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Intro to Western Art II
Final Essay

Realism, High Renaissance and the Female Nude

Realism artists were undoubtedly influenced by High Renaissance artists, but not necessarily in technique. They were influenced to move beyond the High Renaissance artists and challenge the status quo. In the High Renaissance, we see artists portray the female nude exclusively through the guise of mythology or history. Three hundred years later, artists in the Realism movement are using similar styles and compositions as the High Renaissance artists. However, they are challenging the norms by asking, "When is it acceptable to portray a nude female figure?" We see this most specifically in the work of Titian and Edouard Manet.

Titian was an artist in the High Renaissance, a period which held ancient Greek and Roman art as the ideal. Titian is well known for his painting *Venus of Urbino*, which was painted in roughly 1538 in Italy. *Venus of Urbino* shows a nude woman reclined on a bed. The symbols in the piece indicate the painting is about marital love, rather than simply a painting of a nude woman. Servants are searching through a dowry chest in the background. The dog at the foot of the bed symbolizes fidelity. Through his technique with looser brush strokes, Titian achieves a glowing effect on Venus' body. He is emphasizing her other-worldliness, because anything otherwise would be unacceptable at the time.

In contrast, Edouard Manet painted a very similar scene in the Realism period. Realism was not defined by its stylistic similarities, but by its subject matter. Realism artists were concerned with challenging mainstream ideas, and nothing is more mainstream than High Renaissance art. In Manet's *Olympia*, he portrays a nude woman in a very similar composition to *Venus of Urbino*. They are both reclined in similar postures. However, *Olympia* is gazing directly at the viewer with a defiant look on her face, compared to Venus' rather alluring gaze. A cat is perched at the end of Olympia's feet, while a dog is sleeping at Venus' feet. And perhaps most importantly, Manet is indicating the subject of his painting is based on a sex worker, with signs of luxury. By doing this, Manet is directly confronting the hypocrisy of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. In Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, he is stating that a female nude is acceptable exclusively through the guise of mythology. Manet rejects that philosophy and presents an image that directly contradicts Titian's message.

The High Renaissance was considered a time of high intellectual achievement, with a focus on anatomical accuracy and decorum. Realism artists, some three hundred years later, sought to challenge those ideals, rather than simply emulate these artists. They were not satisfied by simply borrowing stylistic similarities from High Renaissance artists, but wanted to pose philosophical questions and point out hypocrisy. Early portrayals of the female nude influenced art many years later, but not exclusively in a stylistic manner. Realism artists are not simply attempting to imitate the

skill and influence of artists from the Renaissance period. But instead they are challenging the status quo, asking what is acceptable and what is hypocritical.