

MYTHOLOGIZED, IDEALIZED, MODERNIZED: The Human Figure in Western Art

Whether sculpted, painted, drawn, or photographed, the human body has been one of the most important and powerful subjects in the history of Western art.

This exhibition presents a selection of works that together offer the opportunity to consider how artists have looked to the past, to their imagination, and to the world around them for inspiration in fashioning images of the body that intrigue and move us today.

One theme that surfaces in this exhibition is the idealization of the figure and the corresponding notions of balance, proportion, perfection that elevate the figure into an aesthetic ideal. The nude in classical Greek art provides an early example, evident in the admiration of human form in the Nolan Amphora (475–465 BC), painted by the Athenian artist Hermonax. The technical innovation of red-figure vase painting around 530 BC allowed artists to depict figures with an increased three-dimensionality and detailed line, which contributed to a more naturalistic, yet still formalized, representation.

The small marble *Torso* (300 BC–300 AD) is likely a Roman work modeled after a Greek sculpture, and it further emphasizes the value of proportion in physical beauty. In classical culture these qualities could be linked to either the secular or the divine, and this figure could be either a philosopher or a god. In contrast to the smooth, graceful forms of the *Torso*, the physiognomy of the silver *Mask of a Satyr's Face* (1st century BC) is bulbous and highly irregular. Although far from idealized, the deep-set eyes and bulging facial features give a strange and otherworldly quality that highly typifies this mythological figure.

In Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Christ on the Cross* (1508), we see how the body can serve to heighten an emotional connection between viewer and subject matter. The print has a somber and

intimate quality that accents its religious subject; the body of Christ is portrayed with a subtle use of shadow and intricate line that suggest a sense of reverence for the figure. Dürer's diligent studies of human proportion can further be seen in the meticulously rendered human figures surrounding the cross, whose dramatic gestures enhance the pathos of the work.

Hendrick Goltzius's engraving *The Large Hercules* (1589) offers an example of how the body can be coded with political and social meaning. Here Goltzius exaggerates the musculature of the body and gives a startling physique to his mythological subject. The physiognomy of the figure is distinctly different than classical models, and may have been intended as an allegory of the strength of the Dutch Low Countries, which were engaged in a struggle against Spain during this period.

Completed about sixty years later, Jacob G. Cuyp's *Portrait of a Lady* (c. 1640–50) exemplifies the popularity of portrait painting in 17th-century Dutch art. Commissioned by the burgeoning merchant class during this period, these paintings were primarily intended to communicate and even establish the status of the sitter, who was depicted in a way to maximize the sitter's prestige.

During the neoclassical period, the French Academy established a focus on the body as the most important element of artistic training. In its academic system, rigorous standards for instruction involved studying and depicting the nude, first from classical sculptures, then from live models. *Academie d'homme assis (Study of a Male Nude)* (1786) by Louis Gauffier—recipient of the Prix de Rome, the most esteemed award for artists of the Academy—exemplifies this

This Teaching Gallery exhibition is organized by Jennifer Padgett, an MA candidate in the department of Art History & Archaeology, in conjunction with the course "Introduction to Western Art," offered by Washington University's Department of Art History & Archaeology in summer 2011.

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emphasis on mastery of form, line, and modeling in representing the human figure.

Later neoclassical interest in the body can be found in the work of many American artists, such as Harriet Hosmer's life-size sculpture *Oenone* (1854–55). During the 18th and 19th centuries, many artists sought to connect American cultural and artistic achievements with those of the classical period, which signified for them the height of Western civilization. This marble figure employs classical notions of the human form and physical beauty in its depiction of a popular subject from Greek mythology, the mourning nymph Oenone, betrayed by her husband Paris.

In Honoré Daumier's lithograph *Europe* (1867), the monumental figure of the woman can be seen as an embodiment of Europe, the political troubles plaguing her shown as circling ducks. With the body symbolizing an abstract entity or body politic, the artist is able to provide ingenious commentary on the political, social, or cultural realities of his time through a depiction of the female form.

In the painting *Le Christ tourmenté (Christ Tormented)* (1888), James Ensor explores the multiple, often conflicting, aspects of the human condition, rendering the body of Christ with a tumultuous and frenzied intensity that depicts extreme suffering in a highly imaginative manner. Ensor's bright colors and loose, painterly effects project a vision of a fantasy world in which the body is nearly overwhelmed by its surroundings. The artist may have imagined a connection between his own personal anguish and the trials of Christ, providing commentary on the universality of the human experience.

Modernization of classical renderings of the human form in the 19th and 20th centuries can be seen in works as diverse as those by Edward Sheriff Curtis, Edgar Degas, and Willi Baumeister. Curtis's photogravure *The Morning Bath—Apache* (1906) mythologizes an Apache youth in the midst of everyday routine, infusing his activity with beauty and grace. Like a Greek nude, the figure is not individualized but universalized, his identity

obscured by the covering of his face. Created at a time when many were aware of the disappearance of traditional Native American culture, Curtis's photograph could be seen as a romanticized symbol of the larger population.

Other artists focused on the fleeting quality of everyday life instead of on timeless symbolic forms. Degas's *Torso (Woman Getting out of a Bath)* (c. 1896–1911) and Baumeister's *Bath* (c. 1905–14) are both examples of how the figure could be captured in momentary action, with the body used as a subject in which to explore novel innovations in form.

By the late 20th century, even as artists radically rethought the way that art was produced and form was created, the body remained significant. Jean Dubuffet's *Tête barbue (Bearded Head)* (1959) is an *objet trouvé* (found object) that the artist altered slightly by burning in lines to resemble facial features. While marking a striking change in artistic practice by deemphasizing the skill of the artist, Dubuffet's choice of rendering a human head is a testament to the enduring power of the human figure in art.

- Jennifer Padgett

Further Reading

Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956).

Michael Gill, *Image of the Body: Aspects of the Nude* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).