

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS

LE FREAK, C'EST CHIC

OUTSIDERS: DESIRE – FREEDOM – MODERNITY

Text by Felicitas Berlin

This text presents itself as a free and consciously subjective compilation of central protagonists – with an emphasis on painting. It makes no claim to completeness, but instead offers a personal selection of figures who exemplarily carry this narrative.

The background to our living tableau *Les nouvelles femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* is the story of the emergence of modernity from the mid-19th century onward, continuing into the present, shaped by artists and writers whose common thread is their break with convention, their play with the immoral, and the pursuit of freedom embedded within it.

It begins with a man and a painting: Eugène Delacroix and his *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1833). When the painting debuted at the Paris Salon in 1834, it immediately caused a sensation. It defied, in every respect, the emotionless and ideal-frozen classicism of its time. Fascinated by the light and atmosphere of Algeria, and by the harem he visited there, Delacroix did not depict idealized female figures engaged in dramatic action – but rather women in a private interior, each self-contained, at rest, doing nothing. And this is precisely where the revolutionary nature of the painting lies. At its center was no mythological narrative, but atmosphere, color, and the sheer physical presence of the women. Instead of action he offered sensuality and feeling. This break with the traditional rules of pictorial language paved the way for the Impressionists at the end of the century, and led many to later regard him as the father of modernity.



Eugène Delacroix, *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1833

Delacroix's vision was formulated more fully a few decades later. A group of artists – social outsiders – captured the erotically charged Paris of the late 19th century in their art and recognized that the essence of modernity, the transformation they pursued for the sake of freedom, could not be found in convention or bourgeois life. Among them were the writer Charles Baudelaire and the artists Constantin Guys, Édouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Paul Gauguin, as well as the artists Suzanne Valadon and Paula Modersohn-Becker.

They sought their motifs in the private and the hidden, where the light is dim, where sensory realities are heightened by intoxication, where desire and lust are exposed and freely negotiated – where the boundaries of the normal are crossed. They gathered in those places that undermined bourgeois moral consensus: the bars, boudoirs, and brothels of Paris. Art historically, this milieu thus became symbolic of freedom. The entrance of prostitutes into the visual worlds of these outsiders initiated an emancipatory shift in the history of female representation. The canon of idealized, pious Madonnas, penitent Magdalenes, and reclining Venuses was now revolutionized by a new image of woman whose nakedness possessed autonomy, confidence, and its own erotic agenda.



Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863

The ushering in of modernity by Delacroix was confirmed thirty years later by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, who in late 1863 published his essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* in *Le Figaro*. In it, Baudelaire described, through his protagonist Constantin Guys, the new Paris – a city transformed by Napoleon III and city planner Georges-Eugène Haussmann with unprecedented brutality and faith in progress, from a medieval town into the most modern metropolis in the world. The choice of Guys as the exemplary modern painter greatly annoyed Édouard Manet, with whom Baudelaire was then closely connected. Indeed, in the same year, 1863, Manet completed two works that must be understood as key works of modernity. The first, *Olympia* (1863), deeply shocked visitors to the 1865 Paris Salon in their bourgeois morality. Her gaze is frontal, cool, challenging. *Olympia* is not an idealized nude but the portrayal of a confident woman who fixes the viewer directly and does not submit to his gaze. Her nakedness is radically present.

Manet included the Black model Laure, who hands Olympia the bouquet from an admirer, as well as the black cat at the foot of the bed, at the suggestion of Baudelaire. These elements intensified the tension between desire, power, and social reality. Manet exposes bourgeois hypocrisy not by scandalizing the nude, but by scandalizing the gaze cast upon it. His central concern was to reveal the essence of modern life: Which places, which

bodies, which encounters embody the essence of this new reality? And which artistic rules must be broken to express this new perception at all?

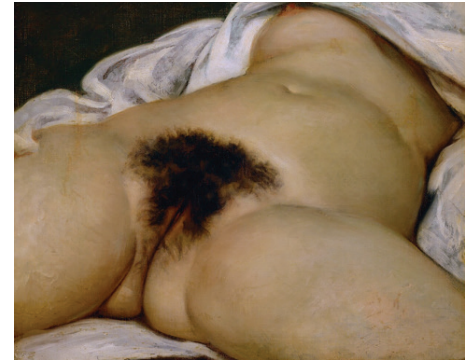
The second of these works with equally profound impact is *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). At the center of a group of fully dressed men sits a naked woman who, like Olympia, looks directly at the viewer. Her nakedness does not appear provocative in a classical sense, but rather natural, self-possessed, almost casual. She radiates a calm and confidence that challenges and almost embarrasses the viewer.

Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863



Paul Cézanne, *L'Après-midi à Naples*, 1875/77

Not less scandalous was Gustave Courbet's *L'origine du monde* (1866), showing nothing more and nothing less than a close-up view of a woman's genitals. The painting's history is a textbook example of bourgeois double standards. Today it hangs in the Musée d'Orsay.



Gustave Courbet, *L'origine d monde*, 1866

The next candidate who arrived in the big city as a young man from the provinces was Paul Cézanne, with the intention that reality could no longer be whitewashed by the agreeable trivialities of Salon painters, but instead required the shock propagated by Baudelaire and his fascination for the unorthodox – exemplified in *L'Après-midi à Naples* (1875/77).

For Edgar Degas – who, far beyond Constantin Guys, became the true painter of modern life – the first three Impressionist exhibitions of 1874 to 1876 offered the ideal opportunity to convey his view of urban reality. The son of a Parisian grand-bourgeois family, he was on track to become a successful society painter, but from the early 1870s

turned toward the more disreputable sides of everyday Paris. He, too, directed his gaze at the margins of modern society. Degas was interested in bodies at work, in discipline, exhaustion, and intimate routines. Shielded from the world of men, women in Degas's works gained the freedom to act according to their own will and to manipulate their own physicality. In works such as *La Maison Tellier* (1876), *Trois filles assises* (c. 1879), or *La Toilette* (c. 1885), he depicts women waiting for their clients, washing, combing, or dancing.

His fleeting perspectives, cropped compositions, and rough brushstrokes create an almost voyeuristic closeness, signaling a new freedom and, above all, high modernity.

Edgar Degas, *La Maison Tellier*, 1876

Edgar Degas, *Trois filles assises*, um 1879

Edgar Degas, *La Toilette*, um 1885

Paris remained the unrivaled world capital of art – and the 1889 World's Fair, including the opening of the Eiffel Tower, confirmed this so impressively that artists from all over the world flocked there simply to say: "I was there."

The small, aristocratic outsider Henri Toulouse-Lautrec was seen nightly in the notorious establishments around Montmartre – as a friend of many artists, including van Gogh, and as a sensitive observer of the women



Henri Toulouse-Lautrec Manet, *Dans le lit*, 1892



Suzanne Valadon, *La chambre bleue*, 1923

Valadon lived an unconventional, self-determined Bohemian life, celebrating wild parties and moving among artists, intellectuals, and Parisian high society, demi-monde, and underworld, embodying a rebellious modern femininity of the Belle Époque. Her work *La chambre bleue* (1923) is exemplary of her revolutionary modern image of womanhood. See also Lisa Brice in the Barnes Foundation catalogue, 2022 ([LINK](#)).



Paul Gauguin, *Aha oe feii?*, 1892

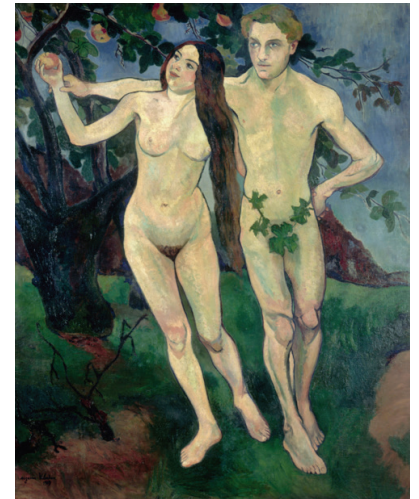


Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1911

working there. With a fine sense for their lived reality and emotional intimacy, he created some of the most moving depictions of human affection, as in *Dans le lit* (1892).

Finally, a woman steps onto the stage of this story. Born in 1865 as Marie-Clémentine Valadon, she began working at age fifteen as a model in Paris's Montmartre – for artists including Edgar Degas and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. During breaks she began to draw, and soon the artists recognized her extraordinary talent. Toulouse-Lautrec in particular encouraged her to become an artist. He suggested she change her name to Suzanne – referencing the biblical Susanna in the bath as painted by Tintoretto – as a conscious step away from being a model toward being an independent artist.

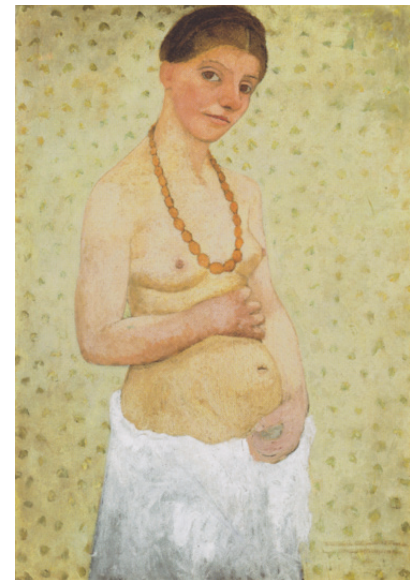
Her most important supporter and lifelong friend was Edgar Degas, who supported her artistically and granted her entry into the art world. Valadon quickly developed into a recognized painter and made history in 1894 as the first woman ever admitted to exhibit at the Salon de la Nationale – a significant milestone in a male-dominated art world. Equally revolutionary: she was the first woman to consistently depict the nude body from a female perspective – and the first female artist to paint a male nude, as in her work *Adam et Ève*.



Suzanne Valadon, *Adam et Ève*, 1909

At this point we must also recall the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, who in 1906 created in her *Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag* the first nude self-portrait ever painted by a woman.

At the end of the 19th century we briefly leave Paris with Paul Gauguin, whose gaze turned to the distant South Seas in search of a lost paradise. Once a successful stockbroker, he abandoned family, profession, and bourgeois security to live solely for art; instead of the idyll he dreamed of, he often encountered a harsh and disillusioning reality, yet he continued to paint his visionary paradises, such as *Aha oe feii?* (1892).



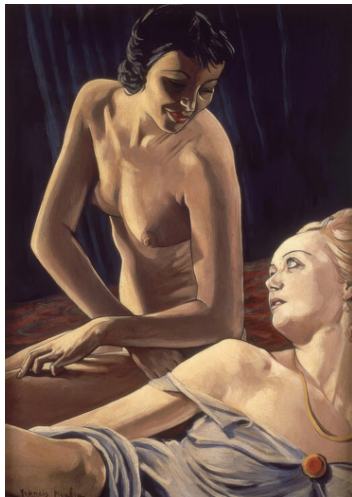
Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag* 1906

A central role in this narrative is played by Pablo Picasso. In 1907 he committed a taboo-breaking act with his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*: five naked women in a brothel, their bodies fragmented, angularly distorted, mask-like, and aggressively sexualized. The painting is considered the birth of Cubism and the definitive farewell to all classical notions of harmony, beauty, and the idealized body.

DADA & SURREALISTS

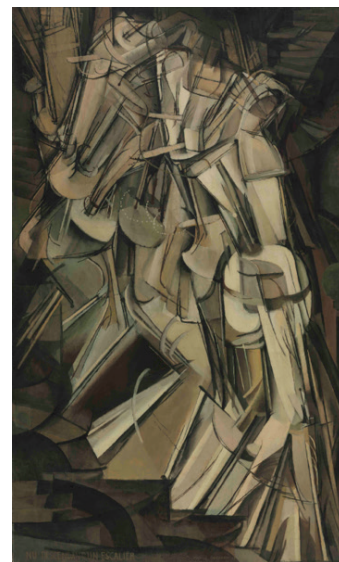
After World War I, the Dadaists and Surrealists – among them Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Meret Oppenheim, Dorothea Tanning, Leonor Fini, Lee Miller, Man Ray, and Max Ernst – pushed this development fur-

ther by continuing to distort, fragment, sexualize, and detaboo the body. Their approach was to present sexuality not as an aesthetic object but as a provocative, irrational, contradictory force – beyond morality, beauty, and order.



Francis Picabia, *La brune et la blonde*, nicht datiert

Marcel Duchamp radically pursued the de-bodification of the classical nude: *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (1912). His fragmented bodies were analyses of time, movement, and form.



Marcel Duchamp, *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2 d'Avignon*, 1912

Francis Picabia, a close friend of Duchamp and a central figure of Dadaism and Surrealism, finally declared the body a non-sacred entity. In his Dada period the nude appears mechanical, distant, absurd – the body as a machine of desire, an ironic provocation against morality. In the 1940s he unexpectedly returned to the realistic nude, now deliberately exaggerated, pornographic, and kitschy, as in *La brune et la blonde*.

Between 1954 and 1955 Picasso explicitly returned to Delacroix and created, in 15 variations (A–O), his own *Les Femmes d'Alger*. What had been sensual atmosphere in Delacroix explodes in Picasso into an eruptive landscape of color, form, and sexual energy – as if the entire history of modern body representation, from the romantic Orientalist image to radical avant-garde, condensed once more in these variations. Thus the arc closes from Delacroix's quiet revolution of sensuality to the glaring, fragmented corporeality of modernity.



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1955



Sigmar Polke, *Ohne Titel*, 1973

Even in his 90s Picasso returned to Degas's brothel monotypes and developed his own variations.

PRESENT

With a bold leap into the present, our examples include Sigmar Polke, Marlène Dumas, and Cecily Brown. In the 1970s Polke provoked with his annual edition for the Westfälischer Kunstverein Münster, consisting of pornographic images – a deliberate, humorous confrontation with provincial art circles.

In 2000, Marlène Dumas and photographer Anton Corbijn visited strip clubs in Amsterdam's Red Light District and created paintings and photographs – much like Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec a century earlier.

Finally, Cecily Brown used pornography as a deliberate source material early in her career – a statement aimed pointedly at her male colleagues. In 2022, CFA presented *The Spell*, a series of paintings in which Brown depicted nude men, as in *Reclining Blonde with Nudes* (2021) – comparable to Suzanne Valadon's pioneering position as the first woman ever to paint a male nude.



Cecily Brown, *Reclining Blonde with Nudes*, 2021



Marlène Dumas und Anton Corbijn, *Ohne Titel*, ohne Jahr