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Hiram Powers (1805–1873), The Greek Slave, 1844

23-22 The Victorian Nude

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

Welcome to The Victorian Nude. Over the following slides we trace how British artists from the 1830s to the 1890s navigated the fundamental paradox of displaying the unclothed body in an era of professed moral propriety. The strategies they employed ranged from classical mythology and literary narrative to photographic experiment and pure aesthetic decoration, examined through fourteen key works in painting, sculpture, and photography. We begin with the artist who set the template: William Etty.

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William Etty (1787–1849),
The Sirens and Ulysses, 1837,
297 × 442.5 cm,
Manchester Art Gallery

William Etty (1787–1849), *The Sirens and Ulysses*, 1837, 297 × 442.5 cm, Manchester Art Gallery

William Etty's vast canvas — nearly fifteen feet across — was the foundational Victorian nude. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1837, it shows three voluptuous, fully human Sirens on an island heaped with rotting sailors, while Ulysses strains against the mast. The classical alibi was watertight: Homer made him do it. York-born Etty (1787–1849), a former Hull printer's apprentice obsessed with Titian and Rubens, sketched the decomposing corpses from actual mortuary cadavers, which the press found delightfully appalling. The Spectator called it "a disgusting combination of voluptuousness and loathsome putridity," while The Gentleman's Magazine declared it his finest work. Daniel Grant, a Manchester cotton merchant, eventually bagged it at a fire-sale price. Etty's experimental varnish began rotting almost immediately; the painting languished in storage for 150 years before its 2003–2010 restoration. The formula — myth plus flesh plus moral framing — set the template for everything that followed.

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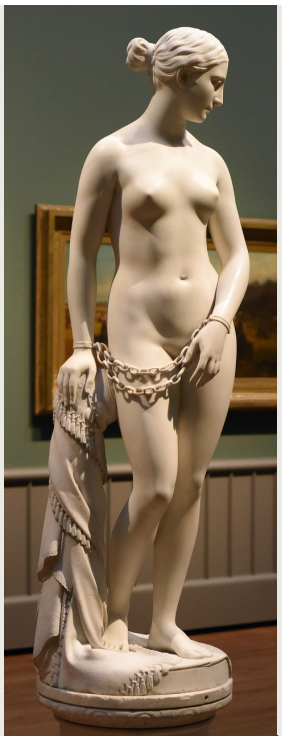

Hiram Powers (1805–1873),
The Greek Slave,
1844,
167.5 × 51.4 × 47 cm,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.

Hiram Powers (1805–1873), *The Greek Slave*, 1844, 167.5 × 51.4 × 47 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Hiram Powers's marble heroine was the nineteenth century's most respectable nude. A Greek Christian girl, captured by Ottomans and stripped for the Constantinople slave market, she stands chained yet serene, eyes lowered, a small cross and locket on the post beside her. Nudity, in other words, was not her choice — and that, Powers insisted, made all the difference. Born in Vermont, raised in Cincinnati, and trained as a clockmaker's apprentice, Powers moved to Florence in 1837 for the marble and the carvers, and proceeded to produce six full-scale versions plus more than a hundred busts. Reverend Orville Dewey famously pronounced her "clothed all over with sentiment." In America, abolitionists adopted her as an icon; in Britain, she stole the 1851 Great Exhibition. Some U.S. venues segregated male and female viewers. Minton later cranked out Parian ware miniatures for the mantelpiece trade.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Greek_Slave

William Edward Frost (1810–1877),
Una among the Fauns and Wood Nymphs,
1847,
122.2 × 183.9 cm,
Royal Collection (Windsor Castle)

William Edward Frost (1810–1877), *Una among the Fauns and Wood Nymphs*, 1847, 122.2 × 183.9 cm, Royal Collection (Windsor Castle)

William Edward Frost made a tidy career converting Spenser's Faerie Queene into well-lit female flesh, and Queen Victoria adored him for it. Una, Spenser's allegory of Truth, wanders the forest and is surrounded by fauns who recognise her purity and abandon their lecherous habits — a narrative so morally upright that the unclothed central figure becomes, technically, an emblem of virtue. The Royal Academy ate it up. Frost was an Etty protégé and inherited his master's facility with rosy, polished skin, but stripped out the unsettling corpses and theatrical danger; what remained was decorative sensuality wrapped in literary respectability. Victoria bought several of his works, including Una and the Wood Nymphs in 1847. Critics by the 1860s found Frost increasingly saccharine, but in the late 1840s he represented a winning formula: classical-adjacent narrative, no awkward questions, and flesh you could safely hang above the drawing-room sofa.

Jean-Louis-Marie-Eugène Durieu (1800–1874),
Female Nude Studies,
c.1853–55,
17.3 × 11.2 cm (per image),
J. Paul Getty Museum (and other collections)

Jean-Louis-Marie-Eugène Durieu (1800–1874), *Female Nude Studies*, c.1853–55, 17.3 × 11.2 cm (per image), J. Paul Getty Museum (and other collections)

Jean-Louis-Marie-Eugène Durieu was a civil servant, a founder of the Société française de photographie, and — crucially — a friend of Delacroix, who actively directed several of his nude sessions. The resulting albumen prints were intended as working aids for painters: poses, foreshortening, anatomy, gravity. But the camera proved an awkward ally. Real skin sagged, dimpled, and refused to flatter; pubic hair did not politely vanish; the models had bored expressions and goose pimples. Where the academic nude smoothed everything into marble idealism, Durieu's photographs let the mechanical truth leak in. Delacroix annotated some of them with painterly corrections, effectively re-idealising the body in the margins. The studies circulated quietly among artists, who used them constantly while rarely admitting it. They mark the moment when the nude tradition collided with optical fact — a small collision at the time, but a consequential one.

Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875),
The Two Ways of Life,
1857,
41 × 79 cm,
National Science and Media Museum, Bradford

Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875), *The Two Ways of Life*, 1857, 41 × 79 cm, National Science and Media Museum, Bradford

Oscar Gustave Rejlander, a Swedish émigré working in Wolverhampton, combined thirty-two separate negatives into a single sprawling allegory: a sage gesturing toward Virtue (industry, religion, sober family life) on one side, and Vice (drink, gambling, conspicuous female nudity) on the other. The point was to prove photography could do Grand Manner history painting. Queen Victoria bought a print for Prince Albert. The Photographic Society of Scotland refused to show the Vice half. Rejlander shot his nude figures from professional models, then composited them with the precision of a chess problem. Critics split between awe at the technical feat and horror at the very idea of photographed nudity hanging in a gallery. The image essentially invented combination printing and made the case for photography as fine art, while demonstrating that the moral framing required to legitimise the nude was getting more elaborate by the year.

Frederic Leighton (1830–1896),
Venus Disrobing for the Bath,
c.1866–67,
200.8 × 90.2 cm,
Private collection

Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), *Venus Disrobing for the Bath*, c.1866–67, 200.8 × 90.2 cm, Private collection

Frederic Leighton's marble-warm Venus, the very picture of polished classical containment, announced his arrival as the supreme High Victorian classicist when shown at the Royal Academy in 1867. The model was probably Mrs Dene, a professional sitter. The figure stands one foot raised, drapery sliding down, the moment suspended between concealment and revelation. Critics swooned. Frederic Leighton (1830–96) — later President of the Royal Academy and the only British artist ever ennobled before his death, as Baron Leighton, granted the day before he died (he held the title for under twenty-four hours) — built his reputation on flesh that looked like cool stone made suddenly warm. The pose owes a clear debt to the Aphrodite of Cnidus, antiquity laundered through Victorian propriety. The painting was sold and resold through the twentieth century; it last appeared at auction in 2008, fetching a record price.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_Disrobing_for_the_Bath

Albert Joseph Moore (1841–1893),
A Summer Night,
c.1887–90,
132 × 228.5 cm,
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Albert Joseph Moore (1841–1893), *A Summer Night*, c.1887–90, 132 × 228.5 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Albert Moore painted four reclining female nudes in a frieze, eyes closed, in front of a Mediterranean balcony at twilight. There is no story. That was the point. Moore had been studying Greek sculpture and Whistler's tonal experiments, and his aim was decorative harmony: colour, line, repetition. The figures sleep so the viewer can look without being looked at. Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool bought it in 1888, where it remains. The critical reception was mixed — those who wanted narrative were baffled; those who wanted aesthetic refinement adored it. Whistler called Moore a great painter, and meant it. Moore signed his work with a small anthemion leaf, almost an Art Nouveau monogram avant la lettre. His shadow falls over the entire Aesthetic Movement. He died of cancer at fifty-two, painting almost to the end, having quietly made the nude into wallpaper of the most sophisticated kind.

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882),
Lady Lilith,
1866–68 (altered 1872–73),
95.3 × 81.3 cm,
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Lady Lilith*, 1866–68 (altered 1872–73), 95.3 × 81.3 cm, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lilith was Adam's apocryphal first wife, dismissed for refusing to lie beneath him. She combs her copper hair, examines herself in a mirror, and ignores the viewer entirely. This is the eroticised, self-aware female nude — psychologically modern, narratively armed. The model was originally Fanny Cornforth, Rossetti's lover; he later repainted the face to resemble Alexa Wilding, leaving Cornforth's body and Wilding's head, a small Frankensteinian act of revisionism. Rossetti inscribed the frame with Shelley's line about the witch who draws men to watch the bright web she can weave. The flowers — white roses, poppies — carry standard Pre-Raphaelite freight: passion, sleep, death. Owned for years by Frederick Leyland, the Liverpool shipping magnate Whistler later fell out spectacularly with over the Peacock Room, the picture entered the Bancroft collection and thence the Delaware Art Museum. Few Victorian nudes look back this hard.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Lilith

John Everett Millais (1829–1896),
The Knight Errant,
1870,
184.1 × 135.3 cm,
Tate Britain, London

John Everett Millais (1829–1896), *The Knight Errant*, 1870, 184.1 × 135.3 cm, Tate Britain, London

Millais's only major nude, and a strange one. A bound, naked woman lashed to a tree; a knight in full armour cutting her free; assailants slain in the underbrush. Rescue narrative, vulnerability staged. Originally Millais (1829–96) painted the woman facing the viewer; critics found the direct gaze indecent, so he scraped her head off and repainted her looking demurely away. The discarded original head was reused in another picture. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1870, it was a commercial failure — too overtly nude for British taste, too unclassical to claim mythological cover. Tate Britain holds it now. Millais, founding Pre-Raphaelite turned Royal Academy president and baronet, never tried the genre again. The painting is fascinating precisely because it half-works: a rescue fantasy that admits its own voyeurism, in armour. By the twentieth century critics had rehabilitated it as a key study of Victorian ambivalence.

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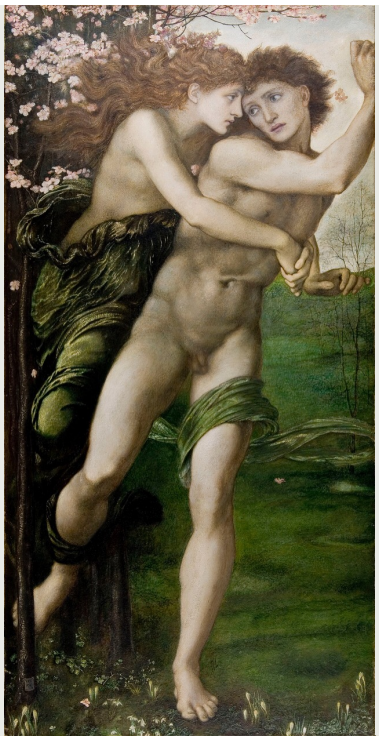

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898),
Phyllis and Demophoön, 1870,
93.8 × 47.5 cm,
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), *Phyllis and Demophoön*, 1870, 93.8 × 47.5 cm, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Edward Burne-Jones showed this watercolour at the Old Water-Colour Society in 1870, and it caused a scandal. The Thracian princess Phyllis, transformed into an almond tree, bursts from the bark to embrace her returning faithless lover. The trouble was twofold: Demophoön was unambiguously naked, full frontal, and the face of Phyllis was recognisably Maria Zambaco, Burne-Jones's recent lover, with whom the affair had publicly and messily collapsed. The Society asked him to add a fig leaf; he refused and resigned. He retreated from public exhibition for seven years. The picture entered Birmingham's collection in 1907. Critically, it marks something important: a male nude without muscular heroism, soft and yearning, the body as feeling rather than force. Burne-Jones later reworked the subject in oils as The Tree of Forgiveness, this time with a discreet drapery — proof that even radicals occasionally compromise when the gallery walls demand it.

Thomas Woolner (1825–1892),
Puck,
modelled 1845–47 (bronze cast 1865),
49.8 × 35.5 × 28 cm,
Tate Britain, London

Thomas Woolner (1825–1892), *Puck*, modelled 1845–47 (bronze cast 1865), 49.8 × 35.5 × 28 cm, Tate Britain, London

Thomas Woolner, a founder-member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who quietly defected to sculpture, modelled this naturalistic adolescent male nude as a Shakespearean sprite seated on a toadstool, gripping a frog. Carved in marble for Pauline Trevelyan at Wallington Hall in Northumberland, it became an unexpected hit and was reproduced many times in marble and bronze. Woolner's Puck is awkwardly real — knock-kneed, slightly chubby, anatomically specific in ways that classical idealism would have airbrushed away. This is sculpture negotiating realism: a fairy whose ribs you can count. Woolner was also a poet and an emigrant who briefly tried his luck in the Australian goldfields (Ford Madox Brown's painting The Last of England commemorates the farewell). He returned to become a Royal Academician. Puck demonstrates how the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to truth-to-nature could survive translation into three dimensions, with results that delighted some viewers and unsettled others.

George Frederic Watts (1817–1904),
The Spirit of Christianity,
1873–75,
dimensions not confirmed,
Tate Britain, London

George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), *The Spirit of Christianity*, 1873–75, dimensions not confirmed, Tate Britain, London

George Frederic Watts painted his allegorical figure as a hooded, robed, female-bodied embodiment of Christian love, gathering small souls beneath her arms. The body is spiritualised — softened by drapery, generalised, drained of erotic charge — but unmistakably there. Watts was Victorian Britain's senior moralist-in-paint, the man who painted Hope blindfolded on her globe and gave Tate his entire allegorical cycle. He believed art existed to elevate. The Spirit of Christianity was painted partly in response to sectarian quarrels within the Anglican Church; the figure embraces children dressed in the colours of contending factions, suggesting a love above doctrine. Critics generally approved, though some found the figure too feminine for the role. Watts gave the picture to the nation. He married twice — first the actress Ellen Terry, briefly, when she was sixteen and he forty-six — and lived to ninety-six, painting steadily, increasingly out of fashion, never out of conviction.

Edward Poynter (1836–1919),
Diadumenè,
c.1883,
51 × 50.9 cm,
Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

Edward Poynter (1836–1919), *Diadumenè*, c.1883, 51 × 50.9 cm, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

Edward Poynter's archaeologically reconstructed bather binds her hair — a diadumene is, literally, a woman binding a fillet around her head, the female counterpart to Polykleitos's Diadumenos. The setting is a meticulously researched Greco-Roman bath: mosaic floor, marble basins, the right lamps in the right brackets. Edward Poynter (1836–1919), later President of the Royal Academy and director of the National Gallery, was the era's most learned painter, and his nudes function as classical scholarship made fleshy. The first version (1884) drew a complaint from the Bishop of Carlisle; Poynter painted a draped variant the following year for the squeamish market. The episode says something about late-Victorian taste — even an impeccably researched antique citation could not entirely vaccinate the nude against episcopal disapproval. Poynter's surface finish is glassy, his figures cool and self-contained. Archaeology was, by 1884, the favoured alibi for showing skin.

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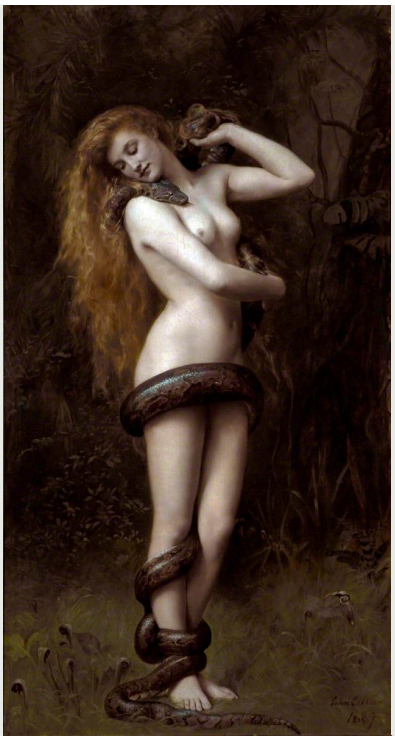

John Collier (1850–1934),
Lilith,
1887,
194 × 104 cm,
Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport

John Collier (1850–1934), *Lilith*, 1887, 194 × 104 cm, Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport

John Collier painted his Lilith naked, alone in a forest clearing, eyes closed in ecstasy, a vast snake coiling around her body. There is no classical frame, no Greek bath, no almond-tree metamorphosis — just a woman, a serpent, and a state of intense feeling. The mythological cover is paper-thin: Lilith, in Jewish folklore, became the serpent of Eden. Collier was a portraitist by trade — he painted Gladstone, Darwin, Huxley — and a member of the rationalist Ethical Society, which lends a certain dry, observational quality to his nudes. The painting belongs to the Atkinson Art Gallery in Southport. Critics in 1887 found it striking; later viewers found it frankly erotic. Collier married two Huxley daughters in succession (the first died; he married her sister, requiring a special Act because English law forbade it). This is the nude no longer mythologically distant — confrontational, present, unmistakably 1887.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilith_(painting)

John William Waterhouse (1849–1917),
Hylas and the Nymphs,
1896,
98.2 × 163.3 cm,
Manchester Art Gallery

John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896, 98.2 × 163.3 cm, Manchester Art Gallery

John William Waterhouse's most famous painting. The Argonaut Hylas leans toward a pond full of seven nymphs, their faces almost identical, their bodies emerging from waterlilies. He will be pulled under and never seen again. The seriality of the nymphs — interchangeable models repeated like photographic studio cards — is the point: this is collective eroticism, the woman as multiple, the man as the one about to drown. John William Waterhouse, a Royal Academician working in a late-Pre-Raphaelite vein, used the same model for all the heads, a technique borrowed (consciously or not) from Victorian academic photography. The painting was an immediate hit and entered Manchester Art Gallery in 1896. In 2018 the gallery briefly removed it to provoke discussion of gendered violence in art; the picture returned within a week after public objection. Few Victorian works have remained so persistently contested.

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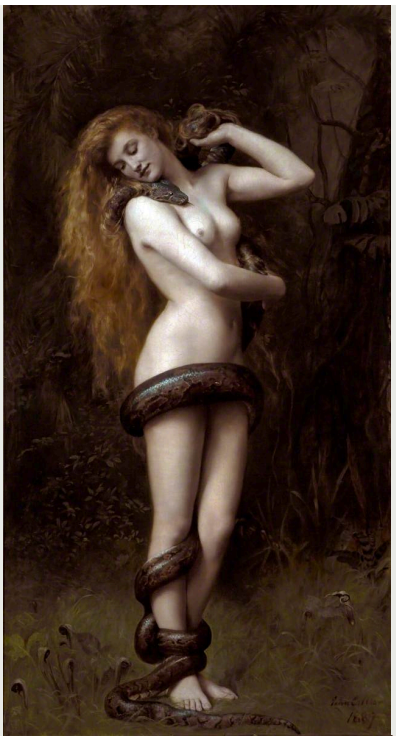

23-22 The Victorian Nude

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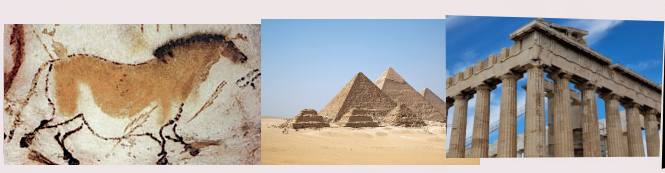
John Collier (1850–1934), Lilith, 1887

After Victoria's death in 1901, the elaborate justifications that had sustained the nude — classical myth, literary narrative, moral allegory — fell rapidly out of fashion. Modernism had no use for Sirens or marble bathers; the body was handled directly or abstracted. Yet the Victorian nude's very defensiveness has proved historically revealing. Its careful strategies — the classical alibi, the averted gaze, the selective archaeology — map the exact fault lines between public morality and private desire, illuminating the social history of the period.
Thank you for your time and attention.



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