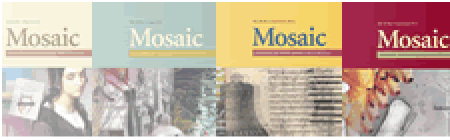

The “Hottentot Venus,” Sexuality, and the Changing Aesthetics of Race, 1650–1850

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Source: *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 19-41

Published by: University of Manitoba

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90011643

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This essay examines the joint emergence of the sciences of “race” and “aesthetics,” particularly as mediated through the goddess Venus in European thought and art. A “double natured” goddess embodying both ideal beauty and carnal desire, Venus shows how the creation of these interdependent sciences resolved internal conflicts in Eurocentricism and male sexuality.

The “Hottentot Venus,” Sexuality, and the Changing Aesthetics of Race, 1650–1850

NICHOLAS HUDSON

As now widely recognized in modern scholarship, changing conceptions of race, beauty, and sexuality during the eighteenth century must be regarded as interrelated phenomena in a broader transformation of Western culture. None of these categories emerged in isolation from the others. In obvious ways, aesthetic standards informed racial scientists who deployed judgments of beauty as proof that whites stood atop a hierarchy of deepening darkness and deformity (Armstrong; Bindman; Meijer). Just as clearly, racial science was deeply sexualized, absorbed by the contours of breasts and pudenda, committed to upholding the superiority of Caucasian norms of patriarchy and domesticity (Schiebinger; Stepan; Zack). The triad of race, beauty, and sexuality could indeed be ramified even further, for it “arose alongside and in step with broader movements of Enlightenment Europe” (Schiebinger 9). In focusing on the interconnections of race and beauty, or of race and gender, modern scholarship has illuminated only a corner of a grander network of relations woven by the thinkers, artists, and moralists of the eighteenth century.

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In the following essay, I seek to broaden our understanding of these interconnections by triangulating race, beauty, and sexuality in a single historical design. All three categories were being reconfigured toward a modern form. Eighteenth-century writers were inventing the hierarchy of "races" that would become a virtually uncontested scientific norm in the nineteenth century. Many of the same writers were, at the same time, creating a "science" of aesthetics. Modern forms of domesticity, in turn, relied on a more formal discrimination between the differing natures of the two sexes: women in particular were assigned the property of fleshy and dangerous beauty that needed to be mastered by male reason. All three developments, I will argue, stemmed from common sources. Principal among these sources were intellectual and cultural changes that threw traditional beliefs and assumptions into crisis. Exploration had increased contact with non-European people, challenging received beliefs about the unity and common origin of the human species. This experience also cast doubt on the universality of European ideas of beauty, a process abetted by the philosophy of experience, empiricism, which gathered evidence from exploration to suggest that the idea of beauty was culturally relative. And new ideas of femininity, instigated by the need to rearrange the family in line with the economic and political ends of the nascent middle-class, emerged through comparisons between European women and women of different "races." In response to these changes, the categories of race, beauty, and gender imposed order and clarity on an intellectual and cultural horizon that had become increasingly inchoate and illegible.

In tracing this process, I will begin near its end with an episode that brought the new discourses of race, beauty, and sexuality into a sudden and dramatic union. In 1810, a dark-skinned young woman christened Saartje Baartman was brought from her south African homeland to London, where she was displayed almost naked before crowds in Piccadilly as the "Hottentot Venus."[1] Thereafter, she was bought by an animal keeper in Paris, where she again left a cage to parade in front of crowds, becoming the subject of numerous artists, both popular caricaturists and medical illustrators, each group saving its most sensational strokes for the depiction of her famously enlarged buttocks (Illus. 1). When Saartje Baartman died in 1815, her body was meticulously dissected by the most renowned French naturalist of the day, George Cuvier, who reported this procedure in the *Mémoires du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle.* Cuvier's report dwelled particularly on that joint object of fascination for both popular and scientific views, her buttocks. He also gave a detailed report on what she had hidden from the crowds, her elongated labia, which he incised and put in a jar of spirits later displayed with great aplomb at a meeting of the Academy of Science (Cuvier).

This unbeautiful story, with its concatenation of public bad-taste and professorial

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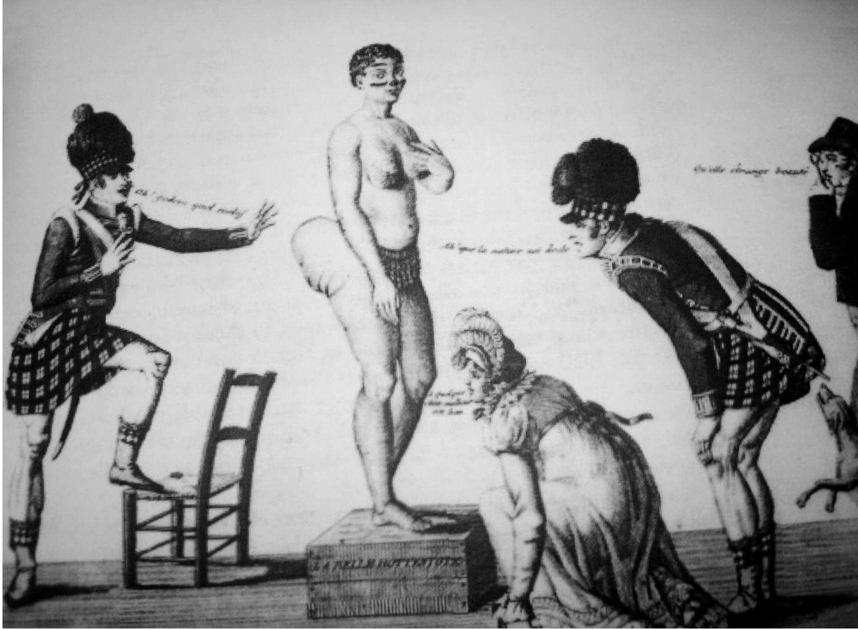

1. French cartoon of "Hottentot Venus," circa 1815.

inhumanity, illustrates well the ways in which modern racial science sunk foundations for a new and pernicious form of popular racism. The epithet "Venus," moreover, introduces a further element that concerns evolving attitudes towards both beauty and gender during the same period. The impresarios who gave Saartje Baartman her stage-name were obviously indulging in a bad joke; they wanted to exploit connections between Venus and female desirability in the popular imagination. But the goddess of love and beauty, at least as she was depicted in visual arts, was also playing a constitutive role in the formation of racial categories during the same period. In 1795, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach reported on his examination of the skull of another female, a girl from the Georgian region of the Caucuses, which he reproduced in a drawing that depicted this skull between counterparts representing a "Negro" and a "Mongloid" (Illus. 2). The "Caucasian" skull, he pronounced, must exemplify the original and most perfect racial type of *homo sapiens* precisely because it was incomparably more "beautiful" than the accompanying craniums, which he described as grotesque deviations from the Georgian norm (237–38). Race scientists influenced by the work of Blumenbach, arguably the founder of their field, shared this enthusiasm for the

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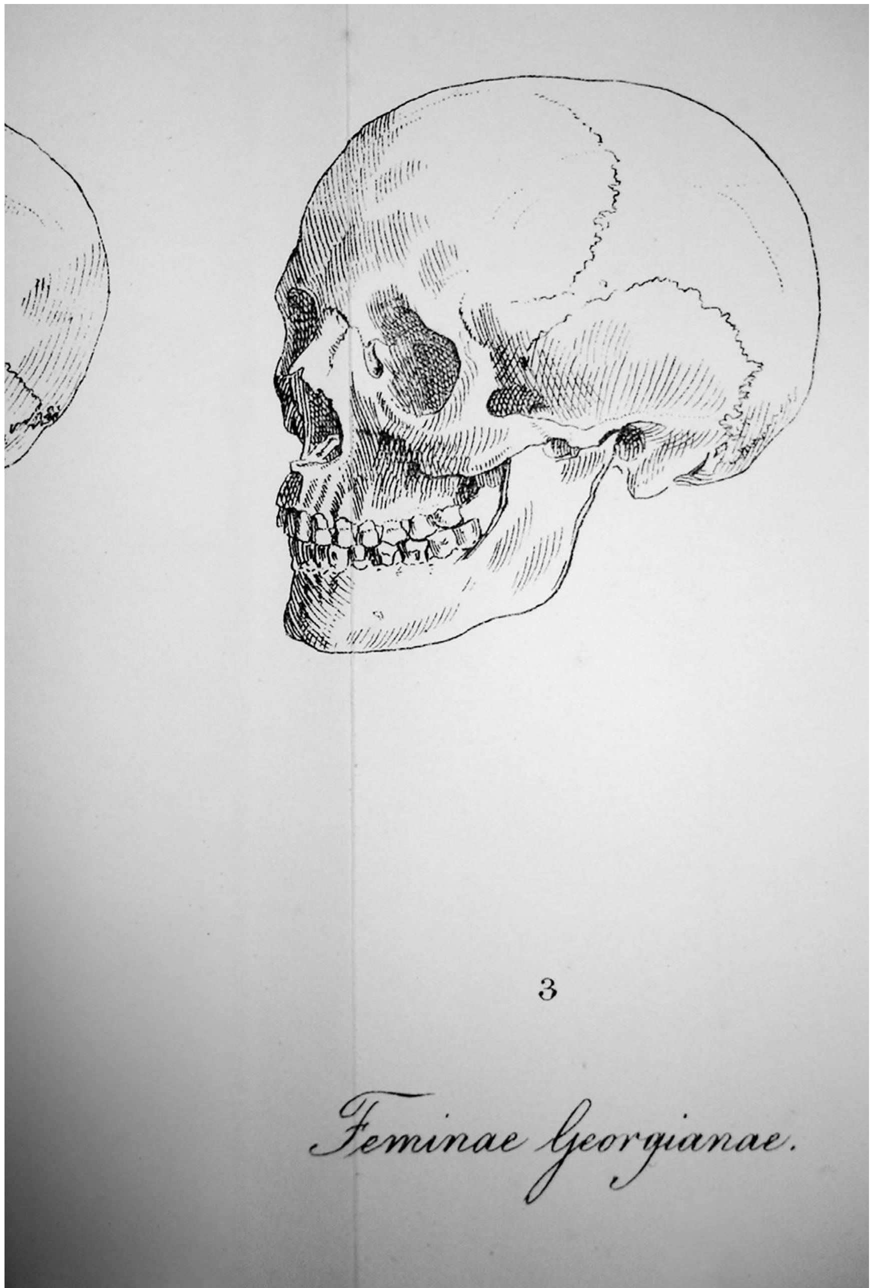

2. Skull of “Georgian Female” in *De generis humani varietate native* by J.F. Blumenbach, 1795.

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beauty of this Caucasian skull. In *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man,* published in 1822, William Lawrence dwelled for a paragraph on its bony attractions, even paraphrasing some lines by the eighteenth-century poet James Thomson:

> So stands the statue that enchants the world,
> So bending, tries to veil the matchless boast,
> The mingled beauties of exulting Greece. ("Summer" 2.1347–49; Lawrence 291)

The statue described in these lines is the Venus de' Medici, which was found in Rome in the sixteenth century, and is probably a copy of a previous Greek statue. This Venus was widely acclaimed in the eighteenth century as the purest example of beauty captured in stone by the ancients (Illus. 3). But Lawrence insisted that the skull of the Georgian girl was even *more* beautiful than the Venus de' Medici. The head of the statue, he complained, was too small. The perfect shape of the Caucasian head, on the other hand, combined the charms of physical beauty with the refined attractions of moral and rational advancement. As he wrote, "in this Georgian head, the physical and moral attributes are well combined; the personal charms, which enchant the senses, are joined to those rational endowments which command esteem and respect, and satisfy the judgment" (291).

The judgments of Blumenbach and Lawrence illustrate, in unmistakable ways, the connections between the rise of racial science and of aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the word "race" was being redefined in its updated scientific sense during precisely the era when European philosophers were coining the term "aesthetics" to describe what Hegel called the burgeoning "science" devoted to the study of artistic beauty (Hudson, "From"; Hegel 1:77). Equally evident in these judgments is the third element of sexuality. The spectacle of the "Hottentot Venus," both on stage and on the dissecting table, provided an outlet for public scrutiny of female sexuality sanctioned by the fact that this female was black, not white, and could therefore be treated as either a freak-show or scientific specimen. But the Caucasian skull also provided, curiously, an opportunity for meditations on femininity. Quite unapologetically, Blumenbach and Lawrence fell in "love" with this deceased female, though she was significantly without brains or a body. This most rarified, or suppressed, form of sexuality found expression in the new languages of race science and aesthetics.

The "Hottentot Venus" and the Caucasian skull, we might propose, represent two male constructions of femininity. The first is all fleshly body, even to the exclusion of Saartje Bartmann's head, which remained virtually silent and attracted little attention;

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3. Venus de' Medici, 1st century BCE; marble, 153 cm. Inscription on base: *Kloonenes, son of Appollodoros of Athens.* Uffizi Gallery, Florence (courtesy Alinari/Art Resouce, NY).

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the second is only a head, though empty, and the subject of heady male speculations on race and beauty. In bringing together this body and this head, a useful figure is the goddess Venus, whose name became associated with both. For Venus has had, since her ancient conception, what the art historians Catherine Arscott and Katie Scott have called a "double nature" (6). That divided identity has never been far removed from her function as the goddess of sex. The mythological origins of Aphrodite presented a logical problem, for as the deity presiding over the sexual act, she was unable to be present at her own making. In the story that unknotted this dilemma, the testicles of the castrated Titan Ouranos fell into the sea, producing a foamy surge that impregnated the beaches belonging to the earth-goddess Gaia (Gryson 19–20). From this surge sprang not only Aphrodite, but a whole vocabulary that inflected her name into the Greek names for copulation, brothels, and prostitutes. Venus maintained this role as the sexual goddess, mother of both Eros and Priapus, in a tradition of lewd artwork throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and later in the use of her name in innumerable eighteenth-century titles devoted to venereal pursuits and venereal diseases (Rubin). Hence, when the "Hottentot Venus" performed her ethnographically-sanctioned strip-shows in London and Paris, the invitations to sexual stimulation were bald, and the outcry against these shows (leading in England to a court-case attempting to drive her from public view) reflected anxieties about public decency as much as humanitarian concerns about the mistreatment of Africans.

Yet Venus had another manifestation, one more in tune with the highest ideals of philosophy and art. According to Plato, sexual love represented an earthly and transient adumbration of amorous joys experienced truly by the soul. The division of Aphrodite between the love goddess's physical and spiritual dimensions would be performed more formally by the fifteenth-century neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino. In his commentary on Plato's *Symposium,* Ficino distinguished between two Venuses, one that was "Vulgar," devoted to the procreation of beauty through the body, and the second that was "Heavenly," incarnating an innate love for understanding the beauty of god (Rubin 30). Ficino directly influenced his fellow Florentine Sandro Botticelli, who so famously portrays Venus riding a shell from the sea, the foamy surge attenuated into discreet white chevrons, the goddess a shimmering incarnation of ideal beauty (Lightbown 160-62) (Illus. 4).[2] That the love kindled by this beauty was meant to be intellectual rather than physical is signalled by the modest positioning of the goddess's hand and flowing hair, details typical of the classical *Venus pudica.* With the discovery of the Venus de' Medici about a hundred years after Botticelli's painting, similar gestures would evidently satisfy Western art critics of their own purely intellectual appreciation for Venus in her spiritual manifestation. Such neoplatonic conceptions of beauty and love would enjoy a

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4. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* [post-restoration], circa 1484; tempera on canvas, 172.4 x 278.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence (courtesy Scala/Art Resource, NY).

longevity in art criticism that outlasted Plato's authority in other fields like philosophy and literature. James Thomson's lines on this statue in the eighteenth century, already cited, reflected the conventional view that the Venus de' Medici brought together "the mingled beauties of exulting Greece," incarnating an ideal beauty found in no individual and merely fleshy female. For a renowned scholar of classical statuary, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, writing in 1755, the Venus de' Medici reified an idea of Nature found only in imperfect forms in physical nature itself. He told the story of Bernini, concluding, after having meditated on this statue, that he had been wrong to instruct his students to contemplate "beauties in nature" when the highest art brought these beauties together at once, providing a short-cut to the idea of natural perfection. In Winckelmann's words:

> He was taught then by Venus, to discover beauties in common Nature, which he had formerly thought peculiar to that statue, and but for it, never would have searched for them. Follows it not from thence, that the beauties of the Greek statues being discovered with less difficulty than those of Nature, are of course more affecting; not so diffused but more harmoniously united? And if this be true, the pointing out of nature as chiefly imitable, is

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> leading us into a more tedious and bewildered road to the knowledge of perfect beauty, than setting up the ancients for that purpose: consequently Bernini, by adhering too strictly to nature, acted against his own principles, as well as obstructed the progress of his disciples. (17–18)

Through their differing modes of worshipping Venus, men had historically expressed their divided experience of love and women: Venus was celebrated as an embodiment of sexual desire but also, particularly as she was immobilized in stone or paint, as an extension of men's intellectual desire for higher truth and "nature" itself. This "double nature" of Venus explains how her name could be applied to both Saartje Baartman and Blumenbach's Caucasian skull. If the "Hottentot Venus" exposed, with grotesque vividness, Venus in her lowest and most sexual manifestation, Lawrence's comparison of the Georgian skull to the Venus de' Medici evoked his highest aspirations for women and humanity in general. "From the elegance and symmetry of its formation, it may be regarded as the model of a female head" (291). The Venus de' Medici provoked even more passionate ideals for women and humanity in a later admirer, Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Surely, it makes me more ready to believe in the high destiny of the human race to think that this beautiful form is but nature's plan for all womankind, and that the nearer the actual woman approaches it, the more natural she is" (302).

It is significant, however, that Lawrence regarded the Caucasian skull as even *more* beautiful than the Venus de' Medici. Still influenced by Platonism, Bernini had found an abstract ideal of beauty and "nature" in this statue that could not be easily gathered from empirical investigation of physical nature. Lawrence, by contrast, merged beauty back into physical nature, downgrading its stony idealization. In this judgment, Lawrence reflected a transformation of aesthetic standards promoted by the erosion of neoplatonic ideals of beauty.

For a previous generation of philosophers influenced in particular by John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding,* knowledge derived solely from the senses, not from innate ideas or ideal forms. And this conviction led inevitably to the conclusion that "beauty" denominated impressions that were fundamentally sense-based, subjective, and relativistic. The skeptical empiricist who enunciated this doctrine in its radical form was, predictably, David Hume. "Beauty," wrote Hume in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," "is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty" (230). Hume's opinion, reached in comparable forms by philosophers across Enlightenment Europe, was re-enforced by a second major development, the expanding navigation of the

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world and the massive influx of accounts concerning non-European peoples and cultures. As Hume wrote, "those, who can enlarge their view to contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are still more surprised at the great inconsistence and contrariety. We are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us" (227).

Quite obviously, empiricism and exploration threatened a Copernican revolution that would displace Europe from its privileged place at the centre of the world in all fields, including aesthetics. That even Hottentots worshipped a perfectly legitimate Venus—a Venus nonetheless embodying all the fabled barbarity and nastiness of that people—manifested this danger of relativism in its most extreme and threatening form. Hottentots, the name given to a Cape people who still call themselves the Khoi, had long been proverbial for habits of life and for notions of beauty that departed in radical ways from anything previously known to Europeans. According to widely rehearsed legends, they smeared their relatively light-skinned bodies with sooty grease, decorated their limbs with bracelets made from rotten intestines, and valued copper and shiny bits of glass rather than gold and diamonds, to name just a few of the various ways in which this people seemed entirely to contradict European values and norms. The Khoi were frequently depicted by artists at the Cape. But just as this people seemed to defy European categories of social organization and aesthetic taste, so pictures of Hottentots, like other non-European groups, fell outside received categories of art and beauty. In typically portraying the Khoi as decked in odd finery, or engaged in customs regarded by Europeans as bizarre and unsavoury, these artists seemed most indebted to the Western tradition of caricature and the grotesque. It is significant, indeed, that the first artists to portray the Khoi were Dutch, for Lowlands artists became particularly famous, or infamous, for their grotesque treatment of "low" people and subjects (Fresnoy 88, 95; Lamotte 22–23; Reynolds 113–14, 170). According to the prevailing standards of neoplatonism, such subjects fell far below the ideal that painting should display what was most noble. In the words of John Dryden, in the preface to his translation of Charles-Alphonse du Frenoy's *De arte graphica,* the grotesque was a "lower sort" of art: "For a Farce is that in Poetry, which Grotesque is in a Picture. The Persons, and action of a Farce are all unnatural, and the Manners false, that is, inconsisting with the characters of Mankind" (55).[3]

The portrayal of Hottentots as grotesque nonetheless raised a destabilizing paradox. For the Hottentots were real, not "false" or "inconsisting with the characters of Mankind." While described by many travellers as "unnatural" or "bestial," the Khoi ultimately convinced most Europeans that they belonged to "Mankind," displaying a legitimate, if dreadful, permutation of human "nature." Given this acknowledgement,

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the perception of Hottentots as living grotesques could rebound on Europeans themselves. I have discussed elsewhere how the Khoi became a kind of *locus classicus* of cultural and aesthetic relativity, raising questions about whether European customs and manners were really less absurd than those of Hottentots (Hudson, "'Hottentots'" 316–20). One especially notorious essay, which appeared in the English periodical *The Connoisseur* in 1754, showed a newly-wed Hottentot couple expressing astonishment at the ugliness and absurdity of some Dutch colonists, who appear as grotesques or caricatures through the lens of Hottentot ideas of beauty: "Upon his skin the sun darted his scorching rays in vain, and the colour of it was as pale and wan as the watery beams of the moon. His hair, which he could put on or take off at pleasure, was white as the blossoms of the almond tree, and bushy as the fleece of the ram [. . .]. His lips and cheeks resembled the red oker, and his nose was sharpened like the beak of an eagle. His language, which was rough and inarticulate, was as the language of beasts" (1.165–66). For some readers of this essay—such as Friedrich Reidel, Christoph Wieland, and Marcus Herz—the divergent standard of beauty represented by the Hottentots confirmed Hume's thesis about the relativity of aesthetic ideas (Mielke). Not only did this conclusion threaten European perceptions of their own superiority, it threw into chaos the neoplatonic principle that beauty reflected some higher ideal of "nature."

For those concerned to maintain the notion of European superiority, however, such relativism simply would not do. In *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,* Lessing read the *The Connoisseur* essay as essentially reaffirming the ludicrous grotesqueness of the Hottentots (132–33). And throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, philosophers attempted to redefine beauty in ways that took into account variations in the concept of beauty while maintaining that "true" beauty represented an absolute and unchanging standard of nature. These attempts took various forms. First, there was an effort to separate a genuine apprehension of beauty from national "prejudice." In the words of one of Hume's major opponents, the common-sense philosopher Thomas Reid, "whole nations by the force of prejudice have been brought to believe the grossest absurdities; and why should it be thought that the taste is less capable of being perverted than the judgment?" We should not be surprised, then, that "the African should esteem thick lips and a flat nose" (718). According to Reid, "common-sense" nonetheless represents a deeper and truer standard exhibited by the general consensus of humankind—though this philosopher significantly aligns this standard with Western ideas of beauty: "It is [. . .] contrary to the universal sense of mankind, expressed by their language, that beauty is not really in the object, but is merely a feeling in the person said to perceive it. Philosophers should be

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very cautious in opposing the common sense of mankind; for, when they do, they rarely miss going wrong" (719). Reid's position combines features of both empiricist and neoplatonic theories of beauty. Like empiricists such as Hume, Reid stresses the essentially subjective nature of beauty. But he refused to concede that this subjectivism entailed aesthetic relativism, for "the universal sense of mankind" ensured that the apprehension of beauty corresponded with real qualities in objects. This combination of subjectivism with objective realism, as we will see, characterized both aesthetic theory and racial science during the last decades of the eighteenth century and beyond. The standard of beauty was shifted from intellectual archetypes to real objects as perceived by a mind naturally, or even racially, attuned to discover beauty.

The challenge of empiricism, that is, led to a reconstruction of metaphysics that attempted to restore certainty to aesthetic judgments while also accounting for variations in humankind's ideas of beauty around the world. This was a reconstruction spearheaded by Immanuel Kant, whose writings would exert a major impact on the direction of both aesthetics and racial science. Awoken by Hume from his dogmatic slumbers, Kant acknowledged the essentially subjective basis of all cognition, including the judgment of beauty. Nonetheless, he determined that an aesthetic judgment always supposed the universal agreement of humankind, even if an aesthetic judgment, by its very nature, could make no reference to a law or "determinate concepts" (*Critique* 79). Kant therefore agreed with Reid that all people appeal to "the universal sense of mankind" in calling something "beautiful," though he resisted Reid's further deduction that this claim to universality proved the objective existence of beauty in the world. We might well ask how this theory of aesthetic judgment corresponded with the rise of race science, for, as Robert Bernasconi has shown, Kant was among the first authors to develop a systematic categorization of races ("Who" 11–36). In his pre-critical work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* Kant classified the nations of Europe and other peoples around the world according to their varying capacities to appreciate beautiful and sublime objects. Significantly, Kant assumed that "Negroes of Africa" were incapable of appreciating either the beautiful or the sublime, for their feelings never rose above the "trifling" love of decorations like "a bird feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object" (111). Kant's often startling combination of profound philosophy with the crassest racism (Bernasconi, "Kant" 145–66) offended even some contemporaries such as the world-traveller Georg Forster, who challenged Kant to defend his belief in races. In reply, Kant acknowledged that race was "itself nowhere to be found in the world" ("Teleological" 40). He nonetheless insisted that racial categories provided a framework for the otherwise aimless investigation of human varieties, raising natural description *(Naturbeschreibung)* into the science of natural history *(Naturgeschichte).*

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Racial science belonged to what Kant called teleological judgment in his *Critique of Judgment*—the organization of experience by means of the ineluctable and a priori principle that nature is purposeful and tends towards some end. Racial science and judgments of beauty, which he treats in the same critique, thus constitute analogous and interrelated forms of reasoning. Indeed, while Kant never uses the term "race" in the third critique, he makes important suggestions there about the aesthetic character of racial classifications. Judgments of *human* beauty, Kant indicates, are not entirely like judgments of the beauty of flowers or paintings. Hume had been right in observing that purely aesthetic judgments of human beauty generally contained a high degree of relativity, for they relied on a measure special to a particular culture or region: "a Negro's standard of beauty of the [human] figure necessarily differs from that of a white man, that of a Chinese, from that of a European" (82). Nevertheless, the "ideal" (as opposed to the average) of human beauty was not measured merely against such a relative standard. As this ideal also "consists in the expression of the *moral*," it was subordinate to both the objective ethical ideals of practical reason and the teleological judgment of nature's ultimate purpose: "these moral ideas must be connected, in the idea of the highest purposiveness, with everything that our reason links with the morally good: goodness of soul, or purity, or fortitude, or serenity, etc." (83–84).

These conclusions are rich in connections that would be central to the later development of race science: the judgment of human beauty, Kant indicates, is ideally also a moral and scientific judgment. Influenced by Kant's ideas on both race and beauty, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach assessed the relative beauty of human skulls in order to determine the order and history of the human species, judging that his most beautiful skull, that of the Caucasian girl, also represented the most perfect and original production of nature. In Blumenbach as in Kant, aesthetics intersected with teleology. Nevertheless, by dwelling on the significance of *skulls,* Blumenbach both departed from Kant and showed the influence of other intellectual trends in his time. Kant persisted in dividing the races according to skin colour, resisting what he himself acknowledged to be the prevailing tendency to rely on skull shape as the primary measure of human difference (see "Teleological" 44; *Anthropology* 199). Behind Blumenbach, on the other hand, lay the work of his friend and fellow collector of skulls, Petrus Camper.

As Camper testifies in his autobiographical sketches, he began life not as an aspiring scientist, but as an enthusiast for painting. He was particularly perturbed by Flemish artists like Van Tempel and Ruebens who portrayed "Negroes" as no different from white figures except in their skin colour. As he notes of "the figure of a Moor" in a piece by Van Tempel, "in his colour he was Black; but his features were European" (2). Inspired by this dissatisfaction, Camper set about collecting and measuring skulls,

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including the "the head of a female Hottentot" (8). His resulting cranial measurements, which he delivered before the Amsterdam Academy of Drawing, claimed to distinguish with mathematical precision between the skulls of Europeans and those of "Negroes" and "Calmucks," allegedly showing that "national differences may be reduced to rules" (x). As the venue of these lectures suggests, Camper the scientist never lost sight of Camper the student of fine art. His ideals of beauty professedly derived from classical statuary, particularly "the head of a Pythian Apollo, a Venus de Medici, a Hercules of Farnese" (1). A Dutchman discomforted by the tradition of Flemish art, he cherished above all Hellenic proportion, symmetry and the "oval" shape of a perfect head (6), features that he found corrupted by the grotesque protrusions and angles of non-white races.

Camper nonetheless resisted connecting skull shape to the innate capacities or moral character of the various races, protesting strongly in his lectures against the denigration of blacks and other groups (Meijer 123–27). The further step of aligning physical beauty with character was taken by Camper's admirer Johann Casper Lavater in *Physionomische Fragmente.* In this "sensationally successful work" (Bindman 92), Lavater directly related the beauty or deformity of the head to the individual's moral character, maintaining that a beautiful skull shape demonstrated an innate tendency to beautiful character and conduct. Kant disliked Lavater's theories, which he considered crude and impressionistic (*Anthropology* 199). Yet the two Germans were presenting comparable visions of beauty and race. First, both authors were aligning judgments of human beauty and judgments of morality: they were reviving, in a new form, the Platonic equation of the beautiful and the good. Second, both made a crucial distinction between beautiful form and what was merely extraneous to form. In the *Critique of Judgment,* Kant insisted that real beauty lay not in "what we call *ornaments* (*parerga*)" (72) or even colours, but rather in "design," the shape of any object or the analogous contours of a musical line. It is not difficult to see how such a belief led many authors to value the beauty of skull shape over other racial or cultural features. Lavater distinguished sharply between the aesthetic qualities of the cranium, which he related directly to character, and the changeable expressions of the face ("pathognomy"), which he considered deceptive and less subject to exact scientific analysis (1.24). Lavater's English follower, Alexander Cozens, pursued the same line of argument in *Principles of Beauty relative to the Human Head,* contrasting skull shape with the outward expressions of the face. The attractions of the face were mutable and superficial, governed by "different local tastes of beauty, as the Chinese, the Ethiopian, the Hottentot, &c." (7). Skull shape, on the other hand, represented an immutable and universal standard of human beauty.

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In this way, empiricist observations concerning the vicissitudes of aesthetic standards could be acknowledged without sacrificing belief in an absolute standard associated anthropologically with the form of the skull. This compromise was achieved, as we have considered, by distinguishing between "form" and "decoration," or anthropologically between bone and flesh. Such a distinction bears an interesting analogy with the "double nature" of the goddess of beauty, who had similarly been portrayed throughout history as having both an eternal "heavenly" manifestation (associated with the spirit) and a transient earth form (associated with the body). Particularly as this double-nature corresponds in turn with the paradoxical understanding of female nature—both ideal and fleshly, morally pure and debased—we should consider more closely how developing ideas of gender in the late eighteenth century coordinated with developing doctrines of race and aesthetics.

In the middle-class domestic sphere, Venus was brought down from heaven to be the perfect wife, a role that only intensified her paradoxes. Male love could no longer be satisfied with the abstracted and intellectualized Venus of neoplatonic art and criticism. Kant himself considered the head of the Venus de' Medici too austere and lacking in "charm" (*Anthropology* 197). Yet the Venus de' Medici, her arms half-shielding her naked breasts and pelvis, still looked like a good wife in a more mundane sense: she was iconic of female modesty. Speechless herself, she "spoke" a philosophical and anthropological language entirely supplied by men. Venus in her "lower" manifestation was not, however, without her role in marriage. Particularly in private, the domestic partner was also required to be *Vénus physique.* This was the title of a tract by Maupertuis, published in 1745, which described the physical generation of human groupings in often lusciously sexual language. If the Caucasian female should share, at least to some degree, the skull proportion of the race as a whole, her body should equally manifest the carnal Venus. In *An Account of the Regular Gradation of Man,* Charles White begins his celebration of Caucasian superiority with the description of the skull that is, at least nominally, gender-neutral: "Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain?" (304). White then moves to the Caucasian face and body, the extrinsic and variable dimensions of beauty, here gendered specifically as female. Consider in the following passage how White progresses from praise for the modesty of the woman's countenance to a highly sexualized description of her breasts: "In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, the delicate feelings, and of sense? Where that sincere expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance, and that general elegance of features and complexion? Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two

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plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermillion?" (304–305). White's description thus rehearses the distinction between bone and flesh—what is universal and what is merely external to "ideal" beauty—more formally demarcated by Kant, Lavater, and Cozens. The physical beauty of even the white female is extrinsic and mutable, though her body is crowned by the more enduring and significant beauty of a "noble" cranium.

White's picture of Caucasian femininity attempts a kind of reconciliation between the two manifestations of Venus, now imagined through the contrast between noble skull shape and plump breasts. In descriptions of the "lower" races, on the contrary, the superficial attractions of flesh overwhelm a small and narrow head. These external qualities place the dark races even further out than the white woman from the centre of what is truly "noble" and lasting. They are mutable attractions, linked to the mutability of the flesh, though they also express the primitive, intrinsic, and enduring realities of human sexuality. "In all nations that have not attained a high degree of civilization and refinement" (41), wrote John Cowles Prichard in *Researches into the Physical History of Man,* fleshly beauty remained the *only* criterion for a marriage partner. Significantly, Prichard theorized that sexual attributes among lower races tended to be more salient than in the Caucasian race. The men were more angular and jutting, the women rounder and fleshier, with wide hips to aid in their primary job of childbirth. "The male pelvis is very narrow," he wrote of the "New Hollander," "and it would appear that the female is wide, if we may judge by the ease with which the women of this country like those of Guinea undergo parturition" (270).

In the popular imagination, the "Hottentot Venus" was a living caricature of such fleshy and "primitive" exaggerations. Saartje Baartmann departed from higher ideas of beauty in irregularities of shape—particularly in buttocks and labia—that drew attention to her sexuality and a lack of moral discipline over the appetites. Observers of the Hottentot Venus recorded, with great flourishes of disgust, the jiggling of her fleshy buttocks, as if this movement signalled her lack of control over the "physical." As the traveller Sir John Barrow observed, the buttocks of Khoi females made "the most ridiculous appearance imaginable, every step being accompanied with a quivering and tremulous motion, as if two masses of jelly were attached behind" (1:281). Barrow's description belongs, as we have seen, to a long history of grotesque portraiture of Hottentots, among other non-European groups. The grotesque is characterized by excess: it is non-symmetrical and (unlike skulls) exceeds proper measurement or control. Doubtless the "Hottentot Venus" exerted a sexual appeal through this very excess, yet the titillation must be inferred beneath the laughter of some and disgust of others. Evidently, the superabundance of flesh could elicit a more confident and unrestrained desire only when mastered within measurable lines. In his *Narrative of an*

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Explorer in Tropical South Africa, the founder of eugenics, Francis Galton, described his sighting of "a Venus among Hottentots," whose prominent buttocks so impressed him that he measured them through his sextant and calculated their proportions by trigonometry. Significantly, this Hottentot Venus also reminded Galton of desirably white women back in England: "I gazed at [. . .] that gift of bounteous nature to this favoured race, which no mantua-maker with all her crinoline and stuffing, can do otherwise than humbly imitate." Galton was referring to the English fashion for bustles, which expanded the rear of a dress in ways that Galton found sexually alluring. And in other ways as well, the Hottentot woman reminds him of her European counterparts. As he examined his Venus through his sextant, she "was turning herself about to all points of the compass, as ladies who wished to be admired usually do" (54).

As Galton's observations suggest, there was more in common between the Hottentot Venus and her Caucasian sisters than was suggested by the mockery of Saartje Baartman. In both cases, we find male reactions teetering ambiguously on the line dividing carnality and the grotesque, excitement and control. Lust and disgust, as Sander Gilman has shown, were conjoined reactions to both African women and the European prostitute. Although the soft protrusions and quivering of female flesh, either black or white, allured because they hinted at something undisciplined, they also threatened the male aspiration to bring both women and himself within the quadrants of measurement, mastery, and intellectual clarity. The "noble" skull of the European woman was not, therefore, without a strange pathos. This skull, reminiscent of the Venus de' Medici, extended the promise of modesty and intellect; it brought the white spouse within the scope of measurability and control. And yet to be fully "ideal" (in Kant's sense), to radiate beauty of the "purest" form, the Caucasian woman had to be deprived of a body and even the movable flesh of her face. Lawrence's loving description of Blumenbach's Georgian skull is comparable to Botticelli's depiction of Venus, or to Bernini's or Hawthorne's appreciations of the Venus de' Medici: in each case, the complicating attractions of flesh and body remain only in the ghostly vestiges of imagination, paint, or stone. There remains only the *idea* of a woman and of a race. By combining fleshly and intellectual beauty, the two manifestations of Venus, the Caucasian woman seemed *almost* to promise the Hegelian reconciliation between matter and spirit imagined by Charles White. But, distressingly, this dialectic could never be fully resolved: the male mind and body were themselves at odds, attracted and repelled at once by the flesh that men both loved in its quivering undiscipline and sought to control.

In both these lower and higher manifestations, Venus continued her buried and unsettling life in the European imagination. Later in the nineteenth century, archeologists began attaching her name to prehistoric statuettes such as the "*Vénus Impudique*"

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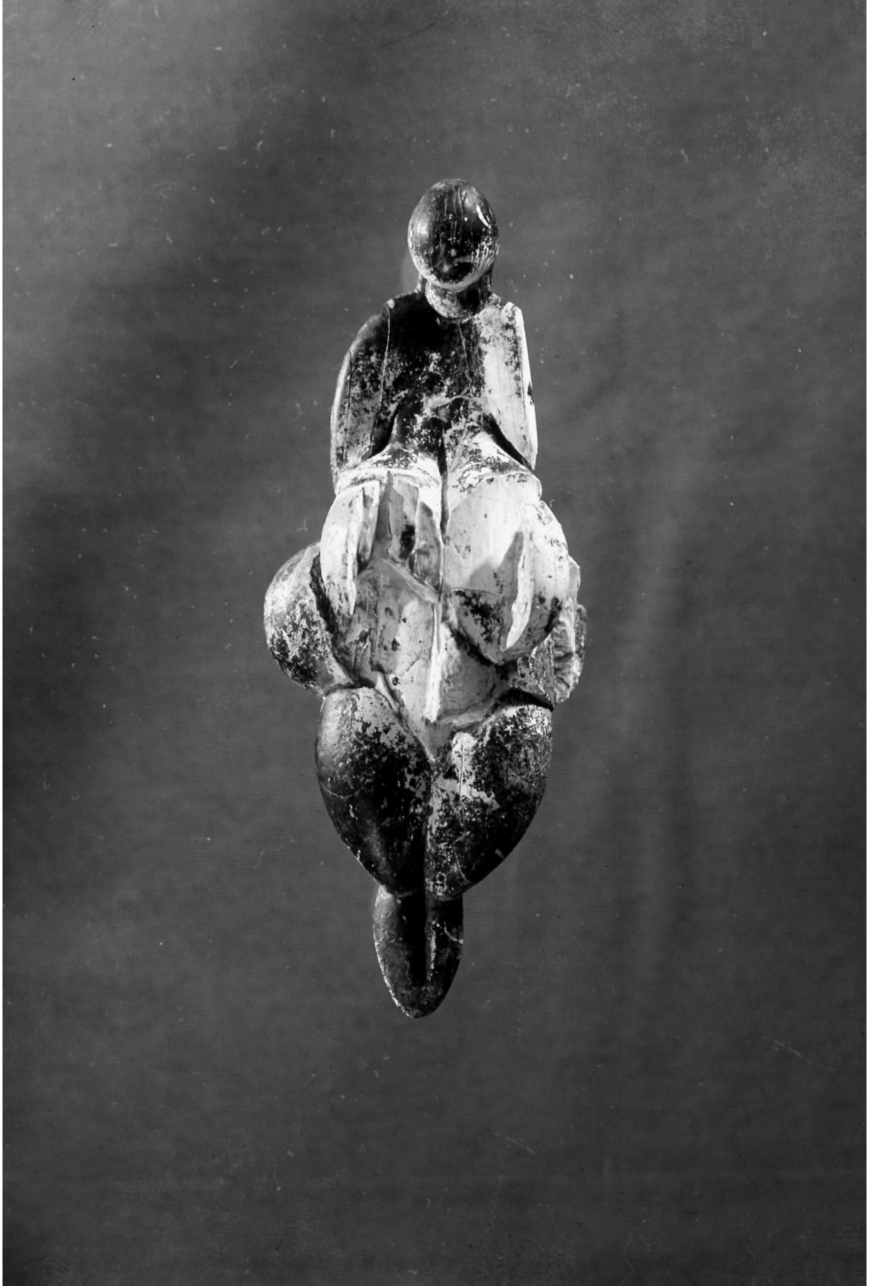

5. *Venus of Lespugue,* approx. 25,000 years old; carved mammoth tusk, Musée de l'Homme, Paris (courtesy Scala/Art Resource, NY).

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or "Immodest Venus" discovered in 1864 by the Marquis Paul de Vibray, or the Venus of Lespugue. This latter statuette, with its exaggerated buttocks, bears an interesting resemblance to the caricatures of the Hottentot Venus (Illus. 5). Primitive figurines connected with female fertility symbolized, like the Hottentot Venus, forces of immodest sexuality that Western culture had allegedly brought under discipline and now contemplated in the desexualized atmosphere of modern science. Clearly, such artifacts embodied "beauty" only in an attenuated and low sense. Victorians relegated these figurines, along with all the supposed gewgaws and accoutrements of so-called "primitive" cultures, to museums of natural history and ethnology (Shelton). Such ethnographical and anthropological artifacts were physically quarantined from expressions of the truly "beautiful," now enshrined in museums devoted to the treasures of Western art. Such anthropological artifacts included body parts and the body cast of the "Hottentot Venus," Saartje Baartman, displayed as raciological exhibits in Paris until recently reclaimed by her Khoi people.

In European museums of fine art, in turn, Venus continued to be worshipped in her second and higher manifestation as the goddess of spiritualized love, though her beauty took on a somewhat different form. Interestingly, William Lawrence's dissatisfaction with the small-headed Venus de' Medici reflected a more widespread devaluation of this statue in European art criticism. Wilhelm Lubke reinterpreted her gesturing arms as a coquettish come-on rather than a sign of modesty (Arscott and Scott, 11): the Venus so admired as a Platonic archetype in the eighteenth century degenerated into the Venus of brothels. This statue was widely displaced as a pre-eminent symbol of love and beauty by the Venus de Milo, which was not found until 1820. As Jennifer Shaw has shown, Venus was a favourite subject at art salons of the mid-nineteenth century, and these depictions had moved a long way from the demure embodiment of Platonic love portrayed by Botticelli. How should we understand such evidently brazen Vensuses as Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval's award winning portrait of 1862? (Illus. 6) As Shaw suggests, these paintings seem to exhibit the masteries of painterly technique, the imposition of masculine form on that most unruly force, female sexuality (91). The carnal Venus still simmers in these portraits. But, like the foamy surge that rolls symmetrically at the feet of Amaury-Duval's figure, this manifestation of Venus is tamed, ordered, disciplined. This is not Botticelli's Platonic Venus, the physical manifestation of higher intellectual ideals. These modern painters sought again to reconcile the dialectic between a heavenly and earthly Venus, to cast a measured and brilliant light on a female form that evokes, notwithstanding, a darker and tacit eroticism.

In dividing and organizing their museums, or in portraying the technically-perfect Venus, these Victorians carried on the quest that had inspired racial science and

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6. Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval, *The Birth of Venus,* 1862; oil on canvas, 1.97 x 1.09 m, Palais des Beaux Arts, Lille. Photo: Phillip Bernard (courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY).

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aesthetics since the eighteenth century—the quest to impose a new order on the intellectual and material worlds. Eighteenth-century skepticism and increased knowledge of the world had left many of the comforting verities of an older tradition in disarray. The superiority of Europe over all the other peoples had been questioned; the supremacy of Platonic intellect over the body threatened to collapse; the middle-rank family demanded a new and clearer definition of sexual roles in the family. New doctrines of race, aesthetics, and gender emerged jointly during the second half of the eighteenth century to provide, above all, reassurance, a new way of categorizing the manifold of expanding knowledge and theories in ways that buttressed Eurocentric and imperialist ideologies. The temporal conjunction of the "Hottentot Venus" and the Caucasian skull, unruly flesh and measured bone, opened a scene of ideological disclosure. It dramatized how philosophies of beauty had come to shape racial science. And it assembled a cast of female characters—Saartje Baartman, a long-dead girl from the Caucuses, the Venus de' Medici, and Venus herself—who testified that women and sexuality informed the highest speculations of science and philosophy.

NOTES

1/ Saartje Baartman's ordeal as the "Hottentot Venus" has been recently described by Rachel Holmes in *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007). See also Stephen Jay Gould, "The Hottentot Venus," *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections on Natural History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985) 291–305; Partha Mitter, "The Hottentot Venus and Western Man: Reflections on the Construction of Beauty in the West," *Cultural Encounters: Representing "Otherness"* (Eds. Elizabeth Hallam and V. Brian Street, London: Routledge, 2000) 35–50; and Linda E. Merians, *Envisioning the Worst: Representations of "Hottentots" in Early Modern England* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1988), 229–34. Especially on the continuing legacy of the Hottentot Venus in modern art and literature, see Anna Vlasopolos, "Venus Live! Sarah Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus, Re-Membered," *Mosaic* 34.4 (2000): 128–43.

2/ Ronald Lightbown classifies this painting as "the first surviving celebration of the beauty of the female nude represented for its own perfection rather than with erotic or moral or religious overtones" (160).

3/ Jonathan Richardson believed similarly that the artist is "chiefly concerned with the Noblest, and most Beautiful part of Human Nature" (23; *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* [2nd ed., London, 1725]), dismissing the "low" and grotesque as an inferior form of art. His dislike of "any Ridiculous Contortion of the Body" (191) in painting is comparable to descriptions of "Hottentot" dancing by their most influential observer in the eighteenth century, Peter Kolb (1:323–24; *The Present State of the Cape of Good-Hope* [trans. Guido Medley, 2 vols. London, 1731]). Kolb drew from European painting in his depictions of the Khoi. Of the women, for example, he wrote, "never [...] did the Imagination of a Painter teem with Devils as frightful" (1:199).

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