

# BEACH BUZZ

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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

## Nude Art Throughout History

"Who is so barbarous as not to understand that the foot of a man is nobler than his shoe, and his skin nobler than that of the sheep with which he is clothed?"

– Michelangelo

By Paul LeValley

A longer version of this article appeared in *Naturally*, No. 32.

If we distinguish man from other animals by our ability to use tools, human existence began about 2 million years ago. Around 40,000 B.C.E., Neanderthal people (about to go extinct) began wearing the first furs. All people had been naked until then, and most would remain so for thousands of years more. The first clothes were decorative headbands – not loincloths. Nor did climate necessitate the wearing of furs. People had survived at least four ice ages without any clothes; the last glaciers retreated about 10,000 years before anyone thought about wearing anything.

In other words, all people had lived without clothing of any type through 99% of human experience. That's 75,000 generations walking this earth before us – at least 74,250 of those generations totally nude. When a man, a woman, and a child stroll nude down a beach today, or across a grassy field, or through a woods, they fulfill a heritage as old as humankind. It links us with the ages, and reminds us of our responsibility to pass this world on, unmolested, to the next generation.



"The Ancient of Days."

An illustration by William Blake from his work, *Europe: A Prophecy*, 1794.

Cloth and writing came at the same time, about 3000 B.C.E. That is also when King Narmer (or Menes) of Upper Egypt (upriver to the south) conquered Lower Egypt (downriver to the north), thus unifying the kingdom. A large commemorative stone shows him about to bonk his kneeling rival

over the head. Clothing had by now become part of the trappings of power; the royal sandal-bearer follows discretely behind the king. But what are the two naked men at the bottom doing? A minority of historians say they are swimming in the Nile, enjoying the peace that Narmer has



established.

It would be nice to think that historical art began with a skinny-dipping scene. It would probably also be mistaken. Swimmers are exceedingly rare in Egyptian art – a brief passing fad some 16 centuries after the carving of this palette. The British museum owns another stone, called the Battlefield Palette, about a century older than this one. It shows the corpses of naked warriors being devoured by lions and vultures. Though the bodies lie horizontally rather than vertically, their hands and legs fall in positions similar to those on the Narmer Palette. So the majority of historians are probably right in identifying the two naked men as fallen soldiers. Too bad.

A thousand years later, a new civilization had matured on the Indus River in what is now Pakistan. The people were black – related to the Australian aborigines. Unlike the Egyptians, people of India felt comfortable in their skins, and made the nude or seminude their main art form. Archaeologists have dug up little bronze dancing girls wearing only their jewelry. Skirts would remain optional for another 25 centuries. No woman would even think of wearing a blouse during the next 31 centuries. The jaunty pose of the dancing girl radiates a pride and confidence not found in the few Egyptian nudes.

Another civilization was just beginning in China. But their artists usually avoided nudes, so we can skip them. By 1000 B.C.E., two more civilizations had begun: Greek on the island of Crete, and American Indian in Mexico. The people of Xochipala did some remarkably realistic nudes in clay. One shows a toothless old grandmother with crinkled skin cradling her new grandson – or maybe great grandson. Respect for the wisdom of the elders would characterize most American Indian

groups. (For an example of a middle-aged woman, see Naturally, No. 14.) Yet, after this amazing beginning, American Indian art would veer off in an abstract direction.

The opposite happened in Greece. There, artists moved toward greater and greater realism in depicting the nude. The Spinario or Thorn-Puller came at the end of that development – a Roman copy of a favorite Hellenistic theme. Above all else, Greek artists delighted in portraying the mental and physical beauty of the adolescent – especially adolescent boys. Such art grew directly out of the naked Greek athletic tradition.

During the next millennium, Arabic civilization developed (usually without nudes). In 1000 C.E., Islamic rulers started making raids into India, and were shocked to find temples filled with nude statues. They didn't get to south India right away, where the world's tallest nude had just been carved at Shravana Belgola in the region of Mysore. It represents the Jain saint Bahubali, who stood meditating so long that vines grew up around his legs. When the Jains (and people in several related but extinct religions) gave up worldly goods, they gave up everything – including clothes. But it was a powerful court minister, Chamundaraya, who ordered this 52-foot statue carved from the top of a hill. It is commonly called Gommateshvara – probably in reference to a nickname of its patron.

Let's cheat and slip in an extra painting only halfway through the next millennium. 1500 marked the peak of the European Renaissance. Religious artists emphasized the great humanity of Jesus by showing him and John the Baptist as naked babies. Some paintings, such as Correggio's Madonna del Latte revealed Mary's bare breast as a symbol of her nurturing care. Just as in India and Greece, nudity had become central to religious art.

The twentieth century has been one of fragmentation – in the arts and in world society. An overpopulated globe has forced solitary activities such as skinny-dipping onto densely packed nude beaches. Whether there, or on a busy city street, or at work in a large corporation, how does one maintain one's individuality in a crowd? By joining a small clique? By doing something noticeably extreme? By pushing oneself on others? By tuning others out and going internal? Eric Fischl has dealt with these questions in many paintings. The Life of Pigeons treats each person, animal (and even a tree) as individual portraits, while also showing how they all fit into the jigsaw puzzle of life. We don't need to know all of the pieces to realize that each of us is a part of nature.

And what kind of art can we expect a thousand years from now? The history and prehistory teach us that there will be nudes as long as there are people. But will there be people? We are shoving huge numbers of species into extinction at an alarming speed. Will we take ourselves out with them?

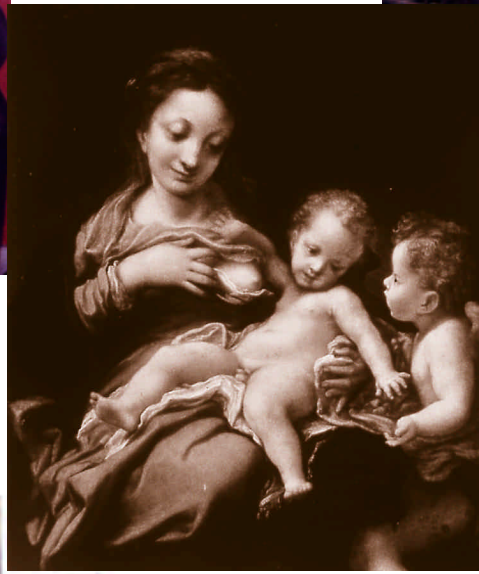
For millions of years, human existence has been a struggle against nature. In our own lifetime, that battle has largely been won. We have conquered the jungles, the skies, outer space, the atom, many diseases, the very DNA that makes up our bodies. We have not conquered our own human passions and short-sightedness. Perhaps we can learn from the wisdom of some of the older civilizations. Their thinkers have been counseling us that we need to stop fighting nature, and learn to live naturally as a part of nature. Naturism has some answers at this exciting turning point in human history. Can we help set a new direction that will guide us through the next thousand years? ✨



left:  
*Dancing Girl*  
from Mohenjo-Daro,  
2000 B.C.E.  
National Museum, New Delhi.



right:  
*Gommateshvara*  
*Shravana,*  
1000 C.E.  
Belgola, India.



above:  
*Correggio, Madonna del Latte*  
1500 C.E., Szépmvészeti  
Museum, Budapest.



top:  
*Narmer Palette,*  
3000 B.C.E.,  
Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

below:  
*Fischl, The Life of Pigeons,* 2000 C.E.  
Saatchi Collection, London



left:  
*Old Woman Holding*  
*a Child (Xochipala),*  
1000 B.C.E.  
University Art Museum,  
Princeton.



left:  
*Spinario*  
1C.E.  
Capitoline Museum, Rome