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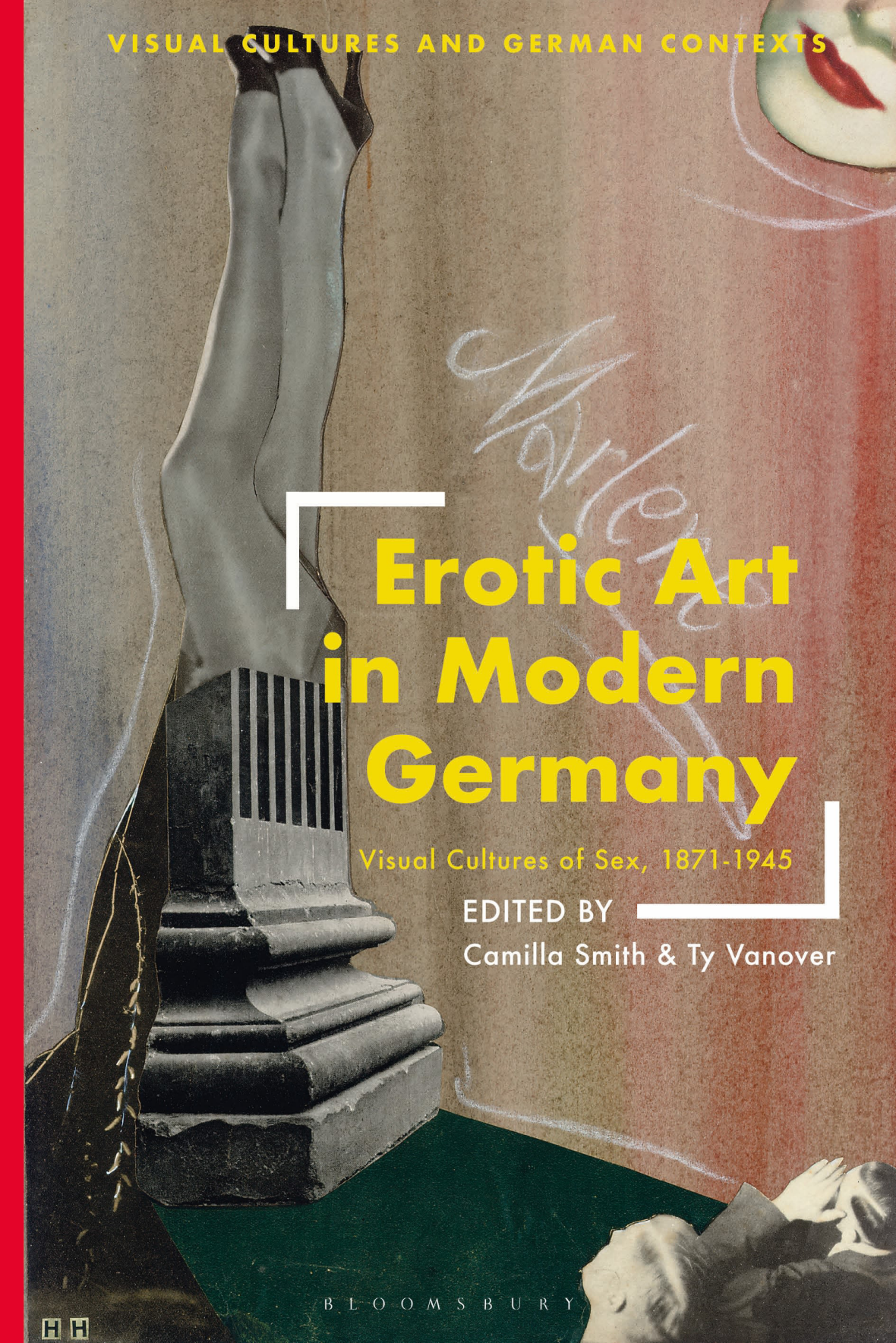

Erotic Art in Modern Germany

Visual Cultures of Sex, 1871-1945

EDITED BY
Camilla Smith & Ty Vanover

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Erotic Art in Modern Germany

Visual Cultures and German Contexts

Series Editors

Deborah Ascher Barnstone (University of Sydney, Australia), Thomas O. Haakenson (California College of the Arts, USA)

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BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

First published in Great Britain 2026

Cover design: Elena Durey
Cover image: Hannah Höch, *Marlene*, 1930, watercolor, white pastel and paper collage on paper, 36.7 × 24.2 cm. Private Collection. Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images. © 2025 DACS.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3505-4016-3
ePDF: 978-1-3505-4020-0
eBook: 978-1-3505-4019-4

Series: Visual Cultures and German Contexts

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people who have helped this book take shape. The idea for this volume was born out of a series of symposia and conferences between 2020 and 2023, most notably a January 2020 symposium on sexuality and visual culture hosted by the University of Exeter's "Rethinking Sexology" cross-disciplinary research group, the 2022 conference panel "Modern Erotica: Sex, Censorship and German Visual Culture" at the German Studies Association (GSA) conference in Houston, and two symposia convened under the title "Weimar Visions: Picturing Sexual Subjectivities" held in Berlin and Exeter in 2022 and 2023. Papers from these symposia are published in the forthcoming volume, *Weimar's Queer Visual Cultures* (University of Toronto Press, 2026). To this end, we would like to first thank Kate Fisher, Jana Funke, Birgit Lang, Ina Linge, Katie Sutton, Nina Lübbren, Andrew Donson, and many others who facilitated and/or participated in these events and contributed to lively discussions on erotic art and visual culture.

It was during a post-conference GSA dinner in Houston that we first broached the idea of a volume that specifically explored erotic art in Germany. We are immensely grateful to Deborah Ascher Barnstone and Tom Haakenson, as series editors, for their support of this project, and to Tom for writing a series editor introduction. At Bloomsbury, we are indebted to the hard work of Ross Fraser-Smith and Alexander Highfield. We also acknowledge the useful feedback solicited from four anonymous external reviewers that aided the final shape of the volume. The introduction to the volume greatly benefited from the careful eye of Claire Jones, whose suggestions were invaluable.

We would finally like to thank each of the scholars who contributed their work to this volume. This project represents a collaborative effort that spans the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Spain—the result is a truly remarkable body of work from scholars with a clear commitment to understanding how histories of sex and sexuality continue to shape our present. We are excited to have had the opportunity to read and edit your work and are proud to finally see it in print. This book is dedicated to you.

SERIES EDITOR INTRODUCTION

EROTIC LOOKS

Thomas O. Haakenson

The scholarly effort to explain "sex" is fraught with challenges. In English, "sex" can mean both these things: the acts and the (supposed) facts. To appreciate fully the important contributions of the following study, the reader needs to understand that the "acts of sex"—the physical, intimate encounters in which humans engage, often but not always with others—need to be distinguished, provisionally at least, from what we might call the "facts of sex"—those human, genital, morphological markers often attributed to supposed natural or biological laws, or seen as outward expressions of the human body's otherwise less visible functions and features, such as glands, gonads, or hormones.

Centuries of scholarship show that it is difficult to distinguish the "acts of sex" (sexuality) from the bodily "facts of sex" (morphological sex or gender expression). The efforts have been the focus of not only academic but also public discourse, as well as the target of innumerable interventions by museum curators, medical experts, cultural institutions, and, of course, political figures alike. Yet no single effort to present either a satisfactory contemporary definition or an all-encompassing historical account of the "acts of sex," as contemporary or historically specific forms of human erotic expression and release, has ever really satisfied the insatiable lust for complete (definitional) satisfaction, to use a potent turn of phrase that artist-provocateur Marcel Duchamp might enjoy.

As such, it is necessary—especially for those unfamiliar with these definitional debates—to understand that the present volume asks its readers to understand "sex"—and specifically the "acts of sex"—through deference to a related, perhaps even coterminous, "eroticism." As the volume's essays suggest, "eroticism" may itself be another form of what is recognized as "sex." Or the erotic may be so fully charged with sexual energy that it

amounts to a kind of a sexual, intellectual foreplay with and of the senses (in the cases presented here, primarily foreplay with the optical senses through visual cultural forms). The erotic is situated as visual seduction, giving the reader a coquettish taste of the possible ecstasy of knowing, exactly, what "sex" is and how it transcends historical, social, cultural, and even personal differences. Presenting "sex" through the lens, and lenses, of the "erotic" gives the reader a glimpse of a universalizing, normativizing definition of "sex" without falling into the traps and truncations of which artists like Marcel Duchamp and philosophers and historians like Michel Foucault were keenly aware, even as these two titans of twentieth-century thought addressed these traps and truncations quite differently.

Using a focus on eroticism to unpack the problematic relationship between "sex" and "history"—especially in German contexts—is what makes the present volume so rewarding, intellectually and perhaps also libidinally. The editors and contributors of *Erotic Art in Modern Germany* seek to address the seemingly irreconcilable problem of "sex" as "history" by focusing on the erotic as the category by which the reader can come to an understanding of the profoundly situated, personal, and specific, yet also fundamentally universal, historical, and general forms that "sex" might take. The collection does an even greater service in focusing its attention on the underappreciated, under-analyzed significance of erotic art in a particular time and place: Germany from 1871 until 1945.

To these ends, Duchamp—whose contributions to (Western) aesthetic and philosophical discussions of the twentieth century are considered by major museums like the Tate Modern (London) and the Museum of Modern Art (New York) to be some of the most influential—marks a significant reference point, as both a well-known figure across a variety of disciplines and a famous, even infamous, artist provocateur. In the epigraph to their introduction, Camilla Smith and Ty Vanover showcase how the enigmatic figure of Duchamp embodies one of the most effective responses to the problem of approaching "sex" as an historical object or fact. Furthermore, the volume's contributors reveal how Duchamp's perspective allows the reader to capture the slipperiness, the lubrication, the undulation that "sex" entails. This innovative approach is embodied not only in this volume, but by the artist himself. Duchamp's decision to take on a cross-dressing alter ego named Rrose Sélavy, an onomatopoeic pun on the French "Eros, c'est la vie" ("Eros is life" or perhaps even "Sex or sexuality is life"), was inspired. A cis-gendered man, Duchamp did not identify as transexual, transgender, or non-binary. Rather, through Rrose Sélavy, Duchamp revealed in a quite radical way the arbitrary, socially determined relationship between gender expression and that other kind of sex noted above—the "facts of sex"—the sex of one's body, indicated supposedly by one's genitals and the supposed natural or biological or essential connection between them and one's expressed femininity or masculinity.

Rrose Sélavy was certainly "queer" in a very playful way, but Duchamp was also employing that alter ego in the critical, radical ways in which "queer" might be associated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The artist understood that the mutability of gender expression in relation to the sex of one's body—the "facts of sex"—also meant that sexuality, and specifically homosexuality, could be understood as another form of his aesthetic worldview. This worldview situated interpersonal relations as sexual connections by another name, connections that Duchamp erected and ejaculated through artistic collaborations with a number of the cis-gendered male artists of his era, including and especially the French surrealist André Breton. The alter ego of Rrose Sélavy thus allowed Duchamp to get at "sex" in that other sense, as "acts of sex," by suggesting lots of kinds of activities might be associated with, substituted for, even understood as sexuality if understood as part of an erotic expression. According to Duchamp's logic, eroticism may be easier to understand than the innumerable, undefinable varieties of what might be considered "acts of sex" because eroticism "is truly widespread throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands."[1]

Through much of his playful corpus, Duchamp employed according to Paul B. Franklin "a queerness which, historically speaking, has rarely spoken its name directly."[2] Even more provocative, to these ends, are claims Duchamp would make later in life about his artistic collaborations with cis-gendered Dada artists such as André Breton, Francis Picabia, and Tristan Tzara, suggesting in a 1961 radio interview that these partnerships "flourished in the ambiguous interstices between homosociality and homosexuality."[3] Describing specifically his relationship to Breton, Duchamp suggests the connection between the two in even more telling terms: "One could even see in it a homosexual element, if we were indeed homosexuals. We were not, but it is all the same. Our friendship could have turned into a homosexual one if it had not expressed itself in [art] instead."[4] Duchamp's critique here is not directed at the idea of artistic partnerships but rather sexual taxonomies; he challenges what one could "see" and what one actually "is." And he concludes his provocation with an erasure of that distinction: "it is all the same."

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[1] Duchamp interview with Pierre Cabanne in 1966, cited by Camilla Smith and Ty Vanover in the Introduction to this volume. The interview can be found in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1979).

[2] Paul B. Franklin, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain and the Art of Queer Art History," *Oxford Art Journal* 23.1 (2000): 40.

[3] Franklin, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain," 44.

[4] Duchamp qtd. in Franklin, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain," 44. Duchamp's quote is from an interview with Georges Charbonnier broadcasted on French radio in 1961. The French reads as follows: "une amitié d'homme à homme. On pourrait même y voir une homosexualité, si nous étions des homosexuels. Nous ne le sommes pas, mais ça revient au même. (On aurait pu se changer en homosexualité plutôt que de s'exprimer dans le surréalisme)" G. Charbonnier, "Souvenirs surréalistes," in *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (Marseilles: André Dimanche, 1994), 7.

Duchamp's aesthetically informed engagement with the "acts of sex" in relation to the "facts of sex" is in sharp contrast to another figure that haunts this volume in a number of ways: Michel Foucault. The fact that both Duchamp and Foucault were French demonstrates further the kind of important work this volume does, as its editors make clear in their introduction. But Foucault's relationship to *Erotic Art in Modern Germany* can be seen in other ways, too. Most notably, Foucault's effort to distinguish Western forms of understanding about the "acts of sex" from supposedly non-Western ones led him famously—or is it, again, infamously—to distinguish in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* between a *scientia sexualis* and an *ars erotica*. This arbitrary distinction was problematic from its inception, and Foucault sought to some extent to create other frameworks for understanding the "acts of sex" in the later volumes of his planned six-volume *History of Sexuality*.

Foucault's innovative methodological engagements in approaching the history of sexuality live on. His focus primarily on the "acts of sex" rather than the sex of the body, or the "facts of sex," is invoked by the editors of this volume in their introduction as well as referenced directly and indirectly by several contributors in the present volume. Foucault's use of anthropological and genealogical approaches as methodological ones in engaging the history of "sex" were informed by his own frustrations with writing a history without normativizing, without rendering less-than-radical, kinds of sexual encounters, sex acts, sexual pleasures that traditional accounts might further stigmatize as "abnormal"—or, possibly even worse, ignore altogether. The debate between the "abnormal" and "normal" also occupied much of Foucault's thought later in his life, leading him through his methodological inventiveness to address something perhaps more appalling, from an historian's perspective: rendering invisible the kinds of fleeting visibility that so often have made certain "acts of sex" disruptive and revolutionary in particular places and at particular moments in time.

Working within the kind of conflicting dynamic that Marcel Duchamp and Michel Foucault set up, the editors and contributors of *Erotic Art in Modern Germany* focus on "eroticism" as a way to get at the disruptive and revolutionary potential of "sex" without problematically reducing "acts of sex" to the normativizing, and ultimately inaccurate, definitions and descriptions that would reduce these "acts of sex" to particular, even singular, kinds of things or acts. Or worse, to erase historically these "acts of sex" altogether. Thus, these scholars collectively help the reader see just how much "eroticism"—especially in the realm of visual culture—can act to focus the reader on the "acts of sex" without reducing these acts to universalizing categories that ultimately lend themselves much too easily to invisibility or simply to moralizing binarism: the good and the bad, the righteous and the sinful, the right and the wrong.

Disrupting binarisms may seem unfamiliar, even frustrating, to those readers seeking the pleasure of bold-faced definitions, of simple labels, of

reductive thinking. But such disruption is necessary to correct the "absence of scholarship exploring erotic art *qua* art in a German context"—to account for potential (historical) invisibility.[5] And such disruption is part of the approach that has made the book series of which the present volume is a part so vital. Much like *Erotic Art in Modern Germany*, many of the volumes in the *Visual Cultures and German Contexts* (*VCGC*) series have embraced the ambiguity, the curiosity, and the intersectionality that interdisciplinary scholarship brings to German Studies specifically, and the many related disciplines in which scholars in the field find themselves, from art history to cultural studies to political science to the histories of science and beyond. The list is lengthy. And rightly so.

With its fascinating explorations of "eroticism" at the center and the periphery, as expressions of desire and gender nonconformity, and bodily (and body) politics as sites of possibilities and foreclosures, *Erotic Art in Modern Germany* makes clear—like much of what the reader will find in the *VCGC* series as a whole—what is lost in narrowly focusing on universalizing approaches and seemingly helpful binarisms: the very things that engender and create and shape and grow those amorphous, undefinable things—like those illicit "acts of sex"—that were, and are, continually defined and delimited as mechanisms for power and control, not only at the level of the state, but also the community, the institution, and the individual themself. In this way, Foucault's methodological inventiveness—despite the reductive and problematic colonial framing in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*—finds convergence with Marcel Duchamp's/Rrose Sélavy's playful aesthetic analogy where sexuality and artistic collaboration converge. Whereas Foucault initially failed to untangle the dilemma of "sex" and "history" because of his Western bias, his inability to see a sustained connection between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*, Duchamp found such a connection waiting seductively within Western visual culture itself. Duchamp's encounters with Breton and others through their art were (homo)sexual ones, but not the kinds of "sex," not "acts of sex," that Foucault, or most (Western) readers, could see or understand as such. Duchamp made the connection clear: "One could even see in it a homosexual element, if we were indeed homosexuals. We were not, but it is all the same. Our friendship could have turned into a homosexual one if it had not expressed itself in [art] instead."

The artworks and art forms, and the various approaches to erotic looking, featured in the present volume help address the problematic limitation of "sex" to a reductive historical fact or a normalizing set of labels. The astute observer is given tools through the volume's contributions to approach the erotic visual arts in German contexts, and in Duchampian fashion, as

[5] See the Introduction to this volume.

themselves kinds of "sex," as "acts of sex." As one opens up the titillating pages of *Erotic Art in Modern Germany*, one might find oneself in an erotically charged space, where those seemingly clear and obvious boundaries that constitute "acts of sex" are called into question—regardless of their relation to the "facts of sex"—and one just might discover the truly sexual pleasures of erotic looks.

Introduction:

Erotic Art in Modern Germany

Camilla Smith and Ty Vanover

"I believe in eroticism a lot, because it is truly widespread throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called Symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another 'ism' so to speak."

MARCEL DUCHAMP INTERVIEWED BY PIERRE CABANNE, 1966[1]

This volume seeks to offer some of the pieces in a complex puzzle, historicizing the multifarious sexual practices, desires, bodies, and identities that could be considered constitutive of "erotic visual art" in modern Germany. The essays herein present artist case studies and thick descriptions of objects in their historical and discursive contexts using cross-disciplinary approaches drawing from art history, anthropology, material culture; the histories of science, medicine, and technology; and the history of ideas. They often foreground an individual artist or collector, and collectively offer rich comparative analysis, drawing on a wide range of material from across the globe, from the Hindu *Kāma-sūtra* to ancient Greek vases to works of French Orientalist and surrealist art. Taken together, the volume expressly foregrounds the value of studying erotic art because it demonstrates *how much* sex mattered in German society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—irrespective of whether you were "for" or "against" it, whether it was invoked for its commercial or political application, whether it was sold as a commodity or fulfilled an artist's own social, sexual, or psychological need.

[1] *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* trans. Ron Padgett (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1979), 88.

The "cultures" of sex—how it is discursively understood, performed, and recorded in art—are constantly subject to social change.[2] The seventy-year period under consideration in this volume, a period we have broadly termed "modern," which saw significant structural transformations in class and society, is particularly fruitful in this regard. During this time, Germany experienced dramatic political change: from its inception as a unified empire in 1871, through to its reconfiguration as the unstable Weimar Republic, and the installation of a fascist regime in 1933. The volume contends that each of these political shifts incited social and cultural changes that had profound effects on eroticism. It does not seek to trace these shifts via the stylistic development of erotic visual art—a futile task given the sheer stylistic variation throughout the period. Rather, it explores the ways in which these wider cultural, social, and political contexts came to bear on erotic art and the means by which artists produced it. These contexts include the impact of imperialism, democracy, and National Socialism, social reshuffling prompted by Germany's defeat in the First World War, widening class divisions, a robust and active sexual reform (*Sexualreform*) movement, legal proscriptions on the circulation of "obscene" materials, and intercultural artistic exchange with France.

This volume is the first consolidated art historical study of its kind. Though eroticism permeates the history of art (and, indeed, as Marcel Duchamp noted above, our world), it has not been given much space in Western art historical scholarship.[3] This is perhaps surprising, given contemporary trends in the discipline that seek to push our collective understanding of the history of art beyond the canonical register. Yet, as Marcia Pointon notes, the discipline has circled around the nude and pornography as facets of the erotic.[4] Since the 1990s, Pointon, Lynda Nead, Carol Duncan, and other scholars of feminism have compellingly argued for understanding the female nude in art as a subject that goes well beyond debates on prurient censorship of the body.[5] It is a fundamental subject in the circuit of sexual desire—a register of the oppressive "male gaze" and a cipher for male creativity. In so doing, they challenged an established understanding that for the nude to be art, it had to be "an abstract principle of beauty."[6]

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[2] Kate Lister, *A Curious History of Sex* (London: Unbound, 2020), 2.

[3] Erotic art exhibitions in museums and galleries have been more forthcoming in this respect. In the UK, see for example: "Seduced: Art & Sex from Antiquity to Now," Barbican Art Gallery, October 12, 2007, to January 27, 2008; "Very Private?" Charleston, September 17, 2022, to March 12, 2023; and "Beryl Cook / Tom of Finland," Studio Voltaire, May 15, 2024, to August 25, 2024.

[4] Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority. The Body in Western Painting 1830–1908* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

[5] Lynda Nead, "Theorising the Female Nude," in *The Female Nude, Art Obscenity and Sexuality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 5–25; Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," in *The Aesthetics of Power. Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 81–108.

[6] These scholars took Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* (1956) and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) to task, which adopted the problematic binary construction of naked/nude in order to distinguish between the (bad) unclothed female body and the (good) "high art" nude in order to disavow her potential as an erotic object for the male gaze. Berger, in his later work, simply inverted Clark's initial distinction.