

1000

Erotic Works of Genius



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Introduction

Erotic art or pornography?

“That which is pornography to one person is the laughter of genius for the other.”

— D. H. Lawrence

The term ‘Erotic Art’ is muddied by a miasma of ambiguous terms. Art and pornography, sexuality and sensuality, obscenity and morality are all involved to such an extent that it seems almost impossible to reach an objective definition, which is not unusual in the history of art. How is it possible to speak of erotic art?

This much is certain: the depiction of a sexual activity alone does not raise a work to the nobility that is erotic art. To identify erotic art only with its content would reduce it to one dimension, just as it is not possible to distinguish artistic and pornographic depictions only by describing their immoral contents. The view that erotic works are created solely for sexual arousal and so cannot be art is erroneous as well. Does the creative imagination brought to erotic art distinguish it from pornography? Yet pornography is also a product of imagination. It has to be more than just a depiction of sexual reality, however, or who would buy it? Günter Schmidt states that pornography is “constructed like sexual fantasy and daydreams, just as unreal, megalomaniacal, magical, illogical, and just as stereotypical.” Erotic daydreams – they are the subject of erotic art as well. Those making a choice between art and pornography may have already decided against the first one. Pornography is a moralising defamatory term. What is art to one person is the Devil’s handiwork to another. The mixing of aesthetic with ethical-moralistic questions dooms every clarification process right from the start.

In the original Greek, *pornography* means ‘prostitute writings’ – that is, text with sexual content – in which case it would be possible to approach pornography in a free-thinking manner and equate the content of erotic art with that of pornography. This re-evaluation would amount to a rehabilitation of the term.

The extent to which the distinction between art and pornography depends on contemporary attitudes is illustrated, for example, by the painting over of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. Nudity was not considered obscene during the Renaissance. The patron of this work of art, Pope Clement VII, saw nothing immoral in its execution. His successor, Paul IV, however, ordered an artist to provide the *Last Judgment* with pants!

Another example of the difficult relationship between society and erotic art is the handling of the excavated frescos of Pompeii which were inaccessible to the public until recently. In 1819, the Gallery of Obscenities was established in the Palazzo degli Studi, the future National Museum where only people of mature age and known high moral standards had access to the locked room. The collection changed its name to Gallery of Locked Objects in 1823. Again, only those with a royal permit were able to view the exhibited works. The reactionary wave after the unrest in 1848 also affected the erotic collection of the museum. In 1849, the doors of

the Gallery of Locked Objects were closed forever. The collection was transferred to a still further removed section of the museum three years later, with even the doors leading to that area being bricked up.

Not until 1860, when Guiseppe Garibaldi marched into Naples, was reopening of the erotic collection even considered. The name of the collection was then changed to the Pornographic Collection. Over time, many objects were removed from this collection and returned to the normal exhibits. The history of the Gallery thus provides an overview of the mores of the last three centuries. Not every age is equally propitious for the creation of eroticism and its associated matters. It can even become its confessed enemy. For example, the libertine environment of the Rococo period created a very favourable atmosphere for eroticism and erotic art. Erotic art, however, is not only a reflection of achieved sexual freedom; it can also be a by-product of the suppression and repression with which eroticism is burdened. It is even conceivable that the most passionate erotic works were created not in spite of, but rather because of, the cultural pressures on sexuality. In nature, the instinct-controlled sexuality of animals is not erotic. In eroticism, however, culture uses nature. Whereas sexuality as an imperative of nature – even in humans – is timeless, eroticism is changeable: as culturally conditioned sexuality, it has a history.

Eroticism thus would have to be understood as a socially and culturally formed phenomenon. In which case, it is the creature of moral, legal, and magical prohibitions, prohibitions which arise to prevent sexuality harming the social structure. The bridled urge expresses itself; but it also encourages fantasy without exposing society to the destructive dangers of excess. This distance distinguishes eroticism from sexuality. Eroticism is a successful balancing act that finds a precarious equilibrium between the cold flow of a rationally organised society – which in its extremes can also cause the collapse of the community – and the warm flow of a licentious, destructive sexuality.

Yet, even in its tamed versions, eroticism remains a demonic power in human consciousness because it echoes the dangerous song of the sirens – trying to approach them is fatal. Devotion and surrender, regression and aggression: these are the powers that still tempt us. The convergence of desire and longing for death has always played a big part in literature.

Insofar as eroticism consists of distance and detours, the fetishist constitutes the picture-perfect eroticist. The fetishised object, in its fixed, tense relationship with what is immediate, is more significant to the fetishist than the promise of fulfilled desires represented by the object. The imagined body is more meaningful than any real body.

Collectors are eroticists as well. While the lecher or debaucher is active in real life, the collector lives with a chaste heart in a realm of fantasy. And is it not true that the chaste heart can relish the delights of vice even more deeply and thoroughly than the unbridled debaucher?

Distance permits freedom. Art, too – which can also represent a fetishistic production for the artist – affords freedom. It affords the freedom to play with fire without being burned. It appeals to the eye; it allows toying with sin without having actually sinned. This freedom through distance can be noted when observing the different reactions of viewers when looking at sex magazines and works of art: have you ever seen the viewer of a porn magazine smile? A quiet cheerfulness, however, can be observed frequently in viewers of works of art, as if art brings forth an easing of the compellingly sensual. Those, however, who in a derogatory

manner pronounce a work of art pornographic prove nothing more than that they do not have any appreciation of what is artistic in the object depicted. Turning away in disgust does not necessarily have to be a characteristic of a special morality. Such people have a non-erotic culture. Eduard Fuchs, the past master of erotic art, whose books were accused of being pornographic during his lifetime, considered eroticism the fundamental subject of all art: sensuality is said to be present in any art, even if its objective is not always of a sexual nature. Accordingly, it would almost be a tautology to speak of ‘erotic art’.

Long before Fuchs, Lou Andreas-Salomé had already pointed out the true relationship between eroticism and aesthetics: “It seems to be a sibling growth from the same root that artistic drive and sexual drive yield such extensive analogies that aesthetic delight changes into erotic delight so imperceptibly, erotic desire so instinctively reaches for the aesthetic, the ornamental (possibly giving the animal kingdom its ornament directly as a bodily creation).” Once, when Picasso, in the evening of his life, was asked about the difference between art and eroticism, his pensive answer was: “But – there is no difference.” Instead, as others warned about eroticism, Picasso warned about the experience of art: “Art is never chaste; one should keep it away from all innocent ignoramuses. People insufficiently prepared for art should never be allowed close to art. Yes, art is dangerous. If it is chaste, it is not art.”

Viewed with the eyes of a moral watchdog, every type of art and literature would have to be abolished. If spirit and mind are the essence of humanity, then all those placing the mind and spirit in a position opposed to sensuality are hypocrites. On the contrary, sexuality experiences its true human form only after developing into eroticism and art – some translate eroticism as the art of love. Matters excluded from the civilising process assert themselves by demanding a medium that is spiritually determined, and that is art. It is in art that sexuality reaches its fullest bloom, which seems to negate all that is sensual in the shape of erotic art.

Pornography is a judgmental term used by those who remain closed to eroticism. It is assumed that their sensuality never had the opportunity to be cultivated. These culturally underprivileged people – among them possibly so-called art experts and prosecuting attorneys – perceive sexuality as a threat even when it occurs in an aesthetically-tempered format. Even the observation that a work has offended or violated the viewpoints of many still does not make it pornographic. Art is dangerous! Works of art can offend and injure the feelings of others; they do not always make viewers happy. After all, is it not the duty of art to annoy and to stir things up? The bottom line: the term pornography is no longer in keeping with the times. Artistic depictions of sexual activities, whether they annoy or please, are part of erotic art. If not, they are insipid, dumb works, even if harmless.

Eastern societies in particular have known how to integrate the sexual and erotic into their art and culture. Chinese religion, for example, entirely free of western notions of sin, considers lust and love as pure things. The union of man and woman under the sign of Tao expresses the same harmony as the alternation of day and night, winter and summer. One can say – and rightly so – that the ancient forms of Chinese thought have their origins in sexual conceptions. *Yin* and *yang*, two complementary ideas, determine the universe. In this way, the erotic philosophy of the ancient Chinese also encompasses a cosmology. Sexuality is an integrated component of a philosophy of life and cannot be separated from it. One of the oldest and most stimulating civilisations on earth thus assures us through its religion that sex is good and instructs us, for

religious reasons, to carry out the act of love creatively and passionately. This lack of inhibition in sexual matters is mirrored in art from China.

The great masters of Japan also created a wealth of erotic pictures, which rank equal with Japan's other works of art. No measure of state censorship was ever able to completely suppress the production of these images. Shungas (Images of Spring) depict the pleasures and entertainment of a rather earthly world. It was considered natural to seek out the pleasures of the flesh, whichever form they took. The word 'vice' was unspoken in ancient Japan, and sodomy was a sexual pleasure like any other.

In India, eroticism is sanctified in Hindu temples. In Greece, it culminates in the cult of beauty, joining the pleasures of the body with those of the mind. Greek philosophy understood the world as interplay between Apollo and Dionysus, between reason and ecstasy.

Only Christianity began to view eroticism in a context of sin and the world of darkness, so creating irreconcilable differences. "The Devil Eros has become more interesting to man than all the angels and all the saints," a tenet held by Nietzsche, which would probably find no sympathy in Far Eastern Japan: Eros was never demonised there. In fact, that which Nietzsche lamented in the West never did occur in Japan, nor in many other Eastern cultures. "Christianity," in Nietzschean words, "forced Eros to drink poison."

In Western Europe, erotic depictions were banished to secret galleries. The floating, transitory world was held in chains, and only with great difficulty was science able to free sexuality from prejudices and association with sin. It is therefore no wonder that sexology developed wherever the relationship between sexuality and eroticism was especially ambivalent or troubled. Our cornucopia of a colourful, erotic world of images and objects shows that Eros can be an all-encompassing and unifying energy. These items provide an opportunity to steal a glimpse of an essential, human sphere – usually taboo – through the eyes of many artists with a continuously changing point of view.

Unlike pornography, which often lacks imagination, erotic art allows us to partake in creative joy. Even if some of the pictures seem strange to us, or even annoy and force us to confront taboos, we still should open ourselves to that experience. Real art has always caused offence. Only through a willingness to be affronted can this journey through the geography of pleasure also be profitable, namely in the sense that this fantasy journey enriches our innermost selves. The humour evident in many works of erotic art is only accessible to those who can feel positive about claiming the erotic experience.

This book invites you to take a special journey, one that will open up a vista of pleasures and desires. An abundance of images and objects from art as well as cult present eroticism and sexuality as the universal, fundamental subject. By opening ourselves to the origins in a variety of cultures, some of them strange, we may enrich our own culture as well... The many and varied points of view encountered in this work demonstrate the multifarious aspects of sexuality. It reveals that nothing is more natural than sexual desire; and, paradoxically, nothing is less natural than the forms in which this desire expresses itself or finds satisfaction.

Items long hidden in the vaults of public museums and galleries of private collectors can be seen in this book. Many of these pictures and objects were forbidden in a western society which was less open to sexuality and anything associated with it. So they grant us a rare and therefore more fascinating glimpse of what is part and parcel of human nature.

Pictures of the pleasures of the flesh, in this book, promise a feast for the eyes, albeit a distanced pleasure. Yet, is not the essence of eroticism that it should be just beyond reach?

Aspects of the cultural history of humankind can help to extend the limits of tolerance by helping to expand the viewer's opinion. They can liberate minds from clichés, which may occupy our fantasies and imagination today, but hopefully not after this book has been read.

— Hans-Jürgen Döpp



1. Anonymous,
The Venus of Willendorf, 30,000-25,000 B.C.E.
Limestone with red polychromy, h: 11.1 cm.
Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna (Austria).

From Prehistory and Primitive Forms to Antiquity and the Perfection of the Body

Art has dealt with sexuality since its prehistoric beginnings. Though their purpose remains obscure, small Palaeolithic sculptures of women make up some of the earliest evidence of human existence, such as the so-called [Venus of Laussel](#), whose stylised body with exaggerated hips and breasts have led to interpretations as a fertility figure and to her being named after the goddess of love. Much later on, the Minoan civilisation of ancient Crete created similar figures including tantalising statuettes such as the [Snake Goddess](#). While more naturalistic than her prehistoric counterpart, the figure's feminine attributes were still emphasised. Like her predecessors, the Snake Goddess's function is unknown — even her identity as a goddess is uncertain.

Succeeding the Minoans in the Mediterranean, the Ancient Greeks developed a virtual cult of the body, particularly the male body. Their admiration of athletic prowess was reflected in their many idealised representations of nude young men. In the Archaic period life-size nude marble statues called *kouroi* marked the graves of youthful warriors. Polykleitos' later sculpture, [Doryphoros](#), based on his mathematical set of ideal proportions rather than actual bodies, showed the evolution of such figures into purely aesthetic expressions.

Although Ancient writers discussed many famous Greek paintings, no actual works have survived. Decorated ceramics, offering a wealth of erotic subjects and information on the culture that created them, are the primary surviving form of two-dimensional art from the time. The Greek practice of pederasty, in which an older man attached himself to a beautiful youth as a form of mentorship, was often depicted on vases, such as those by the Triptolemus Painter and the [Brygos Painter](#). Patriarchal Greek society had little room for female sexual agency; females in Greek erotic scenes were usually prostitutes or deities. The beauty of Praxiteles' fourth century B.C. [Aphrodite of Knidos](#), the most famous sculpture of classical Antiquity, became a tourist attraction for the island and, according to Pliny, won the love of a man who attempted intercourse with it.

Drama and emotion characterised the Hellenistic phase of Greek art, as in the highly sensuous [Barberini Faun](#). Part goat, his unfiltered sexuality and drunken allegiance to Dionysos highlight his animal nature. The famous [Venus de Milo](#) was a graceful representation of Aphrodite showing the Hellenistic ideal of female beauty. As with nearly all free-standing Greek sculpture after the Archaic period, what survives today are largely Roman copies of the Greek originals.

In Italy, the Etruscans adapted many Greek ideas into their own culture, which offered considerably more status to women. Etruscan sarcophagi often depicted a man and woman together as a couple, and decorations in Etruscan tombs sometimes featured paintings of explicit or suggested sexual activity.

Their successors, the Romans, also respected and imitated many aspects of Greek culture. As more Roman art survived than Greek, we thus have more erotic scenes, particularly in

painting. Excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum have revealed the rich sexual culture of the Romans, often humorous in nature as in the depictions of Priapus, cursed with an eternal erection. Brothels often had erotic advertisements and interior decorations. Homosexual themes were not uncommon; the Warren cup depicted two male couples in coitus, and sculptures of Antinous, Emperor Hadrian's young lover, abounded. Despite a tradition of realism, Roman depictions of bodies followed the Greek methods of idealisation. The classical model of Greece and Rome became the ideal of art and culture for centuries to come.



2. Anonymous,
Venus of Laussel, c. 20,000-18,000 B.C.E.
Limestone, 54 x 36 x 15.5 cm.
Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux (France).



3. Anonymous, *Reclining Female Figure*,
Naxos (?) (Greece), 2,400-2,300 B.C.E.
White marble, 36.8 x 11.3 x 3.2 cm.
The Menil Collection, Houston (United States).



4. Anonymous, *Statuette of a Snake Goddess*, c. 1,600-1,500 B.C.E.
Gold and ivory, h: 16.1 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (United States).



5. **Anonymous**, *The Cosmic Union of Geb and Nut*
(detail from an Egyptian papyrus), c. 1,025 B.C.E.

Vignette, 53 x 93 cm. The British Museum,
London (United Kingdom).



6. Anonymous, *Skyphos with an Erotic Group* (detail), c. 1 C.E.



7. **Anonymous**, *Sarcophagus of a Couple from Cerveteri*, c. 520-510 B.C.E.
Painted terra-cotta, 111 x 194 x 69 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris (France).

Though their civilisation flourished alongside that of the Greeks, our limited understanding of Etruscan language and culture has left a veil of mystery over the people who lived in Italy before the Roman Republic. Their art was strongly influenced by that of the Greeks, as evidenced by this terracotta sarcophagus with its echoes of the style of the Greek Archaic period. In Etruscan sculpture, however, we find more lively subjects, like this couple, animated in their easy affection for each other. Like so much of Etruscan art, this is a funerary piece, designed for placement in one of the elaborate tombs the Etruscans carved out of the soft volcanic bedrock of central Italy. It reveals the Etruscan view of the afterlife: an eternal party, where men and women would lounge at a banquet, enjoying good food, drink, and the company of their loved ones.



8. Anonymous, *The Sounion Kouros*, c. 600 B.C.E.
Marble, h: 305 cm. National Archaeological
Museum of Athens, Athens (Greece).



9. **Anonymous**, *Kleobis and Biton*, Apollo Sanctuary, Delphi, c. 610-580 B.C.E. Marble, h: 218 cm. Archaeological Museum of Delphi, Delphi (Greece).

Kleobis and Biton are life-size statues that were found in the sanctuary at Delphi. An inscription identifies the artist as coming from Argos, on the Peloponnese. The sculptures' origin in Argos links them to the mythical twins Kleobis and Biton. These young men from Argos were said to pull a cart a full five miles in order to bring their mother to a festival dedicated to the goddess Hera. In return, Hera granted the men what was seen as a great gift: a gentle death while sleeping. The brothers fell asleep after the festival and never woke up. Their great strength, devotion to their mother, and their early deaths were memorialised in dedicatory statues offered at the great sanctuary at Delphi, according to the historian Herodotus. These statues, which may be those described by Herodotus, are close in date to the Dipylon Head and share the same Egyptian style and decorative, incised details.



10. Anonymous, *The Kritios Boy*, Acropolis, Athens, c. 480-470 B.C.E. Marble, h: 116 cm. Acropolis Museum, Athens (Greece).

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