

Nudes in the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical Periods:

A Comparison of Style and Content

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Nude figures have been common subject matter in painting and sculpture throughout history. The female body was of particular interest to painters in the Renaissance (from roughly 1400 A.D. until the mid-fifteenth century), Baroque (the seventeenth century), and Neoclassical (late eighteenth century) period. However, each period showed its own distinctive treatment of the subject matter. Four typical works, when studied, show the differences in style and content that characterize the art of these periods. Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1509) and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c. 1538) are from the High Renaissance and Late Renaissance respectively. Diego Velázquez typifies the Spanish Baroque with his *Venus with a Mirror (The Rokeby Venus)* (c. 1648). Finally, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres shows the Neoclassical view of the female figure in *Grande Odalisque* (1814).

All four works are oil paintings on canvas, of similar size (three to four feet high by five to six feet long) and orientation. All four depict a realistically portrayed, nude female figure reclining on a fabric-draped surface. Each of the four women is portrayed as a real person, in contrast to the subject of Watteau's Rococo-era *A Lady at her Toilet*, who looks like nothing so much as a china doll in her vapid prettiness. But here the similarities end -- each painting is clearly distinguishable in both style and content from the others.

Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* is the earliest of these four works. It clearly exemplifies the High Renaissance idealized style. Venus is an idealized, mythological creation rather than a real woman. She is shown asleep, unaware of her surroundings (and thus unaware of the viewer). She is carefully depicted, with the chiaroscuro effect of light and shadow combining to delineate her form precisely and delicately. Her pose, with one

arm raised over her head, combined with the tousled drapery exhibits a subtle eroticism with no further symbolism necessary to provide clues to the viewer.

Giorgione's painting is the only one of the four set outdoors. The background is a carefully drawn landscape showing intricate, realistic detail and use of linear perspective to produce a typical Renaissance setting for its subject.

Unlike Giorgione's subject, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* is awake and very much aware of her surroundings, and by extension the viewer. Like Giorgione, Titian uses careful, subtly drawn light and shadow to delineate his female figure. Titian's subject is further enhanced by the masterful use of color for which he was famous, particularly with the "Titian red" of her hair and the yellowish light which enhances the tones of her skin. Titian additionally enhances the eroticism of his subject with the languidly drooping flowers in her hand, as well as by placing a small dog (a typical symbol of lust) at the foot of the bed.

In the background of Titian's work we see the beginnings of movement away from the purely classical style of the Renaissance. Rather than using an open, spacious landscape, as did Giorgione, for a background, he sets this painting inside. The typical Renaissance "window effect" produced by linear perspective can be seen on the right side of the painting, but the left side of the background is blocked with a flat black wall which sets off and emphasizes the head and torso of Venus.

The Counter-Reformation movement of the Baroque era, with its emphasis on religious themes, produced a scarcity of female nude images, particularly in southern Europe (the stronghold of the movement), in the seventeenth century. However, private citizens of this time still commissioned a few works with nude subjects. Spanish painter

Diego Velázquez produced *Venus with a Mirror* (also known as *The Rokeby Venus*) for one such individual. The Counter-Reformation influence can be clearly seen in this painting, of course. The female subject is modestly facing away from us; therefore we see only her back and buttocks. The figure itself is much less clearly delineated than in any of the other paintings discussed here. It is still very clear that this is a nude female, but the blurring of the image obscures the potential eroticism of such a painting. This blurring is further enhanced by the modest view in the mirror, which shows only an unfocused image of the model's face rather than a more accurate view of the breasts and upper torso which would be expected from the angle at which it is placed. The texture shown in the figure and the drapery of the bed on which she reclines is due far more to the painterly brushstrokes themselves rather than to an accurate representation of the image.

Velázquez's use of color is also very different from either of his predecessors in that the subject actually looks rather pale and washed-out, almost flat, rather than rich and lush. This is particularly evident when contrasted with the strong red and black colors of the background, and additionally decreases the eroticism of such a subject.

Velázquez uses a typical Baroque background treatment – flat, lacking in depth and space, focusing the viewer's attention strictly on the picture plane. The woman herself, despite the obscuring of details, is the center of attention, with minimal distractions evident around her.

Ingres, in his *Grande Odalisque*, puts an interesting twist on the nude female figure. Like Velázquez, he shows his subject from the back, but unlike Velázquez, his subject gazes back directly at the viewer, similarly to Titian's *Venus*. Rather than seductive, however, her gaze is aloof and detached. The image of the Odalisque herself is

reminiscent of the Renaissance nudes, with her precisely drawn form delineated clearly. Her coloring is the naturalistic, warm flesh tones of the Renaissance paintings rather than the pale, washed-out Baroque skin color. Unlike the Renaissance attention to proportion, her body is distorted, with both her right arm and lower back elongated and her hips broadened well beyond the realistic.

Ingres' setting, on the other hand, owes much to the Baroque influence, showing a lack of depth in the background and focusing the viewer's attention on the picture plane. Rather than an everyday setting like the other images, though, this painting veers away into an exotic setting, as evidenced by the silk draperies, peacock feather fan and hookah. Despite the unusual setting and the connotations of the harem, however, this painting fails to produce the sensuality and eroticism of the Renaissance images, particularly of Titian's Venus.

In these four similar, yet diverse, paintings, style and setting produce very different images, with quite different effects on the viewer. Each painting is sensual in its own way: Giorgione's image of the idealized yet everyday woman contrasts with Ingres' exotically depicted harem resident, while Titian's openly inviting model contrasts with Velázquez's modestly retiring subject.