

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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exhibition review of

Masculine / Masculine: The Nude Man in Art from 1800 to the Present Day

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 13, no. 1 (Spring 2014)

Citation: Thijs Dekeukeleire, exhibition review of *Masculine / Masculine: The Nude Man in Art from 1800 to the Present Day*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2014), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring14/dekeukeleire-reviews-masculine-masculine>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Masculine / Masculine: The Nude Man in Art from 1800 to the Present Day

Paris, Musée d'Orsay

September 24, 2013 – January 2, 2014

Catalogue:

Guy Cogeval, with contributions by Claude Arnaud, Philippe Comar, Charles Dantzig, Damien Delille, Ophélie Ferlier, Ulrich Pohlmann, Xavier Rey and Jonathan Weinberg.

Masculin / Masculin: L'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours.

Paris: Flammarion, 2013.

300 pp; 220 color illustrations; list of exhibited works; selected bibliography.

€39.90

ISBN 9782081310094

For present-day nineteenth-century art aficionados, 'the nude' invariably brings to mind images such as Ingres' gracefully reclining odalisque or Manet's scandalously audacious Olympia, yet one would undoubtedly be hard-pressed to think of male nudes that have attained an equally emblematic status in the collective memory. During the nineteenth century, however, and indeed for many centuries prior, nude men formed a key feature of western art: a significance eclipsed by the subsequent ascendancy of the female nude, though reinstated by contemporary scholars, particularly within the blossoming field of gender studies. Major art institutions, it seems, are catching on: at the same time that the female nude is awarded a place of prominence in the exhibition *Desirs et Voluptés* at the Parisian Jacquemart-André Museum, the Musée d'Orsay treads a different path. Explicitly placing itself in the footsteps of the Viennese Leopold Museum, which caused a stir in 2012 with the exhibition *Nackte Männer*, it is the Musée d'Orsay's turn to explore the theme of the male nude in art, shedding light on the various forms and shapes it has taken in the past two centuries. As the title would suggest, mirroring the word 'masculine' and its iteration, the approach opted for by curators Guy Cogeval, Ophélie Ferlier, Xavier Rey, Ulrich Pohlmann, and Tobias G. Natter is deliberately transversal. Traditional divisions and fixed chronologies were playfully unsettled by grouping artworks of various techniques, styles, and periods, thereby attempting to establish a genuine dialogue that revealed mechanisms and interconnections, which would otherwise remain hidden. Though the result was unfortunately more than a little disjointed, the revelatory power of the whole was undeniable. The visitor was plunged into a world seemingly just below the surface of canonical art overviews: one that was rich and colorful beyond imagination, and rewarding at every turn.

Uniting works of art from collections in France as well as abroad (the main collaborator being none other than the Leopold Museum itself), the exhibition was built around six themes, which are laid out in the catalogue as follows: 'The Classic Ideal', 'The Heroic Nude', 'Im Natur', 'In Pain', 'Nuda Veritas', and 'The Object of Desire'. At no point in the exhibition, however, were the six main themes in any way enunciated: instead, there were eleven rooms in total, where additional, though largely interchangeable, aspects of the male nude were considered, thereby unnecessarily befuddling what could otherwise have been a more coherent, more tightly-knit exposition. Though they differed in size and layout, these rooms were tied together by a slick, unobtrusive style of presentation, with walls colored either in light or dark grey (or, in the first two of the exhibition's rooms, olive green). Succinct French and English notices served as

general introductions to each of the eleven rooms, while small plaques offered supplementary information for a limited number of works, though exclusively in French.

This review takes a closer, more contextualized look at each theme, foregrounding the art of the long nineteenth century, which constituted roughly half of the works gathered. As for the post-1914 art, the vast majority was comprised of photography, with Pierre et Gilles returning no less than seven times and being accorded an exclusive—but not particularly memorable—interview in the catalogue, while the painting and sculpture joined some of the biggest names in modern and contemporary art, including Pablo Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Louise Bourgeois, and Ron Mueck. Oddly, a handful of works dating from the seventeenth century was on display as well, presumably in an attempt to underline the continuity in tradition.

The Classic Ideal

The first room, devoted to ‘The Classic Ideal’, introduced the visitor to the aesthetic canons inherited from antiquity that continued to hold sway during the nineteenth century, and particularly its first few decades. The Greeks, after all, were the ones who first claimed humankind’s greatest and noblest qualities to be exemplified by the *male* body: not just any male body, of course, but one perfected and untouched by faults of the flesh, one that was idealized. What was invented in the fifth century BCE, Kenneth Clark stressed in his authoritative study on the subject, was the nude itself: an art form in which the body is not imitated but ennobled, not deformed but *reformed*.^[1] From the Renaissance onward, this conception of the idealized male body as the archetype of anatomical perfection came to stand as an institutionalized part of the artist’s training: this by way of an extensive study of the male nude, consecutively undertaken in the academy through drawings and prints, sculptures and casts, and, finally, the live model. The exhibition left the first phase of this traditionally tripartite program undocumented, but thankfully, the second phase was represented by two plaster copies made in the nineteenth century after the *Belvedere Torso* and the *Barberini Faun* (fig. 1). Such was the reverence of the antique *beau idéal*—especially in the wake of Johann Winckelmann’s fervent writings—that statues like these littered the galleries of academies throughout Europe.



Fig. 1, Installation view. Left: François Léon Bénouville, *La colère d'Achille* (*Achilles' Anger*), 1847. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier; middle: Anonymous, *Barberini Faun*, between 1799 and 1829. Plaster with metallic armatures. Musée du Louvre, Paris; right: Jean-Baptiste Frédéric Desmarais, *Le berger Pâris* (*The Shepherd Paris*), 1787. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [\[larger image\]](#)

It was, to be sure, not until the artist had been wholly familiarized with the classic ideal and able to cast the living into an antique mold that he was allowed to move onto the third and final phase of his training: that of the life class. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, the models encountered there were, again, almost exclusively male: a fact to which the students' nude studies attest, and which they produced ad nauseam. One representative example, drawn in black pencil by the 17-year-old Georges Seurat while studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, presents an unassuming though striking interplay of outline and contrast; it was included with preparatory nude studies by artists such as Jules Elie Delaunay and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes in a separate graphic art display, rather unfortunately cut off from the main part of the show in an altogether different wing.

On view in the first gallery was one of the extraordinary academy paintings produced by Jacques-Louis David during his stay in Italy as Prix de Rome laureate, in 1780 (fig. 2). The young artist endowed his work with the dramatic intensity of a true *tableau*, thereby transcending what could otherwise have been a mere academic exercise. The nude figure, seated in a variation on the pose of the *Dying Gaul*, the tension in his muscular frame stressed by a bold chiaroscuro, appears caught in the throes of heavy turmoil. The level of expressivity combined with the bow and arrows depicted strewn on the floor makes it easy to understand why commentators would later dub the figure Patroclus, after the Greek hero Achilles' brother-in-arms who lost his life in the Trojan War.



Fig. 2, Jacques-Louis David, *Académie d'homme, dite Patrocle* (*Academy of a Man, called Patroclus*), 1780. Oil on canvas. Musée d'art Thomas-Henry, Cherbourg-Octeville. [\[larger image\]](#)

Here we also found *Le berger Pâris* (1787, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa); the *envoi de Rome* by the lesser known artist Jean-Baptiste Frédéric Desmarais shows the Trojan prince Paris contemplating the Apple of Discord, elegantly leaning against a tree branch in a stance reminiscent of ancient prototypes like the *Pothos* by Skopas and the *Marble Faun* (fig. 1). Nude but for the characteristic Phrygian hat and a luxurious red cloak, the viewer's attention is decidedly drawn to the figure's bare midriff, pale and smooth as if it were sculpted out of marble. Hung on the wall opposite was *Mercury* (2001), one of the many works by the French artist duo Pierre et Gilles presented; together, the pair formed the first of the more obvious of the juxtapositions littered throughout the exhibition (the reason for which, one assumes, it was selected as *Masculine / Masculine*'s official promotional picture, fig. 3). The hand-painted photograph indeed owes a great debt to the classic ideal as mediated through nineteenth-century art: incontestably so, for in the catalogue, Pierre et Gilles admit to having been inspired by a depiction of the deity by Jules Elie Delaunay.^[2] When placed side by side, Paris and Mercury could very well function as each other's mirror image. The downcast looks, the *déhanchement* of the hips, and of course, the ideal, transcendent nature of both men's nudity, as enhanced in *Mercury* by the glossiness typical of Pierre et Gilles' work, combine to make this coupling fruitful. However, one might wonder if such a loosely comparative approach, whereby drawing conclusions is entirely left up to a visitor who may lack any foreknowledge, is preferable to a more in-depth exploration of these works and the iconographic tradition they represent.



Fig. 3, View of the entrance to the exhibition. [\[larger image\]](#)

The Heroic Nude

The second and third rooms were entitled 'The Heroic Nude' and 'The Gods of the Stadium' respectively, though *both*, in fact, revolved around the heroic nude in the sense of the exhibition's second overarching theme. Perhaps a solution for this needless confusion would have been to group both under the header of 'Muscle' or 'The Powerhouse', for the nudes explored here were those that represent vitality, virility and vigor: in other words, those that establish a link between strength of spirit and strength of body. Among the *Herculeses* and *Davids* selected to represent the hero, the most striking were two works from the museum's own collections, albeit with iconographies that are altogether more difficult to apprehend. One is George Desvallières' virtually unknown pastel *Les tireurs à l'arc* (1895, Musée d'Orsay), showing a group of nude men armed with bows and arrows, shooting a flight of storks (fig. 4). The scene is vaguely reminiscent of the type of battle depictions popular in the Renaissance, such as Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* and Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina*, the likes of which gave artists the opportunity to display their mastery of the nude by depicting a number of unclad men engaged in frantic action, and seen from a multitude of points of view. Though the mastery of man over nature has been a staple of the heroic tradition since antiquity, the choice of storks is highly intriguing, and a sense of mystery is wrought by the combination of a murky color palette and blue highlights for the quiver and bows. The other work of notice was Henri Camille Danger's *Fléau!* (1901, Musée d'Orsay), a recent acquisition on public display here for the first time (fig. 5).^[3] Depicted is a giant of a man making his way through a vast city. Entirely nude, broad-shouldered and bearing an enormous club, the colossus is manifestly Herculean, though his significance here is far more sinister: indeed, he is the embodiment of War and Decay, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake; buildings ablaze or ruined; and corpses of men and women scattered on the blood-spattered ground. Unfortunately, no help was offered to place either of these works: not even in the catalogue, where, to further complicate matters, *Fléau!* is reproduced in the section of 'Nuda Veritas'.



Fig. 4, Installation view. Front right: Antonin Mercié, *David*, ca. 1872. Bronze. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back left: George Desvallièrre, *Les tireurs à l'arc (Archers)*, 1895. Pastel on paper. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Henri Camille Danger, *Fléau! (Plague!)*, 1901. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

As for the athlete, it is known that sports—and particularly those of a rough nature—in the final decades of the nineteenth-century took on a renewed importance. Sportsmen would soon grow into the heroes of the modern age. Gender historians have linked this revival to the crisis of masculinity, which is generally agreed to have struck western men at the time (not in the least in France, after its disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War). One of the solutions to these growing concerns about masculinity appears to have been found in the emphasis on its embodiment: in a so-called muscular masculinity, which embraces physical prowess, brute force, and aggression.^[4] A testament to this new ideal is Alexandre Falguière's *Lutteurs* (1875, Musée d'Orsay), which shows a pair of brawny wrestlers fighting, closely observed by spectators almost exclusively male. On Eugène Jansson's masterpiece *Pushing weights with two arms II* (1913, Peter and Renate Nahum), a man is also shown displaying his strength for an audience, though the context is one radically different (fig. 6). Here, the scene is distinctly intimate. Set in a contemporary, sunlit interior, one athlete looks on as another lifts a barbell with both arms, standing proudly erect. Unlike Falguière's wrestlers, both men are stark nude, allowing the viewer to fully take in their impressively lean physiques. Indeed, muscles and tendons are so emphasized by the brushwork that the figures could, at first glance, be mistaken

for *écorchés*. The extraordinary painting is but one of the many treatments of the male nude that Jansson carried out from 1904 until his death in 1914, after already having established himself as a painter of atmospheric, blue-tinted cityscapes in his native Sweden. Not only was Jansson by all accounts homosexual, he also struggled his entire life with severe health problems, thus explaining his fascination for the athletic young men he encountered at Stockholm's Flottans Badhus, who served as radiant emblems of fitness and well-being: particularly at a time when in Scandinavia, as elsewhere in the west, questions of masculinity merged with those of national vitality.^[5]

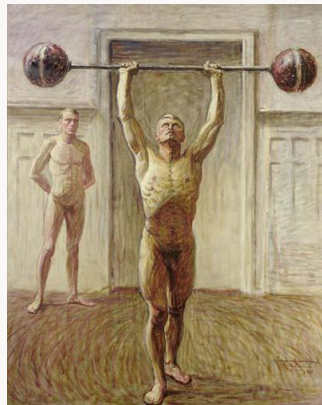


Fig. 6, Eugène Fredrik Jansson, *Pushing Weights with Two Arms II*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Peter and Renate Nahum. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. [\[larger image\]](#)

Im Natur

With modern society being understood more and more as having weakened the body and dulled the mind, men in the later nineteenth century increasingly took to nature, which was recast as “a testing ground of masculinity”, where physical exposure to fresh air and cold water was believed to have a wholly invigorating, strengthening effect.^[6] Closely related to the figure of the muscleman, therefore, is the exhibition's third theme, to which the room ‘Im Natur’ was devoted. Of the plein air male nudes of the final decades of the century, it seems, the curators posited Hippolyte Flandrin's *Jeune Homme nu assis au bord de la mer* (1836, Louvre) as the distant ancestor. The piece hung isolated on a long stretch of wall, perhaps in an attempt to stress the figure's seclusion on the canvas, which shows him seated at the edge of a seascape, his head resting on the pulled up knees. Like those paintings by David and Desmairais already encountered, Flandrin's work is an *envoi de Rome*, and like those paintings, it was awarded the status of a history painting, thereby surpassing that of a mere academic study. In this case, the evocative pose and the inclusion of an eerie setting suggest solitude and melancholy, which, incidentally, are titles the work would accrue over the years. It has been argued, in fact, that the popularity of the image can be accounted for precisely by the tension between context and the lack thereof, which allows new meanings to be ascribed time and again.^[7] And popular it was; long after it had toured salons and world fairs and had been acquired by Napoléon III to join the collections of the Musée du Luxembourg, this painting still continued to impress, as could be seen in the nearby re-stagings by such noted photographers of the male nude as Wilhelm von Gloeden and Robert Mapplethorpe. Besides serving to place the young man against a backdrop of the romantic sublime in a manner typical of the period, the natural setting makes

for an inspired contrast with the fleshiness of the human body: an artistic device taken up with fervor at the end of the nineteenth century, when a flood of male bathing images hit the art scene. Among renowned examples from the hands of Paul Cézanne and Edvard Munch, and little-known gems by eastern and northern European artists like Ludwig von Hofmann and František Kupka, an obvious absentee is the British artist Henry Scott Tuke, who achieved renown with his naturalist treatment of the nude adolescent, whom he depicted swimming, fishing and playing about at the shore and in the sea.

In Pain

Perhaps it would be easy to forget amidst the nudes discussed above, who seem ever strong and steadfast, that man can come to a fall, that bones can break, muscles can strain, flesh can rip, and the mind can shatter, reducing the body to a vehicle of pain and suffering—an embodiment of pathos—with the possibility of death impending. Several rooms in the exhibition reminded us of this stark reality, and though they were classified varyingly by the curators, it might be best, for clarity's sake, to discuss them under the header of the exhibition's fourth theme, 'In Pain'. One of the first examples of the naked victim was the magnificently grim *Mort pour la patrie* by Jean Jules Antoine Lecomte du Noüy (1892, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers), in the room entitled 'It's Tough Being A Hero'. Depicted is a fallen soldier lying face down on the ground, his arms and legs limp, his eyes glazed over and his mouth slightly ajar. He is also stark naked, and though the *tricouleur* and imperial eagle obviously refer to a specific political reality, his nudity adds a universal dimension to the image, placing the dead man outside of time and space.^[8]

Farther along, in the room named 'Without Compromise', this universality of death was brought to the fore with one of the most powerful juxtapositions of the exhibition (figs. 7, 8). Lit up in the relatively small, slightly darkened room, were William Adolphe Bouguereau's *Egalité devant la mort* (1848, Musée d'Orsay) on the central wall, and before it, on a stand in the middle, Ron Mueck's *Dead Dad* (1996–97, Stefan T. Edlis Collection, Chicago). On one level, the two could not be further apart: Bouguereau has depicted the figure of a dead man being shrouded by an angel of death, linking the austerity of neoclassicism and the dramatic intensity of romanticism, while Mueck has crafted a sculpture of his deceased father, shrunken in size, in a hyperrealist fashion.^[9] Together, though, the lifeless, uncovered bodies mirror each other entirely, establishing a *memento mori* of the most powerful sort.



Fig. 7, Installation view. Front: Ron Mueck, *Dead Dad*, 1996–97. Mixed medium. Stefan T. Edlis Collection, Chicago; back: William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Egalité devant la mort* (*Equality before Death*), 1848. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Installation view of the room 'Without Compromise'. Photo: Nicolas Krief, courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Proceeding to the room actually dubbed 'In Pain', a particular revelation was Just Becquet's *L'Abîme* (1901, Musée d'Orsay), effectively positioned across from Francis Bacon's triptych *Three Figures in a Room* (1964, Centre Pompidou, Paris) (figs. 9, 10). The impression given by the monumental sculpture is wholly unnerving. Shown is a man stretched out in a position of utter torment, contorted to an almost Expressionist extreme, his eyes sunken deep in hollow sockets and his mouth frozen in a scream. How fortunate to be able to discover the work here, cleaned and restored after a decades-long stay at the Jardin des Plantes in Angers, but what a pity that more information about its creator's intentions is apparently lacking.^[10]



Fig. 9, Installation view. Front: Just Becquet, *L'Abîme (The Abyss)*, ca. 1901. Marble. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back left: Jules Elie Delaunay, *Ixion précipité dans les Enfers (Ixion Flung into Hell)*, 1876. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes; back right: Francis Bacon, *Three Figures in a Room*, 1964. Oil on canvas. Centre Pompidou, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 10, Installation view of the room 'In Pain'. Photo: Nicolas Krief, courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

Though works such as these certainly betray the influence of classical prototypes (the arm bent to the head was established by the Greeks as denoting suffering, while the man's cry of terror is reminiscent of Laocoön's), it was arguably Christianity, which gave the naked victim its most compelling form.^[11] Indeed, fueled undoubtedly by the perception of the human body as but a mortal container that imprisons man's eternal soul, nudity in Christian art is almost exclusively acceptable as the subject of pathos, in works inspired by, on one hand, Biblical events like the expulsion, the murder of Abel by Cain, the flagellation of Christ, the crucifixion, the *pieta*, and the entombment; and, on the other, the gruesome deaths of countless martyrs.^[12] To be sure, 'In Pain' united several *Abels*, of which the most remarkable is undoubtedly Kehinde Wiley's *Study for the Death of Abel* (2008, Collection Karen and Courtney Lord, Aspen, Colorado), which re-envisioned the Biblical character as a twenty-first-century young black man, sprawled out before a wall adorned with peacocks and roses, with an unmistakable, cheeky nod to the solemn interpretations produced in previous centuries. A commendable effort was made throughout to showcase the black male nude in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but for an exhibition that prides itself on juxtaposing eras and mediums, an

opportunity was missed by not representing his specifically *nineteenth*-century counterpart. What a spectacular pairing, for instance, Wiley's *Abel* would have made with *Esclave nègre après la bastonnade* (1854, Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique) by the Belgian sculptor Victor Van Hove, which, in an ugly reminder of the past, depicts a black slave writhing on the ground after a beating. Other male nudes depicting the Christian tradition could be found in the room 'The Glorious Body', which grouped several renditions of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (fig. 11), with Bouguereau's exquisite *La Flagellation du Christ* (1880, Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, La Rochelle) hung centrally on the far wall, a corollary of sorts to Armand Bloch's mahogany sculpture *Supplicié* (1902, Musée d'Orsay) encountered earlier, in 'Without Compromise'.



Fig. 11, Installation view. Left: Horace Le Blanc, *Le martyr de saint Sébastien* (*The Martyr Saint Sebastian*), 1624. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen; middle: Angel Zárraga, *Ex Voto with Saint Sebastian*, 1910. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte Munal, Mexico City; right: François-Xavier Fabre, *Saint Sébastien expirant* (*Saint Sebastian Dying*), 1789. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[larger image\]](#)

Nuda Veritas

Serving as a counterweight to the nudes of an almost otherworldly physical beauty encountered above, was the exhibition's fifth main theme, 'Nuda Veritas', in which the gods and heroes of old were brought crashing down to solid ground. Fueled by the scientific quest for exactitude and by advances made simultaneously in the field of photography (projected on one of the room's walls was a film montage of chronophotographs made to detail human movement), the dogged emphasis on the idealized nude eventually had to contend with a growing desire to portray the human body as exactly as possible. Verisimilitude is key here, and what better way to illustrate this than Auguste Rodin's *L'Âge d'airain* (1877–80, Musée d'Orsay), whose debut on the art scene met with controversy precisely because of what the audience perceived to be a realist treatment of the male body (fig. 12). One of the photographs made in the ensuing polemic—of the model, Auguste Neyt, in the same stance as the statue—was enlarged and pasted on one of the exhibition room's walls, allowing the visitor (or at least one familiar with the sculpture's history) to make the comparison between life and art himself. More striking still was Rodin's study for the monument commemorating Honoré de Balzac (ca. 1894), on view in the room 'Without Compromise'; with his plump face and potbelly, the author's likeness is even farther removed from the idealist aesthetic (fig. 8).



Fig. 12, Installation view. Left: Richard Gerstl, *Semi-Nude Self-Portrait*, 1904–05. Oil on canvas. Leopold Museum, Vienna; middle: Auguste Rodin, *L'âge d'airain* (*The Age of Bronze*), 1877–80. Bronze. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; right: Lucian Freud, *David and Eli*, 2003–04. Oil on canvas. Private collection (?). [\[larger image\]](#)

Closely related to this realist endeavor is the distinction between the nude and the naked, as it was famously expounded by Kenneth Clark and refined by scholars following in his footsteps, but oddly appears to have been largely foregone by the exhibition's curators.^[13] While the nude perfects the body, covering its flaws and failings like an idealizing form of dress, to be naked is to be exposed. At its full extent, the latter term implies an unreserved, candid look at a human body of flesh and blood, in all its sweaty, hairy, scarred, and blemished glory. The arguably quintessential naked male of nineteenth-century art, Gustave Caillebotte's *Homme au bain* (1884, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), was, alas, absent from the exhibition: a pity, even if admittedly, the canvas has only just made its way back to Boston after being displayed at the Musée d'Orsay as part of the exhibition *Degas and the Nude* in 2012. Thankfully, Egon Schiele's oeuvre was adequately represented by a selection of the self-portraits in which he ruthlessly ascertained his own body, scrutinizing with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. While these works can hardly be ascribed a realist aesthetic, they undeniably depict the artist naked, not nude, making it all the more surprising that the distinction here seemingly went ignored.^[14]

The Object of Desire

Finally, we reach the two rooms 'The Temptation of the Male' and 'The Object of Desire', which both pertained to the sixth of the exhibition's main themes. Here, a light was shone on a reality, which, in the past, has all too easily been swept under the carpet: the fact that the male body is a *sexualized* body as well, and that the interest in its beauty has been not only purely esthetic, but also erotic. Interestingly, the emphasis here, as elsewhere in the exhibit, lay almost exclusively on works created by male artists (the sole exceptions in this section being the two photographs by Orlan and Zoe Leonard), thereby largely disavowing what can be constituted as the female gaze. Of course, women artists' relation to the nude was, during the long nineteenth century, highly contentious; in fact, the consternation caused by the thought of their access to the life class was the primary reason for their being excluded from academic training up until the very end of the century. Even so, the lacuna could have been filled by works such as Camille Claudel's *La Valse* (1889–90, Musée Rodin, Paris) or Suzanne Valadon's *Lancement du filet* (1914, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy), in which she portrayed her model and lover André Utter in the nude, seen from the back, the side *and* the front.

Still, there was plenty to appreciate in the two rooms, including a playful pairing of Jean Broc's *La Mort d'Hyacinthe* (1801, Musées de Poitiers) and Pierre et Gilles' *David et Jonathan* (2005, Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris), both of which, divided in time by a gap of just about two hundred years, show a pair of gay lovers locked in an intimate embrace (fig. 13). It may be surprising to find such an explicit acknowledgment of homosexuality in high art at the turn of the nineteenth century, but in reality, such portrayals of Greek love were not, at the time, as rare as one might suspect, as is demonstrated by Claude Marie Dubufe's *Apollon et Cyparisse* (1821, Musée Calvet, Avignon) hung on one of the nearby walls. The figure of the languid, feminized youth was, moreover, somewhat of a staple of neoclassicism.^[15] Hyacinth, of course, was the beloved of Apollo who was tragically killed during a game of discus throwing, and is depicted by Broc as expiring in the god's arms. Pierre et Gilles' photograph is not without a deeper meaning either, for the *keffiyeh* and *kippah* identify the men as an Arab and a Jew respectively, with obvious political implications.

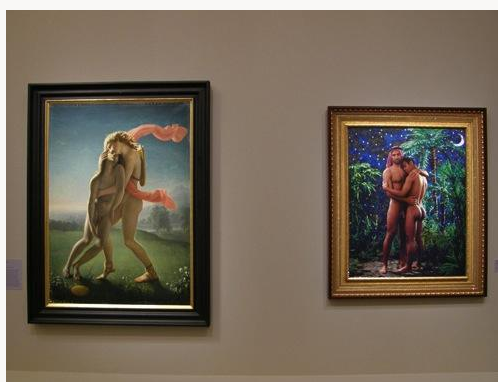


Fig. 13, Left: Jean Broc, *La mort d'Hyacinthe*, 1801. Oil on canvas. Musées de Poitiers, Poitiers; right: Pierre et Gilles, *David et Jonathan (Jean-Yves et Moussa)*, 2005. Painted photograph. Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris.

[\[larger image\]](#)

In the same section, we found Jean Delville's extraordinary *Ecole de Platon* (1898, Musée d'Orsay), and though this chef d'œuvre more than deserved to be part of the exhibition, its placement was problematic, hung in a section devoted to an exploration of homosexual desire (fig. 14). To be sure, the catalogue describes the painting as "a delirious and homoerotic composition [. . .], in which the homosexual relations meant to materialize the osmosis of thought among the philosopher's disciples are suggested by the delicately muscular bodies of Plato's admirers, in poses as seductive as they are improbable." *Ecole de Platon*, it concludes, "clearly announces the LSD-induced delusions of James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus*," a gay-themed erotic film actually projected in the exhibition on an adjacent wall.^[16] These sweeping assertions are indicative of the approach that—more or less explicitly—underpinned *Masculine / Masculine*, aimed at unearthing the "latent homo-eroticism that runs through numerous works from the eighteenth century onward."^[17] This approach is not without risks: in fact, it may have been the only point in the exhibition at which the superficially comparative approach threatened to do real damage. First, a retrospective attribution of homosexuality—or, more vaguely, of homoerotic desires—to nineteenth-century artists is, in the vast majority of cases, extremely difficult to substantiate. Even what to our twenty-first-century eyes appears unquestionably homosexual or homoerotic may not, at the time, have

held such connotations. Second, reducing the history of the male nude in art to one of unspoken homosexuality is done at the expense of a historic reality infinitely more complex. After all, not only is it clear that the male nude once was a wholly sanctioned subject for artists of all sorts and backgrounds (indeed, the modern-day assumption that an artist's choice to paint, sculpt or photograph a nude man must be sexually motivated in a straightforward manner seems to be a byproduct of the eclipse of the nude male by the female), but every artwork also presents a compound of meanings not to be diminished to just one.^[18] None of this is to deny, of course, that men, in the past as today, loved and bedded men: a fact that most certainly merits recognition by historians and art historians alike. However, the issue presents a precarious balancing act that demands more nuance than was provided.



Fig. 14, Installation view. Front: Jean Antoine Marie Idrac, *Mercure inventant le caducée* (*Mercury Inventing the Caduceus*), 1878. Marble. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back: Jean Delville, *L'école de Platon* (*School of Plato*), 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

In the case of Delville's *Ecole de Platon*, yes, the disciples are semi or even fully nude, each one even more radiantly beautiful than the other, and yes, they touch and lean on one another as they let the wise words of their teacher sink in. But to regard the painting simply as an expression of the temptation of the male body “in the guise of a reconstructed Platonic Antiquity”, as the room's notice put it, is to do a great disservice to a work intricately conceived so as to translate in a single image the idealist doctrine adhered to by the artist.^[19] Idealism is one of the more drastic manifestations of the symbolist quest for transcendental truth, founded by the French author and art critic Joséphin Peladan on the neo-Platonist notion that true art should strive to be a reflection of the ‘Idea’, which manifests itself in the ‘Beautiful’.^[20] Idealist principles not only underlie the painting's choice of subject and its compositional arrangement—depicted in an elaborate geometric scheme that combines symmetry, rhythm and number, is a world limited to initiates, simultaneously Plato and pupils, Christ and apostles, grandmaster and acolytes—but also informed its peculiar emphasis on the ephebic nude. As the incarnation of the ‘Beautiful’ and hence the ‘Ideal’, Delville's nudes formed the end-all of the idealist esthetic, and were assigned the loftiest of accolades. “It's by the *nude*, alone, that the artist can express the essential character of life, the impersonal ideas, the universal beliefs and the general sentiments of humanity,” he wrote. “I like to repeat: the nude reveals the true *meaning* of nature.”^[21] Engulfed in a bluish, immaterial glow, the men gathered possess an almost otherworldly charm: indeed, these are bodies no longer hindered by the shackles of an earthbound existence, but ones that dwell in higher realms, in the

domain of the spirit, not unlike those created by the other great Belgian idealist painter, Emile Fabry.^[22] That the disciples seem effeminate, with their slim, graceful bodies and luscious locks crowned with floral wreaths, is because they are intended to exemplify the figure of the androgyne, a popular presence in fin-de-siècle symbolist art which Peladan and his followers, in accordance with Plato's writings in the *Symposium*, considered to be the embodiment of the original state of unity and oneness.^[23]

Having set out to shine a light on a key feature of western art that for too long has been consigned to the shadows, *Masculine / Masculine's* heart was in the right place; however, it regrettably, and ultimately, failed to deliver on its promise, the fresh perspective it aimed for oftentimes falling short, resulting in an exhibition that was rather too lightweight for a museum of the Musée d'Orsay's stature. Still, the quality of the works united was indisputable: as an eye-opener of note, the high-profile exposition was capable of making a broad audience acknowledge the prominence of the male nude in the art of the past two centuries, leading hopefully to future endeavors which delve deeper, addressing the questions that were here left unanswered.^[24]

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Notes

The author would like to thank the editors of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* and Prof. Dr. Marjan Sterckx for their helpful remarks.

[1] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 1, 3.

[2] Guy Cogeval et al., *Masculin Masculin: L'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours*, exh. cat. (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 20.

[3] Céline Piettre, "[Musée D'Orsay Curator Tackles the Ultimate Taboo: Academic Art](#)," accessed October 14, 2013.

[4] Ava Baron, "Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (2006): 143-160.

[5] Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 332.

[6] *Ibid.*, 331.

[7] Michael Camille, "The Abject Gaze and the Homosexual Body: Flandrin's Figure d'Etude," in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, ed. Whitney Davis (Philadelphia: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1994), 161, 165-166.

[8] Cogeval et al., *Masculin / Masculin*, 97.

[9] "[William Bouguereau: Equality Before Death](#)," accessed October 14, 2013.

[10] "[L'Abîme de Juste Becquet quitte le Jardin des Plantes pour le Musée d'Orsay](#)," accessed October 14, 2013.

[11] Clark, *The Nude*, 215.

[12] *Ibid.*, 227.

[13] There is only a baffling mention of "nudity and the nude" in the notice at the start of the exhibition, as if these are the opposing terms conventionally employed.

[14] Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), 271.

[15] Abigail Solomon-Godeau devoted a well-known study to the subject, in which she links its preponderance to an early-nineteenth-century crisis of masculinity: See: Abigail Solomon Godeau, *Male Trouble* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

[16] Cogeval et al., *Masculin / Masculin*, 13 (author's translation).

[17] Ibid., 16 (author's translation).

[18] Michael Hatt, "The Male Body in Another Frame: Thomas Eakins' *The Swimming Hole* as a Homoerotic Image," *Journal of Philosophy and Visual Arts: The Body* (1993): 9.

[19] Two of the most interesting contributions dealing specifically with the work in question are: Brendan Cole, "L'École de Platon de Jean Delville: Amour, beauté et androgynie dans la peinture fin-de-siècle," *La Revue Des Musées De France: Revue Du Louvre* 4 (2006): 57-63; and J. H. Leshner, "[The Philosophical Aspects of Jean Delville's L'École de Plato](#)," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 12, no. 2 (2013), accessed October 2, 2013.

[20] Cole, "L'Ecole," 58-59.

[21] Ibid., 61 (author's translation).

[22] Michel Dragnet, *Het symbolisme in België* [*Symbolism in Belgium*] (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2010), 285, 296.

[23] Cole, "L'Ecole," 62.

[24] Besides raising points similar to the ones above, the scathing exhibition review published in *Tribune de l'Art* lists a number of questions pertinent to an exploration of the male nude: Didier Rykner, "[Masculin / Masculin. L'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours](#)," accessed October 26, 2013.

Illustrations

All photographs taken by the author with permission of the Musée d'Orsay, unless otherwise noted.



Fig. 1, Installation view. Left: François Léon Bénouville, *La colère d'Achille* (*Achilles' Anger*), 1847. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier; middle: Anonymous, *Barberini Faun*, between 1799 and 1829. Plaster with metallic armatures. Musée du Louvre, Paris; right: Jean-Baptiste Frédéric Desmarais, *Le berger Pâris* (*The Shepherd Paris*), 1787. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jacques-Louis David, *Académie d'homme, dite Patrocle* (*Academy of a Man, called Patroclus*), 1780. Oil on canvas. Musée d'art Thomas-Henry, Cherbourg-Octeville. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, View of the entrance to the exhibition. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Installation view. Front right: Antonin Mercié, *David*, ca. 1872. Bronze. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back left: George Desvallièr, *Les tireurs à l'arc* (*Archers*), 1895. Pastel on paper. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

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Fig. 5, Henri Camille Danger, *Fléau! (Plague!)*, 1901. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)

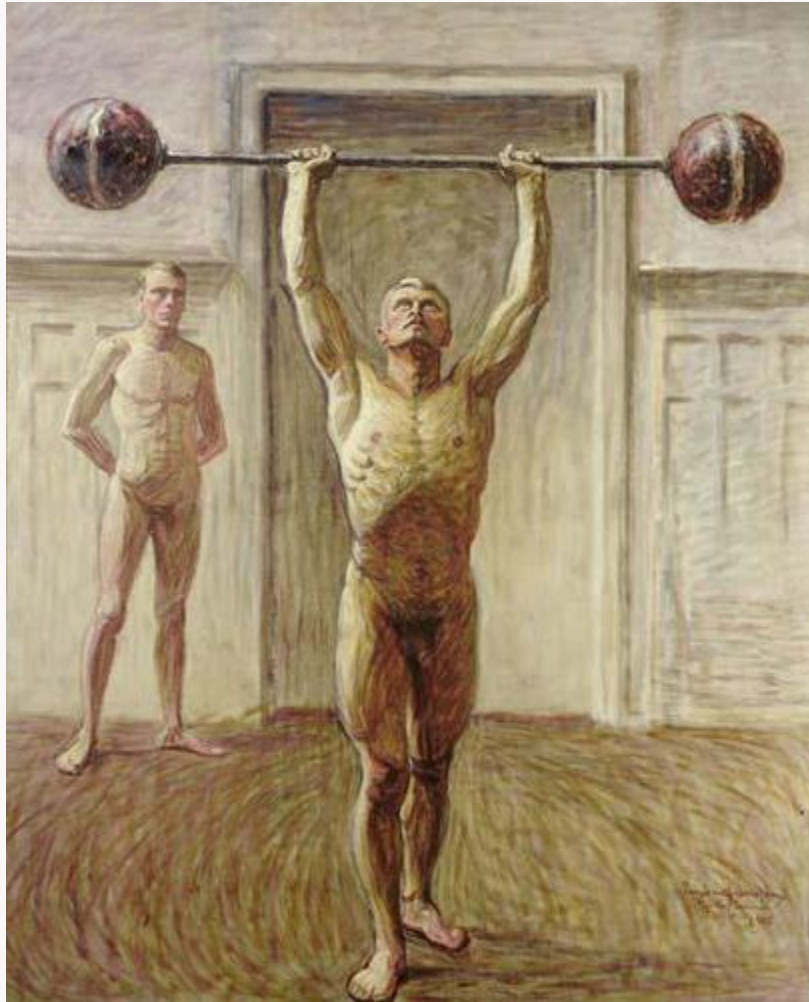


Fig. 6, Eugène Fredrik Jansson, *Pushing Weights with Two Arms II*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Peter and Renate Nahum. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view. Front: Ron Mueck, *Dead Dad*, 1996–97. Mixed medium. Stefan T. Edlis Collection, Chicago; back: William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Egalité devant la mort* (*Equality before Death*), 1848. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Installation view of the room 'Without Compromise'. Photo: Nicolas Krief, courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Installation view. Front: Just Becquet, *L'Abîme* (*The Abyss*), ca. 1901. Marble. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back left: Jules Elie Delaunay, *Ixion précipité dans les Enfers* (*Ixion Flung into Hell*), 1876. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes; back right: Francis Bacon, *Three Figures in a Room*, 1964. Oil on canvas. Centre Pompidou, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Installation view of the room 'In Pain'. Photo: Nicolas Krief, courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
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Fig. 11, Installation view. Left: Horace Le Blanc, *Le martyre de saint Sébastien* (*The Martyr Saint Sebastian*), 1624. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen; middle: Angel Zárraga, *Ex Voto with Saint Sebastian*, 1910. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte Munal, Mexico City; right: François-Xavier Fabre, *Saint Sébastien expirant* (*Saint Sebastian Dying*), 1789. Oil on canvas. Musée Fabre, Montpellier. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Installation view. Left: Richard Gerstl, *Semi-Nude Self-Portrait*, 1904–05. Oil on canvas. Leopold Museum, Vienna; middle: Auguste Rodin, *L'âge d'airain* (*The Age of Bronze*), 1877–80. Bronze. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; right: Lucian Freud, *David and Eli*, 2003–04. Oil on canvas. Private collection (?).

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Fig. 13, Left: Jean Broc, *La mort d'Hyacinthe*, 1801. Oil on canvas. Musées de Poitiers, Poitiers; right: Pierre et Gilles, *David et Jonathan (Jean-Yves et Moussa)*, 2005. Painted photograph. Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Installation view. Front: Jean Antoine Marie Idrac, *Mercure inventant le caducée* (*Mercury Inventing the Caduceus*), 1878. Marble. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; back: Jean Delville, *L'école de Platon* (*School of Plato*), 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)