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From Aphrodite to Advertising : Images of Objectified Women
Using the Critique of John Berger

Tracy Ann Timmester

**From Aphrodite to Advertising:
Images of Objectified Women Using the Critique of John Berger**

Tracy Ann Timmester

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Barry University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the completion of the Honors Program

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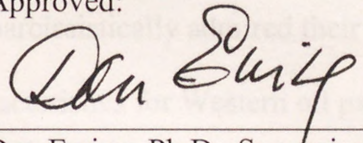
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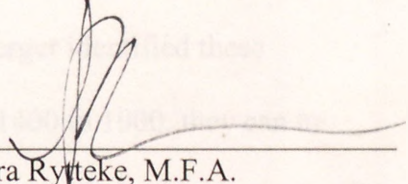
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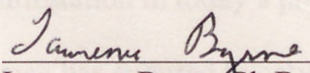
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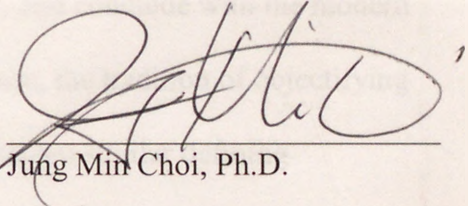
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From Aphrodite to Advertising: Images of Objectified
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Since the first known portrayal of a large-scale nude woman twenty-three centuries ago in Ancient Greece, nude or partially nude women in Western art have been portrayed as sexual objects on display for male viewing pleasure. The first modern critic to take this tradition seriously, and to analyze its dynamics, was John Berger, writing in his 1972 book, *Ways of Seeing*. Berger came up with common conventions by which nude female subjects were objectified. Under these conventions, female subjects were portrayed as: (1) ideal beauties, (2) viewing spectacles, and (3) submissive possessions, who (4) lacked individuality, (5) gave their attention to the assumed outside viewer, and (6) narcissistically admired their own beauty. Although Berger identified these characteristics for Western oil painting from the period of 1400 to 1900, they can be applied to the depictions of women from much of Western history. In this thesis, I will analyze woman's first nude portrayal in 4th century B.C. and conclude with the modern manifestation in today's photo advertisements. In essence, the tradition of objectifying women has endured twenty-three centuries, it has maintained similar defining characteristics, and it has become much more pervasive through the medium of photographic advertising in our modern consumer culture.

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Introduction

The first known, large-scale nude portrayal of a woman in Western art was sculpted in the 4th century B.C. in Ancient Greece. This is Praxiteles's famous statue, the *Aphrodite of Knidos*. Prior to this, women were usually shown clothed (with a few small-scale exceptions painted on Greek vases), while Greek men were commonly portrayed in the nude out of reverence to their achievements. Unlike male nudes, however, Aphrodite's nakedness did not represent her strength or individuality but instead put her on display for the purpose of a man's viewing pleasure. This novel portrayal of woman as a sexualized object set a precedent and established a persistent tradition in Western art.

This Honors thesis is an analysis of the various ways in which women have been objectified in Western culture – starting with the *Aphrodite of Knidos* and ending with its modern manifestation in today's photo advertisements. I will focus on the common characteristics of this tradition since its origin twenty-three centuries ago.

These characteristics were first identified by John Berger in his influential, groundbreaking book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Specifically, Berger discovered a series of common conventions by which women were objectified in Western oil paintings. In the following pages, I will elaborate other female portrayals in which these conventions appear. This thesis, therefore, is divided into three sections: (1) Praxiteles's *Aphrodite of Knidos*, (2) John Berger's ideas and discoveries, and (3) contemporary photo advertisements.

Ancient Greece

Created in the Late Classical Period of Ancient Greece (400-323 B.C.), *The Aphrodite of Knidos* is a famous masterpiece, well-known both for the skill of its accomplished sculptor, Praxiteles, and for its distinctive position as one of the first eroticized portrayals of a nude, life-size female figure in Western art (Figure 1). Sculpted during a time when only men were portrayed in the nude, in homage to their athletic or political achievements, Praxiteles's nude, erotic statue of a female shocked and changed the Western world. The sculpture "had an electrifying effect on its age and the periods which followed" (Pollitt 157) because it simultaneously introduced two new subjects in art: female nudity and female sensuality. "Up to this time, undraped female figures... were rarely represented by Greek sculptors. It was Praxiteles who first made such types popular," and, by doing so, inaugurated an enduring, obsessive trend in Western art, which has since established the nude woman as a popular, common subject of "high art" (Chase 116).

Ancient Greece is the undisputed origin of Western culture. As a result, Greece's powerful artwork has had a resounding impact on the Western world. To begin with, the Greeks loved youth, beauty, and athleticism, and revered those qualities in their art. Using strong lines in their sculpture, Greek artists created flawless, beautiful profiles and strong, muscular physiques. In many cases, the Greeks ignored flawed reality to portray their heroes as idealized, impeccable beauties. Typically, statues during the Classical Period (500-350 B.C.) depicted their male subjects as young, muscular, healthy, and handsome. "Greek sculpture was concerned with nothing so much as the celebration of

Man... It took to itself the function of creating his image in the most glorious aspects possible" (Rothschild 40). This reverence for beauty is, of course, still apparent in modern culture.

Unfortunately, another undemocratic characteristic of Ancient Greece has also passed into modern culture. This is the Greek patriarchal way of revering its men and devaluing its women, evident in the artwork of the Classical periods. Prior to the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, only men were sculpted life-size in the nude. They were done so as a means of symbolizing their heroism, strength, and achievement. Because man's body was seen as a marvelous tool for success and because Greeks revered athleticism, physical strength and beauty, artists portrayed male heroes with idealized physiques as an ode to the subject's political, academic, or athletic achievement. This tradition is evident in numerous well-known pieces, including Polykleitos's *Spear-Bearer*, Myron's *Discus-Thrower*, and *Hermes* of Praxiteles as an example (Fig. 2). These three nude males glorify, respectively, a warrior, an athlete, and a god.

In direct contrast, the *Aphrodite of Knidos* was sculpted in the nude to glorify the erotic appeal of her physical beauty. The individuality, strength, and accomplishments of the goddess were insignificant to the sculptor in deference to the importance placed upon her physical beauty, demonstrating the difference between the portrayal of women in Western art and the portrayal of men, which began with Praxiteles's statue.

Praxiteles's sculpture, which stands 6ft., 9in., was originally commissioned by the eastern Greek city of Kos but was rejected because of the indignation caused by its female nudity. Eventually, the *Aphrodite* statue was accepted by another eastern city, Knidos, and was received there with much awe and amazement. Praxiteles's sculpture

depicts Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, sex, and beauty, preparing for a bath.

Originally displayed in an open, temple-like structure in which the statue was surrounded by columns and visible from all sides, the effect of the piece was supposed to be that of a voyeur coming upon the goddess and catching her in a private moment of nakedness.

The temple was “designed to facilitate the viewer’s appreciation of [the statue] from all angles” (Pollitt 157). Unexpectedly seen in the nude, the goddess clutches at her cloth and covers herself with her right hand, implying feelings of modesty. However, her inability to fully cover herself and her famous “melting gaze, spoken of by the writers of antiquity” contradict that modesty and hint at a comfort and confidence upon being seen naked (Butler 47). Some Ancient writers even referred to the “dewy quality” of her eyes “with their joyous radiance and welcoming look” (Pollitt 157). This legendary ambivalence, combining modesty and welcoming attention, is the main reason the piece is considered very erotic.

Praxiteles’s *Aphrodite of Knidos* shocked the Greek world. Not only was the sculpture of the goddess the first monumental nude female figure in art, it was also the first nude woman portrayed in a sensuous, erotic way.

The nude female figure had played a minimal role in Greek art up to this time. In early red-figure vase painting... such representations are not uncommon, but the women depicted seem in most cases to be courtesans; and in monumental art the social conditions of fifth-century Greece tended to discourage a romantic and sensuous view of women. The appeal of the Knidian Aphrodite was frankly, although not vulgarly, erotic... (Pollitt 157).

With the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, Praxiteles introduced the first large-scale nude female figure into Western art and subsequently encouraged the Western view of woman as a sexual, beautiful object to be appreciated for her physical assets.

Praxiteles's *Aphrodite of Knidos* was instantly famous. The nude goddess both mesmerized and shocked contemporaries, due to her unprecedented nudity, the powerful eroticism of her modesty/confidence, and the masterful craftsmanship of the sculptor. Adding to the initial awe of the *Aphrodite*'s unveiling, the statue was considered dazzling and splendid and was admired for its touchable "delicate surface" (Butler 47). Praxiteles was renowned for depicting the "graceful softness of the feminine body" with amazing realism (Garrison 440). As an example of this, the *Encyclopedia of Art* refers to the "delicate convex forms" and dimples of the *Aphrodite*'s buttocks and how they "convey the softness of the flesh with remarkable effectiveness" ("Greek sculpture" 646). Considered a magician with his tools and medium, Praxiteles "caused marble to become flesh" (Garrison 438).

The shock of her nudity and eroticism not only caused instant fame, it inspired countless imitations. Her popularity and effect was so great that literally hundreds of artists in subsequent centuries recreated the goddess's modesty in thousands of similar statues, which have since been termed "venus pudicas". The *Aphrodite*'s "influence upon contemporary and subsequent sculpture was very great... So true was this that for many years after the fourth century, *Aphrodite* was not represented in any form differing significantly from that conceived by Praxiteles" (Garrison 440). Referring to the numerous "descendants of the Knidian *Aphrodite*," one art historian commented that "we are confronted with what are really a set of variations on the Praxitelean theme" (Pollitt

159). Famous examples of these “descendants” include the *Aphrodite of Cyrene*, created during the subsequent Hellenistic period, and the *Medici Aphrodite*, sculpted in the 1st century A.D. in Rome, which portrays the goddess after a bath using both her arms to cover her genitalia and her chest (Fig. 3).

Beyond the world of ancient sculpture, centuries into the future of Western art, the same erotically modest pose, with the nude female attempting to cover herself, was used in countless paintings. A famous example that uses almost the identical pose is Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* created in 1482. Also, many future artists evolved the “Praxitelean theme” and applied it to subjects lying down, such as Titian did with his *Venus of Urbino* (1538), who covers herself with her left hand while reclining in bed (Fig. 4). Clearly, female nudity, particularly with this theme of erotic modesty, became commonplace in Western art following the Knidian Aphrodite’s introduction in the 4th century B.C. Almost overnight, the nude female, admired for her physical and sexual beauty, became a central subject in Western art.

While male statues in Ancient Greece were portrayed in a glorified way which focused on their power and achievements, the “power” of *Aphrodite of Knidos* derived from her eroticism and physical beauty. This dichotomy between the nude portrayal of men versus that of women set the stage for future depictions of women in Western art. With the *Aphrodite*’s creation, a cultural and artistic split emerged: “Men act and women appear” (Berger 47). Aphrodite was ignored as a powerful goddess of strength, power, and individuality, and instead portrayed as a sexual vision for male viewers to enjoy. With the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, this degrading portrayal of women

became overwhelmingly popular throughout the history of Western art, leading to the nude female's identityless spectacle in innumerable art pieces to follow.

John Berger

In 1972, John Berger, a cultural commentator and art critic, wrote an important book titled, *Ways of Seeing*. In this book, originally created as a BBC television special, Berger discusses the objectification of women in artwork and the importance of the "assumed male viewer" in that tradition. Berger focuses on Western oil paintings from the Renaissance (1400s) and later, and states that in almost all paintings of nude women, "there remains the implication that the subject (a woman) is aware of being seen by a spectator" (Berger 49). Berger claims that this spectator is the main theme of most nude portrayals of women in art, and the reason for their creation. According to Berger, the male viewer is the true "protagonist" of nude female paintings, more so than the women subjects who are put on display. Under this "inwritten idea" of a man viewing a naked woman and being the reason for her nudity, Berger identified other "conventions by which women have been seen, judged [and portrayed] as sights" (Berger 47). These conventions include the portrayal of women as (1) submissive, (2) ideally beautiful, and (3) narcissistic, with the figures (4) acknowledging the presence of the viewer and (5) lacking all signs of individuality or humanity. Berger is significant for his observations of female objectification in Western oil painting and the common characteristics he discovered in that tradition, including, most importantly, the role of the assumed male viewer as protagonist.

John Berger recognized that most nude women in Western art were objectified for the pleasure of male viewers, and referred to this tradition as “absurd male flattery” (Berger 57). He determined through the nude, frontal, submissive portrayal of females in paintings that women were objectified for and because of an assumed male spectator. Discussing this prevalent theme, Berger stated,

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger- with his clothes still on (Berger 54).

With an outside male viewer acting as protagonist, the females portrayed within the paintings were inconsequential beyond the perfection of their appearance. Because everything in these paintings was addressed to the spectator, the woman subject was insignificant as an individual. Everything was addressed to the man’s sexuality and ego, and, as a result, the women were portrayed as mere display objects of beauty and submission. This common trend is evident in most paintings in which a nude female is put “on display”- exposed, laid out, and frontally posed. The first example Berger provides is *Reclining Bacchante* by Trutat, in which a young, beautiful girl lays naked upon a bed in a revealing pose (Fig. 5). Included in this piece is a male spectator’s head looming in above the subject, looking down upon the woman through a window, further implying her role as a mere “vision” for man’s viewing pleasure.

There are many conventions by which women were objectified in Western paintings, all of which fit into the male-as-spectator/female-as-spectacle dynamic defined

by Berger. To begin with, nude female subjects typically lacked signs of humanity or individuality. Functioning as mere sexual objects, the women were insignificant as individuals, and consequently, their personalities were excluded from paintings. This disregard is evident in many symbolic ways, including the omission of a subject's head, the covering of her face, or the blankness of her expression. For example, in Edgar Degas' *Bather*, the subject's arm is draped over her face, symbolically hiding her identity and individuality (Fig. 6). In this painting, there is "no question of a model's or a woman's identity" because the "*Bather* declares itself an object of the gaze" (Suleiman 230). In another example, Harold Gilman's *Nude at a Window* is shown from the backside with the focus on her behind, completely excluding the face and the importance of the woman (Fig. 7).

Clearly, in these examples, the focus of the paintings was on the bodies and physical appearances of the subjects. This blatant disregard of the woman is an obvious "convention" by which women were commonly objectified. The women were reduced to mere objects, admired only for their appeal from the neck down. To add to this allure and amplify the male viewer's enjoyment, many artists idealized the bodies of their subjects. For example, the body of Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* is unrealistically distorted in the long curve of her supine back (Fig. 8). Also, the German artist Durer was known for picking "perfect" body parts from various models and combining them into a single, unrealistic female portrayal. This objectifying process is evident in the artist's sketches (Fig. 9). According to Berger, Durer's "exercise presumed a remarkable indifference to who any one person really was" (Berger 62).

With this idealizing trend, standards of perfection were developed. Men, the creators and viewers of females as sex objects, became the self-appointed judges of beauty. They created the criteria and passed indisputable judgments based on their desires. As a consequence, “those who are not judged beautiful are *not beautiful*” (Berger 52). This new idea of male judgment is most prominent in the popular art subject, *The Judgment of Paris*, in which Paris determines which of three goddesses, including Aphrodite, is the most beautiful and thus the most valuable (Fig. 10).

In many cases, “the prize” of favorable male judgment – i.e. the winning woman – was “to be owned by the judge – that is to say to be available to him” (Berger 52). Nude women in Western paintings were portrayed as mere possessions. Implying their submission to the assumed male viewer, female subjects generally reclined or posed passively, with compliant facial expressions and docile bodies. Lely’s painting of *Nell Gwynne* was commissioned by King Charles II and depicts his young mistress “passively looking at the spectator staring at her naked” (Berger 52) (Fig. 11). As the King’s “possession”, Nell was portrayed as such in the form of a painting (another material possession) which the King used to show off the submission of his young sex object. Lely’s painting “is a highly typical image of the tradition” in which an objectified woman’s role as a possession is implied in the submissive portrayal of her body, nudity, and expression (Berger 52).

In Nell Gwynne’s case, her submission implies a passive acceptance of her role as a possession. However, even in cases when the nude female subject was not passively posed, artists found ways to force the subject’s recognition of and submission to her imposed status, and they did so by including mirrors in their paintings. This new element

served many purposes in erotic portrayals of women, such as implying female narcissism, portraying the woman as an object, and having the woman acknowledge herself as such. With this added accessory, female subjects were shown admiring themselves and were scorned for being vain and narcissistic. For example, Memling painted a piece of a nude woman admiring herself in a hand-held mirror and derided her with his title, *Vanity* (Fig. 12). Specifically addressing the error of this artist, Berger says, “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity* thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure” (Berger 51).

In most cases, however, “the real function of the mirror was... to make the woman connive in treating herself, as first and foremost, a sight” (Berger 51). Female subjects were depicted looking at themselves in the mirror, thus acknowledging themselves as visions by “joining the spectators of themselves” (Berger 50). The mirror is an element of many famous paintings, including *Susannah and the Elders* by Tintoretto, and *Venus at the Mirror* by Rubens (Fig. 13). In this piece, Venus looks at herself in the mirror held up by Cupid, and, as a result of the mirror’s angle, she is also able to simultaneously gaze out at the assumed male viewer. In this piece, Venus is not only acknowledging herself as an object, but she’s also acknowledging the presence of an outside male spectator.

This attention directed towards the presumed outside viewer is very common in Western oil paintings, and in many cases, it is the element which makes the male spectator’s presence and importance most evident. The female subjects look outward to seemingly acknowledge their spectator-owner’s presence and possession over them, most

obviously in paintings in which other men, such as romantic love interests, are portrayed. In many of these instances, even with a lover touching her hair or kissing her neck, the female subject ignores him, despite his presence and proximity, and looks outward, implying her preference for the assumed spectator. In Von Aachen's *Bacchus, Ceres and Cupid*, Ceres ignores Bacchus in front of her, offering her a drink, and instead looks back over her shoulder, giving a coy, seductive look of recognition to her "secret" lover, the viewer (Fig. 14). "Often [the female subject] looks away from [the male lover] or she looks out of the picture towards the one who considers himself her true lover- the spectator-owner" (Berger 56).

Von Aachen's painting makes the objectification of women in paintings blatant in the way that his female subject's own desires and sexuality are deferred for those of the assumed viewer. Ceres is inactive in the loving scene before her in order to appeal to the spectator's ego and sexuality. In this way, paintings are "made to appeal to *his* sexuality. They have nothing to do with her sexuality... Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own" (Berger 55).

As stated before, this objectified portrayal of women is due mainly to the presence of the assumed viewer. Were he not such an important aspect of Western art, a woman would be portrayed as an individual with her own sexuality and desires. For instance, in the art of particular cultures, such as Indian, Persian and African, women are portrayed as the equals of men, and thus, sexual attraction and activity occurs equally between both parties with "woman as active as the man" and "the actions of each absorbing the other" (Berger 53). In rare cases of Western art, the spectator is ignored or totally nonexistent, such as in Rembrandt's *Danae* (Fig. 15). In this piece, the female subject is consumed

with her passion for another man and is unaware of a spectator. The painting isn't intended to appeal to the viewer, but instead intended to display the beauty of the woman's individuality and desires. The painting focuses on her, not on the viewer, and here lies the democratic distinction our culture has yet to recognize. Of this unique painting, Berger says

the way the painter has painted [the subject] includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and face... [the spectator] is forced to recognize himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him (Berger 58).

This painting is distinctive from most Western oil paintings because the nude female is the main subject and the viewer is not.

However, this painting is an exception to the conventions of Western art. In general, the male viewer was a powerful force in Western painting, and he, along with the objectified portrayal of women, have endured into the modern world. In 1972, Berger emphasized that, "the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed," and this is most evident in modern photo-advertisements (Berger 64). The tradition of the objectified woman has not only survived, it has also grown and become more pervasive. This development is due to many reasons, including the invention, popularity, and power of photography; the nature of capitalist, consumer culture; and advertising's overwhelming presence. As a result, the characteristics that Berger discovered in oil painting of the objectified woman are present today, vastly multiplied, in advertising.

Modern Advertisements

Invented in the 1820s in France, photography immediately became popular as the modern medium capable of “capturing the moment.” Finally, after numerous attempts with the likes of the camera lucida and camera obscura, a place, person, and moment in time could be documented. Suddenly, an exotic locale was visible, distant relatives were seen, the horrors of war were witnessed, and the flowering of our image-obsessed culture was underway. Since photography’s inception, the Western world has been unable to quench its thirst for the photographic image.

Photography is immensely popular, not only because of its inherent mimetic qualities and the appeal of its verisimilitude, but also because of its excessive impact upon us by institutions, corporations, and the leaders of our capitalist culture. “A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex” (Sontag 178). Advertising is an inevitable creation of capitalism for it is a means by which large corporations play upon the consumer’s weaknesses and desires in order to stimulate more consumption, leading to more profit for the companies.

In order to achieve this goal of encouraging consumption, image-based advertising “draws heavily upon the load of Western culture” (Barthel 12), and consequently, utilizes familiar traditions, stereotypes, and allusions in art history in order to connect with consumers. Most commonly, the traditional sex roles are exhibited and maintained in advertising, because “advertisers wish to make print ads a pleasurable experience for the intended audience. They construct the ads in ways that reinforce the image of gender most familiar to and comfortable with their target audience” (Hall 29).

For this reason, women in advertisements are mainly concerned with domestic issues and appearance and, therefore, are used to sell cleaning supplies and low-fat foods. In contrast to this, men in advertisements are active and involved with sports or office work and used to sell gym equipment and palm pilots. Advertisers also allude to familiar, famous historical art pieces as a means of creating a comfortable “pleasurable experience”, and this is evident in an advertisement for “Sunday Times Great Recordings” which directly mimics the subject, poses and composition of Manet’s famous *Luncheon in the Grass* (Fig. 16). By using these recognizable stereotypes and allusions, advertising is helping to maintain our culture’s ancient traditions, views, and values. By maintaining our culture’s tradition of portraying woman as a sexualized object, advertising is reflecting the value that has existed since the commencement of Western culture. “Advertising helps to create a climate in which... the attitude that women are valuable only as objects of men’s desire... flourishes” (Kilbourne 290).

Today’s photographs – much like oil paintings in the past – seem to inherently turn subjects into possessions, because photographs “are material realities in their own right” (Sontag 180). Marshall McLuhan echoes this idea in *Understanding Media*, stating, “Cameras tend to turn people into things,” and this is possibly due to photography’s two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality (McLuhan 189). Inherently, because of this imperfect representation, photography reduces its subjects to flattened, shallow objects. Although considered a “realistic” medium, photography is nonetheless unable to capture all the dimensions and realities before it, and thus, a photograph inevitably objectifies its figures. Referring to this tendency, Gustav Janouch writes in *Conversations with Kafka*, “Photography concentrates one’s

eye on the superficial. For that reason it obscures the hidden life which glimmers through the outlines of things... One can't even catch that with the sharpest lens" (Sontag 207).

In this way, subjects of photographs are often reduced to objects because of the inherent qualities of the medium. In many cases, photo figures can be seen as mere possessions. Susan Sontag, a leading social and feminist critic, wrote extensively on photography-related topics in her book *On Photography*, and claims that "photography is acquisition... A photograph is a potent means of acquiring a subject... of gaining control over it... Photographs give mock forms of possession" (Sontag 155/167). For this reason, women in photographs seem even more like objects and possessions than they did in their past portrayals in oil painting.

This is also due to the nature of our consumer, capitalist culture, as we have seen. Fierbaker, in *The Essence of Christianity*, was complaining about this Western tendency as long ago as 1843. He prophetically observed that "a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images,... [which] have extraordinary powers to determine our demands upon reality" (as quoted in Sontag 153). Because advertising is everywhere, photography is everywhere.

As discussed in the previous section, Berger noted a series of specific characteristics in oil painting that objectified female subjects for male viewing pleasure, and those conventions can still be seen in photo advertisements today: (1) female models are put "on display" in awkward poses that make the woman most readily visible and available to her spectator-owner; (2) the women lack any sense of identity, individuality, or humanity that would distinguish them from any other beautiful, objectified male fantasy; (3) the models are young and beautiful, often manipulated and airbrushed with

modern technology to appear unrealistically flawless; (4) the women's body language and expressions suggest a passivity and submission to the sexuality and masculinity of the viewer; (5) the women give their full attention to their male spectator, even if ignoring the surrounding scene or attentive persons within it; (6) and advertisements, like paintings of the past, also hint at female narcissism with women subjects "admiring" their mirrored reflections. We will now turn to the specific examples of each of these enduring, powerful conventions.

In an advertisement for Donald J. Pliner fashion, a young girl sits on the top of a sofa while, below her, a young man gazes up at her as she looks out at the viewer (Fig. 17). Although it's an updated version of Trutat's *Reclining Bacchante* (with the female subject under the gaze of both the male viewer and the male subject in the piece), the message is the same: woman is a vision – a display object for man's viewing pleasure. According to Barthes, "Through its particular rhetoric and pun, [advertising] adds new (commercial) meaning to the old meanings" (Barthes 12). Woman's role as a display object is accepted in modern mainstream culture, evident in the profusion of half naked women used to sell everything from luggage to liquor. In our consumer culture, through the popularity and surfeit of advertising, woman has become a commodity on display. Female models in photo advertisements pose for the viewer by standing provocatively or laying submissively and are shown taking off their clothes and exposing bare skin. In an ad for Nivea skin firming lotion, a young woman is shown from the back side in her undergarments, lifting up the hem of her underwear with a welcoming smile- seemingly inviting the spectator to view and enjoy the sight of her exposed flesh (Fig. 18). In both

ads, the implication is that the women are viewing objects, valued solely for their physical beauty.

This objectification and disregard of feminine identity is most evident in advertisements' tendency to crop specific body parts, to exclude the subjects' heads, or to show models only from the back. Similar to Degas' *Bather*, women in photo advertisements are symbolically disregarded through the manner in which their faces are intentionally excluded or hidden. According to Cortese, "Advertising that depicts women's bodies without faces and heads implies that all that is really important about a woman lies between her neck and knees. The lack of a head symbolizes a woman without a brain. A faceless woman has no individuality" (Cortese 31).

For instance, in an ad for Valentino, the photograph depicts a woman's torso but intentionally crops out the woman's face above her lips (Fig. 19). In an advertisement for Musk perfume, the female subject is equally indistinguishable in a photograph that shows her only from the back (Fig. 20). In some examples, even if the woman's face is included, it is somehow concealed, as in the print advertisement for Checkmates lingerie, which shows a woman in her underwear with her face almost entirely veiled by her hair (Fig. 21). The text of the advertisement refers not only to the feel of the lingerie but also to the woman's identity (and thus its insignificance) when it says "barely there." Also in advertisements, as a way of objectifying and ignoring the woman, "women's bodies are often dismembered or hacked apart" (Cortese 31). When this is the case, "women cease to be seen as whole persons... The implication is that women are objects and therefore less than human" (Cortese 31). This trend is obvious in the ad for an Allday thong pantiliner, in which the photograph shows just a woman's behind from the back, wearing

a thong (Fig. 22). The image is extremely cropped, showing nothing but the middle of the woman's waist down to the bottom of her buttocks. This photograph, because it is used to sell a product to women, demonstrates just how accepted such blatant female disrespect has become.

This obvious disregard of female identity is also apparent in other symbolic formats as well, in which women are portrayed as voiceless with their mouths covered or lips sealed. For example, in a magazine advertisement for Esprit clothing, a young girl's mouth and nose are obscured by the extended neck of her sweater (Fig. 23) and in a photograph for a movie soundtrack, a woman's lips are sewn together with thick, black thread (Fig. 24). To support these images with powerful verbal reiterations encouraging female silence, the ads sometimes also state "Make a statement without saying a word" (in an ad for perfume) or "Watch your mouth young lady" (lipstick ad).

Artists throughout the history of Western art have objectified women by using idealized, unattainable beauty in the portrayal of their subjects, rejecting real, flawed women for a fantasy of distorted, manipulated, and accentuated parts. This objectifying tradition remains alive today in photo advertisements, in which the most physically "perfect" of our society – models (who already fit core standards of "perfection" in height, weight, and bone structure) – are used and subsequently manipulated through the benefit of modern technology. In the same way that Ingres distorted his *Odalisque* in 1814, today's woman is "improved" to look more like a lifeless statue than a living woman. According to Bob Ciano, who was once the art director of *Life* magazine, "no picture of a woman goes unretouched" (Wolf 82), and, as a result, "the 'perfect provocateur' is a mere facade" (Cortese 54). "Even the models themselves do not look in

the flesh as impeccable as they are depicted in the ads. The classic image is constructed through cosmetics, photography, and air-brushing techniques” (Cortese 54).

In countless advertisements, female models are distorted beyond reality to look like porcelain dolls with flawless skin and idealistic features. For example, in an advertisement for Thermasilk hair products, the model is indistinguishable as a living human with facial features that have been transformed to look like smooth porcelain (Fig. 25). In another ad, a nude subject is curled into a fetus-like position with all her features, including the surface of her skin, glazed and smoothed over, making her appear lifeless and plastic (Fig. 26). And in yet a third example, a female model is painted gold-brown and posed (complete with a piece of luggage resting on her head) as if a beautiful, inhuman statue (Fig. 27). In perfect summation of this objectifying trend, Cortese says, “the perfect provocateur is not human, rather, she is a form or hollow shell representing a female figure” (Cortese 54).

As “hollow shells”, many women in advertisements appear disoriented or spaced out with blank facial expressions and glazed eyes, implying that the woman is either a thoughtless object or completely lifeless. This blank portrayal of women, which has since been popularly termed “licensed withdrawal,” is a common, modern result of an ancient tradition (Kilbourne 145). This “withdrawal” manifests itself in numerous forms, including the ad for Versace in which a model appears dead, “lying on the ground as if washed up to shore” (Kilbourne 145) (Fig. 28). This horrifying ad, which makes it seem socially desirable and acceptable that a woman be portrayed as lifeless – void of spirit, humanity, identity, and voice – makes it blatantly obvious that the assumed male viewer is still a powerful force in our patriarchal society. The influence of the male spectator

seems to have increased since the time of oil painting, evident in our mainstream culture's acceptance of such a degrading portrayal of women.

With their powers of distortion and unrealistic portrayals of beautiful women, artists introduced standards of beauty into Western culture. With these idealized depictions of women in art came standards of perfection by which men, the creators and viewers of such depictions, judged women. This male judgment, which first made itself obvious in *The Judgment of Paris*, survived Western history to become a constant theme in advertisements. According to ads, men are the determiners of value and worth and women are the inferior subjects desperate for a favorable verdict, evident in advertising slogans such as "*The more you choose L'eggs, the more you get chosen*" (Barthel 65). This theme is manifest in an advertisement for lingerie in which three women, dressed only in their undergarments, are standing in a police line-up and are looked upon by three male police officers in the foreground (Fig. 29). This ad implies that, not only are the men judging the women for their "guilty" behavior but also for their nearly nude physiques, because "in the arena of male scrutiny, [a woman's] femininity, [a woman's] sexuality can never step down from the lineup" (Ewen 144). In this ad, it is "men who get to enjoy [the women's] display.. men who make the judgment" (Ewen 144). The importance of male opinion and favorable male judgment is also hinted at in an advertisement for Hanes Hosiery, which depicts two young, well-dressed couples facing away from each other against a city skyline (Fig. 30). The man from the couple to the right (with his female partner wearing pants) looks back admiringly at the legs of the woman in the other couple, who is wearing a skirt, and the familiar slogan reads "Gentlemen prefer Hanes."

With the tradition of male judgment surviving centuries of Western art, the idea of female competition is a modern, commonplace result. In numerous advertisements, women are pitted against one another in order to win the approval of their male spectators and judges. In these ads, hateful language encourages and makes it seem acceptable that women reduce themselves to mere objects in need of male approval. For example, in a well-known advertising campaign that shows a photograph of a beautiful, flawless model, the text reads “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful,” and in a clothing advertisement of a young woman, smiling confidently, lying face down and topless on a bed, the text states, “What the bitch who’s about to steal your man wears.” Partially due to the power of ads such as this, Jean Kilbourne feels that “girls are encouraged by the culture to sacrifice their relationships with each other and to enter into hostile competition for the attention of boys and men” (Kilbourne 149).

Berger noted that most nude female subjects of Western oil paintings appeared submissive and subservient to the male viewer- via blatant docile body language or facial expression, as in Lely’s *Nell Gwynne*. In this same tradition, the female subjects of advertisements have compliant bodies and passive expressions which portray their submission to their spectator-owners’ desires. Such vulnerability and compliance are evident in an advertisement for Missoni fashions in which a young woman is sprawled upon rocks with her head back and her face passive, making the pose of this young beauty very similar to Lely’s piece from the 1600’s (Fig. 31). Also similar to Lely’s painting is the youthful, passive submission of model Kate Moss in the famous ad for Calvin Klein in which the fragile, childlike model lies face down, naked, upon a sofa while looking “innocently” back at the viewer (Fig. 32). Unfortunately, in a culture

wearied by repetitive images, this traditional theme of submission has become extreme, evident in an advertisement for THINK skateboards in which a woman, posed on all fours, acts as the footstool for a man whose feet are propped upon her back (Fig. 33).

Just as in Western oil paintings, women in advertisements direct their attention to the presumed viewer. A female subject, even with a male love interest standing at her back or kissing her neck, might ignore her own desires and imply her yearning for her “spectator-owner” by looking out directly at the assumed viewer. Continuing this tradition in an advertisement for Guess clothing, a young woman looks out at the viewer with lips parted, while an attractive man kisses her cheek (Fig. 34). Similarly, in an advertisement for Mambo cologne, a woman is shown dancing erotically with a male figure from behind. Although he looks back at her, the woman in the picture instead seductively gazes out over her dance partner’s shoulder to the viewer beyond (Fig. 35). By ignoring the lovers before them, the models, like nude female subjects in past oil paintings, ignore their own desires in deference to the sexual appetites of their presumed viewers. Referring to women in advertisements, Kilbourne comments that they are “not supposed to have sexual agency. They are supposed to be passive” because “the emphasis for girls and women [in advertising] is always on being desirable, not on experiencing desire” (Kilbourne 148). With this observation, it is obvious that the relevance and existence of the assumed male viewer have survived as has the devaluing message to women.

The male viewer’s powerful presence is also evident in the popular use of mirrors in modern photo advertisements, because the accessory serves as a degrading tool in which the female subject either acknowledges her status as an object or hints at

narcissistic feelings of self-admiration. By including a mirror and showing the woman admiring herself within it, “advertisements reinforce the image of female sexuality as narcissistic. It is her own body that the woman finds appealing and that provides the greatest turn-on” (Barthel 83). Once again, because of the male viewer’s presence, these photographs are never about the sexuality of the female subjects, but more about how the sexuality of the woman can be manipulated to better appeal to the male viewer. In these ads, not only is the woman portrayed as a viewing object, but it is implied that she enjoys her status as such and she devalues herself in much the same way that the viewer does. The mirror was used for the female subjects to acknowledge their inferior, devalued status as a vision. The mirror “reflects the commandment that women see themselves as others [i.e. men] see them” – mere objects (Barthel 60). This tradition has grown to become increasingly complex, evident in an advertisement for Bacardi Rum, which features a woman standing in a nightclub looking at herself in the mirror behind the bar (Fig. 36). Her image is reflected in the mirror directly back at the viewer and is also reflected in the drinking glass of the man sitting beside her. In this ad, the female subject is not only looking at herself, but simultaneously at the viewer and the man beside her, thus acting as a viewing spectacle in three different ways.

The examples of modern photo advertisements in this section make it blatant that the conventions of female objectification, which John Berger discovered in oil painting from the 1400s and later, survived six centuries of western history. These ads reflect the tendencies Western oil painters used to portray their subjects as sexual objects and viewing spectacles, and, as a result, they maintain the ancient message of Western art “that women are valuable only as objects of men’s desire” (Kilbourne 290). Advertising

is an inevitable outcome of our capitalist, consumer society, and it is through the powerful force of advertising that the traditional portrayal of women has endured to become a forceful theme of mainstream culture.

Conclusion

In the history of Western culture, it is clear that woman has been repeatedly portrayed as a sexual object – on display for man’s viewing pleasure. However, what is shocking about this tradition is how long it has endured, how steadfast it has remained to its founding characteristics, and how much more pervasive it has become in the age of advertising.

John Berger identified specific common conventions by which nude female subjects were portrayed in Western oil painting. Those characteristics have proven to be applicable to the majority of nude portrayals of women throughout Western history. In essence, Berger’s discoveries make it obvious that even though the styles, mediums, and values of art have changed, certain conventions have remained the same.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, Berger’s main discovery, that woman was put “on display” for the purpose of the male viewer’s enjoyment, was first introduced with the *Aphrodite of Knidos*. She was created as a “vision” for the enjoyment of male onlookers. In fact, the goddess’s portrayal literally involved the viewer in that her reaction of modesty was a result of the viewer’s presence. In this way, the Aphrodite introduced the idea of the assumed male spectator as the cause for the woman’s nude exposure – the main “inwritten idea” which connects all of Berger’s points and unites the

majority of Western objectified portrayals of women (Berger 51). Historically, Praxiteles is important for setting the precedent.

Following the Aphrodite's creation, the nude, erotic portrayal of women rapidly entered Western culture and became a common subject of many pieces. Eventually, the theme entered into Renaissance oil painting and expanded. In this period, Berger noted, artists found new ways to objectify their subjects, and thus, the female subject of Renaissance art was typically portrayed as a submissive beauty who lacked individuality, devoted her attention to the outside viewer, and narcissistically loved her own beauty.

In the modern world, because of advertising's inclination to allude to historical art and traditional values, these characteristics of the objectified woman are sustained. According to Berger, "today the attitudes and values which informed that tradition [of objectifying women in art] are expressed through more diffused media – [including] advertising" (Berger 63). Even more emphatic on this point, Kilbourne says, "It is true that there have been erotic images of women in art for centuries, but mass technology has made it possible for these images to constantly surround us" (Kilbourne 132).

The consequences of the history we have been studying are large, evident in the power and influence of today's advertising. Women in the modern world are exposed to objectified portrayals of themselves every day on the sides of buses and buildings, in the pages of magazines, and on billboards at the side of the road. As a result, Jean Kilbourne, who wrote the book Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising, recognized that women have a tendency to "self-objectify" –

... the tendency to view one's body from the outside in – regarding physical attractiveness, sex appeal, measurements, and weight as central to one's physical identity... – has many harmful effects, including diminished mental performance, increased feelings of shame and anxiety,

depression, sexual dysfunction, and the development of eating disorders (Kilbourne 132/133).

Within this thesis, I have attempted to show some of the causes that have brought us to this disastrous point, beginning with the first erotic portrayal of woman in Ancient Greece.

With the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, the presence and importance of the male viewer was introduced. Since that introduction in 4th century B.C., the male spectator has played a significant role in sexualized depictions of women, determining Western standards of female desirability and beauty and causing such objectified portrayals. The “assumed male viewer” and the objectified characteristics that exist because of him have made woman a viewing spectacle in Western imagery for twenty-three centuries.

Unfortunately, this tradition of the exposed, frontally posed, lifeless, submissive, attentive woman has grown in the pervasive realm of modern photo advertisements to a devastating point. Now, as a result of “being objectified for so long” (Kilbourne 131), modern woman is viewed and accepted as a sexual object by all of society, including herself. The contemporary woman sees herself degraded through these mainstream portrayals and internalizes her “inferiorities” and objectified status on a daily basis. As a result of the objectifying tradition begun with Praxiteles’s *Aphrodite*, woman is now made to value herself only as a sexual object, assessed based on her physical appearance and appeal to the “male viewers” that surround her.

Figure 1



Figure 2

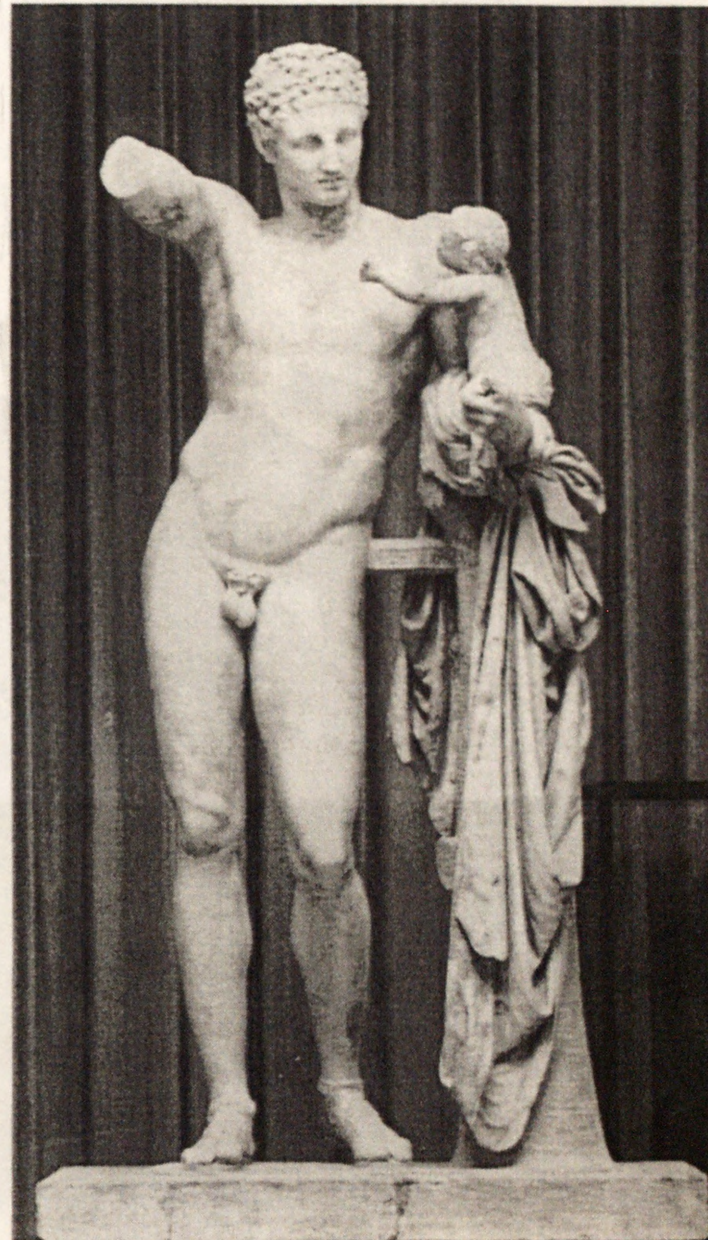


Figure 3

Figure 5



Figure 4



Figure 5

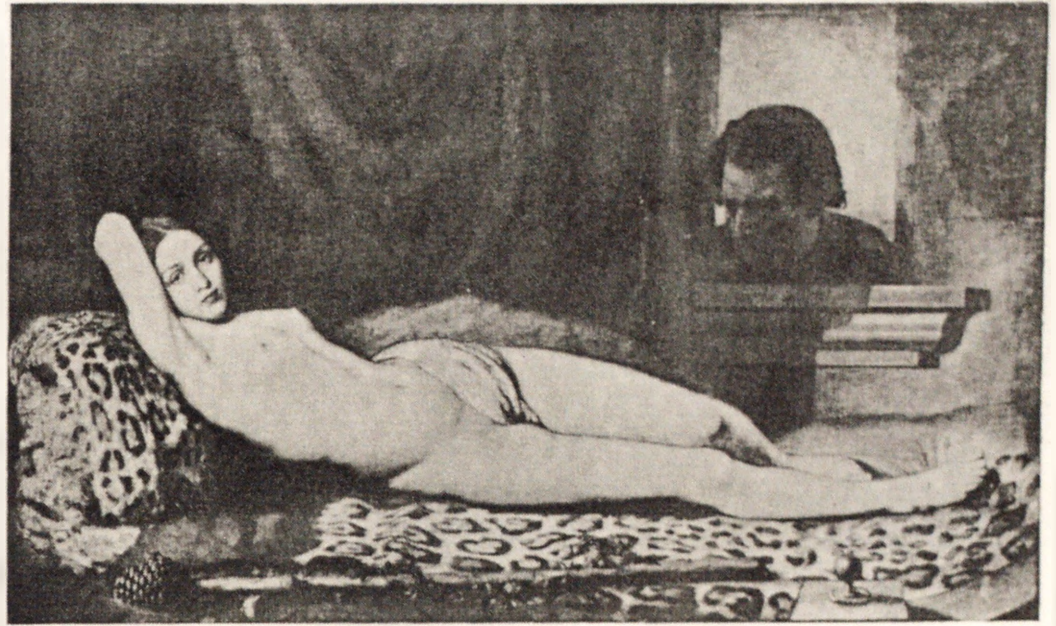


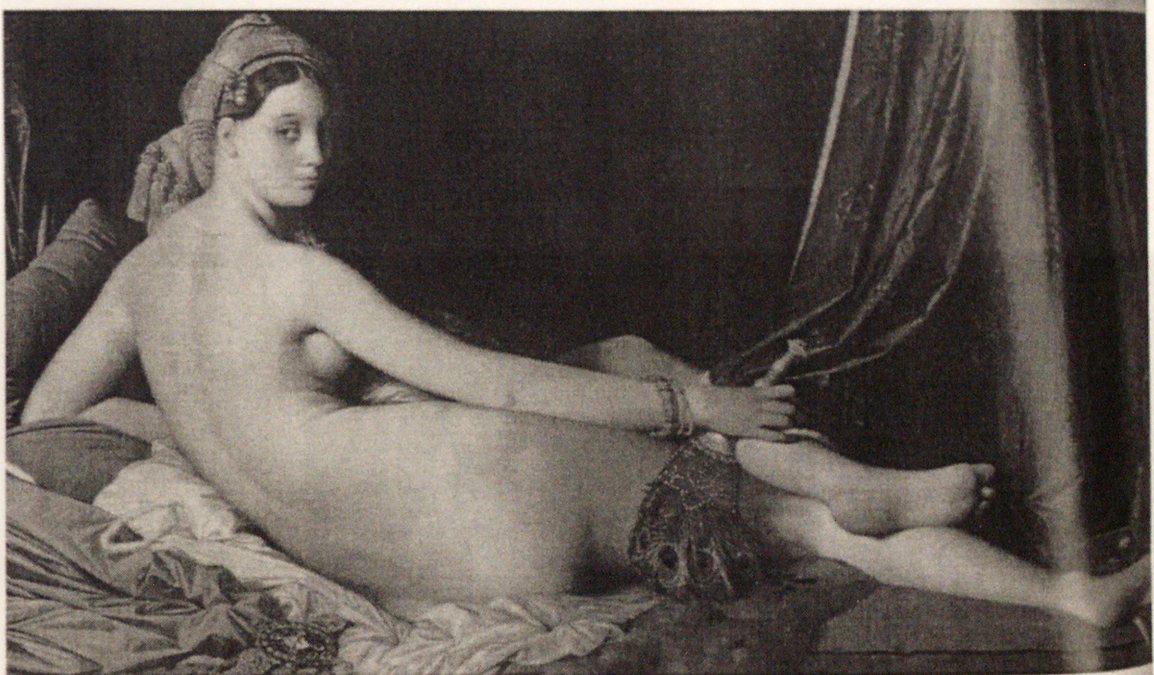
Figure 6





Figure 7

Figure 8



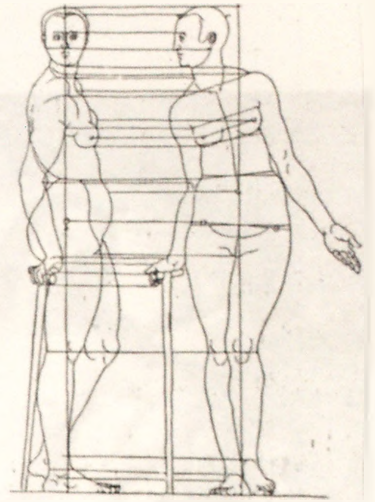


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

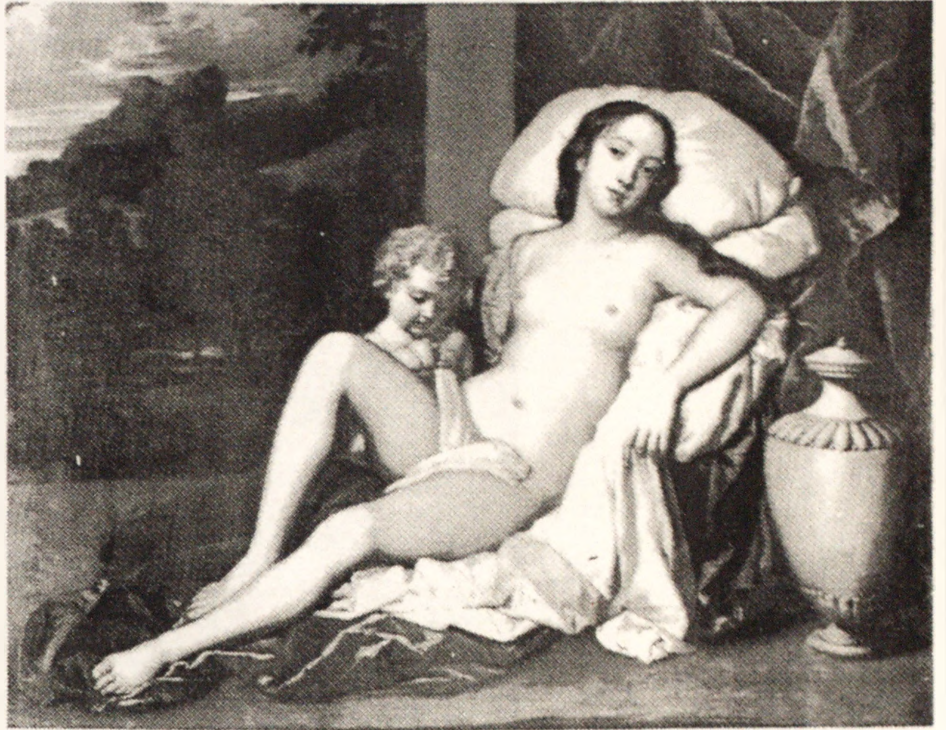


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

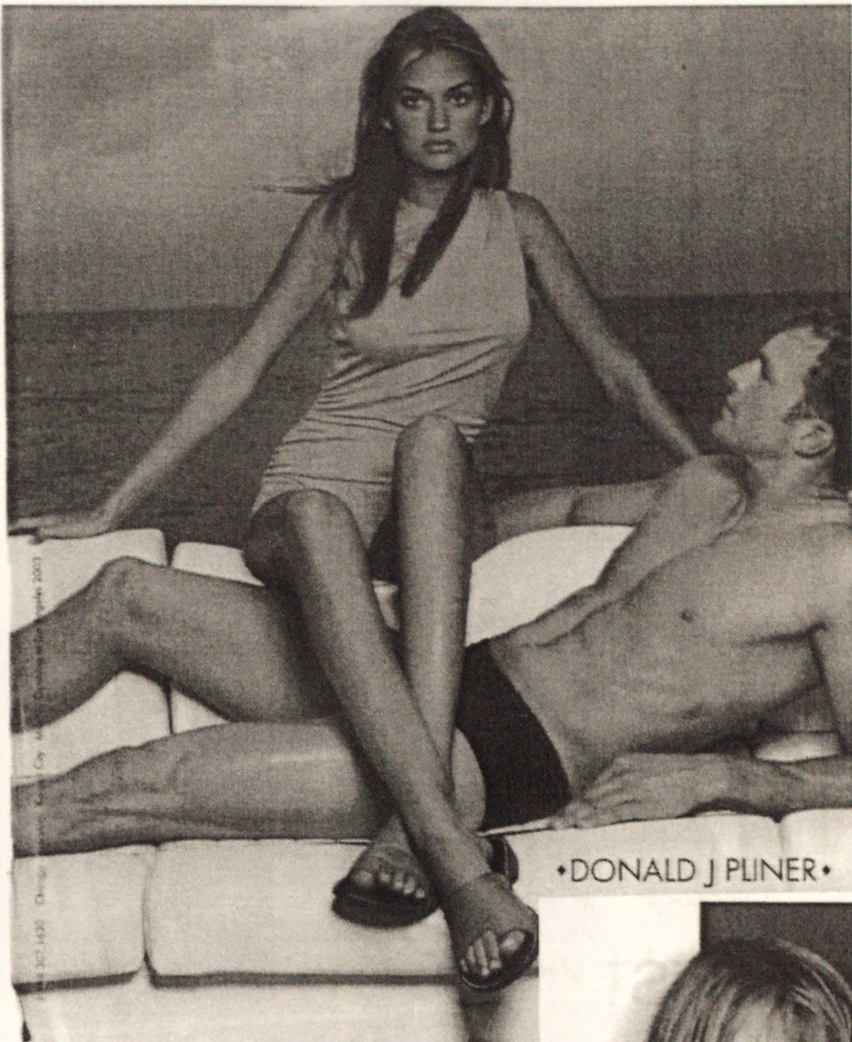


We could all use a little romance

Remember the famous album by Peter Paul Rubens, 'The Rape of Helen', which was the first of the series of 'The Rape of Helen' series, now being issued in a new edition by the New York Philharmonic. The full edition, complete with the original album, is available in a new edition by the New York Philharmonic.

Record 2
Record 3

Figure 17



•DONALD J PLINER•

Figure 20
Figure 18



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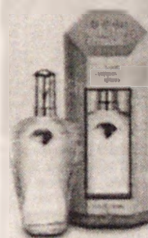
Figure 19



VALENTINO

Figure 20

fresh



fresh white musk. light, fresh and so sexy.

by Prince Matchabelli®

Figure 21

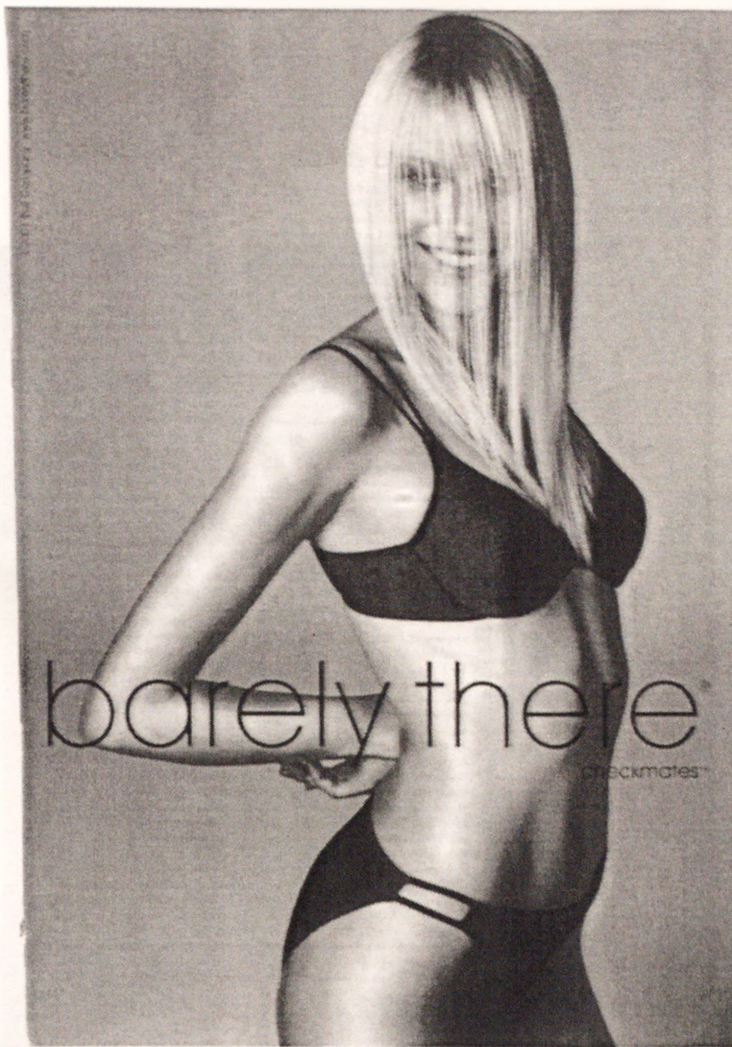


Figure 22



*(Reason to wear your thong every day.
(Not that you needed one.)*

Figure 23



Figure 24

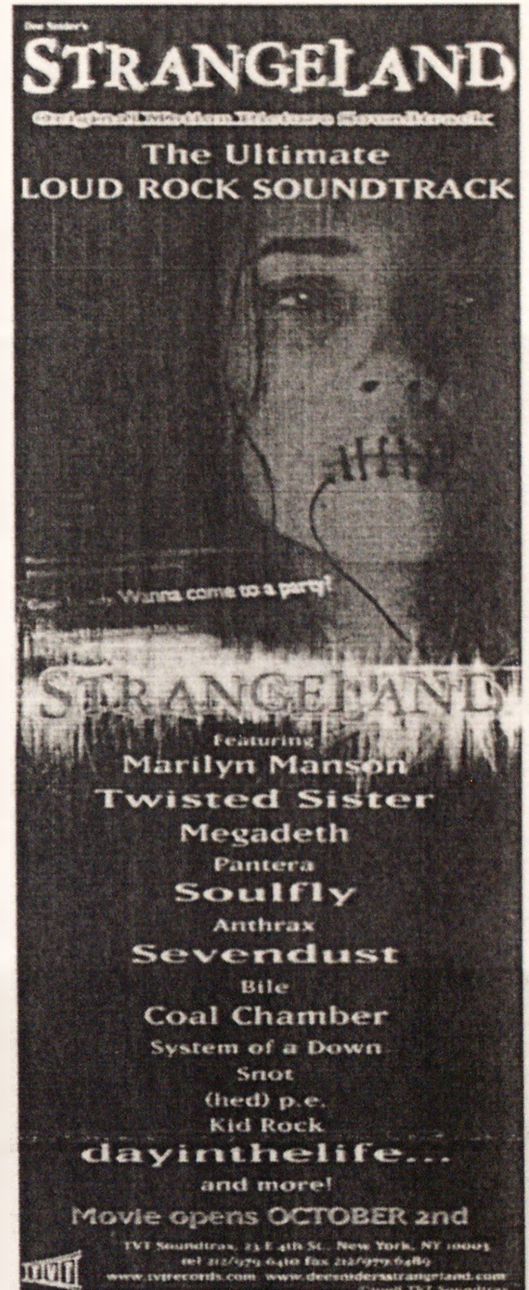


Figure 25



Figure 26

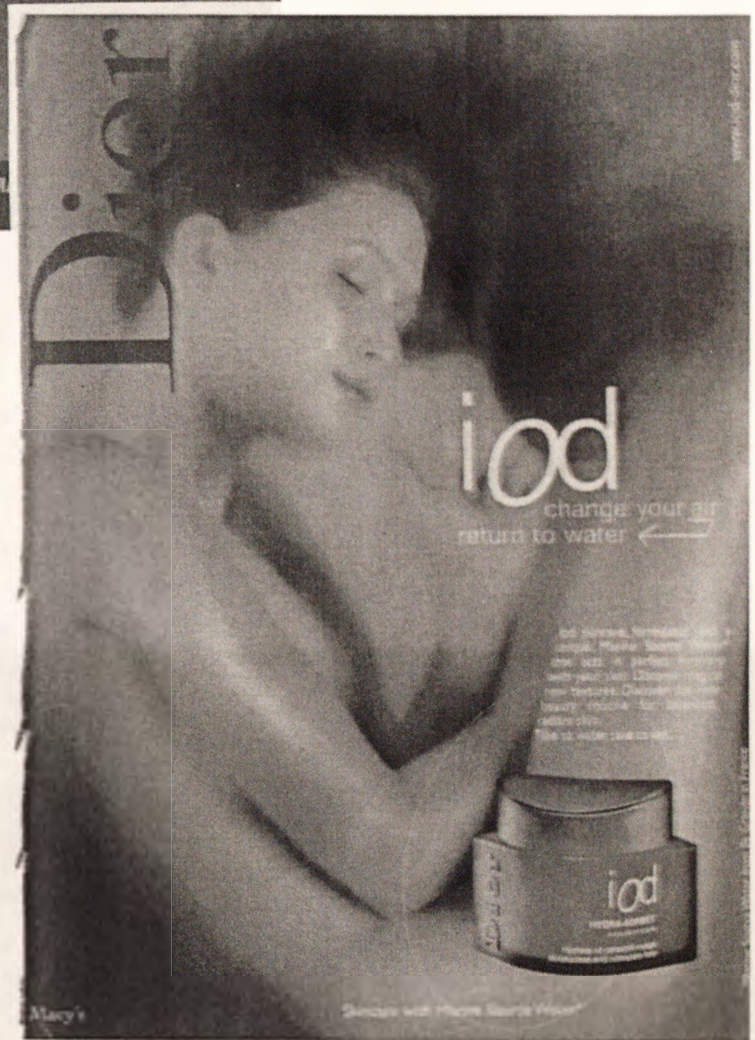




Figure 27

Figure 28



The new French Connection by Lily of France.
Once you've worn it you can never plead innocent.

Midnight lace. Morning-after satin. And lingerie so sexy it's meant for women who know that sometimes innocence is no virtue. Experience the French Connection and you'll discover the secret pleasures of French-inspired lingerie. Bras that give the illusion of a bonnet full of sumptuous color and revealing

lace. Panties cut higher on the thigh so you look leggy. And garter belts that do more than just hold up stockings.

Shimmering nylon in a line-up of exciting colors like champagne, rose, dusty rose, peach, ivory and red. Summer-ready bras \$8.50, garter belt \$6.00. Underwire front hook bra \$8.00. 1/2 cup \$9.00. Back \$4.50. Soft cup front hook bra \$6.00. 1/2 cup front hook bra \$5.00. Soft cup front hook bra with light fabric \$7.00.

LILY OF FRANCE
New York, NY • Los Angeles, CA • Chicago, IL • Dallas, TX • Atlanta, GA • Miami, FL • San Francisco, CA • San Diego, CA • Phoenix, AZ • Salt Lake City, UT • Denver, CO • Portland, OR • Seattle, WA • Minneapolis, MN • St. Paul, MN • Detroit, MI • Cleveland, OH • Columbus, OH • Indianapolis, IN • Louisville, KY • Memphis, TN • Nashville, TN • New Orleans, LA • Houston, TX • Phoenix, AZ • Salt Lake City, UT • Denver, CO • Portland, OR • Seattle, WA • Minneapolis, MN • St. Paul, MN • Detroit, MI • Cleveland, OH • Columbus, OH • Indianapolis, IN • Louisville, KY • Memphis, TN • Nashville, TN • New Orleans, LA • Houston, TX

Figure 29

Figure 30

Gentlemen Preter Flanes
LUXURY AND ELEGANCE

Figure 31

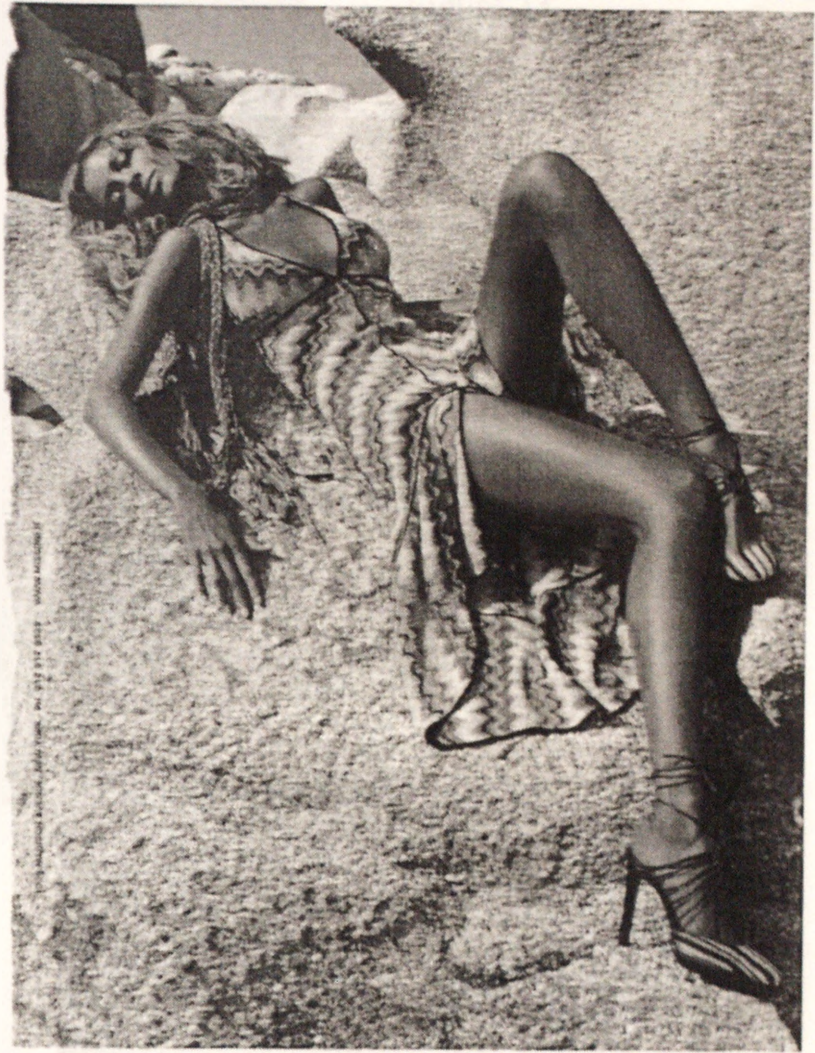


Figure 32

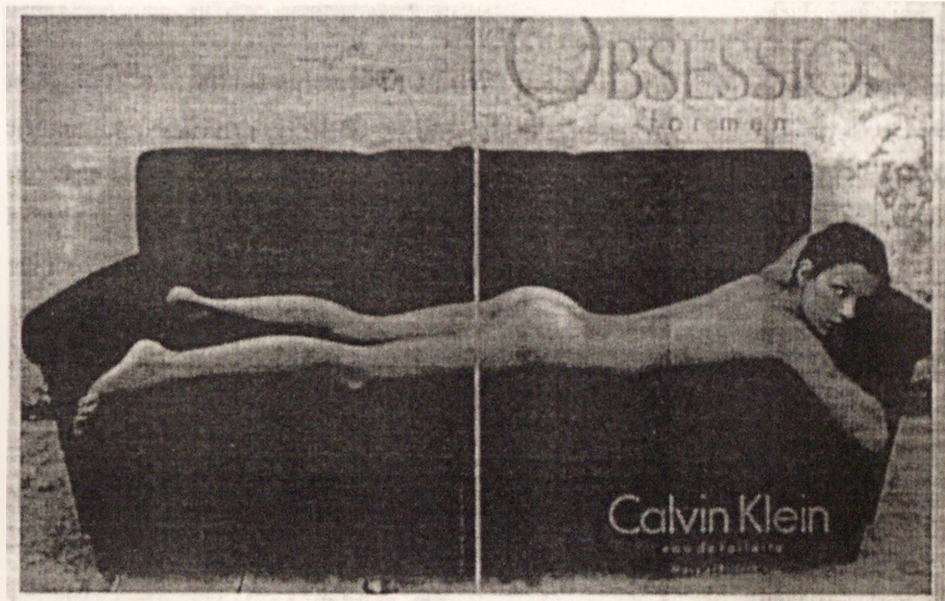




Figure 33

Figure 34

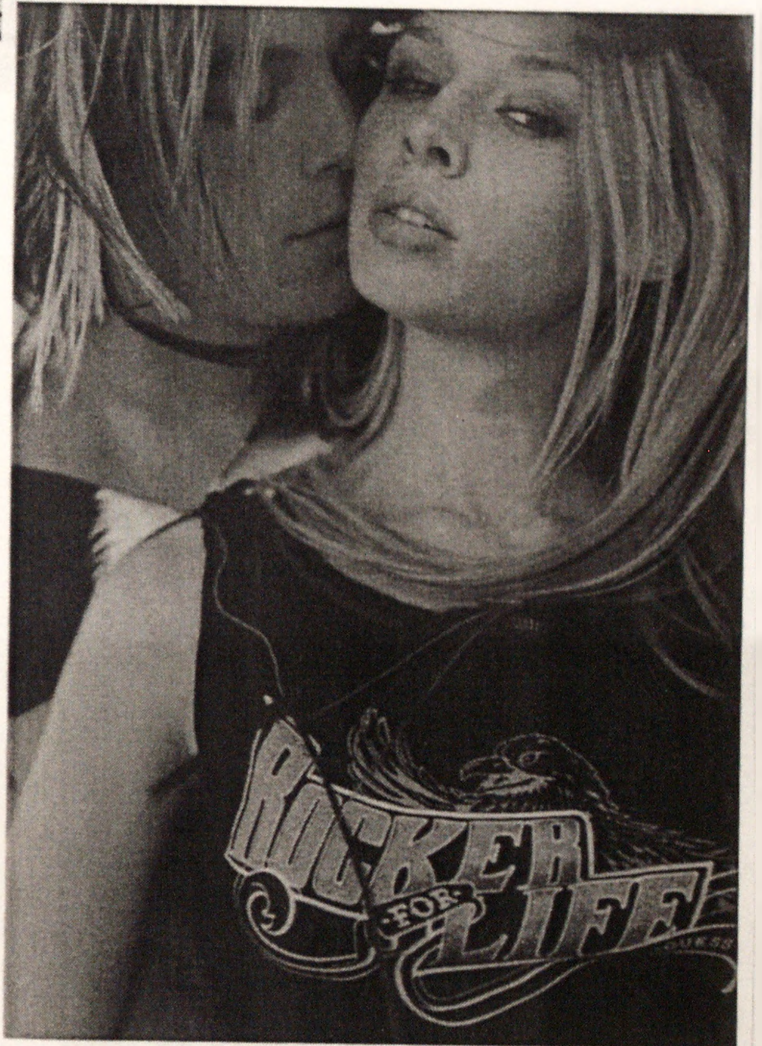




Figure 35

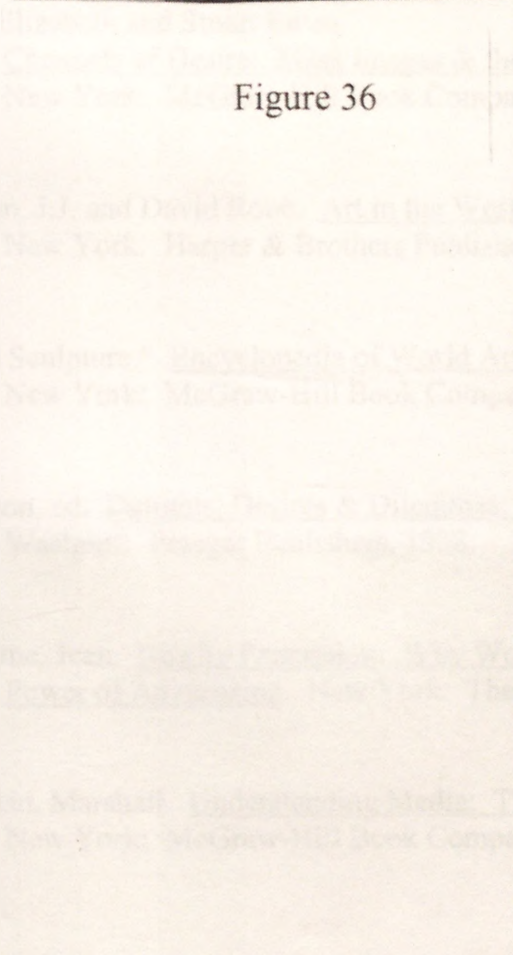


Figure 36



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