

The Male Venus in Art History: Emulating the Tropes of the Goddess of Love and Sexuality

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Abstract

In the history of art, portrayal of females for viewership by men is deeply ingrained, but in recent years a shift has occurred. Today many artists are depicting male nudes, in sensual poses, inspired by Venus, the goddess of love and sexuality, which was rare before the 1970s. The Venus trope discussed throughout this paper will refer to the elements common in Venus paintings, a term which will be used for both overt depictions of the goddess as well as female nudes posed to evoke her visually. This trope is comprised of a sensual pose, usually reclining or resting, of an unclothed body that, it will be argued, both explicitly and implicitly informs ideas of eroticism and sensuality while eschewing explicit narratives. Also discussed will be the appropriation of this trope for use in male nudes. The concept of the male Venus, which will be used to describe this growing body of representations, departs from more traditional modes of depicting unclothed men—athletes and heroes. In analyzing the male nude, this study will discuss the visual similarities of contemporary male nudes to female nudes from the past, as well as the fact that today male nudes often lack contextual narratives and simply present the body as a symbol of desire. This paper includes a quantitative analysis of female and male nudes in the canon of Western art history, culled from the approximately 6,500 illustrations in the five most commonly used survey textbooks. This analysis revealed that the number of male nudes peaked first in the Classical era and later during the Renaissance, while female nudes appear less frequently in antiquity and rose in popularity during subsequent eras. Today male nudes are on the rise, featuring elements that have traditionally been associated with females. These attributes include sexual vulnerability, as well as being the subject of an erotic gaze. To historically contextualize the prevalence of male nudes in recent decades, this paper uses a mixed theoretical approach, drawing on the disciplines of anthropology and art history, as well as insights and theories from the fields of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) studies and gender studies. In addition to the quantitative work, this study includes a qualitative analysis of one female Renaissance-era painting, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* from 1538, and one contemporary male nude photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jamie*, from 1973. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that male nudes are becoming prevalent today—after having been in decline since the Renaissance—and shows that these varied depictions of male sex and sexuality reflect changing perspectives of masculinity and male beauty in Western culture.

Keywords: Male Venus, Titian, Mapplethorpe

1. Introduction

In the history of art, portrayal of females for viewership by men is deeply ingrained, but in recent years a shift has occurred. Today many artists are depicting male nudes, in sensual poses, inspired by Venus, the goddess of love and sexuality, which was rare before the 1970s. The Venus trope discussed throughout this paper will refer to the elements common in Venus paintings, a term which will be used for both overt depictions of the goddess as well as

female nudes that are posed to evoke her visually. This trope is comprised of a sensual pose, usually reclining or resting, of an unclothed body that both explicitly and implicitly informs ideas of eroticism and sensuality while often eschewing explicit narratives. Further discussed will be the appropriation of this trope for use in male nudes. The concept of the male Venus, which will be used to describe this growing body of representations, breaks away from more traditional modes of depicting unclothed men—commonly as athletes and heroes. In analyzing the male nude, this study will discuss the visual similarities of contemporary male nudes to female nudes from the past, as well as the fact that today male nudes often lack contextual narratives and simply present the body as a symbol of desire. This paper includes a quantitative analysis of female and male nudes in the canon of Western art history, gathered from the approximately 6,500 illustrations in the five most commonly used survey textbooks. This analysis revealed that the number of male nudes peaked first in the Classical era and later during the Renaissance, while female nudes appear less frequently in antiquity and rose in popularity during subsequent eras. Today, male nudes are on the rise, many featuring elements that have traditionally been associated with females. These attributes include both sexual vulnerability, as well as being the subject of an erotic gaze. To historically contextualize the prevalence of male nudes in recent decades, this paper uses a mixed theoretical approach, drawing on the disciplines of anthropology and art history, as well as insights and theories from the fields of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) studies and gender studies. In addition to the quantitative work, this study includes a qualitative analysis of one female Renaissance-era painting, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* from 1538 (figure 1), and one contemporary male nude photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jamie*, from 1973 (figure 2). Ultimately, this study demonstrates that male nudes are becoming prevalent again today—after having been in decline of production since the Renaissance—and shows that these varied depictions of male sex and sexuality reflect changing perspectives of masculinity and beauty in Western culture.

2. Methodology

To begin this study of female and male representations in art, two figures and their works were chosen. Because a gender dynamic that has occurred over the last millennium is being considered, the two works include both one from a farther historical setting and one composed contemporarily. As previously mentioned, the reclining pose of Venuses, a genre historically targeted when gender dynamics are contemplated, makes it one perfect for considering this dynamic in male nude art.¹ With this in mind, a piece famous art historically that is appropriate is Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. For the purposes of this study, the *Venus* not only supports some ideas of gender in her posturing, suggesting an air of vulnerability, sensuality, and eroticism, but also the direction of her gaze, which some art historians have analyzed and discussed, is of consideration as well.² To fulfill both the requirements of contemporary art as well as a depiction of males, Robert Mapplethorpe's *Jamie* was chosen. To fairly compare the two, it is noteworthy to focus on the similarities between the two images.

In order to fully discuss as well as represent as veraciously as possible the depiction of both male and female nudes in art, several textbooks were considered. These texts were chosen due to their prevalence and purpose in the study of art history: most undergraduates pursuing education in the arts have used these texts as their guide to understanding the "quintessential" elements and depictions of art throughout history. Ranging as far back as Helen Gardner's *Art Throughout the Ages*, referred to as the "Bible of Art History" and noted for its uniqueness in covering works from various cultural and regional vantages³, to Janson's *History of Art* and the British alternative Honour and Flemming's *The Visual Arts: A History* and culminating in Stokstad's *Art History* and Adam's *Art Across Time*, these texts provide a survey of the ratio and common elements of female and male nudes. While, of course, books focusing on specific eras may depict the nudes that were common in that period, the art history books which depict the history of art as a whole seem to depict what art historians deem important for their students to see and learn or those that are common throughout all of the eras featured.

Many of the texts used in the development of this research focus on Titian and his *Venus of Urbino* and Robert Mapplethorpe and his *Jamie* Polaroid as well as both artistic and societal movements and practices in Renaissance Italy as well as America during the 1960s-1980s. Also discussed in this paper are theoretical components such as feminism and LGBT theory, the history of depictions of female and male bodies, and the erotic and nude in art. These varying theoretical fields have been employed for grounding in the arguments presented, each providing a unique framing to understand the history of gendered representations, nudity, sexuality of men and women, and how the rise of gay rights has helped influence and change some of these representations in the modern era.

3. The History of Art History through Images

The emphasis on censorship in the definition of male nudes is particularly important in the consideration of these texts. For the purposes of this study, male nudes must be those where primary sexual characteristics, which are defined as “any of the body structures directly concerned in reproduction, as the testes, ovaries, and external genitalia,”⁴ and/or the buttocks are displayed unobscured. Female nudes will be defined as those that display both primary and secondary sexual characteristics, which are defined as “any of a number of manifestations, as development of breasts or beard, muscularity, distribution of fat tissue, and change of pitch in voice, specific to each sex and incipient at puberty but not essential to reproduction.”⁵ In regards to the disparity between these definitions, the standards of contemporary Western society are considered: the display of male genitals and/or buttocks is considered indecent in both Western public forums as well as mainstream Western media/entertainment while the display of breasts, buttocks, and/or genitalia is respectively taboo for the female sex.

Beginning with what has become known as the “Bible of Art History” and notable as being one of the first art history educational texts, *Art Throughout the Ages* by Helen Gardner—one of the first and most enigmatic historians of art—provides us with a grounding in understanding how male nudes have been composed, how often they have been created, and how they compare to their gender counterpart in these respects. Eighty male nudes, images of men devoid of clothing and whose genitals are not censored *by fabric, foliage, or architectural elements*⁶, illustrate this text. 80 images of female nudes also populate this text, an indication of what one might call equality of representation.

This pattern of representation is, however, not consistent through the remainder of the other texts; throughout the majority of the remaining textbooks, the only exception being Janson’s *History of Art*, female nudes are notably more prevalent than their counterpart:

Table 1.

Textbook	Female Nudes	Male Nudes
Gardner's <i>Art Throughout the Ages</i>	80	80
Honour and Fleming's: <i>The Visual Arts a History</i>	58	39
Adam's <i>Art Across Time</i>	62	30
Stokstad's <i>Art History</i>	52	46
Janson's <i>History of Art</i>	51	54
	Total: 305	Total: 249

Considering the difference in these numbers of gendered nudity, one can see that depictions of the nude female are considered more important in art history education than the male nude and this is reinforced by the treatment of male versus female nudes in the contemporary art world .

In breaking down these numbers, one can see interesting trends in the history of art regarding gendered nudity. In categorizing the nudes exhibited in these texts into eras, the depictions of male nudes more frequently fell into sections on ancient art, particularly Greco-Roman followed by the Renaissance. Male nudes have historically been associated with the triumphs of traditionally masculine, physical efforts: athleticism, heroism, and hard labor. Contextually, this arises from the Greek, often considered one of the earliest models of contemporary Western society along with the Romans. This idea of traditional masculine ideals and the nudity associated with it stems

largely from the institution of nudity associated with athletic pursuits and public nudity, heroic nudity in ancient Greek representations, and the erection of statues related to this in public forums.

Female nudes, though rare in antiquity apart from statuary and depictions of Aphrodite/Venus, increase in popularity in subsequent eras and maintain their significance. The origins of female nudity arise from a different form of veneration: a veneration of the female body as incubator of human life. Fertility, and consequently sexuality and beauty, form the basis for female nudity rather than physicality as in the case for male nudity. The art historical and anthropological labeling of fertility icons from prehistoric art as Venuses (figure 3) indicates this. Sex and sexuality has always been the basis of the female nude, whether for the figure herself or for the viewer engaging with her, and Classical art is no exception to this. As stated above, female nudes are dedicated predominantly to Venus; representations of Artemis and Athena, whose mythology designates one of their spheres of influence as virginity, shows them as clothed in most if not all of their representations.⁷ Hera, the goddess of marriage, is equally represented as never nude in her main iconography. Kore statues, representations of eternally young women, are predominantly (if not always) covered, unlike their counterpart the kouroi statues, eternally young and always nude men.

After the Classical age, the Middle Ages arises as the next main era of art and there is less frequency of nude art due to the views of the clergy, the source of many patrons of the arts. As paganism had its last hurrah and Christianity solidified its position as the main religious body of Europe, the nudity associated with the pagans and their veneration of the human body and gods that reflected this idealization was viewed as contrary to the morality of Christians. Their belief that the nude body in art was indecent and a manifestation of paganism and idolatry made nude figures in art—unless they were grounded in a biblical or moral purpose—taboo.⁸ Donatello's *David* (figure 4) is credited with reviving the freestanding nude in sculpture in the Renaissance era.^{9,10} Donatello adopts the traditional pose and look of the Classical freestanding nude for his *David*: one hip cocked with the opposite leg pointed outward suggesting balance but fluidity, and heroically nude with musculature and genitals reminiscent of Apollo/Kouroi statues that suggest the eternally young *ephebe*. However, the works of Jan Van Eyck, a Flemish artist working during the time of the Renaissance, can likewise be credited with reviving depictions of nude women with his images of Eve on the Ghent Altarpiece (figure 5). Eve channels Greco-Roman depictions of *Venus Pudica*, the goddess attempting to maintain her modesty, resurrecting what would become the common mode of depicting most nude women during the period. Covering her vagina identically to the Knidos Venus by Praxiteles (figure 6), Eve, resentful of dealing with the Devil, attempts to cover her nudity now that she is exposed to the sin of shame and the gift of knowledge. With these two representations by two of the most famous artists of the Renaissance as anchors, representations of nude art are returned to the foreground of art production. However, history has shown that it is the latter, female nudes, that will flourish. Male nudes, following their resurgence in the Renaissance and brief stay in the Baroque era, will return to the shadows, confined mostly to the figure studies of artists.

Michelangelo, one of the most esteemed artists of his time, contributed many works of male nudity to the art world, including his arguably most famous *David* as well as the reputable biblical images on the Sistine Chapel and his *Slave* series. However, not even he, nor the works of his famed peers, could save the male nude from returning to obscurity. Though male nudity didn't disappear from the canon of art in the subsequent era, Baroque, one can begin to see the male nude face some censorship. In a thematic essay on the nude in Baroque and later art, scholar Jean Sorabella chooses 15 images she believes to be representative of both male and female nudity during the era¹¹. Seven of these images are male nudes and the remaining eight female; though the difference of one image isn't a particularly large difference, the majority of images chosen by this scholar is already in favor of female nudes. Two of these five representations are both depictions of Western mythology (figure 7-8), again showing that artists have historically generally favored the male nude predominantly in a Classical Greco-Roman context. Five of the eight depictions of female nudes are not in a mythological context, however, and though their genitals are partially obscured in four of the eight representations (figures 9-12) and fully obscured in the remainder (figures 13-16), their breasts and buttocks are on full display in place of their vaginas in the case of the latter. From this scholarship, the disparity between both frequency and depiction is visible. This is further proven in the research accumulated via this study presented in table 1¹². As indicated by the table and Sorabella's scholarship, in later eras, this disparity only widens.

Putting these numbers into context, according to table 1, a breakdown of the eras shows that the Renaissance and Neoclassicism (1750-1850) combined with Romanticism (1780-1850) accounts for the most female nudes, followed by ancient art and Baroque art. The Renaissance, as it marked a return to form for male nudes as begun by ancient artists, suggests a small margin between the production of male nudes vs. female nudes. The female body, as it has always been linked with sexuality and fertility, however, overtook the male body as being the predominantly beautiful form. Also, as institutionalized homosexuality was phased out with the uprising of Christianity, male idealization among patrons appears to have weakened. Men as sexual or nude subjects in Western art became

limited likely because of the demographics of these patrons; they were largely secular, heterosexually-identifying males and clergy. One of Michelangelo's most famous works, the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, was commissioned for a church and the only occurrence of male nudity is set in a biblical context. If patrons were homosexual they likely wouldn't have been forthcoming in mainstream European society; described as "the vice of Florence" by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*,¹³ sodomy was illegal throughout Europe. Instances of homosexuality appear implicitly through the works of artists, hidden in mythological and religious metaphor and symbols. Donatello's *David* comes to mind as art historians have expressed belief that Donatello expressed his homosexuality through rendering David "effeminately" and the sensuality of both his body and the plumage from a slain Goliath's helmet trailing up his leg to his penis.¹⁴ Female patrons were likely as few and far between as female artists, who were largely unaccepted in education in art and would've been forbade from interactions with nude males as models. Thus men in nude art would become increasingly rare. They didn't disappear altogether from the discipline, but quickly they became solely the subjects of studies, practice and skill-developmental art that would never be exhibited by the artist in shows. Even then, they sometimes appeared censored by clothing (figure 16). Female nudes, more commonly Venus and works inspired by her, would become one of the most popular representations of the nude body, for the next 500 years.

4. Venus of Urbino: Titian's Manifestation of Eroticism

Completed in 1538 and inspired by the *Sleeping Venus* begun by Giorgione in 1510 and finished by Titian in 1512, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, though contributing to an already established tradition of depicting the goddess of love, provided a fresh perspective on art evocative of the deity. Until this point, the *Venus Pudica* appeared devoted to shielding viewers' eyes from her sexual organ. She maintained the downcast eyes attributed to chaste women in the period,¹⁵ averting her eyes in an attempt to avoid suggestion that she was anything but virtuous. The *Venus of Urbino*, however, subverts this: looking straight at the viewer, who in this period was more commonly than not a man, she suggests an overt sexuality that her predecessors and fellow Venuses lack. Rona Goffen, refers to the *Venus of Urbino*'s gaze as "problematic,"¹⁶ but this negatively charged word is somewhat inappropriate. While her gaze makes it difficult to label her strictly as a *Venus Pudica*, it adds complexity to her classification as such. She is complex, not problematic. Her gaze transforms her from *Venus Pudica* to an empowered Venus capable of commanding the artwork beyond more than composition. This is in reference to the Venus that inspired Titian's Venus, Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*. Her body, though separate from the landscape, follows the motion of the rolling hills thus compositionally balancing the piece between the background and the subject. Laurie Adams states that the Venus is having an erotic dream indicated by the ruffle in her sheets and her upraised right arm.¹⁷

However, Titian's product is erotic herself, seductively gazing at the viewer in a way that takes full advantage of Aphroditic associations with love and sex. She stands apart from not only her fellow Venuses, even those crafted by Titian, but from women of the period as a whole. She is not the chaste woman who marries into the family of a male suitor, the *Venus of Urbino* exhibits none of that woman's characteristics—none of her chastity, none of her modesty, none of her obedience and submissiveness—that role is fulfilled by the Venus of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (figure 17). Therefore this image is more than a mere marriage picture.¹⁸ Conversely, the *Venus of Urbino*, though modeled after a courtesan, according to some scholarship,¹⁹ is not obscene or pornographic by non-prudish standards; she is beyond this spectrum of description. Titian effectively combined *Venus Pudica*'s inclination toward modesty with mythological Venus's sphere of influence: eroticism and sexuality. In doing so, he effectively evoked more of the love goddess's power, more fully manifesting Venus's eroticism.

5. Jamie: Embodying the Subversion of the Male Nude's Traditional Masculinity

Male nudes and the artists who create them have within the last 30 years been contributing to subverting the traditional masculinity of male nudes commonly depicted and discussed above. Many modern artists have given men the same treatment as female nudes, removing the traditional view of male nudes as depictions of physical prowess and athleticism/heroism, and making them strictly sexually or physically desirable. This is not to say that the "untraditional" male nude was nonexistent, *The Sleep of Endymion* (figure 18) and Cephalus from *Aurora and Cephalus*, (figure 19) who would both qualify as mostly fulfilling the Venus trope, again: referring to a sensual pose of a nude body that informs ideas of eroticism and sensuality without explicit narratives. The fact that they are

grounded in mythology, Endymion and Cephalus both being the lovers of deities, is, ironically, problematic for placing them in the classification of the Venus trope as discussed thus far. However, given what qualities they do fulfill, they are an exception to the rule and emphasize how rare it is for males to be depicted in this way. Much of Sylvia Sleigh's work with model Paul Rosano, as well as the works of many female and gay modern artists, is indicative of this transformation (figure 20-24). However, this study, in an attempt to explore various media looked at the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, specifically his Polaroid, *Jamie*. Completed in 1973 and described in the following, "Jamie, with his long hair, deep-set eyes, pouting mouth, and sinewy posture, regards the camera with a sultry come-hither look,"²⁰ *Jamie* seemed, out of all of Mapplethorpe's models, to embody all of the same characteristics that define the Venus trope. Not only this, but the attitude he projected was identical to that projected by the Venus of Urbino.

Though Jamie is vertically positioned, his body is draped upon the frame of a door comparable to the way Titian rendered his Venus draped across a bed. His bent right arm frames him as he rests it above his head; the Venus, while not positioned congruently, rests her bent left arm near the upper portion of her body. Jamie's left arm wraps around his torso while the Venus's right is lifted so that she may cover her genitalia. While Jamie does not explicitly cover his genitalia, the modesty of his primary sexual characteristic is maintained. Comparatively though, just as some have argued for the case of the Venus covering her vagina in a gesture of modesty, Jamie cradling his body can be interpreted likewise as a display of coyness. The sinuous curve of both figures gives the images a shared dichotomy: while their arms cover their bodies in a way that suggests a feigned attempt at demureness, the look in their eyes identifies a second presence, an onlooker, as well as the curve of their unclothed bodies that suggests a receptiveness toward the onlooker that would likely lead to some form of seduction and eroticism. He is being watched, vulnerable to the thoughts of the onlooker, and he is okay with this. He invites it and depending upon the gazer's intentions, reciprocation and erotic receptiveness are possible results. With these in mind, the posturing and general visual qualities of the works are similar enough for an equal comparison between them.

As *Jamie* captures the qualities of the Venus, he is a visual embodiment of the efforts of modern artists to subvert the traditional depiction of male nudes. Mapplethorpe, having been inspired by gay pornography,²¹ sought to capture what artists have been capturing for centuries: the objects and subjects of their desire and interest; Mapplethorpe, however, did so from a homosexual inclination. Capturing *Jamie* captured Mapplethorpe's fascination with sexuality, with eroticism but outside of the traditional scope of masculinity. He worked even in different media and drew inspiration from poses of Greco-Roman male nudes (figure 25), however, his interest in the nude was inspired by many of the other forms of sexuality he found beautiful and those he saw in the many circles within which he socialized. Having experienced a life where he was limited artistically and sexually—having matured in an era where rigid gender roles prevailed—and broke through those limitations, Mapplethorpe sought to free his art from as many limits as he possibly could. His personal experiences with a lifestyle that blended drugs, sexuality, and non-Judeo-Christian religion exposed him to a varied degree of personalities and that is reflected in his work.²² The products, including *Jamie*, therefore present to viewers not only the subversion of these visual elements but produce results that alter, inspire, and incite change within themselves and their societies. *Jamie*, Mapplethorpe's male Venus, is thus a contribution to the expansion of male nude representation and, by extension, representation of the masculine. No longer does the male nude predominantly bring to mind thoughts of athleticism, heroism, and physicality; more and more does he evoke elements of eroticism, sensuality, and physical desire like his female counterpart has done throughout history.

6. You are the change you wish to see: The Result of the Male Venus

As stated above, the male Venus provides contemporary society exposure to masculinity beyond the rigidity of the traditional male roles. They are exposed to the potentials of males as receptive partners, to males as subjects of the gaze, to the power of the male beyond merely his physical prowess. Their definitions of masculinities and the manifestations of it are challenged and may even be expanded. Thus the male Venus is not only indicative of the social definitions of his time, but he is a catalyst for change—and these are two of the many purposes of art, something that artists have been striving to and some achieving for millennia. Gay artists have increased within the last 40 years due to the efforts of advocacy and their uncloseted contribution to the discipline is valuable as it has been absent since the decline of paganism. They are able more freely to express their desire through their art, unlike Donatello who only metaphorically expressed his sexuality through *David* via his effeminate qualities and an anthropomorphically sexual feather tickling his testes. This desire, taking many forms from butch, traditionally masculine homosexual partners to receptive, sexually submissive partners and everything in between, is valuable to

the discipline as it chronicles the multitudes of expression within a very cosmopolitan Western society.

The study of male nudes in art history is a growing one; within the last 2 years, two institutions have exhibited shows solely regarding the male nude in an attempt to reveal its history as well as the growing fascination contemporary societies have with male nudes.²³²⁴ A resurgence, much like the one that occurred in the Renaissance, is occurring, however, this one is more complete. This one depicts men with variety: athletic and heroic as well as sensual and seductive throughout various eras. This momentum may hopefully inspire continued changes in the modes of depicting the fascinating, relatively unrepresented qualities and proclivities of humankind. Just as the *Venus of Urbino* provided a distinct representation of the goddess of love, the male Venus provides modern society with distinct views on what it means to represent the male and expanding the discipline of art history as well as understanding within the society that experiences him.

7. References

All figures located at: <http://1drv.ms/1qpqsBy>

8. Endnotes.

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 - 6 2D works in which if the viewer could experience them in the round the same way they could 3D works will be allowed. Therefore, if the position of the subject in a 2D work excludes their genitalia, but they are clearly still nude and their genitals would be visible if the viewer could walk around them, they will be accepted as a nude.
 - 7 The only occurrence of Artemis/Diana being nude in myths relates to the divine punishment that arises from the violation of her chastity and privacy by Actaeon, a hunter who mistakenly sees the goddess naked. Due to his violation of her privacy and by consequence her virgin modesty, the goddess of beasts and wilderness has him devoured by his own hunting dogs.
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