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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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A Christian Perspective on Nudity in Art

by Matthew Clark

John is a Christian who enjoys the arts and finds them edifying. He is particularly fond of the art of painting. Desiring to expand his art history knowledge, he visits the best, closest art museum he can find. Going from gallery to gallery, John begins to become discouraged and more than a little embarrassed because of all the nudity shown in the paintings. He finds himself wondering if he should leave the museum in a state of disillusioned protest. As a Christian, John understands the need to shun pornography; but what he is seeing is not Hollywood at its X-rated worst, it is Western Civilization. These are the paintings that make up the canon of art. What is he — what are Christians — to do with nudity as it is often shown in art?

To answer the overriding question, one must first understand the difference between nudity and pornography. Nudity is nothing more than a human figure without clothing. There is no overt intention of sexual arousal. When nudity is used in art, it is often (but not always) with the goal of eliciting an admiration on the part of the viewer for the handy-work of his Creator. The Greeks believed that man was the measure of all things; as such they sought to find the perfect human form and show it in their art. The resulting nudes are not pornographic; rather, they are the outworking of the Greek ideal. As Christians, we rightly reject their philosophy, but we should not make the mistake of mislabeling their art. There has been much written on the beauty of the human body and it does not need be rehearsed here. It is clear that we are, indeed, fearfully and wonderfully made. When an artist shows nudity with this in mind, he is showing it to the praise and glory of the Creator. Pornography, on the other hand, has sexual arousal as its sole intention. It seeks to debase and lower both its subject, the person being looked at, and its object, the person doing the looking, to the level of mere animals. It is meant to feed our lusts, with the full understanding that they can never be sated. Sexual lust — like all other lusts — operates according to the Law of Diminishing Returns; the more a person feeds his lust, the harder it is to get even temporary satisfaction. This forces him to go back for increasingly more and more stimulation until it is almost impossible to derive *any* pleasure from his vice, no matter how much he indulges. It would be irresponsible to say that no part of Western Art leans to the pornographic side of things; for some of it does (much of Klimt, Schiele, some Courbet, etc.); however, the difference is usually reasonably obvious with sober thought (if it's not, then the artist has not done his job!).

There is also art that is quite charged with erotic content that doesn't show so much as an exposed ankle. These paintings rely on context and subtlety to convey the true meaning of the work. For example,

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Continued on page 2

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A Christian Perspective on Nudity in Art

continued from page 1

Gustave Courbet's painting, *Demoiselles on the Banks of the Seine* of 1856, is widely understood to be a depiction of two lesbians in post-coital sleep — an obviously unacceptable situation for the Christian. There is no crass sexual imagery to suggest this relationship; however, when viewed in light of some of his other paintings, and when the painting is looked at carefully the relationship between the two women becomes clear. This is far from the only example of subtle erotic imagery, but it is illustrative of the issue. Like so many situations in life, context is the key to making a decision about whether or not to show or look at imagery like this. Song of Solomon (among other passages in scripture) is very explicit in its description of a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. It speaks quite openly of physical desire. We know from the context of the whole book that this is not a sinful desire and that it is proper for us to read about it and learn from it. So it is with art; when we properly understand the context of a picture we can make decisions on whether it is sinful to look at or not. We have to decide what our aim is in looking at it: are we indulging in an unlawful desire, or are we confronting an opposing worldview? If it is the former, then by no means should the image be viewed; however, if our education is to have any value we must confront opposing worldviews. To what are we objecting in pictures like this? It is obviously not the depiction of an unclothed human body. It is the representation and the implicit approval of promiscuity. This is what breaks the Law of God in Scripture — the sin does not necessarily occur when we look at such material, it happens when we approve of it.

Things are rarely one dimensional; there

are many reasons for showing nudity in art. We do a disservice to our students (and ourselves) when we teach them to be reactionary instead of thoughtful and discerning. There is a long tradition of depicting the nude human form in Western Art. I mentioned above that appreciation of the human form is one reason for showing nudity in art. However, it is not the only reason. Realism is another; nudity in varying degrees is a part of life, even public life at many times in the past and in different parts of the world. Many times artists were showing only what they saw as a part of everyday life. In the past there were public baths and public toilets that did not afford the same privacy that we, as 21st century Americans, have come to take for granted. There were even times when public nudity was accepted (for example, Peter worked in the nude while he fished (John 21:7). As such, people would have come to understand the concept of modesty as opposed to prudish-

ness. Modesty reserves the exposure of the body to appropriate times and places, whereas prudishness sees the body as sinful *in and of itself*. As Christians, we must reject prudishness in light of the fact that God

has given us many good gifts that are to be enjoyed in their proper context, our bodies being one of them.

Since the Fall, nakedness in many situations has become shameful to us. Artists throughout history have recognized this fact and have used it in their art. For example, there are many depictions of the Last Judgment in art history (Rogier Van der Weyden, Hieronymous Bosch, Petrus Christus, the van Eycks, etc.), many of which show those to be judged completely naked; the blessed are usually given a

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Continued on page 3

CLASSIS

A Christian Perspective on Nudity in Art

continued from page 2

robe while the damned are sent into hell naked. This is done to emphasize their state before God; they have no covering, either physical or metaphorical to shield them from their Creator. The image of nakedness is used in the Scriptures to highlight our condition before God (Hebrews 4:13). God describes Israel as having been naked before He found her (Ezekiel 16, Hosea 2:1-5). He also uses literal nakedness when he commands Isaiah to go without clothing for three years as a sign of impending judgment (Isaiah 20:1-6). Whether in Scripture or elsewhere, a literary image of nudity is not really that much different from a literal image; both give the mind *pictures* of naked bodies to think about. It is the intended goal of depicting nudity (whether in words or pictures) that carries the weight of moral responsibility. If we take into account the Scriptures' use of nudity, it seems that it is proper — even edifying — at times to show nudity in art if it is done for the same reasons as the Scriptures.

Many times in art the baby Jesus is shown quite openly nude. This is done for a very serious reason. His genitals were shown so that the artist might emphasize the very real human nature of the Christ. The artists wished to refute various Christological heresies (Nestorianism, Monophysitism, various forms of Gnosticism, etc.) by showing that Jesus was both God and man. The attributes of Divinity are obvious and well known (the halo, lamb, and cross) but the tradition of depicting Jesus' humanity through showing His genitals is often misunderstood. At the other end of the spectrum of representing Jesus during His life on Earth is the cross. He would have been completely naked on the cross. The loincloth that we commonly see in

paintings is a piece of pure fiction. Would it have been sinful for Him to be naked in public? Of course not, this was not a sexual context, nor was it meant to be. Was it sinful for Jesus' female followers to be there and see Him in such a state? No. Again, context is the key.

A common example of public exposure (albeit mild exposure) that many of us will encounter is breastfeeding. This is a context in which a woman's breasts are not

meant to be seen as sexual, but as motherly. If a man is aroused by the sight of this, does that not point to the sin in him and not in the act of breastfeeding? God ordained this method of nourishment for children and alludes to it many times in Scripture as a good and proper thing. Again, context is the key to discerning the nature of this situation. Likewise, it is exceedingly rare for a medical doctor to be accused of being a pornography addict for giving physical exams to members of the opposite sex. The context of the examination room is not a sexual one. However, if a doctor mistreats his position and does look at a woman in a lecherous manner, does that mean that all physicals are pornographic and we should stop having them? There are other examples where images of nudity do not and should not elicit sexual arousal: childbirth, war pictures, anatomical charts and books, images from other (often indigenous) cultures, etc.

The age at which it is acceptable for children to begin seeing paintings with nudity in them is a matter of debate. It seems that children should be exposed to nudity in art from an early age with the understanding that it is proper in some contexts and improper in others (many of which have been discussed above). If this

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Continued on page 5

A Christian Perspective on Nudity in Art

continued from page 3

is done, many aspects of the question of pornography will have been answered at an early age. Furthermore, if this approach is taken, children will gain an understanding of modesty and prudishness and know the differ-

ence between the two before it becomes an issue of practice for them (e.g. skirt length, bathing suits, movies, etc.). Of course there are many things that are perfectly good and right in and of themselves that are inappro-

priate for children. It is the responsibility of the parents to know their children and use their discernment in this question.

The above arguments show that things are rarely as simple as nude = bad,

clothed = good. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the issue by any means; however, it should shed light on different perspectives on how a Christian is supposed to view nudity in art.

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