

# John Paul II's Theology of the Body and the Representation of Man in Christian Art

## What is the place of the nude in sacred art?

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*Abstract: In his writing on the human person and art, John Paul II created a renewed interest the nude in art in general, and in sacred art in particular. His call for artists to represent the human form 'naked without shame' has given many artists the inspiration to paint nude figures in service of the Church. This article compares the writings of the Pope on this matter with the traditions of the Church to try to assess how artists ought to respond. The conclusion I draw is that far from representing a new Catholic permissiveness (as some have interpreted) he is reaffirming a very traditional line. While the arguments I make can be extended to other disciplines, the most obvious being sculpture, this discussion considers predominantly painting.*

In 1984 the cleaning and restoration of the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican began in a process that was to take 10 years. It was unveiled on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1994 in the presence of Pope John Paul II. The cleaning process was so aggressive that it removed not only the wax and soot that had accumulated as a result of centuries of candle smoke, but also some of the wall painting itself – including loin cloths and fig leaves added by artists after Michelangelo. These additions had been placed there on the instruction of later Popes who were less tolerant of nudity than Julius II who commissioned the original work. Much has been made of the restoration process. Firstly some who were concerned that not only had later paint work been removed but also some of the original done by Michelangelo. As a result, they said, restorers had to add new colour and when they did so they did a poor job. Consequently, the newly cleaned chapel had an artificial, almost electric brightness to it that did not correspond to what the original would have looked like. For my part I cannot comment on that, for I do not know how it looked originally. I will say that regardless of its authenticity, I prefer the cleaner, brighter new version to the dirty one of 1984.

In regard to the loincloths and fig leaves, the controversy was all the greater because, it was said, John Paul II had directly asked for these to be removed in order to reveal the human bodies in full nudity, his intention being that it would become a pictorial representation of his Theology of the Body. This, it was suggested, put him at odds with the Fathers of the Council of Trent (which ‘banned nudity in church’) and especially Pius IV who ordered the first cover up in the 1560s immediately following the Council. This controversy seems to me to have been to some extent manufactured. First of all I cannot find any mention of a ban on nudity in the Council of Trent. It does specify, that ‘*all lasciviousness be avoided, so that images shall not be painted and adorned with a seductive charm*’ This is not the same as saying that all nudity is banned, but rather there should be prudential judgment as to whether or not a figure, nude or clothed is lascivious. As a result of the Council, it is true, the judgment as to what was appropriate did change and Pius IV ordered that *some* figures were to be amended. In the following centuries subsequent popes ordered additions. If the restorers were indeed following John Paul II’s directions, then we can conclude that his judgment matched precisely that of Pius IV after the Council: those amendments made at his instruction in 1560s were left intact and only those added by later the Popes were removed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the main figures that John Paul II focuses in on in his homily, Adam and Eve, have never been covered up at any stage as far as I can ascertain. So the central focus of his discussion was not on newly revealed figures.

Regardless of the accuracy any of this, we can say for certain that in April 1994 as all assembled and looked up at the newly cleaned chapel ceiling and walls, there were some figures that were nude and some that were not, and this is the Sistine Chapel that John Paul II was referring to in his remarks, and it is this current view that is important in this discussion.

### **What sort of nudity are we referring to?**

In talking of nakedness and nudity in art what are we talking about? At one level nudity is very easy to define: someone is nude if they have no clothes on. However, it is not as simple as this for the image is distinct from what it portrays. It is possible to have a picture of someone who has no clothes on and whose sexual organs are hidden by carefully positioned tree boughs for example and

these are generally not so contentious. Also, in consideration of what is appropriate in sacred art, the discussion invariably opens out into discussions of degrees of nakedness. Sometimes, in my experience, extending to consideration of paintings of the Blessed Virgin breastfeeding the baby Jesus with nipple clearly visible; or of small children and babies who are naked – perhaps Our Lord and St John the Baptist as boys; and even the common paintings of Christ on the cross (wearing loin cloth) . Although it would clearly be very easy to paint such images in an inappropriate way I would say that generally these are not images that are likely to cause problems if done well and most would expect a good artist to be able to do this.

If however, the breasts of Our Lady were revealed but she was not feeding Our Lord, I think more might object and the risk of an inappropriate image would be much greater. This indicates that while what we see is important, there is more to this than considering *only* what we see. There is a story of a judge in a pornography trial in England which was a landmark case for establishing the boundaries of decency as defined in law. As I heard the tale, in the trial it very quickly became apparent that attempts to define pornography simply in terms of what parts of the body could be seen would not be adequate, there was a tradition of the nude in art which was clearly not pornographic for example, and so this point was being used to usher in what those who were objecting would call pornographic imagery as well. The judge was not inclined to accept the argument and remarked that while he couldn't say what pornography was, but he knew it when he saw it. This immediately made him the subject of ridicule in the press and ultimately the court decided to relax laws on public decency; but in fact there is more sense to this than he was given credit for. So much of what makes imagery objectionable is not what is seen, but the way it is portrayed and how we, the viewers, are disposed to see it. This makes it very hard to define precisely what is good and what is bad, and we are faced with the same sort of discussion here. The context and the artistic style affect our judgment as much as the content and for this reason the same subject can be lascivious – to use the word of the council – in the hands of one artist, but perfectly decent in the hands of another.

If we wanted to reduce the risk of inappropriate imagery to the minimum, we could easily stipulate that only fully clothed figures are painted. The reason that we do not do this is that it is not only

permissible at certain times to have naked forms, but actually desirable. In the painting of Adam and Eve in paradise, for example, their nakedness is essential to the understanding of the situation. As an extension of the description of our first parents in the book of Genesis, and following John Paul II, the discussion here considers particularly what is necessary to reveal human sexuality in an ordered way – ‘naked without shame’. In doing so, therefore, it focuses almost exclusively on consideration on artistic style – *how* a subject is painted – rather than the fine considerations of content, on the assumption that potentially all those aspects of the human body that reveal human sexuality are visible. We can assume, therefore, that if we find a style of painting in which complete nakedness (in which the sexual organs are visible) can be presented in an ordered and dignified way, we will have found a way also to tackle these other, less risky, images as well.

So what criteria did John Paul II use to make the judgment as to what is appropriate in regard to the human figure? We get some idea from his homily made on that day in the Sistine Chapel. In referring to the paintings he said:

‘It seems that Michelangelo, in his own way, allowed himself to be guided by the evocative words of the Book of Genesis, which, as regards the creation of the human being, male and female, reveals: “The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame” (Gen 2:25). The Sistine Chapel is precisely – if one may say so – the sanctuary of the theology of the human body. In witnessing to the beauty of man created by God as male and female, it also expresses in a certain way, the hope of a world transfigured, inaugurated by the Risen Christ, and even before by Christ on Mt Tabor. We know that the Transfiguration is one of the main sources of Eastern devotion; it is an eloquent book for mystics, just as for St Francis, Christ crucified contemplated on the mountain of La Verna was an open book.

‘If we are dazzled as we contemplate the Last Judgement by its splendor and its terror, admiring on the one hand the glorified bodies and on the other those condemned to eternal damnation, we understand too that the whole composition is deeply penetrated by a unique light and by a single artistic logic: the light of faith that the Church proclaims, confessing: “I believe in one God...maker

of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible<sup>1</sup>”. On the basis of this logic in the context of the light that comes from God, the human body also keeps its splendour and its dignity. If it is removed from this dimension, it becomes in some way an object, which depreciates very easily, since only before the eyes of God can the human body remain naked and unclothed, and keep its splendor and its beauty intact.’

Some commentators have interpreted the Popes statement as strong validation for nudity in art and as a result many artists have embarked enthusiastically on programs of paintings of nudes. I have seen paintings and sculptures of figures in carefully contrived poses and striking gestures made in all sincerity and which are presented as the art of the Theology of the Body.

Some of this is good, in my opinion, however my sense is that many have misinterpreted the Pope’s words: in fact he is not giving artists quite the license that they are claiming. In order to attempt to understand fully what he is saying, let us consider first what shapes the form of the artistic traditions of the Church and compare this with the reflections of the Holy Father on the subject.

### **The three traditions of figurative liturgical art**

In his book the *Spirit of the Liturgy* Pope Benedict XVI identified three established traditions of authentically Catholic art which are distinguishable from one another stylistically. These are the iconographic tradition, which we tend to associated today with the Eastern Church (although in fact there are many Western styles); the gothic, which was a Western form that dominated in the period from approximately the mid-twelfth century until the High Renaissance; and the baroque (‘at its best’), which is the form that flowered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century before degenerating in the next century under the influence of Enlightenment (along with much of the wider culture)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of this on the Vatican website gives the old translation of the creed ie ‘we believe’ and all things ‘seen and unseen’. I have inserted the new translation, on the assumption that the Pope did not deliver his homily in English, or at least not only English, and so the true sense of the creed would have been in his speech in the non-English versions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Baroque, John Rupert Martin, *Baroque*: The definition of the baroque as the art of Western Europe of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is given by John Rupert Martin, the great authority on this artistic style in his book published by Penguin

The thing that forms the style of these different types of art is the way in which they reveal or emphasize different aspects of humanity. Each communicates both visible and invisible truths. To take a simple example, man has a body and a soul and both must be indicated by the artist. As the soul is invisible this presents particular problems to the painter or sculptor. It calls on the artist partially to abstract, that is, to deviate from strict visual appearances so this abstraction (literally a ‘drawing out’) suggests otherwise hidden truths. It takes a great skill to do this. (We shall discuss how it is done in regard to each tradition in a moment.) We are very used to this idea in another context – in cartoons and animation (I am talking here of a cartoon in the Walt Disney sense, not the older sense of a preparatory drawing for a painting). Every cartoonist portrays a human figure but exaggerates features in order to communicate a caricature. When this is done well, we understand instinctively, whether we approve or not, just what the artist is trying to communicate. The artist cannot deviate too far from actual physical appearances though, for if he did we wouldn’t know what we were looking at.

It may surprise some people to learn that exactly the same considerations must apply in Christian art. Every Christian representation must be a balance between naturalism and idealism. The first transmits what we can see, and the second transmits what we can’t. The difference between the political satirist and the Christian artist is that while the cartoonist portrays the person in a narrow way, emphasizing only a few aspects of character, the Christian artist who is seeking to paint sacred art, must seek to reveal the full beauty of the human person. This is a sterner test. He must ennoble by revealing the fullness of humanity – demonstrating that we are the greatest and most beautiful of God’s creatures. If he swings too far in the direction of either idealism or naturalism then his picture will overemphasize one aspect at the expense of the other and in extreme cases even transmit heresy (as some distorted figures of modern art do). Given that the style that sets the standard for Christians is liturgical art – that intended as art for worship and prayer – and can therefore profoundly affect those who use it, it is vital that a Christian artist works hard to get it right.

As with so much, tradition is a guide. The stylization of each of the traditions of liturgical art of the Church was worked out painstakingly by fruitful dialogue between many people. Without much, if

any, direction from a central authority on the specifics (although very broadly laid out general principles have been given, for example, by Ecumenical Councils), a coherent order emerges out of personal communication and interaction between the liturgists, theologians and philosophers of the Church and artists and patrons. What fuels the engine of this process is the beauty of the work of each artist who produces something new. His complete work is seen by others, and if they are impressed they look to work in a similar vein, perhaps improving on what he has done. If there is change it is driven by the need of the current community for something hitherto unseen in art, not by the personal tastes of the artist. The power of the beauty and conformity to truth of these traditions is evidenced by the extraordinary way in which they dominated the art of their period even spilling out into the wider culture and become the stylistic models of the secular art of the period.

Until we reach the final day we cannot assume that we have heard the final word (or perhaps I should say ‘seen the final picture’) in artistic style. There are always some individuals whose work sits outside these traditions that nevertheless have, in personal and unique ways, reflected the truth and beauty of the Word and this will continue in the future. Also, there is room for the development of new traditions. It is always possible that one will produce work with a characteristic style that speaks so powerfully to its age that it sets the trend for other artists in his time and on into the future. In making this point Pius XII even considered the possibility of modern art (he was writing in 1947) contributing, but he laid down conditions: that its stylistic elements were created in order to meet a particular need of the time and that it avoided the error of excessive naturalism (he calls it ‘realism’) or idealism (he uses the word ‘symbolism’). In fact, I suggest, that in practice his criteria rule out most modern art – most wouldn’t pass the test! He expressed it in *Mediator Dei* as follows: ‘Recent works of art which lend themselves to the materials of modern composition, should not be universally despised and rejected through prejudice. Modern art should be given free scope in the due and reverent service of the church and the sacred rites, provided that they preserve the correct balance between styles tending neither to extreme realism or to excessive “symbolism” and that the needs of the Christian community are taken into consideration rather than the particular taste or talent of the individual artist.’

## **The basis of the different styles of authentic liturgical art**

Those who have read John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* will be aware that there are different stages of human existence. First, there is man before the Fall, Original Man, characterized by Adam and Eve who were 'naked without shame' and enjoyed an innocence that comes from purity and complete reliance upon God. Second there is Historical Man, mankind after the Fall, experiencing the fear and resentment that results from a dislocation in the relationships with each other and with God. Though not as good as man ought to be, Historical man is still good and has the potential for sanctity. We are all historical men and women. Third there is Eschatological Man. This is destiny that God intended for each of us. In this stage, if we cooperate with grace, we fulfill our human purpose as saints, partaking of the divine nature in heaven in communion with the Trinity in a perfect exchange of love and in perfect and perpetual bliss.

We can look at these traditions in the light of this. The iconographic tradition<sup>3</sup> reveals Eschatological Man. Inspired especially, as JPII said in his homily, on the description of the glorified Christ in the Transfiguration in which the saints in heaven participate. All stylistic features are formed by the desire to communicate the reality of man in heaven. For example, the figures have halos, representing the uncreated light shining out of the glorified body and for similar reasons there are no cast shadows (which would result from external light sources). Consistent also with the communication of the heavenly realm, which is outside space (as well as time), the icon deliberately reduces the illusion of depth as far as possible with optical devices such as reverse perspective. The figures live, so to speak in the plane of the painting.

The baroque tradition reveals Historical Man who is different and accordingly has a very different style to the iconographic. Examples of painters of the baroque would be Velazquez, Georges de La Tour, Zurbaran, Van Dyck, Rubens, Guido Reni and Ribera,. In contrast with the iconographic style, the baroque deliberately sets out to create an illusion of space using devices such as perspective, and shows deep cast shadow from external light sources.

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<sup>3</sup> This includes all the local variations that are consistent with the iconographic prototype, for example, Celtic, Carolingian, Ottonian and Romanesque art in the West.



Because its presence is heightened in a fallen world, shadow has become a symbol of evil and suffering. Shadow has been a symbol of evil and suffering since long before the baroque period. The ancient Office of Tenebrae, for example (which means shadows and darkness) symbolizes just this in the dark days, as it were, of the Triduum. In baroque art the shadowy depths are exaggerated to make this point. However, the Christian message is not one of despair. Just as Easter Sunday follows Good Friday, hope due to Christ the Redeemer is always with us even in the darkest periods, so within the painting the shadow is always contrasted with bright light, which represents the Light that overcomes the darkness.

The baroque style is far more naturalistic than the iconographic style but it is not simply a representation of visual appearances. The artist varies the colour content, the sharpness of edges and the contrast in order to draw our eye to the important parts of the figure and the painting in accordance with the natural hierarchy of being. Furthermore, the skillful use of these devices ensures that man is given a dignity and a beauty worthy of someone created by God. While always the art of fallen, Historical man, the baroque nevertheless emphasizes man's potential for sanctity which is created in us; and the need for God's grace to realize it. It is the art of suffering and hope. Because the style of the baroque period is more naturalistic than other forms of sacred art, the idealization is more subtly applied and less apparent, but it is there all the same.

Baroque art should be clearly distinguished from the academic art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and figures such as Ingres or Bougeureau). This is a heightened naturalism detached from a genuinely Christian understanding of the human person (even if some of the artists of this period were believers). The way in which the artist deviates from visual appearances is different from that of the earlier form driven by a different understanding of man. As a result it became either sterile and cold or else sentimental and saccharine.<sup>4</sup> Much of what formed 20<sup>th</sup> century modern art was an overreaction to 19<sup>th</sup> century academic art. Although the artists themselves thought they were reacting to Christian tradition they were in fact reacting, aesthetically at least, against a lesser, sterile version of it.

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<sup>4</sup> For a greater understanding of this one should read *Baroque* by John Rupert Martin, pub Penguin 1989. The point that there is a contrast between 19<sup>th</sup> century art and the baroque is also made by Pope Benedict XVI in he *Spirit of the Liturgy*.

The gothic is the third Catholic figurative tradition. This appears to oscillate between the styles of Eschatological and Historical Man. Historically it is a transitional form between the two, derived from the Western iconographic forms that preceded it such as the Romanesque, and anticipating the baroque which post-dated it (it lasted from approximately the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century). It might be thought of as the art of pilgrimage. The stylistic elements point both to heaven and to a fallen world. It reflects the fact that although we can never fully make that transformation to Eschatological Man in this world, there is nevertheless a continuum between the two states along which we can make progress through the transforming process of participation in the sacramental life of the Church in the here and now. Even in this life we are not stuck, immobile in a life occupying the shadowy depths thinking only of our potential for sanctity – we can start the transition to sanctity right now and experience Christian joy. Like the spires of the gothic churches, gothic art reaches up to heaven, but at the same time it is firmly planted on earth. To illustrate the point we can consider the work of the late-gothic artist Fra Angelico. He used elements of both the visual vocabulary of the increased naturalism and cast shadow that was developing around him, such as perspective and shadow (which we see in his most famous Annunciation for example); and at other times the iconographic prototype of uncreated light and ‘flatness’ – for example when portraying heavenly scenes such as the crowning of the Virgin. His selection depended upon the theological point he wanted to communicate.

### **Why not the High Renaissance?**

Some may be surprised that the High Renaissance does not appear in the list (and neither do the Mannerist styles that followed it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century). In terms of artistic style, the High Renaissance represents a break from the gothic which precedes it and a period of transition that culminates in the development of the baroque some time later.

It is a radical change in the way that artists were trained that formed the High Renaissance and caused the break with the gothic which had preceded it. All traditional art training involves (in varying degrees) both the copying of works of great masters and the direct observation of nature. In the training of any artist, the influence that affects the style in which he ultimately paints is the art

with which he is most familiar. So someone who wants to draw superheroes in the style of Spiderman, should go to life drawing classes and copy as many figures from Marvel comics as he can. In the gothic period, the level of observation of nature increased strongly, but the stylistic substrate onto which this heightened naturalism was fused was the Romanesque, which is a variant of the iconographic. For this reason there is no clear break between the gothic and the iconographic in terms of style, one is a slightly 'naturalised' version of the other, the level of naturalism gradually increasing over time.

When we come to the High Renaissance and the period of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was a clear dislocation in style. This was because artists no longer looked to Romanesque or gothic masters for their inspiration, but to the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures that surrounded them in Italy and which were being excavated at the time. As it was in an early, developmental stage, the period of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is characterized not so much by a coherent tradition as it is by dominant, individualistic but brilliant figures such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian, each drawing their own inspiration and varying in style. John Paul II refers to this in his *Letter to Artists* (section 9). Gradually the contributions of these and other masters were assessed and a coherent tradition integrating theology and form developed out of their work. A lot of the synthesis was driven by a response to the Council of Trent (which closed in 1564) as part of the Catholic Counter Reformation. This is what became the baroque of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **What about the art of Original Man?**

I am not aware of a tradition that manifests Original Man in the way that Eschatological Man and Historical Man are represented. In thinking about what it might look like, I began by talking to theologians and reading the Church Fathers who describe the appearance of Adam and Even in paradise (such as Ephraim the Syrian in his *Hymns from Paradise*). This suggests to me that in many ways the bodily appearance of Original Man is very similar to Eschatological Man, shining with an uncreated light. One person who has written about this more recently is the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Eric Petersen. He wrote about it not as theology of the body, but rather in a theology of clothes in a

short article called *The Theology of Dress*<sup>5</sup>. He points out that Original Man did not need to wear clothes because he was, so to speak, clothed in glory. This glory did not dazzle and hide, but rather it revealed his sexuality in a way that was appropriate to the person. The body radiated brightly with a light that communicated the truth of the whole person, this could be seen and apprehended by those around him fully because in their purity their ability to do so was perfect. After the Fall stripped man of this glory, Historical man is naked in a way that Original man was not. Not only is the light that radiates the full truth of his being dimmed, but because everyone else, the observers who look at him are also impure, they are less able to apprehend whatever aspect of the truth that is transmitted. The result is that we only perceive man in a diminished form, less beautiful. We often think of clothes as covering up things that should not be revealed. But in fact when we see Historical Man naked, the problem is not that we see too much, but rather that we see too little. Clothes are necessary, but not as something that hides the human state, rather they fulfill a function of a temporary and partial completion of it. They make up for what was lost in the Fall. Their purpose is not to hide sexuality, but to reveal it in an ordered and dignified way. It is a natural appreciation of this fact, I suggest, that leads to most societies (until the present day) choosing feminine and masculine styles of clothing. When a woman, for example wears elegant and graceful feminine clothing, it communicates to others around her in an ordered way that she is a woman. For Historical Man, it seems, the way to reveal sexuality in an ordered way is to wear clothes.

### **Michelangelo and the icon – two possible models for Original Man?**

Elsewhere in his address in 1994, John Paul II praised the work of Michelangelo as revealing man and woman, ‘naked without shame’. This is a clear reference to his portrayal of Adam and Eve. What is he seeing in Michelangelo’s work that leads him to think that style is appropriate to the subject matter? There may be a number of things, but two come to mind. First is that he feels that his figures shine with the ‘unique light...that comes from God’. As we have said, the traditional picture of Original Man is one that is clothed in glory, that is shining with uncreated light. The Holy Father made the connection between this and the uncreated light of Eschatological Man, which we see in the glorified Christ on Mt Tabor. Indeed he draws our attention to the similarity in appearance

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<sup>5</sup> Reproduced in *Communio* 20 (Fall, 1993). Petersen died in 1960. I am grateful to Stratford Caldecott for making me aware of this article when I was talking about this topic with him.

of Original Man and Eschatological man in reality, and therefore the appropriateness of artists using a similar approach in portraying each: ‘whole composition’ is penetrated by a unique light and single artistic logic...On the basis of this logic in the context of the light that comes from God, the human body keeps its splendor and dignity.’

This suggests that the iconographic form would also be suitable for the portrayal of both Original Man and Historical Man and JP II says as much. (I would add that early gothic art also has that quality of light and might also be suitable).

A second reason for the Pope’s interest, I suggest, is the correspondence of Michelangelo’s work to Greek classical sculpture. Michelangelo is not unusual amongst the artists of his time in copying Greek and Roman statues and allowing this to influence his style. In fact pretty much all artists did so from the High Renaissance onwards through to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is unusual is the degree to which he allowed the Greek ideal to influence his own style. If one looks for example at the facial features of his work the similarity between them and those of the earlier period are striking. Most others (a possible exception being Raphael) sought a far greater degree of naturalism. In his *Theology of the Body* John Paul II cites Greek classical art as a model for portraying human nakedness in an ordered way. He talks of the need of artists to go beyond what the senses perceive (‘suprasensual’) and through this heightened idealization reveal invisible truths:

‘In the course of various epochs from antiquity down – and especially in the great period of classical Greek art – there are works of art whose subject is the human body in its nakedness, the contemplation of which allows one to concentrate in some way on the whole truth of the man, on the dignity and beauty – even ‘suprasensual’ beauty – of his masculinity and femininity. These works bear within themselves in a hidden way, as it were, an element of sublimation that leads the viewer through the body to the whole mystery of man. In contact with such works, we do not feel pushed by their content toward “looking to desire”, as the Sermon on the Mount puts it; in some way we

learn the spousal meaning of the body, which corresponds to and provides the measure of for “purity of heart”.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned, in his Sistine Chapel homily he remarks also on how the iconographic tradition has a stylization that portrays the light of the glorified body. Interestingly, John Paul II is not the first to make the connection between Greek classical sculpture as a model of glorified body and then to draw parallels with icons. Pavel Florensky was a respected and highly influential commentator on icons who did the same. He was a Russian Orthodox priest who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed significantly to the development of a theology of icons during this period. What makes this all the more interesting is that he was generally extremely negative about Western forms (unfairly, I would say – he did not acknowledge the baroque or gothic as authentic forms for example) yet he did see something in Greek classical art. Despite the fact that they are very different in many ways (not least in one is a genre of three-dimensional sculpture and the other of two-dimensional painting) he notices that both convey the human form in an idealized way that through partial abstraction is a move towards a truer picture:

‘Russian iconography of 14-15 centuries is perfection of imagery achieved, an equal of which or even a similar to which the history of world’s art does not know and to which, in a certain sense, only Greek sculpture can be juxtaposed, — likewise an incarnation of spiritual images and likewise, after a luminous elevation, corrupted by rationalism and sensuality.’<sup>7</sup>

### **Summary of what we have given so far – John Paul II’s position on the nude in art in sacred art**

I suggest that John Paul II’s position could be summarized as follows: the portrayal of nudity in art is desirable, even for sacred art in churches, if it is portraying Original Man, that is, the human person naked without shame and revealing human sexuality as gift, or the glorified figures of saints

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<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 63:4

<sup>7</sup> Iconostasis, <http://www.vchi.net/florensky/ikonost.html> “Русская иконопись XIV—XV веков есть достигнутое совершенство изобразительности, равного которому или даже подобного не знает история всемирного искусства и с которым в известном смысле можно сопоставлять только греческую скульптуру — тоже воплощение духовных образов и тоже, после светлого подъема, разложенную рационализмом и чувственностью.” Translated by Alexey Pismenny, via private communication

in heaven. In practice this means a highly idealized portrayal which would be showing a glorified body, shining with the light of God. He suggests two possible forms that seem appropriate therefore: the traditional iconographic style which although portraying Eschatological man, is a model formed around the portrayal of glorified man and so might be considered appropriate for Original Man as well; or some visual form based upon classical Greek sculpture. As an example of the second he points us to the highly personal interpretation of Michelangelo as seen in the art of Sistine Chapel.

At the same time, the Holy Father is very clear that naturalistic styles, representing Historical Man are very likely to be inappropriate. In his homily in the chapel he said: ‘On the basis of this logic in the context of the light that comes from God, the human body also keeps its splendour and its dignity. If it is removed from this dimension, it becomes in some way an object , which depreciates very easily, since *only before the eyes of God* can the human body remain naked and unclothed, and keep its splendor and its beauty intact.’ [my emphasis]

He is referring here of naturalistic styles that are based upon a close adherence to faithful representation of man as he appears to the observer in this life. These are to be rejected because such strict adherence to visual appearance ignores invisible truths about man and therefore does not reveal the whole truth.

He makes this point strongly in his *Theology of the Body*: “It is not possible to agree on this point with the representatives of so-called naturalism who appeal to the right to “everything that is human” in works of art and in the products of artistic reproduction, and who claim that in this way they act in the name of the realistic truth about man. It is precisely this truth about man – the whole truth about man – that requires us to consider the sense of the intimacy of the body and the consistency of the gift connected with the masculinity and femininity of the body itself, which reflects the mystery of man proper to the inner structure of the person. We must consider this truth about man also in the artistic order if we want to speak of a full realism.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Theology of the Body; 62.2

One might argue that there is no more a justification for nude images of Historical Man to be seen by the public, than there is for living breathing people themselves to be nude in public. If the image portrays Historical Man accurately, then given that those who will be seeing it will also be fallen, impure people who cannot see as God sees. Taking this into account, the artist should use the same device for revealing human sexuality that each of us does in real life, that is, he should put some clothes on the figure. The consideration of who is to look at the painting should never be forgotten we are told: ‘What we have called “ethos of the image” cannot be considered in abstraction from the correlative component, which one would have to call “ethos of seeing.”’ The whole process of communication is contained between these two components, regardless of the vastness of the circles described by this communication, which in this case is always “social”.<sup>9</sup> The situations where we see each other, Historical men and women, appropriately naked in real life are highly personal relationships, such as between spouses or between a doctor and a patient – this is the social dimension that the Pope refers to. A piece of artwork is almost by definition, for broader consumption and it therefore reduces those who are made privy to such a relationship to the status of voyeur.

All of this reinforces the point that the artist today who wishes to respond to Pope’s call would be most certain in doing so by adopting employing iconographic or gothic styles; or one based on classical Greek sculpture. Styles that are more naturalistic than this and have a much greater correspondence to physical appearances are most likely inappropriate.

### **The response of artists today**

Much of what I have seen from Catholic artists who are responding to the call of the Pope are working either in individualistic modern styles that sit outside tradition<sup>10</sup>, or are from people who are trained in the highly naturalistic style of the ‘academic’ method. This latter style, in my opinion, comes under the category referred to by JP II of a form of naturalism based upon a claim to ‘the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 63:6

<sup>10</sup> And therefore difficult to generalize about here except to say that their style seems to indicate that they are unacquainted with the detail of John Paul II said.



right to “everything that is human”’, and is inappropriate. Those interested in understanding their working ethos and how it is manifested in their art, including many nudes, should go to a website called the Art Renewal Center<sup>11</sup>.

The method by which style of painting is taught is called the ‘academic’ method. Given that, in my experience, many people, including Catholic artists contrary to this see this style as an appropriate way to represent the nude, it is worth examining it in greater details to consider the validity of this hypothesis.

### **The academic method**

The academic method of drawing and painting (and sculpture) developed in the art schools that were established and took hold in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and then dominated through to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is called ‘academic’ because the most successful of the early schools had the word ‘Academy’ in their names – it was done deliberately to evoke an image of the culture of classical Greece by making a connection with Plato’s Academy (although Plato’s school was not an art school). They taught a systematic method of observation and drawing which, it is said today, originated with Leonardo and Michelangelo. This method has remained largely the same right through to the present day although by the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become detached from its Christian ethos. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the schools were either large institutions which still called themselves academies, or else small workshops, in France these were called ‘ateliers’ (literally ‘workshops’) run by working artists. While there were differences in approach (which are not worth discussing here) both taught what was essentially the same academic method and so this is the art education that pretty much all artists were still receiving at this time.

Under the influence of the Impressionists initially, and then of modernism pretty much all the academies and ateliers of Europe had closed by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the schools that replaced them did not teach drawing so rigorously. This began the decline in artistic skill that is so characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is because although the Impressionists were themselves

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<sup>11</sup> [www.artrenewal.org](http://www.artrenewal.org)

highly skilled and academically trained artists they eschewed tradition and refused to teach it to those who sought them out as teachers - which great numbers did once they when they achieved great success. So clean was the break in tradition that resulted that the academic method might have died altogether if it had not been for very few individuals persisting with it and teaching it despite the adverse opinions most of the art world.

The most well known of these is Robert Ives Gammell who died in 1981. Ives Gammell grew up in New England, where it took perhaps 20 years longer than in Europe for the academic schools to close. He learned the method at the school in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the period leading up to the First World War. He doggedly continued to paint and later to teach this method right through to the time of his death. Some of the people taught by him late in his life in the 1970s, when he was in his eighties, started to set up their own schools, with his help and guidance – I know of one in Minnesota, two in Florence in Italy and one in Manchester, New Hampshire. Over the years students who have emerged from the Ives Gammell line have established more schools, mostly small independent studios as the academic method slowly reestablishes itself. While not all the schools that exist now come from this (I have heard of Russian schools that persisted and one in Australia), a large proportion of the schools in the US and Western European do. The method and ethos transmitted in nearly the schools that exist today tends to be one that is based upon 19<sup>th</sup> century classical naturalism, which they refer to as ‘realism’. They use this term because they believe that their brand of extreme naturalism portrays reality. As we have discussed, from the Christian point of view, to call this 19<sup>th</sup> century art ‘realism’ is a misnomer for such extreme naturalism does not portray the full reality of the person, limited as it is by an overemphasis on visual appearances.

If one reads their philosophy that typifies so many of these schools today (as seen at the Art Renewal Center website, referred to before), it says explicitly that it is promoting an art that manifests the values of the Enlightenment and which are contrary to those of the Christianity. While the differences in style between these and the baroque are subtle, they are critical.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I am often asked where a Christian who is seeking to work in the traditional way of the baroque might go to train. Despite the drawbacks I have mentioned, I unhesitatingly respond that they should go to any of these ateliers, for they will learn great artistic skill. Provided that they are themselves aware of the differences of forms of 19<sup>th</sup> century and 17<sup>th</sup> academic art and the atelier encourages (rather than simply tolerates) the attendance of those with a faith and the

The ethos that drives these modern schools is first a desire to continuation of the flawed 19<sup>th</sup> century form, and second a reaction against the misguided heightened abstraction of modern art. Because of this they emphasize a correspondence to physical appearances all the more strongly than their forebears of 100 years ago. If the abstract art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is reflecting an overemphasis of the soul at the expense of the body – to the degree it claims to portray or reflect aspects of the soul, for example, human emotions and feelings separated from the body; this modern academic art overemphasizes the body at the expense of the soul. The two forms are more closely connected than they imagine for each is the corollary of the other, two sides of a coin that represents the error of a philosophical dualism that separates body and soul in the description of man.

In the end, the test of the value of art is what it looks like. Readers should make their own minds up. When I look at the figures and especially the nudes displayed on the ARC website, the vast majority are, to my eye, charged with eroticism and do not transmit the full dignity of the human person. There is no accounting for whom God may choose to inspire, and who is able respond to that inspiration of course, but we can say that to the degree that these works conform to the ethos they profess they are contrary to Christian tradition and to what John Paul II stipulated as appropriate for the portrayal of the human person.

### **The problem of the nude model**

One of the great difficulties of the academic method, especially as it is taught today in regard to the portrayal of the human figure is, it seems to me, to be the insistence of training through the drawing of nude models. When I was learning at one such atelier in Florence, the basic training consisted of the drawing of plaster casts of sculpture of the human figure (some of it classical Greek work) in the morning; and figure drawing, which meant the nude, in the afternoon.

Drawing the nude figure has become such an accepted part of art training that it is rarely questioned by any art student or teacher today, even by those who are devout Christians. If anyone does, they

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ultimate aim of modifying what they learn to the 17<sup>th</sup> century style, then this will work. One such place is the Ingbretson Studios in Manchester, New Hampshire.

are usually met with incredulity. When I was a student in an atelier, while I was never wholly comfortable with the experience of drawing nudes, I never questioned that it was necessary if I wanted to be a good artist, and so viewed it as a necessary evil. It was not until I started to be involved in teaching art in a conservative Catholic liberal arts college I started to consider this in any depth. I anticipated that many students and even more parents would object to nude drawing and painting. In order to be able to justify what seemed to me to be an indispensable part of any serious art student's training, I set out to find arguments to defend the practice that were likely to convince skeptical parents. In fact, while I do not claim to have settled the matter definitely, to my surprise, the more I looked into it, the more it seemed to me that it was problematic.

The problem relates to the etiquette of the studio and the objectification of the person who is the model. Any students who have done a life drawing class will be aware of the strict etiquette that is usually applied: the model always dresses or undresses behind a screen; once naked conversation with the model by students is strongly discouraged and in the studio I studied at it was a strict rule that only the teacher was allowed to do so; and nobody other than teacher and students was allowed in the studio.

It is not a Christian ethos that is driving this etiquette, very few are students of the *Theology of the Body*, or even Christian. However they are nevertheless naturally aware that of the fact that if this is done in a casual way, it becomes very undignified and uncomfortable for model and artists alike. Furthermore, if they did not observe this etiquette, they would have a great deal of trouble recruiting any models for their studio for they would not want to come back. This is demonstrated by the fact that I have very occasionally been involved with groups elsewhere which were lax in their application of this. It was noticeable is how uncomfortable the model became instantly and how embarrassed most felt for them, if for example, one of the students began to engage the model in a conversation even about the weather.

This natural discomfort arises certainly, one suggests, from the temptation to lust, but it seems to me that it is more than that. Putting the sexual attraction aside, there is, it seems an undignified

imbalance in this scenario if one person is unclothed while the other is clothed. Curiosity alone tempts one to be a voyeur intruding into another's personal space, visually lapping up personal details of their body that would otherwise be hidden.

The etiquette of the studio does serve to remove the sexual element from the equation, but it does so by eliminating other aspects of the personal relationship between artist and model too. Thus it heightens the objectification of the person, if not sexually, in other ways. As a result, the artist feels that he is looking not a person, but at a nude, a form, a body. This seems to be supported by how those involved will describe the experience: most I have spoken to tell me that the sexual element is removed because they are so engrossed in studying the shapes in order to draw them that they are not thinking about the person to whom the form belongs. This highlights the inherent problem with studying the nude in this scenario. The etiquette eliminates one form of objectification with another. This objectification is always bad, regardless of what type, for the lack of love and respect for the person, is what has contributed to greatly to the breakdown of society and the culture of death.

I am skeptical about the claim that this etiquette removes the temptation altogether for another reason. Temptation in this scenario arises from a stimulation of the passions. This cannot be controlled for the passions are involuntary. Given this, I wonder how many can truthfully claim that their concentration is so high 100 per cent of the time that they are wholly able to resist temptation when it occurs? Certainly I cannot.

In defending figure drawing, some draw parallels with other situations where disrobing is acceptable, especially that of doctor and patient. To my mind there is a crucial difference. The relationship doctor and patient is and inherently personal one. No patient wants to be viewed by a doctor as a body to treated for malfunctions; and any doctor that claimed that he wasn't interested in the whole person would not be a good doctor. It is the properly ordered gift and reception of charity that defines the personal aspect in this relationship and that makes disrobing acceptable. This is what is lacking in the artist-model relationship, I suggest.

Is there any way around this? Perhaps, it seems. I have heard a variety of alternative approaches suggested that might allow for an appropriate nakedness in the art studio. One might suggest that the answer is for the artist and model to be in a natural personal relationship with each other? This however, does raise the question as to the appropriateness of third parties seeing drawings that a man makes of his wife. This is not unknown

Another possibility might be for artists to draw only those to whom they have no sexual attraction, which would generally mean men draw men and women draw women and then engage with them personally. This might work if carefully handled. I was told that this is how Michelangelo always and Raphael (sometimes) used male models even when producing final painting was of a woman. of females. Another solution used by Michelangelo was to draw dead bodies (which can be legitimately objectified). I don't see any proposing to do the same in the art schools of today.

Given all of these difficulties we should ask ourselves is it really necessary to have nude models? If it isn't then we needn't face the problem. I deal next with the most commonly given arguments in support of the idea that the drawing and painting of the nude in the academic method is necessary.

*1. Drawing the nude is necessary in the training of the artist even for painting clothed figures because the need to understand the anatomy of the body:* It is a common assumption that in order to paint the human form, even a clothed figure, one needs to understand the anatomy of the human body underneath it but this is not necessarily so. While it is true that some traditional methods adopt this approach, there are others that do not. Many of the great artists of the baroque period, for example, did not train in painting nudes – Velazquez and the artists of the Spanish school of the 17<sup>th</sup> century for example, were not allowed to because of the influence of the Church in Spain. My training in Florence was based on Velazquez's method (although unlike Velazquez's training we did study the nude). I did not focus on the anatomy – consideration of the underlying muscle and bone structures, for example, at all. We had critiques every day when studying and never once was I asked to consider the anatomy of the body I was drawing. Always the focus *visually* was on an abstract consideration of tone, colour and shape. This means that it makes no difference to the technique of observation if I am painting

figure, clothed or unclothed, or a still life or a landscape. This is *not* to say, when painting for example a portrait or figure (with clothes) that the good artist does not at some level think about all *invisible* aspects of the person that he is trying to communicate and then abstract slightly from what is seen in order to do so.

*2. It is part of the tradition – the nudes of the Renaissance and the baroque are some of the greatest works of art ever painted.* In response to this I would say it while it was true that the nude became part of the tradition, it did not do so to the degree that some now suggest. Also, it is a matter of opinion that these nudes are great, and one that has not been uniformly accepted since they were painted.

Prior to High Renaissance the nude was never given the elevated status amongst the canon of imagery that it was to develop later. Generally, nudity did appear when the narrative demanded it, such as Adam and Eve in paradise, or the baptism in the Jordan. We see images of these figures in medieval books of Hours for example. However, the images were highly idealized and painted in the iconographic or gothic styles. These, shone with the light of God and did not focus on the sexual organs in any detail – sometimes this aspect was so downplayed that they appear absent or smoothed over, as in a tailor's dummy. Artists did not train or study nude models systematically as they learned their craft and one feels (and here I am speculating) that when portraying these figures they are relying more on their memories of having seen nudity in ordinary personal relationships in the family in spouses or in parents when they were children. I have never heard of icon painters training by studying the nude, for example, but it is common to consider the structure of the human body with reference to what we know to be there from our ordinary experiences.

The inclusion of the study of the nude figure did not become common in the Christian tradition until the High Renaissance and the baroque, but even then it was not universally accepted or without controversy. One of the most famous of these, Titian's Urbino Venus, for example, is generally accepted to have been made intentionally erotic. It was precisely to avoid this that the Spanish court during the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not allow the nude figure (as mentioned). There is one famous nude, Venus, painted by Velazquez – this was painted while he was visiting Italy.

It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it seems to have become an unquestioned standard in the training of the academic method, and this was, as we have said, in the academies that no longer connected what they did with a Christian ethos.

So it seems, therefore, that even in the heyday of the Christian naturalistic art, there were some dangers in attempting to paint the nude that were not there in the same way in the gothic or the iconographic styles.

Even if we accept that some of the nudes of this time, can be considered reasonable representations (we will discuss how this might be possible in the context of Historical Man later) I would argue that we are much less likely to find artist capable of doing this today. When we draw and paint anything, the final painting is affected not only by what we see but also similar imagery stored in the memory. This is what accounts for the unconscious development of individual style. Artists in the past were aware of this tendency and sought to control it. The baroque master Rubens, for example, stressed the importance of controlling the images in the memory of the artist by ensuring that the student train by drawing only the most beautiful and dignified sculptures of the human form. The modern person is bombarded by the imagery of film, television and photography. So much of this is deliberately manipulated to conform to a negative ideal of overemphasized eroticism. In glossy magazines, for example, the figures are deliberately airbrushed so as promote impurity. These disordered images stored in the memory of the artist crowd will impinge upon the final drawing of the artist, whether he is conscious of it or not this is an influence that simply would not have been there 400 years ago. Therefore even given an identical training, the tendency of artist to produce disordered imagery is greater today than it was in the past. I suggest therefore that we should err on the side of an even greater caution than was used in past times.

*The naked form is beautiful:* this is true, but it does not in itself justify the painting of it nude. This is the whole essence of the discussion relating to Original Man, Historical Man and Eschatological Man given earlier. John Paul II argues that only 'before the eyes of God' can Historical Man, which is



whom we are considering at this point, be looked at without clothes. As mentioned, after consideration of Erik Petersesen's article on the *Theology of Dress*, clothes do not hide the beauty of Historical Man but rather, they enhance it so that it is closer to what it ought to be.

## Conclusion

If the few articles I have read are anything to go by, the comments of JP II on nudity in art have been interpreted in some circles as a theology of Catholic permissiveness. Here was a ground breaking theologian, pointing the need for nudity in art. One imagines cultured Catholics who did not want to be seen as puritanical by their liberal friends heaving a sigh of relief: now when the subject came up at dinner parties they could point gleefully to the words of this 'right-on' pro-nude Pope and hold their heads high.

While, as we have discussed, the Pope was indeed very interested in artists portraying human sexuality visually in an ordered way, when one examines the sort of nudity he proposes, rather than opening the door to a previously unseen permissiveness, he appears to me to be reinforcing a very traditional and conservative line (though certainly not puritanical).

Does this rule out the portrayal naked historical man altogether? While all that I have described sets out the great difficulty of the task facing the artist, it seems to me that it does not rule out altogether the possibility that that a skilled artist could paint Historical Man naked provided he did so in a particular way. Historical Man is still essentially human and therefore if this can be revealed through a very careful and subtle abstraction that reveals the full humanity of the subject and his potential for glory then it will be legitimate, for this is man as God sees him. The artist must by means of idealization communicate this full truth to people who are themselves fallen and all predisposed (to some degree) to look at the naked form with the eyes of impurity. Strict adherence to natural appearances is out of the question, as the Pope has said, but there must nevertheless be a high degree of naturalism in order for this to correspond to Historical Man. It requires therefore, a highly skilled artist with a very clear idea of what his purpose is if he is going to give us a dignified portrayal

of Historical Man with just the right balance of naturalism and idealization that is not open to misinterpretation. We might argue that some of the great Masters of the past were able to do this.

However, given all the pitfalls involved, I feel that it would be prudential today for artists to restrict the portrayal of the nude to those cases where it is necessary, such as Adam and Eve, and to do so in forms that are highly stylized, such as the iconographic or the gothic. I would avoid the naturalistic forms that an academic training produces and I would remove the study of the nude from the training of artists in this form, so that they have training that is closer to that of the Spanish baroque masters.