

Art Policy On Nude Models

Why does Gordon, a Christian college, practice the use of nude models in Art courses?

Over the past decade and a half, Gordon College has been building and expanding its Art program. The College is committed to helping recover the rich relationship between art and the church that has been a significant part of our Renaissance and Medieval legacy. Additionally, the College is eager to prepare artists who can help restore a Christian aesthetic and moral vision in the postmodern culture. We seek to respect and understand tradition and to prepare students to engage their culture -- bringing a deep commitment to excellence and an even deeper commitment to Christ and to the leavening of conversation in the public square.

With these values, Gordon has developed a curriculum in Art that includes the study and rendering of the undraped human figure, one of the traditional practices of Western art. Following is a brief statement that provides the College's rationale for this practice and describes the steps that are taken to insure that the College preserves professional decorum in courses involving nude models.

Do students have a choice about studying the nude figure?

We stand behind the general requirement that Art majors at Gordon will need to study the undraped human form in advanced Art courses. Though we do not have a two-track system -- those who study the human form and those who do not -- nevertheless we do try to make provision for the dissenting student, if after engaging in a thorough examination of our theory, history, and practice, and after meeting with an advisor and the Chair of the department, the student considers this study a violation of conscience.

As part of admission to the Art program, all students are asked to review the following policy and to sign, indicating that they have read and understood the policy. Faculty in the Art department are willing to answer any questions that individuals might have about the study of the human figure in art courses.

Rationale

We have chosen in the Art Department at Gordon College to work respectfully with the human figure attempting to bring honor and glory to God in the process. We base this, in a Christian context, on a time-honored professional practice, holding the belief that the human form is the crowning achievement of God in Creation - worthy of our expert knowledge, and analogous to the scientific knowledge of the human body in medicine and biology. In our tradition as artists it is seen as the linchpin of our practice of visual knowledge. If you can accurately and expressively draw or paint or sculpt the human form you can draw anything.

A walk through the museums of the world underscores how much our philosophy, literature and even sciences are built upon the foundation of Western European culture beginning with the Greeks and the Romans, moving through the Mediterranean world and Europe up to the present day. We are free to critique these traditions and to be selective as to which parts seem best applicable to our Christian worldview. But we cannot disregard these traditions or our liberal arts education would crumble. Extensive use of the nude is part of this tradition.

In our teaching, the nude has much more in common with medical knowledge than with popular sexualization of images in advertising and movies. The context of the encounter determines the meaning of the unclothed form. An operating theater in a hospital has a drastically different meaning from that of a strip joint. An art studio with students or artists surrounding a model is akin to the operating theater. Knowledge is being gained and a professional activity is being practiced.

Gordon College students who are serious about the study of art would be handicapped in their capacity to render the draped or clothed human form if they were denied the opportunity to study anatomy in the undraped form. Likewise, it is necessary to study the skeleton and the musculature in order to gain a thorough knowledge of the forms one encounters on the surface of the body. Gordon College Art majors are required to study all of the above. You can only draw what you can see, and that which you cannot see cannot be fully known.

As Christians we seek to honor God's creation in the study of the human form. Only in a Christian college may the human form be seen and rendered in the context of a community of belief. Many Christian colleges currently send their art students to secular universities to get training in the nude figure because they forbid the use of nude models on campus. This practice is inconsistent and constitutes a lack of integrity. Christians ought to reclaim cultural territory surrendered to their secular counterparts and to redeem this territory for Christ's glory. When the human form is honored and upheld in a Christian college

context, students have opportunity to hear and see professors using it meaningfully, setting the theological and professional context for the study. Great artists of the past have used the human figure. Contemporary Christians should reclaim it for God and His purposes as a means to leaven popular culture.

Praxis

We take steps to ensure professional protocols are followed within the human figure-drawing context. In fact our professional models report that they are treated more respectfully at Gordon than at any other art program they are associated with. We pay a professional rate and only use select professional models, never members of the Gordon community. This preserves professional distance and anonymity, just as in the confidentiality of the doctor's office.

Studio doors are closed and locked and window shades are drawn while class is in session to protect professional decorum. Only art majors are allowed to participate in these upper level courses to ensure that students have been brought up through the curriculum with a full understanding of our practices and intentions. Models do not disrobe in the classroom in order to avoid the appearance of impropriety before an audience. Rather, they change in the restroom and wear a robe at all times when not posing. Finally, each classroom contains a human skeleton and various classical plaster casts, which are used for the study of the mechanics and basic structure of the human figure -- thus contributing to an atmosphere of high seriousness.

There are Christian colleges which allow drawing of the human figure clothed in bikinis or racing suits both of which resemble underwear and have well known advertising campaigns associated with them that exploit sex as the main point of their style. This practice seems inappropriate and more sensual by its suggestive commercial context and the unnecessary focus upon the covered area that it invites. To some, it appears more like going to the beach than to the classroom where serious academic study is underway.

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BRIEF ESSAY BY ART DEPARTMENT CHAIR, Jim Zingarelli

On The Nude in Art

By James Zingarelli
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For about ten years now, I've noticed a language shift in art criticism from discussions of the figure to examinations of the body. This language shift signals a different perspective, moving from how we view ourselves through a high perception lens of beauty whether naturalized, idealized, or abstracted, toward a clinical deconstruction where the body is reduced to an amalgam of fluids, a list of parts, an assortment of DNA swatches.

I believe we are currently experiencing a debasing of human identity where these high-minded critiques address only "body" without spirit, function without purpose, concept without beauty. In fact, beauty often is not an issue at all in the scrambled ramblings of artspeak, but rather, a stripping away of those essential qualities of humanity that have defined the figurative tradition for centuries (i.e. gesture, proportion, expression, relationship with the eternal), and left us instead with genetic codes as a dot to dot screened irresolution of selfhood. In other words, we are left naked without an ethical pair of trousers to buckle.

The figure, i.e. the nude figure (and I do not mean nudity in the political sense for which so many arguments have been

waged concerning censorship), is a soulful being, created we are told in the image of God and imbued with the stretch and celebration of dance, the gravity and reflection of thought, the expression and imagination of spirit. To see the figure in this light is to honor, not to worship it. We come to draw the figure with eyes focused to study, not to lust. We revel in our lines, smudges, colors, clay forms, to render the poetry of all that is human, not to debase it as the pornographer's butcher shop. In fact, we rebel in our prints, pictures, and sculpture against the newsstand rags, which pervert the man or woman that was made with a temple in mind. If as Christians and artists we seek to elevate the nude figure as a metaphor for what it means to truly be alive at a certain time, in a certain place, then we have accomplished a great deal. If, however, we reduce ourselves to the naked body, we are relegated to being the makers of empty vessels without full transcendence, and therefore merely a cold and shivering heap of parts.

Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, is among the top Christian colleges in the nation and the only nondenominational Christian College in New England. Gordon is committed to excellence in liberal arts education, spiritual development and academic freedom informed by a framework of faith.

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