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“Men Want to Be Looked At: A Look at the Male Nude in Western Photography”, by Sandi Harageones



THIS PAPER WAS ORIGINALLY PRESENTED AT THE SPRING ART HISTORY SEMINAR AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO, AND WILL BE PRESENTED AT THE 'PHOTOGRAPHY + (CON)TEXT' INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: PHOTOGRAPHY IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH, September 8-9, 2016 at University College London (UCL), Institute of Archaeology (Heritage Studies) in

London, England.

The male nude is an important, but forgotten, subject. When most people think of the word “nude” in art, they think of the female nude—as demonstrated by such books as *Mastering Digital Nude Photography* by Roderick Macdonald, which disappointingly features all females and not one male despite its ambiguous title. The female nude is more prevalent in the art world than the male nude. The female nude is beautiful and we should continue to appreciate her vitality in art, but she has overshadowed another beauty that should be in the same spotlight. While in the past century the male nude has been slowly reviving through photography, the greater part of its revitalization is associated with homoeroticism. What has happened to the male nude and how can we make the desirous gaze more comfortable for all audiences? In this paper, we will examine the male nude in photography and discover the changes in “the gazes” to answer this question.

For nearly two thousand years, the male nude overshadowed the female nude. In early Classical Greece and early Italian Renaissance, artists used the male body for studies of naturalism, anatomy, and proportion. Widely depicted in Greek sculpture, the beauty of the male body was honored in ancient Greek society and nudity was shown with pride and confidence. By contrast, “Aphrodite [was] the only goddess ever portrayed naked.” Even ancient erotic art, both heterosexuals and homosexuals, “[celebrated] the male body, the erect penis, and the act of penetration” more so than the female nude who “was never the sole and exclusive object of sexual feeling that it has become since the Renaissance.” However, homosexuals and heterosexuals viewed the male nude differently. Homosexuals preferred the heroic figures depicting strength and athleticism while heterosexuals were drawn to the sensual and “feminine” figures—especially after the radical change of Hellenistic Greece when men “turned inward to family life” and “the private experience which was associated with the feminine.” “All through the long centuries of Hellenistic expansion and decline, the male nude [remained] the favored type.” So, when did the female surpass the male? More importantly, why didn’t both genders stay equally important as subjects in art?

In the late antique world, Christianity spread like wildfire, placing upon the naked body shame and humiliation and an expressed fear of the genitals. If there was nudity in Christian art, the genitals were almost always covered by a fig leaf or loincloth—especially after the Catholic reform of the 16th century. The Quattrocento, the period of increasing prosperity in the arts leading up to the High Renaissance, hallmarked the turning of the nude into a subject of desire purely for aesthetic purposes. More and more antique nudes were being discovered after the Dark Age in a newly flourishing period where people had previously been deprived of such visual pleasures for so long and now have the opportunity to own such art in private collections. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals found delight in owning antique male nudes—even fragments. “They [were] playthings to be contemplated and handled by a man with an eye for art—and for a beautiful body.”

Their reactions to nudity are understandable. Religion, no matter how influential, has never stopped human sexual desire and we can thank religion for enhanced sensuality due to the covering of the body. As Kenneth Clark says, “the very degradation the body

has suffered as a result of Christian morality served to sharpen its erotic content.” It is like visual foreplay to see a nearly naked body or even body parts that are slightly revealed through translucent clothing.

During the 15th century, the separation of the genders was a way of juggling emotions associated with fears and desires of masculinity and femininity in men and women among the constraints of religion. The popularity of male nudes still grew alongside these constraints in this prospering era. It wasn't until the 17th century that the female nude became the more popular subject in art. Art at this time focused on sensuality and artistic creativity became associated with sexuality.

Today's modern masculinity and the “male stereotype” is a product from the making of the new bourgeois society that flourished at the end of the 18th century. To be “manly” became a number of new expectations to assume and uphold—such as being strong, having facial and chest hair, being heterosexual, and creating offspring. The opposite (sensitivity, joblessness, sterility, and homosexuality) had severe backlash in society. This new perspective of manliness grew in accordance with the need for more births (due to wars) in combination with the establishment of class, aristocracy, advancements in science, and with patriarchy that was ever present. Movements in the 20th century, such as gender bending and androgyny in the 1990's, homosexual rights acts, and feminism influenced change to modern masculinity.

Oddly, male nudity whether shown in popular film or represented by Greek sculpture doesn't have the homoerotic association that the male nudes in photography do. In my research, “the sexualized male nude body has its cultural roots in gay male aesthetics” and therefore the male nude in photography is more acceptable and comfortable for viewing among homosexual males because these men don't share “the heterosexual man's desire to keep the nude male body from view. They simply “do not fear the loss of power [and] control of being gazed at.” These homosexual men have adopted what Laura Mulvey calls the “female gaze” or otherwise known as “to-be-looked-at-ness”. Mulvey's “female gaze” no longer belongs to just females. Moreover, popular culture shows that the heterosexual man is also seizing upon this “to-be-looked-at-ness” gaze; for instance, actor Brad Pitt is shirtless when he seduces Geena Davis in *Thelma and Louise* 1991 and naked in the sex scene with Rose Byrne in *Troy* 2004. Ryan Gosling stars alongside Emma Stone in *Crazy Stupid Love* 2011 who says to him, “Seriously? It's like you're Photoshopped!” in regards to his chiseled torso after telling him to remove his shirt. Both singer/songwriter Adam Levine and soccer superstar David Beckham have posed nude or shirtless on multiple occasions. Actor Channing Tatum directed and starred nearly naked in his movies *Magic Mike* 2012 and *Magic Mike XXL* 2015 with the intent of being “looked at”. His two movies are blatantly made to satisfy the erotic desires of the heterosexual female audience. Furthermore, all of these men have appeared as *People Magazine's*: Sexiest Man Alive with the exception of Ryan Gosling. Whether for a heterosexual or homosexual audience, it is clear these men like how they look and thus enjoy being looked at.

According to Mulvey's gaze theory, the active male is the “one who looks” (the male gaze) and the passive female is the “one being looked at” (the female gaze). Popular culture shows that this is no longer the case. Today, both genders are doing the looking

and being looked at and the bearer of the look is interchanged at any given time. For example, I am a heterosexual female and in my relationship, I find myself being the active one who looks as well as the passive one who is being looked at, depending on the situation and the mood. Scopophilia and voyeurism are without a doubt actions performed by both genders. Lynda Nead's quote from *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* applies directly to the male. "The [male] nude—natural, unstructured—represents something that is outside the proper field of art and aesthetic judgment; but artistic style, pictorial form, contains and regulates the body and renders it an object of beauty, suitable for art and aesthetic judgment."

The nude body is an essence of what we both desire and fear. We derive pleasure from looking and from being looked at. This is the nature of human sexuality and eroticism. Failure of the heterosexual male to accept the male nude is credited to "power relations in contemporary Western culture". Florence Dee Boodakian explains that the heterosexual man's desire to keep the male nude from view is a way of protecting the male nude body, "protection against his own surveillance (Is my penis too small? Am I muscular enough? Too fat?...) and protection of the power he possesses as the one who is typically the "gazer". That said, the male has the same insecurities as the female. Yet, men like Brad Pitt, Ryan Gosling, Channing Tatum, Adam Levine, and David Beckham willfully surrender this "protection" as well as their position as the "gazer". Film critic Linda Williams from UC-Berkeley says "a growing eroticism about the male body that hasn't quite existed before may be a form of rebellion." Rebellion refers to Foucault's statement "where there is power, there is always resistance." But is it rebellion or is it listening to what people want to see—or both?

What makes the male nude in photography so challenging? The female nude is so prevalent in modern society that its interpretation is readily available for all genders and sexual orientations, but the male nude is not. Beth A. Eck says that looking at the male nude is complicated for women as well as men but in different ways. She says, "Neither men nor women are culturally adept at the interpretation and use of nude male images." I disagree that heterosexual females have trouble looking. If they do, then they may have a problem with nudity in general. Eck's research is based on an interview with only forty-five people. That said, could heterosexual males accept the male nude as they do with film and Greek sculpture? The difference may be because photography freezes a moment in time unlike the naked man in film who will eventually leave the scene or the Greek God whose identity is mythical and appearance is not as realistic as a photograph. With photography, we are forced to see the unchanging male nude for eternity or until we look away. Men may question their own heterosexuality if looking too long. They fear that others may perceive them as homosexual and "possibly get the wrong idea about [them]." However, "Pronger's (1990) examination of heterosexual and homosexual men in sport suggests that all men, gay or straight, look at one another in locker rooms." The curiosity is there, but fear holds them back.



Looking at Herb Ritts' *Tony With Shadow* 1988, we see a beautiful nude torso of a muscular man casting his shadow against a wall. He shifts his hips forward, posed for us with his left hand on his hip. He appears tall, handsome, masculine, and confident. His head is out of our view but the shadow of his regal profile tells us that he is looking forward—his attention is elsewhere and not on us. His hair is clean cut, his face and his body are smooth, and his skin is soft, delicate, and sensual. The light accentuates his defined muscles—indicating strength. He stands freely and peacefully, free of distractions—it is just he and the wall behind him. His chest dominates the frame, leading our eye downward to his penis, which is just out of our view (our visual foreplay) and then back upwards along his shadow to his profile. Whether he is aware of us or not, he stands proud, nude, and is showing off his body. Tony wants to be looked at. His power is in his passivity.

Horst P. Horst's *Male Nude, frontal sitting* 1952 sits in a masculine pose and is casually sensual as compared to Tony, who is more overtly sexual. Horst also uses chiaroscuro lighting to highlight the model's arms and legs to draw our attention to his penis, which is faintly visible (once again our visible foreplay). Initially, our eyes are directed to the model's forearm, leading down to his hand and into the dark area of his groin—which appears to be the Subject. Horst's strategic use of lighting emphasizes the model's circular position, keeping our eyes moving around his slender body. Although we cannot see his head, his attention is directed away from us. He shaved his arms and legs to make his skin smooth so that it appears like marble. He is comfortable and confident with his appearance and wants to be looked at.

In conclusion, the male nude was the central focus in art by both heterosexuals and homosexuals until the 17th century, but today it is associated with homoeroticism. The female nude is easily accepted by both genders because she is more prevalent and there are more “readily available cultural scripts for interpreting and responding to [her].” The male stereotype was constructed as a result of changes in society and still exists today. However, the interchanging of the gazes have influenced how men, both heterosexual and homosexual, see themselves as objects of desire—especially depicted in popular culture. If the male nude in photography were as commonly accepted as the female nude, would our culturally constructed gaze become more comfortable with him or are we at the dawn of a new Renaissance?

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