

7. Ideality and Realism

Historically, the scenario of the sleeping nude is that of modesty caught unguarded, as if a hunter had stumbled upon a sleeping doe. In Greek mythology it is particularly common (chapter 4, fig. 60, 62-64, 67). In Renaissance painting, it was Giorgione (1477-1510) who, in the last year of his life, inaugurated the genre with his *Sleeping Venus* (fig. 111). She reclines languorously on rich velvet cushions and lush drapery; her air of repose conveys unselfconsciousness while her relaxed hand covers her sex. Her tranquil face has the oval shape typical of the Madonna, while the raised right arm that uplifts her breast grounds her in a more earthly womanhood. The harmonious setting of the nude in the landscape, the one's contours echoing the other's curves, and the assumption of the female figure as the primary subject, make Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* the iconic image it has become.



Figure 111.
Giorgio da Castelfranco,
called Giorgione
(Italy, 1477-1510).
Sleeping Venus, circa
1510. Oil on canvas, 108
x 175 cm. Gallery of Old
Masters, Dresden -
Germany

Rubens' (1577-1630) *Angelica and the Hermit* (fig. 112) depicts a scene from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: Angelica, after a demon conjured by the hermit takes control of her horse, ends up stranded on an island; while she is asleep, the hermit attempts to have his way with her. As the old man removes the delicate cloth covering her, the demon behind her stands defiant. The flesh of the heroine, painted in pigments of Venetian luminosity, is set off by the vermillion drapery she lies upon. What is going through her mind at this moment? Her voluptuous pose invites one to imagine.



Figure 112.
Peter Paul Rubens
(Flemish, 1577-1640).
Angelica and the Hermit,
circa 1630.
Oil on wood, 43 x 66 cm.
Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna - Austria.

Botticelli's (1445-1510) *Venus and Mars* (fig. 115) juxtaposes masculine and feminine beauty in an allegorical image: The near-naked god, virile and smooth as marble, sleeps in post-love bliss; the goddess, alert in her gold-trimmed gown, gazes at him ambiguously, as if wondering, "Do I really know this intimate stranger?". The rose-coloured drapery they lie upon highlights the lovers' symmetry; behind them, shrubs of myrtle, the evergreen aphrodisiac, curtain off a plain meadow. And what about the boisterous acolytes of Bacchus so assiduously ignored by the satisfied lover? Goat-legged, horned and tailed, the little satyrs, playing with his helmet, lance and cuirass, amuse themselves as the warrior rests: Love has disarmed the god of war; love, indeed, has conquered all.



Figure 113. Sandro Botticelli (Italian, 1445 - 1510). Mars and Venus, circa 1483. Tempera and oil on wood, 69 x 173 cm. National Gallery, London - G.B.

In the physically awkward pose and the ambiguity of the nude it depicts, Francesco Salviati's (1510-1563) *Allegory of Sleep* (fig. 114), an overdoor fresco in the Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti in Rome, asserts its artificiality, its rejection of the harmonious ideals and restrained naturalism typical of his Renaissance peers. Indeed, the subject's red lips and blonde curls sit uneasily with his fortissima donna limbs.

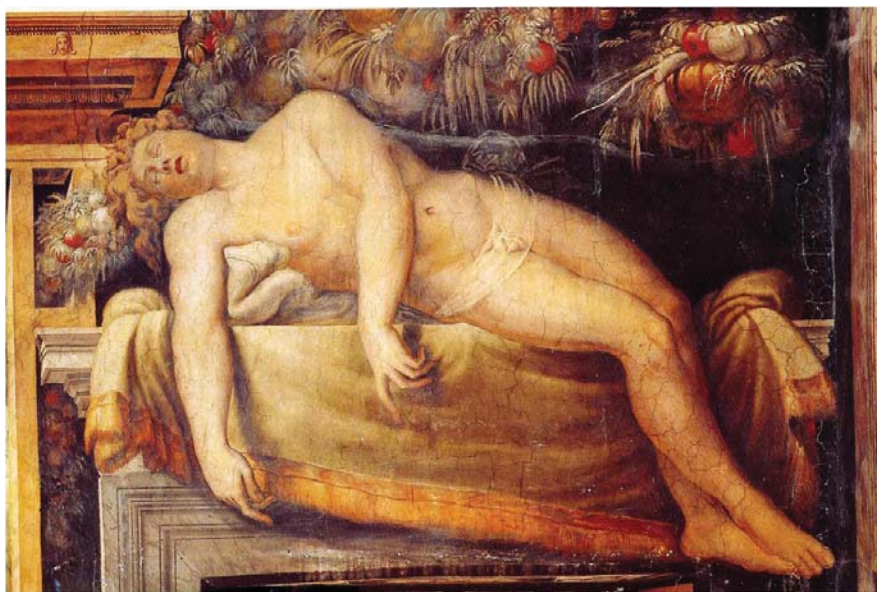


Figure 114. Francesco Salviati (Italian, 1510-1563). Allegory of sleep. Fresco. Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti, Rome - Italy.

Donato Creti (1671-1749), inspired by his fellow Bolognese painters Annibale Carracci and Guido Reni, opted for a monochrome in white and brown oil to render the superbly balanced proportions of his male nude (fig. 115). The finely-measured play of light and shadow, the pose at once modest and provocative, give the work a brooding quality.



*Figure 115.-Donato Creti (Italian, 1671-1749).
Naked male asleep. Brush and brown and white oil on thick paper, 28 x 41 cm.
Prado Museum, Madrid - Spain.*

François Boucher's (1703-1770) *Diana Asleep* (fig. 116) is a pencil and chalk rendering in his typical rocaille style of a Diana flaunting her modesty.



Figure 116.- François Boucher (France, 1703-1770). Diana asleep. Sanguine and chalk on gray paper, 23.2 x 38 cm. Ecole des Beaux - Arts, Paris - France

In *Le feu aux poudres* (fig. 117) Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), “the poet of erotic painting” (as nineteenth-century critic Paul de Saint-Victor called him), gives us another of his rapid-fire renderings of the stirrings of desire. Indulging their curiosity, ribald little angels, one of them brandishing a firebrand, gaze upon the crotch of the robust sleeper. Rosy-pink flesh and silver-grey bedding, a suspension of action in contemplation, concur to create a heady atmosphere.



Figure 117.
Jean - Honore Fragonard
(France, 1732-1806).). «
Le Feu aux poudres,
circa 1763-1764.
Oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm.
The Louvre,
Paris - France.

Altogether different from Fragonard is Jean-Baptiste Corot's (1796-1875) *The Nymph of the Seine* (fig. 120). Indeed, Corot, no stranger to poetic invention, was nevertheless anchored in realism. Baudelaire considered him, at least as far as landscape painting was concerned, the first of the moderns. This early *Odalisque* is among the first in a series the artist painted throughout his career.

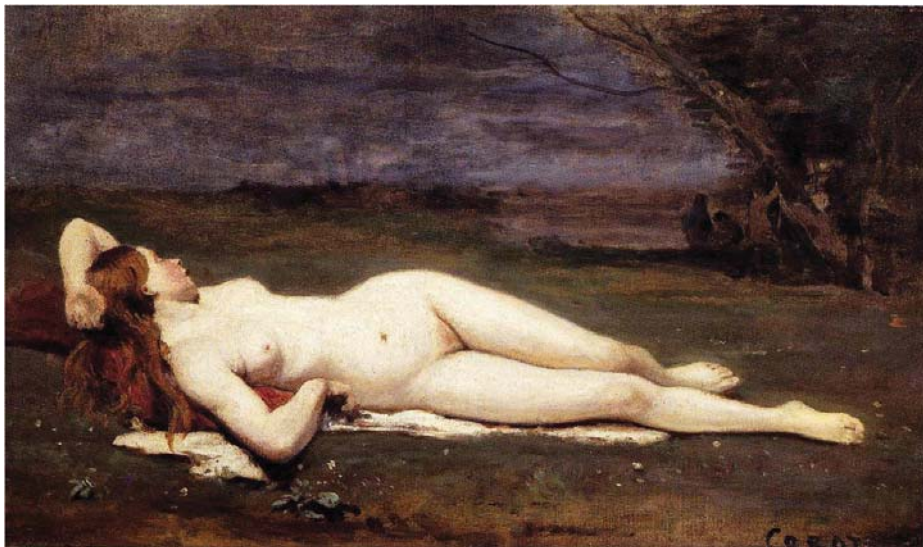


Figure 118. - Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (France, 1796-1875).
The Nymph of the Seine, 1837. Oil on canvas, 30 x 45 cm. Private collection

With something of the Renaissance masters, he depicts a reclining nude in a moody landscape, nature and nude in perfect harmony. Her red hair flows loose, as if to emphasize

her organic link with the landscape, while her long legs and womanly curves testify to Corot's feminine ideal. As the 1996 Corot Exhibition catalogue stated, Corot's oeuvre reflects "the seemingly contradictory tenets of Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism". Courbet would give the nude a greater realism, but who else but Corot could evoke, with such unaffected naturalness and personal poetry, a nude as virtuous as she is provocative, wrapped in the autumnal tones of a rural day?

Henri Gervex (1852-1929) enjoyed a great succès de scandale with *Rolla* (fig. 119), a painting that has become one of the iconic images in the abundant depiction of the demi-monde in French nineteenth-century painting. The scene evokes the last night that Rolla, the dissolute hero of Alfred de Musset's poem, spent with Marion, a poor girl turned prostitute, just before Rolla poisons himself. It was not Marion's pose that caused scandal, but rather the depiction of the clothes on the armchair. Indeed, the man's top hat and the girl's corset, garters and skirt make the characters' respective social statuses explicit, and such a frank depiction of social relations was not acceptable to bourgeois spectators. Even the sexual metaphor of the man's cane sticking through the girl's corset, one end of the diagonal running through the girl's sex to the man's head, was not as "offensive" as this. For the Salon jury that refused *Rolla*, this was simply "too much reality" to bear.

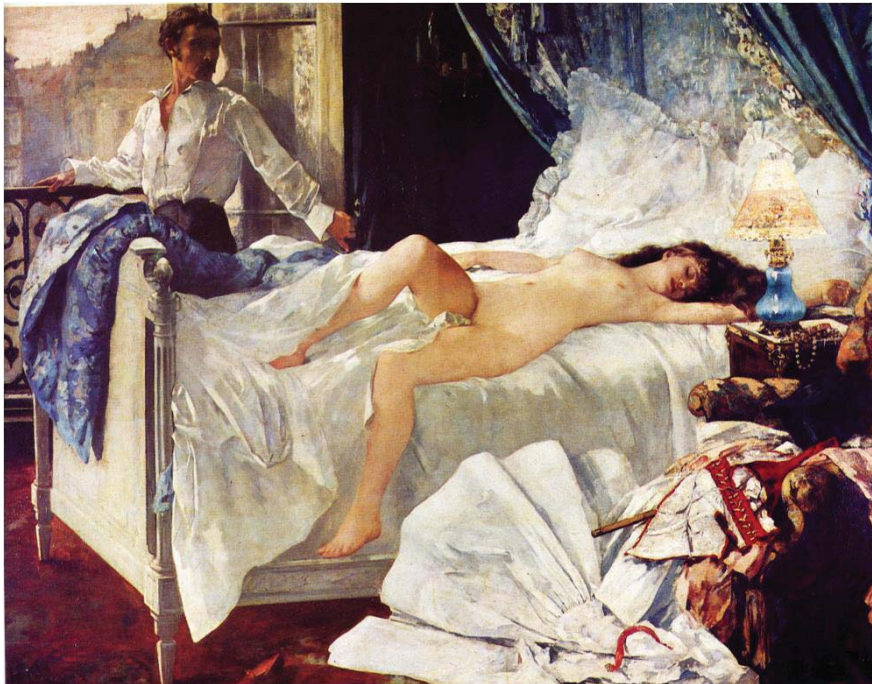


Figure 119. Henri Gervex (France, 1852 - 1929), Rolla, 1878. Oil on canvas, 175 x 220 cm. Museum of Fine - Arts, Bordeaux – France

A number of artists found in the sleeping nude an occasion to charm the viewer/critic or, failing that, to provoke him. During a period when virtue was so easily offended, when defenders of bourgeois taste and public morals would denounce in a self-righteous chorus the work of independent artists, these painters would take liberties with the accepted code. With courage and daring, Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), an artist that no sound and fury could shake from his "régime of freedom", painted *Le Sommeil* (The Sleep, fig. 120). Vividly clear and life-size, the painting shows two female lovers in a languorous caress, while a broken string of pearls and a hairpin on the bed make it clear that these are not academic nymphs,

purged of earthly flesh. Once again, sleep serves as a pretext to free art from the constraints of archaic social codes. The painting may flatter the taste of the Turkish diplomat who commissioned it, but it remains as fresh today as it was in 1866, the year of its creation. One only has to consider that Courbet's most famous violation of taboo, *The Origin of the World*, is today on open display (after almost 130 years in clandestinity) to measure the distance come—and the time it has taken—since *Sleepers* first opened the way. Indeed, when it comes to sex, painting is no longer the incendiary medium it once was. This, in fact, may be something to regret, for as Degas said, “A painting is a thing which requires as much cunning, trickery and vice as the perpetration of a crime” (R.H. Ives Gammell, *The Shop-Talk of Edgar Degas*). Having lost sex as a source of transgression, today's postmodern provocations make do with much lesser things.



Figure 120.
Gustave Courbet
(France, 1819-1877).
Le Sommeil
(the Sleep), 1866.
Musée du Petit Palais,
Paris - France

Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), whose aristocratic parents' inbreeding left him with a man's torso and a child's legs, contradicted his state by mastering in art the human body in motion, and by making himself at home—literally—in brothels and cabarets. In *Alone* (fig. 121), an oil-on-cardboard study for a lithograph, he exploits the fluidity of the medium to produce a snapshot, as it were, of a prostitute flat on her back on an unmade bed, abandoning herself to her exhaustion.

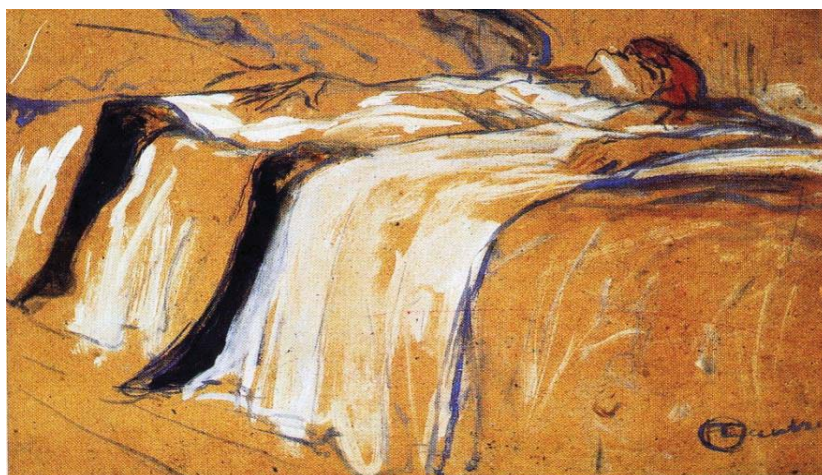


Figure 121.
Henri de Toulouse-
Lautrec
(France, 1864-1901).
Alone, 1896.
Oil on cardboard,
31 x 40 cm.
Musée d'Orsay,
Paris – France

Van Gogh (1853-1890) the martyr, van Gogh the madman, van Gogh the saint: Let us try not to impose our romantic clichés on his painting. And yet, the weight of the documentary evidence is overwhelming: van Gogh, the replacement son of a mourning mother, had miserably unhappy relationships with women (A.J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth*. H.Holt & Co., NY, 1972) and sought refuge in his friendships with prostitutes. Attracted to “despised” women on whose “half-faded face” life has left its mark, he depicts here, in *Nude Woman Reclining* (fig. 122), one such figure. It is a small-format painting in which clarity of line gives way to milky colour. The woman is shown in the now-classical diagonal pose, with no attempt to make her conventionally desirable. Emile Bernard, van Gogh’s fellow artist and friend, wrote of Vincent’s “extreme humanity for prostitutes”; if van Gogh, in his life, tended to idealize them into madonnas, there is no evidence of that in this particular work.



Figure 122.
Vincent Van Gogh
(Dutch, 1853-1890).
Reclining nude woman,
1887.
Oil on canvas,
24 x 41 cm.
Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam - Holland

Sleep can also be seen as one of life’s pleasures and as a dreamy respite from the cares of living. In its opulence and quietude, Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s (1841-1919) *The Sleeper* (fig. 123) conveys this attitude. The pink, purple-tinged light captures the evanescent grace of the pose and, with its flecks of gold, shows the forms to advantage.

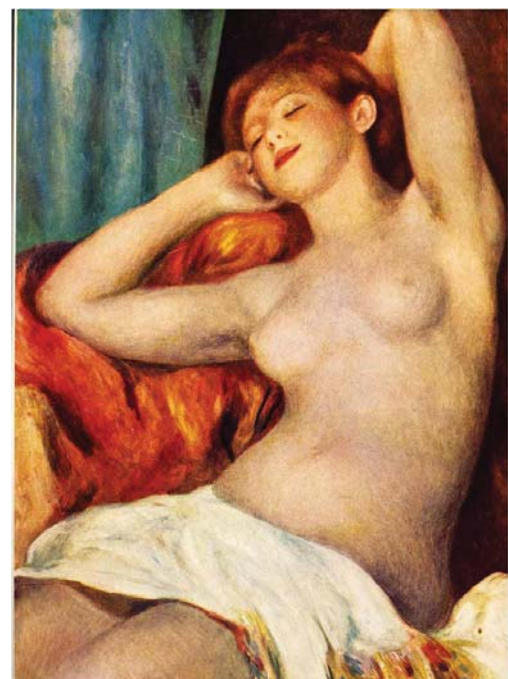


Figure 123.- Pierre-Auguste Renoir
(France, 1841-1919).
The Sleeper, 1897.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 63 cm.
Sammlung Oscar Reinhart Am Römerholz
Winterthur – Switzerland

Amedeo Modigliani's (1884-1920) *Nude* (fig. 124) is one of the at least 26 reclining nudes he painted. It is a genre in which his intensity never failed him, unlike in his portraits, where occasionally his mannerism would slip into sentimentality. Here the burnt-orange body cuts a diagonal between the planes of white and black, mediated by the carmine of the bed cover. As so often in Modigliani, all is tenderness and grace, serenity and melancholy. An artist of singular independence, largely indifferent to the fashions of his times, he pursued his own path, taking the elongated oval face of the African mask as a model to create enduring renditions of the human figure, resonant with emotion and grace.

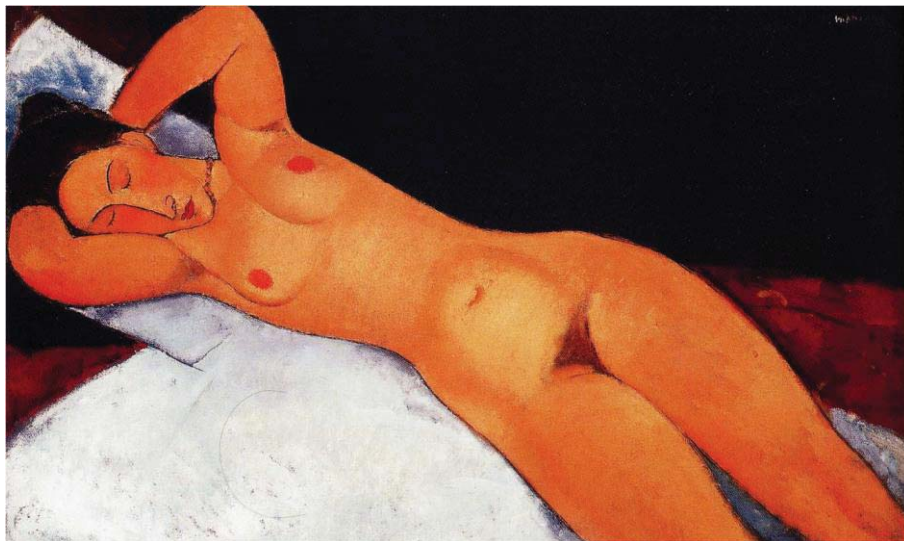
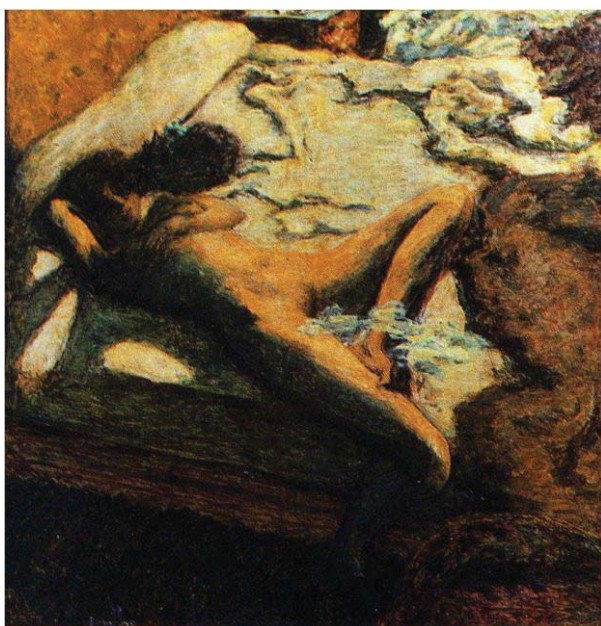


Figure 124. - Amedeo Modigliani (Italian, 1884 - France, 1920). *Nude (Nu)*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 73.0 x 116.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York - United States

Like a number of paintings we have examined in this chapter (fig. 113, 119, 120), Pierre Bonnard's (1867-1947) *The Indolent Woman* (fig. 125) depicts a figure resting after lovemaking. From a magma of colour it emerges, seen from above, half in shadow.



The bold composition is characterized by sinuous lines and vibrant textures; an air of intimacy pervades the quiet monochrome. The model happens to be Bonnard's muse, and the woman who would become his wife. A puff of blue smoke, floating across her ankle towards her sex, suggests the lover's presence, while her shock of black hair and her uplifted arm, together with her open thighs, convey a nonchalant eroticism evocative of love in the afternoon.

Figure 125. - Pierre Bonnard (France, 1867-1947). *Woman Dozing on a Bed or The Indolent Woman*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 96 x 106 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris – France. ©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Charles Camoin (1879-1965) in *La Saltimbanque au repos* (Resting Acrobat, fig. 126) uses colour to bring to incandescence a yellow-hued nude in performer's boots and stockings. (Such use of colour would come to be known as the "Fauve aesthetic".) Indeed, the hot colours combine with the obscene pose to bring the painting to a feverish pitch, if not of eroticism, then at least of provocation.

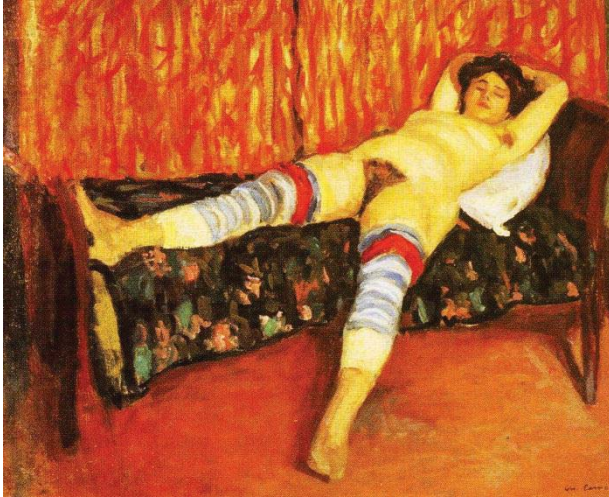


Figure 126.
Charles Camoin (France, 1879 - 1964).
La Saltimbanque au repos, 1905,
65 x 81 cm.
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de
Paris, Paris - France
©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Sir William Nicholson (1872-1949) painted very few nudes. The model of this one (fig. 127) was the artist's second wife Edith. The young woman, endowed with a delicately coloured peach skin is taken in lateral view. The work is full of charm and languid nature.



Figure 127. Sir William Nicholson (British, 1872-1949).
Nude, circa 1921. Oil on wood 40.6 x 58.4 cm. Tate Gallery, London - G.B.
©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) spent his artistic life in a relentless struggle to express his vision of volume and space, as much in his drawing as in his sculpture. Here, in a *Nu couché* dated 1940 (fig. 128), the figure, the bed and the empty space around them (the latter interests Giacometti as much as the former) are rendered in a few rapidly-traced lines.

Between the model and the artist's hand and eye, one feels the flow of a restless mind never satisfied with facility.

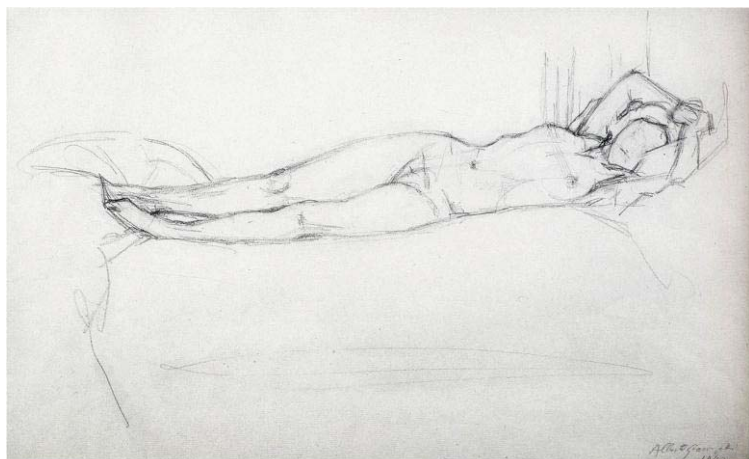


Figure 128.
Alberto Giacometti
 (Switzerland, 1901 - 1966).
Reclining Nude, 1940.
Pencil on paper, 31 x 48 cm.
Collection Alain Frumkin, New
York, USA
 ©Succession Alberto
 Giacometti, (Fondation Alberto
 et Annette Giacometti, Paris
 /ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Prodigious and enigmatic, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) could express his thought, with or without pencil or brush in hand, in whatever medium happened to be available: scraps of metal, bits of cardboard, wrapping paper, driftwood or pebbles. He once made a series of drawings featuring sleep in all its details. These drawings are as exciting as a spirited film sequence or comic strip; in them, the mischievous artist, at once a plaything of his animal spirits and a master of his means, orchestrated a collaboration between Eros and creativity. Does anyone need to be reminded of how, at every renewal in his cycle of creativity, Eros presented itself in a new incarnation? We understand that the attitude of the man facing the woman is ambivalent: Young, the artist at his easel is at one with the model; old, he is weary with obstination. In the end, blending desire, beauty and real presence, the image-maker himself becomes image.

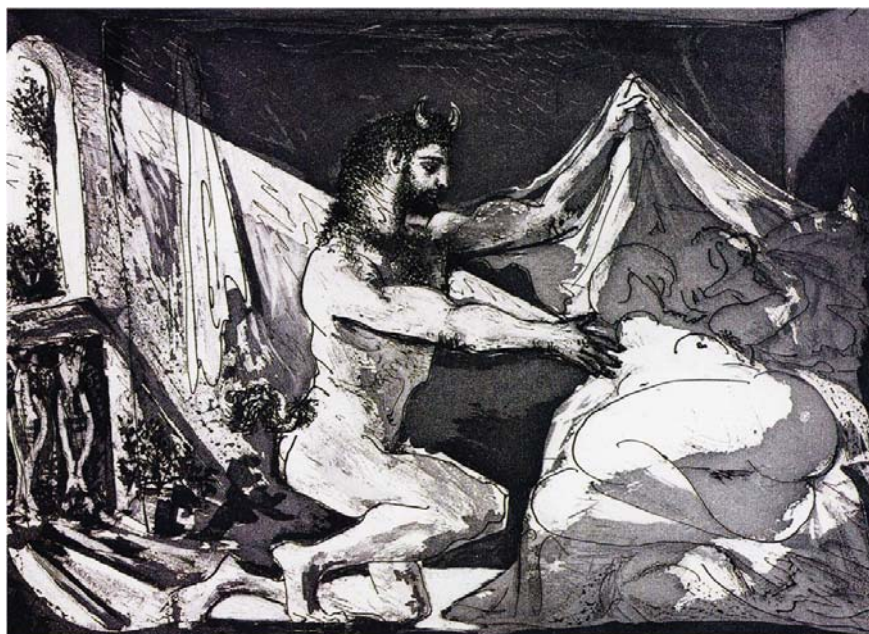
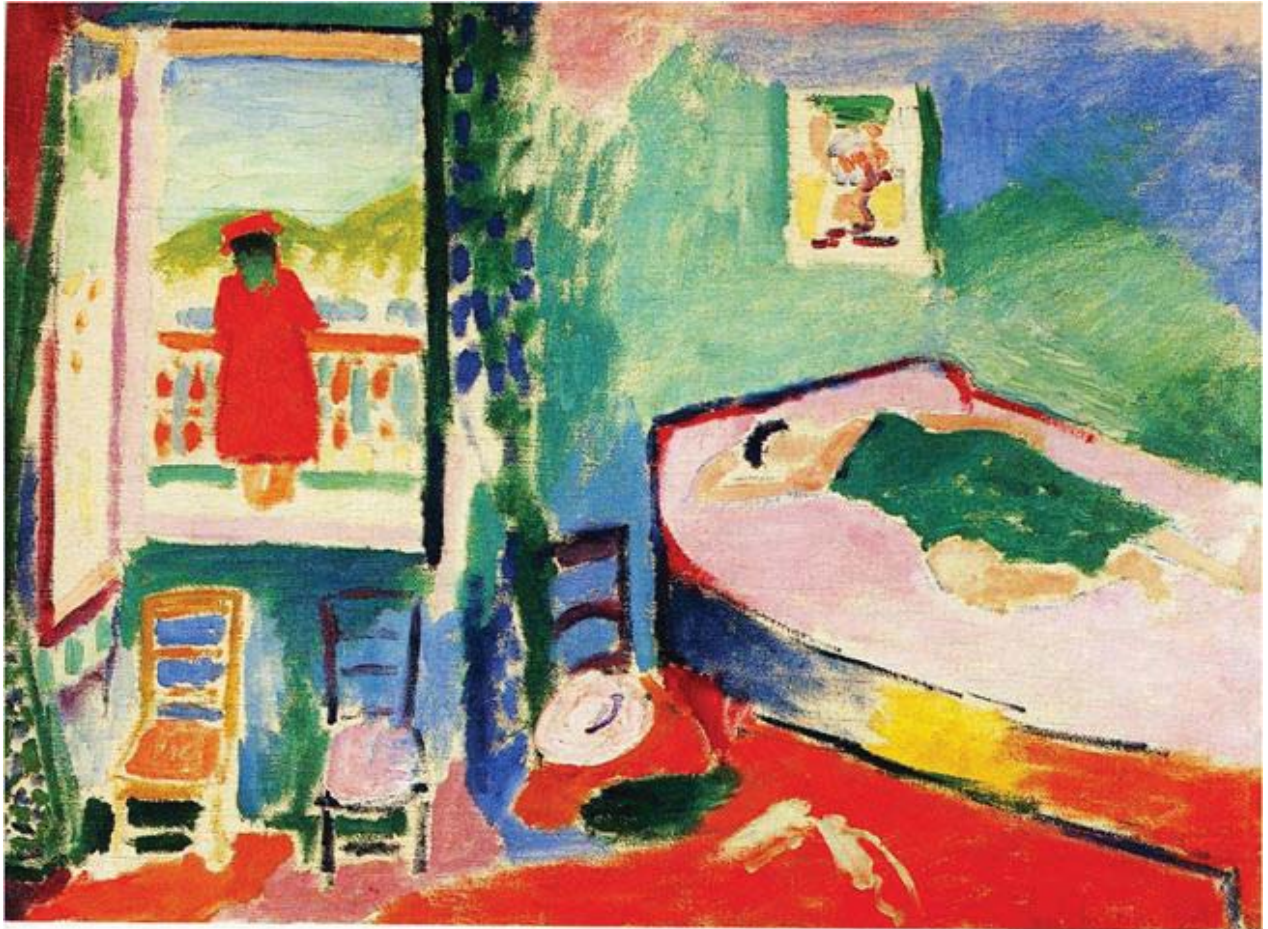


Figure 129.
Pablo Picasso
 (Spain, 1881 -
 France, 1973).
Faun revealing a
woman, 1963.
Aquatint.
Kupferstachkabinett,
Staatliche Museen zu
Berlin, Berlin -
Germany.
 ©Succession Pablo
 Picasso

Sleep, then, is a recurring subject in Picasso's oeuvre; indeed, we have inventoried over one hundred different works, in all media and from all periods, in which he dealt with it. In *Faun Revealing a Sleeping Woman* (fig. 129), he takes up the theme in the register of moonlight, producing a subtle nocturne made possible by the tonal effects of aquatint.

Picasso, even more than his alter ego Matisse, conceives of sleep as the height of voluptuousness, a domain where the model totally submits to the artist's caprices, be they propitiatory or vengeful.



*Figure 130. Henri Matisse (France, 1869 - 1954). Interior at Collioure (Nap), 1906. Oil on canvas, 52 x 72 cm. Private Collection, Ascona - Switzerland.
©Succession H. Matisse*

In his *Interior at Collioure (The Siesta)* (fig. 130) and *The Two Odalisques (The Terrace)* (fig. 131), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) evokes a vision of leisure as a luminous fusion of sleep, seaside and summer. Among painters he was among the most aware of all that sleep could offer the artist pictorially; indeed, wakefulness and sleep in perpetual pursuit of each other may be seen as one of his enduring subjects. Typically, as in *The Two Odalisques*, his decorative compositions convey a sense of calm and abandon, of lush reverie, while in his Fauvist works, such as *Interior at Collioure*, the human figure loses its physicality and abandons itself to colour.

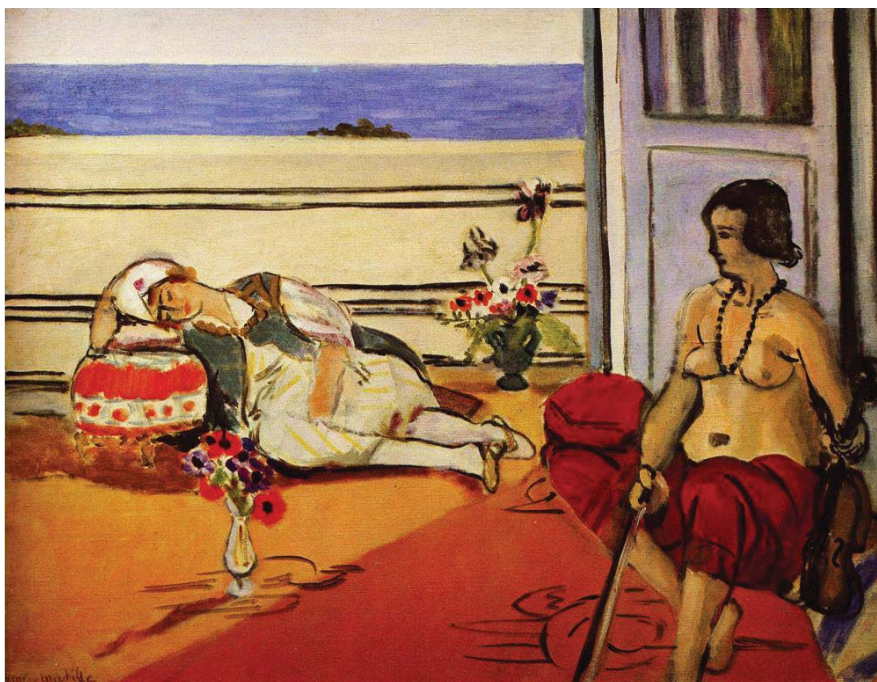


Figure 131.
Henri Matisse
 (France, 1869-1964).
Two Odalisques (the
terrace), 1921.
Oil on canvas.
Hester Diamond
Collection,
New York – USA
 ©Succession H. Matisse

Roy Lichtenstein's (1923-1997) *Figure in a Landscape* (fig. 132) is one in a series of what he called "Brushstroke Landscapes", painted in 1985. It shows a space lacerated by strips of pure colour—red, green, yellow, blue and brown—with shades of would-be-calming white showing through. The image conveys a sense of urgency and agitation; it is the landscape that appears dazed and confused, while the figure seeks refuge, if not in sleep, then in stasis and recumbency.

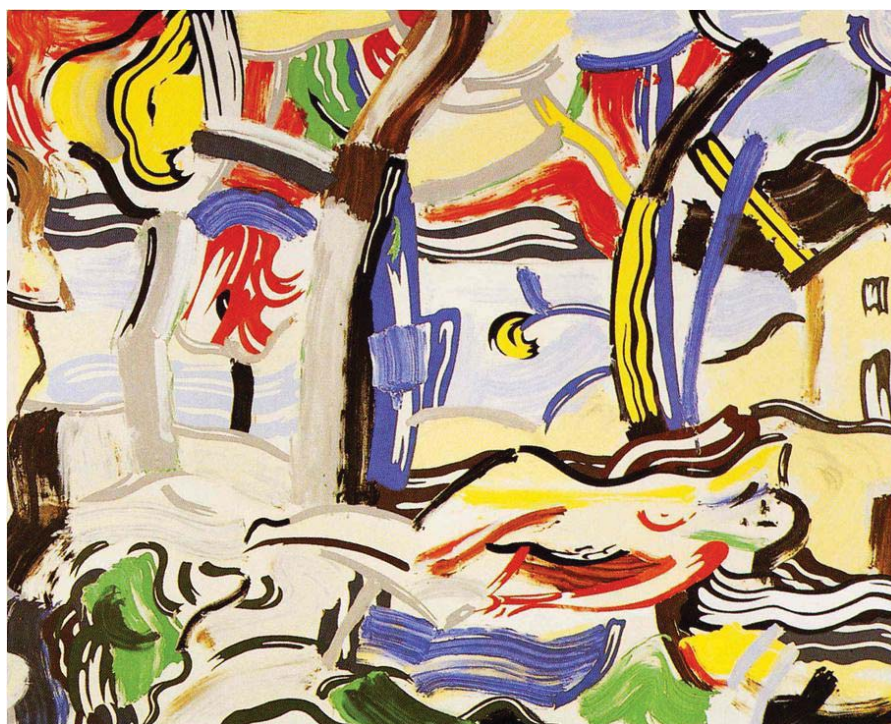


Figure 132.- Roy Lichtenstein (USA, 1923 - 1997).
Figure in a Landscape, 1985. Oil and magma on canvas, 243.8 x 279.4 cm.
Private collection. ©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein New York/ADAGP, Paris,

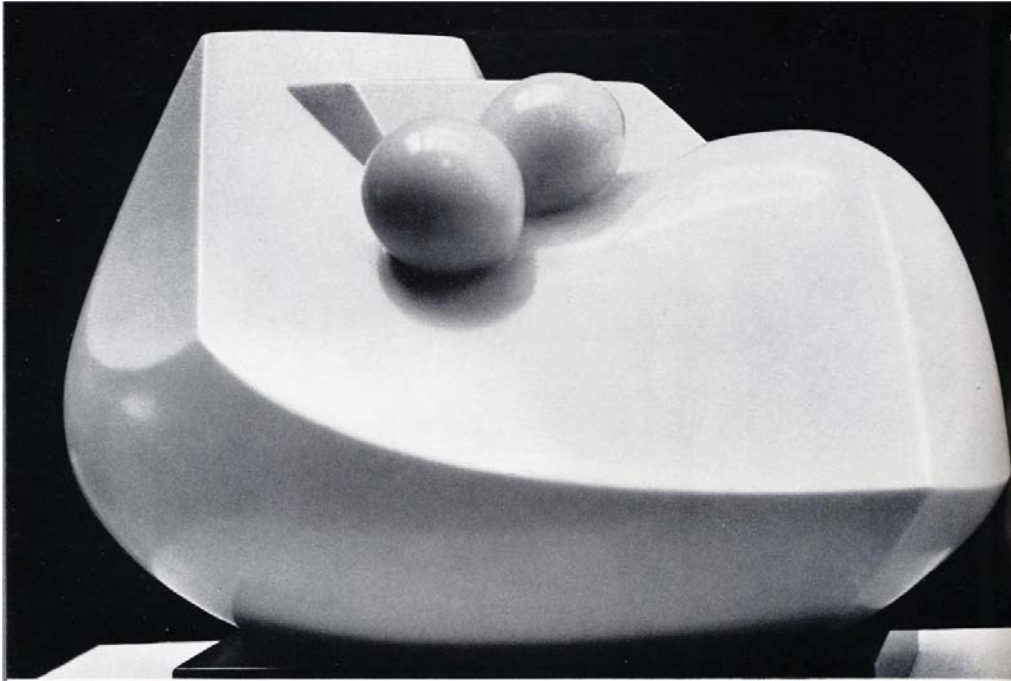


Figure 133. Emile Gilioli (France, 1911-1977). Woman Sleeping (La Dormeuse), 1962. Marble. Private Collection. . © ADAGP, Paris, 2012

In *Woman Sleeping* (fig. 138), Emile Gilioli (1911-1977) distills the essence of sleep in a synecdoche of femaleness: two balls of dense marble, suave and sensual, disposed as a pair in the gentle hollow of a sloping surface. Here, the eroticization of sleep is achieved with the most economical of means; it is matter itself, restricted in form, which becomes hypnotic. One is seduced: The presence of the object in its deceptive simplicity contrives to replace reality with an art of the real.