

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 fit 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 Eugene 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 show-girls anymore.

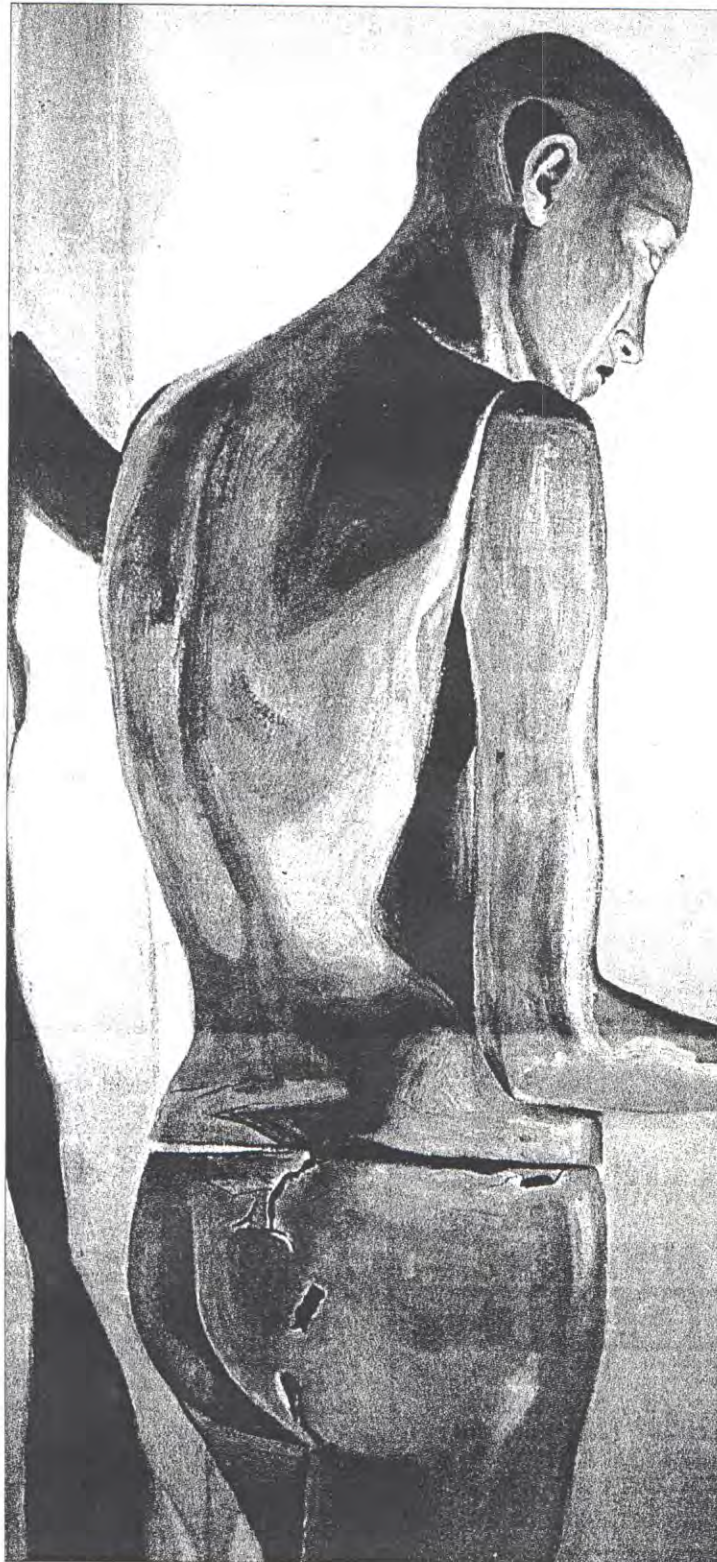
The female form has become almost entirely commercial in the most narrow sense, a possession of either the multi-billion-dollar beauty cartel or the multi-billion-dollar pornography industry.

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.

**INSIDE:
Through
the ages**



A look at 45,000 years of the female form. Page 8



At far left, Aphrodite of Melo, better known as the Venus de Melo, was a representation of the female form. Above, Joan Semmel's "Busted Butt" is part of her series of mannequin painting.

Art

Bodies in motion

The female form through the ages

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



1 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 "fetish figure" because the sexual attributes, mostly the breasts and buttocks, are wildly exaggerated.



2 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.

3 Aphrodite of Melos, artist unknown, marble, c. 100 B.C. Like other female figures in commercials have been imitated by this statue than any other; it fits precisely the ideal classical proportions (she stands eight heads high), and the distance between the breasts is the same as that from the navel to the nipple).



5 Profane freedom "Sacred and Profane Love," by Titian, oil on canvas, c. 1520. One of the most famous of Renaissance nudes, "Profane Love" places nudity firmly in the context of marriage (in the other half of the painting, "Sacred Love" sits calmly in a Venetian wedding dress).



Female

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From goddess to Amazon

How could the 2,300-year-old Western tradition of the expressive nude come to this? Partly, it has to do with Sigmund Freud and the evolution of sex out of religion and into a question of internal plumbing. In equal measure, there are the modern technologies of visual reproduction, particularly photography, which have flooded our psyches with cheaply produced images of the broadest possible appeal, while simultaneously making traditional, and necessarily more thoughtful, means of making images economically ruinous.

But the chief reason has to be a fundamental change in the general perception of women themselves, by both sexes.

Two new shows opened last week, at the Jersey City Museum and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, that bring such thoughts immediately to mind.

The Jersey City Museum is showing new paintings by retired Rutgers University art professor Joan Semmel, 63, a noted feminist and realist painter who first gained attention in the 1970s with her self-portraits. Here, she is showing paintings of commercial mannequins, mostly female, naked, wigless, and often broken into crumbly pieces that leave a powder trail of plaster dust and cruelty.

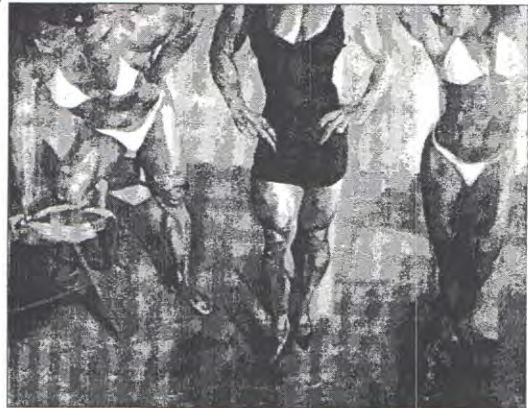
The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, on the other hand, has mounted an exhibition that sometimes tries to be more of a consciousness-raising event than an art show. "Picturing the Modern Amazon" includes the work of some 60 American artists depicting "hyper-muscular and physically strong women," including pictures by artists as familiar as Andres Serrano, Cindy Sherman, comic book impresarios Stan Lee and R. Crumb, and Louise Bourgeois.

As part of the show, bodybuilders will pose in the plate glass window of the museum's SoHo building every Saturday afternoon; the press opening was hosted by half a dozen bodybuilders in thong bikinis, striking poses before their portraits.

The real subject of both shows is the "ideal feminine form," a concept



In Joan Semmel's "Stacked," store mannequins represent the unattainable idealized female figure.



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, 472 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"

functionless and forlorn; broken and chipped, posed in joint-wrenching positions with blank serene indifference and often segmented like a Soprano mob victim, they are indeed disturbing images, and a powerful critique of the base contemporary commercialization of the female form.

The show at the New Museum is far more complicated, if only because it includes so many different artists. The ideal body they all dealt with is a more extreme version of the male bodybuilder shape, flat-chested, very broad in the shoulders and narrow in



6 **St. Barbara**, by Tilman Riemenschneider, alabaster, 1485-90. Late Gothic works, like medieval images before them, tend to focus on a woman's belly, or better yet, her draperies, which drift toward heaven of their own accord.



7 **"A Tambourine Player,"** by William Merritt Chase, oil on canvas, 1891. The Victorian ideal tended to be taller, flatter-chested, virginal — and, most importantly, class-obsessed, always carefully denoting the class of a woman by her dress or the objects she carries as a clue to how we should judge the image.



8 **"Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2,"** by Marcel Duchamp, oil on canvas, 1912. This painting caused a sensation in the 1914 New York Armory Show because it turned that traditional symbol of fecund purity into an exploitable machine.



9 **Columbia Studios logo**, 1924-present. At the height of its prestige, the female body could symbolize any collective entity, from a nation state to a corporation, as an unalloyed good.



10 **Argas Girl**, 1940s-50s. In the middle of the 20th century, the pin-up, an exclusively male understanding of feminine beauty, had received a kind of respectability unheard of in earlier generations, best exemplified in the work of artist Antonio Vargas.



11 **"Galatea,"** by Joan Semmel, oil on canvas, 1997. Feminist painters have often accepted the female nude as a cultural battleground — and mannequins project the current commercial ideal (tall, angular, impossibly thin yet round-breasted) with a sour irony.



12 **"Betty Moore"** by Alfred Leslie, oil on canvas, 1999. By the '90s, the female nude was an argument about what a woman can be — or, at least, what pornography can be.



13 **Cover of Maxim**, 2000. Porn now has its own visual style, like 16th-century Venetian painting or French Impressionism. Though not a porn magazine, Maxim's harshly lurid color combinations and silky-hard cover gloss jump out like the girly mag covers of the '80s — even without the bikini'd babe.

—Dan Bischoff

Stan Lee and R. Crumb, and Louise Bourgeois.

As part of the show, bodybuilders will pose in the plate glass window of the museum's SoHo building every Saturday afternoon; the press opening was hosted by half a dozen bodybuilders in thong bikinis, striking poses before their portraits.

The real subject of both shows is the "ideal feminine form," a concept that once seemed so certain it could be told by the numbers.

Most of those turn-of-the-20th century American civic nudes were based on a Greek formula for the ideal female form that balanced erotic tension against a generalized geometric perfection based on actual human bodies. It is that formula that helps a classical figure become a "nude" instead of just a naked person, clothing the figure with an invisible conceptual armor at once sensual and virtuous.

Simply put, the formula is based on the size of the head, and goes like this: The classic woman is between seven and eight heads tall. The distance between her breasts, nipple to nipple, should be the length of one head, as should the distance from the breasts to the navel and again from the navel to the division of the legs.

This is not a question of relative fat or thinness, a fashion that varies from culture to culture and from era to era, but one of proportion (the nudes of Peter Paul Rubens, called upon to justify so many broken diets, more often than not fall within the Greek equation). And of course, just carving a figure with those proportions alone would not necessarily make a "nude." The term also implies a certain simplification of bodily planes, a naturalness of pose, and a complete lack of self-consciousness that lifts the figure out of day-to-day nakedness to a mystically ideal plane.

Like the Egyptians, the Greeks only rarely executed statues of actual women. No portrait of a woman from the fifth century B.C., when the form of a classically beautiful human body was first codified, has come down to us. Most Greeks of the classic age preferred the nude male as an aesthetic object, and felt a woman's body was almost always more pleasing when draped in a fine muslin called a chlamys, the fashion ancestor of Columbia's cloak.

The ideal female nude was invented by a sculptor named Praxiteles, probably around 330 B.C., and was meant to show Aphrodite (Venus) as she steps into her bath. It was carved for the people of Kos, but they rejected it in shock because she had no draperies — these art world disputes about nudity have been going on for a very long time — and it wound up on the island of Knidos instead, where it became known as the Knidian Aphrodite and was a tourist trap for 350 years until it was destroyed in a war.

There are 49 full-size replicas of

floor of the Jersey City Public Library, 472 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"

Where: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, New York

When: Through June 25; noon-6 p.m. Wednesday and Sunday; noon-8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday

How much: \$6 general admission; \$3 artists/students/seniors. Free Thursdays 6-8 p.m. Call (212) 219-1222.

Praxiteles' Knidian Aphrodite in existence, all Roman copies, and they are all pretty bad. You can get a better idea of the subtlety of Praxiteles' invention from later Hellenistic pastiches, such as the Venus de Melo (done in a highly professional shop 200 years later, in a different pose and partially draped, but with a near perfect torso).

Every ancient author who saw the original, though, came away with the same very Greek thought: That somehow the Knidian Aphrodite was a woman's body perfected by geometry, and that the sculpture both filled men with desire and with a sense of religious awe.

The new shows at the Jersey City Museum and the New Museum in Manhattan are about the way contemporary culture is pulling on that ideal set of proportions like taffy, producing two very different contemporary ideals, neither of which has very much to do with religious awe.

Joan Semmel's store mannequins represent the fashion world ideal. Impossibly long and thin (nine or even 10 heads tall), with boyish shoulders and an angular profile, modern mannequins are rather like adolescent boys with breasts. They are perfectly unconscious of their nakedness because they are never meant to be seen without clothes, which gives them a self-absorption that borders on the ethereal. They replace the stimulation of desire with a deadness of surface that mocks the aspirations of classic art.

The feminist take on these images is well known: Women don't really look like this — not without an eating disorder — and the fashion industry feeds this stuff to women to cripple their self-image and increase their desire to buy the accessories that decorate these stick figures.

Semmel's paintings are merciless on these points, so much so that the Jersey City Museum has posted warnings for children for the first time. Stripped of their clothes, the mannequins have a ludicrous half-life,

mob victim, they are indeed disturbing images, and a powerful critique of the base contemporary commercialization of the female form.

The show at the New Museum is far more complicated, if only because it includes so many different artists: The ideal body they all dealt with is more extreme version of the mal bodybuilder shape, flat-chested, very broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips, heavily biceped, and with long, cheese-grater midsection — an of course, not even the curators of "Picturing the Modern Amazon" would suggest this shape could be norm for women generally.

The show does have an argument about what women can be, one that blows the convention of the sentimental civic nude right out of the water. It does so by calling on man of the conventions of male-directed pornography — the hard silky gloss of color photography, the stilted, artificial poses, and most of all the intense awareness of the camera's presence.

Curated by bodybuilder Lauri Fierstein and critics Joanna Freue and Judith Stein, "Picturing the Modern Amazon" never quite escapes the sticky associations of muscle magazines and the dominant subculture. There is a nagging sense that even women who have rejected the classical conception of sexual roles to seize independence and power in their physiques are undergoing a kind of ritual hazing. Like the anorexic ideal in Semmel's show these women are bound to a never ending regimen, in their case involving exercise and steroids, and you can't help thinking that's not a full life.

Of course, this ideal muscle bound figure is no less artificial than the breast implants and ritualized poses of conventional heterosexual pornography. In this year's Whitney Biennial, the most prestigious show of contemporary American art in the country, painter Lisa Yuskavage has no fewer than three of her large, immensely popular paintings of male mag sex toys on display, each with the wildly exaggerated breasts and buttocks of ancient fetish figures, by painted in the gauzy colors of the Venetian Renaissance. Virtually a other examples of feminine nudity in the Biennial are also drawn from pornography in one way or another, an almost all are executed by women artists.

What's new in the modern equation is women themselves, who finally are able to make art in their own image. For most of the 23 centuries since Praxiteles, virtually all the artists whose work has survived have been men.

Today, if anything, there are more women in art schools than there are men, and many women artists are willing to accept the nude female form as a battleground for the war between self-absorbed giraffes and bulbous posers.