



13. THE BODY

Introduction

From the earliest civilizations, images of the human form have been drawn, painted, and sculpted. Some of the earliest depictions of the human body, dating back potentially as early as 40,000 BCE, are found at the site of Ubirr in northern Australia, where elongated stick-like figures engaged in hunting and other activities were painted on rock walls with rudimentary brushes and red ochre pigment.¹ The variety of approaches used to represent the body over time reflects changing cultural values. Artists from many countries and eras have depicted the body to explore issues of identity, sex, gender, and power.

The general acceptance of portraying male or female nudes varies by individual culture and region. Some works of art that feature nudity are considered inappropriate for general public viewing—even within a museum context. Yet, throughout history and in many cultures, nudity in art has not been considered taboo.

Early Depictions of the Body

The small stone carving of the *Venus of Willendorf* (ca. 25,000-20,000 BCE), named for the location in Austria where it was found, is an example of what has been considered a fertility figurine or “goddess” from the Paleolithic era (ca. 35,000-12,000 BCE). The unknown artist focused on the standing nude’s swollen stomach, emphasizing sexual characteristics such as the breasts, pubic triangle, and vulva.² Another such figurine, the *Venus of Lespugue* (ca. 24,000-22,000 BCE), was found in France. It was carved from mammoth ivory, while an even older figurine, dating from approximately 35,000 years ago, was reported to have been discovered in 2008 in a cave in southwestern Germany. It, too, renders the female form with exaggerated breasts, buttocks, and genitalia.³ Archaeologists arbitrarily gave the name “Venus” to these small Ice Age figurines, and although we cannot be certain what they meant to their original owners, they may have functioned as erotic charms or fetishes related to fertility.⁴

A relief carving known as the *Venus of Laussel* (ca. 20,000 BCE) depicts what is believed to be a pregnant female figure with one hand covering her uterus and the other holding a bison horn on which vertical notches—thought to represent the menstrual year—are carved.⁵ Two prehistoric reliefs of nude

women from La Magdelaine in France (ca. 15,000-10,000 BCE) use the natural curves and ledges of the wall to bring forth the legs and torso directly from the rock. Although arms and head are barely visible, it is clear that the pose is that of a reclining nude.⁶

Thousands of years later, stylized renderings of the nude female form can be seen other cultures, as evidenced by examples from Egypt (Figure 1, pg. 412), Mexico (Figure 2, pg. 413), Iran (Figure 3, pg. 414), Costa Rica (Figure 4, pg. 415), Syria (Figure 5, pg. 416), Mesopotamia, and the Cyclades, a group of islands in the southwestern Aegean Sea. Cycladic Artists from the Neolithic period (5th millennium BCE) created stone and marble figurines, Venus-like females, with an emphasis on the abdomen, breasts, thighs, and buttocks. With the emergence of early Cycladic culture (ca. 3200-2300 BCE), sculptors were producing predominantly female figures with both naturalized and idealized proportions. Their consistency in form and proportion, especially statues in what is called the Spedos style--named for a cemetery on the island of Naxos--suggests the sculptures were planned with a compass. This early Cycladic desire for preservation of proportion mirrors later imagery related to the ideal presentation of the body in Greek and Renaissance art.⁷

While earlier representation of the nude female figure may have been associated with notions of fertility, the 8th century BCE Neo-Assyrian sculpture in Figure 5 (pg. 416) represents the nude female body in a manner that seems to emphasize the figure's sexual allure. She stands erect with eyes wide open, cupping her breasts in her hands as if offering them to the viewer.



Figure 1. *Female Figurine*; terracotta; Ma'mariya, Egypt; ca. 3650-3300 BCE; H: 11.5 in. (29.3 cm.); Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY. Photograph courtesy of Brooklyn Museum Collection Fund /the Bridgeman Art Library.



Figure 2. *Female Figure*; ceramic; Mexico; 12th-9th century BCE.; H. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (17 cm.); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund / Photo by Max Yawney.



Figure 3. *Figurine*; bronze; Iran; ca.1000-500 BCE; H: 7.2 in. (18.2 cm.), W: 3.7 in. (9.4 cm.); Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



Figure 4. *Figure Pendant*; prophyllite; Costa Rica; ca. 4th-8th century; H. 4 1/8 in. (10.5 cm); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1966 / Photo by Max Yawney.



Figure 5. Unknown artist (probably Syrian); *Female Figure*; ivory; Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th century; H: 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (30 cm); W: 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (7.4 cm); D: 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (14.5 cm.). Photograph courtesy of Il Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia, Turin, Italy.

Real vs. Ideal in Egypt and Greece

Ancient Egypt was the first culture to adopt formal artistic conventions related to the depiction of the body, dictating the way gods, pharaohs, and ordinary individuals should be portrayed in both painting and sculpture. An idealized image of an elite Egyptian woman is seen in a wall relief fragment in Figure 6 (pg. 418), 12th Dynasty, ca. 1850 BCE, from the Tomb of Djehutyhotep, a provincial official. The figure believed to be Djehutyhotep's sister wears a form-fitting dress that accentuates her breasts, buttocks, long arms, legs, and slender frame. Her depiction conforms to a canonical grid that specified proportions and ratios between body parts, standardized for figurative renderings. This illustration combines profile and frontal views of different parts of the woman's body, in order to highlight various features of the idealized body at once.

As evident in the statue of *Thutmose III* (ca. 1479-1425 BCE) shown in Figure 7 (pg. 419), portrait statues from this period are almost cubic in form, with poses conveying information about the figure's hierarchal status. Standing poses are usually rigid and angular, depicting a youthful pharaoh with strong shoulders, a narrow waist, and the symbols of his office, such as the false beard and *khat* headcloth. Such works did not depict the specific features of an individual, but were intended to present a rather idealized portrayal according to the established canon.

Egyptian art of the Amarna Period, like the *Statuette of Amenophis IV (Akhenaten) and Nefertiti* (ca. 1353-1337) shown in Figure 8 (pg. 420), reflected changes in the image of the ideal body. Instead of an angular physique like that of Thutmose III, Akhenaten's body is softer and rounder. The work incorporates a new level of informality and intimacy, showing the king and queen holding hands. This new approach was just one of a number of cultural changes Akhenaten initiated during his reign from ca. 1353 to 1336 BCE. Perhaps the most significant was the introduction of monotheism to Egypt; he devoted himself to worshiping the sun god.⁸

The art of the ancient Greeks during the Archaic period (ca. 800-500 BCE) built upon the knowledge of earlier civilizations, incorporating scientific discoveries and observations that enabled the Greeks to depict the human form more accurately. In the 6th century BCE, a type of sculpture depicting a standing figure called *kouros* (male youth) emerged. Similar to the static standing statues of ancient Egypt, the *kouros* had both feet planted on the ground with the left foot forward, arms straight at his sides, head facing forward. Rather than representing a specific individual, *kouros* statues were created to embody an ideal of youth.⁹



Figure 6. Unknown artist (Deir el-Bersha, Egypt); *Fragment of a wall relief showing the sister of Djehutyhotep*; painted limestone relief; Africa; Middle Kingdom, 12th Dynasty, ca. 1850 BCE; H: 28 ¼ in. (71.5 cm.), W: 12 ¼ (33.5 cm.); British Museum, London, UK. Photograph © British Museum/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 7. *Statue of Thutmose III*; Egypt; New Kingdom, ca. 1479-1425 BCE. Photograph © Sandro Vannini/Corbis.



Figure 8. Unknown artist, (Tell el-Amarna, Egypt); *Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) and Nefertiti*; painted limestone; New Kingdom, Amarna Period, 1345-1337 BCE; H: 8 3.4 in. (22.2 cm.), W: 4 3/4 in. (12.3 cm.), D: 3 7/8 in. (9.8 cm.); Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Photograph courtesy of Giraudon/ the Bridgeman Art Library International.

In the 5th century BCE, portrayal of the human form began to evolve with more naturalistic sculptures such as *The Kritios Boy* (a.k.a. *Kritian Boy*, ca. 480 BCE).¹⁰ Attributed to the sculptor Kritios, this statue also has his foot forward, but the pose is more relaxed. One leg carries the weight while the other is free, allowing for a natural stance in which opposite limbs, hips, and shoulders counterbalance each other. This pose, referred to as *contrapposto* (“counterpoise”) enabled Greek artists to develop more dynamic human portrayals, best captured by the celebrated sculptor and theoretician Polykleitos (ca. 480/475-415 BCE).¹¹

Perhaps the most important sculptor of classical antiquity, Polykleitos is considered the master of symmetry. His treatise from the mid-5th century BCE, known as the *Canon*, or the “Rule,” sets forth a system of for representing the ideal human body using standardized mathematical ratios. Polykleitos also explains how relaxed and tensed body parts should be counterbalanced and the direction in which the body parts move in relationship to one another. While none of Polykleitos’s original works survive, a copy of his sculpture, *Doryphoros* (*Canon* or *Spear-Bearer*) (450-440 BCE), shown in Figure 9 on page 422, shows the application of the concepts in his treatise. The *Doryphoros* stands in the *contrapposto* pose, illustrating alternating tension and relaxation of the legs and arms in what is called the chiasmic, or cross, pattern. As the weight of the body rests on one leg, the right limbs are straight and “passive,” and the left limbs flexed, or “active.” Like other works of the High Classical period of Greek art, this image presented the ideal man, portrayed as a young, heroic, muscular nude, devoid of individualized facial features or emotion, yet posed naturalistically.

Polykleitos’s *Canon* revolutionized the Greek style from the traditional static frontal poses to more dynamic, powerful representations, influencing followers who built upon this tradition. Lysippos (fl. ca. 370-300 BCE), who was the court sculptor of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), developed new proportional rules that differed from the *Canon*, with longer limbs, shorter torsos, and a smaller head to body ratio than those of Polykleitos. As a result, the figures of Lysippos, such as the *Apoxyomenos*,¹² appear more slender, with parts of the body seeming to flow into one another. Lysippos’s figures also broke from the basic stable cubic format established by Polykleitos, with elements such as arms thrusting outward into the viewer’s three-dimensional space.¹³ This activation of the figure helped usher in the Hellenistic period of art (ca. 323-31 BCE), known for its realistic portrayal of the human form with active poses.

Another celebrated Greek sculptor, Praxiteles (400-330 BCE) created what is believed to be the first major work to depict Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in the nude—*Aphrodite of Knidos* (ca. 350 BCE). Praxiteles’s *Aphrodite* served as inspiration for later Roman sculptors, who looked to it as the ideal of



Figure 9. After Polykleitos of Argos (Greek); *Doryphoros (Canon)*; bronze; Europe; 450-440 BCE; H: approx. 84 in. (213 cm.); Munich Museum, Munich, Germany. Photograph courtesy of the Munich Museum.



Figure 10. Roman artist; *Statue of Aphrodite*; Marble; 1st–2nd century CE copy after Greek original ca. 3rd–2nd century BCE; H: 62 ½ in. (158.8 cm.) (with plinth); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

beauty, proportion, and grace. He made many copies, like the one in Figure 10 (now missing arms), shown on page 423. Her gestures and posture draw attention to her sexuality and while simultaneously conveying modesty.

The Re-emergence of the Nude

The Greek and Roman artistic tradition of depicting gods and goddesses with idealized human bodies was rejected in Western Europe during the early Christian era and Middle Ages because the practice was linked to idolatry and pagan religions. In most painting and sculpture up until the Renaissance, the unclothed body became associated with sin, shame, suffering, and humiliation. The nude human form does not typically appear unless it is clearly taken from a classical source or associated with a biblical reference, such as Masaccio's (1401-1428) fresco *Adam and Eve Banished from Paradise* (ca. 1427) shown in Figure 11 on page 425.

The nude reemerged as an acceptable subject for Western art during the Renaissance,¹⁴ when artists, as well as scholars and statesmen, were adopting humanist ideals. Applying lessons learned from classical Greek and Roman arts and sciences within the context of Christianity, the goal was not only to imitate great civilizations of the past but to surpass them.

Donatello (ca. 1386-1466) created a statue of *David* (ca. 1440), shown in Figure 12 on page 426, that was the first life-size, free-standing nude statue since antiquity. Donatello's sculpture presents David not in his future role as king of Israel, or as the idealized, athletic nudes of ancient Greece, but rather as a vulnerable, young adolescent who stands quietly contemplating his amazing victory over Goliath. Within this naturalistic representation of the body, Donatello combined elements from Christianity—a figure from the Old Testament—with what might have been seen as the pagan influence of classical Greek sculpture.¹⁵

In 1508, shortly after Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) completed his own sculpture of *David* (1501-04),¹⁶ Pope Julius II (1444-1513) commissioned the Italian artist to paint a series of ceiling frescoes for the Sistine Chapel—an endeavor that would take the artist four years to complete. The most famous of the nine paintings for the central axis of the Sistine Chapel, all based on episodes found in the Book of Genesis, may be Michelangelo's interpretation of the *Creation of Adam* (Figure 13, pg. 427). His representations of the body were informed by his study of ancient sculpture and knowledge of human anatomy. The position of Adam's muscular body echoes that of God, who has created man in his own image and touches him with the spark of life. The depictions of other idealized nudes add dynamic energy to the fresco, reflecting Michelangelo's belief that the body should be celebrated as a reflection of both divine beauty and the beauty of the human soul.



Figure 11. Masaccio (Italian, 1401-28); *Adam and Eve Banished from Paradise*; fresco; ca. 1427; Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy. Photograph courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.



Figure 12. Donatello (Italian, ca. 1386-1466); *David*; bronze; ca.1440; H: 62.2 in. (158 cm.); Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photograph courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.



Figure 13. Michelangelo Buonarroti (Italian, 1475-1564); *The Creation of Adam*; fresco; ca. 1510; The Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Italy. Photograph courtesy of Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City, Italy/ Bridgeman Art Library.

The relationship between art, science, and mathematics in 15th-century Italy can be seen in Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) sketch of *Vitruvian Man* (1492), shown in Figure 14 on page 428. Leonardo was a painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, scientist, thinker, musician, and inventor. His *Vitruvian Man* was inspired by a treatise he translated by Marcus Vitruvius (active 46-30 BCE), an architect of ancient Rome. Vitruvius asserted that circles and squares were perfect geometric units that could be used to form ideal spaces. Leonardo's drawing presents an image of a perfectly proportioned man constructed of these geometrical units. Although the work is informed by Leonardo's study of anatomy and human proportions, he had to make slight adjustments to make the body fit into the frame.

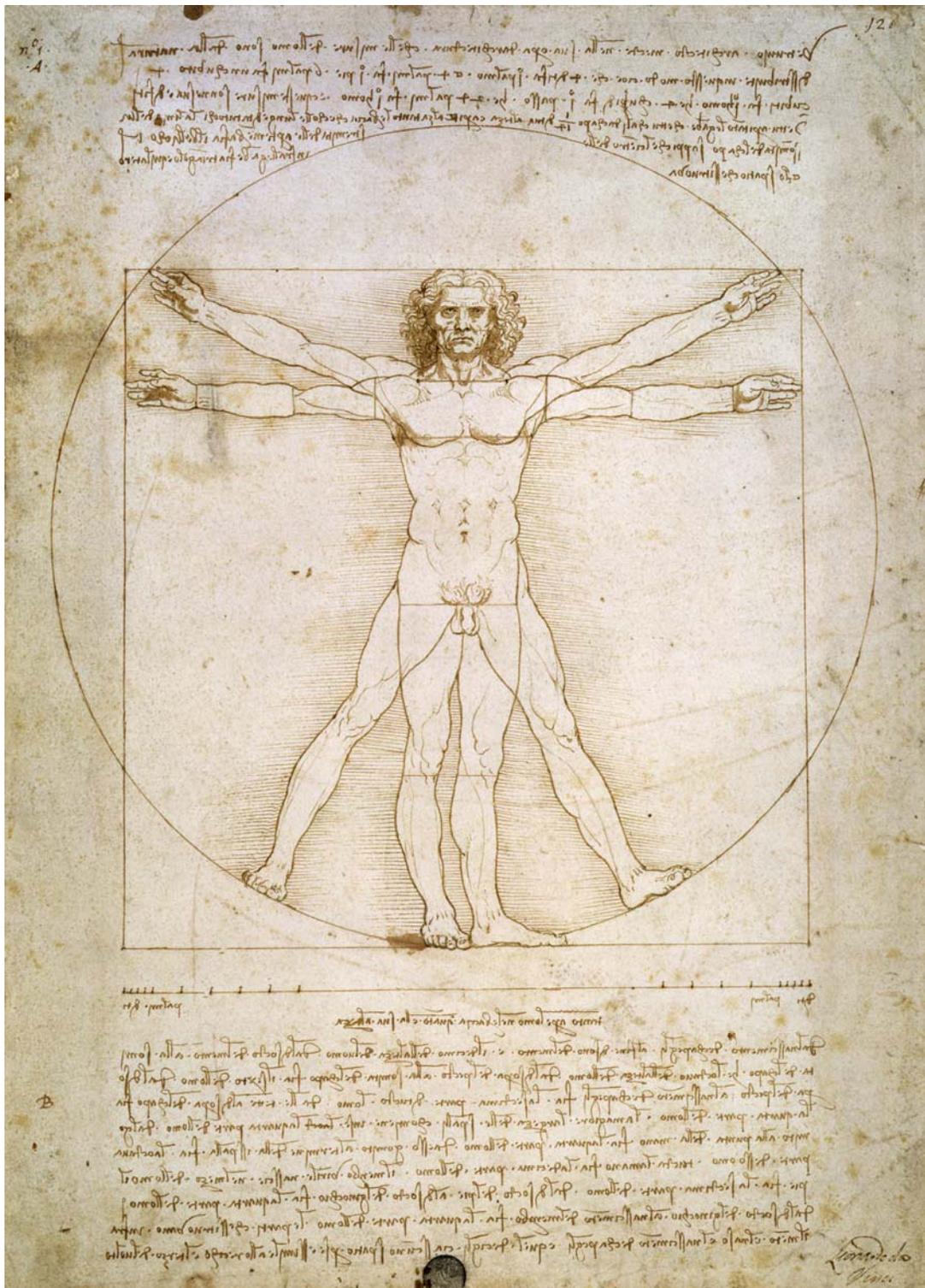


Figure 14. Leonardo da Vinci (Italian); *Vitruvian Man*; pen and ink; 1492; H: 13 ½ in (34.3 cm.), W: 9 5/8 in. (24.5 cm.); Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice, Italy. Photograph © Bettmann/Corbis.

In the 19th century, the French artist Édouard Manet (1832-1883) challenged the tradition of presenting idealized, detailed renderings of mythological and historical subjects painted in a smooth, realistic style. His *Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (1863),¹⁷ or “Lunch on the Grass,” Figure 15, depicts a non-idealized nude woman enjoying an outdoor picnic with two fully-clothed men in modern dress. Although it raised eyebrows at the Salon des Refusés in Paris, the painting was a huge success.¹⁸



Figure 15. Edouard Manet (French, 1832-1883); *Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (*Lunch on the Grass*); oil on canvas; 1863; H: 81.9 in. (208 cm.), W: 104.1 in. (64.5 cm.); Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Photograph courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

In *Te Arii Vahine* (*The King's Wife*) (1896), shown in Figure 16 on page 430, French painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) combines familiar elements from art history with imagery from an exotic locale. The positioning of the naked Tahitian woman alludes to the European tradition of reclining nymphs, odalisques, and Venuses dating back to the 16th century. Lying on a hill next to ripe mangoes, she seems to be part of the fertile landscape, which is as seductive as she is.



Figure 16. Paul Gauguin (French); *Te Arii Vahine (The King's Wife)*; oil on canvas; 1896; H: 38.1 in. (97 cm.), W: 51.1 in. (130 cm.); The Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, Moscow, Russia. Photograph © The Gallery Collection/Corbis.

Erotica in East Asia

Although the nude figure has been part of the canon of Western art, it has been less common in the art of East Asia. Until the late 20th century, for the most part the nude figure was associated with sex and considered to be unsuitable as a subject for artistic expression in China. However, illustrations accompanying erotic literature and instructional sex manuals had become a well-developed tradition by the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁹ Also, Chinese ivory carvers of the Ming period (1368-1644) created small statuettes of female bodies for use in medical consultations. A female patient could point on the figurine to the location of her problem without undressing.²⁰

Depictions of the nude figure also have been rare in Japanese art. During the late 18th and 19th centuries, partial nudity appeared in erotic *shunga* prints made by artists such as Utagawa Kunisada II (1823-1880). Although the techniques and aesthetics of these works were on par with the non-erotic prints of the period, such works depicted private fantasies and were not intended for general public viewing.²¹

Adorning the Body

At first glance, voluptuous sculptural figures on the *Vamana Temple* (11th century), shown in Figure 17, in Khajuraho, India, may appear nude, but they are covered with translucent fabric and wear jewelry. There is no nude body in Indian art, and adornment, a sign of good fortune, is required. Erotic sculpture on other temples is even more explicit—showing clothed couples engaged in sexual acts. In traditional Indian culture the line between the sacred and the secular is blurred. Images of amorous behavior were considered acceptable decoration for temples because they were associated with fertility and prosperity. ²²



Figure 17. Unknown artist (Indian); *Vamana Temple* (exterior); sandstone; 11th century; Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, India. Photograph courtesy of Tamara Sears.

For the Dinka people in southern Sudan, adornment conveys significant information about the wearer. A Dinka man would wear a traditional beaded corset like the one in Figure 18 (pg. 432). Because the Dinka people are cattle herders who lead a mobile life, their possessions and clothing must be portable. As in many African cultures, the colors and patterns in this ornamental garment reflect the wearer's age and status. The red and black rows of beads indicate that the man is between the ages of 15 and 25. The vertical strip that runs up the back rises above the shoulders, indicating that he comes from a family with a large herd.



Figure 18. Dinka artist (Sudan); *Man's corset*; Beads, fiber, leather; second half of the 20th century; H: 30 in. (76.2 cm.); Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph courtesy of Newark Museum.

The body serves as a canvas in what may be the most traditional and widespread way—through face and body painting. From Japanese Kabuki actors to the war paint of Sioux Indians and the face painting designs inherited from the ancestors of Australian Aboriginal people, this temporary form of adornment is used during performances, ceremonies, rites of passage, or to scare one's enemies.

Body paint was used in many societies to signify a person's status or religious beliefs. For example, a young man living in the Nuba mountains of the Sudan was allowed to paint himself with red and white from age 8, but had to wait until he was older and had completed certain initiation practices to wear yellow or black.

Some of the most intricate forms of body painting can be seen in henna designs that are drawn on hands (Figure 19) and feet in parts of India, the Middle East, and among the Berbers in northern Africa. The practice of coloring one's hands is thought to have originated in fertility ceremonies of the Neolithic people of Catal Hayuk in the 7th millennium BCE. Considered a woman's art form, these designs are applied for celebrations and social occasions, especially on brides and bridal guests.²³



Figure 19. *Pakistani girls decorate their hands with henna ahead of the Eid al-Fitr, a Muslim festival celebrated to mark the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan; 2007; Multan, Pakistan. Photograph © MK Chaudrey/epa/Corbis.*

In many parts of the world, men and women use body paint or makeup in an attempt to beautify themselves or to become more attractive to the opposite sex. Men of the Wodaabe tribe in Africa adorn their entire bodies and faces with paint for a special festival called *Gerewol* to make themselves more appealing to the women who will select mates that evening.²⁴

Modifying the Body

In some cultures, permanent modifications to the body are a form of artistic expression. The tradition of tattooing is perhaps the first known example of body adornment. A corpse dating from 3200 BCE, found frozen in a glacier between the borders of Austria and Italy in 1991, was covered with 58 tattoos. Close analysis of the imagery led to the theory that these were perhaps for medicinal purposes.²⁵ Tattoos are used for protection, religious purposes, beautification, and, within the Pacific Island tradition, as a rite of passage. The pain associated with a full body tattoo is sometimes equated with the pain of childbirth, a process seen as a rite of passage to adulthood.²⁶

Some of the first images of tattoos were depicted by Europeans when they visited Tahiti. Captain James Cook and his crew drew images of the tattoo designs during their 1774 voyage to the island, and introduced the word *tatau* to Western culture afterwards. In Tahiti, tattooing was a symbol of rank and kinship for men—with different designs for priests, chiefs, warriors, and common people—and an indication of sexual maturity and marriageability for women.²⁷ However, as Christian European values spread, tattoo was outlawed in Tahiti.

Patterns and placement of tattoos varied among different groups in the Pacific Islands. Facial tattoos, called *moko*, distinguished the Maori of New Zealand. The *Life Mask of Chief Tapua Te Whanoa* (1854), shown in Figure 20 on page 435, is thought to be a copy of the Maori chief's actual *moko*. The *moko* was usually reserved for elite men, although women of status wore partial *moko* on the bottom half of the face.

In Nigeria, scarification is practiced for several reasons. The Tiv use scarification on a woman's back, neck, and stomach for purely decorative purposes. The Ga'anda of northern Nigeria use ritual scarification on girls, beginning at the age of five, to mark different stages in their progression toward womanhood and, ultimately, to make them marriageable. These marks, called *hleeta*, form raised dot patterns that become increasingly elaborate at each phase in the initiation rites.²⁸ The 20th-century Ga'anda shrine vessel shown in Figure 21 (pg. 436) is believed to contain ancestral spirits and to represent—with its round belly—the fertility of females. Around the lower part are designs representing the *hleeta* of a specific woman, reflecting the significance of scarification in the Ga'anda culture.

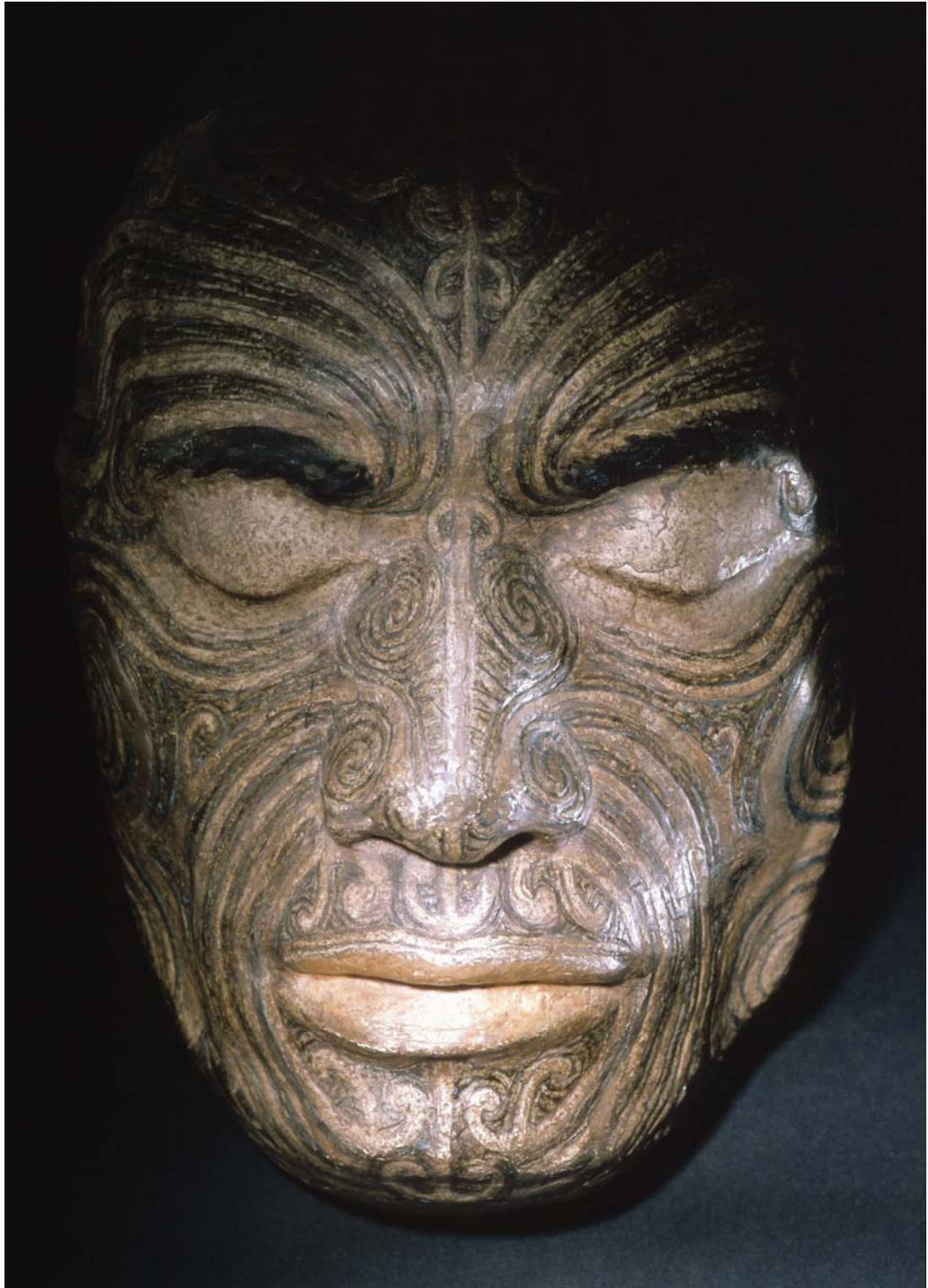


Figure 20. Maori artist (New Zealand); *Life mask of Chief Tapua Te Whanoa*; tinted cast incised with small bone adze dipped in liquid charcoal; 1854; National Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, NZ. Photograph courtesy of Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 21. Ga'anda artist (Nigeria/Chad); *Shrine Vessel*; terracotta; 20th century; H: 19.5 in. (49.5 cm.), D: 12 in. (30.5 cm.); Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph courtesy of Newark Museum.

At one time, the Mangbetu peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa practiced head shaping, attempting to elongate their heads through binding and/or applying gentle pressure to the head of an infant.²⁹ Skulls found at burial mounds in Mesoamerica indicate that Classic and Post-Classic Lowland Maya also practiced cranial modification on infants. The Maya practiced dental shaping and tattooing as further attempts to mold their bodies into specific shapes.³⁰



Figure 22. *Previously Bound Feet*, 1985; Kunming, China. Photograph © Janet Wishnetsky/Corbis.

In China, the tradition of foot binding was practiced until the 20th century. The feet of young girls were wrapped tightly with cloth strips to inhibit normal growth, creating small feet that were considered delicate and feminine, a trait believed to make a woman more eligible for marriage (Figure 22).

As early as 2000 BCE in Minoan Crete, both men and women used corsets as an outer garment to contour the shape of their torsos, a practice that continued, primarily for women, through the 14th century.



Figure 23. Unknown artist, United States; *Half-length portrait of woman wearing corset*; photographic print; North America; ca. 1899; Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The shape and construction of these garments changed with the aesthetics and fashions of the times and the specific regions in which they were worn.

The first real waist-cinching bodices originated in the 15th century in Renaissance Europe. During the 16th century, armor-like corsets made of iron or wood were designed to elongate the figure and flatten the bust, in imitation of the naturally svelte Queen Elizabeth. These garments made it practically impossible for women to sit in chairs, so many simply stood or leaned on stools. By the next century, corsets were usually made of cloth stretched over whalebone, wood, or flexible steel, and changed shape depending on period dress styles.

During the late Victorian era (1870-1901), longer, very tight corsets were designed to push the breasts upwards and define the waist, creating an extreme “hourglass figure.” This full coverage garment was also thought to have a moral function in that it encumbered the wearer—a reminder of self-restraint.³¹ An extreme example, such as the corset shown in Figure 23 (pg. 438), not only redistributed the flesh, but also compressed internal organs, which could result in permanent physical damage. The practice of women wearing corsets continued until the mid-20th century, when it was replaced with Lycra undergarments, plastic surgery, and changing values that accompanied the rise of the feminist movement.³²

Gender and Identity

In the United States, the portrayal of women became a central theme in feminist art of the 1970s, as women artists “reclaimed” and recreated their image. Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-85) incorporated her own body into art works that explored gender and her cross-cultural identity. She developed her own performance-based genre, self-described as “earth-body art,” in which the naked female body (often her own) was placed in a natural setting, using organic materials such as earth, leaves, mud, and blood to create connections to an ancestral past.³³ Mendieta’s work, while deeply personal, also sought to promote greater cultural awareness by breaking down and exposing the cultural and sexual biases inherent in our society.³⁴ In the photograph of her installation, *Tree of Life* (1976), shown in Figure 24 (pg. 440), the artist’s mud-covered body seems to be rooted in the earth, echoing the forms, textures, and natural cycle of the tree behind her, as if she has emerged from nature itself.



Figure 24. Ana Mendieta (Cuban, 1948-1985); *Tree of Life* (photograph from installation); 1976; New York. Photograph © Whitney Museum of Art/epa/Corbis.

Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) is known for her photographic commentary on portrayals of women in the media and popular culture. In her *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-1980), she created sixty-nine self portraits in which she plays different fictional characters based on the stereotypical roles of women seen in Hollywood B-movies of the 1950s and '60s. Each 8-by-10-inch, black and white photograph takes the exact format of a publicity still released by the film studios. Using different props and wearing different costumes, Sherman reenacts such roles as the luscious librarian, the domesticated sex kitten, the ice-cold sophisticate, the ingénue in the big city, the sweetheart next door, the blonde bombshell lounging in the bedroom, and the sexy starlet at her seaside hideaway (Figures 25-28), on pages 441-444.³⁵ The artist's series suggests that women have been categorized into specific types created by the media, which have since become engrained in America's collective consciousness.



Figure 25. Cindy Sherman (American, b.1954); *Untitled Film Still #11*; photographic print; 1978. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 26. Cindy Sherman (American, b.1954); *Untitled Film Still #7*; photographic print; 1978. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 27. Cindy Sherman (American, b.1954); *Untitled Film Still #15*; photographic print; 1978. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 28. Cindy Sherman (American, b.1954); *Untitled Film Still #6*; photographic print; 1978. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

In African art, the human figure, typically depicted nude in sculpture, has traditionally been a major subject. Often there is a departure from natural proportions, with simplification and exaggeration of certain features. In many African societies, a figure's head may be depicted proportionately larger than the rest of the body because of its symbolic associations with guiding one's destiny. The mostly wooden figures are often stylized or abstracted forms, with the front view sculpted symmetrically, the head facing forward, the arms in parallel positions, and both legs on the ground. The formal quality of the frontal pose is counterbalanced by the curves and projections seen in the side view of the stomach, buttocks, breasts, and knees. In some African cultures, the wood is first divided and notched into three units, so that the head and neck are seen as one unit, the arms and torso another, and the thighs, legs, and feet as the last. Representations of humans are almost always idealized, reflecting spiritual, ethical, or cultural values of the community.³⁶



Figure 29. Bamana artist (Kala, Mali); *Male and Female Twin Figures (flanitokelew)*; wood, metal; 20th century; (Male) H: 14 in. (35.6 cm.), W: 5 in. (12.7 cm.), D: 4 ½ in. (11.4 cm.); (Female) H: 13 7/8 in. (35.3 cm.), W: 5 ½ in. (14 cm.), D: 5 in. (12.7 cm.); Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph courtesy of Newark Museum, Collection of Bernard and Patricia Wagner, Promised Gift/Photo by Sven Lindahl.

The 20th-century twin statuettes in Figure 29 (pg. 445), known as *flanitokelew*, were carved by the Bamana people of Mali. It is likely that the figures represent a dead twin and its spiritual companion. The highly stylized bodies have elongated torsos with arms held stiffly at their sides. Although one twin is male and the other is female, their appearance is more alike than different. This convention refers to origin myths, in which the first people were twins of the opposite sex.

Contemporary Japanese-Samoan artist Shigeyuki Kihara (b. 1975) addresses issues related to identity, gender, colonialism, sexuality, perception, and shared cultural memory in her triptych series, *Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman* (2004-2005). *Fa'a fafine* had traditionally been defined in Samoan culture as a third gender—individuals who are biologically born as men but live their lives as females.³⁷

In the *Fa'a fafine* series, Kihara produces photographic self portraits in sepia tones that are reminiscent of the 19th-century images that were usually staged by non-Samoan photographers and then distributed abroad. These early images may have been instrumental in forming Western perceptions and sexual stereotypes about Pacific Islanders. Kihara, herself a *fa'a fafine*, is



Figure 30. Shigeyuki Kihara (Japanese-Samoan); *Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman, Triptych 1*; chromogenic print on "Fujicolor Professional Paper"; 2004-2005; H: 23 5/8 in. (60 cm.), W: 31 1/2 in. (80 cm); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stephanie H. Bernheim Gifts, and the artist/Photo by Sean Coyle.

shown similarly in the three images of the series. In the image in Figure 30 (pg. 446), the first of the series, she appears as a beautiful, young island woman, partially clothed and posed in a suggestive manner reminiscent of the reclining nudes found throughout the Western art history canon. In the second photograph, she is in the same pose, but is nude, with genitals concealed. In the third photograph of the series, the artist's male genitals and her *fa'a fafine* identity are fully revealed.

The Moving Body

By the 20th century, the female nude appears in abstracted form. The stylized depiction of five nude prostitutes in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907) by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)³⁸ was revolutionary, establishing the painting as one of the seminal works of modern art. While drawing on influences from classical antiquity as well as African and Iberian sculpture, the painting marks a radical departure from traditional representational art by presenting fragmented, geometric forms rather than naturalistic figures. The result is the reconfiguration of human anatomy into figures that one critic described as resembling “a field of broken glass.”³⁹

A number of modern artists focused on depicting the body in motion. Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), considered to be the father of motion photography, created more than 100,000 images depicting both animals and humans in motion.⁴⁰ His body of work, along with the time-lapse chromophotographs of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904), are said to have influenced two European artists whose works appeared at about the same time—Duchamp and Boccioni.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) created two versions of his painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1911 and 1912). The series of successive static poses plots the motion of the body through space, deconstructing the descending nude to a mechanized assemblage of fractured, flattened geometric forms.⁴¹ These paintings by Duchamp have often been compared to the work of the Italian futurists, who sought to portray images that conveyed dynamism and velocity. A sculpture by the Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), entitled *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), shown in Figure 31 on page 448,⁴² depicts the human form as a windswept metal machine in motion.⁴³



Figure 31. Umberto Boccioni (Italian, 1882-1916); *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*; bronze; 1913; H: 48 in. (121.9 cm.), W: 15 ½ in. (39.4 cm.), D: 36 in. (91.4 cm.); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph © the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

Experimentation

Some artists of the mid-20th century used their bodies in motion to create art. Rather than using the traditional easel and brushes, American artist Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) fixed his canvas to the floor or wall and, while moving around it, poured, dripped, or splashed paint from a can, sometimes manipulating it with knives, sticks, or trowels. Pollock worked with his entire body, and his paintings recorded that motion.

In 1958, French avant-garde artist Yves Klein (1928-1962) began experimenting with what he called “living brushes,” a method in which he covered the nude body of a woman with blue paint (a color he later registered and patented under the name of IKB, or International Klein Blue) and had her rotate on sheets of paper placed on the floor until they were fully covered in paint. Two years later, he created a choreographed performance piece called *Anthropométries de l’Epoque bleue* in which three nude models covered in blue paint pressed their bodies against papers tacked to the walls and floor of a gallery. The images left on the papers, he said, captured fleeting “states-moments of flesh.” Other work by Klein features images left by bodies silhouetted with halos of blue spray paint, such as *Imprint* (1961), shown in Figure 32 on page 450.⁴⁴ Klein’s works were unique because the human form became both the subject of the image and the means by which the image was created.

These works were created around the same time a new live art form involving the human body—Happenings—was emerging. First used by Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) in his piece *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), the non-improvised theater-like works often took place in lofts and stores and included readings, music, and dance. Happening participants included the artists Claes Oldenburg (b.1929), Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), Jim Dine (b.1935), John Cage (1912-1992), and Carolee Schneemann (b.1939), among others.⁴⁵

Schneemann is considered a pioneer in performance, installation, and video art. Her work *Fuses* (1964-1967) is a time-lapse film of herself and her boyfriend engaged in sexual acts, manipulated with drawing, stains, and burns onto the film cells themselves. The film questions whether a woman's depiction of her own sexual acts is different from pornography or classical art.⁴⁶ Another live work, *Meat Joy*, seen in Figure 33 (pg. 451), was performed originally in 1964 as part of the First Festival of Free Expression at the American Center in Paris. Later, it was performed at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. It was, according to the artist, like “an erotic rite...a celebration of flesh as raw material.” This performance involved couples interacting on stage with materials such as paint and blood, as they responded to various sound and movement elements. Schneemann said she specifically used the naked body in her “Kinetic Theater” works to challenge

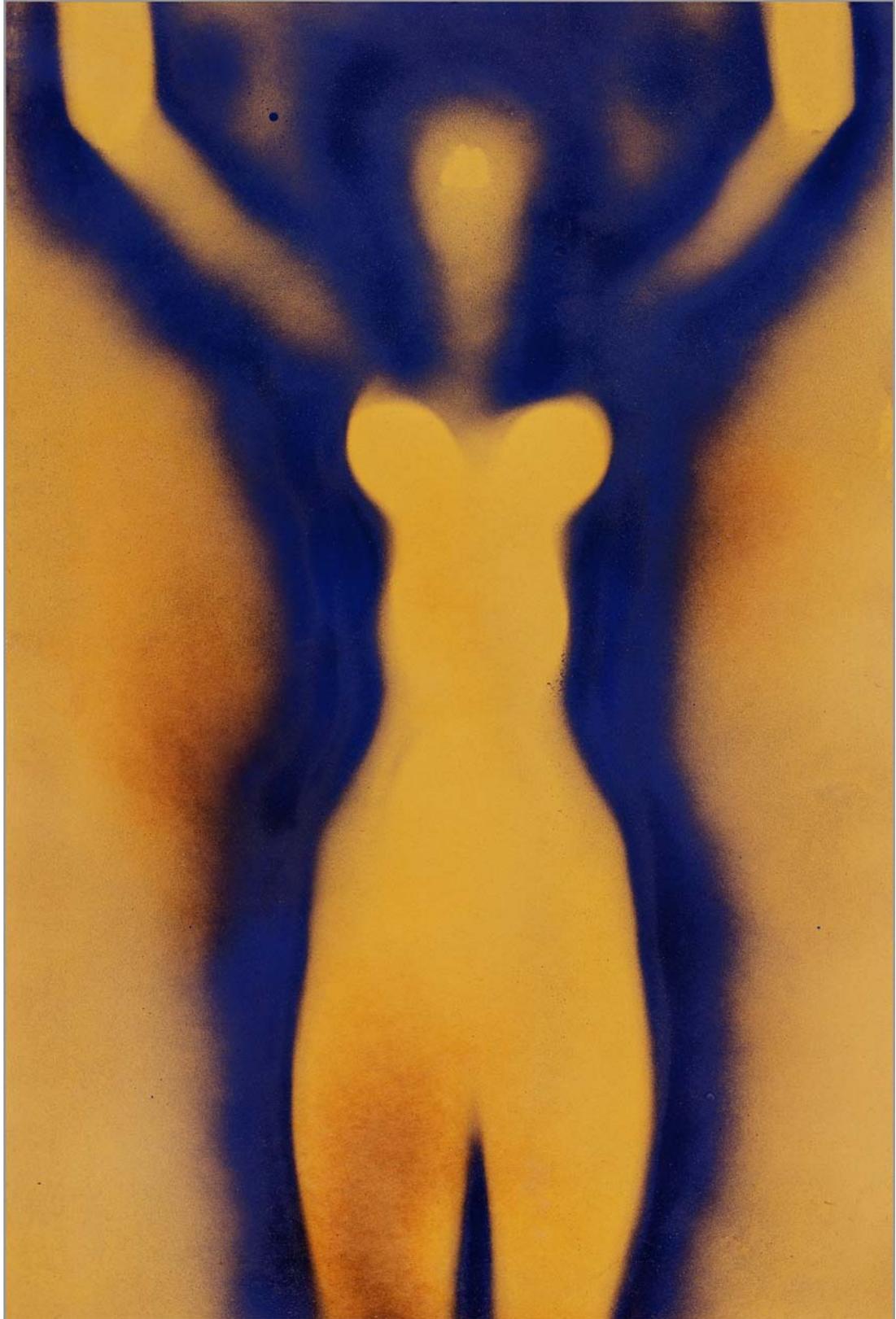


Figure 32. Yves Klein (French, 1928-1962); *Imprint*, spray paint on enamel; 1961; private collection. Photograph © DACS /the Bridgeman Art Library.



Figure 33. Carolee Schneemann (American); *Meat Joy*; group performance with raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, plastic, rope, and shredded scrap paper; 1964. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

taboos and the “sexual rigidities” of a “guilt-ridden,” “sex-negative” culture.⁴⁷

Since 1994, photographer/videographer Spencer Tunick (b. 1967) has organized and documented site-specific events in which large numbers of men and women voluntarily gather nude to create artistic formations in public spaces. Seen en masse, the group becomes a single abstracted form, challenging notions of nudity and privacy.⁴⁸

The body is one of the oldest and most enduring subjects in art, as evidenced by the discovery of the Venus figurine created approximately 35,000 years ago. In addition to serving as a subject for many canvases, the body itself has functioned as a canvas for adornment and modification. It is fundamentally human to explore the human form, and as technology continues to develop, the possibilities for new representations of the body are endless.

Endnotes

- ¹ Eric Kjellgren. "Ubirr (ca. 40,000?–present)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ubir/hd_ubir.htm (October 2000).
- ² H. W. Janson. *History of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 29.
- ³ John Noble Wilford. "Full-Figured Statuette, 35,000 Years Old, Provides New Clues to How Art Evolved." *New York Times*, May 13, 2009. Science section: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/14/science/14venus.html>.
- ⁴ "Ice Age Art." Bradshaw Foundation Web site: www.bradshawfoundation.com/sculpture/index.php.
- ⁵ Christine Fielding and Chris King. *Sexual Paradox: Complementarity, Reproductive Conflict and Human Emergence* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2006), 174.
- ⁶ N. K. Sandars. *Prehistoric Art in Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 85-88.
- ⁷ Department of Greek and Roman Art. "Early Cycladic Art and Culture," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ecyc/hd_ecyc.htm (October 2004).
- ⁸ Kate Spence. "Akhenaten and the Amarna Period." BBC Web site: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/akhenaten_01.shtml.
- ⁹ "Statue of a Kouros (85.AA.40)." Getty Museum Web site: <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=12908>.
- ¹⁰ "Acropolis Sculptures." Ancient-Greece.org Web site: www.ancient-greece.org/art/acropolis-sculptures.html.
- ¹¹ Janson, *History of Art*, 129-131.
- ¹² "Apoxyomenos." Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri Web site: <http://maa.missouri.edu/objects/castgallery/castApoxyomenos.html>.
- ¹³ J.J. Pollitt. *Art and the Experience in Classical Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 174-178.
- ¹⁴ Pollitt, *Art and the Experience*, 366-367.
- ¹⁵ Bruce Cole and Adelheid M. Gealt. *Art of the Western World: From Ancient Greece to Post Modernism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 97-100.
- ¹⁶ "Michelangelo's David," in *Culture Shock: Flashpoints: Visual Arts*. PBS Web site: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/david_a.html.

¹⁷ “Picasso / Manet: *Le Déjeuner sur L’Herbe*,” in *Exhibitions*. Musée d’Orsay Web site: [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/article/picasso-manet-span-classitaliquenoirle-dejeuner-sur-lherbespan-20437.html?tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=649&cHash=92f9244231](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/article/picasso-manet-span-classitaliquenoirle-dejeuner-sur-lherbespan-20437.html?tx_ttnews[backPid]=649&cHash=92f9244231).

¹⁸ “Déjeuner sur L’Herbe.” Royal Academy of Arts Web site: <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/monet/dejeuner-sur-lherbe,338,AR.html>.

¹⁹ Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow. *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994), 53.

²⁰ Robert Hans van Gulik. *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston, MA: Brill, 1994), 317-319.

²¹ Timon Screech. *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 30-38.

²² A.L. Dallapiccola. *Indian Art in Detail* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

²³ Margo DeMello. *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 38-39.

²⁴ Victoria Sherrow. *For Appearance Sake: The Historical Encyclopedia of Good Looks, Beauty and Grooming* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 2001), 50.

²⁵ John A. Rush. *Spiritual Tattoo: A Cultural History of Tattooing, Piercing, Scarification, Branding, and Implants* (California: Frog Books, 2005), 26.

²⁶ Juniper Ellis. *Tattooing the World: Pacific Designs in Print & Skin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 167.

²⁷ DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, 255.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁹ "Harp [Mangbetu peoples; Democratic Republic of Congo] (1978.412.412)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ahis/ho_1978.412.412.htm (October 2006).

³⁰ Rosemarie A. Joyce. “Negotiating Sex and Gender in Classic Maya Society,” in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecilia F. Klein (Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, n.d.), 8.

³¹ “Antique Corsets.” Antique Corset Gallery Web site: <http://www.antiquecorsetgallery.com/>; “Early Corsetry Fashion History.” Fashion Era Web site: http://www.fashion-era.com/early_corsetry.htm; and Suzanne W. Hull. *Women According to Men* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1996), 180.

-
- ³² DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, 79.
- ³³ “In Depth: Ana Mendieta.” Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Web site: http://hirshhorn.si.edu/visit/in_depth.asp?key=33&subkey=57.
- ³⁴ “Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and performance 1972-1985,” in *Resource Library Magazine*. Traditional Fine Arts Organization, Inc. Web site: <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/4aa/4aa459.htm>.
- ³⁵ “The Complete *Untitled Film Stills*: Cindy Sherman,” in *Exhibitions*. Museum of Modern Art Web site: <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1997/sherman/>.
- ³⁶ Christa Clarke. *The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), 21; and Margaret Lazzari and Dona Schlesier. *Exploring Art* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 379.
- ³⁷ Johanna Schmidt. “Paradise Lost? Social Change and Fa’afafine in Samoa,” in *Global Forces and Local Life Worlds* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 207.
- ³⁸ “Les Desmoiselles d’Avignon (333.1939),” in *The Collection*. Museum of Modern Art Web site: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79766.
- ³⁹ Jansen, *History of Art*, 682.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 664.
- ⁴¹ “Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 1) (1950-134-58),” in *Collections*. Philadelphia Museum of Art Web site: <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51449.html?mulR=27934>; and “Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2) (1950-134-59),” in *Collections*. Philadelphia Museum of Art Web site: <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51448.html?mulR=18024>.
- ⁴² “Unique Forms of Continuity in Space (231.1948),” in *The Collection*. Museum of Modern Art Web site: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81179.
- ⁴³ Janson, *History of Art*, 686.
- ⁴⁴ “Biography.” Yves Klein Archives Web site: http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/bio_us.html.
- ⁴⁵ Michael Kirby. “Happenings: An Introduction,” in *Happenings and Other Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-24.
- ⁴⁶ Amy Newman. “An Innovator Who Was the Eros of Her Own Art,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2002. Arts section: <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/03/arts/art-architecture-an-innovator-who-was-the-eros-of-her-own-art.html>.

⁴⁷ Rudolf Frieling. "Carolee Schneemann, Meat Joy." Media Art Net Web site: <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/meat-joy/>; and "Meat Joy 1964." Carolee Schneemann Web site: <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/meatjoy.html>.

⁴⁸ "Bio." Spencer Tunick Web site: <http://www.spencertunick.com/bio.html>.