THE VENUS PARADOX

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In a lithograph of 1864 Honoré Daumier used the popularity of the Paris Salon nude to symbolize the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of Louis-Napoleon’s Second Empire (1852-1870; fig. 1). His caption has two bourgeoisies bemoaning the excessive number of female nudes on display: ‘Still more Venuses this year…always Venuses… as if there were any women built like that…’ Born from sea spume, Venus is of course the Greek mythological goddess of love, par excellence the tasteful symbol of French Second Empire depravity. In addition to Daumier’s cartoon, in this essay I will explore the contradictions between morality and obscenity in the later 19th-century artistic nude with reference to work by Alexandre Cabanel, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

In Daumier’s caricature the two bourgeoisies are invited to compare themselves to the Salon ideal of naked female beauty and find themselves wanting. The cartoon assumes a male viewer since the bourgeoisies’ reaction to the Venuses makes them the humorous object of a knowing male gaze. Looking was active and identified with a masculine social position. It confirmed power on the bearer of the look, assigning to him the capacity to decipher and thereby control the object of his gaze. The cultivated male gaze both produced and consumed meaning. Daumier was by no means a lover of feminism or female emancipation himself, and the female gaze he encoded in his bourgeoisies was maternal, biological; rooted in the body (as against the mind), it thus lacked the requisite distance, the necessary impartiality to engage intellectually with the Venuses at a cultural level. Paradoxically, in their unembattled naiveté, Daumier’s women spectators ‘see through’ the cultural rhetoric clothing artistic nudity in the garb of civilised decency that allowed erotic paintings like Alexandre Cabanel’s Birth of Venus (fig. 2) to pass as publicly acceptable – a case of the emperor’s new clothes. Comparing these representations to their own bodies, Daumier’s bourgeoisies take these naked Venuses literally (‘…as if there were any women built like that…’). Daumier thus exposed the artificiality of the academic nude. He invited his audience to acknowledge the hypocrisy of their classicising veneer, which was also exposed by the radical new realism of the modern Venus in Manet’s work of 1863.

As ever, Daumier’s intervention was astute and timely. In 1863 the Paris Salon had been dubbed the ‘Salon of the Venuses’ due to the large number of alluring nudes on show, and notable among these was Cabanel’s lascivious Rococo-esque Birth of Venus. It was purchased from the Salon by no less than Napoleon III himself for his personal collection. The painting embodied precisely those ideals of academic art – the careful modelling, delicate colours, silky ‘lack’ brushwork and mythological subject matter – bemoaned by Daumier’s bourgeoisies as artificial. For Daumier these ‘ideals’ were synonymous with the debauched tyranny of the Second Empire, its political oppression cloaked in decadent frivolity. Emile Zola likewise attacked the facile artificiality of Cabanel’s Venus when Napoleon showed his painting at the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle.
Take an antique Venus, the body of any woman whatsoever drawn according to the well-ordered rules, and, lightly, with a powder puff, dab colour and powder on the body; there you have Monsieur Cabanet's ideal [...]

The ladies swoon, the gentlemen keep a reverent demeanour [...]. The goddess, drowned in a sea of milk, resembles a delicious courtesan [louve], not of flesh and blood – that would be indelicate – but made of a sort of pink and white marzipan.²

The women who, according to Zola, were taken in by and 'swooned over' Cabanet's Venus were apparently a different species to those portrayed by Daumier. Yet all were doomed prey to their emotions, succumbing to their bodily reactions.

The growing medicalisation of the female anatomy by mid-century in France constrained women as wholly subject to her reproductive organs, a theory that by the late 1870s found new expression in Jean-Baptiste Charcot's hysteria diagnosis.³ It is therefore no coincidence that both Daumier and Zola drew on medical metaphors in their construction of the response of female spectators to viewing 'representations of women's nude bodies.' The spectacle of Venus's in the Paris Salons in the 1860s coincided not just with this process of medicalisation, but with the problematic emergence of the assertive 'New Woman', serving to highlight contentious issues of modern feminine subjectivity and female agency.

The spread during the Second Empire of both unregistered, 'clandestine' prostitutes and of venereal disease posed a serious threat to the health of the nation and to its heritage.

At the root of this problem lay sexuality: more specifically, female sexuality, since bourgeois codes of sexual regulation focussed not on the apparently invisible normative heterosexual practices of men, but rather on female deviance. Unregulated female sexuality posed a moral, medical and hygienic threat to youth and to the non-natural femme, as well as to the structures of the bourgeois family itself.⁷ As Jill Harsin has argued...
The definition of the clandestine was far hazier than that of the inscribed prostitute, and as the century wore on the clandestine came to overshadow the AVE scourge, to the point that a leading abolitionist would write, with conscious irony, that a clandestine prostitute was simply any woman who had not been registered yet.\textsuperscript{6}

The mythological figure of the goddess of love was a metaphor for modern transgressive feminine sexuality. Pampered and sanitised, the Venus of Cabanel fused the academic purism of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres with a throwback to the Ancien Régime: the erotic decadence of French court Rococo in the manner of François Boucher or Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Thus Cabanel's treatment gives an aura of respectability to his modern "courtesan," whose seductive powers threatened to undermine French manhood.

Increasingly codified during the Second Empire in its decadent reflection of the pre-revolutionary era, the Goncourt brothers were among the first to revive modern interest in French Rococo. As we shall see, the nudes of Manet were equally indebted to the revival.

In that same year, 1863, Manet's infamous Le déjeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the Grass, Paris, Musée d'Orsay) was rejected by the official Salon Jury as obscene. He exhibited it instead to great notoriety at the 1863 Salon des Refusés. Manet depicted a thoroughly contemporary naked woman, the model for whom, Victoire Meunier, was well-known in Parisian artistic circles, ensuring she was no anonymous "type." He dispensed with all the conventions associated with mythology in general and Venus in particular, despite depicting an overtly sexualised scene in which the woman has clearly removed the clothes displayed beside her. Accompanied by a charme-clad female bather in the background and in the foreground two equally recognisable fully clothed gentlemen, she sits unashamed, gazing boldly out at the spectator and thus implicating him in her brazen nakedness.\textsuperscript{7} Manet refused to embellish his nude in the tasteful polished style of the academic Cabanel.
indeed he affirmed the coarseness of his subject matter by his bluntly direct handling and crude frontal lighting.

Although painted in that same year, Manet did not exhibit his reclining "Venus" figure, the Olympia (fig. 3), until 1865, when, in an attempt to avert a repeat of the scandalous 1863 Salon des Refusés, the official jury accepted it for exhibition. Here Manet again combined his direct, undulating painting style with a flattening frontal light; the resulting figure was characterized as a "faux kimono" without nuanced shading or modeling she appeared startlingly similar to a popular print rather than high art. Again, Victorine Meurent stories out at us. Such an active female gaze like that in Manet's two paintings implied not just female agency but female sexual agency as associated with prostitutes. Her direct gaze challenged propriety, suggesting woman might not be the submissive vessel required of dominant sexual morals. Indeed, as the rise of clandestine prostitution proved, women were taking the illicit sexual economy into their own hands, marketing their bodies independent of male laws and constraints.

Significantly in this respect, Manet's Olympia was deemed to have an "unhealthy" yellow pallor. Her "crude" painted flesh — unlike the blended, rosy-cream tints of Cabarete's luxuriously powdered Venus — was considered symptomatic of the fallen woman, the courtesan she did indeed represent. In medical-social terms, then, the Olympia's flesh evoked pathological connotations of syphilis, the hereditary disease most feared by the bourgeoisie; in its putrid hue and effects on the male spectator, it corresponded to the social value of sexuality. Thus the Deurnier, Manet attacked Second Empire moral hypocrisy, His Olympia's public decorum, from the Salon wall she sat upright and slightly boldy out at the assumed male spectator, effectively her next client — the donor of the huge bouquet of flowers held by her black maid. Where Manet's Olympia draws attention to her genitalia by covering them with her hand — in the manner of a Venus Pudica — Cabarete's Venus thrusts forward her "sex-brushed" pubic region at the viewer's eyeliner. Laid invitingly supine, her raised arms expose her full breasts while shielding her eyes in a tantalizing
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His Olympia routed public decree from the Salon well she sat upright and stared boldly out at the assumed male spectator, effectively her next client — the donor of the huge bouquet of flowers held by her black maid. Where Manet's Olympia draws attention to her genitalia by covering them with her hand — in the manner of a Venus Pudica — Cabanel's Venus thrusts forward her 'launched' pubes region at the viewer's eyelids. Laid invitingly supine, her raised arms expose her full breasts while shielding her eyes in a tantalising display of modesty. In contrast to Olympia's confrontational gaze, the viewer's eye here is challenged and even encouraged by the little staring Cupids flying above her, yet simultaneously Cabanel erased her sexuality by obliterating the split (pudendal cleft) in the mons veneris — literally 'mount of Venus' — that announces the start of the outer labial majora and the inner female genitalia. His Venus was sexually available yet unawed.

Degas produced hundreds of images of women and water, his brothels nudes engage in private abutments, and his reprehensible 'Venuses' rise out of their cheap flat tubs: the modern shell of the mythical sea-born Venus from Botticelli (c. 1485, Florence, Uffizi Gallery) to William Adolphe Bouguereau (1879, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In works such as Degas' Woman bathing in a Shallow Tub (Fig. 4), which was exhibited with other bather pastels at the last Impressionist exhibition in 1886, he personified middle-class exoticism and modernised its 18th-century Rococo usage while subverting its feminine associations in representing a life assumed (a registered prostitute). The fricative exoticism associated with pastel and hence with the aristocratic Amien Régime takes on a darker hue in the context of fin-de-siècle anxiety over venereal contagion. Degas made the link explicit in his pastel over monotype print Women at her Toilette (Fig. 5), which shows a prostitute on a bidet washing her genitalia. In 'Maisons de Tolérance' — brothels whose inmates were registered with the Moral Police and thus 'tolerated' despite prostitution being illegal for women — the practice of washing between clients was made a requirement for reasons of hygiene aimed at reducing venereal contagion. Such women were also subject to regular medical inspection for signs of disease, an event movingly portrayed by Toulouse-Lautrec in Rue des Moulins: The Medical Inspection (Fig. 6). Thus in Second Empire and Third Republican Paris the equation of Venus and water added up to more than harmless mythology. It also denoted feminine hygiene and thence the relationship between prostitution, the Moral Police, and public health. Completing the circle, women found to be diseased were transferred for treatment to the Paris Women's Hospital — Charcot's La Salpêtrière.
What we are witnessing here is the very porous fluidity of the visual and discursive boundaries between medico-sexual pathologies, hereditary disease, mortification, scientific observation, aesthetic pleasure and erotic titillation. That these apparently divergent discourses came together in the scrutiny of the naked female body is entirely predictable, since women was a key disempowered site and expression of male agency. Identified with 'nature', as such women was the proper subject of scrutiny for both art and science. Louise-Emile Balsam's highly acclaimed sculpture commission for the new Faculty of Medicine in Bordeaux, a first version from 1893, Nature Unveiling Herself before Science is emblematic of this porosity. The 1899 polychrome stone second version is now in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris (fig. 7), while a 1902 replica in white marble is appropriately located in the foyer of the Paris Faculty of Medicine.1 How different to the unveiling the women undertake in Toulouse-Lautrec's Rue des Moulins (fig. 6), where in instead of submissive Nature exposing her elegant bosoms before the discomposing male scientist, disenchanted female sex workers are required to hitch up their chemises, 'unveiling' to medical scrutiny their abused genitalia.

The intersecting narratives of medicine, art and eroticism are similarly figured from the medical side in the work of Dr Paul Richer, assistant to Charcot at La Salpêtrière and future Professor of Anatomy, at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts.2 Following his research with Charcot into female hysteria, Richer (also a sculptor) began in the 1880s to publish in the field of artistic anatomy. Accepting modern scientistic and anthropological methods that included the use of photography and comparative measurement as 'objective' records, he began to seek modern artistic ideals of male and female anatomical perfection. Just as velvetschemises were entailed in exposing the female body to view in Barrias and Toulouse-Lautrec, Richer often used masks (with too much medical photography and by 'artistic' models for supposed anonymity in photographic nude shots as well as his female subjects' hair to simultaneously vex and titillate in a wholly unscientific manner. Masks were associated with the sexuality, roast masked balls held at the Paris Opera, as depicted by Manet in his 1873 Masked Ball at the Opera (Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art). Perhaps uneasily but consciously deploying the erotic tropes of women's hair and seductive masques circulates widely in pornographic photographs (fig. 6), Richer made no attempt to disguise in his narrative sequences of 'statistical' photographs his own pleasure in big, long hair (fig. 9).3

Seductive hair returns us to the Rococo Revival's luscious hair, hair flowing like water, in a feature of many nudes, including Renoir's Blonde Bather (1881; Williamstown, MA, Clark Art Institute, fig. 10). Here, Impressionist techniques and modern life merge with a Rococo goddess. Painted when Renoir was travelling in Italy and inspired by ancient Roman and Italian Renaissance art, still French Nocca is central. Renoir's modern seaside Venus was probably modelled by his mistress, Aline Charigot; her prominent wedding ring gave some probity to the subject, although they married only in 1890. Rococo artists and their painting methods underwent a major revial after a long period of disfavour following the French Revolution of 1789. Significantly, in 1802—the year the Second Empire formally began—the Louvre acquired its first Boucher since the 18th century. The Goncourt brothers, Jules and Edmond, took up the cause of pre-revolutionary art, and in 1856 began publishing essays that would result in their volumes on l'Art du dieu Xixe siècle, completed in 1875. Published in 1860, the four-volume colour print by Jean-François Janinet after Boucher's Toile de Upere (fig. 11) has remarkable compositional affinities with Renoir's Blonde Bather; the painter's feathery style and brilliant colour were also indebted to Bouchard's techniques. His small Reckling Female Nude Seen from the Back (cat. no. 71) in the A. G. Leventis Gallery in Nicosia takes up this theme, the warm serpentine curves of the figure contrasting with the cool sea blues that evoke the ismene-born goddess.

Paul Richer, 'Female Morphology', Sou (Gedern [31 years], plate nos 2165/2051, 1926. École Nationale de Sculpture des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

Late 19th-century pornographic photograph, private collection.
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1. Plate 2 of Chirac vs. as Roland Quatremère, 1864. Lithograph in blue on white paper, 24 x 250 mm (image), 38 x 237 mm (sheet), The Art Institute of Chicago, William McComick McNichols Endowment, 1953.692. Baumann Regus 3411. Dated 34-34-10 (accessioned 1965).

2. Précis d'une Vénus parallèle, un corps de femme quiconque désire d'après les légies espagnoles, et, égalemnt, avec une houpppe, magnum prorsus de las taches de poitrine (de rosas, y tu jura a los de M. Calzada?). [Dispar, le corps est un simple masque, et on pourrait en diriger les humeurs à de fatales espérances...]. La houpppe, on vole dans un


7. The main figure on the right was based on a combination of Manet's two brothers, Eugène and Gustave. The other man is based on his brother Émile, a Dutch sculptor named Hendrik Leenhoff. (own name, London, in his Majesties service. The Meuse Eisla in 1839). See also in (1983), The Making of the Modern Body, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1997, pp. 239-254.


11. Original text: “A Vénus paradox is a kind of Don Quixote, and there are small-scale recasts in plaster and marble; there was also an additional bronze in six bronze figures produced by Steven Ferris. See also in the Museum of Deyssin, online catalogue: http://www.musee-deyssin.com/collections/les-collectionneurs/la-vénus-paradox.htm, caanister-controlled 117976.