

Eros in Modern Art

An involvement with all forms and facets of eros – love, passion and lust, desire and sexual union – was and still is one of the most crucial impulses behind the creation of art.

The Fondation Beyeler is devoting a comprehensive two-part exhibition to eros, a theme that has held a prominent place in the history of art. We concentrate especially on works by artists who relied on eros as the essential motive force behind their creative activity.

After the first exhibition focused on the two pioneers of modernism Auguste Rodin and Pablo Picasso, the second, *Eros in Modern Art*, will be a larger overview comprising over 250 works. Various approaches to and developments in erotic art from the early modern period, through the twentieth century, and down to our own day will be presented.

The eroticism in these works ranges from the straightforward and drastic to evocations whose meaning becomes clear only upon a deeper involvement with the artist's oeuvre. Nearly every medium employed in modern and contemporary art is represented in the show: painting and sculpture, video and film, as well as graphic art, drawing and photography.

Based on an idea of Ernst Beyeler's, the exhibition was conceived in collaboration with the BA-CA Kunstforum, Vienna.

■ *This symbol in the exhibition refers to works discussed in the notes below. On each work it is accompanied by a number that corresponds to the number of the note (e.g., ■ 8).*

1 • Paul Cézanne, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, c. 1875–1877
Cézanne tells the story of the Temptation of St. Anthony in a highly idiosyncratic way, both in terms of form and content. A nude woman, confident of triumph, reclines in front of a blue and white cloth (the canvas), as if to say, Here I am, St. Cézanne, paint me! St. Anthony falls to his knees, averting his eyes, resisting the woman (a naked Madonna in her gloriole?) and her infant angels. The radiant light emitted by the nude, unseen by the saint, falls on a bare skull – apparently to the chagrin of the red, horned devil. Like St. Anthony, Cézanne refused to succumb to female beauty – he would never paint a “beautiful,” pleasing nude in his life – but held fast to the beauty and truth of the painted image.

2 • Félicien Rops, *Pornokratès*, 1878
The Belgian painter and graphic artist Félicien Rops is known primarily for his etchings and ink drawings, especially for his erotically decadent individual depictions and series. Rops illustrated works of the Symbolists and *Les Épaves* by Baudelaire, whom he knew personally. He was considered the painter of “perverse” and “diabolical” females, a role in which he charmed contemporary audiences, especially in his illustrations for Joséphin Péladan's *Vice suprême* (The Extreme Vice) and Jules Barbey d'Aureville's *Diaboliques* (The Diabolical Ones). *Pornokratès* is Rops's best-known work. It depicts a courtesan, apparently omnipotent, striding through the modern world, leading a pig. She proudly tramples down the classical arts – sculpture, music, poetry and painting.

3 • Edouard Manet, *La Toilette*, c. 1879
In 1863, Manet painted two scandalous pictures: *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*. In the former he translated a gathering of ancient river gods into a bourgeois picnic; in the latter he transformed Titian's *Venus of Urbino* into a prostitute gazing saucily out of the picture and drawing the viewer near the edge of the bed. The same close-up feeling is engendered by the pastel on view, *La Toilette*. Yet in this late work, Manet strikes a quite different tone. In delicate pastel hues – filling the entire picture yet hardly tangible – he depicts a young, anonymous woman from the back. The diaphanous light blue, pinks and yellows are

defined by vague contour lines. The soft landscape of the body recalls pastel studies by Degas, which may well have inspired Manet to this female nude.

4 • Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Le Moderne Jugement de Pâris*, 1894

Toulouse-Lautrec's great theme was the human dignity that exists on the shady fringes of big-city life. Occasionally he tended to sarcasm and caricature, as in the present depiction, a demimonde version of the Judgment of Paris. In Greek mythology, the youthful hero Paris – in an episode preceding the Trojan War – had to choose among three goddesses, and decided on the goddess of love. But how does Toulouse-Lautrec tell this story? A top-hated, would-be gentleman who has seen better days, gnawing on his walking stick, peruses three very different prostitutes who proffer their charms in an attempt to gain his attention. By turning a mythological scene into a grotesque display, the artist reveals all the sadness and shabbiness of an unjustly mystified underworld.

5 • Edgar Degas, *Le Petit Déjeuner après le bain (Le Bain)*, c. 1895–1898

Degas never left his female figures up in the air, as would a snapshot that freezes a figure balanced on one leg. His compositions lead beyond the moment. It is his artistic skills – precise composition, distribution of emphases and intervals, excerpting, flow of line, and spectacular coloration – that make this woman appear veritably to climb out of her tub. The appeal of this superb pastel lies not so much in the lovely figure depicted as in the simple and yet complex course our eye traces through every element in the picture – from a bath in the tub to breakfast. Prior to Degas, no artist saw or rendered the female body quite like this. Here a scene is not developed out of the subject; the scene itself becomes the subject of a painting.

6 • Fernand Khnopff, *Des Caresses (or L'Art)*, 1896
A major work of the Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff, *Des Caresses* is also one of the most significant examples of Symbolist art and embodies fin-de-siècle painting in a magnificent way. In fact, its symbolically charged motif is extremely hermetic and enigmatic, and remains open to highly diverse interpretations. Khnopff himself described the picture as an allegory of a man faced with the decision between power and pleasure. The leopard-like sphinx lies tenderly beside the androgynous figure next to her, yet her embrace signals danger. Has the man tamed the animal, or fallen under the seductive sphinx's spell? It is just this ambivalence in the figures and gestures that lends this image its erotic fascination and magnetism.

7 • Pierre Bonnard, *L'Homme et la femme*, 1900
Bonnard was not only a superb colorist but a master in the evocation of psychological nuances. The situation depicted here is basically unspectacular: a man and a woman, she naked and crouching on a bed, staring in front of herself; he standing next to her, almost entirely undressed and apparently just slipping out of his shirt. His facial expression is neutral, but perhaps more concerned than happy. Although the two are separated from each other by a kind of screen, they obviously represent a couple. Was the picture meant to be a bordello scene? Although the answer is uncertain, the impression of estrangement between man and woman is definitely there. Might Bonnard have succeeded in evoking the sudden sense of shame that can arise in face of the other's nakedness when two people become intimate for the first time?

8 • Franz von Stuck, *Susanna im Bade*, 1904
Von Stuck, the major representative of Munich Jugendstil and founding member of the Munich Secession, was very partial to erotic subjects. His *Susanna im Bade* tells an ancient story from the biblical Apocrypha, painted a thousand times before, with a surprising new twist. There are the two old men hoping to sur-

prise the young lady in her bath and obtain a glimpse of her, as she seems to be on the lookout for voyeurs. The artist leaves no doubt that we, the picture's viewers, are the ones who have the privilege of gazing at her lovely body. Unashamedly, as long as we wish and the water continues to flow. The blue cloth she holds up is like a canvas on which Susanna, with an Ingresque swing of her hips, appears as a delightful picture within the picture.

9 • Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Frauenakt (Dodo)*, 1909

"Everyone belongs with us," emphatically stated the program of the Expressionist artists group "Die Brücke", "who directly and unadulteratedly depicts that which urges him to create." It goes almost without saying that eros was foremost among such urges. Unlike the "Fauves" in France, whose rebellion was largely limited to their palette, the "Brücke" artists led an unconventional lifestyle, and pursued their ideals of liberty both out of doors and in the studio. The strong emotional presence of Kirchner's close-up view of a female nude – likely representing his girlfriend Dodo – shows the degree to which art and erotic appeal can be reciprocally related.

10 • Egon Schiele, *Zwei sich umarmende Frauen*, 1911

Viewers today might find it hard to understand why Schiele's contemporaries reacted to drawings like *Zwei sich umarmende Frauen* with accusations of "pornography" and "obscenity." Depictions of masturbation and homoerotic love ran counter to the morals of the day, despite the fact that human sexuality had long since become one of the prime subjects of science, especially medicine and psychoanalysis. Schiele, however, broke with the accepted manner of such depictions. His guidelines were not superficial beauty or verisimilitude. To him, even pale, thin, emaciated bodies held an aesthetic and erotic appeal. Isolated, excerpted, and sometimes viewed from a very high vantage point, Schiele's female protagonists gaze frankly out at the viewer, entirely aware of their pose, obviating any clearly defined relationship between voyeur and model.

11 • Gustav Klimt, *Sitzende Frau mit gespreizten Schenkeln*, 1916/17

The art of Gustav Klimt, famous as the painter of lovely society ladies in fin-de-siècle Vienna, possesses a "scandalous" side in the form of his drawing oeuvre. Over 4000 explicitly erotic drawings, which the artist did not intend for sale, have survived. While in Degas's drawings of women at their toilette, the context permitted and perhaps legitimated a display of female nudity, Klimt lifted his figures entirely out of their surroundings, as seen in *Sitzende Frau mit gespreizten Schenkeln*. Apart from the aesthetic charm of his masterly, relaxed line, he defied conventions by revealing the female sexuality – even though caught by the artist's eye and sanctioned by the male viewer's pleasure. Seemingly oblivious to the world around them, Klimt's models present themselves with eyes closed, unselfconsciously, never losing their aplomb – in a word, literally without shame.

12 • Amedeo Modigliani, *Jeune Fille en chemise*, 1918

Here Modigliani does not depict a nude in the strict sense. Unlike his famous, simplified yet sensuous nudes, who often stretch lasciviously across the entire picture, this is a half-figure of a veritably ethereal seated girl, clad in a chemise. Inclining her head, her limpid gaze directed into the distance, she conceals her left breast with her right hand and holds her left hand in her lap, a gesture reminiscent of a *Venus pudica*. Deprived of individuality and depicted in reduced forms, the model has the look of a delicate, naive child-woman in a mature, sensually full body. This results in the classical erotic tension between innocence and sensuality, revealing and concealing, in an atmosphere of virtually dreamlike weightlessness.

13 • Man Ray, *Retour à la raison*, 1923

In addition to painting and film, Man Ray, an American in Paris, devoted himself to photography throughout his career. As a mem-

ber of the Dada group, he playfully experimented with the medium's potentials. He employed new techniques such as "solarization" (as in *Swana* and *Jacqueline Goddard*), strategies of formal composition, and the alienation of subject matter by means of excerpting or close-ups, to produce highly innovative visual impressions. The erotic appeal of his models – often companions and lovers – was augmented by an aspect of mystery and unreality entirely in keeping with the Surrealists' interest in the phenomena of desire and dream. This is seen here in the pattern of shadows flowing over and as if embracing the torso, transforming a fragment of flesh and blood into an epiphany.

14 • Salvador Dalí, *Le Grand Masturbateur*, 1929

Created under the impression of Dalí's first encounter with his future wife, Gala, this painting may be seen as a mirror of the artist's sexual longings and complexes. The figure of the masturbator consists of a huge face, nose to the ground and single eye shut. At the height of the missing mouth appears a giant locust whose phallic body is being attacked by a swarm of ants. Out of the face emerges the bust of a woman whose mouth approaches the genitals of a male torso. The "great masturbator" has a hybrid form, a sphinx-like figure that unites elements of the male and female sexes. Like a dream image arisen from the unconscious mind, the composite figure embodies an ideal of Surrealism par excellence.

15 • Alberto Giacometti, *Femme éborgnée*, 1932

Giacometti's bronze sculpture *Femme éborgnée* is surely one of his most disturbing works. It confronts us with what looks like an insect, or the skeleton and jagged carapace of some unknown creature. A human woman? At any rate, a victim who seems to rise one last time and strike back at her murderer. A nightmare like that described by the artist in 1946 in his gripping text *Le rêve, le sphinx et la mort de T.*: "... loudly screaming I begged them to kill the monster. Someone I had not yet noticed crushed it with a long stick or shovel, striking it with violent, swinging strokes, and with averted eyes I heard the carapace break and the terrible sound of innards being crushed."

16 • Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (various works), from 1934 on
Hans Bellmer, a Franco-German draftsman, graphic artist, object artist, photographer, and writer, created a lifesize, naked doll, an "artificial girl," in 1933-34. It would subsequently dominate his entire oeuvre. In the present exhibition the doll occurs in photographs, drawings, and sculptures, in every conceivable and inconceivable distorted and mutilated form. The obsessive display of this alienated, sensually tactile figure has a confusing, deeply disquieting effect. Bellmer evokes horrifying images and situations by means of a familiar nursery toy. Over thirty years after his death, the artist's oeuvre still remains difficult, controversial, and disturbing, but it is also gripping and highly suggestive, as the Cindy Sherman photograph on display here shows.

17 • André Masson, *Gradiva*, 1939

If artists around the turn of the twentieth century frequently chose mythological themes as veils for erotic subject matter, a Surrealist like André Masson had a different motivation for turning to a literary source. "Gradiva", the key figure in a 1903 novella of that name by Wilhelm Jensen, was initially a fictitious woman who found a correspondence in a real person and sparked the male protagonist's obsessive desire. According to Sigmund Freud's influential interpretation of the novella, Gradiva represented a mediator between the real and the unreal, or the dream, a role in which she became an ideal and muse of the Surrealists. In Masson's painting she appears as a massive reclining figure composed both of flesh and stone, accompanied by ambiguous visual quotes from the literary source, such as the erupting volcano, symbol both of male sexuality and oppression.

18 • Max Ernst, *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, 1941

Ernst's painting, done during the Second World War, can surely

be read, among other things, as a political statement against dictatorship. Working in the “jungle style” of that period, the artist has brought algae-like figures out of the intermingling veils of paint, from one of which a nude female figure seems to emerge. The landscape is set off by a quite conventionally rendered passage of blue sky, which creates an illusion of depth. The pose of the figure on the left recalls depictions of Napoleon. The emperor, as if overgrown with moss and algae, has apparently gone astray, a wilderness being no place for a Napoleon. Might he have been tempted here by the lovely woman, like the water nymph of Loreley, never to find his way back out of the jungle? Or might the beautiful figure be a symbol of the humane, female principle that survives every dictatorship and takes tyranny ad absurdum?

19 • Yves Klein, *ANT 110*, 1960

Yves Klein, who died in 1962 at the age of only thirty-four, produced an extraordinary oeuvre in the eight years of his career. His concentration on a few essential colors, especially the ultramarine blue that became his trademark, his performances, and the metaphysical meaning of his works, continue to fascinate the art world even today. The images on view here resulted from Klein’s famous body performances. After applying blue paint to nude models, he had them “paint pictures” by leaving impressions of their bodies on paper, creating images of a highly individual eroticism.

20 • David Hockney, *Two Boys in a Pool, Hollywood*, 1965

David Hockney’s painting tells a tender story in sparing terms. It apparently began with two boys stepping into the water, using the chrome handrails in the foreground. Water? It looks more as if the two nude men had strayed into the blue loops of some *Hourloupe* painting by Jean Dubuffet. In the meantime they have reached the far end of the pool, and exchange a glance. The looping ripples seem to have brought them closer together as they prepare to leave the pool for the chaise longue – so narrow that they will have to lie on top of one another. Or will they prefer the lawn? It looks soft enough... but let us leave them to go on with their love story undisturbed.

21 • Robert Indiana, *LOVE (Red/Blue/Green)*, 1966/1998

In 1966, Indiana depicted the word “LOVE” in a painting. A short time later, he created a sculpture consisting of the four letters, stacked in twos, turning the word “LOVE” – central as much to Christianity as to the Flower Power movement – into an object. This work is one of the few in the present exhibition (another is Jenny Holzer’s *Arno*) that addresses the world of eros in a literally verbal formal language. The use of typography in works of art has an interesting history. While the Cubists enriched their paintings with a symbolic category of reality in the form of newspaper clippings, the monumental letters and numbers Jasper Johns began painting in the 1950s became the true – if silent – messages of his art. With Indiana, language began to speak with the tongues of angels once again.

22 • Tom Wesselmann, *Great American Nude # 87*, 1967

In art history, the reclining nude is the quintessential mode for the erotic depiction of the female body, be it in Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, Goya’s *Naked Maja*, or Manet’s *Olympia*. Wesselmann’s *Great American Nudes*, among the icons of Pop Art, belong to this tradition. These large-scale female figures have the appearance of standardized templates of a desirable body. Explicit female sexual traits are emphasized, even sometimes isolated as the principal motif – red lips, erect nipples, or dilated vulvas take on the character of objects or fetishes. Sex as a commodity, depicted on a monumental scale, as in a billboard. Some art critics have described the *Great American Nudes* as embodiments of the sexist male view of women. For the artist himself, they represented dream images of femininity, and at the same time signs of the frank approach to sexuality that emerged in the U.S. in the 1960s.

23 • Louise Bourgeois, *Fillette (Sweeter Version)*, 1968/1999

The title of this powerful phallic sculpture itself evokes a paradoxical merger of word and object. What does a sixty-centimeter-long erect latex penis with its dark, rubbery skin have to do with a little girl (the French *Fillette*)? The work reflects the impulse behind Bourgeois’s art to investigate the phenomenon of sexual polarity and lend it a form that expresses masculine/feminine opposition. For instance, the two large spheres flanking the penis shape might be read as testicles, breasts, or as the receptive female genitals. By the way, the effect of the oversized penis was undermined by the ninety-year-old artist herself, when – in allusion to Freud’s notion that every woman strives to give birth to a penis of her own – she appeared with it under her arm, ironically smiling, for a photo session with Robert Mapplethorpe (this picture is also on display in the exhibition).

24 • Robert Mapplethorpe, *Christopher Holly*, 1981

In the late 1970s, Mapplethorpe transcended the final barriers in the photography of the male nude by depicting previously tabooed motifs on a high aesthetic level. Many of his photographs frankly reflect Mapplethorpe’s own homosexuality, indeed making it a basic theme of his art. In *Christopher Holly*, too, the photographer’s homoerotic eye for the male body becomes apparent from the model’s pose, reclining, with an erection. The horizontal torso, set in a perfect play of light and shade, emphasizes the male body’s sculptural beauty without denying its sexual attraction. Mapplethorpe’s male nudes represent gay ideals and fantasies, and even when the subjects approach the obscene, their aesthetic quality insures that dignity is retained.

25 • Bruce Nauman, *Masturbating Woman*, 1985

Animated neon signs are a ubiquitous feature of nighttime advertising. Nauman’s work automatically puts us in mind of Times Square, likely making us overlook what the sequence of movements actually represents. Instead of trying to sell us something, they depict a highly private situation – a woman masturbating. An intimate activity, described in light, is brought into the public domain. Nauman, a major American artist, has frequently given kinetic, illuminated form to hardly utterable episodes of this kind. So what do we actually see here? Not advertising, certainly. A sculpture? Or possibly a kind of sculptural, very short narrative film of the “Neon Vague”?

26 • Jeff Koons, *Woman in Tub*, 1988

The seductive yet disturbing art of Koons, one of the most significant and controversial contemporary American artists, may seem light-handed, yet it reflects on the conditions and history of modern and post-modern art and immediately addresses the viewer’s perception. One of Koons’ favorite materials is porcelain, which to him embodies luxury and mundanity, tradition and innovation in one. About the figure on view here, whose erotic appeal oscillates between naivety and violence, he once noted: “*Woman in Tub* was based on a postcard. This was part of my total vocabulary on *Banality*. It was to show the interface between the Victim and the Victimizer. There’s the snorkel and somebody is doing something to her under the water because she’s grabbing her breast for protection. But the viewer also wants to participate and victimize her.”

27 • Rebecca Horn, *Bett der Liebhaber*, 1990

We are confronted by an empty metal bed with beautiful blue butterflies hovering over it. Suddenly they begin to move their wings, evoking the dreamlike presence of delight even in the void. The butterflies relate to the figure of old Serafina in Horn’s 1998 film *Buster’s Bedroom* (see the film sequence on the wall). In an insane asylum, Serafina was visited by butterflies that reminded her of her dead lovers. In the installation itself, this film sequence, associated with certain actors (Valentina Cortese and Donald Sutherland), is shifted onto a different time plane where everything accidental and transitory has vanished. The old woman is gone, and the machinery, in a

ballet of memory, celebrates only the souls of the deceased lovers, fluttering around the empty bed in the guise of butterflies.

28 • Lucian Freud, *Woman Holding her Thumb*, 1992

In the days of omnipresent computer-manipulated and perfectly retouched images, Lucian Freud's paintings have a compelling immediacy. His portraits concentrate less on facial features than on the naked bodies of his models, their authenticity deriving from an intense, uncompromising observation in which physical exposure is combined with mental reserve. Freud's treatment of the incarnadine, or skin, with its range of gradations of pink, yellow, gray, and even blue, stands in the tradition of Old Masters like Rubens and Titian, while also recalling Francis Bacon. The well-nigh oppressive physical presence of the figures in all their imperfection conveys a flesh-and-blood aliveness that evokes states between pleasurable relaxation and complete fatigue, making the viewer privy to intimate moments.

29 • Pipilotti Rist, *Pickelporno (Pimple Porno)*, 1992

This video, made all of fourteen years ago, shows the following in full swing: a controlled flux of images, colors, effects, and sounds; a superb and ebullient artistic talent; and, last but not least, a couple making love. Like other of Rist's major works, it indicates that art can be fun, moving, absolutely unelitist, highly complex, radical, delightful, humorous, and irresistible at one and the same time. Does this still hold five years after 9/11? The answer is definitely yes. Rist's masterpiece has effortlessly survived that zero hour of a new era, a criminal act staged largely for television. Today *Pimple Porno* represents a wonderful manifesto for eros – and proves that art still remains one of the best means of communicating this special and exciting state of life.

30 • Marlene Dumas, *Snow Flake*, 1996

Dumas's imagery is compellingly straightforward. Her faces and figures, female, male and children's, make an immediate appeal to the viewer's emotions. Like many of her works, *Snow Flake* is based on a photograph, whose original motif has been transformed by means of watercolor, ink and oil crayon into a new, highly nuanced black-and-white composition. The softly contoured figure takes on a sensual life of its own. Dumas's prime concern is to create aesthetic imagery that challenges the schematization of the female figure by photography and the voyeuristic visual media. Since the paper does not absorb the paint, the surface takes on a tangible, skin-like look – a "somatization" that continually calls the dialectic of seeing and being seen into question.

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