

Nudity: from ancient to modern

Literature



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Nudity was regarded as being normal in many ancient cultures and is still prevalent in primitive tribes, but was considered derogatory and embarrassing during the Victorian Era and is even now not widely accepted in North America. Many of us are ignorant to the fact that nudity is a normal condition that has reigned throughout most of mankind's existence. Anything from total exposure to casual body covering was a part of the lifestyle from prehistoric times through the Greco-Roman civilizations and into the Middle Ages. Even in the modern era, primitive tribes still exist in remote areas of the Earth and subsist without clothing of any kind. However, the Victorian and to a lesser extent modern societies both loathe nakedness and condemn those who practice nudism.

When examining prehistoric cultures, the Greeks stand apart as a civilization overflowing with culture and progression. Having over a thousand years of eminence, the history of Greek traditions has been well preserved. While many cultures have recognized the contributions of the earliest Greece to art, law, literature, philosophy, and politics, not much has been documented about early Greek advocacy of liberty from clothing when sensible and appropriate. The dress of both the upper and lower classes within Greek society was in accordance with the simplicity and forthrightness character of Greek philosophy; "that a draped garment could be taken off in an instant" (Mireaux 65). Even the fancier gowns designed for both sexes, with jewelled or metal shoulder clips, were made from one piece of an elegant draped material.

When the Greeks desired to dance or work, they merely disrobed and proceeded. It was the natural thing to do, and no one was dismayed or

distraught at the sight of a bare person. Even students in school were normally educated while unclad by teachers who were also undressed. Archaeologists have discovered numerous vases illustrating completely naked performers at festivals and labourers in the fields.

Historians acknowledged this ancient Greek body-attitude primarily when they write about the athletic training that occurred in the Greek gymnasium. The very word gymnasium is based on the root word "gymnos", which means naked. In time, bareness also became an element of convention of the Olympic Games. It is believed that "the Olympic Games originated as far back as 1100 BCE as peace treaty contests authorized by the kings of the cities of Pisa, Elis, and Sparta" (Durant 170). Up until 394 CE, when the games were banned by Theodosius the Great, nudity was a principle element of the Olympic Games

Contrary to the Greek philosophy, the Victorian Era (mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century) fashioned a society of contradictions by placing taboos on principle biological urges and desires. The years of emotional and physical body-freedom enjoyed during the Napoleonic epoch shifted to the version of puritanical repression notoriously known in history as "Victorianism". It was common to cover all legs, even those of pianos and tables, in order to prevent sexual arousal. Bathing suits at the time covered almost the entire bodies of both men and women. However, obliterating the body was not sufficient for the ethics of the Victorian period. Sexual words and references to body parts were removed from "proper" language to thwart the stimulation of sinful sexual desires. It was egregious to make references to the human body in the mixed company of polite society. Legs

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became "limbs," a chicken leg became "dark meat," and a chicken breast "white meat."

Shame relating to sexual desires and activities reached such extremes that a lady in the mid-1800s concealed all body parts apart from her face. She dressed in layers of petticoats and was encased in clothing from a high-collared blouse to a floor-length bustled skirt, a bonnet completely concealing her head and a shawl drawn around the body. Even a lady's hands were hidden and gloves were viewed as "graceful for a lady in the house except at meals" (Heer 127). In addition, some women did not appear at the table barehanded, but wore fingerless mittens. Men were also expected to be proper in both dress and manner. Then, similar to now, the majority of society considered nudity and sexual arousal to be synonymous.

Although Victorianism influenced modern society, in various secluded areas of the warmer climes, naked societies endure as primitive tribes whose members do not wear clothes. The Yanomamis of the remote northern Brazilian territory of Roraima, a primitive and naked tribe, are the largest known tribe still isolated from the outside world with a population of approximately one hundred thousand. They hunt with poisoned arrows, and many use primitive tools. They shun clothes, decorate their bodies with fruit dye and flowers, and live under huge palm huts in communities of fifty people.

The Tupari tribe of the Rio Branco, in the Amazon jungles of Brazil, demonstrate another example of nude living among aborigines. The Tupari never created any kind of clothing, because the weather is always warm.

Their natural nudity fits perfectly into the framework of their surroundings and, except for ceremony or decoration, they never wish to cover themselves. Men of the Tupari set off before sunup to hunt. Those men and boys remaining in the village work at preparing the ground for planting or collect firewood and building materials. Meanwhile, the women attend to the children, collect fruit, spin cotton, and weave hammocks. By three o'clock in the afternoon, their day's work over, men and women gather together, drink, make bows, arrows, necklaces, and headdresses, and decorate their bodies. It is a life of "unhurried simplicity" (Weyer 37). It is remarkable that such serene scenes of primitive and perhaps prehistoric times still co-exist with our industrialized, stress-filled lifestyles and complex governmental configuration.

During the last 50 years, there has been a tremendous liberalization in North American attitudes concerning sexual behavior, but public nudity continues to evoke disgust and unease. Even though legal limitations have been more lenient and clothing-optional beaches are more numerous than ever before, as are the sunbathers who frequent them, most North Americans continue to disapprove of nudity in public. In spite of the fact that it now is fairly acceptable to display virtually all of one's body poolside or at the beach, total nudity continues to make North Americans perturbed.

Most of us are ambivalent when it comes to nudity. It used to be quite risquẽ½ to read about sexual encounters in a novel or to watch a passionate love scene in a film. However, many successful novels contain explicit descriptions of sexual anatomy, and Playboy magazine has 3 400 000 subscribers. Since commercial films are designed for public viewing, though,

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on-screen nudity is subject to censorship. Paintings of nudes by European masters and classical nude statues from Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome are exhibited to the public without much gripe.

Yet, those who openly express acceptance of public nudity in the U. S. are likely to be criticized. Ironically, some North Americans correlate nudity with purity and innocence, having Adam and Eve in mind. From this perspective, primitive tribes that lack clothing may be seen as exemplifying some sort of pristine nobility. Others attribute tribal nudity to cultural backwardness. Both views are fully compatible with condemnation of nudity among "civilized" men and women. Although television documentaries that include pictures of minimally clothed or even entirely naked natives of other continents do not seem to offend mainstream audiences, any prime-time images of bare Caucasian breasts and buttocks are likely to cause trepidation.

In Victorian times, a large number of Europeans never saw an unclothed human body. Paradoxically, numerous European beaches today no longer expect clothing. France's largest nudist colony, Cap'd Agde, draws 40 000 European tourists every summer. Guests not only swim in the nude at this resort, but go about naked even while shopping for groceries or enjoying a meal at a restaurant. Scandinavia also has a long custom of nude sunbathing. Finding a Swedish beach where most of the bathers are not nude is virtually impossible. Asia attracts numerous European tourists by presenting them nude resorts and beaches. Gambia, in West Africa, is the choice of many Swedish people who wish to holiday in the nude during the winter. These are just some of the places where nudity is not only permitted, but it is encouraged and is sometimes compulsory.

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Nudity was regarded as being commonplace in many ancient cultures and is still prevalent in primitive tribes, but was considered derogatory and embarrassing during the Victorian Era and is even now not part of mainstream North American culture. Ancient Greeks were quite fond of nudity and encouraged it in sports and in school. Contrary to this, the Victorian Era subdued nakedness and sexual arousal by covering everything and censoring any depiction of or reference to nudity. However, primitive tribes still exist in tropical regions without the need for clothing or technology. In modern society, the naked body is still not broadly acknowledged. Nudity on North American television is rare. Children are protected from the "damaging" effects of viewing a natural, normal, and harmless human body, but violent carnage is condoned as entertainment for children. It is time for North America to lighten up and rethink its views on nudity because the naked body will always be around.