In 1914, Canadian Suffragette Mary Richardson walked into the National Gallery and attacked Vélasquez’ iconic *Rokeby Venus* several times with an axe. “I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history,” Richardson [said](https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp58987/mary-raleigh-richardson) later, “as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history”.

As a campaigner for women’s suffrage, Richardson was more concerned with women’s representation in the electorate than in art galleries. But the two are intimately connected – at least as far as modern art criticism is concerned. In [*Ways of Seeing*](http://waysofseeingwaysofseeing.com/ways-of-seeing-john-berger-5.7.pdf), his 1972 classic on art and perception, John Berger argued that in the Western tradition of painting women are stripped of agency, even as viewing them as objects confers agency on the (presumed male) viewer. In this worldview, Berger says, ‘Men act and women appear’; women are never just unselfconsciously ‘naked’, they’re always ‘nude’, which he defined as ‘to be seen naked by others, not recognizing oneself’.

Perhaps, then, Richardson was onto something. If being painted as an object strips women of agency, artworks such as the *Rokeby Venus* argue against the idea that women are people with agency, and as such should be able to vote.

The debate around objectification of women, whether in fine art or the media, has raged since Berger’s day. Whether curating collections of figurative work by women in search of ‘[the female gaze’](https://pallant.org.uk/whats-on/women-artists-the-female-gaze/), or taking to Twitter as ‘Art Activist Barbie’ to [protest the predominance of female nudes in paintings](https://twitter.com/BarbieReports/status/1413948533552656388?s=20) and [canonical male painters creating those images](https://twitter.com/BarbieReports/status/1067759847687507968?s=20), since Mary Richardson’s time women have increasingly challenged the objectification of women in visual art.

But even as a growing chorus of voices has joined Berger in arguing that ‘artistic’ objectification of women is on a continuum with the pornographic sort, and both are at war with women’s political representation, so too over the same period fine art has also become more sexually explicit. Now, we’ve reached the endpoint of this convergence: full reverse takeover of art by the porn industry.

This reached a new nadir with the launch by online porn colossus Pornhub of [‘Classic Nudes’](https://www.pornhub.com/art/classic-nudes/museums), an online guide to the wank-fodder potential hidden in museums. But hidden between the relentlessly cynical lines of this cursed website, like [an enslaved factory-worker’s plea for help hidden in a cheap Halloween decoration](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/chinese-labor-camp-worker_n_2370216?ri18n=true), lurks a counter-revolutionary longing for the one thing pornography can’t offer: erotic restraint.

Having worked for some years as a commercial copywriter, I feel for the anonymous individual who wrote the text for ‘Classic Nudes’. To get the gig you’d need a working knowledge of art history, which for most people comes with a love of fine art, and a capacity to think seriously about the subject. Imagine spending a fortune for a BA or MA in this field, only to find yourself making rent by writing about the ‘super-obvious sexual imagery’ in Salvatore Viniegra’s 1891 [painting](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-first-kiss/ba4a9a85-4c25-4d73-bdab-71758b02775f) of the first kiss between Adam and Eve, noting the way Eve’s hair covers ‘Adam’s Garden of Eden’ and the way the ‘massive snake’ in Adam’s hand represents his ‘old testament’.

Imagine, too, introducing Luca Giordano’s 1696 [*Bathsheba at her Bath*](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/bathsheba-at-her-bath/174869c4-1947-459f-87c9-f876cc9db73b) with a potted account of the biblical story of King David and ‘B.C. hottie Bathsheba’, that takes in David’s ‘total dick move’ of getting Bathsheba ‘knocked up’ before sending her husband to be killed in a war. And imagine capering thus across theology, ancient history and the intensely human and tragically complex field of commitment, jealousy and desire, to conclude blithely that ‘the real story here is about Bathsheba’s smoking curves’.

And yet the *real* real story here is not Bathsheba’s curves, but how difficult it’s become to imagine a painting being about anything other than those curves. This stunted imaginative state has in fact been some time in the making.

Even as Viniegra was painting suggestive images of Adam and Eve, other painting schools were pushing at the constraints of realistic figurative art. Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism and Vorticism (among others) all responded to the increasingly high-tech modern world with less photo-realistic paintings. Famously, in Picasso’s work, 3D perspective itself was discarded [in favour of multiple overlapping perspectives.](https://news.masterworksfineart.com/2018/10/31/pablo-picasso-and-cubism#:~:text=Picasso%20believed%20in%20the%20concept,selected%20by%20sight%20and%20movement.)

Not everyone was keen on all this boundary-pushing. [Hitler’s 1937 ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3868) set out to collect examples of such cultural corruption in one place, so as to condemn them. The event was wildly popular, albeit not for the reasons Hitler intended: most people just liked the paintings and found the ‘degenerate’ designation added spice. The tension this set up, between the repressive forces of order and the liberatory force of boundary-pushing art, set the template for every controversy-courting art exhibition since.

If Hitler is against something, it must be good. Everyone smash traditions! But this has left the art world with a dilemma. For one tradition challenged by twentieth-century art, whether in the John Berger or Art Activist Barbie style, has been the representation of women as ‘nude’. But another tradition in need of smashing was the one that nudes, while nude, must be tastefully so. The result was that even as feminists denounced the ‘male gaze’ in visual art as dehumanising and porn-adjacent, other corners of visual art became steadily more sexually explicit.

In 1998, for example, the West Midlands Police paedophile and pornography unit mounted [a (doomed) court case](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mapplethorpe-images-cleared-1175348.html) against the University of Central England for displaying two ‘obscene’ photos by Robert Mapplethorpe. Fast-forward another decade and a half, and the convergence was still more advanced: Paul McCarthy’s [installation ‘WS’](https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/paul-mccarthy-ws) featured a half-dressed Snow White in what looks a great deal like the early stages of a gangbang with the Seven Dwarfs.

A couple of years later, performance artist Emma Sulkowicz appeared in [*Ceci C’est Pas Un Viol*](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/emma-sulkowiczs-rape-referencing-video-305180)(“This Is Not A Rape”). This 8-minute video recorded Sulkowicz having sex with an anonymous actor in scenes that appeared to begin consensually but ended in what looked like non-consensual anal rape.

If you’ve drunk the twentieth-century boundary-pushing Kool-Aid, either as an artist or a pornographer or - like Emma Sulkowicz - both, there’s no reason why this shouldn’t all be fine. From this perspective we can argue, [with art historian Julia Friedman,](https://quillette.com/2021/07/31/a-treasure-trove-of-priceless-pornography/) that “Classic Nudes” is far from being ‘a predatory assault on Old Master painting’. How can this be, when art and porn are a continuum? Rather, she argues, it’s a route into fine art: ‘a democratizing project, one that could expand the museum-going audience by engaging their interest’.

And there are plenty for whom pushing everyone’s boundaries on acceptable levels of explicitly sexual imagery seems not just to be an acceptable part of culture, but something more like evangelism. Back in 2015 Richard Dawkins [suggested](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/richard-dawkins-wants-lovebomb-iran-erotica-10015488.html) that we might ‘beam erotic videos to theocracies’, seemingly on the assumption that viewing porn would help such benighted places break out of their hidebound superstitions.

And just last week, nepotism enjoyer and liberal arch-troll Flora Gill [tweeted](https://twitter.com/Jim_from_Milw/status/1422427971999215616?s=20) that we should produce ‘entry level porn’ for children. This suggestion, though roundly condemned and swiftly deleted, nonetheless reappeared a few days later for [debate](https://twitter.com/bbcwomanshour/status/1422474495122681898?s=21) on Woman’s Hour, suggesting an elite Overton window just *itching* to sidle ever further in the direction of porn-as-moral-crusade.

For it remains widely received opinion that openness is good by definition: a view also shared by Pornhub’s art guide. Here, what’s hidden is assumed only to be so because of the type of superstition Richard Dawkins would like to see cleansed from ‘theocracies’ through the transmission of porn.

Rembrandt’s Woman Bathing In A Stream, for example, in which a woman lifts her petticoats to paddle, is [described](https://www.pornhub.com/art/classic-nudes/paintings/a-woman-bathing-in-a-stream) by our Pornhub copywriter as ‘a precursor to the sort of porn that starts with a romantic bubble bath and ends in unspeakable things being done with a rubber duck’. Rembrandt’s gentle riverside eroticism, then, is a primitive precursor to more mature works of slippery-when-wet horndoggery such as “Naturally Busty Gabbie’s Sensual Bathtub Sex”.

Of Rubens’ *Nymphs and Satyrs* (1615), Pornhub tells us it was created by a society “certainly orgy-curious, but also frustratingly constrained by the strict religious order of the day”. Clearly the seventeenth century would have been greatly improved by access to Richard Dawkins-approved pornography.

This assumption claims fine art as a precursor to porn. What struck me about it, though, and what leaks from every jaded paragraph penned by Pornhub’s tragically suborned art historian, is the implicit admission it makes: openness kills eroticism.

Rubens’ world might have been ‘frustratingly constrained’, but that constraint also delivers the painting’s erotic charge. The same applies to every innuendo pointed out by *Classic Nudes*: every half-glimpsed crotch, every frilly dress suggesting vaginal lips, every hand caressing a snake. The power lies, precisely, in not saying the quiet part out loud. The dividing line between art and porn may shift as cultural taboos change; but what distinguishes art from porn is its relationship to boundaries.

Art dances with boundaries; porn hates and seeks to destroy them. And this isn’t a static condition, but a *process*, for consumers as well as producers. Studies have [shown](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/1874574) porn consumers have to go looking for ever more forbidden taboos in order to keep getting the same frisson of transgression.

In his proposal for porn evangelism, Richard Dawkins added that of course such content should be ‘gentle, woman-respecting eroticism’. Gill likewise argues that the point of providing curated porn to children is because at least that’s better than the ‘violent, hardcore’ variety.

So evangelism should employ *nice* porn, not (as Dawkins puts it) the ‘violent, woman-hating’ sort we see so often on, er, Pornhub, where common tags [include](https://twitter.com/LailaMickelwait/status/1419108855984885770?s=20) ‘raped teen’, ‘crying teen’ and ‘stop f\*\*\*ing me’. But what the proponents of openness refuse to acknowledge is that their commitment to boundary-smashing inexorably finds itself, whether in art or porn, precisely in the monstrous places they’re so keen to disavow.

Instead of nodding politely, like the producers of Woman’s Hour, to the proposal that we foster yet more ‘openness’, we should listen to the poignant message-in-a-bottle conveyed by Pornhub’s *Classic Nudes*: constrained eroticism is infinitely sexier than the sort that’s on display for everyone. And the alternative will always, inexorably, end up [abominations](https://twitter.com/lailamickelwait/status/1422413188667150339?s=21). Perhaps next time they’ll even call it art.