

The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy

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As L. P. Hartley famously remarked in *The Go-Between* (1953), ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’. This was more prescient than he knew, for most of the English-speaking world now seems to view the past not merely as foreign but as totally alien – diverting at times, perhaps, but utterly irrelevant to them and their lives.

To quote its publisher and editor, this ‘exciting new series’ aspires to change all that: ‘to show how antiquity is relevant to life today’. Aimed at ‘students and general readers ... it seeks to engage, provoke, and stimulate, and to show how, for large parts of the world, Graeco-Roman antiquity continues to be relevant to debates in culture, politics, and society’ (p. ix). A Quixotic crusade. For in the United States at least, if a book of this kind doesn’t catch fire on Amazon or isn’t geared to a college course, one might as well save the ink and paper.

Squire takes his charge ‘to engage, provoke, and stimulate’ seriously. Relentlessly jaunty, he tends to veer from point to point as if writing for the attention-deficient, seeking ‘to collapse history ... not just “ancients and moderns”, but each *through, alongside, and in relation to* the other’ (p. 29; Squire’s italics). He profusely peppers his narrative, British tabloid style, with puckish puns, jangling jingles, and artful alliterations (plus some exasperating exaggerations), of which I offer a scanty sample: ‘A passé past?’ (p. 24); ‘V-ness’ (p. 71, on Aphrodite’s crotch); ‘turn this manmade manikin into mortal muff’ (p. 87: muff?); ‘ideal idol turns living idle doll’ (p. 88); ‘delightfully derrièred’ (p. 90, Aphrodite again); ‘the nude portrait – a bare necessity’ (p. 126); ‘face-to-face value’ (p. 129); and most egregiously, ‘wholly holey holy lord’ (p. 174). Ouch.

The book’s structure is straightforward. An introduction reasserts antiquity’s relevance; attacks the mutually exclusive parochialism of many classical archaeologists and historians of more recent art; and articulates three guiding principles.

First, that the ancient art of the body is to be found everywhere we look: like it or not—and there have been many reasons for not liking it—antiquity has supplied the mould for all subsequent attempts to figure and figure out the human body. Second, the book argues that the afterlife of ancient images necessarily complicates our understanding of what they ‘originally’

meant: each modern re-appropriation of ancient models muddles the assumed distinction between antiquity and modernity in the first place. Thirdly and finally, my objective has been to demonstrate, through a series of diachronic case studies, how ancient and modern *corpora* of images shed light on each other. When viewed comparatively, ancient and modern images of the body prove at once familiar and strange: there follows a process of *mutual* illumination' (pp. xi-xii; Squire's italics).

Chapter one, 'Embodying the classical,' begins with Canova's *Napoleon* and moves from its neo-classical aesthetic and assumptions through Polykleitos's *Doryphoros*, Renaissance canons, 'body fascism' (Sandow, Breker, Thorak, and Riefenstahl), and assorted modern anticlassical '-isms', to Dalí and Marc Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant*. A coda begs indulgence on grounds of space for downplaying painting, relief sculpture, and other media, plus 'huge topics' (p. 31) such as desire and homoeroticism, images of Orientals and Others, the suffering body, hybrids, monsters, and the dead.

To these omissions add the baroque and its enormously influential icon, the *Laokoon*, mentioned (without illustration) only on pp. 15, 51–3, and 118. Since Squire used it as a *Leitmotiv* in an earlier book, this is puzzling – until the penny drops. Despite its inclusive title, this book is more about *classicism* and its discontents than about 'the art of the body' as such.

Chapter two tackles the 'Greek miracle' and its consequences, beginning with the 'textbook' case (p. 33) of Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1950) and its classic narrative of Greek making and matching, from Athenian Geometric stick men through *kouroi* to the Kritios Boy.

Proceeding via the Renaissance to Winckelmann, Squire disputes both the realist and democratic/liberal interpretations of this 'Miracle' and then uses the *Doryphoros*, Myron's *Diskobolos*, and others to argue that Renaissance and Enlightenment concerns have corrupted our eyes and minds, and that their real driving force is the search for clarity of articulation and 'continuity of convention' (p. 60). Thud. He concludes:

For my money, we are not dealing with (what later writers would rationalize as) 'naturalism' at all ... rather, these changes in presentational mode are bound up with changing cultural, intellectual, and theological ideas about figuration on the one hand, and about the individual viewing subject on the other. Above all ... it was challenges in (re-)presenting the gods that were at issue ...' (pp. 67–8).

Intriguing at first sight, this catch-all paragraph actually *explains* almost nothing, and the gods – hitherto completely absent – immediately vanish again. We shall revisit this chapter – and the next – below.

Chapter three, the longest, discusses the female nude. After pondering the suffragette attack on Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus*, Squire focuses on Praxiteles' *Knidian Aphrodite*, mobilizing Berger, Clark, Mulvey, Laqueur, Botticelli, Dürer, and Alma Tadema to unpack its tangled legacy. The resulting narrative of soft porn, voyeurism, and prostitution is complicated, however, by the tales of the Judgment of Paris, Zeuxis and the maidens of Kroton, Pygmalion, and Ruskin's traumatic wedding night – plus the *Venus de Milo*. The upshot: (a) 'No woman, it seems, could ever live up to Zeuxis' male imagination' (p. 82); (b) it reduces 'woman' ... to ... fetishized segments' (p. 83), minus pubic hair and even genitals; and (c) 'the ancient material *matters* within modern-day debates about gender, pornography, and representation' (p. 88; Squire's italics).

Having thus entwined ancient and modern, Squire then disentangles them. He first reconstructs the Knidia in her original setting; then unpicks these assorted reactions in order to re-establish some historical distance; and finally stresses – correctly – that above all the statue represented a *goddess*, and that any historical interpretation *must* begin with this obvious but usually (not ‘*always*’, p. 96; Squire’s italics) overlooked fact. ‘Just what might it mean to encounter a [naked] godhead?’ (p. 102). The last few pages ponder issues of transgression, including Artemis and Actaeon, and the notorious ‘Slipper-slapper’ from Delos.

Chapter four turns to Rome. A matron as Venus and (again) Canova’s *Napoleon* spark a discussion of ‘nudity as a costume’ (Larisa Bonfante) as an elevating device. Squire then examines the predominantly negative reactions, Napoleon’s included, to Canova’s colossus, Greenough’s *George Washington* (1841), and finally Giorgio Gori’s wondrously kitschy *Genius of Fascism* (1937): a naked Mussolini perched uncomfortably astride a horse. Ancient precedents are invoked, including Perikles, the *Tyrannicides* (see below), the Terme General, and the Pseudo-Athlete (a Roman trader) from Delos. Alternative formats are investigated via a togate and a cuirassed Augustus (the Primaporta one), with a bizarre assessment of their supposed novelty and shock effect. For the muscle cuirass had been invented by 700 B.C. and had appeared in portraits in armor by 500. Conventionalized for half a millennium, how could the latter have appeared ‘ridiculous’ (p. 141) to Romans, the Primaporta statue included? Moreover, Squire has forgotten that Augustus’s wife Livia commissioned the statue *for her own villa* – to ridicule him? Also, the Caesars could not and did not aspire to ‘absolute, totalitarian control’ (p. 141). Happily for the Romans and unhappily for us, totalitarianism is a modern invention, abetted by the technological revolution of the 20th century.

Fortunately, Squire’s generally sensitive discussion of the later emperors eschews such hyperbole, ending with some interesting musings on corporeal hybridity and fragmentation, aided by a late Egyptian portrait mummy. Yet throughout, the fundamental Roman attitude to Greek portraiture eludes him – especially the Greek conviction that the *whole* body constituted the person, and the authoritative portrait conventions it generated. For Romans focused above all on the face (*facies*), which projected one’s *persona*. Bodies – naked, clothed, armored, and so on – were vehicles, mere supplements, and thus (in portraiture) optional. Hence the often inchoate and/or almost invisible bodies beneath these togas; the Roman partiality for the bust; and contemporary physiognomers’ increasing focus on the face, especially the eyes. None of this surfaces in Squire’s chapter.

Chapter five, ‘On gods made men made images’, concludes the book. It begins with Tommaso Laureti’s stunning *Triumph of Christianity* of 1585 in the Vatican, showing the crucified Christ in a vast Renaissance basilica presiding over a shattered antique marble nude. With heavy irony, Squire asks: ‘Could the Vatican, with the largest modern-day collection of classical sculpture, really claim to have abandoned the ancient?’ (p. 156). Indeed it could, since in 1585 it no longer had such a collection. 19 years earlier, the newly elected, hard-line Pius V had issued his momentous decree banishing all pagan sculpture from its halls, since ‘it was not fitting that Peter’s successor keep idols in his house’. In the greatest giveaway of the Renaissance, many went to the Conservatori on the Capitoline and to Pius’s favorite cardinals, and the rest to Francesco I of Tuscany, Albert V of Bavaria, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian II. Only the Laokoon, the Belvedere Torso and Apollo, and a few others remained in their eponymous *cortile*, behind firmly locked doors. Hence, presumably, Laureti’s fresco.

The rest of the chapter, otherwise perhaps the best of the book, addresses in a sophisticated and accessible way the protocols and paradoxes of figuring the divine, ranging from Mark Wallinger’s gay icon *Ecce Homo* and Danish cartoons of Mohammed, to the well-known Greek conflation of divinity and image. The key point, well taken, is that ‘this cultic-cum-cultural background is crucial for understanding the history of early Christianity’ (p. 168), especially since it conflicted head-on with the resolute aniconism of the Jewish tradition. The result: the Christian cult of icons *and* its bouts of iconoclasm; the ‘word made flesh’ *and* the Trinity. And even (by a bit of a stretch), Hegel and the ‘end of painting’ with the 20th century’s increasing dedication to abstraction, not to mention performance art and ‘happenings’.

To return to the ancient Greek male and female nudes, where our differences – and Squire’s lacunae – are greatest. Once again (actually, thrice), he simply hasn’t done his homework. Briefly, the evidence indicates (and I would contend) that the Greek gods were made in man’s image, not vice versa; that the Greek male nude is broadly *political*, a construct of the independent *polis* or city state (1); and that the female one – more correctly, as Squire rightly emphasizes, Aphrodite and her ilk – is historically and geographically contingent too.

Thus, the *kouros* (pp. 32–42, figs. 17–20), naked, youthful, beautiful, autonomous, and happy, bodies forth Homer’s ‘long-haired Achaeans’ (*Iliad* 1.91, 2.44, 4.12, 3.43, etc.). Representing ‘the best of the Achaeans’ (*ibid.*), it was conceived for their successors, the ruling elites of the emerging *poleis* of archaic Greece, at a time when the underprivileged, often led by upstart strongmen or ‘tyrants’ (*tyrannoi*), had begun to threaten their monopoly on power. Egypt’s sudden receptivity to Greek commerce provided the catalyst, but the result, as Gombrich and Squire correctly note, is Greek through and through.

Kouroi, then, represented the gilded youth of this brazenly elitist society in all its shining splendor, brilliant in peace and glorious in war, serving as models for Apollo and other gods. Though they staunchly maintained their standardized format (signaling the solidarity and stability of their elite patrons) for a full 150 years, distinct local physiques – that is, local styles of male beauty – soon emerged. And when populist tyrants and democrats began to prevail, they began to vanish.

The classical body that replaced them (pp. 41–68, figs. 21–6) is an artifact of the Persian wars. In its first incarnation, which archaeologists label the Severe Style, its most obvious characteristics are simplicity, strength, vigor, rationality, and intelligence, conveyed via simple proportions and clear-cut *contrapposto*; dynamic postures and robust modeling; and sober facial expressions. Late archaic works offer occasional precedents (for nothing comes out of nothing), but as a coherent, integrated entity the Severe Style materializes suddenly and in revealing circumstances. Whereas the debris left in 480/79 by the Persian and (in Sicily) Carthaginian invaders is purely archaic, the Tyrannicides by Kritios and Nesiotes (p. 125), commissioned by the Athenian democracy in 477 (2), prove that the Severe Style had indeed emerged by that date. Indeed, this uniquely tight chronology suggests that the cliché that they represent this style’s ‘official birthday’ may be literally correct.

Given this chronology and the style’s rapid spread, it can hardly be coincidental that the battles of 480-79 had established Greek physical superiority over the barbarian invaders as a fact, and that simplicity, rationality, pondered thought, and self control were precisely the qualities they prized above all and denied to their ‘barbarian’ enemies. So, just like 1914, Hiroshima, and 9/11, these invasions were a ‘tipping point’: earthshaking events after which everything looks utterly different. Elated by their miraculous deliverance, basking in their dearly bought freedom, convinced of their military, physical, and cultural superiority, and spurning both archaic elitism and barbarian excess, after 479 the Greeks simply reinvented their own self-image and their own body image too.

As for the Knidian Aphrodite (pp. 72–114, figs. 34, 36), Squire cites her cult title of *Euploia*, ‘Fair-Sailing’ (p. 88), lamenting *inter alia* the ‘remarkably little [bibliography] on [her] cultic stakes’ (p. 215). Yet what of the extensive literature on these maritime Aphrodite cults and their message of harmony between man and sea (and thus between the lands connected by the latter)? Of Knidos’s history and maritime connections? Of key discoveries in the Euploia sanctuary? Not to mention other recent reconstructions of the statue and the responses it perhaps was meant to evoke.(3) So *faut de mieux*, here goes.

It can hardly be coincidental that this pioneering work was commissioned by a Greek seaport under Persian rule, located on the cusp between Greece and the Levant, and frequented by Greek and Phoenician sailors, who presumably dedicated the dozens of terracotta figurines of the naked Astarte/Ashtart holding her breasts found in the sanctuary.(4) The city’s relocation around 370 from further east to its present site, generating an immediate need for new shrines and cult statues, evidently prompted the commission. (Pliny’s tale of *two*

Aphrodites, one draped and one naked, offered speculatively for sale and bought by Kos and Knidos, respectively, is a 'Just-So' story, as Squire (p. 91) sensibly recognizes.)

The Knidia's glance, ancient writers tell us (but Squire does not), was 'melting' and her smile was 'proud, a grin that just parts the lips'.⁽⁵⁾ Though the Roman copyists miss these subtleties, they do faithfully catch her averted head and sideways glance. All this was completely new in the genre (compare Pheidias's *Athena Parthenos* (pl. 12)), and is key to her meaning and impact. For while a naïve spectator would see only a beautiful, naked goddess, nonchalantly turning away from him, an astute one would sense a *second* visitor to the shrine: someone off to his right at whom she looks and smiles. The drachma drops. Is this rival her irascible, implacable lover: the blood-soaked, man-slaughtering Ares?! ('Run away! Run away!!') Hence Aphrodite's (presumably) pre-coital bathing ritual, no mere 'fictional excuse' (p. 94) for her nudity, but an integral part of her erotic mythology and well attested textually.⁽¹⁶⁾

A Hellenistic epigram mentioned by Squire (p. 100) indirectly confirms this reading, ending with the line that '[Praxiteles]' chisel carved [her] just as Ares would have wanted her' (*Planudean Anthology* 160). The Slipper-Slapper (pp. 110–14, pl. 8), substituting Pan for Ares, confirms it too.

This teasing strategy of simultaneous invitation and rejection is precisely that of the love triangle. Like the goddess's sheer size and cultic setting, it affirms her independence from the viewer, even as her nakedness and alluring posture dangle the possibility of a relationship. Such triangles were a specialty of ancient Greek courtesans or *hetairai*: those beautiful, independent, clever, and witty women of the world whose power and notoriety were soaring exactly when Praxiteles took up his chisel. The Athenian comic poets show that Knidos was a magnet for them, and as Squire notes (pp. 100–1), tradition held that one, Praxiteles' own mistress Phryne (or Kratine), modeled for the statue.

Indeed, in this tradition, Phryne/Kratine and Aphrodite, and specifically she and the *Knidian* Aphrodite, were indivisible: Phryne was the goddess's earthly avatar and the Knidia was the archetypal *hetaira*.⁽⁷⁾ Knidos's numerous *hetairai* surely paid her special attention. All this may even shed new light on her startling nakedness. For *hetairai* behaved more like men than women. Financially independent, educated, witty, and sexually aggressive, they imitated male behavior, using masculine body language, proud smiles, gentle grins, and even masculine *eros*-magic to gain their ends.⁽⁸⁾ So in art, maybe their nakedness didn't signal vulnerability, as with ordinary women, but instead was quasi-masculine, a sign of autonomy and power.

So like the Euploia cult itself, was Praxiteles' statue also a product of this 'east-west drift of religious technology'?⁽⁹⁾ For she brilliantly revives the ancient Near Eastern concept of the naked love-goddess as the ultimate courtesan. Fostering tranquil commerce and harmony between the Levant and Greece, and located physically between them and temporally between the age of the *polis* and Alexander's conquest of the East, she spoke eloquently to Greek and Easterner alike. Eloquently but not equally, for her form and setting were purely Greek.

And the language that she spoke was one of female power exercised through sexual choice. For Praxiteles understood that when the spectator is conventionally gendered male, and femininity is synonymous with passivity, the sovereign, independent female subjectivity that a goddess *must* possess may only be constructed by moving outside convention. To the Greek mind, it could only transpire outside the 'normal' woman's strictly regulated social progression from virgin to wife, from *parthenos* to *gynê*. And that meant turning to the demimonde: the world of the *hetaira* and her near-Eastern counterparts, the *halimet* and *harimtu*. For like Aphrodite, Astart, and Ishtar, they too straddled the boundaries of the social matrix. They inhabited a liminal space that allowed them a modicum of social and sexual choice.

The birth of the Western male and female nudes is truly a singular tale, still properly to be told.

Notes

1. See the reviewer's *Greek Sculpture* (fn. 1), pp. 109–10, 133–6; *Art, Desire, and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 63–75; *Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art* (Cambridge, 2008) pp. 28–33, 60–3; 'The Persian and Carthaginian invasions of 480 B.C.E. and the beginning of the classical style', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 112 (2008), 377–412, 581–615 (< <http://www.ajaonline.org/article/240> [2]> [accessed 23 April 2012] and <http://www.ajaonline.org/article/256> [3] [accessed 23 April 2012]); with, for example, Marion Meyer and Nora Brüggeman, *Kore und Kouros: Weihgaben für die Götter* (Vienna, 2007), pp. 119–33; and Sheila Dillon's 'Review of Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*', *Art Bulletin*, 94 (2012), 130–3, at 133. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For illustrations of the *Tyrannicides*, see, for example, *Greek Sculpture* figs. 227–31; *Art, Desire, and the Body* figs. 40–1; 'The Persian and Carthaginian Invasions' figs. 2, 20; and *Classical Greece* fig. 34. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Euploia and related maritime cults: Elena Miranda, 'Osservazioni sul culto di Euploia', *Miscellanei greci e romani*, 14 (1989), 133–4 (1989), 133-3ulto di Euploia,n't know the word myself...7; Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque* (Athens and Liège, 1994) pp. 33 n. 98 (bibliography), 373, 433–7; Mustafa Sahin, 'Terrakotten aus Knidos: Erste Ergebnisse. Die Kulte auf den Rundtempelterrasse', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*, 55 (2005), 65–93; cf. Gabriela Pironti, *Entre ciel et guerre. Figures d'Aphrodite en Grèce ancienne* (Liège, 2007), pp. 245–7; and see now *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, ed. Christine Kondoleon and Phoebe C. Segal (exh. cat., Boston, MA, 2012), esp. pp. 47–51. Reconstructions and responses: Kristen Seaman, 'Retrieving the original Aphrodite of Knidos', *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Anno 401. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche. *Rendiconti*, 9.15.3 (2004), 531–94; cf. the reviewer's *Art, Desire, and the Body* 97–106; and now 'A tale of seven nudes: the Capitoline and Medici Aphrodites, four nymphs at Elean Herakleia, and an Aphrodite at Megalopolis', *Antichthon*, 44 (2010), 12–32. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Iris C. Love, 'A preliminary report of the excavations at Knidos, 1972', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 77 (1973), 413–24, at 419, pl. 74, fig. 12; Sahin, op. cit. (fn. 5), 70–2. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Lucian, *Imagines*, 6; Lucian, *Amores*, 13. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Homer, *Odyssey*, 8.360–7; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, (5) 58–67; *Greek Anthology*, 9.619, 633, 637; etc. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Athenaeus, 13, 590; Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protrepticus*, 53; Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 14. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See in general, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, ed. Christopher Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison, WI, 2006). Proud smiles, etc.: Theocritus, *Idylls*, 20.12–15 (the *hetaira* Eunica). Eros magic: Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge and London, 1999), pp. 146–60. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MS, 1992), pp. 96–100. [Back to \(9\)](#)

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[5] <http://rogueclassicisim.com/2012/04/17/cj-online-review-squire-the-art-of-the-body/>

The art of the human body is arguably the most important and wide-ranging legacy bequeathed to us by Classical antiquity. Not only has it directed the course of western image-making it has shaped our collective cultural imaginary - as ideal antitype and point of departure. Instead of approaching his material chronologically Michael Squire faces up to its inherent modernity. Writing in a lively and accessible style and supplementing his text with a rich array of pictures he shows how Graeco-Roman images inhabit our world as if they were our own.