



chrysalis seed trust

In our living rooms we have naked women.

Both are contemporary paintings (by Kees Bruin and Linda James). Bruin's beautifully painted *Eve and Easter Lily* (1996) is a nude directly referencing the Classical sculptural pose, echoed in many works through the centuries. James' *Bathsheba* (1995) [p. 3] depicts her at her toilette, referencing Artemesia Gentileschi of the mid-seventeenth century. In the history of art and the church, relationships between art, the depiction of the body and Christian believers has often been strained. Michelangelo's nudes in the Sistine Chapel were commissioned by one Pope and 'clothed' by another, illustrating a mixed attitude to sex.

Censorship in the arts has always been a minefield, often confused over definitions of the *erotic* and *pornographic*. If we accept the precept of divine biblical authorship, then Christians must also affirm the implications of the Creation story in *Genesis*: that God created all things good, and that men and women were *both* made in the image of God. They were naked before the account of their mortal failure that introduced suffering, sin and death into Paradise. Humanity's first response was to hide their 'shame,' their genitalia, a rupture in both their relationship with each other and God, and a distortion in their sexuality.

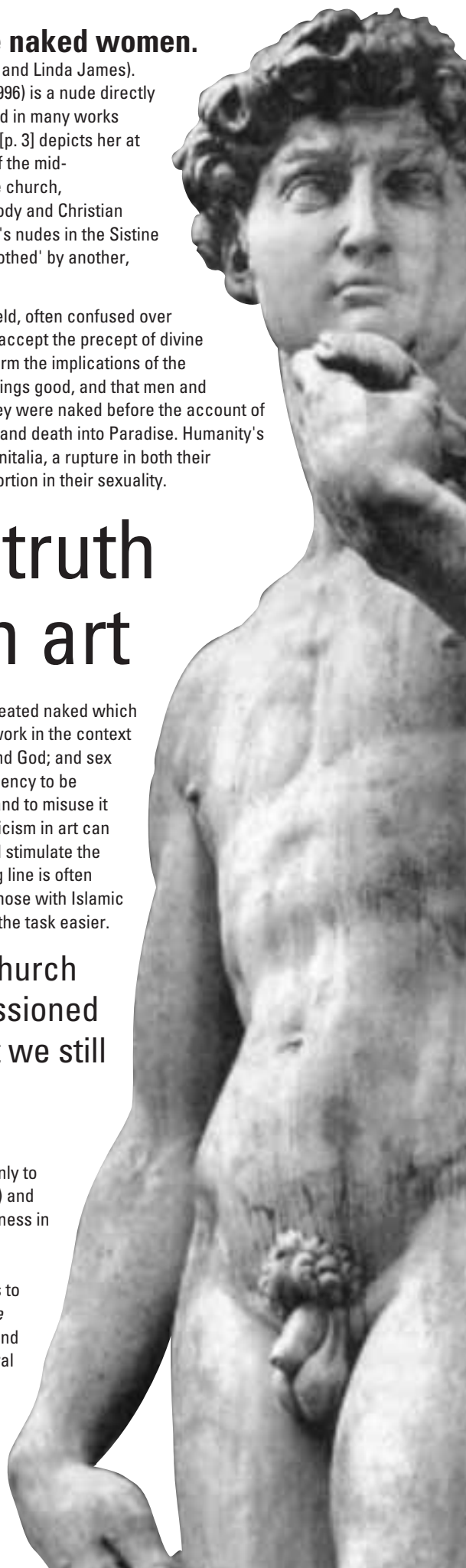
The naked truth on nudity in art

Three things are clear: people were originally created naked which was good in every respect; sex was created to work in the context of male and female commitment to each other and God; and sex has since been distorted. The distortion is a tendency to be ashamed of sex and to consider it bad and evil, and to misuse it for selfish ends. The depiction of nudity and eroticism in art can either affirm divine inspiration or can arouse and stimulate the voyeur to misuse God-given desires. The dividing line is often subjective and blurred; some censors (such as those with Islamic and Victorian values) simply ban nudity to make the task easier.

/// The contemporary church would never have commissioned Michelangelo's *David*, yet we still have *Song of Songs*."

Jeff Crabtree [See page 3 and 6]

Christianity clearly accepts eroticism (one has only to read *Song of Songs* to understand that - see p. 4) and has a long continual tradition of depicting nakedness in art. Jan van Eyck's *Adam & Eve* on the Ghent altarpiece (1432) is a study of humanity's naked naivety, the figures modestly clutching fig leaves to their genitalia. The raw nudity of Masaccio's *The Expulsion from Eden* (1427) featuring both male and female nakedness, is emotive because of its literal rendering; Michelangelo's *David* (1501) unashamedly exposes himself, in an overt celebration of the Greek and Renaissance conceptions of the ideal human form. Leonardo da Vinci's *Human Figure in a Circle and Square, illustrating Vitruvius on Proportion* (1485-90) is a literal study of full frontal male nudity and Gericault's *The Raft of the 'Medusa'* (1819) shows all.





seven plus



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Who we are

Founded in 1997 the Chrysalis Seed charitable trust serves a growing number of contemporary artists. Our mission is to "help resource the arts community from a Christian perspective." We meet regularly to encourage each other and participate in a range of activities designed to support artists and their profession. We operate a resource centre in the heart of the Arts Centre above Southern Ballet where all are welcome to explore, read and coffee.

We have a number of groups and collectives with regular events. The two main artist collectives are for visual artists (Seven Plus) and contemporary poets (CS Poets).

Seven Plus is a visual arts collective with an emphasis on exhibiting and producing contemporary visual art.

Chrysalis Seed Trust

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Context is clearly important. If a performance artist were to stand naked in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, he would be offensive to many, yet Michelangelo's colossal *David*, with a large uncovered penis, standing close by, would not. Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of nude children might be unacceptable because of sensitivities about child pornography and abuse, yet a cavorting putti in any of Correggio or Titian's works is almost universally acceptable. The conclusion is, **nudity is not, of itself, wrong, even though it might offend some sensibilities.** The human body has always been a primary vehicle of comment. The earliest forms of human art (*The Willendorf Venus*, the carved *Laussel Venus*, etc) are sculptures of nude female bodies. Christianity has mostly embraced this and the neo-Classical tradition, so entwined with the history of church art, elevated human nudity within a context of lofty abstract ideals.

Intent is the difference. *HOW* nakedness is used is the issue. *Eroticism*, perhaps defined as the reproduction of, or allusion to, sexual desire, is celebrated by Christendom. *Pornography*, the use of erotic content to specifically stimulate or arouse sexual feelings, is considered unacceptable. As Paul has said, "all things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful." Jeff Crabtree (p. 3) makes the point that gratuitousness for its own sake is self indulgent and is often a misuse of nakedness.

Some modern artists attempt to shock and create controversy for its own sake, often to gain attention and to propel their work into the public eye. Other artists have socio-political agendas (to promote sub-cultures they belong to, for example) or make fringe statements about abstract concepts on the very borderline of taste (bottles of urine, artworks made from human cadavers, body parts, faeces painting). Nudity is often exploited in this context as the conduit of message. Christians have the right to question if this is a valid mechanism. Could other subjects be used more intelligently to provoke, rather than tiredly appropriating human nudity?

Culture is also very relevant. Some cultures (conservative elements of Christendom, certainly Islam which eschews any form of animal or human depiction) oppose nudity per se. For others, nudity is intrinsic (Maori and African art, the art of the East) with erect penises and overt vulvas being important symbols of mythological and cultural meaning. Tenth-century Indian temples overtly feature sexual desire and remain good works of art because eroticism is part of the philosophy inherent to the temples. That Christianity may disagree with that philosophy does not make the art work invalid, because the decoration is contextually sincere and true to its belief.

Many Christians would take issue with trends that emerged in the European art and literary traditions that followed the Renaissance, where eroticism became a vehicle for titillation and gratuity. Women became the subject of the so-called "male gaze". The *Hotel de Soubise* is an example of eighteenth century 'erotic'

architecture and decoration full of erotic art (such as *Cupid & Psyche*, 1738, by Natoire). Mythology and the Classical tradition were used as a pretext for a cross-over from eroticism to pornography. Boucher led a risqué development, where inherent eroticism became more explicit. Fragonard combined the pastoral tradition of painting with popular erotic print culture devoid of the interpretive Classical allusions leading to the question - do his paintings depict nymphs or just naked eighteenth-century women? What is his meaning and intent? What was behind his creation of "bedroom art," and what is the purpose of his erupting evocative foliage, suggestive swords, spindles and gaping gateways and doorways on the rustic fertile imagination? What do paintings such as his *Useless Resistance* (1770) and Delaunay's *The Indiscreet Spouse* (1771) set out to achieve and be?

In conclusion, human nakedness in art is common from the earliest of times and is a tradition largely developed by Christian art. Eroticism is an accepted, even biblical, reality understood as "good." Context and intent, often influenced by culture, are important facets of determining whether nudity in art has validating merit. In many contexts, nudity is exploitative, gratuitous, a vehicle for controversy, hidden agendas (such as gaining attention otherwise unmerited or to promote other messages) or mere titillation. The use of the naked human form in this way might be considered demeaning or a misappropriation. There is no definitive "Christian perspective" except perhaps to reflect on the bare facts of the central tenet of Christianity that "The Word [God Himself] became *FLESH*..."



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