

Antiquity and the Body

Throughout history, artists have met the challenge of representing the human form by developing creative approaches to the freestanding nude and the partially draped figure. Far from serving as an index of tangible reality, the nude in art is an abstract ideal, a constructed set of conventions that both filter and reflect shifting cultural attitudes about the body, society, religion, and gender. The paintings and sculpture in this gallery find common ground in the development of the nude, from its earliest manifestations in the ancient world to its proliferation in the modern age.

In antiquity, the human form in art was a bellwether of religious and ritual values. Egyptian artisans developed fixed canons of rigid frontality to deify their patrons and assure their unending presence in the afterlife; likewise, sculptors in the Cyclades islands personified their idols by reducing the human form to an instantly recognizable geometry. Greek sculptors in the 5th century B.C. created work that humanized the pantheon of deities through the judicious application of mathematical systems of proportion and the simulation of movement and balance; their example lived on with exuberance through the Hellenistic period and into the Roman Empire.

In modern Europe and America, the nude gradually transcended its spiritual and symbolic associations to emerge as an end in itself. While artists such as John Talbot Donoghue created neoclassical figures that operated according to the normative and distancing comfort zone of academic taste, Thomas Eakins confronted Victorian propriety through the frank presentation of the nude as an ordinary person. Auguste Rodin took liberties with surface texture and anatomy to set the body in motion, and his example liberated artists in the early 20th century to conceptualize the nude form as a configuration of planar surfaces to be manipulated according to the impulses and complexities of individual creative vision.