forms

function

From goddess to Amazon to sex object, art has had its way with the female form

By Dan Bischoff
Star-Ledger Staff

Take a walk through any American city today and you will see very few representations of the female nude, but you will see quite a few naked ladies.

A few generations ago, the figure of a woman — the idea and embodiment of virtue itself — was a fitting symbol, nude or thinly veiled, for nations, cities, banks, corporate enterprises, even abstract concepts like human virtue.

France prints a Liberty with bare breasts on its money, courtesy of painter Eugène Delacroix. Classical nudes graced railroad and utility stock certificates, and from its first moving pictures, Columbia Pictures has had a series of comely matrons in Athenian robes as its symbol. The original Columbia, as in the Chicago World Columbian Exposition of 1893, represented nothing less than the hemispheric ambitions of the U.S.A.

Time has not been kind to the female figure. Where once it was the chief totem of nearly all Western societies, lately all sorts of social groups have taken to using big red apples, calligraphic skylines, anthropomorphic lightning bolts, cactuses wearing hats — just about anything but the female figure — as their symbols. Even the new family-friendly Las Vegas doesn’t want to advertise itself with 50-foot-tall showgirls anymore.

The female form has become almost entirely commercial in the most narrow sense, a possession of either the multi-billion-dollar beauty cartel or the multi-billion-dollar pornography industry.

At least since the 1980s, when David Salle started painting poses from girlie mags into the backgrounds of his canvases, it has been rare for the nude female figure ever to make an appearance in the fine arts without a reference to one of those businesses.
Bodies in motion

The female form through the ages

The female image has been used to represent many things over the centuries, from beauty to spirituality to the aspirations of entire nations. But in contemporary fine art, the commercial power of the pornographic industry has come to dominate discussion of the female figure.

Venus of Willendorf, artist unknown, stone, c. 15,000-10,000 B.C. The most famous neolithic carving, like others of its type, the "Venus" is usually referred to as a "fattish figure" because the sexual attributes, mostly the breasts and buttocks, are wildly exaggerated.

In Jean Semmel's "Stacked," store mannequins represent the unsustainable idealized female figure.

Hrodite of Maia, artist unknown, marble, c. 100 B.C. The commercialization has been enriched by the statue more than any other, for its precisely the ideal classical proportions (the stands eight heads high, and the distance between the sists is the same as that from the waist to the nipples).

Standing Woman, artist unknown, alabaster, 2500 B.C. This portrait of an unknown woman shows her in the usual Egyptian pose for females, hands at her sides, looking straight ahead, shoulders and breasts slightly exaggerated but anatomical details otherwise quite natural — as if each limb and dimple were on display for an owner.

Janet Cooling's "Three Views of Fran," which portrays a female bodybuilder, is part of the New Museum of Contemporary Art show, "Picturing the Modern Amazon."

Joan Semmel: Recent Paintings

Where: Jersey City Museum, fourth floor of the Jersey City Public Library, 425 Jersey Ave., Jersey City

When: Through June 3; 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, until 8 p.m. Wednesday

How much: Free. Call (201) 547-4514.

"Picturing the Modern Amazon."

"Sacred Love" sits by a calm in in Vesperian ceremony.
The show at the New Museum is a more radical version of the same body-filler shape. Small, square, square-wrapped in the shoulders and narrow at the hips, loosely bunched, and with long, sheerer-domain jackets — all of which isn't common, of course, not even the curators. "Picture The Modern Museum" would suggest this shape could be normal for women generally.

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