

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 19 (October 2019), No. 208

Thomas Kren with Jill Burke and Stephen J. Campbell, eds., *The Renaissance Nude*. Exhibition catalog (30 October, 2018 – 27 January, 2019, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; 2 March – 2 June, 2019, Royal Academy of Arts, London). Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018. \$65.00 (cl.). 432 pp. ISBN 978-1606065846.

Review by Jennifer Nelson, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Every chapter of *The Renaissance Nude* starts with the skin of a European Renaissance nude. That is, each chapter begins with a flesh-colored page of text facing a well-chosen, well-photographed full-bleed detail from the exhibition (which took place last fall through winter at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and last spring at the Royal Academy of Arts in London). The shades of these chapter openers range from beige to a full rose, as the painted nudes of this time period in Europe generally do. These blushing pages set the tone, so to speak, of playful confrontation and experiential immersion shared by both show and catalogue.

My only complaint about the catalogue is that these pages, with their extra gloss, can be difficult to read in most lighting; the catalogue, heavier and on thicker stock than its relatively low price would suggest, is unwieldy for re-positioning to avoid glare. But that is all. What follows here will be praise admixed with some further thoughts the catalogue might raise for scholars of the Renaissance, of the body, and of the history of art in general.

Produced in conjunction with one of the best full-scale shows of Renaissance art in the last two decades, this catalogue extends the impact of that show by providing enormous high-quality illustrations, copious comparanda not present in the show itself, and dozens of incredible, often sensuous details. Even more importantly, the catalogue also deepens the exhibition's reach into nuances of social context and questions of historiographical importance. And these nuances and questions are not just fussy, quibbly fodder for pedants. Thorough—almost to the point of inventory at times—yet following clear lines of argument, the essays here cover, among other things: which artists used live models, dissections, or even stereometric projects where and when (Jill Burke); the erotics of female nudes from private courtly images in France to the communal misogyny of Power of Women prints in the Low Countries and Germany (Diane Wolfthal); the counter-ideal of “unruly bodies,” those that depart from various societal norms (my favorite of Stephen J. Campbell's two essays); and so on. With some exceptions, as is common for catalogue essays, the focus does not lie on new scholarly discoveries. But the thorough collection and smart reframing of historiographical strands is most welcome for anyone who uses Renaissance nudes in scholarship or teaching.

These strands are almost exclusively tied to Italy, France, the Low Countries, and the German states. Such a geographic purview, though not explicitly accounted for in the catalogue, is no surprise. First of all, I would like to applaud the catalogue's overall light but genuine engagement with figures from outside Europe. Though there was no gratuitous inclusion of token outsider nudes, succinct address of the influence of peoples of sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas on concepts of primal or "savage" human existence appeared in multiple essays, with good bibliography (pp. 10, 156, 239, and 279).

Secondly, for better or worse, art historians generally recognize the "Renaissance," in crude geographic terms, from Vienna westward, with occasional acknowledgments of Hungarian and Polish courts. (Though this already-ambitious catalogue might have weakened from the strain of even more work, similar acknowledgment of the production of nudes in what is now Poland, largely by German-speaking workshops, and more attention to work east of the Elbe in general, would have been welcome.) This conventional Renaissance now includes Spain and to some extent England as other major "national" traditions. Art-making in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Spain tended to avoid the nude, though wealthy Spanish collectors, including political rulers, were among the most famous owners of painted nude figures in the period. It seems likely that most nudes produced at this time in England would have been ephemera, courtly or otherwise, of which little survives. (A well-known exception would be the unclothed male soul in Holbein's 1530s rendition of the Lutheran-Cranachian theme [itself perhaps inspired by a French print] of *Law and Grace*, now in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh.) And if these assumptions are not borne out by more extensive examination of material remains, perhaps this catalogue will encourage scholars of Spain and England to complicate its arguments further.

For part of the joy of the catalogue is its particular kind of transnational approach, one overtly affirmed by the editors (p. 1). It is now a commonplace to eschew the old nationalist agendas of the formative years of Renaissance art history; but these ghosts linger, especially in the historiography, which can take the form of dense silos of nation-based specialist dialogue. Not so here. In almost every essay, specialists stray past "their own" nation and generate substantial conclusions. If occasionally a date like 1517 is used as shorthand by an Italianist for a phenomenon like the Reformation that does not really get going internationally till the early 1520s, these occasions are much outweighed by the valuable insights produced by the editors' method. For example, re-examinations of how earlier, primarily fifteenth-century French illuminations compare with later Italian painting (in both C. Jean Campbell's and the first of Thomas Kren's essays) go beyond the clichés of linear development common to textbook art history. Kren attends to the gender divide (female in France, male in Italy), the different contexts of viewing, and shifting relationships to faith and to antiquity. C. Jean Campbell's essay is somewhat a work of art itself, teasing the reader with the impossible task of "painting Venus"—not just any unattainable Platonic ideal, but one that presents the complex oxymoron of a desired material erotic ideal replete in itself—and ending so abruptly one feels the writer herself joining the ranks of Apelles and Titian.

Beyond these two essays devoting several sustained pages to French art and its history, the French tradition is given its due throughout. Though Jean Fouquet's painting of the breast-baring Virgin of the Melun Diptych did not make it to the London version of the show, she appears on the book's cover. There is some disagreement even within the catalogue about whether she truly represents Agnès Sorel. Ulrich Pfisterer, in an imaginative essay about "personalizing" the nude, reminds readers that the identification of the Melun Virgin with this

beloved mistress of Charles VIII does not antedate the seventeenth century (p. 313); but Thomas Kren's catalogue entry takes the identification for granted (cat. no. 102, pp. 338-340). The catalogue's reproduction of the painting at different scales unintentionally reinforces the fascinating tension between a crisp, high-contrast style one might associate with manuscript illumination, in which Fouquet was trained, and the human-sized scale of the panel.

Scholars of French manuscript illumination will, again, not necessarily find fresh discoveries, but they will consistently find startling juxtapositions and new contextualizations of canonical manuscripts. As in the show, illumination is not simply deployed as a precursor to the painting, as is too often the case: the catalogue begins with some Adam and Eves, then moves through Dieric Bouts' Lille panels of saved and damned souls to images of the suffering Christ. French manuscript nudes instead make for linchpins of catalogue themes. Intended for a notionally private, devotional setting, they contain elements of both bodily suffering and humanist (that is, antiquity-driven) erudition.

One of the stars of the catalogue is a French illumination by the Netherlands-born Limbourg brothers, an image one could call documentary. A leaf from the *Belles heures* of the Duc du Berry, *The Procession of Flagellants* (cat. no. 21, pp. 72-73) depicts several lean, male nudes with pale skin often reserved for women in mixed imagery. Their rolled-down robes clinging tenuously to their hips, they participate in "ritual public self-mortification," a "controversial" practice at the time. The figures' procession is not isocephalic but rather slants downward to the right, imprinting the viewer subtly with the just-concluded downward stroke of the flail held across the center of the image. This flail has just left traces of blood on the back of one of the men prostrate on their knees in the foreground. The play of gazes--almost all concealed, almost all directed downward at the spectacle of punishment--creates an erotic tension all on its own, as the figures' affects are withheld and somehow thereby become all the more identifiable with the viewer.

Though there are many more things to praise, I will conclude by turning to some further thoughts the catalogue provoked. The first question is about chronology. The three editors state outright in their introductory essay that they are addressing the years 1400-1530, even providing a "therefore"-like "then" as they do so (p. 7). However, though the catalogue itself suggests some justifications for this limit, a clear antecedent to the "therefore" is missing.

My favorite justification for an end date in the 1530s is Thomas DePasquale's convincing account in his concluding essay of the importance not of the Council of Trent (here DePasquale follows the work of John W. O'Malley) but of the discourse surrounding Michelangelo's "divine" and all-too-human Sistine fresco of the *Last Judgment* in constraining the possibilities of the nude in the later sixteenth century. The sophisticated approach to nudes in the work of the Limbourg brothers and then Jan van Eyck point toward a start date around 1400, though the much earlier exemplars in Diane Wolfthal's essay also inspire much curiosity in this reviewer.

Speaking of earliness, one revelation for me in the show was encountering Pisanello's drawings of female nudes in person (cat. no. 62, pp. 214-215). The exhibition's claim on the accompanying placard that these drawings were taken from life *with female models* delighted me and led me to the bold and convincing scholarship of Jill Burke elsewhere (helpfully cited in the catalogue, in the footnotes of her own essay preceding the catalogue entry) about the use of such models. It is true that of the four figures, which all seem to be of the same person, the two on the left have somewhat masculine turns in their calves. But the rest of the figure in much of its details--the

left axillary fold of the leftmost figure, the way thighs protrude from hip, the softer pouching of the belly over the pubis, the extra jag at the hipbone—really does suggest that this bizarre, wonderful artist was perhaps working with a female model at some point in the 1420s or 1430s, long before sly comments about such women pop up in surviving discourse. Regardless, it is above all a welcome and important challenge to revisit the iconography of the gendered body today, in light of the importance of resisting forced gender conformity six hundred years later in societies very much influenced by Renaissance nudes.

My final reflection stems from one of the broader themes of the catalogue, a divide between the importance of material specificity in the production and social context of nudes and the association of the nude with ideal forms. Stephen J. Campbell concludes his excellent overview of humanist associations with the nude in his first catalogue essay with a call for readers to “recognize” the “diversity” of forms of the nude, as he has just laid them out (p. 153). This diversity he pits against the “transhistorical” ideals of later artists and thinkers. Such a conflict made me eager for a sequel to the show: a catalogue of nudes on the “eve of the modern,” perhaps, with a focus on the diversity of specific transhistorical conceptions of the nude figure, neoclassical and otherwise. But I doubt that catalogue could be so rich.

We are lucky that a landmark exhibition like *The Renaissance Nude* found its match in its catalogue. This compilation of scholarship and bibliography is a gift to anyone interested in the history of representation and theorization of the body. The large, crisp reproductions are gifts for anyone at all: framing the art more expertly and productively than even an internet-image-search adept, this catalogue lets the nudes do their various work. And they do still work, not through transhistorical beauty, not the way they did centuries ago, but through a complex inheritance this book capaciously and complexly acknowledges.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Timothy Potts and Christopher Le Brun, “Foreword”

Part One: The Nude in Christian Art

Thomas Kren, “Christian Imagery and the Development of the Nude in Europe”

Part Two: Humanism and the Expansion of Secular Themes

Diane Wolftham, “From Venus to Witches: The Female Nude in Northern Europe”

C. Jean Campbell, “‘Painting Venus’ in the Poetic Tradition of the Early Renaissance”

Stephen J. Campbell, “Naked Truth: Humanism, Poetry, and the Nude in Renaissance Art”

Part Three: Artistic Theory and Practice

Jill Burke, “The Body in Artistic Theory and Practice”

Davide Gasparotto, “The Renaissance Nude and the Study of the Antique”

---

Part Four: Beyond the Ideal Nude

Stephen J. Campbell, “Unruly Bodies: The Uncanny, the Abject, the Excessive”

Part Five: Personalizing the Nude

Ulrich Pfisterer, “Here’s Looking at You’: Ambiguities of Personalizing the Nude”

Thomas Kren, “Epilogue One: Reformation and Beyond in Northern Europe”

Thomas Despasquale, “Epilogue Two: Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* and the Reception of the Nude in Counter-Reformation Italy”

Jennifer Nelson

University of Wisconsin-Madison

[jnelson44@wisc.edu](mailto:jnelson44@wisc.edu)

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172