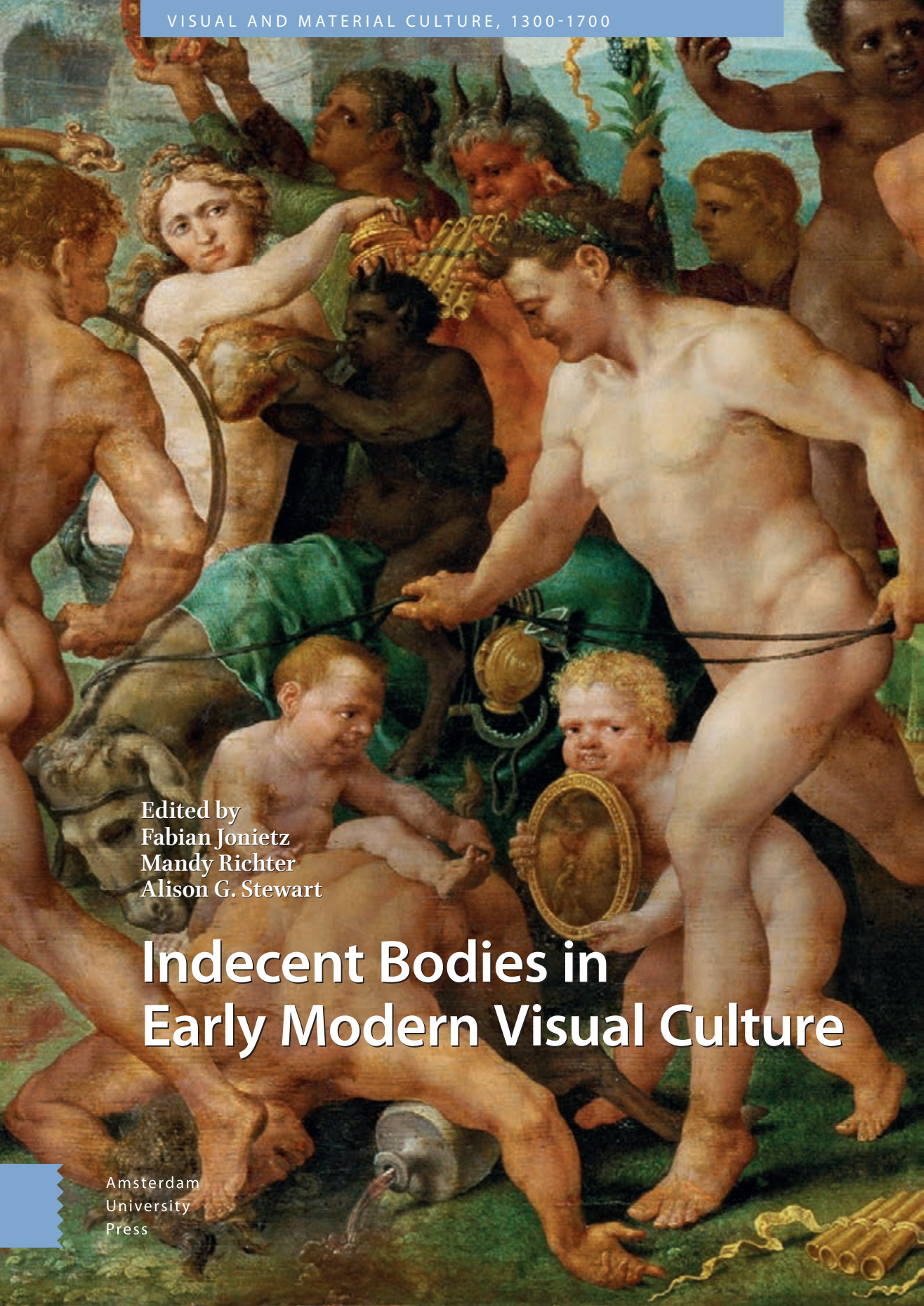
VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700



Edited by
Fabian Jonietz
Mandy Richter
Alison G. Stewart

Indecent Bodies in Early Modern Visual Culture

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A forum for innovative research on the role of images and objects in the late medieval and early modern periods, *Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700* publishes monographs and essay collections that combine rigorous investigation with critical inquiry to present new narratives on a wide range of topics, from traditional arts to seemingly ordinary things. Recognizing the fluidity of images, objects, and ideas, this series fosters cross-cultural as well as multi-disciplinary exploration. We consider proposals from across the spectrum of analytic approaches and methodologies.

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Indecent Bodies in Early Modern Visual Culture: An Introduction

Fabian Jonietz, Mandy Richter, Alison G. Stewart

Indecency – the polar opposite of propriety, appropriateness, respectability, decorum – has played a central role in our understanding of Early Modern cultural norms since the beginning of art history as an academic field in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the concept of indecency was fundamental to historical and contemporary discourses that attempted to balance social limits on indecorous behaviour and images. At the same time, the appeal of such visual imagery, the attraction of graphic depictions of bodies and their actions, resulted in conflicting responses on the part of viewers.

Historically, decency and indecency played defining roles in both the idea of the 'Renaissance' and its characteristics. The nineteenth-century view of this period – notably shaped by Jacob Burckhardt and his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) – not surprisingly saw the Renaissance as the birthplace of modern individualism, and with it ideas of the idealised, the classical, 'clean' beauty, and striving for grace.[1] Since the 1950s, the idea of the European Renaissance north and south of the Alps has expanded to include the struggle between decorous and indecorous elements, a fact acknowledged within art history, cultural studies, and philology following Eugenio Battisti's *L'Antirinascimento* ('The Anti-Renaissance', 1964), the ground-breaking work of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965, English translation 1984), and the general reassessment of sixteenth-century Mannerism.[2]

The alleged individualism of Renaissance men and women led Stephen Greenblatt (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1980) and the large field of studies addressing self-fashioning to acknowledge that being socially improper or indecent had become, in fact, equally important to individualism for Early Modern society and courts.

1 Cf. recently Biow, *Cleanliness*.

2 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Battisti, *L'Antirinascimento*; Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*; Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera*; Hauser, *Mannerism*; Shearman, *Mannerism*; Hofmann, *Zauber der Medusa*.

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One example is Benvenuto Cellini as someone continuously opposing the model of the courtier propagated by Baldassare Castiglione (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1528) or Giovanni della Casa (*Galateo: The Rules of Polite Behavior*, 1558), the ideal neither to offend nor to stand out.[3] Yet, it is worth remembering that well before what might be called the rediscovery of the 'Indecent Renaissance' and well before Burkhardt, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe centred his sixteenth-century play *Torquato Tasso*, written in the 1780s, around the clash of these two concepts: Is everything allowed that pleases (*erlaubt ist was gefällt*), as he lets the Italian poet Tasso argue impetuously in a nostalgic vision of the Golden Age? Or, as the Princess Leonora d'Este replies with reference to contemporary moral values, only what is decent (*erlaubt ist was sich ziemt*)?

Indecent Viewings

Goethe's renowned debate between Tasso and Leonora touches on a simple truth that some scholarly discussions omit. That what social norms might label *unziemlich* or 'indecent' is, in many cases, the visibility of an initially innocent action or desire, or of a natural bodily function or appearance. The latter issue contrasts with offenses and felonies forbidden by law and religion, thus indecency can be defined by its public nature. In addition, the viewer's curiosity and arousal is often what turns such natural acts into something indecent, as Isaac Cruikshank's print *Indecency* (1799) seems to address, in which a displeased prostitute complains about the viewer gazing at her while she takes a leak: 'B[an]t you / what are you staring at?' (fig. 0.1). This example demonstrates that oftentimes such images and texts explicitly request an audience and therefore function much like a performance.[4]

Not only did the audience enjoy staring at or reading such indecencies, there is also evidence that artists enjoyed themselves in producing them, as is shown by the example of François Rabelais. In chapter VII of *Pantagruel*, the reader is presented with a list of satirical books in the imaginary humanist library of Saint Victor. This list had been expanded by the author from the first edition in c. 1532, which mentions 42 titles in the library, to the final edition in 1542 with a list of 139 books.[5] The titles, which often mix French, Latin, or even Greek, include much scatological and erotic vocabulary and underline the authors' skills of intellectual

3 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; Biow, *In Your Face*.

4 Butterworth, 'Introduction', p. 27.

5 Cf. Bowen, 'The Library of Saint-Victor'. For the first English translation see Ferguson, 'Sir Thomas Urquhart's Translation'.

Figure 0.1: Isaac Cruikshank, *Indecency*, coloured etching, 1799, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, PC 3 – 1799 – Indecency (A size) [P&P], https://www.loc.gov/item/2003652525/.

verbal play and invention with the intention to amuse, among them *Tartaretus, De modo cacandi*, *Le culpelé des vefves* [*The Bald Arse or Peel'd Breech of the Widows*], or *Les cymbals des dames* [*The Cymbals of Ladies*]. Even if it may seem so at first, this and many examples discussed in this volume offer evidence that the point of departure for debates dealing with indecency is not primarily antiquity, or at least not alone. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the 'reception of antiquity' fails to fully grasp the widespread use of such imagery in the Early Modern period, which in many cases revolves rather around contemporary concerns and demands.[6]

Therefore, the present volume aims for a change in perspective. Instead of investigating such issues from the normative point of departure of *decorum* ('decency') and *aptum* ('appropriateness') – rhetorical and stylistic norms introduced into artistic theory since antiquity – the ten essays collected in this book look at various case studies from a different point of view.[7] The contributions take into account the relation of represented bodies to socio-moral norms by considering why and how indecency was related to, and defined by, visibility and a premodern concept of privacy.[8]

When considering the addressed public, the issue of gender, as well as a broader variety of spectators, needs to be considered because the reception of works may differ widely depending on the audience. The effects of indecent words and actions on a (female) audience, and therefore indecencies as cognitive problem, for example, Erasmus of Rotterdam explicitly broached in *Institutio christiani matrimonii* (*The Institution of Christian Matrimony*, 1526) when he underlined that such indecencies spoken or performed in front of a girl '…remain in her mind like a corrupt seed that will one day grow into a poisonous plant'.[9] In similar manner, Nuremberg's patrician authorities attempted to control participants of popular carnival celebrations to ensure that they did not make use of 'bawdy words and

6 The link to antiquity has in particular been discussed in connection to sexual imagery, amongst others, see Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*; Lindquist, *The Meanings of Nudity*; Turner, *Eros Visible*; Kren, *The Renaissance Nude*; Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude*; Hegener, *Nackte Gestalten*.

7 See above all – with further bibliographical references – Grassi and Pepe, *Dizionario della critica d'arte*, I, pp. 144–145; Mildner-Flesch, *Decorum*; Haussherr, *Convenevolezza*; Ames-Lewis and Bednarek, *Decorum*; Asmuth, 'Angemessenheit'; Rutherford and Mildner-Flesch, 'Decorum' (for painting and sculpture, see esp. cols. 434–452); Müller, *Decorum*; Thimann, 'Decorum'; Gaston, 'Vasari'; Kanz, 'Decorum'; a recent discussion of the concept of *decorum* in Williams, *Raphael*. See also below, n. 24.

8 Cf. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how the concepts of the public and the private, as indicated by Elias and further developed by Jürgen Habermas in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962, English translation 1989), prove to be unsatisfactory and insufficient for analysing Early Modern history. For this change of perspective in scholarship see e.g. Melville and Moos, *Das Öffentliche und Private* as well as Green, Nørgaard, and Bruun, *Early Modern Privacy*.

9 Erasmus, *Institutio christiani matrimonii*, p. 424, see also Roberts, 'Erasmus', p. 102.

indecent gestures' (*unczymliche wort*, *unordeliche geperde*), especially in front of maidens and ladies of high rank.[10]

How contemporary viewers would have reacted to images and objects has, in fact, been the focus of many studies close to reception theory and the aesthetics of reception. Apart from the seminal works by Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco, art historical studies have mostly profited from Michael Baxandall's renowned concept of the *period eye* and Wolfgang Kemp's discussions of reception theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*).[11] Especially in one specialised field of art history within the anglophone scholarly community it has become popular to paraphrase Baxandall's methodological groundwork to engage with such issues as gendered spectatorship or the physical handling of artistic and crafted everyday objects by females. Such ambitious approaches proclaiming 'period bodies', 'period hands', 'period hearts', 'situational eye', or 'gendered period eye', however, have been confronted with criticism, as they seem to have rather weakened Baxandall's heuristic approach instead of helping to expand it.[12] After all, the methodological success of the *period eye* was owed, for the most part, to Baxandall's attentive reconstruction of the language of a past beholder, and to his philological analysis of historical terminologies and their foundation in the diverse traditions of spectators' rhetoric, faith, economy, and social classes.

Starting with the proper way of looking (and therefore perceiving), there may be no better example to illustrate how a 'wrong' way of seeing was defined as unseemly than Leon Battista Alberti's use in the 1430s of the adjective *indecenter* to comment on the inappropriate squinting of an ancient statue of a cross-eyed Venus sculpted by Praxiteles. Apparently, the statue's gaze lacked decorum in the eyes of the beholder because it did not correspond to an ideal of beauty and because it suggested that the goddess's vision lacked clear direction and focus: She was 'looking wrong' in a double sense.[13] A second use of the term *indecenter*, also by Alberti, describes the indecency of painters showing male gods like Jupiter and Mars in women's clothes.[14] This example emphasises again that the concept of indecency is much broader

10 Simon, 'Carnival Obscenities', pp. 199–200, 211. Cuneo and Meurer in this volume discuss the carnival items of phalluses and excrement.

11 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*; Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*; Iser, *The Act of Reading*; Eco, *Lector in fabula*; Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*; Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors*, ch. VI; Kemp, *Der Betrachter ist im Bild*; Kemp, 'The Work of Art and its Beholder'.

12 See, e.g., Berdini, 'Women under the Gaze'; L'Estrange, *Holy Motherhood*, esp. pp. 25–43; Randolph, *Touching Objects*; Pearson, *Gardens of Love*, esp. pp. 12–13.

13 'Praxiteles quom a Veneris statua, quae indecenter intuebatur, iterum atque iterum suasionibus, cohortationibus, precibus atque denique conviciis et comminationibus frustra petisset ut oculorum vitium emendaret, ferro tandem id ipsum tollendum censuit.' Alberti, *Apologhi*, p. 94 (LXVIII).

14 'Iovem aut Martem veste muliebri indecenter vestires.' Alberti, *Opere volgari*, III, p. 67 (*De pictura* II.38).

Figure 0.2: Master of the Hours of Henri II, *Francis I as Minerva*, parchment on oak, c. 1545, 234 × 134 mm, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Estampes, Rés. Na 255.

than the mere question of lasciviousness in connection with sexual images – an important aspect, discussed below, yet only one of many described by the much broader concept of indecency. In this instance, Alberti addresses cross-dressing as a breach of decorum, a case which somehow resembles the image of Francis I of France appearing with various attributes of male and female gods (fig. 0.2). Apparently, this panegyrical glorification of the ruler seems to have been more troubling for twentieth-century art historians (who shared Alberti's concerns) than for the King's sixteenth-century contemporaries.

Terms of Indecency

In the context of the royal court across Europe, both north and south, this iconographical vocabulary would have appeared as respectable or as dignified (*decenter*) as other visualisations of political power.[15] *Decenter* is a Latin term that is used, among many other examples from courtly contexts, in the inscription of the famous diptych painted by Piero della Francesca to describe the festive appropriateness of the triumphal celebration of Federico da Montefeltro. In contrast to rhetorical texts, where fifteenth-century theoreticians such as Lorenzo Valla defined the category *dedecus* ('disgrace') as the opposite of *decus* / *decor*, texts commenting on the visual arts seem to have established a more sophisticated and versatile vocabulary to address indecency. Only in the post-tridentine climate did *indecente* become a key term used by authors such as Gabriele Paleotti and the eccentric Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo.[16] Throughout Pietro da Cortona's and Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli's treatise, a late reaction to this conservative trend – published only in 1652 – *indecente* had in fact become an adjective used most frequently to condemn iconographical, ornamental or stylistic violations of religious and moral ideas.[17]

In contrast, most vernacular languages had developed their own, very different jargon in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, especially in Northern Europe. In German, such images were often described as 'not prudish' (*unschamhaftig*) and 'unseemly' (*unschicklich*, *unzi*[*e*]*mlich*), or that they evoke lewdness (*reytzent zu der geylheit*) and must be considered 'inappropriately lewd ornament' (*unmässig geile Schmuck*).[18] One booklet, with images that provoked the Nuremberg authorities to remove it from circulation, described it as 'shameful' (*schenndtlich*) and 'sinful'

15 Cf. Pfisterer, 'Die Erotik der Macht'.

16 See e.g. Paleotti, *Discorso*, p. 184 recto; Lomazzo, *Trattato*, p. 530.

17 Cortona and Ottonelli, *Trattato*, esp. pp. 33, 67, 181, 206, 210, 322, 330.

18 For these examples and the specific language used in the German speaking countries regarding indecent imagery, see – apart from the important hints in Asmuth, *Angemessenheit*, cols. 581–582 – the enormously helpful anthology of sources *Von Strittigkeit der Bilder*.

(*lesterlich*), with 'indecorous' (*unzüchtig*) pictures showing 'unchaste' (*unordentlicher*) love in an official document; not one copy of the booklet is known today. Words within German anecdotes and popular plays, among others, indicated similar meanings, in the vernacular language used every day.[19] Dutch art treatises similarly called these images 'improper' (*niet behoorlijk*).[20]

As will be abundantly clear in the Introduction that follows, the Italian use of the Latin rhetorical tradition, with its emphasis on theory and terminology relating to 'indecency', is distinct from the less prevalent use of terminology in the north where much documentation, including names, has not come down to us – even more so than in the south – due to iconoclasm, changing religious affiliation and war, and different social practices.[21] There, humanist terminology is also accompanied by vernacular terms, often drawn from contemporary carnival plays, jokes, and sermons that were recorded by poet-shoemaker Hans Sachs, among others.

Yet, also in general the Italian sources – especially in earlier writings – address the matter of decency under such heterogeneous rubrics such as 'honourable' (*onorevole*), 'honest' (*onesto*), 'discrete' (*discreto*), 'adequate' (*adeguato*), 'reasonable' (*ragionevole*), or 'convenient' (*convenevole*); by defining indecency through the negation (e.g. *poco onorevole*, *sconvenevole*, *senza decoro*, *disonesto*); or through specific terms such as 'lascivious' (*lascivo*) or 'obscene' (*osceno*) – the latter word, again, in the Early Modern period was not restricted to questions of a sexual nature. The ancient rhetorical category most commonly utilised in art historical scholarship to deal with such questions, *decorum*, functions in most cases for the European Early Modern period as a mere synonym.[22] This interchangabilityle of 'decency' and 'decorum' is demonstrated by the relevant chapter in the treatise on ancient painting, *Da pintura antiga* (1548), entitled *Do decoro ou decência* ('On Decorum or Decency'), by the sixteenth-century Portuguese painter Francisco de Holanda.[23]

19 Cuneo addresses the use of the word 'obscene' in her essay below; Stewart, also below, for the vernacular German for a 'shameful and sinful booklet.'

20 Van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding*, p. 95.

21 On the 'Northern Renaissance', see Porras, *Art of the Northern Renaissance*, 'What is a Renaissance', pp. 14–15; Nash, *Northern Renaissance Art*, pp. 2–7, especially p. 4; Smith, *The Northern Renaissance*, p. 12 who states there was a 'distinctly northern European Renaissance, but one in which curiosity about the individual and the natural world was valued more than a renewed dialogue with antiquity. The latter occurred in the sixteenth century but never to the same degree as in Italy.' On destruction in the north, see Nash, *Northern Renaissance Art*, ch. 2, 'Dispersal and Destruction.'

22 The terms used to circumscribe the semantic field of decency and indecency are, however, vast; cf. e.g. David Summer's reasoning on 'discretion' (*discretione* / *descrição*) and familiar concepts: Summers, *The Language of Art*, pp. 332–346; for sources mentioning *sconvenienza* / *sconvenevolezza* see Grassi and Pepe, *Dizionario della critica d'arte*, II, p. 514. For the use of the French term *obscène* in the Renaissance and its roots in Latin, see Butterworth, 'Defining Obscenity'; cf. more generally *Obscenity*, ed. by Ziolkowski.

23 De Holanda, *Da pintura antiga*, pp. 73–75; for an English translation see De Holanda, *On Antique Painting*, pp. 128–130. For literature on *decorum* and further synonyms, see above, n. 7. The Vitruvian use

The concept of *decorum*, applied in art historical studies today, is primarily the one used by Alberti in the Quattrocento. His definition of the term denoted the rhetorical theory for the decency of style and the adequacy of the elements within a painterly narrative (*istoria*).[24] In antiquity, the issue of literary inappropriateness (*ἀπρεπές* [aprepés]) was already touched upon by Homer and Aristotle.[25] Even if the best-known passage from antiquity complaining about indecency in the arts – the mocking of the citizens of the town Tralles (*vitium indecentiae*), reported by Vitruvius – is related to the misplacing of statues (*Ita indecens…adiecit*), indecency is not a subject limited to bodies and painted or sculpted *istorie*.[26] All discussion of ornament (*decor* / *ornatus*) since antiquity centred around its appropriate use. In the Early Modern period, witnesses discussed the unsuitability of placing a meridian line in the floor of a Roman church (*poco convenevole*) and many other issues regarding architecture, urbanism, or non-figurative depictions.[27] Sixteenth-century theoreticians and theologians including Paolo Cortesi, Bernardino Cirillo, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo or Giovan Battista Armenini argued whether or not landscape paintings, *grotteschi*, and mythological subjects were, according to the concept of *decorum*, suitable for specific rooms of a palace or villa.[28] The grotesque exaggeration of the caricature – a related new feature of the Renaissance – responded to the secret desire to ridicule authoritative figures and norms, and thus soon found its place in the market of prints (fig. 3).

Body Troubles

Another general idea of the present volume is to connect various fields of scholarship that have received new attention, especially over the last few decades. Apart from studies addressing gender and queerness since the 1980s, recent scholarship for the Early Modern period has increasingly added new material and insights to the concept of age and to unusual physiognomies and physical disabilities, sometimes visually strengthened through juxtapositions of vastly differing ages and size (fig. 0.4, 0.5).[29] These issues are directly related to the artistic theory of *decorum* in regard

of the term *το πρέπον* (to prepón – 'appropriate' or 'fitting') does not seem to have had a literary impact in the artistic literature prior to the eighteenth century.

24 In this volume, *decorum* is discussed by Richter for Marcantonio Raimondi's use of pubic hair.

25 Asmuth, *Angemessenheit*, col. 580.

26 Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, VII, 5.

27 Valesio, *Diario di Roma*, I, p. 515.

28 For a summary, see Jonietz, *Buch zum Bild*, pp. 163–166.

29 Among the numerous recent contributions, see e.g. Nolte, *Homo debilis*; Bolze et al., *Prozesse des Alterns*; Ghadessi, *Human Monsters*; Love, *Early Modern Theatre*; Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds*; O'Bryan,

Figure 0.3: Hans Liefrinck after Leonardo da Vinci, *Two Grotesque Heads*, engraving, 1538, 115 × 157 mm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 2008.577.3, Gift of Leo Steinberg, 2008.

to proportions and harmony. The fact that Federico da Montefeltro, mentioned above, had a deformed right side of his face due to terrible scars, and was for this reason portrayed by Piero della Francesca showing only his unharmed side, is well known and mentioned in every discussion of his diptych. Yet, art history has generally overlooked the fact that such issues remained a permanent and crucial problem for artists. In 1673, a painter was even imprisoned for depicting the natural appearance of a one-eyed cardinal instead of painting him in a more advantageous position that would hide his defective side.[30]

To see this matter of indecency in relation to the question of the human appearance, as discussed in Romana Sammern's and Mandy Richter's contributions, helps us to better understand how a concept of bodily (in-)decency was constructed

'Grotesque Bodies, Princely, Delight'; *Representing Infirmity*, ed. by Henderson et al.; *Körper-Bilder in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Stolberg. The difficulty of interdisciplinary research on this topic, however, is demonstrated by the problematic interpretations of Early Modern artworks written by medically trained authors included in the collected volume edited by Canalis and Ciavolella, *Disease and Disability*.

30 'Si sente qualche bisbiglio trà pittori vedendosi carcerato un compagno per haver dipinto al naturale il Cardinal Gastaldi (privo d'un occhio), che vuol esser ritratto in sbiescio per paliar il mancamento della natura.' Rossi, 'Roma ignorata', p. 317.

Figure 0.4: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Old Man and his Grandson*, tempera on wood, c. 1490, 62.7 × 46.3 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. RF 266, RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010064987.

Figure 0.5: German painter, *The Giant Anton Frank with the Dwarf Thomele*, canvas, end of sixteenth century, 266.8 × 162.5 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. Gemäldegalerie, 8299 © KHM-Museumsverband.

and pursued in the Renaissance and beyond. Addressing human appearance reveals how it found creative and provocative responses to the idealised norms. Sammern demonstrates this aspect in her discussion of the Early Modern discourse, which included medical writings, on the colour of skin and its impurities, in particular stains, odours, and bodily fluids. Indecencies of skin extended to unwanted body hair. In similar manner, Richter relates the perception of body hair to the representation of pubic hair in sixteenth-century prints, in the depictions of female nudes by Marcantonio Raimondi. There fine hairs made visible that which is normally invisible. For Venus in Marcantonio's prints, the inclusion of pubic hair is seen to indicate fertility and therefore not indecorous or indecent.

The oscillating relationship between such ideals of beauty and the desire for sexually explicit imagery has recently re-entered the focus of several ambitious books and exhibitions.[31] Alison G. Stewart and Lisa Kirch demonstrate in their essays the widespread taste for and interest in explicit images prevalent in the

31 See above, note 6.

German print market during the first half of the sixteenth century and responses via censorship, including the colouring and cutting of prints by their owners. Kirch discusses the meaning of Sebald Beham's highly erotic *Night* in the social context of Frankfurt am Main. There the engraving, which offers a nude woman displaying her genitals to the viewer, is understood not as indecent, but as market oriented and as having a broad audience including humanistically educated city officials. Stewart analyses the responses to two other prints by Beham, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife and Death* and the *Lascivious Couple* that show an aroused male, both the living Joseph and the figure of death. She argues that the prints confirm a Renaissance interest in sexual imagery. Pia F. Cuneo's essay on Hans Baldung Grien's *Horses*, instead, demonstrates that beastly bodies – apart from the mythological creatures in the grotesques mentioned above – also constituted part of these discussions and sometimes wittily served as examples of human behaviour. She explores both the contemporary writings of the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam and vernacular sources in German, from carnival plays to sermons and concludes that what she calls 'seeing sex' – showing body parts and processes usually concealed – constituted what was deemed indecent.

The increased demand for sexual imagery was not exclusively restricted to the print market, but applies to almost all artistic categories and genres in the sixteenth century:[32] this amongst others was told by the occurrence of sexually allusive attributes, gestures, and acts in many artworks connected to private commissions, sometimes even with an allegedly instructive purpose. In the contribution of Bette Talvacchia, the partial nudity in Venetian painted portraits is discussed with regard to the art historical tradition of interpreting these female sitters as courtesans. In the portraits, a bare breast revealed to the viewer has been interpreted as indecent. Rather, Talvacchia discusses the portraits within the context of betrothal and marriage customs and describes them as 'chaste nudity'. Renaissance Venice is also the historical background for Ricardo De Mambro Santos's analysis of the concept of 'honest lust', as depicted by Pauwels Franck (Paolo Fiammingo) in four allegories. He calls the paintings on canvas, each displaying a nude woman in a 'kaleidoscope of sexual positions' before a landscape, as sensually provocative, but never gratuitously indecent.

Such indecent symbolism or acts, which may include those not within the hetero-normative framework, should be seen in most cases outside of general socio-moral norms because they are connected to one specific context. As mentioned above, erotic imagery has for a long time been reviewed by art historians exclusively in relation to ancient models. Yet, as the huge number of publications on the topic attests, the many still-preserved artworks created in the Early Modern period

32 See e.g. Nova, 'Erotismo e spritualità'.

depicting such issues reveal manifold motivations and offer a much broader scope of images and texts. Institutions like the *Rugamt* (the office of trade control) in Nuremberg, and its proceedings, and the patent and privilege system in Venice, as well the famous case of the *Modi*, assist in explaining censorship or legal punishment when it comes to the creation of such indecencies and their divulgation, namely their increased visibility and accessibility.

Limits and Liminalities

Later censure and the oftentimes problematic reception tell another story, one of different definitions of *decorum* in different times as well as changed social limits and visibility. Some aspects of the human body, however, have been considered indecent at all times by some individuals, even if the treatment and cleaning of specific areas differed due to religious or cultural beliefs and traditions. Liminal areas such as the genitalia and certain body functions and natural needs have at various times contested such socio-cultural norms. Nobert Elias has drawn attention to Erasmus's arguing against the recommended suppressing of passing gas in order to avoid indecent noises, or the equally unhealthy holding back of urine.[33] Such an open-minded understanding of natural needs remains problematic when it comes to their visibility. Therefore, the representation of urination and other bodily excretions in the visual arts is of particular interest for this volume. Catherine Emerson focusses on the small bronze statue of a naked boy urinating, known as the *Mannekin Pis*, and the omnipresent fountains with urinating statues in the Low Countries and France. These fountains span from the middle of the fifteenth to the eighteenth century and underscore the visibility and acceptance of bodily emissions in the public realm. Fabian Jonietz discusses the metaphorical and practical relation of bodily excretion – defecating, urinating, vomiting, or farting – to artistic and poetic creation, how the artist's stomach and anus were considered in this discourse, and how human waste products served as symbolic and actual artistic materials. Both Emerson and Jonietz demonstrate that the natural, yet socially improper notion of human excretions served as the reason artists used them to express provocative or subversive ideas through the representation of bodily excretions.

The physical pain and agony accompanying human bodily functions, which Erasmus addresses, is linked to the fact that explicit depictions of pain and violence, which have increasingly gained the attention of scholars, constitute another subject area within the larger field of indecency. In related manner, for imagery of Christian salvation, the viewer contemplating such works is asked to engage imaginatively and

33 Erasmus, *De Civilitate*; Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, pp. 110–111, 500.

Figure 0.6: Master of the Crucifixion of Kempten, detail of *Crucifixion*, panel painting, c. 1460/70, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, loan of the Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen Munich, inv. Gm879.

emphatically with the scenes represented. Sometimes the most atrocious depictions of pain and violence are employed to call for an answer from the viewer.[34] As with most depicted indecencies, it is exactly this push-and-pull effect which makes these images effective.[35] In some cases, the broken body and pain form a sort of spectacle. It is used by the artist as a possible means for showing artistic invention, as seen for example in depictions of the two thieves in images of the Crucifixion (fig. 0.6).[36]

34 Decker, 'Spectacular Unmaking', p. 5; Graham and Kilroy-Ewbank, 'Introduction'.
35 Baert, 'Cutting the Throat', p. 138.
36 See, e.g., Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*.

In an irritating way, the caricatures mentioned above resemble sometimes such deformations of the body, provoking however a very different reaction. Ludicrous representations constitute, as studies on the topic have strengthened, a visual manifestation of a general 'culture of laughter' in the Early Modern period, a social trend to address a very broad audience and to make use of a similarly wide range of content – from subtle allusions to offensive and very indecent statements.[37] There are preserved examples specific to one individual that appear quite nebulous without a clear context, as has been argued for Willibald Pirckheimer's scribbled Greek words ('with the erect penis in the anus of the man') next to a silverpoint portrait of the humanist made by Albrecht Dürer (fig. 0.7).[38] The relation between laughter and indecent imagery is without a doubt extremely complex,[39] and it underlines the potential for artistic indecencies to transform into something publicly acceptable through the element of laughter. Its appearance as a rebellion against the body's rational faculties has been placed parallel to some indecent images with regard to their subversive claims toward existing structures.[40]

The comical deformations of caricatures or even subversive comments in different media, with bodies and acts to be considered outside of established socio-moral norms, form only one part of such fields of witty experimentation and invention. Like the isolated spaces of garden rooms and loggias, social spaces allowed one to address vices in a blunt way for a specific period of time. The northern tradition of carnival festivities, when the world turned upside-down, comprised one of these periods in which graphic motifs such as gluttony were thematised in such a prominent and provocative way that it is difficult to decide whether the vices were caricatured, or whether the norms punishing the latter were ridiculed. Susanne Meurer's essay is a case in point and addresses an unusual late sixteenth-century woodcut depicting the *Land of Cockaigne*, where both laughter and disgust meet in a very large woodcut print showing the imaginary land where 'gluttonous layabouts' eat, drink, fart, and defecate around tables near a river of pies or excrement. The range of topics directly connected to such figures' indecency makes clear that this incongruity is not a characteristic limited to genre painting and the depiction of everyday life, as some recent scholars have suggested.[41] Such examples also indicate that artworks should not be seen

37 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire*; Alberti and Bodart, *Rire en images à la Renaissance*; Bowen, *Humour and Humanism in the Renaissance.*

38 Schleif, 'Frey and Pirckheimer', p. 203.

39 Harris, 'Obscene Laughter'. Even Castiglione dedicates a whole chapter on the connection between incongruity or deformity and the laughable (*The Book of the Courtier*, II, ch. 46).

40 Harris, 'Introduction', p. 209.

41 For a summary of recent scholarship, see *Peiraikos' Erben*, ed. by Münch and Müller; *Alltag als Exemplum*, ed. by Müller and Braune.

Figure 0.7: Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Willibald Pirckheimer*, silverpoint drawing, c. 1503, 21.1 × 15 cm, Berlin, SMB, Kupferstichkabinett, KdZ 24623, © Kupferstichkabinett. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

in a binary manner, of either one idea or another, with only one interpretation or understanding.[42]

A last aspect linking the essays of the present volume is their effort to not reduce visual indecency to a matter of iconography or specific art forms and media. Rather, the essays consider the agency of such artworks along with the relation between the subjects and the beholder's knowledge of bodily norms, or the beholder's body itself. Artworks did not exclusively transport and transmit such graphic imagery, and they developed a specific iconography over time. Rather, the artefacts and their producers actively transformed and shaped the discourse on the indecency of

42 On viewer interpretations and how they can vary, what Pearson calls the 'subjectivity of visual experience', see Pearson, *Gardens of Love*, pp. 228–229, including the section 'Ambiguities', and the Introduction.

bodies and provoked reactions, a process not only illustrated by, but documented in the subject of art historical studies itself.

* * *

In sum, the ten essays that follow explore the concept of indecency across media in prints, paintings, and sculptures made throughout Europe in England, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. Four contributions explore indecency through images centred on women and their bodies: Kirch and Richter on female genitalia and pubic hair, Talvacchia on the exposed breast, and De Mambro Santos on women shown completely nude. Three essays explore males and the male member: Stewart on impassioned biblical men, Cuneo on the aroused horse, and Emerson on the small urinating boy fountain. Finally, bodily emissions are featured in the essays on scatology by Meurer and Jonietz and on skin by Sammern.

Not surprisingly, these essays suggest that attitudes about the body, its activities and excretions in Early Modern Europe differ greatly from those today and what was deemed 'indecent.' Hailing from a variety of times and places, the viewers and patrons of such artworks understood 'indecent' as having not just one, fixed meaning. Yet once we consider, for example, today's provocative use of advertising and the arts, censorship in social media, shaming and hiding of bodily 'defects' and excretions, and the almost unrestricted access to pornography, this comparison appears in a different light. The great range of meanings and responses to Early Modern 'indecent' images (not to mention both their acceptance and censorship) appears to stand closer to the paradox of 'indecent' human bodies in our postmodern time than one might suspect at first glance.

* * *

The idea for this volume originated in a double session at the 63th Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America at Chicago in 2017, entitled *The Human Stain: Indecency and De-Idealization of the Body*. Two of the co-organisers, Fabian Jonietz and Mandy Richter, were joined by presenter Alison G. Stewart to edit *Indecent Bodies in Early Modern Visual Culture*. This book includes selected papers presented in Chicago and a number of additional authors who cover topics that we consider crucial to the debate. Our sincere gratitude goes to all the contributors for their book chapters and for their patience during the process of writing and editing, which unfortunately coincided with the worst phase of the 2019/22 pandemic.

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