

John Berger writes:

The Judgement of Paris was another theme with the same inwritten idea of a man or men looking at naked women. But a further element is now added. The element of judgement. Paris awards the apple to the woman he finds most beautiful. Thus Beauty becomes competitive. (Today The Judgement of Paris has become the Beauty Contest.) Those who are not judged beautiful are *not beautiful*. Those who are, are given the prize. The prize is to be owned by a judge - that is to say to be available for him.¹

This comes in an untitled chapter dealing with representation of women in art. The thrust of Berger's argument is that the artistic nude is no different from the soft porn nude, existing to fulfil male voyeurism and desire for possession. He argues that all but a few of the hundreds of thousands of nudes in European painting were designed to appeal to sexuality of the man looking at the picture. The sexuality of the woman, he says, "needs to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he has the monopoly of such passion. Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own". If this is so, then Berger is right to single out *The Judgment of Paris* for special attention. The story reflects, in literary form, a point he makes about hypocrisy in painting:

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.²

The Judgment of Paris, a story originated by men (presumably), begins with a display of female vanity: the dispute of the three goddesses over their own beauty triggers the meeting with Paris, the bribery and the consequences. Then the characters of the goddesses are fleshed out with vindictiveness and conceit, so there is no way that Paris can make a safe decision, let alone a just one. The blame for it all falls on the goddesses.

Yet this particular story offers possibilities for the artist (who is not concerned with blame) to examine the relationships between sexuality and power. Ostensibly, as Berger suggests, Paris and the (male) viewers have the power of judgment over female beauty, but within the story's world, the real power lies with the goddesses. Indeed, in the aftermath - the conflict at Troy - these three goddesses were often responsible for the victories and defeats of men, by their direct divine intervention.

The divinity of the goddesses has been represented by artists in various ways. Cranach chose to make their figures luminescent, but also frail and waiflike. Ruben's infuses them

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, 1972, pp 51-52.

² *ibid.*

with vigour, but they are clearly on display, for us, as well as for Paris. Raphael's figures are powerful. They are naked in a naked world, and their gestures suggest at least equality with Paris³. But none of these represent the power of the goddesses over Paris to the extent that Watteau achieves.



Anton Watteau, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1720.

The iconographic elements are present in this picture as they are in Raphael, Cranach and Rubens. Paris sits on the lower left of the picture before the central form of Aphrodite. Athena is on the right, dressed already, and holding her shield. At the top of the picture, Hera retreats, accompanied by peacock. Hermes, Cupid, and Paris' dog appear, as usual. Having said all this, the picture is so different in composition from any that went before that it represents a special genius.

Aphrodite's power over Paris is rendered clearly in this painting. Paris almost cowers before the goddess, and his handing over of the apple is not the gesture of a judge conferring a

³ Medieval, Gothic and Renaissance art has many examples of male and female nudity where sexuality is not at issue, or where there is sexual equity.

prize but that of a supplicant making an offering. Hera and Athena see this too. Hera is already conceding, while Athena appears to be shielding herself against power of the winning goddess. But the situation is more complicated than this, for the nature of the power that Aphrodite has is explicitly sexual. All eyes are turned towards her as she disrobes (except for Hermes' - averted, of course). Yet all that is visible to the spectators in the picture is her lower half. Cupid ensures that Paris has a good view of Aphrodite's genitals, and that, apparently is enough to secure her victory. Paris looks sheepishly up at Aphrodite's hidden face, presumably having made his inspection, now perhaps ashamed, perhaps aroused - even that is ambiguous in this painting - but the other goddesses are clearly staring at what Cupid has exposed. We voyeurs (as Berger would have us) are denied sight of these contest-deciding attributes. But instead we are given another ambiguity. Athena's shield is so painted that the Gorgon's head appears like a reflection in a mirror: I might see that as my own reflection, transformed into a hideous form, perhaps because of my own prurient interest in Aphrodite. Or I might see it as a transformation of Aphrodite's reflection - a transformation that shows that beneath her appearance of beauty, there is ugliness too. This, then, is a remarkable painting, offering ambiguities aplenty, and telling a story of female sexual dominance, and, perhaps, male fear thereof.

Rubens' goddesses are, as I mentioned above, on display for Paris and for us. This is particularly true of the Prado Rubens, which I show again here.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1638

Of all the works we have considered, this one seems best to fit Berger's criteria for nudity designed to satisfy the male observer's lust and acquisitiveness. We might agree with the Infante Ferdinand, Governor of the Low Countries who wrote to his brother Philip IV to tell him that Rubens had finished this canvas, that it was generally held to be his finest work, and that it had a single flaw: "The three goddesses are too nude"⁴. The Infante may have said this on the grounds of decency, but Berger's argument is to do with power. The

⁴ Quoted by Damisch, *op cit*, p 276.

question is whether the nudes are arranged for our benefit to be "owned". The answer, I think is ambiguous. The goddesses *are* arranged for us, in a pattern that evokes the Three Graces. Thus there is an artistic decision based on our position outside the picture. But the sexual intent of the goddesses is directed within the picture. They are putting on a show, designed to appeal to Paris, and by his pose of rapt attention, they are clearly succeeding. At the instant of the picture, Paris sees Hera and Athena in profile, but Aphrodite face on. This was the case in the Raphael picture too, and there is here a hint of the direction of sexual power (shown much more forcibly in the Watteau) in the frontal relationship of Paris and Aphrodite. In other words, Rubens has made a choice to arrange the nudes for the sake of Paris and the story. They are not primarily displayed as sexual beings for us, but are observed in such a display to Paris.

In general the inter-relationships between nudity, sex and power in art are more complicated than suggested by Berger's general statements. We have just looked at two examples of nude sexuality, where the power relationship is not simply spectator/owner over woman/object. Of course, there are paintings to which Berger's comments do apply:



Bouguereau, *Nymphaeum*

But examples like this come from a relatively short period in art history in the nineteenth century. Indeed, they probably represent the final era of the nude as an important art form. Manet's *Le Dejeuner su l'herbe* challenged the power relationships inherent in this kind of art, as did his other famous picture of a nude woman assessing the viewer with a level, defiant, gaze:



Manet *Olympia*

After photography and *Olympia*, the nude fell out of artistic favour. Male lust and acquisitiveness could now be satisfied through high-fidelity mass production. Manet's challenges to the conventionalized nudes of the academy undermined naked figure painting as a serious endeavor. In our day, pornography is widely available. (Only soft-core porn has antecedents in mainstream Western art; hard-core was underground in the West, but not in the East.) The power relationships implicit in downloading photos of naked models are different from those of a single owner of a nude painting. Nudity in fine art is relatively rare, and often desexed. Finally, we have post-modern non-nudity in pastiches like Charles Bell's. Who can say what these tell us about sex and power at the end of the 20th century?



Charles Bell, *The Judgment of Paris*