

Fall 12-15-2012

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Challenging the Ideal: A Comparative Study of Suzanne Valadon and William Bouguereau
2012

By

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Art History

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
In the Honors Program at
Coastal Carolina University

December 2012

Introduction

The female nude has been represented in art for millennia. From the Paleolithic *Woman of Willendorf* fertility symbol (22,000 to 24,000 BCE, Fig. 1), to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538 Fig. 2), women have frequently been depicted as sexualized creatures. Standard ideal body types have been established for each era through the thousands of pieces of art picturing nude women. Archaic women were expected to have large breasts and hips in order to show their fertility. Medieval representations of Mary Magdalene were usually nude and provocative. Women were supposed to see these images of Mary Magdalene and remember to keep their chastity. Women in the Renaissance were thought to be beautiful if they were fleshy, soft, and curvy, like Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Art during all of these time periods emphasized the ideal body types to which women were meant to aspire. All of these representations were created by men.

Female artists were not able to have successful artistic careers until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although there had been females who painted, they were not recognized by the general population as artists. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century, many changes occurred in the art world. Degas and Manet had been rebelling against the French Academy for decades, photography was considered art at this time, and women started having the opportunity to become artists. An artist who challenged artistic stereotypes for women was Suzanne Valadon. She was not only a female artist, a rarity at the time, but she also depicted women that were highly unidealized and unattractive according to society's standards. Valadon was the first female artist to truly raise issues regarding the standard representations of ideal women in art. Her images disrupt the conventions that had been used for hundreds of years. She was the first woman to truly defy the norm and change how women were viewed in art. The way Valadon changed the masculine art world will be shown through the review of academic

literature on the idealized and unidealized female body, as well as with a comparison to an Academic artist working at the same time, William Bouguereau.

Literature Review

History of the Nude

In order to critique the current ideal, first the past ideals must be examined. The Greeks were the first to appreciate the human body as something beautiful.¹ Bahrani questions how the original Greek and Hellenistic representations of nude women have changed over time.² She also questions why female genitalia was not shown in Greek and Hellenistic art. Before the fifth century BC, the nude female was only depicted in narratives of violence, or as a prostitute.³ Vulvas were not represented due to a fear of female sexuality.⁴ During this time of realization, a representational figure of Aphrodite was sculpted, *The Capitoline Venus* (2nd or 3rd century BCE, Fig. 3). This Venus holds one hand over her breasts and the other over her genitals, hiding the erotic parts of her body from the viewer. Venus's pose warns about the dangers of female sexuality, which influenced Renaissance art and the attitudes towards female sexuality.⁵ This source outlines the beginnings of female nude representation, and the beginnings of ideal female beauty. Bahrani argues that art reveals the sexuality and fetishes throughout history.

Clark also writes about the *The Capitoline Venus* and her ideal proportions. It was believed by the Greeks that the ideally proportioned woman is seven heads tall. There should be one head length between her head and breast, one head length between her breast and navel, and

¹ Zainab Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 19 (1996): 3.

² Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Art," 3-16.

³ Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Art," 5.

⁴ Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Art," 5.

⁵ Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Ancient Art," 6.

one head length from the navel to the division of her legs.⁶ Clark explains that our eyes have “grown accustomed to the harmonious simplifications of Antiquity so we are disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections.”⁷ Constant representations of the perfect body in art have created assumptions of what bodies should look like.⁸ Clark discusses how every time a viewer criticizes a figure, the viewer admits that there is a concrete ideal body. Aristotle said that because people criticize the ugliness in the natural world, our instinctive desire when creating art is to perfect and not to imitate.⁹

Christian art is usually highly idealized. Heartney asks how Catholic artists deal with female sexuality within their work and how their art differs from non-Catholic artists’.¹⁰ Contemporary artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Robert Gober, Terrence McNalley, Chris Ofili, and Karen Finley are used to discuss the stereotypes of Catholic-raised artists who deal with female sexuality. She uses depictions of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene to demonstrate the biblical stereotypes of women. The Virgin Mary is the ultimate heroine, but she also represents the stereotype that women’s ultimate destiny is to have children.¹¹ The Virgin Mary has always been a symbol of strength, submission, motherhood, and virginity.¹² Mary’s strength was represented in scenes of the crucifixion when she watched her son die. In representations of the Annunciation Mary is submissive and following God’s orders to bear his son. Mary Magdalene is the sexual woman of the Bible, and is almost always depicted as a whore. Mary Magdalene is usually nude, or her body is fully visible beneath her clothing. Though in many representations she is beautiful and idealized, in her case, this is a bad thing.

⁶ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York, MJF Books: 1956), 75.

⁷ Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 7.

⁸ Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 13.

⁹ Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 12-13.

¹⁰ Eleanor Heartney, “Thinking through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination,” *Women, Art, and Aesthetics* 18 (2003): 3-22.

¹¹ Heartney, “Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination,” 5.

¹² Heartney, “Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination,” 4.

Men want beautiful but chaste women. Mary Magdalene was beautiful, but a whore. Donatello's sculpture of Mary Magdalene (1455, Fig. 4) is not idealized however; he depicted her after her self-imposed exile in the desert. Mary is gaunt, wild-eyed, and uncivil. Donatello constructed his sculpture of Mary Magdalene fifteen years after his sculpture of David. *David* (1440 Fig. 5) was an idealized boy with correct anatomical proportions. When Donatello made the sculpture of Mary Magdalene, a woman who is looked down upon, he purposefully rejected ideal forms and proportions.

Hults discusses the ideal heroic women of the Bible and how they were represented during the Renaissance.¹³ Heroic women in the Bible were meant to inspire women to be good people and follow the standards the Bible created for them. Other than the Virgin Mary, there are very few women looked to as role models. Hults analyzes the Orthodox biblical story of Lucretia, in the Book of Judith, and various representations of her. Images of Lucretia portray, to all viewers, that husbands own and control their wives, and that women lack the heroic capacity of men. Lucas Cranach the Elder painted *The Suicide of Lucretia* (1508, Fig. 6) to address the moral aspects of her story. Lucretia holds a knife to her breast as if she is just about to commit suicide, but her stance and nude figure sexualize the scene.¹⁴ Lucretia's story taught that women are supposed to be pure and only intimate with their husbands; chastity is worth their lives. Some representations of Lucretia show her as ugly and cold, while others eroticize her death.

All the representations look naturalistic because of the use of nude models, which began during the sixteenth century. Bernstein examines when and why artists began to use nude female models. The first recorded use of nude models was during the Renaissance, from 1490 to 1520,

¹³ Linda C. Hults, "Dürer's 'Lucretia': Speaking the Silence of Women," *Signs* 16 (1991): 205-237.

¹⁴ Hults, "Dürer's 'Lucretia': Speaking the Silence of Women," 216.

by Dürer, Giorgione, and Raphael.¹⁵ Nude models led to naturalistic images. Although the woman would have posed in the artist's studio, he would paint her within a different setting to create context. Artists painted women outside bathing, sitting in a garden, or outside with their children. In Venice, the reclining nude became extremely popular with Giorgione's *Venus* (1510, Fig. 7). Images showed these women as erotic, and made specifically for male viewing.

Bostrom and Malik discuss the history of the use of nude models within the classroom.¹⁶ They discuss how artists are taught to view the model as an object to be studied and used solely for the purpose of art. If a non-artist witnessed the class he might perceive the interaction to be much more sexual than it is. Bostrom and Malik also discuss the tradition of classical nude representations and how artists follow these traditions today.¹⁷ In eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in western art, nude female representations were created to fulfill every bourgeois male fantasy.¹⁸ The women were often painted or drawn lying in the bed or bath, or cavorting in the landscape. These paintings influenced this composition of the female nude in today's art world. As the use of nude models increased and became more widely accepted, the representations of nude females changed and evolved.

How do males and females view the nude female figure?

In order to understand ugliness and disgust one must look at how people react to ugly images, and why they react the way they do. Weekes attempts to answer these questions by asking, "Why are women be embarrassed by a representation of a woman they view as

¹⁵ Joanne G. Bernstein. "The Female Model and the Renaissance Nude: Durer, Giorgione, and Raphael," *Artibus et Historiae* (1992): 49.

¹⁶ Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik, "Re-Viewing the Nude," *Art Journal* 58 (1999): 42-48.

¹⁷ Bostrom and Malik, "Re-Viewing the Nude," 45.

¹⁸ Bostrom and Malik, "Re-Viewing the Nude," 45.

negative?” and, “Why do they see the representations as negative?”¹⁹ These questions arose when students in Weekes’s western civilization class saw an image of Valadon’s painting *The Blue Room* (1923, Fig. 8). Students said that Valadon’s woman was “fat and unfeminine.”²⁰ Weekes argues that women, especially young girls, need to be retrained in how they view images of other women in order to make a change in the way they view themselves.²¹ Young women are bombarded with images of sexually appealing women in television, movies, and advertisement. The constant viewing of these images teaches women how society expects them to act.²² Girls are taught from an early age how they are supposed to be viewed by society. In order to change those stereotypes, women need to be introduced to successful women artists, and be exposed to more images of women that fail to meet the unnatural standards established by mass media imagery.

The ways men and women observe nude images are very different, whether the figure is idealized or not.²³ Betterton says that a woman’s pleasure when looking at nude representations of women is narcissistic. Women have been trained through constant imagery in art and the media to see through men’s eyes, and be critical of the body being shown. Women can be both fascinated by and attracted to an image at the same time.²⁴ A passive and negative relationship has been established by women when looking at a nude representation.²⁵ Females are critical of other women, comparing themselves to what they see and either dismissing the image as inferior to themselves, or using the image as inspiration for what they aspire to be. Men view nude

¹⁹ Ann Owens Weekes, “Students’ Self-Image: Representations of Women in ‘High’ Art and Popular Culture,” *Women’s Art Journal* 13 (1992-1993): 32-38.

²⁰ Weekes, “Students’ Self-Image: Representations of Women in ‘High’ Art and Popular Culture,” 32.

²¹ Weekes, “Students’ Self-Image: Representations of Women in ‘High’ Art and Popular Culture,” 37.

²² Weekes, “Students’ Self-Image: Representations of Women in ‘High’ Art and Popular Culture,” 32.

²³ Rosemary Betterton, “How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon,” *Feminist Review* 19 (1983): 4.

²⁴ Betterton, “How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon,” 10.

²⁵ Betterton, “How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon,” 6.

images with a sense of ownership because they have always been the artist.²⁶ Men have a dominating gaze, and seek pleasure in looking at the image.²⁷

Eck determines that observing the nude figure is an interactive process for both genders. She proves through the experiment that a viewer's gender characterizes the nature of his or her viewing experience.²⁸ The image becomes a reflection of the female viewer's own body, and forces her to question whether she is acceptable to herself and others. The author suggests that part of being a female is evaluating, judging, and obsessing about one's body.²⁹ In addition to viewing the female body with a sense of ownership, men interpret the body as an object of pleasure.³⁰ Looking at nude females helps men reaffirm their masculinity. During her research, Eck found that, "when men look at these images, they reveal no sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness in rendering an opinion on models. They assume a culturally conferred right to evaluate the female nude..."³¹ Women on the other hand compare themselves to the images of nude females. The women in her study said things like "her stomach looks like mine," and "I need to lose 10 pounds too."³² All of the women responded as if a part of themselves was in the image. Women judge other women based on what they have learned society finds attractive.

Eck also completed an experiment in which she asked how people interpret these images once they have been viewed.³³ She found that there are three categories into which people put the nude images: art, pornography, and information. To put images into these categories, one uses

²⁶ Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, *Thinking Feminist* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993): 124.

²⁷ Patricia Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991):

²⁸ Beth A. Eck, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," *Gender and Society* 17 (2003): 696.

²⁹ Eck, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," 697.

³⁰ Beth A. Eck, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," 696.

³¹ Eck, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," 697.

³² Eck, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images," 698.

³³ Beth A. Eck, "Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity," *Gender and Society* 16 (2001): 603-632.

the context to interpret the image.³⁴ Context helps determine the meaning behind an image, as well as the purpose of the image. Many of the respondents said that nude images are expected in art galleries or museums. Nude paintings have become a staple in the art world.³⁵ Respondents also stated that the classical imagery of the female body is not expected to arouse.³⁶ Furthermore, the respondents said that the art was not sexual in any way because it was of the old ideal body type.³⁷ Both men and women found the old ideal body type ugly and therefore classified it as art. According to Eck, pornography is where women “showcase their bodies” in a sexual manner.³⁸ Eck discusses the ideal body and how it has changed from “old” to “new.” She explains that the old ideal was a woman with curves and a fleshy body, while the new ideal is a thin woman with few curves. One woman said that Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* is not sexual because her body type is the old ideal.³⁹

While Eck puts her images into the categories of art, pornography, and information, Nead discusses how, exactly, these two categories of art and pornography are defined. Nead describes how art is different from pornography, and more specifically, she questions how the female nude fits into these two categories.⁴⁰ The biggest difference, according to Nead, is that art is contemplative, while pornography is active.⁴¹ Unlike fine art, pornography is meant “to incite the viewer to action.”⁴² Photography gave a whole new life to pornographic imagery. There had been pornographic paintings, but photography gave these images context. As photography came to be recognized as an art form, the controversy over nude females being portrayed in

³⁴ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 604.

³⁵ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 610.

³⁶ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 611.

³⁷ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 612.

³⁸ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 613.

³⁹ Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” 612.

⁴⁰ Lynda Nead, “The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality,” *The University of Chicago Press* 15 (1990): 325.

⁴¹ Nead, “The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality,” 324-325.

⁴² Nead, “The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality,” 325.

photographs began.⁴³ Photographs were considered, by many, to be a lower form of art because of their reproducibility, so the image was not a unique object.⁴⁴ Paintings, on the other hand, represent the ideal nude that embodies perfection, universality, and unity. These characteristics are what keep paintings of nudes in the realm of contemplation, rather than pornography. Instead of inciting action, art is only meant to be appreciated and contemplated. Nead's main point throughout these various debates is that images of the nude female figure change over time. A viewer's culture affects how he or she interprets images. Culture also affects the censorship of images, and people's access to these images.

Challenging the Ideal

Polinska suggests how female artists can challenge the stereotypical eroticized representations of females. The Western visual tradition of the nude was developed by a male artistic gaze and created for male spectators.⁴⁵ Women have traditionally been the object of the male gaze, and have often been represented as weak, passive, and available for men's sexual needs. Polinska believes that this negative attitude towards women's bodies began with the early church.⁴⁶ The church fathers stressed that females were intellectually inferior because of their different bodies and because The Fall was blamed solely on Eve.⁴⁷ Feminist art is a way for women to reclaim their own bodies, and this is the kind of art that female artists need to start creating.⁴⁸ Polinska ties in the history of nude representation with the discussions of current critiques of these images. She also demonstrates where the negative attitudes towards women

⁴³ Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, Sexuality," 329.

⁴⁴ Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality," 329.

⁴⁵ Wioleta Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16 (2000), 45.

⁴⁶ Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology," 48.

⁴⁷ Polinska, "Dangerous Bodie: Women's Nakedness and Theology," 48.

⁴⁸ Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology," 61-62.

began and illustrates how some women are trying to fix these stereotypes.⁴⁹ Instead of purely sexual idealized figures, lesbian, black, old, overweight, and disabled women have started to portray themselves as the powerful and beautiful people that they are, beginning with Suzanne Valadon.⁵⁰

Bonney asks how women portray themselves in contemporary photography and why the representations are changing.⁵¹ Women began experimenting with identity in photography by changing guises and role playing.⁵² Female photography in the sixties and seventies showed women looking into the mirror discerning who they are.⁵³ Female artists used role playing to critique the history of stereotyping. Cindy Sherman was a photographer who showed herself in fake movie stills that challenged the role of women in society. Women also started representing themselves nude in very atypical situations such as leaping through fields, sipping coffee at a cafe, and being operated on.⁵⁴ *Self-Portrait with Sandro Salamandro* (1979, Fig. 9) by Manon depicts a woman sitting at a kitchen table nude. No longer are women being portrayed as the sexual Venus figure reclining on a sofa. The representations of nude women as passive objects of men's desire are slowly fading away. She discusses these new positive representations of women, by women. Polinska argues that it was at this point when male photographers started to recognize women as artists.⁵⁵

Once an ideal body has been established by society, than an "unideal" or ugly body forms. Meagher looks at the definition of ugly within the context of the female body while also

⁴⁹ Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology," 48-50.

⁵⁰ Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology," 57.

⁵¹ Claire Bonney, "The Nude Photograph: Some Female Perspectives," *Women's Art Journal* 6 (1985-1986): 9.

⁵² Bonney, "The Nude Photograph: Some Female Perspectives," 10.

⁵³ Bonney, "The Nude Photograph: Some Female Perspectives," 9.

⁵⁴ Bonney, "The Nude Photograph: Some Female Perspectives," 10.

⁵⁵ Bonney, "The Nude Photograph: Some Female Perspectives," 13.

asking “what would it mean for an artist to embody disgust?”⁵⁶ She looks at the origins of disgust, and why viewers feel it when viewing certain pieces of art. Disgust is fundamental to human nature, everyone feels disgust.⁵⁷ Meagher says that disgust “can inform aesthetic practices, which include the production of and reaction to art objects.”⁵⁸ She examines the work of Jenny Saville, a contemporary artist who paints disproportionate and obese women in very up-close compositions. Society has established boundaries of what is beautiful, acceptable, and disgusting when it comes to representations of nude women. Meagher explains that disgust comes from a combination of physical, cultural, and personal values and beliefs.⁵⁹ Meagher uses Jenny Saville to demonstrate how people react to what they think is disgusting. Saville’s paintings depict women who are overweight in all the places that women fear. Meagher says that stereotypical women are most afraid of fat in their stomachs, hips, thighs, and buttocks. Saville wants women to be conscious of their own bodies. She is not trying to redefine beauty, but rather challenging the reasons why viewers feel disgusted and why overweight women are not considered beautiful.⁶⁰ Her paintings are an effort to rewrite the language of beauty from a woman’s perspective.⁶¹ No longer does the language of beauty have to be the classical, male-made image. Saville wants her viewer to acknowledge her gut reaction upon first seeing her paintings, and to be able to come to terms with those feelings of disgust.⁶²

Only recently have female artists been recognized as professionals, and Lipton asks why women artists are seen as women first, and artists second. Lipton uses Suzanne Valadon, a model turned painter, as an example of this phenomenon. The roles of men and women as viewers, as

⁵⁶ Michelle Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” *Women, Art, and Aesthetics* 18 (2003): 23-41.

⁵⁷ Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” 24.

⁵⁸ Meagher, 24.

⁵⁹ Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” 30.

⁶⁰ Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” 27-28.

⁶¹ Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” 24.

⁶² Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” 29.

artists, and as models are examined. The artist is male and active, and the model is female and passive.⁶³ Valadon painted images of women who are not idealized and are active in the way their bodies are positioned. Valadon's women question why they are being looked at rather than enjoying the male gaze. By most viewers, both male and female, these images are considered ugly.⁶⁴ Valadon's work is intended for the female viewer, not the male, because she represents the female as ugly or unideal and not erotic.⁶⁵

Comparative Case Study

An artist working shortly before Valadon was William Bouguereau. He was a painter in the French Academy, and his style was fully rooted in the classical Academic style. Bouguereau's nude females are in perfect proportion and do not show a single flaw. Valadon's nude females are obese, wrinkled, and naturalistic. Though these two artists were both working in Paris around the same time, their work was incredibly different. Valadon worked in a modern style, with flatness, visible brushstrokes, and a lack of modeling of the human form. Bouguereau on the other hand, painted in the style of classical antiquity. His figures were beautifully modeled with the use of chiaroscuro, depth in space was represented, and brushstrokes were invisible on the canvas.

Valadon's painting *Nude on a Sofa* (1920, Fig. 10) is one of her later works. She depicts a woman lying on her back, not acknowledging the viewer. The woman in the painting reclines on a sofa that is covered with a decorative blanket that appears to be hanging from above the couch.

⁶³ Eunice Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artists' Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," *The Journal of Sex Research* 27 (1990): 82.

⁶⁴ Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artists' Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 93.

⁶⁵ Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artists' Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 92-93.

The woman's right arm is bent and behind her head, while her left arm rests lazily on the sofa. Both of the woman's legs are bent, with the right propped up on the sofa and the left hanging down to the ground. All of the woman's body is visible, including both breasts and pubic area. There is a perfect triangle of pubic hair covering her genitals. Having pubic hair is not ideal. Classically there would be no hair and just a triangle of skin would be exposed.⁶⁶ The reclining figure has not attempted to cover anything, rather she sits comfortably naked.

The woman's body is composed of awkward proportions and has not been idealized. Her body is voluptuous, with large breasts, a round waist, and chunky legs. Her head is much smaller than the rest of her body, putting her body on display rather than the entire figure. Her right arm is awkwardly shorter than her left as it disappears behind her head. The woman's shoulders and collarbone are strangely large, and seem to cut off her neck and head, separating them from her body. Her right leg is shorter and skinnier than her left, as though Valadon was trying to create depth in the flat space. The left leg dangles off of the couch, but the calf has been shortened so that her foot touches the ground.

Valadon uses her model's faces to express how women feel about being looked at. The figure does not acknowledge the viewer in any way. She looks straight ahead and does not seem to notice anything around her. Though the woman's body looks completely relaxed, her face does not. The closed line of her mouth is completely straight; there is no hint of a smile nor a frown. The woman's eyes show that she concentrates on anything except for where she is. Perhaps this woman is used to people looking at her body and she lets her mind wander to a different place to forget about her location and the people looking at her. This response is unlike the women's responses in classical paintings who appear to enjoy being looked at.

⁶⁶ Bahrani, "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism, and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Ancient Art," 5.

Bouguereau painted just shortly earlier than Valadon, but in the extreme opposite style as her, and represented nude women within a very different context. Bouguereau's *Birth of Venus* (1879, Fig. 11) pictures multiple women who are aware of their nudity, but enjoy it, and want to be looked at. Venus stands on a shell in the middle of a body of water. She is surrounded by other mythological men and women as well as flying putti. To create a good comparison, this paper will focus on the figure of Venus. Venus is nude and does not seem to notice or care that she is being looked at, unlike the woman in Valadon's painting. Venus stands in a contrapposto position with her arms above her head. Her left arm wraps around the side of her face and rests on the top of her head. Venus's right arm is bent and playing with her hair at the back of her head. The contrapposto position forces her weight onto her left leg, with her right leg just slightly bent and her heel slightly lifted off the ground.

The position of Venus's body is sexualized. Venus's entire body is on display, like the woman on the sofa; however, she is in a complete frontal view, rather than at an angle seen from the side. The view is more flattering of the body and both sides are symmetrical, which is more appealing to the eye. Her hips swing to the left, making them look bigger and her waist smaller. Her genitals are not covered in pubic hair so that her pubic area is completely visible to the viewer. Her breasts are medium-sized and are proportional to the rest of her body. Bouguereau uses the classical proportions that Clark explains in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. Nothing is out of proportion like in Valadon's painting. Venus's head tilts downwards to her left shoulder and her eyes cast a gaze diagonally at the floor. She knows that she is being looked at and admired.

Venus has a slight smile on her face, like she enjoys being the center of attention and having the male gaze upon her. Unlike Valadon's woman whose eyes are open and pronounced,

Venus seductively casts her eyes downward, so only her eyelids are shown. Venus is completely passive. Her purpose within the painting is to be looked at, which is the purpose of nude women in classical sculptures. The woman in Valadon's painting becomes active because she wears a facial expression that questions the viewer, rather than accepting the gaze. This is the biggest way Valadon has strayed from the established ideal nude paintings. The women Valadon paints are like the woman in *Woman on the Sofa* or the woman in *The Reclining Nude* (1928, Fig. 12) staring into the distance, and almost ignoring the viewer, or staring at the viewer forcing him to question why he is looking at her.

Not only has Valadon changed the content, but she has changed the style of painting. Like the artists who taught Valadon, such as Degas, she paints vastly differently from the paintings in the French Academy at this time. Degas encouraged Valadon to begin drawing and painting, although her style was not influenced by his.⁶⁷ Bouguereau modeled with light and shadow to create three dimensional forms; Valadon paints with broad brushstrokes and different colors. She is not attempting to form naturalistic bodies; rather she flattens the body and acknowledges that it is a painting. In contrast, Bouguereau's forms are perfectly modeled with light and shadow. The contours of the bodies are not outlined, like Valadon's, but rather the different values of color establish the shape of the body. The surface of the painting is completely smooth and all of the paint is blended together. Rather than acknowledging that this is a painting, Bouguereau attempts to make the figure look as naturalistic and illusionistic as possible.

Bouguereau places the nude in a realistic space while Valadon challenges the viewer spatially by flattening the space. The couch in *Nude on the Sofa* does not fit in the space in which it has been set. The seat cushions tilt downwards so it appears as if the woman is sliding off. The

⁶⁷ Jordi Vigue, *Great Women Masters of Art* (New York: Watson Guptill Publications, 2002): 325.

back right of the couch is lower in space than the left side, to create perspective and depth, but the front left side of the couch is smaller than the front right, so the perspective does not work. The lines of the floor boards run straight back, but the back wall slopes upward to the right, so the intersection visually does not make sense. This completely flattens the room so that it is almost like a backdrop. The wall behind the couch has been pushed towards the front of the picture plane, not allowing any access into the space.

Bouguereau also creates a backdrop effect in *Birth of Venus*, but he uses atmospheric perspective to do so. Though the space Venus stands in is not naturalistic, it looks as if it could be. Bouguereau creates a space that is real, unlike the flat spaces Valadon paints. A woman standing on a seashell in the middle of a body of water would never exist, and she would never be naked surrounded by other nude figures; it is purely a fantastical scene. Atmospheric perspective has been used so that the water recedes into the distance, unlike the couch in Valadon's painting. The representation of correct perspective and space is a classical technique.

Valadon creates tension and does not allow the viewer into the space by flattening out the space and figures. Valadon has changed the nude genre by deflecting the male gaze. Rather than the women accepting and possibly enjoying the male gaze, Valadon's women question the viewer. The women are uncomfortable with their nudity. Valadon uses their facial expressions to convey these feelings. The women's bodies are not proportional and are awkwardly squeezed into the picture plane. In contrast, Bouguereau's women are perfectly proportioned according to ancient Greek standards. Valadon also paints oversized women, and body types that are considered unattractive to men. The space and style of painting pushes the viewer out and denies access to the female. Bouguereau's *Birth of Venus* was painted thirty one years before Valadon's *Nude on the Sofa*. However, she would have been knowledgeable of his work as it was presented

in the Academy in Paris while she was modeling and beginning her art career. Bouguereau's style did not change during the years he was actively painting; he stayed strictly within the classical Academy style. Valadon was reacting against the painters in the Academy who had always objectified women in their artwork.

Findings

During the nineteenth century, the female nude was usually depicted as a harem woman, or odalisque.⁶⁸ The harem woman would be adorned in jewels and rich materials with connotations of extreme sexuality. This woman was clearly for the male gaze. *Grande Odalisque* (1814, Fig. 13) by Ingres is an example of this stereotypical harem woman. A young, beautiful woman lies with her body facing backwards and looking over her shoulder at the viewer. She is completely nude except for a turban and jewels on her head. The bed she is lying on is covered in rich fabrics and jewelry. The woman holds a peacock feather fan in her right arm and a hookah pipe sits at her feet. While some artists at the turn of the nineteenth century continued to follow classical themes, others were changing the techniques and standards in the art world. Valadon was one of the first women to paint in the nude female genre.⁶⁹ Valadon depicted women that reject the ideal.

Modern artists working in the nineteenth century, such as Renoir and Degas, also studied and honored the historical ideals of feminine beauty. Unlike Bouguereau, however, they wished to change these ideals to apply to nineteenth century culture.⁷⁰ Wissman says about Bouguereau, "He was a staunch supporter of the very forms of art that dated back to antiquity. He valued

⁶⁸ Betterton, "How do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 5.

⁶⁹ Betterton, "How do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 3.

⁷⁰ Fronia Wissman. *Bouguereau*. San Francisco, Pomegranate Artbooks (1996): 10.

above all else the beauty of the human body.”⁷¹ He was interested in representing nature, but took those realistic elements, perfected them, and made them more beautiful and appealing to the eye, therefore idealizing the world around him. Even Bouguereau’s images of nymphs and fantastical creatures are just highly idealized images of the natural world.

The world Valadon grew up in was not pleasant, and this affected how she created her work. Valadon is most well-known as the model for Degas, Renoir, Puvis de Chavannes, and Toulouse-Lautrec. The daughter of an unmarried, unaffectionate domestic servant, she moved to Paris by herself at a young age.⁷² She was a self-taught artist, learning from observing the artists for whom she modeled.⁷³ Valadon’s experiences as a model greatly affected the way in which she painted. She uses the female body to express her own needs and desires, which had never been done before by a woman.⁷⁴

Valadon expresses her concerns about the exploitation of the female body as an object through her paintings. Mathews says the following about a similar painting by Valadon, *The Reclining Nude*:

The woman lies on a divan too short to be comfortable to contain her large body; her legs are crossed, covering her genitals, one arm crosses her breasts, and her hand grasps a white drapery. The space of the picture is cramped and shallow, so that the figure confronts the viewer, who cannot escape her body.⁷⁵

The woman stares out at the viewer, but not in a seductive manner like the reclining female a male artist would have painted. This woman’s facial expression shows that she is aware of the viewer, forcing the male viewer to feel self-conscious and unwanted. Although Manet’s *Olympia*

⁷¹ Wissman, *Bouguereau*, 10.

⁷² Coletter Giraudon, “Valadon, Suzanne,” Grove Art Online (2006): 1.

⁷³ Giraudon, “Valadon, Suzanne,” 1.

⁷⁴ Mathews, “Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon,” 418.

⁷⁵ Mathews, “Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon,” 416-424.

(1863, Fig. 14) also wore a facial expression that made the viewer feel unwanted, this was painted by a man. A woman artist telling a man that his gaze is unwanted is different. The woman's gaze is not sexually charged, so she becomes almost asexual. The typical reclining nude would be open, her body on display for the viewer, and sexually available. This figure, however, is closed off; she does not want to be looked at, and does not want to be a sexual being. The awkwardness and tightness of her body gives a feeling of anxiety and resistance.⁷⁶

In contrast to this Valadon painting is Bouguereau's *The Nymphaeum* (1878, Fig. 15). The thirteen women in the painting relax and play in a small pond in the middle of a forest. Though the landscape is realistic and the women's bodies are perfectly proportioned, this scene is completely unrealistic. The women's facial features differ slightly, and the hair styles of each woman change, but there is no individuality to any of his figures. The pose of the woman on the far left with her arms above her head adjusting her hair is also in Bouguereau's *The Birth of Venus*. Wissman describes the pose as a woman who is not ashamed of her naked body, "Her body, displayed to its full extent--the raised arms are crucial here--is a promise of future gratification, both for herself and for others."⁷⁷ She also describes this pose as passive, which is how most classical painters represented nude women.

Valadon puts her women in spaces where they would actually be found on a regular basis such as the bedroom, the couch, or bathing. *The Two Bathers* (1923, Fig. 16) shows two women prior to taking a bath. Men would not usually see a scene like this. The women are not displaying their bodies or acting sexual. One woman is pulling the hair back of the woman sitting in front of her. Renoir's *Great Bathers* (1884, Fig. 17) is very different from Valadon's paintings of bathers.

⁷⁶ Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," 424.

⁷⁷ Wissman, *Bouguereau*, 87.

Valadon was a model for this painting, she is the woman on the far right of the composition.⁷⁸ Renoir paints three women beside a river playfully undressing themselves, washing their bodies, and toweling themselves dry. Though the women's bodies are overweight, like Valadon's women, their curves are attractive in sexual areas of the body, such as the hips and breasts. In contrast, Valadon desexualizes the tradition of erotically painting multiple nude women doing everyday activities.

To challenge the genre of nude paintings, in *The Reclining Nude*, Valadon changes the space in which the woman lies. Valadon puts the figure directly at the foreground of the composition. The nude immediately confronts the viewer, questioning why he or she is looking at her. The couch, although in correct perspective, appears flat and the space behind the couch is almost nonexistent. The viewer is only allowed to observe the painting from afar; he is not allowed into it. This flattened and distorted space does not allow an ideal viewing angle for the viewer; he will always feel awkward when viewing this painting.⁷⁹ However, the space does make sense, unlike the spaces her contemporaries paint, which completely flattens the space and makes the paintings an incoherent narrative.⁸⁰

The style in which Valadon paints is modernist. Harsh outlines, flatness, and a graphic quality are all characteristics of this painting style.⁸¹ Valadon's work employs all of these techniques, although she never formally studied anywhere. This modern style is characterized by a simplification of forms, the use of vivid colors, and an emphasis on aesthetics. The abruptness, harshness, and edginess of Valadon's lines denies any kind of erotic sensation that classical

⁷⁸ Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artists' Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 83.

⁷⁹ Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 17.

⁸⁰ Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," 421.

⁸¹ Giraudon, "Valadon, Suzanne," 1.

paintings of reclining nude figures may have.⁸² Valadon also uses the modern style of representing the woman as she is, not as a historical or mythological character.⁸³

The work of Bouguereau during this time shows women who look like ancient Greek sculptures and paintings. He uses proportions created by the Greek artists and he painted mythological themes, like in Greek antiquity, as well as religious-themed paintings, like during the Renaissance.⁸⁴ His work, very unlike Valadon's, was smooth, even, and polished-looking. In *Brush and Pendil* magazine Bouguereau's work is described as "The smoothing away of individuality as marked the goddess which he made to float in misty ether or recline beside a gliding stream set in a classical landscape."⁸⁵ Bouguereau idealized every part of his paintings, including both the females and the landscapes. Critics have also written about the "regularity of curves, evenly laid colors, penciled eyebrows, and waxen complexion."⁸⁶ The women he paints are more like statues, not real people with individual characteristics.

Valadon used a variety of models and represented very individualized women. The models Valadon painted from were very different from the models her contemporaries used. Artists have been considered lusty, and models were objects to be controlled and manipulated. Many times modeling was accompanied by a sexual relationship.⁸⁷ Valadon used the people around her, as well as herself, as her models.⁸⁸ The experiences Valadon had as a model shaped how she, as a painter, represented the female.⁸⁹ Betterton says that "a woman artist has not 'seen' the figure differently, rather her experiences as a woman that affect the representation."

⁸² Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 17.

⁸³ Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 15.

⁸⁴ Adapted for *Brush and Pendil*. "The Art of Adolph William Bouguereau." *Brush and Pendil* (1905): 83.

⁸⁵ *Brush and Pendil*, *The Art of Adolph William Bouguereau*, 85-86.

⁸⁶ *Brush and Pendil*, *The Art of Adolph William Bouguereau*, 85-86.

⁸⁷ Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artists' Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 82.

⁸⁸ Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 13-20.

⁸⁹ Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artist's Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 83.

Valadon creates art that is different from men's because she has experienced the world in a different way.

Rather than representing the female body as an object, Valadon represents it as an experience.⁹⁰ Movement in the body and a sense of the subjects' musculature is present in her art. The individuals in her paintings are many times interacting with one another. The women either pose nude in the studio, in domestic interiors, or in the landscape.⁹¹ Although men represented women in these settings as well, Valadon takes away the sexuality of the figure, so the composition is very different. Instead of a static and timeless moment, like the settings in Renaissance nude paintings, Valadon's paintings represent the intensity of a specific moment. The women stand in active poses; instead of a body on display, her art gives a glimpse into the intimate and hidden world of women. Valadon concentrated on creating paintings that focused on relationships and the experiences women have with their bodies as they change and age. She avoided creating art that is a spectacle for the male viewer.

Valadon's *The Cast-Off Doll* (1921, Fig. 18) depicts an older woman toweling off a young nude girl. One can assume that the older woman is the young girl's mother. The young girl has just taken a bath, an intimate activity that is hidden to men, and Valadon provides a window into that world. The girl is beautiful, while the mother is older and not as attractive. Valadon comments on age and changes as women mature and grow older.⁹² Valadon represents a common and true scene; she is not trying to attract men, but rather give men a glimpse into women's lives.

⁹⁰ Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," 419.

⁹¹ Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 15-20

⁹² Lipton, "Representing Sexuality in Women Artist's Biographies: The Cases of Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent," 92-93.

The women Valadon paints are working-class women in middle class settings. Working-class women were not the ideal during the twentieth century. When they were depicted they were always represented as sexually available-- until Valadon. Valadon represents these women realistically with large stomachs, breasts, and buttocks.⁹³ By not representing the ideal woman, Valadon takes away the male gaze. Many men do not want to look at women that they think are large and unattractive.

The active posture of this woman also draws in the viewer's attention. She does not just lying longingly in a field like Giorgione's *Venus*, rather her body is twisted and her muscles are clearly being used. Valadon uses the active positions in all of her work. This is her way to counter the passive, "to-be-looked-at-ness."⁹⁴ Representations of women have, since antiquity, shown women as available for sex and available to be looked at and appreciated for their appearances. Valadon uses the nude bodies to grab men's attention, but the women are non-responsive to or confront their gazes.

Betterton says that no image of a nude woman can fully escape being sexual and exploitative.⁹⁵ The women Valadon paints address the viewer, in a non-sexual way, questioning why she must be viewed as a sexual object. In *The Reclining Nude* Valadon uses the typical depiction of a woman on display and changes it by closing off the woman's body, keeping it off-limits. Valadon creates a space that is closed off to the viewer, and keeps him at a distance. The centuries-old genre of the female nude has been kept by Valadon in her painting, but she has changed her figures in order to question the sexual aspect of the genre.

Conclusion

⁹³ Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," 416.

⁹⁴ Mathews, "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon," 423.

⁹⁵ Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," 14.

Suzanne Valadon was one of the very first female artists to challenge how females are represented in art. She opened doors for the next generations of female artists to continue to challenge ideals and represent themselves in the way they would like to be viewed. Valadon influenced feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman and Jenny Saville. They both continue to ask Valadon's questions about the ideal female body through their work. No research has been done on how Valadon influenced Sherman and Saville. Some research says that feminist art began with Valadon.

Only recently has in-depth research been done on Suzanne Valadon. To many, she is still known only as a Modern model, not as a revolutionary artist. This paper has started to compare Valadon to her contemporaries, research that is very rarely done. Though some scholars believe other female artists started feminist art, this paper suggests that Valadon was the first female artist to challenge the ideal female body. With this new research, more studies can be conducted about Valadon's work and how she relates to the male artists working around her. More research can also be conducted on how exactly Valadon influenced Saville and Sherman and other female artists.