

**DBS SCHOOL OF ARTS**

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**The Naked vs. The Nude:**

**A study in how female nudes have been represented  
throughout art in Western and Tribal cultures**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the Bachelor of Art (Hon).**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the relationship between the 'naked' and the 'nude' and how they are represented throughout art over the centuries. It examines how our perception have changed on how we view the subject due to social changes. It also examines the differences between Western culture and the Tribal culture and how we view and treat naked women differently.

The western art section covers three time periods that influenced the art scene in one way or another, The Ancient Greeks, The Middle Ages and The Renaissance and The Nineteenth Century. The Tribal art section covers two of the biggest tribal cultures, The Oceanic region and the Mesoamerican region and compares how the way they live, their daily influences and how they produce art is different from the west.

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## **Chapter 1: The Naked vs. The Nude**

For centuries, dating as far back as the ancient civilisations of the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, and as long as art has been around, people have been fascinated with the same 'topic' within art, and that is the nude. Over time, from the Stone Age up to modern time, the nude has always been present in some form or shape but it is in how we perceive and view the nude that has changed the most. The nude has gone from being a symbol of female power and fertility, something we celebrated to something shameful, erotic and perverse in the same way. However, the most important here is to be able to distinct between what is counted as a 'nude' and what is counted as a 'naked'. There is a significant distinction between the naked and the nude, where one is considerate to be a shameful subject and one is considered to be an art form.

One person who has tackled this subject in great depth is Kenneth Clark in his book *The Nude: A study in ideal form* from 1956. In his book, Clark talks about what separates the naked from the nude. He focuses in great lengths on the high classical art of the Greeks as the perfect human form. For Clarke, the nude is an ideal form (and not a subject), the nude is the creation of which presupposes ‘an austere tradition of design’ (Weisstein, p. 360). Clark also

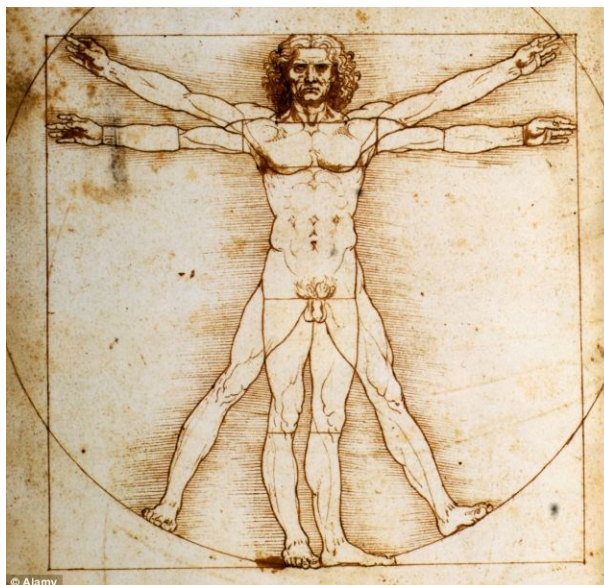


Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1490

points out that the nude is not the subject of art, but rather a form of art and that it is widely assumed that the naked human body is in itself an object which the eye dwells on with pleasure and which we are glad to see portrayed (Clarke, p.5). The body is not one of those subjects in art that can be made into art by copying it like an animal or nature painting. The artist have to create an image that is aesthetically pleasing for the spectator no matter what the model looks like. The artist will apply a mathematical calculation of perfect proportions between the different body parts for the perfect body. When drawing a human body, the slightest disproportion will be extremely notable, and we will keep changing it until the proportions are right and pleasing to look at. This applies not only for nude paintings but also clothed images of humans. One of the most known drawings to show the ‘perfect proportions of the human body is Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* from 1460 (**Figure 1**). Unless the proportions follows the mathematically correct formula, we will not enjoy the painting or sculpture. Da Vinci displays that with the right proportions, the perfect human body should fit perfectly inside a circle when legs and arms are spread out. Da Vinci was not the only one though to adapt this thinking when it came to the depiction of the human body. Clarke argues that we cannot discuss the nude without considering its practical application. Because every time we criticise a figure by saying its neck is too long, the hips are too wide or breasts too small, we are admitting to ourselves the existence of ideal beauty. However this is mostly

confined within the Western Art world because in the culture and societies of Mesoamerica (Mexico) their figurines had very elongated heads and disproportionate bodies (**Figure 2**). We have this belief that no individual body is satisfactory as a whole, so the artist can choose the perfect parts from a number of subjects and combine them into ‘the perfect body’, hence the mathematical formula for perfect proportions (Clarke, p.13). Clarke did not however come up with this belief and it is not a new concept nor is it going to stop any time soon. Even in today’s society we have this belief that if we just could have someone else’s specific body parts we would visually improve our own image. This is specifically common within the plastic surgery industry where people bring in photos of celebrities and ask to have their nose, lips, breasts etc. we are constantly on this quest for ‘the perfect body’.

Clarke’s book has been reviewed and analysed by several people since it was published in 1956. Some people have agreed with his research and some have argued that Clarke fails to take into consideration the politic and cultural changes between different societies when analysing the nude. Ullrich Weisstein among others have pointed out that in Clarke’s book, is that the analysis of significant forms of the nude are done by enlarging on the differences

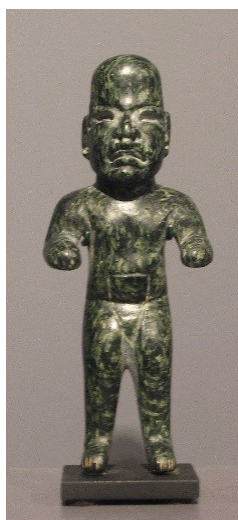


Figure 2. Olmec Figurine, 1500 BCE

between the adjectives ‘naked’ and ‘nude’. The ‘naked’ implies an absence of clothes and thus carries with them an undertone of social embarrassment and religious shame. The word ‘nude’ on the other hand characterises a positive attitude towards the human body and its pictorial representation, an attitude towards that conforms to the Mediterranean philosophy of life and beauty (Weisstein, p. 360). One passage in *The Nude: A study in ideal form* that is widely quoted in reviews of the book is where Clarke points out that “no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be

only the faintest shadow – and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals”. The nude is there to please the spectator while the naked is looked upon with shame.

John Berger on the other hand does not agree with Clarke regarding how we see the naked and the nude. According to Berger, the way we perceive men and women in the social context is substantially different. A man’s presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies. That power can be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social or sexual. In contrast, the woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself. Her presence



is manifested through her gestures, voice, opinions, expression, clothes, chosen surroundings and taste (Berger, pp. 45-46). Women are constantly aware of how they look and act, how they perceive themselves but also how others would perceive them. They watch themselves being watched. To be a woman can be compared to a form of outer body experience, we survey ourselves while at the same time survey how we appear to others. The woman is both the surveyor and the surveyed at the same time. Berger continues to elaborate on the topic on how women are perceived by men by saying that men survey the women before treating them and consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated by the man. Also every action the woman does, whatever it might be, direct or indirect, on purpose or not, also reads as an indication of how she would like to be treated. Men and women can perform the same action and they would be interpreted differently. Berger uses the example of smashing a glass, if a man would smash a glass that is seen as an expression of anger, when a woman would smash a glass, she shows how she treats her own emotions of anger and by doing so she also shows how she would like to be treated by others. To simplify it, men act and women appear (Berger, pp. 46-47).

Tamar Garb follows in Berger's path of thinking by saying that men are rational and women are emotional. Men act through the power they have been given from their sex while women are being controlled by their emotions. She points out that we all can acknowledge that men and women have different sexual characteristics and capacities here in life, women can give birth and men cannot. But it is the values and meaning that different societies and cultures attribute to this fact that makes the difference in how they view the world. It is the relationship between viewer and scene that acts as a partial identification between pleasure and distrust when viewing art. The phrase 'pleasure in looking' has its own name, 'scopophilia' (Garb, pp. 219-221). Scopophilia is a Freudian term and it is used when talking about the male gaze. Men take pleasure from looking at nudes, the nude is there to please the spectator, who often is a male. Nude imagery is represented in all cultures and societies around the world but they are being viewed differently depending on the spectator's cultural background and what the nude image have been created for. So the term Scopophilia is mainly a western concept when dealing with art, the nude and the gaze of the beholder. So what is the relationship between power and the act of looking (men) or being looked at (women)? Who has the right to look and how is looking legitimated and culturally coded? The cultural background is important when investigating how different societies view the same subject, in this context, the subject is the nude. So the way that traditional patterns of

'looking' and 'being looked at' are related to gender identity and accepted notions of sexual pleasure (Garb, pp. 222-23).

This draws us back to Berger and his views on the nude. One of the most recurring subjects in western art, and especially European art, is the nude. Some of the first nudes that were depicted were the story about Adam and Eve. What is fascinating about the story of Adam and Eve is that they are not 'aware' that they were naked before they ate the apple. Before their eyes were opened up to their surroundings, they lived in blissful 'ignorance'. They became aware of being naked as a result of eating the apple and all of a sudden they view each other differently, they now felt a need to cover up. As Berger puts it, nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder. However, during the Renaissance, the depiction of the moment when Adam and Eve realised they were naked and started to cover themselves up changed. The shift went from being enlightened that they were naked to a feeling of shame. But the shame is not so much to each other as to the spectator (Berger, pp. 48-49). This is a vast change from how the Greeks viewed the human body. They celebrated the male nude as the peak of human athletic perfection. Women were not depicted nude because that was not a respectable way of displaying a female. Instead carefully placed drapery was used to show off the woman's torso and legs and in that way also celebrate the female form like they celebrated the male. It was with the introduction of Christianity that being naked started to become a shameful thing. Berger also points out that in other non-European traditions, such as Indian art, Persian art, African art, Pre-Columbian art, Oceanic art, nakedness is never prone in this way. In these traditions, in so-called tribal societies, it is more likely to show active sexual love as between two people, the woman just as active as the man, displaying the actions of each absorbing the other. It is now that we can begin to see the differences between nakedness and nudity in the European tradition. Here Berger points out the flaws of Clarke, because Clarke states that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art (Berger, p. 53). Berger clearly demonstrates though that that is not the case. It depends very much on the culture from where the artwork comes from. This is the focus in Philippa Levine's article '*States of undress: Nakedness and the colonial imagination*' where she compared the different views on nakedness through the lens of British colonisation. She demonstrates that a lack of clothing among the colonised individuals has represented primitiveness and savagery since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She has the same mind-set as both Berger and Clarke and points out that the statues and sculptures of ancient Greece that celebrated the heroic, naked male body were, and often continues to be the peak of a civilised

aesthetic, the unclothed African, Australian, Aboriginal, or Pacific Islander however signified an absence of civilisation (Levine, p. 189).

So how come there is such a difference between the cultures on how we view the same subject? How do we view the differences between men and women and especially in their rawest, most revealing naked form? Why is scopophilia confined to Western art and not to Africa, America or Oceania? Why did Western art and mind-set go from celebrating the naked body to shame it? The tribal societies around the world still celebrates the naked body, and especially the female naked body. These are all questions that need to be answered through extensive research into the minds of the people from the different cultures and how they view *The Nude*.

## **Chapter 2: The Nude represented throughout Western Art**

Continuing on the path with Clarke and Berger on how the Western art has developed over the centuries, we need to start by examining where they consider the nude art form started, we need to start by looking at the Greeks. Looking at art today and comparing that with the art from the so-called 'classical' era we can clearly see that we have experienced a significant change in the form and display of the human body. The classical era consists of the life-size, realistic statues of the Greeks and the Romans while contemporary paintings and sculptures of modern times can have all shapes and sizes and some might barely even look like a human body. This difference between our age and 'classical' eras, between our western culture and other cultures lies in the attitudes towards what we consider to be physical beauty. Every culture have their own perception of what is considered to be this 'pure form' when talking about the nude. There will always be a distinction between 'naked' and 'nude' in all cultures, but compared to the naked, the nude must be an idealisation of ideal beauty and the

vision of ideal beauty is varying from culture to culture (Bunker, 1957). So what we might find ‘attractive’ and ‘ideal’ in the west, cultures from the other side of the world might find ‘ugly’ and the opposite, what they might find attractive we might find non-attractive.

## Ancient Greece

The nude first became significant in the art of Ancient Greece, where athletic competitions at religious festivals were used to celebrate the human body. However they only celebrated the male naked body at the time. It was natural for the Greeks to associate the male nude form with triumph, glory and even moral excellence because of their athletic ability and therefore almost all male nudes from ancient Greece is depicted naked, to put the perfect body on display (Sorabella, 2008). One of the most influential philosophers of the Ancient Greek world was Pythagoras of Samos (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and even today, we are still using his geometric theorem in math. For Pythagoras there were underlying harmonic proportions that could be found in all of nature, to

determine the form of the cosmos as well as of things on earth and that beauty resided in harmonious numerical ratios. It

was by this reasoning that a perfect statue would be constructed according to an all-encompassing mathematical formula. During the mid- fifth century BCE, the Greek sculptor Polykleitos of Argos set out to make just such a statue from this mathematical formula. Polykleitos recorded all the principles he followed and the proportions he used and he titled the statue the *Canon* (**Figure 3**) – the standard of perfection (Kleiner, p. 132). The original statue was done in bronze but that has been lost forever. Today only copies made in marble are available. The biggest challenge for the Greeks when they made life-size statues in marble was that they often had to incorporate ‘tree-trunks’ or other nature references to support the weight of the marble. Even though Polykleitos named his ‘perfect man’ statue *Canon* it is today known as *Doryphoros*. Along with the original bronze statue that is lost, so is Polykleitos original notes but a philosopher of the time wrote down the formula that Polykleitos followed;



Figure 3 Polykleitos, *Doryphoros*, c. 450-440 BCE.

“Beauty arises from the commensurability of the parts, such as that of finger to finger, and of all the fingers to the palm and the wrist, and of these to the forearm, and of the forearm to the upper arm, and in fact, of everything to everything else, just as it is written in the *Canon* of Polykleitos ... Polykleitos supports his treatise by making a statue according to the tenets of his treatise, and called the statue, like the work, the *Canon*”

The *Doryphoros* was the embodiment of Polykleitos vision of the ideal statue of a nude male or warrior. To make the statue as lifelike as possible, Polykleitos aim when creating it was to impose human movement into the statue to ‘perfect’ it. Compared to other Greek statues at the time, the contrapposto is more pronounced in *Doryphoros*. Polykleitos did not want a statue where the man just stands naturally, he wanted movement so that he could display this ‘perfect’, beautiful male body. By incorporating movement into the statue, Polykleitos managed to use the cross balance between the two halves to support the statue. It might seem like a natural pose but the right side of the body, the arm is hanging straight and the leg stands straight up, which gives the support the statue needs while the left side can hang loose and give the effect of movement (Kleiner, p. 133).

Another Greek statue that displayed the perfect male nude body is Myron’s *Discus Thrower* (**Figure 4**). Compared to Polykleitos standing statue, *Discus Thrower* is a vigorous action statue and the sculptor posed the man’s body in an almost archaic manner, with profile limbs, a nearly frontal chest giving the suggestion of the tension of a coiled spring. Myron



Figure 4. Myron, *Diskobolos* (*Discus Thrower*), ca. 450 BCE

froze the action of the statue and arranged the body and limbs to form two intersecting arcs (one from the discus to the left hand, one from the head to the right knee) creating the impression of a tightly stretched bow at the moment before the archer releases the string. In contrast to other archaic athlete statues, *Diskobolos* does not perform for the spectator, he is concentrates on the task at hand (Kleiner, p. 132). Both statues are depicting men in different situations, one walking and one performing an activity, but what they have in common is that both statues are celebrating the male beauty in form of the naked body. The full body is on display, every muscle, movement, expression, the

body as a whole is celebrated, and they are the embodiment of what was considered the 'ideal' body.

The naked female figure in Ancient Greece however is not celebrated in the same way the males were. The naked men were often athletes that were celebrated for their triumphs while the naked female figures are shown as fertility deities. If a 'normal' female was depicted she would be clothed. Depicting a woman nude was not a respectable way to show her and the nude women that were painted on Greek pottery were often prostitutes. In the archaic and early classical periods, the female nude interested Greek artists much less than its male counterpart. However in the fourth century BCE, the balance shifted and Praxiteles *Aphrodite of Knidos* (**Figure 5**) would soon become the most famous statue of the ancient world and it stands at the beginning of a long series of



Figure 5. Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, ca 330 BCE

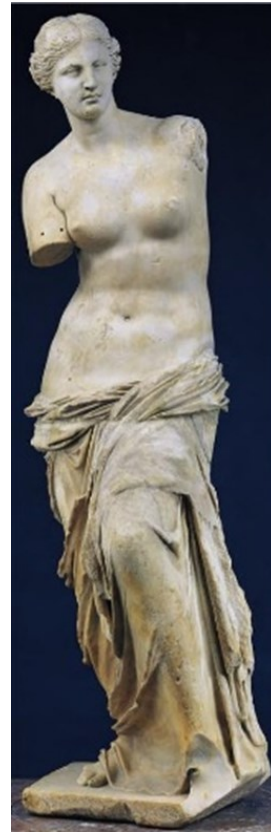


Figure 6. Alexandros of Antioch-on-the-Meander, *Aphrodite (Venus di Milo)*, ca. 150-125 BCE

representations of naked females (Lucie-Smith, p. 22). The Greek goddess Aphrodite was imagined as a life-giving, proud and seductive female. She is known for her pose with the head turned to the side and one hand covering the body in a modest gesture. About 200 years after Praxiteles *Aphrodite*, the Greeks moved into the Hellenistic period and a new Aphrodite came along to shake up the old ways of viewing a nude female once again. The Greeks had gone from not depicting nude females, to depicting goddesses naked and they were now starting to explore and incorporate eroticism into the female statues. *Venus de Milo* (**Figure 6**) is displaying the eroticism of many Hellenistic statues of the time. Even though *Venus di Milo* is more clothed than *Aphrodite of Knidos*, this Aphrodite is more sexual in its appearance. The slipping garment on *Venus di Milo* is teasing the spectator more than the fully nude *Aphrodite of Knidos* does. In the Hellenistic period, the sculptors still regularly followed Praxiteles lead when undressing Aphrodite, but they also openly started to explore the eroticism of the nude

female form (Kleiner pp. 158-9). While Praxiteles Aphrodite is fully nude she is still covering her most private parts with her hand and in that way she covers herself up more than the other Aphrodite does. Because there is a slipping garment covering *Venus di Milos* most private parts, the spectator is automatically more eager for the garment to slip all the way off, revealing the goddess fully naked body. The nudes of ancient Greece and Rome would become the normative in later Western Art and in the Renaissance the artistic style of the Greeks would be revived with their own spin added onto it, adding even more sexuality and eroticism to the female nude.

## The Middle Ages and the Renaissance



Once Christianity was the predominant religion of Europe, the orgiastic eroticism of Rome and Greece was defeated and were put in a category of ‘pagan abomination’. Sexual and erotic imagery was not common during the Middle Ages and the Church forbade anything out of the normal when it came to sexuality. The Christian fear of sex, and contempt for the body, are frequently expressed in a way that graphically expresses the attractions of what was feared and despised. And in the most extreme cases the artist’s reaction was almost wholly sadistic. *The Last Judgement* by Giotto (**Figure 7**) is a fresco in the Arena Chapel at Padua that shows just how sadistic medieval paintings could be (Lucie-Smith, pp. 32-34). The fresco covers the whole wall but it is the bottom right corner of the fresco that is the most eye-catching and it is the most debated piece of the whole fresco. In the bottom right corner is ‘hell’ and in the hell section we can see a group of four naked sinners, each suspended by the part which they have sinned with – one man hangs by the tongue, a female hangs by her hair, and two more, one female and one male are suspended by their sexual organs (**Figure 8**). The medieval artists were never shy or squeamish about sadistic representations, even when it came to a

sexual nature

Figure 7. Giotto, *The Last Judgement*, c. 1303-10

(Lucie-Smith, p. 34). During medieval times, the naked body was not something that man should lust for and any sexual act should be at home in the marital bed. Any deviations from what the Church preached was punishable.



Figure 8. Giotto, *The Last Judgement* (detail), c. 1303-10





Figure 9. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, ca. 1484-1486

The female nude was exceedingly rare during the Middle Ages (due to the strict rules of the church) however one of the most famous Venus paintings came from the late- end of the Middle Ages, Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (**Figure 9**). In his painting, Botticelli used an ancient Venus statue (a Hellenistic variation of Praxiteles *Aphrodite of Knidos*, Fig. 5) as a model and he could have ended up drawing harsh criticism for it. But at the time the painting was finished the society was on the edge between the cruel Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance and therefore he escaped the criticism for his 'sexual' painting. Botticelli based his painting on a poem by Poliziano who was a leading humanist of the time. The painting is depicting the Greek myth about Zephyrus, carrying Chloris, and he blows Venus, who is born of the sea foam and carried on a cockle shell to her sacred island, Cyprus, and there the nymph Pomona runs to meet her with a brocaded mantle (Kleiner, p. 581). Botticelli painted Venus (the Roman word for Aphrodite) in her classical pose, head turned to the side and her hands covering the most modest part of her body. Although Venus is nude and for all the modesty of her gestures, she is quite evidently unashamed of her nudity. The Renaissance is often thought of as representing a return to pagan hedonism after the Christian asceticism of preceding centuries (Lucie-Smith, p. 47).

Erotic art did in fact flourish in the Renaissance, though in theory, it should never have existed. The church and the state condemned every kind of sex outside of wedlock, and they forbade all experiments in the marriage bed. The standard position was more than enough to be able to procreate. It even went as far that husband and wife were thought to commit adultery if they desired each other too intensely, pursued pleasure for its own sake, or even looked at each other naked. They celebrated betrothals, weddings and childbirth with paintings but the physical reality of sex and procreation remained taboo during the renaissance (Grantham-Turner, p. 178). To work around this taboo, the painters during the Renaissance revived the classical style of the Greeks. Regarding Botticelli he make use of the classical subject-matter but his forms are very far from being classical. His Venus has a number of classical prototypes but her presentation is more of a standard late-medieval style than that of the classical Greek style. The real effort towards achieving a truly classical style in painting comes later in the history of Italian art (Lucie-Smith, p. 48). One painter



Figure 10. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538

that managed to ‘perfect’ the classical style was the Italian painter Titian. His painting *Venus of Urbino* (**Figure 10**) are today considered to be one of the great masterpieces of the Renaissance. The painting was commissioned by the Duke of Urbino to celebrate his marriage in 1534. The model in the painting adapts the position of a reclining Venus, looking seductively at the spectator. Titian’s Venus includes many significant details not only to epithalamia but also more generally to contemporary marriage imagery. The servants in the background are packing or unpacking gowns stored in the two chests in the background; the myrtle bush on the window ledge; the rose petals in Venus hand; her pearl earring and her faithful dog sleeping by her feet. Even in the way which Titian uses Venus’s gestures and the geometry of

the body composition to draw our attention to the goddess pubic area could contribute to the themes of martially sanctioned sexuality and fertility (Bayer, p. 232). Titian's painting is all about the fantasy of female flesh, seductively laid out and available. This was another change that happened during the Renaissance, the female flesh started to become something to celebrate, the plumper the better. When food was in short supply, a plump wife advertised a man's wealth and property. This also applied to the skin itself, having pale white skin showed that you did not have to be out in the sun working like the servants. Being 'fat' showed the vitality and fertility of the woman. The Venetian artists saw full-figured fleshiness (and even 'problem areas' such as cellulites) as sexy (Paglia, pp.4-6). Titian's *Venus of Urbino* would later on be used as the inspiration for Manet's *Olympia*.

Even though nude paintings started to become more acceptable during the sixteenth century, in general, the artists of the time in Europe were not yet ready to deal with eroticism through a confrontation with everyday reality. The Renaissance strategy was to build up a typology – a range of subject-matter through which erotic feelings could be expressed, and at the same time distanced. Some of these subjects were drawn from the Bible and from the lives of the saints: *Susanna and the Elders* are a typical example of a Biblical story transferred to the canvas (Lucie-Smith, pp. 73-4). When this type of painting became more common it



offered the opportunity of painting nudes on a more widespread scale. But in all the paintings the implication remains that the subject (a woman) is aware of being seen by a spectator (like Titian's *Venus*). The woman is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her and in *Susanna and the Elders* this is

the actual theme of the painting. There are several different variations of the same theme painted over the centuries but they all show the same 'story'. We join the Elders to spy on Susanna taking her bath. In some of the paintings, Susanna looks back at us looking at her and in some, like Tintoretto's version of *Susanna and the Elders* (**Figure 11.**), Susanna is looking

Figure 11. Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1555

at herself in a mirror, and thus

she joins the spectators of herself. The mirror was often used as a symbol of the woman's vanity. However this was very hypocritical because you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, then you put a mirror in her hand and you call the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted in the first place for your own pleasure (Berger, pp.49-51).



and the Elders was Artemisia Gentileschi (Figure 12). In today's society she would be seen as one of the first feminist painters.

However, her 'brutal' style of various biblical stories did not go down well with the public in early seventeenth century Italy (which technically is seen as the Baroque and not the Renaissance anymore but she is relevant in the discussion for the Renaissance period).

Artemisia was the daughter of another famous painter, Orazio Gentileschi, and were often accused of putting her name on her father's paintings because she was a better painter than him. As well as being accused of not painting her own paintings, Artemisia went through a very public and humiliating rape trial which damaged her reputation a great deal. So Artemisia's own life story resembles the one of *Susanna and the Elders*, because the elders tried to make advances towards Susanna, when she rejected them, they set out to ruin her reputation by telling lies just like Agostino Tassi (her rapist and teacher) tried to ruin her reputation by telling lies to the court. Both Artemisia and Susanna was cleared in trail but the damage was already done. In 1998, American artist Kathleen Gilje x-rayed Artemisia's painting which revealed a much more aggressive underpainting (Figure 13). The original painting depicted how Artemisia felt during her rape and how she screamed and tried to

One Italian painter that did not follow the standards when painting the story about *Susanna*



Figure 12. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610

defend herself with a knife against her assailant (Gilje, 1998). The painting was deemed to ‘aggressive and brutal’, especially since it was done by a female, so she had to re-paint it. Artemisia painted a more realistic version of not just her own story, but Susanna’s as well, but, because the painting was not aesthetically pleasing to look at for men, it was not the submissive, sexual and alluring Susanna they were used to from previous paintings, it had to be changed. This just shows how much the nude female was there to first and foremost, please the male spectator, to feed into the male gaze. However, this way of thinking and the way female nudes were painted would take a drastic turn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it would not be without controversy.

## The Nineteenth Century

The Western art world has had more ‘style’ changes than any other culture in the world. As we evolved as a society, so did our art. With every new time period in our history, the art changed with it and every period brought their own style. Even though there were constant changes to the art, most were minor and they evolved over long periods of time. But every now and then, big changes came into play. We have seen it with the classical art from the Greeks, we have seen it with the Italian art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the next big change came in the nineteenth century, this time with the French. The Modern Art period is considered to have been 1851-1929 and it started with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. The new, modern life was considered to be an urban, industrially based, socially fluid and defined by the notion of capital. The old ways were gone and now it was all about new inventions and urbanized living. The shift also went from Italy being the centre of the art world to France and to Paris especially. Paris was seen as the Art Capital of the world from 1852-1929 (Brettell, pp. 1-3). In 1846, five years before the Great Exhibition in London, Charles Baudelaire published his review of the Salon in Paris in which he called artists to ‘be of their time’ and to create an artistic world that is continuously involved in an interaction with the present rather than the past. This call was heard by very few artists and the Salon would have a big role in what was about to unfold in the late nineteenth century, but its role would be nowhere near the effect the Salon des Refusés would have. This exhibition, created by Napoleon III in 1863 would have a profound effect on the definition of modern art by making absolutely clear and central its opposition to any forms of censorship and official

Figure 13. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610 (x-rayed in 1998)

control (Brettell, pp. 5-6). And it was here, in Salon des Refusés that Manet would display two of his greatest and most controversial paintings.

Today, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (**Figure 15**) and *Olympia* (**Figure 16**) are seen as masterpieces but that was not the case in 1863 when they were painted (however *Olympia* were not shown until two years later in 1865). The most persistent and problematic subject in the history of human art is the human body itself and most 'body' paintings, or so called nude paintings up until now have had a religious theme and therefore they were accepted by the society. One of the first ways in which the modern artists entered the realm of public consciousness was to engage in a challenge to the conventions of body representations this was done most forcefully through an effort to take the nude figure from the realm of allegory, religious or otherwise, and place that nude into an actual or clearly contemporary visual context (Brettell, p.131). To paint a 'naked' painting and not a nude would cause an uproar with the public and that is exactly what Manet did with his, at the time, controversial paintings. In nineteenth century France, hypocrisy was matched by extremes of honesty. Manet's first serious attempt at painting a female nude came in 1861 with his painting *The Surprised Nymph* (**Figure 14**). This first attempt by Manet to paint the female nude was unfavourably reviewed, and not even shown in Paris until 1867. His decisions to pursue the subject in the intervening years, first with *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and then *Olympia*, showed his determination to master the genre. Manet however would locate his nude in a distinctly modern context instead of a religious context



Figure 14. Manet, *The Surprised Nymph*, 1859-61



(Krell, p.26). So why was there such an uproar about these two paintings in particular? By showing these paintings Manet offered a direct challenge to both his fellow-exhibitors and to the public opinion. He first submitted the painting to the Salon in Paris in 1863 but it was rejected for its offensive imagery and instead it ended up in Salon des Refusés. Manet borrowed the composition for *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* from an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi. Manet's 'crime' when painting *Déjeuner* was that he put the two male figures in contemporary clothing, while leaving their companion completely nude. This suggested not merely a compositional, but an actual social relationship between the individuals, and that was the thing that shocked contemporary opinion so deeply. And in fact, nineteenth century



Figure 15. Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863

to the public. How dare the model, and the artist who painted her, take it so calmly? The woman in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* has no feeling of inferiority, despite her sex and despite her lack of clothes. She meets her companions on equal terms (Lucie-Smith pp. 132-4).

bourgeois opinion found distinctions of this kind as important as the more commonly accepted difference between the naked and the nude. Given the fact that the painting did suggest a social relationship, this classic serenity between the naked female and the clothed men added to

Manet's supposed offence



Figure 16. Manet, *Olympia*, 1863

We can elaborate this argument on how the naked female acts to camly by turning our attention to another controversial painting from Manet, *Olympia*. *Olympia* was also painted in 1863 like *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* but it was not shown until 1865. Once again, Manet tried to submit *Olympia* to the Salon and yet again he was refused and *Olympia* was shown in Salon des Refusés. *Olympia* caused an even bigger uproar than *Déjeuner* did two years earlier. Some 70 critics discussed the painting, almost all in the most disparaging and vitriolic ways. *Olympia*, without a doubt, was a *succès du scandale* (Krell, p. 47). With *Olympia* Manet had violated a taboo. He had painted neither a pneumatic goddess nor a startled nymph, the Salons customary accepted nudes, but he had painted a common whore receiving a client and therein lays the scandal. And moreover, there was a hint of perversity to Manet's painting. The slender body of Victorine Meurent, his model and mistress, only nineteen years old at the time. She had fully developed breasts but her hips were those of an adolescence (Néret, p. 21). Manet took inspiration for his painting from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (**Figure 10**). By taking

inspiration from Titian, Manet was hoping to shield himself behind Titan's name from the amount of backlash the painting got. The difference between the two paintings (Titan's model was a Venetian courtesan of Titian but she was depicted as a Venus) was that Titian turned his whore into a Venus and therefore worked around the taboo of painting a nude while Manet painted *Olympia* as she was, just a common whore. There is no need to stress how traditional Manet's painting is. The female nude, with a servant or servants, is one of the most common themes of European art, from the sixteenth century onwards. There were more differences between Manet's and Titian's paintings than just the pose of the female nude. In Titian's painting, the servants are in the background taking care of their daily duties, while in Manet's

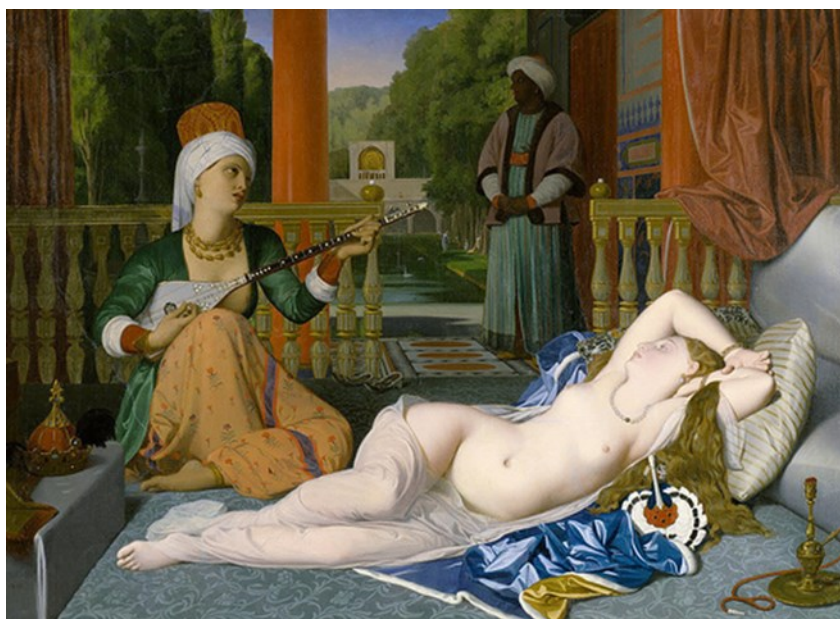


Figure 17. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave*, 1842

painting the slave is interacting with Olympia, presenting her with flowers that most likely came from a client, and her dog lies faithfully at her feet. In Manet's painting, he has replaced the dog with a black cat. And what was worse was that the cat is not sleeping faithfully at Olympias feet, its back is arched and tail raised. The black cat is often thought of as Satan's minion, and French *chatte* and English *pussy* designates precisely what *Olympia's* left hand so relentlessly refuses to the spectator's eye (Néret, p.21). As mentioned before, *Olympia* was inspired by *Venus of Urbino* but it also has a relationship to Ingres's *Odalisque with a Slave* (Figure 17). And yet when we compare Ingres's and Titian's paintings with Manet's it is evident they are worlds apart in the psychological sense. The odalisque is totally submissive, she awaits the man who will possess her and every line of the pose tells us that she will not resist him. Her body is not her own. And looking at her face we can see that she is anonymous, she belongs to the man that will take her. This however, does not apply to *Olympia*. She looks out of the canvas which shows that she submits to no man (Lucie-Smith, pp. 134-35). What is even more chilling about Manet's painting is the sheer force of Olympia's gaze at her spectator, her self-possession and her complete lack of illusion. She is in ultimate control of both her beauty and her body.

## **Chapter 3: The Nude represented throughout ‘Tribal Art’**

Compared to the Western world, tribal societies did not evolve as quickly as we did and many tribal societies and cultures today are the same now as they were hundreds of years ago. Some cultures still remain today, like the ones in Oceania, while others have disappeared such as the Mayans and Aztecs in Mesoamerica (now Mexico and Central America). These tribal cultures did not create art for the same purpose the Western world did. To compare them on an art history map, tribal art has stayed within what we call the Pre-historic era in the west. That is not to say that these remote, tribal cultures are considered to be ‘cavemen’ like the western man would have been during Pre-historic times. Pre-historic art (c. 40,000 BCE) in the west was produced when man just started to become man, cave paintings were a form of communication back then, symbolising what was needed to survive. Man was not yet agricultural but still a hunter and gatherer. While the west was still trying to create a society, these societies in Mesoamerica and Oceania were highly evolved already. They had structured political societies and they had learned to grow crops and domesticate animals for farming purposes. However these societies were also highly religious and their religious beliefs was much more brutal than the religions in the west and therefore was seen as ‘barbaric’ by westerners. Another big difference between tribal art and western art is that ‘the nude’ is rarely depicted in tribal art, if even depicted at all. That is not to say that they do not have nude imagery, it just do not serve the same purpose as the nude in the west.

### **Oceanic Art**

Oceania is a region that is centred on the thousands of island in the Pacific Ocean. Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, smaller islands between New Guinea and South America, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia is considered to belong to Oceania. Compared to western art, Oceanic art were not made with any notion of them being ‘art’ at all. Oceanic painting, sculpture and wood-carvings were all conceived as an integral part of the religious

and social ceremony of everyday island life. These islanders focused much of their life on ancestor and spirit worship. They spent much focus on fertility as well since that was vital for the society's survival, but they also focused on more sinister parts of their life such as headhunting and ritual cannibalism. What differed the tribal people from the western people was that much of the art was 'living body art', bodypainting, tattooing and face painting (**Figure 18**). The living and the dead were closely connected in



Figure 18. Tattooed Ethnic 'types' of the South Pacific, 1890

these communities. Because the art produced in Oceania was so closely connected to religious and communal life, it cannot be understood from its cultural context (Kleiner, p. 1042). Compare that to the European art where anything could be painted and understood by the masses no matter the subject or the context of the art object whether it was a painting or sculpture. It did not matter if it was a

religious theme, a landscape, portraits, or a story, anything could be turned into art without questioning. Art in tribal communities always had a purpose.



Figure 19. Men's ceremonial house (*Bai*), from Belau, Micronesia, 20th century

The Caroline Islands are the largest group of islands in Micronesia. The Micronesian cultures focuses on seafaring activities such as fishing, trading and long-distance travel therefore much of their art were related to these activities. On Belau (former Palau) in the Caroline Islands, the islanders put much effort into creating and maintaining elaborated, painted

men's ceremonial houses called *Bai* (**Figure 19**). These houses were in themselves also seen as 'work of art'. Although the *Bai* was the domain for men and the women were not allowed inside them, females figured prominently in the ceremonial houses imagery. The women also created the art that was incorporated into the ceremonial houses (Kleiner, p. 1050). This was consistent with the important symbolic and social positions women held in Belau culture. A common element surmounting the



Figure 20. Dilukai wood sculpture, from Belau, Micronesia, late 19th century

main *Bai* entrance was a symmetrical wooden sculpture of a splayed female figure known as *Dilukai* (**Figure 20**). According to local legend, the figure featured on the men's houses represents a promiscuous woman named Dilukai, who was tied in this position by her father as a warning to all the women in the village to be chaste (Caglayan, 2004).

Given the prominence of these men's houses and the importance of the male initiation rituals in these societies, it is easy to believe that women might appear to be peripheral members of these cultures. And, even though the story about the *Dilukai* seems degrading towards women, they actually play a crucial role in most Pacific cultures. They contribute significantly through, exchange, ritual activities and preservation of the social network which the stability of village life depends upon, and they are important producers of art as well. However, the women do not produce images having religious or spiritual powers. This is because the women have the natural powers to create and control life, so male dominated societies developed elaborate ritual practices to counteract this female power. Pacific cultures often acknowledge the women's innate power in the depiction of women in art. And often the women are celebrated through the *Dilukai* figure. The *Dilukai* figure celebrates the women's procreative powers. Often flanked by figures of sexually aroused men, these female figures

were surrounded by images of sun disks, trees and birds. They always faced east towards the rising sun and that symbolised the sun's gift to earth as well as human fertility. Not only does the *Dilukai* figure celebrate female fertility, it also offers protection to the visitors to the *Bai*, another symbolic acknowledgement to female power (Kleiner, pp.1051-52). In some of the Pacific cultures, the men's house are conceived as a giant female ancestor. These men's houses they incorporated women's natural power into the most important structure of the village. They also associated entrance and departure from the men's houses with death and rebirth, reinforcing the primacy of fertility and the perception of the men's house as representing a woman's body.

Compared to western culture where there is a huge amount of females depicted in art, these Pacific cultures does not have it. The closest they will come to a 'nude' is the *Dilukai* figure. These cultures produced 'meaningful art'. The people of the high-lands areas of New Guinea have little visual art beyond fantastic and elaborate personal decorations (tattoos). Some of the low-land people have a few sculptures and paintings but physical art is a rare



Figure 21. Full body tattoo of a Caroline Islander, c. 1835

body ornaments and both sexes displayed tattoos. Men often had more tattoos than the women did but the placement was different between the two sexes. The face and the buttocks were the main areas for men while lips, chin and vulva was the main areas for females. That said, every culture had their own style, design and placement. The tattoos also indicated status within the community and the quantity and quality of the tattoos often reflected the rank within the society and fully covered men had the highest status (**Figure 21**). Polynesian tattoo design

thing (Newton, p75). For most of the cultures in the Pacific area, sculptures and paintings had religious themes and often symbolised animals and birds which they found to have spiritual powers. Instead these cultures focused their art to the human body itself. Throughout Oceanic cultures, body decorations was an important means of representing cultural and personal identity. Clothing and ornaments was just as important as

were predominantly geometric and resembled the patterns of their other art. And these tattoos could be 'read' or deciphered just like their normal art (Kleiner, p.1055). The tattoo designs of the Pacific could be read by the people to learn about the people's family and lineage. This could be compared to the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt of the Mayans. The Egyptians painted or carved their stories into the walls just like the Mayans did, the Pacific people tattooed their story on their body.



Tattoos were found throughout Oceania and each island group had their own designs and patterns, Most of these designs derived from nature and the spiritual power it held. In western culture it was fashionable to have pale skin and be a bit on the plump side and that's how they showed off their wealth and status. The rich and the powerful did not have to be outside working in the sun which would result in darker skin, and being fat meant that you could afford to eat. In the Pacific cultures, your tattoos showed off your wealth and status, the

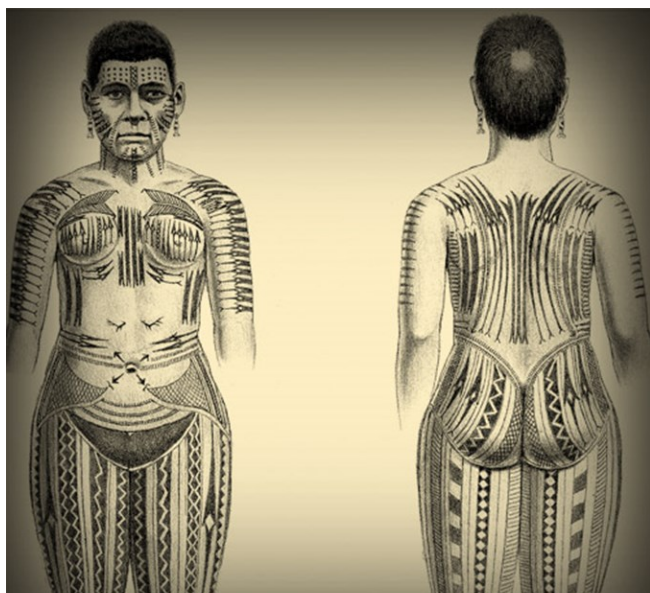


Figure 22. Intricate body tattoo patterns of an Ontong Java woman, c. 1880

more tattoos and the grander design they had, the higher rank did you have in society (**Figure 22**). In these cultures there was a saying that “you must become tattooed, so that you can become beautiful, and that your skin does not shrink with age” (Krutak, p.120). For the people in these cultures, material things did not play a crucial role in showing off your riches. In Europe, wealthy people would have walls filled with art work, the Pacific Islanders would not produce art just for the sake of having art. Their

mind-set was that everything will be left behind by human at death but tattoos will be taken to the grave and therefore you take your wealth with you when you die. The patterns of the tattoos mimicked the lines of fish and birds. The people displayed their tattoos for each other as well as for nature. The tattoos also helped with identifying chiefs or high ranking men and women. Low ranking people were not allowed to have the same patterns as the high ranking. Finger tattoos were restricted to high ranking women and if they could afford it, noble women would have shoulder tattoos as well. The tattooing of females also served as to show where in puberty the girl or woman would be. A woman would get a tattoo on her hand when she reached puberty and then she would get one on the forearms to show that she was available

for marriage and the final stage was to get her legs tattooed and that showed that she was a mature woman (**Figure 23**). It was also common for women to get pubic tattoos. There were normally done in their teenage years but they were only for the husband to see. Also after childbirth it was common to ‘redo’ their pubic tattoos to strengthen the skin and keep it from sagging. The more children they had, the harder the skin would be from the scarring from repeated

tattooing of the same area

(Krutak, p.

127). So while

the European

‘nudes’ were

hanging on the

walls of

museums and

wealthy

families homes

to be looked at and to please the men’s sexual desires, the tribal ‘nudes’ were living and breathing women, walking around, proudly displaying their ‘naked’ body while being respected by their fellow tribe men. These women were just as nude as the pale Victorian women of Europe, yet they were not seen as a ‘sex object’, something to be sexually aroused by, they did not evoke the same sexual desires that *Susanna and the Elders* or *Olympia* did and therein lies the difference between the two cultures, and how they represented and treated their naked women. The Pacific people were not ashamed to be naked, it was not something shameful like in the west and therefore being naked was just as normal as being clothed in Europe.

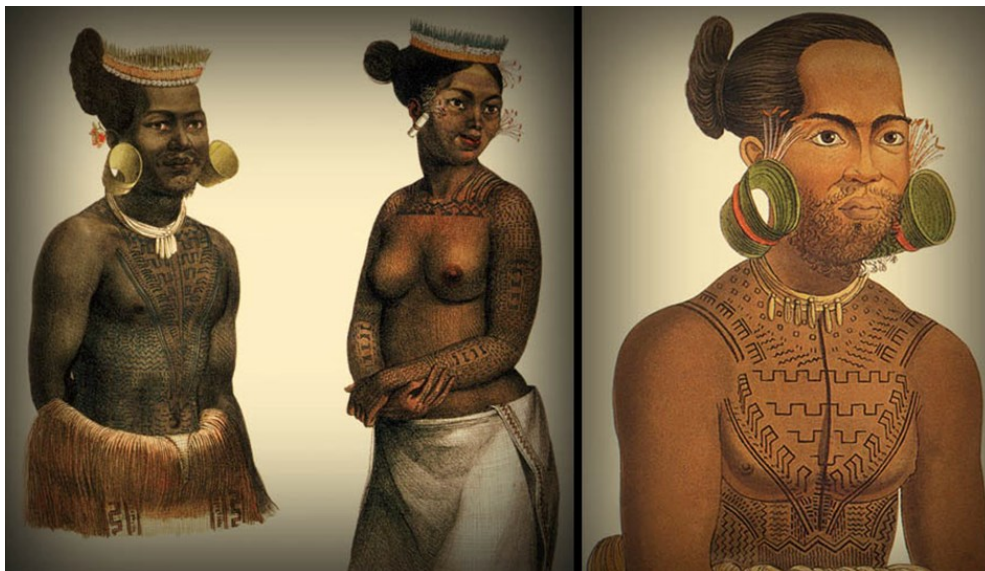


Figure 23. Earliest known sketches of Marshallese tattooing, 1816

## Mesoamerican Art

Mesoamerica is a cultural area that stretches from central Mexico to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and northern Costa Rica. This cultural region is where the pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish invasion in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. It is in this area that the impressive cultures of the Mayans and Aztecs flourished.



Figure 24. Olmec stone head, c. 1200 BCE

Mesoamerica can be divided into three periods, the pre-classic, classic and post classic. The pre-classic era stretches from 2000-1000 BCE and the first civilisation was the Olmec, mostly known for their giant stone heads (**Figure 24**). The classical period stretched from 1000 BCE – 800 AD and

here we see an introduction of three-dimensional sculptures. The post-classic period then lasted from 800 AD to the invasion of the Spanish in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was here that the most notably aggressive military states flourished with the Aztecs (Jones, p. 548). Unfortunately these societies died with the colonisation of the areas and with the introduction of Catholicism. Luckily, much of these impressive structures and statues still stand in the different countries and there is a newfound respect for these highly evolved societies again.

These cultures were a cultivation of the love of beauty, measured by an independent standard, which however distinct from ours, nevertheless proves the presence of intellectual and art loving tribes. One common thread that runs through practically all Mesoamerican cultures is ‘the feeling for order and exact proportions, the real mania for ritual’ of a ceremonial society (Kennedy, p.13). In the Mesoamerican cultures, just like in the Pacific cultures, art created purely for the pleasure of the owner or the artist would have been meaningless. It was the iconography and symbolism of the artefact that gave the primary meaning to the work, and the majority of the figurines represent women wearing nothing but jewellery, sandals and elaborate hairstyles and headdresses. These figures had no sexual context like the ancient Greek statues would have had, but rather just depicted the women in their natural self in the

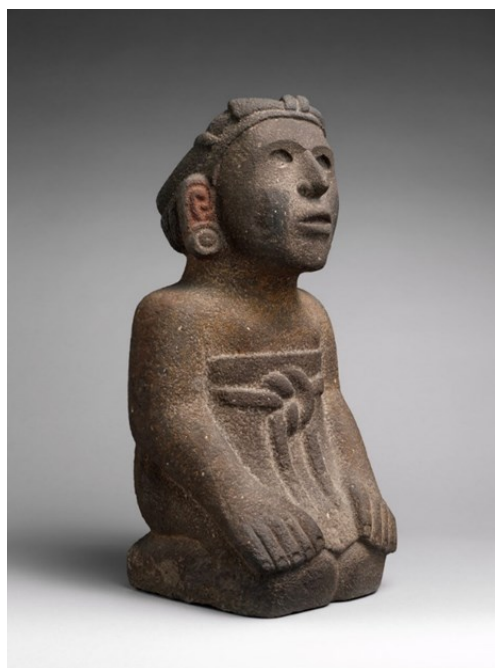


Figure 25. Kneeling female Aztec stone sculpture, c. 15th–early 16th century

society. Most of the Olmec figurines wear only the simplest clothing and jewellery or they wear nothing at all. What differs these human sculptures from those in the western culture is that there is seldom any indication of sex even on nude figures (Kennedy, pp. 74-5). Because of the clean, straight, symmetrical shapes of the figurines, the lack of ‘body curves’ and no display of sex, the poses and positions they are depicted in are most of the time how you determine if the sculpture is male or female. This custom of suppressing sexual characteristics in hieratic images has no true parallel in the more literal traditions of Western art. The most accomplished sculptors in the Aztec empire carved impressive images of the gods. It was the sculptors that served to communicate the concept of Aztec religion to the people. Just like other tribal societies, the Mesoamerican cultures were all highly religious and religious practises greatly influenced the art and daily life. The sculptors followed the basic conventions for portraying deity figures: they are shown in frontal view and strictly symmetrical, females kneeling, their hands resting on their knees while male figures are often sitting with their knees drawn up and their arms crossed upon them (**Figure 25 & 26**). The sculptures have ageless faces, inlaid eyes and a half-open mouth which gave them a life-like look but they still lacked individuality (King, 2008).

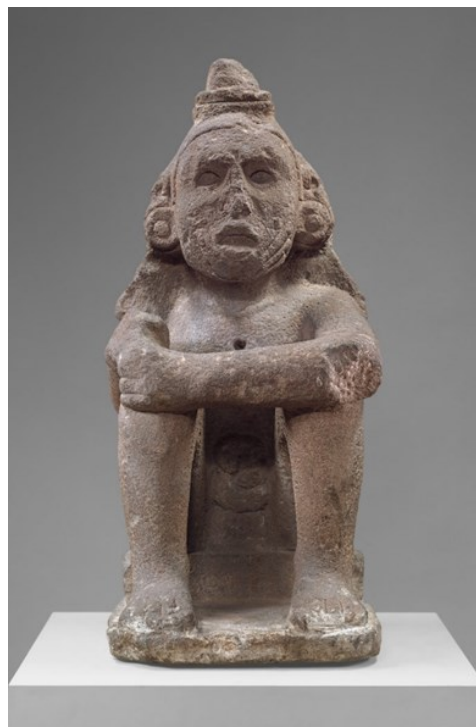


Figure 26. Seated male Aztec stone sculpture, c. 15th –early 16th century



Figure 27. Skeletal couple with child bottle, Moche Culture, 3rd – 7th century

Another important belief in the Mesoamerican cultures, and especially in the Andean cultures was the belief in Dualism. They believed that there was a fundamental complimentary between life and death and this was a central component of the cosmology of Andean societies. Other opposing ideas such as male and female, left and right, night and day, sun and moon, also helped to define religious beliefs and practises (Bernier, 2009). One cannot exist without the other, everything is

complementary halves of each other, so-called mirror images. The most common symbol of

this is the Yin and Yang symbol which originated in China. Dualism is also deeply rooted in Andean artistic traditions and according to an Inka belief, silver came from the moon, which symbolised a female entity, and gold came from the sun, its male opposite. In the Moche society, the spiritual complementary between life and death is illustrated through sculpted ceramic vessels, which shows dead and/or living women engaged in sexual intercourse with skeletal men (**Figure 27**). The diversity of none fertile sexual acts depicted on these vessels symbolises the inverted fertility in the world of the dead (Bernier, 2009). This was a mirror image comparing the infertility of the dead compared to the fertility of the living. The Andean cultures depicted all stages of like unlike the Europeans. This kind of imagery would have shocked the western societies. In these cultures, men and women were depicted in an almost equal level, one cannot exist without the other. Women are essential for the procreation powers they hold. Without women, the society cannot grow and prosper and therefore they were treated with respect. Nude imagery is not prominent either in these cultures because just like the Pacific societies, the Mesoamericans did not wear much clothing and being naked was a natural part of everyday life. Once the shame of being naked is removed, the sexual appeal of seeing a naked female is diminished as well.

## Conclusion

There is no argument that the human body is always going to fascinate us and especially the naked human body. But it is in the way that we perceive and accept the naked human body that is the most fascinating. In the ancient civilisations of the Greeks and Roman, the naked male body was celebrated as the ultimate perfection of the human form. The naked male body was something to celebrate and it was associated with glory and triumph. At first the Greeks did not depict naked females out of respect but instead they used a technique of 'wet drapery' to show off the female form and in that way it could be celebrated as well. It was first at the end of the Greek era that they started to explore the more sexualised portrayal of the female goddess Aphrodite. With the introduction of Christianity to Europe, there was a significant shift in how we perceived the naked body. All of a sudden being naked was something shameful and the church took control over people's sexuality and the Medieval Art was often on the edge of sadistic when portraying sexual desires. To desire a naked woman was considered a sin and the art of the time served to remind people of the punishment that will come to sinners. Then, with the Renaissance, came the revival of the classical style of the Greeks. The church still had a heavy influence on the society and painting nude imagery was not accepted. To go around this taboo, the artists of the time borrowed inspiration from the Greeks and painted their nude models as the Greek goddess Aphrodite and in that way the art became accepted. It was during this time period that the artists started to explore more ways to paint nude women to satisfy their desire for a naked woman. When the nineteenth century rolled around the corner, the French painter Manet would once again shake up the society with this controversial nude paintings. What made Manet's paintings so controversial compared to those of the Renaissance was that the Renaissance painters had painted their mistresses as goddesses while Manet painted his mistress for what she was, a common whore. This outraged the society because he painted real life, he had not painted a nude, he had painted a naked woman, and what was worse was that she was not ashamed of being naked for the public to see. The western society went from celebrating the naked body to shame it, and back to slowly appreciate it again. What has been consisted throughout the centuries are that we have always found a way to sexualise the female for male pleasure.

If we then compared that to the mind-set of the tribal societies around the world, both societies that have vanished and societies that still exist is that they are all celebrating the woman and the powers she hold. Throughout the Pacific region, the females are celebrated for their natural power to create life, something men cannot do and therefore they had to create their own ways to balance out the women's power. Nude imagery is a rare occasion in these

societies because they do not produce art for the sake of art, it all has a meaning. And if there should be nude imagery of a female it would not have a sexual context. The women of these cultures are naked on a daily basis and therefore there is no shame in the naked human body unlike in the western societies. Also, much of the art in the Pacific cultures is displayed on their body in form of tattoos. The more tattoos a woman would have, the more beautiful she would be considered to be. This goes hand in hand with how women are depicted in the Mesoamerican culture. Once again, nude female imagery is a rare thing because they also were not ashamed of being naked and they believed in dualism, once cannot exist without the other. Males and females are considered to be equal in society, without one another, the society cannot evolve and continue on. It is safe to say that from this research, western societies are too much influenced of things happening around them and what people tell them are acceptable and what is not. Once we put clothes on our backs and let religion control our life, we became aware of our surroundings and how we perceive ourselves as well as how we are being perceived to others. While in these tribal cultures, where they let no outside influences control or change their way of life, they continue on living like they have always done and they seem more carefree and accepting than the west will probably ever be again and it shows in their art.

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