscular and complimentary (Cosimo's is based on the Hellenistic marble *Belvedere Torso*), the purpose is apparently to honor the sitter by idealizing his body. The same approach governs Andrea Riccio's reliefs from the tomb of Marcantonio and Girolamo Della Torre (ca. 1516–21; Louvre, Paris; <http://www.lesing-photo.com/search.asp?a=I&kw=andrea riccio&l=E&m=0&p=2&ipp=6>). In *Girolamo Taken Ill* and *The Death of Girolamo*, the subject's splendidly nude body is clearly based on classical examples. Many courtesan/mistress portraits also display perfect bodies, raising the possibility that their intent might also have been honorific, not simply airbrushing a female body into objectification.

Once again, things were different in the north. Albrecht Dürer made three drawings of himself nude, none of which show him with a glorious physique. Matthäus Schwarz, chief bookkeeper for the Fugger banking family in Augsburg, decided to include in his *Book of Costumes* a nude portrait of himself seen from both front and back along with various clothed portraits; the illuminations are by Narcissus Renner (Herzog-Anton-Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig; <http://www.mediafire.com/?cbo3krr9x54urn>). Both views of Schwarz show a distinctly unidealized body, and the exact date of July 1, 1526 appearing on the image (like those on some van Eyck portraits) implies that it was meant to be documentarily accurate. In these examples, nudity equals truth and honesty, as it does metaphorically at the beginning of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, where the French writer claims he would gladly depict himself naked with all his faults.¹⁸

The mortality and even the destruction of the human body are not the usual focus of nudes, or of portraits, yet that is what the northern European mode of funerary sculpture called the *transi* emphasizes, in which the deceased is shown on his or her tomb as dead and decaying. Starting in the second half of the fourteenth century, such images appear on numerous tombs in England, France, and Germany; the type is rare in Italy. Although sometimes the corpses appear still wrapped in their shrouds,

others are nude. Panofsky connected the rise of this phenomenon to the “general preoccupation with the macabre” seen all over Europe after the Black Death of 1348; he also coined the happy phrase “double-decker” tomb to identify the monuments where a *transi* contrasts with an image of the deceased as still alive.¹⁹ In Antonio and Giovanni Giusti’s tomb of Louis XII of France and Anne of Brittany in the royal funeral chapel at St. Denis (1515–31; <http://commons.wikimedia.org>), the king and queen appear on top of the monument, kneeling before prayer benches as if alive. Below, they lie as *transis*, naked, dead, with their torsos sewn back up after having been cut open to remove their hearts and intestines. Death is the great equalizer: in *transi* figures there is no visual distinction between genders.

Michelangelo

No Renaissance artist is more closely identified with the naked human body than Michelangelo, whose preoccupation with the genre, coupled with his immense prestige, fostered greater acceptance of and support for the depiction of the nude, particularly in sculpture. His individual style, which favored highly muscular types, was also widely imitated and often literally quoted. During the sixteenth century, the production of nudes significantly increased overall as artists and patrons strove to emulate Michelangelo and his oeuvre.

In the Vatican *Pietà* (1498–1500) the representation of the nude is traditional: Jesus is the suffering *nudus virtualis*, and Michelangelo’s unrealistic presentation of his body as virtually unmarked by crucifixion further underscores his innocence. The iconography of the seventeen-foot-tall *David* (1501–04; Accademia, Florence; <http://www.wga.hu>) is also traditional, that of the athlete of virtue, where the perfection of the hero’s body visualizes his spiritual perfection. The unprecedented scale of the *David*, however, breaks new ground. Monumental sculpture is the realm of power and authority, concepts usually problematic to reconcile with the exposure of total nudity and the shame so often attached to it. Michelangelo supposedly once said:

And who is so barbarous as not to understand that the foot of a man is nobler than his shoe, and his skin nobler than that of the sheep with which he is clothed, and not to be able to estimate the worth and degree of each thing accordingly?²⁰

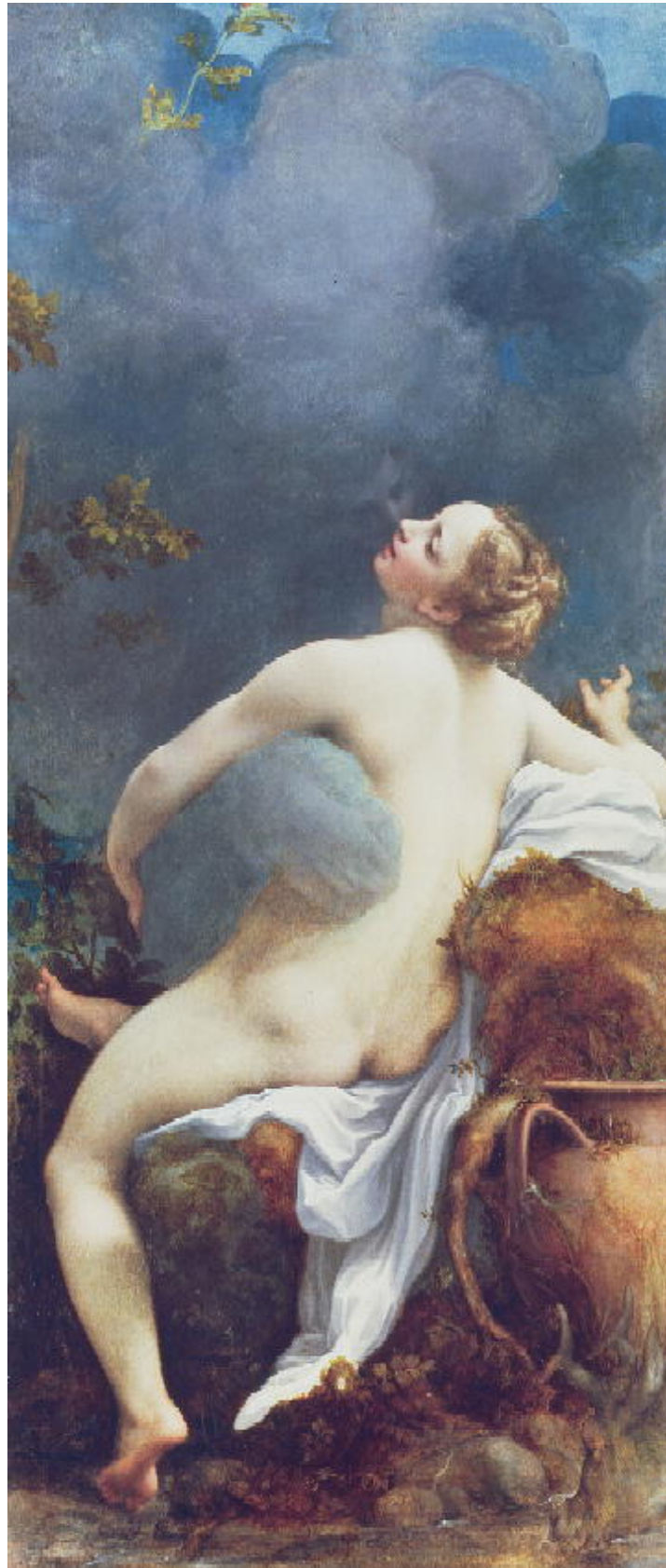
That Michelangelo considered nudity inherently honorific – because the human body is God’s greatest creation – is proclaimed by the sheer scale of the *David*, giving rise not only to the numerous other nude “giants” that later sculptors would create (Bartolommeo Ammannati, Giambologna, Baccio Bandinelli, Benvenuto Cellini) but also to the legitimization of monumental nudity in artworks in public places. That this nudity was too much for popular taste, however, was evidenced by the girdle-cum-loincloth later placed on the statue.²¹

The nude had special significance for Michelangelo, but often its exact meaning is hard to pin down: witness the still enigmatic male nudes in the background of the *Doni Tondo* (ca. 1503; Uffizi, Florence; <http://www.wga.hu>), who remain strangely unattached, both spatially and emotionally, to the foreground figures. Something similar occurs in the Sistine ceiling (1508–12), where the painted nudes rival in monumentality the sculptured gigantism of the *David*. The nudity in the narrative scenes from Genesis is iconographically traditional. But the *ignudi* (the male nudes at each corner of the frames of the narrative scenes) are like the background figures in the *Doni Tondo*: detached from their surroundings and hard to assign specific meaning; the most accepted interpretation is that they are wingless angels.²² Yet their titanic physiques and complicated poses gave additional life to the genre of the nude. Notably, there was little outcry over this extensive nudity in the chapel of the pope, unlike the later outcry over the *Last Judgment*. Rather, the power of Michelangelo’s new figural language was quickly emulated by Raphael, Titian, and many others.

Rome during the reigns of Julius II, Leo X, and Clement VII (1503–34), up to the Sack of Rome in 1527, witnessed an efflorescence of the nude: Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel, Raphael at the Farnesina (Agostino Chigi's then-suburban villa), and, most influential of all, Raphael and Marcantonio Raimondi in partnership diffusing the nude figure via prints. These years also saw the rediscovery of ancient sculptures such as the Laocoön, which, with its highly emotional depiction of the Trojan priest and his two sons attacked by snakes, helped forge new explorations of the suffering, heroic nude.

It was in this very same atmosphere and period, however, that the scandal of the *Modi* erupted. A set of sixteen engravings published in Rome by Marcantonio Raimondi based on drawings by Giulio Romano, the *Modi* depict a naked heterosexual couple in the various “modes” of sexual intercourse (ca. 1524). In a later edition (ca. 1527), each of the images was accompanied by a sonnet by Pietro Aretino. Erotic prints were nothing new, but they usually depicted classical subjects. No mythological window-dressing appeared in the *Modi*, however. Although the engravings apparently sold like the proverbial hotcakes, Pope Clement VII was not amused: Marcantonio was thrown in jail (Giulio Romano had already left Rome to join the Gonzaga court in Mantua) and the images themselves were destroyed whenever possible (no complete set survives; a single copy of the edition with Aretino's sonnets exists). Presumably what crossed the line here was the encyclopedic, explicit nature of the series, and their origin in the holy city of Rome itself. The body types employed for the couple were the traditional, classically-inspired physiques already standard in Renaissance art. New, however, are their attitudes: while their faces remain relatively impassive, their bodies engage in mutual enjoyment and pleasure where, contrary to the sexual expectations of the time, the woman is as active as her male partner.^{[23](#)}

FIGURE 19.3 Correggio, *Jupiter and Io*, early 1530s. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The Bridgeman Art Library.



Despite the official condemnation of the *Modi*, demand for such images – and the economics of the print trade – prompted a similar enterprise shortly afterwards, with the publication of twenty prints showing the *Loves of the Gods* based on drawings by

Rosso Fiorentino and Perino del Vaga, engraved by Jacopo Caraglio (ca. 1527). The authors of the *Loves* learned from their predecessors' mistakes and avoided censure by making three fundamental changes: the characters depicted are mythological, not mortal; sexual activity is only suggested, not depicted; and the focus is on female nudity.

The emphasis on female over male nudity participates in the still-prevailing double standard in western culture where, for instance, female frontal nudity in films is rated R whereas male frontal nudity receives an X. In Renaissance art, this issue forms part of the phenomenon that Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat has designated "the disappearance of the man from erotic images," noting how, during the course of the sixteenth century, more and more images depict subjects such as the Elders looking at nude Susanna, or King David looking at nude Bathsheba. Instead of interacting with the female, the male is reduced to a passive role as voyeur.²⁴

The *Loves of the Gods* thus provided the model for erotic images in the later sixteenth century, a model best seen in Correggio and Titian. We see it in the former's *Jupiter and Io* (early 1530s; [fig. 19.3](#)), where the nude Io dominates the picture as opposed to her literally nebulous male partner, who appears as a cloud with only his face and right hand indistinctly visible. Titian's (and his workshop's) many depictions of a nude "Venus" ogled by a clothed male lutenist or organist slavishly follow the model: the man in the picture demonstrates the activity the male viewer is to perform. Only in works like Titian's *Danae* (1554; Capodimonte, Naples; <http://www.wga.hu>) does the figure possess an individuality that makes her stand out from the rest of the production. Nonetheless, she is a mythological character, sexual activity is only suggested, and the entire focus of the picture is her exposed, unclothed flesh.

The Female Nude in Sixteenth-Century Northern Europe

Although the male or female nude rarely appeared in the north during the 1400s even within traditional iconographical limits, the situation changed dramatically in the sixteenth century with a veritable outburst of northern nudes, starting with those by Albrecht Dürer. When he entered the scene, a new tradition of the nude already existed, laid down by the Italian pioneers. By the last quarter of the fifteenth century, everyone knew that a "great" modern artist was supposed to do nudes (like the ancient Apelles). Accordingly, Dürer copied copies of drawings of nudes by Pollaiuolo and of the *Battle of the Sea Gods* engraving by Mantegna. The revolution in imagery brought about by the print, plus its availability for the depiction of mythological scenes featuring a naked cast of characters, was central for him. Nonetheless, his iconographical use of the nude in engravings such as *The Dream of the Doctor* (1497–99) is solidly traditional: the naked woman functions moralistically as temptress.

His major statement in the genre is the 1504 engraving of *Adam and Eve* (<http://www.wga.hu>). Just as the *cartellino*, or small signature plaque, in its upper-left corner seems a direct reply to the one in Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes*, so does Dürer seem to have wanted this print to publicize that he was a master of the nude, the equal of Pollaiuolo or any other Italian artist. He succeeded and blazed a trail for northern artists (such as Jan Gossart, Lucas van Leyden, Martin van Heemskerck, and Frans Floris) to depict Italianate, classicizing nudes.

But critiques of Dürer soon appeared. An especially strong one is in Hans Baldung Grien's *Fall of Man* (1511; <http://commons.wikimedia.org>), a chiaroscuro woodcut where, it has been argued, the Fall is seen as an openly erotic act for the very first time in art. Dürer's Adam and Eve do not even touch each other, whereas in Baldung's print, Adam cups Eve's breast as he reaches

for the apple: sin and sex are hand-in-breast.²⁵ Just as the chasteness of Dürer's approach is gone, so are his body types, with Baldung substituting much more realistic bodies for Dürer's derivations from idealized ancient statuary.

In the previous year, 1510, Baldung had made another radical innovation with his chiaroscuro woodcut *Witches' Sabbath* (fig. 19.4), his first image of witches (a subject almost unknown before 1500). The various European witch crazes were themselves as misogynistic as Baldung's image, which shows the power of women (like Eve) to control men, and the nudity of the witches, along with their awkward poses, demonstrates how they belong not to the civilized world but to feral, uncontrollable nature. Female nudity is unambiguously identical with sin and evil in Baldung's work and the figures themselves are not comely, but ugly.

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) likewise took a non-Italianate approach. From the mid-1520s on, he specialized in mythological and biblical nudes for (and beyond) a circle of patrons grouped around the faculty at the University of Wittenberg. There survive today twenty-seven versions of his *Cupid Complaining to Venus* and fifty versions (!) of his *Adam and Eve*. The sheer extent of production confirms what the mechanistic technique of the pictures themselves indicates: they were produced in the workshop from stencils. Like the pictures from Botticelli's workshop isolating Venus, they were reproduced quickly to supply the large demand for them. The figural type – boneless, elongated, with small high breasts and a smallish head – is a formula that deliberately rejects the classically based body type in Italian art.

FIGURE 19.4 Hans Baldung Grien, *Witches' Sabbath*, chiaroscuro woodcut, 1511. The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.



Susan Foister has characterized the vast appeal of Cranach's *Adam and Eve*: "The portrayal of Eve inevitably offered the opportunity for the male viewer to enjoy the depiction of female nudity while deploring the ability of women to lead men astray from the path of Christian virtue."²⁶ Cranach's nudes indeed convey a double-edged sexism: they cynically exploit female nudity, being produced for a market in erotica under a veneer of moral righteousness (often supplied by a moralizing inscription).²⁷

The Scandal of the *Last Judgment*

Although the influence of the Catholic Reformation on art and artists has often been exaggerated, the "scandal" of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1534–41; Sistine Chapel, Vatican City; <http://www.wga.hu>) demonstrates the negative view taken by the Catholic Church toward nudity in art in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, which had already provided criticism of its own against images in general. Less than a month after the fresco was unveiled on October 31, 1541, a letter already recorded the principal criticism against it, "that it is not good to have nudes displaying themselves in such a place."²⁸ The outcry was still raging ten years later when, in 1551, a Dominican friar published an essay in which he commented that "it is most indecent to see all these nudities everywhere, on the altars and in the chapel of God."²⁹ In short, many felt that Michelangelo had violated accepted norms of decorum with the extensive nudity in the fresco. In 1566, after Michelangelo's death, Daniele da Volterra was commissioned to cover up the genitals of several figures in the frescoes, and even to change some of the poses.

Like the *Modi* in the 1520s – but in a very different context – Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* exceeded the public's comfort level with nudity in art, and negative views came to the foreground. As in an earlier puritanical episode under the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola in Florence in the 1490s, some artists felt penitent. The most notable was the Florentine sculptor Bartolomeo Ammannati (1511–92), who published two letters expressing his regret for having devoted so much time to nudes. In August 1582, he pleaded with his brother artists in the Accademia del Disegno "not to fall into the errors and mistakes into which I have fallen in my work by making many of my statues nude and undraped," and in 1590 he requested that the Grand Duke Ferdinand I no longer allow nudes to be painted or sculpted, and that those already made should be covered up or taken away.³⁰

Conclusion

As with Savonarola, however, the Catholic Reformation had only a short-lived effect. Mythological nudes in particular remained plentiful and public, as evidenced by Giambologna's *Neptune Fountain* (1566) in the main square of Bologna and by Benvenuto Cellini's statue of *Perseus* in Florence (1545–54); both are descendants of the heroic, muscular male nude pioneered by Pollaiuolo and canonized by Michelangelo. In the world of prints, explicit images continued apace. Although Agostino Carracci (1557–1602) was supposedly chided during the 1590s by Pope Clement VIII for his lascivious engravings, no action was taken against him or his production.

The main reason the nude continued despite opposition from the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) was that already by 1500, the nude was an established genre in the art world, one to be aspired to by ambitious artists, and mastery of the nude

figure was expected from any competent artist. It carried a variety of meanings that artists and patrons had grown to expect: nostalgia for a lost ancient world of innocent oneness with nature; erotic thrill; muscular power signifying virtue; freedom from modern conventions. And the role of Michelangelo cannot be underestimated: by the sheer power of his art as well as by the authority of his position as “il divino Michelangelo,” i.e., the greatest artist in the world, he had enshrined the nude human figure as the most noble subject in art, and so it remained.

A second reason is that drawing after the nude model had become institutionalized in the education of artists. Pollaiuolo started this practice, and the Carracci family formalized it, making drawing after the nude model the basis for academic art instruction, adopted by the Roman Academy and then, still more influentially, by the Paris Academy. Even with the eclipse of representational art in the west, most art schools still offer life-drawing classes today.

The primary legacy of the Renaissance nude was the naturalistic yet idealized body that dominated later European art. In the seventeenth century, both Bernini and Rubens, for example, glorified the body, while being careful not to expose the genitals. It might be argued that in this sense, the Catholic Reformation won: although the nude body was not puritanically banished, although art schools and academies taught that anatomy must be thoroughly understood, the body that continually appeared in art was one refined away from particularity and individuality. That idealized body continued its hold on European art until, after Neoclassicism, new critiques of it were raised first by Romanticism, then Realism, then Modernism.

Notes

[1](#) Panofsky, *Iconology*, 154–60.

[2](#) Steinberg, *Sexuality*, 9–34.

[3](#) See Emison, “Word,” and also Joseph Manca, “Passion and Primitivism in Antonio Pollaiuolo’s Battle of Naked Men,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 20 (2001): 28–36.

[4](#) Eisler, “Athlete,” 82–97.

[5](#) Emison, “Word,” 264.

[6](#) Baxandall, “Dialogue,” 314.

[7](#) Ginzburg, “Titian,” 26.

[8](#) See Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[9](#) Hammer-Tugendhat, “Jan van Eyck,” 78–81.

[10](#) Wolfgang Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art, 1400–1600: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 5.

[11](#) Paula Nuttall, “Jan van Eyck’s Paintings in Italy,” in *Investigating Jan van Eyck*, ed. Susan Foister et al. (Turnhout, NL: Brepols, 2000), 170–71. For bathhouse imagery, see Hammer-Tugendhat, “Jan van Eyck,” 85–88.

[12](#) The variants are in Berlin, Turin, and the Bodmer Collection, Geneva; see Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 120–22.

[13](#) Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1878), 3:312.

[14](#) See Gregor J. M. Weber, “Velata dal tempo: La Venere di Giorgione,” in *Venere svelata: La Venere di Urbino di Tiziano*, ed. Omar Calabrese (Milan: Silvana, 2003), 47–57.

[15](#) See the essays in *Titian’s “Venus of Urbino,”* ed. Rona Goffen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[16](#) Zerner, *Renaissance*, 215–16.

[17](#) Chapeaurouge, “Aktsporäts.”

[18](#) For an alternate view, see Valentin Groebner, “Inside Out: Clothes, Dissimulation, and the Arts of Accounting in the Autobiography of Matthäus Schwarz,” *Representations* 66 (1999), 100–21.

[19](#) Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 63–66.

[20](#) Francisco de Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. Aubrey F. G. Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 70.

[21](#) A girdle of fictive grape leaves covered the David’s genitals by 1545 and perhaps by 1504. See Joachim Poeschke, *Michelangelo and his World: Sculpture of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Harry S. Abrams, 1996), 85.

[22](#) For the Ignudi as angels see Edgar Wind, “Michelangelo’s Prophets and Sybils,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 (1966), 79–80.

[23](#) Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*.

[24](#) Hammer-Tugendhat, “Erotik,” 394–401.

[25](#) That the sin of Adam and Eve involved sex goes back to early Christianity; see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989).

[26](#) Foister, “Before Fall,” 48.

[27](#) For an alternate view, see Werner, “Veil.”

[28](#) André Chastel, *Art of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Arch Cape Press, 1988), 188.

[29](#) *Ibid.*, 202.

[30](#) Elizabeth B. G. Holt, *Literary Sources of Art History; an Anthology of Texts from Theophilus to Goethe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 1:252–57.

Bibliography

Baxandall, Michael. “A Dialogue on Art from the Court of Leonello d’Este: Angelo Decembrio’s *De politia litteraria* Pars LXVIII.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26 (1963): 304–26.

Bonnet, Anne-Marie. “Akt” bei Dürer. Cologne: W. König, 2001.

Brinkmann, Bodo, with an essay by Berthold Hinz. *Hexenlust und Sundenfall: Die seltsamen Phantasien des Hans Baldung Grien / Witches’ Lust and the Fall of Man: The Strange Fantasies of Hans Baldung Grien*. Exh. cat. Petersberg, Germany: Michael Imhof, 2007.

Chapeaurouge, Donat de. “Aktsporträts des 16. Jahrhunderts.” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 11 (1969): 161–77.

Eisler, Colin. “The Athlete of Virtue: The Iconography of Asceticism.” In *De artibus opuscula XL. Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, edited by H. W. Janson, 82–97. New York: New York University Press, 1961.

Emison, Patricia. “The Word Made Naked in Pollaiuolo’s *Battle of the Nudes*.” *Art History* 13, no. 3 (1990): 261–75.

Findlen, Paula. “Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy.” In *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*, edited by Lynn Hunt, 49–108. New York: Zone Books, 1993.

Foister, Susan. “Before the Fall: *Adam and Eve* and Some Mythological Paintings by Cranach.” In *Temptation in Eden: Lucas Cranach’s “Adam and Eve,”* edited by Caroline Campbell, 47–61. Exh. cat. London: Paul Holberton, 2007.

Ginzburg, Carlo. “Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration.” In *Titian’s “Venus of Urbino,”* edited by Rona Goffen, 23–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hammer-Tugendhat, Daniela. “Jan van Eyck – Autonomisierung des Aktbildes und Geschlechterdifferenz.” *Kritische Berichte* 17, no. 3 (1989): 78–99.

_____. "Erotik und Geschlechterdifferenz: Aspekte zur Aktmalerei Tizians." In *Privatisierung der Triebe? Sexualität in der frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Daniela Erlach, Markus Reisenleitner, and Karl Vocelka, 367–446. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1994.

Himmelman, Nikolaus. "Nudità ideale." In *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana*, vol. 2, *I generi e i temi ritrovati*, edited by Salvatore Settis, 201–78. Turin: Einaudi, 1985.

Panofsky, Erwin. "The Neoplatonic Movement in Florence and North Italy." In *Studies in Iconology*, 129–70. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

_____. *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1964.

Schrader, Stephanie. "Mythological Nudes and the Shaping of Philip of Burgundy's Erotic Identity." In *Man, Myth, and Sensual Pleasures: Jan Gossaert's Renaissance, The Complete Works*, edited by Maryan W. Ainsworth, 57–67. Exh. cat. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010.

Schuler, Carol. "The Courtesan in Art: Historical Fact or Modern Fantasy?" *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 19, no.2 (1991): 209–22.

Silver, Larry. "Figure nude historiae e poesie: Jan Gossaert and the Renaissance Nude in the Netherlands." *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 37 (1986): 1–40.

_____ and Susan Smith. "Carnal Knowledge: The Late Engravings of Lucas van Leyden." *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 29 (1978): 239–98.

Steinberg, Leo. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. New York: Pantheon, 1983.

Talbot, Charles W. "Baldung and the Female Nude." In *Hans Baldung Grien: Prints and Drawings*, edited by James H. Marrow and Alan Shestack, 19–37. Exh. cat. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Talvacchia, Bette. *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Werner, Elke Anna. "The Veil of Venus: A Matter of Seeing in Lucas Cranach the Elder." In *Cranach*, edited by Bodo Brinkmann, 99–109. Exh. cat. New York: Harry S. Abrams, 2008.

Zerner, Henri. "Lady in Her Bath: Portraiture with a Difference." In his *Renaissance Art in France: The Invention of Classicism*, translated by Deke Dusinberre et al., 204–25. Paris: Flammarion, 2003.