

Panic is rising and I am unsure of what to choose. I peer over all the artworks I see before me, seconds away from inevitable disaster. Where will it hit? No one knows, but the unsettling paranoia of the unknown led me to the position I am in right now... I have to preserve three paintings for the sake of humanity. But I've only been in the country for three years. What deems important to me feels unfavorable to others' preferences; is what I prefer redeemable too selfish? Or is it enlightening to others what people like me have endured? Traveling to the United States after the affairs I experienced in Paris felt like a breath of fresh air— my nudity has never felt more beautiful after leaving France with an artist who has offered me a modeling job. So I guess we should start there.

I was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland in 1898 until my father and I moved to Paris. I began “working on the streets” as they call it quickly after, in 1912, I was only fourteen. My father, impulsive in nature by his vast consumption of alcohol, sold me for he preferred a son, and after conceiving one with his mistress (my mother insisted he left the country after finding out, and he took me along), I was seen as a source of income rather than a daughter. I think he's always resented me for I looked too much like my mother, which he internally resented for reasons I will never find out. Up until age twenty-one, I've been sold, used, abused, and pleased upon by more men than the coins I have in my pocket. The pay is good, and most men I've performed for are generous with their spending, but the emptiness I feel inside lingers stronger and most of the money my father inherits. But does that feeling have power? Here I am now, standing before paintings of nudity, people like me, as time ticks away by the millisecond. As a current nude model (for a well-known French artist who now resides with me in the United States) after years

of erotic prostitution, I've been more educated on the matter after being taught how to read and study art myself. The main practice in the female nude for an artist was that it was considered the ideal beauty in art, that only the most professional artists could study and depict. However, it seems as though this is a beginning of an era when the "notion of "indecent" dramatically shifted and a more modernist view of the representation of the human figure emerged" (Villareal). French artists, to my understanding, relied heavily on traditional depictions of nudity like Venus, but now they are trained to maintain this practice, while also updating the nude figure in their artworks. This seems like a step in the right direction because "No longer were figures trapped in heroic or idealized poses; they were placed in realistic contemporary scenes, as well as in ethereal or invented settings" (Villareal). Instead of being seen as an object, female nudity is seen as expressive, a realistic depiction of the emotional states of a female in a naturalistic setting. This shift (and not many at first liked it, according to artist Manet, who has pissed off a lot of people with this execution), even recalled some of the nude figures confronting the viewer's gaze, like in his oil piece *Olympia* (1865) (see Appendix A), which is no longer unfamiliar in the art world. As these thoughts race through my head, I snap back into reality as time is running out and I need to decide quickly.

The first painting I glance at is Paul Gauguin's *In The Waves*, painted in 1889 with oil on fabric (Figure 1). This painting felt like a rejection of other nudity paintings I've seen; by the 1880s, it seems, especially considering mythical figures like Venus, the popularity of nudity in art started. Even then, this painting "conflat[es] the imagery of Venus... and other mythical water women, they complicated the established Salon depictions of women" (Neginsky pg 272). This feels important if not, the most important painting to preserve. It denies the traditional expectations of

the female nude since women were described as cold, moist, and the weaker sex. But this painting that Gauguin created, uses the female nude as a beautiful force of nature (Neginisky pg 272). It should also be noted that the figure is in water, making another point of the use of “swimming or enjoying leisure time in natural bodies of water, – which had become standard among ambitious artists. Such images had long been popular in French art; in particular, the goddess Diana and her maidens in pastoral settings” (Villareal). Some artists kept making these references, maintaining the traditions of depicting mythological beings such as Diana. However, the modern female nude had a decrease in idealization and romanticization, such as Gauguin’s piece. It only feels fair to compare this contemporary vision of the female nude to an older painting that holds the traditional values of the female nude: Peter Paul Rubens’s *Diana and her Nymphs Departing for the Hunt* (Figure 2). Painted in oil around the 1600s, this work depicts Diana, the goddess of hunt, moon, and nature according to Roman mythology. She was also known to be the virgin goddess of childbirth and women, and also made an oath to never marry. This work, while older, still feels empowering as Diana and her Nymphs are on their way to a hunt); having Diana, the goddess of hunt and also known for captivating “unattainable beauty or chastity” (Cleveland Museum of Art), feels uncommon and even uncomfortable since hunting isn’t typically a woman, or even a goddess's job. She also has her left breast hanging out, which to me feels like confidence in her femininity while performing a traditional man’s work or even problematic. Nudity during this century, especially for mythology, was common and especially intimidating during this time period. Even back then, what was considered the proper nude since life as a woman during this era was immensely bigotry. This practice during the late 1400s - early 1500s leading into the 1600s was known as “The Power of Women”. This theme of power implied that women had “implication” over men, for their power “is sexual in nature, and that

women will abuse this power to destroy even the strongest and wisest of men” (Kren pg 88), causing this faux power to be contained. Preserving this painting would remind us how far we have come since then, that nudity is embraced rather than being objectified. It will also be served as a history lesson, what *not* to do with women moving forward, and applaud the corrections that have been made. Let’s compare the two now with this context; was this shift of nudity an association with high culture, or an assault on public morality (Hacking, Victorian Nude)? Because it can be inferred that “The beginning of the nineteenth-century nudity in art was predominantly associated with the heroic male form” (Hacking), which later on turned out to be replaced with female nudity. After seeing the first two paintings I’ve chosen, I would deem this again to be true. The properties of female nudes also seemed to be going through a revolution; instead of seeing this as erotic and under a male gaze (*Diana and her Nymphs Departing for the Hunt*), it’s now seen as independent and naturally beautiful (*In The Waves*).

The second painting coming to mind is Pablo Picasso's *La Vie (Life)* (Figure 3), painted in 1903 with oil on canvas. Apparently, after the death of Picasso’s friend who had shot himself, transferred over to what was called his “Blue Period”, which this painting was a part of; it was coming to terms with the world, and accepting death. This painting particularly resembles human misery and the social alienation that comes with it. According to the museum itself, “The subject has been interpreted variously as an allegory of sacred and profane love, a symbolic representation of the cycle of life, and a working-class couple facing the hazards of real life” (Cleveland Museum of Art). This one feels pretty self-explanatory; as a former prostitute during the 19th century would feel alienating. Before I was even born, there was a movement in Ireland during the 1870s, where “women’s campaign made it clear that they wanted a single standard of

morality, one based upon women's ideals" (Luddy pg 490). Isabella Tod, who was a part of this movement, quoted that women "owe a duty to men ... to awaken their consciences to pull down the selfish screen which society has set up We have the power of the newly awakened conscience of women, as to their duty to protect their poorer and weaker sisters, and to withstand and enlighten those who would seek to assail them" (Luddy, pg 490). This issue that society, for hundreds of years, encouraged the idea of objectifying women's bodies, whether in pieces of art, literature, or physical professions (assumedly known as the oldest profession). Seeing the grief in Picasso's painting, while it feels like a stretch, speaks to me in a personal way; seeing the weight of grief, human misery, and coming to terms with the reality of the world feels similar to how most women in my practice would also feel. Preserving this painting would showcase the uglier, more realistic side of humanity in general, and that glorification (that we see in older paintings) is overrated and impractical.

The last painting I chose was hard to pick, admittedly. But I ultimately decided on the 1851 painting Ary Scheffer's *Dante with Virgil Meeting the Shades of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo* (Figure 4). Without context, this piece feels personal and also intimate, which gives off the feeling of forbidden romance. This painting makes the nude figures (both male and female) feel normalized and accurate in setting, compared to Diana's intentional left breast hanging out. This is a scene in *Dante's Inferno*, which is a book describing Dante's experience in hell, of Dante (right) viewing the murdered lovers Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, in the second circle of Hell: lust. This couple was a famous depiction of 19th-century art for it was, again, a traditional way of depicting the nude, this time in a more upfront negative light. This action of intimacy was an act of adultery, for they were simply overtaken by each other, therefore the two

lovers were sent to Hell for lust. Here is an excerpt from *Lust, Literature, and Damnation* written by William Carroll to provide further context:

“ Notice how this line, just prior to the encounter with Francesca, anticipates the story she tells, as well as Dante's reaction to it: "pity overcame me and I was as one bewildered."¹² The stories of these ladies and knights of old, central to the courtly love tradition of the Middle Ages, call to mind not only great feats and noble deeds, but sinful passions as well. As we have seen, Francesca reveals her own reading of precisely such a story: "Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us (ma un solo punto fu quel che ci vinse)." [Inferno V, 131-2] The book they were reading had rhythms of its own that slowly possessed the lovers” (Carroll, pg 17).

These lovers who share their nudity and intimacy together are seen as “sinful passion” rather than noble and acceptable; I think it is important to shed light on this historical context that depictions of nudity in the lens of older stories and ideals showcase the reality of medieval life. This was most likely painted in the 19th century as a reminder of what truly defines nudity since, during this time, its definition was drastically shifting. This will also show others how divided and controversial the topic of female nudity was. With that being said, I’d like to add an additional fourth painting to strengthen both sides of this argument, Pierre Bonnard’s *Nude Rising from Bed*, painted in 1912 (Figure 5). This is a painting of a nude figure, the artist’s wife, rising out of her bed, allegedly in the morning after a night of intimacy. Bonnard’s use of light and color falls under the category of Impressionism, which normally depicts scenes of everyday life, suggesting that nudity and intimacy is an act of normal, everyday life, as we “enter the 20th century with paintings of interiors—not only those familiar dining rooms and sitting rooms with windows open to lush landscapes but also bedrooms in which Bonnard’s muse, companion, model and (much) later wife, Marthe” (Grand Palais). The painting also seems to be focusing

more on the domestic quality of the scene rather than the sexual desire. This is completely opposite compared to Scheffer's work, in which the main purpose is "sinful passion", and sexual desire under a bad lens. Preserving these both would allow others to open up this discussion further.

As someone who has never been valued up until recently, I personally believe that no matter how bitter, how angry, or how vengeful you feel after experiencing torment after torment, it's important to shed light on all angles. This is why I decided on the paintings I did; some accept nudity in all its embrace and see it as an individuality, such as *In The Waves* and *Nude Rising from Bed*, while others view it as a sin like *Dante with Virgil Meeting the Shades of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo*, or downright accepting the harsh reality of life like *La Vie (Life)*. The events one experience in life comes in many forms and layers, and not all of them are great. But, not all of them are bad either. I believe we all should have the freedom to form our own thoughts and make our own choices, even when we are forced to be silent. This selection of paintings is biased, but also gives everyone an opportunity to see *all sides*, and allows everyone to *choose* what they believe.

ILLUSTRATIONS

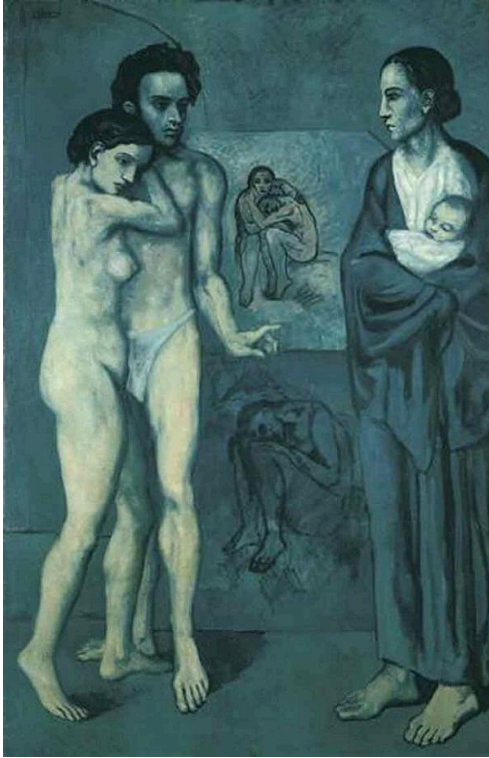
**FIGURE 1**

Paul Gauguin *In The Waves* (1889), oil on fabric, 123.8 x 106 x 7 cm

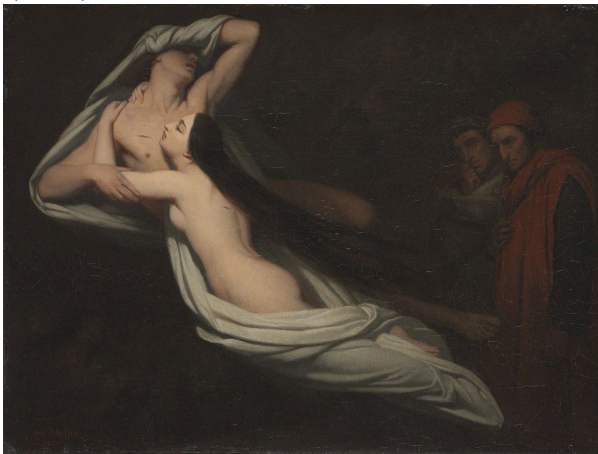


FIGURE 2

Peter Paul Rubens and Workshop, *Diana and her Nymphs Departing for the Hunt* (c 1615), oil on canvas, 261 x 225 x 11 cm

**FIGURE 3**

(1903), oil on canvas, 239 x 170 x 10 cm

**FIGURE 4**

Ary Scheffer, *Dante with Virgil Meeting the Shades of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo* (1851), oil on fabric, 45.5 x 53 x 7.5 cm



FIGURE 5

Pierre Bonnard, *Nude Rising from Bed* (1912), oil on cardboard, mounted to panel, 74.9 x 102.7 cm

APPENDIX A



Edouard Manet

Olympia

En 1863

Huile sur toile

H. 130,5 ; L. 191,0 cm.

1890

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With *Olympia*, Manet reworked the traditional theme of the female nude, using a strong, uncompromising technique. Both the subject matter and its depiction explain the scandal caused by this painting at the 1865 Salon. Even though Manet quoted numerous formal and iconographic references, such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Goya's *Maja desnuda*, and the theme of the odalisque with her black slave, already handled by Ingres among others, the picture portrays the cold and prosaic reality of a truly contemporary subject.

Venus has become a prostitute, challenging the viewer with her calculating look. This profanation of the idealized nude, the very foundation of academic tradition, provoked a violent reaction. Critics attacked the "yellow-bellied odalisque" whose modernity was nevertheless defended by a small group of Manet's contemporaries with Zola at their head.

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