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Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s *Three Graces* and the Winckelmannian Female Nude

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Abstract:

The final decades of the eighteenth century are associated in art-historical scholarship with the flourishing of representations of the ephebic male nude and this article complements such studies by elucidating theories and paintings of the female form. Particular focus is given to Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s *Three Graces* of 1793–94 as an embodiment of contemporaneous theoretical issues regarding the idealized female nude, grace, and the Graces found in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s writings as well as a variety of French treatises.
Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s *Three Graces* and the Winckelmannian Female Nude  
by Katie Hanson

In a 1786 letter to the comte d’Angiviller, Hubert Robert recorded an interaction he had had with Jacques-Louis David: “I fear that he will not take on the small painting after Bouchardon presumably for fear of not succeeding at it as he would wish to, since he told me that no one could do this better than Regnault.”[1] The female bather that Jean-Baptiste Regnault executed after a drawing by Edmé Bouchardon (as recorded in Angiviller’s 1794 inventory) is now lost, but David’s perceived insecurity in that area of representation vis-à-vis his peer confirms Regnault’s apparent early pre-eminence.[2] The excellence of Regnault’s female nudes was routinely recognized by his contemporaries.

In an 1806 notice on Regnault in the *Pausanias français*, Pierre Chaussard declared: “The purity of drawing and the charm of the brush come together in Regnault in a grand vigor of execution: perhaps no artist better painted the torso.”[3] The critic was also a champion of David, but when it came to the nude Chaussard favored Regnault.[4] This type of assessment continued throughout the artist’s lifetime. Alexandre Lenoir, writing in 1830, drew attention to Regnault’s facility and excellence in rendering the mythic female nude. He likened Regnault to famed ancient sculptor Praxiteles by imagining that the Venus Regnault depicted in his *Judgment of Paris* (Detroit Art Institute) would respond to this painting as she had to her sculpture at Knidos: “I appeared nude before only three mortals: Adonis, Anchises, and Paris; but Praxiteles, where did he see me?”[5] He then praised Regnault’s 1793–94 *Three Graces* (fig. 1), which he believed depicted “the perfection of the human form,” and the artist’s *Death of Adonis*, which he believed surpassed the work of Guido Reni in the beauty of its execution.[6]

Regarding the *Three Graces* and *Death of Adonis* (now known through an oil sketch in the Louvre), Lenoir reminded readers: “One can see with pleasure these two very classical paintings in the King’s museum.”[7] Lenoir highlighted the perfection of the human form in Regnault’s paintings of mythological female nudes, rather than in his *Education of Achilles, Descent, or Deluge* (all three are now in the Louvre), which were also mentioned and celebrated in Lenoir’s article, but which feature the male body, now so closely associated with Neoclassicism in art-historical scholarship.[8] Furthermore, Lenoir followed his praise of Regnault’s “truly classical” paintings of the female nude by quoting the artist warning the younger generation that “if they do not promptly return to serious study of antique statues and of paintings by great masters, they are lost.”[9] Lenoir’s inclusion of this warning in his article implicitly recommended Regnault’s own classicizing female nudes for study in the museum. The “perfection of the human form” that Lenoir saw evidenced in Regnault’s *Three Graces* embodies contemporaneous theoretical issues regarding the idealized female nude, grace, and the Graces found in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s work as well as a variety of French treatises.
While Lenoir’s description of Regnault’s *Three Graces* as “very classical” may seem obvious, such an assessment had been long overshadowed by Charles Blanc’s estimation, in the 1860s era of Realism, that the combination of real and ideal elements gave the work the “character of a genre painting.”[10] Regnault’s three idealized nudes present the female body in frontal, rear, and profile views (as is typical of depictions of the Graces) against a dark background with subtle indications of an outdoor setting; however, the distinctive faces and varied hair colors of the three women fueled later nineteenth-century speculation on Regnault’s use of live studio models or even his own female pupils to pose for the Graces.[11] More recent publications have proposed classical and Renaissance Graces (such as the ancient sculpture now in Siena Cathedral and Raphael’s painting in the Condé collection at Chantilly) as further sources, but none, to my knowledge, has suggested a Venus model.[12] Specifically, Regnault’s two peripheral Graces appear to be rendered from two viewpoints of the *Medici Venus*, as reproduced in the engravings accompanying Gérard Audran’s 1683 treatise on human bodily proportions (fig. 2), which was part of Regnault’s library.[13] Regnault’s central figure may be based on the back view of the same sculpture or on the Callipygian Venus, famed for her ideal posterior, also included in Audran’s treatise (figs. 3, 4). Basing the Graces on a Venus prototype harmonizes with the role of the Graces as companions of Venus; consulting Audran’s seventeenth-century treatise reinforces a viewpoint on classicism popularized by Winckelmann in the eighteenth century, in that both authors espoused the superiority of Greek sculptures, even over nature, as models for modern artists and ascribed artistic beauty to ancient Greece’s good climate and government.[14]
Fig. 2, Gérard Audran, *Medici Vénus*. Published as plate 15 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).

Fig. 3, Gérard Audran, *Medici Vénus*. Published as plate 16 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).

Fig. 4, Gérard Audran, *Greek Shepherdess (Callipygian Vénus)*. Published as plate 14 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).
Winckelmann wrote specifically about the *Medici Venus*; however, with so much scholarly attention focused on the male body in Neoclassical painting, his (admittedly less copious) studies and theories of the female form have been generally overlooked. In his 1764 *History of Ancient Art*, translated into French by 1766 and updated regularly thereafter, Winckelmann praised the *Medici Venus* as embodying the ideal female form. He wrote:

> Among the goddesses, Venus is outstanding, not only as the goddess of beauty, but because she alone, with the Graces, and the Seasons or Hours, has the privilege of appearing undraped. She also is found represented more frequently than any other goddess, and in different ages. Now, I will give a brief description of the statue of this goddess located in Florence. The *Medici Venus* resembles a rose which appears, after a lovely dawn, and unfolds its leaves to the rising sun. She passes from an age which is hard and somewhat harsh—like fruits before their perfect ripeness—into another, in which all the vessels of the animal system are beginning to dilate, and the breasts to fill out. When I contemplate her attitude, it brings to mind Laïs who Apelles instructed in love: I imagine seeing her as she appeared when she saw herself obligated to remove her clothes for the first time and to present herself nude to the eyes of the ecstatic artist.

In depicting mythic female nudes, artists could self-position within this history of great artists as those granted access to perfection. Honoré Lacombe de Prezel, in his 1779 *Iconological Dictionary*, found the *Medici Venus* to improve upon nature in its idealism: “Everyone who saw it agrees that it is the most beautiful female body that one could imagine, and that art, in this point, seems to have surpassed nature.” To depict the goddess’s form was to outdo nature in achieving the perfection of art, and it is no surprise that artists of the nude would emulate the *Medici Venus*, which was also praised in French art theory of the 1760s by Charles-Henri Watelet and Michel-François Dandré-Bardon.

The classical female form departed considerably from the ideal type of earlier eighteenth-century France, as seen, for example, in François Boucher’s female figures. The typical Boucher nude (of the 1730s through 1760s) had small shoulders and a slim waist above full hips and thighs that tapered toward delicate feet. The whole was typically rosy and topped by an ovoid head with large eyes, jutting chin, and full cheeks. This sort of nude deviated markedly from the classical profile and diminished ratio of hip to waist to shoulder evidenced in the *Medici Venus*, which was not even mentioned in Lacombe de Prezel’s *Iconological Dictionary* of 1756, but received glowing praise in the second edition, published in 1779, perhaps attesting to a shift in French taste during this period.

When the female body type favored in earlier eighteenth-century painting began to be replaced by the classicizing Grecian model of antique sculptures, many critics objected. Jean-Hugues Taraval’s *Autumn: Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 5), the first eighteenth-century contribution to the completion of the Louvre’s Apollo Gallery’s ceiling, appeared at the 1769 Salon where Daudet de Jossac deemed the chariot’s female occupant “une grosse dondon” or a big fatty. Charles-Nicolas Cochin affirmed this assessment of the female figure in his rebuttal: “Haven’t you been told that drinkers have a fondness for big fat women?” These pejorative descriptions implicitly contrasted the hearty body with the delicate, doll-like type common to so much Rococo painting. Even Denis Diderot described Taraval’s figures as “low and ignoble,” reinforcing conceptual alignment of broader bodies with coarseness. Yet, a few years later,
when Louis-Jacques Durameau exhibited his *Summer: Ceres and her Companions Beseeching the Sun* (fig. 6) at the 1775 Salon, critics praised the classically proportioned female figures as "beautiful, noble, well-drawn"[24] and specified that "Ceres' pose and the composition of these reclining and orderly nymphs at the front are the most pleasing part."[25] By the time Antoine-François Callet’s Apollo Gallery contribution, *Spring: Zephyr and Flora Crowning Cybele with Flowers* (fig. 7), appeared at the 1781 Salon, the fuller female form (albeit fully clothed) of his Cybele was wholly approved. The ample body struck critics as appropriate for an allegorical figure of Spring, a season of plentiful regeneration. An anonymous critic in 1769 found the “striking” Cybele “a corpulent and robust woman, whose exuberant vitality foretells the effects of the season on nature when she revives all things to distribute and lavish her treasures upon them.”[26] Critics found that the fuller female figure of Cybele embodied notions of vigor, strength, and health, as well as natural abundance and her classical facial type exuded nobility and grace. By contrast, within the same painting, Flora’s head was seen to lack beauty in comparison to the classical Zephyr or to Cybele’s “noble and graceful” visage.[27]

Fig. 5, Jean-Hugues Taraval, *Autumn: Triumph of Bacchus*, Salon of 1769. Oil on canvas. Apollo Gallery ceiling, Louvre, Paris. [larger image]

Fig. 6, Louis-Jacques Durameau, *Summer: Ceres and her Companions Imploiring the Sun*, Salon of 1775. Oil on canvas. Apollo Gallery ceiling, Louvre, Paris. [larger image]
This equation of the robust female body with abundance and nature also appeared in French medical and social treatises of the period. Indeed, the frail body came to be associated with the corset and infertility, while a more robust female body suggested the strength and health required to populate the nation.[28] This viewpoint certainly aligned women with procreation and domestic tasks, divorced from urban and political activities, but it also broke with notions of a debauched and artificial femininity of the ancien régime.[29] The revival of classical bodies has been ascribed to a Revolutionary desire to dissociate from national history, though the shift in artistic ideal also predated the Revolution, as did association of it with regeneration; robust people were even deemed one of the king’s greatest riches as early as 1778.[30] The hearty female body of ancient Greek sculptures evoked notions of the natural in its most perfected form.

The outdoor setting Regnault’s Three Graces (fig. 1) inhabit underscores the congruence of these bodies with nature. The blossoms in the Graces’ hair heighten this linkage and also recall Winckelmann’s sensual language, evoking opening flowers and ripening fruit, used in discussing the perfection of the Medici Venus. Such language resembles his now better-known descriptions of male nudes and also identifies the female figure as youthful, just at the moment of transition from childhood toward maturity, thus comparable to the ephebic male bodies that were so thoroughly analyzed in art-historical studies of the 1990s.[31] The youth of Regnault’s figures and their antique model aligned them with eighteenth-century notions of the natural being, but also made them resolutely divine.[32]

Winckelmann observed that “the youth of divinities of both sexes has its degrees and its different ages, in the representation of which art strives toward rendering all kinds of beauty.”[33] On the youth of Greek gods and goddesses, Winckelmann declared:

Could human perception, in creating living divinities, embody anything more dignified, anything more attractive for the imagination, than the state of eternal youth, than the spring of an unalterable life, of which the memory alone contrives to enchant us still in our more advanced age? This picture would be analogous to the idea of the immutability of a divine being: the beautiful stature of a young and brilliant divinity would give birth to love and tenderness, the sole affections that can ravish the soul in
sweet ecstasy. And is it not this ravishing of the senses that defines the human felicity that was sought in all religions, well or badly understood?[34]

Beauty and youth, according to Winckelmann, ravish the viewer’s spirit and inspire love and contentment. Such ideas reverberate in Winckelmann’s description of the Medici Venus, which he claimed to inspire love courtesy of the youthful perfection of its forms. Winckelmann’s analysis of the ancient Greeks’ equation of their deities with youth and beauty was common enough knowledge in France for the 1792 Dictionary of Art to include it, without further justification, in the entry on mythology.[35]

The youthful beauty of the Three Graces conveyed more than just their divine status, it also reinforced their conceptual association with innocence, charm, and good deeds. Regarding the demeanor of the Graces in ancient sculptures, Winckelmann found that “the physiognomy of these deities expresses neither gaiety nor gravity, it announces the sweet satisfaction, peculiar to the innocence of this age.”[36] Antoine Mongez (whose wife was in Regnault’s studio during 1793–94) borrowed this line from Winckelmann for his own assessment of the Graces in his 1786–94 Dictionary of Antiquity and ascribed further resonance to the youthfulness of the mythic Graces.[37] He elaborated that “they are painted young because charms are always regarded as the lot of youth . . . [and] because the memory of a good deed should never age; light and lively because one must oblige promptly and a good deed must never be kept waiting.”[38] The youth of the Graces conveyed their essential divine association with gratitude and recognition.

Watelet’s tract on grace, from his 1760 Art of Painting, which reappeared in the 1792 Dictionary of Art, specified that grace was the purview of youth and of women. He asserted: “Grace consists in the accord of these movements [of the body] with those of the soul. In childhood and youth, the soul moves freely and immediately on the springs of expression. . . . Consequently, childhood and youth are the ages of the graces. Suppleness and gentleness of the parts are so totally necessary to the graces, that the mature age is excluded.”[39] He specified: “The gender that is the most supple in its motivations, the most sensitive in its affections, in which the desire to please is a sentiment to a certain degree independent of it, because it is necessary to the system of nature; this gender that makes beauty more interesting, when it escapes from artifice and affectation also offers the graces at their most seductive.”[40] Winckelmann concurred, asserting in his On Grace in Works of Art, that the Graces should look “as one would want to see a young beauty that one loves exiting one’s bed,” again reinforcing an alignment of desirable concepts with desirable forms.[41] The casual stances and outdoor environs of Regnault’s Three Graces resonate with these assessments of grace as natural, in its freedom from affectation, and as alluring.

Regarding female divinities and their youthful purity, Winckelmann assured readers: “Among goddesses, one attributed a perpetual virginity to Diana and to Pallas; the other goddesses who had lost it could recover it. This is the reason that the breast of goddesses and Amazons is always represented like that of young ladies who have not yet tasted the fruit of love: that is to say, that on these figures the nipple is not yet developed.”[42] He elaborated: “In divine figures the breast always has a virginal form. The breasts are tight and similar to hillocks terminated in a point: this form of the breast seems to have been regarded as the most beautiful: for this is
the form of this part in the age of innocence.”[43] Winckelmann singled out Andrea del Sarto’s depiction of breasts as an exemplary model in paint.[44]

In Regnault’s Three Graces too, the nipples appear pale in comparison to the figures’ own flushed cheeks or lips and contrast those of lustful women depicted in his Socrates Tearing Alcibiades from the Bosom of Voluptuousness of 1791 (Louvre). Regnault was keenly engaged with narrative in his work and his home and studio housed extensive libraries.[45] One of his volumes was Lacombe de Prezel’s (previously cited) Iconological Dictionary, which included this assessment of the Three Graces: “They are nude, because one must oblige one’s friends with sincerity and without affectation. They are young: the memory of a kind deed must never age. They are virgins: what virtue demands more prudence and more restraint than the generous inclination? Socrates seeing a man who gave lavishly of his kindnesses without distinction and to all who came: may the gods confound you, he cried: the Graces are virgins, and you make them courtesans.”[46] Clearly, Regnault would have understood the need to insist on his Graces’ virginity.

Anne-Louis Girodet’s depictions of Danaë present another apt contrast in this regard. The standing Danaë (fig. 8), executed as part of an erudite decorative scheme and rife with intellectual content, as well as eroticism, displays nipples that, in hue, are barely discernable from the surrounding flesh.[47] The seated figure in Mademoiselle Lange as Danaë (fig. 9) exhibits more prominent and roseate nipples (that match the flush of her own cheeks and lips) indicative of her lust and essential to the work’s satirical intent of mocking the actress Mlle Lange for her venality.[48] The concept was clearly quite well known and understood in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France, as François Gérard and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, as well as Girodet and Regnault, also depicted their fabled females with modest hillocks topped by a delicate pale peak. Ingres even annotated his drawing Venus with a Gesture of Modesty (fig. 10) “virgin nipple not yet developed” at the upper left and elaborated that “among the ancients the nipples are not visible on goddesses because such is the form of this part in adolescence” near the lower left of the sheet, thereby affirming his intent to evoke youth and virginity in rendering this female form.[49]

Fig. 8, Anne-Louis Girodet, Danaë, 1798. Oil on canvas. Museum der Bildenden Künst, Leipzig. [larger image]
These mythological figures stand apart from the virtuous mothers painted by many artists of the period and often discussed by art historians. Women, excluded from political action by late 1793, have been associated with the body, sexuality, and reproduction, whether virtuous and nourishing, in the case of patriotic mothers, or debauched and unnatural, associated with aristocratic women of the ancien régime. The erotic charge of the idealized female nude could bring to mind the ideal spouse and future mother; as Joan Landes has demonstrated, the youthful female body used in Revolutionary allegorical prints connoted notions of nature and nurturing as opposed to the artificial or haggard appearance of female bodies associated with aristocracy. This Madonna/whore binary is rendered problematic by the youthful and virginal female nudes of myth, who are more akin to ephebes—like Girodet’s Endymion (Louvre) and Jean Broc’s Apollo and Hyacinth (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Poitiers)—than to the mothers or aristocrats the binary posits. The youthful, virginal mythic female nudes, more analogous to the fantasy world of the mythic ephebes, than the maternal domain or aristocratic memory, also provide a third alternative. Indeed, the mythic female nude, like the
ephebe, could also be read as transcending immediate socio-political concerns and embodying an ideal of beauty that, as Winckelmann asserted, “may transport the spirit to a sweet ecstasy.”

The transportative thrill of the idealized female body was to be paired also with an intellectually informative face. Winckelmann urged readers not to judge goddesses by body alone, but to consider carefully the face as well in order to appreciate character. Writing of the general similarity of female figures in antique sculptures, he noted: “My remark as to the similarity of the nude parts of female figures is to be understood only of the shape of the body, and does not exclude a distinctive character in their heads. This has been strongly expressed in each goddess as well as in the heroines, so that both superior and inferior goddesses can be distinguished, even when the emblems usually adjoined to them are wanting.”[53] The particularized faces of Regnault’s Three Graces may reflect just such consideration.

Whereas, as art historian Candace Clements has shown, earlier eighteenth-century artistic theory posited that the female form must be most idealized and generalized in its extremities (she specified “head, hands, and feet”), the Academy’s expressive head competitions (founded in 1759), like Winckelmann’s treatise, drew attention to the expressive and individual qualities of female faces.[54] Unlike many depictions of the Graces, wherein the figures differ only in pose or in the vantage point from which they are presented, Regnault individualized his goddesses in feature and coloration. With regard to the differentiation of the Graces, Lacombe de Prezel wrote: “The names signify brilliant, sweet, vivacious, to teach us that in a discourse, a single pleasure will not suffice to maintain our attention for a long time. The brilliant alone tires us: the sweet alone becomes tasteless: the vivacious alone dizzies: the Three Graces must therefore hold each other.”[55] In Regnault’s composition, the differentiated heads remind the viewer of three distinct qualities unified by the figures’ gestures and uniformity of body type.

While the face of Regnault’s flaxen-haired central figure is obscured, the redhead at far left displays a classical profile and the raven-haired Grace at right presents a full frontal view of the face that allows for close consideration. Her pronounced lower lids correspond to a particular feature Winckelmann praised in the Medici Venus, on which Regnault’s brunette Grace clearly is based. Winckelmann wrote: “All representations of Venus have in their softly opened eyes that expression of tenderness and love which the Greeks term ‘liquid,’ which I will elucidate in my later discussion of the beauty of eyes. This look is, however, entirely free from wantonness, by which certain modern sculptors claim to characterize their Venus, for Love was regarded by the ancient artists and intelligent philosophers as, in the words of Euripides, the associate of Wisdom.”[56] Winckelmann clarified, in his discussion of eyes, that in depictions of Venus, “the elevated lower eyelid characterizes this grace and this languor that the Greeks call ‘liquid.’”[57] Regnault’s serious Graces, with wise, “liquid” eyes, suggest to the viewer a deeper wisdom than the beauty of their graceful bodily forms. An erotic charge need not negate the intellectual and philosophical dimensions in a female form; as previously noted, Winckelmann himself opined that graceful Graces should look as though freshly out of bed. Moreover, a similar inflammation of the lower lid appears in Gérard’s Psyche (Louvre) and Ingres’s Venus (Musée Condé, Chantilly), suggesting the evident commonality and comprehensibility of this feature for mythic female nudes.
The notion of “wisdom,” indicated by the gaze, relates also to period concepts of grace itself as of the mind. Grace, according to Winckelmann, “is that which pleases the mind” and “is formed by education and reflection.”[58] One should not be surprised to find a deeper meaning within the pleasing forms, as Lacombe de Prezel assured readers: A depiction of the Three Graces featured prominently at the ancient school in Athens “to show that they could form an alliance with philosophy and that the useful must appear only in the guise of pleasure.”[59] Regnault’s Three Graces aligns closely with contemporaneous scholarly interpretations of the theme and theories of the female form.

Regnault included a half-sized version of his Three Graces in his Parisian solo exhibition of 1800.[60] In his exhibition pamphlet, Regnault described the Three Graces with a quotation of a verse from Jean de la Fontaine’s poem “Adonis”: “Grace is more beautiful than beauty.”[61] With this quotation, he encouraged attuned viewers to seek something more, something deeper than lovely forms. Charles-Paul Landon, in his review of the 1800 exhibition, remarked: “This captivating painting of the Three Graces collects universal praise. This exquisite group, by the delicacy and correctness of the forms, the sweet opposition of the movements and poses, corresponds perfectly to the idea of these amiable divinities given to us by poets.”[62] He included analysis of Regnault’s Three Graces, and Charles Normand’s reproductive line engraving of the painting, in his 1801 Annals of the Museum, thereby giving Regnault’s forms and content an even broader audience.[63] Indeed, as noted at the outset of this article, Regnault’s contemporaries continued to highlight his achievement in the Three Graces throughout his lifetime. Renewed consideration of Regnault’s Three Graces allows for exploration of theory and criticism of mythic female nudity, which has been overshadowed by the ephebe in art history and which harkens new directions in nineteenth-century French painting, wherein the female nude would supersede the male.

Katie Hanson earned her master’s degree at Williams College and her doctorate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; her dissertation, entitled “A Neoclassical Conundrum: Painting Greek Mythology in France, 1780–1825,” was advised by Dr. Patricia Mainardi. She is currently a curatorial fellow at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, where she is researching eighteenth-century French paintings for a new catalogue of the permanent collection. Her other upcoming publications include “An Uplifting Finale for Jacques-Louis David: Coming to Peace with Mars Disarmed,” which will be published this summer (2012) in the anthology Gravity in Art, eds. Mary Edwards and Elizabeth Bailey (McFarland), and “Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s Solo Exhibition, Paris 1800,” which will appear within the anthology Alternative Venues, ed. Andrew Graciano, next year (2013).

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Notes

All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. Quotations in French retain the spelling of the original.
speculations of Regnault’s having posed his female students in the nude for his pupils. A.Y., “Mademoiselle Hémery,” repeats this speculation of the late nineteenth century that the Graces were based on Regnault’s Catalogue Raisonné” (PhD. diss., University of London, Courtauld Institute, 1980), 451–52, to live models. Ibid. Christopher Sells, “Jean-Baptiste Regnault (1754–1829) Biography and

[1] “J’ay vu aussi David. Il m’a paru tres sensible au Refus de la permission pour fair mouler le gladiateur il espere vous flicher un allant vous expliquer luy meme ses raisons. Je crains qu’il ne se charge pas du petit tableau d’apres Bouchardon dans la crainte vraisemblablement de n’y pas reussir comme il le desirait car il m’a dit que personne ne pourrait faire cela mieux que Renaud.” Hubert Robert to comte d’Angiviller dated as received February 7, 1786. Archives National (Paris) O/1/1919. The variant spelling “Renaud” appeared in the Salon livrets of the 1780s as well as in Robert’s correspondence. See for example: Exposition des peintures, sculptures et gravures de Messieurs de l’Académie Royale (Paris: Hériassant, 1785), 29. By the 1790s and for the remainder of the artist’s career, as is also the case now, his name has more consistently been spelled “Regnault.”


[11] Writing during the heyday of French Realism, Blanc insisted upon Regnault’s commitment to live models. Ibid. Christopher Sells, “Jean-Baptiste Regnault (1754–1829) Biography and Catalogue Raisonne” (PhD. diss., University of London, Courtauld Institute, 1980), 431–52, repeats this speculation of the late nineteenth century that the Graces were based on Regnault’s pupils. A.Y., “Mademoiselle Hémery,” L’Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux 25, no. 374, February 29, 1892, 222–23, references two previous discussions in the same publication regarding speculations of Regnault’s having posed his female students in the nude for his Three Graces and clarified that Regnault used his students faces, not their bodies. Albertine Clément-Hémery,
Souvenirs de 1793 et 1794 (Cambrai: Lesne-Daloin, 1832), 22, 49n11 asserts that Regnault employed studio models and borrowed his pupils faces for certain “tableaux de chevalet” including Diana and Callisto and Mars Disarmed by the Graces; she makes no mention of the Three Graces.


Audran, Les Proportions, preface.

Solomon-Godeau, Male Trouble, 69–70 described Jean-Baptiste Regnault as “producing (somewhat exceptionally for the period) icons of eroticized femininity.” Parentheses per the original. She also observed that a “withdrawal of the eroticized male body from visual culture and its replacement by an eroticized female one can be traced in the careers of many of the period’s artists, such as Regnault as well as David’s own students,” though the eroticized female body was not the focus of her study. Ibid., 60–61. Potts, Flesh and the Ideal, chapter four includes a subsection on “The Sublime Fetish” wherein he employs Freudian fetish analysis to assess Winckelmann’s description of the antique Niobe group.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Histoire de l’art chez les anciens, trans. Gottfried Sellius, ed. Jean-Baptiste-René Robinet (Paris: Saillant, 1766). I have used the more comprehensive 1789 translation, since it is more contemporaneous with the paintings under consideration. “Parmi les divinités, Vénus comme la déesse de la beauté, occupe à juste titre le premier rang. Elle seule avec les Graces et les déités des saisons ou les Heures, a le privilège de paroître sans vêtement. Elle se trouve aussi représentée plus souvent que les autres déesses, et cela dans différents âges. Je ferai ici une courte description de la statue de cette déesse, conservée à Florence. La Vénus de Médicis est semblable à une rose qui paroît à la suite d’une belle aurore, et qui s’épanouit au lever du soleil. Elle entre dans cet âge ou les vaisseaux commencent à s’étendre, où le sein prend de la consistance. Quand je la contemple dans son attitude, je me représente cette Laïs qu’Apelle obligée la première fois d’ôter ses vêtements et de se présenter nue aux yeux de l’artiste extasié.” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Histoire de l’art chez les anciens, trans. M. Huber (Paris: Barrois; Savoye, 1789), 2:76.

“Tous ceux qui l’ont vue conviennent que c’est le plus beau corps de femme que l’on puisse se figurer, et que l’art en ce point semble avoir surpassé la nature.” Honoré Lacombe de Prezel, Dictionnaire iconologique, ou Introduction de la connoissance des peintures, sculptures, estampes. Nouvelle édition, revue et considérablement augmentée (Paris: Hardouin, 1779), 2:277–78.

Claude-Henri Watelot, L’Art de peindre. Poème, avec des réflexions sur les différentes parties de la peinture. Nouvelle édition (Amsterdam, 1761), 81 and plate following page 86; Michel François Dandré-Bardon, Traité de peinture suivi d’un essai sur la sculpture pour servir d’introduction à une histoire universelle, relative à ces beaux-arts (Paris: Saillant, 1765), 55.


“De plus, est-ce que tu ne sais pas que les Buveurs aiment les grosses Dondons.” [Charles-Nicolas Cochin,] Réponse de M. Jérome, rapeur de tabac, à M. Raphael, Peintre de l’Académie de S. Luc, Entrepreneur général des Enseignes de la ville, faubourgs et banlieue de Paris (Paris: Jombert, 1769), 26.

Hanson: Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s Three Graces and the Winckelmannian Female Nude

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[27] Brigitte Gallini, “Antoine-François Callet, Spring or Zephyr and Flora Crowning Cybele with Flowers,” trans. Michael Gibson in Bresc-Bautier, Apollo Gallery in the Louvre, 145 summarizes critical responses comparing the figures’ faces. The quoted description comes from the anonymous, Panard au Salon [sic] (1781), as transcribed in Collection Deloynes 12, no. 259, 146. “Beau tableau dont le plus grand défaut est de n’être pas vu à la place qui lui est destinée. Composition riche, riante et vigoureuse. Le groupe de la Terre trainée par ses lions, est admirable, le caractère de tête de Cibèle est noble et gracieux ; mais Flore est d’un ton de craie.”

[28] Perrot, Le Travail des apparences, 80. See Jacques Bonnoud, Dégradation de l’espèce humaine par l’usage des corps à baleine : Ouvrage dans lequel on démontre que c’est aller contre les lois de la nature, augmenter la dépopulation et abâtardir pour ainsi dire l’homme d’en la mettre à la torture dès les premiers moments de son existence, sous prétexte de le former (Paris: Hérisant fils, 1770), 168–69 regarding the more robust female body as embodying the strength and health required to populate the nation.


[30] Landes, Visualizing the Nation; Perrot, Le Travail des apparences, 76; and Jean-Baptiste Moheau, Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France (Paris: Moutard, 1778), 11 describes robust people as the king’s greatest riches.

[31] See for example: Crow, Emulation; Solomon-Godeau, Male Trouble; and Potts, Flesh and the Ideal.

[32] D. G. Charlton, New Images of the Natural in France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chapter 7 addresses eighteenth-century understandings of children as natural as compared to adults; chapter 8 outlines the eighteenth-century alignment of nature with benevolence and goodness and demonstrates contemporaneous understanding of women as closer to nature than men and as always remaining child-like (see especially 165 in that regard).


[34] “La conception humaine, en créant des divinités sensibles, pouvait-elle se figurer rien de plus digne, rien de plus attrayant pour l’imagination, que l’état d’une jeunesse éternelle, que le printemps d’une vie inaltérable, dont le souvenir seul nous enchante encore dans un âge plus avancé ? Ce tableau étoit analogue à l’idée de l’immutabilité d’un être divin : la belle stature de ces Nymphes, couchées et rangées sur le devant du Tableau, sont ce que l’on aime le mieux.”


[37] See Clément-Hémery, Souvenirs, 7 on Mme Mongez’s presence in Regnault’s studio during the 1790s.


“Le sexe le plus souple dans ses ressorts, le plus sensible dans ses affections, dans lequel le désir de plaire est un sentiment et quelque façon indépendant de lui, parce qu’il est nécessaire au système de la nature; ce sexe qui rend la beauté plus intéressante, offre aussi, lorsqu’il échappe à l’artifice et à l’affectation, les graces sous l’aspect le plus séduisant.” Ibid.

“Ainsi qu’on voudroit voir sortir de son lit une jeune beauté qu’on aime.” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “De la grâce dans les ouvrages de l’art,” in *Recueil de différentes pièces sur les arts par M. Winckelmann.* Traduit de l’allemand, trans. H. Jansen (Paris: Barrois l’aîné, 1786), 292. Winckelmann’s statement that “grace in works of art concerns principally the figure of man” has been taken, in some art-historical studies, from the French translation—in which the final word in the sentence is “l’homme”—to indicate only the male body. See, Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble,* 43. However, Winckelmann’s original German formulation is “die menschliche figure” and refers to the human body generally, as opposed to animal bodies or inanimate objects, and he references male and female sculptures as examples of grace. On this, see Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “De la grâce dans,” 287, which states: “La grace dans les ouvrages de l’art, regarde principalement la figure de l’homme.” Winckelmann, *Werke. Einzig rechtmäßige Original-Ausgabe* (Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1847), 2:65 transcribes the original German. Winckelmann’s close associate and his emulators also identified grace across gender. For example, Robin noted in the 1792 *Dictionary of Art:* “La Vénus de Médicis, la Vénus accroupie, l’Apollino, l’Hermaphrodite, sont, comme indique fort bien Mengs, de vrais modes de grace que nous avons dans l’antique.” [A footnote citing Mengs is also provided.] Italics per the original. Jean-Baptiste-Claude Robin, “Grace,” in Watelet and Lévesque, *Dictionnaire,* 2:459.

Winckelmann, *Histoire,* 2:51. “Parmi les divinités du sexe, on attribuoiit à Diane et à Pallas une virginité perpétuelle; les autres déesses qui l’avoient perdue pouvoient la recouvrer . . . C’est par cette raison que la gorge des déesses et des amazones est toujours représentée comme celle des jeunes filles . . . qui n’ont pas encore goûté le fruit de l’amour: c’est-à-dire, qu’à ces figures le bout du sein n’est pas encore développé.”


Ibid., 2:152. He cites an untraceable drawing by Andrea del Sarto, but, based on his criteria for praise, the *Leda* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Belgique would be a worthy substitute. He contrasts this type of depiction with the full breasts and prominent nipples depicted on the figure of Truth in Domenichino’s frescoes in Rome’s Villa Costaguti.


“Ibid., 211 and 216n75 regarding the presence of Lacombe de Prezel’s work in Regnault’s studio library. Lacombe de Prezel, *Dictionnaire iconologique . . . Nouvelle édition,* 1:264. “Elles sont nues, parce qu’il faut obliger ses amis avec sincérité et sans affectation. Elles sont jeunes; la mémoire d’un bienfait ne doit jamais vieillir. Elles sont vierges: quelle vertu demande plus de prudence et de retenue que l’inclinaison bienfaisante? Socrate voyant un homme qui prodiguait ses biensfaits sans distinction et à tout venant: que les Dieux te confondent, s’écria-t-il: les Graces sont vierges, et tu en fais des courtisanes.” Italics per the original.


Solomon-Godeau, Male Trouble, 206, asserts that “French artists of the Revolutionary period preferred to depict virtuous mothers when they undertook to create patriotic subjects.” On this topic, see also Duncan, “Happy Mothers,” 370–88; and Rosenblum, “Caritas,” 42–63.

Solomon-Godeau, Male Trouble, 205 on the ancien régime; 207 on Jacobins’ exclusion of women from politics after a bloody riot between market women and female Jacobins in October of 1793; and 214 on alignment of women with body, sex, and reproduction.

Landes, Visualizing the Nation, 120.


“Les noms signifient brillant, douceur, vivacité, pour nous apprendre que dans un discours, un seul agrément ne suffit pas pour soutenir long-temps notre attention. Le brillant tout seul nous fatigue : la douceur toute seule affaît : la vivacité toute seule étourdit : les trois Graces doivent donc se tenir . . . ; c’est-à-dire, que le brillant doit être doux, la douceur vive, et la vivacité douce et lumineuse.” Lacombe de Prezel, Dictionnaire iconologique . . . Nouvelle édition, 1: 265. Italics per the original.

“Mais l’une et l’autre Vénus ont des yeux pleins de douceur, avec un regard languissant et amoureux que les Grecs nomment ΥΓΡΩΝ, comme je le ferai voir ci-après dans mes remarques sur la beauté des yeux. Ce regard toutefois est bien éloigné des traits lascifs, par lesquels certains sculpteurs modernes ont prétendu caractériser leur Vénus : car dans l’antiquité l’Amour a été regardé par les artistes, ainsi que par les philosophes sensés, comme le collègue de la sagesse.” [A footnote to Euripides is then provided.] Winckelmann, Histoire, 2:78.

“La paupière inférieure tirée en haut caractérise cette grace et cette langueur que les Grecs nomment ΥΓΡΩΝ.” Ibid., 2:133.

Winckelmann, “De la grâce,” Recueil de différentes pièces, 285. “La grace est ce qui plaît à l’esprit . . . La grace se forme par l’éducation et par la réflexion.”

Lacombe de Prezel, Dictionnaire iconologique . . . Nouvelle édition, 1:266. “Les trois Graces étoient représentées . . . dans l’endroit le plus apparent du Lycée à Athènes, pour montrer qu’elles peuvent s’allier à la Philosophie, et que l’utile ne doit paroir que sous les dehors de l’agrément.”

I analyze Regnault’s solo exhibition of 1800 at length in a forthcoming anthology, tentatively entitled Alternative Vénues, edited by Andrew Graciano. Regarding the size of the Three Graces exhibited in 1800, Charles-Paul Landon lamented that they were not life-size. Landon, “Réflexions sur les tableaux de Regnault exposés dans une des salles du palais national des sciences et des arts le 30 pluvoise an 8. 19 février 1800,” Collection Deloynes 21, no. 604, 843. In his Annales du muséeet l’école moderne des beaux-arts (Paris: Didot jeune, 1801), 146, Landon specified that Normand’s engraving reproduced the painting formerly exhibited “in the studio of the artist in the Louvre” and which was “a bit under half life-size” (“de proportion un peu au dessous de demi-nature”).


“Tableau seduisant des trois graces reunit tous les suffrages. Ce groupe delicieux, par la delicatesse et la correction des formes, la douce opposition des mouvemens et des attitudes repond parfaitement à l’idée que nous ont donné les poètes de ces aimables divinités.” Landon, Réflexions, 843.

Illustrations

Fig. 1, Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *Three Graces*, an II, 1793–94. Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 2, Gérard Audran, *Medici Vénus*. Published as plate 15 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).
Fig. 3, Gérard Audran, *Medici Venus*. Published as plate 16 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).

Fig. 4, Gérard Audran, *Greek Shepherdess (Callipygian Venus)*. Published as plate 14 in his *Les Proportions du corps humain: Mesurées sur les plus belles figures de l’antiquité* (Paris: Audran, 1683).
Fig. 5, Jean-Hugues Taraval, *Autumn: Triumph of Bacchus*, Salon of 1769. Oil on canvas. Apollo Gallery ceiling, Louvre, Paris. [return to text]

Fig. 6, Louis-Jacques Durameau, *Summer: Ceres and her Companions Imploring the Sun*, Salon of 1775. Oil on canvas. Apollo Gallery ceiling, Louvre, Paris. [return to text]
Fig. 7, Antoine-François Callet, *Spring: Zephyr and Flora Crowning Cybele with Flowers*, Salon of 1781. Oil on canvas. Apollo Gallery ceiling, Louvre, Paris. [return to text]

Fig. 8, Anne-Louis Girodet, *Danaë*, 1798. Oil on canvas. Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig. [return to text]
Fig. 9, Anne-Louis Girodet, *Mademoiselle Lange as Danaë*, 1799. Oil on canvas. Frame in gilded wood with, in the corners, four medallions in grisaille painted by the artist. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. [return to text]

Fig. 10, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Venus with a Gesture of Modesty*, ca. 1806–20. Graphite on paper. Musée Ingres, Montauban. [return to text]