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Power and Danger: The Victorian Photographic Nude

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Abstract

Photography of the nude in Victorian Britain was a highly problematic artistic form. Contemporary reception of nude photographs varied from commendation to destruction with seeming illogicality. This thesis uses the anthropological theories of Mary Douglas as a basis to explain the reasons behind the problematic nature of the Victorian photographic nude and to elucidate the logic of its evaluation. Scholarship in Victorian sexual socio-history and photography are employed in conjunction with Douglas' work to argue that nude photography was the intersection of these two areas of Victorian uncertainty, forming a nexus of anxiety. Finally, the fears and fascinations uncovered in this process are used to analyse and categorise the range of Victorian photographic nudes into coherent groups of censorship and acceptance.

Declarations Page

I, Jennifer Malia Appleford, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Introduction

It is not so much common ideals that mark a period as common aversions.

E. H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images*¹

I can pinpoint precisely the beginning of this study. A discussion approaching a brawl erupted following a lecture in my nineteenth-century British Photography class at the University of St Andrews. The contentious subject was the erotic character of Lewis Carroll's beautifully photographed images of young girls, particularly in his use of the nude. Some fervently argued that these pictures were innocuous visions of innocence, while others (rightly, I think) perceived a latent, but insistent, sexual tension in the strong gazes and positioning of the girls. The debate progressed, becoming more and more heated, until Professor Graham Smith curtailed any more discussion for fear, I think, of violence. I was fascinated by the fact that this topic could produce such ferocious debate from my normally reticent classmates and so decided to investigate this problematic subject in an extended essay. In addition to confirming my previous opinion, what I discovered in this essay was that Lewis Carroll's photographs were but a small part of the much wider issue of the Victorian photographic nude. In fact, Carroll's work was much less controversial when it was produced than it is today. The deeper I dug, the more I realised that there was a complex and problematic system of valuing photographs of the nude in nineteenth-century Britain. This was the motivation for this study.

Uncomfortable areas of human expression are always the most revealing ones, and this case is no different. The photographic nude in the nineteenth century is first of all interesting in the context of the history of the photographic medium. It seems that shortly after Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot announced their photographic inventions the medium was turned toward the nude figure. Concrete historical evidence is slim, but several sources relate that the French optician-photographer Noël-Marie-Paymal Lerebours began photographing nudes as early as 1840.² Within a few years a lively trade in photographs of the

1 E. H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*, (London: Phaidon 1999): 258.

2 Arthur Goldmith, *The Nude in Photography* (London: Octopus Books 1975): 44.

nude, particularly those of a sexual nature, was under way.³ As Arthur Goldsmith comments, "If anyone was surprised, history has failed to record it."⁴ Surprised, perhaps not, but concerned, certainly. In parallel with the emergence of the photographic nude was the invention of classes with which to delineate and regulate it.

Moreover, the Victorian photographic nude is particularly fascinating because no other photographic genre has been more effective as a barometer of social values. The causal reasons for this are a subject that I shall treat later. The modern world, thanks in part to the plentiful studies of Victorian sexuality during the last 50 years, generally equates the Victorians with hypocritical prudery. In fact, the usage of the word 'Victorian' had, by 1930, acquired the definition of "prudish, strict."⁵ This characterisation holds more than a grain of truth. However, it is simplistic and superficial. I have come to realize that the controversy surrounding nude photography during this time was not due to a simple rejection or suppression of all expressions of a sexual nature. Rather, it was caused by an underlying intersection of social and individual fears and desires. The goal of my study of the photographic nude is to reveal this infrastructure.

Jacques Derrida suggests that the critical place of judgement, and thus the critical test of categoric definitions, is to be found at the margins of categories, the limit, where categories blur.⁶ It is here that the social and individual ideological constructs of the judge are tested. Thus it is at these margins that the largest amount of discussion and controversy will collect and the largest effort to separate the categories will centre. In art, these categories are called conventions: conventions of genre, conventions of pose, and conventions of subject. As Richard Leppert explains, conventions "are highly selective truths. They are never objective, though always interested and partial."⁷ Artistic conventions are visual reflections of the truths that society wants to tell, the ideologies that it wants to establish or reinforce. As symbolic representatives, the categories of art must be upheld if the essential precepts of society are to be maintained. Therefore, areas of artistic disputation are those at the margins of artistic conventions, and thus

3 Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1966): 66.

4 Goldsmith, *Nude in Photography*: 8.

5 Martin Myrone, "Prudery, Pornography and the Victorian Nude (Or, what do we think the butler saw?)," *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (London, Tate 2001): 25.

6 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge 1992): 24.

7 Richard Leppert, *Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery* (London and Boulder: Westview Press 1996): 9.

at the margins of the ideologies they represent. Through analysing the various discourses surrounding such contentious areas, one is able to elucidate the ideological infrastructure of a particular individual or group.

The Victorian photographic nude provides a host of such discourses, complex and some seemingly contradictory. On the first level, one finds the predictable outrage at the unambiguously pornographic. An 1857 editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* shockingly reports that:

There are two streets in London [Holywell and Wych-street] ... in the immediate vicinity of a teeming thoroughfare [Fleet-street], which from sunrise to midnight are almost impassable to decent men, and wholly so to decent women from the disgusting nature of the prints and pictures exhibited in the shop windows, and which are, according to the revelations of our sessions courts, only a faint and almost mild reflex of the foul publications on sale within.⁸

Others were sufficiently concerned to join the Society for the Suppression of Vice, an organisation that claimed to have seized between 1868 and 1880 over 250,000 photographs and prints of an indecent nature.⁹ Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, public outrage toward lewd photographs and prints fuelled fervent purity movements and drove mass arrests of purveyors.¹⁰ Those unlucky enough to be discovered by purity campaigners faced seizure and destruction of their products as well as fines and sentences of hard labour.¹¹

One would even expect the Victorian distrust towards the ambiguously erotic, such as that referred to by a *Saturday Review* commentator in 1858:

There is hardly a street in London which does not contain shops in which photographs, and especially stereoscopic photographs, are exposed for sale, which are certainly not positively indecent, but which, it is equally clear, are expressly intended for the gratification of that pruriency which Parliament tried to deprive of its coarser stimulants ... stereoscopic slides, representing women more or less naked, and generally leering at the spectator with a conscious or elaborately unconscious impudence, the ugliness of which is its only redeeming feature.¹²

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- 8 M. D. J. Roberts, "Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857," *Victorian Studies* Summer 1985: 614.
- 9 Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, morality and art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1996): 64.
- 10 See Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd. 1977). This book gives a good account of the nature of the purity movements and their actions.
- 11 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*: 56. One such example was that of Henry Evans, fined £50 and sentenced to 2 years of hard labour.
- 12 "Holywell-Street Revived", *Saturday Review*, reprinted in *The Journal of the Photographic Society*, September 21, 1858: 33.

However, a more thorough search reveals some interesting contradictions that surpass censorship of the truly pornographic or even erotic. High Art photographers and those producing artistic studies of the nude were also sometimes considered indecent. One such example was Oscar Rejlander's composite photograph *The Two Ways of Life*, a tableau composition juxtaposing acts of evil and acts of virtue that included several nude figures. Although good reviews outnumbered bad and a copy was even bought by Prince Albert, the work garnered criticism for using nude figures in a photograph. At an exhibition at the Scottish Photographic Society in 1857 *The Two Ways* was withdrawn on moral grounds and later re-exhibited with the side containing the nude figures covered with a drapery.¹³

Another indication that the genre of the photographic nude was marginal in the best Derridan sense was the double standard in the realm of reproduction. On several occasions, photographic reproductions of nude paintings that were themselves acceptable were judged indecent, while at the same time photographic reproductions of fine art were generally heralded for their instructive value. After one instance where such photographs were destroyed in 1891, the *Photographic News* quoted the Secretary of the National Vigilance Society, W. A. Coote, as stating "that the photograph of a picture may be objectionable, though the picture itself may not be."¹⁴ Even scientific photographs were not exempt from such criticism. For instance, in 1879 a London photographic dealer was famously prosecuted for displaying anthropological photographs of nude Zulus.¹⁵

Strangely, given the anxious and illogical nature of some of the discourses surrounding the photographic nude in the Victorian period, there has been scant research into this topic. While the subject of the Victorians and sex has been studied exhaustively, academics have yet to centre their studies around representations of the nude in photography. In fact, the subject of the photographic nude across all periods has scarcely been written about. Perhaps we still harbour reservations about the propriety and appropriateness of the subject, for to date there is but a handful of texts on this subject, most taking the form of coffee table books.¹⁶ A few exhibition

13 Stephanie Spencer, *O.G. Rejlander: Photography as Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1985): 102.

14 Myrone, "Prudery": 32.

15 William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books 1994): 14.

16 See, for example, Arthur Goldsmith, *The Nude in Photography* (London: Octopus Books 1975), or even more recent books such as Peter-Cornell Richter's *Nude Photography: Masterpieces from the Past 150 Years* (London: Prestel-Verlag 1998).

catalogues, however, have attempted to redress this absence. The most important of these is Michael Köhler's *The Body Exposed: Views of the Body*, the most academic text to date. Yet even here Köhler feels compelled to say:

It must be noted that this initial attempt to survey the full panorama of nude photography cannot deliver a definite compendium of the genre but can only be as informative as the current state of research permits. Which leaves a great deal to be desired ... this project is better taken as an incitement to fill the many gaps in our knowledge of the subjects as rapidly as possible.¹⁷

Furthermore, as Köhler states, his exhibition catalogue is a panorama of nude photography across time, nationality, and genre. Although there has been research into nineteenth-century French nude photography, there has been nothing written exclusively about the Victorian photographic nude. The closest to this are Alison Smith's books on the Victorian nude—*The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*, and her exhibition catalogue for the exhibition held in 2001 at the Tate Gallery, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*. In these excellent texts the photographic medium is touched upon as a subset of Victorian nudes. Their treatment is negligible, however, compared to that of the traditional media—painting, drawing and sculpture.

The aim of this study is to partially remedy this situation. I will not pretend to present a comprehensive history of the photographic nude in nineteenth-century Britain, for such a task is beyond the scope of this thesis and would require the research efforts of many individuals. Instead, I intend to focus on the contradictory and seemingly illogical attitudes toward the photographic nude in nineteenth-century Britain and proceed in two directions. First, I will investigate the Victorian ideological framework in order to discover the source and background of these attitudes. I will then use these findings to discern from the apparent ambiguity a system of categories of acceptability and use.

In order to accomplish this, I will use general sociological and cultural studies as well as research and information that is specific to Victorian Britain. Throughout the thesis, I will be referring to as 'Victorian' attitudes and assumptions generally characteristic of the period. This action may, I fear, trouble some historically-minded readers. Certainly, in all historical periods, beliefs and positions change as time progresses. This is certainly the case in the Victorian period, a time of rapid political and social change. Indeed, attitudes toward the nude, the body and photography progressed linearly and cyclically throughout the last half of the nineteenth

¹⁷ Köhler, *Body Exposed*: 8.

century. However, to examine in detail the movements and nuances in Victorian ideological thought would require more space than is permitted here. Furthermore, in comparison to contemporary thought, most ideological stances in nineteenth-century Britain remained fairly constant. For the purposes of this study, I am therefore interested in the overall pattern of Victorian social and moral philosophy. These ideological characteristics and the manner in which they intersect are at the crux of the nervousness and ambiguity surrounding the photographic nude. Their centre can best be described by the concept of the taboo.

Mary Douglas's landmark 1966 text *Purity and Danger* is the classic study of this concept. Douglas's idea of the taboo essentially hinges upon the idea that human beings have a fundamental need to create order from the chaotic disorder of life. This allows us to make sense of the world around us and to form meaning out of our existence upon this earth. This order is created in the form of categories and frames that delimit occurrences and learning into comprehensible pattern. Because of this drive to order, disorder is unacceptable. Douglas argues that the concept of dirt, or impurity, is actually the concept of disorder:

There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.¹⁸

Dirt is therefore not a physical entity but a quality that applies to any object or even thought that does not belong to the established order. Douglas proceeds to document a wide variety of religious and traditional beliefs in which the level of cleanliness of a thing is defined by how completely it belongs to its particular category. Within Old Testament laws, for example, the holiest or cleanest animals to eat are those that most fully exemplify the characteristics of that category of animal.¹⁹

Nothing that is completely clean or holy, therefore, is susceptible to being confused with another class of creature or object, and is therefore safe. Things that are anomalous, that are not decisively one thing or another, are unsettling because they do not easily fit the pattern. Some of humanity's oldest fears and legends centre on the construction of the monster, for example.

18 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 2.

19 *Ibid.*: 54.

The mythic Sphinx and Frankenstein's monster are examples of the fear felt toward a combination of categories. As Roger Shattuck says, "A graft of parts from different species, even if accomplished only in imagination, strikes us as an unnatural dissonance in a larger harmony."²⁰ Much of the time, however, anomalies are significantly less grotesque. They are those things that push the boundaries of our definitions.

Douglas, like Derrida, refers to these areas of anomaly, areas that are not entirely one category or another, as margins, and she points out that all margins are essentially dangerous. They are dangerous because re-evaluating the items within them shifts and adjusts their boundaries, and as a result, our fundamental experience, or perception of this experience, is significantly altered.²¹ How we treat these anomalous items, therefore, becomes of critical importance. This is the concept of the taboo.

Although the word is originally Polynesian, it has become integrated into the western world via anthropological study. The anthropologist James Frazer defined taboo as an object, place, person, or action in which holiness and pollution are not yet distinguished.²² That is, a tabooed entity is one for whom the knowledge surrounding it is not sufficient to place it within one category or another; in short, it exists on the margins. A taboo is therefore not simply something that is not spoken of, or that is forbidden, because it is certainly harmful; it is an entity whose true nature is, as of yet, undefined, whose placement is precarious, is dangerous to the ideological structure of society.

However, although marginal entities are dangerous, spoiling existing patterns, this disorder is also the very material of pattern:

Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. *It symbolises both danger and power.* [italics mine]²³

20 Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1996): 218.

21 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 122.

22 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, quoted in Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*: 30.

23 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 95.

Freud used the word 'the uncanny' (*das Unheimliche*) to explain much the same thing—something dangerous but alluring due to its potential power.²⁴ Disorder, then, represents the creative power of the universe. Harnessing this power, for good or evil, without incurring its dangers is one of the great goals of mankind and the source of its greatest arrogance. The powerful nature of disorder also means that it is one of the most powerful symbols, used in ritual and art to signify both rebirth and creativity.

The Victorian photographic nude fits well the profile of a tabooed subject. Nudity and eroticism are one of the great ambiguities of the human race. William A. Ewing asks, "Is there such a thing as an erotic image or is eroticism purely a function of the gaze? ... What one person sees as sensuous and beautiful, the next sees as prurient and obscene."²⁵ The nude itself falls perfectly between the concepts of art and obscenity. As Lynda Nead argues, art and obscenity are a dualistic pairing. Obscenity, literally meaning in etymological terms 'off to one side of the stage', is that which cannot be presented. Art is that whose presentation is condoned. Each cannot exist without the other as an opposite. Nead maintains that, "At any given moment, however, the critical place of definition is the borderline, where art and obscenity brush up against each other and where the matter of distinction becomes most urgent."²⁶ This statement clearly echoes not only Douglas but also Derrida.

Two basic conditions also indicate that the photographic nude was 'a taboo.' As Alison Smith comments, in the Victorian period, as now, "the boundaries separating art from pornography were by no means distinct. Precisely which representational forms came within the orbit of obscenity was unresolved."²⁷ This ambiguity is characteristic of those areas that as of yet have no defined place in current categories. Moreover, the Victorians treated these boundary areas with a combination of disgust mixed with enthrallment, a "prolonged fascinated gaze."²⁸ Attitudes such as these surely signify 'the Uncanny', an acknowledgement of both the power and danger of a margin. Both aspects will be examined in more depth later.

24 Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*: 30.

25 Ewing, *The Body*: 206.

26 Lynda Nead, "Bodies of Judgement: Art, Obscenity, and the Connoisseur," *Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law*, ed Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999): 205.

27 Smith, *Victorian Nude*: 48.

28 Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, Ltc 1994): 16.

However, the solution to anxiety induced by the photographic is more elusive. One of the favourite and most frequently depicted mythological themes of nineteenth-century Britain was the story of Pygmalion. In this, an artist, unable to find a perfect woman, sculpts his ideal and then falls in love with it. Athena, hearing Pygmalion's fervent prayers, then brings the sculpture to life. As David Freedberg observes, "Perhaps one of the most extraordinary things about Ovid's Pygmalion narrative is that its very structure adumbrates two of the deepest fears ... in the first place the fear of the real body; and in the second that of making an image come alive."²⁹ He also describes the story as one of "artistic creativity" and "creation."³⁰ If we assume that, as Douglas postulates, humans tend artistically or ritualistically to render major ambiguities in their existence in order to transform them into positive symbols, we are left with the conclusion that the Victorians were particularly concerned with these two areas. Indeed, the Victorian fear of and fascination with the real human body is well documented, and Victorians were also troubled and attracted by the emotionally and physically affective properties of the visual image.

It is noteworthy that at this time religion was waning, and the fields of science and art became, as Roger Shattuck explains, "semi-priestly vocations holding out the promise of improving the lot of mankind." T. H. Huxley and Max Weber extolled the refining power of scientific thought, whilst German idealists like Kant and Hegel "argued that the artist will re-establish our lost communion with the spiritual and the transcendent."³¹ Photography could aspire to both these categories but was definitively neither, a marginal entity in itself. Moreover, it had the power to create perfect likenesses, to come closer to bringing an image to life than anything anyone had ever seen. It was the embodiment of ambiguity.

In light of these considerations, we realise that the nineteenth-century British photographic nude was a complex, rather than a simple, tabooed area. The photographic nude was the intersection of two other powerfully contested areas of danger and power – sex and the human body and the development of photography – and the controversy and bizarre attitudes that accompanied it were the result of trying to navigate these two taboos simultaneously. The Victorian photographic nude was thus essentially the taboo of taboos. This is the proposition that I will argue in the following sections.

29 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989): 359.

30 Freedberg, *Power of Images*: 343.

31 Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*: 309.

Anxiety over the Sexual Body

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace.

Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*

The apprehension with which the Victorians treated the body and sex is widely recognised. Most people are well aware of the titillation a glimpse of an ankle brought, or the Victorian myth of the asexual woman, or any other of a host of anecdotes about the prudery of nineteenth-century Britons. Perhaps a catalogue of such stories does not bear repeating. Indeed, one may wonder why an entire chapter of an art historical study should be devoted to a sociological investigation into Victorian attitudes toward sexuality. Yet, this section is of great importance. First and foremost, it exists as a proof that anxiety toward the photographic nude was real. In order to prove that nude photography in the nineteenth century was problematic because it was the intersection of the two great taboos of the age (the body and photography), it must first be shown that each holds to the definition of the taboo. Secondly, the discussions of this chapter are important because they pertain immediately to any iconographical or stylistic rendering of a nude subject. For the Victorians, a nude figure, although it may have been steeped in artistic tradition, was ultimately a depiction of the corporeal body, the sexual body. As we shall see in the second chapter, all critical opinion towards the traditional artistic nude was essentially predicated on basic philosophies toward sex and the body. Therefore, in order to understand why certain categories of photographic nudes were sometimes accepted, censured, or even destroyed, it is first necessary to understand the attitudes of the society in which they existed. To do so, we must consider the ideological construction of sex and sexuality in nineteenth-century Britain.

The study of Victorian sexuality and conception of the body, like many historical topics, has progressed through several theoretical conceptions. The early twentieth century conceived this era as a wholly prudish one. Later, in the 1960s, works such as Stephen Marcus's *The Other*

Victorians,¹ presented Victorian Britain through newly discovered pornographic and 'alternative' texts as a dualistic society of a prim and respectable overworld and the seedy, lurid and hidden underworld that supported its existence. This hypocritical assessment of the Victorians has been the most persistent.

However, in *The History of Sexuality* (1977), Michel Foucault proposed a theory that turned the repressive premise on its head.² Foucault, asserts that, far from being a repressed subject, the body and sex were *the* concern of the nineteenth century. Sex was, according to Foucault,

that aspect of [the bourgeois self] which troubled and preoccupied it more than any other, begged and obtained its attention, and which it cultivated with a mixture of fear, curiosity, delight, and excitement. The bourgeoisie made this element identical with its body, or at least subordinated the latter to the former by attributing to it a mysterious and undefined power; it staked its life and its death on sex by making it responsible for its future welfare; it placed its hopes for the future in sex by imagining it to have ineluctable effects on generations to come; it subordinated its soul to sex by conceiving of it as what constituted the soul's most secret and determinant part.³

Within Foucault's description of sexuality and the body in Victorian Britain, it is easy to identify the characteristic traits of the taboo: "fear, curiosity, delight, and excitement"; a "mysterious and undefined power"; the "soul's most secret and determinate part." Sexuality and the body, its representative agent, were not the unequivocal evils asserted in previous texts but rather the great unknown. Indeed, as Foucault establishes, the fascination and concern with the body and sex was not simply due to a fear of their dangers, but to the recognition of their powers. Taking this indeterminacy on as one of the, if not the, chief issues of their existence, the Victorians passionately investigated and fanatically categorised knowledge of the body's powers. Such behaviour indicates that the Victorians certainly had not determined whether or not, which aspects of, or to what degree the body and sexuality were 'holy' or 'polluted'—they were undefined, on the margins, potentially able to destroy society or enable its progress. This ambiguity and Victorian attempts to resolve it therefore marks the body as a taboo locus in the highest sense.

1 See Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1966).

2 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin 1998).

3 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge* 123.

The question of the nature of the power and danger of sexuality for the Victorians is a crucial one. Control of the body suddenly became paramount due to a combination of the Victorian obsession with progress and hegemony and the concurrent angst of modernization. To understand how the body related to the first, we must return to Foucault. Foucault's theory of Victorian sexuality hinges upon his central premise of power relationships—the overarching theme of his oeuvre. He asserts that power is not an entity of possession, but rather that power is created and exists only within the interactions of various relationships. The existence of power relationships, says Foucault, “depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. The points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.”⁴ In essence, power is the exchange, or exchanges, that occur between individuals or groups of individuals at certain sites. These exchanges can either uphold or destabilise the existing system. Thus, sexuality, explains Foucault,

must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient ... It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration. Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.⁵

For the Victorians, sex was thus the entry point to class definition, spiritual perfection, and social control. If, however, sexuality is one of the most powerful of points, it must also be one of the most dangerous, especially to those who are only beginning to investigate its true nature and its uses. It requires, therefore, the utmost care in its navigation.

On the second point of modernization, Mary Douglas suggests that the body tends to be seen as representative of society.⁶ As a complex system, the body affords a rich source of symbols for other complex systems. An anxiety about the state of the body, therefore, relates to an anxiety about the state of society as a whole. Douglas further refines this argument to explain that, “when rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a [threatened] group.”⁷ Wherever

⁴ *Ibid.*: 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 103.

⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 125.

lines of the social, political, or religious variety are precarious, concludes Douglas, fears of the moral or physical pollution of the body emerge.⁸ Edward J. Bristow, in his book *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700*, echoes this idea with the assertion that purity movements peak at times of social threat.⁹ And indeed, Foucault himself would say that sexual or bodily ‘discourses’ tell us of the status of power relationships within a society.¹⁰

Such hypotheses directly relate to the condition of nineteenth-century Britain, a period of great political and social upheaval. This was the time of the triumph of the industrial revolution, of urbanisation, of capitalism, of the victory of the middle classes, of imperial rise and imperial decline and of the questioning of religion in the face of science. The new uncertainties of modern life required more rigid categorisation than usual to keep life intelligible and familiar. This, in turn, created precarious boundaries between these categories and the need to maintain them. As Jeffrey Weeks explains, what appears to have been the response to such rapid social change was “a continuous battle over the definition of acceptable sexual behaviour within the context of changing class and power relations.”¹¹

Sex became the key to ensuring the proper boundaries and keeping the established power relationships stable within the chaos, providing a means for the expansion of Victorian civilisation and a salve for the anxieties of modernity. Thus, the sexual body required investigation and application but also great care. As the great source of power and control of the nation, the body and its sexuality therefore acquired an aura of the mystical, the secret—another typical aspect of the taboo. As Foucault explains, society “set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harbouring a fundamental secret ... Thus sex gradually became an object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence.”¹² Sexuality and the body, then, were to the Victorians an area of great power and fear, where the beneficial and the detrimental were not yet quite differentiated; in short, the taboo.

That the nineteenth-century British anxieties over the body and sexuality do, indeed, fall into Mary Douglas’s construct of the taboo is amply supported by historical evidence. In

8 *Ibid.*: 140.

9 See pages 3-6 in Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd. 1977)

10 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*: 102.

11 Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, politics and Society: The regulation of sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman 1981): 23.

12 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*: 69.

nineteenth-century Britain, sexual regulation and examination did not take one single, overarching form, but rather was distributed over various points on the power network. However, these sites where sexual regulation was employed to keep power relationships stable can be roughly divided into two categories: the social and the biological. A full explication of these points follows in order to prove and emphasise that the real body was one of the most important ambiguities of Victorian society, and that it therefore strongly impacts the content and acceptance of the nude figure. It will also thus provide a framework in which to analyse nude images.

Social applications, as opposed to biological ones, centred on the ways in which sexual behaviour can define and restrict the social and political categories and relationships within society. These were the points at which the Victorians used sex and the body to develop and perfect the social structure of their nation to ensure the furthest progress and hegemony of Britain. Driving this 'self-perfection' of Britain were the newly dominant middle classes, and indeed, one of the major points of such sexual applications was the self-definition of the bourgeoisie. In order to maintain their freshly won supremacy it was essential that the middle classes, themselves an assemblage of various backgrounds, construct a coherent class identity in opposition to both the older aristocracy and the rising proletariat. This self-justification was achieved with a new set of moral values. Argues Allison Smith, "It was through the rhetoric of moral values such as those of the dignity of work, respectability and individual initiative that the middle class consolidated its position and influence."¹³ It was within the middle concept of 'respectability' that bodily and sexual control was crucial.

This bodily and sexual control took several forms in pursuit of respectability. One significant mode was the idea of controlling one's physical, or bestial body. The notion that the bestiality of one's corporeal body opposed one's spiritual nature dates to ancient times. Both the Stoics and later the Christians made the dualism of flesh and spirit a central part of their doctrine. In this tradition, the messy and mortal body is polluted, while the spirit is pure, and the physical must be transcended if we are to remain superior to the animals.

Following this idea, the Christian idea of the body is that it is a degenerate version of God. The degeneracy, explains Richard Posner, consists 'not only in pride and envy and other spiritual flaws but also in the possession of a body that is prone not just to decay but to every

13 Smith, *Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 68.

sort of shame and indignity. The body, male or female, should be clothed, ideally at all times; for it is a shameful thing, a thing to be concealed ...¹⁴ During the late 1850s and throughout the 1860s and 1870s a wave of evangelical revival resulted in hundreds of thousands of committed Christian converts, and this revivalism contributed strongly to the Victorian idea of the sinful and animal body.

Yet to the dominant Victorian bourgeoisie not only this religious but also a secularised notion of control of the body and its sexuality became crucial to the spiritual and social perfection of humankind. This secularised anti-sensualism, argues Michael Mason, was not only more influential to Victorian thinking than its religious counterpart, but closely linked to progressive, Enlightenment-derived thought.¹⁵ According to Leonore Davidoff, "sexuality—particularly male sexuality—became the focus of a more generalized fear of disorder and of a continuing battle to tame natural forces ... Rational asceticism, alertness, self-control and methodical planning of life are threatened the most by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act."¹⁶ The vulgarity and bestiality of the body threatened the rationality upon which well-run states and societies are maintained. Thus control over one's body was worn like a badge proving that one's rationality had gained control over the illogical demands of the physical, and was therefore better equipped to fairly administer justice and order, especially to those who were less able to control their passions. As Davidoff observes, "Control over one's own body became, in turn, associated with both the ability and the right to control and dominate others."¹⁷

This need for 'bodily order' was borne out in myriad social conventions and vogues. Corsetry for women was designed to reign in the excesses of the physical shape, while the bourgeois fashions over them covered completely the flesh. Attention to the physical fitness of men resulted in a movement toward outdoor exercise and body-building regimes, otherwise known as 'physical culturism'. Adherence to such a regimen required the subservience of the body to the mind. Concern was also shown over eating habits as well as the well-documented area of sexual restraint. Control of the body showed the middle classes to be sober, rational and

14 Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1992): 46.

15 Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994): 3.

16 Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Case of Hannah Cullwick and A.J. Munby", *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (London: Routledge 1995): 106.

17 *Ibid.*: 111.

fit to govern and apt to direct the country towards greatness. Because of this, it was one major way in which members of the bourgeoisie identified each other.

As important to their image as the code of bodily control was the centrality of the nuclear family in the social organisation of the middle classes. Sexual morality was symbolic of a fundamental shift between the political family, in which society is based on alliances between clans, and the individual family, within which companionate marriage was paramount. Whether or not the move to companionate marriage and the nuclear family was a construct of the middle classes is debatable, but certainly, as Jeffrey Weeks remarks, "by the end of the eighteenth century sexual love was enshrined as a central element in the making of families ..."¹⁸ Whatever the causes of this structural shift, the Victorian bourgeoisie constructed their social existence around the companionate nuclear family and the social and sexual roles that that arrangement engendered. One result was that sexual morality, which upholds companionate marriage and thus the familial structure, became paramount to their ethical system. It thus also became an important way to distinguish themselves from other, theoretically 'amoral', social groups in a bid to maintain ideological dominance. Françoise Barret-Ducrocq describes this as the "moral disqualification" of the aristocracy and the poor.¹⁹ Despite the fact that, as Barret-Ducrocq establishes, the supposed moral depravity of the underclasses and the aristocracy was not as pronounced as the middle classes believed, both were increasingly forced to adopt the bourgeois sexual morality as the century advanced.²⁰ In fact, this middle-class sexual 'respectability' was eventually utilised by the skilled worker to prove that he had risen above the amorphous mass of the urban proletariat.²¹

One of the ways, then, that the power of the body and its sexuality was used was at the point of middle-class self-definition. However, this individual sexual and bodily morality was also implemented on a national scale in order to realise and reinforce social and political coherence and progress. The central tenet of this process was the conviction that social morality creates and also indicates political stability. In this 'cause and effect' relationship, sexual immorality is seen to cause expropriation and revolution, an idea that may have been stimulated

18 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 26.

19 Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso 1991): 181.

20 *Ibid.*: 8.

21 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 74.

by Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*.²² As Richard Posner comments, Gibbons asserted that "sexual Puritanism in the Roman Republic gave way to sexual license in the empire," and that this was ultimately the cause of the empire's fall.²³ The decadence and sexual permissiveness at the end of the *ancien regime* also lent credence to this theory as it was seen to have contributed directly to the French Revolution. As such, Victorian pundits felt justified in calling for sexual restraint as a course to strengthen the nation, particularly in times of distress. In 1885, for example, a year of particular political tensions,²⁴ the Reverend J. M. Wilson called for social purity, "for the good of your nation and your country," and warned that "Rome fell; other nations [implying Britain] are falling ... In all countries the purity of the family must be the surest strength of a nation; and virtue from above is mighty in its power over the homes below."²⁵ Sexual indiscipline – not carefully observing the boundaries at the margin – therefore could endanger the entire nation.

This idea resulted in the tendency of the Victorians to directly equate the health of the nuclear family to the health of the nation. Jeffery Weeks argues that "the conscious articulation of the [domestic] ideology" was not only propagated in order to develop the identity of the middle class, but was also a product of political crisis and social disintegration "for which the breakdown of familial and sexual order became a striking metaphor."²⁶ The establishment of a nuclear, rather than extended, political, family structure was accompanied by the creation of a creed of domestic order. In it, the nuclear family, and not the individual, was seen as the basic unit of society, and its cultivation an almost spiritual substitute for diminishing religion. Therefore, as Weeks points out, "even positivists like Eric Harrison, who rejected supernatural religions, supported an almost Catholic orthodoxy of marriage."²⁷ The home was the centre of peace, privacy, and purity, the antidote to the corruption of the public world where the tensions of modern life – poverty, dirt, competition, sexual promiscuity, crime and danger – ran rampant. Thus emerged the concept of the 'Angel in the House,' the wife whose task it was to create a heavenly emotional refuge of the home and to purify her husband from the pollution of the

22 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger 1872).

23 Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 45.

24 During this year the electorate was expanded, General Gordon defeated, the future of Ireland heavily debated, and socialist and feminist agitation revived.

25 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 87.

26 *Ibid.*: 27.

27 *Ibid.*: 24.

outside by keeping herself and her house clean, beautiful, spiritual and pure. The destruction of the nuclear family would thus be the destruction of spiritual refuge.

Within the nuclear family, the power of the sexual body is harnessed for good – a strong marital bond, spiritual regeneration, production of healthy and legitimate children, the social stability of the nation. Outside of the domestic circle, the power of sexuality was untethered and created social disorder by undermining the nuclear family and thus transgressing the marginal boundary created.

In addition to cultivating a domestic ideology of the nuclear family, therefore, the major method of promoting political stability through social control of the body was to regulate and suppress public vice. This was accomplished through popular purity movements and organisations and the national legislation that in general emerged from these efforts. The most prominent organisation to emerge from the sea of public opinion was the Society for the Suppression of Vice, which eventually reformed itself into the National Vigilance Association in the 1880s. However, other numerous grassroots purity alliances such as the White Cross Society and the Ladies' National Association were established and became influential during the last half of the nineteenth century. Although their membership held by no means the majority of the populace, their sway was nevertheless strong because of the forces that they could mobilise at crucial moments. Purity organisations coordinated protests, letter campaigns, and rallies. They persuaded individuals to sign purity and abstinence pledges *en masse*. Most of all, they fought for legislation against public vice, and in some cases they even acted as its enforcers through open collaboration with magistrates and police forces.²⁸

Despite the fact that the very personal nature of the problem as they saw it—social disruption caused by individual vice—made it difficult to enact an administrative machinery to eradicate immorality, certain important laws were created from purity groups' endeavours. After the publication of W. T. Stead's *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* in 1885, a work that exposed the practice of selling or forcing teenage girls into brothels in Britain and abroad,²⁹ the ensuing protest from the purity camps resulted in the Criminal Law Amendment Act. This Act raised the age of sexual consent to 16 (from 12), suppressed brothels and introduced new

28 Mason, *Victorian Sexual Attitudes*: 71.

29 To what extent this actually was occurring is a subject of debate among scholars. It was, however, one of the better pieces of investigative journalism of the later Victorian period as it entailed Stead posing undercover as a brothel customer to uncover the practice.

punishments for incest and homosexuality.³⁰ Yet the most successful attempt to legislate public morality was in the area of obscenity.

Laws regulating visual or written obscenity were Victorian creations. Although the first legal pressures against obscenity date from the late Georgian period, as Martin Myrone says, “it was the nineteenth century that saw the successive clarification and specialisation of the legal regulations.”³¹ For example, tacked onto the Vagrancy Act of 1824 was a provision that stipulated the trial of anyone exhibiting obscene materials in public, and a later amendment extended this to display within shop windows.³² The Customs Consolidation Act of 1853 contained the first express ban on the importation of obscenity.³³ However, the capstone piece of these efforts was the Obscenity Publications Act of 1857.

The Act was the work of Lord Campbell, a prominent judge, who during the course of a trial realised the level of obscene publications in circulation. Soon after in the House of Lords he announced “with horror and alarm” his discovery that “a sale of poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine, or arsenic – the sale of obscene publications and indecent books.”³⁴ Six weeks later, he introduced his own bill into Parliament that gave police the right to enter (by force, if need be) and search premises on the authority of any magistrate who thought that obscene publications were being kept there for sale or exhibition. Upon finding any indecent material, the police officers were permitted to seize and destroy them without trial or hearing.³⁵ The bill generated a large amount of discussion on both sides of the issue. However, despite the fact that within the registered opinions of an “abnormally wide cross-section of society”³⁶ some strong voices of dissent were heard, the press extended and amplified support of the bill, so that by the time it reached the Commons a public mandate was clear and it became nearly impossible to debate the principle of the Act.³⁷ M. D. J. Roberts argues that there was “a fear that ‘free trade in obscenity’ might stimulate criminal appetites, undermine working-class incentives to lead a life of self-discipline and moral regularity and, not least, provide opportunities to deflate the moral pretensions of the upper ranks in society.”³⁸ Many contemporary writers were alarmed

30 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 219.

31 Myrone, “Prudery”: 25.

32 *Ibid.*: 25.

33 St. John-Stevas, *Obscenity and the Law*: 66.

34 Roberts, “Morals”: 609.

35 *Ibid.*: 609.

36 *Ibid.*: 611.

37 *Ibid.*: 610.

38 *Ibid.*: 613.

because indecent publications would expose “respectable” youth to demoralising “poisons,” and lessen their abilities to domesticate the sexual instinct.³⁹ Indeed, it may be argued that it was at this stage that the Victorian correlation between sexual immorality and social instability solidified. Here the attempt to legislate public morality was clearly based on the idea that it was critically linked to the social and political health of the nation.

Later legislation, such as the Indecent Advertisements Act of 1889, built upon this concept of obscenity as social and political poison. The Act focused on indecency in public view—anyone who affixed to a wall or post an ‘indecent’ item, in view from a road, even in a private dwelling, or in fact anyone delivering material for such a purpose, was liable to summary conviction.⁴⁰ The obvious concern, again, was the exposure of the public to sexual or visceral images or text at the peril of social stability.

The legislation against obscenity was essentially calculated against items that could incite behaviour antithetical to the prevailing domestic social organization—that is, that could provoke sexual activities outside of the nuclear family structure designed to protect participants from their dangers and harness their powers for social well-being. However, legislation was also devised to regulate those powerful and dangerous practices themselves.

These laws were mostly concerned with the management and suppression of “undifferentiated” male desire. There were various forms of this theoretically elemental and untamed sexuality, but arguably the most important was the demand for prostitution. Strangely enough, the actual act of prostitution had never been illegal. Indeed, the Church had historically condoned regulated prostitution as a safety valve to encourage companionate marriage. As Richard Posner asserts, if all avenues of non-marital sex are closed off, individuals unfit for companionate marriage are more likely to enter into the marriage market for sexual gratification.⁴¹ Moreover, “a man who is unsatisfied with the sexual aspects of his marriage may be driven to divorce his wife, or to support a mistress, if the alternative of patronizing prostitutes is closed to him; and the result is likely to be a greater diversion of resources from the support for his children.”⁴² This argument persuaded both Aquinas and Augustine to support the regulation, rather than the prohibition of prostitution. Many Victorians agreed, and were of the opinion that prostitution protected the reputations of respectable women by serving any

39 *Ibid.*: 615.

40 Robertson, *Obscenity*: 356.

41 Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 261.

42 *Ibid.*: 186.

excessive sexual needs of their husbands outside of the home.⁴³ “The only unequivocal ‘bad’ of prostitution, then,” says Posner, “is the tendency to spread venereal disease.”⁴⁴

There were thus various attempts to regulate prostitution for just such a reason. The most important of these was the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s.⁴⁵ These Acts, inspired by writings on the adverse sanitary effects of prostitution by the urogenital pathologist William Acton,⁴⁶ provided for the genital inspection of any suspected prostitute for disease, and for their treatment at government expense.⁴⁷ However, whilst the Contagious Diseases Acts to some extent reduced the amount of venereal disease in certain populations, it also forced possibly innocent women to undergo humiliating examination. More importantly, it condoned the violation of the nuclear family’s sanctity, a consideration that became more significant to the Victorians than the control of disease and prompted one of the largest protests of the century. The violation was twofold: first, prostitution enabled sexual encounters outside of the sacred marriage bond; and secondly, it created a double standard in which women (female prostitutes) but not men were held accountable for sexual immorality, compromising the precept of companionate marriage. As Richard Posner explains, “the elevation of woman to fit companion for many must, if men are to be secure in their paternity, be accompanied by a general elevation of sexual morality, and more specifically by an increase in male sexual morality, since it is men who threaten a wife’s chastity.”⁴⁸ Because prostitution was representative not only of female, but male, moral degeneracy, it had to be eradicated, or at the very least strongly discouraged, by the state. The result of this was a major campaign in the 1880s to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, a campaign whose tenets eventually became the basis for a general crusade. The familiar emphasis was on sexual monogamy as the key to social cohesion, achieved through the eradication of a sexual double standard and the removal of all public vice.⁴⁹ An example of the products of this crusade is the White Cross League’s Oath:

To treat all women with respect, and endeavour to protect them from wrong
and degradation

43 Smith, *Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 26

44 Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 186.

45 1864, 1868 and 1869.

46 The most important of these is *Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*.

47 Mason, *Victorian Sexual Attitudes*: 59.

48 Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 160.

49 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 216.

To use every possible means to fulfil the command 'keep THYSELF pure.'
 To endeavour to put down all indecent language and coarse jests.
 To maintain the law of purity as equally binding upon men and women.
 To endeavour to spread these principles among my companions, and to try
 and help my younger brothers.⁵⁰

Indeed, although the Contagious Diseases Acts were finally suppressed in 1885 by the Labouchere Amendment, and repealed in 1886,⁵¹ this attitude of unilateral sexual morality at the service of social stability persisted.

Thus, the perception of sex as an entity that needed to be strictly controlled within the confines of the nuclear family in order to harness its powers and prevent its destabilising dangers led to different legislative tactics toward prostitution. It also, however, led to the emergence and regulation of the category of the homosexual. Along with prostitution, homosexuality was seen as a form of undifferentiated male desire, unconfined by the strictures of marriage and therefore dangerous.⁵²

It was only in the Victorian period that homosexuality became separate from sodomy, an act that had been punishable by death since at least the late eighteenth century. Urbanisation created larger proximal pools of individuals with similar sexual tastes, and thus increased the likelihood of successful encounters,⁵³ and the public acknowledgement of sexuality itself encouraged the named 'homosexual' subcategory.⁵⁴ Whereas sodomy was seen as a temporary aberration, homosexuality was a permanent condition; the homosexual was a species for study and control.

Thus, in a similar fashion to prostitution, homosexuality became a point of legislative concern as a method to protect society from the dangerous power of free sexuality. The 1885 Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act (the same amendment that suppressed the Contagious Diseases Acts), for example, made all homosexual acts misdemeanors, punishable by two years hard labour.⁵⁵ Later legislation such as the 1898 Vagrancy Act and the 1912 Criminal Law Amendment similarly prohibited homosexual

50 As quoted in *ibid.*: 218.

51 *Ibid.*: 219.

52 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 106.

53 For a good explanation of the sexual economics of urbanisation, see Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 126.

54 Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*: 107.

55 *Ibid.*: 102.

behaviour. Again, homosexual acts were threats to the strict boundaries that attempted to navigate a region of precarious power.

One further area of sexuality that seemed to draw the attention of social activists was the supposed sexual ‘immorality’ of the poor. Although attempted, this concern was never translated into forms of legislation, essentially because any effective regulation was impossible to construct. However, this did not stop purity groups from focusing their attentions upon raising the bodily conduct of the poor through evangelising, investigating, and campaigning. Their reasoning for this was a pervasive view that working class sexuality was unstructured and undisciplined, and power not carefully dealt with could erupt in social diarray. In fact, the middle classes perceived that the loose sexual morals of the poor had created higher levels of illegitimacy and incest and resulted in a general indifference to children. Although Françoise Barret-Ducrocq persuasively argues that this anarchic and bestial copulation was a figment of the bourgeois imagination,⁵⁶ the concept was a persistent one. Evidence to this was possibly created by middle-class observers from fear of proletarian growth, and threat to middle class supremacy. Yet despite the truth of the situation, here again the abuse of sexual power was seen to threaten the stability of the domestic ideology and social structure, and thus the solution was to campaign and proselytize for the absolute sexual purity and “respectability” of the poor.

All the varied social initiatives discussed above had one thing in common: their absolute confidence that unregulated sexuality had the disruptive power to undermine the whole of society. Here the policy-makers of the Victorian era on one hand established the potential power of the sexual body: to secure and strengthen the familial building block of society. On the other hand they attributed to sexuality striking disordering power: its misuse could destroy the same social fabric it supports. In doing so, there is an inherent admittance that sexuality is in essence disorder – and thus absolute creative power – that necessitates ordering within a socially created construct. It is at once the very material of the nuclear family and the thing that can bring about its downfall, an entity that is neither entirely holy nor pollutive, that belongs surely to no category; a taboo.

Yet, in addition to its position in the social fabric of society, sexuality also came to be seen as the key to the very biological health of the population. Physically healthy citizens were more able to assist in the permanence and progress of the nation. Sex – the procreation of the nation –

56 Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time*: 180.

did not have simply social consequences and applications, then, but medical ones as well. Science was applied to sexuality in order to discover its biological secrets and to employ them. Foucault asserts that sexuality's power over life came to have two basic forms: one pole that centred on the usefulness of the body as a machine—the optimization of its individual capabilities and forces; and a second pole, formed somewhat later, that focused on the health and reproduction of the species body.⁵⁷ Thus, as with social initiatives, biological “points of power” administered sexuality at a personal (mechanical) as well as a public (population) level.

The personal level of such “points” derived primarily from the advice of medical writings. Probably the first and one of the most influential of these writers was William Acton, the physician whose texts initially prompted the Contagious Diseases Acts. While, as some scholars have asserted, Acton's influence has probably been overstated by Stephen Marcus and others,⁵⁸ the very fact that his work provoked legislation attests to its importance. Indeed, his work influenced medical thought on sex for the rest of the century. The argument that runs throughout his writings is that the sexual drive and its components (especially the germ cells themselves) are essentially the elements of life force to be handled with the utmost care. For example, Acton invented a catch-all phrase “spermatorrhoea” to describe any condition where too much semen is lost, and attributes myriad health problems to its onset.⁵⁹ Included in its causes are the ever-deadly masturbation, marital sexual excess, homosexuality, releasing sperm into prostitutes—in short, any activity that ‘wastes’ the life force of the individual on inappropriate purposes. Additionally, Acton perceived female sexuality essentially in terms of the maternal instinct, of the need to translate the germinal power of the egg into life. Indeed, the idea that the germ seed had extraordinary power over one's livelihood gained currency throughout the Victorian period. Says Jeffrey Weeks of the Victorian attitude toward sexual components, “A man should be so proud of his virility that he should not squander or debase it.”⁶⁰

Perhaps the most talked about of these categories of ‘squandering’ was the ‘scourge’ of masturbation. Masturbation was widely seen as the biggest threat to personal health in the Victorian period. This anxiety was a new fascination of the nineteenth century—no longer were

57 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*: 139.

58 Myrone, “Prudery”: 26.

59 Marcus, *Other Victorians*: 27.

60 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 39.

commentators interested in the sin of the act but in medical complications and debilitation. In Acton's construction, "the large expenditure of semen has exhausted the vital force,"⁶¹ has depleted that which is necessary for bodily growth and renewal, and thus he described the physical consequences as enervation:

The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, pasty, or covered with spots of acne, the hands are damp and cold, and the skin moist ... He cannot look anyone in the face, and becomes careless in dress and uncleanly in person. His intellect has become sluggish and enfeebled, and if his evil habits are persisted in, he may end in becoming a drivelling idiot or a peevish valetudinarian.⁶²

Women were likewise warned that masturbation could "lead to the most fearful consequences: nervousness, depression, hysteria, senility and the inability to have healthy children."⁶³ Furthermore, a disproportionate concern with childhood masturbation emerged. That this phobia was centred on childhood was due to the new Victorian construction of childhood as a separate, desexualised category. Children touching themselves in a sexual way crossed barriers that kept sex in a productive, domestic sphere and away from the blissful innocence of childhood. In essence, the abuse of sexuality inherent in masturbation, the use of its components for nonessential ends, was seen to cause physical consequences.

Homosexuality was viewed similarly in a medical sense. Here the expenditure of semen was obviously useless to the formation of life, and thus a waste. Homosexuality was thus thought, like masturbation, to cause insanity and physical ill health as well as to be an indication of these conditions.⁶⁴

Even sex within marriage could not be exempted from the constraints of prudence. Having sex with your spouse too frequently could result in heart failure and loss of memory, and the indulgent man would be ruined both physically and financially.⁶⁵ As Stephen Marcus relates, "the rites of the marriage bed, though sacred, are perilous."⁶⁶ This concept sounds familiar to readers of Mary Douglas; the sacredness of the act directly relates to its potential physically disordering power.

61 *Ibid.*: 21.

62 Quoted in *Ibid.*: 21.

63 James Wolvin, *A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood 1800-1914* (Middlesex: Penguin Books 1982): 138.

64 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 104.

65 Marcus, *Other Victorians*: 26.

66 *Ibid.*: 26.

The only true solution to any of these physical dangers, according to Acton, is complete abstinence from all sexual excitement, so that all of one's vital energy is turned to production and maintenance of glowing health. That sexual endeavours are at once so vital and so dangerous to personal health is another indication that sexuality falls under the definition of the taboo. Furthermore, that Douglas describes avoidance—Acton's abstinence—as ~~once~~ of the methods of dealing with such ambiguity confirms it.

The obvious corollary to defining sexuality in terms of this personal health was its consideration in terms of the health of the whole population. While this was in part an extrapolation from the connection seen between proper use of sexuality and individual physical health, it was also a result of developing ideas of racial fitness. Increasingly it was believed that the health, hygiene and composition of the population were the keys to the strength and progress of the nation. And sex was the point of control for these concerns.⁶⁷ Across the western nations, the goal of creating a universally fit and healthy populace gained popularity throughout the nineteenth century. These concerns eventually developed into the science of eugenics. Jeffrey Weeks explains that the impetus behind eugenics "was the conviction that social reform had failed, or that it was totally insufficient to improve the race. What was needed were policies designed to produce a new sense of citizenship based on the planning of sexual behaviour."⁶⁸ Thus sexual activities were judged not only on their consequences upon the health of the individual, or even on their effect upon the social substructure, but on their contribution to the health and capability of the British race.

On one level this led to extraordinary concern with the control of women's bodies. Foucault labels this action, which reduced women's existences to the accomplishments of their wombs, "hysterization."⁶⁹ All physical emphasis was thus placed on a woman's fitness to produce healthy children of quality for the betterment of the population. All sexual activities that did not directly result in the conception of children or in their nourishment and development were decried. Notice that among the warnings given to women concerning masturbation was their inability to have healthy children. Moreover, although Acton (characteristically for the Victorian period) rarely mentions women with respect to sexuality, he goes out of his way to relate the dangers of sexual activity while pregnant or nursing. During

67 *Ibid.*: 122.

68 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 129.

69 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*: 104.

this time, he argues, it is imperative to use all vital (sexual) force to nourish the baby.⁷⁰ Thus, even the sanctioned sexual relations of the marriage bed were restricted in pursuit of racial health. Even activities that affected the moral sensibilities of a woman were thought to have an effect upon her fertility. Study or work outside of the home was believed to have a deleterious effect upon a woman's morality and purity, and therefore upon her children. Said Lord Shaftesbury, "It is bad enough if you corrupt the man, but if you corrupt the woman, you poison the waters of life at the very fountain."⁷¹

At its heart, however, the movement that culminated in eugenics was about population management: encouraging suitable, strong and healthy populations, and discouraging unsuitable or damaging ones. As such, there was a wide debate on the subject of birth control. Overpopulation and crowding in urban, working-class areas was recognised not only as a cause of poverty but of moral degeneracy. Such a view prompted the re-emergence of the Malthusian Doctrine in the mid- to late-Victorian period. One leading neo-Malthusian could not understand how Parliament could enact a legal minimum wage but not a "Legal Maximum Family."⁷² Surprisingly, however, most people during this period had no sympathy for advocates of birth control.⁷³ This perhaps may be another instance of attacking sexual practices that "wasted" the life force on non-productive ends, as birth control made strictly recreational sex possible. However, the very fact that birth control at this stage became a topic of debate indicates that the idea of regulating the population via sexual controls was emerging. Indeed, despite outward objection, Mason relates that it was said that "most thinking middle-class women had a belief in birth-control principles which they could confide to each other but which they were embarrassed to be more open about."⁷⁴ Certainly it was obvious that birth control in some fashion was being used by a substantial number of people by the end of the century to improve the quality of their lives and to accelerate their upward mobility.⁷⁵

Paradoxically, at the same time there was a general anxiety about the falling birth rate overall and the perceived decrease in population quality as the Victorians approached the

70 Marcus, *Other Victorians*: 30.

71 Quoted in Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 58.

72 *Ibid.*: 125.

73 *Ibid.*: 45. The British Medical Journal, for instance, attacked one H.A. Allbutt for producing *The Wife's Handbook*, a book that described birth control methods. The primary concern seemed to be that he was addressing a medical subject to a public audience, specifically that the book was too cheap.

74 Mason, *Victorian Sexual Attitudes*: 180.

75 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 47.

twentieth century.⁷⁶ Here the concern was that those of good genetic stock (ie, the dominant classes) were not producing enough children to maintain or improve the overall quality of the British population. The supposed result of such a decrease in quality, or degeneracy, was a higher number of lunatics, neurotics, kleptomaniacs, alcoholics and sexual perverts.⁷⁷ The solution, therefore, was to encourage the traditional sexual outlet of marriage, and to discourage any peripheral activities in a bid to reverse this trend. Consequently, as Weeks explains, "the more ideology stressed the role of sex within conjugality, the more it was necessary to describe and regulate those forms of sexuality which were outside it."⁷⁸

It was thus in the mid- to late-nineteenth century that the discipline of sexology was invented, a discipline intended to study the nature of sex with the view to isolate its good (productive) and bad (destructive) forms. The field of sexology essentially fell into two categories. The first focused on characterising deviations from the norm and resulted in such works as Charles Fere's *Sexual Degeneration in Mankind and Animals* and Albert Moll's *Perversions of the Sex Instinct*. The second, that emerged later and gained more centrality towards the end of the nineteenth century, attempted to elucidate exactly what the natural sexual instinct is; what "normality" is.⁷⁹ Both perspectives produced vast amounts of new terminology and new systems of sexual classifications: Westphal's homosexual, Krafft-Ebing's zoophile and zoerasts, Rohleder's auto-monosexualists, and even such banal terms as pornography and autoeroticism were all products of the new sexology.⁸⁰ Public scandals revelled in the exposition of the sexually abnormal, from the arrest of two transvestites in 1870 to Oscar Wilde's homosexuality trial in 1895.⁸¹

Victorian Britons were thus fascinated with and terrified by the ways in which sexuality could affect population. Here again, they viewed sexual activity as a strangely powerful, yet dangerous, mechanism of human existence. Sexuality constrained within conventional forms was its power harnessed for the betterment of the race. Sexuality unbounded in alternative forms had the ability to destroy a whole people through their genetic downfall. Furthermore, the emergence of the discipline of sexology is a perfect testament to the mystical and unknown

76 Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*: 140.

77 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 124.

78 *Ibid.*: 31.

79 *Ibid.*: 144.

80 Robert Sobieszek, "Addressing the Erotic: Reflections on the Nude Photograph," *Nude Photographs: 1850-1980*, ed. Constance Sullivan (New York: Harper and Row 1980): 172.

81 See Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*: 101-3.

character that was ascribed to sex and the workings of the reproductive body. Such was the indefinite quality of sexuality that the Victorians evolved an entire area of study to characterise and analyse its potential and danger. Here again, the sexual body is revealed as a taboo.

This chapter has explored how the various ways that Victorian Britain dealt with the sexual and corporeal body identify it as a tabooed area. In their private and public, social and biological attitudes toward and discourses of sexuality, they constantly referred to it as an entity of great power and ultimate danger, as a subject that necessitated its fullest attention and its greatest research in order to discover its secrets and to master it. If a tabooed item is one whose sacredness or pollution is not yet defined, who is assumed to hold a mystical secret and who prompts investigation into how this power might be harnessed or controlled, then sexuality in nineteenth-century Britain was certainly a taboo. It was an extremely dangerous pursuit, possibly destroying both the individual and the nation. Yet it was, as Foucault argues, a locus of potential power relationships. It was the entry point to the progress and stability of the nation: it essentially created the building block of society – the nuclear family – and provided for the physical and social control of the population. That this danger and power dualism was recognised by the Victorians is evident by their obsessive investigation of the topic in all forms, their ‘production of discourses’, their attempt to elucidate the finest of boundaries between good and evil. It was this sense of taboo that was to exercise a strong influence upon the production and reception of the photographic nude. In the following chapters, I shall argue that anxieties over the body intersected with concerns derived from the ambiguity of the photographic medium to produce a complex set of criteria with which the photographic nude was judged. Understanding the context of Victorian sexual attitudes is crucial to understanding their related expression in the visual arts. However, in order to gain a clearer idea of this expression without the complicating factor of photography, it is necessary first to examine the impact of sexual anxieties upon the human form in traditional media.

The Victorian Nude in Traditional Media

One effect of Victorian anxieties over sex and the body was that certain subjects were drawn into the debate and themselves became discourses. One such discourse was the image of the body in the traditional fine art media. I cannot hope to thoroughly treat this subject within one chapter, especially when it has been achieved so admirably elsewhere, but I aim to give an overview that can be used to support the arguments of the previous chapter and in comparison with the medium of photography.¹ Given that visual manifestations of contentious subjects are typically seen as symbolic of that subject, this absorption of the artistic nude into contemporary discussions is not really unexpected. Remembering that for the Victorians the corporeal body was sex, or at least subservient to it and indicative of this subservience, it was almost inevitable that images of such a crucial and disputatious subject would fall within Victorian sexual politics.

Furthermore, that the body in art became a major discourse was predisposed in another respect. Mary Douglas observes that it is not always unpleasant to confront ambiguity. "There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and intensities. These can be stimulating ... Ehrenzweig has even argued that we enjoy works of art because they enable us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience. Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms."² Therefore, by categorising otherwise unacceptable images as 'art' we essentially condone their ambiguity. Indeed, the sophistication of a people may be judged by how effectively their aesthetic solvates the major ambiguities of life. This is certainly the case with the nude. As Freedberg explains, "we sophisticates deal with our greater or lesser discomfort in perceiving the images as straightforwardly erotic by putting them into a loftier category, by granting them the higher status of art."³

However, despite this removal, a transformation into art does not fully remove the danger of the body, for, as Michael Hatt suggests, the action works both ways. "The dangerous body is defused into aesthetic safety; and this safe body is reawakened into dangerous

1 See Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, morality and art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1996), and also Alison Smith, ed, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (London: Tate 2001).

2 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 38.

3 Freedberg, *The Power of Images*: 349.

pleasure.”⁴ This ability to reawaken desire into unacceptable behaviours was for the Victorians very real, and it was precisely this aspect of the nude that troubled them. Because of the possibility that viewers could transform the symbolic body into physical or mental activity, the visual representation of the nude body had to be as strictly regulated as the real body.

The history of the Victorian nude is, therefore, the story of the tensions between and the balancing of these two conceptions: image as aesthetic removal, and image as affective power. In order to minimise the risk to society, representation of the nude was impelled forward aesthetically, but required to remain firmly symbolic and ideal in order to remove its immediacy, and was expected to deftly articulate the boundaries of action of and interaction between human bodies. Furthermore, the very fact that the artistic nude was seen to both defuse the ambiguous body but also to incite its most dangerous practices marks it as an undifferentiated category of hope and fear, of benefit and detriment—a taboo.

The fear that an image would be reawakened into what it symbolised derives from the almost prophetic and transformative powers the Victorians ascribed to art. They believed strongly that it was both indicative of a society’s true character and also affective upon viewers’ behaviours and values. Although dubious to modern thinking, these attitudes ran deep and had a strong historical underpinning. E.H. Gombrich describes them as the “diagnostic” and “pharmacological” theories of art.⁵ The first premise was born in ancient times. Seneca the Younger believed that corrupt literary styles emerged at certain periods because “People’s speech matches their lives.”⁶ The first art historians took up this belief. Shaftesbury, Rousseau and Winckelmann all believed that the artistic production of a nation directly reflected the morality of its citizens.⁷ The notion has even persisted in the work of modern art historians with the concept of the *zeitgeist*, and comments such as this from Adrian Stokes: “We are intact only in so far as our objects are intact,”⁸ arguing that when art no longer keeps an ideology intact, it is representative of the breakdown of that ideology. Nineteenth-century Britons were therefore highly conscious that any improper or ‘degenerate’ works were indications of the moral

4 Michael Hatt, “Thoughts and Things: Sculpture and the Victorian Nude,” *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate 2001): 49.

5 E.H Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*, (London: Phaidon 1999): 241.

6 Quoted in *ibid.*: 242.

7 *Ibid.*: 266.

8 Adrian Stokes, “Reflections on the Nude,” *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes: Volume III 1955-67* (London: Thames and Hudson 1978): 326.

disintegration of their nation, and thus its impending doom. One can see how this would inculcate fear and even paranoia over the content of art.⁹

Early art historians also promulgated the idea that art is pharmacologically affective. Says Gombrich of them, "In the opinion of these prophets the very power of images to impress the mind increases their ability not only to inspire but also to seduce and corrupt."¹⁰ Victorian art historians continued this theoretical foundation. Alison Smith comments that Ruskin, Eastlake and Thackeray all believed that "the experience of looking at pictures directly influenced the social and moral behaviour of the spectator."¹¹ Ruskin even asserted that one of the three roles of art was "perfecting [mankind's] ethical state."¹² This is also a concept that has proven long-lived. David Freedberg, for example, suggests that "there is a cognitive relation between looking and enlivening; and between looking hard, not turning away, concentrating, and enjoying on one hand, and possession and arousal on the other."¹³ Whether or not there is truth in these assertions, belief in them compounded the Victorians' palpable fear of art's manifestations.

It was these beliefs together, the diagnostic and the pharmacological, that prompted many to decry nudes of any form within art, for nudity would both indicate and incite depravity. Says Richard Posner, "a form of artistic representation calculated to stimulate, often to celebrate, and at the very least to remind of male sexual desire could ... undermine companionate marriage by causing men to seek sexual pleasure outside the marriage bed."¹⁴ This was a situation that the Victorians believed could bring down their whole society. Thus the purity movements described in the last chapter fixed upon the nude in art as an area of danger that should be eliminated, an idea predicated upon the notion that ordinary, inartistic minds could not differentiate between the aesthetic and the obscene. As E. J. Bristow remarks, "For the social purity forces, simulated nudity was as evil as nudity itself."¹⁵

Victorian attitudes were reinforced by the fact that the nude had never truly sat comfortably within British art. Associations had always been drawn between the unclothed

9 As another example, the threat of 'degenerate' art resurfaced during the Third Reich and in totalitarian Soviet Russia.

10 Gombrich, *Uses of Images*: 266.

11 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 77.

12 Norman St. John-Stevan, *Obscenity and the Law* (London: Secker and Warburg 1956): 45.

13 *Ibid.*: 325.

14 Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 358.

15 Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*: 212.

body and the 'immorality' of Catholic and pagan cultures,¹⁶ and hence when the Royal Academy was established in 1768, no formal theoretical tradition for studying the nude was created. Neither Church nor State thought the nude figure was "a suitable means of personifying spiritual aspirations or ideological virtues;" these were best communicated through "the word."¹⁷ Some lecturers, or 'visitors,' at the Academy attempted to introduce study from the nude figure, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful. The Academy instead assigned particular importance to study from antique casts, believing that this would prevent students from slavishly rendering human imperfections and lead them to a proper idealisation of the figure.¹⁸

In fact, the first major exhibition of the nude in Britain was as late as William Etty's 1849 retrospective. Even this small contribution, however, was the high point, as Etty, who devoted his life to studying the female nude in the fashion of the Old Masters, suffered a loss in reputation when Victorian anxieties solidified.¹⁹ This was due both to criticisms of the impropriety of the nude and that his trademark rich and vibrant palette was felt too sensuous for a nude subject.²⁰ This was the first stirring of the stylistic and compositional restrictions that the nude was to suffer in order to void its stimulating power.

The downward turn that Etty's exhibition heralded continued throughout the 1850s and 1860s to suppress the nude on moral grounds. For instance, one female art student in the late 1840s complained that the penises on nude antique casts were offensive and requested that they be cut off.²¹ Although most of her fellow students disagreed, this was the beginning of an increased level of moral agitation against the nude. A representative example of this was William Peters' tract "The Statue Question," which appealed to fathers to protect their women and children from the disgusting and appalling sculptural displays of nudity at the 1851 Exhibition.²²

Despite the nude's overall steep decline, however, Victoria and Albert were both avid collectors of the nude, exchanging them for birthdays and anniversaries and amassing a large

16 Smith, *Exposed*: 54.

17 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 13.

18 *Ibid.*: 17.

19 *Ibid.*: 89.

20 *Ibid.*: 86.

21 *Ibid.*: 19.

22 Hatt, "Thoughts": 38.

collection of mild erotica throughout their estates.²³ Whereas this sort of compilation, if owned by an ordinary individual, would have been viewed as dangerously prurient, in Victoria's case it was allowed because purity of gaze was associated with aristocracy.²⁴ Those of the higher ranks of the bourgeoisie also assumed this purity and connoisseurship. Public exhibitions of the nude, however, were generally restricted as they exposed less cultivated and thus more susceptible members of the population to the affective powers of the image. Furthermore, although the new liberal patrons and the royal couple prevented the nude from completely dying out in the 1850s and 1860s,²⁵ the preferred subjects were those that were legitimated through literary associations, such as those from Spenserian, Miltonic and Shakespearean texts as in Joseph Noël Paton's *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (figure 1). In this way the nude could be seen to symbolise the purity and innocence of a kind of "timeless British Arcadia."²⁶

Yet by and large the nude in traditional media did not return until the late 1860s. The immediate catalyst for this reappearance was the poor British showing at the International Exhibitions of 1855, 1862 and 1867. As Alison Smith comments, this was a "confrontation between insular British conventions of representation and powerful continental traditions."²⁷ The matter of the nude became a matter of national pride as the artistic deficiency was widely



Figure 1: Joseph Noël Paton, *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (1847)

23 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 71.

24 *Ibid.*: 73.

25 *Ibid.*: 71.

26 Smith, *Exposed*: 54.

27 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 101.

identified as due to Britons' lack of direct figure study. Consequently, during the 1860s groups of students, including Leighton and Poynter, travelled to the continent to study from the nude,²⁸ and agitation for figure study within the Academy increased. The result was that by the end of the 1860s, study from the nude was firmly in place at the Academy, although debate surrounding its rules and regulations continued for the rest of the century. Thus, whereas concern over the affective quality of art was dominant in the 1850s and 60s, a need to balance this with aesthetic sophistication became important in the late 1860s.

A dramatic revival of the nude was then begun by a new generation of painters, heralded by Frederic Leighton's *Venus Disrobing* (figure 2), shown at the Academy in 1867. This "new" nude was accompanied by a classical aesthetic that attempted to raise the nude above any implication of impropriety. These ideas were based upon Winckelmann's championship of Greek and early Roman art as its highest and most moral forms. He therefore believed that the noblest way to perceive the figure was with the "sensuous intellect" of the Greeks.²⁹ Classicism, which argued the "aesthetic" formal beauty of the figure while removing sexuality to an idealised, intellectualised realm, therefore became the key to social acceptability. One court, for example, declared in 1868 that indecency was anything more obscene than the statue of Venus in the Dulwich Gallery.³⁰ Writers and artists increasingly believed that the idealised bodies of the Greek and Roman republics elicited a pure gaze,³¹ while some even held that the classicised female nude could be a symbol of faith in the modern age.³²

Despite this new compromise between aesthetic and moral, moral objections had not been entirely quieted; the balance of influence had simply shifted. One example of this persistence is the "British Matron" letter to *The Times*



Figure 2: Frederic Leighton, *Venus Disrobing for the Bath* (1866-67)

28 *Ibid.*: 101.

29 *Ibid.*: 113.

30 Robertson, *Obscenity*: 68.

31 Alison Smith, "The Nude in Nineteenth-Century Britain: 'The English Nude,'" *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed Alison Smith (London: Tate 2001): 18.

32 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*: 231.

of 20 May 1885. Later to be ascribed to Horsley, the letter asks:

Is it not a crying shame that pictures are flaunted before the public from the pencil of male and female artists which must lead many visitors to the gallery to turn from them in disgust and cause only timid half glances to be cast at the paintings hanging close by, however excellent they may be, lest it should be supposed that the spectator is looking at that which revolts his or her sense of decency?³³

Although a retort argued that this attitude was “born out of a want of culture” and that “the human form is the most beautiful and perfect shape known,”³⁴ the letter is characteristic of continued anti-nude attitudes. Samuel Carter Hall, the founder of the *Art Union*, recalls receiving semi-nudes published in his magazine torn through by outraged families.³⁵ Some physicians, in the tradition of Acton, declared that viewing the nude was overly stimulating for women and that it would therefore damage their reproductive systems.³⁶ Partially for the same reasons women were not allowed to study from the figure or exhibit a nude, a clear indication that classicism had not erased the idea of the nude as a product and a stimulus of desire. Some purists viewed the nude as a degenerate influence because they linked the new aestheticism with the upper classes and thus with their supposed vice.³⁷ Others identified the rise of the nude as indicative of degenerate influences from the continent, particularly from France.³⁸ Especially during the French political crises of the early 1870s,³⁹ critics linked their decadent style to the collapse of their country, and expressed fears that a similar fate would befall Britain if the nude were allowed to prosper.⁴⁰

The largest objection against the nude by far, however, was that it necessitated the use of real models. Social purity campaigners such as Ellice Hopkins,⁴¹ identified the use of nude models exclusively with female degradation and the double standard, and lobbied the Academy over their use with some effect.⁴² Female nude models were also associated with prostitution, and possibly with good reason. The author of the 11-volume pornographic diary *My Secret Life*

33 Quoted in *ibid.*: 1.

34 *The Times*, 21 May 1885, quoted in *ibid.*: 1.

35 *Ibid.*: 69.

36 *Ibid.*: 39.

37 *Ibid.*: 220.

38 *Ibid.*: 158.

39 The Franco-Prussian War and the incidents that led to the Paris Commune.

40 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*: 169.

41 See her journal *Seeking and Saving*.

42 Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*: 206.

discussed in one entry his liaison with Sarah Mavis, one of Eddy's models. He explained that Mavis would often pose for the author's drawings and paintings in nothing "but her silk stockings and kid boots," saying that "posing naked made her feel lewd and want me."⁴³ Agitators believed that modelling objectified women and that, more often than not, there was an inappropriate relationship between artist and sitter.

Because of the allegations of impropriety there was a strong hierarchy set up to delineate between classes of models. Martin Postle explains that "one of the principal distinctions, for example, between female models lay between those women who were willing to pose nude and those who would only work as draped models ... there was also a pecking order in terms of employers, the greater the artist the more socially acceptable the model."⁴⁴ This type of classification indicates a desperate need to demarcate the boundaries in a disputed area between the sanctity of art and the destructive powers of prostitution and pornography.

From these sorts of anti-nude remarks and assertions, it is clear that the nude within even the traditional high-art media was still a fiercely contested area and that, in order to deal with its ambiguity, strict rules and categories were necessitated. These applied predominantly to the manner in which nudes were portrayed – matters of style, subject and composition. Their establishment effectively walked the fine line between heeding the warnings of the sensuously affective qualities of art at the expense of the whole genre of the nude (and the advance of British art) and allowing the nude a completely free rein at the peril of society. These rules, largely unwritten except in terms of critical censure, fell into several categories: emotional removal, gender roles, idealisation, and the suppression of narrative.

The removal of any emotions or innate urges to a strictly intellectual space was seen as very important to the propriety of the nude for obvious reasons. Violations suffered condemnation, alteration, or at the very least, censure. Venus's tongue and left nipple, for example, were erased from Bronzino's *Allegory of Love* in the National Gallery during the nineteenth century. As Alison Smith comments on this episode, "in public exhibitions it was essential that the nude fall on the right side of the tenuous border separating artistic from sensual pleasure."⁴⁵ The tongue and nipple connoted desire and were therefore removed. In the

43 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*: 25.

44 Martin Postle, "Hidden Lives: Linley Sambourne and the female model," *Public Artist Private Passions: The World of Edward Linley Sambourne*, ed Robin Simon (London: The British Art Journal 2001): 26.

45 Smith, *Nude: Sexuality, morality and art*: 81.

late 1870s, some nudes were also criticised for sensuality that was too much akin to the Hellenistic tendencies of late Rome.⁴⁶ Here the obvious implication was that emotion and sensuality defeated Rome and could as well defeat Britain. And while Old Master nudes were generally shown more latitude than modern works, this was not always the case. The National Gallery, for example, refused Titian's *Rape of Lucretia* in 1845 because its tone was too arousing, and therefore not suitable for a public collection.⁴⁷ Stoicism thus became a critical characteristic of the nude calculated to keep it firmly in the realm of the intellectual.

Another critical area of control derived from a related fear of domestic, and therefore social, disintegration: the destruction of gender roles. In the later Victorian period, the question of women's suffrage was beginning to demand attention. A significant number of suffragettes were related to purity agitation, and therefore requested the ability to vote to eradicate the double standard and to enact anti-vice legislation. However, many of those beginning to demand equal rights were not basing their requests upon the moral superiority of women, but rather upon their status as human beings, and this campaign for women's complete liberation from male legal control was terrifying to those who believed that political stability was predicated upon the "angel in the house." Thus, as a related problem to that of sexual destabilising of the nuclear family, gender roles could compound the danger of the nude. And so, as Alison Smith comments, "One of the key features of art criticism and popular protest in the later nineteenth century is its insistence on the absoluteness of gender difference."⁴⁸ In fact, Richard Leppert argues that as the objectified female nude is essentially an indication and an acknowledgement that women are able to satisfy a desire that men cannot satisfy themselves, their portrayal in times of threat of gender equality will attempt to subdue their power. "The need to dominate is the surest sociological indicator of [male weakness]."⁴⁹

Thus, the female nude figure should be represented as decorative and passive. This was typically manifested with an indirect gaze, demure and beautiful expression, elegant lines, and a decorative colour scheme. Two excellent examples are Albert Moore's 1869 *A Venus* (figure 3) and Leighton's 1889-90 *The Bath of Psyche* (figure 4). Both depict a woman of Greek type, sculptural and smooth, preparing for a bath in a composition balanced in colour and decorative elements. Alison Smith explains that by

46 *Ibid.*: 185.

47 *Ibid.*: 78.

48 *Ibid.*: 236.

49 Leppert, *Committed Eye*: 214.

focusing on issues of style and treatment, painters and critics were projecting a view of woman as a beautiful passive object ... Images of the nude could thus be regarded as a positive rearguard action; positive in that they presented the female form as a universal and natural ideal, inspiring contemplative pleasure in the male spectator.⁵⁰

Leighton was thus praised for presenting the female form “sensuously but not sensually,”⁵¹ that is, for relegating a women to the decorative through aesthetic balance and beauty, but not allowing this appeal to the aesthetic senses to move into the sexual sphere. This treatment of women as decorative and domestic creatures also restricted female artists to the realm of decorative art. Those who managed to break this barrier were certainly not allowed to portray nudes. A female artist who treated a male nude would endanger her reproductive system, and

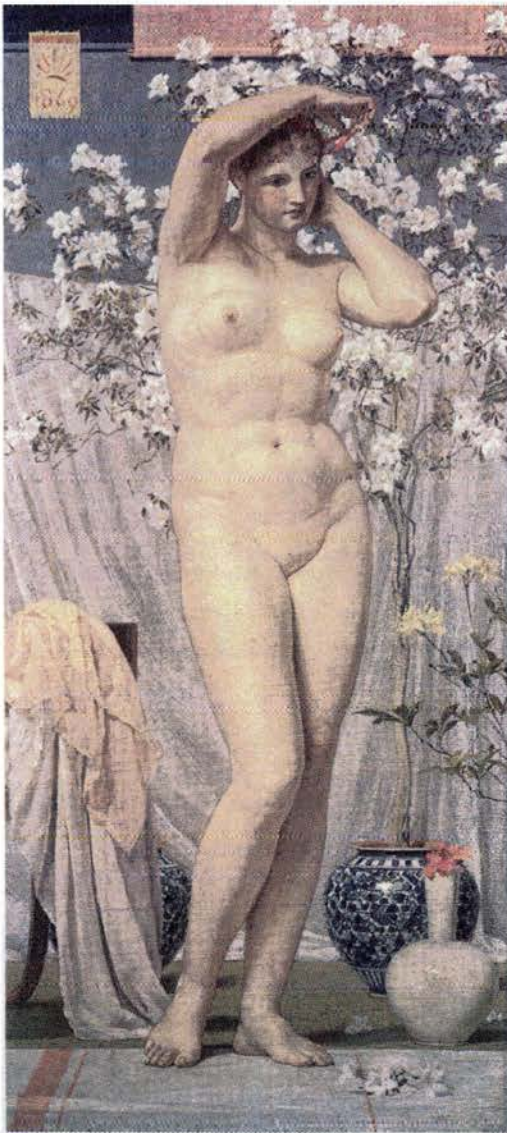


Figure 3: Albert Moore, *A Venus* (1869)

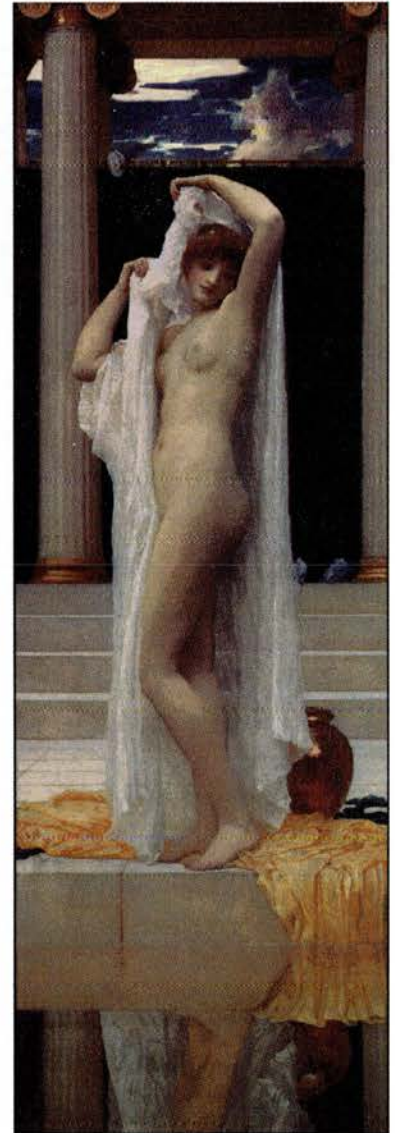


Figure 4: Frederic Leighton, *The Bath of Psyche* (1889-90)

50 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 133.

51 *The Times*, 7 April 1869: 12.

one who treated a female nude would disrupt the subjugation that the nude female figure necessarily projected.

On the opposite side of the gender coin, the male nude was pushed far away from possible domination. Whereas female nudes were expected to be decorative and docile, nude males required historical context and strong, muscular lines or they were dangerously effete.⁵² The emergence in the late 1860s, for instance, of a more effeminate male figure type was met with critical censure. Edward Burne-Jones' *Phyllis and Demophöon* (figure 5), as an example, was roundly slated because Demophöon was portrayed as a limply elegant, androgynous young man with a brooding, emotional expression.⁵³ *The Spectator*, meanwhile, compared Leighton's *Helios and Rhodos* (now destroyed) to Swinburne's "effete" poetry, for the beauty of his figures.⁵⁴ This danger perhaps contributed to the tendency to avoid the male nude in the late nineteenth century to the extent that "nude" became nearly synonymous with "female nude." Some complained, as Alison Smith relates, that "representations of ideal male beauty were perverse in deviating from the disciplined norms of masculine behaviour. It is hardly surprising that the classical nude was to become more exclusively female, as the male nude was constrained into conforming to unconvincing stereotypes of manly endeavour."⁵⁵

Furthermore, concern over gender roles was revealed through anxieties over the ways in which male and female nudes



Figure 5: Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *Phyllis and Demophöon* (1870)

52 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 120.

53 *Ibid.*: 85.

54 *The Spectator*, 12 June 1869: 706.

55 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 142.

interacted. William Blake Richmond's *The Bowlers* (figure 6), for example, was criticised by *The Times* for juxtaposing loosely draped women with the nude male bowlers, although there are precedents for this in Greek art. "The exercises of perfectly nude young men," in the presence of maidens were seen "as inconsistent with Greek as with English usage."⁵⁶ Naked women and men interspersed with each other during activity would suggest other incidents of communal naked action, and were therefore possibly arousing. Furthermore, as Alison Smith reveals, "For most viewers ... the positioning of well-toned bodies within the enclosed 'feminine' space of a garden replete with butterflies, lilies and daisies, would have signified emasculation."⁵⁷ And not even Leighton was exempt from this sort of criticism. His *Fisherman and the Syren* (figure 7), taken from a ballad by Goethe, was thought to laud the power of women over men. Only by portraying the subject as a fantasy and on a small scale did he escape complete censure.⁵⁸

Although some critics disagreed with condemnations stemming from transgression of gender roles, at least a significant number did not, and the very fact that there was a critical concern indicates that it was also an important area of meaning. Ensuring that the gender roles portrayed in nude art supported the structure of the middle-class nuclear family was a method of controlling the actions consequent from a potentially affective genre. If the nude aroused viewers, at least they would be encouraged to find the appropriate outlet (ie, marital relations) for that arousal.

One way of controlling that arousal in the first place, however, was to require the idealisation of the figure. This was predicated both on the ideas of the Greek "pure gaze" as well as theories of this idealisation from such art historians as Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds advocated the principle of Ideal Beauty, based on the belief that all of the great works of the past, were, as Alison Smith puts it, "general, transcendent and, therefore, applicable to all ages."⁵⁹ Reynolds believed art should appeal to the intellect and not to the mean senses. Therefore, all disparate elements that did not contribute to the intellectual concept should be restrained or idealised into conformity. This was the doctrine that was taught in the Royal Academy, and later it was used to revive the nude through aestheticism. Although in many respects far from Reynolds' Grand Manner style, aestheticism shared his belief in idealism. It argued that an artwork should appeal

56 *The Times*, 22 May 1871: 6.

57 Smith, *Exposed*: 108.

58 *Ibid.*: 67.

59 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 14.

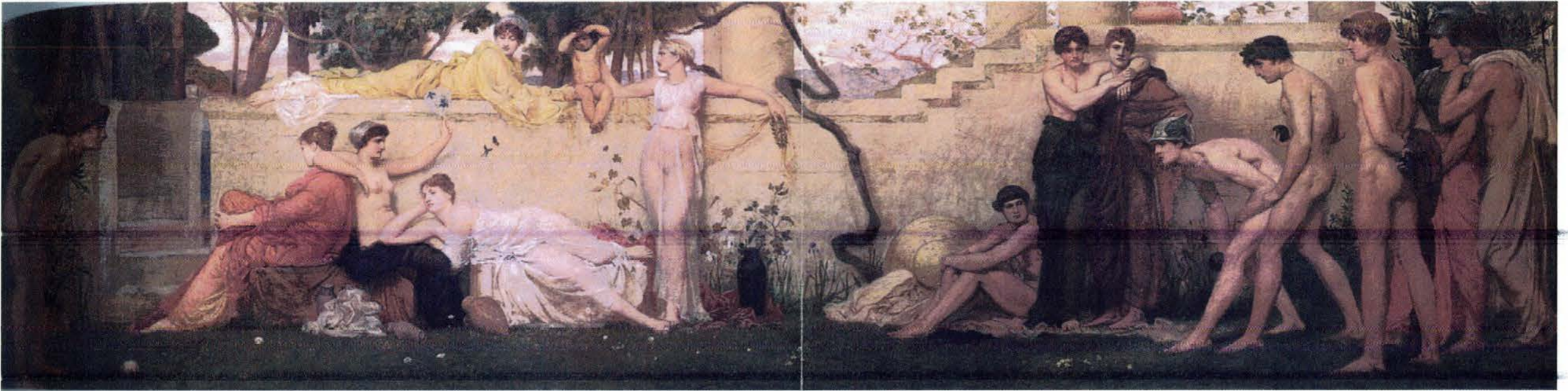


Figure 6: William Blake Richmond, *The Bowlers* (1870)



Figure 7: Frederick Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren*: from a ballad by Goethe (c. 1856–8)

to the senses through its formal, abstract qualities, rather than through morality or duty. Thus, when applied to the nude, aestheticism dictated that the human form become abstracted, idealised into an intellectual concept of beauty, an idea in common with the ancient world. Completing the circle, aesthetes therefore took the Greeks and early Romans as their highest prophets, classical art as their influence, and by association the purity of ancient gaze. "Ideality," said Victorian commentator George Combe, "produces a pleasing emotion of great purity and intensity when objects are presented to us which gratify the intellectual artistic organs ... it gives a longing desire for beauty of every kind, and prompts us to aim at the highest perfection which our faculties are capable of reaching."⁶⁰

Classicism and concentration on the formal beauty of the figure, then, in the opinion of the Victorians, fixed the mind upon intellectual and inspiring, rather than prurient, interests. All bodily mechanisms were thus carefully idealised, either removed or smoothed over. Most artists, for example, removed pubic hair and the genitals completely.⁶¹ They tended also to highly finish the skin and hair to remove all traces of worldly experience and age, so that, as Michael Hatt says, the body is "outside history." "The removal of bodily process," he explains, is therefore "matched by the absence of psychic processes, such as sexual desire, carnal appetites or violent emotion."⁶²

Artists also, in an attempt to create the nude as an intellectual symbol and as a nod to the laws of classicism, idealised the proportions of the body. Said the artist G.F. Watts, "It is not possible to represent nudity with any attempt at realism without drifting perilously near vulgarity. The nudity of the Greek statues, though representing wonderfully natural facts, never shows any attempt at illusion."⁶³ Typical examples of nudes thus purified are Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *La Source* (figure 8), judged "an ideal corrective" to sensuality,⁶⁴ and the previously discussed *Bath of Psyche* (figure 4). The *Bath of Psyche* was originally inspired by the first century BC *Venus Kallipygos* (figure 9), a sculpture that was thought to be vulgar due to its prominent posterior. By straightening the figure's posture and directing the gaze to the breasts and stomach, however, Leighton counteracted this proportional problem to the approval of the critics.⁶⁵

60 Quoted in *ibid.*: 74.

61 So much so that John Ruskin was mortified on his wedding night to discover that his wife had pubic hair and was unable to consummate the marriage.

62 Hatt, "Thoughts": 38.

63 Quoted in Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 4.

64 *Ibid.*: 104.

65 Smith, *Exposed*: 102.

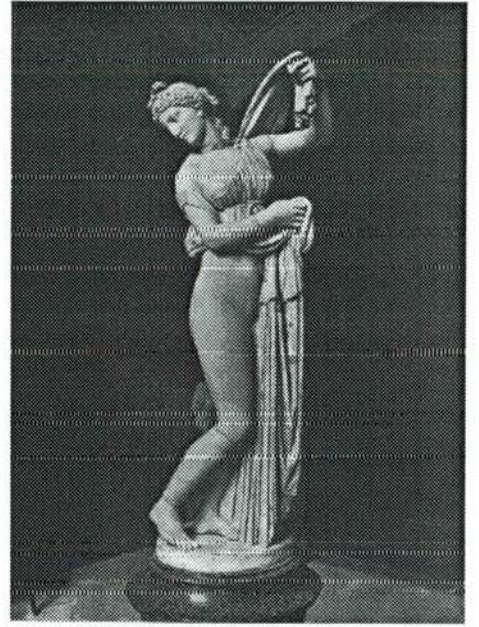


Figure 9: *Venus Kallipygos* (1BC)



Figure 8: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Source* (c. 1856)

Those that did not pay close attention to completely idealised bodies were punished with censure. The *Illustrated London News*, for example, criticised Philip Hermogenes Calderon's *Oenone* for appearing too realistic, and not merely realistic, they said, but "essentially modern in type," with nothing classical about her but her peplum and stola.⁶⁶ Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *An Artist's Model* (figure 10), was consumed in an uproar because the reality of figure directly connected with contemporary debates on the morality of contemporary artist's models.⁶⁷ Edwin Landseer's *Lady Godiva's Prayer* was dismissed because the figure's waist was too nipped in, as though altered with corsetry rather than classically proportioned.⁶⁸ Ruskin believed William Mulready's studies to be "vulgar and abominable" because they were too individual,⁶⁹ and



Figure 10: Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *An Artist's Model* (1877)



Figure 11: Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave* (c. 1845-67)

66 9 May 1868, quoted in Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 120.

67 *Ibid.*: 203.

68 *Ibid.*: 109.

69 *Ibid.*: 82.

indeed, all French nudes of the late nineteenth century were suspect because they looked to have been lifted directly from life instead of first proceeding through the idealising fire of the artist.⁷⁰

One final method of idealising the body was to mute its colour, dampening its reality and sensuousness. A white or pale colour not only made the nude less tangible, but also alluded to classical sculpture and purity. Modern scholars have amassed a great deal of evidence that classical statuary was in fact coloured, but during the Victorian period it was believed to be strictly uncoloured. White's reference to antiquity and purity was amplified by the mania surrounding Hiram Powers' sculpture *The Greek Slave* (figure 11), a work that represented a beautiful Christian girl captured by infidels and stripped naked for sale. The girl was thought to be innocent and chaste, unashamed of her nakedness, an interpretation that was fashioned from not only the Christian subtext, but moreover the pure whiteness and classical lines of the sculpture and its allusion through title to antiquity. As Michael Hatt explains:

White marble stands for both a presence and an absence. As a presence it signifies purity or chasteness; it alludes to the uncoloured Greek statues that one could see in the British Museum and elsewhere. But the whiteness also signified the absence of colour, pure form. The very absence of colour predisposed the viewer to read the statue as an instance of abstraction, as a moral thought rather than a carnal thing.⁷¹

Such a classical, sculptural aesthetic was therefore transferred to painting in order to idealise and abstract the difficult subject of the nude. Whilst whiteness and pure form were believed to be intellectual constructs, colour and movement were held to be passionate and related to the baser, instinctive emotions. Whistler even described it in terms of gender – line and form as masculine, colour as feminine.⁷² Luxurious colour in a male nude in particular is therefore problematic, because it contradicts gender roles by treating a masculine subject with feminine attributes. Above all, colour in sculpture was condemned because it transcends form, the essence of sculpture. Henry Weeks, when lecturing as Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy therefore remarked that colour destroyed the purity and essence of the nude sculpture: “The absence of colour in a statue ... remove[s] it from common Nature, that the most vulgarly constituted mind may contemplate it without causing any feeling of a sensuous kind.”⁷³ This

70 *Ibid.*: 103.

71 Hatt, “Thoughts”: 42.

72 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 121.

73 Hatt, “Thoughts and Things”: 39.

fear of stimulating desire from a sculpture makes the Victorian popularity of the Pygmalion story rather ironic, but is also indicative of the deeper societal issues of the real body and image making. Although most importantly in sculpture, artists in all media thus strove to eliminate luxurious colour from their nudes and instead tended toward whites and clear, pale tones or monochrome.

One final mechanism for idealising, and therefore neutralising, the nude in traditional media was the suppression of narrative in subject matter. This had the effect of universalising the figure and further forcing it into a space of intellectual concept. Says Alison Smith, "By muting the narrative and moral dimensions ... the female nude is presented as an embodiment of universal beauty, a paradigmatic metaphor for the artist's power to create perfect form."⁷⁴ This meant timeless costumes and accessories, settings of an ambiguous classical or pastoral past and lower degrees of gesture. In the male nude, this pursuit manifested itself in the subordination of heroic action to depictions of ideal beauty and human experience. Works such as Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus* (figure 12) and Edward John Poynter's *The Prodigal's Return* transformed the nude into universal portraits of human interaction by reducing the specificity of the situation.

Nude compositions that portrayed their subjects in an ageless realm seemed to escape moral censure by claiming an eternal ideal. Obviously, anything strictly classical was inferred to be inherently timeless and thus easily fitted into this category. However, throughout the Victorian period nudes depicted in landscape were also generally tolerated. Alison Smith argues that "by placing the nude in a pastoral context, artists and critics were in effect associating it with a Nature that was perceived to be passive, timeless and remote."⁷⁵ This is similarly the case with Miltonian, Spenserian, Shakespearean, or other literary subjects. By attaching the definition of British national myth to these subjects, they also

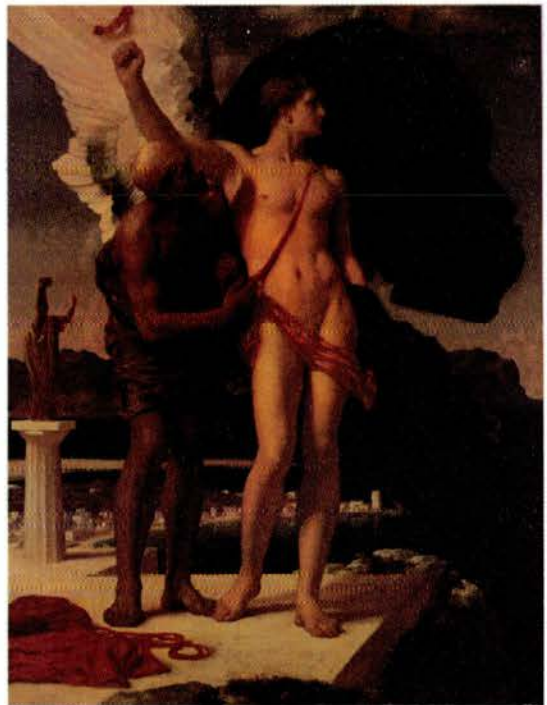


Figure 12: Frederic Leighton, *Daedalus and Icarus* (1869)

⁷⁴ Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 119.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 90.

became ethereal and an intellectual ideal. One instance of this was the respectability that Tennyson's poem gave to the Lady Godiva subject.⁷⁶

Nudes that did not present this idealised timelessness provoked upset. John Everett Millais' *Knight Errant* (figure 13), for example, was judged scandalous because it did not have a

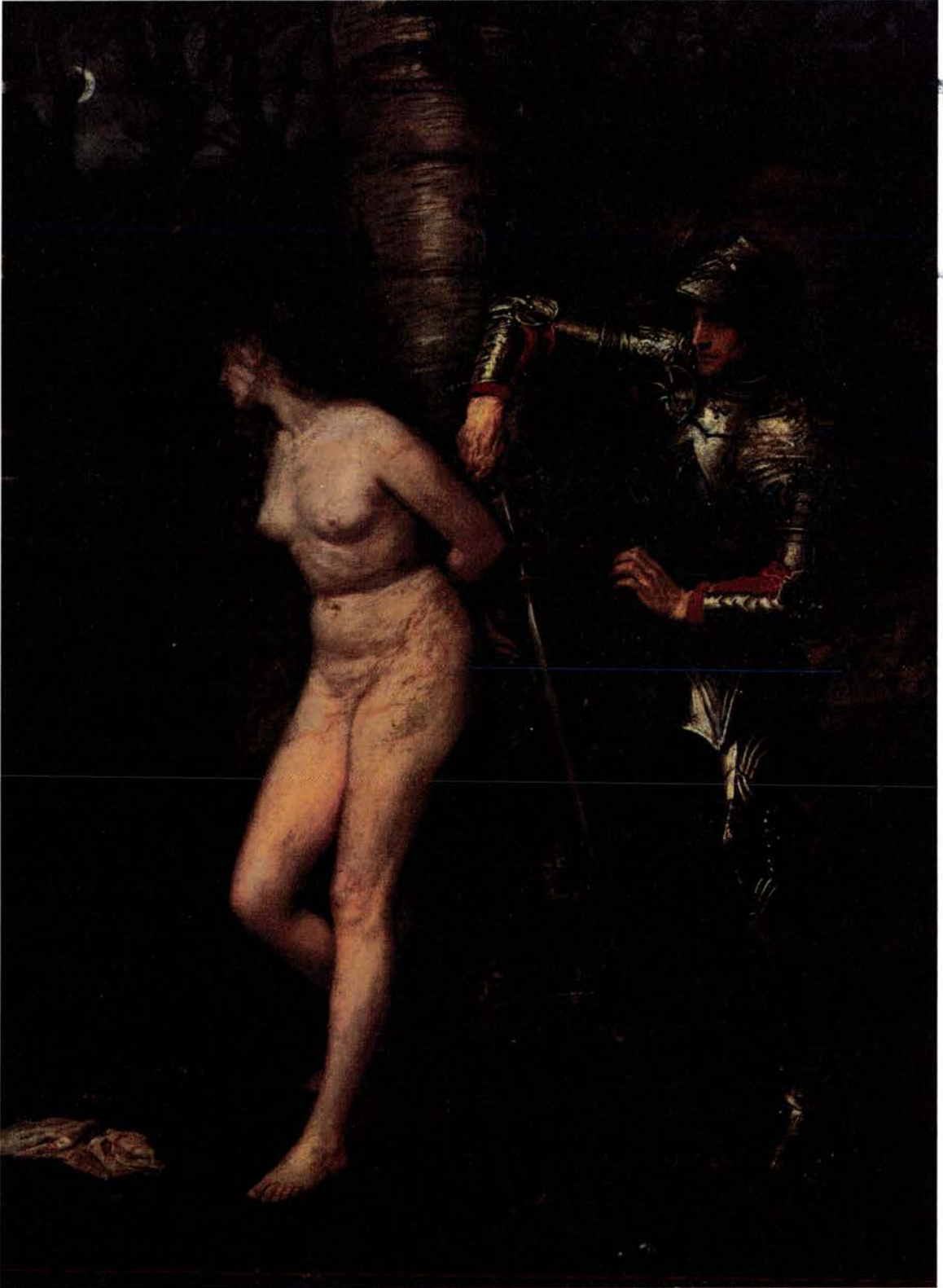


Figure 13: John Everett Millais, *The Knight Errant* (1870)

⁷⁶ Smith, *Exposed*: 67.

mythological, that is, ideal, pretext. A naked woman and an armour-clad knight juxtaposed with no basis in an intellectual concept would only serve, it was thought, to inflame the desires of viewers. Not surprisingly, then, it was only at the end of the century that modern nudes appeared that placed the naked human form in everyday, contemporary settings.

These unwritten rules of nude representation—emotional removal, conservative gender roles, and idealisation in figure and subject—enabled artists, and society, to walk the fine line between two conceptions of the nude: as agent which aestheticises ambiguity, and as potential instigator of subversive sexual practices. The resultant nudes could thus enlighten the populace through archetypal human experiences and impel artistic progress while minimising risk of behaviours that threatened the hegemony of the nuclear family by restricting the most arousing qualities of art. While not suggesting that these rules held universally, they were general critical boundaries that defined the broad directions and aims of art during this period.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the nude, even in the traditional media, was a highly problematical subject that reflected the overall anxiety toward the body. We see the belief that representations of the nude were potentially enlightening or deleterious, characteristic of a tabooed area. Furthermore, there was a pervasive desire to draw lines between the two by using various elements of presentation, even if the precise location of such lines were hotly debated. It appears that, as is the case with the general fascination and fear of the body, they were drawn to maintain societal boundaries in a quickly changing world.

If depictions of the nude in traditional media were controversial and subject to critical censure, their counterparts in the medium of photography were at times literally illegal. To understand how a shift in media so greatly exacerbated concerns over the nude, we must first understand that photography itself was a tabooed area, provoking both optimism and fear.

The Photographic Medium

The simultaneous threat and promise of the new medium was recognized at a very early date even before the daguerreotype process had proliferated ... Photography promises an enchanted mastery of nature, but photography also threatens conflagration and anarchy, an incendiary levelling of the existing cultural order.

Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive"¹

The instability of the nude as a category of artistic production in the nineteenth century derives very largely from its place within the new physical, social, and imaginative territories forged by the technologies of reproduction and representation at the opening of the modern era.

Martin Myrone, "Prudery, Pornography and the Victorian Nude"²

The nineteenth century in Britain was a time of new frontiers. Solidification of scientific method, general prosperity and the expansion of the British Empire throughout the world produced a multiplicity of sites—scientific, geographical, technological and anthropological—to be explored and exploited for the progress and excitement of the nation. The medium of photography was one such frontier. Almost contemporaneous with the ascendancy of Queen Victoria to the throne, photography was invented in 1839—independently by William Henry Fox Talbot in England and Daguerre in France—and by the end of the century had revolutionised visual perception and its relationship to society. Photography for the Victorians held all the promise of a precocious child. Here was a technology whose magic could be applied to any discipline by anyone, that could speed communication and provide an eyewitness to the past. However, also like a talented young child, photography's place in society was not yet established. The future of the medium could not be foreseen, nor indeed, the changes that it would bring to society. Photography may have had the potential to develop science and art, but it also had the ability to change significantly power relationships because it altered patterns of information ownership and dissemination. Photography was a democratic art at a time when class was still the overriding factor in the structure of society. This quality made photography dangerous because

1 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT University Press 1989): 343.

2 Myrone, "Prudery": 23.

it threatened that very structure, and this threat compromised any already dangerous imagery that it captured.

This is the heart of the problematic nature of the photographic nude. It was not only constructed by the Victorian taboo of sex and the body, but by the photographic medium itself. Because the new medium of photography held both the grand promise of new realms of scientific and artistic advancement and the potential for social and cultural upheaval—both power and danger—it also clearly fits Douglas’s definition of the taboo. The achievements and effects of the new medium were in the Victorian period uncertain, so neither its “holiness” (beneficence) or its “pollution” (harmfulness) were established. Photography’s dangers therefore intersected with and magnified Victorian taboos over the body and sex. The resultant product—photography of the nude—was even more difficult to resolve into beneficent or harmful elements and thus even more precarious and frightening, hence the existence of firm, yet often contradictory, regulation.

The Victorians were caught between photography’s potential and danger precisely because that potential was so great. Being able to record an image without artistic training had been a great dream for centuries. Particularly, many sought to fix permanently the images produced within the *camera obscura*, an artist’s device that projected the scene it was focused upon through a lens into an enclosed space to assist with proportion and composition. In 1690, John Locke went so far as to compare this amazing hypothetical process to the action of the human mind. “Would that the pictures coming into such a dark room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the understanding of a man, in reference to all objects of sight, and the ideas of them.”³ Thus there were already high hopes for the photographic medium, and when finally invented almost 150 years later, it seemed to fulfil, and even succeed, all expectations.

William A. Ewing believes that what connected the inventors and refiners of photography was the ardent desire to “make visible the invisible,”⁴ whatever the category. Being a product of such universal intent, photography was also of universal application. Said one commentator in the *Journal of the Photographic Society*, “Who shall predict the ultimate uses

3 John Locke, “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 1690, quoted in Robert Sobieszek, “Addressing the Erotic: Reflections on the Nude Photograph,” *Nude Photographs: 1850-1980*, ed. Constance Sullivan (New York: Harper and Row 1980): 169.

4 Ewing, *Body*: 18.

and application of our beautiful science of photography? Who knows the extent of the grasp of the future in the fertile imaginations of Daguerre, Niépce, and Fox Talbot?"⁵ Photography was connected strongly with science, as it was a technological breakthrough and as it owed its propagation to the various scientific societies who discussed and admired it in its infancy. These scientific societies, in the period when scientific method was striving for its general acceptance, were eager to show the relationship of scientific theory and its application to technology and industry, an endeavour photography easily accomplished.⁶ Photography could be used to categorise and classify, as in botany or anthropology. It could be used to capture the results of scientific experiments, and could possibly elucidate visual information that humans alone could not. It was an excellent scientific instrument.

Yet photography was also a useful historical device. For the first time it was possible to have a reliable visual record of what and who actually existed and the events they participated in. Enthused one writer, "If London is ever potted like Pompeii, a future generation will find a record of us, from the Queen on her throne down to Palmer in the dungeon, preserved by the aid of this new art. This clear-sighted, deep-seeing, sure-handed, steam-power spirit of the sun will leave heirlooms."⁷ Even more so, photographs could be a valuable educational device, both instructing the populace in scientific fact and process and improving the aesthetic taste. David Brewster, one of photography's earliest proponents, promoted photography specifically because he, as Jager explains, "believed in the educating and soul-elevating force of the medium through its ability to represent truth and beauty."⁸ These educational effects were thought to assist social, moral and economic improvement.⁹ And at least one idealist, Jane Welsh Carlyle, voiced hopes that portrait photography would become a social palliative. "Blessed be the inventor of photography ... It has given more positive pleasure to poor suffering humanity than anything that has been 'cast up' in my time ... this art, by which even the poor can possess themselves tolerable likenesses of their absent dear loved ones."¹⁰

Photography was a medium that seemed to the Victorians to be capable of all things. As Allan Sekula comments, "photography ... fulfilled the dream of a universal language: the

5 "The Mission of Photography," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 6:101 (Sept 15, 1860).

6 Jens Jager, "Discourses on Photography in Mid-Victorian Britain," *History of Photography* 19:4 (winter 1995): 318.

7 "The Photographic Exhibitions," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 3:50 (Jan 21, 1857).

8 Jager, "Discourses": 318.

9 *Ibid.*: 320.

10 Sekula, "Body and the Archive": 346.

universal mimetic language of the camera yielded up a higher, more cerebral truth, a truth that could be uttered in the universal abstract language of mathematics."¹¹ Photography thus had immense and seemingly miraculous power, and is therefore consistent with the first half of the definition of a taboo. But it was also very dangerous, a quality that was recognised almost at once. Says Jager, the "proposals for future applications of photography can be read as an attempt to restrict the use of the medium for respectable and useful aims."¹² This implies that there were potentially detrimental uses or uses of ambiguous outcome and that photography needed regulation, a pattern also evident in Victorian anxieties over the body. Furthermore, and worryingly, the dangers seemed to be inherent in the nature of the medium.

In 1879, the *Photographic News* delineated the superior traits of photography: "First, its cheapness; second, its simplicity; third, its power of infinite reproduction, and fourth, last and most important of all, its absolute truth and fidelity. It cannot lie."¹³ Within these qualities the phenomenal power of photography was believed to rest. However, it was also these precise characteristics that were its greatest flaws and causes of threat to society, and although these dangers had ramifications in a wide variety of areas, it was especially the case when photography was applied to fine art and in particular to the art of the nude. My aim here, therefore, is to explain the fears that photography as a medium presented (and thereby prove the second half of the taboo definition) and, furthermore, their relationship to the genre of the photographic nude.

To begin with, the much-vaunted simplicity of the medium led many to believe that photography was far too easy and too technological to be a fine art. Art was hallmarked by the technical skill and genius of the artist, his ability to render and stylise forms through the dexterity of his hands. It was a time-consuming, difficult *craft*. Accurate photographic rendering of a scene was relatively immediate, removed from the hands of the photographer. The only technical skills required, it was thought, were pressing a button and mixing chemicals—a purely technological, rather than individual, achievement. In fact, there was at this stage no individual discourse of photography. Its identity was only as it functioned in relation to the category of its application. Contemporary writers divided photographers into two categories—those who viewed photography as an item of technology and scientific advance,

11 *Ibid.*: 352.

12 Jager, "Discourses": 318.

13 *Photographic News*, 16 May 1879, quoted in Ewing, *Body*: 106.

and those who viewed it as a tool of the aesthetic.¹⁴ And indeed, even most of those in the aesthetic group did not recognise photography as a medium in its own right, rather only as a technical aid. Said Frank Howard in *The Journal of the Photographic Society* in 1854:

Let the photographers devote their attention to removing all difficulties from the manipulation and method of developing the reproduction of facts in their most complete form. Let them make their art a handmaiden to science and an embodiment of truth. Let them realise an encyclopaedia of form, collecting every instance within reach, and leave the artist to apply this invaluable assistance to the production of fine arts.¹⁵

Asserts Jager, "It was important what science or machinery was used for. As a tool it was accepted when it did not jeopardize the essence of the occupation to which it was applied."¹⁶ Photography, with its ability to easily and quickly capture what had previously taken copious effort and time, threatened the very existence, or at least identity, of an art of versimilitude.

In the early days of photography, it was feared that the new medium would replace traditional two-dimensional media such as painting and printmaking. Howard believed that photography would put cheap portrait makers out of business,¹⁷ and Sir Francis Palgrave believed that a new era of technology had begun in which mechanical reproduction would cause fine art to lose its place in society and even kill freedom of expression.¹⁸ While fears that photography would replace and eradicate painting were eventually proved erroneous, the debate as to whether photography was art continued for the rest of the century. For example, in the period leading up to and during the 1862 International Exhibition, debate raged as to whether photographs within the exhibition should be classed as a fine art or a science. Hundreds of editorials and letters to the editor of not only photographic publications such as *Photo News*, but also in general ones such as *The Times*, fought a war of words over the ability of the medium to stand alone as art. Most letters that argued against photography as an art form pointed specifically to the simple technical, and not human, action of "drawing." Some, like Sir William J. Newton, even believed that the use of photography too early would damage the aesthetic abilities of the young artist by relying too heavily upon the ease with which the camera

14 R. W. Buss, "On the Use of Photography to Artists," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 1:6 (July 1853): 75.

15 Frank Howard, "Photography as connected with the Fine Arts," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 1:13 (January 1854): 157.

16 Jager, "Discourses": 320.

17 Howard, "Photography": 154.

18 Jager, "Discourses": 320.

captures an image, thus rendering them unable to depict images accurately. "I consider it to be a sort of duty, as an artist," he observed, "to recommend the student in art not to take up the Camera as a means of advancement in his profession until he has made himself well acquainted with the true principles of his art, as well as acquired considerable power of hand, with a view to draw with ease and correctness the outline of any object he may wish to represent."¹⁹ The simplicity of photography therefore held the danger of surpassing or damaging fine art, a critical signpost of national progress, through removing the element of talent and craft from the creation of a work. Here, then, is the first instance of the very spirit and strength of photography also posing very real dangers, creating ambiguity as to the beneficence of the medium, and therefore placing it in the realm of the taboo.

Moreover, from what we know of Victorian social values and their attitudes toward the nude genre, this ambiguity in photography's status as art or technical device would have had a significant effect upon the opinion of the photographic nude. If photography is not art, or even if it is yet possible that it is not art, it would be difficult to justify the photographic image of a nude figure as an aesthetic removal. Here, the balance between moral and aesthetic that the nude was required to keep would be considerably tipped toward moral censure because an aesthetic treatment would neither further national artistic advancement nor provide an intellectual release for the ambiguity of the human figure. This is not to say that the lack of acceptance of photography as art did not also hinder the recognition of other photographic artworks. But whereas these images could then become documentary or at least harmless diversions, a nude figure that was not artistic had the power severely to disrupt society, and therefore was not justified in its existence. Here the dangers of the photographic medium exacerbate the already precarious situation of depictions of the nude through its ambiguity as an art. Yet photography's simplicity and the ensuing debates surrounding its identity as art were the least of the dangers that it posed to art and especially the genre of the nude.

One commentator speaking in 1880 of the absolute fidelity of the photographic image said, "After a while we shall grow accustomed to the hard truths the camera teaches us, but the present generation is the first to appreciate them to the full."²⁰ It was probably the perfection and truth of the image that created the most awe and admiration in the eyes of those who viewed

19 William J. Newton, "Upon Photography in an Artistic View, and in its relations to the Arts," *The Journal of Photography* 1:1 (January 1853).

20 *Photo News* 6 (August 1880), quoted in Ewing, *Body*: 240.

photography in its childhood. As mentioned, it was this aspect that gave photography scientific and historical value, and even usefulness in producing studies for artists. Yet, as the individual writing in *Photo News* points out, they are sometimes hard truths, disillusioning and disheartening, difficult to escape from. The camera had the ability to disrupt ignorant bliss. Furthermore, if the camera for the first time allowed the accurate recording of important events and people, it also meant that it became much more difficult to paint these occurrences and individuals in a deliberately positive or negative light, potentially destabilising power relationships. Indeed, with any situation in which it is important to control attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours for the benefit of the community, pure truth without the mediation of appropriate directives is highly dangerous. Thus because of the camera's power of very truth, it became important to control access to this power and its products, a concept to which we shall return later.

But the veracity of photography was also a stumbling block for the medium's acceptance as an art form. After all, even ignoring the mechanical nature of photography's image-making, the *creation* of the image, not simply the *capture* of the image, was central to the identity of the artist. Artistic representation was not a mere objective reproduction of reality but a subjective visual interpretation of what that reality meant. Reynolds' dicta of idealisation and the concept of "artistic license" leave no room for a medium so intertwined with veracity. But indeed, such a medium also had the capability to shift the boundaries of the identity of art. Here again we find Douglas's statement that the definition of margins is critical entirely accurate. The acceptance of photography within the fine arts would indicate a rejection of the notion that art must be ideal, or that art must even involve the imaginative creation of the scene or object it depicts. The culmination of this shift can be seen in Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of found items and in the whole Dada movement.²¹

The strict veracity of the photograph was therefore dangerous to art and to the stability and relationships of power. Its inability to idealise figures or situations²² threatened to challenge "safe" but inaccurate presentations of dominant figures, occurrences, or even beliefs by providing an absolutely truthful record. It also endangered the idealising precepts of British art,

21 A lineage that I believe is traceable but outside the scope of this thesis.

22 In comparison to traditional media. As artists became used to the medium of photography, they found ways of idealising figures and occurrences through viewpoint or setting whilst still keeping the basic fidelity of the camera. Yet, unlike other media, this basic fidelity could not be changed strictly within photography.

an attitude firmly established within the Royal Academy since the days of Reynolds, by pretending to fine art. Again, the exact traits—in this case, verisimilitude—that imbued photography with wonder and usefulness also imbued it with danger, marking photography as a taboo.

Upon the already precarious genre of the nude this particular taboo of absolute truth had palpable effect. As we have seen, nowhere was idealisation so critical to acceptability as with the representation of the nude. Not only was the nude an artistic genre but it was also held to be a key to social behaviour. Therefore, nowhere was the photographic reality so terribly dangerous as within the art of the nude.

This trouble at the intersection of photographic veracity and the nude was provoked on a number of different levels. The most basic of these was the faithfulness of the camera to the event—whatever was portrayed in the image must by necessity really have occurred.²³ This aggravated concerns over the morality of artistic models. The use of a model created a relationship of sorts between a man and a naked woman outside of the bounds of marriage—an unacceptable situation. The fidelity of the photographic medium exacerbated this problem by retaining the proximity of the model in the finished product. Whereas a painted or sculpted nude could be disguised through subject and style,²⁴ the photographic nude could not escape the identity of the sitter, and therefore a relationship was created between the naked sitter and every individual who viewed the photograph. It was for this reason that photographic models were so often identified with prostitutes, as they (or their images) had ‘relationships’ with myriad men.

Furthermore, the truth of photography was problematic in conjunction with the nude because there was no scope for the idealisation that allowed the nude acceptability in traditional media. Lack of idealisation, although related, is a separate concern from the recognisability of the model because, as discussed, the latter presupposes an inappropriate connection with the viewer while the former prevents the human figure from being elevated to an intellectualised ideal, and is therefore potentially arousing. Kenneth Clark, who himself describes elevation

23 Again, in reality, photography was always capable of manipulating the truth of a scene by retouching or building composite photographs. However, on a fundamental level, a photograph cannot be created without a tangible subject. See Roland Barthes’ concept of ‘This has been’ in his *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, trans Richard Howard (London: Flamingo 1987 (1984)).

24 As, for example, in Goya’s *The Naked Maja* c.1800, where the figure of the Duchess of Alba was given the face of an unknown woman.

through idealisation as a reconciliation between what he calls the two Venuses (celestial, symbolising ideal human love, and vulgar, representing unreasonable physical desire),²⁵ thus likens photographers of the nude to Diogenes with his lantern searching for a man.²⁶ In this case, he believes, photographers are searching for the ideal figure among the flawed reality of humanity, and thus photographic nudes can never truly achieve artistic status – that is, they can never really reconcile physical humanity with ideal humanity. And thus, he believes, the more ideal the concept that is to be portrayed with the nude, the more photography fails in its attempt.²⁷ In the Victorian period, nudes were required to be highly idealised in order to remain safe. Photography on this count failed. Indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms of the nude photograph in the nineteenth century was not that the figures were nude, but that they were not ideal; they were ugly and imperfect.²⁸

Thus, as with the nude in traditional media, the danger of the unidealised photographic nude was not only that it was bad art for its lack of transcendence (as perhaps Reynolds would have commented) but that its realistic portrayal of a naked figure was sexually arousing. This perhaps was compounded by a subconscious identification of the photographic medium itself as sexual. St. Augustine, in Book X of the *Confession* (in which he outlines humanity's three major temptations), closely correlates "concupiscence of the flesh" (sexual lust) with "concupiscence of the eyes," by which he means a lust for knowledge, or *libido sciendi*. He explains:

There is also present in the soul, by means of these bodily senses, a kind of empty longing and curiosity, which aims not at taking pleasure in the flesh but at acquiring experience through the flesh, and this empty curiosity is dignified by the names of learning and science. Since this is in the appetite for knowing, and since the eyes are the chief of our senses for acquiring knowledge, it is called in the divine language the lust of the eyes.²⁹

Photography, with its hungry mechanism of capturing and assembling visual truths, is a method for just such a lust. Indigenous peoples who believe that having one's photograph taken removes part of the soul may not be far from the truth, for the veracity of the photograph allows individuals to collect and preserve bits of reality and experience for their own personal

25 *Ibid.*: 109.

26 *Ibid.*: 26.

27 *Ibid.*: 27.

28 Sobieszek, "Addressing": 170.

29 Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*: 46.

satisfaction like women in a harem. This idea connects the Victorian zeal for knowledge and taxonomy, within which photography was so deeply engrained, with a dangerous physical need.

David Freedberg writes that "the early photographs were seen as realistic and arousing, and they were both used and censored for that reason. Moreover, they were seen and used as arousing because they were realistic."³⁰ In fact, they were more than just realistic; they were part of reality, and this aspect, regardless of subject, makes photography an erotic medium. As Freedberg says, "we want ... images to be alive—to be real ... It has to be real so that we can properly possess it."³¹ In fact, he argues, the history of photography begins with and is a result of the gaze that fetishizes."³² The camera has, indeed, frequently been described as phallus. The terminology of "shooting" films and "taking" photographs seems to allude to the acts of symbolic predation and possession.³³

It is for this reason that, as Freedberg notes, "any suggestion of the sexual, or any perception of sexual potential," which the nude at this time clearly had, "is likely to enhance the strain to enlivenment and possession. This is the tension that underlies the concerns of the censors and that troubles the rest of us."³⁴ And this, Alison Smith concurs, was the case with the Victorian photographic nude, which was inherently erotic because it was "predicated on the act of looking," upon the medium's realism and mechanism of capture.³⁵

Thus the realism of photography was a significant cause for anxiety over its portrayal of the nude on three counts. Firstly, it confirmed the reality of the nude model and the morally unacceptable action of a female posing in front of groups of men, both artists in life class and viewers of the photograph itself. Secondly, it disallowed the idealisation of the figure and consequently the elevation of the nude to an intellectual ideal. The photographic nude was thus more liable to effect sexual arousal. Thirdly the erotic character of the medium's truth-collecting mechanism further emphasised this tendency toward arousal, enlivenment, and the sensation of (sexualised) possession. The power of the truth of photography, dangerous to society and art,

30 Freedberg, *Power of Images*: 352.

31 Ibid.: 352.

32 Ibid.: 349.

33 Carol Armstrong, "The Reflexive and Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude," *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989).

34 Freedberg, *Power of Images*: 360.

35 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 55.

was thus also very dangerous to the nude because, in all three cases, it disrupted the Enlightenment ideal of contemplative viewing by suggesting or eliciting participation.

Yet it was neither the ease nor verisimilitude of the photograph that ultimately posed the most threat to society both by itself and in conjunction with the nude genre. It was instead photography's cheapness and infinite reproduction—the creation of a visual mass media and the consequent availability of the medium's dangers to the wider public. As Allan Sekula comments, "The early promise of photography had faded in the face of a massive and chaotic archive of images."³⁶ The chaos of this 'archive' was engendered on several different levels. The ease with which photography created and reproduced images produced a surge in the levels of visual imagery available, making the total visual "archive" unruly and widely dispersed. This dispersal, in turn, made it nearly impossible to control the content or meaning of visual production. The main danger of photography, therefore, lay in its ability to transgress or even destroy several significant social or cultural boundaries. This is important with respect to the nude as it calls attention to parallels between the mass characteristics of photography and the obscene. As Jill Bennett points out, the traditional definition of obscenity is something that is not contained by a frame, that "has the propensity to transgress its borders."³⁷ In this section therefore, each of such societal transgressions (dangers) of photographic democracy will be explored, and their effect on the genre of the nude will be assessed. These transgressions fall into the wider categories of transgressions of context and transgressions of class and status.

Because the Victorians held that the visual image was extremely affective, the context in which it was viewed became highly important. Partially, this stemmed from the Enlightenment ideal of contemplative viewing, one predicated on the definition of the aesthetic put forth by Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century. According to Pierre Bourdieu,

Kant, in order to apprehend in its pure state the irreducible specificity of aesthetic judgement, strove to distinguish 'that which pleases' from 'that which gratifies' and, more generally, to separate 'disinterestedness', the sole guarantee of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the 'interest of the senses' which defines 'the agreeable,' and from 'the interest of Reason' which defines 'the Good'.³⁸

36 Sekula, "Body and the Archive": 357.

37 Jill Bennett, "Leaving Nothing to Imagination: Obscenity and Postmodern Subjectivity," *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996): 243.

38 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge: Polity Press 1990): 85

The point here was to separate out the visceral emotions from the viewing of an image to isolate the moral and logical ones, thus elevating the visual image to "art." Quietly and intellectually contemplating the visual cultivated such disinterestedness and lessened the chance that images would arouse any base instincts. However, controlling the context of the viewing of images also helped to control the meanings they produced, so that in the event that contemplation did not restrain the animal, such arousal would be directed toward activities and beliefs conducive to society and the existent power relationships. This dual precaution was the general case of the control exerted over the nude in traditional media, where images were not only idealised to prevent base emotion, but their content was also controlled in order to funnel any visceral urges into safe channels.

Both strategies were accomplished via the institution of the museum. A nineteenth-century creation, public museums were established as aesthetic refuges that forced the disinterestedness that constituted the "pure gaze." Museums were consecrated buildings that enforced the silence and contemplation of the viewer. They were filled with settings and décor designed to encourage viewing from the correct physical and emotional distance. On occasion, with more affective imagery, they restricted viewing to a single sex at a time, in order to prevent any proximal stimulation. Museums also removed art from any economic consideration by eliminating any possibility of individual purchase. Furthermore, a museum was the gatekeeper to the public display of images, and thus controlled the content of the canon of available images. Donald Preziosi argues that, in the nineteenth century, museum objects were restricted to those that would maintain power relationships and social attitudes through their messages. He asserts that "the new public museum institution came to be systematically integrated and put to explicitly political uses in order to (re)educate a newly democratised citizenry."³⁹ For the Victorians, images that were particularly physically stimulating would be contrary to these purposes, and were thus disallowed. As Freedberg argues, "The images that are most effective turn out to be excluded from museums." By 'effective,' he means those that "engage our apparently lower senses."⁴⁰ Thus, dangerous images like Titan's *Rape of Lucretia* could be rejected. Because of the museum's restrictive power, their censure was control enough. The

39 Donald Preziosi, "Brain of the Earth's Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity," *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996): 101.

40 Freedberg, *Power of Images*: 425.

invention of photography bypassed this power. The mass availability of photographs meant that images were widely available to the general public outside of the museum. The museum could no longer control the setting in which images were viewed nor their content. This was frightening, for if images are inherently affective, their effect must be strictly controlled in order to maintain the stability and progress of the nation. And, as we know, this was especially the case with images of the nude. Photography's ability to circumvent the societal protection of the museum compounded anxieties over the traditional nude and made its photographic counterpart extremely dangerous. Says Martin Myrone:

Reproduction made possible the re-ordering of the aesthetic structures that prevailed in officialdom: nudes could be extracted from their 'art' context, and repackaged (even quite literally and commercially) according to the desires of the consumer. What proved unsettling in this case was the capacity of the new technologies to defy the strictures of the art world, strictures that were meant to ensure propriety.⁴¹

For one, photography's abilities placed nude photographs in environments not conducive to contemplative viewing. Says Ben Maddow, while nudes were conditionally allowable in museums, "Photographs were a far different case ... They were displayed ... in the popular noise and confusion of the great ... exhibitions."⁴² And indeed, they were not just available at popular exhibitions, but, because of their inexpensiveness and infinite reproduction, virtually anywhere. The safety net of a contemplative environment thus could not be guaranteed.

Photography also enabled shifts in format and size, and thus meaning could be altered at every reproduction. Says Stephanie Spencer, "The public, to the exasperation of many photographers, preferred small photographs both for cheapness and for collectability."⁴³ Unlike the physical and emotional distance compelled by museum viewing, such a small format encouraged a much more personal and arousing relationship with the image, and enhanced the possessive and erotic qualities of the medium. Photography also enabled the fragmentation of the body in new or recropped images, allowing fetishisation of certain areas. And indeed, the nature of photography and the popularity of photographic collecting meant that, as Allan Sekula puts it, "There were always more images to be acquired, obtainable at a price, from a relentlessly

41 Myrone, "Prudery": 34.

42 Maddow, "Nude in a Social Landscape": 185.

43 Stephanie Spencer, *O.G. Rejlander: Photography as Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press 1985): 24.

expanding, globally dispersed picture-gathering agency."⁴⁴ In personal albums, individual photographs could therefore be juxtaposed with each other, creating new and possibly subversive meanings in infinite permutations completely out of the control of the dominant authorities.

Moreover, the cheapness of photography created an easy commerciality that was at odds with a contemplative gaze. Such commercialisation reduced the acceptability of the photograph as art. Hence many individuals who wished to see photography elevated to art condemned the cheap sale of photographs. Said one, "It is high time that this commercial art, these namby-pamby absurdities, were put a stop to."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Council of the Photographic Society, in announcing its forthcoming exhibition in 1859, declared that "all works which have been exposed in shop-windows," were prohibited from entry. "A picture seen in a shop-window," they said, "is not hung in the Royal Academy ... The walls of the Photographic Society should in like manner convey to the public photographic intelligence."⁴⁶ Commercialised nude figures therefore lost the veneer of art and moreover acquired the aura of aesthetic and actual prostitution. The act of paying for a personal and collectable nude image conjured up and reinforced the erotic nature of the medium.

Furthermore, the traits of the photographic medium also meant that images not allowable in public museums could be easily disseminated to anyone who desired them, a situation that was even more threatening and complicated and is an issue to which we shall return later. Photography, therefore, altered the carefully constructed context within which images were hitherto viewed by removing them from museums and placing them in the hands of the public. The democratisation of imagery meant that aesthetic entities no longer controlled its environment, format or content, destroying the boundaries of artistic control designed to protect the nation from the affective powers of the image. This was especially true with respect to images of the nude, whose aesthetic protection was so critical. Without such protection, the danger was greatly increased that the photographic nude would arouse in the viewer emotions that could destabilise society.

However, by removing legitimate culture (ie, the museum or Academy) from the mass control of all visual imagery, photography also transgressed social boundaries that were inherent

44 Sekula, "Body and the Archive": 374.

45 "The Exhibition," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 4:66 (May 21 1858): 210.

46 *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 5:71 (Oct 21, 1858): 35.

in visual culture until this time. These transgressions took the form of threatening both the position of visual culture as class distinction and the foundations of social power relationships and stability by allowing democratic access to formerly restricted (and possibly dangerous) visual knowledge. Together they contributed to the danger of photographic mass availability and greatly compounded the problems surrounding the photographic nude.

Kenneth Clark, one of the last survivors of the old aesthetic school lamented in 1957, "The drift of all popular art is toward the lowest common denominator."⁴⁷ The inference is that popularising art decreases its merit. But what exactly is that merit based on? Pierre Bourdieu believes that the merit of art, as traditionally constructed, actually lies in its ability to differentiate its viewers from less dominant groups. He writes, "the dominant class distinguish themselves through that which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it."⁴⁸ Thus, more specifically, art is a function of the privileges of money and breeding. As Richard Leppert explains, "art conventionally functioned to extend and perpetuate institutional and personal power."⁴⁹ So "art," in order to perform this task of distinction, must be an image that requires one to be of a certain monetary or educational status to obtain or enjoy it. Indeed, as Bourdieu comments:

The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest to the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person.⁵⁰

Within this context, art can work in two ways. On one hand, paintings or sculptures are objects that require breeding or an investment of education in order to comprehend. On the other, art can also represent objects of distinction, thereby compounding their effect. Says Leppert, "For the painting's viewer-owner, looking confirms – and makes more beautiful – what is owned, thereby helping to define both the owner's private and social self."⁵¹ What is important to realise, however, is that, according to this system, anything that does not require

47 Clark, *Nude*: 145.

48 Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 258.

49 Leppert, *Committed Eye*: 114.

50 Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 281.

51 Leppert, *Committed Eye*: 108.

traits that only the dominant classes possess does not reflect their dominant status, and does not, therefore, have artistic merit. For this reason, Bourdieu says: "it could be shown that the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the facile ... that 'pure taste,' purely negative in its essence, is based on the disgust ... for everything that is 'facile' – facile music, or a facile stylistic effect, but also 'easy virtue' or an 'easy lay.'"⁵² Thus, whilst the "legitimate gaze" elevates everything that it touches, the popular gaze makes "middle-brow" everything it touches, for it indicates that it is within the reach of the dominated.⁵³

Prior to the onset of photography, visual culture was a mode of distinction for the dominant classes in Britain. Despite the fact that the new museums provided the populace with access to artistic masterworks, for the most part art remained the province of those with enough money and cultural education to own and understand it. Photography upset these social boundaries by placing, for the first time, visual images and the ability to create them in the hands of the dominated classes. By nature, photographic images were antithetical to this concept of distinction via the visual. Within this definition, photography was too "facile" to be of any cultural value as it did not necessitate the requisite investment of study or training to create an image. Hence there were contemporary complaints that the vast majority of photographs had no real artistic merit. Said Alfred H. Wall, for example, "among the many thousands of photographs passing before us, how many are there which have the slightest claim to any pictorial element?"⁵⁴ Furthermore, a photograph was inherently not unique. As long as the negative is extant, a photograph can be reproduced *ad infinitum*. Therefore, according to the theory of art as distinction, photographs hold very little artistic merit. Says David Freedberg, "Almost everyone can own or have access to a photograph; but art, being high, is reserved for the few."⁵⁵ For these reasons, photography could not be art in the traditional sense and challenged these precepts.

However, what was most dangerous about photography and its relation to a distinctive art form was that it is, as Allan Sekula recognises, "a system of representation capable of functioning both honorifically and repressively."⁵⁶ That is, in appropriating the functions

52 Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 486.

53 *Ibid.*: 327.

54 Alfred H. Wall, "Practical Observations upon Photographs in their Relation to Art," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 6:91 (Jan 16, 1860): 141.

55 Freedberg, *Power of Images*: 355.

56 Sekula, "Body and the Archive": 345.

traditionally fulfilled by painting, sculpture and drawing, photography both honours their cultural legacy and at the same time takes away from it by democratising the results, decreasing their prestige and, therefore, their artistic merit and the indication of personal quality that it engenders. For example, the wildly popular celebrity *cartes-de-visite*, and in fact portrait photography in general, allowed "the most dispossessed people the opportunity of owning portraits," and facilitated the democratisation of the portrait gallery,⁵⁷ a previous hallmark of the upper classes. And whilst a movement to improve national taste through the dissemination of reproduction art objects⁵⁸ supported the photographic duplication of "frescoes, statues, drawings, pictures and engravings,"⁵⁹ such reproduction also threatened to reduce the status of those very works. This idea has contemporary support. The theorist Herbert Marcuse believes that dissemination of cheap copies of famous artworks creates "a thick layer of familiarity [that] interposes itself, like an aesthetic cataract, between the work and ourselves," turning them into kitsch.⁶⁰ Indeed, in the Victorian period fears were similarly expressed that a mass audience and market for art would result in aesthetic decline.⁶¹ Photography, whether by assuming the title of art, or by reproducing art within the traditional definition, thus threatened the conventional role of art as social discriminator. This was dangerous, for at a time when Marx's *Das Kapital* and socialism was gaining support, and when the upper classes were losing ever more power, the loss of visual distinction (and theoretically legitimate culture altogether) could be seen as a metaphor for the growing influence of the masses. Again, photography's strengths were also its dangers, making it an ambiguous entity and a taboo.

Furthermore, this problem affected photographic imagery of the nude because such imagery aided photography in its bid to become art. In their respective books, Lynda Nead and Marcia Pointon both argue that the nude is *the* central subject of art.⁶² The nude is firstly understood to be pure art because for centuries the measure of artistic talent and professional attainment has been the mastery of the human body. It is thus also identified with art "through its very centrality in that tradition."⁶³ Finally, the nude, in particular the female nude, is also a

57 Bourdieu, *Photography*: 30.

58 Smith, *Exposed*: 72.

59 "The Photographic Exhibiton," *The Journal of the Photographic Society* 3:51 (February 21, 1857): 213.

60 Quoted in Posner, *Sex and Reason*: 239.

61 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 76.

62 See Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge 1992), and Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990).

63 Pointon, *Naked Authority*: 12.

sign of male creativity in that it involves, as Nead points out, the conversion of pure nature into pure culture through the forms of art.⁶⁴ If the nude is truly the sign of Art, then in its appropriation, photography is the ultimate usurper of distinction because it carries the ultimate symbol of culture to the masses. As Bourdieu comments, "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of that which taste dictates shall be separated."⁶⁵ Certainly ultimate culture, that is, ultimate distinction, should be separated from its antithesis—pure democracy.

The photographic nude moreover threatened cultural distinction in that it called into question the concept of connoisseurship and the personal quality it indicated. Prior to the rise of mass media, "dangerous" art images did exist. These images, precarious because of violence, sedition and, most of all, overt sexuality were very rarely legally censored or officially destroyed. Rather, access to them was controlled by status and education, restricted to those whose quality presumably ensured their safe—that is, non-arousing—examination.⁶⁶ At times this restriction was simply a function of access to images at all; only those with the money and proper background had the contacts and means to purchase or commission images. In other circumstances, such as public collections or museums, dangerous images were transferred to a separate room, which only allowed access to those of the highest calibre (or with the money to bribe). Such restricted collections were called "The Secret Museum," the most famous of which was established at the newly-discovered ruins of Pompeii in the eighteenth century, where a series of erotic murals and objects were found. Lynda Nead, in her essay "Bodies of Judgement: Art, Obscenity and the Connoisseur," has shown how this "Secret Museum" engendered feelings of superiority via connoisseurship in those who were allowed access. The collection at Pompeii, she says, enabled enthusiasts to:

get closer and closer to the borderline of art and obscenity. The closer the connoisseur came to the dividing line, the more exquisite the judgement required. To go right to the edge of legitimate culture and to remain unscathed could be the ultimate display of the supremacy of bourgeois masculinity and of the composed mind over the troubled body.⁶⁷

64 Nead, *Female Nude*: 18.

65 Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 56.

66 Even when such images were calculated to be arousing, as in Caravaggio's youths, for example, viewers and authorities could pretend that the gaze of those with proper breeding was perfectly pure.

67 Lynda Nead, "Bodies of Judgement: Art, Obscenity and the Connoisseur," *Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law*, ed Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999): 208.

This pattern was repeated throughout the secret museums and collections of the world. Henry Spencer Ashbee, for example, in his *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a bibliography of pornographic and sexual literature, asserted that the books he was describing should, "be used with caution even by the mature; they should be looked upon as poisons, and treated as such; should be (so to say) distinctly labelled, and only confided to those who understand their potency, and are capable of rightly using them."⁶⁸ Judging sexualised art thus became the ultimate challenge for the gentleman of taste, for an aesthetic gaze ('pure taste') must be completely removed from all visceral pleasures. Therefore, as Nead explains,

If the sacred sphere of culture is characterized by the expulsion of bodily appetite, then what could be more risky, or potentially more rewarding, than to classify the venal, sex itself? What better way to demonstrate cultural disinterestedness and superiority than to come into contact with the sexual and to be—partially, at least—unmoved?⁶⁹

And as "the definition of obscenity is as much concerned with the body of the viewer as with the body imaged,"⁷⁰ entrance to such collections of obscenity implied that the connoisseur's body was "unimpeachable," that it was somehow elevated above the common lusts of humanity. This connoisseurship, then, provided another way for the dominant classes (and dominant sex) to distinguish themselves from the "unwashed masses" of the underclasses.

The disseminability of the photographic nude threatened this distinction. No longer were such dangerous obscenities restricted to those who could prove to themselves their moral and social superiority through disinterested viewing. Instead, by removing its difficulty of appropriation—the indication of the appropriator's quality—photography reduced the distinguishing power of viewing the nude figure. This, again, symbolically threatened the power of the dominant classes.

Photography's traits of cheapness and infinite reproducibility therefore threatened the distinction of the classes through visual culture. The mass availability of photographic images meant that the simple fact of the image could no longer signal dominance. Again, photography was a danger to existing social structures through the very characteristics that cause its usefulness and benefit, creating ambiguity and confusion over its 'holiness' or 'pollution.' Moreover, these dangers would serve to augment the discomfort surrounding the nude by being

68 Quoted in Marcus, *Other Victorians*: 48.

69 Nead, "Bodies of Judgement": 222.

70 *Ibid.*: 221.

the agent of distinctive usurpation. Here the nude indicates the aspiration of photography to the realm of fine art, and it also represents the downfall of strict restriction of erotica to the elite, and therefore the diminishing of connoisseurship and distinction thereof.

Yet, if we consider the Victorian belief in the visual's affective power to be true and important to their society, it is not just the visual distinction of classes that is called into question by photographic democracy, but established power relationships on a very real level. If the veracity of photography expresses ultimate truths that are sometimes dangerous, it is photography's wide disseminability that makes it a true threat to social stability. This is a recurrent pattern that appears any time in history that new methods of the propagation of information are developed, from cuneiform writing to the internet. Susan H. Edwards compares the effects and fears over photography to those surrounding the printing press.

Many formerly disenfranchised by class, gender, race, ethnicity, age or physical challenge are empowered by anonymity and access to markets and information. In the sixteenth century the invention of Gutenberg's moveable type was celebrated by some but others saw it as the end of civilization, because it placed the means of communication in the hand of people presumed silent.⁷¹

Photographic democracy brought subversive truths and the ability to record visual truths to the masses, a dangerous idea in times of intense social and political change.

Furthermore, particularly in the case of viscerally stimulating images, this danger was compounded by the fact that the underclasses were held to be more susceptible to arousal by them. This belief was stimulated by desires to distinguish both the upper classes culturally via the disinterested gaze and the bourgeoisie via elevated morality. Perhaps to some extent this is true, for according to Bourdieu, the working classes "expect every image to fulfil a purpose." Photographs always provoke responses "to the reality of the thing represented or to the functions the representation could serve."⁷² Whether or not this is altogether true, the Victorians certainly believed it to be the case. And if arousal, as we have seen, could lead to inappropriate sexual behaviour and to the downfall of the nation, placing these images in the hands of those most susceptible to arousal was a major risk to its stability. On two counts, then, political and sexual, photography threatened the solidity of the social infrastructure.

71 Susan H. Edwards, "Post-photographic Anxiety Bit by Bit," *History of Photography* 22:1 (Spring 98): 3.

72 Bourdieu, *Distinction*: 41.

That it was the disseminability of a medium that was most dangerous is demonstrated by the clear statement that it was not truly the *content* (subversive ideas) of publications that wanted restriction but the *distribution* of those publications. As Lynda Nead maintains, "obscenity is that which, at any given moment, a particular dominant group does not wish to see in the hands of another, less dominant group."⁷³ H.A. Allbutt's book on birth control methods (briefly discussed in the first chapter), for example, was condemned not because of his advocacy of birth control, but rather because the book "was too cheap."⁷⁴ Likewise Havelock Ellis, the great sexologist of the late nineteenth century, published a book on homosexuality entitled *Sexual Inversion* which was labelled "lewd and obscene" precisely because his intended audience was not a specialist medico-forensic one, but a popular one.⁷⁵

Indeed, this stance is reflected in Victorian law's attempt to limit specifically *mass consumption* of sexually dangerous "texts." What is important to recognise with these obscenity laws is that in most of them the point is not to restrict the existence of the arousing entities, but rather their exposure to the mass populace.⁷⁶ The Vagrancy Act of 1838, for example specified that only obscene images within public view were illegal. And in fact, Lord Campbell himself declared that his bill was not directed at images in collections "kept for the owner's contemplation" and not for sale, but "against the *mass* of impure publications, which was poured forth on London [italics mine]."⁷⁷ This statement allied the ideas of Kantian, museum-based contemplative viewing, cultural distinction (the "owner" assumed to be a gentleman and qualified) and fears of the susceptibility of the mass populace. Indeed, scholars like Walter Kendrick believe that pornography and obscenity are necessarily defined by their participation in mass culture.⁷⁸ Photography was on the wrong side of this divide on all counts due to its wide circulation. The photographic nude, as a mass media, was thus predisposed to labelling as pornography.

Once again, those aspects that were photography's true strengths were also its true dangers. Whilst photographic cheapness and infinite reproduction could bring images of

73 Nead, *Female Nude*: 91.

74 Weeks, *Sex, politics and society*: 45.

75 *Ibid.*: 141.

76 True, the 1857 Obscenities Act stipulated the destruction of obscene books and images, but the main thrust was to prevent their distribution.

77 Smith, *Sexuality, morality and art*: 64.

78 Paraphrased from Nead, *Female Nude*: 94.

stabilisation and elevation to the populace, it could also bring images that were detrimental to the prevailing power relationships to those who were unused to such knowledge. Photography as a medium was therefore of an ambiguous nature, one whose traits were both bad and good at the same time. This inability to separate purity and pollution marks it as a taboo. Furthermore, this taboo of the mass media intersected with the genre of the nude to 'pornographise' its photographic versions by virtue of a wide circulation.

The principal traits of photography—ease, veracity, cheapness and infinite reproducibility—were, then, also the source of its principal dangers to the Victorian social and artistic structures, confirming what the art nouveau designer Henri van de Velde was later to write: "What [machines] drop indifferently from their entrails is both the monstrous and the beautiful."⁷⁹ Unknowingly, he identified them as the taboo. These very characteristics of the medium therefore threatened the safety of the photographic nude within Victorian society because they compounded already present dangers. Photography itself was dangerous, and this in conjunction with images of the dangerous body combined to form the very dangerous area of nude photography, an area that demanded even stricter policing than either of the two alone. In the next chapter I shall look at the different ways in which photographs in this area of danger and power were judged and resolved.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Ghislaine Wood, *Art Nouveau and the Erotic* (London: V&A Publications 2000): 70.

The Nude in Photography

Objections to the fact of nudity are rare; it is only the character of presentation of that nudity which attracts criticism.

Gill Saunders, *The Nude: a new perspective*

Michel Foucault maintains that power relationships rely upon transfers or interactions at specific points throughout society's infrastructure. The densest of these are at once the most useful and the most dangerous, for they potentially have the most influence upon the stability of the existing power structures. They are also therefore the most precarious and contentious because they are neither decidedly constructive nor decidedly destructive. They are, in short, ambiguous – the definition of the taboo. The previous three chapters have revealed that both the body and photography in the nineteenth century were such dense points of transfer. Their intersection in the photographic nude was therefore a hyper-dense point. Having now established the underlying forces at work in the dense transfer points of the body and photography, this chapter aims to use them to explain the reception and influence of some of the highlights of the Victorian photographic nude and to construct a set of overall criteria to which they were subjected.

In dealing with a taboo, the most important consideration is to defuse the threat to the stability of the current definition system. The Victorians were a society focused on achieving British advancement and hegemony, so that in the case of the photographic nude—a combination of two transfer points with the power of progress but also the potential to upset the social infrastructure—the definition system at hand was that of delimiting between entities of social beneficence and damage. Their strategy toward the photographic nude was thus to accept those examples whose perceived benefits to society outweighed their detriments and to condemn through censure or destruction all others. Perhaps because they were considered the principal benefits of photography, or perhaps because they were seen as major channels of societal progress (or both), no nude photograph could aspire to compensate for its dangers without being regarded as within the categories of either art or science or both.

Art

In 1875, one judge of an obscenity trial observed that “the word ‘artistic’ covered a multitude of sins.”¹ As has been seen from the discussion of traditional fine art media, the advancement of art and culture in general was of great importance to the Victorians as they fought for international supremacy. Indeed, the acceptance of the photographic nude, similarly to the nude in traditional media, was predicated on balancing their need for this advancement with the restriction of dangerous images and establishments. Such a balancing act was made significantly more complicated because of the ambiguities of the photographic medium. Despite this, three categories of nude photographs eligible for the status of Art emerged: the high art photograph; the academic study; and the photographic reproduction of works of traditional media. Whilst each category developed individual levels of tolerance, sets of ‘rules’ and mechanisms of enforcement, these aspects all relied expressly upon the sociological infrastructure that has been established in the previous three chapters.

Fine Art

High art photography of the nude had a sporadic history in the Victorian period – not appearing in full until the end of the 1850s and absent for long stretches of time until the end of the century. Although influenced by the myriad forces at work that have already been discussed, the existence and acceptance of the high art photographic nude was essentially dependent upon two factors: the recognition of photography as a fine art, and an established respectability in the relationships between sitter(s), photographer and viewer(s).

Whilst Lerebours and later French practitioners were experimenting with the nude as a subject in its own right during the 1840s and 50s,² the didactic character of mid-Victorian art left little room for the nude in traditional media, let alone within the thorny domain of photography. Therefore it was not until 1857 that the first significant example of the high art photographic nude appeared in Britain, created by the painter-turned-photographer Oscar Gustav Rejlander. After a mediocre career in Rome supporting himself by lithography and painting portraits and copies of Old Masters, Rejlander became interested in photography after seeing photographs of classical and classicising sculptures in Rome.³ At first his interest was limited to the potential of

1 “Surrey Sessions,” *The Times*, 28 October, 1875: 11.

2 Ewing, *The Body*: 63.

3 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 5-7.

photography as a study aid to painting. However, sometime during the 1850s, Rejlander began to be convinced of the artistic merit of photography in and of itself, and he is chiefly remembered for his photographic work, rather than his oeuvre as a painter.

Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life* (1857) (figure 14), a composition containing several nude figures, was the work that brought him artistic fame and also notoriety. Exhibited at the Art Treasures Exhibition at Manchester, the first major exhibition of international art since that in the Crystal Palace in 1851, Rejlander conceived *The Two Ways* as a competition piece designed to showcase the artistic capabilities of his adopted medium. He was later to relate in a paper read to the London Photographic Society that one of the principle goals of the photograph was "To show the plasticity of photography ... and to prove that you are not, by my way of proceeding, confined to one plane, but may place figures and objects at any distances, as clear and distinct as they relatively ought to be."⁴ By his "way of proceeding" Rejlander meant his invented method of composite photography—a photograph printed from several different negatives combined to produce one coherent picture. For *The Two Ways*, each figure was individually photographed and meticulously arranged, making it extraordinarily complex technically.

The composition itself was one firmly in the tradition of the mid-Victorian moralizing painting. Visually deriving from Raphael's *School of Athens* and showing much influence from Hogarth's moral satires of the late eighteenth century, *The Two Ways of Life* tells the story of two brothers sent out into the world by their sage-like father.⁵ One chooses the path of righteousness, the other the path of debauchery and sin. Among the various groups of complex symbolism in the photograph lies in the middle foreground the crucial group of a bacchante, Murder, and Penitence. Discussing this group in his address to the Photographic Society, Rejlander explained that it was transitional between the two sides. Penitence, with her head covered, "is placed, I think rightly, between the two ways of good and evil, to convey what is taught to and believed by us all, that repentance, if true, will not be refused by religion."⁶ Narrative tableaux containing symbolic figures were a traditional and frequent device in

4 O.G. Rejlander, esq, "On Photographic Composition; with a Description of 'Two Ways of Life,'" *Photographic Journal* 4:65 (April 21 1858): 191.

5 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 98.

6 Rejlander, "On Photographic Composition": 192.

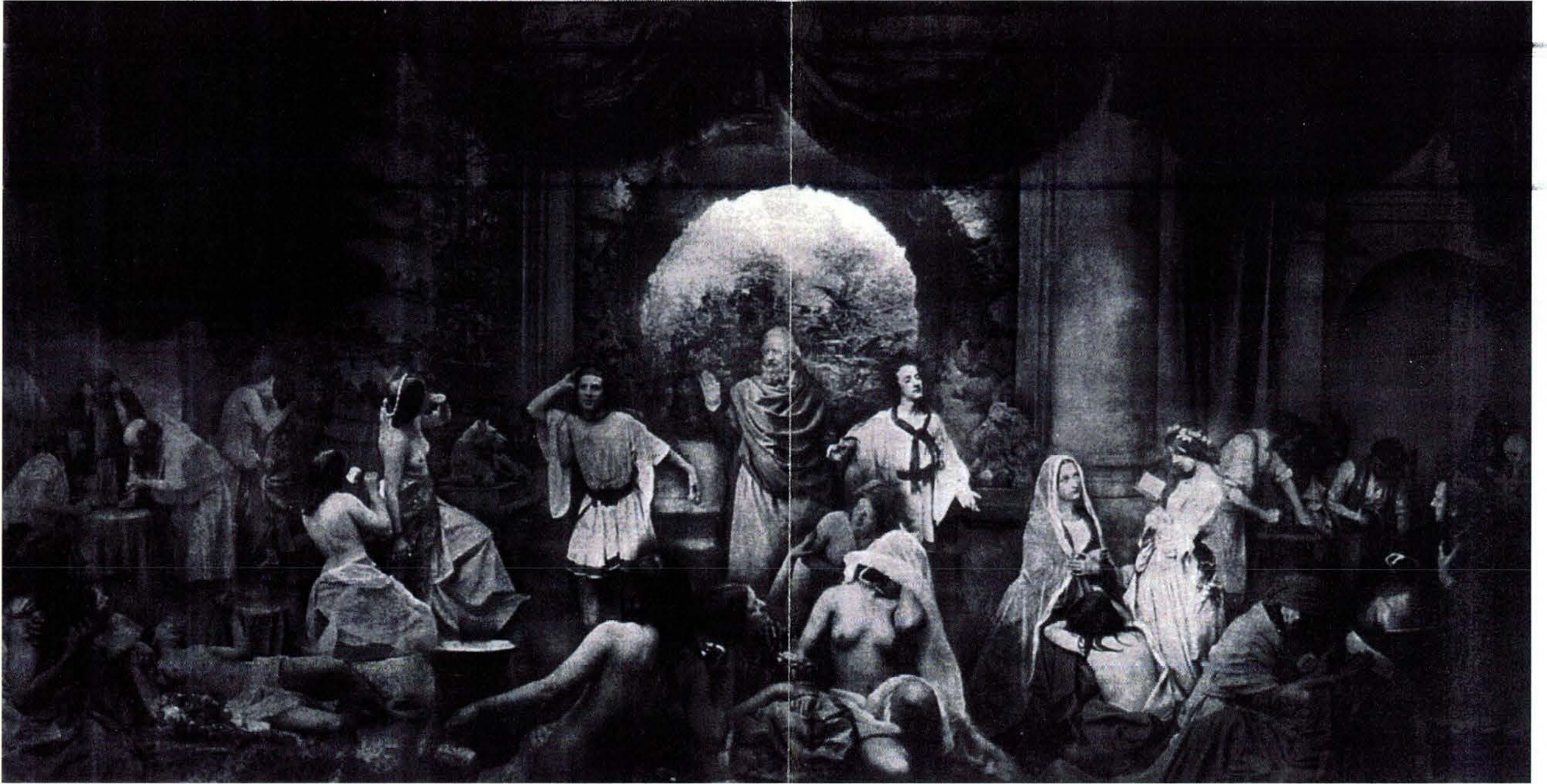


Figure 14: Oscar Rejlander, *The Two Ways of Life* (1857)

Victorian didactic images, such as those by Augustus Leopold Egg, and Rejlander's photograph surely conforms to these conventions.

Thus both in his stated intentions for photography in his production of *The Two Ways* and in his appropriation of contemporary art themes and conventions Rejlander asserted its status as a work of Art. It was certainly a breakthrough in the history of photography, gaining the admiration of many others besides the Queen and Prince Consort. Yet, as his friend and disciple Henry Peach Robinson was to later write in 1890, "No photograph has ever met with so much criticism, for and against."⁷ This criticism not only led to its rejection at the Scottish Photographic Society but also to a furor of critical discussion. The controversy predictably centred around Rejlander's use of the nude within the composition. Detractors had three main arguments: that the poses of the nude figures were too provocative; that the medium of photography rendered them too realistic; and that photography itself was not suited to works of fine art—all familiar criticisms.

In response to Rejlander's address at the London Photographic Society, a Mr. Grace commented that "it certainly is to be regretted that two or three figures in it, though, perhaps not exactly indelicate, verge so closely upon it, as to prevent that general approval of the picture which it otherwise would have met with."⁸ Although Mr. Grace did not believe that they were completely "indelicate," others undoubtedly believed that they were. Certainly it is difficult to portray figures symbolizing vice for moralizing purposes without actually depicting the vice itself. Robinson summed it up when he observed that "a picture intended to convey the highest moral was rejected because of its supposed immorality."⁹ The groups containing nude figures were very similar in composition to many of Lord Campbell's "indecent" foreign photographs inhabiting shop windows. Compare, for example, the group representing Idleness in the far lower left-hand corner with an anonymous daguerreotype c. 1855 (figure 15). While Rejlander's reclining figure does not engage the viewer with the same directness and is partially draped, the connection was still apparent. Stephanie Spencer argues that the Idle Group has "explicit sexual overtones" and that the poses are clearly related to sexually charged works such as Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians*. She also notes that Cesare Ripa, in his iconographical dictionary, states

7 Henry Peach Robinson, "Oscar Gustav Rejlander," *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* 21 (February 22, 1890): 107.

8 Rejlander, "On Photographic Composition": 195.

9 Robinson, "Rejlander": 107.

that "leaning on one's arm, as the rear Idle Woman is, is a sign of lust."¹⁰ Thus viewers could be forgiven for finding a sexually provocative element within the photograph, and one that could possibly be destructively affective.

Moreover, in accordance with the debate over the use of artistic models in traditional media, concern was raised as to the character of those posing for Rejlander's photograph. It was revealed that several of the models were procured from the infamous Madame Wharton's troupe of *tableaux vivants* performers.¹¹ Whilst Rejlander rejoined in his later essay "An Apology for Art Photography" that "There are many female models whose good name is as dear to them as to any other woman,"¹² this did not stop commentators from linking his photographs to *tableaux* for years to come.¹³ Difficulty was also caused by the fact that men and women were pictured in the photograph together. It may be remembered that models of mixed sex conventionally were never posed together for reasons of propriety. However, many viewers and reviewers, as the *Art Journal* pointed out, were of the



Figure 15: Anonymous (c. 1855)

misconception that "the groups ... have been copied by one operation from living figures grouped as we see them in the picture; and hence some very strong objections have been raised."¹⁴ If placing nude women and men together in a painting such as Richmond's *The Bowlers* was considered titillating, a photograph that intimated the reality of an bacchanal orgy would pose a serious threat to the sexual stability of British viewers.

10 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 99.

11 Smith, *Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 61. Madame Wharton's group was known for their risqué performances in London, which at times may or may not have been performed completely in the nude.

12 O.G. Rejlander, "An Apology for Art Photography," *Photo News* 7 (February 20, 1863): 89.

13 In a review of the "Exhibition of the Photographic Society," in *The Times* on 16 November, 1869, for example, Rejlander's *Two Ways* is called "a *tableau vivant* in all the objectionable sense of the word."

14 "Photographic Exhibition," *Art Journal* 19 (February 1859): 21.

Finally, and perhaps the most serious blow to the photograph's wide acceptability, were those who questioned the claim of the photograph to high art at all. A number of commentators in Manchester remarked that allegorical subjects were an improper use of photography.¹⁵ The *Art Journal* epitomized this viewpoint:

Virtue and Vice—Industry and Pleasure—are here displayed with an allegorical felicity, which is—under all circumstances of producing such a picture—surprising ... We do not, however, desire to see many advances in this direction. Works of high Art are not to be executed by a mechanical Contrivance.¹⁶

Additionally, Rejlander's complex narrative and symbology complicated *The Two Ways of Life's* aspirations to fine art. *The Photographic Journal* later asserted that "Mr. Rejlander's clever 'Two Ways of Life,' failed to produce half the effect due to its real merit, as much from the ambiguity of its story as from the questionable modesty of many of the figures."¹⁷ And W.D. Clark used this perceived incoherency to refute claims to the status of fine art:

The meaning has been explained to us by Mr. Rejlander, but I question if any one could have found it out for himself. If it was unintelligible, it must have been a failure. So with all other attempts I have seen of the same kind; they fail from the total absence of expression in the figures that should tell the story.¹⁸

By attacking the categorization of *The Two Ways* as high art, these comments attacked Rejlander's right to use nude figures within his photograph and removed the label that would ensure their acceptability.

Marginally, *The Two Ways of Life* was accepted as an advance for photography. It continued to be exhibited throughout Rejlander's career and was well loved by many. But in the end it appears to have been too revolutionary and problematic to become truly mainstream—the sum of its benefits only slightly outweighed its dangers. Viewing the situation through Mary Douglas' theories, society was simply unwilling to redefine the boundaries of existence around Rejlander's creation. That this was the case fully emerged later. A nude entry of Rejlander's at the Dublin International Exhibition in 1865 drew the following criticism: "A photograph of a nude female is inexcusable at best; but when that figure is deformed and in a very questionable

15 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 101.

16 "The Photographic Exhibition," *Art Journal* 20 (1858): 121.

17 "Autumn: a Landscape and Figures, Photographed from nature in several negatives. By H.P. Robinson," *Photographic Journal* 8:140 (Dec 15, 1863): 427.

18 "On Photography as a Fine Art," *Photographic Journal* 8:133 (May 15 1863): 286.

attitude, regard for the feelings of the visitors to the exhibition should compel its withdrawal."¹⁹ And even those who had originally lauded *The Two Ways of Life* recanted in the following decades. Said Thomas Sutton of the Scottish Society of Photography's treatment of *The Two Ways*:

When the Council of the Society, some years ago, banished from the walls of its Exhibition a photograph entitled *The Two Ways of Life*, in which degraded females were exhibited in a state of nudity, with all the uncompromising truthfulness of photography, they did quite right, for there was neither art nor decency in such a photograph, and if I expressed a different opinion at the time, I was wrong.²⁰

And Henry Peach Robinson admitted that the use of the nude was later "ruled, and rightly, to be outside the natural limitations of the art," even if the picture was "a marvel of skill and excellence."²¹ Sadly, following its brilliant debut, the adult photographic nude in fine art photography virtually disappeared until the early 1890s.

This, however, did not stop the fine art photographic nude entirely. As Ben Maddow comments, during this period "The nudes that were actually photographed were of a curiously restricted sort—they were children."²² Despite the fact that to the modern viewer some of these photographs have, as William A. Ewing has described it, "a distinct undertow of eroticism,"²³ images of naked children were particularly popular in Victorian Britain and were considered entirely acceptable. This acceptability within an otherwise strict moral climate was due to the position which children occupied within the Victorian ideology.

The very concept of childhood having only emerged in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century was the period in which it was fully explored and developed. In contrast to the views of the late-seventeenth century philosopher John Locke, who believed that children were born with the reason of adults and should be treated rationally, eighteenth and early-nineteenth century philosophers believed childhood to be the "sleep of reason" with "its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling."²⁴ For the first time, then, a child's perspective and world were thought of as fundamentally different from that of an adult person.

19 "The Dublin Exhibition—Photographic Department (Second Notice)," *The Photographic Journal*, 10:160 (August 15, 1865): 125.

20 "Photographic Society of Scotland," *The Photographic Journal* 8 (January 15 1863): 203.

21 Robinson, "Rejlander": 107.

22 Ben Maddow, "Nude in a Social Landscape," *Nude Photographs: 1850-1980*, ed. Constance Sullivan, (New York: Harper and Row 1980): 186.

23 Ewing, *The Body*: 63.

24 Jean Jacques Rousseau, as quoted in Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. (London: Longman 1995): 63.

The main result of this re-examination of children and childhood was the triumph of what Chris Jenks calls the “Apollonian Child” over the “Dionysian Child.”²⁵ The Dionysian child—Dionysius being the prince of wine, revelry and hedonism—corresponds to the traditional Puritan belief in the sinful, fallen nature of humankind. The child viewed from this perspective was the vessel of inherent evil, and parents were thus required to suppress all natural, and therefore iniquitous, instincts. In contrast, the Apollonian—a term derived from the sun god Apollo—conception believed the child to be innately good. Having just arrived on this earth from their creator, they were assumed to be angelic, innocent, untainted by the corrupted world, and possessors of a pure, unadulterated humanity. Thus, explains Hugh Cunningham, “children were transformed from being corrupt and innately evil to being angels, messengers from God to a tired adult world.”

Because the child came to be seen as a symbol of goodness, purity and the lost innocence and individuality of the adult world, images of nude children became a sort of talisman for these virtues. Thus, while Rejlander’s *Two Ways* was being critically maligned by morally sensitive individuals, his *Non Angli, sed Angeli* (1856) (figure 16), a photograph of two children in the manner of Raphael’s cherubs became his official emblem.²⁶ The nude cherub was indeed a typical motif for photographers, some pictured with cameras as in Rejlander’s *The Infant Photography* (1856) (figure 17). The famous soft-focus pioneer Julia Margaret Cameron was also fond of including nude children in her allegorical and typological photographs, such as *Venus chiding Cupid and removing his Wings* (1872) (figure 18) or *Cupid’s Pencil of Light* (1870) (figure 19). Critics seemed to have nothing but praise for such photographs. Peter Henry Emerson said



Figure 16: Oscar Rejlander, *Non Angli, sed Angeli* (1856)



Figure 17: Oscar Rejlander, *The Infant Photography* (1856)

25 Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge 1996): 70-74.

26 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 110.

about the latter, "An interesting and beautiful study of the nude ... Altogether a most artistic picture."²⁷ And another commentator in *The Times* effused:

[Mrs Cameron] can appreciate the simple greatness of true and noble things, and, at the same time, kindle her work with her own power of artistic intuition, so that it speaks with poetic vividness all that she could make it say ... here are children and little angels that seem to have fluttered down from the kingdom of Raphael ... There are the little cherubim, seraphim, Christ heads, nestling angels, and other children's heads, which have each their special charm.²⁸

Assessment of Cameron's child nudes contained not a hint of disapproval or impropriety.

This did not mean that the child nude was fully exempt from criticism, however. The rising tide against sexual immorality in the late-1870s and 1880s made the child nude somewhat more problematic. The Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, was one individual whose nude photographs of children fell victim to the more stringent moral constraints of the period. Brassai styled Dodgson, "the most remarkable photographer of children in the nineteenth century."²⁹ This is not surprising considering Dodgson's great love for both children and art. It appears that he took up photography when the critic John Ruskin told him with characteristic bluntness that he did not possess enough talent to become a real artist or to illustrate his books. Dodgson's photographs are characterised by a clear eye for



Figure 18: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Venus chiding Cupid and removing his Wings* (1872)

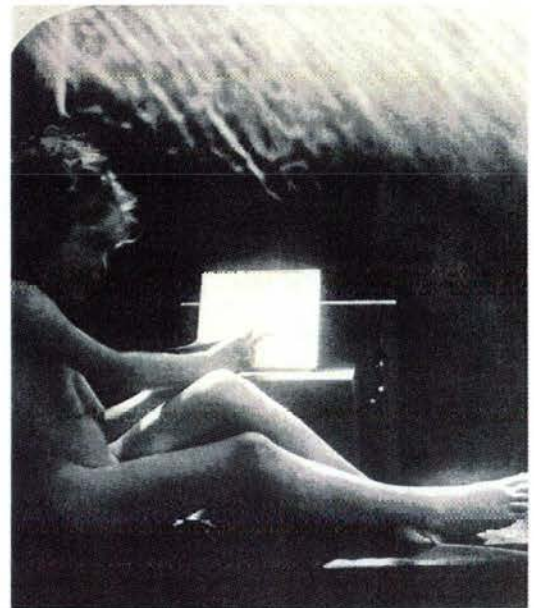


Figure 19: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Cupid's Pencil of Light* (1870)

27 P.H. Emerson, *Sun Artists* 42, as quoted in Mike Weaver, *Julia Margaret Cameron 1815-1879* (London: Herbert 1994).

28 "Photographs," *The Times*, 20 December 1873: 5.

29 Gyula H. Brassai. "Carroll The Photographer." 1975. Reprinted in *Literature and Photography: Interactions 1840-1990*. Jane M. Rabb, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1995): 51.

beauty and lighting, meticulous technique, and a true appreciation for the innocence and wonderment of childhood. Unlike most professional photographers of the day whose output was noticeably routine and sterile, Dodgson managed to turn a photographic sitting into games of make-believe and scientific experiments. Said one of his sitters, Beatrice Hatch, later in life, "He kept various costumes and 'properties' with which to dress us up, and, of course, that added to the fun. What child would not thoroughly enjoy impersonating a Japanese, or a beggar-child, or a gipsy [sic], or an Indian?"³⁰ Although Dodgson was not a working photographer as such, his ease with children and excellence of technique induced many a mother to bring their children to his rooms in Christ Church College, Oxford to sit. One particularly fine example of such works is *Xie Kitchin as Penelope Boothby* (1876) (figure 20).

Dodgson's photographs of children, or more precisely girls, in the nude were a comparatively small portion of his output. However, it was the social criticism of these photographs, such as the hand-tinted *Evelyn Hatch reclining* (1879) (figure 21), that prompted the reduction and eventual cessation of his photographic activities.³¹ Although, as Roger Taylor explains, "[Dodgson's] aspiration was to create a nude study that would be regarded as a work of art and not be out of place in the drawing room of the most respectable home,"³² and despite the precautions he took to ensure confidentiality and propriety, his photographs were not above reproach because of the highly personal nature of his relationships with the young girls whose photographs he took and the older ages which certain of them had reached. From both his own accounts and that of others, we know that Dodgson was a dedicated adherent to the Apollonian view of children and their ameliorating function. He declared that



Figure 20: Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, *Xie Kitchin as Penelope Boothby* (1876)

30 As quoted in Morton N. Cohen, "Lewis Carroll: Pioneer Photographer," *Reflections in a Looking Glass: A Centennial Celebration of Lewis Carroll, Photographer* (New York: Aperture 1998): 7.

31 Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: Macmillan 1995): 171.

32 Roger Taylor, "'All in the Golden Afternoon': The photographs of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson," *Lewis Carroll: Photographer* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002): 108.

children were “three-fourths of my life,” and added that “Next to conversing with an angel ... comes, I think, the privilege of having a real child’s thoughts uttered to one.”³³ Throughout his life he cultivated close friendships with young girls, writing them letters, creating games and books for them, and taking their photographs. Remembering that one of the chief concerns of employing nude models in the Victorian period was that an illicit relationship would develop or indeed had developed between the artist and his model, such a close relationship between Dodgson and his young sitters could be construed as suggestive. Furthermore, there appeared to be conflict between Carroll’s concept of a child and that of parents or outside observers. Carroll proclaimed that he believed the ideal age of a child to be 12,³⁴ however, for most of his photographic career this was a marriageable age for girls. Thus, Margaret Mayhew remembered:

My mother raised no objection to my younger sister, aged about six or seven, being photographed in the nude, or in very scanty clothing ... but when permission was asked to photograph her elder sister, who was probably then about eleven, in a similar state, my mother’s strict sense of Victorian propriety was shocked, and she refused the request. Mr. Dodgson was offended, and the friendship ceased forthwith.³⁵



Figure 21: Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, *Evelyn Hatch reclining* (1876)

33 Cohen, *Lewis Carroll*: 78.

34 Miss E. L. Shute, “Lewis Carroll as Artist” in *Cornhill Magazine* (November 1932). Reprinted in *Lewis Carroll, Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Morton N. Cohen. (London: Macmillan, 1989): 57.

35 Cohen, *Lewis Carroll*: 170.

This and similar incidents created much gossip within Oxford society. Says Roger Taylor, “By [July 1880], rumours were freely circulating among university wives about Dodgson’s photographic activities in the rooftop studio. These, they felt, lay beyond the bounds of propriety.”³⁶ Not long after, Dodgson took his very last photograph.

Perhaps because Dodgson did not exhibit and therefore was not truly established as a practising fine art photographer, and partly because moral strictures regarding relationships between members of the opposite sex were becoming tighter, the artistic merit of his photographic nudes did not outweigh their perceived dangers. Much has been made of the strong erotic overtones of Dodgson’s nudes, such as Evelyn Hatch’s rather explicit pose. However, as these photographs were shown only to the families of the sitters, such iconographical concerns could not have contributed to their controversy. It was, rather, the perceived intimacy of the relationship between Dodgson and his young sitters of the opposite sex that tipped the scales.

This was far from the fate of all photographic child-nudes, however. Frank Meadow Sutcliffe’s *The Water Rats* (1886) (figure 22) was such a success that not only did the Prince of



Figure 22: Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, *The Water Rats* (1886)

36 Taylor, “Golden Afternoon”: 108.

Wales (later Edward VII) have it enlarged to be hung in Marlborough House,³⁷ but seven years later the first issue of *The Studio* was to comment "In certain instances, notably a group by Mr. Frank Sutcliffe, which, under the title of 'Water Rats', is too widely known to make it necessary to be reproduced here, one doubts if the most careful study of composition, or the most happy invention, had resulted in a more delightful picture."³⁸ Sutcliffe was a professional portrait photographer in Yorkshire whose realistic exhibition photographs of life in and around Whitby gained him renown.³⁹ Unlike H. P. Robinson, who would use middle-class acquaintances as his models for his "peasant" pictures, Sutcliffe "thought that it was better to risk a little awkwardness on the part of figures chosen on the spot."⁴⁰ The photograph shows a group of naked boys he had happened upon one hot summer morning playing in the water with a boat and an old box.

Sutcliffe's nude boys were not entirely unproblematic. He later joked that the clergy "excommunicated" him "for exhibiting such an indecent print in his shopwindow to the corruption of the young of the other sex."⁴¹ He also remembered that when he sent the print to Mr. Lever, the soap manufacturer in Port Sunlight, "in the hope that he would buy it and use it as a picture of the rising generation, 'whose only soap was sunlight,'" the print was politely declined on the basis that it was not suitable for reproduction.⁴² But despite such small objections, *The Water Rats* was very well received when it was exhibited at the Photographic Society in 1887 and the Camera Club in 1888. Noted the *British Journal of Photography*,

A medal has been awarded this single picture, but it contains within itself artistic perception of the highest order ... There is a wonderful sharpness about the focus of the boys, which suggests that the camera was kept waiting whilst the group assumed that phase which the artist felt to be right. Altogether the picture, though, is well deserving of the honour conferred upon it.⁴³

And *The Times* argued, "The series of studies for which a medal has been given to Mr. Sutcliffe includes some of the best work in the gallery."⁴⁴ Nowhere do the reviews of *The Water Rats* comment upon the propriety, or lack thereof, of showing the nude figure.

37 Michael Hiley, *Frank Sutcliffe: Photographer of Whitby*, (London: Gordon Fraser 1974): 69.

38 "The Nude in Photography: With some Studies Taken in the Open Air," *The Studio* I (1893): 104.

39 Sutcliffe often expressed a desire to quit the commercial business and focus upon his art, but financial necessity never allowed this. Hiley, *Sutcliffe*: 41.

40 Hiley, *Sutcliffe*: 66.

41 Hiley, *Sutcliffe*: 70.

42 Hiley, *Sutcliffe*: 69.

43 No author given, *British Journal of Photography*, 22 October 1887: 665.

44 "The Photographic Society's Exhibition," *The Times*, 4 October 1887: 12.

Why should a photograph of nude boys, a modern and realistic representation containing some children of the age that implicated C.L. Dodgson, be considered an acceptable production in the moral furor of the 1880s? There are several possible reasons for this. First, there is the fact that the children portrayed, unlike Dodgson's girls, were of the same sex as the photographer and had no relationship with him. As homosexual paedophilia was not a widely recognised concept at this time, it would be assumed that there was no possibility of an inappropriate relationship between the sitter and the artist. Notice that the local clergy's concerns were for the purity of young girls who might see the print and not perverted men. Secondly, the subject of bathers would have been identified with the concurrent movement towards hygiene and clean water supplies. Furthermore, says Alison Smith,

The physical and moral benefits of bathing were popularised in Charles Kingsley's novel *The Water-Babies* of 1863, a cautionary tale in which water acts as a metaphor for moral cleanliness and the simple innocence of childhood. The book influenced Frederick Walker's painting *Bathers* of 1867, which, despite initial criticisms of its 'coarseness' and 'vulgarity', later came to epitomise one strain of Englishness among nude subjects on account of its nostalgic evocation of boyhood liberty and camaraderie.⁴⁵

This strain was firmly established in the 1880s when *The Water Rats* was taken. Compare, for example, William Stott's *A Summer's Day* of the same year (figure 23). Whilst Stott's painting

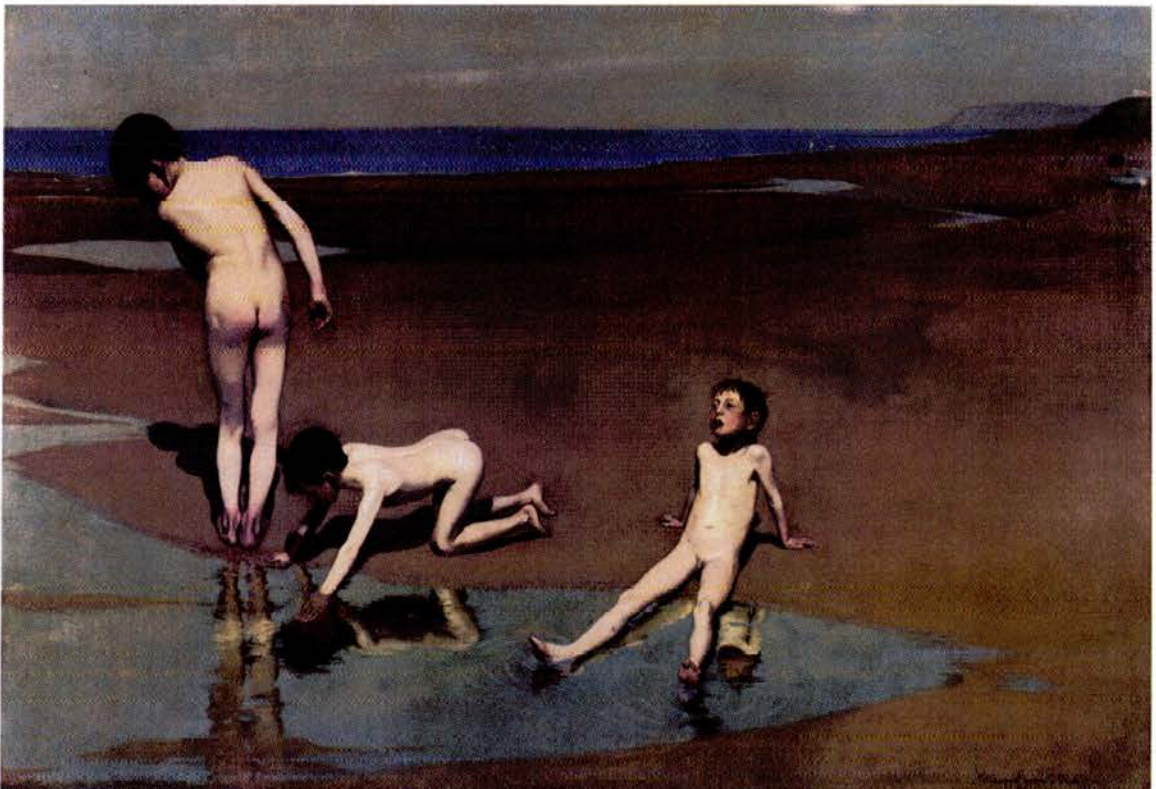


Figure 23: William Stott, *A Summer's Day* (1886)

45 Smith, "Nude in Nineteenth Century Britain": 14.

was criticised for its flat expanses of colour and hard lines, Robert Upstone comments that both it and *The Water Rats* were “trying to suggest the pleasures of an open air, healthy experience.”⁴⁶ This may, coincidentally, be the reason why, despite the annoyance of certain individuals in Whitby attempting to sell the town as a tourist destination, the frequent boy bathers were not impeded.⁴⁷

The Water Rats paved the way for other photographs of bathing boys such as Peter Henry Emerson’s *Water-Babies* (1887) (figure 24), and ensured the continued success of such subjects and the survival of the photographic nude. It was not until seven years later, however, that the adult nude in fine art photography made its return. This comeback occurred not via a native Briton but rather through the exhibition of photographs by an aristocratic German. Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden was born in Mecklenberg in East Prussia in 1856, but is associated with Taormina in Sicily, where he lived and worked until his death in 1931. Another artist who abandoned painting for photography, von Gloeden was entranced by the homoerotic potential of the classical male nude and began photographing from Sicilian models in the early 1890s. In 1893, a series of these photographs was exhibited at the Photographic Society’s annual exhibition, and, as *The Times* commented, “it is not too much to say that such a series is now for the first time placed before the public at a photographic exhibition.”⁴⁸ Perhaps the author of this statement had forgotten Rejlander and his nudes, but it shows exactly how long it had been since an adult photographic nude had graced the walls of the artistic establishment. Reviewers were unanimous that Gloeden’s “nude subjects are excellent material for artistic painters,”⁴⁹ but were at this stage unwilling to attribute to them artistic status in their own right, saying “Whether they may be held to be pictures in

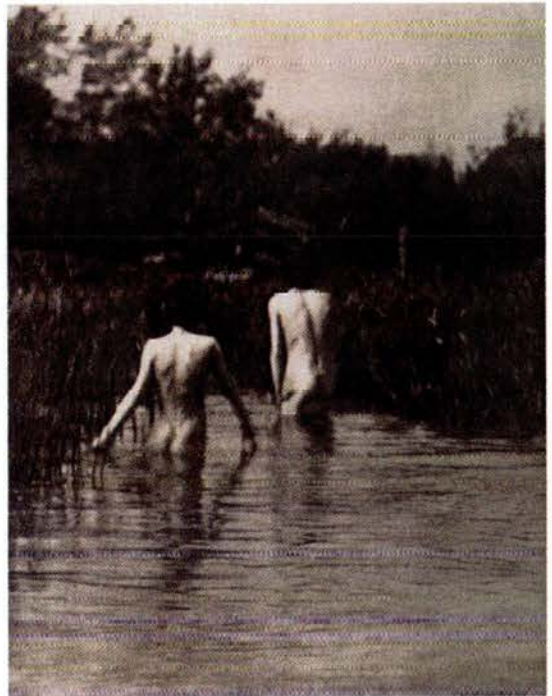


Figure 24: Peter Henry Emerson, *Water-Babies* (1887)

46 Robert Upstone, catalogue entry for William Stott, *A Summer's Day, Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. Alison Smith, (London: Tate 2001): 272.

47 See a letter to the *Whitby Times* signed 'Nuda Veritas,' reprinted in Hiley, *Sutcliffe*: 70-71.

48 "The Photographic Society's Exhibition," *The Times*, 25 September 1893: 2.

49 "The "Photographic Salon" at the Dudley Gallery," *The Times*, 7 October 1893: 7.

themselves is a question upon which opinions may legitimately differ."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, reviews were positive and did not question the photographs' decency, and the very fact that the series was accepted at the exhibition at all shows that the sum of their characteristics categorised them as conducive to society.

What caused this sudden re-emergence of the adult photographic nude? The answer lies both in the qualities of the photographs themselves as well as in the development of photography in the 1890s. Looking at two of von Gloeden's untitled nudes from 1890 (figures 25, 26), two aspects are immediately apparent. The first is that they are restricted to the idealisation of the *male* nude body, and the second is that they are presented in an overtly classical guise. Both characteristics would have helped von Gloeden's photographs overcome the theoretical dangers of nude photography. Said Alison Smith, "the widely held assumption [was] that, while the female nude could be appreciated purely in terms of style, the male nude required mental and physical characterisation."⁵¹ This concept placed the male nude on an intellectual plane above the pure emotional and erotic perception of the female. This was what Michael Anton Budd refers to as the "morally infused rhetoric of a male/female, heroic/erotic hierarchy."⁵² Because of this, despite their obvious homoerotic interest, male nudes were seen as much less titillating and without as much prurient appeal. Additionally, as in painting, the classicising nature of the photographs would have helped establish their relationship with the 'pure,' intellectual, classical gaze. Note the classical vases and discarded toga in figure 25, and the 'classical' (ie, Mediterranean) features of the subjects as well as the overriding theme of 'platonic' love within both. Such characteristics would tend to set the photographs apart from vulgar 'modern' nudes available in seedy shops.

Furthermore, the nature of photography at this time was changing. 'Art photographers' had become self-aware and were asserting their identities and legitimacy through new agencies and a new aesthetic to match. Believing that the Photographic Society was fundamentally biased against photography as fine art, cohorts of artistic photographers formed the rival Camera Club of London in 1885 and The Linked Ring in 1892, organisations devoted to creating

50 "The Photographic Society's Exhibition," *The Times*, 25 September 1893: 2.

51 Smith, *Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 177.

52 Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politic in the Age of Empire* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press 1997): 79.



Figure 25: Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled* (1890)

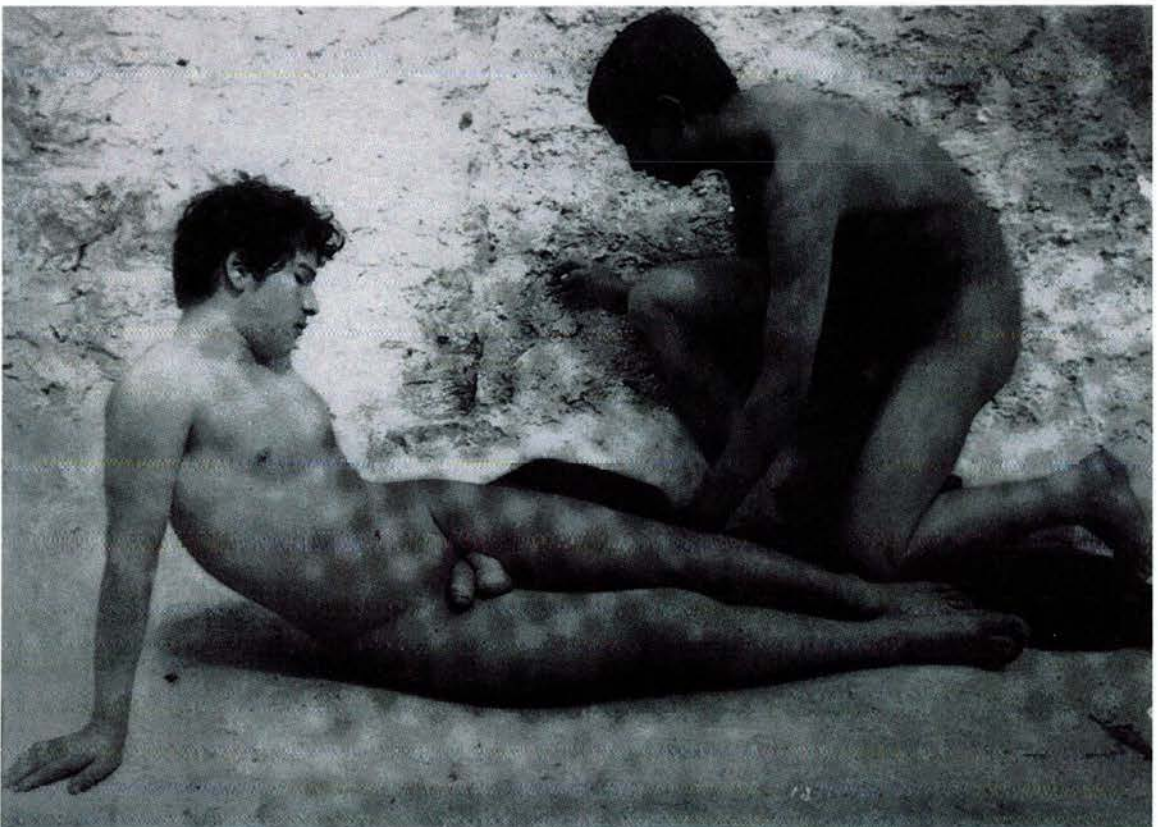


Figure 26: Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled* (1890)

excellent pictures rather than to the scientific advancement of photography.⁵³ The Camera Club began holding exhibitions in 1888 and in 1893 initiated an annual “Photographic Salon,” an exhibition designed to showcase the best photographic art of the year. For the first time photography was accepted outright as art by the majority of the public. Meanwhile, these art photographers were cultivating a new photographic style that encouraged the intervention of the hand of the photographer through direct manipulation of the negative and a painterly soft focus. Practitioners like Henry Van der Weyde “deprecat[ed] the tendency that existed to believe that photography could not lie,” and invented devices such as his “photo corrector” to manipulate the photograph’s optical registry.⁵⁴ Such devices enabled the idealisation whose previous lack partially prevented photography’s ascension to the realms of art. Photographs like George Davison’s *The Onion Field* (1889) (figure 27) provoked reviewers to assert that “the photographer has come within such measurable distance of the same goal [as traditional artists] that ‘How like a drawing’ is the exclamation which must inevitably fall from the lips not only of the untrained spectator.”⁵⁵ Unlike the period of Rejlander’s early high art works, at the time when von Gloeden’s nude series was exhibited, photography’s status as art was firmly entrenched, enabling their beneficial value to be accordingly judged much higher.

The acceptance of Von Gloeden’s photographs opened the field to nudes that formerly would probably not have been possible. Von Gloeden was followed closely by his cousin Guglielmo (Wilhelm von) Plüschow and the Italian Vincenzo Galdi in production of classically posed Italian nudes, but in some cases took they things a bit further. Plüschow’s untitled nude pair of 1895 (figure 28), for example, shows the previously unimaginable interaction of a male and a female nude. Indeed, it appears that the nude’s absence from photography was so keenly felt that in 1895 a flood of them were presented at the Photographic Salon:

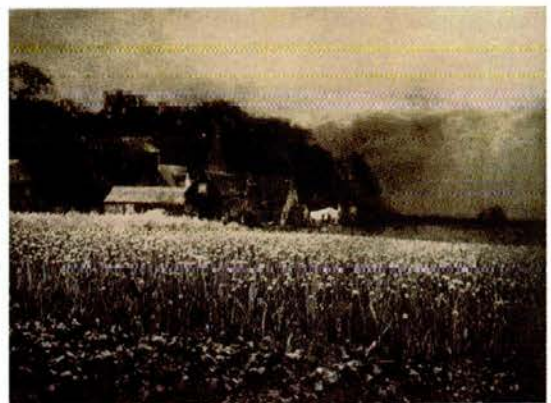


Figure 27: George Davison, *The Onion Field* (1889)

53 Margaret Harker, *The Linked Ring: the Secession Movement in Photography in Britain 1892-1910* (London: Heinemann 1979): 64. The formation of the Linked Ring followed a particularly acrimonious incident during the hanging of the 1891 Photographic Society Exhibition in which Robinson and Davison, among others, resigned from the Society.

54 “The Camera Club,” *The Times*, 17 April 1893: 4.

55 “Photographic Salon,” *The Times*, 23 September 1899: 12.

A very important feature of this year's salon is the boldness with which the photographer has attacked the subject of the nude and semi-draped. This has always been, of course, a question of great difficulty in photography. There is no real reason, perhaps, but the fact remains that the nude figure from life is apt to be more unpleasantly suggestive and objectionable than the painter's treatment of it.⁵⁶

Such a statement indicates a measure of doubt regarding photography's ability to idealise the figure. Despite this, the author maintained that "There are at least ten examples in this exhibition, and it may fairly be said that they are in no case offensive."⁵⁷ The nude in photographic fine art had at last won acceptance as a legitimate and decent subject.

Acceptance of the fine art photographic nude was therefore generally predicated upon two aspects: firstly, the level of acknowledgement of photography as a fine art; and secondly, the nature of the sitter and his or her interactions with the photographer, viewer or other



Figure 28: Guglielmo (Wilhelm von) Plüschow, *Untitled* (1895)

56 "The Photographic Salon," *The Times*, 26 September 1895: 4.

57 *Ibid.*, 4. The article mentions nudes by A.B. Langfeld and H. A. Collins in particular, but nothing is known about either photographer and their photographs are untraced.

individuals within the photograph. These two measurements taken together provide a general barometer of the fine art photographic nude's tolerance. However, while this equation was relatively simple, the process of distinguishing the propriety of other photographic nudes identifying themselves under the label of "art" was not nearly as easy.

Academies

From the very beginning of photography, artists in traditional media were quick to appreciate the value of the photographic nude. Nude photographs afforded higher efficiency and economy in anatomy and drawing from the figure, the conventional staples of artistic study. Not only could a photograph capture figures in mid-motion or off-balance, something that even the most talented model could not achieve, but a photographic model never moved nor grew tired. Moreover, photographic models were cheaper than the real thing as they could be reproduced and thus shared amongst many different artists. Particularly amongst French academic painters, such as Ingres, Courbet, and Delacroix, these "academies" were highly popular. Delacroix, for one, effused that he learned from photographs "far more than the inventions of any scribbler could teach me."⁵⁸ Some artists took up the "black art" themselves, but more commonly they either commissioned figure studies from an experienced photographer or purchased them ready-made.

The production and use of such academies was dangerous in Victorian Britain, however. Unlike photographic nudes that were judged art in their own right, artist's aids were generally not exhibited and could not enjoy the protection of the contemplative atmosphere of the exhibition hall and the legitimising gaze of the artistic authorities. Moreover, because of the commercial and mass characteristics of such photographs, they fell under the jurisdiction of the Obscene Publications Act. While, as we have seen, this law was not intended to hinder publications that were art or contributed to its progress, there was no true way of delineating the intentions of photographer or the purchaser. Indeed, as one photographer in 1870 lamented, "It is certain that it is a dangerous thing for photographers to dabble in the production and sale of studies from the nude, even for legitimate art purposes, because very innocent studies of the naked human form may appear to prurient minds very naughty indeed."⁵⁹ Certainly 'art study'

⁵⁸ Goldsmith, *Nude in Photography*: 48.

⁵⁹ "Echoes of the Month," *Photo News*, 14 (Oct 14 1870): 483.

became a banner under which to hide all manner of titillating imagery, and thus some remained dubious that the true artist's aid even existed. Said the painter Walter Sickert in 1910, "Does not every petty dealer convicted of the sale of photographs of the naked put up a plea that they are necessary for the use of artists? Has anyone ever heard of an artist who had the slightest use for such things?"⁶⁰ As there are many recorded instances of British artists who did use academies for their work, Sickert exaggerated, but the eternal question of where to draw the line on commercially available nude studies was a continual concern within Victorian Britain.

From examination of arrest and trial notices in newspapers such as *The Times* as well as from information about known practitioners of academies, it is clear that nude artist's studies, according to their highly ambiguous nature, were an area treated with extreme care. Because of the dangerous connotations of commercial profit from such photographs, in nearly all cases, academies were only accepted, and indeed, only legal, when the artistic intention of either the photographer or the purchaser could be expressly proven or when it was established that the photograph was not taken for mass purposes. In all other cases, they were deemed obscene, and therefore illegal.

Artistic intent was easy to establish when either the photographer or owner (or both) were recognised artists. Many exhibiting photographers were known to have dabbled in this area. Rejlander, one may recall, was originally fascinated by photography as a means to improve the proportions and realism of painting. Upon first seeing photographs of classical sculpture in Rome, he bought them, "delighted to have a fair chance of measuring the relative proportions of the antique on the flat and true copies of the original."⁶¹ This was an interest he was to maintain throughout his career through his nude studies. One category of such studies were reproductions of poses in Old Master works (of which his *Non Angli, sed Angeli* is one), taken to verify their accuracy. A study from the nude based upon Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, for example, proved that no figure could achieve Venus's convoluted pose.⁶² Another category focused upon collecting "details and exquisite tit-bits [*sic*] of beauties of all sorts and proportions," intended to fill the gap in artists' study from nature.⁶³ These endeavours resulted in such photographs as

60 As quoted in Alison Smith, A 'valuable adjunct': The role of photography in the art of Linley Sambourne, *Public Artist Private Passions: The World of Edward Linley Sambourne*, ed Robin Simon, (London: The British Art Journal 2001): 12.

61 Rejlander, "Apology": 88.

62 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 111.

63 O.G. Rejlander, "Something for Photography to Undertake," *Yearbook* (1870), 46, as quoted in Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 60.

Too Late (1856) (figure 29) and a now untraced study of two wrestlers. While Rejlander typically did not exhibit his nude studies (as opposed to full compositions), they presumably circulated in albums and portfolios.⁶⁴ His wrestlers, however, garnered high praise from those who saw them. The *Athenaeum* termed them “admirable,”⁶⁵ and A. H. Wall enthused, “An artistic student of anatomy ... would certainly derive far more good from a study like this than he could obtain in painting from living models.”⁶⁶ Certainly, we know that artists like Cecil Lawson, RA, did in fact use Rejlander’s photographic nude studies in their own work. Rejlander’s nude studies appear to have been tolerated because of his artistic status and their proven usefulness to other ‘real’ artists.

This also seems to have been the case with Roger Fenton’s *Draped Nude* (c. 1850s) (figure 30) and John Watson’s *Academic Study* (1855) (figure 31). Roger Fenton’s photographic fame would certainly have legitimised his use of the nude. Not much is known about John Watson, other than that he appears to have been a well-established photographer who suddenly lost his sight,⁶⁷ however Delacroix owned several of his studies. Here again, proof of artistic intent on either side justified the nude’s use and its legality.



Figure 29: Oscar Rejlander,
Too Late (1856)



Figure 30: Roger Fenton,
Draped Nude (c. 1850s)

64 Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 125.

65 “Fine Art Gossip,” *The Athenaeum* 1733 (January 12 1861): 55.

66 A. H. Wall, “An Hour with Rejlander,” *Photo News* 4 (November 2 1860): 302.

67 *The Times* describes a benefit concert held for Watson after his loss of sight to help support his family because he could no longer work. “Photography,” 27 April 1863: 6.

One British artist who produced his own nude studies was the *Punch* cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne. Sambourne's artistic training, unlike some of his more renowned colleagues, was largely through his apprenticeship in the drawing office of a steam engine manufacturer rather than the hallowed halls of the Royal Academy. Required to quickly compose cartoons featuring the human figure, he thus keenly felt his lack of formal artistic education. As such, Sambourne turned to photography, as Alison Smith says, regarding "the camera as 'a valuable adjunct' to art, enabling him to work efficiently and methodically under pressure which allow[ed] for inventive accurate composition."⁶⁸ He began taking photographs from the nude in the early 1880s for his own artistic uses and eventually attained a collection of an estimated 10,000-30,000 purchased and personally created photographs of the nude.⁶⁹ Sambourne's cyanotype of Etty Pettigrew in a nude diving pose (1891) (figure 32) and its related cartoon *The Bath Club, Dover Street* (1895) (figure 33) show how such photographs were translated into viable artistic products. The original photograph was perhaps inspired by a photographic reproduction of Tabacchi's *The Bather* (c. 1890) (figure 34), also in Sambourne's collection.

Not all of Sambourne's photographic nudes were intended for artistic study or were as innocuous as his bather, however. Many of his nude studies varied little from the standard erotic

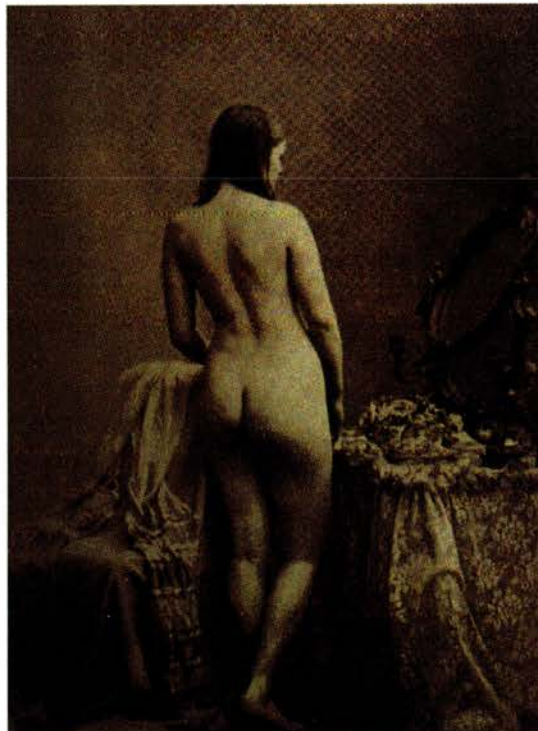


Figure 31: John Watson, *Academic Study* (1855)

68 Smith, "Valuable Adjunct": 13.

69 Smith, "Valuable Adjunct": 12.



Figure 33: Edward Linley Sambourne,
The Bath Club, Dover Street (1895)



Figure 32: Edward Linley Sambourne,
Untitled (Etty Pettigrew Diving) (1891)



Figure 34: Photograph of Odoardo Tabacchi,
The Bather (c. 1890)

'academies' sold discreetly under the counter and some are utterly pornographic. Sambourne's *Maude Easton in 'Folly dress' and mask* (1891) (figure 35) could not be described as an artist's study in any estimation and seems to exist wholly for the purposes of Sambourne's private titillation. Martin Postle notes that the "most sexually explicit of Sambourne's photographs tend to be based upon particular models,"⁷⁰ possibly indicating the sorts of illicit relationships that so distressed Victorian moralists. Nevertheless, Sambourne's studies were never ethically called into question despite his complete openness about them. In fact, says Smith, "his candidness ...



Figure 35: Edward Linley Sambourne, *Maude Easton in 'Folly dress' and mask* (1891)

70 Martin Postle, "Hidden Lives: Linley Sambourne and the female model," *Public Artist Private Passions: The World of Edward Linley Sambourne*, ed. Robin Simon (London: The British Art Journal, 2001): 25.

would only have reinforced perceptions that his was a worthy endeavour."⁷¹ Again, establishing the artistic intention of the photographer or the consumer of photographic nude studies, even if this artistic intention only applied to certain of the photographs, legitimised and legalised their use.

This concept held up in court. In one case, charges of procuring and selling obscene photographs against a Stanislaus Gorsky were dropped because he was a professional and distinguished professor in black and white design. The presiding judge proclaimed that he "saw no reason whatever to doubt that the album of photographs was used by him if not exclusively, certainly primarily, for the objects of his art, and used quite legitimately."⁷² In the realm of photographic nude studies it appears that one had to be an established artist before one could safely use them to advance one's art, a frustrating Catch-22 for aspiring artists.

Indeed, those who were not artistically recognised were forced to use other tactics to prove the artistic merit of nude academies. One strategy was to prove that the allegedly indecent photographs were not of commercial, and thus mass, value. As was discussed in the last chapter, the commercial aspect of photography removes it from the contemplative and disinterested gaze of high art through allying it with the vulgarities of money-making and visceral gratification. Certainly during the rise of the Aesthetic movement, philosophers such as Colvin argued that a work's unsaleability increased its aesthetic value—removing the aspect of monetary worth from a work encouraged its evaluation solely based upon the higher faculties of man.⁷³ Commerciality also opened photography to a mass market whose popular emphasis directs power away from the "legitimate" dominant classes. Thus, Sydney Powell, charged with selling obscene photographic slides, was allowed to claim back two erotic oil paintings that were also seized because they were unique and therefore not obscene under Lord Campbell's Act. Said the judge "They were valuable only for their artistic merit," even if they "had somewhat of a lewd tendency."⁷⁴ Henri Wirth, meanwhile, argued that he did not sell nude studies, but only "kept the negatives for his own gratification. He presumed he had a right to keep such things."⁷⁵ Under the Obscenities Act, he was right. Still others, such as Charles Bossoli, asserted that he was innocent because he didn't "traffic in [nude studies] for a living."⁷⁶

71 Smith, "Valuable Adjunct": 13.

72 "Police," *The Times*, 2 January 1900: 13.

73 Smith, *Sexuality, Morality and Art*: 144.

74 "Police," *The Times*, 17 May 1869: 11.

75 "Police," *The Times*, 31 December 1875: 11.

76 "Police," *The Times*, 18 April 1871: 11.

When negating the commercial viability of such studies was impracticable, defendants concentrated upon proving the artistic intent of the purchaser or the photographer. One way of accomplishing this was to argue that the character of the individual was above a base interest in the nude. An Alfred Paul de Witt, a professional photographer, therefore argued that, out of twelve supposedly indecent images, he had taken "eight negatives for a gentleman, and the six copies were made for him also. Four negatives, he said, he had taken as works of art, and should, after a time, destroy them."⁷⁷ The gentleman's name, shown to the judge but not named publicly in court, and the professionalism of the photographer were apparently enough to ensure acquittal. Yet it was obvious that this tactic necessitated consistent evidence as to the individual's intent. One defendant's argument that his photographs were inoffensive art studies failed when several other, more explicit, photographs sent from him were stopped by the Post Office.⁷⁸ Thus, judgement as to nude studies' legality tended not to be based upon the actual iconographical content of the photographs, but rather the circumstances surrounding their existence.

Even when such studies were executed in the sort of classicising tone that might have legitimised them in traditional media or in exhibited photographs, they were still suspect without concrete evidence of artistic usage. The lawyer for two men named Edmaun and M'Intosh⁷⁹ urged that, although the figures were nude, they were classic in character and not of that class known as indecent or improper. The learned counsel proceeded to allude to various works of art exposed in public galleries which "must be considered indecent or improper if the pictures in this case were."⁸⁰ Yet despite the fact that the judge in the case found that only several of the 900 photographs seized were of ambiguous nature, he ruled against them, explaining that, "there was no reason shown that it was for the advancement of art, but it was evident that they were sold for profit."⁸¹ Here again, nude photographs for whom the sum of their aspects did not register on the beneficent side—in this case, not enough artistic merit was shown to outweigh their commerciality—were unacceptable. Moreover, studies that were executed by renowned photographic artists but which found their way into the commercial stream were also unacceptable. Within the 850 nude photographic studies seized from Henry

77 "Police," *The Times*, 23 October 1879: 12.

78 "Police," *The Times*, 13 September 1885: 3.

79 A nineteenth-century spelling of McIntosh.

80 "Police," *The Times*, 14 June 1886: 3.

81 "Police," *The Times*, 5 July 1886: 4.

Evans in 1870 were "a great many ... fine artistic studies by Rejlander."⁸² Despite this, and the observations of more than one individual that most of the photos were more art than obscene,⁸³ Evans was still proven guilty "in the usual way," and sentenced to two years of hard labour.⁸⁴ Again, the evidence that Evans was selling the photographs for a strictly artistic purpose was insufficient.

Several individuals showed reason that their photographs were for the advancement of art by having an established artist testify as to their aesthetic worth. The sculptor Charles Bennet Lawes testified in this manner for Charles Hirsch. He explained that "artists were in the habit of keeping such photographs by them for professional purposes," and "did not regard such photographs as being indecent or obscene."⁸⁵ He was careful to note, however, that he "did not think such photographs should be exposed openly for sale in shop windows."⁸⁶ By emphasising the photographs' artistic merit and downplaying their commercial/mass aspects, Lawes was able to tip the balance in their favour.

One indication that it was of the utmost importance to establish the artistic legitimacy of nude photographic studies was a proposition to set up an officiating body for such photographs related in a letter to *The Times*:

Our subject in addressing you is to say that 600 studies of the nude are issued with the sanction of the Royal Academies of Paris and Vienna, on the very proper condition, as Mr. Mansfield, the magistrate remarks, that they are not exhibited in a shop window, and that a committee is in course of formation to try the legality of the sale of these photographs in England, Mr. Henry G. Bohn, the well-known ex-publisher and fine art collector, being chairman. We are, Sir, your obedient servants,—MUNTON and MORRIS, solicitors to the committee.⁸⁷

Again, the emphasis of the proposed action was to settle beyond a doubt the artistic intention of appropriate photographic nude studies and to mitigate their commercial and popular aspects. Unfortunately, there was no further mention of this idea.

Thus, no matter how it was accomplished, the crucial element in establishing the legitimacy of the nude photographic study was establishing the legitimate circumstances of its

82 "Prosecutions of Photographers," *Photo News* 14 (October 21, 1870): 493.

83 See "Correspondence," *Photo News* 14 (March 18 1870): 130.

84 "Criminal Trials," *The Times*, 17 March 1870: 11.

85 "Police," *The Times*, 27 January 1899: 12.

86 *Ibid.*: 12.

87 "Photographic Art Studies," letter to *The Times*, 11 January 1882: 5.

creation and use with enough strength to counteract their dangerous commerciality. What was clear was that the mere designation of such photographs as 'artists' studies,' as many of the accused did, was not enough to make them legal. Said one prosecutor, "an impression prevailed among persons who trafficked [*sic*] in this kind of publication that by calling the pictures 'artists' studies' they were not liable to prosecution, and the society [for the Suppression of Vice] were very desirous that this delusion should be dispelled."⁸⁸ Indeed, although the reported prosecutions for the sale of artists' studies waned as the century drew to a close as did the amount of coverage spent upon those that were, perhaps indicating a more tolerant approach to the genre, it did not cease. Even as von Gloeden's nude series was gaining acceptance in the exhibition halls, suppliers of academies were still being prosecuted. Try as they might, the photographic nude was still within the intersection of two taboos.

Photographic Reproductions

A further indication that this was the case was the treatment of photographic reproductions of nudes in traditional media. Conventionally, the ability to reproduce, and thus disseminate, art to the populace was thought to be one of the most beneficial aspects of photography, "giving pleasure and culture to thousands of persons."⁸⁹ However, because of the ambiguous character of even the traditional nude, its photographic reproduction was almost completely restricted. Once again, establishing the legitimacy and legality of the artistic photographic nude depended upon restricting the purposes to which it was used to those which were beyond all doubt artistic. Unlike artists' studies that could conceivably be used to create new art, and thus promote its advance, photographic reproductions of the already controversial nude did not outweigh their possible costs to the health of the nation. Therefore, only very specific conditions enabled the reproductive photographic nude to be justified.

Photographic reproductions of the Parthenon and the Elgin Marbles were acceptable and even specifically described as "legitimate,"⁹⁰ as were reproductions of drawings by Raphael of nude figures.⁹¹ These presumably were important enough artistic milestones that even the

88 "Middlesex Sessions," *The Times*, 6 June 1868: 11.

89 "Photographic Reproductions of Paintings," *The Photographic Journal* 11:168 (April 16, 1866): 24.

90 "Exhibition of the Photographic Society," *The Times*, 19 January 1861: 7.

91 "Photography at South Kensington. Cheap Art," *The Athenaeum*, reprinted in *The Photographic Journal* 7:105 (October 15, 1860): 6.

fact of their nakedness could not disrupt their aesthetic intention. Even photographs made from paintings by Albert Moore and Alma-Tadema were allowed, as long as they were exhibited.⁹² The act of their exhibition, as always, ensured the proper disinterested gaze. And one final category which appears to have escaped comment were promotional photographs of new works, sent to artistic authorities. These, such as photographs of a Mr. Mozier's classicising sculpture sent to and mentioned by *The Athenaeum*,⁹³ were again legitimated by the obviously artistic character of both the sender and the recipient.

All other photographic reproductions of the nude in art fell directly under the jurisdiction of the Obscene Publications Act. The common decision handed down by the courts in these matters was that it was the transformation of works of art into mass media that made them indecent. One interesting example was that of Morris Goldberg and Maurice and Abraham Cohen, charged with, and convicted for, exposing indecent photographs for sale in Lambeth. Mr. Benson, the presiding judge, acknowledged that some of the said photographs were "related to works of a celebrated French artist, but, being copied and exposed for sale in the street, they became indecent."⁹⁴ Even more remarkable was that the defendants had actually checked with a different magistrate, Mr. Bushby, as to the legality of the photographs before they had put them out for sale, and had been assured of their propriety. This indicates that there did exist some ambiguousness about the legitimacy of such productions at this time, but, tellingly, Mr. Bushby neglected to intervene on the defendants' behalf, saying that "he felt that he ought not to interfere in the matter."⁹⁵ Obviously, his belief in the respectability of such photographs was not strong enough to risk censure by his colleagues.

In other cases, such as that of Charles Caslake, the judge specifically cited the inability to control the atmosphere in which photographic reproductions were viewed. "In the Dresden and other galleries," said Mr. Vaughn, "there might be a Guido, Titian, or Correggio that might possibly be thought indecent, but there it was surrounded by other pictures of an ennobling tendency."⁹⁶ It also seems that a knowledge that photographic reproductions of the nude might be made available to uneducated and inartistic minds—a dangerous situation—was enough to eliminate the possibility of good artistic intentions on the part of the seller. Said one prosecutor

92 "Photography," *The Times*, 4 October 1875: 4.

93 "Fine-Art Gossip," *The Athenaeum* 2019 (7 July 1866): 23.

94 "Police," *The Times*, 24 August, 1875: 11.

95 "Police," *The Times*, 28 August 1875: 9.

96 "Police," *The Times*, 26 January 1882: 4.

during sentencing, "The prisoner was the source of supply [to a costermonger], and he was quite unable, knowing how barrows containing these photographs infested the metropolis, to recommend the learned Chairman take any lenient course with the prisoner."⁹⁷ The dangers of the photographic media combined with the artistic nude, without being mediated by a beneficial artistic use, added up to an overall detriment to society. Interestingly, this aspect began to wane during the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1894, a man accused of selling lewd photographs was discharged on the basis that "there was nothing indecent in them as they were photographs of statues."⁹⁸ Generally, however, photographic reproductions were still problematic.

Within the realm of nude photographs aspiring to the category of art or artistic tool, legitimacy and legality were predicated on their perceived level of art, both in the degree to which artistic intention could be proven and in the level of beneficence that the photograph provided for the advancement of art. In this manner, the Victorians attempted to ascertain a delineation between the positive and negative attributes of the taboo intersection of nude photography. The process was similar for the other great area defining progress at the time: science.

Science

As many sins as "art" covered, in the modern estimation scientific enquiry perhaps covered more. Possibly this was due to the perception that science, unlike art, was completely unconnected with emotion but rather relied upon cool logic and higher reason, placing it far from any visceral reactions. Additionally, while art could perform a moralizing and culturing effect upon the populace, it was recognized that science and industry were the true engines of progress for the British Empire. For both of these reasons, providing that they kept to ostensibly scientific goals and iconography, scientific photographs could hold more nude in solution than artistic ones without overpowering their perceived benefit to society. Such scientific presentation ironically celebrated and demanded the very realism that placed the artistic nude in jeopardy. Yet despite its overall tolerance, the scientific nude could not entirely escape the nexus of taboos and was not, as we shall see, without controversy.

97 "County of London Sessions," *The Times*, 7 June 1890: 7.

98 "Police," *The Times*, 13 February 1894: 14.

One way that the photographic nude was made useful to science was within the study of medicine, a position explained by one Dr. H.G. Wright in 1867:

Photography was at once recognized by medical men as useful to their profession in its earliest days. The character of disease, the varying conditions which mark its progress, could thus be permanently recorded, and those which precede and follow treatment accurately noted, all peculiarities or original development, of expression, or of structure being thus faithfully represented.⁹⁹

Thus photographs such as O.G. Mason's *Veiled Lady: or elephantitis due to scarlet fever* (1878) (figure 36), appeared in medical journals and textbooks without problem. The photograph's acceptability was assisted by the subject's covered face, disallowing any emotional connection with the viewer, and the completely barren, clinical background. Similarly, Mayall's photograph of a woman being treated for spinal curvature (1877) (figure 37) escapes rules of propriety regarding the depiction of men and women together when one or both is nude because of its stated relationship with medical science. The viewer thus assumes that the man is a doctor and that his relationship with the woman is strictly clinical. Again, as in artistic nude photographs, the iconography, which by itself could suggest bondage or sexual torture, is secondary to the established circumstances of the photograph's ownership and creation.¹⁰⁰ Association with

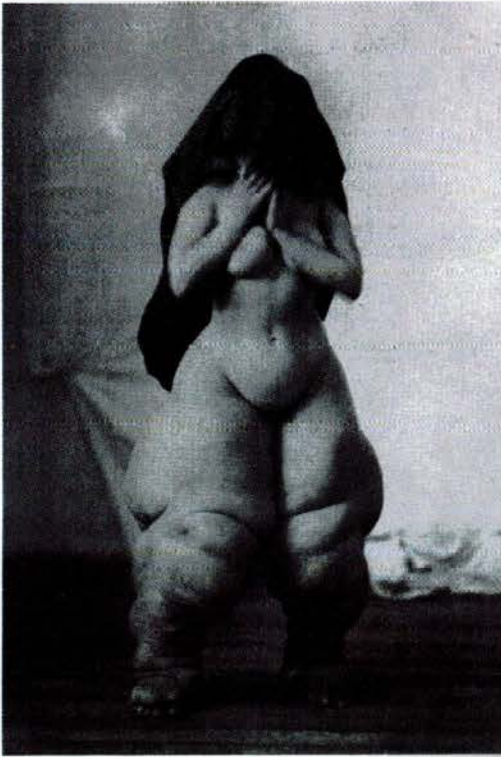


Figure 36: O.G. Mason, *Veiled Lady: or elephantitis due to scarlet fever* (1878)

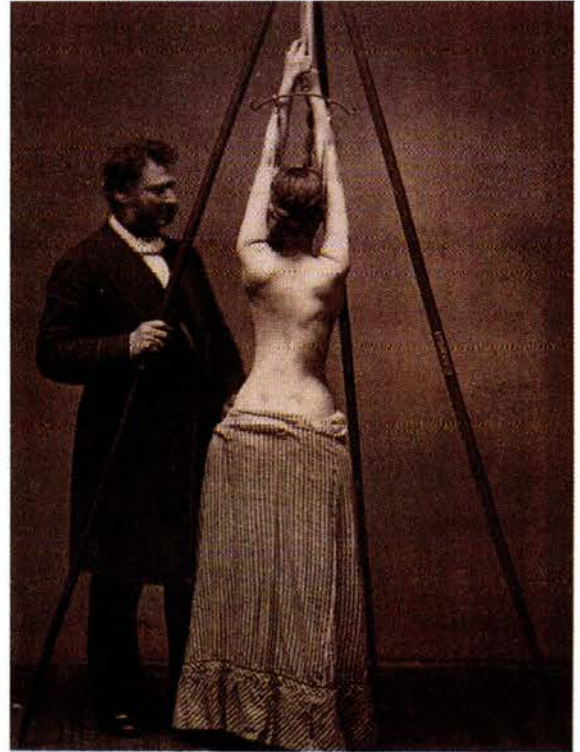


Figure 37: John Jabez Mayall, *Untitled* (1877)

⁹⁹ Dr. H. G. Wright, "Address on the Medical Uses of Photography," *The Photographic Journal* 11:178 (15 February 1867): 203.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly enough, Mayall was frequently claimed by British critics as the first to make artistic photographs. Spencer, *Photography as Art*: 65.

science enabled such photographs to be acceptable by overriding the dangers of their nudity.

However, by far the most predominant use of the scientific nude was in the area of ethnology, or anthropology. As Dr. Wright stated, "Ethnology is, I need hardly say, an offshoot of medical research ... Very closely akin to medical science is the study of the physical characteristics presented by different races of mankind, and by the various tribes comprised in each race."¹⁰¹ Prevailing thought held that culture was biologically determined. As Elizabeth Edwards explains, "Non-European races, who appeared less accomplished technologically, were interpreted as representing the 'childhood of mankind,' a phase through which European man had passed in his prehistoric and proto-historic periods in a linear progression towards 'civilisation.'"¹⁰² The expanding empire therefore created an urge within Victorians to examine and classify those over whom they now wielded sovereignty, to examine the nature of civilization and to assure themselves of their own advanced status within its structure. These goals were first given institutional form in 1843 when the Ethnological Society was formed out of the more scientifically minded members of the Anti-Slavery and the Aborigines' Protection Societies.¹⁰³ In the 1860s, when the Society created a classification committee designed to provide "insights into the natural growth and order of development of all branches of human culture,"¹⁰⁴ this investigation became linked with photography, which had the ability to accurately record people and settlements. Many of these photographs contained images of nude or semi-nude figures, either in their native dress or stripped of their clothing for scientific purposes.

The members of the Ethnological Society were predominantly men that Roslyn Poignant describes as "Gentlemen of Science."¹⁰⁵ These 'gentlemen' were not necessarily professional ethnologists—in fact, most were not—but instead were men whose ideas and occupations contributed to the science and industry that drove the nation. There were, therefore, no more qualified or disinterested individuals to view ethnological images of the nude. The restriction of such images to this audience alone could have justified their production. However, the

101 Wright, "Medical Uses of Photography": 204.

102 Elizabeth Edwards, "Introduction," *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, ed Elizabeth Edwards (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992): 6.

103 Roslyn Poignant, "Surveying the Field of View: The Making of the RAI Photographic Collection," *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, ed Elizabeth Edwards (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992): 45.

104 *Ibid.*: 49.

105 *Ibid.*: 45.

demand for anthropological photographs existed across the levels of Victorian society, creating a genre of popular anthropology whose nude imagery was acceptable. Indeed, it appears that it was not so much the character of the intended viewer that was the legitimating aspect, although this factor did help, as it was the use of subjects of non-Caucasian ethnic background presented in a more or less scientific matter. This type of photographic nude was especially acceptable because it not only offered the benefit of the advancement of science, but also provided images that reinforced concepts of imperial dominance and the biological supremacy of Europeans.

There thus existed a spectrum of anthropological imagery, from hard science to popular stereotype. Among those photographs that played a role in true scientific inquiry, two general approaches were taken. The first centred on the discipline of anthropometry, a branch of ethnology that attempted to elucidate the average measurements and capacities of every race or group of humans in hopes that these proportions could explain their relative progress or retardation. Francis Galton, for example, sought to find the 'essential' features of a race through composite photographs. In his method, pictures of the faces of a large number of individuals were taken on a single plate, so that successive exposures would reinforce typical characteristics and fade out atypical ones.¹⁰⁶ A more popular system of anthropometric inquiry was the photographing of naked individual subjects in such a manner that their exact measurements could be read from the resultant photograph. Two methods for this approach emerged in the late 1860s. The first, developed by biologist T. H. Huxley, positioned the subject next to a large measuring stick (figure 38a-b). A more enduring and useful method, unveiled by Lamprey at the Ethnological Society in 1869, employed instead of a stick a grid of threads two inches apart (figure 39a-b).¹⁰⁷ Photographs from his presentation, showing the nude figure, were in fact the first use of a photographic illustration in the Society's *Ethnological Journal*. Clearly this sort of photographic nude was considered above reproach. Their propriety was assisted by the stark backgrounds and clinical, objectifying gaze created by the unforgiving frontal and profile composition. Here, not only is emotional (and erotic) distance kept, but the subjects are presented as laboratory animals, emphasizing their "lower" position on the scale of human civilization.

106 Sekula, "Body and the Archive": 368.

107 Poignant, "Surveying": 49.

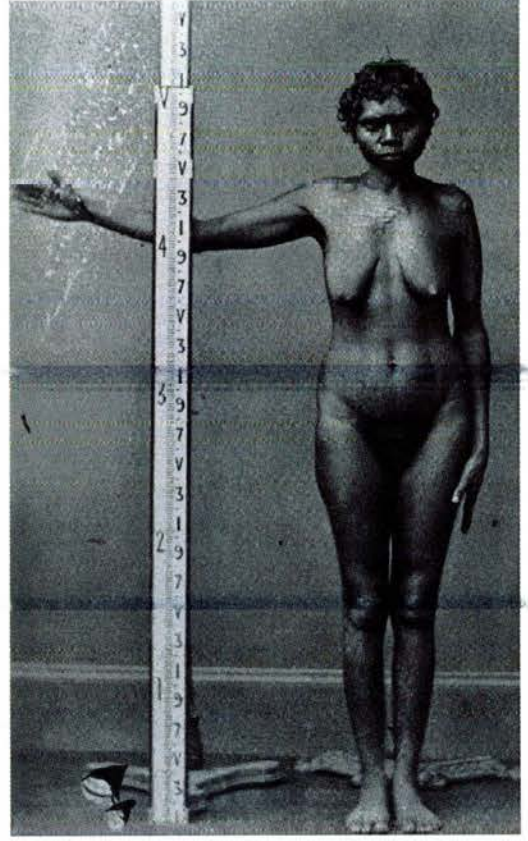
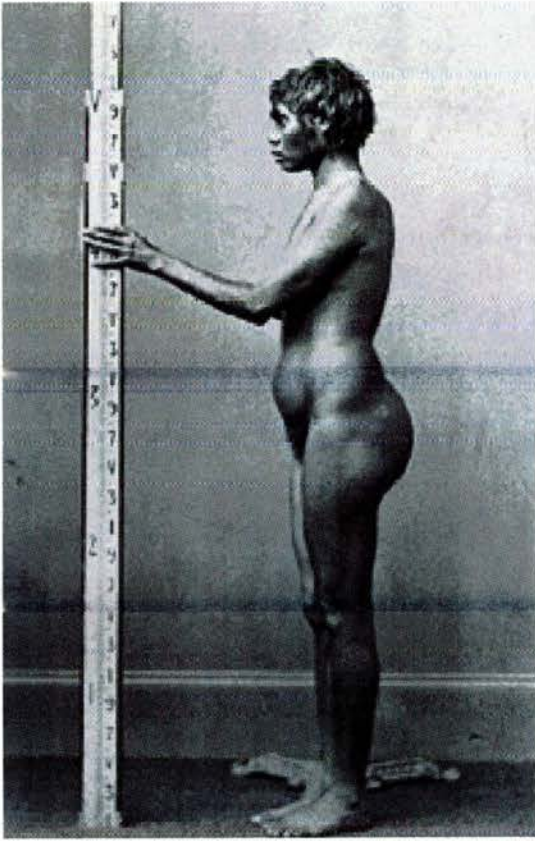


Figure 38a-b: Anonymous,
Aborigine Woman (1870)

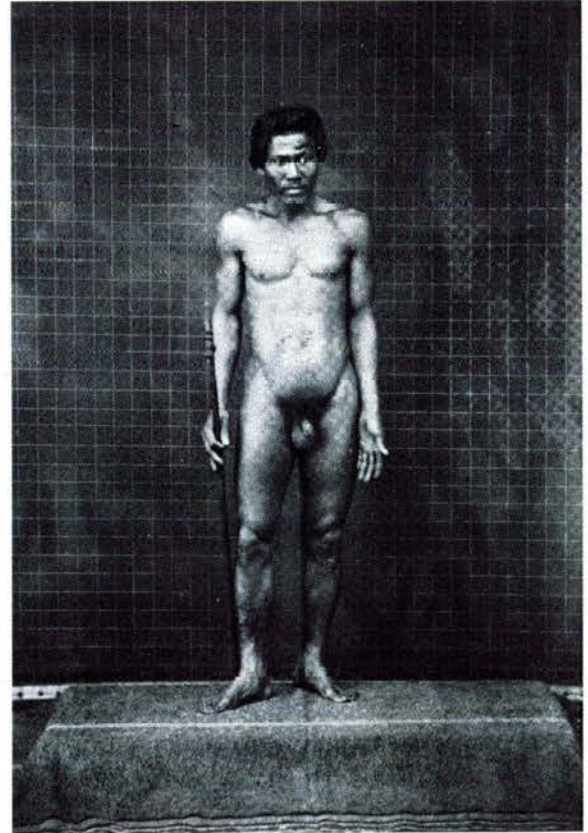
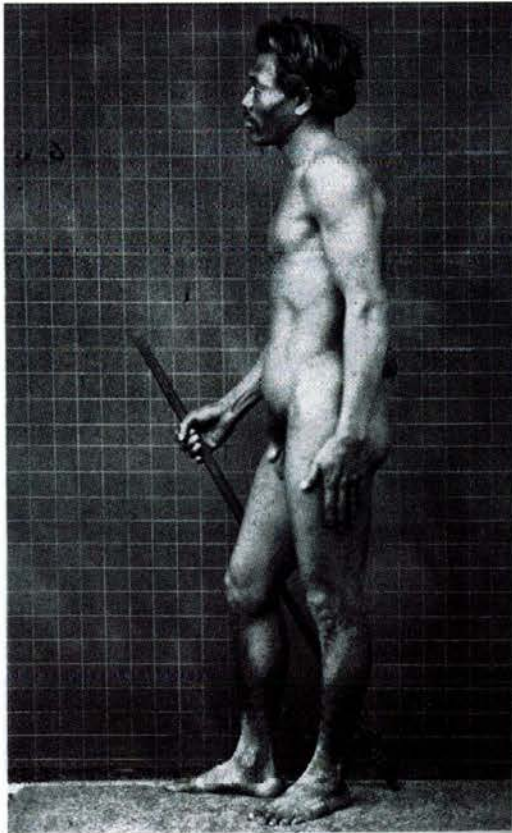


Figure 39a-b: John Lamprey,
Malayan Man (c. 1868-69)

The other approach to photographic ethnology concentrated on more social aspects, recording indigenous peoples in the context of their everyday lives and societies. These, too, were acceptable based upon both their scientific slant and their attitude towards native peoples. The actual photographers who captured such imagery came from diverse backgrounds. Although some, like Northcott Thomas in Nigeria, were anthropologists employed by the government, most were peripheral to anthropology; they were missionaries (like Hooper (figure 40)), administrators and professional photographers. Thus, Roger Fenton photographed a series of "Eastern characters" on his travels. When exhibited in 1859, *The Athenaeum* described his "Nubian Water-Carrier" as "the serf-like, patient woman of the old servile type, with the talisman on her bare breast, and the huge jar poised on her head."¹⁰⁸ Hardly the reaction that would have been garnered from an "obscene" photograph. More typical were the large volumes of *The People of India*, commissioned by the Indian government,¹⁰⁹ or the photographs of New Guinea by both J. W. Lindt (figure 41) and F. W. Barton (figure 42). Despite the fact that several of Lindt's female subjects were semi-nude, of his photographs *The Times* enthused "they afford an excellent example of one of the most important applications of photography, the production of trustworthy exploration in unknown lands."¹¹⁰ Once again, linking the nude to science and subjugation justified its appearance in photography.



Figure 40: Willoughby Wallace Hooper, *Starving Indians, Madra (South India)* (1876)

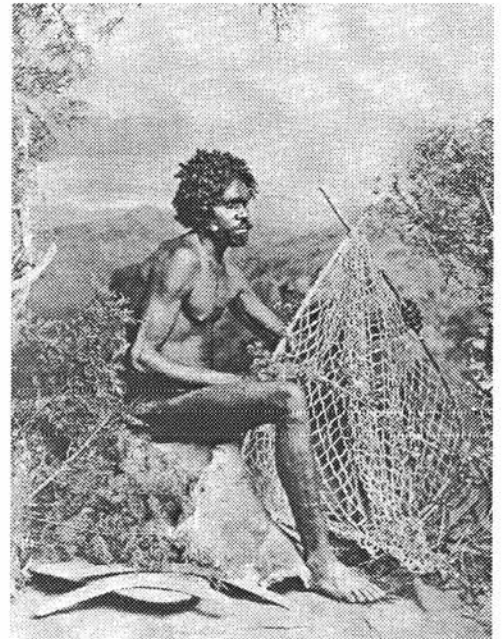


Figure 41: J.W. Lindt, *Australian Aborigine, Clarence River* (c. 1870s)

108 "Photographic Society," *The Athenaeum* 1629 (Jan 15 1859): 36.

109 See "The People of India," *The Times*, 20 Oct 1873: 12.

110 "The Photographic Society's Exhibition," *The Times*, 4 October 1887: 12.



Figure 42: F.W. Barton,
Motu Girl (1890)

Even when the iconography of such photography was closer to high art than to archive, the nude anthropological photograph was saved by its connection to science. Martha Macintyre and Maureen MacKenzie argue that Barton, a colonial administrator, reflected more academy than anthropology in his photography of Motu Papuans: "The girls become artist's models, choreographed by Barton to emulate the postures of Hellenic sculptures."¹¹¹ Indeed, had a similar picture to Barton's *Motu Girl* (1890) (figure 42) been taken of an English girl there is no doubt that the National Vigilance Association would have had it seized and destroyed under the Obscene Publications Act. Incredibly, according to Macintyre and MacKenzie, such a display of nudity would never have been acceptable to the Motuans themselves:

The patterns that decorated a girl's thigh, buttocks and pudenda were on public view only during the initiation ceremony, and thereafter were seen exclusively by her husband ... The attitude to nudity that is an essential aspect of Barton's pictures would not merely have affronted Papuan propriety, but would have constituted an entirely alien ideal of beauty.¹¹²

Barton, having lived in New Guinea for many years, was obviously aware of this ethical system, and that his photographs were not only permissible but indeed found their way to the Royal Anthropological Institute archives is a testament to the legitimising power of anthropology, even when it had lost its scientific objectivity.

That this power was even enough to counteract the most populist characteristics of photography is made clear through a remarkable trial in 1879 concerning commercial photographs of Zulus. The zeal for the other had resulted in the popularization of both the anthropometric and the social anthropological nude. Notes Roslyn Poignant, plans for photographic ethnological archives "lent an air of scientific respectability to a well-established practice of exhibiting individuals and groups of 'out-of-the-way types of humanity' in places of popular entertainment along with freaks, contortionists and other 'marvels'."¹¹³ Indeed, bound volumes such as C. and F. W. Dammann's *Ethnological Photographic Gallery of the Various Races of Man* and inexpensive cartes-de-visite of non-Western peoples (figure 43) were widely available, taken by entrepreneurial photographers who set up studios in remote locations.¹¹⁴ These

111 Maureen MacKenzie and Martha Macintyre, "Focal Length as an Analogue of Cultural Distance," *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, ed Elizabeth Edwards (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992): 162.

112 *Ibid.*: 163.

113 Poignant, "Surveying": 51.

114 *Ibid.*: 44.

photographs, says Joanna C. Scherer, “catered to Victorian taste for escapism and possession.”¹¹⁵ Such dissemination into mass media would appear to present exactly the sort of dangerous situations that compromised artistic nude studies: a viewer who was possibly not a specialist (and therefore more prone to a visceral viewpoint), an uncontrolled viewing atmosphere, and abilities to resize/reshape the emphasis of photographs. Indeed, it is certainly the case that anthropological photographs were not always used in a “respectable” manner, providing the sort of sexual fantasy of the other that was not unlike modern prepubescent reactions to *National Geographic*. Yet despite this, when such issues were tried in a court of law, the public reaction was one of overwhelming support for the sale of nude anthropological photographs.

In the late 1870s the British military campaign to retain administrative control over Zululand, commonly known as the Zulu War, created a surge in the public demand for images of the savage enemy. Photographic companies responded with a wide variety of photographic portraits and scenes of Zulu life, depicting the Zulus in their traditional costume of near nudity (figure 44). Unsurprisingly, it was not long before a vendor of such photographs was brought up on charges of selling indecent photographs. The trial that ensued bordered on the farcical.



Figure 43: Anonymous, (c. 1880)

Mr. Phillpott, a London bookseller and newsagent, had purchased his whole supply of Zulu photographs from three of the most eminent photographic firms in the country, including the renowned London Stereoscopic Company,¹¹⁶ and at the summons claimed that he “had no conception the photographs were indecent or offensive,” as they were not so different from the war illustrations being published weekly in such periodicals as the *Illustrated London News*. Moreover, “he now voluntarily offered to destroy the whole stock of

¹¹⁵ Joanna C. Scherer, “The Photographic Document: Photographs as Primary Data in Anthropological Enquiry,” *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, ed Elizabeth Edwards (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992): 35.

¹¹⁶ The other firms were “Messrs. Thorp and Watson,” and “Messrs. Collins.” “Police,” *The Times*, 24 October 1879: 9.

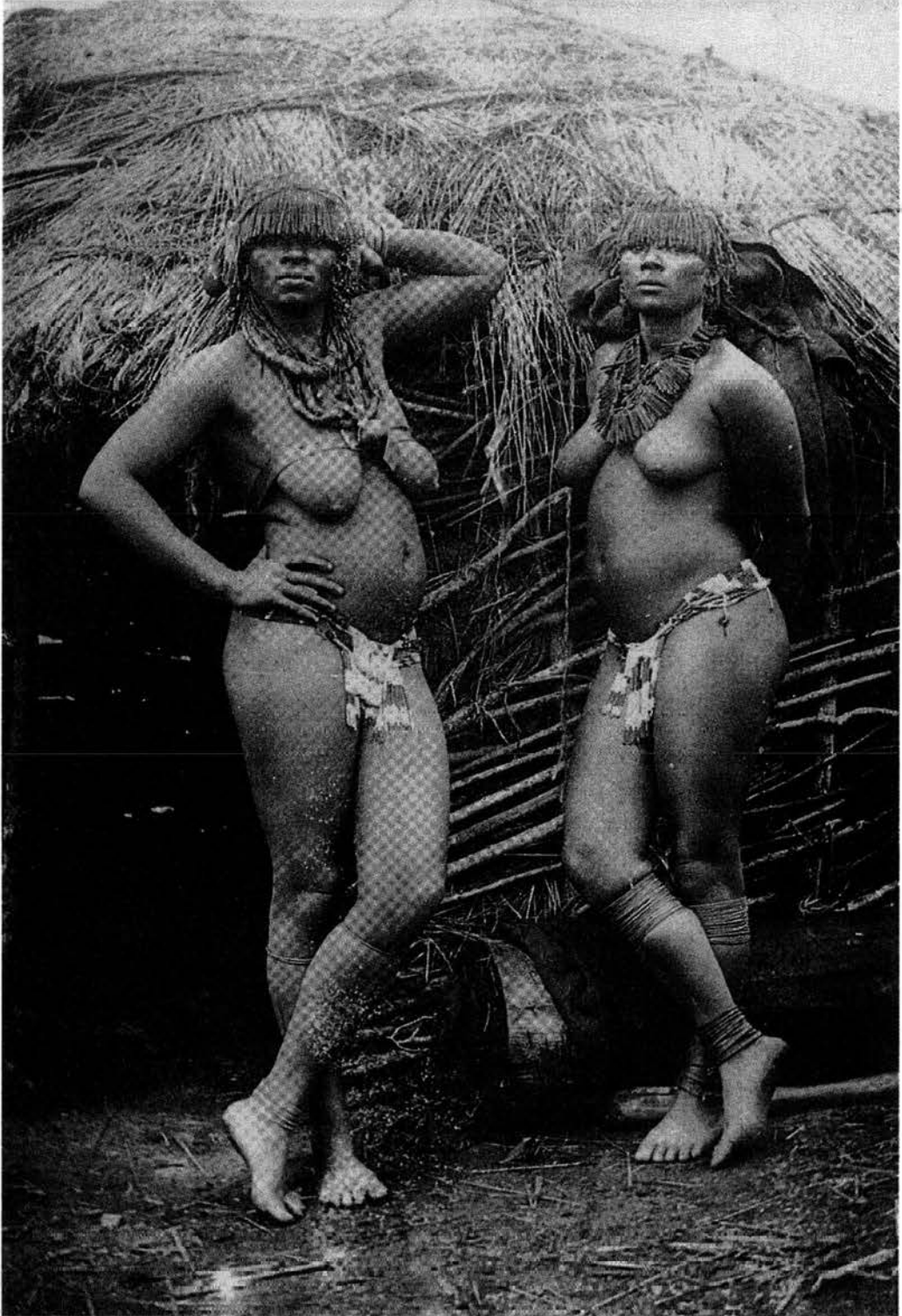


Figure 44: Anonymous, *A Happy New Year (Zulu Women)* (c. 1879)

them."¹¹⁷ However, the Lord Mayor Sir Charles Whetham, not only the presiding magistrate but acting as a proxy for an unknown prosecutor, replied that he "regretted to hear that photographers descended" to making profit by such things. He also denied that periodical illustrations "bore any comparison with the indecency of the photographs in question," and, owing to a number of letters he had received protesting against them, decided not only to prosecute Phillpott, but the publishers of the photographs as well.¹¹⁸

The next day the solicitors of the London Stereoscopic Company wrote a letter to *The Times*:

[The heads of the company are] prepared to take upon themselves the entire responsibility of the issue and publication of all Zulu photographs bearing their name, and that, while indignantly denying that such photographs (which were faithful copies of ones taken at the colony from life) could be fairly regarded as indecent or indelicate, they courted the fullest investigation into the subject-matter of the Lord Mayor's remarks, and were most anxious to have the opportunity of answering the attack upon their reputation.¹¹⁹

The trial of Mr. Phillpott's Zulu War photographs was quickly becoming a war itself between those who believed in the propriety of the anthropological nude and those who, like the Lord Mayor, saw them as obscene.

By the time of the trial it was clear that the public sided with the former. On October 30, coverage of "The Zulu Photograph Case" spanned a column and a half and provided a full transcript of the proceedings, a fuller treatment by several times over than an average trial, indicating the high interest that the story had generated. The reporter's choice to give account of the trial word for word appears to have been designed to ridicule the Lord Mayor's absolute defeat at the hands of the defense and the contempt of spectators in the courtroom. At every point won by the defense, the reporter recorded the public's spontaneous applause. Later this was to so frustrate the Lord Mayor that he had the courtroom cleared.¹²⁰ Even the sarcasm of the title of the trial coverage—"Alleged 'Indecent Photographs'"—reveals the ridiculousness with which the public viewed this charge.

Furthermore, individuals who ordinarily would be expected to support such prosecutions refused to lend their cooperation. Detective-constable William Harding, one of the

117 *Ibid.*: 9.

118 *Ibid.*: 9.

119 Chorley, Crawford and Chester, letter to *The Times*, 25 October 1879: 6.

120 "Alleged 'Indecent Photographs,'" *The Times*, 30 October 1879: 11.

individuals sent by the Lord Mayor to purchase the Zulu photographs from Phillipott, would not say that they were obscene, rather that "it was a matter of opinion."¹²¹ Even Mr. Collette, one of the chief officials of the Society for the Prevention of Vice, and a frequent prosecutor of obscene photographs, declined to become involved. He had previously written a letter to the Lord Mayor in support of the proceedings, which the Lord Mayor attempted to read in court (prompting the defense lawyer to humorously comment that he was not aware that Mr. Collette's society was "a society for the suppression of Zulus").¹²² However, Collette protested, saying that "when he wrote the letters he had never seen the photographs,"¹²³ indicating that even he thought the definition of obscene had been extended too far.

The clear public judgment for the legality of the photographs, and indeed, Phillipott's legal acquittal, was based predominantly on the ethnicity of the subjects and upon their positioning within the photograph. On the subject of the first, Mr. Poland for the defence angrily maintained "It was an outrage on good sense to say that photographs of nude savages in their ordinary costume were obscene ... If the photographs were of an English man or woman, with their pink flesh, they might or might not be deemed indecent."¹²⁴ To reinforce this concept, the defence then proceeded to call several witnesses to attest that nudity was indeed the traditional costume of the Zulus. They also called a number of officials from the London Stereoscopic Company who swore that they had never found such photographs obscene.¹²⁵ The obvious implication of these arguments was that the photographic subjects were on a less civilised level and therefore could not be held to the same standards of propriety in a documentary photograph.

The defence's second argument was mounted in opposition to the Lord Mayor's concerns that one photograph, entitled in Phillipott's shopwindow "A Happy Marriage," showed a naked Zulu man and a naked Zulu woman in close proximity to each other. The defence successfully proved that not only was the title a mistake made by one of Phillipott's employees, but that both subjects were in fact women—one married and one unmarried. The Lord Mayor's comment after this discovery suggests that some anxieties surrounding the body and sex could not be entirely covered by anthropological intention: "It is a great pity that those

121 *Ibid.*: 11.

122 *Ibid.*: 11.

123 *Ibid.*: 11.

124 *Ibid.*: 11.

125 *Ibid.*: 11.

who sent those photographs into the market should not have stated that the one marked No. 1 represents two women. My impression is that they ought to have done so, and I think their not doing so tends to interfere with the morals of the rising generation."¹²⁶ Here Whetham is simply repeating the concerns about mixed-sex nudes voiced throughout the artistic genre. Had the figures been a man and a woman, as in G. E. Dobson's 1872 photograph of an Andamanese chief and his wife (figure 45), Phillipott's innocence might not have been as easy to secure.

Nevertheless, the fact that trade in Zulu photographs had been going on "uninterruptedly for some months,"¹²⁷ the fact that the Chief Commissioner of the City Police had declined to prosecute Phillipott himself because he "did not consider the photographs objectionable,"¹²⁸ and the fact that no further arrests were made for photographs of ethnological nudity all suggest that the majority of Victorians were willing to overlook the normal strictures

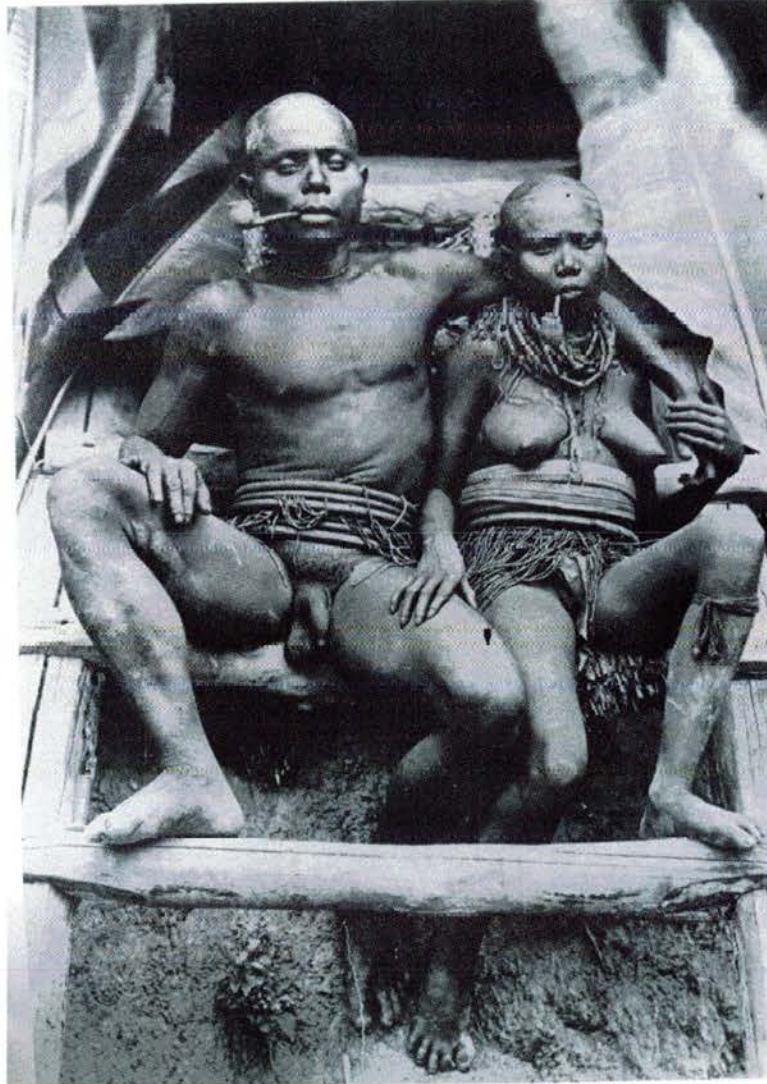


Figure 45: G.E. Dobson, *Maia Biala, the Chief of Rutland Island and his wife* (1872)

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*: 11.

¹²⁷ "Police," *The Times*, 24 October 1879: 9.

¹²⁸ "The Zulu Photograph Case," *The Times*, 31 October 1879: 9.

surrounding the nude because of the race of the subjects. That anthropological photographs were scientific and imperialistic enough to be above ordinary propriety is supported by the fervor with which the head of the London Stereoscopic Company, Alderman Nottage, defended the honor and respectability of his company in producing such photographs. As the courtroom was being cleared (for "excessive applause"), Nottage had been attempting to refute the Lord Mayor's claims that his company had descended into immorality in order to make a profit. One thinks that perhaps the Lord Mayor was attempting to quiet him by ordering the court cleared, but as he was being forcibly removed by the guards, Nottage shouted "You decline to hear me and yet you are supposed to be dispensing justice from that seat. I impeach you, in the name of the citizens of London, with having brought discredit on your office, and having violated the duty which belongs to that ancient chair."¹²⁹ Not to be subdued, several days later, the London Stereoscopic Company filed a slander lawsuit against the Lord Mayor, "for expressions used in his magisterial capacity" during the Zulu photograph trial.¹³⁰ Obviously Nottage believed very strongly that an ethnological nude was not obscene, and most of the country agreed with him.

It was thus clear that scientific association, no matter how tenuous, held a stronger justification for the photographic nude. Unlike its artistic cousins, the legality and acceptability of the scientific nude photograph was not based upon the expertise of the owner or creator, but was rather based upon the notion of national hegemony and progress, a notion that the connotations of science and social Darwinism strongly reinforced. For these reasons, whereas the artistic nude was able only sporadically to overcome the dangers of the nude image and mass media, the scientific nude rested on the productive side of the scale in the Victorian mind.

Scientific Art or Artistic Science—A Little of Both

Certain Victorian photographic nudes contain elements of both science and art. Despite their artistic component, these nudes appear to have been treated as scientific nudes—accepted without restriction on the location or character of the viewer even when iconographies are similar to those of artistic photographs judged obscene.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in photographic studies of movement. Medical advances in physiology and a commitment to physical realism by artists of the second half of the

129 "Alleged 'Indecent Photographs': 11.

130 "Zulu Photographs," *The Times*, 6 November 1879: 10.

nineteenth century required the exacting study of human and animal motion. With the continued improvement in exposure times during the 1870s it was not long before photography was applied to the task. Two men, Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey, are considered to be the major practitioners of this genre.

Muybridge was an Anglo-American photographer, born in Kingston-on-Thames but made in the lawless west of mid-nineteenth-century America. Originally an agent in San Francisco for a London publisher, he eventually found fame as a photographer through a series of photographs of Yosemite Valley taken in 1867.¹³¹ He fell into the business of motion photography when he was hired by the Governor of California, Leland Stanford, to assist him in learning more about the movement of horses—his prize racehorse Occident in particular—through photography. Stanford was of the opinion that at one point in a horse's gallop all feet are off the ground, and a photograph by Muybridge published in 1877 shook the scientific and artistic worlds by proving just that.¹³² Although Stanford underwrote several more motion studies, some including human athletes, Muybridge's major achievement was a collaboration with scientists at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1880s. This study used animal as well as nude and draped human subjects to produce 781 plates of sequential photographs depicting the progression of a wide variety of movements.¹³³

While the precise sequence of events that led to the study is unclear, the entrepreneurial Muybridge had been giving lectures on his earlier motion photographs and his zoopraxiscope—an early film projector of his own invention. During these lectures he had met Fairman Rogers, the sportsman and scientist, and the artist Thomas Eakins.¹³⁴ Eakins, at that time Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, was also interested in the use of photography to ensure art's fidelity to nature (figure 46) and may have persuaded Rogers to encourage a new initiative under the auspices of the University.¹³⁵ In any case, according to the authors of a contemporary description of the study's method, "It was represented to the Trustees of the University that several individuals appreciating the importance of the proposed work to art and science would

131 Gordon Hendricks, *Eadweard Muybridge: The Father of the Motion Picture* (London: Secker & Warburg 1975): 3-17.

132 *Ibid.*: 46. The photograph was originally taken in 1872.

133 A forthcoming article in *History of Photography* indicates that Muybridge often modelled for the studies himself.

134 Hendricks, *Muybridge*: 149.

135 *Ibid.*: 157.

unite in guaranteeing all expenses connected with the investigation if a University Commission would be appointed to supervise the entire affair and thus insure its thoroughly scientific character."¹³⁶

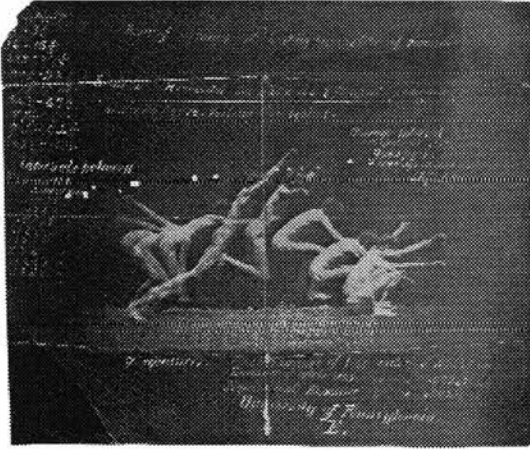


Figure 46: Thomas Eakins, *Man Jumping* (1884-85)

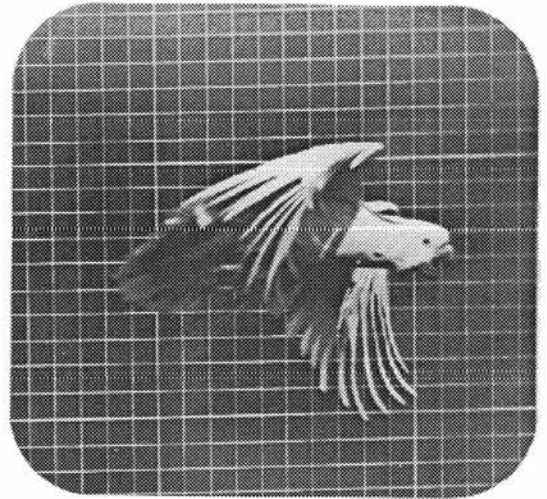


Figure 47: Eadweard Muybridge, *Bird in Flight* (1885-87)

The study, carried out between 1885 and 1887, indeed presented much of scientific interest. For one, the photographs presented a virtual library of human and animal movement, from simple tasks such as a man walking to what had been almost unthinkable several years before—an image of a bird mid-flight (figure 47). Muybridge and his team also photographed the movements of individuals with various physical impairments from a local hospital (figure 48), the first record of such motion.¹³⁷

Additionally, Muybridge's method was very technical. Each series of photographs used a string of 24 cameras about six inches apart, connected by an electronic device that opened and closed their shutters in sequence to depict the figure in various stages of movement.¹³⁸ The subjects were also photographed against the same sort of grid used in Lamprey's

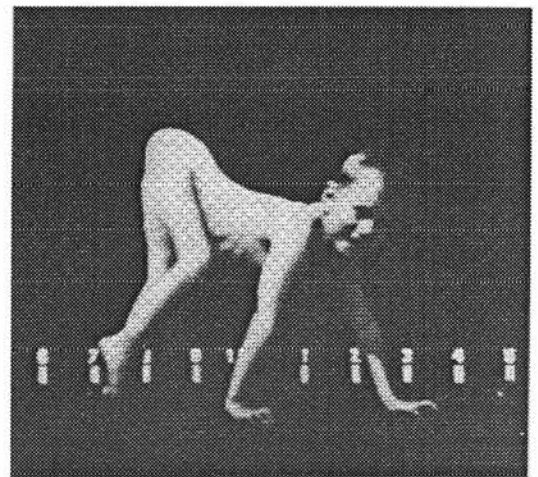


Figure 48: Eadweard Muybridge, *Infantile Paralysis; Child, walking on hand and feet* (1885-87)

136 W. D. Marks, H. Allen, and F. X. Dercum, *Animal Locomotion: The Muybridge Works at the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Lippincott 1888) as quoted in Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1992): 232.

137 Hendricks, *Muybridge*: 162.

138 *Ibid.*: 168.

anthropometric system to give a sense of scale, a system that appears to have been suggested by Eakins to make the figures easier for artists to correctly copy.¹³⁹

Upon a closer inspection, however, Muybridge's photographs were not entirely the dispassionate and logical creations of science. Marta Braun argues that "Most often Muybridge was not using his camera as an analytic tool at all but was using it for a narrative representation."¹⁴⁰ Because the frame of reference changed for each photograph, the system of multiple cameras that the study used could convey neither a sense of space traversed nor the time that such movement actually took, rendering it not useful for the close study of individual movements.¹⁴¹ Moreover, many of the human image sequences take for their subject not a clearly defined movement, but rather, motion overlaid by anecdote. For example, two connected series of photographs entitled *One Woman Disrobing Another* (figure 49), and *Turning Around in Surprise and Running* (figure 50) depict not impassive observation of standard movements but instead tell a distinct story of a woman exposed unwillingly. Quite unlike the cold rigidity of anthropometric images, these photographs invite our sympathetic connection through conveying human emotion. This is supported by the fact that by Muybridge's own account he himself was an artist, rather than a scientist.¹⁴² Interestingly, Muybridge's own notebooks title these series *Inspecting a Slave (White)* and *Ashamed*,¹⁴³ betraying his own narrative intentions. Furthermore, certain of his nude series portray scenes that, in other cases, would be construed to have sexual connotations. *Toilet* (figure 51), for example, shows a woman undressing before bed, a scene whose iconography is similar in convention to both erotic photographs of "toilet scenes" (figure 52) and later erotic silent films such as Esmé Collings' *A Victorian Lady in her Boudoir* (figure 53). Both images would have been considered indecent, for the woman's state of half-dress would have implied that she was undressing for something or someone, making the nude no longer universal and symbolic. However, in the context of Muybridge's scientific experiment, such photographs were tolerated, and even published by a university.

All of this was in contrast to the strictly rational photographs of Marey. Marey was a physician-physiologist who became absorbed with visually recording the unseen phenomena of

139 Braun, *Picturing Time*: 232.

140 *Ibid.*: 249.

141 *Ibid.*: 237.

142 *Ibid.*: 54.

143 *Ibid.*: 251.

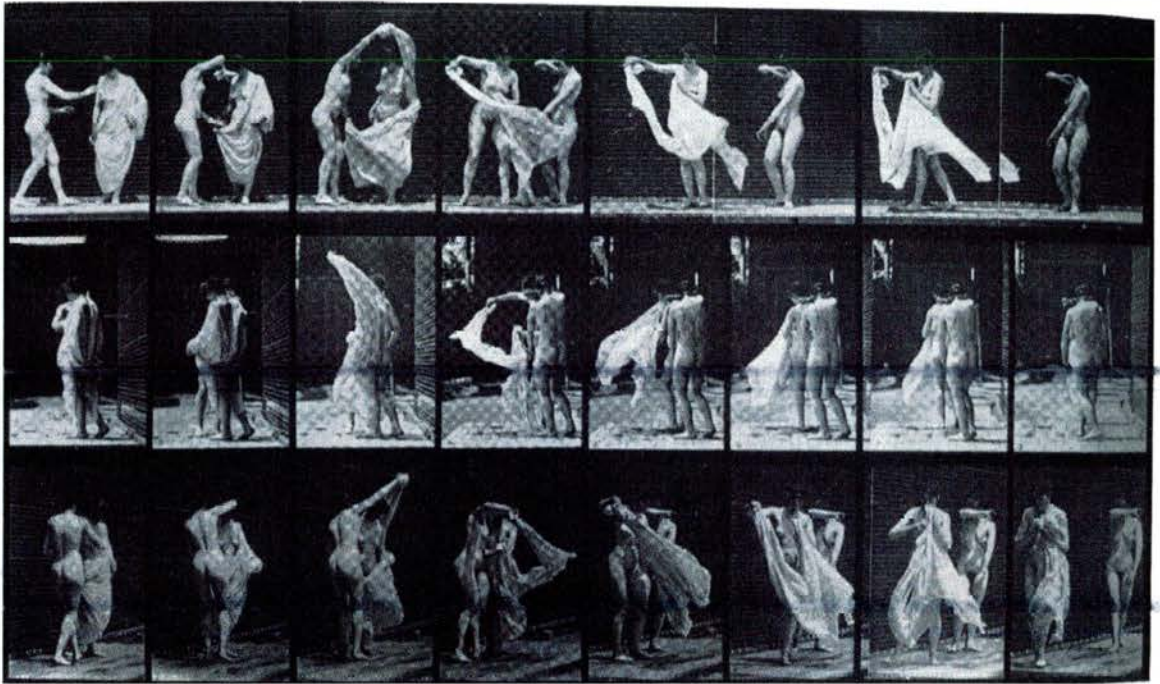


Figure 49: Eadweard Muybridge, *One Woman Disrobing Another* (1887)

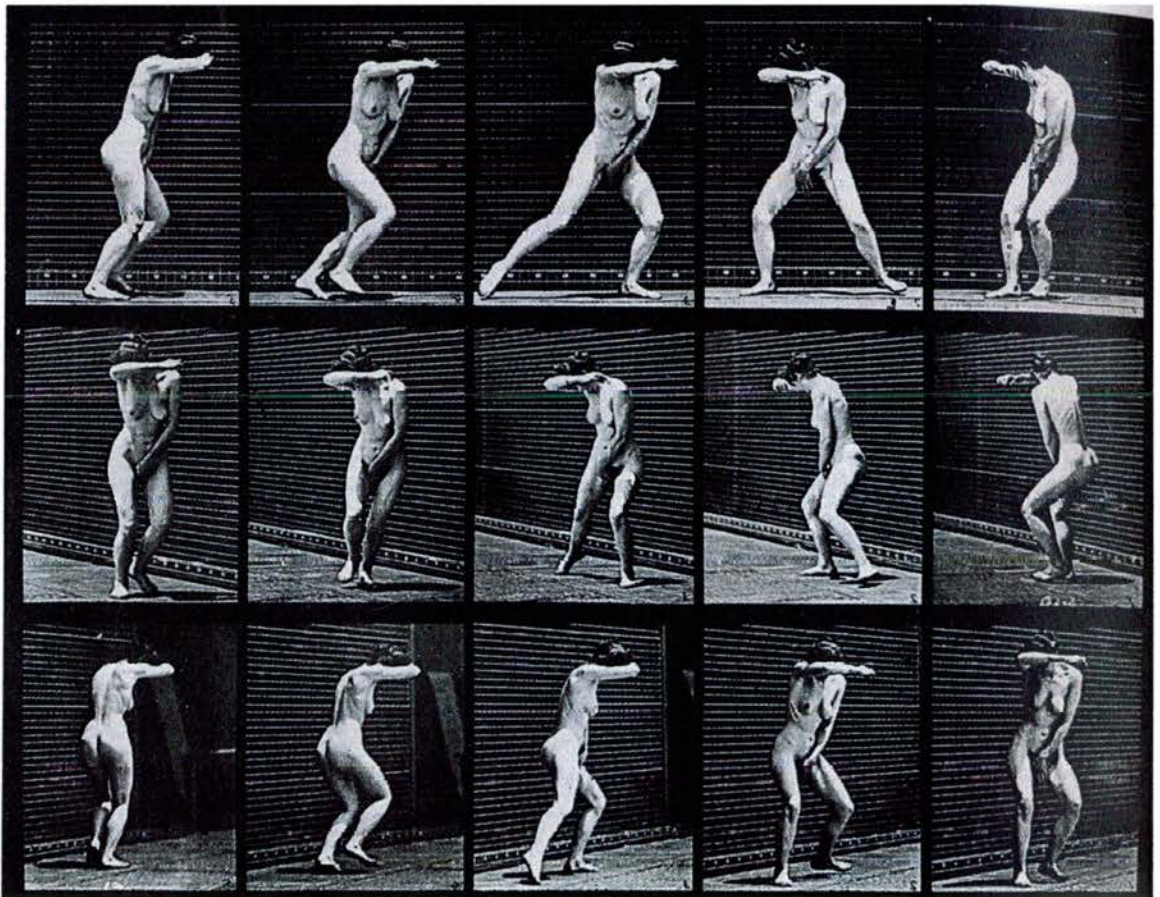


Figure 50: Eadweard Muybridge, *Turning Around in Surprise and Running* (1887)

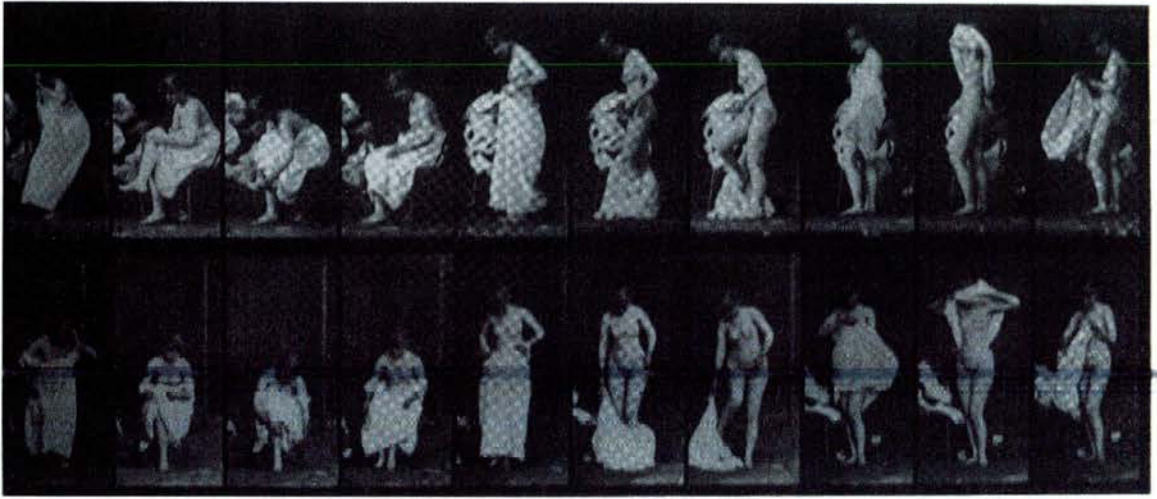


Figure 51: Eadweard Muybridge, *Toilet* (1887)



Figure 52: Anonymous, *Exotic Toilet Scene* (c. 1890)



Figure 53: Attr. Esmé Collings, *A Victorian Lady in her Boudoir* (1896)

the body. He began with such internal mechanisms as blood circulation and contraction of muscles, but became increasingly interested in the movements of the global organism.¹⁴⁴ After seeing Muybridge's early motion photographs in Paris during one of Muybridge's European lecture tours Marey altered his mechanical method of data collection.¹⁴⁵ Although Muybridge was lionized by Parisian society for his groundbreaking photographs, Marey was disappointed by the lack of true scientific data that they produced.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he was convinced that photography could be adapted to record the information that he needed. Marey thus developed a photographic gun that took several exposures on the same plate by means of a rotating, slotted metal disc that alternately exposed and masked the plate.¹⁴⁷ Says Marta Braun, "The advantages of [Marey's] gun over Muybridge's battery of cameras were evident: a single point of view, and equal as well as verifiable intervals of time; continuous registration on a single plate instead of instantaneous images of multiple plates."¹⁴⁸ Marey's photographs, like those of a man walking (figures 54,55), were undoubtedly scientifically constructed—unlike Muybridge's they possessed no narrative element and were produced in an austere setting whose only visual

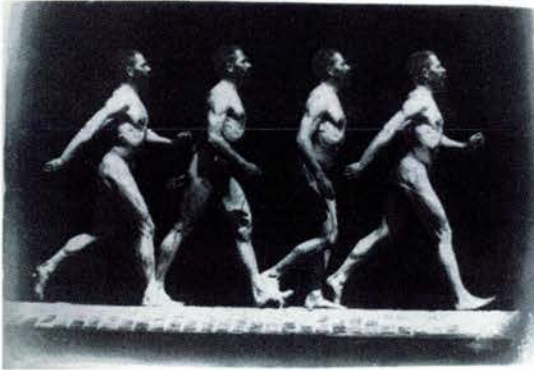


Figure 54: Etienne-Jules Marey,
Man Walking (1890-91)

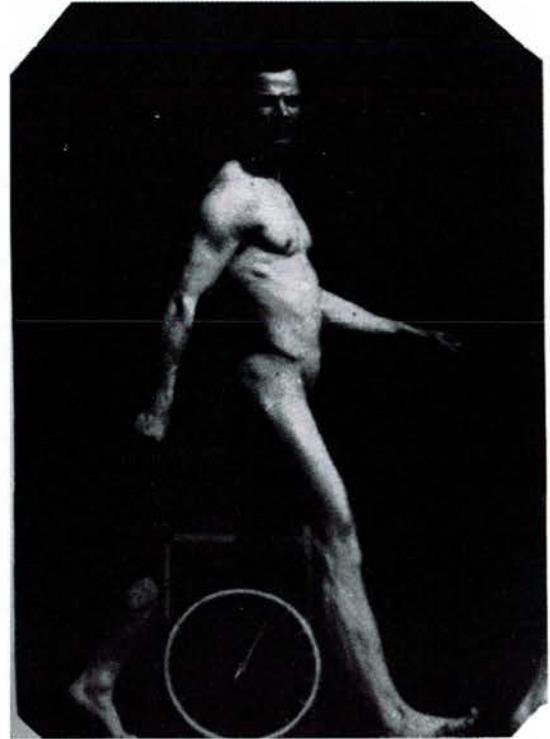


Figure 55: Etienne-Jules Marey,
Man Walking (1890-91)

144 François Dagognet, *Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace*, trans Robert Galeta with Jeanine Herman (New York: Zone Books 1992): 46.

145 Hendricks, *Muybridge*: 111.

146 Braun, *Picturing Time*: 53-4.

147 *Ibid.*: 64.

148 *Ibid.*: 61.

accessories were the occasional stopwatch printed by the camera itself. Here the link with science was clear.

Nonetheless, both men's photographs were treated with the same level of acceptance for their use of the nude. During Muybridge's second tour of Europe in 1889, this time promoting the University of Pennsylvania project, he lectured at the Royal Society in London. An account of this visit was published in the *Illustrated London News*, and of the plates they enthused "The results of these ingenious labours are already shown in a collection of 781 beautiful plates, each illustrating the successive phases of a single action of human figures, draped or nude, walking, running, jumping, dancing, fighting, working or playing."¹⁴⁹ No criticisms of Muybridge's use of the nude were made, and, indeed, the lecture was so well received that an illustration of Muybridge formed the cover for the week's edition. The *Photographic News* had already expressed their opinion that "few things [were] likely to be more useful to artists and others."¹⁵⁰ Certainly, the demand for the publication, called *Animal Locomotion*, was high. When Muybridge sent an account of the tour to the Secretary of the University of Pennsylvania in 1891, he noted that:

The Universities now on the subscription list are the following: Oxford, Berlin, Paris, Munich, Naples, Leipzig, Rome, Bologna, Turin, Bern, Tubingen, Wurzburg, Geneva, Freiberg, Basel, Halle, Gottingen, Bonn, Strassburg, Vienna, Heidelberg, Prague, Genoa, Zurich, Pisa, Innsbruck, Budapest, Florence, Padua ... In addition to those, the Royal and other academies of art ... and also such names as Helmholtz, Bunsen, Virchow, Ludwig, du Bois, von Remond, etc., etc., as representatives of science, and nearly all the most eminent artists in Germany, France, Italy and England.¹⁵¹

Similar approval was granted to Marey's *Etudes de physiologie artistique faites au moyen de la chronophotographie*, published in 1892 with his assistant Georges Demeny. This book, again ordered by the various universities and art academies of Europe, supplanted the medieval pattern books in use by the French art community.¹⁵²

The images were not acceptable to just artists and specialists, however. In 1901 *The Times* reviewed a version of Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* published in London. While the complete nudity made it "unsuitable for a drawing-room table," the reviewer was certain that it was "an

149 "Muybridge's Photographs of Animal Motion," *Illustrated London News*, 25 May 1889: 11.

150 *Photographic News*, June 24, 1887, as quoted in Hendricks, *Muybridge*: 175.

151 As quoted in Anita Ventura Mozley, "Introduction," *Muybridge's Complete Human and Animal Locomotion* (New York: Dover Publications): xxxv.

152 Braun, *Picturing Time*: 268.

otherwise very interesting publication."¹⁵³ Indeed, the book was intended from its beginning to be unrestricted to the public. Although the President of the Academy of Fine Arts, Edward Coates, expressed concern that, "If the work is to be published at all the usual questions as to the study of the nude in art and science must be answered yes,"¹⁵⁴ it was obviously clear that they were shortly answered in the affirmative. What is even more telling about the power of the name of science in the acceptability of the nude is the fact that, at the time of the letter, Coates had recently presided over Thomas Eakins' dismissal from his post at the Academy for his use of the nude in teaching art students.¹⁵⁵ Clearly, the scientific component of Muybridge's work had far more legitimising clout than did art alone. Indeed, although both Marey's and Muybridge's work could be considered 'art studies,' unlike those that did not claim the shield of science, there is no record of anyone being arrested for their possession.

Thus, despite its frequent iconographical similarity to images judged obscene and its substantial artistic character, the photographic study of movement was free from similar objections due to its "legitimate" scientific origin. Here, it seems that the link between science and progress was again enough to override the dangers of a mass media nude. A similar attitude was posed to photographic images relating to the practice of physical culture.

Physical culture was part of the general Victorian initiative to systematically (and ostensibly scientifically) optimize the capabilities of the human body. It also, like the relation of morality to the stability of the nation, developed from the belief that progress of the nation was dependent upon the total health and hygiene of the populace. As Michael Anton Budd explains, between 1867 and 1885 "Sports, exercise, health policies, popular entertainment, and military and moral concerns for the nation's 'physical' well-being began to converge within a jumble of attempts to salvage the physical body of the 'degenerate' British worker."¹⁵⁶ If the fitness level of the average British man could be improved, it was believed, the British race and thus the British nation would be stronger, more capable of progress, and more able to exert its hegemony throughout the world. The physical solidity of the bodybuilder, says Budd, counteracted the uncertainty of the fast-changing, machine-led world by giving the perception of the solidity and stability of the nation.¹⁵⁷ It was thus that physical culturists—performing musclemen-cum-

153 "Short Notices," *The Times*, 30 December 1901: 9.

154 Letter from Edward Coates, 27 September 1886, as quoted in Hendricks, *Muybridge*: 173.

155 Gill, *Image of the Body*: 309.

156 Budd, *Sculpture Machine*: 18.

157 *Ibid.*: 11.

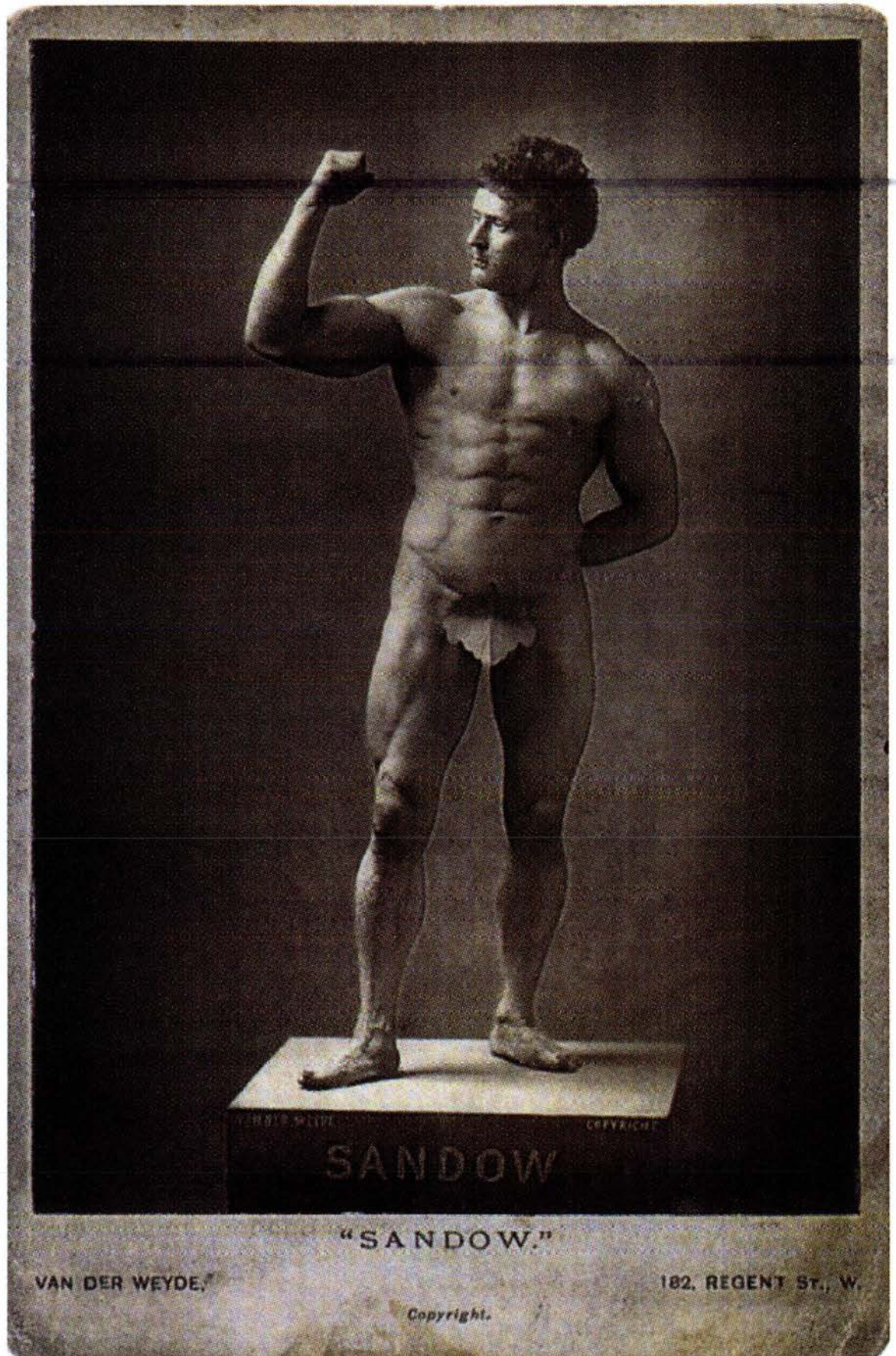


Figure 56: Henry van der Weyde, *Eugene Sandow* (1889)

fitness instructors—became popular figures in later Victorian Britain. Among the many who contributed to the category's rise, there was no greater physical culturist than Eugene Sandow (figures 56, 57).

Sandow, born Ernst Müller in East Prussia, began his career as a circus and music hall performer before being taken under the wing of the strongman Oscar Atilla. Atilla made his name by exploiting the relationship between strength and kingship. Among others, he claimed to have instructed Edward VII when still Prince of Wales, and was invited to perform at Queen Victoria's 1887 Golden Jubilee.¹⁵⁸ Under Atilla's direction, Sandow soon became renowned for his compact but extraordinarily developed physique and feats of strength such as holding a man in the palm of his hands.¹⁵⁹ His increasing popularity found outlet in frequent public demonstrations, lectures, classes,¹⁶⁰ and even his own fitness magazine, *Sandow's*, which invited readers to send pictures and accounts of their own physical development.¹⁶¹ A true celebrity, Sandow courted the nascent visual mass media by using photography as a cornerstone of his success. Says Alison Smith, "Photographs of Sandow almost or completely nude [to show off his physique] were distributed across Europe and America," and other bodybuilders followed his lead, coming to "accept the camera as a tool as essential as the mirror in their efforts to mould their own flesh in Sandow's image."¹⁶² This led to assortments of photographic images of athletes and strongmen like the Rotary Photographic Company's "Ideal Physical Culture" and "Health and Strength" series.¹⁶³

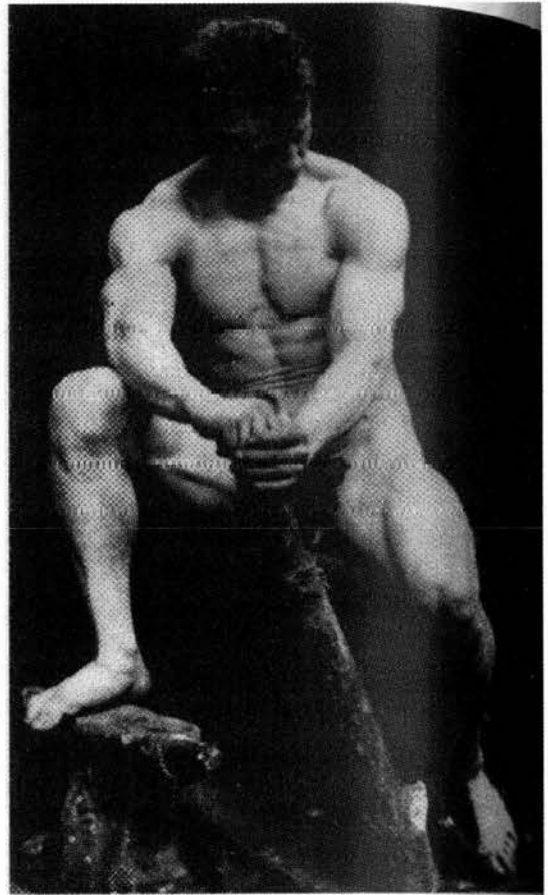


Figure 57: Anonymous, Eugene Sandow (c. 1895)

158 *Ibid.*: 38.

159 *Ibid.*: 40.

160 See for example *The Times*, "Physical Culture at the Crystal Palace," 30 November 1899: 6.

161 Budd, *Sculpture Machine*: 44.

162 Virginia Dodier, catalogue entry for Henry Van der Weyde, *Eugene Sandow in Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate 2001): 125.

163 Budd, *Sculpture Machine*: 43.

Such photographs were typically presented in the manner of the antique.

Like several other physical culturists, Sandow claimed that the inspiration for building his body was the experience of seeing classical statues in Italy as a young man. Upon witnessing the sculpted physiques of the ancients, he asked his father “why our modern race had nothing to show in physical development like those lusty men of olden time? Had the race deteriorated, or were the figures before him only ... ideal creations of god-like men?” His father answered that man’s decline was a result of “sordid habits” and “fashionable indulgences.”¹⁶⁴ Whether this was a true account or simply a fictionalized version of the truth, it reveals the strong connection between the interest in physical culture and the perceived degeneration of the national body. It also reveals the link felt between physical culturists and classical art.¹⁶⁵

Indeed, Henry Van der Weyde’s 1889 photograph of Sandow (figure 56) exploits such allusion to heroic antiquity. Sandow stands in the traditional *contrepasto* upon a sculptural plinth inscribed with his name and the date in Roman numerals. As in exhibitions of antique statuary as well as new, his genital region is subtly covered with a leaf, and the diagonal lighting of the photograph is intended to show the “modeling”

to its fullest advantage. The only concession to modernity is the flexing of his bicep. Neither was such neo-classical posing confined to photographs of Sandow. Like the popular *poses plastiques* artists, who portrayed scenes from sculpture and painting clad in flesh-toned bodysuits, such posing formed an integral part of Sandow’s public performances.¹⁶⁶

These photographs, despite their nakedness and similarity to art studies, were completely acceptable, a surprising situation that did not escape the notice of at least one Briton.

The writer John Addington Symonds expressed

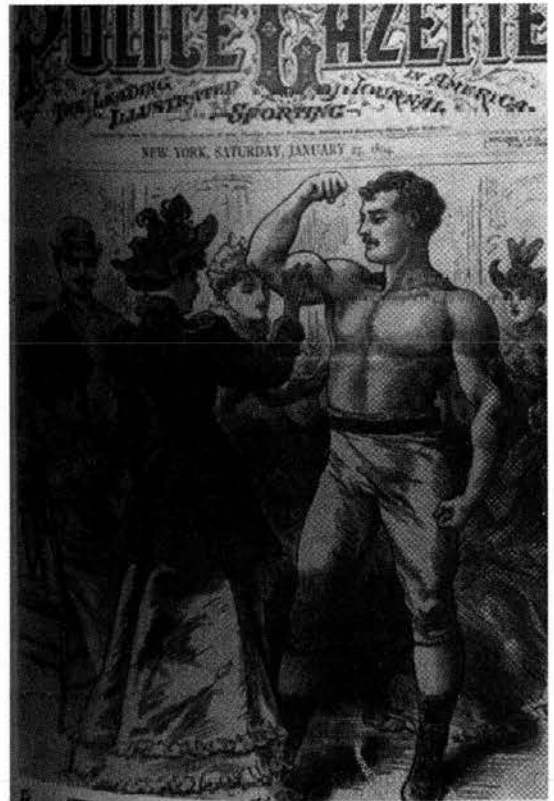


Figure 58: *The Ladies Idolise Sandow* (illustration from *The Police Gazette*) (1894)

164 *Ibid.*: 70.

165 Interestingly, Charles B. Lawes, the sculptor who testified as to the respectability of nude art studies, served as judge for several of Sandow’s physical culture competitions. Budd, *Sculpture Machine*: 60.

166 *Ibid.*: 42.

his astonishment in a letter to his friend and fellow writer Edmund Gosse: "It seems to me rather odd ... that the authorities should allow the wide circulation of this nude portrait of a man ... Odd, I say, when one remembers the extraordinary attitude of the English law toward certain practices."¹⁶⁷ This, even when Sandow's sexual charisma was widely noted. Homosexuals like Gosse and Symonds viewed Sandow as an example of ideal manhood and sexual desire, but his appeal to women was also undeniable. Says Virginia Dodier,

photographs of Sandow were produced for, promoted to, and purchased by women. Many attended his performances and then paid a little extra to go backstage. Sandow usually appeared at these soirees in his stage costume of vest and tights, but at an 1894 lecture for women only he wore just a strip of silk.¹⁶⁸

One image from New York's *Police Gazette* in 1894 shows this idolization well (figure 58). Dodier continues, "Clearly Sandow understood his sexual magnetism and undoubted virility drew both women and men—and it appears that he acted on this knowledge in his private as well as his professional life."¹⁶⁹ Surely Sandow's sexualized nature combined with the mass distribution of his image would ordinarily be enough to characterize his nude figure as obscene.

However, several legitimizing elements were at work. Firstly, because of its optimization of the human body, physical culture was linked to the science of physiology. This, as we have seen, would have been a strong justification in and of itself. Moreover, the connection between physical culture and ideal sculpture would also have assisted this process. Says Michael Hatt, "Just as the ideal body of sculpture repressed desire and process, so the physical culturist's body is cleansed of its material baseness. It is this that makes his body a legitimate object of display."¹⁷⁰ Here the idea of physical control of the corporeal body as a path to spiritual perfection is crucial. By making the body subservient to the will of the mind, the physical culturist is denying its visceral demands, thus purifying it. Lastly, Sandow's popularity meant that this principle could be applied to the populace. Condoning Sandow's idolization was to encourage British men's imitation of his physical control/purification. This would hopefully increase the physical and moral well-being of the British race and promote the stability and hegemony of the nation. These three elements were enough to balance out the problematic

167 As quoted in Dodier: 125.

168 *Ibid.*: 125.

169 *Ibid.*: 125.

170 Hatt, "Thought and Things": 48.

nature of the mass photographic nude, and again, despite no significant deviation from the iconography of artistic studies, they were accepted and legal whilst art studies were typically not.

Nude photographs containing elements of both art and science therefore benefited from the justification of science and its connotation of progress. Although they might theoretically be considered to register between the acceptance of scientific nudes and the illegality of art studies, it seems that, in fact, science is the dominant factor. Possibly this is because of the differing stabilities in the Victorian categorizations of art and science. Whereas the affective power of art could be used to ennoble or to degrade the population, science's perception was much more uniform. Apart from fears of man's usurpation of the role of God, expressed in literary works like *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, science had yet to prove itself of any danger. On the contrary, science was perceived to be the Victorian engine of progress, and as such, its beneficial power to the nation far outweighed that of art.

Marcia Pointon has said in her book, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting*, that "the nude functions not as a category with clear parameters but as a form of rhetoric."¹⁷¹ The judgment of the nude photograph in Victorian Britain illustrates this point perfectly. The discussion of its various forms in this chapter has revealed that it was not the sight of the body itself that was the basis of the nude photograph's acceptance or legality, but rather the socio-cultural constructs that it symbolized and their interactions within the photograph. Assessing nude photographs, therefore, was the difficult navigation of the web of ambiguities surrounding the body and the photographic medium, the double taboo. The results were not surprisingly different for even slightly differing representations, for at the margin a slight movement can make a large difference in the boundary. Art photographs were dependent upon the nature of the relationships between the viewer, subject and photographer. In scientific photographs respectability was taken for granted if the name of science was invoked. And although ambiguous, photographs that were in between were treated as scientific. Such seemingly illogical differences are what cause modern confusion on the subject. Yet in every case, the determination of the position of nude photographs was calculated to maximize the progress and power of the Victorian state according to their understanding of the world. And knowing the logic of this understanding is knowing the logic of the nude photograph.

¹⁷¹ Pointon, *Naked Authority*: 14.

Conclusion

I began this study with a two-fold goal. Firstly, I wanted to discover fundamentally why the photographic nude occupied such a precarious position in the art of Victorian Britain, above and beyond the already problematic existence of the traditional fine art nude. But moreover, I wanted to use the information I discovered to unravel and make sense of the Victorian reactions to specific classes of or even individual nude photographs.

On the first count, the precariousness of the photographic nude is due to the density of related issues. Michel Foucault has argued that sexual discourses of a society are indicative of their power structures: “we must question them on the two levels of their tactical productivity (what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure) and their strategical integration (what conjunction and what force relationship make their utilization necessary in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur).”¹ Throughout this study I have attempted to show that the Victorian photographic nude was a particularly revealing sexual discourse in that it was situated at a complex and important intersection of power relationships in nineteenth-century Britain. We have seen that the major components of this intersection—attitudes toward the human body and the new medium of photography—were both problematic in that they were created by and could create a range of power relationships, some conducive to prevailing structures and others antithetical. The photographic nude was similarly ambiguous. These same areas that Foucault would call ‘dense points of transfer’ for their high potentiality Mary Douglas calls tabooed, marginal, because their uses do not fit easily within existing definitions. Despite the fact that such indefiniteness does, as Foucault suggests, lend the area great power, its ability to disrupt the framework of life by altering the margins also imbues it with great danger. In this case, the powers of the body and the camera to upset the social structures that Victorians believed to be directly relevant to their hegemony caused fear and fascination in Victorian estimation of their intersection: the nude photograph.

As to the second problem of untangling and justifying Victorian response to individual nude photographs, Mary Douglas’ description of ways in which ambiguity may be resolved is key.

1 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*: 102.

First, by settling for one or other interpretation ... Second, the existence of anomaly can be physically controlled ... Third, a rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform ... Fourth, anomalous events may be labelled dangerous ... Attributing danger is one way of putting a subject above dispute. It also helps to enforce conformity ... Fifth, ambiguous symbols can be used ... for the same ends as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence.²

Each of these tactics at one point or another were used by the Victorians to attempt to remove the ambiguity, and therefore danger, of the photographic nude. Not only does this description affirm the position of the photographic nude as a taboo, but its very variety indicates both just how dangerous the Victorians viewed the genre to be and, additionally, how fine the divisions were between its categories. At such an important watershed, even the slightest difference holds great distinction.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the problem of the Victorian photographic nude is the special case of a general rule, namely that areas of human expression that are uncomfortable must signify underlying unstable boundaries. If we believe that such tabooed areas hold both danger and power—are dense points of transfer—we must assume that they will invite many discourses of many perspectives with the power to shift experience and the accompanying feeling of unease. Such subjects are like windows into the infrastructure of human social existence. On this note Mary Douglas comments that, “Each culture has its own special risks and problems ... It seems that our deepest fears and desires take expression with a kind of witty aptness.”³ All that remains is to ask ourselves what such expressions reveal about the taboos of our society.

² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 40–1.

³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*: 122.

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