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book review of

Bodies of Art, French Literary Realism, and the Artist's Model by
Marie Lathers

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Marie Lathers

Bodies of Art, French Literary Realism, and the Artist's Model

Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001

294 pp.; 17 b/w ills.; index, bibliography; \$60.00(hardcover)

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The various ways in which artists and writers approached the live model throughout the nineteenth century provide Marie Lathers with the focus of her examination of the relationship between literature and the visual arts. Weaving a complex web of correspondences between the arts, Lathers discusses the existence of different types of models—Italian, Jewish, and the Parisienne—that writers and visual artists used in the creation of their works. Each type is interpreted as evidence of gender structures employed by such leading writers as Honoré de Balzac, Edmond de Goncourt, and Emile Zola. Lathers also demonstrates how the continuously changing interest in different types of models symbolically reveals how artistic reclamation of the body was modified as the nineteenth century progressed. These models' bodies, as seen against the cultural background of the era, functioned as symbols for societal decay at the *fin de siècle* and into the twentieth century. As *Bodies of Art* unfolds, the reader learns how the cultural historian, doubling as a literary critic, can provide significant insights into the interpretation of literary and visual works of art.

In her first chapter, "Paris Qui Pose: The Female Model in Nineteenth Century France," the author traces the use of models in classes at the Academy or their employment by working artists, which contributed to the professionalization of modeling as a career. By presenting evidence for shifts in the selection of models, from the exotic Italian or Jewish type to the more prevalent Parisienne, Lathers provides a historical context for the profession. In more general terms, the artist's perception and choice of a model affected how the female nude, or "woman," was received by the viewing public.

The greater part of the book is devoted to chapters that analyze how major writers, such as Balzac, used stories from the past—beginning with that of Raphael and his seductive model, the Fornarina—as guides for the presentation of the model in the nineteenth century. Lathers advances the proposition that artists either employed the model as a source for realist interpretations or transformed her into an "ideal" icon. In each case, the artist could not produce his creations without first studying the model. A later chapter focuses on the career of Charles Baudelaire, how his literary characters were drawn from specific individuals, including Madame Sabatier, and how these figures inspired the often seductive phrases in the poet's *Fleurs du mal*. Lathers's examination of Edmond de Goncourt's model, Manette Salomon, presents the female model in a different role. As a Jew, a type believed to be uncontrollable, the poser is increasingly seen as a threat both to society and to the continuing creative prowess of the artist. However, this type of model was not as complicated or as dangerous as the Parisienne, who was the embodiment of the *femme fatale*; the latter dominated the pages of writers and the canvases of Salon painters in Paris at the end of the century.

"The Model's Postpartum Belly: Zola's *L'Oeuvre*" offers an approach to the study of the model when she is used as a naturalist icon. In this chapter devoted to literary and visual works that are crafted with scrupulous realism, the model becomes interesting not so much for her ideal shape, but for her personification of a genuine woman. Represented in her motherly role and mired in the grip of poverty, she becomes a grim reminder of the transience of life, often symbolized in the decaying appearance of her body. Zola's creation in *L'Oeuvre* of a new, modern type of model, one that shows the vulgar side of life, provides a parallel construction for Lathers's discourse.

In "Maupassant, Mauclair, and Villiers: The Aging and Death of the Model," Lathers argues that by the last decades of the century the model is no longer confined to the artist's studio. Painters now depict the Parisienne everywhere in society, in her street clothes, suggesting that another type of model had become the dominant type. The last segments of the book, including a commentary on how artists renounced the live model in favor of working from published or available photographs of the nude, demonstrate how new techniques replaced the earlier tradition. In a brief postscript, Lathers recounts the suicides of several models whose *raison d'être* no longer existed. A centuries-old profession simply vanished at the close of the century as artists ceased to take inspiration from the closely observed, living human body.

Lathers's compelling and well-researched text poses numerous questions that are left unanswered. Did the nineteenth-century writer or artist use the model only as metaphor, as a means of analyzing gender specific texts? Or, as Lathers tantalizingly suggests, was the posed nude really a symbol for the changing course of modernism as filtered through the creative approaches and methodologies of painters and writers? This provocative book suggests many avenues along this line of investigation, but leaves the reader to follow his or her own path.

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