What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?

A Feminist Perspective on Art and Pornography

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Insofar as erotic art and in particular the female nude makes male dominance and female subordination and objectification sexy, this chapter argues, it eroticizes the traditional gender hierarchy and in this way is a significant part of the complex mechanism that sustains sex inequality. To substantiate this claim, she offers a close analysis, supported by a long list of examples, of the different ways in which artworks belonging to the genre of the female nude can be sexually objectifying. She also lends some much-needed precision to the concept of the male gaze, and addresses two serious objections to her particular feminist approach. Firstly, if visual representations typically trade in tokens, not types, then the question arises how a picture can objectify women in general. Secondly, since many consider objectification to be a normal and even healthy part of human sexuality, one might wonder what is wrong with sexual objectification in the first place?
This chapter concludes by underlining a significant difference between pornographic works and the traditional female nude: the latter not only eroticizes but also aestheticizes the sexual objectification of women, and does so ‘from on high’, art’s venerated status investing the traditional nude’s message of female inferiority with special authority, making it an especially effective way of promoting sexual inequality.

_{Keywords:_ nude, painting, feminism, male gaze, objectification, sexual objectification, Nussbaum, high art, female nude}_

In her study on the female nude, Lynda Nead recounts the following story:

On 10 March 1914, shortly after 10:00 a.m., a small woman, neatly dressed in a grey suit, made her way through the imposing entrance of the National Gallery, London. It was a Tuesday and so one of the Gallery’s ‘free’ days.... The woman made her way through the Gallery’s succession of rooms, pausing now and then to examine a painting more closely or to make a drawing in her sketch book. Eventually she made her way to a far corner of Room 17, where she stood, apparently in rapt contemplation, before a picture on an easel. By now it was approaching lunch-time and the room was beginning to empty of the crowds who filled the gallery on its ‘free’ days. Suddenly, the tranquility of the museum was broken by the sound of smashing glass.... The woman in grey was Mary Richardson, a well-known and highly active militant suffragist; the painting she attacked was Velazquez’s ‘Rokeby Venus’.2

Richardson was brought to court and tried. At her defense, she explained that the attack was meant as retribution for the Government’s imprisonment (p.278) of Emmeline Pankhurst, also a militant suffragist and founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union. But for the purposes of retribution and drawing attention to her cause, _any_ treasured artwork would have been a suitable candidate for attack. Why wind her way deep into the museum to go after _this_ particular painting? What Richardson did not explain until much later, in an interview in 1952, was that she ‘didn’t like the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at [the Rokeby Venus] all day’.3

Even before Richardson made the connection explicit, you’d probably guessed that there was some relationship between her fight against sexism and her disapproval, to put it mildly, of Velasquez’s painting. But how, exactly, should we formulate this connection? What, after all, is wrong with gaping at a picture of a beautiful naked woman? How else are you supposed to look to this painting, which, after all, almost _asks_ to be looked upon with open-mouthed desire?

Richardson’s actions, less than her remarks, indicate that the problem was not so much with the gaping museum patrons as it was with the picture itself. In addition to her motives of retribution and gaining notoriety for her cause, she appears to have found fault with the picture for so candidly catering to the carnal appetites of heterosexual men. But just what is the problem here? Although there are arguments against licentious images in general, puritanical iconoclasm was not the motive in this case. Behind
Richardson’s attack on Velazquez’s painting was, I suggest, a specifically feminist critique of the female nude.

My task in this chapter will be to offer a clear and persuasive formulation of that critique. My aim is neither to uncover Richardson’s specific psychological motives, nor to justify her actions. (Just to be clear, I do not advocate the physical destruction of great artworks!) Rather, I aim to explain why the female nude—by which I mean the genre of artistic representations that take the unclothed female body as their primary subject matter—has been a target of feminist criticism for nearly a century.

One might ask, How is what has come to be known as ‘the problem of the female nude’ in need of explanation? After all, in feminist circles it is now taken as an established fact that there is something wrong, ethically speaking, with representing the unclothed female body in the manner that has dominated Western art as far back as one cares to look. But what is self-evident to (p.279) feminists is not always clear to those who are not familiar with or not convinced by feminist arguments.

This is especially true in the case of the female nude. After all, some of the finest treasures of Western art fall into this genre, from the Venus de Milo to Titian’s Venus of Urbino to Ingres’s Grande Odalisque to Matisse’s Blue Nude. If these are deeply problematic works, as many feminists contend, their flaw is far from self-evident. Human beings take erotic pleasure in looking at representations of bodies that they find attractive. If there’s nothing wrong with this interest—a compelling argument against it has yet to present itself—then what’s wrong with pictures that cater to it? Of course, different people will find different kinds of bodies attractive and so, to be fair to all, the artistic tradition should gratify these many different tastes and orientations. But, one might argue, this is the situation in the history of European art: there are hard-bodied Apollo’s and David’s as well as voluptuous Venuses of all shapes and sizes. On this view it is easier to see why one might think that there’s something wrong with representing nudity per se than it is to understand singling out the female nude as problematic. If heterosexual women should not feel bad about the pleasures they take in representations of unclothed men, why should heterosexual men feel bad about the pleasures they take in representations of unclothed women? They are, after all, just representations.

These are just some of the objections that one unconvinced by feminist arguments might raise against a feminist critique of the female nude. Since it is these unconvinced whom we most need to address, it is important for feminists to speak to such worries. Unfortunately, feminist work on the female nude tends to ‘preach to the choir’; that is, it tends to address feminists who are already predisposed to accept the view. Not only will this do little to change the minds of the unconvinced, but it is also bad for feminism because it leaves too much unsupported. We need to continually respond to the kind of critical pressure that is often best formulated by the unconvinced in order to support our views with the best arguments.

My aim in this chapter is to offer a precise, compelling, and jargon-free articulation of the
problem, from a feminist perspective, with the female nude. At times this will mean providing new arguments to fill in gaps that have not been addressed; at other times I will simply be making explicit what others have left implicit. I aim throughout to earnestly consider other sides of the issue and, in particular, to take seriously the possibility that there might not (p.280) be anything at all wrong with the female nude. (I ultimately do not think that this is so, but I intend to give the view its due.) Finally, I also mean to avoid what I take to be a common failing in the philosophy of art, namely allowing one’s theory to hover at such a level of abstraction that it’s difficult to see how it speaks to actual works of art. Instead, my account of the problems with the female nude will be grounded in the material and historical specificity of the artworks in question. (On this last point I should note that I discuss lots of particular works that cannot be reproduced here. To follow my arguments it will be important to see how they are supported by the art. To this end I strongly recommend consulting a visual arts database.)

My account proceeds as follows. Section 1 outlines the general shape of the feminist critique. Section 2, drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton, explains how pictures can sexually objectify. Section 3 lends some much-needed precision to the concept of a paradigmatic form of sexual objectification, namely the male gaze. Section 4 explains how works of visual art could be said to sexually objectify a type, such as ‘women,’ rather than merely sexually objectify specific women. Section 5 explains what exactly is wrong, from a feminist point of view, with the sexual objectification of women. Section 6 concludes by discussing the implications of this critique for thinking about the relationship between art and pornography.

1. Basic Formulation of the Feminist Critique

Here, in a nutshell, is the most fundamental formulation of the feminist critique of the female nude. Women’s subordination has several sources and components, one of the most significant being the sexualization of traditional gender hierarchy; that is, the way in which dominance and related active traits are eroticized for males whereas the contraries are eroticized for females. Insofar as it makes male dominance and female subordination sexy, the female nude is one important source of this eroticization and in this way is a significant part of the complex mechanism that sustains sex inequality.

(p.281) Stripping things down in this way makes it clear what the female nude has in common with pornography, at least from one kind of feminist perspective, namely one that has its roots in J. S. Mill and is more fully developed by Catharine MacKinnon. The basic idea here is that the eroticization of gender hierarchy lies at the heart of women’s subordinate position in society. In particular, people’s—both men’s and women’s—experience of sexual desire and standards of sexual attractiveness have been systematically shaped in a way that renders women’s subordination and men’s dominance sexy. Erotic representations, according to this line of thought, have a powerful influence over our erotic tastes and are an important source of this eroticization of sex hierarchy. The female nude and pornography—in particular what I have called inequalitarian pornography—are two important kinds of erotic representation that feminists single out for criticism on these grounds.
Despite this important similarity between the female nude and pornography, there are significant differences between the female nude and inegalitarian pornography in terms of their roles in promoting and sustaining the sexual objectification of women, as I shall suggest in the final sections of this chapter. Before we can explore these similarities and differences, however, we need to clarify the terms of the feminist critique of the female nude and anticipate some objections.

First, as briefly mentioned above, by ‘female nude’ I mean the genre of artistic representations that take the unclothed female body as their primary (p.282) subject matter. As with antiporn feminism, the feminist critique of the female nude depends on a generalization about the dominant mode of this genre, namely that it sexually objectifies women. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization, some of which I discuss below. This is to say that not all artistic representations of the female nude sexually objectify, just as not all pornography sexually objectifies women. But the predominant form of heterosexual pornography, like the predominant form of the female nude in the European artistic tradition, are both deeply sexually objectifying of women. Indeed, the fact of the predominance of this way of representing the unclothed female body is itself part of the problem from a feminist perspective, as I argue in the final section of this chapter.

Second, in saying that the female nude promotes and sustains sex inequality I in no way mean to suggest that it, or even sexual objectification generally, is single-handedly responsible for gender inequality. Rather, gender inequality should be understood as systemic in nature, which is to say that there is no single element sufficient for the injustices women suffer. In the form it takes today, gender inequality is a complex whole sustained by a functionally related group of interacting, interrelated, interdependent, and diverse elements: exploitation in the workplace, everyday practices and rituals, representations of various sorts, rules and regulations, mores and customs, violence and the threat thereof, and so forth. Singling out any one element for critical analysis risks giving the false impression that one is holding it solely responsible for women’s oppression. This is what I mean to dispel here. The female nude as I describe it below is but one element in a system of oppression; it is, however, a significant element.

Third, I do not mean to suggest that the female nude is or was ever responsible for women’s lack of rights. But feminists have long realized that there is much more than lack of rights underpinning women’s subordination. In addition to its economic and legal dimensions, sex oppression also has significant social and psychological dimensions. One such significant dimension, which many feminists have gone to great lengths to articulate with subtlety and detail, is men’s and women’s internalization of an erotic taste that manifests, promotes, and sustains male dominance. In particular, women and men both learn to eroticize men’s ascendance over women. (Consider, for instance, the very common preference—on the part of both heterosexual men and women—that a man be taller than his female mate. This is just one example of the eroticization of a subtle form of male dominance and female subordination that permeates our everyday experience.) Because erotic desire plays such an important role in most
peoples’ lives, the eroticization of sex inequality is a significant way that this inequality is sustained and reproduced.

But what, one might wonder, does any of this have to do with pictures and other representations of unclothed women? The short answer is that representations of various sorts shape our erotic taste by making gender inequality sexy. Advertising, television, movies, popular music and videos, pornography, and high art encourage and entice us to connect sexual desire with women’s inferiority to men. Although the nude is just one among many such representations, it plays a special role in the eroticization of sex inequality, as explained in the final section below.

At this point one might object that the source of the eroticization of male dominance and female submissiveness evident in the female nude and pornography is natural rather than cultural.12 The general idea at work here is familiar: our female ancestors who chose dominant males (and vice versa) enjoyed greater reproductive success. The taste for male dominance and female passivity were advantageous for early hominids as they faced a host of challenges in their environment. In this way, the inequitarian shape of the dominant mode of erotic taste, which so many feminists decry, is an evolutionary adaptation that has become hardwired into our basic physiological and psychological makeup. As evolutionary psychologist David Barash puts the point, ‘There is good reason to believe that we are (genetically) primed to be much less sexually egalitarian than we appear to be.’13

A full response to this kind of sociobiological objection deserves a study of its own and I can only gesture at a response here. First, an enormous amount of work must be done to make the point scientifically viable: a specific trait must be isolated, it must be shown to be genetically heritable, and it must be demonstrated to be an adaptation rather than the result of drift, mutation, or recombination. This is a tall order that few, if any, sociobiological accounts have filled.14 But let us assume that our erotic tastes and sexual behaviors are ‘natural’ in the sense that they evolved through a process of natural selection, as the objection maintains. First, we must distinguish between what selection favors and what is morally right and just. Whether natural or not, eroticizing women’s subordination to men is morally wrong—at least wherever women as a group are subordinate to men, which is the context in which we find ourselves today—and should be thwarted as much as is reasonable given other constraints. But, our objector might protest, if these preferences and tendencies are hardwired in the sense just described then they are inevitable and so it is senseless to speak of a moral obligation to override it. This brings me to my second point, namely that genes do not determine human behavior.15 For one thing, phenotypes often differ under varying conditions,16 and for another, cultural transmission of ideas, values, skills, and tastes is a significant source of human behavior.17

(p.285) The latter is the focus of the critique presented here where the idea is not, to repeat myself, that a particular cultural form is single-handedly responsible for sexist attitudes and conduct. Rather, the feminist critique presented here maintains that in its sexual objectification of the unclothed female body, the female nude is one significant
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source of the values that sustain and perpetuate male dominance.

In making this case we encounter three difficulties. First, it is not so easy to spell out exactly what it means for a visual representation to sexually objectify anyone. People objectify people, but can a picture do this? If so, how are we to distinguish sexually objectifying pictures from, for instance, anatomical renderings of the unclothed female body, on the one hand, and avowedly feminist representations of the same, on the other? Second, it is far from obvious that there is anything wrong with sexual objectification in the first place. After all, many consider objectification to be a normal and even healthy part of human sexuality. If it is acceptable for women to objectify men, for men to objectify men, and for women to objectify women, what is the problem with men sexually objectifying women? If there is a problem with sexual objectification in general, what is it? Third and finally, even if one can explain how pictures sexually objectify and explain what is wrong with this in the case of the female nude, there remains the problem of explaining how a picture can be said to sexually objectify woman in general. With few exceptions, visual representations appear to trade in tokens, not types. Pictures, so it would seem, do not have access to the concept ‘woman’ in general; rather, pictures appear to depict only particular naked women. Even if you thought that the sexual objectification of the woman in, for instance, Ingres’s Ruggiero Rescuing Angelica (1819, Musée du Louvre) were obvious, it might still seem a stretch to say that the picture comments on women in general, and so an even further stretch to claim that it harms women as a group.

These are the sorts of questions that a compelling feminist critique of the female nude must address. I mean to put these worries to rest by answering each of these questions below.

2. Sexually Objectifying Pictures
We shall make our way through some of the questions just raised by starting with the claim that representations of the female nude sexually objectify women.

(p.286) Even if you do not agree that the genre of the female nude is marked by a predominant tendency to sexually objectify women, the meaning of the claim may at first blush seem clear and unproblematic: a group of pictures and other representational works represent something that is not an object—namely a woman—as if she were an object, and in particular a sexual object. But this seemingly straightforward formulation of the purported problem raises questions. What exactly is involved in depicting a person as if she were an object? This question is particularly tricky in the case of purely visual representations (by which I mean: paintings, photographs, drawings, engravings, and sculpture) because they are non-verbal and do not have recourse to, for instance, similes as one does in language. One can use language, as Balzac did, to express the thought that a ‘woman is like a lyre which gives up its secret only to him who knows how to play it.’18 But how could you paint, sculpt, or draw a figure in such a way that she seemed both ‘like a lyre’ and like a woman?

Before I begin my explanation of the mechanisms of objectification available to the visual arts, we need to get clear about two things. First, objectifying pictures need not
represent objectifying acts or states of objectification. Second, not all pictures representing objectifying acts or states of objectification are themselves objectifying pictures. On this last point, imagine, for instance, a picture that simply documented an act of rape.

With these clarifications in mind, let us begin our examination of objectifying pictures with the concept objectification. To objectify is to treat as a mere thing something that is in fact not a thing. Martha Nussbaum has persuasively shown that there are a variety of conceptually distinct ways to treat a person as a thing. (Note that in practice several of these may overlap in a single instance of objectification). Since her analysis is well known, I shall only briefly summarize the different things that may be involved in treating a person as an object:¹⁹

1. Instrumentality: to treat a person as a tool for her purposes
2. Denial of autonomy: to treat a person as lacking autonomy and self-determination
3. Inertness: to treat a person as lacking agency and perhaps also activity
4. Fungibility: to treat a person as interchangeable with (a) other objects of the same type and/or (b) objects of other types
5. Violability: to treat a person as lacking boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to smash up or break into
6. Ownership: to treat someone as a thing that is owned and that can perhaps be bought, sold, traded, given away, or acquired
7. Denial of subjectivity: to treat someone as something whose experience and feelings need not be taken into account.

To this list Rae Langton has recently added a few more:²⁰

8. Reduction to body: to treat a person as identified with her body or body parts
9. Reduction to appearance: to treat a person primarily in terms of how she appears to the senses.
10. Silencing: to treat a person as silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

Taking these ten ‘faces’ of objectification as a starting point, I suggest that there are nine ways in which artworks belonging to the genre of the female nude objectify the person or people represented. Each of these incorporates several of the different modes of objectification outlined by Nussbaum and Langton. As with Nussbaum’s and Langton’s lists, my list aims to make explicit the conceptually distinct visual means of objectification, means that are not mutually exclusive and are even sometimes mutually entailing. In practice, as we shall see, a single artwork can objectify the unclothed female body in several of the ways described here.

2.1. Visual metaphor

The work suggests an analogy between a person and an inert thing through visual similarity and proximity. Often the inert thing to which the woman is compared is an object
to be consumed or used as a means to some end. Examples: (p.288)

A. Woman as musical instrument: Titian’s various ‘Venus and Musician’ paintings21 or Man Ray, Le Violon d’Ingres (1924, Getty Collection).22
B. Woman as vessel: Ingres, La Source (1820, Musée d’Orsay, Paris).
C. Woman’s body or body-part as fruit: Paul Gaugin, Two Tahitian Women (1899, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

2.2. Eroticization of violation
The work makes the physical violation of a woman sexy. Examples:

A. Eroticization of rape: Titian, Rape of Europa (1559–62, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston); Rubens, Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus (1670, Alte Pinakothek, Munich)23
B. Eroticization of physical destruction: Delacroix, The Death of Sardanapalus (1827, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

2.3. Foregrounding of erogenous zones
Figure is posed so as to make breasts, pubis, and/or buttocks the focus, often while minimizing or even erasing any traces of subjectivity. Examples:

A. Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus (c.1510, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) is the prototype for a whole tradition of recumbent nudes. The figure’s bodily position is marked by a noticeable vulnerability and availability that cannot be explained by sleep; rather, the function of the pose is to emphasize vulnerability and to provide maximal visual access to erogenous zones. (The so-called pudica gesture, by the way, calls attention to that which it supposedly hides, and the shape of the hand itself (p.289) is a visual metaphor for the genitals ‘concealed’ below it.)24 Her subjectivity is important only insofar as her loss of consciousness emphasizes her utter passivity and vulnerability.

2.4. Divided into sexual parts
A more extreme version of 2.3 above, the work does not even represent the entire person but only erogenous parts.

A. Courbet, L’Origine du monde (1866, Musée d’Orsay, Paris)
B. L’Action enchaînée (Enchained Action) (1906), a larger-than-life headless and limbless unclothed torso by Maillol that for many years was the centerpiece of the grand staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago.

2.5. Generic body
Typically the female nude is a generic figure that lacks any suggestion of a unique personality, particular identity, or distinctive qualities. Rather, the nude is simply one of the many sexually available bodies that constitute the type. While this feature is best seen with the entire genre or even an oeuvre taken into consideration—e.g. all of Titian’s
unclothed women are virtually identical—there are a few famous single works offering a superabundance of generic docile soft bodies that make this point:

Examples:

B. ‘Bathers,’ a favorite modernist theme, offered an opportunity to cram into a single canvas many female nudes in various poses of sexual availability. Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, and Seurat, for instance, made several versions.

2.6. Eroticization of passivity, powerlessness, and lack of autonomy
Some already mentioned do this (e.g. Giorgione, Titian, Rubens, Delacroix), but also consider the popular theme of ‘nymph and satyr’; e.g. Correggio’s famous version (1524–5, Musée du Louvre, Paris) and the many versions produced by Picasso.

2.7. Diegetic surveillance or self-surveillance
The work makes the unclothed female the object of someone’s gaze within the diegetic world of the work, thereby thematizing her function as a means to the end of the viewer’s erotic visual gratification. We have already seen some works that do this like Gaugin’s *Tahitian Women*. But the unclothed female is often also the object of her own gaze, demonstrating her internalization of ‘the male gaze’ (more on this in the next section).

A. Velazquez’s *Rokeby Venus* or Titian’s many representations of Venus with a mirror.25

As John Berger notes, such works not only sexually objectify women but also morally condemn them for it.26

2.8. Gratuitous nudity
By this I mean two things:

A. First, nudity can be gratuitous in the sense that it is not called for by the narrative circumstances in the picture. Consider, for instance, Titian’s famous *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1523–4, Museo del Prado, Madrid), where the nude strikes a familiar vulnerable and revealing pose while playing no role in diegetic events and remaining utterly unintegrated into the composition. As in so many works in this genre, the nude is there to serve as sexual eye candy and nothing more.

B. Nudity can also be gratuitous in the sense that even when there is a narrative motivation for the figure’s state of undress, this only thinly disguises the real point of such pictures which, once again, is to offer a (p.291) titillating view of an unclothed female body. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, for instance,
an artist couldn’t get away with the bold and unapologetic display of the female body for the sake of the viewer’s erotic pleasure alone, so she was Venus, or some other figure revived from ancient mythology. This pretext was evident as such to artists and patrons from the beginning. This need for a mythological pretext persisted through the mid-nineteenth century—consider the Birth of Venus by Cabanel (1865) and Bouguereau (1879), both in the Musée d’Orsay—although it is plainly obvious that the mythological veneer hardly explains the writhing poses of utter surrender and availability. Although Venus was just born, you might say that she comes into the world ready for immediate use.

2.9. Passive poses of availability and surrender

The classic pose for the female nude is (a) recumbent, (b) frontal (so that pubis and breasts are in full view), and (c) often with one arm raised above (p.292) head. The pose is passive, unprotected, vulnerable, and suggests sexual availability.

Examples:

A. Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus, mentioned above, is the prototype for this pose whose influence one can still see in twentieth-century masterpieces such as Matisse, Blue Nude (Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra, 1907, Baltimore Museum of Art) and Picasso, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

3. The Male Gaze

My brief analysis of the various means by which a work of visual art can sexually objectify makes it clear that the primary function of the female nude is to provide visual erotic pleasure. But, many feminists hasten to remind us, this erotic pleasure is of a gendered sort. This brings us to the familiar concept of ‘the male gaze’. The female nude, it is often said, is first and foremost characterized by works that cater to male interests and desires. Despite the term’s common currency, particularly in art history and gender studies, ‘the male gaze’ remains murky and in need of clarification.

There is a temptation to understand the concept empirically, as if it described actual audiences and their viewing practices. Conceived this way, ‘the male gaze’ is taken to designate, for instance, the desirous, open-mouthed stare of the museum patrons who provoked the Rokeby Venus’ attacker. But if this is what is meant by the concept, then it privileges heterosexual male viewers while ignoring the many others who were exposed to these pictures from their inception. This leads one to ask, as some frustrated critics have, What of the heterosexual women who have been looking at these pictures over the ages? What of the homosexual men? What of the lesbians? Why should we say that the female nude is any more an (p.293) object of the male gaze than it is of, say, the female gaze, or better, the lesbian gaze?

However well-meaning, such questions are misguided. This is because ‘the male gaze’ is best construed not as an empirical concept meant to describe actual viewing practices on the part of audiences, even in cases where a description of this sort is accurate.
Rather, ‘the male gaze’ should be understood as normative, referring to the sexually objectifying ‘way of seeing,’ to use John Berger’s term, that the work in question solicits. To say that a work embodies the male gaze is to say that it calls upon its audience to ‘see’ (whether literally or figuratively) the woman represented—in this case the unclothed female body—as primarily a sex object. To describe this ‘way of seeing’ as ‘male’ is not to claim anything about how all, or even most, men respond to such pictures; rather, it is to note that this is the ‘way of seeing’ proper to someone in the masculine social role, a role which, it should be noted, is avowedly heterosexual. (For this reason it would be more fitting to call this ideal viewing position the masculine gaze.)

A related common but misguided conception of ‘the male gaze’ is the assumption that works embodying this way of seeing address men exclusively. This is understandable since works like those we have been considering have the obvious function of arousing the erotic desires of heterosexual men. As art historian Charles Hope puts the point about Venus of Urbino and similar paintings by Titian, ‘The implication is that these pictures were for the most part mere pinups, and that the girls were seen as little more than sex objects.’ However, I suggest that both pinups and high art nudes address women as well, although the function of these representations is importantly different in each case. The nude is one of those cultural forms that teaches women to see themselves in terms of masculine interests. As Mill might have put the point, the female nude is an important part of how women learn that ‘meekness, submissiveness and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, [are] an essential part of [their] sexual attractiveness.’ By representing inertness, passivity, violability, and lack of autonomy as sexually attractive characteristics in females, the nude eroticizes objectification and subordinance. And insofar as the nude is one of those cultural forms that emphasizes our appearance and sexual appeal above all other characteristics, it offers an ideal of feminine self-understanding in which our sexual appeal to men becomes, as Mill puts it, ‘the polar star’ of our identity.

The narcissism that results from this learned obsession with our appearance and sexual attractiveness itself becomes a theme of the genre, as noted in number 7 in my list above. The nude is not just a sight for the masculine gaze; she is a thing to be looked at even by herself, although always evaluated through masculine eyes. As art historian John Berger astutely puts the point,

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

The male gaze is to be internalized by men and women alike. It is for this reason that I say that the female nude’s target audience, then, is both sexes.

This is not to say, however, that the nude’s male and female audiences are somehow forced to take up the male gaze. A viewer could be either unable or unwilling, perhaps...
for ethical reasons, to look upon the nude in the way that the pictures prescribe. Nothing prevents imaginative resistance to the male gaze, but such resistance is bound to interfere with one’s appreciation of the work in question. A viewer who refused to inhabit the male gaze would be unable to properly appreciate, for instance, Velázquez’s painting, and there are deep questions, that I cannot explore here, about whom or what is to blame for this failure: the painting or the viewer.

For the moment, let us consider the question of whether all representations of the female nude are necessarily marred by the male gaze. Is it possible to represent the unclothed female figure in a manner that does not sexually objectify?

I’ll address this question by way of an example: Artemisia Gentileschi’s Susanna and the Elders (1610, Pommersfelden). In the Apocryphal story from the Book of Daniel, Susanna is in her garden bathing when attacked by two elders of her community who plan to rape her. They threaten her but she does not give in and, after a series of complicated events, they are tried and convicted for their crime. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the story provided a pretense for displaying the unclothed female body, much like Lucretia or Venus or Danaë, but unlike these others, the Susanna story was sanctioned by its Christianity and, more important for our purposes, offered heightened erotic appeal by its inclusion of two lecherous men.

Artists before and after Artemisia’s time typically represented the moment before Susanna notices the elders, when she is calmly going about her bath, with little to distract us from the visual center of the picture, namely her voluptuous and opalescent body. Consider, for instance, Tintoretto’s version Susanna and the Elders, (c.1555–6, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). By contrast, the core of Artemisia’s painting is, as Mary Garrard aptly puts it, ‘the heroine’s plight, not the villain’s anticipated pleasure.’ In Artemisia’s picture Susanna’s body is not idealized by contemporaneous standards: notice the groin wrinkle, the lines in her neck, her hanging breast, and her awkwardly proportioned legs and reddish feet. Further, unlike many of the nudes we’ve seen thus far, Susanna’s subjectivity is foregrounded in the psychological anguish expressed on her face, in her unusually well-defined gesture of resistance and hiding, and in her contorted posture. In contrast to the weak, passive, positively limp nudes we’ve seen thus far, Artemisia’s Susanna is a figura serpentinata, an artistic term for this type of energetic spiral pose characteristic of Mannerist art. The pose conveys the potential energy of a wound coil about to spring, and for this reason was in this period typically reserved for male figures. In these ways, Artemisia’s Susanna is shown as heroic in her struggle against forces of evil. Although the picture represents her unclothed and represents her sexual objectification, it does so without sexually objectifying her.

Here we have an example of the point made at the start of section 2 that there is an important conceptual distinction between a representation of sexual objectification and a sexually objectifying representation. Whereas the latter prescribes the male gaze, the former could register the male gaze without endorsing it; this, I argue, is how Artemisia’s Susanna works. (This is not to say that a representation cannot both sexually objectify and represent sexual objectification: Tintoretto’s Susanna and Titian’s Rape of Europa,
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4. Types, not Tokens
Thus far I have made the case for a peculiarly pictorial means of sexual objectification. I wager that this constitutes the dominant mode of representing the unclothed female body in the Western artistic tradition. It is in this way that the genre of the nude perpetuates and promotes a damaging (p.297) gender stereotype, namely that women are first and foremost sex objects; that is, that a woman’s sexuality, and in particular her sexual appeal to men, is a primary feature of her identity.

At this point a serious objection arises. While it is clear that all of the artworks mentioned thus far objectify an individual woman or women, what licenses the conclusion that a picture can objectify women in general? A stereotype, after all, is a demeaning and restrictive generalization about a group, but none of the artworks we’ve seen so far depict women as a group. Even when a picture offers a swarm of docile and voluptuous unclothed bodies, as we saw in Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*, it would seem that at most one is entitled to say that the picture sexually objectifies these women, not the entire class of women.

Indeed, with few exceptions, visual representations appear unavoidably bound up with details. Putting something in visible form makes it concrete and specifies particular traits: representing a woman requires making decisions about all of her visible physical features, from the shape of her nose to the size of her feet. The more abstract the representation, of course, the less information conveyed about particularities, and so the claim about objectification of women in general might hold for abstract nudes. But the case made here has relied heavily upon pre-modern and early modern works—for reasons to be made clear—and with few exceptions these would seem to represent individual women in all their particularity; that is, they seem to offer us tokens, not types. So how can a visual representation stereotype women as a whole?

This is an important question that, to my knowledge, finds no answer in the literature. My answer has two parts: the female nude in the European tradition is almost always both generic and idealized.

As mentioned in section 2.5 from my list above, by ‘generic’ I mean that the individual unclothed females comprising the genre tend to lack distinctive qualities that suggest individuality and set each apart from the rest. Instead, there is a strong tendency for nudes to exhibit qualities common to a group, where this is defined by a particular oeuvre, a period style, and the genre itself. (This is an important point to which I return in the final section of this chapter: in order to see that a particular figure is generic, you must appeal to the group of which it is a part.) One such commonality is (p.298) posture. As noted in section 2.9 from my list above, female nudes tend to strike very similar poses of surrender and availability that highlight breasts, pubis, and/or buttocks. Whether recumbent (à la Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*) or standing (à la Bouguereau’s *Birth of Venus*), these poses are peculiar to female nudes and are rarely used for unclothed males. But it is not simply pose that makes female nudes generic: female nudes tend to
share physiognomic qualities as well. Regardless of time period, nudes are regularly pale and without any trace of body hair, with full round breasts and erect nipples. Facial features are also quite similar, particularly within the context of an oeuvre: for instance, all of Titian’s nudes, whether Venus or Danaë or some other goddess, have the same facial features, the same skin tone, the same long blondish wavy hair, and even almost always wear the same pearl earrings. This is not simply a point about artistic style, for despite the fact that Titian’s men are recognizably in the artist’s style, they nevertheless exhibit individuating features. Female nudes are rarely represented as unique personalities distinguishable from others; rather, all peculiarities are left out in favor of a sameness that renders the figures interchangeable or, as Nussbaum would put it, fungible.

There are good reasons why the unclothed females represented throughout the tradition do not lend themselves to being identified as particular individuals. First, this would undercut their ‘pinup function’ (see remark by Charles Hope in section 3 above). Generic figures are better suited to serve the fantasies of a wide audience of male viewers. But individuality would also undercut the normative function of the nude where the women depicted serve as ideals of female beauty and erotic excellence. (To repeat a point made earlier, this is an ideal for both male and female audiences.)

This idea that the nude is both generic and ideal—both a model of and a model for women—was theorized in humanistic treatises on painting at the time that painters like Botticelli, Giorgione, and Titian were developing their prototypes. Most notably, Leon Battista Alberti spells out his method of what one might call ‘ideal imitation’ in his treatise on painting, Della Pittura. Like so many of his contemporaries, Alberti firmly believed both that paintings should copy nature and be beautiful. This presents the artist depicting the human form with a serious challenge since, Alberti notes, ‘complete beauties are never found in a single body, but are rare and dispersed in many bodies.’ Alberti’s advice is to follow the example of the ancient painter Zeuxis, ‘the most excellent and most skilled painter of all.’ According to legend, Zeuxis ‘chose the five most beautiful young girls from the youth of that land in order to draw from them whatever beauty is praised in a woman.’ Following this venerable example, the painter of the female nude should consult nature directly by selecting from many different women for representation the fairest parts of each to produce a composite figure that would be both true to nature and more perfect than any existing woman. The resultant nude would be both everywoman (generic) and what every woman should be (ideal). This ideal, I argue, is a sexual object.

5. What’s Wrong with Sexual Objectification?
We’ve now seen how the female nude sexually objectifies, and how through genericization and idealization the object of that sexual objectification is ‘woman’ as a type rather than a particular token woman or women. But none of this explains why feminists have a problem with the female nude. An important question still remains, namely: What is wrong with sexual objectification? After all, many would agree that some form and degree of objectification constitutes a normal, and even salutary, dimension of human sexual
activity.

Against such a view, some, most notably Kant, have disparaged all sexual objectification as the practice of making oneself into a thing to be used by another, a mere means to an end that degrades one’s humanity and reduces one to the level of (other) animals. If this is the kind of concern that feminists mean to adduce against sexual objectification, then the concern ought to apply to the sexual objectification of men as well. From such a view (p.300) one should expect sexually objectifying representations of male nudes to come under fire. Consider the following list of famous examples of beefcake—that is, sexually objectified unclothed males—from the European tradition:

- Michelangelo, so-called Dying Slave (c.1513, Louvre, Paris)
- Rodin, Age of Bronze, also known as The Vanquished (modeled 1867, cast c.1906)
- Mantegna, St. Sebastian, (c.1458, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)
- El Greco, Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (c.1577–8, Museo Catedralico, Palencia)
- Titian, Three Ages of Man (1511–12, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) (Note, by the way, that in this picture the partially clothed youth’s sex organ is compared to an instrument to be played by the (mostly) clothed young woman.)

Each of these figures is accurately characterized by at least some combination of the concepts from Nussbaum’s and Langton’s list: they are inert, fungible, violable, silenced, anonymous, passive, subjectivity-less, enslaved, sexually violated, and/or reduced to their bodies and appearance. Why do feminists not criticize these? Is there a double standard at work here? I don’t think so. The feminist critique of the female nude does not object to sexual objectification per se; it is not Kantian in this regard.

In order to see why the female nude is singled out as specially problematic, we need to understand a key methodological aspect of the feminist critique of the female nude that is too often left inexplicit, namely that the critique cannot be framed adequately from the perspective of methodological individualism. Here I am importing the term ‘methodological individualism’ to aesthetics and art criticism to refer to the view that all artistically relevant features of an artwork can be explained by appeal to individual works alone. Methodologically individualist accounts hold, either explicitly or implicitly, that all of a work’s artistic properties can be defined, explained, and appreciated for that work independently of all other individual artworks. Supra-individual and aggregate artistic categories play no explanatory or evaluative role in such accounts. This, I wager, is the dominant view in art history, art criticism, and the philosophy of art, a preeminence likely due to stress laid on the uniqueness and particularity of artworks.

While I strongly agree that it is crucial to attend to the uniqueness of artworks in all of their richness and subtlety of detail in both formal and historical terms, I contend that resting at the atomistic level of individuals will leave obscured some of the deep problems that most concern feminists. This is because these problems are not intrinsic to individual
works themselves but, rather, can only be captured through appeal to *relational*
features of female nudes and to *patterns* seen in aggregate artistic categories. The
problem, to put it succinctly, is the systematic and preeminent sexual objectification of
the female body, and only the female body, that persists throughout the European artistic
tradition. To adequately capture this, we need to take what Marilyn Frye calls a
*macroscopic view* of things.\(^5^1\) Here are at least four things that a macroscopic view
brings into focus:

1. There are a large number of works where a sexually objectified female nude appears
   with clothed and active men who are not sexually objectified. Consider, for instance, the
   many famous works where a sexually objectified female nude is featured with fully
dressed men who are engaging in some artistic or intellectual activity.

   - Titian’s six paintings of Venus with Musician.\(^5^2\)
   - Giorgione, *Fête champêtre* (1508–9, Musée du Louvre, Paris)
   - Manet, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863, Musée d’Orsay, Paris)

\(^{(p.302)}\) A sub-genre of these are countless pictures that explicitly thematize the role of
the female nude in the practice of making art. In many of these works the model’s gaze is
averted or downcast, de-emphasizing her subjectivity—and her supple posture is one of
vulnerability—her arms often pulled back in an exposed, unguarded, and revealing
gesture. He, on the other hand, is not just clothed but deeply absorbed in the artistic act.
She is the object of his gaze, the passive material for his creative intelligence, and
sometimes also his inspiration and muse. His job: make great art. Her job: sit and look
pretty. Here are just a few examples from different periods:

   - Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Nude* (1525, woodcut).
   - Gustave Courbet, *The Painter’s Studio* (1855, Musée d’Orsay, Paris).
   - Matisse, *Artist and Model* (c.1919, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)

These works illustrate the way that the female nude has come to stand as the archetypal
artwork. When artists represent themselves at work, the default subject matter is often
an unclothed female body. It’s not surprising then, that a nude is often the first thing one
sees upon entering some of the great museums in the European world.\(^5^3\)

This is rarely the case with male nudes. I know of very few works in which unclothed,
docile men consort with clothed, actively engaged women. This disparity in the visual
treatment of females and males, with an egregiously disproportionate emphasis placed on
the docile sexuality of the former, is an important element of the feminist critique. It
becomes even more apparent when one moves to consider the aggregate category of
the genre itself:

2. The second thing one must consider to fully understand the feminist critique is the
sheer prevalence of the female nude in the Western tradition \(\text{(p.303) when compared}\)
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with male nudes. The female nude is omnipresent in most major periods of European art (medieval art being a notable exception), and while representations of unclothed males exist, their numbers do not approach the female nude through all styles and periods. It is due to this widespread and uneven preoccupation with sexually objectified unclothed female bodies that the term ‘nude,’ in art circles, has come to designate female nudes exclusively and it is only when the unclothed body in question is male that one must specify gender. Comparing the two genres (female nudes vs. male nudes) allows us to see the glaringly uneven importance placed on women’s appearance and sexual appeal.

This is yet another way in which the nude can be said to stereotype women. Stereotyping is achieved not simply through the generic but ideal types offered up by individual works; the stereotype of woman-as-sex-object is also achieved by the genre itself in its insistent, repeated, pervasive sexual objectification of women’s unclothed bodies throughout much of the Western artistic tradition.

3. Third is the manner in which unclothed female bodies are typically represented compared with that of unclothed male bodies. The problem is not simply that the unclothed female body is almost always sexually objectified in the ways described throughout this chapter; an important part of the problem is that male nudes typically are not. Although sexually objectified male nudes exist in the European tradition—consider, for instance, Thomas Eakins’s Arcadia (c.1883, Metropolitan Museum of Art)—they are exceptional in this regard. Typically, male nudes are represented as active, strong, heroic, and unassailable figures engaged in combat, thinking, or other ‘manly’ activities. Consider the following famous works:

- Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes (Engraving, 1470s, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)
- Ingres, Oedipus Answering the Sphinx’s Riddle (1808–20, Musée du Louvre)
- Michelangelo, David (1504, Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence)
- Rodin, The Thinker (Bronze, first casting 1902)

(p.304) The feminist critique does not focus simply on the fact that female nudes are represented as passive, vulnerable, weak, fungible, and lacking subjectivity. Indeed, I would argue that there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with an individual picture of an unclothed woman that sexually objectifies her in these ways. The problem, from a feminist perspective, is that the overwhelming majority of female nudes have traditionally been represented this way while the majority of male nudes (and here we should keep in mind the first point, that this total number is considerably smaller) are not. There are very few active, strong, psychologically engaging, heroic female nudes and I know of no female counterparts to The Thinker, the Pollaiuolo engraving, or David. To make this point vivid, try the thought experiment of imagining a work like Ingres’s Turkish Bath with men rather than women, or Pollaiuolo’s Battle with women rather than men. The results, I think you’ll find, will seem so foreign as to border on the absurd.

4. Fourth, let us conjoin this imbalance—this one-sided abundance of objectified female
flesh—with women’s cultural, and especially artistic, disenfranchisement, by which I mean women’s exclusion from the artistic canon. This exclusion takes two forms. First, although women make up roughly one-half of the human population, they are almost entirely absent from the pantheon of great artists, including modern and contemporary artists. Second, the kinds of artefacts traditionally produced by women—e.g. clothing, quilts, pottery, needlework, and weaving—have not been taken seriously as art but, instead, have been relegated to the diminished categories of ‘decorative arts’ or ‘crafts’. The problem, then, is not that this or that particular representation of the female nude was produced by a man, but that men are overwhelmingly responsible for the entire genre. Pace Foucault and intentional fallacy theorists, it does matter who’s speaking: the message one gets strolling through the great museums of the world, or even just flipping through an art history textbook, is that women are connected to great art not as its creators, but simply as bodies, as the raw material out of which men forge masterpieces. (Here I remind you of the theme of artist-and-model discussed earlier.)

This point is humorously captured in a 1989 poster by the Guerilla Girls, an artist activist group. The poster features a gorilla mask atop the body of Ingres’s *Grande Odalisque* and reads: ‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less [sic] than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.’ On September 1, 2004, the Guerilla Girls returned to the Met with another survey to find that the situation had only worsened: a mere 3 per cent of the artists in the modern and contemporary section are women, and 83% per cent of the nudes are female.

To sum up, I have argued that the female nude sexually objectifies women, and that this is achieved through the use of ideal types in individual representations and also through the sheer omnipresence of such images in the Western tradition. But this raised the question, What’s wrong with sexual objectification, anyway? After having briefly compared the genre of the female nude with that of the male nude and considered its place within the broader artistic tradition, we are now in a position to see the answer. Isolated instances of sexual objectification are not necessarily any more problematic for women than for men. Indeed, in some cases sexual objectification is most welcome; it makes sense at certain appropriate times for a woman to want to be a sexual object for her lover rather than, say, a challenging intellectual sparring partner. The problem is that women do not have this choice because we live under the umbrella of sexual objectification. The most extreme and violent form of this sexual objectification can be seen in the fact that women live with the constant threat of rape and are not safe on the streets or at home. But a less extreme example is the persistent preoccupation with women’s bodies, appearance, and erotic appeal. The constant emphasis on women’s appearance and sex appeal at the expense of any other important aspect of our identity extends to almost every aspect of our lives. This is not merely something that is done to us. Women have come to internalize ‘the male gaze’, to see ourselves through objectifying eyes and in terms of male interests.

If we lived in a world where everyone, men and women alike, lived under this umbrella of
sexual objectification, that might be weird but to my mind not unjust or otherwise morally problematic (unless, of course, sexual objectification were unwelcome). The injustice that concerns feminists arises from the fact that men do not live under this umbrella. Men get to choose when to play the role of sex object whereas women have no such choice. It is this asymmetry — where women are continually reduced to objects of men’s pleasure but not the converse — that underpins gender injustice. The nude, I have shown, is one of the means of perpetuating this injustice.

6. Concluding Thoughts about Art and Pornography

Pornography becomes difficult to distinguish from art and ads once it is clear that what is degrading to women is the same as what is compelling to the consumer.

Catharine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State

What’s wrong with the female nude, to put the point succinctly, is that it promotes sex inequality by eroticizing it. To those familiar with the literature, this will sound an awful lot like one dimension of a certain kind of feminist critique of pornography. According to that critique, standard heterosexual pornography — what I have elsewhere called inegalitarian (p. 307) pornography — eroticizes women’s subordination to men and this, antiporn feminists charge, can have a host of harmful effects on real women’s lives. Similar worries have also been leveled against mainstream advertising, music and music videos, and various other aspects of popular culture, as seen in the quote from MacKinnon above. The similarity that feminist critique brings to light between the nude and other cultural forms could make it seem as if, from a feminist perspective, the nude is just another of the many elements of our culture that make sexism sexy. This is sometimes thought to render the distinctions between ‘art’ and ‘pornography’ or ‘advertising’ irrelevant from the viewpoint of feminist critique.

This, however, overlooks the important way in which these distinctions do matter from a feminist perspective, and a reason why the female nude should have a special place in our account of the role of representations in bending our erotic taste toward sex inequality. The female nude not only eroticizes but also aestheticizes the sexual objectification of women, and it does so from on high. These two features, which I shall explain in turn, serve well the nude’s function of promoting sex inequality and so should make it a cultural form of primary concern to feminists.

The female nude aestheticizes sexual objectification of women insofar as all of the works discussed in this chapter display considerable attention to the formal and material dimensions of the representations. Pace Charles Hope, this is an important difference between the nude and the average pornographic photo: the nude demands to be looked at as art, to be appreciated for its composition, textures, portrayal of light and shadow, and other formal and material features. Many of the works discussed in this chapter are quite beautiful and compelling and display dazzling skill and creativity. This not only makes the message of female inferiority and male superiority more compelling, but insofar as one considers art to be immune to moral scrutiny — a common enough view in
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the history of Western thought— the nude’s aestheticization protects it from feminist criticism. As feminists we may be uncomfortable with the eroticization of sex inequality, but as appreciators of art qua art (on this view) we should be ignoring artworks’ moral failings and attending instead to the aesthetic dimension of the work.

Unlike most contemporary philosophical discussions of art and pornography, I have deliberately focused on older works, many of which are uncontested masterpieces. Many of these works are prominently featured in almost any survey of Western art history: they are canonical. The artistic canon is generally thought of as the repository of our highest and most enduring values. Art with a capital ‘A’ is a hallowed category of works that demands our undivided attention, respect, special care and maintenance. I have shown that some of the gems of the Western canon offer not (or not just) beautiful and profound truths about the human condition, but actively promote women’s subordination to men. Art’s venerated status invests this message of male superiority and female inferiority with special authority, making it an especially effective way of promoting sex inequality. As art historian Carol Duncan eloquently puts it, ‘as sanctified a category as any our society offers, art silently but ritually validates and invests with mystifying authority the ideals that sustain existing social relations.’

In short, unlike pornographic works, the ‘artistic gems’ I’ve been discussing (a) make sex inequality not just sexy but also beautiful, (2) lend sex inequality special authority, and (c) and present themselves as immune to, or at the very least resistant to, moral and political scrutiny. This gives feminists good reason to worry about the nude at least as much as we worry about pornography, and perhaps even more, since the nude’s appeal is more insidious.

Notes:

(1) A distant ancestor of this chapter was presented at the American Society of Aesthetics annual meeting in 2002 where it received helpful comments from Ivan Gaskell, Paul Guyer, and Alexander Nehamas. I presented a substantially revised version at the University of Illinois-Chicago where members of the philosophy department offered challenging comments. Faith Hart and Mary Stroud read the paper carefully and gave lots of good advice. Finally, I am grateful to Hans Maes and Jerry Levinson for their thoughtful and detailed comments. Thank you all for helping me to make this a better chapter.

(2) Lynda Nead, The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality (Routledge, 1992), 34.


(4) An excellent and stable database of high quality images of European art from the eleventh to the mid-nineteenth centuries is the Web Gallery of Art: (http://www.wga.hu). (Note that to search this database, you must use artist’s names in their original languages, so, for instance, ‘Titian’ = ‘Tiziano’.) In addition, most major museums now offer online databases of their collections.
(5) Mill observed that 'a means of holding women in subjection [is] representing to them meekness, submissiveness and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness' (The Subjection of Women [1869], ed. Susan Okin (Hackett, 1988), 16). Mill mentions this only in passing, but the idea that the eroticization of gender hierarchy plays a significant role in sustaining that hierarchy has been developed most fully and notably by Catharine MacKinnon in Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Harvard University Press, 1989), chs. 6 and 7 and in Feminism Unmodified (Harvard University Press, 1987), chs. 2 and 3, although she does not, to my knowledge, see Mill as a source. MacKinnon argues convincingly that gender difference itself is the effect of power imbalance: 'Male and female are created through the eroticization of dominance and submission' (Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, 113, my emphasis). Pornography, she famously argues, plays an integral role in this eroticization. Where I agree with this as a characterization of what I call inegalitarian pornography—which, I should note, characterizes mainstream heterosexual pornography for men, as well as some other—I think it a grave mistake for MacKinnon to cast this as a feature of pornography per se. Her refusal to acknowledge that some forms of pornography can sidestep—much less thwart—the eroticization of male dominance and female subordination is what leads many to suspect—wrongly, I think—that sex-negativity motivates her feminism. I develop this point in 'A Sex-Positive Antiporn Feminism' (forthcoming).

(6) Prompted by an interesting essay by Larry May, I make the distinction between egalitarian and inegalitarian pornography in 'A Sensible Antiporn Feminism,' Ethics 117(4) (July 2007), 674–715.

(7) I stand by this generalization for nearly all artistic traditions in human history. In this chapter, however, I shall be concerned with the European artistic tradition.

(8) Elsewhere I make the case that only a subset of all pornography is problematic from a feminist perspective. However, this subset, which I dub inegalitarian porn, is by far the dominant form of pornography. See my ‘A Sensible Antiporn Feminism’.


(10) See Ann E. Cudd, Analyzing Oppression (Oxford University Press, 2006) for an excellent summary and also compelling original arguments.


(12) This kind of objection to a feminist critique is common but this particular formulation
in relation to the female nude comes from Jerrold Levinson.


(14) See Philip Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (MIT Press, 1985) for a strong doubts that sociobiology could ever fill this order.

(15) Sociobiologists whose work might be cited as support for the above objection themselves acknowledge this very point. For instance, in their controversial *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (MIT Press, 2000) Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer argue that rape is either the by-product of an adaptation or an adaptation itself. However, they insist that rape can be prevented when its evolutionary causes are taken into account. For criticisms of this book, see Cheryl Brown Travis (ed.), *Evolution, Gender and Rape* (MIT Press, 2003).

(16) Anne Fausto-Sterling puts the point this way: ‘in animals and humans alike, male-female interactions around sex and the rearing of offspring are variable matters. Depending on their environments, both sexes can exhibit a wide range of behaviors. Changing the environment can change a set of behaviors.’ ‘Beyond Difference: Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology,’ in Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (eds.), *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (Jonathan Cape, 2000), 184.


(18) Quoted in Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 397. The Balzac quote comes from *Physiologie du mariage*.


(21) Titian and his workshop produced several paintings representing a nude Venus reclining on a lusciously draped couch in the company of a male musician fully dressed in contemporaneous patrician clothing playing a lute or an organ. In several cases, the musician stares directly at Venus’ crotch or breasts, as in the most famous of these examples, *Venus with Organist and Cupid* (1548, Museo del Prado, Madrid).

(22) ‘Violon d’Ingres’ is French idiom that means ‘hobby,’ especially an artistic hobby. Not only does this photograph objectify by turning the armless female torso into a musical instrument, but the title suggests that this female model, Kiki, was a ‘hobby’ of
Man Ray’s.

(23) The eroticizing representations of rape from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries are too numerous to even begin to enumerate here. During the mid- to late Renaissance, such fantasies were protected from moral scrutiny by a mythological veneer: the eroticized and violated unclothed bodies were lent moral and cultural respectability by being represented as Danaë, Leda, Io, Europa, or a generic nymph. For a good analysis, see Diane Wolfthal, Images of Rape: The ‘Heroic’ Tradition and Its Alternatives (Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 1, especially “‘Heroic’ Rape Imagery.” See also A. W. Eaton, ‘Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet,’ in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy (Winter 2003), 159–88.


(25) Titian and his workshop did several versions of this, the most famous of which is from 1555 and now hangs in the National Gallery, Washington DC.


(27) Consider the following famous example. The Duke of Urbino, the eponymous first owner of Titian’s famous painting, in a letter from March 9, 1538, referred to it not as ‘Venus’ (la Venere) but, rather, as ‘the naked lady’ or ‘the nude lady’; the words are the same in Italian—la donna nuda (Georg Gronau, Documenti artistici urbinati, Raccolta di fonti per la storia dell’arte, vol. i (Florence, 1936), 93, no. XXXI). The same phrase was used in 1598 by a man writing to the Duke to ask for a copy, to which the Duke responded that he preferred not to be identified as the painting’s owner, explaining that he only kept this ‘lascivious work’ in his collection because it was by Titian (see Charles Hope, “Poesie” and Painted Allegories’, in J. Martineau and C. Hope (eds.), The Genius of Venice, 1500–1600 (Abrams, 1984), 36). Titian himself acknowledged the real point of some of his most important mythological paintings in a letter to his patron, Philip II of Spain, who commissioned a set of mythological paintings featuring unclothed women. After having sent the first painting in the series, the Danae, Titian wrote to Philip to announce the shipment of the second painting which was to be a pendant of the Danae, namely the Venus and Adonis. Titian writes: ‘And as the Danae which I have already sent to Your Majesty is seen entirely from the front, I want to vary it in this other [painting], showing the figure from the opposite side; thus the room in which they are to hang will be more appealing’ (Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura (Rome, 1757), ii. 22). This letter makes it clear that the woman’s posture in these pictures is explained not by some narrative event in the painting but, rather, by the desire to provide maximal visual access to the unclothed female body, and in particular to erogenous zones which are foregrounded and highlighted through a variety of compositional devices. I mean to suggest that what is driving these pictures is not the mythological narrative but rather the viewer’s erotic titillation; this is their function, their raison d’être. For a compelling
account of Titian’s mythological paintings along these lines, see Charles Hope, ‘Problems of Interpretation in Titian’s Erotic Paintings’, in Massimo Gemin and Giannantonio Paladini (eds.), Tiziano e Venezia, Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, 1976 (Vicenza, 1980), 11–24. For a sophisticated treatment of these issues with respect to the Venus of Urbino in particular, see the essays in Rona Goffen (ed.), Titian’s Venus of Urbino (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

(28) Sociologist Erving Goffman makes a similar observation with respect to the ubiquity of this pose for women in advertising: ‘a recumbent position is one from which physical defense of oneself can least well be initiated and therefore which renders one very dependent on the benignness of the surround. (Of course, lying on the floor or on a sofa or bed seems also to be a conventionalized expression of sexual availability.)’ Erving Goffman, Gender Advertisements (Harper Torchbooks, 1979), 41.

(29) The term ‘male gaze’ was first coined in Laura Mulvey’s now classic and widely reproduced essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Screen 16(3) (Autumn 1975), 6–18.


(31) I mean that these questions misunderstand the normative nature of the concept male gaze. I decidedly do not mean that inquiries into female spectatorship are misguided. In film theory, Mary Ann Doane was one of the first to raise the question of female spectatorship with her essay ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator’, Screen 23(3–4) (September–October 1982), 74–87.

(32) I first made this case in ‘Feminist Philosophy of Art’, Philosophy Compass 3(5) (September 2008), 873–93. One could correctly apply the concept ‘male gaze’ to a work that had never been viewed by a single man. What one would mean, in such a case, is that the work prescribes to its viewers a particular ‘way of seeing’, namely seeing the woman represented as primarily a sex object.

(33) I mean to leave open the possibility that a verbal description could embody the male gaze.


(36) Ibid. Sandra Bartky makes a similar point: ‘Subject to the evaluating eye of the male connoisseur, women learn to evaluate themselves first and best’ (Bartky, ‘On Psychological Oppression’, 28).
(37) Berger, Ways of Seeing, 46. It is worth noting that Berger’s point is part of a larger observation about the role of ‘double consciousness’ in oppression. The term ‘double consciousness’ comes to us from DuBois in describing the situation of African-Americans as: ‘a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (‘Of Our Spiritual Strivings’ in The Souls of Black Folk (CreatSpace, 2011; original 1903). Bartky assimilates the concept to sex oppression (‘On Psychological Oppression’) and although Berger does not explicitly use the term, I take him to be making a similar point about the female nude and the male gaze.


(40) I owe this observation to Mary Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi (Princeton University Press, 1989), 191. As evidence, Garrard cites the following description of Rubens’s several representations of Susanna by the Belgian writer, literature critic, and curator of the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Max Rooses: ‘Il est permis de croire que, pour lui, le charme du sujet n’était pas tant la chasteté de l’héroïne biblique que l’occasion de montrer une belle femme nue, deux audacieux qui tentent une entreprise gallante, et les emotions fort diverses qui en résultent pour chacun de personages’ (my emphasis). Max Rooses, L’Oeuvre de P. P. Rubens: Histoire et description de ses tableaux et dessins, 5 volumes (Antwerp: J. Maes, 1886–92), i. 171. Cited in Garrard, p. 530 n. 21.

(41) Garrard, ibid. 189.

(42) Visual symbols for abstract notions—such as light as a symbol of knowledge—is one exception.

(43) First written in Latin (De Pictura) and then translated into Italian by Alberti himself in 1435–6, Della Pittura is arguably the first modern theoretical treatment of painting. It had considerable influence on both artists and other treatises on art.
What’s Wrong with the (Female) Nude?


(45) The story is recounted by Pliny (The Natural History XXXV, xxxvi, 64) and Cicero (De inventione II. i. 1–3) and by many after Alberti.

(46) On Painting, 93.


(48) The 1480 version in the Louvre and the 1506 version in the Galleria Franchetti in Venice are also good examples.

(49) The later version, from c.1610–14, now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, is also a good example.

(50) The term ‘methodological individualism’ comes to us from political philosophy that is often of a feminist bent. The following two essays provide a good introduction to and critique of the concept. Marilyn Friedman and Larry May, ‘Harming Women as a Group’, Social Theory and Practice 11(2) (1985), 207–34. Iris Marion Young, ‘Five Faces of Oppression’, Philosophical Forum 19(4) (1998), 270–90.

(51) Frye argues that in order to understand how particular practices can be oppressive, one must take a macroscopic view of the larger systems in which the particular practices are embedded. She writes: ‘One cannot see the meanings of these rituals [such as the man’s opening the door for the woman] if one’s focus is riveted upon the individual even in all its particularity….The oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and diverse lives is a macroscopic phenomenon…[which you can see] when you look macroscopically.’ Politics of Reality (The Crossing Press, 1983), 6–7.

(52) For instance: several pictures of Venus with Cupid and Organist (1548–9, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; 1548 Museo del Prado, Madrid); Venus with Organist and Little Dog (c.1550, Galleria degli Uffizi); Venus and Lute Player (1560, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; 1565–70, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

(53) Here are two examples. Until very recently, Maillol’s L’Action enchainée—a larger-than-life headless and limbless buxom torso with arched back to enhance buttocks and breasts—stood smack in the middle of the grand staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago and was the very first work a visitor saw upon entering the museum. One of the very first works one sees upon entering the Musée d’Orsay in Paris—and of the first works, the one that is most prominently displayed—is Schoenewerk’s Jeune Tarantine (1871), a sculpture of a nude woman in a back-breaking reclining pose with pelvis thrust above the chest so as to highlight her perky nipples and pubic region. Jeune Tarantine is displayed
on a pedestal about 1.5 feet above the floor so that the viewer cannot but help looking down onto her splayed body.

(54) Thanks to Hans Maes for this example.

(55) To make this point, in 1972 Linda Nochlin made a photograph entitled Buy My Bananas of an unclothed man holding a tray of bananas just below his penis. A visual metaphor that is unremarkable when the subject is an unclothed woman becomes absurd when it is an unclothed man who offers the fruit. Feminists artists like Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Semmel, and Judy Chicago have also engaged in ‘turn the tables’ projects where male nudes are eroticized. Sleigh, as Hans Maes has reminded me, even produced her own all-male Turkish Bath (1973), although the picture does not come close to offering as many unclothed supple bodies as Ingres’s.


(58) Such as Barthes, and Beardsley and Wimsatt in analytic tradition.

(59) This poster can be seen on the Guerilla Girls website at [http://www.guerrillagirls.com/].

(60) Sandra Bartky puts this point well: ‘But surely there are times, in the sexual embrace perhaps, when a woman might want to be regarded as nothing but a sexually intoxicating body and when attention paid to some other aspect of her person—say, to her mathematical ability—would be absurdly out of place. If sexual relations involve some sexual objectification, then it becomes necessary to distinguish situations in which sexual objectification is oppressive from the sorts of situations in which it is not. The identification of a person with her sexuality becomes oppressive, one might venture, when such an identification becomes habitually extended into every area of her experience.’ ‘On Psychological Oppression’, 26.

(61) P. 113.

(62) I say ‘one dimension’ because antiporn feminists are also concerned with the harms incurred to women in the production of pornography. Although this may have an analogue in the realm of high art, I do not discuss it here.

(63) How exactly to understand these effects is a matter of some dispute. I offer what I consider to be the most sensible way of understanding pornography’s effects in ‘A
Sensible Antiporn Feminism’ and ‘Feminist Philosophy of Art’,

(64) As Jerrold Levinson notes, artistic representations invite us to ‘dwell on features of the image itself, and not merely on what the image represents’, whereas pornographic representations ‘present the object for sexual fantasy vividly and then, as it were, get out of the way’. ‘Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures’, Philosophy and Literature 29 (2005), 232–3.

(65) Proponents of the idea that art qua art—that is, the aesthetic dimension of a work which is what makes it art—is immune to ethical criticism range from Kant to Oscar Wilde. For a contemporary overview of the position as well as responses to it, see Noël Carroll, ‘Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions in Research’, Ethics (2000), 350–87, particularly section II. For an astute analysis of Carroll’s take on autonomism, see Daniel Jacobson, ‘Ethical Criticism and the Vice of Moderation’, in Matthew Kieran (ed.), Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art (Blackwell, 2006), 343–6.


(67) Thanks to Jerry Levinson for pushing me to complete this thought.