Victorians Were Late to Nudity, but Learned Fast

LONDON  So, the new commonplace goes, the Victorians were not prudes after all, just hypocrites. All that preaching against sin and depravity was only for public consumption. Behind the lace curtains of London's drawing rooms, a whole lot of fun was going on. Even Queen Victoria, so majestically austere in public, was a party girl at heart. Don't imagine she was thinking of England when she gave Prince Albert paintings of naked ladies as birthday presents.

This, at least, is the underlying premise of "Exposed: The Victorian Nude," an entertaining exhibition running through Jan. 27 at Tate Britain's Linbury Galleries, the museum's new extension. While the Society for the Suppression of Vice was prowling 19th-century England with evangelical zeal, the educated classes were learning to celebrate the naked body. The nude, central to European art since the Renaissance, had finally been discovered by English painters.

As with all revisionist theories, however, reality was more nuanced. In fact, what makes the show interesting is not that the Victorians have once again been unmasked. Rather, it is the evidence it provides of how difficult it was for a country with no tradition of painting nudes to start doing so with any degree of originality. The ever-vigilant watchdogs of morality were certainly a factor. More crucially, so was the long isolation of English art.

The Protestant Reformation, with its distaste for icons and discouragement of worship of the Virgin Mary, shielded England from the explosion of European religious art. Without the patronage of the church and, for the most part, of the monarchy, English art floundered. The greatest "English" painter of the 16th century, Holbein, was German; the greatest "English" painter of the 17th century, Van Dyck, was Flemish. When Gainsborough, Constable and Turner came along in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they were known for landscape, not figurative, art.

Change finally came when European art flooded into England after the Napoleonic wars. What excited English painters drawn to the nude, though, was not the recent classicism of, say, David, but the 16th-century Venetian Renaissance personified by Titian and the Baroque exuberance of Peter Paul Rubens. They then set about applying the techniques of religious art to figures from Greek mythology, English literature and popular legend. Only later did they paint nudes without allegorical disguises. By then, back-street photographers were already churning out naughty pictures.

Tate Britain has opted for a thematic rather than a chronological approach, although in practice they overlap. Certainly Victorian England, with a global empire feeding its sense of superiority, was initially willing to accept portrayal of female nakedness only if it represented "the English nude," the subject of the first section of the exhibition.

Writing in the catalogue, Alison Smith, the senior curator who organized this show, notes that Victorians were wary of the morally suspect French nude and preferred to seek out their ideal in English literature, notably Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser's "Faerie Queene." "The female figure was thus seen to incarnate the purity and innocence of a timeless British Arcadia, watched over by a 'faery' Queen," she writes, "and it became man's duty to honor this ideal by maintaining a chivalric code of conduct based on self-discipline and a pure uncorrupted gaze."
Queen Victoria herself helped things along, yes, with her birthday presents, but also by adopting Lady Godiva - she who rode naked through Coventry in 1067 - as a model of chastity. Indeed, it was on her orders that Edwin Landseer's "Lady Godiva's Prayer" was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1866. William Etty in turn based his works in literature to justify his audacity. For example, "Britomart Redeems Faire Amoret," which shows the naked Amoret in bondage-like chains, had its source in two verses of "The Faerie Queene." He took his "Musidora: The Bather," in which the Venus-like beauty is spied on by her lover, from James Thomson's book "The Seasons."

Evidently, painters enjoyed finding such pretexts. Frederic Leighton mobilized Homer, Milton and Goethe to explain "The Fisherman and the Syren," a steamy canvas that shows a mermaid seducing an innocent young man, her arms around his neck, her breasts pressed against his bare chest. Still more mischievously, when John Everett Millais displayed "The Knight Errant" at the Royal Academy in 1870, he invented a legend about an order of knights that rescued maidens in distress, in this case a naked woman tied to a tree. But he also made concessions: Although the woman looks away demurely, a painted-over version had her staring expectantly at the knight.

The second section, "The Classical Nude," illustrates the usefulness of Greek art and mythology to Victorian painters. Nudes that appeared to step out of antiquity were somehow respectable; they could even be shown frontally as long as they resembled statues and, as such, had no pubic hair. Leighton's "Bath of Psyche," Charles Hazelwood Shannon's "Bath of Venus" and Edward John Poynter's "Andromeda" portray idealized women untainted by desire.

More intimate work, however, was also being done, as displayed in the section called "The Private Nude." Robert Upstone, another Tate Britain curator, writes in the catalogue: "Artists sold pictures of this kind directly to their patrons, such private commissions allowing even greater erotic treatment of the body and also permitting the circulation of androgynous and homoerotic imagery that could not normally be shown in public."

For private viewing, there were also erotic sketches as well as Aubrey Beardsley's pornographic pen and ink drawings. Further, from the mid-19th century, photography assumed growing importance. Child photography was fashionable, with naked children used as symbols of purity and innocence (notwithstanding today's questions about Lewis Carroll's obsession with prepubescent girls). "The Modern Nude," the show's final section, brings the story to the late 19th century when Victorian England could no longer resist the influence of French Impressionism: Theodore Roussel's naked "Reading Girl" has echoes of Manet; Philip Wilson Steer's "Seated Nude: The Black Hat" reminds one of Renoir. Nudes had finally become just that, naked figures presented without excuses or apologies.

In that sense, the artists in this show represent steppingstones that led English art from mediocrity and introspection toward a more auspicious 20th century, yet their contribution to the nude in Western art is limited. The show demonstrates that the Victorians did understand the importance of the nude. It is just that, as London's Art Journal said in 1867, "a deeply-rooted sense of propriety" kept naked women off the walls of English exhibitions. It added: "The French do not even pretend to delicacy." Well, yes, but look where it got them.

Note:
One of the Ambrotypes (early photographs) in the exhibition, together with its two companions which are not in the exhibition, are reproduced more or less actual size (when clicked) at the following page:

http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/_3TOPICS/AtoZArts/Social/Ambro/AmbroEng.htm
together with a note on some of the problems arising from their attribution.