



## THE RENAISSANCE NUDE

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*Laocoön and His Sons* has been one of the most famous ancient sculptures ever since it was excavated in Rome in 1506 and placed on public display in the Vatican, where it remains

- This talk is inspired by an exhibition called 'The Renaissance Nude' that took place at the Royal Academy in 2019. I explore how representations of the naked human body became more complex and nuanced during the Renaissance and took many forms from the religious to the erotic.
- The Renaissance was a period when European culture and art were 'reborn' — inspired by classical art. Generally regarded as starting in the 14th century and continuing to the 17th century although more narrowly its high point was the 15th to 16th centuries.
- As classical texts became available in Europe through translations made by the Arab world interest in the period grew particularly in Italy, the centre of the Roman world. There was a rediscovery of classical art as ancient sculpture was literally dug out of ground (CLICK) and the idea developed of man as the centre of all things. There were new discoveries and new worlds discovered.
- This is *Laocoön and His Sons* and it was dug up in Rome in 1506 and since then has been one of the most famous ancient sculptures ever excavated. It was placed on public display in the Vatican, where it remains
- The human body was an important focus of as it symbolised many attributes such as motherhood, eroticism, strength and beauty. The form and structure of

the body took on an increasing symbolic importance in more and more works of art.

- **My approach is thematic and chronological. I will take you through various views of the body as they developed from about 1400 to about 1600 starting with religious themes, then mythological, then everyday life and finally the erotic.**

## **NOTES**

- Religious: I start with the Christian view of the body and its relationship with various Biblical stories from Adam and Eve, to Christ to death, the Last Judgement and heaven and hell. Use 8 examples.
  - Christian nude, God's perfect, innocent body, Adam and Eve, the temptation and the desire to clothe themselves
  - The damned in hell are naked those going to heaven are semi-naked.
  - The idea of the beautiful body of the crucified Christ took hold in Northern Europe from the beginning of the 14th century.
  - Lucas Cranach the Elder, Adam and Eve
  - Giovanni Bellini, Saint Sebastien
  - Jean Colombe, Bathsheba Bathing
  - Dieric Boutts, The Last Judgement
  - Jean Fouquet, Virgin and Child, c. 1452-55
  - Michelangelo, The Last Judgement, 1537-41, censorship
  - Titian, Penitent Magdalene, c. 1535
  - Donatello, David Astride the Head of Goliath, c. 1435-40, a turning point in the history of European art, see also Lorenzo Ghiberti, The Sacrifice of Isaac
- Mythological: I then consider the impact classical works had on artists and how the ideas raised were incorporated in their art. Use 4 examples.
  - Pisanello, Luxuria, c. 1426, earliest surviving Renaissance reclining nude.
  - Baldung, Aristotle and Phyllis, 1513, interesting story of the power of women.
  - Sandro Botticelli, The Calumny of Appelles and the Birth of Venus
  - Piero di Cosimo, A Satyr Mourning a Nymph, 1495-1500
  - Master of the Cite des Dames and Workshop, p. 131, Christine de Pisan shows mythological tales where she reinterprets the female role to be equally balanced with the male, for example, Actaeon comes upon Diana bathing naked but her nymphs are clothed and try to hide her.
  - Titian, Anadyomene, c. 1520, p.134

- Lucas Cranach, Venus Standing in a Landscape, 1529, Cranach exploited the commercial potential and painted over 70 versions.
- Raimondi, The Dream, borrows from Bosch, a hellish nightmare scene
- Everyday life: day-to-day was rarely depicted directly but there are example, from the bathhouse to witches as well as ceremonies and marriage. This includes the uncanny (strange, artificial bodies, Mannerism), the abject (c) and the excessive (death, Caraglio, Fury). Use 4 examples.
  - The Bathhouse
  - Tres Riche Heures
  - Ulm sculptor, Elderly Bather
  - Hans Baldung Two Witches, 1523 first depiction of witches, underdrawing shows the care he took. "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable". 1515-35 5,000 women burned as witches in Germany.
- Philosophy: it was too early to talk about science as we understand it today but there was interest in the structure and anatomy of the body as God's work. One dominant figure with a deep interest in anatomy was Leonardo. Use 4 examples.
  - Michelangelo, Male Nude with Proportions Indicated, 1515-20, Royal Collection
  - Raphael, The Feast of the Gods, 1517-18, Villa Farnesina
  - Pollaiuolo, Battle of the Nudes, 1470s
  - Leonardo, The Superficial Anatomy of the Shoulder and Neck, c. 1510-11
  - Antico, The Spinario
  - The Laocoon and studies after it
- Erotic: The erotic underpins a lot of the work. The period was one when women were expected to cover themselves, in some cases including face veils but there were many exceptions depending on time, place and class. Use 4 examples.
  - The taste for erotic subject matter expanded in the first quarter of the 16th century fuelled by Raphael's sensual program for Villa Farnesina. Mythology was used as a loophole to make the subject acceptable. Engravings and books were censored by the Pope but continued to circulate.
  - Piero di Cosimo, Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, c. 1480s
  - Giorgione, Laura, 1506, Kunsthistorische, bare breasted
  - Veneto, A Woman as Flora, 1505-10, bare breasted
  - Raphael, La Fornarina, c. 1518-20, bare breasted
  - Palma Vecchio, A Blond Woman, c. 1520, bare breasted
  - Correggio, Danaë, c. 1530

- Veneziano, Portrait of a Man and Lovers in an Interior, before 1497
- Titian, Venus of Urbino
- Giorgione

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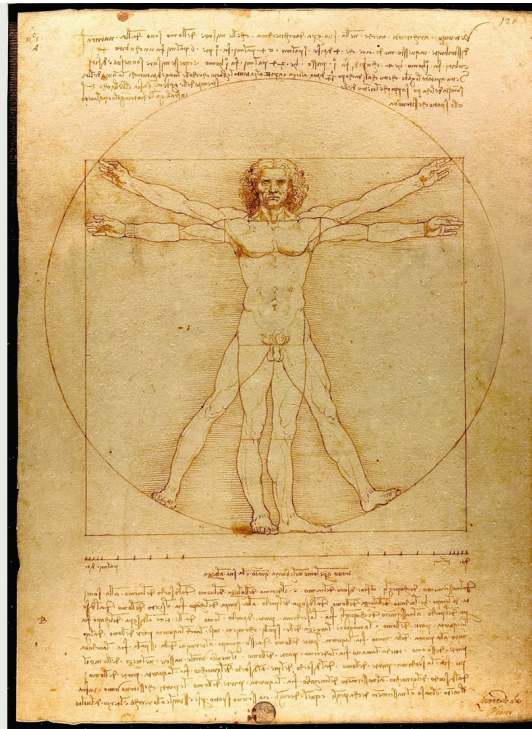
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"Man is the measure of all things"

Protagoras of Abdera (485-415 BCE)

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519),  
*Vitruvian man*, c. 1490, pen and ink  
with wash over metalpoint on paper,  
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice



Leonardo da Vinci (14/15 April 1452 – 2 May 1519), *Vitruvian man*, c. 1490, pen and ink with wash over metalpoint on paper, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

- Around the 14th century intellectuals in Italy began to rediscover the writings of ancient Greece and Rome. Protagoras was a sophist, that is a learned man who for an exorbitant fee, would teach wealthy young men the art of rhetoric. This was important because ancient Athens was a litigious society and law suits were common. Those trained in the art of rhetoric knew how to turn a jury to support their claim. I sometimes think schoolchildren should be taught rhetoric today as it enables us to see how we are manipulated by everyone, from politicians to advertisers, and, if we wish, how to manipulate others and win arguments.
- Now, Plato strongly believed that truth is absolute although he also believed that most people are unable to judge what is true as he thought it required years of dedicated study.
- Protagoras however believed that truth is relative and he could teach his students how to "make the worse appear the better". Protagoras argued that even if truth is absolute each person must decide what is true for themselves, in other words, as he said, "man is the measure of all things".
- This was interpreted in 14th century Italy as the measure of all things in the Earthly realm. Everyone was fiercely religious and this meant the human body took on a new significance as it represented God's ultimate creation and God's form on Earth.

- **Leonardo here reveals one aspect of that perfection, its mathematical perfection shown by containing the human body within the perfect forms of a circle and a square. This image is called Vitruvian man because it demonstrates the human bodily proportions as described by the Roman architect Vitruvius** (*De architectura*, Book III). The notes on the page are in Leonardo's mirror writing and describe the work of Vitruvius.

### NOTES

- "Man is the measure of all things", one example is whether a room is hot or cold. A person from a cold climate might think it is hot and another from a hot climate cold and both are right. The resolution came with the scientific method that, within narrow bounds, measured things in a repeatable way that everyone could agree upon. The scientific method was used even in ancient times, but it was first documented by England's Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) who set up inductive methods for scientific inquiry. The scientific method can be applied to almost all fields of study as a logical, rational, problem-solving method.
- One of the earliest and most important of the humanists was the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. Petrarch was born in 1304 not far from Florence. He was a dedicated student of Latin literature and a talented poet.
- In the fifteenth century, in Italy, new ways of thinking became established based on the rediscovery of classical Greek philosophy based on translations made by the Arabs and scholars fleeing the collapsing Byzantine Empire. This new way of thinking was called Renaissance, which means rebirth and it represented the rebirth of classical knowledge and it made "man the measure of all things" (Protagoras).
- The Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453. During most of its existence, the empire was the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe. 'Byzantine Empire' is a term created later, they called themselves the Roman Empire.

### REFERENCES

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man) (contains a translation of the text)



Artist unknown (English or French),  
*Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-c.1399,  
 tempera on wood, 53 x 37 cm,  
 National Gallery

Artist unknown (English or French), *Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-c.1399, tempera on wood, 53 x 37 cm, National Gallery

English: Richard II presented to the Virgin and Child by his Patron Saint John the Baptist and Saints Edward and Edmund (The Wilton Diptych)

- **A brief aside, during the Middle Ages that is, from about the 5th to the late 15th century, most art was religious and it was God who was the measure of all things.**
- **As an example this is one of the greatest works of British art from the Middle Ages. It is in the National Gallery and is called the *Wilton Diptych*. It was produced between 1377 and 1399 and shows the way the figure was stylised in religious paintings. It shows Richard II being presented to the Virgin Mary by Edmund and Edward the Confessor, England's patron saints, and his personal patron, John the Baptist. His emblem of a white hart or stag is worn as badges by the host of angels. He adopted the hart from his mother and it is a visual pun on his name (Richart in French).**

## **REFERENCES**

- <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/english-or-french-the-wilton-diptych>





## Paul Limbourg, 'February', *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, c. 1412-16

- This is a late medieval manuscript called *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. It was produced in the early fifteenth century and shows everyday life in rural France. This page is from a 'Book of Hours' which was a form of prayer book containing psalms and other prayers. It is one of the finest such prayer books ever made and it was produced for the Duke of Berry between 1412 and 1416. It was produced by the Limbourg Brothers and this page was produced by Paul Limbourg.
- Each month is represented by a secular images and this is February. It is freezing cold and the ground is covered in snow. We see workers in the field and three people at home warming themselves in front of the fire.
- Let's look more closely [CLICK]. Look at the couple at the back. I am showing you this partly as it is amusing, partly because it shows what life was like in the fifteenth century and partly to show that nudity was an everyday part of life.
- Renaissance art began to use the body in many ways...

## REFERENCES

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Très\\_Riches\\_Heures\\_du\\_Duc\\_de\\_Berry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Très_Riches_Heures_du_Duc_de_Berry)

## THE RENAISSANCE NUDE

- ❖ Religious
- ❖ Mythological
- ❖ Secular
- ❖ Portraits
- ❖ The Reclining Nude

- With the rediscovery of classical sculpture the nude figure became respectable or at least appreciated by intellectuals, connoisseurs and wealthy patrons who were the only ones that would have seen art.
  - It was used to show new aspects of the Bible,
  - to represent mythological scenes from the newly discovered classical literature,
  - to record everyday events,
  - to represent individuals,
  - to explore beauty and the erotic.
- It was also used by a view to study anatomy but I will not be covering that today.
- I will keep roughly to this sequence as I explore these categories.
- During the medieval period most art was religious and there was one biblical event when nudity was required to be shown and that was the representation of Adam and Eve before their Fall...

## NOTES

- The Middle Ages is sometimes called the medieval period and lasted from the fall of Rome in the 5th century to the beginning of the Renaissance in the 15th century. It was

followed by what we call the Early Modern Period.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*, 1526, Courtauld



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553), *Adam and Eve*, 1526, Courtauld

- This was probably painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder for the enjoyment of a wealthy patron and Cranach maintains a balance between a purely decorative style and a lively and natural representation of the figures. He found his Adam and Eve paintings were in high demand and he produced over 50 versions.
- All the animals in painting have a didactic (i.e. educational, particularly moral education) function:
  - The antler-less roebuck (a male roe deer) drinking represents the defenceless Christ when he first entered the world. The most common symbol of Christ the redeemer was the stag and Psalm 42 compares the human thirsting after God to the stag in search of water. Roe deer were also famed for their chastity and their devotion to one mate.
  - The mature stag which overlaps Adam's body probably represents the resurrected Christ.
  - The sheep represents the true Christian for whom "The Lord is my shepherd".
  - The stork, bottom centre, was associated by Christian iconographers with piety, purity and resurrection. They believed it was a prudent creature which only built one nest, which was used as a metaphor for the true Church, the only home for the faithful.

- The heron at bottom right signified one who was steadfast and on the right path.
- The partridges was used to represent deceit and impurity.
- The boar and the lion have multiple opposing meanings. The boar could stand for anger, brutality and lust but also, as probably intended here, justice, independence and courage. Similarly the lion could be opposed to the stag and personify the devil but such a friendly lion could also signify the courage needed to overcome evil.
- Finally the horse in the background is another symbol of Christ and appears to be leaving suggesting the powers of good are about to abandon Eden with the arrival of original Sin.
- **All the usual symbolic elements of Catholic art, such as angels, have been omitted, it is a very naturalistic image. The anatomy is fairly accurate although Eve's shoulder is strangely developed particularly the rotator muscle at the back, the teres major (pronounced 'teris').**
- **[CLICK] The date 1526 is carved on the tree trunk with part of Cranach's coat of arms, a bat-winged serpent with a ring in its mouth, a heraldic device granted to Cranach by Frederick the Wise in 1508. Cranach was a close friend of Martin Luther and the naked human figures were particularly admired.**

### **NOTES**

- Psalm 42:1 "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Bible, King James Version)
- **Religious:** I start with the Christian view of the body and its relationship with various Biblical stories from Adam and Eve, to Christ to death, the Last Judgement and Heaven and Hell. Christian nude, God's perfect, innocent body, Adam and Eve, the temptation and the desire to clothe themselves
  - The damned in hell are naked those going to heaven are semi-naked.
  - The idea of the beautiful body of the crucified Christ took hold in Northern Europe from the beginning of the 14th century.

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Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553),  
*Venus Standing in a Landscape*, 1529, 38 × 25 cm, Louvre Museum



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553),  
*Cupid Complaining to Venus*, c.1525, oil on panel, 81.3 × 54.6 cm, National Gallery

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *Cupid Complaining to Venus*, c.1525, oil on panel, 81.3 × 54.6 cm, National Gallery

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *Venus Standing in a Landscape*, 1529, 38 × 25 cm, Louvre Museum

The Protestant church disapproved of all religious images and so some artists looked for other subjects from which to earn a living. Artists started to paint scenes from Greek mythology and one figure that was expected to be naked was Aphrodite, in Roman mythology called Venus. Venus enabled artists to demonstrate their skill at representing the human figure. Lucas Cranach the Elder turned in large part to classical erotic themes, for example, he produced 20 paintings of Venus between 1525 and 1545. It became his most successful mythological subject.

- Cupid, the god of erotic love, is complaining to his mother, Venus the goddess of love as he has been stung by bees after stealing honeycomb. Venus does not console him but looks seductively towards the viewer as she grasps the branch of an apple tree in reference to the biblical temptress Eve. Note her *teres major* (pronounced 'teh-reez may-juh') muscle is correctly represented in this painting. The hat and choker she wears are in the style of those worn at the Saxon court where he worked from 1505.
- The composition in the National Gallery may be an allegory of the pleasures and

pains of love and may even be a warning of the risks of venereal disease.

- At the top right is a Latin inscription that translated reads:

***As Cupid was stealing honey from the hive***

***A bee stung the thief on the finger***

***And so do we seek transitory and dangerous pleasures***

***That are mixed with sadness and bring us pain***

- It is possible that this version is the one purchased by Adolf Hitler using the royalties he received from *Mein Kampf*. It was photographed in his private collection. After the war an American war correspondent was allowed to select one work from a warehouse in southern Germany guarded by American soldiers. It was sold in New York and bought by the National Gallery in 1963.
- The rock by Venus's foot is inscribed with Cranach's heraldic device (CLICK). See if you can see Cranach's device in the version of Venus in the Louvre. Venus is holding a thin gauze and she also wears a hat that looks a bit like a halo. Cranach's device is to the right of where the gauzy material reaches the ground.

## **NOTES**

- The story of the 'Honeycomb Stealer' by Theocritus was first translated into German in the 1520s and the subject may have been suggested to Cranach by a patron.
- Theocritus, *Idylls*, 19-25, translated by J. M. Edmonds:
  - "When the thievish Love one day was stealing honeycomb from the hive, a wicked bee stung him, and made all his finger-tips to smart. In pain and grief he blew on his hand and stamped and leapt upon the ground, and went and showed his hurt to Aphrodite, and made complaint that so a little a beast as a bee could make so great a wound. Whereat his mother laughing, 'What?' cries she, 'art not a match for a bee, and thou so little and yet able to make wounds so great?"

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cupid\\_complaining\\_to\\_Venus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cupid_complaining_to_Venus)



Left: *Bathsheba Bathing*,  
Book of Hours, Anne of  
France

Right: *Bathsheba Bathing*,  
Book of Hours, Claude Molé



*Bathsheba Bathing*, from two Books of Hours, left for Anne of France, right for Claude Molé

There were other stories in the Bible that involved naked figures and one of the popular was that of Bathsheba. The story is that King David, while walking on the roof of his palace, saw a very beautiful woman bathing. He ordered enquiries and found out that she was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah. David desired her and arranged that Uriah be killed in battle. David later made her pregnant. This pair of images shows Bathsheba from two Books of Hours and what is interesting is the image and the owner of each prayer book:

- Guess which one was made for a woman and which for a man? (CLICK)
- The one on the left was produced for Anne of France and was targeted at a feminine viewer. The woman is meant to understand that men are such weak creatures that even a hint of flesh is sure to drive even the greatest of men into passionate and deviant behaviour such as rape, perjury and slander.
- The one on the right was made for Claude Molé, lord of Villy-le-Maréchal near Troyes, and was targeted at a typically male audience. The story understood by men was substantially different: woman is the seductress, so it is best to stay away and not even glance in her direction. But, if the worst does happen, is the man really to blame? (*The Renaissance Nude*, p. 65)
- A key question is whether Bathsheba was aware she was being spied upon. The Bible gives no indication but the sly look in the image on the left indicates the

artist thinks she did.

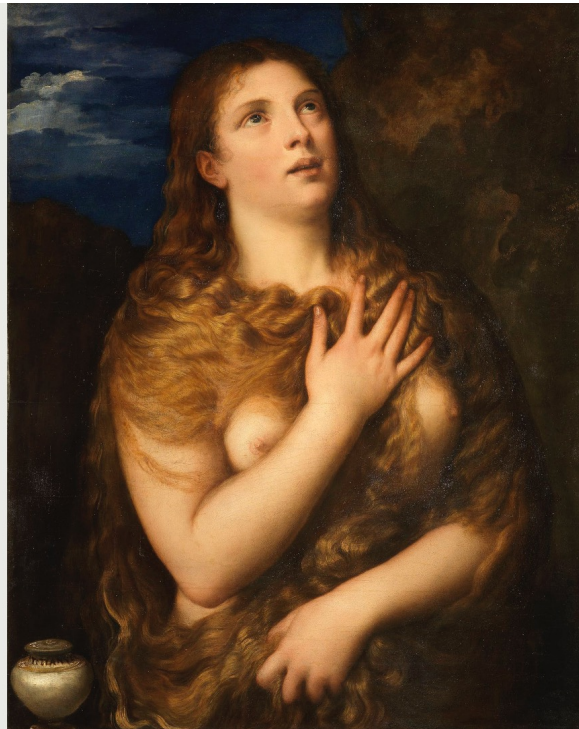
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Titian (c.1488/90-1576), *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1531, 85 x 68 cm, Palazzo Pitti, Florence



Titian (c.1488/90-1576), *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1531, 85 x 68 cm, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

**The other Biblical figure that is often shown partially draped is Mary Magdalene. According to the gospels, she traveled with Jesus as one of his followers and was a witness to his crucifixion and its aftermath. She was mentioned by name twelve times in the gospels, more than most of the apostles and more than any other woman in the gospels, other than Jesus's family. Luke 8:2-3 says she supported Jesus's ministry out of her resources indicating she was wealthy.**

**The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute began after a series of Easter sermons delivered in 591 when Pope Gregory I conflated or perhaps confused Mary Magdalene, who was introduced in Luke 8:2, with Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:39) and the unnamed "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus's feet in Luke 7:36–50. This resulted in a widespread**

**belief that she was a repentant prostitute or promiscuous woman.**

**She was a very popular subject in the 16th century as a representative of a sinner and a fallen women.**

- **"Erotic though it is, as Vasari notes, her nudity refers to the medieval legend that her clothes fell apart during the thirty years she spent repenting in the desert after the Ascension of Jesus. Indeed, most of the many depictions of the subject in art showed the Magdalen with no clothing at all, or just a loose wrap, as in Titian's later treatment. According to popular works such as the Golden Legend, she spent her last years naked and alone in a hermitage in the mountains of Provence, fed only by the singing angels who visited her daily. Thus her lack of clothing symbolises her abandonment of jewels, gold and worldly goods to her faith in Christ. Additionally, the Magdalen's golden hair, fleshy body, and full lips correspond with the Renaissance beauty standards at the time." (Wikipedia)**

## **NOTES**

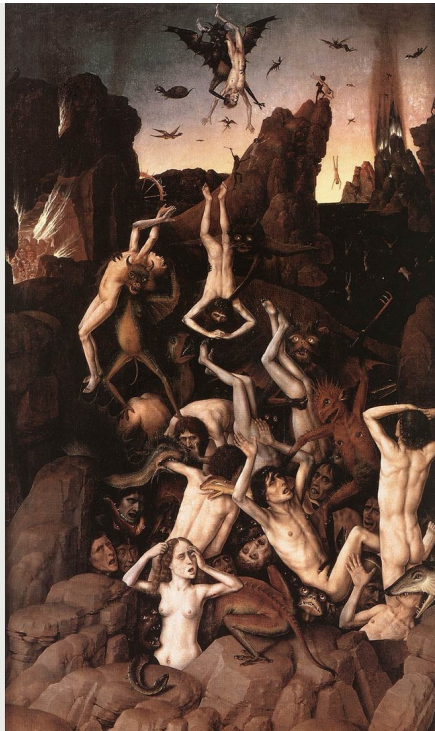
- A later version Titian produced in 1565 (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 119 x 98 cm) is partly clothed and accompanied by an open book and a skull.

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Dirk (or Dieric) Bouts (c. 1410/20-1475),  
*Hell or The Fall of the Damned* part of *The Last Judgement* triptych, c. 1470,  
115 x 69.5 cm, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille



Dirk (or Dieric) Bouts (c. 1410/20-1475), *Hell or The Fall of the Damned* part of *The Last Judgement* triptych, c. 1470, 115 x 69.5 cm, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille

The final example of the use of the naked body in art is the representation of the damned. The saved are usually shown partly clothed. This was painted in 1470 and is Dieric Bouts (pronounced 'deer-ic bowts'), *Hell or The Fall of the Damned*. It was thought to be part of a triptych but recent research suggests this painting was intended to stand alone.

- Here nakedness is being used to represent shame and there is some evidence that these naked bodies also had a semi-humorous aspect— look what happens to you if you aren't good.
- Note that some of the demons are looking out at us as if to remind the viewer of the torments ahead if they do not keep on the path of righteousness. Artists were free to show the most horrific suffering they could imagine.

## NOTES



- Bouts was influenced by Jan van Eyck and by Rogier van der Weyden, under whom he may have studied.
- The Christian doctrine of hell derives from the teaching of the New Testament. For example, as described in Matthew 13:49-50: “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

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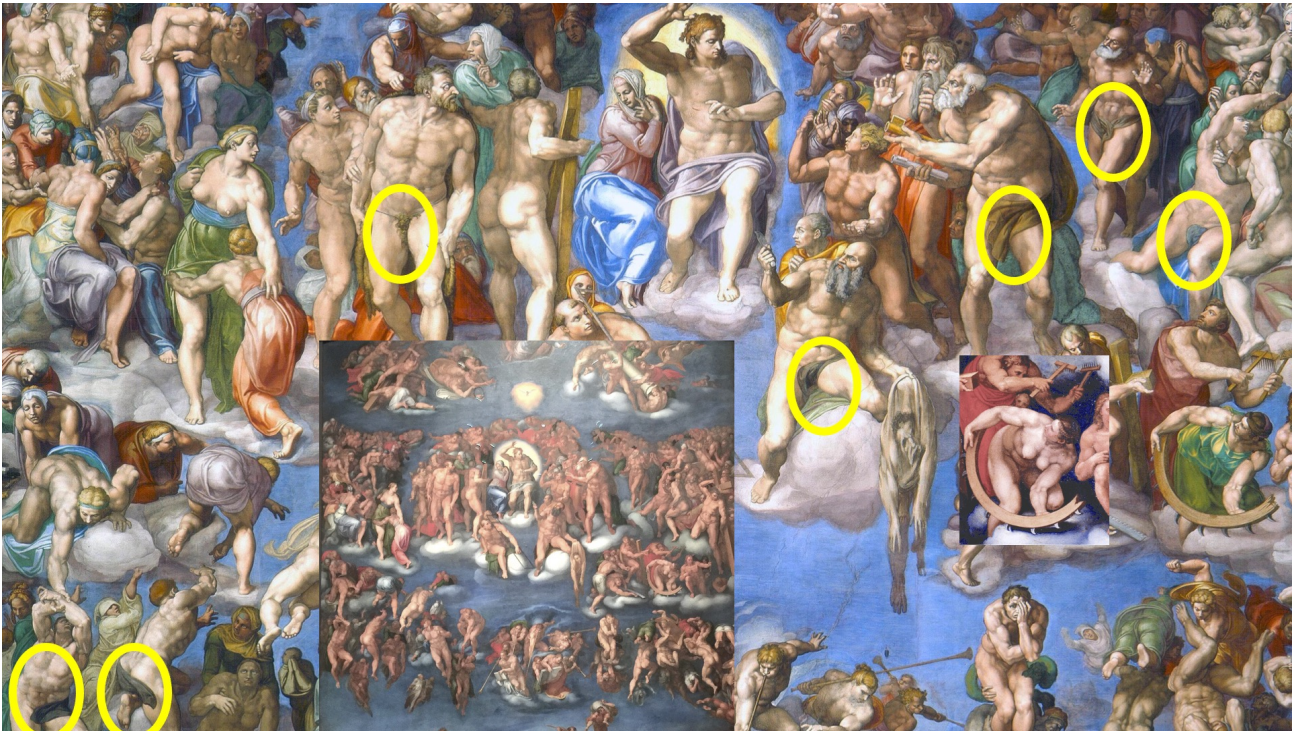


Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, 1537-41, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

Michelangelo (1475-1564), *The Last Judgement*, 1534-41, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

The most famous representation of the Last Judgement is in the Sistine Chapel. It shows the good rising to heaven and the damned descending to hell. When the fresco was being painted the Master of Ceremonies at the Vatican opposed the work as unworthy of a church and he described it as more suited "for public baths and taverns".

- From 1545 to 1563 the Council of Trent discussed how the church should respond to the protestant reformation. At a time when protestants were destroying art Catholic reformers reaffirmed its important but decreed that it must not arouse "carnal desire".
- The year after Michelangelo died it was decided to censor some of the figures of *The Last Judgement* and this work continued over several centuries...



Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, 1537-41

Copy of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, Marcello Venusti, 1549,  
**Museo di Capodimonte, Naples**

- The censorship was carried out by Daniele da Volterra, one of Michelangelo's most adoring followers who only did the work because he was told it would otherwise be destroyed.
- Luckily a copy was made before the censorship and the copy is now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples. [CLICK]
- The censorship consisted mostly of cleverly arranged thin scarves to shield our eyes from male frontal nudity. One of the most dramatic changes was the position of Saint Blaise in relation to St. Catherine. In the original St. Blaise leans over a naked St. Catherine and this was changed to St. Blaise looking back and away from a clothed St. Catherine.





Titian (1490–1576), *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-1569, 184.5 x 202.2 cm, National Galleries of Scotland



Master of the Cité des Dames and Workshop, from Christine de Pisan, *L'epître Othéa* in *Collected Works (The Book of the Queen)*, vol. 1, c. 1410-14, tempera colours and gold leaf on vellum, 36.5 x 28.5 cm, British Library

Master of the Cité des Dames and Workshop, from Christine de Pisan, *L'epître Othéa* in *Collected Works (The Book of the Queen)*, vol. 1, c. 1410-14, tempera colours and gold leaf on vellum, 36.5 x 28.5 cm, British Library. Also called *L'epître Othéa et Hector (The Epistle of Othéa and Hector)*

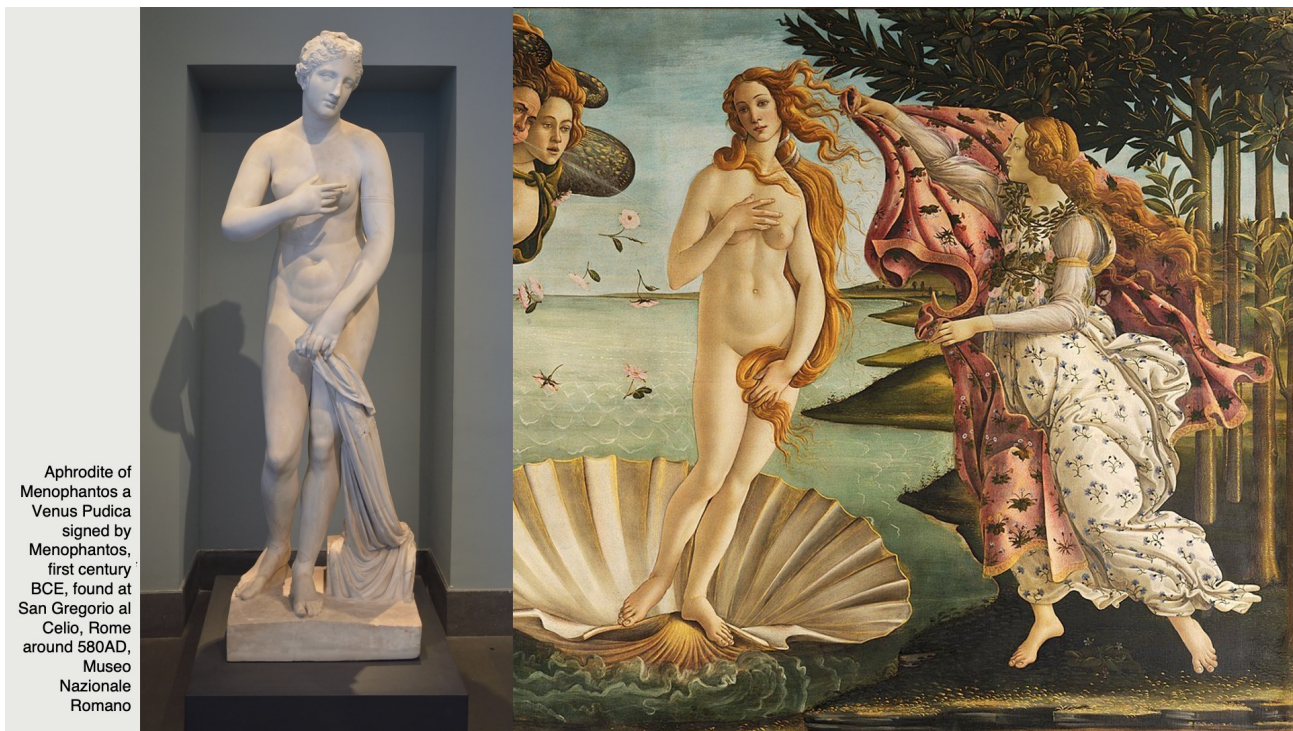
Titian (1490–1576), *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-1569, 184.5 x 202.2 cm, National Galleries of Scotland

**We now look at the mythological. The rediscovery of classical literature meant that the well educated were now familiar with the stories of ancient Greece.**

- **This is an early representation of a Greek myth. Actaeon accidentally comes upon the goddess Diana while she is bathing and as punishment she turns him into a stag and his hunting dogs turn on him and kill him.**
- **Look on. The right for a different interpretation of the**

**myth. Christine de Pisan was a poet and author at the court of King Charles VI of France (b. 1368, r. 1380-1422). Her first major work was a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which this story is told and it became her most popular work. She reinterpreted Ovid's work by giving the women in his tales an equal standing with the men. For example, although Actaeon comes upon Diana bathing naked all her assistants are clothed and try to hide her. Diana covers herself with a pose that suggests the statues of Venus Pudica from ancient Greece. In Pisan's version Diana does not become angry and kill Actaeon.**

- **Nude figures were not common in French secular images of the fifteenth century but were used when they supported the story.**
- **150 years later Titian gives free rein to the expression of female flesh. [CLICK] He has chosen the moment when Actaeon accidentally comes across Diana and she and all her attendants are naked.**



Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510), *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1484–1486, tempera on canvas, 172.5 cm x 278.9 cm (67.9 in x 109.6 in). Uffizi, Florence

Aphrodite of Menophantos a Venus Pudica signed by Menophantos, first century BCE, found at San Gregorio al Celio, Rome around 580AD, Museo Nazionale Romano

**One of the most famous Renaissance nudes is *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. This was painted in Florence where the philosophy and legends of the classical world were being rediscovered.**

- Venus or Aphrodite was born from the foam of the sea which was created from the severed genitals of the Titan Uranus who had been castrated by his son Cronos.
- Large scale depictions of subjects from classical mythology were virtually unknown in medieval art, as was the size and prominence of a nude female figure. Aphrodite is shown in what is called the Venus Pudica (modest Venus) pose. The pose would have been known to Botticelli through classical statues found in Rome, [CLICK] for example this statue of Aphrodite was found in 580AD. There are many possible explanations for the pose, the most obvious is modesty but we must remember this is the representation of a goddess not a mortal. Any mortal that sees a god or goddess at a moment not of their choosing will suffer dire consequences so it is possible Aphrodite conceals her nudity to protect us.
- This was painted a few years before Fra Savonarola was assigned to Florence in 1490. He preached against what he regarded as artistic excesses and by 1495 he

would host a regular "bonfire of the vanities" on which he would burn irreplaceable manuscripts, ancient sculptures, modern paintings, musical instruments and so on. It is said Botticelli burned several of his paintings but the evidence is not clear. In 1498 the Church condemned, hanged and burned Savonarola in the main square in Florence.

## **NOTE**

- Botticelli lived all his life in the same neighbourhood of Florence; his only significant times elsewhere were the months he spent painting in Pisa in 1474 and the Sistine Chapel in Rome in 1481–82.
- At the left is Zephyr blowing Aphrodite to shore. He personified the gentle west wind and was messenger of spring. He is accompanied by either Aura, the personification of a lighter breeze or Chloris, a flower nymph that in some mythologies he married. On the right and floating above the ground is either one of the three Horae or Hours, Greek minor goddesses of the seasons and of other divisions of time, and attendants of Venus or the Greek goddess Chloris, the Roman Flora, goddess of flowers and spring.

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Birth\\_of\\_Venus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus)

<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>



Hans Baldung (1484/5-1545),  
*Aristotle and Phyllis*, 1513-15,  
woodcut



Hans Baldung (1484/5-1545), *Aristotle and Phyllis*, 1513-15, woodcut

***Aristotle and Phyllis***—this woodcut needs a little explaining.

In the north of Europe around the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century a theme known as **The Power of Women** was developed (see *The Renaissance Nude*, p. 88). This coincided with a restriction of women's behaviour, a reduction of women's legal and economic rights, a restriction of women's right to work and the outlawing of previously tolerated practices such as prostitution.

- This Power of Women theme was sexual in nature and women were portrayed as highly sexualised beings who endangered men. The Power of Women was reinforced by images from the bible such as Delilah betraying Samson and Eve seducing Adam. Stories from classical mythology such as this one, *Phyllis*

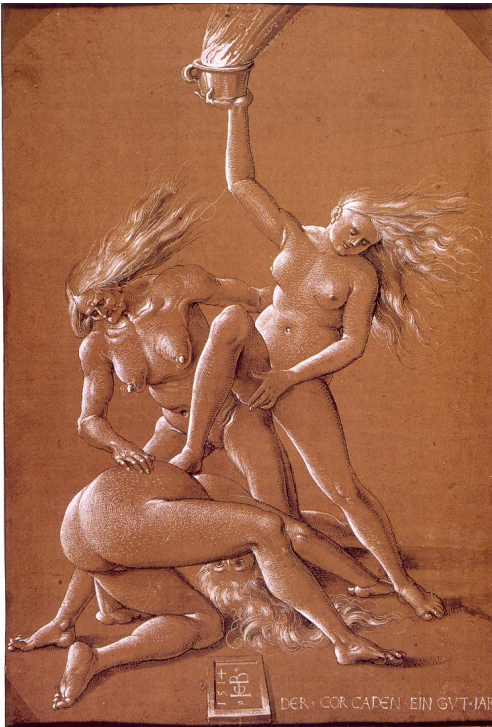


*debasing Aristotle*, were also used to support the argument although Christine of Pizan argued that if women had written the accounts the stories would be very different.

- So what is the story of Phyllis debasing Aristotle?
- The great Greek philosopher Aristotle is aware of the charms of Phyllis and he tells his pupil Alexander to avoid her. This annoys Phyllis and she decides to get revenge. Aristotle is captivated by her charms and she tells him that if he allows her to dominate him she will spend the night with him. Aristotle agrees and she rides him around the garden with a bridle in his mouth. She arranges for Alexander to watch from a hiding place and Phyllis and Alexander end up laughing at Aristotle. In one version of the story he flees to a far country where he meditates on the wickedness of women.
- The story originates in France and Germany in the 13th century and feeds into the idea of the Power of Women which justifies the new restrictions on women and supported stories of witches...

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tale\\_of\\_Phyllis\\_and\\_Aristotle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tale_of_Phyllis_and_Aristotle)



Hans Baldung (1484/5–1545), *The New Year's Greeting with Three Witches*, 1514, black quill pen drawing, partly washed in gray, heightened in white, on brown primed paper, 30.9 x 21 cm, Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria



Hans Baldung (1484/5–1545), *Two Witches*, 1523, 45.6 x 65.3 cm, Städel Museum

Hans Baldung (1484/5-1545), *Two Witches*, 1523, 45.6 x 65.3 cm, Städel Museum

Hans Baldung (1484/5–1545), *The New Year's Greeting with Three Witches*, 1514, black quill pen drawing, partly washed in gray, heightened in white, on brown primed paper, 30.9 x 21 cm, Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria. Inscribed in old German "DER . COR CAPEN . EIN GVT . IAR" ("to the chorists a good year"). Baldung is sending a New Year's wish to the choristers of a cleric from Baldung's circle of friends and he is suggesting that the imagination of certain clergymen did not always turn to witches with moral disgust.

**The Power of Women became associated with witches although in the 15th century it is not clear that artist or audience took the idea seriously. It was more like the horror movies of the day combined with sexual fantasy. The widespread persecution of witches came later.**

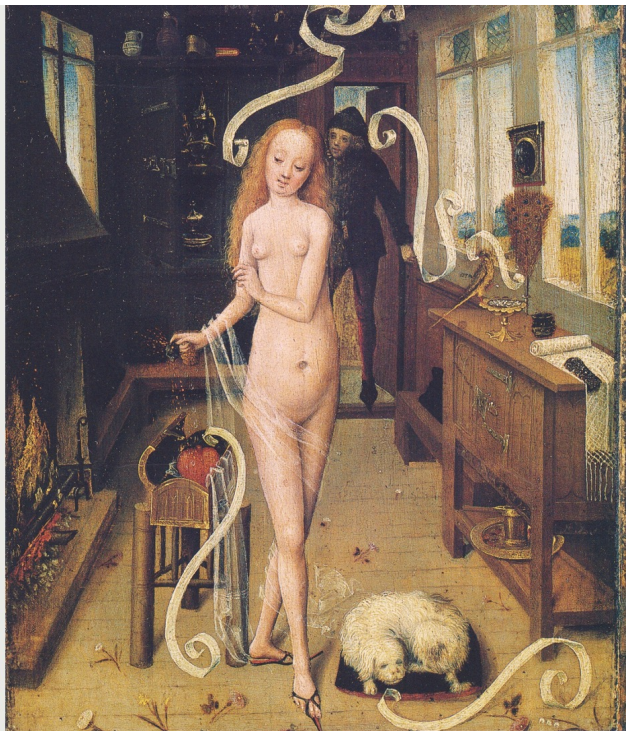
**To illustrate the theme of witches this is another illustration by the German artist Hans Baldung, the most gifted student of Albrecht Dürer. His nickname was 'Grien' which meant green as this was his preferred colour and it is said he wore green clothing. Another suggestion is that it came from 'grienhals' a German word for witch, one of his signature subjects.**

- **Although Baldung was not the first artist to depict witches, Dürer did for example, he was the first to specialise in the subject. His first depiction of witches shows the care he took.**
- **Women's sexuality became linked to the devil and in 1487 Heinrich Kramer wrote in *Hammer of Witches* (Malleus Maleficarum) “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable”. The book was initially condemned by the Catholic Church but it became an important original source text to justify the brutal persecution of witches in the 16th and 17th centuries.**
- **There is something particularly tragic about the myth of witches. Over 300 years, beginning in the late fifteenth century some 40,000 people, mostly women were tortured, burned at the stake, hung or beheaded while an unknown number of additional victims were lynched, assaulted or ostracised. One nineteenth-century historian wrote "There are no pages of human history more filled with horror than those which record the witch-madness of three centuries, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth".**

## **REFERENCES**

<https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/two-witches>

Painting from the lower Rhine,  
1470–1480, 24 × 18 cm,  
showing Love Magic, collection  
of Museum der bildenden Künste



Painting from the lower Rhine, 1470–1480, showing Love Magic, 24 × 18 cm, collection of Museum der bildenden Künste

The other belief at the time, linked to the Power of Women was the notion of 'Love magic'. This is the use of magic to create sexual passion or romantic love. The idea goes back to ancient Egyptian texts, the classical world, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and even up to the present day.

- During the Renaissance it was believed that magic could cause severe damage to the caster and so was not undertaken lightly. The aim was often marriage particularly to a man or woman of higher social rank. Spells were meant to be secret but by letting the victim become aware of the spell enabled it to be more effective as the victim would also believe in magic.
- In this painting the naked woman is wearing open-toed fashionably pointed slippers and is draped in a thin veil. At her side a heart rests in an open casket and she strikes a steel in her right hand with a flint creating a shower of sparks. She also drops water from a sponge onto the heart suggesting only she can inflame the heart and extinguish that flame. The picture contains many erotic symbols, the naked body, the roses strewn on the floor, the parrot and the casket which is a metaphor for the woman's body.
- Most of the writing and pictures are women casting a spell over men but some scholars believe that the reality was that largest age group that practiced love magic were younger men targeting young, unobtainable women. The opposite was the case in literature and painting as men tried to disassociate themselves

from the practice and blame women for their feelings of desire.

## **NOTES**

- An alternative suggestion is that the woman is casting a spell to enable her to see a vision of her future husband.
- It has been pointed out that the woman's upper body, above the elbow is a different proportion than her lower body. This could suggest it was not painted from life.

## **REFERENCES**

Thomas Kren, *The Renaissance Nude*, p. 89



Pisanello (c. 1395-c. 1455), *Allegory of Luxuria* (recto), c. 1426, pen and brown ink on reddish prepared paper, Albertina



Pisanello (c. 1395-c. 1455), *Allegory of Luxuria* (recto), c. 1426, pen and brown ink on reddish prepared paper, Albertina

## Erotic Images

**This is a remarkable drawing as it is the earliest surviving Renaissance reclining nude.**

- **Pisanello was one of the most distinguished painters of the earliest Italian Renaissance. He was employed by the Doge of Venice, the Pope in the Vatican and the courts of Verona, Ferrara, Mantua, Milan, Rimini, and by the King of Naples. He stood in high esteem in the Gonzaga and Este families.**
- **The drawing is usually taken as an allegory of lust, represented by the hare and the abundant hair. Her body is bony and meagre, attributes that are opposed to the abundance, energy and wantonness of lust. This suggests Pisanello may be showing us both the energy**

**of lustful thoughts and their meagre ability to offer true satisfaction.**

## **REFERENCES**

[https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae\\_ID=33745](https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=33745)



Bartolomeo Veneto (1502–1555), *Idealised Portrait of a Courtesan as Flora*, c. 1520, 43.6 × 34.6 cm, tempera and oil on poplar wood, Städel Museum

In the first decade of the sixteenth century Giorgione and Titian pioneered a new type image called **La Bella Donne** (pronounced 'Bella don-ay'). These were mostly idealised images of beautiful women. Whether these were real women is the subject of much speculation, they could be courtesans, a fiancée or wife or an idealised image of a beauty personified.

- These images are often half-length figures of beautiful women with one or both breasts exposed. And often holding a bouquet of flowers. Bartolomeo Veneto's *Idealised Portrait of a Courtesan as Flora* gives us a sideways glance. She holds a garland of flowers which may signify that she is the goddess Flora. She resembles other women in paintings by Bartolomeo, such as the Virgin Mary in *The Circumcision of Jesus*, so she may have been a favourite model.
- The description of the ideal beauty comes from Petrarch's description of Laura — blond hair, alabaster skin, rosy lips and a modest gaze.
- We know little about the model or the intended audience but it can be understood as a combination of Petrarchan beauty and an object of erotic desire.

## NOTE

- Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) was an Italian scholar and poet and his discovery of



Cicero's letters initiated the 14th-century Italian Renaissance. He fell in love with Laura the day he first saw her, 6 April 1327. She was already married and he channeled his feelings into poetry. She died in 1348 and he found his grief as difficult to live with as his former despair.

## **REFERENCES**

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flora\\_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flora_(mythology))



*Portrait of a man (the 'Terris Portrait')*, by Giorgione. c.1506. Panel, 30.2 × 25.7 cm. (San Diego Museum of Art; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London)



Giorgione, *Laura or Portrait of a Young Bride*, 1506, Kunsthistorische

Giorgione, *Laura or Portrait of a Young Bride*, 1506, Kunsthistorische

*Portrait of a man (the 'Terris Portrait')*, by Giorgione. c.1506. Panel, 30.2 × 25.7 cm. (San Diego Museum of Art; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London)

**This is one of the first examples of a Bella Donne, a subject that Giorgione and Titian made popular.**

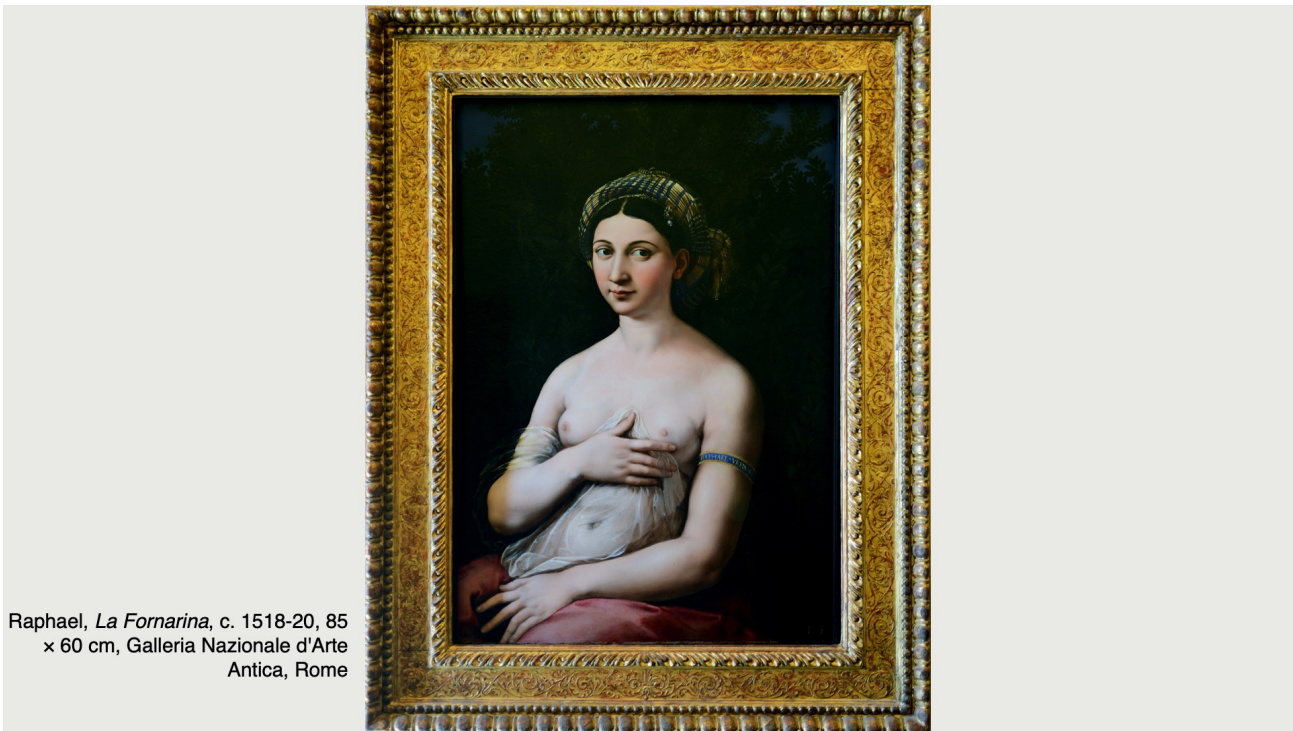
- **We don't know if this is a Bella Donne, a young bride, a courtesan or a reference to Petrarch's Laura, although, as I said, she had blond hair. The bush behind her is a laurel bush in reference to her name. We don't know if she is covering her breast or uncovering.**
- **She is wearing a white camisia or undershirt and a red mantel trimmed with fur. The camisia was an undergarment that was always worn to protect the expensive clothes from body oils and sweat. The were**

made from fine, white linen and there is some evidence for silk.

- Her round face and brown hair do not appear to be idealised so it has been suggested that this is a portrait. In 1506 only one woman called Laura was married in Venice and that was Laura Donà.
- Some suggest it is a companion to Giorgione's *Terris* portrait painted the same year. However, those favouring the courtesan theory point out that it is unlikely an honourable Venecian lady would be painted with a bare breast.

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura\\_\(Giorgione\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura_(Giorgione))



Raphael, *La Fornarina*, c. 1518-20, 85  
x 60 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte  
Antica, Rome

Raphael, *La Fornarina*, c. 1518-20, 85 x 60 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

*The Portrait of a Young Woman* (also known as *La Fornarina*, 'The Baker') is a painting by the Italian High Renaissance master Raphael, made between 1518 and 1520. It is in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

**Gustave Flaubert wrote "She is a beautiful woman, no need to know more." But you probably would like to know more.**

**When first mentioned the painting was described as a Venus and it is not described as Raphael's lover until some time around 1618-30. It was not described as 'la fornarina' (baker or baker's daughter) in 1772 and this was assumed to be the occupation of Raphael's lover in the nineteenth century. Since then the woman is traditionally identified with the fornarina (baker) Margherita Luti, Raphael's Roman lover, though this has been questioned. The identification ignores**

**the fact that bread-making has been associated with Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, fecundity and sexual union since antiquity.**

**According to Vasari, Raphael was known for his excessive sexual activities and had traditionally thought to have died after a night of passion with his mistress but this is speculation.**

**There are currently five interpretations of this painting:**

- 1. Bella Donne. It is Raphael's version of the Bella Donne theme that had become a popular subject.**
- 2. Raphael's Lover. She is wearing an arm band inscribed 'Raphael Vrbinas' and so this is a portrait of his muse and mistress.**
- 3. Breast Cancer. In an article in *The Lancet* in 2002 a doctor describes a possible tumour on her left breast indicated by the shadow by her index finger, the blue colour of her left breast compared with her right breast and her swollen left arm.**
- 4. Fornarina was a Witch. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Ophelia says "They say the owl was a baker's daughter." The owl goddess was a witch and a servant of Satan. Some historians believe that at this time certain witches were accepted and they made a living selling potions and spells.**
- 5. Sex Worker. The woman is a prostitute that Raphael used as a model explaining her seductive look. At the time prostitutes were required to wear a yellow scarf round their heads. These women willing acted as models and such women could show their naked body without being prosecuted.**

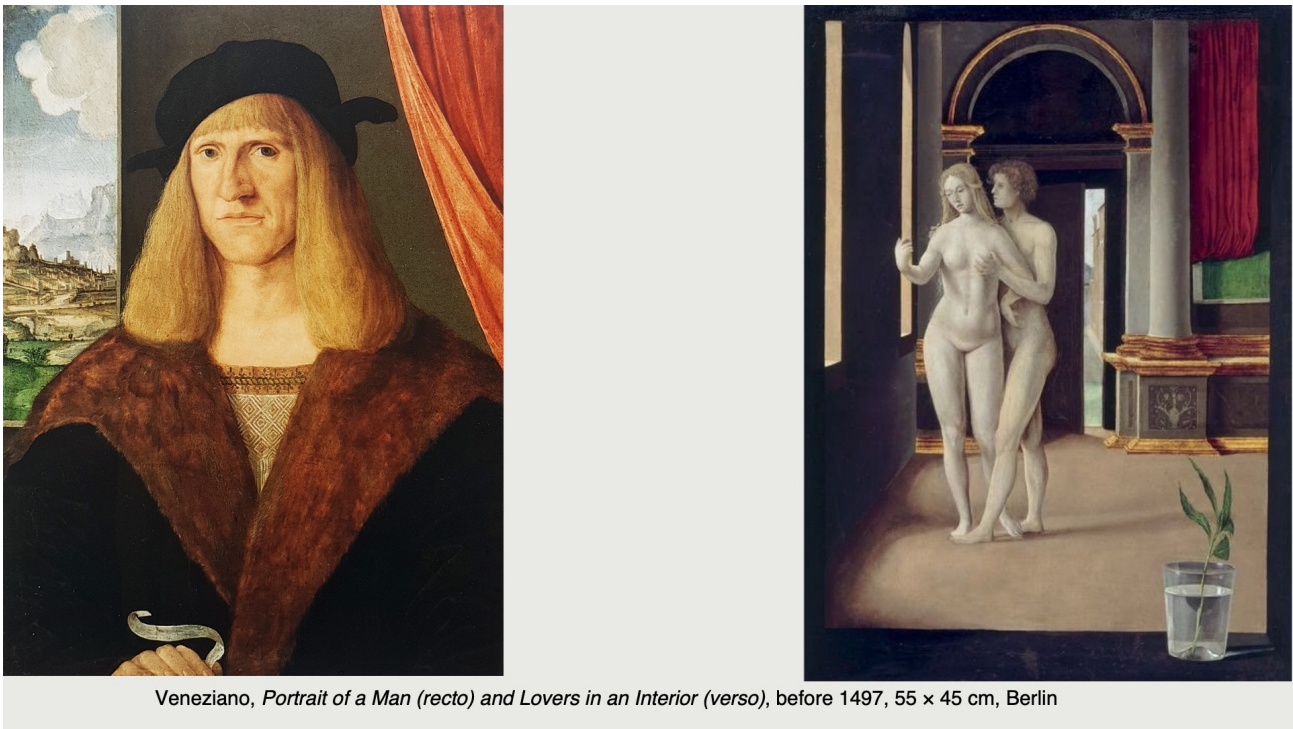


## **NOTES**

As the legend goes, Christ begged hospitality of a baker's wife, who would have given it, but was prevented from doing this act of charity towards the seeming beggar by her daughter, who was, in consequence, changed into an owl.

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Fornarina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Fornarina)



Jacometto Veneziano, *Portrait of a Man (recto) and Lovers in an Interior (verso)*, before 1497, 55 x 45 cm, Berlin

The woman is gazing into a hand mirror while the man tries to get her attention. Astonishingly at the bottom right is a sprig of laurel in a glass of water looking like a detail from some modern conceptual art work. The painting defies interpretation. At one level it is an erotic work yet the expressions of the lovers suggest sadness. Perhaps, it is a moral lesson and they are melancholy because they are having an illicit affair.

- The laurel has many symbolic meanings, most commonly, as a wreath, victory but it was also put under ones pillow to gain poetic inspiration, it had the power of immortality and it was a symbol of peace. But perhaps the meaning relevant here is that it indicated power over ones passions or the lack of them.

## **NOTES**

*The Renaissance Nude*, p. 330

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacometto\\_Veneziano](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacometto_Veneziano)

Piero di Cosimo (2 January 1462 – 12 April 1522), *Portrait of a Woman*, said to be of *Simonetta Vespucci*, c. 1490, 57 x 42 cm, tempera on wood, Condé Museum, Chantilly, France



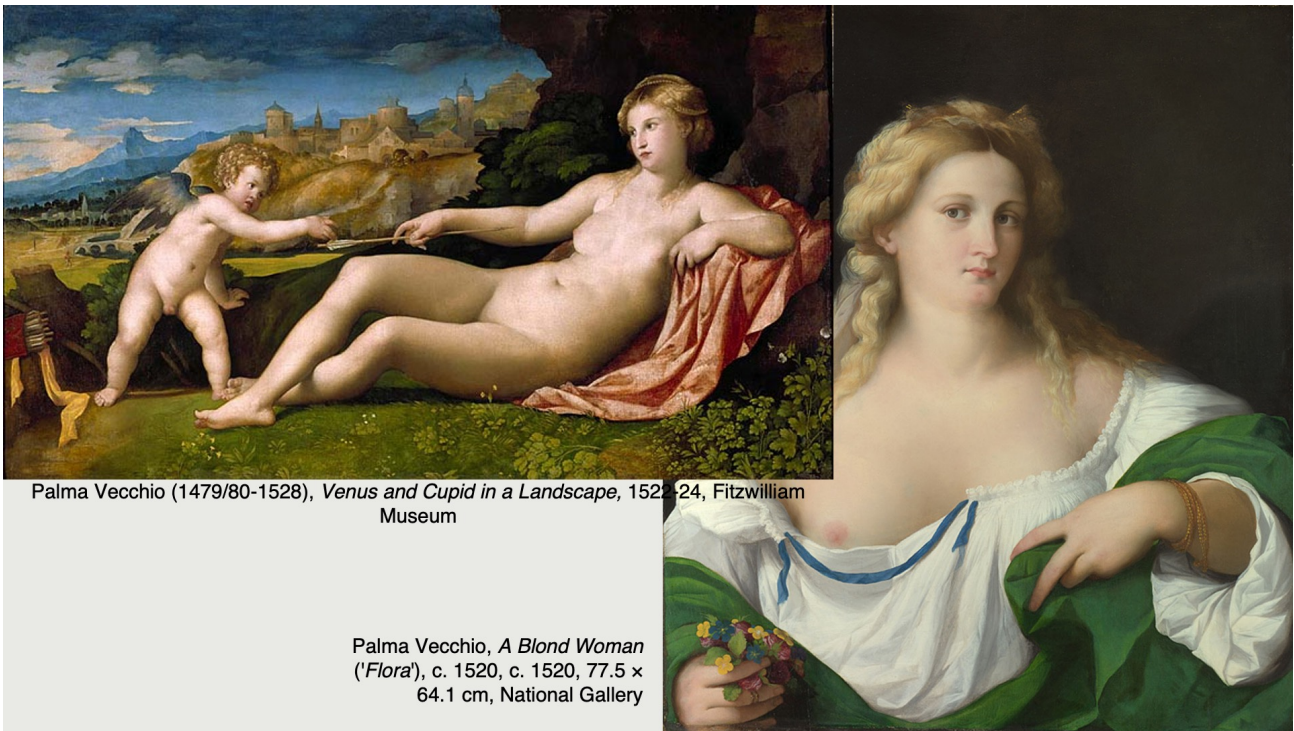
Piero di Cosimo (2 January 1462[1] – 12 April 1522), *Portrait of a Woman*, said to be of *Simonetta Vespucci*, c. 1480, 57 x 42 cm, tempera on wood, Condé Museum, Chantilly, France

**The woman in the painting is said to be Simonetta Vespucci (née Cattaneo; 1453 – 26 April 1476, aged 22) who was known as the greatest beauty of her age. However, this has been doubted by some experts who blame the false attribution on the Victorian critic John Ruskin.**

- **Her father was a Genoese nobleman called Gaspere Cattaneo della Volta and she married Marco Vespucci when she was sixteen. He is a distant relative of Amerigo Vespucci the explorer who America is named after. She became well known in Florence and Giuliano Medici jousted and won on her behalf naming her 'The Queen of Beauty'. She was married into a powerful family so it is unlikely they were lovers and this is an example of courtly love.**
- **She died of tuberculosis one year after the tournament aged 22 and was carried through the city in an open coffin for all to admire. Two years later, to the day, Giuliano was assassinated.**
- **It is believed Sandro Botticelli painted her portrait and some say that Venus in his *the Birth of Venus* resembles her but other historians say this is "romantic nonsense".**
- **Her bare breast would have been seen at the time as a reference to 'Venus**

**pudica' or chaste Venus. Her profile is accentuated by the black cloud placed behind her. The two snakes round her neck are either a reference to the asp that Cleopatra used to commit suicide or an allusion to her death from consumption. Her latinized name appears on the strip at the bottom and she had already died when the portrait was painted.**





Palma Vecchio (1479/80-1528), *A Blond Woman* ('Flora'), c. 1520, c. 1520, 77.5 x 64.1 cm, National Gallery

Palma Vecchio (1479/80-1528), *Venus and Cupid in a Landscape*, 1522-24, Fitzwilliam Museum

**This is in the *Bella Donna* convention for which Palma Vecchio became well-known. The young woman has all the conventional attributes of beauty—long fair hair, black eyes, a large forehead, long hands, small ears, small breasts, fine eyebrows and fine red lips and she is holding a bunch of flowers. The flowers give rise to the alternative title 'Flora' suggesting this is a mythological work representing the classical goddess of spring.**

- The woman is seen in other Palma Vecchio paintings such as *Venus and Cupid in a Landscape* (1522-24, Fitzwilliam Museum) and so is likely to have been a model he used which suggests she was a courtesan

**and a common name for courtesans in sixteenth-century Italy was Flora. The reclining woman was another erotic form of the nude that became established in 16th-century Italy.**

#### **REFERENCES**

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/palma-vecchio-a-blonde-woman>



Giorgione (1478–1510) or Titian (1490–1576), *Sleeping Venus*, 1508, 108.5 × 175 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

Giorgione (1478–1510) or Titian (1490–1576), *Sleeping Venus*, 1508, 108.5 × 175 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

Although nude figures (such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*) had been painted before this one, this is probably the first nude to show a figure simply as a depiction of a nude. It is named Venus but has no traditional attributes (such as Cupid) to indicate that it represents a goddess. It was a break from tradition, and set a new subject for the artist, resulting in 20th century works such as the nudes of Francis Bacon and Henry Moore.

- The Erotic: The erotic became an important subject for art in sixteenth-century Italy. The period was one when women were expected to cover themselves, in some cases including face veils but there were many exceptions depending on time, place and class.
  - The taste for erotic subject matter expanded in the first quarter of the 16th century fuelled by Raphael's sensual program for Villa Farnesina. Mythology was used as a loophole to make the subject acceptable. Engravings and books were censored by the Pope but continued to circulate.

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Titian (c. 1488/90-1576), *Venus of Urbino*, 1534, 119 x 165 cm, Uffizi, Florence

I end with perhaps the most famous Renaissance nude figure. By the time Titian painted the *Venus of Urbino* the format had become well established.

- The young nude woman is traditionally identified as Venus. The figure's pose is based on the figure we have seen attributed to Giorgione. In this painting, Titian has moved Venus indoors, shown her engaging with the viewer, and making her sensuality explicit.
- It has been seen either as a portrait of a courtesan, perhaps Angela del Moro, or Angela Zaffetta, or as a painting celebrating the marriage of its first owner (who according to some may not have commissioned it).
- If it is intended to be Venus she does not have any classical or allegorical attributes of the goddess she is supposed to represent – the painting is sensual and unapologetically erotic. Recent analysis concludes that it might be simply “a representation of a beautiful nude woman on a bed, devoid of classical or even allegorical content”.
- It is believed to have been painted, possibly commissioned for a Medici cardinal who died before seeing it. It was bought by Guidobaldo II della Rovere, later the Duke of Urbino, which accounts for its title. It may have been commissioned by Guidobaldo possibly to celebrate his marriage in 1534 to the 10 year-old Giulia Varano, or the consummation of the marriage a few years later.



- The two maids in the background are looking in a cassone, a chest where clothes were kept particularly a marriage trousseau. The dog represents fidelity or possibly the della Rovere home where its quietness indicates the viewer is her husband.
- The painting has been controversially erotic over the centuries. Just to turn the tables on all the beauty we have seen Mark Twain called it "*the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses*". He proposed that "it was painted for a bagnio[brothel], and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong", adding humorously that "in truth, it is a trifle too strong for any place but a public art gallery".
- With that, my little survey of the Renaissance nude ends, and I am sure we all look forward to returning to our public art galleries some time soon.

## **REFERENCES**

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus\\_of\\_Urbino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Urbino)



NEXT WEEK - WOMEN SURREALISTS