

## Contemplating Venus

Victorian sexual repression and its release through academic painting and photography

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### Introduction:

Photography was born at the outset of the Victorian age and it is, therefore, the first era in human history which is replete with millions of accurate, reliable visual documents. Surely this means we know the Victorians as we know no other peoples in human history. Well, yes, and no. We do know, with unprecedented faithfulness, what 19th century things *looked like*; we even know the faces of the famous with such accuracy that we would recognize them if we met them today.

But what is difficult to grasp, and photographs for all their candor are no help in this regard, is a full understanding of the Victorian's *attitudes*. We can only surmise from a plethora of images, writings, art and objects, is that the typical Victorian was frustratingly similar and yet simultaneously so different from us, as if we are speaking the same language across time but meaning different things with the same words.

No clearer example of the resultant bafflement (if that is not a contradiction) is the Victorian's attitude to sex which is so contradictory and complex. In an age of unprecedented public propriety, for example, there was an equally unprecedented outpouring of pornography, a word which was coined in that age.

Another problem quickly encountered in any study of erotic imagery in the Victorian age is that its appearance, style and ubiquity are inextricably linked and suffused within the culture at large. It is impossible to study paintings and photographs of the nude, without instantly sliding off into issues of religion and sin, education and the teaching of the classics, the role of women, colonialism and the ransacking of Greece and Rome, and a host of other cultural, social and political topics. These are far-ranging issues which deserve, and have received, multi-volume treatises.

In this brief article I will attempt to condense a few of these and other influences in order to bring us a little closer to an understanding of 19th century erotic photography.

### Public and Private:

"He could see at times up to my knee... He was evidently getting excited."

It is revealing, if you will excuse the pun, that this quotation occurred as late as 1904, in a British magazine for women, and not in a pornographic novelette of fifty years previously. The Queen had been dead for three years but Victorian prudery was still very much alive. In polite circles the Victorian attitude to sex was to deny its existence. It is, therefore, paradoxical that in this genteel, straight-laced, stiff-corsetted atmosphere, naked women formed the subjects of so many canvases each year at the Royal Academy and that erotic and blatantly pornographic photography reached its prolific peak during the 19th century.

There are several reasons for this strange ambiguity. The Victorian's fixation with female beauty was a solid, non-shifting shrine in the ever-accelerating complexity of materialistic life in the

postindustrial revolution years.

At this point it is tempting to take a long detour into the realm of the changing roles of women in the Victorian age. But space will not permit this indulgence, although it would be pertinent and instructive. Suffice to say that the 19th century represented a huge stride backwards in terms of female emancipation. The rising middle-class male was a new and strange product of this revolution. He went out to work, leaving the home for a place of business. This is so commonplace today that the ramifications of this notion in the 19th century are difficult to comprehend. This new man measured his success and status to a large degree by what he left behind: his wife and the number of the household staff. The wife's primary task was to enhance his social status, all her previous assets were now under the sole control of the husband and she had few legal rights; the servants organised all aspects of the home. The wife, therefore had nothing to do, except to cultivate "the art of refinement." Basically this meant that she occupied her time with activities which were singularly inconsequential and pointless. She was placed on a pedestal, as a monument to the male's success; she was expected, even assumed, to be subservient, opinionless (she was forbidden to read the newspapers), modest and sexless. His social success was predicated on her passivity. It was assumed that she had no sexual needs of her own - the very idea was preposterous. Queen Victoria's advice to her in bed was to lay back and think of England.

The typical middle-class relationship was a sexual wasteland.

The need to live an unnaturally prudish morality in public forced the release of sexual inhibitions in the visual underground - or, in the case of academic painters and photographers, produced a type of stylized eroticism that privately titillated yet was publicly respectable.

It is reasonable to assume that man's erotic instincts remain reasonable constant in every generation, and denying this fact means that the expressions of those instincts causes pressure in less healthy forms. Squeezing a balloon does not eliminate the air; it merely forces the same air to distort the skin in another area. Because of this difference in pressure between public propriety and private fantasy, never before, or since, in the history of art has it been so easy to recognize the gulf between pornography-proper and pornography-made-palatable. And never before, or since, has it been so easy for the artist who did not want to live underground to bridge the gulf with such a simple, and seemingly foolproof, device. He merely alluded that the naked woman in the picture was not a contemporary person but a reincarnation in paint of a Greek goddess. It was unseemly, if not downright scandalous, to paint a nude in a contemporary setting and title the work with the name of the sitter. But the same work, with the nude frolicking in an innocuous and time-defying woodland glade, or better still languorously reclining in a setting from antiquity (a few fluted columns in the background would do) and labeled "Psyche" or "Venus at her Bath," was not only understandable, but laudable.

There were two major reasons why the Greeks and Romans exercised this miraculous spell over erotic art in 19th century Britain. In 1812, Lord Elgin had shipped his collection of Greek antiquities to London where they captured the public's imagination and became essential studies for painters and sculptors. Lord Elgin was only one of a new breed of adventurer/archaeologists who swarmed over the Mediterranean, ransacking the newly discovered treasures of antiquity, in response to, and fueling, the public's awakened interest in the classical ages.

In addition, the British establishment, the arbiters of morality and taste, were uniformly educated at public and grammar schools where classical studies were the mainstay of the curriculum. The air of middle-class society was musty with the ethos of Greek culture. It was impossible to escape from this tight binding of classical education. Even Samuel Butler, satirical author of Erewhon and The Way of All Flesh ever fighting the establishment order of things, spent a good part of his life attempting to prove that Homer was a woman. Since Greek art was dominated by images of the nude it would have been a denial of classical perfection to suppress the same subject in the art of

their own generation. Hence, the ludicrous position that a nude was acceptable if her nakedness was Greek, but scandalous if she was English and a contemporary.

It was no good arguing that a nude is a nude, and calling her "Andromeda" did not make her any less naked. Who would want to deny their own right to view eroticism as long as they could do so without guilt or public disapproval? Who would deny that Victorian prudery intensely increased the pleasures of titillation, when even piano legs were draped in case they threw males into fits of sexual passion? No one went to bed, they retired to rest; it was unseemly to speak of chicken breast, but bosom was suitable; a person did not have legs, only limbs; pants were unmentionables.

There is an often overlooked reason for the plethora of naked flesh in art galleries of the 19th century: pornography-made-palatable (with a Greek title) was good business for the painters. If the artist had an inclination, and a little talent, to paint pretty women in a state of complete or partial undress, he had only himself to blame if he did not succeed very nicely, thank you. Lord Leighton sold his "Daphnephoria", with no trouble at all, for 1,500 pounds (which he invested sensibly in Eastern Counties Railway Debentures at 4 1/2 per cent). John Everett Millais made a handsome pile (his income was reported to be 30,000 pounds per annum) and spent 6,000 pounds furnishing his house in Cromwell Road, Kensington. These were huge sums for the time, when most families lived on less than 100 pounds per year.

It will be seen that the inhibitions of the Victorian age operated in a curious way to the advantage of the erotic painter. Even straightforward historical and mythological scenes could be given a deliciously fantasy-pricking edge with the addition of a carefully integrated naked woman, transforming an otherwise dull academic exercise into a quasi-erotic image. In this point the painters had a distinct advantage over their writer colleagues. The artist could lavish loving care over the depiction of legs, breasts and buttocks whereas the author, attempting to come to grips with the same imagery, was explicit only at his peril.

#### Literature:

In 1868 Lord Chief Justice Cockburn made the test of obscenity "whether the tendency of the matter charged is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences."

The book that gave rise to this infamous judgment was The Confessional Unmasked, a dreary but certainly not a pornographic work. It was typical of many popular mid-Victorian exposures of the alleged villainies of popery which were peddled in the streets of London. Another title of the same ilk was the Awful Disclosures of Sister Lucy. Prime Minister Gladstone lent Queen Victoria his copy of The Female Jesuit, or a Spy in the Family and "Her Majesty could hardly put it down and has been much occupied by it," said Lady Augusta Bruce in 1863. Censorship of books was rife. At this time, Anthony Trollope (at the request of his publisher, Longmans) was striking out "objectionable" passages in Barchester Towers. One of them was "fat stomach" [sic] which was altered to "deep chest." This was not a personal idiosyncrasy by a puritanical editor. In The Ladies' Guide to True Politeness and Manners, 1864, its author Miss Eliza Leslie considered the word "stomach" to be a vulgarity that must never be uttered.

While living authors were hog-tied to Mrs. Grundy's apron strings, works by the authors of antiquity were published and distributed with immunity. The Times editorialized: "No tribunal would censure a bookseller for supplying his customers with complete editions of the classics although much might be urged against the morality of Petronius, of Nonnus, of Martial and even [the "even" is interesting] of Catullus and Ovid." The classics enjoyed this freedom because they were considered the property of the upper classes. Their indecencies were part and parcel of the cultural inheritance of the public schools with their emphasis on Greek and Roman studies.

But the notion that the classics were the prerogative of the rich and educated had become a false basis for argument. Due to the industrial revolution, a new wealthy middle class had arisen whose sons (including Charles Dicken's) were enjoying the public school privileges of the aristocracy. The lower classes were no longer shielded from the grossest passages of antiquity thanks to the respectable Henry Bohn, who, from his headquarters in Covent Garden, was producing cheap translations through his popular classical library. While Trollope was protecting the young girl from "fat stomachs," in his guinea-and-a-half novels Mr. Bohn was supplying her with 5 shilling translations of the more ribald classics and, in case she missed the more subtle indecencies due to her limited scholarship, giving her explicit annotations. She was informed that Lesbia's sparrow was not a bird but a "licentious allegory", of the curious manner in which radishes were employed in the punishment of adulterers, what Catullus meant when he says he is lying on his back bursting his tunic, explaining that "mentula, synonymous with penis, is a nickname applied by Catullus to Mamurra, of whom he says that he is not a man, but a great thundering mentula."

While Tennyson was objecting to the word "naked" in Kingsley's pious, novel Hypatia, no one objected to such passages as:

Then flinging off her dress, the imperial whore  
Stood, with bare breasts and gilded, at the door,  
And showed, Britannicus, to all who came,  
The womb that bore thee, in Lycisca's name!

from Juvenal in Mr. Bonn's Classical Library. Even, perhaps significantly, clergymen like the Rev. Lewis Evans, M.A. could translate from the same volume such passages as:

The imperial harlot - entered the brothel - then took  
her stand with naked breasts and gilded nipples.

protected as he was from corruption by the amulet of classical culture.

### Fashion:

While we are digressing from the world of painting, we might note that the ethos of classical culture permeated the whole of life, including fashion. One of the pioneers of the back-to-Athens movement was a Mrs. Pfeiffer who habitually wore "Greek" dress. In The Queen (1880) she gave elaborate instructions on making and wearing such costumes. The result was less original than might be supposed. The point of Greek drapery was that it was hung on a naked body whereas Mrs. Pfeiffer recommended an "underdress" and the result was hardly more noticeable than the fashionable dress of the day. She concluded her article with the gloomy warning that "some measure of taste and a knowledge of the hang of classical draperies are necessary to the due arrangement." It was undoubtedly easier to order a costume from a catalogue. Messrs. Liberty & Company announced that they "have made it their special study to reproduce - with due regard to the requirements of modern times (sic) - the beautiful soft-clinging draperies so much esteemed in Ancient Greece."

This fashion fad for antiquity reached its peak in 1885 when all the female guests at the Royal Academician's ball wore Greek dress. The following year the academy painters including Lord Leighton and G. F. Watts competed with the infamous *pose plastique* troupes and designed a series of *tableaux vivants*, featuring favorite models, and illustrating Prof. Warr's Greek translations. These painters were interested in women adopting Greek dress not only on aesthetic grounds but also because it was healthier than tight lacing and whale-bone corsets, which tended to cut the liver in two. In answer to the objection about the un-Greeklike British weather, it was recommended that the Greek dress be worn "over a substratum of pure wool."

The power of art in the 19th century cannot be overlooked or overestimated. It was both a reflection of the moralities of the age and it was its own reality from which the viewers took their own behavior patterns. The sexuality of the Academy paintings was not missed by the viewers. It had been suggested that the public was oblivious to the erotic content of the pictures while reading the mythological and moral significance of the various details in the scene. This is demonstrably untrue. As I hope the following information will reveal so clearly, the viewers of these works were keenly aware of their own, and the images', sexuality. In the fantasy world of erotic art, the repressed painter sublimated his sexual needs in a manner which brought him fame and often fortune; the repressed viewer was given an outlet for his natural voyeurism that was guiltless, provided that the context, such as an art gallery, was respectable.

### Arcadia in Suburbia:

For exactly the same reasons the more serious art-photographers of the 19th century felt that the only way their pictures of the nude could be accepted by the establishment and viewing public was by deliberately imitating academic painting. Inventive and elaborate settings, pious and mythological poses, exotic attempts at pseudo-antiquity, all helped to dull the keen edge of protest. The walls of the Salon and photographic exhibitions everywhere were crowded with justified erotica. In an article on "The Nude in Photography", published c.1900, the anonymous author wrote:

Some few subjects in the Bible story and certain pagan legends, wherein unclothed actors were necessary to depict the subject, have enjoyed a *suspiciously* wide and lasting popularity. (Author's emphasis)

Often, only a caption pushed an "obscene" picture over the edge of acceptability. One critic (1), reviewing a photograph entitled "The Greek Girl" admitted:

I saw nothing distinctly Greek about the model, and presume that the picture was so named to blunt the edge of any feeling that might arise against it, on the score of its nudeness; for education and habit have accustomed us to associate the idea of nudeness with Greek art.

Another reviewer (2) made much the same point about two photographs entitled "The Wise and Foolish Virgins":

...it is difficult to distinguish which are the wise and which are the foolish, the same models being employed for, and looking equally foolish in, both pictures.

But such clear-headed criticism was rare; more often than not photographs of the nude, defused with a reference to antiquity, were appreciated as examples of acceptable eroticism.

Not every camera owner, of course, wanted to be an artist photographer. Many saw in photography's fidelity to reality a lucrative medium for explicit pornography. The sharp, uncompromising delineation of detail, and the sheer 'believability' of the photographic image were a pornographer's delight. One daguerreotype, displayed in a shop window, caused such a commotion for its "obscenity" that the offensive image had to be removed - its subject was people eating in a restaurant!

In an extremely rare admission that the daguerreotype was used for pornographic purposes anywhere in America, Henry Snelling wrote:

Their rooms are frequently the resort of the low and depraved, and they delight in nothing

more than desecrating the sabbath by daguerreotyping these characters in the most obscene positions. Their rooms become a by-word and a reproach, and alas! there are too many who are ever ready to attribute to all the follies and foibles of the few. (3)

Perhaps nothing highlights the shocking believability of a photograph more than the fact that museums and galleries were full of works of art depicting nakedness whereas *photographs* of those very same paintings or sculptures were considered indecent and therefore invited prosecution. One example will suffice. It is arguable that the most popular exhibit at the Great Exhibition of 1851 was a statue entitled "The Greek Slave" - a delightful if antiseptic naked young lady displaying no suggestion of her Grecian origin or of her slavery. The title's function was solely to allow the public to gaze at her nudity with propriety. And in case any of her charms were lost on the viewers, she was mounted on a revolving pedestal and could be seen from every viewpoint when a crank was turned. It is estimated that 25,000 season ticket holders, including Queen Victoria, studied her nakedness on opening day alone without any recorded guilt or embarrassment. Yet twenty years later a print seller, identified only as "a Jew" was fined forty shillings for selling a photograph of "The Greek Slave" (4). One commentator of the contemporary scene clearheadedly saw the absurdity of the situation. He wrote:

If nudity is to be held synonymous with indecency, and the sale of photographs is to be confined to the leering, tousled, semi-nude Jezebels who call themselves actresses, is it not time we shut up South Kensington, and brought our statues to the hammer, or rather the hammer to our statues, and thus find refuge from the prurientes of art in pulverisation?

Imagine the shock of injecting this believability of photography into a direct picture of a naked woman, at a time when a carelessly exposed ankle was considered an erotic encounter.

One shrewd operator who saw such a fitting, if infamous, liaison between camera realism and erotic arousal was Henry Hayler. On 31 March 1874, the London police suddenly put a stop to his business. Raiding his Pimlico studio, the police discovered no fewer than 130,248 obscene photographs and 5,000 plates, all of which were confiscated. Hayler, it was charged, had carried out a lucrative and worldwide trade in obscene pictures. He even cut down on his overheads by minimizing model fees - most of the crudest pornographic poses depicted Hayler himself with his wife and two sons. Or so the authorities claimed. But there is evidence, and testimonials from respected colleagues, that Hayler was framed and slandered. But even if he was unjustly persecuted, the point is made: nakedness if Greek was acceptable, nakedness if Victorian felt the full force of the law.

Seizure of obscene photographs was reported with monotonous regularity in the pages of the 19th century photographic periodicals. The quantities of prints confiscated bear witness to the flourishing trade in erotica and to the pervasiveness of these images in the culture. This was true throughout Europe and North America. When "probably the largest plant in the United States for the production of obscene photographs" was discovered in Chicago, over 120,000 negatives were seized. (5)

But such prosecutions had their funny sides. In 1879, a bookseller was summoned for selling stereoscopic photographs of "semi-nude" Zulus. Even though it was admitted that "a Zulu in that state of nudity which he considers full dress is rather a nasty object to look at", the bookseller was freed because the vindictive, doddering old judge (Sir Charles Whetham) "found great difficulty in discovering the sex of the Zulus." (6)

Photographs of the female nude proliferated from the early 1840s within a year or two of the medium's release to the public.

The Stenger collection at Leverkusen(7) contains a set of choice stereographic daguerreotypes,

hand-tinted, of young women in blatantly erotic positions. By the 1860s, there was a worldwide trade in pornographic prints and stereo cards. Even by strong daylight the exposures for these photographs was long and tedious - so long in fact that a curious problem was encountered. The male models found it impossible to hold an erection for the duration of the exposure, so to prevent a sagging blur in the picture, wooden penises had to be manufactured and held in place.

Between the art photographs which papered Salon walls and the mass underground sale of blatant pornography, was the flourishing trade in photographs of the nude intended as studies for painters. Eugene Delacroix joined the French Photographic Society as a charter member and devoted many hours to posing nude models in photographers' studios to produce his own independent photographs as well as to direct pictures which he could use as studies for paintings. The Belgian painter, Durieu, a friend of Delacroix' who often made photographs for him, wrote:

Delacroix not only admired photographs theoretically, he drew a good deal from daguerreotypes and paper prints. I own an album of models, men and women, posed by him, seized by the lens under his eyes... Incredible phenomenon! Choice of type, attitude, distribution of light and shade, twist of limb, are all so personal, so requisite, that one would say of many of these prints that they were taken from the originals of the master. The artist was in a measure sovereign master of the machine and of the material. The radiance of the ideal he carried with him transformed models at three francs a session into vanquished heroes and dreamers, nervous and panting nymphs. (8)

Nude photographs intended as artists' studies were euphemistically called *Etudes photographiques* or *Etudes Academiques* or, more pompously, *Services des Eleves de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts*. At their best they provided cheap and permanent reference material for painters; at their worst they were merely another example of pornography-made-palatable.

Publications of the 1850s and 1860s are littered with words like "immoral", "pollution", "prostitution", "filthy", "infamous traffic", "shocking pornography" when describing many of these *Etudes photographiques*. Although these words were appropriate for some studies there were a thousand examples which were genuine in their aim of providing a cheap, permanent, portable substitute for a live model for a painter, and which were unfairly criticized by an outraged public defending the puritan morality of the day. Other critics, more reasonably, merely objected to the fact that so many *Etudes* were on public display so that "wife and daughters dare not venture to look at the windows of many of our photographic publishers..." (9)

### Postcards:

After the mid-1890s one of the flourishing and highly lucrative offshoots of the *Etude photographique* was the erotic postcard, intended for a much wider distribution. It was a postcard only that the image was printed on standard size photographic paper (or photomechanically reproduced by one of the new processes, usually collotype) with the reverse side partitioned into a space for the address and a message area. Of course, this was sheer bluff. Most of these cards were kept by the purchasers and were never meant to be stamped and posted. If they were, prosecution was likely since "erotic" is a mild term for many examples.

Yet here is another dichotomy in the complex sexual attitudes of the Victorians: many of these erotic postcards which were stamped and posted contained a much more explicit pornography content than could possibly find its way through the mail even in this so-called permissive age. One particularly large and explicit collection (10) depicts an incredible range of erotic imagery, including leering men having intercourse with pre-puberty girls, which contain innocuous tittle-tattle on the message spaces, and with postage stamps canceled by the post office.

Incidentally academic paintings were often issued as exotic postcards - to prove, if proof is needed - that no gallery visitor was fooled by a Greek title or setting. In the street, a nude is a nude, whether she is ancient or modern. And no present reader can be oblivious to the continuing sale of these same images.

The scale of distribution of these erotic postcards cannot be overestimated. Millions of them flooded Britain, Germany, Austria, Italy and France. Of course, many of the erotic postcards did not reveal such extreme themes. Thousands concerned themselves with quaint, corny and often hilarious genre scenes incorporating bathing beauties, 'artists' models, and the caught-in-the-act bed-goer.

By the turn of the century, the picture postcard had become big business for photographers. And their journals are full of references to the erotic card and its effect on the good name, and business, of those cameramen more interested in the village scene, grand view or picturesque cottage. One editor (11) made this comment on the traffic in erotic postcards in 1904:

Some months ago, it may be remembered, we directed attention to the character of many of the pictorial postcards to be seen in some of the shop windows, and expressed the hope that the production of such pictures would not militate against the popularity of the picture postcard, the production of which has now become an important industry. Since then there have been several prosecutions for exhibiting or selling pictures of an indecent character. Only last week the police made two raids in the East End, and seized eight and nine thousand of these objectionable things. In one case the defendant had to pay ten shillings, the costs of the court, and five guineas for the solicitor's costs. In the other the defendant was mulked in a fine of three pounds and two guineas costs. In both cases the cards were ordered to be destroyed. It is to be hoped that the vigilance of the police in this matter will put a stop to the traffic in these indecent and vulgar pictures before the popularity of the pictorial postcard becomes seriously impaired.

### Photomontages:

Saucy, naughty/pornographic postcards occasionally employed extremely skillful montage and collage techniques to enhance the element of fantasy in the picture. The producers of these erotic montages were no respecters of persons. At this Paris Exhibition of 1867 it was possible to buy nude photographs of the Empress Eugenie (wife of Napoleon III), the face of the Empress having been skillfully joined to the bodies of other women and rephotographed.

One of the more notorious cases involved a young American beauty, Adah Isaacs Menken. After a spectacular career in the U.S. she arrived in Britain in 1864. She starred in the controversial production of "Mazeppa" at the Theatre Royal. "Mazeppa", adapted from Lord Byron's famous poem, was to have no trace of 'the mass of obscenity and profaneness which his Lordship has bequeathed to posterity [and which] has now become a question between himself and his Creator.'" In spite of this avowal, London was plastered with posters which depicted the semi-nude figure of Miss Menken bound to the back of a galloping horse. Of course, this image caused a public scandal; of course, the opening night was packed. Adah was not satisfied with this and following theatrical triumphs. She had written poems and considered herself as a Woman of Letters, and desperately wanted to meet literary men, particularly Alexandre Dumas. She boasted before going to Paris that he would be her lover - and so it was. In less than two weeks, she had been installed by him in a luxurious apartment. Soon, large numbers of photographs began appearing in the shops which specialized in such wares showing the aging author and the young horse-breaker in compromising poses. Most of them were obvious fakes, with the heads of Dumas and Menken superimposed on the bodies of naked models. But some were genuine, and it is a sufficient



comment on their nature that even Dumas had difficulty distinguishing between the real and the fake.

As late as 1907, such montages were produced of the heads of famous people attached to unclothed models. In the popular Case of the Faked Photographs in that year, Miss Gertie Millar sued the producer of three postcards - she was disconcerted to find her own face on another model in a flimsy nightdress, emerging from an egg, and posing as "La Source." Miss Millar lost her case. She happened to be an actress, and therefore had no right to respectability.

### Stereographs:

By the 1860s, the stereographic viewer was a familiar fixture in every middle-class household; it was the Victorian's television. Cards containing two side-by-side photographs were placed in a viewer and passed among the family members. Consequently a huge business rapidly developed for photographers willing and able to provide stereographs of scenic places around the world and of famous personages. The stereo-viewer was refined, educational and suitable for all members of the family.

Inevitably pornographers were quick to seize on this huge market. If sharp, clear photographs of the naked body had galvanized viewers of the past, then how much more sensational would be nudes in three dimensions, viewed in a private setting through a device which excluded all distractions in the environment. More so than any other photographic experience the stereoscope was personal, like having exclusive access to a privileged viewpoint of a salacious scene.

Then, as now, pornographers are usually the first and most inventive exploiters of any new viewing technology.

The social approbation at the public display of erotic stereographs began almost immediately. As early as 1858, the Saturday Review had complained that:

There is hardly a street in London which does not contain shops in which photographs and especially stereoscopic photographs, are exposed for sale." These three-dimensional cards depicted women "More or less naked, and generally leering at the spectator with a conscious or elaborately unconscious impudence as surprising as it is disgusting." The writer drew an interesting difference between erotic drawings/paintings and photographs, asserting that an indecent print proved only the nastiness of the artist and of the vendor whereas an indecent photograph implied also the degradation of the model. "Decency is a matter rather of sentiment than of fixed rule and there would be far more indecency in sitting for a single time for any one of (these) photographs than in adopting the profession of an artist's model.

The editor of The Photographic Journal, one year later, wrote a diatribe which is worth quoting in full since it reveals the foaming-at-the-mouth reaction to the erotic stereograph; there is something almost pornographic in his hysteria:

We are reluctantly compelled to believe, and consider it our duty to mention the fact, that at this present time there are a number of men so foul-minded and degraded as to employ the science of photography in producing stereoscopic slides of the filthiest and most pruriently indecent kind. A semi-nude woman with a beastly leer on her sodden face, a wretched ballet-girl with clothing indecently stunted, and objects of a still more objectionable kind, all

utterly devoid of artistic taste, are exposed in the windows of even respectable shops as the proper sort of aliment wherewith to feed the public taste for art; such are the productions that these miserable panders to the under-current of vice that lurks in every man's mind, offer as a substitute for

"the pleasures  
That fancy can begot in youthful minds."

Can it be wondered at, that in many decent households the stereoscope is looked on as an objectionable instrument, when there is a chance that the search for new and interesting slides may disclose to the customer (perchance a young girl or boy) such filthy objects as those alluded to. It is surely time that some stringent measures should be taken to punish the men who make a traffic of such things. The purpose of all art is to elevate the taste, and to refine instead of degrading "the unpolluted temple of the mind." Here, then, is a definite line by which to distinguish the beautiful renderings of classic statuary from infamous productions that cast a slur on the photographic art. And as to any bombast concerning the freedom of art, we opine that the class of men who might protest against the interference we suggest as needful would be little likely to gain much sympathy, whether producers or buyers of these obnoxious slides. That those who produce such things are the veriest foul scum which ever disgraced the name of humanity and degraded the name of art, we need no other evidence than their own works to prove. And the purchasers of these filthy slides are, if possible, still more despicable, miserable vitiated creatures, whose youth is old in vice, who think they are witty when they are only blasphemous, and funny when they are only obscene; horrible, old satyrs, who having lived fast lives, go fast to their graves, and learn too late that vice is the most exacting of usurers; - these form for the most part the purchasers of such commodities, who make the trade worth pursuing. To one of these classes may be referred every buyer of these filthy slides; and this the sellers of them well know. As regards the wretched creatures represented, who must know that the same faithful art which records their disgrace will also perpetuate their likenesses with the brand of infamy on the brow, it may well be wondered who these can be. We are unwilling to believe that any woman can be so lost in hope of a future, when such portraiture may prove to her a shame, as to so degrade herself by her own free will and can only suppose that these miserable women are the wives and sisters of the photographers themselves, dragged down by their vile companionship into such low depths of shamelessness.

From pornographic daguerreotypes, through erotic stereocards, photographic prints, *études photographiques* and the postcard, the delineation of detail and the believability of photography destroyed the market in less real, and hence far less satisfactory, erotic etchings and engravings. (Interestingly, the frontispieces of pornographic magazines continued to depict engravings of innocuous old master nudes, primarily because it was not possible to reproduce photographs alongside the text at this time).

### Pornography's Influence:

The enormous quantity of erotic imagery available in the shockingly real medium of photography from the 1840s to the 1890s had two important results, reflected in the establishment art of the nineteenth century.

It gave the painter and artist-photographer an expanded visual vocabulary, more firmly rooted in the trivialities and banalities of everyday life and away from the classical ideal. The nude in art relaxed. Kenneth Clark saw this fact but he drew the wrong conclusion.

Photographers of the nude are *presumably* engaged in this search [the perfect nude, in the

classical ideal], with every advantage; and having found a model who pleases them, they are free to pose and light her in conformity with their notions of beauty; finally, they can tone down and accentuate by retouching. But in spite of all their taste and skill, the result is hardly ever satisfactory to those whose eyes have grown accustomed to the harmonious simplifications of antiquity. We are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections, which, in the classical scheme, are eliminated ... In almost every detail the body is not the shape that art had led us to believe it should be ... Consciously or unconsciously, photographers have usually recognised that in a photograph of the nude their real object is not to reproduce the naked body, but to imitate some artist's view of what the naked body should be. (Author's emphasis)

It might very well have been the aim of artist-photographers to imitate a painter's view of the classical ideal. But the point is that artist-photographers were not only an insignificant minority of the producers of photographs of the nude, their work had no influence on anyone, least of all the painters. By contrast, the commercial exploiters of the explosive mixture of the camera's realism with the nude's sensuality, caring not a fig-leaf for the classical ideal, or for the "imperfections" of their models, had a profound effect on the art of the nude in the nineteenth century.

The second important effect of the plethora of erotic photography in establishment art was that the climate of acceptability became more amenable to the contemporary nude, shorn of classical allusions and illusions. Let us assume that we could suddenly break the progression of art development at 1863 and that no paintings were again produced until 1893, while the rest of the history of those years continued as normal. I do not believe that Manet's "Dejeuner sur l'herbe" would cause anywhere near as much fuss and outcry if exhibited at the later date. The controversy aroused by this painting had nothing to do with the female nudity among the picnickers but was centered on the modernity of the women; classical Greek nakedness was one thing but contemporary nudity was in appalling bad taste. Thirty years later this objection would not have arisen. And this would have nothing to do with the change in public morality. During those years, attitudes towards sex remained static and unyielding - the 1890s were as rigidly "Victorian" as the 1860s. What *had* changed dramatically was the accessibility, availability and visibility of photography, from a complex, expensive and tediously time-consuming technique limited to the wealthy and the fastidious; it had become cheap, accessible and fast. Photographs were now part of everyman's daily visual experience; no home of any pretensions was without a stereoscopic viewer and a set of photographs. When the family retired for the evening, no doubt the head of the household would extract from his office desk a batch of his private stereo-views, of the nude. If public morality was as riddled with etiquette as ever, the private response to the photographic nude, previously so sharp, was being blunted by familiarity - gradually, but inexorably.

### The Ideal Model:

Even though G. F. Watts considered that "the modern young lady is often of splendid growth and form such as probably the ancient Greeks never saw" it was still *de rigueur* for painters to study busts, torsos and Venuses culled from antiquity. And, as Watts' remark testifies, even when drawing or painting from a live model the aim of the artist was to seek the Greek ideal.

William Etty, even though a devout celibate, spent his life as a resolute devotee of Venus. He visited 'drawing from the life' classes so frequently that he complained: "I have been accused of being a shocking and immoral man." But the accusation did not deter him from a long series of nude studies, painted with gusto and obvious enjoyment. Even Etty's work was tempered to the taste of the times. He lacked the courage to offer direct transcriptions of reality, the nude for its own sake, and made too many compromises to the expected view of nakedness.

Another Victorian painter of the nude who, agreeing with Watts' appreciation of the contemporary

woman yet still made lifelong concessions to antiquity, was Frederick, Lord Leighton. He believed: "In the Art of the Periclean Age of which the high truthfulness was one of its noblest attributes ..., we find a new ideal of balanced form, wholly Aryan and which the only parallel I know is something found in the women of another Aryan race - your own." (13)

Like William Etty, he painted this race diligently for most of his artistic life; and, like Etty, was sexually repressed. Not that the latter fact is particularly important; but it is significant that below the impeccable propriety of so many Victorian exponents of the naked woman was a bottled up sexuality waiting to burst out, often in perverted directions. (14) Also like Etty, Lord Leighton was criticized for his fixation with the naked female. While he was painting one of his academic nude scenes, "Pan and Venus", he received this advice from his close friend Henry Greville:

If such personages were to be painted, was it not possible to clothe them in crinoline or green gauze drawers ... it makes me so sick, all that cant about impropriety, but there is so much of it as to make the sale of 'nude figures' very improbable, and therefore I hope you will turn your thoughts entirely to well-covered limbs, and paint no more Venuses for some time to come.

Leighton ignored the advice - he did not have too much trouble in selling his works. In 1890 the state bought his sexy "The Bath of Psyche" for 1,000 pounds, and no one considered it odd that this well-heeled, handsome and energetic artist had never been associated with any woman, even though he spent his life depicting what, in any other age, would be considered blatantly erotic subject matter. True, his paintings did have the required Greek titles: "Venus disrobing for the bath" (1867), "Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus" (1868), "Phryne" (1882) and "Andromeda" (1891).

The last named picture depicted the very convenient myth for those artists and viewers whose interest was in a nude woman chained up. Even a reverent gentleman was moved to write in his diary:

I went to Dore's Picture Gallery in New Bond Street. There was a new picture there, an Andromeda, a handsome graceful girl life size, well painted, the flesh tints very natural. The slender girlish form is bowed and shrinking from the monster, the white feet are washed by the lap of the green waves, the manacled hands and wrists are straining at the chain and the rich brown hair is blown wildly forward from the bowed back and beautiful shoulders across the horror-stricken face. (15)

Another ecclesiastic did not limit himself to a lip-licking description of the picture's content when confronted by Alma-Tadema's "Venus" at the Royal Academy. He wrote to the portrait painter George Richmond:

My mind has been considerably exercised this season by the exhibition of Alma-Tadema's nude Venus . . . (there might) be artistic reasons which justify such public exposure of the female form ... In the case of the nude of an Old Master, much allowance can be made, but for a living artist to exhibit a life-size lifelike almost photographic representation of a beautiful naked woman strikes my inartistic mind as somewhat if not very mischievous. (16)

John Ruskin thought Alma-Tadema's works were "crouching" and "dastardly" (17) - weird words to use in aesthetic criticism. But then Ruskin's attitude to women, in reality as well as in paint, *was* weird as the innumerable studies of his life in recent years have so patently demonstrated.

## Photographic Realism:

The repression of sexuality in the everyday lives of Victorian painters, due to a heinous pressure exerted by the moralities of the age, caused an explosion of erotic subject matter in 19th century High Art. This was inevitable, and even laudable, in that the imagery directly tapped a deep well of need in the minds of the artists. No such excuses can be made for the High Art photographers of the period. It is true that they lived under the same frustrating pressures as the painters and to some extent their choice of subject matter was dictated by the same needs. Yet the nudes in establishment photography are rather pathetic in comparison to those by painters. The reason lies in the fact that the photographers were not so much responding to a personal repression but attempting to elevate their studies to the realms of High Art. Their imagery sprang *indirectly* from personal need; directly from established painting styles.

Lewis Mumford, writing about the photographers of the nudes whose work appeared in Camera Work (18) between between 1902 and 1917 would have agreed:

However honest their efforts, they nevertheless surround the body with a halo of arcadian romanticism; note how resolutely they equip their naked models with glass bubbles; how they compel these naked girls painfully, for the first time in their lives, to pour water out of narrow-necked jugs; how they lash them to the tree stumps or make them shiver at the edge of icy pools. Sex must be disguised as art - that is, artiness - before one may peep at it without blushing. Undisguised, the girl averts her face from the camera, so that the self-conscious and self-righteous face shall not acknowledge the powers of the body. The efforts of these earlier photographers are not to be despised; but the tantalising fear of sex, a fear of its heady realities, is written over their prescribed degrees of dimness, their overarch poses.

And, it might be added, in their Greek allusions. A. Hyatt Mayor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art put it beautifully:

The photographs of nude outdoors holding models of Greek double flutes to their mouths and of girls draped in white Grecian slips take on a desperate, even heroic, note in view of the frustration that cannot help but ensue from trying to will Arcadia in the stuffiness of an American suburb.

The same point, that there is something absurd about creating the illusion of classicism with the direct realism of the camera, was explained by George Bernard Shaw, in his own inimitable style:

There is a terrible truthfulness about photography that sometimes makes a thing ridiculous ...take the case of the ordinary academician. He gets hold of a pretty model, he puts a dress on her and he paints her as well as he can, and calls her "Juliet", and puts a nice verse from Shakespeare underneath, and puts the picture in the Gallery. It is admired beyond measure. The photographer finds the same pretty girl; he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her "Juliet", but somehow it is no good - it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet.

Of course, the point of all these models "clad in cheese-cloth masquerading an angels, madonnas, fairies or classic heroines" (19) was not to create pictures for their own sake, but as direct competitors to academic painting of the age. And this is precisely the stumbling block which caused the downfall of the Victorian artist-photographer. An astute critic (20) wrote:

A painting, no matter how trivial or prosaic its subject may be, can still charm by technical qualities, in which certain characteristics of the artist may be reflected, while a photographic genre picture ... no matter how cleverly composed is always hopelessly inartistic... Artistically it is of no more interest than a reproduction of a painting...

But that was exactly the effect desired. In order to achieve a reproduction of an academic painting, the photographer not only searched for the Greek ideal in terms of model physique, (21) dressed her in Grecian-style sheets, posed her in arcadian or column-packed settings, and gave her the name Psyche or Venus, but also distorted the photographic process in order to produce a more 'artistic' effect. There was a funny side to this phoniness. Reviewing "Carmen" by Charles Berg, a critic remarked:

He painted backgrounds and accessories in and he painted them out, with perfect frankness and charming impartiality...To create from the same negative a three-quarter portrait of Carmen standing up and another of Carmen sitting down had in it an element of caricature - whether the lady posed standing or sitting, only she and Mr. B. know, and it matters not; nor would it interest me at this time, if it did not raise an absorbing question. It is undeniably art; but is it photography - below the waistline? (22)

In a lesson on how to damn with praise, a critic, reviewing Frank Eugene's "Adam and Eve" (23) said that "the figures are treated with such artistic reticence that there is not a hint of nakedness." Not bad for a photograph of two nudes - one wonders why the photographer bothered.

Both paintings and photographs of the nude provoked disapproval from the public, state, church and conservative critics; including J. T. Keighley:

Within proper limitations, the study of the nude in photography is desirable... but beyond such limitations, it is to be condemned, for it is apt to be abused, quite as much as it has been by a large number of modern painters, who yearly flood the continental exhibitions of Europe with countless numbers of pictures of the nude, neither elevating or refining, and executed, to all appearances, solely for the purpose of showing on canvas in public that which in real life the code of decency both of the ancient and modern world, would unqualifiedly condemn as subversion of the morals of the community. (24)

So for all the photographers' and painters' pretensions that their nudes were not real, but a dream of Greek heroines, the viewers were not fooled. Most liked pretending that they had been fooled; only a few cynics wanted to point out the enjoyable deception.

### Models:

The Victorian's dream of fair women, nakedly frolicking in Arcadian loveliness, would have been shattered had they known the realities of the private lives of both painters and models.

There were many attempts to prevent the study of the nude in art schools, and in more cases than not, drawing from life was out and plaster casts and drab bric-a-brac was in. Students at the Royal Academy could not, during this period, draw from the nude model unless they were married. Considered little less than a prostitute by those who knew nothing very much about the subject, the nude model was out of bounds to the hot-blooded student fraternity. But not all painters who wished to improve their knowledge of anatomy, went to the extreme of John Gibson, sculptor of the "Painted Venus" (1850). Gibson and a group of fellow artists went grave robbing. They uncovered, said Gibson (25) a "very beautiful girl about sixteen; her face was full and round. How sweet and innocent she looked in death! She was shrouded in white linen and sprinkled over with bits of red wool-like flowers."

Other nude models were only a little more cooperative than this sixteen year old, and posed naked only under economical duress. The Royal Academy paid the girls three guineas per week, which was a handsome sum for a working woman. W. P. Frith tells of a moving encounter with such a

model. While he was drawing from life at the Royal Academy he noticed that the nude model was quietly crying. Frith thought the girl might be in pain so he remarked on her upset to the visiting teacher-celebrity. "Oh no!" answered the instructor, "she can't be in pain; no, I think I know what distresses her. Take no notice. Go on with your work." Later Frith was employing a model for a painting and realized that this was the same girl. He asked her about the Royal Academy incident and she began crying again. Eventually she told her story. Her father was a poor tailor who owed three pounds ten shillings, and to save her father from a debtors' prison was forced to submit to the indignity of nude modeling. "I never sat in that way before," she told Frith. He wrote in his journal:

...no one has any idea that she sat for the nude figure to save her father from prison. I desire to say as little as possible on a disagreeable subject; but attempts have been made now and again to prevent the study of the female nude. If the well-meaning objectors knew half as much as I do of the subject, they would hesitate before they charge a small section of the community with immorality, which exists only in the imagination of the accusers. I declare I have known numbers of *perfectly respectable* women who have sat constantly, and habitually, for the nude ...

Even Frith, a painter accustomed to the nude, and an intelligent and understanding man, concluded that by and large the profession of art modeling was not very salutary. So how much greater must have been the suspicion of the public who knew nothing of the facts? As late as 1894, the fact that the heroine of George du Maurier's novel, *Trilby*, was a model was sufficient to shock the genteel Victorian middle-class.

But if modeling was an honorable profession for some young Victorian ladies it must be admitted, in all honesty, that the doubts of the genteel concerning the model-painter relationship were often well-founded. Benvenuto Cellini said of his young girlfriend Caterina: "I keep her principally for my art's sake, since I cannot do without a model; but being a man also, I have used her for my pleasures." This Renaissance attitude was not uncommon in the 19th century. In the folklore of the street, the legend survives of the dual-purpose woman - mistress by night, model by day - a gadget that no well-equipped studio should be without.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was typical of the Victorian who kept an ethereal, refined, remote, quiescent wife (Elizabeth Siddall) and an assertive, vulgar, prominent mistress/model (Fanny Cornforth). His liaison with Fanny lasted 25 years and she is depicted in many of Rossetti's paintings including "Fazio's Mistress," "Bocca Baciata", "Lady Lilith", and "Monna Vanna." The story goes that Rossetti met his Fanny when she was standing in the Strand cracking nuts with her teeth and she threw some nuts at him. Unfortunately, Rossetti rejected the rumor of such a romantic encounter. Fanny's version was that she was celebrating Florence Nightingale's return from the Crimea, when Rossetti, in the company of Ford Madox Brown and Burne Jones, faked a collision with her and knocked down her mass of beautiful fine hair. The young men made her promise to call at Rossetti's studio the next day. She came, she stripped, she conquered.

Whistler had at least four mistresses before he married widow Godwin at the age of fifty-four. One of his mistress/models was the dancer Finette, who later had the honor of introducing the can-can to England. He lived with the red-haired Joanna Hefferman for ten years while painting in London. Courbet painted her as "La Belle Irlandaise", and Whistler as "The White Girl".

Many of these liaisons began while the woman was working as a domestic servant. Underpaid, overworked and badly housed, it is little wonder that she was tempted to accept an offer of being set up in a luxury apartment in a little house in St. John's Wood, already notorious as a district where the man-about-town kept the "little woman." Perhaps Holman Hunt had such a household in mind when he painted his controversial "The Awakening Conscience"(1854). Archdeacon Farrar said that it represented "the showily furnished room of a suburban house into which a man of wealth

and rank has beguiled his victim.” He continued the story of the painting:

The seducer has a sort of evil handsomeness, and is full of eager vivacity - his right arm is lightly thrown around the girl's waist and he has begun the song:

Oft in the stilly night  
When slumber's chain has bound me,  
Fond memory brings the light  
Of other days around me.

But the words have touched, have startled the slumbering conscience of the sinning woman. She has turned from him with open lips and dilated eyes, and an expression of anguish and horror is passing convulsively across her features, as she recalls the parents and the pure home which she has abandoned for this evil and callous wretch.

Ruskin, in a letter to The Times, expounded on the moral of the sinister glitter and newness of the furniture:

There is not a single object in all that room - common, modern, vulgar... but it becomes tragical, if rightly read... is there nothing to be learnt from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home?

It is difficult for us today to perceive this eloquent relationship between furniture and fornication.

### Pose Plastique:

Another rich source of models (and mistresses) was the *tableaux vivants*. In these displays, which flourished during the mid-Victorian period, male and female models enacted famous paintings and sculptures “in the flesh”. One of these touring companies was Madam Wharton's Pose Plastique Troupe. The leading lady was the shapely woman, Eliza Crowe, who had posed in the nude for William Etty and for Ford Madox Brown. Her independent career began in October 1847 at Sutton House, Leicester Square, where she impersonated Venus, Ariadne, Sappho and Diana. One year later she enacted Lady Godiva's famous ride through Coventry. Her girls from the pose plastique troupe were the nude models for Oscar Rejlander's ambitious "The Two Ways of Life" (1857).

Contrary to present opinion, it was not only the Mrs. Grundys among the public that objected to Rejlander's nudes. Even establishment photographers were a little shocked. Thomas Sutton, a respected scientist, photographer, author, wrote an article "On Some of the Uses and Abuses of Photography" in which he stated:

When [the London Photographic] Society... banished from the walls of its Exhibition a photograph entitled "The Two Ways of Life," in which degraded females were exhibited in a state of nudity, with all the uncompromising truthfulness of photography, they did quite right, for there was neither art nor decency in such a photograph... there is impropriety in allowing the public to see photographs of nude prostitutes, in flesh-and-blood truthfulness and minuteness of detail. (28)

It was assumed that such models were beyond salvation and could not be further dammed by being photographed without their clothes. When this photograph was exhibited in Scotland, the nude half (illustrating the path to damnation, which was obviously synonymous with sex) was covered with a drape.



When on stage the actors in the pose plastique troupe were not allowed to move for fear of prosecution; they learned how to keep motionless for many minutes and were therefore ideal models for the lengthy exposures necessary during the wet-plate process. It was for this reason that these performances were often called "Living Statuary."

By 1910 these static recreations of paintings had come to life in Germany (29), where a craze for spirited dancing by naked models as an aesthetic/erotic art-form. Almost instantly, photographers saw a lucrative new market and so began decades of "nude culture" magazines, professing to publish art studies for culture-lovers, but in reality continuing to feed the erotic appetites of the public in yet another form.

If the nude model was shocking in painting, it was even more so in photography as we have seen. By the time the artist had transformed the model into a painted Venus much of her individuality had been lost; she was merely an erotic symbol. There was little danger that the folks back home would recognize their daughter, pretending to be a shop girl in the big city, even if they did see the painting, which was unlikely. Posing for photographs was a different matter - the camera's image was too real. It was assumed that the photographer's nude model was either the pitiful wife of the photographer, dragooned unwillingly into a degrading pose by the heartless male, or a prostitute. Talking about the years as late as 1916, Dr. Peter Landon affirms: "In those days beyond the professional model - who rarely had a harmonious body - only the prostitute was ready to allow herself to be photographed in a more or less indecently nude attitude."

This distinction between nude models was made in a photographic journal at the turn of the century (30):

... designating the professional ones as profane, and as ideal ones those heroic members of the gentler sex who revere art sufficiently to overcome conventional scruples, and to pose occasionally for an artist of their acquaintance. If photographers would only banish profane models altogether from their studios the nude would become somewhat tolerable in "pure" photography!

Photographers also had the problem that their model must conform, as closely as possible, to the Greek ideal - which tended to limit their choice among a tiny circle of willing girls. Painters might be able to perfect the figure during painting; photographers were largely dependent on the frigid cold stare of the all-seeing, all-recording lens. In addition, most photographers knew that they should be looking for models with a "Greek" figure if their results were to be considered artistic - but what *was* the ideal? It clearly was not enough to grab any willing girl, wrap a bit of muslin around her torso and place a pot on her head, and call her "The Greek Water Carrier", as many did, in the absence of firmer specifications. A painter (31) wrote in 1900:

Few photographers have studied anatomy, cast and life drawing, and have a clear idea of the ideal figure, as distinguished from the imperfect realities of life, which all fall short somewhere. This is especially important in portraying the nude. Indeed, unless photography can select the good point of the actual flesh and blood figures, and hide the many imperfections - in the proportions of bones, muscles and flesh - the artist cannot hope ever to do intrinsically good art work by photographing the nude. And most of such work proves this fact, and also that in the nude more than ever is the photographer dependent on his models' perfections.

Robert Demachy was the leader of the French pictorialists at the turn of the century, and one of the most pungent and entertaining writers in the medium. He wrote: "... some of these extra pure nudophobes have said that actually there are no feminine forms left that can give a complete sensation of classical beauty owing to the deforming action of modern attire (and this seems to

point towards a very extensive and special documentation on the part of such severe puritans - *soit dit en passant*)." He did not agree, maintaining that adequate models were not difficult to find, since he believed the result should be merely "harmonious lines" and not necessarily a Greek ideal. He concluded that "the result may become a work of art that will shock nobody but specially organised individuals whose nervous manifestations will have absolutely no influence on the evolution of pictorial photography."

Since the aim of the photo-pictorialists was to emulate academic painting it was natural that the best in the field would number painters among their friends - and could share their models. The painters of the nude often lived in extravagant style (Lord Leighton's home included an Arabian court that was considered by the director of what is now the Victorian and Albert Museum as "the most beautiful structure which has been erected since the sixteenth century") and could afford to pay with generosity the models who posed for them. Such was the demand for nude paintings, and hence models, and so wealthy were the painters that a colony of models sprang up in the Holland Park/Kensington area, where many of the wealthier painters had their studios. Most of these models were Italians (English girls were considered awkward), and tended to move in and out of the area and the profession with disconcerting frequency. One painter was understandably upset when, halfway through a painting, his model ran off with an ice-cream man.

### Pubic Hair:

Although Etty was one of the great exponents of the female body, and painted his nudes in erotic poses, he was careful that he did not overstep the limits of propriety. He followed the unwritten code that the allegory must be removed from the age in which he and his audience lived - and that pubic hair was never to be seen or suggested. "Pubic hair," says Ronald Pearsall (32) "was the omnipresent reminder of the animal in man, the hairy beast brought to the knowledge of the shocked middle classes by Darwin in The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection (1859)."

This is an interesting idea but does not explain why the hair around the pubis is so rarely depicted in the history of art before the mid-nineteenth century, and why it was not until one hundred years later that pubic hair in photography was tolerated - in some cases. As late as the 1930s even internationally respected photographers, such as Edward Weston, could not send their nude prints through the US mail without using a magnifying glass to check for errant stray hairs.

In fact well into the 1960s the presence or lack of visible pubic hair was a rather clear line of demarcation between porn and art. Certainly the depiction of pubic hair in either a painting or a photograph during the Victorian age was the prerogative of blatant pornography.

Pearsall also contends that Ruskin, "conditioned as an art critic by the smooth hairless female bodies he had viewed on countless canvases," was unable to consummate his marriage with Effie Gray because of the shock he received on the bridal night, the shock of seeing that his wife had acquired the natural attributes of puberty. As this assertion has been made by many respected art historians it is probably true, and merely underscores the sad state of sexual repression among educated, intelligent Victorians.

The painter had two ways to circumvent this embarrassing patch of hair - either they did not paint it, pretending this area was as smooth as a slice of cheddar cheese, or he angled or draped the body so that the pubis was not shown at all. Benjamin Disraeli, later Lord Beaconsfield, wrote in his novel Lothair of 1870 about a typical production:

When the curtain was withdrawn they beheld a lifesize figure exhibiting in undisguised completeness the perfection of the female form, and yet the painter had so skillfully availed

himself of the shadowy and mystic hour and of some gauze-like drapery which veiled without concealing his design that the chastest eye might gaze on his heroine with impunity.

The reference to “the shadowy and mystic hour” was a favorite device of photographers wishing to suggest, but afraid to confront, nakedness.

When Edward Steichen was living in Paris he produced a set of nudes which are the epitome of such somber suggestiveness. Even though George Bernard Shaw was a Steichen fan, he complained:

Steichen's life studies look as though they were taken in coal cellars. He starts with brown, and gets not further than brown, and the parts of his figures which are obscured do not produce the effect of being obscured by darkness, they suddenly become indistinct and insubstantial in a quite unconvincing and unreasonable way.

But then Shaw was an advocate of nudity - he asked Alvin Langdon Coburn to photograph him naked, in the pose of Rodin's “Le Penseur”. His justification was that:

the camera can represent flesh so superbly that if I dared, I would never photograph a figure without asking that figure to take its clothes off ... It is monstrous that custom should force us to display our faces ostentatiously, however worn and wrinkled and mean they may be, whilst carefully concealing all our other parts, however shapely and well preserved ...Our fashionable books on African and Australian travel are full of photographs of dark ladies undraped and unembarrassed, whose natural propriety passes unchallenged because of their self-possession makes us forget our unnatural prudery.

Shaw drew the wrong conclusion in saying that “dark ladies” were acceptable in the nude because they were not embarrassed. Nor were prostitutes and professional models (the same thing in the Victorian mind) and their photographs were not published in the same way. No, the answer is that these pictures were far enough removed, geographically, from Victorian London to enter the realm of the exotic, where they joined Greek goddesses who were even more acceptable since they were removed in both place *and* time. In Henry Mayhew's mammoth sociological study of Victorian England (33) several nudes are illustrated, by engravings from daguerreotypes - all depict foreigners, and hence are not respectable anyway.

It is rather curious that so many private photographs of the nude in the 19th century - those that were not intended for exhibition or distribution - depicted pubic hair unselfconsciously and naturally, whereas the deliberately erotic pictures depicted shaved and/or heavily retouched models. It is also curious, while we are on the subject, that underarm hair was considered quite smart. So many of the erotic images of the 19th century depict models with arms raised, proudly displaying their armpit tufts.

### Naked Children:

One very convenient way to obviate the dangers inherent in revealing the primary and secondary sexual characteristics of the model was to paint and photograph pre-puberty girls and boys. In 1858, two years after the annulment of his eight year marriage (on the grounds of inconsummation) Ruskin was transfixed by the sight of a young girl "half-naked, bare-limbed...her little breasts, scarce dimpled yet - white...marble-like... (34). This was about as much sex as Ruskin could take. But he was not alone - so many Victorian painters could not cope with any more. Lewis Carroll lost all interest in his little girls, which he delighted in photographing “*sous habitement*” when they reached the age of puberty. His diaries contain many references to his little models. In a letter to a friend (35) he confesses: "I wish I dared dispense with all costume. Naked children are so pure

and lovely; but Mrs. Grundy would be furious - it would never do."

But Carroll's interest in naked girls did not extend to boys, even undressed: "I am fond of children except boys...To me they are not an attractive race of beings ... I confess I do NOT admire naked boys. They always seem to me to need clothes - whereas one hardly sees why the lovely forms of girls should EVER be covered up."

Carroll was not a licentious virgin-despoiler, a thriving perversion in Victorian England among the wealthy (36) but he undoubtedly did release his sexual repressions through his photographs of little girls.

All this talk of sexual repression, however, should be emphatically balanced with a healthy dose of common sense. Most of the academic fine art photographers of the Victorian age who included naked children in their images were using them as icons of innocence and purity, as witnessed by the cupids and angels which occur in so many pictures by Julia Margaret Cameron, Oscar Rejlander and many others.

Many painters of the period preferred male youths. Lord Leighton, who remained a bachelor all his life, had a penchant for drawing handsome boys. His favorite model was the youth, John Hanson Walker. There are no firm facts which link Leighton with homosexuality; on the surface his private life seems to have been as shiny and unsullied as his painted nudes. Yet, as even Leighton's over-adulatory biographer (37) admitted, there were some who did not fall under his spell and had the impertinence of "misinterpreting the beautiful so that it should come within the range of their scandalous arrows." But he did recognize his male nude when he saw it - even though it was in the guise of a woman. When Walter Crane exhibited, in 1877, his painting "The Renaissance of Venus", Lord Leighton immediately recognised the figure of the nude Venus as belonging to Alessandro di Marco, a well known *male* Italian model. But as one contemporary remarked: "She was a fine, upstanding slip of a boy." The painting was bought by G. F. Watts.

Not so lucky, or careful, was the painter Simeon Solomon. He was brother to Abraham, a respectable Royal Academician, and friend of Swinburne, Albert Moore, Marcus Stone, Walter Pater, and Burne-Jones. His own paintings, said Swinburne: revealed "the latent relations of pain and pleasure, the subtle conspiracies of good with evil, of attraction and abhorrence" - and he encouraged Solomon to develop his naughty ideas. Solomon was unashamedly homosexual and perverse:

I should doubtless be rigorously judged by two widely different classes of my fellow men, namely those whose passionless temperaments are incapable of being excited by anything in heaven above, or if you will allow me the expression (38) in the hell beneath the earth; the other class is composed of those persons, and their name is legion, who find a delight in visiting casinos, and other dull, disreputable respots of the like nature, and an amusement, nay, a satisfaction in copulating with vulgar and often diseased persons of the opposite sex... I will at once candidly unbosom to my readers, my affections are divided between the boy and the birch. (39)

This was indiscreet, even in the licentious circles in which Solomon moved. It was one thing to divulge private pleasures to friends; it was another to be so *outré* that "it (was) impossible for anyone to keep up his acquaintance and not be cut by the rest of the world as an accomplice," said Swinburne. And that is precisely what happened when Solomon was arrested for buggery in 1873. His friends, who shared his leanings, all conspired to act as though he had never existed. Swinburne's defection is the most inexcusable and dastardly since he encouraged Solomon in his dissipation. Solomon sank lower and lower and died in squalor in a workhouse in 1905. Yet as a painter he had been very gifted - particularly revealed in his strange, perverse study of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice as children. His interest in boys is beautifully revealed by the painting "A

Prelude by Bach”, showing a group of youths in a drawing room - the boys are as elegant and feminine as the girls.

Photographers, too, had a penchant for photographing male youths, preferably wearing laurel leaf crowns and playing fake pipes of Pan. Oliver Hill, author of Pan's Garden, and F. Holland Day made many such studies, derived from academic paintings (40) but the most famous specialist in this area was undoubtedly Baron Van Gloeden. Gloeden, living in Sicily, spent his considerable talent in setting up the most absurd genre scenes of naked Italian youths, marble columns, leopard skins and fig leaves. Sets of these pictures can still be bought by visitors to Sicily, a century after their production.

We have now returned to the Greek ideal model. Homosexual love was encouraged and even sanctified by the emphasis on the classics at public schools for boys. At Rugby [ a boys' school renowned for its academic standards] in the 1860s, seventeen hours out of twenty-two learning hours were devoted to Greek and Latin. At Harrow [ a similar place of education] it was usual for pretty boys to be given feminine names and they were accepted as the “bitches” of the older boys. In 1858, the school's headmaster was forced to resign after his pupil-love, Alfred Proctor, boasted about his affair in an indiscreet letter. This article could be filled with the curious sexual practices available for boys at all the major boarding schools. Enough to ask: is it any wonder that after such an overtly homosexual atmosphere during adolescence that indelible impressions, latent or obvious, remained with the boys for the rest of their lives? These young men had been raised in a culture which encouraged their homosexuality then thrust them into a society which ostracized and prosecuted them unmercifully forcing them to live in fear.

This was merely one of the many factors which caused severe sexual repression among so many sensitive Victorian men.

### Conclusion:

As we have seen in this brief survey, Victorian sexual repression was a real and severe social phenomenon which condemned millions of men and women to lead cramped lives under its heavy burden. The social strata which carried the heaviest load of repression and guilt was the middle-classes, those aspiring to move up the social ladder. The aristocracy, those who had already arrived at society's apex, were unfettered; they did exactly as they wished without fear of ostracization - as long as they were discrete. The shame was not in the deed but in being found out. As to the great mass of the poor, they had no hope of social advancement and were largely immune to criticisms of their sordid sexuality. Anyway, they had no money and could not afford to purchase paintings and photographs, so the world of art did not impinge on their struggles for existence.

When we discuss 19th century photography, and any aspect of sexual repression in the Victorian age we must always bear in mind that, by and large, we are talking about a middle-class culture.

Perhaps we can be grateful that so much of this pressure boiled over into the art of the period. The abundance of nude imagery in the 19th century is as interesting sociologically as it is artistically.

### Notes and References:

1. J. T. Keily, reviewing the Philadelphia Salon of 1899.
2. The Photographic Journal, 15 August 1865.
3. Photographic Art Journal, Vol. II. No. 2. (August, 1851), p.100.
4. The British Journal of Photography, 31 August 1877, p. 419.
5. The British Journal of Photography, 22 December 1905, p.1015.

6. The Photographic News, 31 October 1879, p. 522; 9 January 1880, p.19
7. Now owned by Agfa-Gevaert, and housed (uncatalogued and not on display at the time of writing) at its factory a few miles outside Cologne, Germany.
8. Quoted by Beaumont Newhall, "Delacroix and Photography", Magazine of Art, November 1952, p. 300.
9. Photo News, 3 August 1860.
10. Owned by the painter Graham Ovenden, England.
11. The British Journal of Photography, 20 May 1904.
12. Kenneth Clark, The Nude, 1959, p. 27.
13. Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, Academy Address, 1883.
14. There is considerable evidence that Lord Leighton was a homosexual and that he left the country to escape involvement in the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895.
15. Rev. Francis Kilvert, Diary, 21 May 1873.
16. The Bishop of Carlisle, quoted in The Worm in the Bud, Ronald Pearsall, p.144-145.
17. Lecture given on 26 May 1883, published in The Art of England, 1898.
18. Edited by Alfred Stieglitz, the fifty issues of this magazine included the work of the most respected art photographers of their day. It was the most handsomely produced and the most influential photographic magazine for the Pictorialist.
19. Charles Caffin, a leading photo-critic of his day, writing in 1901 about photographs taken 25 years previously (but still prevalent in his own time.)
20. Sadakichi Hartmann, under the pseudonym Sidney Allan, writing in Camera Notes, 20 July 1902.
21. As late as 1937, in his autobiography As I Remember, the photographer Arnold Genthe spent hundreds of words praising the American woman as model, concluding with satisfaction that in each generation she was showing "a definite trend toward the Greek ideal."
22. J. Edgar Bull, reviewing an exhibition of photographs by Charles Berg, in 1900.
23. "Adam and Eve", 1901, by Frank Eugene depicted a male and female nude - the man has his back to the camera. Both are veiled in somber shadows, and the image is heavily scratched in a pseudo-etching style.
24. J. T. Keighley, Camera Notes, 1900.
25. John Gibson, Autobiography, n.d.
26. W. P. Frith, My Autobiography and Reminiscences, 1887. Two volumes.
27. The "visitor" was George Jones, known as Liquorice Jones for the color of his sepia drawings. He was proud that he resembled the Duke of Wellington, for whom he was often mistaken. The Duke heard of this fact and remarked: "Dear me. Mistaken for me, is he? That's strange, for no one mistakes me for Mr. Jones."
28. The Photographic News, 6 February 1863, pp. 65-68.
29. The British Journal of Photography, 5 February 1909.
30. Camera Notes, 1901.
31. J. Wells Champney, writing under the pseudonym "A Painter" in Camera Work, 1900.
32. Ronald Pearsall, The Worm in the Bud, p. 146.
33. London Labour and the London Poor, Henry Mayhew, 1851-62.
34. For a similar paean of praise to a little girl's limbs see Rev. Francis Kilvert's Diary, 19 April 1870.
35. Lewis Carroll's friend was Harry Furnis, and the letter is quoted in Lewis Carroll: Photographer, by Helmut Gernsheim.
36. If the reader should have any doubts on this point, he is referred to Henry Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor - "It has been proved that 400 individuals procure a livelihood by trepanning females from 11 to 15 years of age for the purposes of prostitution" etc., etc.
37. Mrs. Russell Barrington, Life and Letters, 1906.
38. According to his friend Henry Holiday, Solomon had a "conscientious objection to using stronger language than "Drat it!"
39. Quoted by Ronald Pearsall, The Worm in the Bud, p. 550.
40. Many of these photographs are in the Royal Photographic Society collection, including a

reproduction of a painting and its exact transcription into a photograph.

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