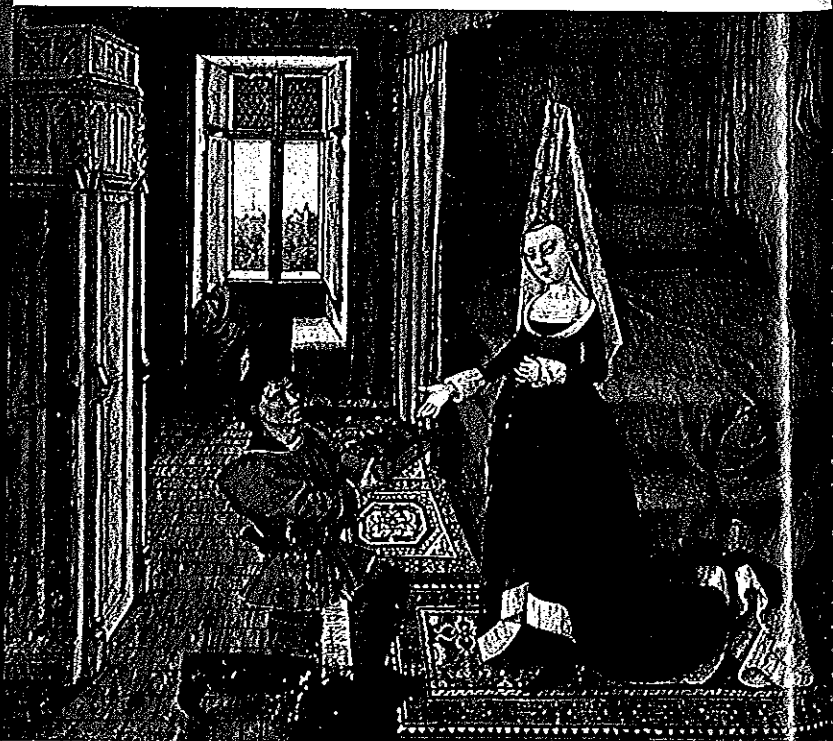


Omnivore  
Autumn 2003

nude & mode

anne hollander



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Opposite:

Barthelemy van Eyck, *A Lady receiving a Book from a Poet*, circa 1469

This page:

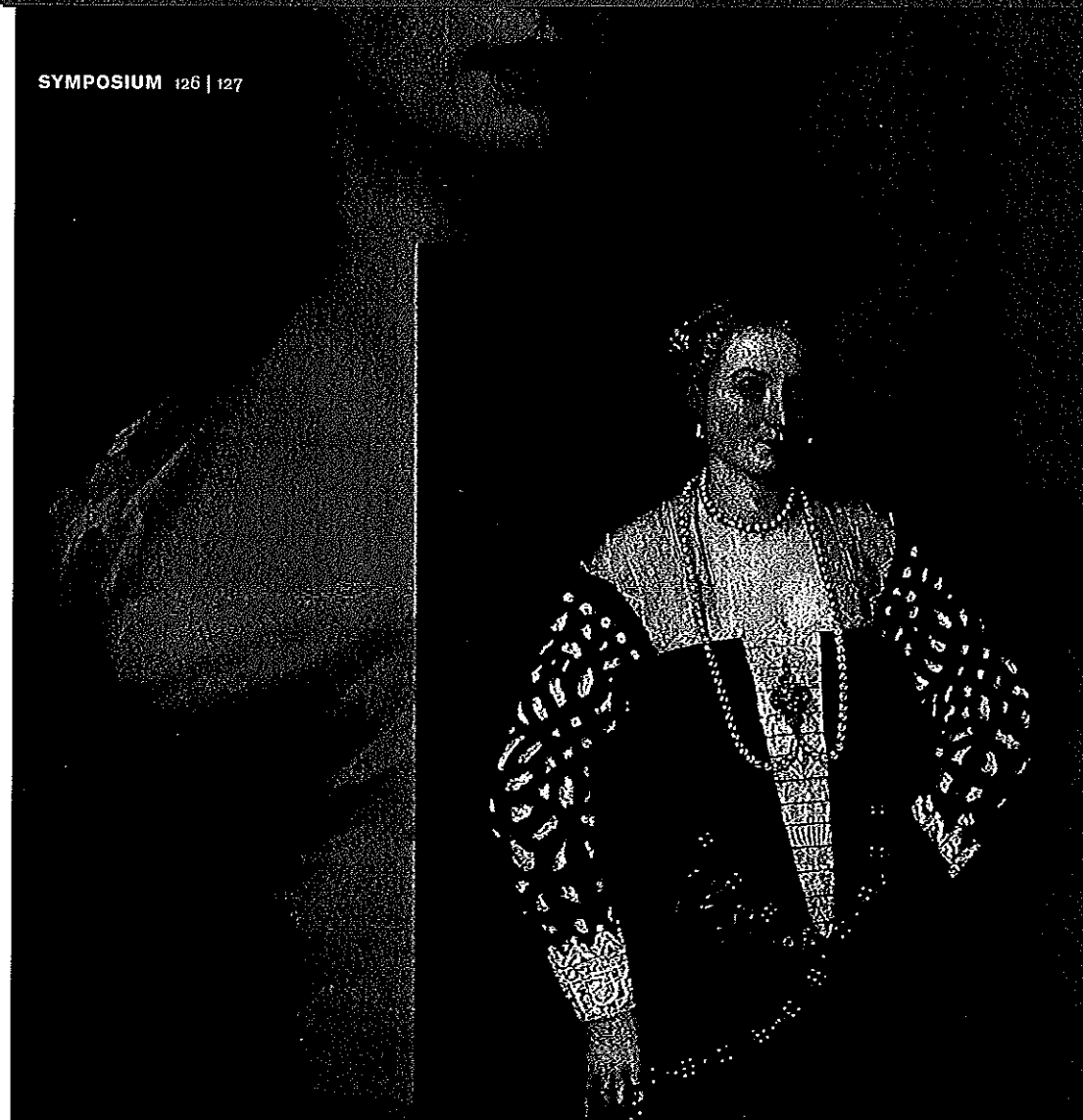
Hans Memling, *Eve*, reverse of the right wing of *The Virgin and Child Enthroned* triptych, circa 1485

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When I looked at art books in my adolescence, I couldn't help noticing that the female nude figures were shaped exactly like the female dressed figures of the same historical period. Not only did the clothes look different from what my mother and I were wearing; the naked bodies didn't look much like my mother and me, either, but more like period mannequins, carefully made to fit into the period clothes.

I pursued and discussed this thought later on, after years of art-historical study had confirmed my early impressions, and last summer it was demonstrated as part of an exhibition I curated at the National Gallery in London. Pairs of pictures were hung to show how artists made their nudes look real, natural and appetizing, mainly by painting them to look as if they had been stripped of fashionable clothing. Across the pages to follow you will see five pairs, ranging from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, each showing a dressed woman and a nude one from the same epoch and the same artistic tradition.

For example, to the left, a fifteenth-century French illumination shows a poet offering his book to a lady, whose bosom-revealing bodice is very small above a narrow, wide-belted high waist, with tight sleeves and high armholes. She sticks out her belly to support the heavy folds of the skirt she holds up in front, showing her two feet in long pointy shoes. The Flemish Eve, above, from the same period has the same long, narrow arms, wide-spaced round little breasts above a narrow rib cage and high waist, with a long, swelling belly below and quite prominent feet at the bottom. Each woman wears her ear nude as an ornament, on a head disproportionately large for her chest and shoulders.



Two sixteenth-century Venetian painters show the same ideal long, thick female torso of their moment, with no extra swell of breast or belly, and with plump, upholstered arms held well away from the body. These women's heads are disproportionately small above their broad, fleshy shoulders and chests. The modish waistline was now occurring down at navel level, and skirts were shaped like stiff, floor-length bells that hid everything. Though this nude's torso and arms look as if she had escaped from the bodice in the portrait, her legs and feet are a quasi-classical fantasy.

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Opposite:

Pablo Veronese, *Portrait of a Woman*,  
circa 1565

Attr. to Jacopo Tintoretto, *Proserpine and  
Ascalaphus*, circa 1578-80

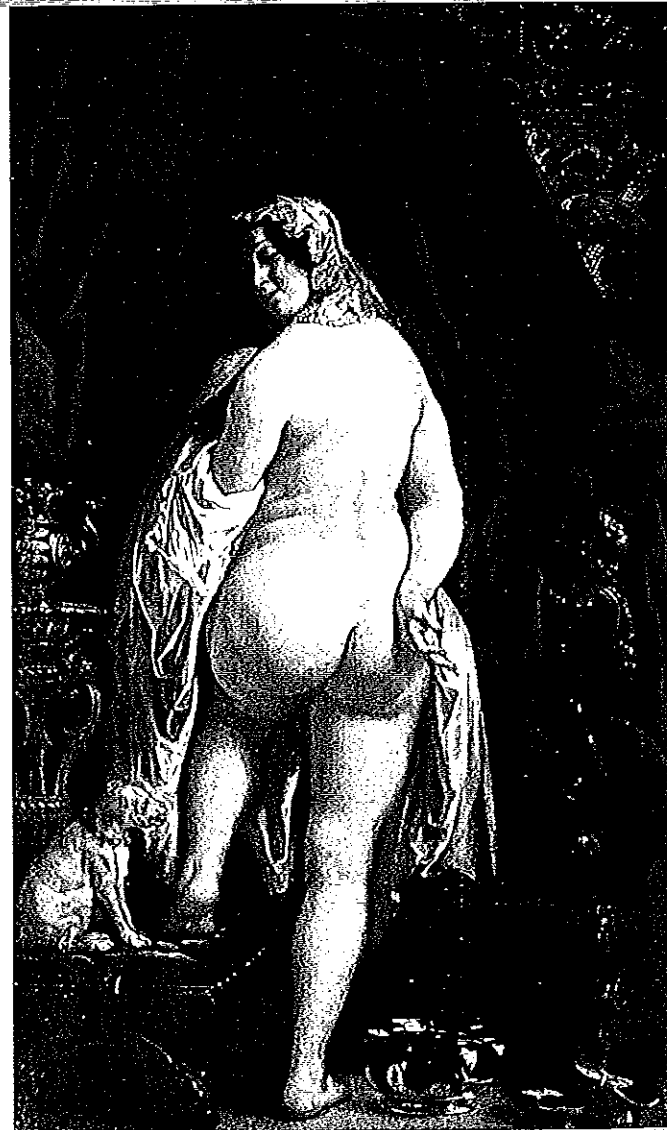
This page:

Jacob Ochtervelt, *A Woman Playing a  
Virginal, Another Singing and a Man  
Playing a Violin*, circa 1675-80

Jacob Jordaens, *King Candaules of Lydia  
showing his Wife to Gyges*, 1646



Two Dutch seventeenth-century interiors, one real and one legendary, display the most attractive female features of the time. The massive nude buttocks below the bulky back and arms, to the right, seem to shine and flow like the satin on the thickly dressed figure, above, whose enormous double-domed skirt is suggestively cleft down the rear. The naked behind seems created to fill out just such a dress as this, which in real life was extended by canvas and padding precisely to create the suggestion of such charms.





Opposite:  
Henry Raeburn  
William Etty  
This page:  
Kees Van Donge  
Pierre Bonnard



Two English painters from the early nineteenth century emphasize the fashionable hourglass figure, with special emphasis on big breasts. The lady in the portrait hides her arms and turns her face from the light, so that its full strength falls on her prominent white bosom, where no ornament distracts the eye from its double swell. Venus also lifts her arms and lowers her face, so her big nude breasts may glow more noticeably. In both pictures, each breast casts its own shadow; and, in the Venus, even the nipples cast theirs.

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Opposite:

Henry Raeburn, *Mrs. Scott Moncrieff*, circa 1814

William Etty, *Venus and Cupid*, circa 1820s

This page:

Kees van Dongen, *The Comtesse de Noailles*, 1931

Pierre Bonnard, *Standing Nude*, 1920



Two early twentieth-century painters, French and Dutch, share the visual idea of the woman as a column. Van Dongen's chic countess forms a draped classical pillar with no bodily projections, her arms held in closely so that nothing interrupts the verticality of her clothed figure. Bonnard keeps the tender face and curves of his nude girl in shadow, sending one insistent band of light straight down her body and her fashionably long leg, to turn her into a sleekly naked modern pillar. Her bare foot even seems shaped to wear a high-heeled shoe, another modern element also shown emerging below the countess's satin folds.



In each of these five clothed figures, the painter has shaped the dress according to current fashion. Each corresponding nude figure shows how the same characteristics of fashionable dress were governing the painter's eye as he shaped the desirable nude. If absent modish clothes are what make female pictorial nudes suggestive, the same is doubtless true in real life. The sexiest nakedness is seen through clothes — when they're there, and even when they aren't.