

# Sexy and sacred Artists speak across centuries in show that's mysterious and almost modern

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## The Renaissance Nude Royal Academy, London



Full of surprises, and a few shocks, sexy, sacred and profane, The Renaissance Nude exhibition is almost as salacious as it is scholarly. With substantial loans from all over Europe and the US, the show has come from the J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and now fills the Sackler galleries at the Royal Academy, in London.

There is a riot of bodies in these low-lit sober grey rooms. Christian martyrs are impaled on trees. Jan Gossaert's Christ, stripped, awaits his fate, sitting on the cold stone and wracked with palpable terror. Several Saint Sebastians stand about, pin-up boys oblivious to the arrows that pierce them. Flagellants in a Netherlandish Book of Hours prepare for their hooded tormentors in an erotic as much as devotional scene. The delicacy and intimacy of the image counterpoints its impending violence.

Titian's Venus Anadyomene rises from the waters, wringing her hair, fully exposed and oblivious to the spectator. She doesn't see us looking, or pretends as much. Perhaps this is Titian's double bluff (she knows that we know ... except of course, she is only painted).

Mantegna's battling sea gods are all muscles and snarls and shouts, while Bosch-like creatures creep up on a sleeping pair of young women on a beach, a city burning on the far shore, in Marcantonio Raimondi's 1507-8 engraving. Filled with detail, the crepuscular image is a nightmarish pastoral of fanciful architecture, the silence of slumber and the cacophony of the besieged city. The little monsters complete the over-the-top scene. I could look at this all day. I was not expecting so much violence, or so much implied sex of all kinds.

Saint Jerome, butt naked, tears at his skin with a stone in a polychromed wood sculpture by Donatello (though there seems to be some dispute over the authorship). The saint attempts to distract himself from the temptations of the flesh. I begin to know how he feels. Baptism was a pretext for Luca Signorelli to paint male buttocks. A woman pleasures herself in Giulio Campagnola's 1508-9 engraving. Those saved walk towards heaven, decorously draped, while naked sinners tumble into hell, to be ravaged by demons in Dieric Bouts' 1468-9 diptych.

Painted in oil or tempera, engraved, etched, printed using woodcuts, drawn, carved and cast, flesh is made malleable by the pressure to dramatise and to exaggerate, to tell stories, educate, edify and horrify, but also tickle the fancy and appeal to the kinks in the Renaissance mind.

Focusing on the period 1400-1530, and with works from France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, the exhibition shows us that the variety of approaches to the naked body is almost as various as the artists who depicted them, let alone the variety of human bodies themselves. In extremis, in flagrante, inflammatory, indecent, idealised, implausible, pagan, mythological, Christian, humanist and abject, the exhibition seems to contain far more than the space it occupies can handle.

I fear The Renaissance Nude will be almost impossible to look at, given the number of actual live bodies these galleries might well host if the exhibition is anything like as popular as it deserves to be. There is so much here to astonish.

In the 1513 Aristotle and Phyllis woodcut, by the German artist Hans Baldung, we see Phyllis, naked, on the back of the equally naked old philosopher as he crawls around the garden. She carries a little whip; he wears a bit. He turns to acknowledge the viewer. Phyllis's lover, Alexander, watches from above.

Baldung is also represented by a naked Christ, in a state between death and resurrection, lying on the ground and looking up as if he has just woken, with one hand between his legs, perhaps to check he's intact, perhaps to signal vulnerability.

Baldung was Albrecht Dürer's student, and one of the most surprising works here is Dürer's bathhouse scene, a crowded woodcut depicting male cruising and voyeurism in an outdoor bathhouse in 1496. The ribald scene is unexpected as it is humorous.

The sacred and profane, linear time and circular time and the end of time are all at play here, along with the devotional and the rational, the irrational and the mythological. What a great show this is, how thought-provoking, mysterious, and nearly modern. Until 2 June

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