

WRITER: ALLISON GELLER
EDITOR: LUCY CLARK

In the summer of 1985, a middle-aged man walked into the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, approached the priceless 6-by-7-foot canvas of Rembrandt van Rijn's "Danae, slashed the nude woman's lower belly and then threw on a jar of sulfuric acid.

Museum guards tackled the man, finding his body strapped with explosives. Once he was subdued—or perhaps concurrently—panic set in amongst the museum's restoration staff. The restorers set about neutralizing the acid by spitting mouthfuls of water onto the canvas. (One was later quoted to dramatically proclaim that he would strap the painting to his very person and jump into the Neva if it would save the masterpiece.) The staff then fixed the underlying paint with a mix of sturgeon glue and honey, a traditional means of restoration that they insisted be applied to the 17th-century work.

After that, "Danae" went underground. Only 12 years later—far longer than it took Rembrandt to paint her—did she reappear again, missing some of her old gloss but nonetheless complete.

In truth, it's hard to know exactly what happened in the Hermitage that morning, and why. The Soviet powers—that be hushed the incident, appalled that such an attack could occur in their great nation. Only the following March did word get out. It didn't take long for the story to make up for lost time in the news cycle, with its combination of old world mystique and political resonance thoroughly doused in scandal.

Some sources alleged that the attacker was a disgruntled Soviet national who had walked from a disenfranchised Baltic state to the Hermitage by foot, others proclaimed him a lunatic and left it at that. Still others cited the influence of the painting's nude subject. The Soviet paper "Izvestia," which first reported the attack, contended that the man was a lifelong virgin who had been driven mad by the image of "Danae" in a magazine—a tidbit of questionable accuracy that other news outlets couldn't resist picking up.

Sensational as it seems, it wasn't the first time "Danae" had been blamed for prompting untoward reactions in a viewer. The painting was banned from the Hermitage in the 19th century because it was so disturbingly sensual, Dutch art historian Eric Jan Sluiter writes in "Rembrandt and the Female Nude." He too romantically considers the effect of the painting's protagonist

Salon des Refusées

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on its attacker, writing: "[the attacker's] actions must have had something to do with the fact that this work is not only one of the greatest paintings ever made of the female nude but also a painting of almost palpable lifelikeness."

The nude woman has been a recurring motif in the plastic arts since antiquity, as anyone who has been to an art museum can testify to. Perhaps more than any other subject, it's also historically been the grounds upon which art wars are waged. A pattern emerges when we look at the most controversial female nudes in the known history of Western art: all of the artists who painted them are men. And while their names were first slandered for the unacceptable nude they painted, the artists were then folded into the canon for eternity.

The story of Danae had long been interpreted as a morality tale about how easily gold could chase away chastity. The king of Argos imprisons his daughter Danae in a tower after learning from the oracle at Delphi that he would be killed by his daughter's son. But this paranoid king is outsmarted by Jupiter, who, enamored with Danae's beauty, enters her chambers in the form of a shower of gold coins. Then—as these things tend to go—their amorous encounter impregnates Danae, her son Perseus kills his grandfather accidentally and the prophecy is fulfilled.

Rembrandt wasn't the first to take on this mythological subject. Before him, Titian, Goltzius, Carracci, and Gentileschi had all authored a famous rendering of Danae that no doubt influenced Rembrandt. Previous depictions illustrate the shower as gold coins, as in the story. In Goltzius' cheeky interpretation, a servant woman wakes up the sleeping Danae as the shower of coins begins to fall, a diaphanous bit of fabric conveniently covering the maiden's vagina. In Titian's, Danae is awake but lies passive. In Carracci's, she is a bit more active, pushing the curtain back as the coins fall, but her pose looks stilled and her body cold as marble.

Though nudes had been a subject of art since the classical era, in Rembrandt's epoch—the 1620s and 1630s—nudes had gone out of fashion. It was a period of great religious orthodoxy in Dutch society, and a time when naturalism had taken hold of art. How to paint a nude woman—always an idealized subject—in this style? Sluiter writes that Rembrandt meant to paint a masterpiece, and he chose the nude Danae precisely because he wanted to make a statement while showing his chops.

X-radiographs of the painting reveal an earlier draft in which influences of earlier Danaes are far more present. The x-rays show that originally, the light came from a strong direct source and the protagonist assumed a more traditional Danae posture: her hand reaches straight out, perhaps pushing the curtain back as in previous depictions.

It seems Rembrandt had to work through an old Danae before he could create a new one. The composition we know today is far more nuanced: Danae welcomes the light with an open palm, a look of enchantment on her face. Immediacy was one of Rembrandt's major goals at the time he reworked the painting, according to Rembrandt scholar Amy Golhary. In her reading, Danae is not pushing back the curtain, but reaching directly towards the light. As viewers, we can almost feel the warmth and wonder ourselves.

Rembrandt also paints a markedly different nude than his predecessors. This Danae is no nymph-like Botticelli or fleshy Rubens, but a woman as she might actually look, with a round stomach and breasts that squish. Gone are the boundaries of stylization and idealization that had kept viewers and their sensual tendencies at bay.

What's more, in the change of gesture, style, and a few additions and omissions, Rembrandt rewrites the Danae myth. While the subject's bed and chamber are plush, there's no money present. Instead Rembrandt highlights Danae's youth and captivity with the presence of the crying cupid and the old woman carrying a set of keys. The imprisoned Danae isn't selling her precious chastity for gold. Here, the light doesn't represent a violation, but a liberation.

In Rembrandt's time, there wasn't much in the way of recorded reaction to his unprecedented nude—PR was generally quiet in the 17th century Low Countries. Not so in 19th century Paris, when a faction of the art world broke away from the juried establishment to form the now-famous Salon des Indépendents and Salon des Refusés, among others. Modernism loved controversy, and the nude was often the first subject artists reached for to create it.

Like Rembrandt, Edouard Manet was inspired by a Titian composition when he painted "Olympia" in 1865. Upon seeing it, the appalled critics were sure the artist was having a jolly good joke at their expense. He depicted a naked Olympia who was clearly a prostitute, her maid standing with flowers in hand from the next John to come through the door. She seemed a parody of Titian's "Venus of Urbino," a painting that was, in its own time, infamous for modeling a goddess off of a Venetian courtesan and portraying her with a steady, candid gaze. "Olympia" shocked as much for its method as its matter—crude strokes and childlike renderings of body parts where Titian had painted with awe-inspiring finesse over 300 years earlier. But it also became the painting for which Manet was best known, and remains so today.

Olympia's brazen gaze multiplied by five in Picasso's 1907 "Demoiselles d'Avignon." Art historians cite the "Demoiselles" as a breaking point in art, and indeed in modernism in general. Picasso painted five harshly stylized "demoiselles" from a brothel in Avignon Street in Barcelona. They might as well have come from another planet when compared to velvet-skinned, classical nudes of yore. With their primitive masks, deconstructed faces and sharp angles, they assault rather than invite the viewer, a clear departure even from "Olympia." The art establishment and public at large reacted with outrage, but the painting eventually solidified Picasso's reputation as the bad boy of modern art. Picasso had successfully one-upped his contemporary Edouard in vulgarity—and subsequently in celebrity.

The cubists that later recognized "Demoiselles" as a watershed work went on to reject Marcel Duchamp's splintered "Nude Descending a Staircase," exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants in 1912, and the following year at the New York Armory Show. This nude isn't a woman, a man or even a nude in any traditional sense, but a stop-motion impression of a figure with no clear boundaries. The painting stunned, puzzled, and aggravated; even the insular cubists rejected it on the grounds that it was too thoroughly influenced by Italian-born futurism.

The painting's original French title, "Nu descendant un escalier n°2," uses the masculine or "neutral" version of the noun for "nude," keeping the gender of the figure vague and leading to perfectly accurate translations like "A Naked Man Going Down Stairs." But most people took for granted that this nude was a woman. In a late-life interview with art journalist Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp remembers the sentiments of his outraged critics: "One just doesn't do a nude coming down the stairs, that's ridiculous... A nude should be respected."

But as with Manet and Picasso, Duchamp's story follows the same trajectory—once rejected, forever renowned. When Cabanne calls the phenomenon that followed Duchamp's contentious nude a *succès de scandale*, he also describes the success of many nudes before Duchamp's: paintings whose infamy solidified their creators' fame.



When news of the Hermitage attack broke, the press painted a dark picture of Maigis, the surname of Danae's defiler. Rumors swirled: he lived alone in a dark room; he had been hospitalized twice for schizophrenia; he was dead; he was still living in a hospital in Lithuania.

We will likely never know the true story of this man, his past, and his intentions in the Hermitage that day. That tabloids and art historians alike dwelled on the violence with which Maigis attacked "Danae" is indicative of the general tendency not to "act our age" when faced with a nude in a museum. In all likelihood, Maigis was simply a mentally unwell man whose reasons for acting as he did can in no way contribute to our understanding of art history.

Linda Nochlin's foundational feminist art essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) points out that when we survey great artists, we are often already accepting a limited view of what "greatness" is, as well as the myths that accompany it. By the same token, we accept the nude female body as properly befitting a canvas, but only if she's the right woman, painted the right way, in the right context. *A nude should be respected*. Duchamp's critic inadvertently begged the question: what is the difference between a "respectable" nude and a "disrespectful" one, and why, and according to whom?

It seems unlikely that the nude will ever occupy the space that it did before, the perfect subject for artistic experimentation, controversy and celebration, a place where old movements are cast aside and new movements forged. In today's artistic and intellectual environment of hypersensitive political correctness, it's hard to imagine an artist painting the female body to make a stylistic statement. That body is both too passé and too politically charged.

At least for the male artists. Some female artists are reclaiming the subject of the female nude. Famous female artists like Cindy Sherman, Marina Abramovic, and Barbara Kruger all use representations of their own bodies, and their bodies' limits, in their work. More recently, the February 2015 "Pheromone Hotbox" exhibition at New York's Steven Kasher Gallery showcased the work of five women photographers who depict female nudes in styles and moods ranging from nostalgic to Instagrammable to plainly ominous. Are these artists reclaiming the nude from its objectified past? We can't impose any such agenda on them, but we can expand our understanding of what a female nude can be.

It takes much more than painted flesh to shock our sensibilities now. At the same time, we are no longer naive enough to endow the nude with shamanistic power. Greatness as it relates to women and art can no longer be decided by the way they are painted on canvas, but by what they create when they're standing in front of one. No matter what subject they choose.



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