The nude body has appeared in visual art and culture in myriad ways and styles; it has been interpreted from different starting points throughout history and imbued with various meanings. The nude has reflected transitions, both within the arts and in broader historical, political and social contexts, and it reveals changes in the concepts of beauty, morality, and attitudes towards gender. As an art object, the nude exposes the model’s surface and depth: especially in the modern age, the nude is an image of both the human form and the psyche.

It is worth asking why and for whom the nude image has been created, and in what context it should be viewed and interpreted. The classic male nude is presented in Western art as a heroic, universal subject, or a mythological deity. The body of a naked man has also been perceived as a sensuous object, but it is not automatically regarded as an object of sexual desire, despite its virility and masculinity. A traditional male nude was portrayed as self-motivated, actively shaping his own world, while women found themselves subject to a demeaning erotic gaze, stripped not only of clothing, but also of their power and autonomy. Masculinity symbolises both vitality and a well-developed mental and intellectual capacity. In contrast to his female counterpart, the male nude embodies a potent mix of power, control and agency, and the gaze appears to be directed outwards from the work of art towards the spectator, rather than the other way around.

Through ideals of beauty that emphasise harmony and aesthetic pleasure, the nude lets us see an authentic human body that depicts reality, or a proportionately precisely defined, flawless ideal. A nude image, however, like any image, is a composite of different meanings, it is a product of its time and of different interpretations which are in a constant flux and re-evaluation in the wake of historical and social changes. Thus, the nude is constantly under construction as it receives new layers of meaning and aesthetic, philosophical, cultural, mythological, political, sexual, social, religious and other content. The presentation of the nude changed rapidly in the 20th century when the art world was fragmented by social upheavals and numerous Modernist trends.

The nude as an object of art – the spectator and the focus of the gaze

Nude female figures are one of the oldest subjects in sculpture. The earliest small statuettes might have been ritual objects that symbolised fertility, but they also give us an inkling of prehistoric people’s concepts of beauty.3

The history of nudes created as works of art begins in Ancient Greece, where archaic and athletic kouroi sculptures inspired by Egyptian art became the model for a classical, heroic nude that was almost always male. Women were usually depicted clothed.4 In medieval art, images of nudity were interwoven with religious practice, and nakedness was aligned with suffering and piety, with the torment of Christ, and with the agonies of martyrs. Renaissance artists in the 15th century rediscovered Ancient heroic sculptures, which consequently became one of the cornerstones of Western art and academic art education.

Women were long forbidden from drawing naked models in art schools, but in the late-1880s these restrictions were removed in Finland, for example in the Finnish Art Society’s drawing school, where men and women studied in the model class together. Women were permitted to draw nude models relatively late, and even then they were not always allowed to depict all of the physical details.5

During the Renaissance, the male nude in particular became one of the most prominent subjects in the non-ecclesiastical sphere. In the later canon of art, the inquiring gaze progressively shifted from the male to the passive, soft, naked female body, but over the centuries a large number of uncontextualised erotic and aesthetic meanings and interpretations have also been attached to the male nude, highlighting male dominance or intellectual superiority. The male nude is thus not as bare and vulnerable as a female nude. The noble, naked man belongs to the public sphere, while a woman is privately protected and controlled. Men are not associated with the same elements of shame or voyeurism as women, so a naked man can withstand a direct public gaze.

Michelangelo’s David (1504) can be viewed as a prototype for the universal, masculine male nude which is, in principle, intended to be viewed in a public space. It is not a realistic or truthful image of a man’s body; rather the sculpture’s idealised nudity appears as a symbol of male power, independence, and freedom.

Women reclining naked, as Odalisques, Venuses and other mythological characters, have been depicted through the centuries as passive and expectant, even nonchalantly seductive, under the male gaze. Edouard Manet’s painting Olympia (1863), caused a major fuss when it was premiered in the Paris Salon.6 The confusion had nothing to do with the nudity of the model, however, or the obvious fact that the work depicted a prostitute, but was rather prompted by her bold gaze, which drilled directly into the spectator. The audience’s attitude was influenced by prevailing attitudes regarding the roles deemed fit for women; consigned to the background, as a male artist’s model, mistress or muse. A woman’s sexuality had to be curbed and controlled. Olympia's gaze pierced the membrane of appropriate behaviour and pushed the private sphere out into public space.

Modernist styles of art at the end of the 19th century shook traditional notions of beauty which emphasised aesthetics and harmony. Darker figures appeared alongside classical nudes, vitalist bathers and nudes in pastoral paintings that depicted pleasure and

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3 Some 200 small figurines depicting the stylised feminine figure, the so-called Venus figurines, have been found, mainly in Europe. The unifying feature is the emphasis on breast, abdominal region and genitalia. One of the most famous is probably the Venus of Willendorf, which was found in 1908 in Willendorf, Austria. These sculptures have been dated to the late Palaeolithic period about 35,000–25,000 years ago.

4 The female counterpart to kouroi sculptures was kore sculptures, of young clad female figures. These figures were used in the architectural art known as caryatids in which they would support an entablature like pillars.


enjoyment. Methods changed. Cubism fragmented the uniform painting surface and the Expressionists depicted not only the visible, but also the sensory world and sensations: pleasure, pain, sadness, suffering and aggression. Symbolists and Surrealists were inspired by the subconscious mind and dreams, while performance artists’ works challenged traditional art expression and dealt with sexuality, corporeality and feminism.

**Images of the new woman**

The image of a woman, both clothed and naked, began to assume unfamiliar nuances, especially in works by female artists. Her body and identity started to be examined while the drive for women’s emancipation and demands for equality progressed. Alongside passive beauty and an erotic charge, the images contained more complex, less idealised and more mundane, even brutal, characteristics. New subjects might be female androgynes, workers or educated, working women, often the artist herself.

Helene Schjerfbeck’s depictions of modern women in the 1920s and ’30s, and Sigrid Schauman’s minimalistic female nudes in the mid-1950s, typified a new way of presenting ‘the new woman’. Schjerfbeck studied her models as typical women of the age, representatives...
of their profession or fashionable, independent actors. Her androgynous paintings of male subjects were also from this time. The works are not portraits, and the identity and personality of the model is not essential. This is also the case with the artist’s self-portraits, which do not seek to be true representations. Schjerfbeck painted over forty self-portraits, none of which depicted her whole body. They were all of her face and torso — the body and corporeality dispelled or noticeably altered. She never hesitated to explore aging and approaching death, but she used her face as her only instrument. The skull-like heads in her last self-portraits express blindness, fragmentation and horror.

To Sigrid Schauman, the naked body was comparable to any other subject, and she did not clearly distinguish between figurative and non-figurative art. Her paintings of nudes can be compared to abstract art works, composed of basic elements, colour, line and composition. Although the paintings are figurative, there is an attempt to withdraw from Figuratism.8

Compared to the heavy, corporeal nudes by her peers Tyko Sallinen and Mikko Oinonen in the 1910s, Schauman’s characters — usually women — are almost ethereal studies in light and colour, despite their clear corporeality and thick layers of paint.

Yrjö Saarinen, The Nude,
1949, oil, 92cm x 73.5cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen
A direct contrast to Schauman’s intellectual nudes can be seen in Yrjö Saarinen’s expressionist work, *The Nude* (1949), in which flesh and blood are strongly present. The contours of the woman’s body, her revealing posture which exposes her genitalia, and strong opposing reds and greens, challenge the viewer; this naked woman is not a passive subject of the male gaze and desire, she is a provocative and perhaps even dangerous temptress. It is interesting that Saarinen has painted the face of his model with a doll-like beauty. We cannot see her gaze, however, which leaves room for interpretation.
Helena Pylkkänen, *Self-Portrait*, 1976, bronze, 57.5cm x 37cm x 37cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

Marjo Lahtinen, *Figure with Arms*, 1996, granite, 46cm x 15cm x 8cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

Helena Pylkkänen, *On the Janiculum (Gianicola)*, 1976, bronze, 82cm x 132cm x 66cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen
Nudity also made its way into self-portraits, in which female artists studied themselves as representatives not only of their profession but also their gender. For instance, American artist Alice Neel (1900–84) painted an unpretentious, unsentimental nude image of herself in 1980 that made no attempt to conceal her aging body, nor was there any shame about bodily functions or the marks accrued from the wear and tear of life. Helena Pylkkänen’s bronze cast Self-Portrait (1976) in the Finnish National Gallery is a powerful interpretation of an independent, professional woman. The form of the work and the model’s (the artist’s) nudity refer to busts of Ancient rulers and intellectuals. Wäinö Aaltonen’s sensual wading women and Finnish maidens, Marjo Lahtinen’s archaic stone-hewn torsos, and Pylkkänen’s dynamic, sensual bronze sculpture On the Janiculum (Gianicolo, 1976) also take their lead from classical sculpture.

Pylkkänen’s bronze Masculine/Recumbent Torso (1986–87), a direct reference to the subjects of Ancient sculpture, comments on a tradition that is based on masculinity, as its title implies. An interesting, perhaps surprising, connection to the same theme can be found in Esko Tirronen’s photorealist works from the 1970s, showing female details, torsos and legs. Ancient torsos are fragments of the human body, whether they are broken or

Esko Tirronen, *Object*, 1970,
oil on canvas, 118cm x 130cm
Skop Collection,
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

Esko Tirronen, *Morning*, 1971,
tempera on canvas, 195cm x 195cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen
deliberately headless or cropped anatomical studies. In Tirronen’s spray paintings, while parts of a woman’s body are admittedly eroticised subjects of the male gaze, the fragments are distanced from the spectator and transformed by their large scale into noble, sculptural characters. The same adjectives can be used to describe Åke Mattas’ painting *Ulla with a Coat on Her Shoulders* (1949). The proud posture of the model on the pedestal and the garment covering her upper body are features that echo portraits of rulers from ancient times as well as academic studies of nudity. The model’s gender and her forthright corporeality defy straightforward interpretation and inject conflict and tension into the work.
Power, body and gender

An examination of the visual art produced in the last century begs the question: what actually happened to the sublime, heroic or beautiful image of the human being? Why did the depiction of the nude change? Modernism and modernisation ushered in a fundamental ideological change in the way that art was created, viewed, interpreted and discussed. The crises created by wars and violence, especially the First World War, along with the ensuing loss of idealism and reconstitution of the social order, can also be seen as a crack or a breaking point. Generations that had experienced war could identify with the nihilism expounded by Friedrich Nietzsche – experiences of emptiness, alienation, worthlessness and insanity – as well as the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Collective trauma changed the perception of humanity and thus also the human image. A powerful expression of this can be found in Aimo Kanerva’s painting *Christ, The Crucified* (1947). Contemporary reviews likened it to the essence of suffering: ‘It consumes, mutilates and distorts the person, but at the same time imbues him with the aura of the sublime and glorious victor.’

In Finland, the middle class began to grow through extensive internal migration and urbanisation, and domestic life and daily work began to be depicted in paintings as well. Alpo Jaakola, for instance, turned his own residential environment into a place to exhibit his art, and as art became a part of everyday life, so everyday life became art. Jaakola saw woman as the key theme of art and eroticism as the power that animates life.\textsuperscript{11} Female Nude (1951), which Jaakola painted as a student, depicted the model in mundane surroundings in a small wooden cabin. She is symbolically positioned beside a traditional tiled stove and her lap parallels the glowing heat of the hearth.

Since the end of the 20th century, arts research has used interdisciplinary dialogue and methods. For instance, multidisciplinary feminist and queer research has opened up new perspectives on the body, identity, gender and non-normative sexuality. With a new, questioning gaze it is possible to bring out the multiple meanings in images and challenge prevailing discursive structures regarding womanhood, manhood, masculinity, femininity, sexual orientation, and more.\textsuperscript{12}


An interesting link between writings on early modernity and feminist research can be found in the concept of location and localisation. Researchers' views are bound by certain theories and concepts that are not neutral, but the world is nevertheless perceived through them and information is always produced from a certain point of view. Knowledge is bound to time and place.

It is also essential to understand the difference between biological (sex) and social sex (gender). The construction of gender and the significance of the gaze has been a topic of research since the 1970s. The thinking of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–84) has influenced the understanding of many scholars regarding gender and the expression of sexuality.

Foucault wrote about the essential connection between vision, knowledge and power, and the relationship between power and corporeality and sexuality in Western society. He describes the emergence of modern societies and how the industrial revolution gave rise to systems that were developed to govern large masses of people. According to Foucault, modern societies are characterised by monitoring the individual. At the same time, he says that society became sexually-oriented. Citizens' bodies and sexual activities began to be controlled and regulated by systems and categories that defined them. Thus, bodies became subject to cultural and historical governance. People's sexuality began to be restricted, paradoxically, by keeping it constantly present and subject to discussion. While sexuality was formerly understood primarily as an act or source of pleasure, the shift from pre-industrial to modern times also meant extending the concept of sexuality to differentiate identities. Among other things, homosexuality as a category emerged at this very time. Foucault demonstrated how definitions of femininity and masculinity, as well as homosexuality and heterosexuality, are part of the societal use of power. The ethos of continuous control also involves the identification and recognition of the silenced, banned and rejected, and the forbidden became fascinating and desirable. Likewise, this is also connected with the idea of presenting the ‘right’ body, for example, in the context of ethnicity and class.

The key to Foucault’s thinking is the way that things are made visible through the body. The aim is to induce the reader or viewer to clearly see visible events or interpretations in the light of the unnoticed concepts or phenomena that underlie them. British feminist art historian Griselda Pollock and, in Finland, Tutta Palin, who has studied the art of the portrait, have used the close-reading method. This involves drawing attention to seemingly irrelevant details that give rise to interpretations that contradict traditional or conventional meanings. Foucault’s perception of power is also encapsulated in the idea that power is not so much suppressive, but rather produces subjects – different genders are also expressions of this use of power.
From the sublime to the grotesque

According to the theory of the carnivalesque put forward by Mihail Bakhtin (1895–1975), a shift in people’s world view as the Middle Ages gave way to the Modern Age has led to a change in the way that people have been depicted. The linear perception of time in the new era led to individual human bodies being depicted with body parts clearly defined.

Bakhtin’s theory brings in the interesting metaphor of an androgynous second body that lures us into paying attention to details and dimensions that are not immediately apparent.

According to Bakhtin, the androgynous body is associated with pre-modern, cyclical time, and it expresses the eternal transformation of reality, the transition from the old to the new. Marshall Berman’s view of the disintegration inherent in the life of the modern individual, and the constant renewal of ‘the maelstrom of life’, is interesting in this context.

In this way of thinking the androgyne can be interpreted as a renewal and questioning of identity, and also as a game. Playing with identities can even bring in humour: what is serious or frightening in life becomes light-hearted. Laughter is an effective way to resist and renew categories and systems, and releases the person from suffering.

Androgyne characters have become part of a silenced, rejected history, and since ancient times they have signified the homoeroticised male body. On the other hand, androgynes allow for a more unrestricted gaze, free of masculine categorisations; the androgyne is a higher and more distant object of desire. In visual culture, the passive young male androgyne also represents women who are invisible at different times for different reasons. On the other hand, the female androgyne can be interpreted as a means of disrupting a woman’s traditional role as the object of others’ gaze.

Greta Hällfors-Sipilä’s paintings Bangs (Elli Sipilä, c. 1920) and Chess (Jussi Hirvola, c. 1918) aptly illustrate the concept of toying with identities.

On the other hand, the carnivalesque is also linked to the idea of the grotesque body, which is erratic or disgusting, a constant source of transformation. It represents a symbolic ‘low’ otherness, almost like the ‘underside’ of the body, which the bourgeoisie tried, in an urban environment for instance, to reject and eliminate. At the same time, this rejection became fascinating and desirable, the object of suppressed desires and fantasy. In nude representations, the grotesque appears as unembellished corporeality and, for example, as images of rejected feelings such as disgust, shame, and fear. The opposite of everything domestic, familiar and close (Heimlich) is terrible, strange, frightening and uncanny (Unheimlich): these feelings should have remained unconscious, and when they rise up within us we experience sensations of otherness, alienation and emptiness, or sheer horror, which is projected in visual art in the form of hideous, grotesque images.

On the other hand, horror or trauma may have led the artist to return to traditional beauty. For example, Ulla Rantanen’s nude images Drawing I and Drawing II (both 1969) are based on images of war or conflict situations; the first drawing depicts a fallen soldier from the Second World War, the second a victim of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising who was dragged behind a car. Rantanen’s works

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21 See Ojanperä 2018, 14.
have also commented on the Vietnam War and the series by Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) *The Disasters of War*. The choice of style was, according to the artist, born of self-criticism as well as criticism from other people who considered the theme too radical for a woman to tackle.25

No matter the style, the nude is a subject that has been endlessly developed by artists. It might be human and humane, grotesque and perverted, traditional or provocative, pleasing, irritating or disgusting, but whatever the case, an image of a person is always an image of its time.

Friedrich Nietzsche summed up the idea of human corporeality when he wrote in his major work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘Body I am entirely, and nothing else.’26

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25 E-mail conversation between the writer and Ulla Rantanen 30 April 2018.