



January 2003

Nudes Under Siege

Patricia Failing

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh>



Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Patricia Failing, *Nudes Under Siege*, 15 YALE J.L. & HUMAN. (2003).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol15/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities by an authorized editor of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.

Book Reviews

Nudes Under Siege

Heather Dawkins, *The Nude in French Art and Culture 1870-1910*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 231. \$70.

Patricia Failing*

Heather Dawkins's *The Nude in French Art and Culture 1870-1910* brings together feminist art history and the emerging field of visual studies. Visual studies is a touchy subject for many art historians, who foresee the eclipse of their discipline and its special skills by this vast and ambiguous field of inquiry. Nevertheless, many feminist scholars have welcomed visual studies as an "indiscipline," a new area of inquiry at the margins of art history unbounded by canonicity. W.J.T. Mitchell, Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, one of the best-known advocates of visual studies, defines the enterprise broadly as the study of the social construction of vision. Mitchell's thinking, like that of many of his

* Professor of Art History, University of Washington.

colleagues, is indebted to Jacques Lacan's work on the structure of the scopic field and the dynamics of the gaze.¹

The Nude in French Art and Culture straddles two broadly related topics: censorial spectatorship on the part of courts and government officials in the French Third Republic, and challenges to the discourse of the nude by women in France in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Mass-produced visual images were consistently ranked as more dangerous than the printed word by France's Chamber of Deputies, on the grounds that images speak to all ages, sexes, and the illiterate, arousing the senses and emotions, in contrast to the more intellectual effect of text. Dawkins approaches censorship as a form of spectatorship rather than an apparatus of repression, since government censorship of images of women was a conspicuous failure, especially after liberalized freedom-of-the-press laws were enacted in 1881.² Censorial spectatorship, she argues, was a construct shaped by tensions in republican ideals, class conflict, state institutions, and the liberalization of print culture.

Much of the ground Dawkins covers in the first section of her book was laid out by Robert Goldstein's *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France*³ and Hollis Clayson's *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*.⁴ Goldstein points out that administrative censorship of images in France was primarily aimed at political caricature and satire. The caricature industry blossomed after the Revolution of 1830: More than 350 caricature journals were established between 1830 and 1914. During those years a score of caricature artists, editors, and printers were jailed for their efforts, and about twenty caricature journals were suppressed.⁵

Dawkins expands upon Goldstein's study by tracking cases involving photographs, as well as satirical drawings, of female nudes. She also discusses a painting depicting a nude prostitute yanked from the official Salon exhibition of 1878 on grounds of indecency, Henry

1. In a recent work, Mitchell chronicled the development and vicissitudes of "visual studies." W.J.T. Mitchell, *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*, in *ART HISTORY, AESTHETICS, VISUAL STUDIES* 231 (Michael Ann Holly & Keith Moxey eds., 2001)

2. Although administrative censorship, which required government approval of images prior to publication, ended in 1881, maximum fines for offending public decency were increased. After 1881, those charged with purveying indecent images were tried by a magistrates court presided over by judges, while similarly charged writers were granted more liberal and democratic jury trials. See HEATHER DAWKINS, *THE NUDE IN FRENCH CULTURE 1870-1910*, at 28 (2002).

3. ROBERT GOLDSTEIN, *CENSORSHIP OF POLITICAL CARICATURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE* (1989).

4. HOLLIS CLAYSON, *PAINTED LOVE: PROSTITUTION IN FRENCH ART OF THE IMPRESSIONIST ERA* (1991).

5. GOLDSTEIN, *supra* note 3, at viii.

Gervex's *Rolla*.⁶ An Alfred de Musset poem chronicling the debauchery and suicide of a bourgeois young man was the painting's literary source. The canvas shows young Jacques Rolla contemplating a leap to his death after a night with a prostitute, a languorous nude fast asleep on a rumpled bed. The brouhaha over the painting was inspired not so much by the nude as by still-life details, especially a discarded red corset, a type known to be favored by contemporary streetwalkers.

The fashionable underwear in Gervex's picture illustrates the chronological rationale for Dawkins's survey. The years 1870-1910 in France mark the flowering of naturalism in the arts and the downfall of the academic nude, an idealized fiction with perfect proportions and, in the female version, no body hair and undivided pubic flesh. Academic art students were taught to correct the imperfections of live models, guided by an internalized canon of ideal beauty, ultimately based on classical statuary. Through this visual alchemy, naked working-class models were transformed into timeless aesthetic objects, the very essence of truth and perfection. The semiotics of contemporary sexuality—a discarded red corset—punctured this sanctimonious refuge for the male gaze with an incongruous reference to living flesh. This detail signals the radical break in the cult of female beauty ultimately realized by naturalist aesthetics, where perceptual truths of everyday experience trumped the intellectual construct of ideal form.

The author's research indicates that between 1875 and 1880, when government approval was still required before an image could be published, photographers developed a thriving business in *academies*, photos of nude women to be marketed to art students. Only a few were apparently censored, and the criteria for rejection were fuzzy and inconsistent. In the 1880s, several cases were brought against purveyors of indecent photographs and illustrations (three of the offenders Dawkins discusses were women), but generalizations about the convictions are difficult to formulate. Three illustrations for an 1884 sociological and medical text, *La Prostitution contemporaine*, for example, were judged obscene because they lacked sufficient integration with the text. Not all the images represented female nudes: One illustrates a pederast kissing a young boy's feet. Another case involved the cover drawing for a book of reproductions of paintings and sculptures of nudes in the 1888 Salon

6. Salon rejection should not be equated with censorship, although government officials served on Salon juries. Paintings rejected by Salon juries could be shown publicly in unofficial exhibitions or, after 1863, in the government-approved Salon des Refuses. See John House, *Manet's Maximilian: Censorship and the Salon, in SUSPENDED LICENSE: CENSORSHIP AND THE VISUAL ARTS* (Elizabeth C. Childs ed., 1997).

exhibition: The reproductions passed muster, but not the drawing on the front, which featured a female nude shielded with a large leaf, strategically torn to reveal part of her body. Dawkins's primary argument is that the "criteria and process used in the early Third Republic for distinguishing art from obscenity have important implications for our understanding today of the spectatorship of both the modern nude and its academic precursor," but the court cases she cites indicate little about what those implications might be.⁷

Dawkins, however, wants to consider the Third Republic censorship industry itself as a sign. Upper-class males were deemed capable of resisting indecent images, and the laws they enacted were enforced to shield those who could not—women, children, and the working classes. This concern about spectatorship is in itself a form of spectatorship, she argues, a social form of looking ultimately motivated by a desire to keep a widening audience for mass-media images, especially images of the nude, under institutional control. As Goldstein emphasizes in his text, a fear of mass-produced images and popular theater in nineteenth-century Europe almost always signals class conflict: Determining what types of images or plays should be accessible to women, children, the lower classes, and the illiterate was a censor's major preoccupation. The presumption of higher-class status and level of education for French Salon viewers largely exempted the academic nude from censorship, even though exhibitions were open to the public and obviously attracted sexual voyeurs.

In Chapter Two, Dawkins clicks into the main focus of her book, women's perspectives on the genre of the nude. Her first case study is Suzanne Valadon, the model for Impressionist painters who became an accomplished visual artist. As have several art historians, Dawkins credits Valadon with successfully conveying a model's confident physicality in her images of nude women. But Valadon did not develop a proficient oeuvre, in Dawkins's view, nor did she directly address the experience of being the nude recipient of the artists' look. Dawkins finds this voice instead in Pauline, a model who worked for Edgar Degas, who was also Valadon's artistic mentor. Pauline apparently dictated her memoirs to Alice Michel, a mysterious writer for the Paris literary magazine *Mercure de France*.⁸ The memoir offers a litany of complaints: Degas's studio is dirty; the

7. DAWKINS, *supra* note 2, at 2.

8. See Alice Michel, *Degas et son model*, *MERCURE DE FRANCE* (PTS. 1 & 2), Feb. 1, 1919, at 457-78, Feb. 16, 1919, at 623-39. Dawkins states incorrectly that this article was neglected in Degas literature until the 1990s. On the contrary, the memoir was cited extensively in several editions of John Rewald's *Degas, Works in Sculpture, A Complete Catalogue*, first published in 1944.

poses are difficult; his sculpture falls apart; he is rude, miserly, abusive, arrogant, and anti-Semitic. Degas is commended, however, for paying regularly, employing models year-around, and never making sexual advances.

The memoir seems to be a remarkable account of model-as-viewer, but the evidence it provides about spectatorship is muddled by the reader's inability to distinguish between the voices of the writer and the model. Their identities are uncertain as well: Degas's notebooks list several models named "Pauline" and no trace of Michel has been found aside from this publication. (Dawkins raises the possibility that the memoir may have been ghost-written by a socialist journalist and the wife of the director of the magazine.) The chronology is uncertain too: Pauline recounts the experience of modeling for Degas in 1910, but the memoir did not appear until 1919, two years after Degas's death at age eighty-three. Degas's acquaintances are nearly unanimous in characterizing the artist as a prickly, anti-Semitic elitist in his old age, but (as is often the case with Degas) the record is not entirely consistent. Fernande Olivier, Picasso's soon-to-be model and mistress, wrote after a visit to Degas' studio in 1904: "He is a curious old painter, caustic and severe, it seems, with the strong, but kind to the humble."⁹ From this text, we learn that the experience of modeling was difficult and that models did not always respect their employers, but we don't really know who is speaking.

Dawkins turns next to the careers of three women artists, Marie Bashkirtseff, one of the first woman to study life drawing at the *Academie Julian*, a famous Paris art school, and two painters who exhibited the Impressionists, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. These artists painted or drew female nudes, but Dawkins finds that "none could re-direct the genre."¹⁰ Cassatt was an admirer of Courbet's nudes and communicated her enthusiasm to American collector Louisine Havemeyer, who bought several paintings and sculptures of female nudes. Morisot copied François Boucher's figures of two embracing naiads, an image the author interprets as "a fantasy of dyadic intimacy articulated through lesbian embrace."¹¹ Dawkins finds evidence in these examples that "there were radical elements in the history of the nude if women could look."¹² The writer Marie de Montifaud, who published witty short stories tweaking the Catholic ideal of female chastity, is the subject of the concluding chapter. She was prosecuted and her writings censored

9. Richard Kendall, *Who Said Anything About Rodin?*, APOLLO, Aug. 1995, at 76.

10. DAWKINS, *supra* note 2, at 123.

11. *Id.* at 133.

12. *Id.*

for affronting public decency. Montifaud was not a visual artist nor a purveyor of images, however, and her radicalism seems of a different order than the looking attributed to Morisot or Cassatt.

From a visual studies perspective, a conclusion that might be drawn from Dawkins's study is that her heroines are hemmed in by a form of censorial spectatorship women inflict upon themselves. As several historians have observed, post-Enlightenment democracies developed new, covert forms of censorship that structure the field of acceptable discourse. This structural censorship moves beyond the model of legislative action, which prescribes a strict opposition between good and bad, official and unofficial, creating a self-regulating system that quashes dissension with constructions such as "female propriety." According to art historian Griselda Pollock, an artist like Mary Cassatt could relate to the working-class nakedness of her female models only with ambivalence. Bourgeois women were prevented from having visual access and knowledge of their own bodies (in Catholic countries they were obligated to wear a shift while bathing).¹³ This censorship of middle-class women's experience of their own corporeality factored into the act of looking and mitigated the kind of challenges they posed (or did not pose) to the genre of the nude. Censorial spectatorship could be an even richer topic than Dawkins indicates in her book, which offers a useful methodological foundation for this kind of inquiry.

13. GRISELDA POLLOCK, *MARY CASSATT: PAINTER OF MODERN WOMEN* 177 (1998).