



FRYE  
ART MUSEUM

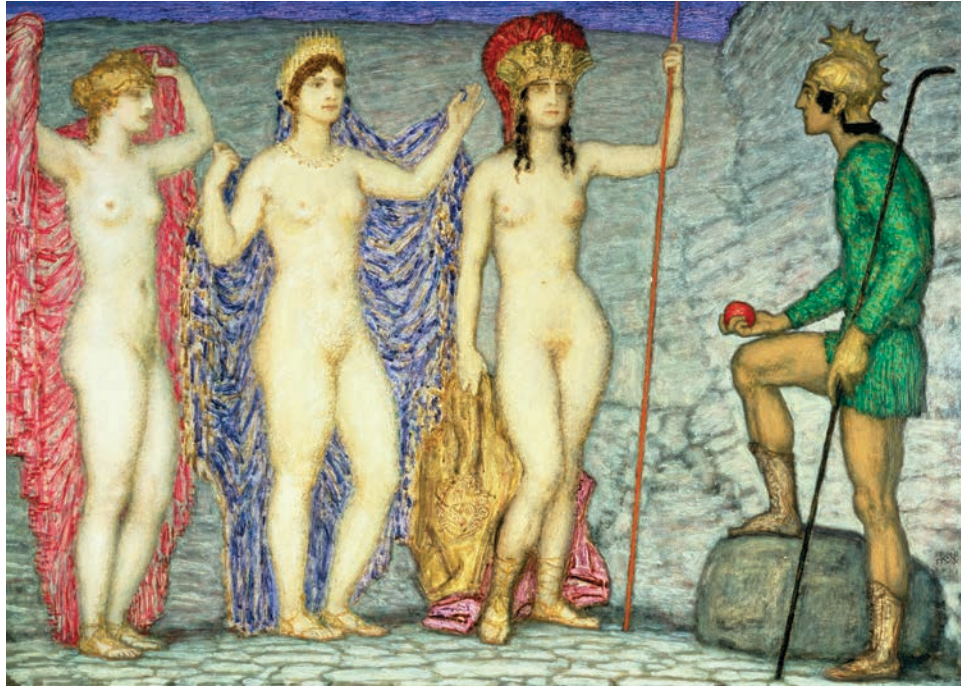
*Unsettling Femininity*  
Selections from the Frye  
Art Museum Collection

September 21, 2019–August 23, 2020

From a young age, we all learn to interpret images of people—from advertisements and fashion spreads to works of art—based on the cultural context in which we live. Portrayals of women are particularly layered with associations that reveal broader social values and expectations. Beginning in the 1970s, feminist scholars and critics led a methodological shift toward a critical examination of representations of women in contemporary Western media. They contextualized the way these representations were conditioned by depictions of women in the tradition of European art, renderings governed by an unspoken assumption: men actively look, and women are objects to be looked at. *Unsettling Femininity* uses the specific lens of the Frye Art Museum's Founding Collection to probe the politics of looking and question our habitual ways of viewing images of women.

The exhibition presents portrayals of mostly white women created during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily by German and Austrian artists. This selection reflects a particular area of interest for the Museum's founders, Charles and Emma Frye, Seattleites of German descent, who assembled their art collection primarily between 1900 and 1925. The women—drawn from subjects encompassing biblical and mythological figures, celebrities and actresses, and rural peasants—assume specific postures, make particular gestures, and display certain expressions, wearing costumes and styles of dress that typify feminine stereotypes of the period. Many of the works emphasize traits such as submissiveness, vulnerability, and sexual availability that correspond to pervasive nineteenth-century cultural attitudes about the ideal feminine nature and body. Others were intended to challenge the increasingly conservative Christian sensibilities prevalent in Bavaria with confrontational images that eroticize female religious figures. From a present-day perspective, these attributes highlight the performative nature of gender as specific sets of socially patterned behaviors informed by race and class. Whether these images associated women with virtue and beauty or danger and sex, they reinscribed moral boundaries that ultimately upheld the patriarchal status quo.

Organized around four primary themes—judgement, morality, performance, and artifice—the exhibition asks viewers to reconsider the very act of looking in all its positive and negative connotations. In doing so, it offers an invitation to unsettle and unpack these enduring, and often unquestioned, notions of femininity.



Franz von Stuck. *Urteil des Paris* (The Judgement of Paris), 1923. Oil on panel. 28 ¾ x 39 ½ in. Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.168.

## Exhibition Related Programs

---

### Curatorial Lecture with Naomi Hume

**September 21, 2019, 2-3:30 pm**

Frye Auditorium

### Panel Discussion with Naomi Hume and Special Guests

**April 25, 2020, 2-3:30 pm**

Frye Auditorium

### Gallery Tours with Naomi Hume

**October 26, 2019, 2-3 pm**

Frye Galleries

**December 14, 2019, 2-3 pm**

Frye Galleries

**February 29, 2020, 2-3 pm**

Frye Galleries

**June 6, 2020, 2-3 pm**

Frye Galleries

**August 22, 2020, 2-3 pm**

Frye Galleries

## The “Surveyed Female”

Naomi Hume, Guest Curator

---

In Franz von Stuck's *The Judgement of Paris* (1923), the Greek goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite stand before their male viewer, the shepherd Paris. According to the ancient story, Paris could not decide which of the three was the most beautiful while they were clothed, so he asked them to disrobe. Even so, he ultimately didn't choose his winner by comparing the goddesses' bodies. Instead, his decision was based on a bribe. As a reward for selecting her, Aphrodite offered him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. Helen was already married, but that didn't stop Paris from absconding with her, igniting the Trojan War. Hera and Athena never forgave Paris for spurning them. The story does not offer an actual judgement of relative beauty. Rather, it exemplifies the pitting of women against one another, their meaningless objectification, and the violent consequences of fostering the masculine assumption that all women are available for the taking. Nevertheless, painters in the European tradition have repeatedly represented the story as Stuck did, by showing the moment when Paris stands before the three naked goddesses.

For centuries, this classical story has legitimized the rendering of multiple female nudes and emphasized the viewer as judge. It thematizes an aspect of European painting that English art critic John Berger famously summarized in the early 1970s: “Men *act* and women *appear*.” That “men look at women” is a familiar organizing principle behind the majority of art created in the European tradition, and especially during the nineteenth century, informed by traditional gendered social relations in the real world. Perhaps less familiar is Berger's characterization of the female viewer: “Women watch themselves being looked at.” Berger explained that the pressure to remain passive in a patriarchal society is brought to bear upon women, not only by men, but by women looking at women and at themselves. “The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female”; that is, women consider their own and other women's behavior in relation to masculine values.<sup>1</sup> Berger wrote during the 1970s, in a culture that still maintained the masculine-feminine binary as describing the totality of genders (and without the intersectional considerations of race and class that we now deem essential to the conversation). But, as he claimed in the 1970s, even in our own time, “the ways women are pictured now, in our current media, have largely been conditioned by the ways 19th-century painters routinely depicted women as objects, and in particular, as available objects of desire.”<sup>2</sup> I explore here a selection of historical viewers' responses to paintings of women in the Frye Art Museum's collection, from the nineteenth-century Munich public to Charles and Emma Frye themselves. Finally, I consider how a present-day viewer might parse these works, focusing in particular on Gabriel von Max's *The Christian Martyr* (1867).

According to contemporaries, Charles Frye (1858–1940) was an energetic, plainspoken, sometimes impetuous man, while Emma (1860–1934) was a more restrained presence, perhaps acting as an anchor for her dynamic husband. Records of the Fries tell us far more about Charles than about Emma. This shouldn't surprise us, given the context of polarized gender roles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and the United States. At that time, both cultures glorified the supposed purview of men—exploration, conquest, and the capitalist exploitation of raw materials; women were admired for qualities that did not lend themselves to dramatic narrative—their beauty, their submissiveness, and the invisibility of their work managing the home. We do know that both Charles and Emma came from rural backgrounds, the children of German immigrant farming families in Iowa. Emma's family prospered, but she had done farm labor as a girl. Charles worked hard on his family's farm and developed tuberculosis as a young man. But by 1888, he and his partners had set up a meatpacking and sales company in Seattle, and by 1902, the couple were wealthy enough to build a large house in Seattle's upscale First Hill neighborhood.

Charles's drive to rise above his origins may have added to his appreciation for and collection of works by German painters Franz von Stuck, Franz von Defregger, and Franz von Lenbach. All three came from rural backgrounds but became wealthy and famous and were known as "painter-princes" in Munich.<sup>3</sup> By 1914, when the Fries first visited Europe, all three were listed on a register of Bavarian millionaires alongside wealthy brewers and royalty.<sup>4</sup> The painter-princes built themselves palatial houses and received their patrons at social, musical, and artistic "salons" where one might encounter celebrities—dancers, actors, singers—and rub shoulders with nobility. It is conceivable that the painter-princes invited the Fries into this rarefied atmosphere and reinforced the couple's desire to create their own social space for cultural appreciation. Upon their return to Seattle, they immediately began building a gallery adjacent to their house, furnishing it opulently in the German Renaissance style of the painter-princes' studios: deep red walls, dark wood furnishings, Persian carpets, heavy curtains, potted palms, and, of course, paintings covering the walls.<sup>5</sup>

The Fries always described their art collection as a joint venture, yet it contains a number of paintings of women that might strain a bourgeois sense of propriety. In response to a Seattle resident who, in 1965, questioned the morality of advertising the Frye Art Museum with an image of a nude child, then-director Walser Greathouse responded, "Charles and Emma Frye certainly had no prejudice against good paintings of the human body," and referred to nudes in the collection as evidence.<sup>6</sup> Yet their opinions on at least one nude painting differed. The Fries' niece, Ruth Seaman O'Rourke, recalled that Emma did not like Gustav Majer's monumental painting *Stella* (1889), which depicts a young woman who looks outward knowingly, her arms raised, exposing her nude body to the viewer. O'Rourke remembered that Emma "insisted that the work be kept in the back room of the packing plant, behind a curtain," and added that Charles sometimes invited business visitors to take a look.<sup>7</sup> The divide between Charles's and Emma's viewing preferences emerges clearly from such anecdotes, derived as much from gendered societal expectations as from personality.

The degrees of modesty perceived in paintings of women, and their moral implications, have been matters of continual and often heated public debate throughout the history of European art. Some of the paintings in the Fries' collection were created during a period of increasingly repressive cultural attitudes in Munich in the late 1880s and 1890s. Residents began to complain about the public display of provocative artworks. One citizen objected to "a photograph of a painting depicting Leda and the Swan exhibited in the window of a local book dealer," arguing that it would incite "'lust and passion in the still immature youth,' who ultimately were driven to commit sexual crimes."<sup>8</sup> In another incident, Munich police banned "the display in a show window of a photographic reproduction of [Stuck's] *Kiss of the Sphinx*."<sup>9</sup> In her research on this period, art historian Maria Makela points out that Munich painters began to develop eroticized religious imagery in response to threats of censorship raised primarily by members of Bavaria's religious right, who carried out a "public morality campaign to muzzle allegedly 'decadent' and 'pornographic' artists."<sup>10</sup> Such works proved so popular with the public that they became a Munich specialty. The first audiences for paintings such as Stuck's *Sin* (ca. 1908) appreciated them not only as modern takes on traditional subjects but also as provocative statements that challenged the conservative status quo.

In the context of polarized gender roles during the nineteenth century and the scarcity of records about women's reactions to paintings, it is striking that one painting in the collection, Max's *The Christian Martyr* (1867), provoked a particularly strong response in women when it was first exhibited in Munich. One art critic reported, "All the women left the [exhibition] with tears in their eyes, and every time a group encountered another of their Munich circle, they posed the same question: 'Have you seen the martyr yet?'"<sup>11</sup> The painting embodies an extreme form of the passive woman, rendered as an object that elicits desire. While her shoulders and head appear unaffected by gravity,

Max emphasized the tangible weight of her lower body pulling her downward into the space occupied by the young man at her feet. Art historian Richard Muther speculated in 1895 that this duality was integral to the painting's appeal: "It was impossible to say whether the young Roman was looking up to the beautiful woman with the desecrating sensuality of a *décadent* or with the fervid ecstasy of a convert." The painting's ambiguity, its simultaneous evocation of perfect virtue and sensuality, Muther thought, provoked the contradictory "horrified fascination" and "shudder[s] of delight" in viewers.<sup>12</sup>

The story behind the depicted saint actually plays havoc with accepted notions of masculinity and femininity, action and passivity, innocence and guilt. Max intended to paint Saint Wilgefortis, whose martyrdom story turns precisely on the issue of feminine beauty. Max described Wilgefortis as "the Christian daughter of non-believers who was ordered to marry a pagan prince, put into prison to break her resistance, and whose fervent prayers were answered by her growing a beard."<sup>13</sup> Wilgefortis's prayers to God to be spared marriage were answered by her beard's sudden appearance: rather than remaining true to her faith by steeling herself against her own sexual urges, she needed to eradicate her attractiveness to men. Her father didn't believe in her Christian god; he saw the growth of her beard as an act of defiance on her part and, further, as making her unmarriageable and therefore valueless for his purposes. He ordered her crucified as punishment. The story makes plain the injustice and hypocrisy that met a historical woman's attempt at self-determination. But Max's decision to omit the beard from the painting points to more contemporary biases about picturing gender.

Max recalled that his teacher, eminent history painter Carl von Piloty, advised against painting the saint's beard. Art historian Karin Althaus has speculated that Piloty anticipated its "bizarre effect" or wanted "to protect [Max] from embarrassment" or the painting "from being relegated to a cabinet of curiosities."<sup>14</sup> The making of *The Christian Martyr* and the ways it has since been discussed expose biases that twenty-first-century viewers share with Max's initial audiences: first, a readiness to empathize with conventional feminine beauty and praise it as virtuous and, second, a tendency to condemn as grotesque conflicting visual markers of gender (i.e., a bearded woman).

In 1990, queer theorist Judith Butler explained how "informal practices, like bullying," as well as "institutional powers, like psychiatric normalization," work "to keep us in our gendered place." Butler theorized the performative nature of gender, arguing that "we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman." Rather than viewing gender as something that reveals an internal truth about us, she conceived of it as "a phenomenon that's produced [and reproduced] all the time." By refusing to play the passive role expected of her, Saint Wilgefortis contradicted her femininity, rendering her unattractive in the eyes of her father and her suitor. The story of the beard visually concretizes the way a woman is perceived as grotesque when she insists on her own autonomy. But the story also reveals the potential threat behind understanding gender as performative. Because "gender is culturally formed," Butler argued, "it's also a domain of agency or freedom."<sup>15</sup> Media scholar Sut Jhally has shown that contemporary media "encodes gender in ways that we unthinkingly accept," reinforcing the equation of feminine beauty with passivity, submissiveness, and availability.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps with greater awareness of the surveyed female, we can redefine the surveyor of gender in ourselves.

**Naomi Hume** is Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art and Art History at Seattle University. She specializes in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European art and visual culture with a focus on Central and Eastern European art and representations of gender. Her work has been published in international journals, including *Slavic Review*, *X-tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, *The History of Photography*, and *Centropa*.



Gabriel von Max. *The Christian Martyr*, 1867.  
Oil on paper affixed to canvas. 48 x 36 ¾ in.  
Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma  
Frye, 1952.116. Photo: Spike Mafford.

- Endnotes:**
1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 74.
  2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1973).
  3. Maria Makela, *The Munich Secession: Art and Artists in Turn-of-the-Century Munich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17.
  4. Lenbach died in 1904, but his widow was listed. Robin Lenman, "A Community in Transition: Painters in Munich, 1886-1924," *Central European History* 15, no. 1 (March 1982): 9-10.
  5. Social section, *Seattle Sunday Times*, April 29, 1917. Cited by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "Art Is, Indeed, the Perfection of Good Nature': The Frye Founding Collection," in *Beloved: Pictures at an Exhibition*, ed. Birnie Danzker (Seattle: Frye Art Museum, 2012), 37.
  6. Walsler Greathouse, letter to Juliana Richardson, May 13, 1965, Frye Archive, Mary Cassatt file.
  7. Ruth Seaman O'Rourke, interview by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker and Cory Gooch, September 2, 2010. Birnie Danzker, "Art Is, Indeed," 102n32. Emma considered *Stella* the property of Frye & Company. Frye Art Museum archive, Gustav Majer file.
  8. Maria Makela, "The Politics of Parody: Some Thoughts on the 'Modern' in Turn-of-the-Century Munich," *Imagining Modern German Culture: 1889-1910*, ed. Françoise Forster-Hahn (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 189. Makela cites Georg Pschorr, letter, January 26, 1892. Munich police archives.
  9. Beth Irwin Lewis, *Art for All: The Collision of Modern Art and the Public in Late-Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 230.
  10. Makela, "The Politics of Parody," 187.
  11. Karin Althaus, "Female Martyrs," in *Gabriel von Max*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker (Seattle: Frye Art Museum, 2011), 60.
  12. Richard Muther, *The History of Modern Painting*, vol. 1, trans. Ernest Dowson, George Arthur Greene, and Arthur Cecil Hillier (London: Henry & Co., 1895), 501-2.
  13. Althaus, "Female Martyrs," 61. Althaus cites Max, undated draft letter to unknown recipient.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. Judith Butler, "Your Behavior Creates Your Gender," interview by Max Miller, Big Think, January 13, 2011, <https://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>.
  16. Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Gender: Identity and Performance in Popular Culture* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2009).



**Images: Cover:** Leopold Schmutzler. *Here I Am* (detail), ca. 1910. Oil on paperboard. 41 ¼ x 29 ½ in. Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.150; **Poster:** Otto Hierl-Deronco. *Spanische Tänzerin* (Spanish Dancer), n.d. Oil on canvas. 44 ¾ x 33 ⅞ in. Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye 1952.068; **Back Cover:** Leopold Schmutzler. *Woman in Costume* (detail), ca. 1910. Oil on canvas. 41 x 29 in. Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.151.

*Unsettling Femininity: Selections from the Frye Art Museum Collection* is organized by the Frye Art Museum and curated by Naomi Hume, Associate Professor of Art History, Seattle University. Generous support is provided by the Robert Lehman Foundation and the Frye Foundation.



FRYE  
FOUNDATION





FRYE  
ART MUSEUM

# *Unsettling Femininity*

Selections from the Frye Art Museum Collection

September 21, 2019–August 23, 2020