Note 4.
Nudity in Art
Dear Students:

It’s time for some comments on the subject of nudity in art.

When you begin to study the arts in a historical context, literally on page 1 of the book, the first thing you run into is the issue of nudity. Over the years, some parents and pastors have expressed concern when we deal with issues like this head-on. But this is college, and we must do this if we’re going to educate rather than just indoctrinate you. I’m a seeker after God’s Truth, not a propagandist. And if we don’t open a Christian conversation with you about subjects like this, who ever will?

I’m talking about human or divine nudity, of course. Funny, isn’t it, how no one objects to dog or horse nudity? Again, as we’ve seen so often, part of this issue has to do with the fact that we bear the image of God, but are fallen creatures. Because we’re not exactly in sync with our Maker, we’re slightly uncomfortable in our own skin; this becomes more noticeable the more “skin” we see. But when artists portray God taking off His clothes, and his angelic and human subjects cavorting around Him in the buff – and when most of these paintings are on the walls of churches around the world – well, American evangelicals don’t know what to think. And seriously, some things are going to be really important to keep in mind as we tackle this subject. For instance:

Why is nudity so prevalent in art? Why paint or sculpt the unclothed human figure? Are artists all somehow preoccupied with nudity? There are more reasons to draw, paint, or sculpt the nude than you might think. First, as an artist I KNOW it isn’t because it’s easier ... clothing or other drapery is much easier to render artistically than all the details underneath. Something else must be at work.

So why? For a believer, it goes back to two things: the Creative nature of God Himself, and the Imago Dei in us. Because we are the handiwork of God
Himself; the forms are interesting and have value in their own right, apart from any sensual or sexual attraction they may also have, because God the Master Creator made them. God has done this, and so it is proper for us to be interested in the subject. And the human form is the original motif for understanding, and celebrating, the beauty of line, symmetry, and proportion in God’s creation, fleshed out in ourselves. It is the most basic way for the artist to acknowledge that Man is a worthy motif because he is a part of God’s good creation. Therefore, throughout the history of the church, the creative work of believing visual artists has teemed with images that put form to the *Imago Dei* – and acknowledge that the “image of God” is something that doesn’t always have to be spiritualized away into invisibility. The fact that we are also not comfortable about this is due partly to our own prudishness and, according to Lewis, to our “split personality” as both spiritual and physical beings. As he has Screwtape say in *The Screwtape Letters*, “Never forget that humans are amphibians.” And the more sheltered we have been, the more powerful the shock if we encounter nudity in art without preparation. That’s a Christian dilemma about nudity. But not nearly all artists have been Christians either, and a non-Christian would have an entirely different worldview. Some of them might surprise you.

For instance, there were the ancient Egyptians whose art sometimes shows people wearing nothing above the waist, or Minoan art showing women with elaborate outfits that left their breasts exposed. The reason for this is simply that that was the way these cultures dressed, and the artists are depicting everyday life; there is no lewd intent in the depiction of what was, for them, normal dress. Then there were the ancient Greeks, who believed, as a philosophical article of faith, that “Man is the measure of all things,” and that the unclothed male body was a statement of the dignity and primacy of man in their culture. Their pantheon of anthropomorphic gods, their high view of athletic ability, their insistence on gymnastic training for all males, and their celebration of the male nude in the arts are all religious and worldview statements. Interestingly enough (and completely unlike contemporary American culture), it was not typical for them to portray their women completely nude (beyond the occasional exposed breast) ... not because they
were protecting them from exploitation, but because, in their male-dominated culture, women were considered weaker and therefore unsuitable to serve as the “measure of all things.” When the Romans came along, they were not above portraying all manner of exploitation and perversion ... as some of the paintings and mosaics in Pompeii show ... and that says something eloquent about Roman worldviews as well. Likewise each culture through the years has had its worldview issues that affected the decision whether (or how much) to portray the human form unclothed.

There are also many instances of artists who had entirely sensual or even perverse motivations for using nudity in their subject matter. So both the artist's worldview and his intent are involved at the root of the matter, and there are important value decisions for us to make as we seek to understand this subject matter.

But let's face it: we come to this question carrying some baggage of our own; in our little church culture, we're shocked when we encounter nudity in any context, so we tend to contribute to the misunderstanding. First, we've each spent a number of years going through several phases of dealing with it: as children, we're almost as innocent as Adam and Eve, but we quickly learn that it's not acceptable to run around the house naked. A bit later we learn a sense of shame about being unclothed in front of others – especially those of the opposite sex. All kids develop this childish sense that nudity is first natural, then funny, then embarrassing, and eventually forbidden. Later, when puberty hits, we simultaneously experience awakening sexuality, intense curiosity about the opposite sex, and a deep, irrational shame about all these dark urges that have us in their grip. Combine this with the clear Biblical teaching on avoiding sins of the flesh and abstinence from sex outside of marriage, the accompanying strong emphasis in our churches about modesty (both Very Good Things), and the virtual vacuum of teaching in our church culture about the arts (a Very Bad Thing), and it is easy for you to form a mistaken ethos about nudity in art.

Maybe you're aware that Europeans like to poke fun at Americans – they
find us, as a culture, still puritanical and prudish in our approach to nudity and sexuality. Moreover, contemporary American culture in turn ridicules Evangelicals as a REALLY prudish subculture. While it isn't right to ridicule others, in this case it does tend to be true. So a student who comes to Cedarville typically has a kind of “secondary separation” (to use a term we understand) from the artistic culture of Europe ... which is where much of our art history was formed. THEN we open the textbook for Introduction to Humanities, and -- for some of you -- your first reaction may be shock, followed by a phone call to Mama.

**I think it’s important to define the difference between being a godly person and being a prude.** A godly person is one who is following Christ, living to the extent of his power in obedience to God’s revealed will, and who is cultivating a conscience that is sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. By way of contrast, here is a dictionary definition of “prude:”

**prude** (prūd) n. One who is excessively concerned with being or appearing to be proper, modest, or righteous. See also puritanical. -- Dictionary.com

So a “prude” is a person with a hyper-sensitized fastidiousness, especially in matters of conscience. This is not the same thing as godliness, although many godly people are also prudish. If taken to the point of pride (a related word), a prude becomes a prig ... a trenchantly juicy English term for the kind of pharisaical person who takes pride in his prohibitions, and mistakes them for spirituality. This is the kind of person the Apostle Paul warns about in Col. 2:21 where he says that their mantra is “touch not, taste not, handle not,” but that their sense of delicacy is actually no defense against temptation, since it is merely a human over-reaction to something they think is improper to do. So it is important to know that the fact that some people are horrified or scandalized about something (like nudity in art) is NOT proof that something is wrong with it. But it would be typical for prudish administrators in a Christian high school or college to put strategically-placed black rectangles on the pictures in their Humanities textbooks. Just to be safe, you know. I call this the Hysterical Approach to the visual arts: *don't*
deal with it ... cover it up! But that’s really nothing more than vandalism – the same thing as drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa, only more pathetic.

Now I want to think the best of someone’s motives – even when they’re being offended at something, their hyper-sensibility is usually coming from a good place. But they are unable to allow themselves to unbend in some area (art, for instance) because they’re concerned that they may be sinning – and their concept of God emphasizes His role as the righteous Judge at the expense of His love and grace. Paul has a term for them: weaker brothers. This term is applied to the condition of their conscience – specifically, it refers to a person who cannot allow himself a certain freedom granted by God, and cannot afford to allow it in others either. Conversely Paul identifies the man whose conscience allows him to relax (perhaps too much) and enjoy certain freedoms Christ has purchased, as the “stronger” brother. These terms can be confusing; perhaps it would be helpful to refer to them as the “overly brittle” brother and the “overly flexible” brother. Because Paul takes both of them to task for a sin they’re both committing -- priding themselves on their positions and disdaining the brother with a different viewpoint in reference to debatable things. (See Romans 12 and I Cor. 8, 9, and 10).

This has an application to the visual arts, of course. If you come from a more enlightened background, the scriptures command you not to look down on us prudes ... and I count myself as a person with a “prudish” bent (I am growing, but that’s where I started, and it’s still my knee-jerk reaction). We are also enjoined to be gentle with our so-called freedoms. You are surrounded by people who have these triggers...some more trigger-happy than others ... and you are responsible, in the interest of their spiritual health, not to beat them over the head with your precious liberties. The point is, we’re all supposed to get our values from the Bible -- not from Hollywood or from prudish Little Old Ladies – and we’re supposed to obey our consciences as they are humbly submitted to His Truth. The cure for some of this misunderstanding is education, and the proper place to deal with and defuse some of our prudish sense of shock is in the college classroom. So here we are. I will be showing
some nude images in this class and I will NOT be putting black rectangles on them. But I will only go so far with it. Why?

So far I’ve been dealing with the human body rather metaphorically as a component of the Imago Dei, which is a fairly sanitized way of looking at the subject. But a discussion of nudity in art also requires that we deal squarely with the distinctions between sexuality, eroticism, perversion, and pornography in art. Let’s do that.

You know your Bible this much, I’m sure: that sexuality is good in and of itself, and is not a result of the Fall of Man (Gen 1-3). Sexuality and sexual desire are God-created, good things, and no healthy person who knows the scriptures would argue that. The human body is amazingly beautiful, and is a sample of God’s good work. We are all sexual beings. Every word of the Song of Solomon is inspired by God, and Paul makes the point that the parts of our bodies we routinely cover up actually have more “honor” (as he puts it) for their specialized sexual functions. But the Fall has had its effect on our sexuality, which has acquired pathologically enflamed overtones of temptation and perversion, mixed in with its original functions of pleasure and procreation within the will of God for us. As C.S. Lewis has written, every evil thing is a twisting of something God created and intended for good. Deliberate sexual attraction – eroticism – is a good thing, but the context is going to be crucial – and that context is always obedience to God’s revealed will. Sexuality per se (and the celebration of sexuality in art) isn’t dirty. There is no prohibition from God about my seeing, understanding, and appreciating the concept, but it is important to approach the subject knowing that it’s a timing thing ... that sexual gratification is a good thing reserved for marriage, and that I will most likely experience it in its time. Meanwhile, though I will (obviously) appreciate the erotic aspect of art more deeply when I am married, this does not mean that erotic subjects in art are wrong for me to see. It DOES mean that I should not dwell on the subject as a single person. THEREFORE this course will not dwell unduly on eroticism in art – not because there is anything wrong with the subject, but out of consideration for you at this time in your lives.
Some art deals explicitly with sexual perversion or pornographic content. This does not necessarily disqualify the work from being Art, but it would be art unsuitable for a Christian to view repeatedly or to display in his home, because the work is asking us to value and embrace something that God has specifically condemned. It is not prudishness -- it is obedience -- to avoid temptation. The temptation to illicit sexual gratification comes from Satanic “spin” on our “amphibian” nature as immortals in animal bodies – it takes advantage of the fact that, if not vigilant, we are somewhat at the mercy of our urges. It panders to our animal instinct, and, like the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, seeks to make us feel unfairly deprived of something we feel we ought to have. Temptation also tends to make us feel that victory is an unattainable “ideal,” and can wear our defenses down over time. If we disobey often enough, we set up a susceptibility to a number of sexual preoccupations and even perversions. And there are plenty of these types of things offering themselves as “art.”

The Bible points out that perversion – including sexual perversion – is clearly the result of deliberate disobedience (Rom. Ch.1), and represents a particularly vicious attack on the dignity of the Imago Dei. If you are excited by perversion, something insidious is happening both to your spirit and to your humanity. Again, this may not mean that the piece of work in question isn’t Art (that’s a separate question), but that it represents an anti-Biblical viewpoint that condones a twisted view of sexuality and the sexual exploitation of its object. Pornography, besides being a blatant exploitation of its object, is a form of voyeurism, which is itself a sexual perversion. (In Mere Christianity C.S. Lewis gives a humorous illustration of voyeurism, using food as his example. Imagine, he says, a person who is hyper-fascinated with pictures of food, and who keeps food magazines hidden under his mattress, snatching furtive glances at them throughout the day. We would say that something strange has happened to his appetite for food, that such a preoccupation isn’t healthy, and that he is using food for some other purpose than that for which God provided it.) Art that is built on pornographic images is exploiting the human sex drive, creating an addiction, resorting to a cheap
trick to make us look, and is degrading to the men, women, or children being used as objects. We will not be viewing art of this type, even if it meets all the other requirements of “a work of art demonstrating the worldview of its creator”.

In your media-saturated state, and addicted as some of you may be to pornography, how do we broach the subject of Nudity in Art without setting off a number of emotional land-mines in your psyche? How do you maintain your innocence (we will presume that you still have some) in a corrupted environment? The short answer is that we can’t read your minds and know where you are spiritually, or how mature you are, but that we have a mandate to educate you. So we can’t be held hostage to the individual triggers that may exist in the class, whether they represent sexual preoccupations or prudishness masquerading as spirituality. We must handle the subject responsibly, and you are likewise responsible to be as mature as possible as we try to do that.

I’d like to offer some encouragement along this line: First, you’re getting an education; knowledge is power. There may be some culture shock for some of you, but this is the proper environment in which to do that. Second, our 21st-century culture is no more depraved that that of the 1st century. Those Christians were commanded to understand their times, to engage their culture rather than to withdraw from it, and to be able to reason with people who came from a totally different worldview. Like them, we are commanded to be knowledgeable about our culture, while at the same time fleeing illicit lust and mortifying illicit desires. But neither they nor we have been commanded to mortify legitimate desire – only to govern it – or to send the message that we think “prudishness is next to godliness.” When Paul stood on Mars Hill and engaged his culture for Christ, he was surrounded by nude images on every side. He did not seize that occasion to condemn the Greeks for their fascination with the human body, but used his knowledge of their culture to press the claims of Jesus.

Next, innocence is not the same thing as stupidity. Innocence is a state
of grace; it is practicing the presence of Christ as we view art and make value judgments about it. We are enjoined to be wise as serpents while being harmless as doves – infants with regard to sin, but otherwise mature adults. We’re supposed to learn the difference between appreciating and analyzing artwork featuring the human body, and the illicit desire to possess that person sexually. It is worth noting that abstinence (of itself) is not the same thing as victory...whether we’re talking about viewing sexuality in art or actual sexual behavior, you could abstain and still be preoccupied. God does not say that balance and victory are easy ... but He does insist that we achieve it, and He provides the Holy Spirit to help us.

Finally, dealing with this subject in a mature way requires growing up enough to deal with an adult subject ... which some people never manage to do. But we have faith in you. I hope these brief thoughts are helpful to you as we approach the subject of nudity in art in this class. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing ... but a full discussion would surely take years, so we’ll leave it here for now.

Love,

Dr. C

P.S.: Here are some questions you should really address in your study teams:

1. Do a Logos search. What does the Bible say about full or partial nudity, and what principles are to be gleaned from those passages? You might start with Paul’s illustration of an athlete stripping everything off (and they did take everything off), in order to run unencumbered – he doesn’t “go off” on the Greeks for doing that, but uses it as a lesson to us. Then look at the passage that talks about the behavior of Noah’s sons, when they discovered their father drunk and uncovered, and what it tells us about the Hebrew view of man.
2. This is a conservative Christian college; why would we not use a “sanitized” Christian textbook?

3. Remembering that artistic communication is metaphorical in nature ... what message (because there always is one) is being sent by painting or sculpting people unclothed? In each particular work of art, what part is nudity playing in that communication? Or is it merely gratuitous sensuality for shock effect?