

17.11 JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES. *Grande Odalisque*. France, 1814. Oil on canvas, 35" × 64". Louvre, Paris.

### The Female Body and the Gaze

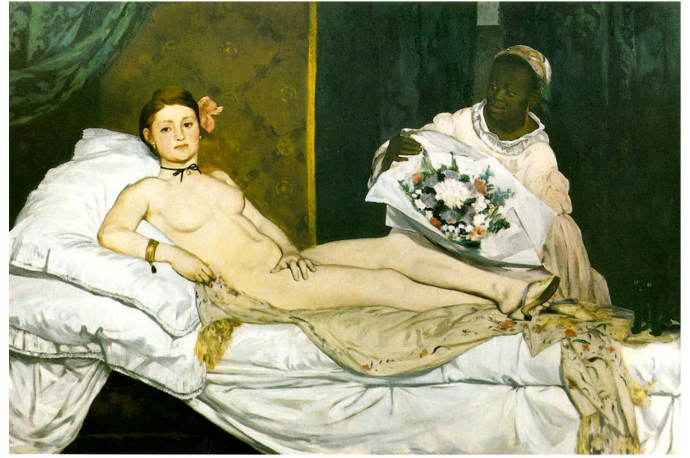
How does sexuality work in an image when only a single figure is depicted? Let us look at female nudes in nineteenth-century Western art. They have been the subject of considerable critical writing recently, which deals with the idea of the gaze, women as the object of the gaze, and men as the ones for whom the images were made.

The *Grande Odalisque* (figure 17.11) was painted by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres in 1814. It is a long horizontal painting of a nude woman seen from behind. The title indicates that she is an odalisque, a member of a Turkish harem. Blue, gold, and cream tones predominate in the painting. The curve of the upper body echoes the curve of the hanging blue drapery. Accents occur at the woman's face and at her hand, holding the peacock-feather fan. Her back is extremely long, creating a sensual flow that complements the curves of her legs, arms, breast, and buttocks. Outline is emphasized and the soft, flawless skin is delicately shaded. The smooth flesh contrasts with the patterned and textured cloth, feathers, and beads that surround and adorn the woman. Her pose is sensually relaxed.

Nineteenth-century female nudes in Europe and the United States were made for nineteenth-century men. They were the privileged audience for such pictures, as viewers whose gaze completed the sexual exchange implied in the painting. As the critic Linda Nochlin wrote:

As far as one knows, there simply exists no art, and certainly no high art, in the nineteenth century based on women's erotic need, wishes or fantasies. Whether the erotic object be breast or buttocks, shoes or corsets. . . , the imagery of sexual delight or provocation has always been created *about* women for men's enjoyment, by men. . . Controlling both sex and art, [men] and [their] fantasies conditioned the world of erotic imagination . . . (Nochlin 1988: 138–139)

The fact that only the female is present in a sexual scene is significant. Without a lover in the scene, the odalisque is sexually available for the viewer—presumably the European male—who gazes upon her. Again, the



17.12 EDWARD MANET. *Olympia*. France, 1865. Oil on canvas, 51.25" × 74.75". Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Musées Nationaux.

position of the viewer is privileged, one who sees and consumes without being seen or consumed himself.

The *Grande Odalisque* reflects other European sexual attitudes. In the nineteenth century, sexuality was limited by social mores and by the Christian religion. Moral sexual activity was restricted to those in monogamous marriage. Divorce was taboo, and all single persons were expected to be celibate. These ideas were very influential, whether or not everyone followed them. At the same time, Europeans developed an ongoing fascination with sexuality in other cultures, ones that Europeans considered to be primitive, exotic, or buried in the past. Men in these other cultures were imagined to be free from burdensome social restrictions that hampered sexual urges, spontaneous feelings, personal power, energy, and creativity. The *Grande Odalisque* was painted during the height of Europe's colonization of vast areas of the world. The Turkish harem girl was exotic and sexually appealing. Her nudity was acceptable in European society because it was presented as somehow distant. The male viewer took the place of the imagined Turkish sultan, a man of apparently great sexual appetite who would have many such women at his disposal.

Our next painting, Edward Manet's *Olympia*, from 1865 (figure 17.12), is superficially similar to the *Grande Odalisque*. But *Olympia* scandalized the Paris public, in part because its sexuality and nudity were not of a distant place and time. The title of the painting came from the assumed name of the nude woman, Victorine Meurant, a known Paris courtesan who was the "companion" of wealthy men. Olympia looks back at the viewer with an understanding that sex and money will be exchanged in her associations with wealthy men. Olympia's gaze identifies and implicates the viewer, whereas with the *Grande Odalisque* the nature of the viewer is less explicit.

Manet's painting is similar to a famous Italian Renaissance painting of Venus. Even the name, *Olympia*, refers to the dwelling of the Greek gods. But this Olympia was not a heavenly goddess, rather a woman who was successful at her business and apparently pleased with herself. Manet revealed that, in fact, nineteenth-century Europe had conflated the concepts of prostitute, courtesan, and goddess. *Olympia* makes evident the sexual nature behind many artworks with mythological subject matter, showing that mythology was merely an acceptably

distant way to present the nude woman for the pleasure of the male viewer. Nineteenth-century wealthy men disguised and insulated their sexual activities. Their “companions” were euphemized socially as embodiments of beauty, like goddesses. Manet’s painting shattered those illusions. The unromantic expression on Olympia’s face shows that the sexual transactions were in fact very similar to those of a street prostitute. The wealthy were horrified that their sexual dalliances could be seen in that light.

Manet’s painting also reveals the social status accorded different races, with the African woman in the role of maid, the white woman as mistress.

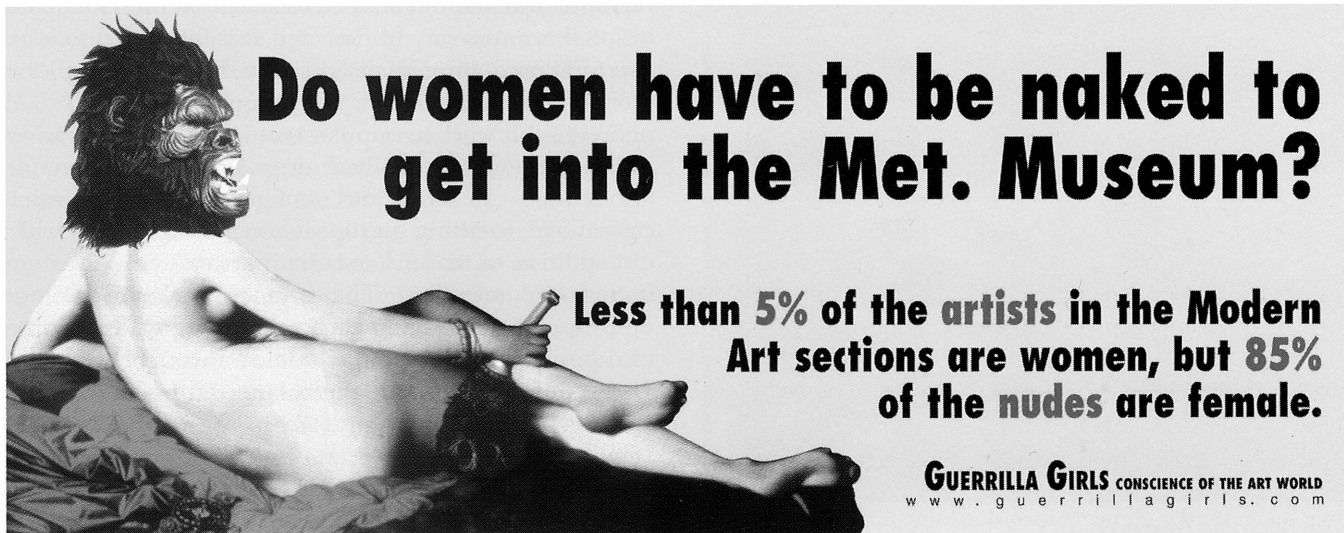
While Manet’s painting was attacked as scandalous, it did have its defenders. But they often defended the work based on its innovative paint quality, and usually left the subject matter alone because it was too sensational. Manet painted thickly, directly on the white surface of the canvas ground, in a style called “alla prima” painting. His colors were flatter and brighter than the subdued tones of traditional academic painting. The body of Olympia is brightly lit. Light areas are separate from the dark, as distinct from most previous oil paintings since the Renaissance where midtones predominate. Manet’s brushwork was obvious, distinctive, and personal. His painting style, individualistic and thickly applied, led to many of the painterly concerns of twentieth-century painting.

*Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, from c. 1986 (figure 17.28) is an artwork by the Guerrilla Girls that seeks to correct a specific kind of gender discrimination. At the time the poster was made, high-profile art exhibitions in prestigious museums often included very few women artists. In other words, a naked woman painted by a man might be shown in a museum, but a painting by a woman artist was not likely to be. The poster pointed out how few women artists had work in

the Modern Art section, but how often they are used as models. On the poster, the woman’s body is that of *Grande Odalisque* (see figure 17.11) whose aesthetically pleasing elongated torso reclines on cushions, on display for male viewers to enjoy and “consume.” However, her head has been obscured by a gorilla mask, like those the Guerrilla Girls wore in public appearances to maintain their anonymity and to liken themselves to revolutionary guerrillas who seek to overthrow a dominant power.

The Guerrilla Girls is a collective of anonymous women artists and arts professionals protesting racial and gender discrimination in the art field. Their posters feature text, image, and humor presented with a strong graphic design sensibility. The punch of their message is delivered like a well-designed advertisement. The posters were mass produced and relatively inexpensive. They would show up outside of galleries and museums hosting high-profile art events where women were underrepresented. The Guerrilla Girls in masks would often show up also, in performance, to protest the event. The purpose of their work was to cause exposure, embarrassment, and, eventually, change.

The Guerrilla Girls also protested other instances of gender discrimination in the art world, noting that women artists had fewer exhibition opportunities, had fewer tenure-track teaching jobs in universities, made approximately 33 percent the income from art that male counterparts earned, were infrequently discussed in scholarly works, and so on. Later posters were concerned with both gender and racial imbalances in museums, exhibitions, and teaching opportunities. The Guerrilla Girls were successful in changing attitudes in the art world, although some argue that the changes were merely superficial. Without a doubt, their barbed humor and effective graphics were the major weapons of the Guerrilla Girls.



17.28 GUERRILLA GIRLS. *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* USA, 1986. Street Poster. See also the text accompanying figure 4.12.