

# Body and nudity in western art: The female nude or the desire to possess

**Speak Out Paris – 18 Sept 2023 – Ilse Ghekiere & Petra Van Brabandt –  
Engagement Arts**

# Body and nudity

- In the creation process, in working relations, in education relations: norms and the risks embedded in power relations
- **In representation**
  - deeply related

# Body and nudity: representation matters

Revisiting art history: **the female nude** is at the heart of western representation of body and nudity, it is the paradigm of western representation of body and nudity

→ how is this body and its nudity structured in western art

→ how it is a symptom of and reproduces

- how we look at and value bodies,
- gendered expectations and norms,
- power relations and abuse

→ and it is still dominant today

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

Martha Nussbaum, *Objectification* (1995)

Anne Eaton, *What's wrong with the female  
nude (if anything)* (2012)

Zoey Lavalley, *What's wrong with the white  
female nude* (2017)

Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade goes west*  
(2000)

# The female nude in western art

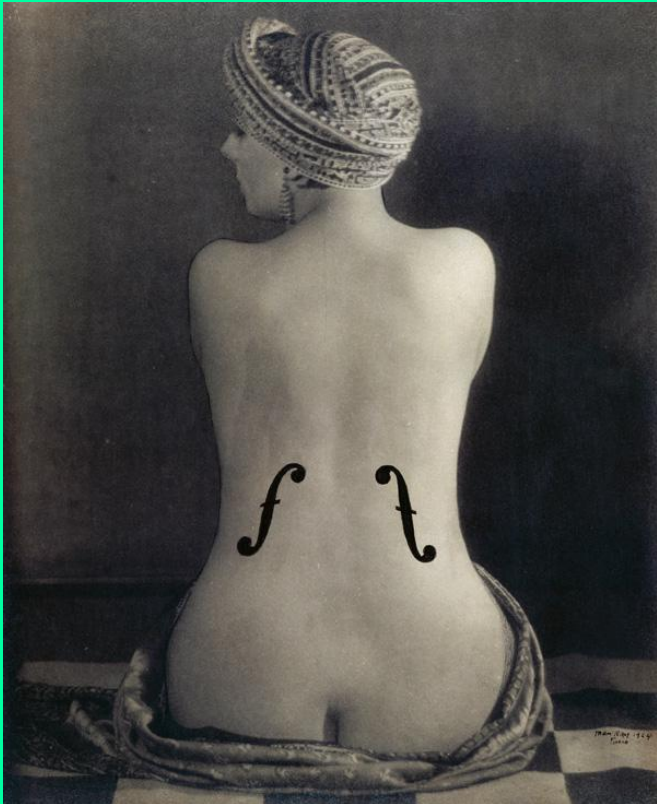
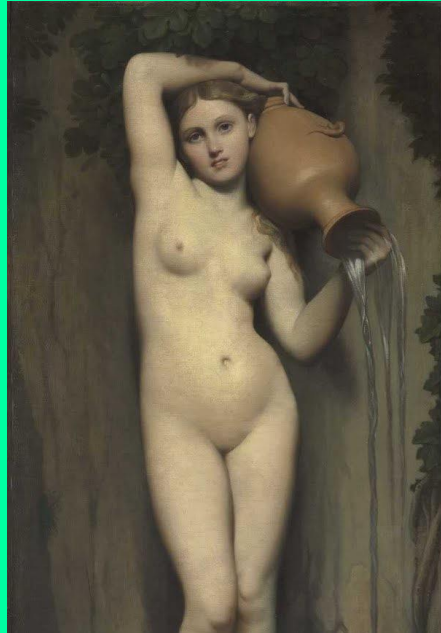
> Nude? Suggestion of nudity / erogenous body parts



***Look at me!***

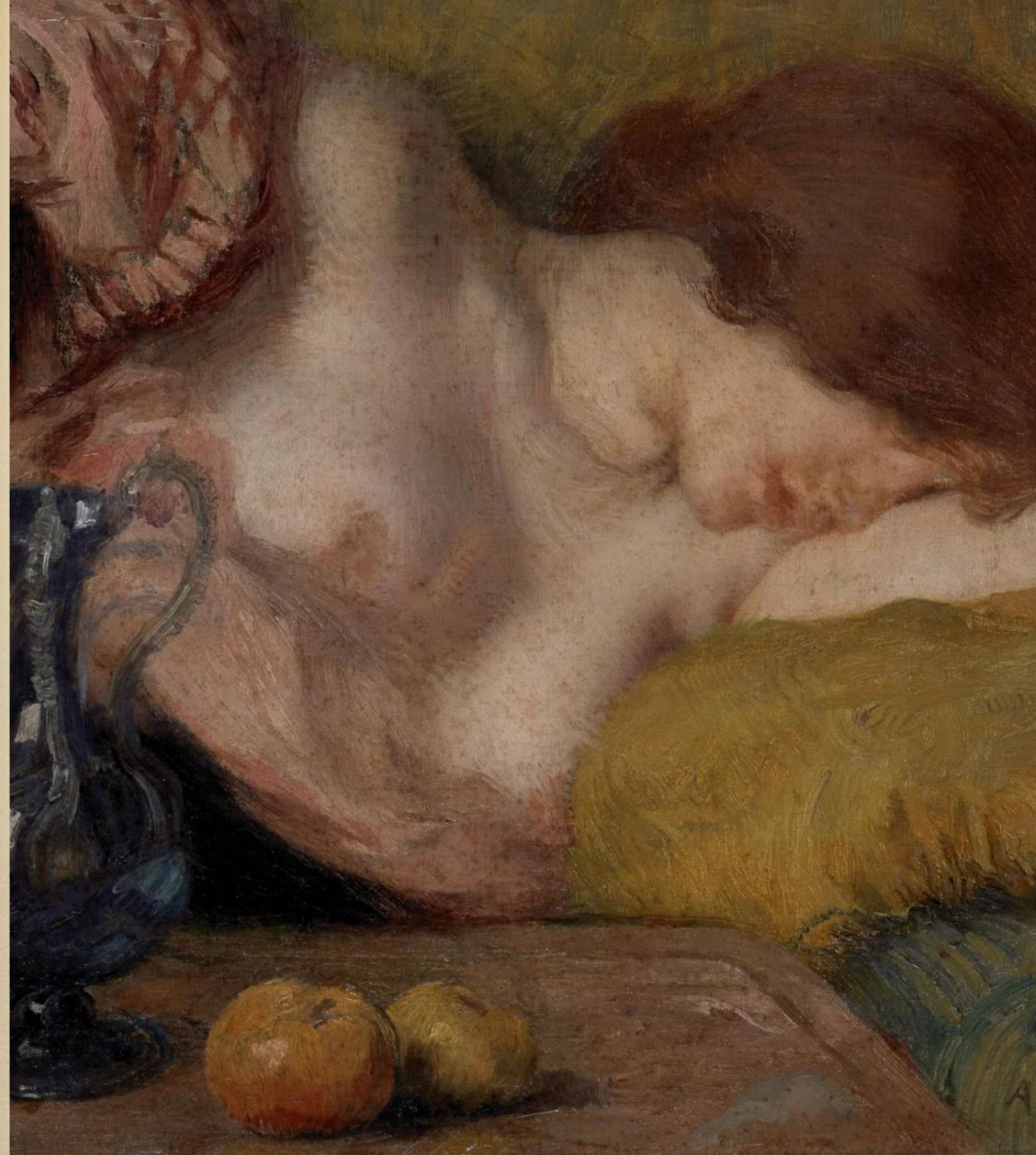
The female body is structured in the image/ the scene as a spectacle to look at.

Artistic strategies to make a body into a  
sight to look at / an object / an erotic  
object  
(Anne Eaton)



Visual metaphor



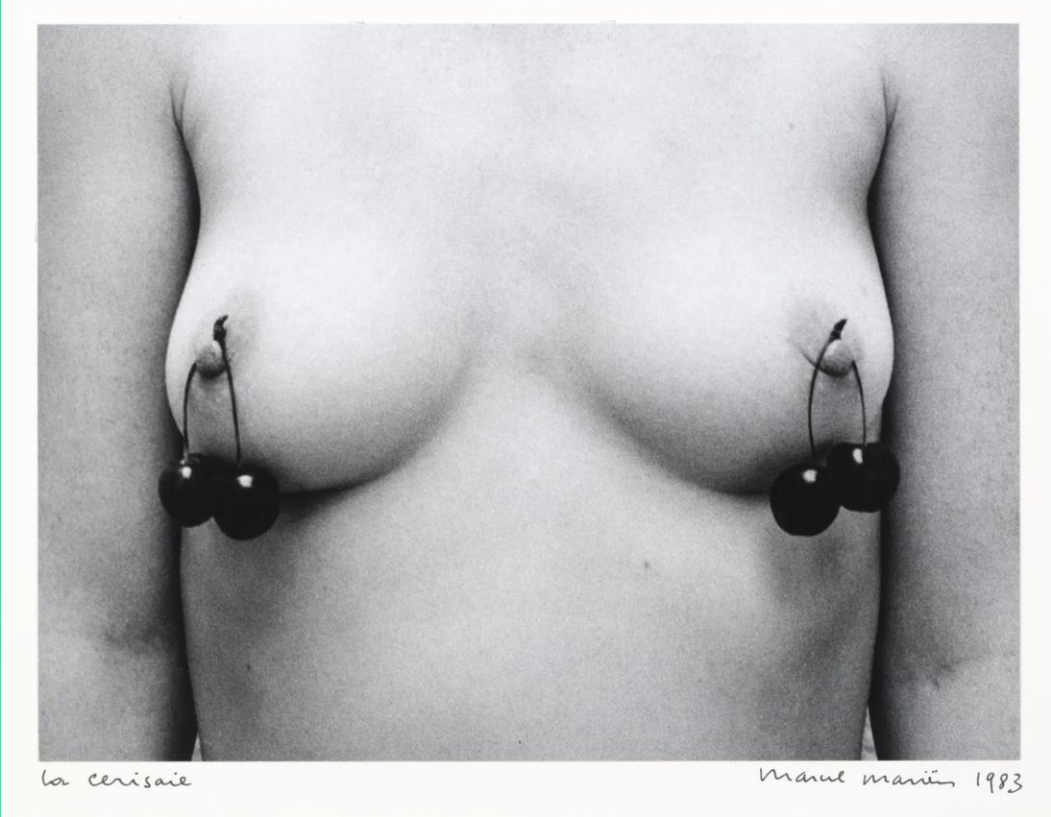




Focus  
erogenous  
body parts



Cutting bodies, heads  
or limbs





Longuet



Generic bodies



Self-discipline



## Mirror?

Symbol indicating that women should above all be treated as objects to look at; it tells women that they should always watch themselves (John Berger).





Gratuitous nudity





Abandon, surrender



Eroticizing passivity



Erotizing violence







The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even.  
Marcel Duchamp & Hannah Wilke

# **In western art Women are reduced to erotic objects**

- (1) object (a sight to look at)
- (2) passive (an object that doesn't resist my desire)
- (3) accessible (an object to take, to possess)
- (4) Strong relation between eroticism and violence: violence against women is exciting

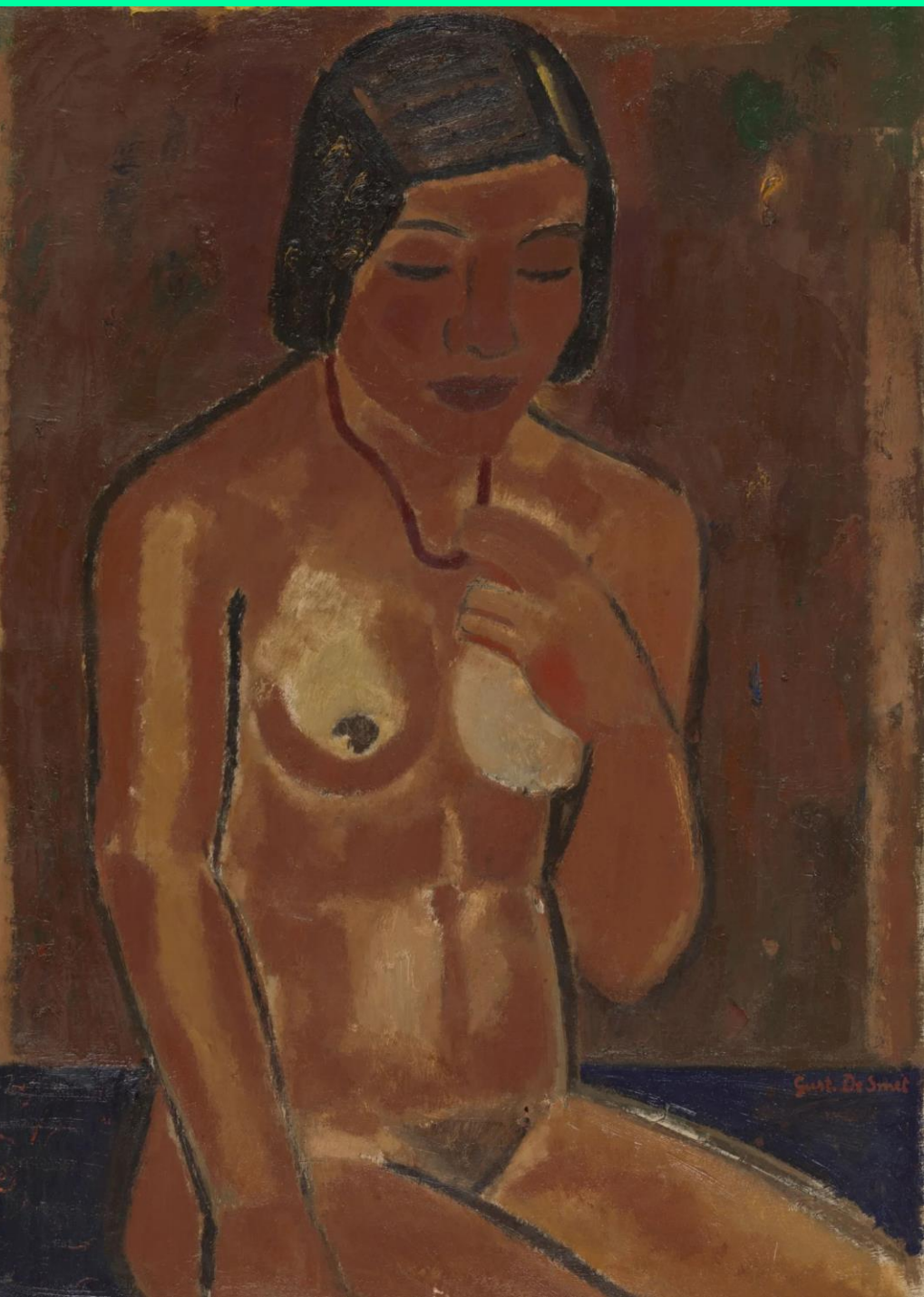


# The western female nude is constructed by the male gaze

The female nude is visually structured as such that it evokes in the viewer (every viewer) a possessive desire (patriarchal and colonial gaze)

# Female nude: beauty as a cover for violence - Michel Regis on western art as the art of rape

Western art only knows how to talk about sex in one mode: violence. It would be better to say: rape. The sexual obsession of Western art is rape. (...) The horror of the discourse is inversely proportional to the refinement of the form. We remain amazed by the ability of artists to brilliantly defend such a violent argument. And so tenacious: from the Renaissance to modern times, this impulsive iconography has persevered without profound alteration. With no doubt they will say I exaggerate. They are wrong. Habit tricks us. That's where the terrorism of works of art lies: in this practice of intimidation that reduces us, through discourse, knowledge and ecstasy (history, museums, heritage, everything that still weaves the religion of art), to the Pavlovian reflex of a selective gaze that ends up seeing 'beauty'. It desires nothing more than blissful ignorance." (my translation, 2002, 84-97).



# Myth

The female nude in western art is celebrating the beauty of women

# Female nude: beauty as a cover for violence

Fatema Mernissi, Sheherazade  
goes West (2000)

## **The West: harem of time**

Women are imprisoned in the ideal of beauty, defined as eternal youth, her body should not show signs of traces of living, time passing: no signs of aging, exhaustion, scars, sagging...

Radical passivity: no engagement in time (subject)



In the Western art tradition, passive, objectified female nudes predominate, while passive male nudes or active female nudes are virtually non-existent. This has a major impact on the way we see women, and women see themselves.

## **How are men represented in western art?**

Physical, sexual, moral, economical, political, psychological power. Their value is defined by what they do. He is active in the world and manipulates it, he is able to take and possess.

## **How are women represented in western art?**

She is a spectacle, a sight. Her value is defined by her value as an object. She is passive in the world, ready to be manipulated. She is not just an object, but an erotic object: she is the object displayed to evoke sexual possessive desire. Taking her, against her will (object) is exciting.

# The female nude in western art: patriarchal and colonial gaze

- > objectification and erotization of women (What is an object? no voice, no agency, no will)
- > > Binary and hierarchical cis-gender-normativity
- > > > Heteronormativity

# The white female nude: colonial gaze

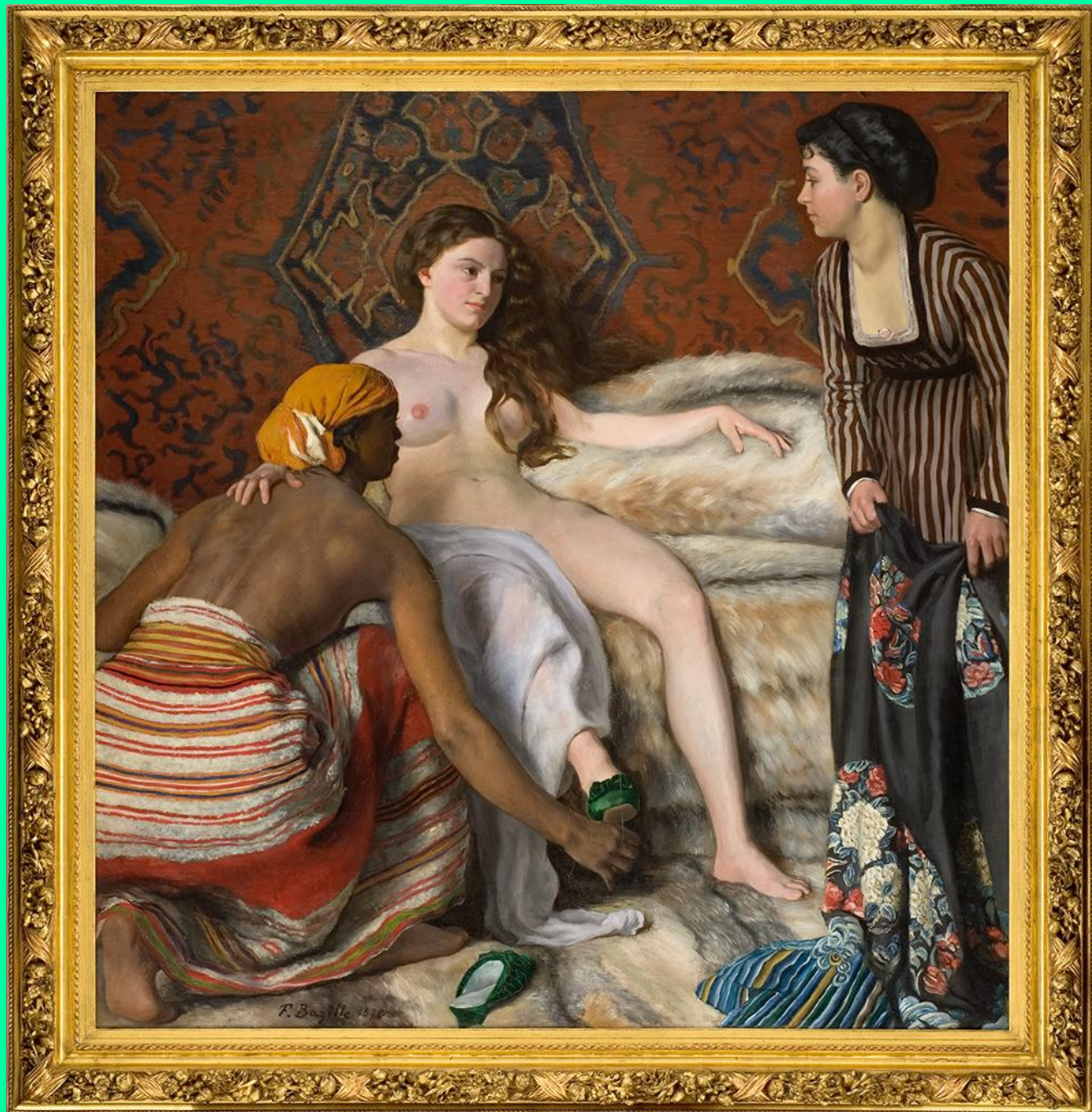


- Objectification without erotization
- White-washing
- Exotization and orientalism: Proximity to nature, lustful, the 'wild', the 'primitive'...









- Visual culture (advertising, films, series, theater, dance, pornography...)
- Sexual violence against women is exciting (an object that can be taken)
- Regime and economy of desire
- Gendered roles and expectations
- Heteronormativity and binary cis-gender normativity
- Gendered racism
- Power relations (subject – object relations)

# REPRESENTATION MATTERS

How we desire

How we value (ourselves)

How we interact

How we endorse and reproduce power relations

(patriarchal, colonial, heteronormative, binary cis-gender)

Tradition of female nude in painting and sculpture: static images

Theatre , dance, circus?

→ scenes, movements, interactions and narrativity

**Relationality:** who is represented as stronger (muscled) or more active, who is the central object of the gaze , who is more erotized as passivity, who is physically supported, who is conquered, who is more horizontally displayed, how is more naked, who is thrown in the air, who is light (airlike)...