

# The Difference in Viewing Nakedness in Art and in Pornography

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At first glance, there does not appear to be much difference in viewing naked men and woman in some classical depictions and in more recent reproductions. For example, in comparing the *Sistine Chapel* ceiling to a *Playboy* magazine, one must admit that both bare all and show naked males or females and their respective body parts that are necessary for procreation. Is the difference simply a matter of preference or taste, or is there something more profound that makes one entirely different from the other?

Perhaps the appropriate context for discovering wherein the difference lies is nakedness in the beginning, in the garden of Eden. The ancient inspired writers of Genesis relate that the first man and woman were created in a state of nakedness without shame (Gen. 2:25). Reflecting on this situation in his *Theology of the Body* catechesis, John Paul II draws out that our first parents, in beholding the nakedness of the other, recognized an ability to enter into a personal communion of life and love, where each could make a gift of self to the other. This ability stems from an order of reciprocal self-giving deeply inscribed in masculinity and femininity and is fittingly called by JP II the *spousal attribute* of the body.

The naked body was for our first parents *the sign* that they were created for a deep interpersonal communion with each other. We read that when Adam beheld the naked Eve for the first time, he joyfully exclaimed “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23); he saw a naked body, like his own, and recognized a person, with whom he could enter into the richness of a personal relationship. In this original situation, the naked body was like a transparent medium that gloriously manifested the person. Our first parents were indeed naked without shame in their experience of the goodness, beauty, and purity of the body and its sexual aspects. In the beginning, nakedness was never something to be ashamed of, or to be hidden from others: it was *very good*.

This bliss was short-lived: as a consequence of turning away from the plan of their Creator and “exchanging the truth about God for a lie”, the man and woman were given up to “dishonourable passions” where they became “consumed with passion for one another” (see Rom. 1:25-27). They realized the need to cover their nakedness, not because each was embarrassed to be without clothing before the other, but so that each might preserve the spousal dimension from being violated by the other on account of disordered passions and desires. Shame, while signifying the lost glory of the state of original nakedness, became a positive reaction against the tendencies of fallen human nature; it aided in preserving the integrity of the gift-dimension of the person.

In our own age, we have an intuition that our nakedness and our sexuality are very good, yet we struggle to reconcile this intuition with the earthly desires and movements of the flesh that are

experienced almost as part of the human condition. The echos of the primordial events that formed our first parents still resound within our own hearts and stir up a substantial yearning to know and understand the meaning of masculinity and femininity. Authentic human culture concretizes these echos as it confirms what it means to be a human being, especially through various art forms including painting and audiovisual media. Despite there being a significant difference (beyond the scope of this endeavor) between the naked body captured by the artist's paintbrush on canvas and by the artist's film or digital technologies, the underlying issue is that a body of a human person has been transferred out of its ontological identity as the body of *this* man or *this* woman and into an abstract dimension where the body begins to lose its connection to the gift-dimension of the person.

Within each particular culture, artists are gifted with a special talent to perceive the mystery of the human heart wherein the echos of the ancient past resound and to find appropriate ways to communicate their perceptions. They not only communicate in their creative work their own thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, but should strive to capture and transmit a portion of reality in a beautiful way. Art is thus much more than the self-expression of the artist: it must *serve* the truth. Artists are frequently inspired to capture the grandeur of the human body as well as the love between a man and a woman. In order for art to be realistic, however, it has the right and the duty to reproduce the human body and the love between a man and a woman as they really are and to speak the *whole truth* about them. Speaking the whole truth includes presenting especially the dignity and beauty of masculinity and femininity in such a way that it leads the viewer *through* the body, so to speak, to the grand vista of the personal mystery of the human being. The artist's utmost concern should be to speak this truth accurately within the framework of our present situation, where we are deprived of the glory of original nakedness, so that the deep order of the spousal attribute which is inscribed in the body is not violated.

Since sexual aspects are an honourable part of the human body and are very connected to the love between a man and a woman, the artist, in depicting the naked body, must speak about these aspects in a way that arises from the whole truth of the human being. In many works that overemphasize the sexual dimensions of the person, it is not that they show too much, but that they show too little. Through an excessive focus on sexuality, producers of such works leave an impression upon the viewer that sexual values are perhaps the only real values of a person and that love consists in nothing more than the self-centered experience of these values. In this way, the producer obscures the whole person and introduces a partial truth through his work, so that the viewer is provoked to react to the person being portrayed simply as an *object*, as a means to one's own pleasure, and not as a person. This is precisely where the lie of pornography is introduced, which tries to convince the viewer that persons have value only insofar as they can be enjoyed and used. On this point, the risqué actress Marilyn Monroe once lamented "I do not consider myself a kind of merchandise; but I am sure that many people do not see anything else in me...That is what annoys me: a sex symbol becomes an object. I hate being an object."

With the paintings in the Sistine chapel, on the other hand, the sexual aspects of the naked figures are in harmony with the whole truth of the human person and do not draw unbalanced attention to themselves. For example, Adam, in the splendor and glory of his nakedness, testifies to the dignity, nobility, and beauty of all of humanity rather than to the sexual powers of man. With these and other pieces of art involving the naked human body, one is not necessarily

pushed by their content toward looking lustfully. Instead, through these works, one is led to contemplate the dignity and beauty of the mystery of the human person.

Matthew, quoting the words of Jesus, writes “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:27-28) With these words, Jesus challenges us to cultivate an interior respect for the whole person, in all of his or her human dimensions and to not violate the integrity of the person by means of a partial viewing. With these words of Christ, the viewer of any art of the human person is assigned a special task, which is to communicate with the truth of the subject and allow one’s self to become formed by the whole truth of the personal mystery of man and woman. No matter how the human body is posed, it always has its own inalienable dignity stemming from its spousal attribute. While it is the duty of the artist to respect the whole truth of the human being, it is also up to the viewer of works involving the naked body to see either a person created in the image and likeness of God, or a creature that can be made into an object for one’s own lust and desire.

Nevertheless, a particular responsibility arises for artists who use audiovisual technologies that capture so accurately the many dimensions of human experience. Can these technologies capture the whole truth concerning the love that is uniquely expressed between spouses? This is an urgent question since many in our times, perhaps on account of experiencing a lack of real love, are attracted to sources that attempt to portray love through explicit sexual activities. Bypassing all the deviations from true spousal love, should sexual acts proper to marriage ever become the subject of art?

A conjugal act, in its very meaning, is a total giving of self and a receiving of the beloved that takes place within marriage. Sexual acts in marriage incarnate in a unique way the love between the spouses. In and through these acts one trustingly shares with one’s beloved what is most profound and what belongs most interiorly to one’s self. This ultimate personal giving and receiving is so connected to the interiority of each of the spouses and the gift of self is so exclusively ordered towards the other, that for a third party to watch the sharing of this gift, even with the best of intentions, is a violation of the spouses’ exclusive communion. In such an intimate and exclusive exchange between spouses there is no room for anyone else.

Does this mean that the right of artists to reproduce the love between a man and a woman is negated? Not one bit. Insight into the truth of spousal love gives the honest artist guidelines for accurately portraying this kind of love. To speak truthfully about spousal love means to respect the exclusive intimacy of the giving and receiving that happens between the spouses. The exclusive intimacy of this profoundly personal experience creates precise limits that the artist must observe, if he serves the truth by his works, lest he degrade the very thing he is trying to capture. Unfortunately, there are many producers in the entertainment industry who market their audiovisual reproductions by exploiting the attractive nature of sexual acts.

It is part of human nature to seek an understanding of one’s self. The human body, in its masculinity or femininity, is rich in meaning and it has a deeply inscribed spousal content. The body then becomes a way of revealing human nature and leads to an understanding of what it means to be a person. Art, as a part of culture, plays a large role in bearing true testimony toward

everything that is human. Authentic and responsible artistic activity with man or woman as its subject must seek appropriate ways to create an artistic expression of the truth of what it means to be human, in our exterior and interior dimensions. May all artists strive towards the general intention that Pope Benedict has expressed for the month of May that literature, art, and the media be used to greater advantage to favour a culture which defends and promotes the values of the human person.