

The Nude and the Norm in the Early Modern Low Countries

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BREPOLS



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The Nude, the Artist and the Model: The Case of Rembrandt

Eric Jan Sluijter

The famous, not to say infamous, etching of *A Nude Woman seated on a Mound*, an early work of around 1631 (fig. 1), has always elicited strong responses. By examining its exceptional aspects, I will touch on a range of issues that are pertinent to discussions of depictions of the female nude: responses to images of female nudes, prestige and artistic rivalry where it concerns portrayals of the nude, conventions and deviations in the rendering of nudes, problems surrounding a 'realistic' representation of the nude, the reality of depicting women posing in the nude, and the relationship between artist, model, and image.

With *A Nude Woman seated on a Mound* Rembrandt did something for which there was no precedent. The etching is not only exceptional because of its striking naturalism but also because of the fact that, in a publicly disseminated work of art, we see nothing but a naked woman posing for the artist – a naked woman, it is suggested, that sat before the artist just as we see her here. She is stripped of all allegorical or narrative content. Rembrandt must have been acutely aware of its novelty. Perhaps in an effort not to present something too startlingly new, he included the suggestion that she is sitting in nature, thus referring to the many nymphs in art who have undressed to bathe. No generic drapery lies next to her, however, but a seventeenth-century chemise, of which we see the sleeve and cuff. This intimates that she has just undressed to show her nude body to the artist and, through him, to the beholder. Moreover – and this makes her even more exceptional – she eyes the viewer, confronting him or her directly. The beholder is quite insistently brought face to face with this naked model. Therefore, the viewer cannot avoid thinking about the living woman behind this representation. This implies that the sexual intrigue surrounding commonplaces about the artist and his model is activated,¹

while connotations of a social nature also surface quite explicitly, since the viewer of the period would have assumed that women posing in the nude were of the lowest kind.

In the same year, or shortly before, Rembrandt made an etching of a nude woman that still took place in a mythological setting (fig. 2). By representing her while bathing and adding a quiver with arrows, he has turned her into a bathing Diana. This nude is also highly unusual because, apart from the drastic naturalism, she too confronts the viewer directly. Of all the prints of nudes that Rembrandt would have known, Rubens's *Susanna*, engraved by Lucas Vorsterman (fig. 3), was the only precedent of a nude looking directly at the beholder; Rembrandt would depict this subject a few years later in his first painting of *Susanna*, which is obviously meant to compete with Rubens's composition (fig. 17).² By turning the first nude woman he etched into the bathing virgin goddess Diana, Rembrandt positions the informed male viewer (and it is for a male viewer specifically that such images were made) as an Actaeon, a spying voyeur.³ Most remarkable, however, and completely unusual in prints of such subjects, is that she quietly returns his gaze. As Rembrandt would also do with his depictions of *Susanna* of a few years later, he thus experiments with the inherent erotic and moral connotations of looking at a nude woman.⁴

Let us consider the written responses these nudes elicited. The earliest and best known are those by Jan de Bisschop and Andries Pels. In 1671, two years after Rembrandt's death, Jan de Bisschop railed against artists of Rembrandt's generation, insisting that some artists who were held in high esteem had created the fashion (he uses the word *mode*) that *one must imitate life indiscriminately as it usually and ubiquitously manifests itself*.⁵ He maintained that, until recently, this approach was deeply rooted among many



Fig. 1. Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631.

good artists so that almost everything that was reprehensible to the eye was selected – indeed sought out – to be painted and drawn, as if it were sacred and special.⁶ He adds, as the most terrifying example, that even if a *Leda* or a *Danaë* was represented (which shows how entrenched this tradition was), one depicted a naked woman with a fat, swollen stomach, pendulous breasts, garter marks on her legs, and many more such deformities.⁷ Although De

Bisschop does not mention Rembrandt by name, he is clearly referring to that most famous of Amsterdam artists of the past half century. Shortly after the Bisschop's diatribe followed the well-known poem by the classicist playwright Andries Pels, who referred in his *Use and Misuse of the Theatre* to Rembrandt as an example of everything that a classicist like Pels judged to be wrong.⁸



Fig. 2. Rembrandt, *Diana*, c. 1631.

*When he painted a nude woman, as sometimes occurred,
No Greek Venus did he choose, oh no, upon my word
His model was a laundress from a hut or a turf treader;
His error he explained away as following Dame Nature,
And all else as idle decoration. Drooping breasts,
Misshapen hands, marks left on flesh all pinched and pressed
By tightly laced up corsets, garter bands that legs constrain,
It all must be depicted or risk nature's high disdain;
His, at least, which brooked no rules, nor did he yet believe*

*In molding human limbs into proportions bound to please.
Correct perspective, rules of art, he did not utilize,
Preferring simply to depict whatever filled his eyes.*

In the early eighteenth century, the painter and biographer Arnold Houbraken followed this line of thought as well, even quoting Pels's verse. Houbraken begins this passage in Rembrandt's biography by stating that nude



Fig. 3. Lucas Vorsterman after Peter Paul Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1620.

women were *the most glorious subject of the artist's brush, to which all renowned masters had set themselves with great diligence since time immemorial*, thus corroborating that it was a current ideology among ambitious artists that depicting nude women was one of the highest aims of art.⁹ However, after having said this, he gives a devastating criticism of Rembrandt's nudes, undoubtedly triggered by Rembrandt's etchings: he finds them too pathetic for words *because in general these are usually depictions which fill one with disgust and make one wonder how a man of so much genius and intellect could be so obstinate in his preferences*.¹⁰ Also Houbraken stated emphatically that it was Rembrandt's ideology to depict unconditionally everything from life, as had been the case with Caravaggio: *Of the same opinion was our great master Rembrandt, whose fundamental principle was 'only to imitate nature,' and everything done otherwise he found suspect*.¹¹

I do not think that we have to doubt that this was, indeed, Rembrandt's fundamental principle. In *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, I argued extensively that the criticism aimed at Rembrandt after 1670, from De Bisschop, Pels, Von Sandrart and Houbraken, was not, as Jan Emmens had maintained, a later classicist standpoint that had taken shape only in the late seventeenth century in classicist treatises and that was then projected onto the art of Rembrandt.¹² I argued that this criticism must have reflected debates of a much earlier period; they were rooted in diverging opinions that were hotly discussed in the period that Rembrandt made these etchings. Rembrandt took a conspicuous stand, which he could not have publicized more forcefully than with these two etchings!

Rembrandt self-consciously championed the notion that one had to depict life in all its diversity, without heeding rules of proportion and anatomy. Such views were already quite fiercely opposed in his time.¹³ Rembrandt would have described his endeavors in terms that had been used for criticizing Titian and Caravaggio – terms that were written down by Carel van Mander, who repeated Vasari's criticism of Titian, and who, as early as 1604, was the first to write about Caravaggio's polemical utterances: that everything not painted from life is mere child's play or trifle and that one should not paint a single stroke without having life before one's eyes.¹⁴ As we

just saw, this passage was, more than a century later, literally repeated by Houbraken as also being Rembrandt's ideology.¹⁵ This was information handed down from pupil to pupil – Houbraken was a pupil of Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten – and not a later construction of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century classicists.

Nonetheless, just like Houbraken, Rembrandt knew that the female nude had a long and prestigious tradition stemming from classical antiquity and revived in the Renaissance. This tradition began with the legendary Apelles, the Greek painter with which every ambitious artist wanted to be compared. Not only was Apelles's fame based on his exceptional excellence in the rendering of grace and beauty of women,¹⁶ according to Pliny (and extensively repeated by Van Mander), but all the anecdotes about Apelles were concerned with the portrayal of female nudes.¹⁷ Rembrandt must have been acutely aware that by depicting nude women, he could conspicuously compete with his great predecessors, from Apelles up to Raphael, Titian, the Carracci and Rubens, whose works Rembrandt studied carefully through prints.

Everything Rembrandt did in this period makes clear that he was spurred by ambition and wanted to position himself in the line of the great masters who came before him. He aspired to surpass these predecessors by way of an unconditional lifelikeness in figures, in the suggestion of space and in the expression of emotions – in, to use his own words, *the most natural motion and emotion*.¹⁸ He endeavored to depict, to borrow a term that Philips Angel used in 1641: *an appearance that seems to be real* ('a virtual reality', we would say now), *seeking nature which is so abundant in its ever-changing diversity*.¹⁹ More than any other artist before, it was his express purpose to render without concession bodies that were *done with real and natural fleshiness by following life itself straightforwardly, without applying any (rules of) art to attain beauty in the torso or legs*. Here I quote Van Mander when he, following Vasari, critically described Titian's depiction of nudes;²⁰ such a description must have been a great inspiration for Rembrandt. And Rembrandt did all this to bring his depiction as close as possible to the world of the viewer's experience, to involve the viewer forcefully, and to give him or her

the opportunity to empathize.²¹ And it is precisely this approach that could cause trouble when considering depictions of nudes.

Responses from the twentieth century were often strikingly similar. In his famous book on the nude, Kenneth Clark articulated in a brilliant synthesis the general attitude of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries towards the nude.²² In Clark's eyes there have been no other nudes, at least not among the ones that he considered great works of art, that deviated so fundamentally from the conventions of the nude as those of Rembrandt: *they are, to our eyes, some of the most unpleasing, not to say disgusting, pictures ever produced by a great artist.*²³ He characterizes them as *...pitiful inadequacy of the flesh... more unflinchingly portrayed than in any representation before or since... As a sort of protest Rembrandt has gone out of his way to find the most deplorable body imaginable and emphasize its least attractive features. ...his eye dwelt on every baggy shape, every humiliating pucker, everything, in fact, that the convention of the nude obliterates but that Rembrandt is determined we shall see.*²⁴

In his well-known introduction, Clark contrasts the words 'nude' and 'naked': *To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body reformed.*²⁵ To clarify his point, he makes a comparison with nude photography, clearly thinking of nineteenth-century photographs of nude models, as he writes: *...we are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections, which, in the classical scheme, are eliminated. By long habit we do not judge it as a living organism, but as a design;... In almost every detail the body is not the shape that art had led us to believe it should be.*²⁶ Obviously, Clark felt highly uncomfortable when looking at Rembrandt's nudes: *We can hardly bring our eyes to dwell on her*, he writes about the Diana etching, but simultaneously he feels that *they achieve a kind of horrible fascination.*²⁷

It is evident that these images evoked so forcefully the presence of the *living organism* of the real, naked woman that was the model that



Fig. 4. Jan Gossart van Mabuse, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1516. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie.

they clashed with Clark's notion of what art is. For Clark and his contemporaries, there was a sharp distinction between the aesthetics of the representation on the one hand and the real things that were depicted at the other. In the case of the nude: on the one hand the 'design' we judge aesthetically, and on the other *the living organism* to which the image refers, the latter being irrelevant and proscribed from interfering with our aesthetic experience. It is an attitude towards art that had become dominant in the nineteenth century. With Rembrandt's nudes – and this was the trouble – one could not avoid being reminded of the *living organism*, that is, the model who sat for the artist, just as in photography.

According to Clark, all thoughts and feelings, including the erotic, that the living organism might evoke tend to upset the *responses from which a work of art derives its independent life*, and that was to be avoided at any price.²⁸ To control that risk, the body had to be clothed in conventions that were developed by the art of classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance.

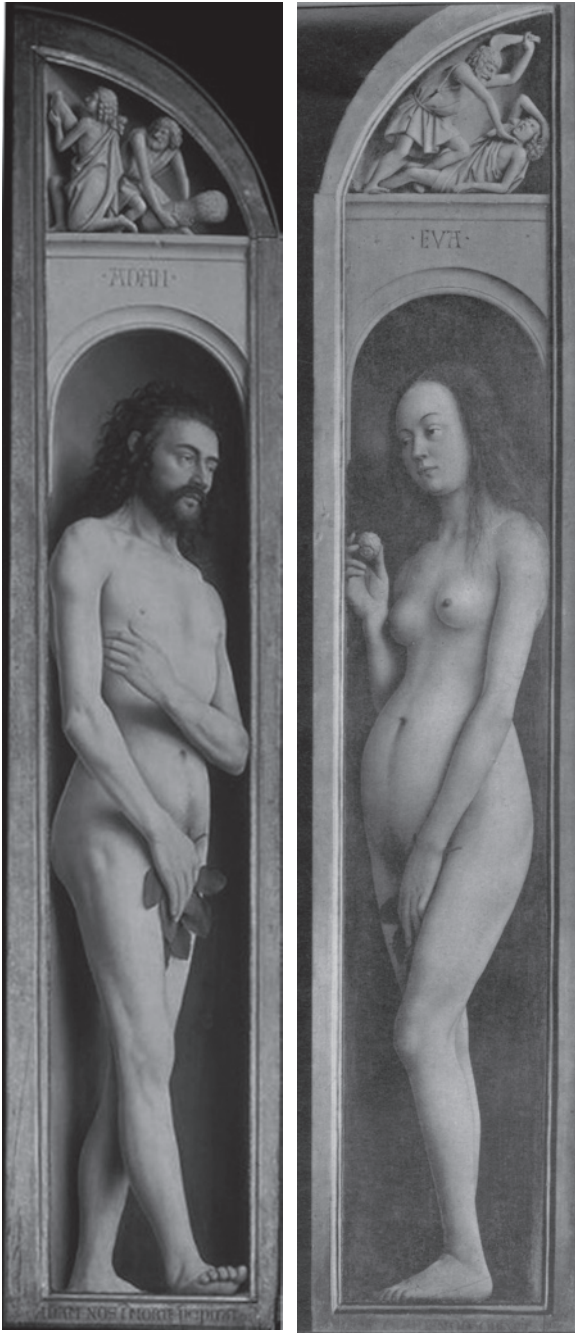


Fig. 5. Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece: Adam and Eve*, 1442. Ghent, St Bavo Cathedral.



Fig. 6. Hendrick Goltzius, *Venus ex Balneo*, 1591. Haarlem, Teylers Stichting.

And those conventions had to be applied consistently. For example, about Jan Gossart, whose style Clark viewed as an unresolved mix of Italian conventions and Northern realism, he writes that his nudes are ...*curiously indecent* (fig. 4). *They seem to push their way forward till they are embarrassingly near to us, and we recognize how necessary it is for the naked body to be clothed by a consistent style.*²⁹ Here we see literally the

notion of being 'clothed' in style. Thus, the naked body – which easily evokes uncomfortable feelings – has to be dressed in the ideal, generalized shapes and geometric proportions from antiquity, with as little emphasis as possible on physicality and none at all on biological functions. To his distress, Clark is reminded of these biological functions in Northern art of the fifteenth century. He



Fig. 7. Abraham Bloemaert, *Apollo and Pan*: detail, c. 1635–40. Berlin, Schloss Grunewald.

writes that the stomach of Jan van Eyck's *Eve* – and this applies also to the nudes by Van der Goes, Memling and other Northern artists of that period – ...*does not take its shape from the will but from the unconscious biological process that gives shape to all hidden organisms* (figs. 5 and 14).³⁰ In the classical ideal this physical threat is tamed and disciplined, as Linda Nead has argued.³¹ This classical ideal is, in fact, in many respects remarkably masculine (fig. 6).

The classical type has a relatively small head, a substantial neck, wide shoulders, a wide ribcage, a clearly articulated midriff and waist, distinctly rendered muscles in the shoulders, arms, midriff and flanks, an even distance from breast to navel and from navel to groin, and strong legs with rather long calves. Most of these characteristics are emphatically present

in the classical type of female anatomy that was, with variations, adapted by Italian Renaissance artists, as well as by two generations of Netherlandish artists before Rembrandt, from Blocklandt to Bloemaert (fig. 7). Rembrandt exchanged this for a relatively large head, a short neck, narrow sloping shoulders, high small breasts, a very high waist and a lower body that seems to begin directly beneath the breasts. From a narrow ribcage it expands downwards, without articulation of a midriff, into a voluminous belly and wide hips, with an utterly unclassical lengthening of the distance from breast to navel (figs. 8 and 9). Instead of muscles, we see the suggestion of a mass of lifelike, soft, rippling flesh. By doing this, he deviated emphatically from current conventions. The norm for every connoisseur



Fig. 8. Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman with a Snake*, c. 1637. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum.



Fig. 9. Rembrandt, *Adam and Eve*, 1638.



Fig. 10. Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *Adam and Eve*, c. 1515.



Fig. 11. Jacopo Caraglio after Raphael, *Roxana and Alexander*: detail, c. 1535.



Fig. 12. Jacob Matham after Hendrick Goltzius, *Venus and Cupid*, 1612.



Fig. 13. Adriaen van Nieulandt, *Venus and Adonis*, 1627. Whereabouts unknown.

at that time would have been constituted by such nudes as those in prints after Raphael (figs. 10 and 11), the example with which Rembrandt competed in this case, as well as by the many nudes in the large number of prints by and after Hendrick Goltzius, Abraham Bloemaert, and Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (figs. 7 and 12). Those were the images that would immediately have come into connoisseurs' minds when they thought of depictions of nudes. In the 1630s this type was still dominant and was depicted by artists like Bloemaert and Adriaen van Nieulandt (fig. 13); the latter lived on the opposite side of the street from Rembrandt. All of these conventions Rembrandt emphatically rejected.

The characteristics of Rembrandt's nudes, however, do conform in several respects to the conventions of the Northern nude from the fifteenth century (figs. 5 and 14). Rembrandt must have considered the older alternative, the indigenous Northern tradition, as being closer to a lifelike female body. But there is more to Rembrandt's body types than that. The shape of his nude women in the 1630s bears a remarkable similarity to the dressed silhouette

of that time. We can see this, for instance, in Rembrandt's 1634 portrait of the highly fashionable Oopjen Coppit: sloping shoulders, small high breasts and an enormously expanding lower body that begins directly under the breasts. And when Rembrandt represents beautiful women from the Bible or antiquity, this same silhouette appears. These heroines, dressed in fancy costumes, show this fashionable silhouette even more prominently (fig. 15).

Ann Hollander has argued – in my view quite convincingly, at least for the period under discussion – that the perception of the desired shape of the female body in a given period is related to, and reflected by, the fashionably dressed body.³² An artist can deviate from this and idealize according to the classical norms (through which the body is further removed from the perception of reality), or he can follow this fashionable shape. As Rembrandt's bodies deviate from classical forms, they would have looked more real for the viewers of that time because they were closer to their own world of experience, which was largely determined by the shape of the

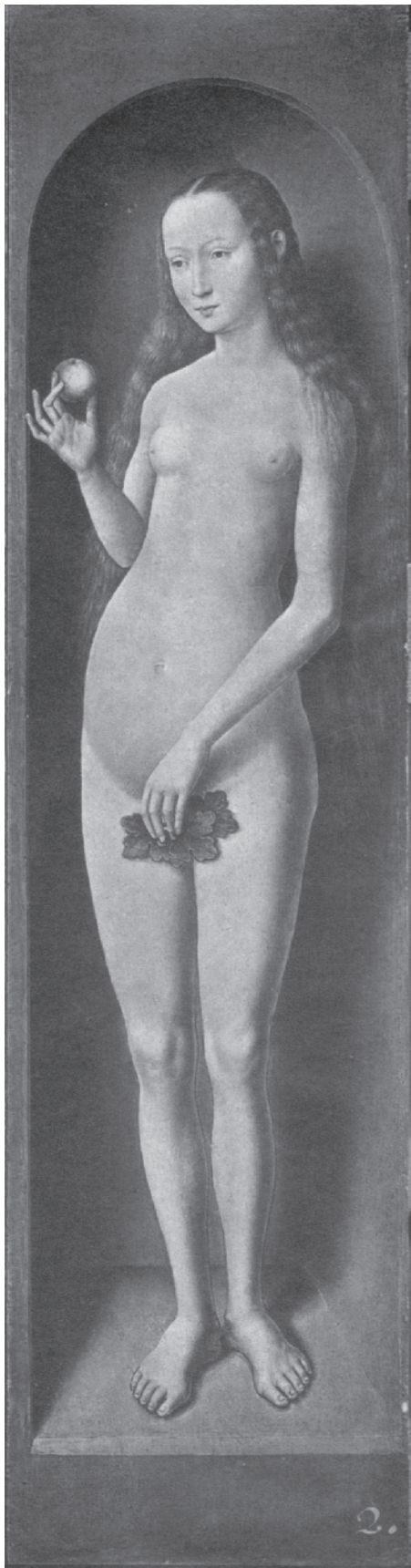


Fig. 14. Hans Memling, *Altar of St. John* (*Johannesaltärchen*): Eve (exterior wing), c. 1485. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



Fig. 15. Rembrandt, *Artemisia*, 1634. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



Fig. 16. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, c. 1632-35. London, National Gallery.

clothed body.³³ As a means to involve the viewer, Rembrandt's women are indeed literally *women deprived of their clothes*, to use Clark's words when he defined 'naked' as opposed to 'nude'.

In this way Rembrandt turned away decisively from the current conventions and from the artists he emulated. It has quite often been observed that Rembrandt's nudes were inspired by Rubens.³⁴ Such a thought, however, only shows that one sees nothing more than the very superficial equation: fat + puckers + dimples = Rubens. Indeed, in Rubens's nudes we do not see the taut skin found in the paintings of his predecessors, but his bodies are pro-

foundly classical in their shapes, proportions and their poses (fig. 16).³⁵ Such conventional poses were also something that Rembrandt systematically avoided. For Rubens the ancients were always the norm that one should follow. His nudes showed his ideal of imitation by bringing antique sculpture to life through the rendering of real fleshiness over this classical structure.³⁶ In the case of women this meant the depiction of soft, fatty female tissue to suggest a lifelike, breathing skin. For Rembrandt, on the contrary, the shapes and poses of the classical examples were not the norm to emulate. Like his first admirer, Constantijn Huygens, he strongly adhered to the notion that the ancients had already been far surpassed by the moderns, by masters like Titian and Rubens.³⁷ They were the ones with whom one should compete. And he competed with them by following a notion of naturalness that was embedded in this vigorous 'from life' ideology.³⁸

Thus we see that, in his endeavor to bring the nude close to the viewer and to involve him as much as possible, he pointedly rejects the current conventions of anatomy – even, or even more so, when he refers to a classical example, as is clearly the case in his *Susanna* (figs. 17–19).³⁹ The 'like real' effect is underlined by an exceptional emphasis on the surface of the skin in truly virtuoso performances.⁴⁰ In *A Nude Woman on the Mound* (fig. 1), he managed to suggest the soft rippling flesh with the etching needle; in paintings, he does this through brushstrokes which carefully imitate a skin-like texture in the paint layer. Remarkably, we see that Rembrandt does precisely that for which Jacob van der Gracht reproaches some artists. Van der Gracht compiled an anatomy book for artists in 1634.⁴¹ In the introduction he stated that some artists think it sufficient to work only from life as it appears to them, while others think that one should only study antique examples. He blames both types of artists because they lack a proper knowledge of anatomy. About the artists who only work from life, he says that they focus completely *on the garment of the human body, which is the skin*. In Rembrandt's case, this remark seems strikingly to the point.⁴²

I am convinced, however, that *The Nude Woman on the Mound* (fig. 1) and *Diana Bathing* (fig. 2) were not drawn after a model posing

for him in the nude. The body of a naked, rather fat woman could never have looked like this. Many parts of the nude portrayed in *The Nude Woman on the Mound* are peculiar. The upper legs are too long, and one sees simultaneously the inside and the outside of her right arm. (Just try to get your arm into this position.) One sees too much of the right leg, while the stomach and breast do not correspond to what one sees of her back; one sees too much of both. And in both etchings, the contour of the belly, sloping down from the somewhat peculiarly placed high breasts in an almost uninterrupted line, has little to do with the real body of a corpulent woman sitting in this pose – there would have been substantial rolls of fat. In that respect, even classical sculptures and the nudes of Raphael, to name a few, are (although less fat) anatomically closer to reality (figs. 10–11). The contours of the bellies of Rembrandt's women are similar to the fashionable silhouette of his sumptuously dressed goddesses and heroines (fig. 15). However, what counts is the *suggestion* that these women have been posing for Rembrandt right as we see them here, and that suggestion is perfect. After all, it is that to which everybody has always responded. But before I move to the problem of the use of nude models, let us first return to the critics for a moment.

Kenneth Clark's view, discussed above, contains many elements which can be traced back to sixteenth-century art literature, and it is based on the notion that the visual knowledge of material objects must be abstracted to contours and clearly structured forms selected from the most beautiful in nature. This notion is the basis of the academic *disegno* ideal of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴³ This 'intellectual' approach holds, as it were, the physicality of the body and its sensual associations in check because it creates some distance from the viewer's experience. And because this was practiced by most artists, especially when they rendered nudes, critics like Clark were able to appreciate the aesthetic object detached from what it represents.⁴⁴

Apart from this academic attitude, however, there came into being a powerful 'from life' ideology, particularly in the first half of the seventeenth century, in which it was emphasized that life should be rendered in all its vari-



Fig. 17. Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636. The Hague, Mauritshuis.



Fig. 18. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Crouching Venus* (after Hellenistic sculpture, the so-called *Venus Doidalsas*).

ety, accidentality and diversity, and that it should be depicted not through line but by way of light and shade, and tone and color, an ideology which became especially popular in Holland and to which Rembrandt adhered.⁴⁵ In the case of nudes this approach is inherently problematic, and it resulted in the criticism we have seen, from De Bisschop to Clark. It is no coincidence that every time heavy criticism was leveled at naturalism in art, it was triggered by representations of the female nude, beginning with Vasari's criticism of Titian's *Danae*, where the Roman-Tuscan ideology of selection of the most beautiful rendered through perfect line is, for the first time, contrasted with the Venetian endeavor for lifelikeness through light, shade and color, which was connected from the start with the notion of working from life.⁴⁶ From there, we can trace a line via De Bisschop's, Pels's and Houbraken's criticism of Rembrandt's nudes all the way to the vehement responses to Manet's *Olympia*, which caused such a scandal because all the standardized conventions of the period were demolished in one stroke.

Suddenly one was, once again, confronted with the woman behind the nude, that is to say, with the social and sexual reality of the lower-class woman posing for the artist, as many critics made clear.⁴⁷ Similar were the reactions of nineteenth-century critics responding to photographs of nudes that were presented as art. In 1862, Adolphe-Eugène Didsderi described such photographs as *those sad nudities which display with a desperate truth all the physical and moral ugliness of the model paid by the session*.⁴⁸

Although their criticism seems quite similar, there is a fundamental difference between them. For the seventeenth-century viewer, it was self-evident that one had to imagine the things one saw in an image as really being before one's eyes in order to bring them to life in one's mind, thus conceiving of the things seen in a painting as a 'virtual reality',⁴⁹ or *eygen schijnende gedaente*, to again use Angel's term. This is profoundly different from the attitude of Clark, for whom, as we have seen, precisely such an engagement had to be avoided. To perceive a represented figure as a *living*



Fig. 19. Sisto Badalocchio after Raphael, *Historia del Testamento Vecchio – Bathsheba Spied Upon by David*: detail, 1607.

organism was absolutely wrong in Clark's view. Clark, as well as the average nineteenth-century viewer, was shocked by such naturalistic nudes because, in a time when one was supposed not to imagine the real woman behind the work of art, the conventions of the nude *clothed in style* were dismantled and the reality of the *living organism* could not be avoided. The responses from which a work of art derives its independent life were seriously upset. However, to see the figure as a living person was precisely what the seventeenth-century viewer wanted to do – and did do – when looking at a work of art.

The many statements in different kinds of literature, from theoretical treatises to poems about paintings, about imagining that one is looking at a living presence in real life and not a mere painted representation have to be taken seriously.⁵⁰ It has often been said that these are just *topoi* going back to classical antiquity and therefore have little meaning. However, far from being empty and meaningless utterances, they embody fundamental responses.⁵¹ Precisely because these were commonplaces that were repeated time and again, they were in everyone's mind, determining the viewer's expectations and the way he looked at paintings. As Junius reminds connoisseurs ... *with the full attention of our art-loving mind we have to consider [the image], as if we were confronted with the living presence of the things themselves and not with their painted portrayal.*⁵²

As Pels said in the poem quoted above, one had to take a Greek Venus as one's model, by which he meant that the idealized shapes of classical antiquity should be an example, so that the result would not be confused with an individual, posing woman. One should be able to bring to life in one's mind a Greek Venus, the ideal of beauty and grace, as if she were a real woman. Instead, Rembrandt made him see a *laundress or turf trader*, by which Pels refers to the lower-class woman that was his model. This confrontation with the naked woman posing in the nude before the artist – and such women were considered immoral – combined with the contemporary fascination with the relation between artist and model, and coupled with the fact that images of female nudes were morally reprehensible for many people anyway, makes clear how controversial such an image must have been in Rembrandt's own day.

Moreover, the then current notions about the exceptional power that the sense of sight holds over the mind – specifically the power to arouse love and lust by seeing naked women, which preoccupied seventeenth-century moralists – moral problems surfaced forcefully in the case of lifelike depictions of the female nude. Jacob Cats formulated such notions nicely and tersely, railing against the rousing effect of seeing the naked limbs of real women, as well as of looking at images of nudes, pointing out that the better the painter and the more lifelike his painting, the more dangerous these images were, at least, from his moralistic standpoint. *The closer he [the painter] is able to come in his suggestion of life / The more he can arouse all passions / Until heaven knows what; precisely the best of minds / Can breed the worst evil and cause the greatest harm.*⁵³ The strictly religious Dirck Raphaelsz Camphuyzen flies into a frenzied rage when it comes to the portrayal of nude women: ... *while the eyes are deceived, / And the heart astonished by the beautiful lies of painting, / One wants to do and to have / Everything one beholds in a painting.*⁵⁴

With such notions about the dangers of the sense of sight, the suggestion of lifelikeness and the effect on the viewer, however, a lighthearted game could also be played. This can be seen in a number of poems celebrating paintings of nudes by Joost van den Vondel and Jan Vos, who wrote about such nudes as if they



Fig. 20. Jacob Backer, *A Seated Nude Woman*, 1648. Boston, Maida and George Abrams Collection.

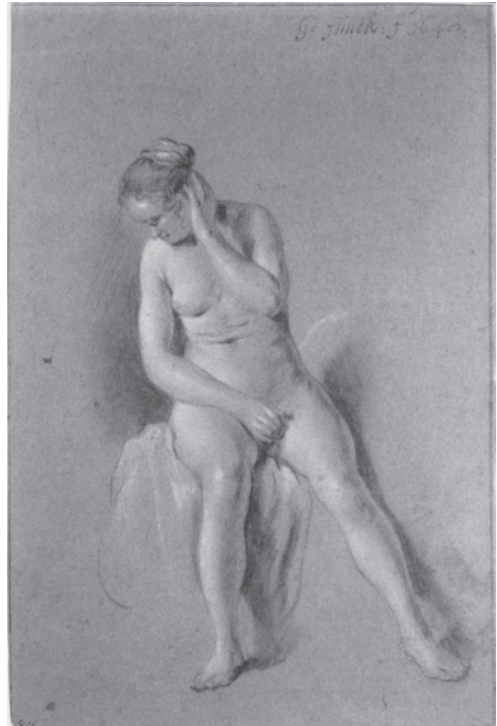


Fig. 21. Govert Flinck, *A Seated Nude Woman*, 1648. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett.



Fig. 22. Rembrandt, *Study of a Woman's Legs*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 23. Rembrandt, *A Seated Female Nude*, c. 1660. Chicago, Art Institute (Clarence Buckingham Collection).

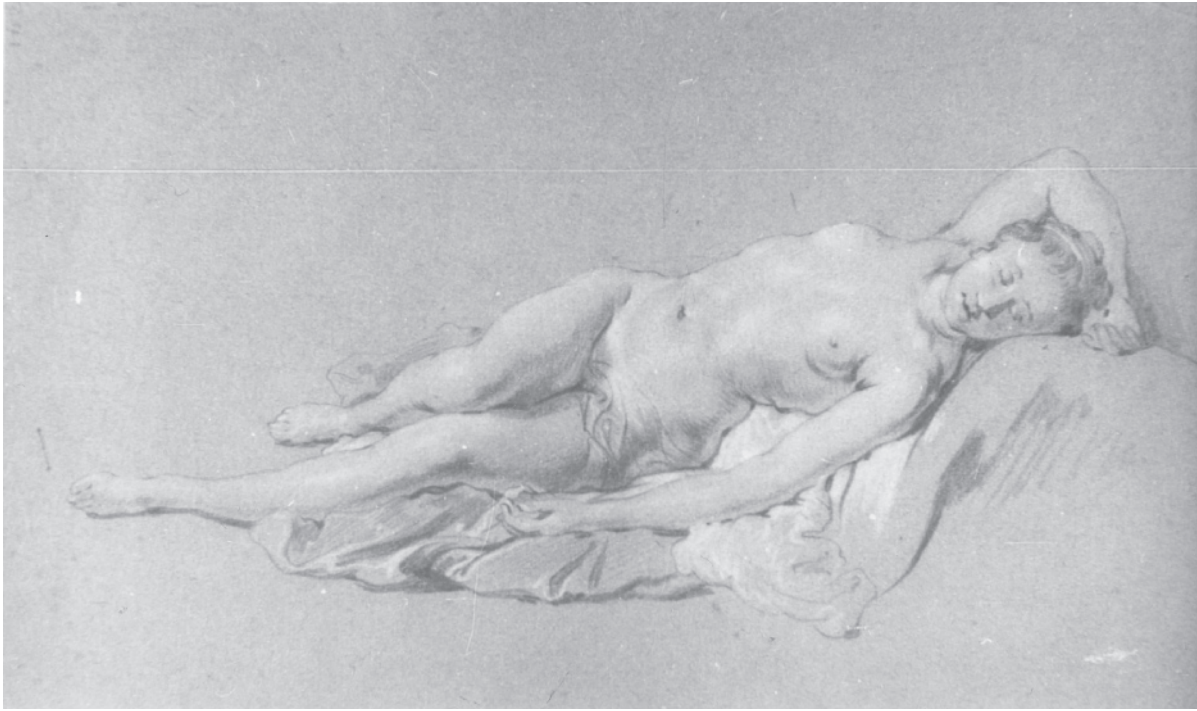


Fig. 24. Govert Flinck, *A Sleeping Nude Woman*, c. 1645-50. Paris, Fondation Custodia (Coll. F. Lugt), Institut Néerlandais.

saw them in reality. Both poets embraced the international trend in poetry of wittily praising paintings and their makers.⁵⁵ In poems by Vondel and Vos on a painting of the chaste *Susanna* (we do not know which painting), the painter's fascination with the nude model is evident. In Vondel's poem we meet with the motif that the woman depicted is so beautiful and effectively seductive because the painter's art was inspired by love, which was kindled by rays coming out of the eyes of his model.⁵⁶ Jan Vos even refers to the obviously thrilling notion that the painter had an immoral woman as his model in order to be able to make a lifelike painting.⁵⁷ However, Vos reassures us that we do not have to fear her poison, because, after all, she is only painted appearance.

From a number of lawsuits it appears that posing in the nude could be considered proof of the woman's immorality.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, there was a fascination with the relation between the painter and his nude model, which resulted in age-old commonplaces recurring from antiquity through the present day, as can be read in Erna Kok's essay.⁵⁹ The current stereotype that painters had amorous

affairs with their models, combined with the assumed low status of the model who posed in the nude, made the moral implications and complications around a naturalistic rendering of a woman all the more intriguing for the viewer, as well as potentially compromising for the artist.⁶⁰

We can be certain that from the late 1640s onwards, drawing from live models posing completely naked was practiced in the studio. Two lawsuits testify that a group of painters, among them Dirk Bleker, Govert Flinck, Jacob Backer, Jacob van Loo and Ferdinand Bol, drew together after nude models; indeed, we know a few drawings of nudes in which the same model was drawn by different artists from slightly different angles (figs. 20-21).⁶¹ It seems likely that before that time, only men posed naked as live models; knowledge of the nude female body was gained by studying and drawing after prints, sculpture and paintings by other masters. In rare cases, partly undressed women were studied directly from life.⁶² It was with this knowledge that the models' male bodies could easily be transformed into repre-



Fig. 25. Rembrandt, *A Seated Nude Woman with a Hat Beside Her*, 1658.



Fig. 26. Rembrandt, *A Nude Woman Bathing Her Feet in a Brook*, 1658.



Fig. 27. Rembrandt, *A Half-Dressed Woman Seated before a Stove*, 1658.

sentations of female bodies.⁶³ Yet, there obviously remained a strong tension between the need that artists felt to draw from nude female models and the reality of doing so, as such lawsuits demonstrate in the later seventeenth century.

I am convinced that Rembrandt, too, began only late in his career to work from a nude female model. In the 1630s Rembrandt sometimes drew after live models with uncovered limbs, as in a study of a bared leg (fig. 22) or studies of models with an exposed upper body.⁶⁴ It is only in the 1650s that Rembrandt began to draw, sometimes together with pupils, from female models posing completely nude (figs. 23–24).⁶⁵ As in the etchings from earlier in his career, we see that in Rembrandt's nude drawings and etchings of this period, the result is something altogether new. In these drawings, as well as in the more public etchings, he presents images of women that are truly nothing more or less than the rendering of models posed in the studio. They are entirely different from the conventional, elegant poses

of the nudes in the drawings that, for example, Flinck and Backer made from live models (figs. 20 and 21). In the 1650s, Rembrandt rendered these women precisely as he had them before his eyes: as tired, somewhat slouching models who seem to sit with reluctance. We also notice that not only their bodies, but also their faces are truly individualized so as to make them as lifelike as possible (figs. 25–27).⁶⁶

It should be emphasized that these etchings are absolutely exceptional, just as, more than twenty-five years earlier and in a different way, *A Nude Woman seated on a Mound* (fig. 1) had been utterly exceptional. From his first nude to his last, Rembrandt did something that was unusual in every respect, taking a polemic stand with which he presented himself as a champion of the 'from life' camp, just as Caravaggio had done according to Van Mander's account.⁶⁷ These nudes must have been controversial from the beginning. Although Rembrandt was in a continuous and intense dialogue with Italian artists and Rubens, he willfully followed another path than his colleagues.

¹ See the essay by Erna Kok in this volume (pp. 35–50).

² See E. J. Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, Amsterdam, 2006: 119–126.

³ For depictions of Diana surprised by Actaeon, see Sluijter 2006: 169–174.

⁴ For Susanna and the voyeuristic position of the viewer, see Sluijter 2006: 127–131.

⁵ J. De Bisschop, *Paradigmata graphices variorum artificum*, The Hague, 1671, ‘Aen... Six’, quoted by J. Emmens, *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*, Amsterdam, 1979: 73: ‘datmen derhalven het leven most volgen sonder onderscheit en soo gelijk het sich meest en over al vertoonden.’

⁶ De Bisschop 1671, quoted by Emmens 1979: 71: ‘Welcke verkeetheyt nochtans voor weynigh jaren by vele en voornam fraeye geesten onses Vaderlants seer diep was ingewortelt, en geworde genoetsaem een gemeen gevoelen: soo dat by na alles dat voor het oogh verwerpelyck was, tot schilderen en teekenen verkoosen ja gesocht wiert als heilichdom en wat bisonders.’

⁷ De Bisschop 1671, quoted by Emmens 1979: ‘...selfs als een Leda of Danaë soude werden uytgebeeld (soo veeringh de gewoonte) wiert gemaectt een vrouw-naeck met een dicken en gheswollen buyck, hangende borsten, knee-pen van kousbanden in de beenen, en veel meer sulcke wanschapenheit.’

⁸ A. Houbraken, *De Groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en schilderessen*, 1, The Hague 1718–1721: 268: ‘Als hy een’ naakte vrouw, gelyc somtijds gebeurde, / Zou schild’ren tot model geen Griekse Venus keurde, / Maar eer een’ Waster, of Turftreedster uit een schuur; / Zyn dwaaling noemende naervolging van natuur, / Al ’t ander ydele ver-ziering. Slappe borsten, / Verwongen’ handen, ja de nepen van de borsten / Des ryglyfs in den buik, des kousebands om ’t been, / ’t Moest als gevolgt zyn, of natuur was niet te vreên; / Ten minsten zyne, die geen regels, noch geen reden / Van evenmatigheid gedoogde in ’s menschen leden. / En doorzigt also min, al tusschenwijdte, woog, / Noch wikte met de kunst, maar op de schijn van ’t oog.’ The translation of the poem is by Diane Webb.

⁹ Houbraken 1718–1721, 1: 261: ‘...naakte vrouwtjes ..., de heerlykste voorwerpen voor ’t konstpenceel, en daar alle berugte meesters van ouds af, al hun vlyt op hebben gelegd;...’

¹⁰ Houbraken 1718–1721, 1: 261–62: ‘die zyn (als het spreekwoord zeit) te droevig om ’er van te zingen, of te spelen. Want het doorgaans vertoonzelen zyn daar men van walen moet, en zig verwonderen dat een man van zoo veel vernuft en geest zo eigenzinnig in zyne verkiezingen geweest is.’

¹¹ Houbraken 1718–1721, 1: 262: After having quoted Van Mander on Caravaggio, he writes: ‘Van deze meening was ook onze grootste meester Rembrandt, stellende zig ten grondwet, enkele naervolging van de natuur, en alles wat daar buiten gedaan werd was by hem verdagt.’ The italics are Houbraken’s, indicating an actual utterance by Rembrandt.

¹² Sluijter 2006: chapter VII. Also see E. J. Sluijter, ‘Rembrandt and the Rules of Art Revisited’, in: H. Bevers, J. Kelch, B. W. Lindemann and C. T. Seifert (eds.), *Rembrandt. Wissenschaft auf der Suche, Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 51, Beiheft (2009): 121–130.

¹³ See Sluijter 2006: 206–219.

¹⁴ Sluijter 2006: 200–206. For Van Mander’s account of Caravaggio: C. van Mander, *t’Leven der vermaerde doorluchtighe*

Schilders des ouden, en nieuwen tyds, in: C. van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1603–1604: fol. 191r. ‘Dan zijn segghen is, dat alle dinghen niet dan *Bagatelli*, kinderwerck, oft bueselinghen zijn, t’zy wat, oft van wien gheschildert en zijn, en datter niet goet, oft beter en can wesen, dan de Natuere te volghen. Alsoo dat hy niet eenen enckelen treck en doet, oft hy en sitter vlack nae t’leven en copieert, end’ en schildert.’

¹⁵ Van Mander 1603–1604: 195–200. Houbraken’s modernized but fairly accurate version of Van Mander: ‘Dat alle schilderwerk, ’t zy wat, of van wien gemaakt, maar kinder- en beuzelwerk is, en datter niet goed of beter kan wesen, dan de natuur te volgen; over zulks hy niet eenen enkele streek deed, of hy zette het leven voor zig &c.’

¹⁶ For this passage, see C. van Mander, *Het leven der oude antijke doorluchtighe schilders*, in: C. Van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1603–1604: fol. 77 r/v.

¹⁷ Van Mander 1603–1604: fol. 78v–80v.

¹⁸ ‘...die meeste ende die natuerelste beweeggelickheit.’ For the letter, see H. Gerson, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt*, The Hague, 1961: 34. For discussion about the word *beweeglijkheid*, see L. de Pauw-Veen, ‘Over de betekenis van het woord ‘beweeglijkheid’ in de zeventiende eeuw,’ *Oud Holland*, 74 (1959): 202–212, and J. A. Emmens, ‘Review of H. Gerson, *Seven Letters by Rembrandt*, The Hague, 1961’, *Oud Holland* 78 (1963): 79–82.

¹⁹ ‘een eygen-schijnende gedaente, soeckende de Natuyre die so overvloeyende in veranderlickheyt is.’ P. Angel, *Lof der schilder-kunst*, Leiden, 1642: 54.

²⁰ See Van Mander 1603–1604, *Leven*: fol. 175v (the biography of Titian, about a painting of St. Sebastian): ‘... een naeck beeldt, ghedaen nae t’leven, sonder datmen siet, datter met eenige Const is ghesocht de schoonheyt in corpus oft beenen, dan recht henen gevolcht het enckel leven, soo eygentlijck en natuerlijck vleeschachtich is het ghedaen, is niet teghenstaende voor seer schoon werck ghehouden.’

²¹ See Sluijter 2006: 100–111.

²² K. Clark, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*, New York, 1956.

²³ K. Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, London, 1966: 10.

²⁴ Clark 1956: 338–9.

²⁵ Clark 1956: 3.

²⁶ Clark 1956: 6–7.

²⁷ Clark 1966: 10. Since Clark nonetheless considers these etchings great works of art, he tries to ‘rescue’ them by suggesting a lofty goal, assuming that ‘another impulse besides defiant truthfulness had impelled him to do these etchings: pity.... To Rembrandt, the supreme interpreter of Biblical Christianity, ugliness, poverty, and other misfortunes of our physical life were not absurd, but inevitable, perhaps he might have said ‘natural,’ and capable of receiving some radiance of the spirit because emptied of all pride.’ Clark 1956: 340. In the case of *Bathsheba* he concedes that she was meant to be a beautiful woman; since she possesses many characteristics that he describes elsewhere as ugly, the miracle of *Bathsheba* is that ‘the naked body is permeated with thought,’ which makes her a great work of art and brings him to the interesting remark that ‘The conventional nudes ... could bear no burden of thought or inner life without losing their formal completeness.’ (p. 342). In this way *Bathsheba* is rescued as a great work of art, but is disqualified as a nude, so Clark maintains his categories.

²⁸ Clark 1956: 8.

²⁹ Clark 1956: 334.

³⁰ Clark 1956: 319. He also describes the curve of her stomach as 'a heavy, unstructural curve, soft and slow, yet with a kind of vegetable persistence.' For the many disparaging qualifications of Van Eyck's figure of Eve, often described in terms of vegetables, see A. S. Lehmann, *Mit Haut und Haaren. Jan van Eycks Adam und Eva-Tafeln in Gent. Rezeption, Bedeutung und Maltechnik des Aktes in der frühniederländischen Malerei*, unpubl. diss., Universiteit Utrecht, 2004.

³¹ L. Nead, *The Female Nude. Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London – New York, 1992: 17–18.

³² A. Hollander, *Seeing through clothes*, 4th ed., Berkeley, 1993: 85–89.

³³ Hollander 1993: 159–160. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Sluijter 2006: 276–278.

³⁴ For example, see E. K. J. Reznicek, 'Opmerkingen bij Rembrandt', *Oud Holland*, 91 (1977): 91–99. Also S. Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, London, 1999: 390–392, and C. White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher. A Study of the Artist at Work*, New Haven – London, 1999: 172.

³⁵ See Sluijter 2006: 96–97; 276–77.

³⁶ See J. M. Müller, 'Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art', *Art Bulletin*, 114 (1982): 229–247. Rubens wrote about this himself in the manuscript *De Imitatione Statuarum*; the manuscript was published by R. de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris, 1708: 139–148.

³⁷ This is argued in Sluijter 2006: 100–103.

³⁸ Sluijter 2006: 103–111 and chapter VII.

³⁹ See Sluijter 2006: 125–126, about his reference to the *Crouching Venus* (*Venus Doidalsas*).

⁴⁰ Sluijter 2006: 93, 126–127, 240.

⁴¹ J. van der Gracht, *Anatomie der wterlicke deelen van het menschelick lichaem. Dienende om te verstaen, ende volkomenlick wt te beelden alle beroerlicheit desselven lichaems*, The Hague, 1634. The complete title reads: *Anatomie der wterlicke deelen van het menschelick lichaem. Dienende om te verstaen, ende volkomenlick wt te beelden alle beroerlicheit desselven lichaems. Bequaem voor schilder, beelt-houwer, plaet-snyders, als oock chirurgiens* (Anatomy of the external parts of the human body. Serving to explain and completely to portray all the afflictions of that same body. Of benefit to painters, sculptors, engravers, and surgeons). I am indebted to Cécile Tainturier for bringing this work and these passages to my attention.

⁴² Van der Gracht 1634: 2: '...sal sijne meesten arbeyt doen op het kleet van 't menschelick lichaem, 't welck 't vel is.'

⁴³ Sluijter 2006: 200–202. The crucial passage concerning Vasari's *disegno*: 'disegno ... procedendo dall' intelletto cava di molte cose un giuizion universale, simile a una forma ovvero idea di tutte le cose della natura...' See, for example: T. Puttfarken, 'The Dispute about Disegno and Colorito in Venice. Paolo Pino, Ludovico Dolce and Titian', in: P. Ganz (ed.), *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400–1900*, Wiesbaden, 1991: 78.

⁴⁴ Sluijter 2006: 312–313.

⁴⁵ Sluijter 2006: 206–212.

⁴⁶ See Sluijter 2006: 200–202.

⁴⁷ On *Olympia*, see T. J. Clark's magisterial chapter in T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, New York, 1985. For quotations indicating that the model was seen as a prostitute or a lower-class woman: Clark 1985: 86–88. For example: '...an ignoble model picked up who knows where...', '...woman of the night...' Remarkably, one critic called her a 'coal lady', which recalls Pels's 'turf treader'!

⁴⁸ Quoted by D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago – London, 1989: 354.

⁴⁹ Sluijter 2006: 150–153 and 312–316.

⁵⁰ On the topos of the 'deceit' of painting and the rhetoric of the 'living' image with numerous examples, see G. J. Weber, *Der Lobtopos des 'lebenden' Bildes. Jan Vos und sein*

'Zeege der Schilderkunst', von 1654, Hildesheim – Zurich – New York, 1991: chapters IV, V and VII. For many examples in Italian ekphrastic poetry and art criticism of the Renaissance (and its sources in antiquity), with the ubiquitous theme of treating the depicted figures as if they were real while simultaneously being aware that they are only representations, see N. E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet. The Renaissance Response to Art*, University Park (PA), 1994: passim. See also T. Weststeijn, *The Visible World. Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, Amsterdam, 2008: chapters III and VI.

⁵¹ I fully agree with Freedberg 1989. See also Lehmann 2004: 67.

⁵² F. Junius, *De schilder-konst der Oude*, Middelburg, 1641: 341. '...door den gantschen aendacht onses Konst-lievenden ghemoeds moeten insien, als of wy met de levendige teghenwoordigheyd der dingen selver, ende niet met haere gekontrefeyte verbeeldinghe toe doen hadden.' For other quotations, Sluijter 2006: 151–153.

⁵³ J. Cats, *Houwelyck*, Middelburg, 1625 (quoted from J. Cats, *Alle de wercken*, 1, Amsterdam, 1712: 387–88): 'En laet dan oock de kunst u geensins hier bewegen, / Want even in de kunst daer is het quaet gelegen; / Hoe dat in dit geval de schilder hooger sweeft / Hoe dat hy dieper quetst, en harder nepen geeft; / Hoe dat hy naeder weet het leven uyt te drucken, / Hoe dat hy verder kan de gansche togten rucken / Tot ick en weet niet wat, gewis de beste geest / Doet hier het slimste quaet en hindert aldermeest.'

⁵⁴ D. R. Camphuysen, *Stichtelycke Rymen*, Amsterdam, 1647: 223. '...t'wijl 't gesicht sich laet bedriegen, / En 't hert verwondert staet door 't schoone schilderlieden / Soo als ghy alles geern in schildery aen-schout, / Alsoo oock in der daet geern doen en hebben sout.'

⁵⁵ See for examples: Sluijter 2006: 148–151 and 153–158.

⁵⁶ See Sluijter 2006: 129–130. See about Vondel's poem: K. Porteman, 'Vondels gedicht "Op een Italiaensche schildery van Susanne"', in: G. van Eemeren and F. Willaert (eds.), *'t Ondersoek leert. Studies over middeleeuwse en 17de-eeuwse literatuur ter nagedachtenis van prof. dr. L. Rens*, Leuven – Amstervoort, 1986: 301–318, 302, 30–33.

⁵⁷ J. Vos, *Alle de gedichten*, Amsterdam, 1742: 330. See Sluijter 2006: 131.

⁵⁸ See V. Manuth, "'As stark naked as one could possibly be painted...': the reputation of the nude female model in the age of Rembrandt", in: J. Lloyd Williams, *Rembrandt's Women*, exh. cat., Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland – London, Royal Academy, 2001: 48–53. Also see Sluijter 2006: 322–324. This taboo was carried so far that showing oneself totally naked was sometimes mentioned as especially incriminating circumstances in lawsuits against prostitutes. When making love, prostitutes usually did not undress. See L. van de Pol, *Het Amsterdamse hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*, Amsterdam, 1996: 334–335. Schott turns this around to argue that, in contrast to other European countries, nakedness was considered of no special interest in Holland and that the Dutch 'had not internalized the same prohibitions about looking at the naked body' as elsewhere (E. A. Schott, *Representing the Body in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands. Rembrandt's Nude Reconsidered*, unpubl. diss., University of Michigan, 2000: 256). There is, in my opinion, enough evidence to suggest the contrary (see Sluijter 2006: chapter V); her arguments are unconvincing or erroneous.

⁵⁹ See also Sluijter 2006: 316–319.

⁶⁰ Sluijter 2006: 315–316 and 322–324.

⁶¹ S. A. C. Dudok van Heel, 'Het "gewoonlijk model" van de schilder Dirck Bleker', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 29 (1981): 214–220 and S. A. C. Dudok van Heel, 'Het "schilderhuis" van Govert Flinck en de kunsthandel van Uylenburgh aan de Lauriergracht te Amsterdam', *Jaarboek Amstelodamum*, 74 (1982): 70–90.

⁶² For the arguments, see Sluijter 2006: 319–322. See C. Goldstein, *Visual Fact over Verbal Fiction*, Cambridge, 1988: 67.

On Dürer, see A.-M. Bonnet, *'Akt' bei Dürer*, Cologne, 2001: 297–303. It is even doubtful that Rubens drew female nudes from life: A.-M. Logan and M. Plomp, *Peter Paul Rubens. The Drawings*, exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004: 148.

⁶³ In two drawings by Federico Barocci in the Uffizi, we literally see the transformation from a young male model into a young woman: see A. Gianotti (ed.), *Federico Barocci 1535–1612. L'incanto del colore. Una lezione per due secoli*, exh. cat.,

Siena, Santa Maria della Scala, 2009: 77, figs. 44 and 45.

⁶⁴ Sluijter 2006: 274–275, 285–286 and 292–305.

⁶⁵ Sluijter 2006: 292–305.

⁶⁶ Since these models were paid, lower class women, he probably would not have bothered to hide their individuality. For my arguments that it is impossible that he would ever have depicted Hendrickje naked, not even as Bathsheba, see Sluijter 2006: 327–331.

⁶⁷ Sluijter 2006: 203–208.

