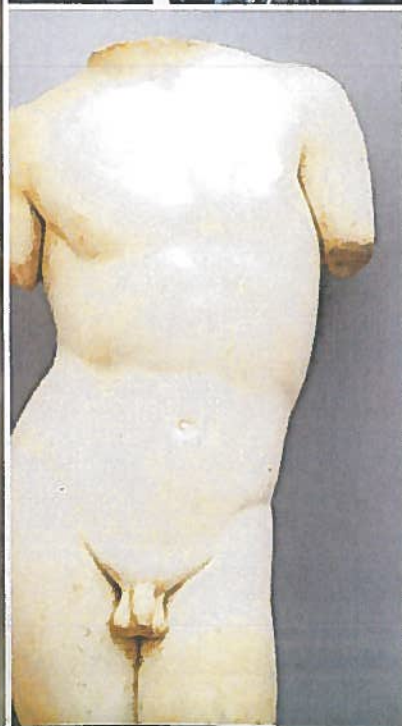


Classical Nudes

and the Making of Queer History

Curated by
Jonathan David Katz

Leslie-Lohman
Museum of Gay
and Lesbian Art



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Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

André Dombrowski

When in 1799 the French neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) wrote "A Note on the Nudity of My Heroes" to defend his *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, he established male heroic nudity both as a fact of ancient life and as a central emblem of post-revolutionary civic virtue: "It was an accepted practice amongst the painters, sculptors and poets of Antiquity to depict nude the gods, heroes and all kinds of men in general that they wished to paint. ... If they painted a warrior, he would be nude, a helmet on his head, his sword attached to a shoulder-strap, a shield on his arm, and boots on his feet; ... In a word, my intention, in creating this painting, was to paint the *moeurs* of Antiquity with such precision that the Greeks and the Romans, upon



Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799, Musée du Louvre, Paris

seeing my work, would not have found me a stranger to their customs."¹ David's association of assertive male nudity with public heroism and the struggles of the modern nation provided one of the most authoritative aesthetic constructions of ambitious academic art and sculpture before abstraction banished figuration in the early twentieth century. It was powerful enough, for instance, to withstand bourgeois culture's gradual neutralization of earlier

sartorial opulence in male dress into the indistinct black frockcoat, as well as the elevation of the female nude to the height of representation for male consumption. The link between male nudity and civic virtue was indeed strong enough to still underwrite much of the practice of one of the first artists to be labeled "homosexual" in the early twentieth century: Sascha Schneider (1870-1927), subject of a recent exhibition at the Leslie-Lohman Museum. Schneider who escaped the charge of "sodomy" under the infamous §175 of the German Criminal Code in 1908 only by fleeing to Italy, conceived of the well-built classical

male nude as the essential key to national health and strength throughout his career, in both art and life (his studio doubled as a fitness studio). In the century-plus that separates these two artists, an uncountable number of buttocks, unencumbered penises and flexed pectoral muscles came to herald the birth of a new social order (of emancipated free citizens that, however, excluded women from political representation until well into the twentieth century) and eventually bespoke a new sexual order as well (the "homosexual," first codified as a type by medical and juridical developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The power of the classical nude in representation thus persisted for as long as it did because it was both the emblem of the strictest social norms concerning modern virility and also—notwithstanding this hypervisibility and ubiquity—the cynosure of non-normative desires.

But the need for David's anxious defense itself makes clear the especially fraught nature of his aesthetic in a modern Christian society. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* could after all also be seen as depicting an overdetermined homosocial world, in which a "sword attached to a shoulder-strap," or "a shield on his arm," were barely masked phallic extensions, embodying less an ancient democratic ideal of pederastic education and altruism than a modern sense of sexual freedom from bourgeois norms of procreation. But David's careful collapse of past and present, ethics and erotics—as the first historian of ancient art, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), had also proposed, as early as the 1750s—was precisely one of the reasons why the "classical" became such an important proto-homosexual trope before the full scientific codification of the "homosexual" was made. Depictions of classic nudes provided imagery for new imaginings, supplying potential erotic stimulation at a safe "visual" distance—in painting, sculpture, and eventually photography—as a set of encounters through pictures only.

Such depictions swept aside the markers of time and place, through a look back in history and most often (from the vantage point of Northern Europe and America) toward Southern Europe, to ancient Greece and Rome. Representations of the classical male nude thus manufactured an image of the here and now that was at the same time a careful distancing from the present and its restrictions. The realm of classical nudity could be real enough (filled with the images of concrete bodies) only to the extent that it could not be mistaken for an actual (and forbidden) reality; it was a past way of life just recognizable enough to be available for aesthetic and erotic pleasure. The realm of classical nudity thus offered a special kind of proto-politics of pleasure in which male heroism and homoerotic desire for once—even if uneasily—coexisted. It offered an imagery of identification but also—and this was crucial—of potential cover and deflection, and, above all perhaps, it provided the terms by which



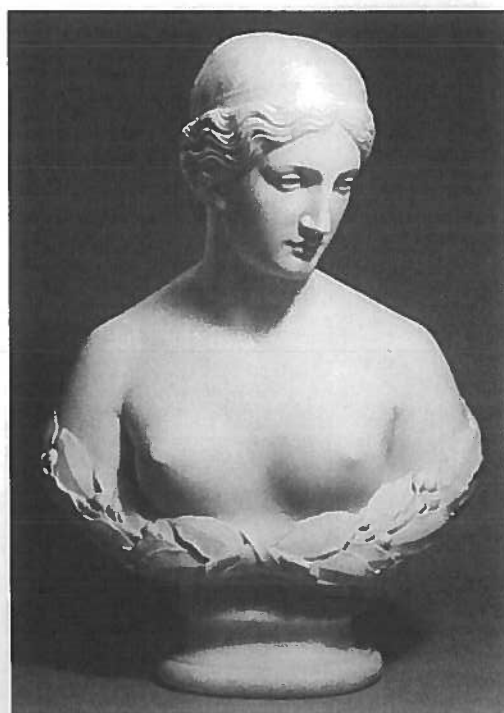
Hans von Marées: *The Ages of Life*, 1877-78, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

and homosocial scenarios of an artist like Hans von Marées [1837-1887], or the attitudes of a cross-dressing artist like Rosa Bonheur [1822-1899], or the proto-lesbian relationships of the expatriate female American sculptors in Rome around Harriet Hosmer [1830-1908]).

The classical male nude also offered a standard to be subverted for the sake of avant-garde aesthetics, which tended to undermine it especially as the nineteenth-century came to a close. This was already the case when David's own students, such as Anne-Louis Girodet (1767-1824), started to favor much less masculinist versions of the male nude and populated their history paintings with ephebic boys and Anacreontic bodies of a slender and feminine build.² Even the ancient sources of a Girodet were different from David's: less the ancient history of Pliny the Elder and Livy, and more the erotic poetry of Anacreon, influenced his imagination and iconography.

a nascent sexual-preference minority imagined itself as having a history that did not seem to exclude it outright. Some of this is true for proto-lesbian iconography in the nineteenth century as well, focused on classical female nudity and culture—such as the cult around the Greek poet Sappho—in which homoeroticism could hide within the plain sight of the ubiquity of female flesh in more standard depictions of naked women.

If anything, classical nudity and its homosocial worlds promoted a rejection of heteronormative imperatives and provoked a certain panic about standard social and artistic behaviors (as for instance in the letters and the often "unfinished"



Harriet Hosmer: *Daphne*, 1854, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Perhaps the greatest attack on the male norm came from symbolist artists later in the nineteenth century, such as Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) and his followers, or the so-called "decadents" within the British Aesthetic Movement, like Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), Simeon Solomon (1840-1905), and of course Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Only the last two were convicted of sodomy during their lifetime, while for many other artists associated with the movement (and beyond) a clear-cut sexual preference is not easy to determine and perhaps was difficult to conceptualize before homosexuality acquired that name. But the movement's shared interest in androgynous bodies, and the unequivocal celebration of the beauty and sexual prowess of the male body over its moral deportment, did much to harm the initial ideal of virile heroic nudity, especially by opening the door to a host of new non-normative representations and thus, potentially, practices as well. Solomon's work is an unusual and special case in point: in it, naked young men frequently gather in imagined literary dreamscapes or scenarios showing distant cultures, where they form novel (and often difficult to parse) relationship constellations—also often including women—that did not resemble the ideals of bourgeois marriage but rather more ambiguous collectivities with strong erotic undertones.

Solomon's mixing of ephebic beauty and non-normative conviviality survived into the realm of early gay photography. Indeed, only perhaps with the emergence of the camera in the mid-nineteenth century did the imagery of classical male nudity carry the actual traces of the initial encounter between model and artist, thus offering the semblance of a tangible homosociality. Photographers like Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931) and Frederick Rolfe (aka Baron Corvo, 1860-1913) should be credited with producing the first actual homosexual imagery in the last years of the nineteenth century—"homosexual" in the sense that its content, although still gesturing towards the ideals of classical culture, had started to lean more expressly toward eroticized viewing and collecting. In their photos, young Italian boys gathered among the modern remnants of ancient cultures—almost always naked or otherwise just scantily clad, often touching or rapt in each other's gazes. Having disrobed for the camera to enact (amid all the slightly preposterous props) scenes of ancient culture, the models nevertheless thrust their potential erotic availability, as a matter of very contemporary expression, into the proto-gay living rooms of London, Berlin, or wherever, like hardly any images before them. By World War I, a proto-gay aesthetic and collective imagination had thus lodged itself within the core of modern media and representation.

That by the early 20th century the classical nude had held sway so powerfully over the tastes of so many nineteenth-century proto-gay men and proto-lesbian women no doubt had to do with the blurry lines it exploited

between image, imagination, and actual sexual conduct. Before the widespread legalization of homosexuality in the twentieth century (a process still incomplete, however, in the second decade of the twenty-first), the ambiguity between sexuality and aesthetics facilitated by the representation of the classical nude offered both a fantasy and a cover, and also eventually came to appear as one actualizable model for a queer life.

Notes

¹ David, Jacques-Louis. *Le Tableau des Sabines exposé publiquement au Palais national des sciences et des arts*. Paris: P. Didot l'aîné, 1799-1800, n.p.

² "A reference to the Greek poet Anacreon, whose love poems addressing both men and women had been repeatedly invoked by Winckelmann to exemplify Greek ideals." Reed, *Art and Homosexuality*, 64.

Further Reading

Davis, Whitney. *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

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André Dombrowski is associate professor of art history at the University of Pennsylvania, where his research centers on the arts and material cultures of France and Germany in the mid- to late-nineteenth century with an emphasis on the histories of science, politics, sexuality, and psychology. He is particularly concerned with the social and intellectual rationales behind the emergence of avant-garde painting in the 1860s and 1870s. His book *Cézanne, Murder, and Modern Life* was published by the University of California Press in 2013 and is winner of the Phillips Book Prize. He has also written essays on Manet, Degas, Menzel, Marées, and other key painters of the period.

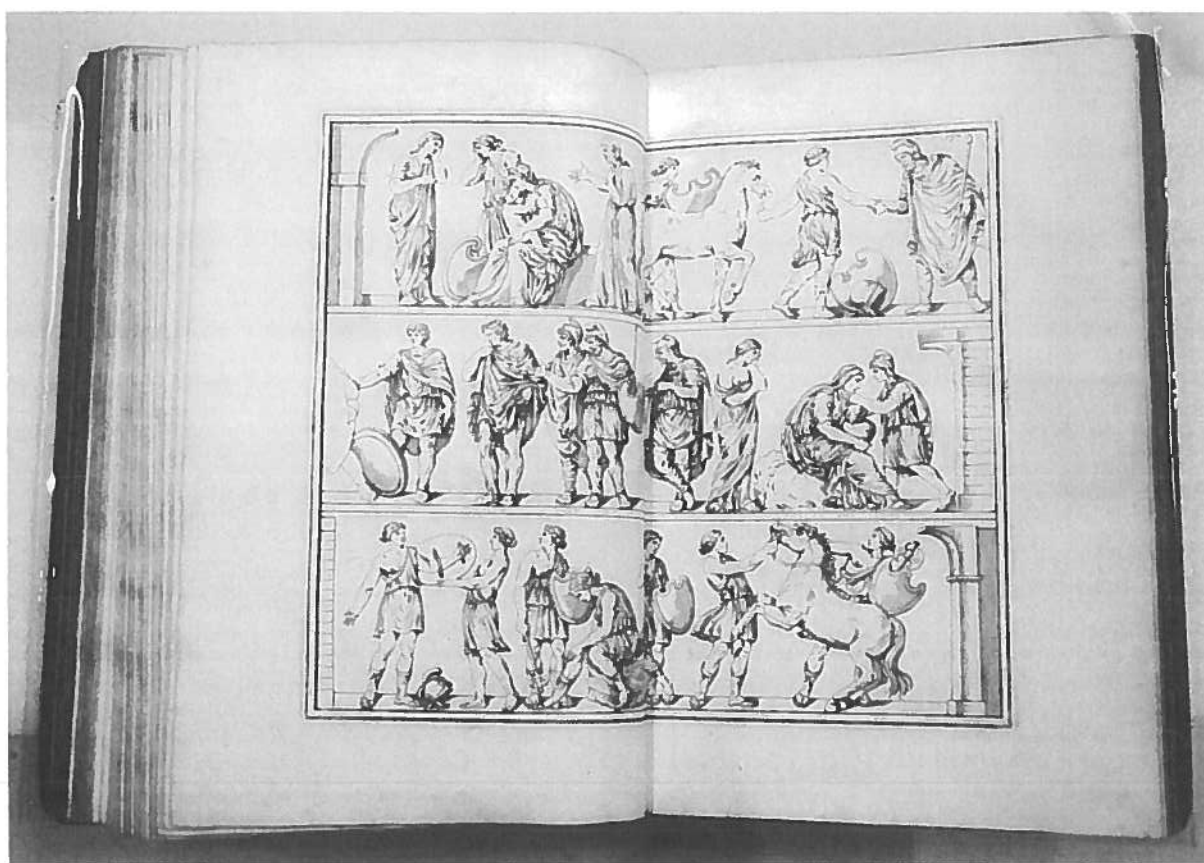


Henry Fuseli, Swiss (1741-1825)

The Rape of Ganymede, 1804

Lithograph, 12 3/8 x 9 1/2 in.

Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

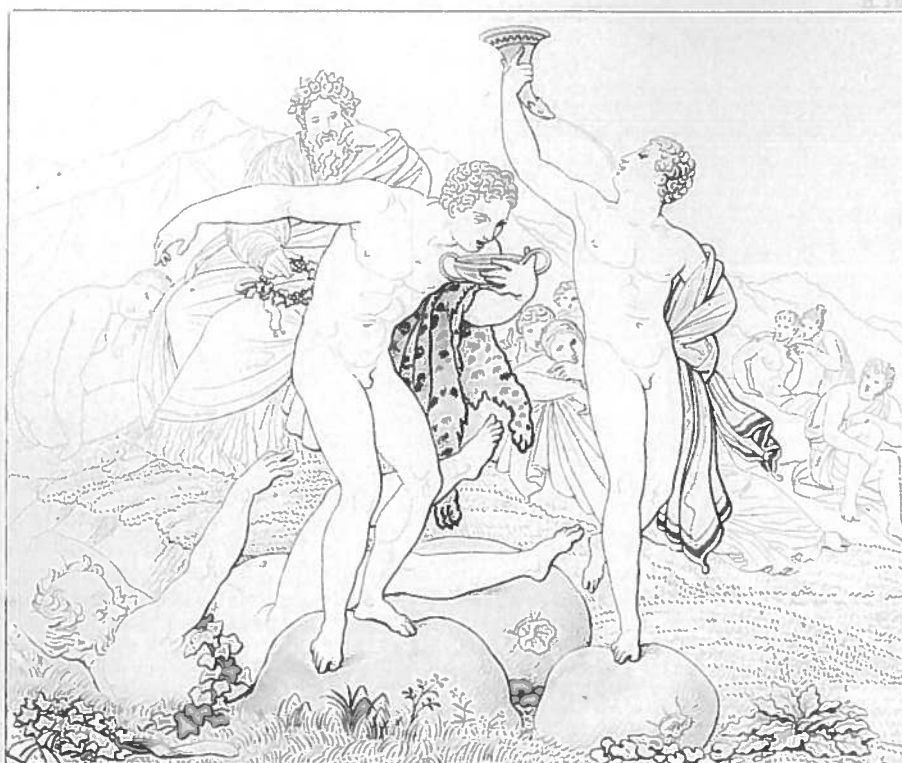


Johann Joachim Winckelmann, German (1717-1768)

Monumenti Antichi Inediti, 1767

Handmade book

Collection of Leslie-Lohman Museum, Foundation purchase with funds provided by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh and others



ODE XXXVIII.

Chape de la couronne.

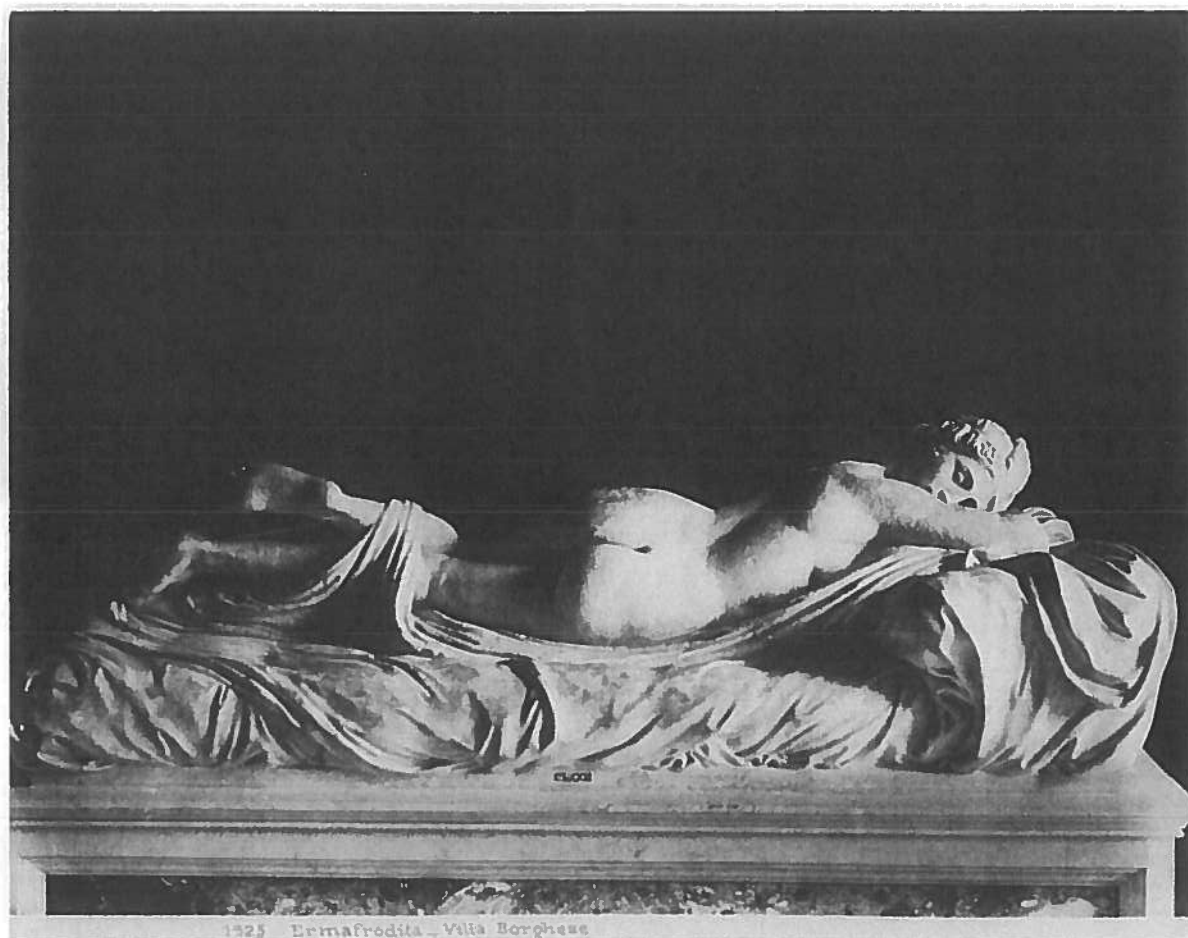
Anne-Louis Girodet, French (1767-1824), engraving by M. Châtillon
Anacreon, Ode XXXVIII, ca. 1820s
Print, 8 x 7.5 in.
Collection of Leslie-Lohman Museum, Foundation purchase



Jean-Jacques Pradier, French (1790-1852)
Standing Sappho, modeled 1848, cast ca. 1851
Bronze, 33 7/8 x 14 9/16 x 13 in.
Collection of the Dahesh Museum of Art, New York



Simeon Solomon, English (1840-1905)
Erinna Taken from Sappho, 1865
Pen and black ink on white wove paper, 9 1/8 x 12 11/16 in.
Collection of Dennis Lanigan



1325 Ermafrodito, Villa Borghese

James Anderson, English (1813-1877)

Hermaphrodite, Villa Borghese, 1865

Albumen print, 8 x 10 in.

Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, Gift of William Knight Zewadski 2003.36.6



Unknown

Thomas Eakins and J. Laurie Wallace posing at water's edge, ca. 1883

Photographic print, 2.75 x 4 in.

Thomas Anshutz Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

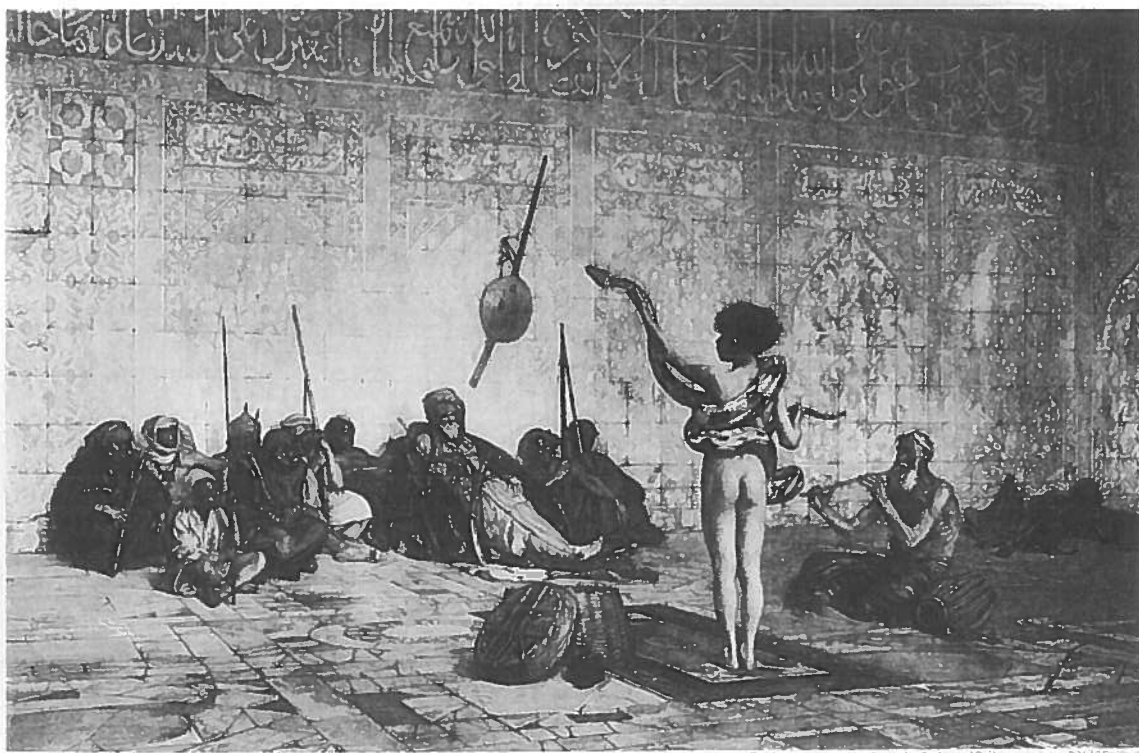


Hans von Marées, German (1837-1887)

Abduction of Ganymede, 1887

Sanguine on paper, 49 x 39.3 cm.

Collection of the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

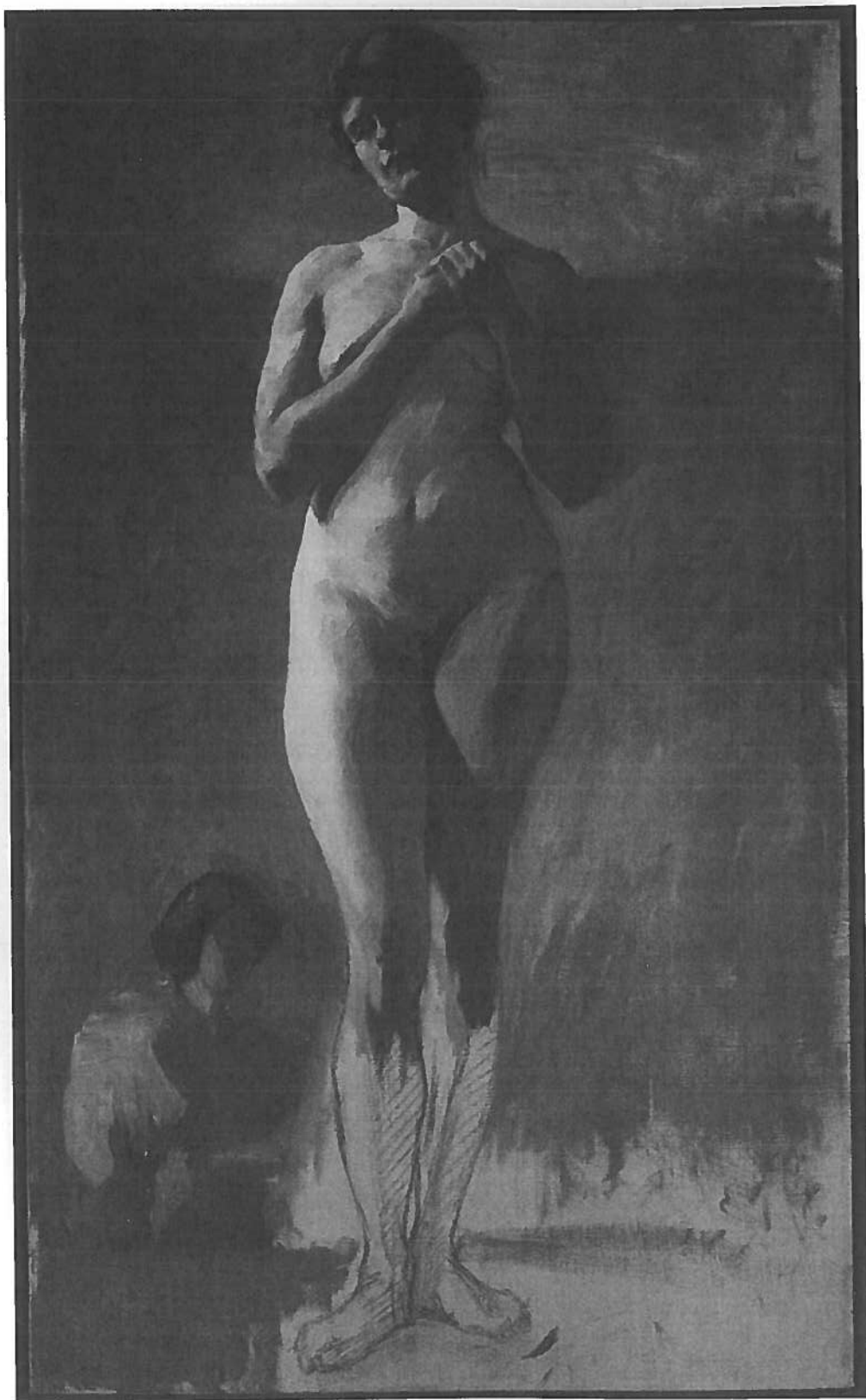


The Serpent Charmer

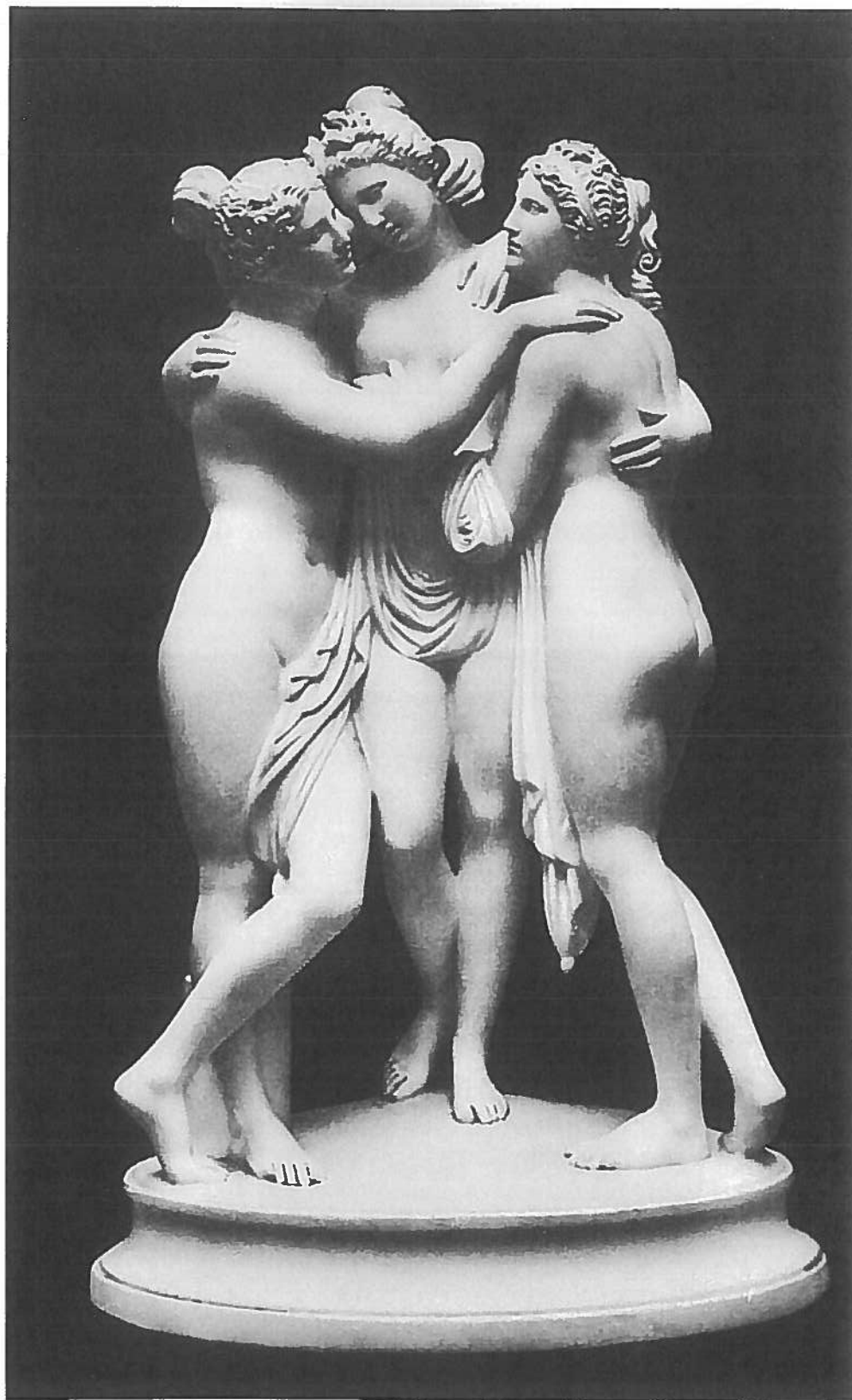
Jean-Léon Gérôme, French (1824-1904)
The Serpent Charmer, 1894
Photogravure (issued by D. Appleton and Co.), 7 7/8 x 11 7/8 in.
Collection of Leslie-Lohman Museum, Foundation purchase



Wilhelm von Gloeden, German (1856-1931)
Untitled (Boy with a garland in his hair), 1895
Albumen print, 9 x 6.75 in.
Collection of Sinski/McLaughlin



Florine Stettheimer, American (1871-1944)
Nude Study, Standing with Hands Clasped, ca. late 1890s
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 30 x 18 in.
Art Properties, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967



Friedrich O. Wolter, German (1874-1958)

Drei Grazien, n.d.

Albumen print, 5.5 x 3.5 in.

Collection of Leslie-Lohman Museum, Foundation purchase