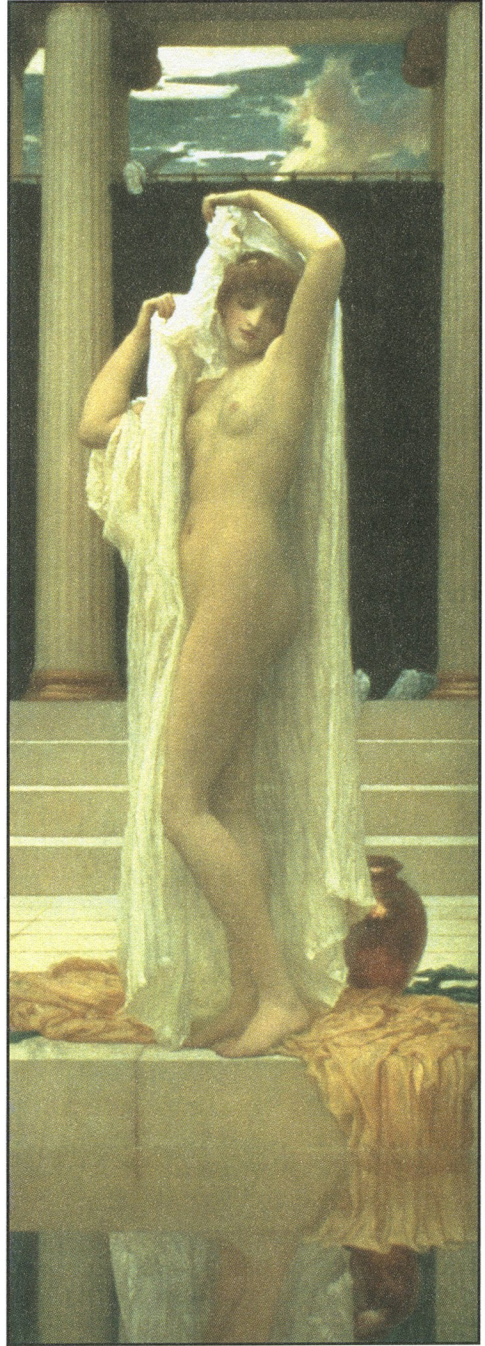


# Body and Soul: The Victorian Nude

by Gail Leggio

“Exposed: The Victorian Nude,” an exhibition organized by the Tate Britain and currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, is symptomatic of some very complicated attitudes, both historical and contemporary. Nudity was an issue in nineteenth-century Britain for many reasons. The lack of a strong figure tradition, in contrast to Continental art, was one factor. While British portraitists and—even more decisively—landscapists had achieved international success, the figure painters lagged behind. At the same time, pride in the Englishness of English art precluded mere copying of Continental styles. The world was changing. Urbanization and mechanization led to overcrowded cities that bred prostitution and child labor, among other social ills that disturbed people of conscience. Ways of art-making were changing, both technologically and stylistically. Many artists felt torn between the competing claims of realism and idealism, philosophically and on the pragmatic level of reconciling them in pictorial space. While all these issues are germane to “Exposed,” one topic remains central, that of sexuality. With the hindsight of a world remade by Freud, the post-Victorians looked back on an era of repression, dysfunction and sublimation. By the 1930s the adjective *Victorian* had become synonymous with *old-fashioned* and *prudish*. In 1966 Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians* offered a counterculture revisionist history that emphasized lurid sexuality instead of gentility. More recently, feminist critics have scanned paintings and literary works for insights into gender issues, especially the victimization and empowerment of women. The authors of the catalogue acknowledge the



Frederick Leighton, *The Bath of Psyche*, 1890  
Tate Gallery, London, England



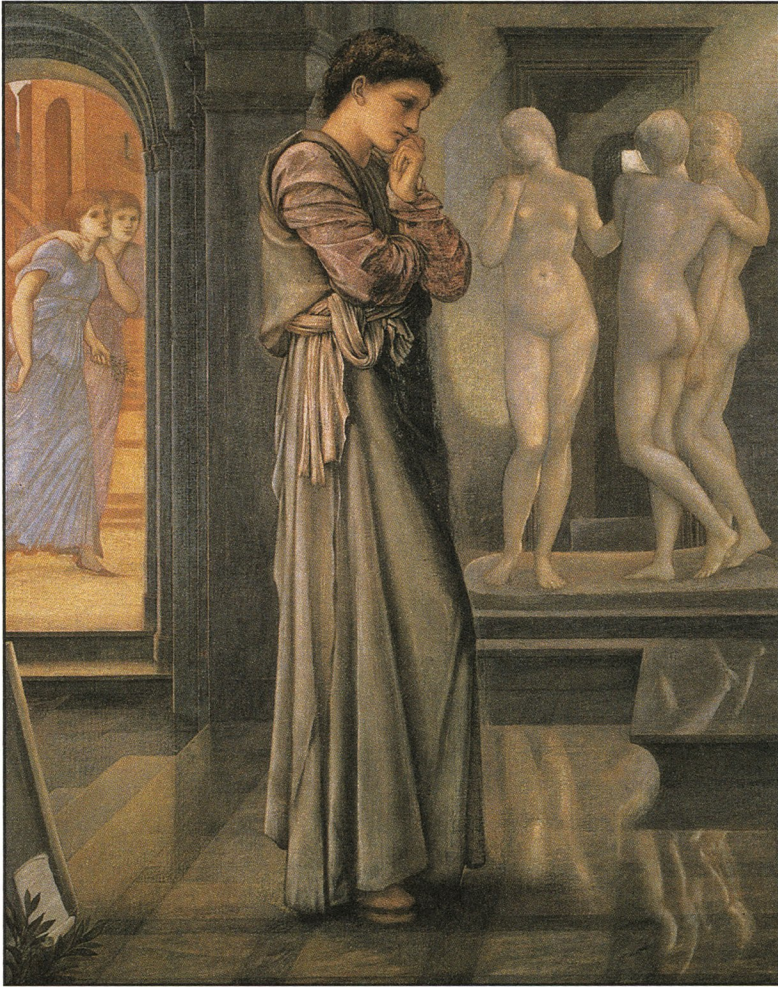
pervasiveness of these concerns, but they also draw attention to the art itself and, in so doing, debunk one more canard: that the nude could not survive what Kenneth Clark called “the great frost of Victorian prudery.”<sup>1</sup>

William Etty’s (1787–1849) lavish displays of rosy flesh may startle those with entrenched preconceptions about Victorian modesty. “[T]he paradox of the English Nude,” curator Alison Smith remarks, “was that it had always been an imported tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Etty practiced an Anglo-Venetian aesthetic, drawing on Titian as a model. The warmth of Titian’s coloring and his Renaissance humanism made him a more attractive source than the French, who were seen as cold and whose austere neoclassicism was tainted by the excesses of the Revolution. Anglo-Venetians such as Etty took their subjects from British literature, from Milton, Shakespeare and especially Spenser. Etty’s 1833 *Britomart Redeems Faire Amoret* (Tate) poses the Amazon heroine in full Athena-Britannia armor, the bound and barely draped victim and the cowering sorcerer in a tableau vivant with a few pseudo-Moorish architectural elements. Etty seems stymied by the problem of combining flesh-and-blood models and chivalric subjects convincingly in a pictorial space. Related to literary painting, the fairy genre was an idiosyncratic British tradition in itself. “Using the convention of enchantment art,” Maureen Duffy has remarked, “and it doesn’t matter whether it is folk or sophisticated, allows unconscious material very free expression untrammelled by the apparatus of credibility.”<sup>3</sup> As was made clear in a traveling show organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London,<sup>4</sup> the fairy genre offered opportunities for presenting both the nude and sexual situations. Robert Huskisson’s (1819–61) *The Midsummer Night’s Fairies* (1847, Tate) is small, but the tininess of the figures—including a voluptuous miniature Titania napping in a rose—is further emphasized by the proportionally giant form of an exquisitely painted snail.

Frederic Leighton (1830–96) is perhaps the foremost exponent of Victorian classicism and a gorgeous painter. His *The Bath of Psyche* (c. 1889–90, Tate) is an ideal nude in the classical style, with British coloring. The proportions of the canvas are unusual (74½" x 24½"), and the repetition of strong verticals—the columns echoed by the gauzy white drapery of the disrobing figure, the reflecting pool extending the image—underlines the architectural formality, reminding us that the classical column has figurative roots. Leighton’s sculpture is still something of a revelation. *The Sluggard* (1885, Tate) and the superb *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (c. 1874–77, Tate) engage the surrounding space with a dynamic more Baroque than antique, yet they are also modern. The shift toward the classical nude grew out of an infatuation with Hellenism, with results that run the gamut from historicist pastiches based on archeological discoveries, to the exotic and erotic, to almost abstract idealizations of the human form. Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) was a superb painter of marble surfaces and diaphanous fabric whose Greek and Roman maidens too often look like the stereotypical Victorian simp, but *Tepidarium* (1882, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight) achieves an elegant eroticism. A small (9½" x 13") horizontal composition, the painting has a remarkable low vantage point. In contrast to this intimacy, Edward Poynter’s (1836–1919) *Andromeda* (1869, Tate) presents the single-figure nude as a character of high drama. The bound figure seems epic, her nakedness set off by swirling waves and billowing blue drapery. Poynter seems to embody, for some feminist critics, “two points in the Victorian sexual ideology: woman needs chaining and she needs saving.”<sup>5</sup>

Victorian painters tend to be very conscious of having a range of stylistic options, ancient, medieval, Renaissance and modern. The Pre-Raphaelites can be particularly





Edward Burne-Jones, *Pygmalion and the Image: The Heart Desires*, 1875  
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, England

deft at sophisticated stylistic cross-pollination. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's (1828–82) *Venus Verticordia* (1864–68, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth) combines a classical goddess, the halo of a medieval saint and the sensuousness and vermillion glow of a Titian, along with natural elements observed with hallucinogenic fidelity. Shown half-length, this red-headed stunner carries as her attributes an apple and an arrow. In Rossetti's multivalenced iconography, the apple reminds us of Eve, but it is primarily the Apple of Discord, which occasioned the judgment of Paris and led to the fall of Troy. Rossetti's Venus is a femme fatale in the solemn, not the frivolous sense. She is an embodiment of Fate, someone who can change the course of human destiny in a moment. The picture is a pagan icon, and it carries a jolt of the numinous. Without a hint of prurience, Rossetti acknowledges that desire is a force that can move heaven and earth.

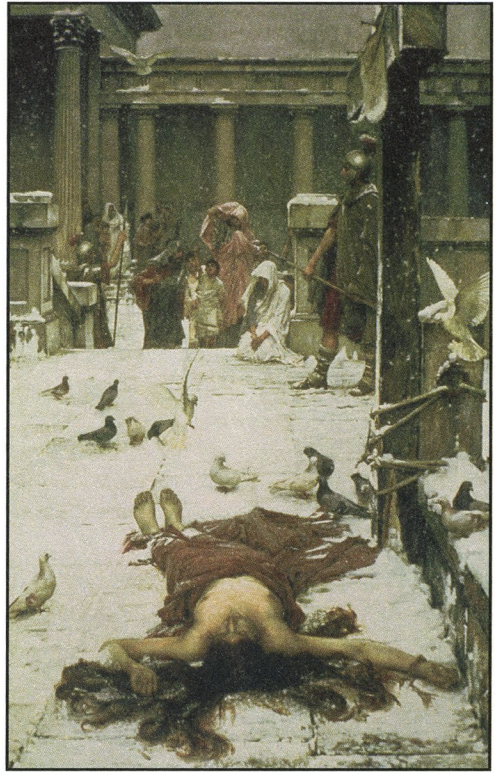
Burne-Jones draws on the pre-eminent ancient myth about studio practice for his four-painting series *Pygmalion and the Image* (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery). In Ovid's original tale, Pygmalion is a misogynist who rejects real women in favor of the



purity of art, but his skill is his undoing. He falls in love with the statue he fashions and begs Venus to bring it to life. Burne-Jones's series is fascinating as an attempt to spread out the narrative across four images. Most artworks based on Ovid focus on a moment of metamorphosis. *The Heart Desires* (1875) shows the artist's motivation. Through the open door of the studio, we glimpse two women passing in the street (the reality he rejects) while the artist considers a cold marble group of the three Graces. In *The Hand Refrains* (c. 1868) the artist stands in wonder before his finished sculpture, disturbed by the stirrings of desire. In the best painting of the series, *The Godhead Fires* (1875–78), there is no sign of Pygmalion (he is presumably praying offstage), but a luminous Venus has appeared, doves and roses around her delicate feet. She links arms with the statue, and Galatea comes to life, taking her first halting step to descend from the pedestal. Venus and Galatea gaze into each other's eyes. The fourth image, *The Soul Attains* (1868–78),

should be the happy ending. Pygmalion kneels at Galatea's feet, grasping her hands, but there is no eye contact, and both seem wistful. For the modern viewer, this problematic conclusion seems fitting for an exploration of the artist's struggle to reconcile passion and aesthetics. Most successful is Burne-Jones's creation of a self-consciously fictional world by inspired anachronism: the classical tale has been medievalized, with the studio's narrow doorway and windows affording glimpses of a town that could be Bruges. Burne-Jones picked up this kind of spatial configuration from Rossetti, a great admirer of Hans Memling. Like a musician, Burne-Jones plays variations on a theme, the studio space. Notice how the door to the exterior shifts from far left in *The Heart Desires* to center for the climactic *The Godhead Fires* to far right for *The Soul Attains*. A narrow stairway subtly suggests the mystery of feminine physicality.

Most of the pictures in this exhibition are images of women fashioned by men, raising the usual questions about the proprietary nature of the gaze, but two nudes by women painters make an interesting juxtaposition. Based on Ovid, Evelyn De Morgan's (1855–1919) *Cadmus and Harmonia* (1877, De Morgan Foundation) was one of the first nudes painted by a woman exhibited in public. With her demure expression and Botticellian pose, the golden-haired Harmonia is emblematic of marital loyalty. Yet the combination of serpent and naked woman inevitably evokes Eve and Lilith, while the scaly skin wrapped around pale flesh serves "to open up new psycho-sexual perspectives on the body."<sup>6</sup> De Morgan works in a predictably school-of-Burne-Jones style. Annie



John William Waterhouse, *Saint Eulalia*, 1885  
Tate Gallery, London, England



Swynnerton (1844–1933) is more original. Swynnerton was the first woman to be elected an Associate of the Royal Academy by ballot. Her *Cupid and Psyche* (1891, Oldham Art Gallery & Museum) is a fresh take on a popular subject. The young lovers are appealingly adolescent in their eagerness, and their fresh British coloring gives the painting a startling immediacy. The choreography of the arms echoes the almost Art Nouveau sweep of Cupid's enveloping blue wings, sensitively textured.

While many of the nudes in this exhibition are based on classical or mythological sources, there is an interesting hybrid genre on display: the saintly nude. Nineteenth-century crises of faith precipitated a host of responses—in agnostics and socially conscious evangelicals, liturgical-revival Anglicans and Roman Catholic converts. The late antique-early Christian era was a particularly popular period setting, with its confusion of religions, inspiring philosophical novels by John Henry Cardinal Newman (*Callista*, 1856) and Walter Pater (*Marius the Epicurean*, 1885). In traditional Christian iconography the virgin martyr saints were usually depicted dressed, carrying an attribute that referred to the details of their suffering, although some Baroque artists depicted graphic torture. The virgin martyrs of Victorian artists were often seen stripped but remained serene figures embodying purity and heroism. Three paintings here show varying degrees of quality and taste. Herbert Schmalz's (1857–1935) *Faithful unto Death, "Christianes ad Leones!"* (1888, Horst M. Rechelbacher collection) is a clear forerunner of Cecil B. DeMille's 1932 Hollywood epic *The Sign of the Cross*. Charles William Mitchell's (1854–1903) *Hypatia* (1885, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne) is far superior. Based on Charles Kingsley's 1853 novel *Hypatia, or New Foes with an Old Face*, a polemic against religious bigotry, the painting depicts the fifth-century pagan philosopher at the altar of a Christian church, decorated with marble and mosaics based on S. Vitale and S. Apollinaire Nuova in Ravenna. A prominent woman teacher in cosmopolitan Alexandria, Hypatia was stripped and murdered by a mob of fanatical monks. Here her nudity becomes a sign of classical idealism, as well as a historical fact. The monks are kept out of frame, but her gesture toward the heavens is a convincingly heroic plea for justice.

Best of all in this genre is John William Waterhouse's (1849–1917) *Saint Eulalia* (1885, Tate), a superb composition based on the story of St. Eulalia of Meridia (died c. 304), a young Christian girl martyred under Diocletian. Waterhouse has distilled the narrative into her posthumous miracle, the snowfall that covered her body. In an archaeologically convincing Roman city, with a columned façade as a backdrop, the body of the saint, naked to the waist, lies on a snowy terrace. Our vantage point is above her, her head toward us, and her reddish hair spreads out around her like blood. The perspective is daring: the body is radically foreshortened, and the rude cross is set at a steep angle that leads the eye back to the two sentries—one at terrace level, one glimpsed at the base of the steps leading up to the terrace—who frame the little band of mourners approaching from the background. The doves flitting through the snowy air and landing on the pavement belong to the miracle, but they are presented naturalistically. The saint's bier is a city street, the classical-style buildings under a slate-grey sky could be London, and the young woman, the victim of a crime, observed by passersby with an objectivity not devoid of tenderness. Dramatic yet removed from the theatrics of rhetorical piety, this picture should enhance Waterhouse's growing reputation.<sup>7</sup>

The late nineteenth century was a golden age of book illustration. Two pen-and-ink drawings from 1896 by Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98) are scandalous confections, exquisite in draftsmanship and so wittily stylized that they mock the censors even as they invite

suppression. Less provocative but even more striking are two sheets by Charles Ricketts (1866–1931). In 1886 Ricketts and his partner Charles Shannon founded *The Dial*, a journal mixing stories and poetry with essays on art and literature. *The Worm* (Tate), a color lithograph frontispiece from that year, is a clever take-off on Gustave Moreau's 1876 *L'Apparition*, depicting Salome confronting a vision of John the Baptist's head. In Ricketts's design a naked girl with a bridal veil of russet hair and a fantastic headdress holds a blue lily as she faces an enormous white worm. There is no St. George to rescue the sacrificial maiden, but the dragon in this case seems more like an affable pet than a danger. The blue-green landscape is as simplified as a Japanese print. Ricketts's 1891 pen-and-ink drawing *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle, England) was commissioned by Leighton, who wrote to the younger artist: "the design is full of imagination and a weird charm—it is also... a marvelous piece of penmanship. It is a great pleasure for me to possess it."<sup>78</sup> Ricketts underscores the eroticism of the encounter between the muscular youth and the mermaid-like sphinx, whose victims include a John the Baptist surrogate, a bearded severed head. An orgiastic girl serves as lady-in-waiting. The dynamic composition divides the sheet diagonally, with blank sky juxtaposed against a wedge of densely worked lines—a riot of curly hair, writhing foliage and feathered wings.

The Victorian era saw the rise of photography, a development with multiple implications for the nude. This exhibition surveys the spectrum of photographs, from academic study to autonomous artwork, to commercial pornography. One of the more interesting characters turns out to be a little-known freelance illustrator, Edward Linley Sambourne (1844–1910). An excellent example of studio praxis, his 1900 cyanotype of a model formally posed as Hygieia is the basis for a concert program cover. Sambourne's more casual photographs of models sprawled nude in armchairs, however, belong to the category of libidinous hobby, although these photographs have aesthetic merit on their own raffish terms. Although many artists used the camera as a tool, often not advertising the fact, there was a persistent feeling that the unclothed human body required the intervention of an idealizing medium such as painting or sculpture. This fascinating exhibition of over 100 works explores the dynamic between idealism and realism on the cusp of modern art's cataclysmic changes, but is most valuable as an opportunity to focus on the work of too-often-neglected artists who celebrated and grappled with the complexities of body and soul. Opening in London and including Munich, Kobe and Tokyo in its venues, "Exposed: The Victorian Nude" continues at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (its only North American stop) through January 5, 2003. 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238. Telephone: (718) 638 5000.

#### Notes

1. *The Nude* (1956), cited in *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, edited by Alison Smith, with contributions by Robert Upstone, Michael Hatt, Martin Myrone, Virginia Dodier, Tim Batchelor (New York: Watson-Guption, 2001), p. 11. The lavishly illustrated, 288-page hardcover book sells for \$45.00.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
3. Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Fairy* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 74.
4. Jeremy Maas, Pamela White Trimpe, Charlette Gere, et al., *Victorian Fairy Painting*, edited by Jane Martineau (London: Royal Academy of Arts, in association with Merrell, 1997).
5. Adrienne Auslander Munich, *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 34.
6. *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, p. 212.
7. For the latest study, incorporating new research, see Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2002).
8. Cited, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, p. 154.