

Nudity As A Theme In Painting: Is It A Proliferation Of Pornography?

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Abstract: One of the pertinent problems which artists face today in our society on nude painting is the negative impression associated with the painting of female nude figures. Some painting students consider female nude painting as immoral and pornographic. This may be due to their religious background, for instance some are Christians, Moslems, and Traditional believers. The study employed qualitative method of research with purposive sampling technique and simple random sampling. Interview and questionnaire were also used to collect the necessary data for the study. The study revealed that nudity in painting or figure painting was introduced by the colonial educators who came to teach art at Achimota College in the 1960s. The research discovered that nudity in painting is art but not pornography: because it is used as a study object by the students in the Department of Painting and Sculpture in KNUST where models are used to learn the anatomical structure of the human figure in order to train high caliber painters who meet the artistic standards of the international arts market. Also there is a clear difference between nude figures and that of pornography. Thus some respondents were of the view that nude figures are to address problems while pornography is to arouse sexual desire. This is left to the viewer to decide. In order to train high caliber painters to help the country develop economically, the research recommends that the Government of Ghana see to it that Nudity in Painting becomes an accepted subject in the school curriculum so that pupils and students could study the anatomical structure of the human figure without being ashamed.

Keywords: Nudity, Pornography, Anatomy, Painting

I. INTRODUCTION

Nudity in Painting should be part of the Schools' curriculum in order to train high caliber painters to help in the study of human anatomy. Students who come out as doctors, artists and other professionals would know the formation of the muscles, bones, and the different shapes of the human figure. Students who would become fashion designer would know the shape of the human figure to enable them design apparel for each shape of human figure such as X-Shape, A-Shape, H-Shape and T-Shape. Also surgeons would know how to draw the human figure before an operation is conducted,

and how to identify the exact position of some diseases of the patient.

Anatomical detail, classical posture, and dignified nudity establish a particular mood that affects one's interpretation of the image. Lynda (1998) affirm the fact that the nude can stimulate the observer (male) by citing an instance that a young man was infatuated with a statue (Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite) that he hid himself one night in the shrine and masturbated on the statue, leaving stain on its thigh – a testimony to the figure's lifelike qualities and the cue for this particular fantasy of male arousal.

In another permutation of this fantasy of male arousal there is the case from sixteenth-century Italy, of Aretino, who

so admired the exceptional realism of a painted nude Venus by Sansorino that he claimed 'it will fill the thoughts of all who look at it with lust.' Lynda also said that over two centuries later after the above instant, there was the example of the bibliophile Henry George Quin, who crept into the Uffizi in Florence when no one was there, in order to admire the Medici Venus and who confessed to having 'ferverently kissed several parts of her divine body'.

After a critical observation about what caused the male sexual arousal it was concluded that, "for Aretino, the realism of the image seems to draw the viewer directly into a speculation on the female sexual body, rather than towards a meditation on the body in and art". In the case of the Pliny and Quin the arousal came because they secretly creep to the place of the statue (the shrine and the gallery) which was unseen by other viewers. Lynda concluded that in all the three cases, the viewer's gaze lacks the elevated intent demanded by high culture and the image is responded to in terms of its content, rather than its formal qualities.

From the researchers observation of the three nudes works it was found out that the poses depict erotic scene which in a way can arouse sexual desire in the observer (male). Benson (2001) notes that nude figures have been common subject matter in painting and sculpture throughout history. She explain further that female body was of particular interest to painters in the Renaissance (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.

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 *ALady at her Toilet*, who looks like nothing so much as a china doll in her vapid prettiness. But here the similarities end in the sense that each painting is clearly distinguishable in both style and content from the others.

Benson (2001) further says that Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (plate 2) 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 colour 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 colour 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 colours 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 from delineated

clearly. Her colouring is the naturalistic, warm flesh tones of the Renaissance paintings rather than the pale, washed out Baroque skin colour. 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. Benson asserts that, 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.

The inferences drawn from the four nude works is that, the way nude is pose can affect the viewer/observer as well as the artist in the sense that some viewers may be aroused by the part been shown depending on where the observers interest is and also the finishing of the work by the artist also may have an effect on the observer as stated in the subtopic "effects of the nude on the observer". On the part of the artist, some artist have mastered the front, others back and so on, this can have an effect on the rendition of the nude as it been proportionally correct or not.

From the authors reviewed on Nudity none of them mentioned pornography as a link to Nudity, but the researcher is of the view that there is a link between Nudity and Pornography because all exhibit nakedness.

From the origin of the word "pornography," emphasis is on the subordination of women as a target. "Pornography" derives from the Greek roots *porne*, which means "sexual slave" or "harlot," and *graphos*, which means "description of". "Thus, pornography means a description of sexual slavery or the purchase of sex from women, both of which involve an imbalance of power, paradigmatically between women and men. Longino (1980) explain "pornography" as the representation of sexual behavior that has as a characteristic mark: the degrading and demeaning portrayal the role and status of the human female. By degrading and demeaning, means the portrayal of behaviour that is intentionally injurious or hurtful, physically or psychologically coercive, or which disregards or denigrates the desires and experiences of the other, thereby treating the other as "a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually".

MacKinnon (1987) also says that, "pornography" is when "women are dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt, in postures of sexual... servility... presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual". Longino (1980) and Mackinnon (1987) share the same view

on pornography as been sexual object dehumanized human female.

Moreover, we can contrast it with educational materials, literature, position papers, or protest pamphlets, for example, all of which might contain sexually explicit representations, including portrayals of assault or degradation, without being "pornographic" in the stipulated sense.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research method with questionnaire administration, and personal interviews to gather data on nudity in painting: art or pornography from the department of painting and sculpture – KNUST - Kumasi. The merits of the method and tools extensively eclipsed their demerits in sourcing and analyzing data from the field. These approaches offered the best means of obtaining valid data to answer the research questions and the objectives.

The study population comprised students, lecturers and non teaching staff from the Painting and Sculpture department. Students in the department were given eighty questionnaires, six lecturers were interviewed in the department and ten people from the non teaching staff were also given questionnaire to answer. The total sample was ninety - six. Purposive and Random sampling techniques were used for the selection base on the individuals who can give the most information about the topic under investigation (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005) and every data source in the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample (Morgan 2008) respectively.

The analysis of the data was done using Pattern-Matching based on the responses and later themes were form from the responses that had similar ideas. The information that was gathered is in form of tables, chart and essay.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority of student artist representing fifty – three (53%) of the population, and seven (7) lecturers representing hundred (100%) of the population said that nudity is to undergo half/full naked for artistic purpose. But according to majority of the non teaching staff and some minority of student artist, nudity is a sin before God (immoral) therefore should be discouraged. The literatures contradict this response as Rev. Martin Wadestone, author of "Nudism and Christianity," writes:

Actually, in the light of the Bible, there is no sin in nudity itself; but if a person uses the nudity for lustful or immoral purposes he has misused it, and this constitutes a sin. The Bible does not speak against nudity nor does it teach that the body is shameful. There is reference to shame in nudity, but this shame was produced in the mind of man, not by divine ordination."

This is an indication that student artist and lecturers who deal with nudity in painting directly are not seeing it as immoral but a form of art as stated in the literature that during the Renaissance period nudity was truly seen as a form of art.

| Student artist | Non-teaching staff | Lecturers |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Nudity is to undergo half/full naked for artistic purpose 30 (53%) | Nudity is the state of being naked 4 (40%) | Nudity is having no cloth on. 7 (100%) |
| 2. Nudity is to learn the anatomical structure of human figure. 12 (21%) | Nudity is a sin before God (immoral) therefore should be discouraged. 6 (60%) | |
| 3. Nudity is immoral 4 (7%) | | |
| 4. Nudity depends on the context in which it is placed 7 (10%) | | |

Table 1: Opinions about nudity

Twenty-four (24) students out of fifty-six (56) student artist representing 43% and four (4) lecturer representing 57.14% interviewed were of the view that the rational for nude painting is to learn the movement of the muscles, the flesh, and the structure of the bones (that is the anatomy of the human figure). It was realized that ten (10) representing 18% of the student respondents and three (3) representing 42.9% of lecturers were of the view that the rational for nude painting is to understand the play of light and shade on the human body.

This suggest that as students artist are introduced to nude figures they should understand the movement of muscles, the flesh, the structure of the bones and the play of light and shade of the human body, this would help them to draw and paint realistic figures/realistically.

| Student artist | Lecturers |
|--|---|
| 1. Nude models are used to learn the human anatomy. 24 (43%) | Nude models are used to learn the movement of the muscles, the flesh, and the structure of the bones. 4 (57.14%) |
| 2. It is to observe the human figure. 12 (21%) | They are used to understand the play of light and shade on the human body. 3 (42.9%) |
| 3. It is to understand the formation of light and shade on the human body. 10 (18%) | |
| 4. It is a way of representing the human figure realistically. 6 (11%) | |
| 5. Nude models are used to solve problems. | |

| | |
|--------|--|
| 4 (7%) | |
|--------|--|

Table 2: Rationale for painting nude models

It emerged from the study that twenty-eight (28) representing 50% of the student artist, five (5) representing 71.4% of lecturers and eight (8) representing 80% of non teaching staff thinks that finished nude works could arouse the observer sexually if the observer does not see the nude figure as an object of art and also as a study object while minority of the respondents are of the view that nude works could not arouse sexual desire in the observer, in the sense that, it does not showcase any erotic scene.

| Student artist | Non-teaching staff | Lecturers |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Nude works can arouse the observer sexually 28 (50%) | Nude works can arouse the observer sexually 8 (80%) | Nude works can arouse the observer sexually if not seen as an object for art. 5 (71.4%) |
| 2. Nude works cannot arouse the observer sexually 16 (29%) | Nude works is a form of art 2 (20%) | Nude works cannot have an impact on the observer. 2 (28.9%) |
| 3. Nude works can have impact on the observer depending on the observer's background 12 (21%) | | |

Table 3: Perceptions about nude works

Majority of student artist thirty-one (31) representing 55%, half of non teaching staff five (5) representing 50%, and lecturers seven (7) representing 100% said that pornography arouses sexual desire in the observer while minority of student artist two (2) representing 4% said pornography is a form of art. This implies that pornography have gotten negative impact on the observer, in the sense that, pornography could enslave the observer sexually. Pornography been a form of art indicates that it can be use as a study object in order to learn the anatomical structure of the human figure as it deals with nakedness of the person. A relative minority of student artist 7 (representing 13%) thinks that pornography should be left to adult because it teaches married couple how to have sex with the partner in order to satisfy him/her sexually but on the other hand children who are not married and watching these things will try to practice it with their peers of which at the end of day it will enslave them and also cause sexual abuse on their peers.

| Student artist | Non-teaching staff | Lecturers |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Pornography involves sexual intercourse 31 (55%) | Pornography is intended to arouse sexual desire in the observer. 5 (50%) | Pornography is intended to arouse sexual desire in the observer. 7(100%) |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| 2. Pornography is immoral 16 (28%) | Pornography should be discouraged because it corrupts the minds of the observer. 5 (50%) | |
| 3. Pornography should be left to only adults. 7 (13%) | | |
| 4. Pornography is a form art 2 (4%) | | |

Table 4: Opinions about pornography

In terms of nudity been painting or pornographic, eighty-nine percent (89%) of the 56 student artist, 100% of lecturers, and minority of the non teaching staff holds that nudity in painting is not pornography but for academic work whereas six (6) representing 60% of the majority of non teaching staff and minority of student artist said that nudity in painting is pornographic. This is an indication that all the respondents in the department have some knowledge about nudity in painting because they are close to the department. This suggests that people perceive things differently although they are exposed to the same things. This is what the researcher called it distortion of perception. The data also suggests that nudity in painting is not pornography but for academic work in the sense that the nude is used as a study to learn the structure of the bones, and also to know how the muscles behave if the model poses.

| Student artist | Non-teaching staff | Lecturers |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Nudity in painting is not pornography but for academic purpose. 50 (89%) | Nudity in painting is pornography 6 (60%) | Nudity in painting is not pornography but for academic purpose. 7 (100%) |
| 2. Nudity in painting is pornography because it arouses sexual urge in the observer. 6 (11%) | Nudity in painting is not pornography 4 (40%) | |

Table 5: Is nudity in painting pornographic?

It is interesting to know that 90% of lecturers interviewed, 10% of non teaching staff and 14% of student artist asserts that there is no clear difference between nude figures and that of pornography in that both carry nakedness of the person whereas majority of the population of student artist respondents forty-three (43) representing 77% and non teaching staff (90%) says that nude figures are to address a problem and pornography is to arouse sexual desire in the observer. The inference that could be drawn from these statements is that all the two have different roles to play that is nude serving as a form of art and a study object and pornography is for erotic purpose but there is a thin line between the two in that they all exhibit nakedness of the person.

| Student artist | Non-teaching staff | Lecturers |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Nude work is supposed to address an issue while pornography is to arouse sexual desire in the observer 43 (77%) | Nude works do not arouse the observer sexually but pornography does. 9 (90%) | There is no clear difference between the two. 6 (90%) |
| 2. No difference between nude works and pornographic work in that both carry nakedness 8 (14%) | Nude figures and pornography are the same 1 (10%) | Nude figures arouse our sensibility while pornography arouse sexual desire. 1 (10%) |
| 3. No idea 5 (9%) | | |

Table 6: Difference between nude figures and pornography

IV. CONCLUSION

The result of this study gives a clear picture of the respondents' perception about nudity in painting and pornography. It is also clear that nude painting should be included the school curriculum and its impacts should also be concerned. From the major findings it could be concluded that:

- ✓ If pornography could arouse sexual desire in the observer than it means that pornography could enslave the observer sexually by making one practice what is seen. For example rape.
- ✓ The study of nude painting would help one to know the anatomical structure of the human figure and also to understand the play of light and shade on the human body.
- ✓ Nude works should not be seen as stimulant for sex.
- ✓ Pornographic materials such as videos and magazines could have both positive and negative influence on the user.
- ✓ Nudity in painting is not pornography but rather is an art.
- ✓ There is a link between nude figures and that of pornography.
- ✓ Nude painting develops students' ideas in drawing, painting, aesthetics, and appreciation.
- ✓ The study of nude painting would enable one to become a critical thinker.

From the responds and the analysis of the data the researcher is of the view that nudity in painting could be said as an art or pornography or immoral depending on the individual because each individual sees things differently from the other. For instance, a person with a Christian or Islamic background might think that nudity in painting is pornography and immoral as it portrays the nakedness of the model. But there is a different statement asserted by Rev. Martin Wadestone, author of "Nudism and Christianity," he writes:

"Actually, in the light of the Bible, there is no sin in nudity itself; but if a person uses the nudity for lustful or immoral purposes he has misused it, and this constitutes a sin. The Bible does not speak against nudity nor does it teach that the body is shameful or immoral when is naked. There is reference to shame in nudity, but this shame was produced in the mind of man, not by divine ordination."

In view of this, it is left to the observer to decide, if nudity in painting is art or pornography and also immoral or not.

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