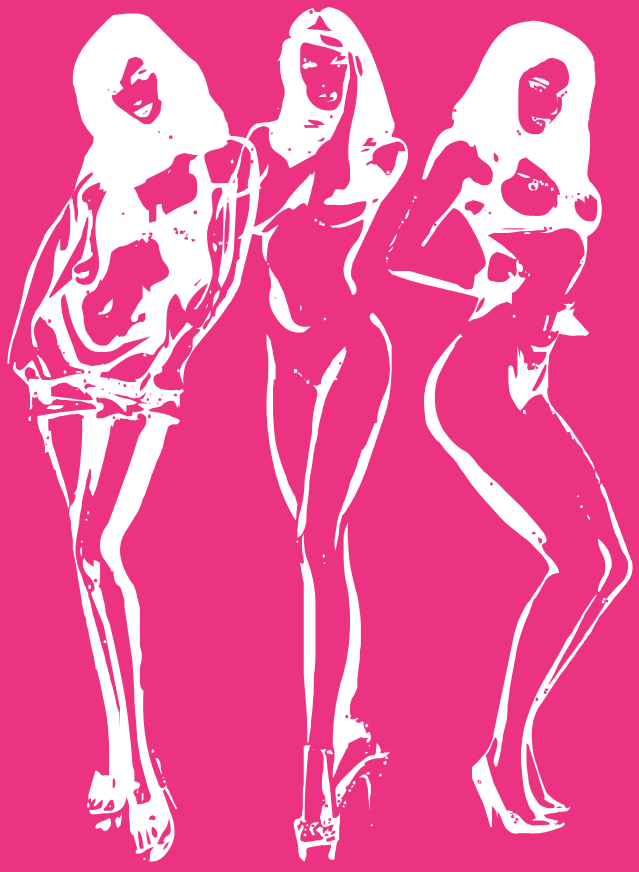
Sex *in* the Cities



AMSTERDAM

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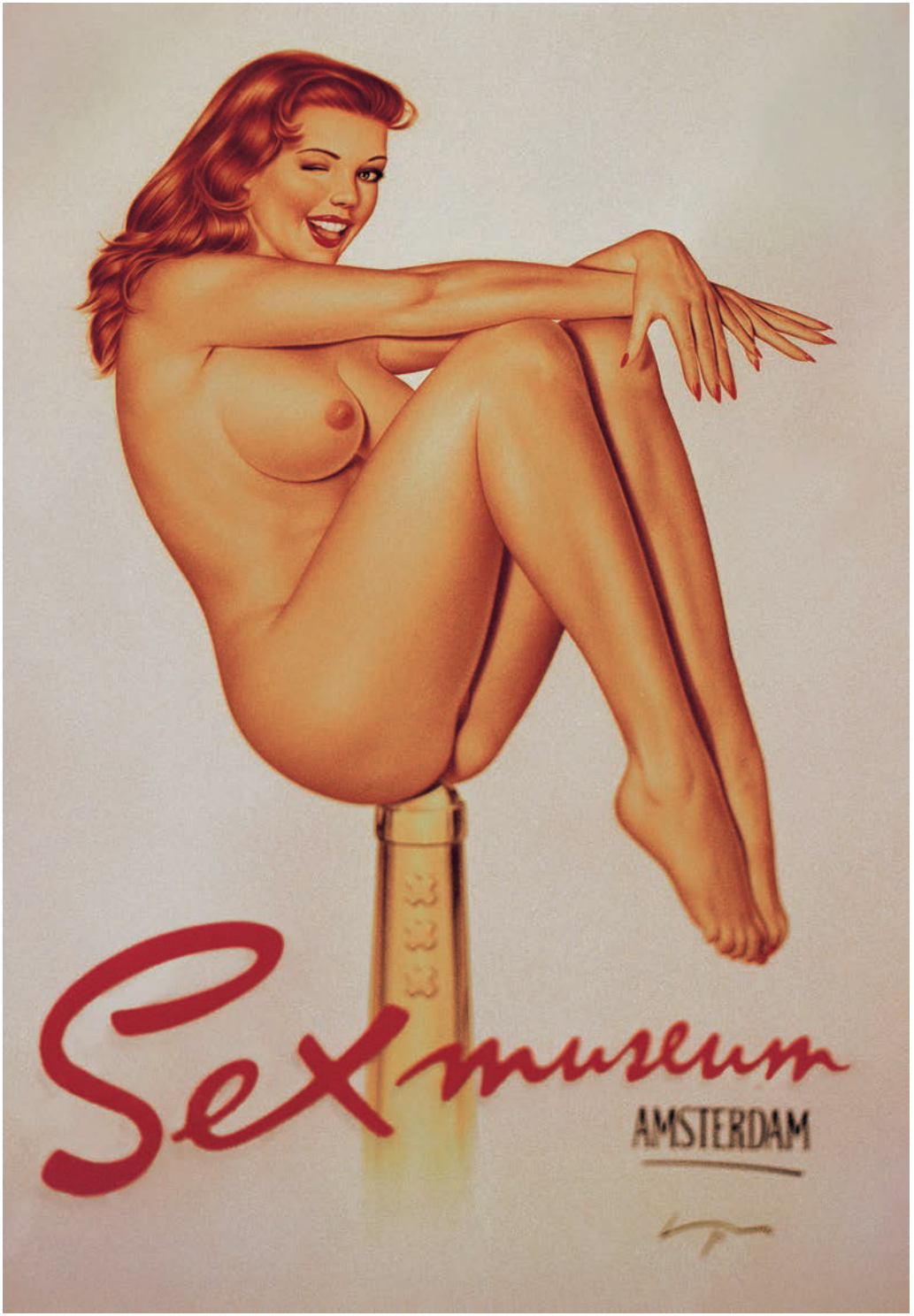

Sex museum
AMSTERDAM

The Temple of Venus: The Sex Museum, Amsterdam

Nobody thought it would make any money when the Sex Museum opened its doors in 1985. For the first few weeks, admission was actually free. Today, however, over 500,000 visitors to Amsterdam enter the museum every year.

Perhaps it was a good omen when two ancient objects of an erotic nature turned up in the soil during excavation for the building of the museum. One of them was a cracked tile on which a card-playing man was depicted sporting an evident erection – maybe betraying the excitement of a winner. The other was a small statuette of the Greek god Hermes with a giant tumescence, probably imported from the Mediterranean centuries ago by a Dutch merchant. In their time, such figurines were not only fertility icons but also good luck charms.

At the opening of the Museum, Monique van Marle may well have been the youngest museum director in Europe – young enough still to depend on the support and advice of her father. The museum's contents were not particularly numerous. All that could be taken for granted in the enterprise was public interest in the erotic, whether for historical, artistic or other reasons.

Museums are meant to reflect every aspect of life and culture in Europe, yet this clearly crucial part of life remains under-represented, despite the fact that artists of cultures from all over the world have created outstanding works on the subject. Simply asking a curator where the erotic art may be found in an art museum is often met with a negative response. And in any case, erotic works tend to hit museums' moral blind spot – so that they might, for example, on the one hand display the borrowed *Landscape with Stagecoach* by Thomas Rowlandson, a master of erotic caricature, while showing nothing else characteristic of his work; and on the other hand, they might hide any erotic work that formed part of their own inventory away in a secluded basement.

Alberto Vargas, plaque design for The Sex Museum, Amsterdam, c. 1990.

"Unsuitable for listing in inventory" was the label on a suitcase of art works found in the cellar of one renowned German museum.

Public morality in matters of sex has moved more slowly over the past thirty years than other aspects of modern culture – with the result that the Sex Museum has had to be established through private initiative.

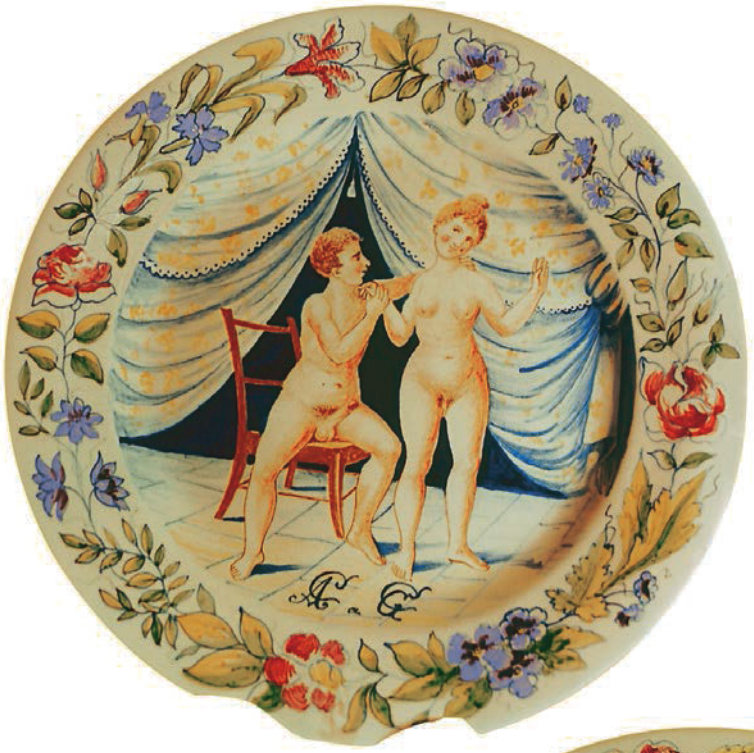
The reactions of the Museum's first visitors confirmed the proprietors' hopes: the public not only accepted the Museum as a museum, but – regardless of age or gender – were intrigued. The listed contents increased in number and variety as the museum itself gained attention and success. After sixteen years of apprenticeship, Monique was able to assess all of the objects that came into the Museum's possession with reverence and expertise, as well as an idea of how to display them appropriately.

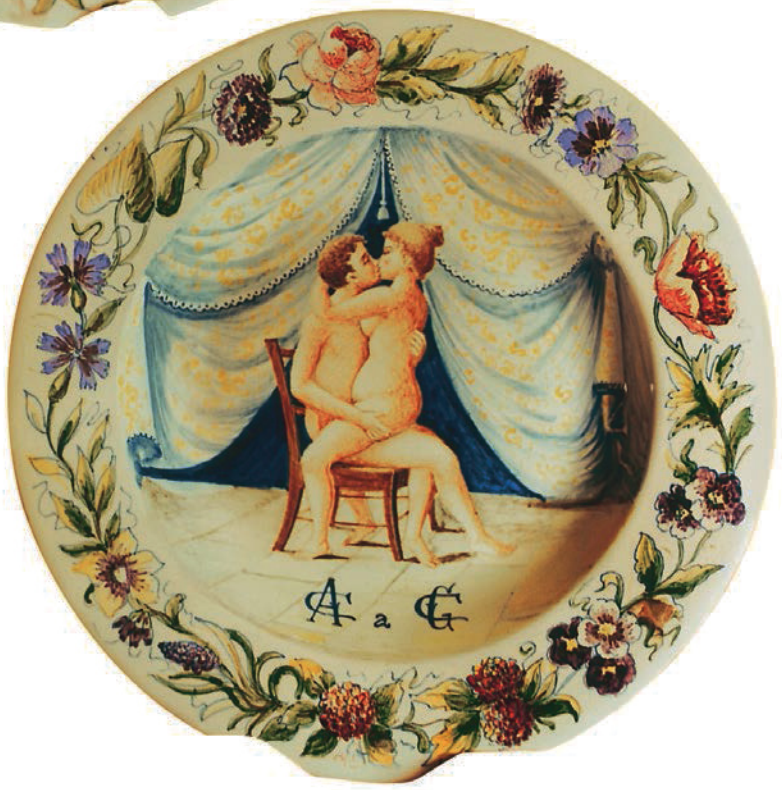
The scope of the collection was initially, perhaps, rather too wide. Today, the focus is on being more eclectic. (The author is both sad and glad to see some of his own collected pieces on display in the cases.) As the collection expanded, so it became necessary to extend the accommodation within the building – a fairly old house in Amsterdam. The result is a somewhat labyrinthine tour of the exhibits, but with new and surprising insights at every twist and turn.

As a woman, Monique has made sure that the choice and style of exhibits in the Museum are not specifically male-oriented. Another objective of the Museum is to point out that sex and the erotic are not just inventions of modern times. What is sometimes described as 'the most natural thing in the world' is of course also one of the most historically well-represented things in the world, depicted and expressed in thousands of ways and forms. It is Monique's opinion that 'many women do not know why men are so interested in sex'. It would equally seem that many men know little of eroticism.

Certainly, curious as they may be, they won't find in the Temple what much of the rest of Amsterdam seems to be advertising. No vulgar expectations are to be met here. Red light presumptions must be left where they belong – outside the Museum. Nonetheless, what the world once considered forbidden, sinful, even pornographic, is here presented cheerfully and without a hint of shame.

French plates decorated with an erotic motif, late 19th century. Porcelain.

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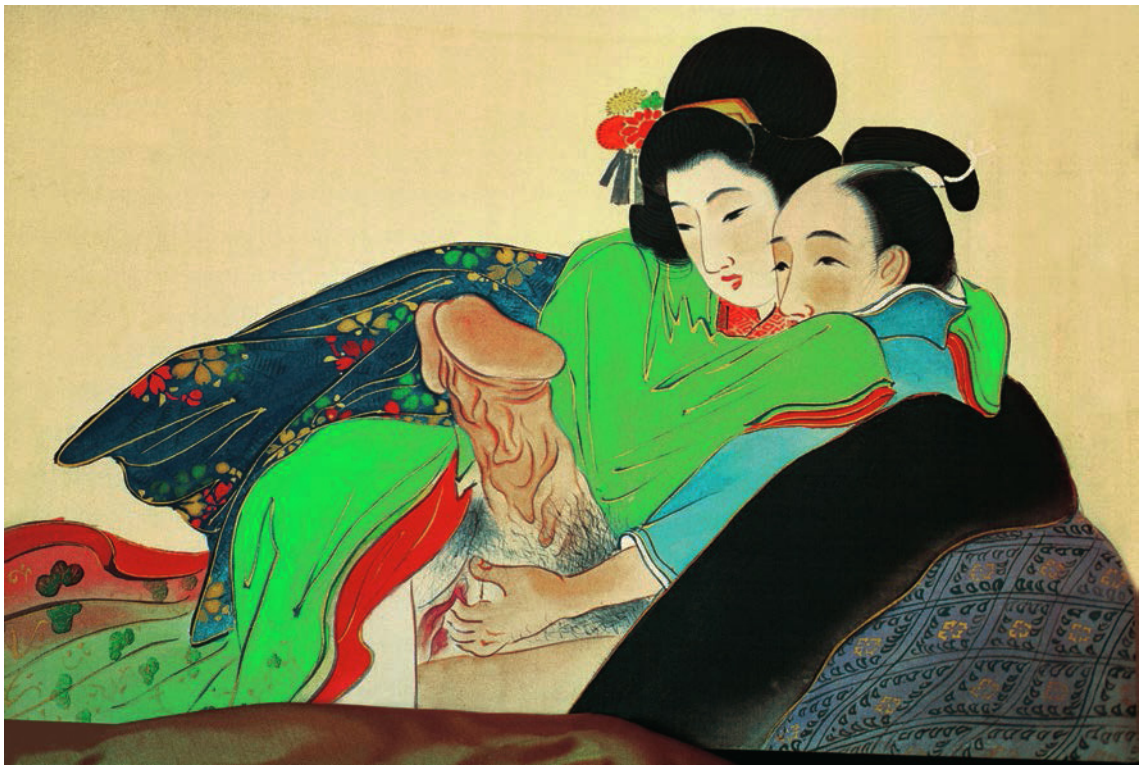
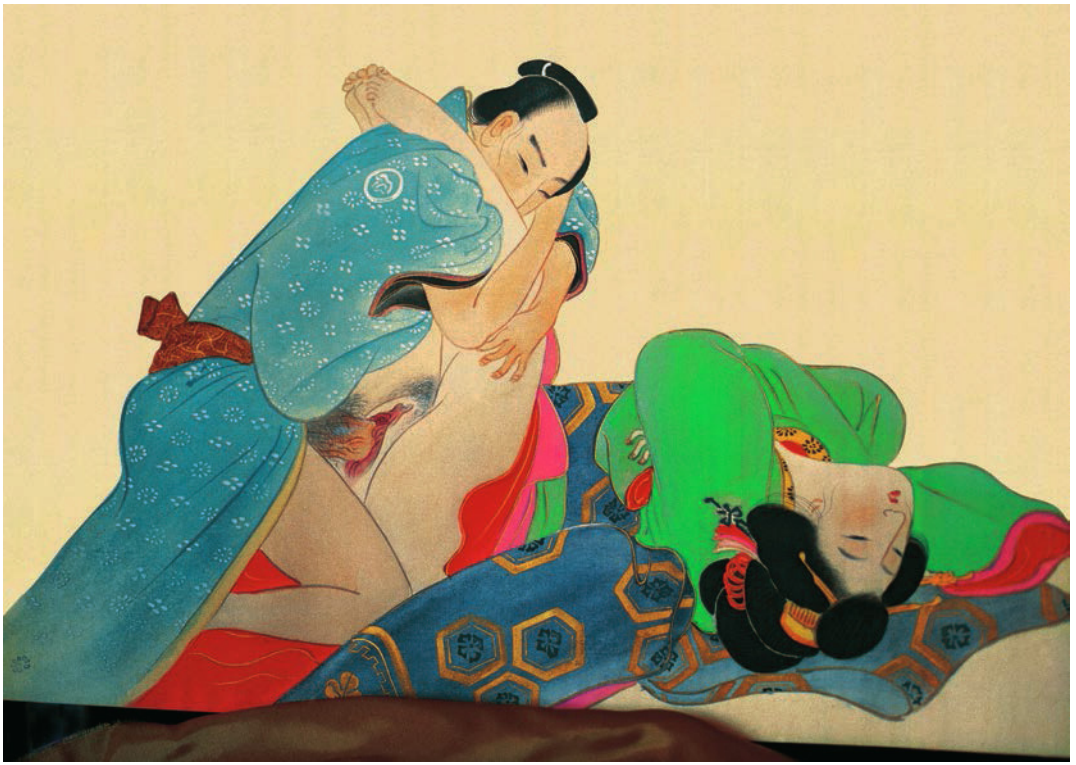


Japanese *shunga* watercolour, c. 1900.



Japanese *shunga* watercolour, c. 1900.

Erotic scene on an Ancient Greek vase.

After all, is there really such a thing as pornography? Images and objects currently admired as works of art might well have been considered unspeakably rude when they were first created.

Is it the elapsing of time over decades that lends these objects some sort of respectability? Does history outweigh the pressures of contemporary morality? Can we only be pleased with these things when they are old enough?

Certainly, pleasure is evident in the faces and voices of the visitors to these rooms, whether they come in groups, in pairs, or solo. The atmosphere is always cheery.

Monique tells how a woman once undressed completely at the cash desk on the way in. She wanted to go round the Museum 'in her natural state'. Isn't that splendidly appropriate? Isn't it appropriately splendid?

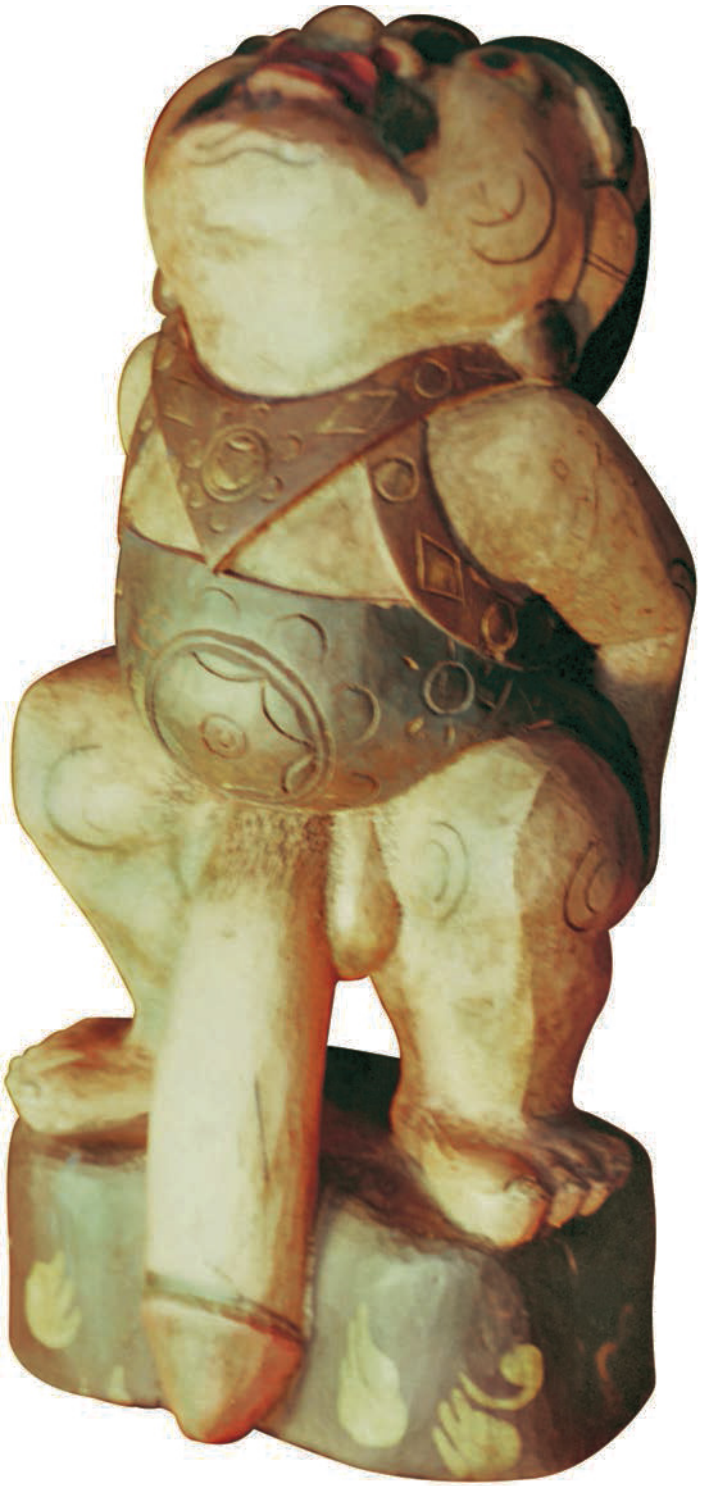
Following the successful opening of the Amsterdam Sex Museum, various other erotic museums have popped up in imitation – in Hamburg, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Paris, for example. The motivation behind some of them was undoubtedly the prospect of a fast buck.

But that meant the quality of the exhibits took a back seat. Monique will tell you, though, that it is just not enough to put a few curiosities of fair to middling value on public display, to switch on the lights and the heating in the morning, and count the money in the till in the evening.

For a museum to be lively and inspiring, it has to be filled with life and inspiration – wherever it is, even without the unique connotations inherent in the location of the Amsterdam Museum.

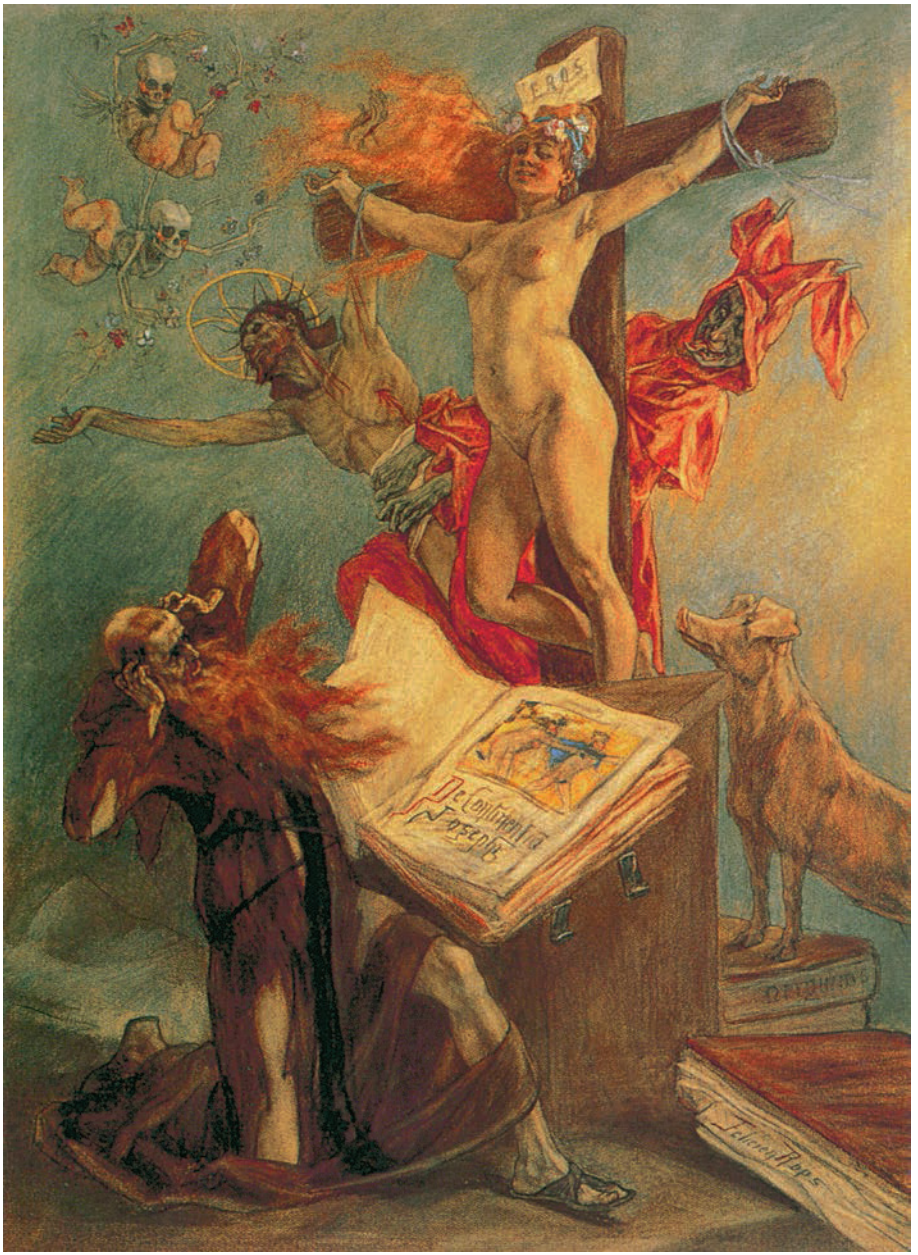
Monique proudly opened her safe to show me some new exhibits she had acquired at auction in Paris four weeks previously. I was fascinated. No matter how many times I come to the Museum, there is always something new and exciting to see.

When you visit the place, perhaps you will walk past a young woman wearing an elegant sweater. She may be sweeping out a corner in order to put a new display-cabinet there. That'll be Monique, the Museum director. It is her museum. Her life's work.



Cesar, Dish of phalluses, c. 1970. Bronze.
The Sex Museum, Amsterdam.

Balinese fertility demon.


EROS
DARWIN

A Ribald Reading

"The real letter is all-powerful; it's the true magic wand."

Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*

The subject of this essay is not how the erotic is depicted in literature and art but rather the use of words in a specific language to suggest the erotic.

The connoisseur and collector of erotic art is well aware that literary and visual depictions very often result in turning an erotic book into something that has its own libidinous properties – into a sexual object that evokes lust or sustains it. In this sense, might the genitalia themselves be nothing more than the executive organs of literary imagination?

Citing and quoting erotic books in erotic art and literature is partly a gesture of self-consciousness. Whilst entertaining the intellect, it is also "name-dropping" – showing the author's wide knowledge, but also acknowledging the worth of previous works. Illustrations in such a book allow for the expression of unrestrained imaginations. And the fact that they are illustrations, specifically referred or referring to the text, ensures that the reader perceives it all as a duality – the printed page of text and the printed image – so that it can never be forgotten that erotic literature is first and foremost literature and not an immediate portrayal of reality.

During the 19th century especially, the sexually explicit and the erotic were removed from the open view of formal society. They were relegated to where imagination was allowed to roam freely, exiled to the less-available field of erotic literature and art. Anybody researching the history of literature and art and scouring the archives of museums and libraries will discover how precarious an aesthetic existence such exiled spheres implied. If these literary asylum-seekers could expect no public response, it is hardly surprising that they at least developed a subterranean communications network with one another.

Felicien Rops, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1878. 73.8 x 54.3 cm. Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Cabinet des Estampes, Bruxelles.

Just as potatoes propagate through the subterraneous tuber, erotic literature seems to propagate through quoting and citing other erotic works. It thus comprises its own excellent reference system within the scope of a closed society.

Books are usually regarded as symbols of cultural development. Their underlying power to undermine culture, however, is not apparent until made evident in an erotic book. What has been banned from public view may then be seen in a sublime form to entice and call for revolt against the bane of the civilisation process: corporeal desire. And of course such desire finds expression also in pictorial images. But with pictures, although sensuality may be more immediate, it remains at an unbridgeable distance because of the depicting medium.

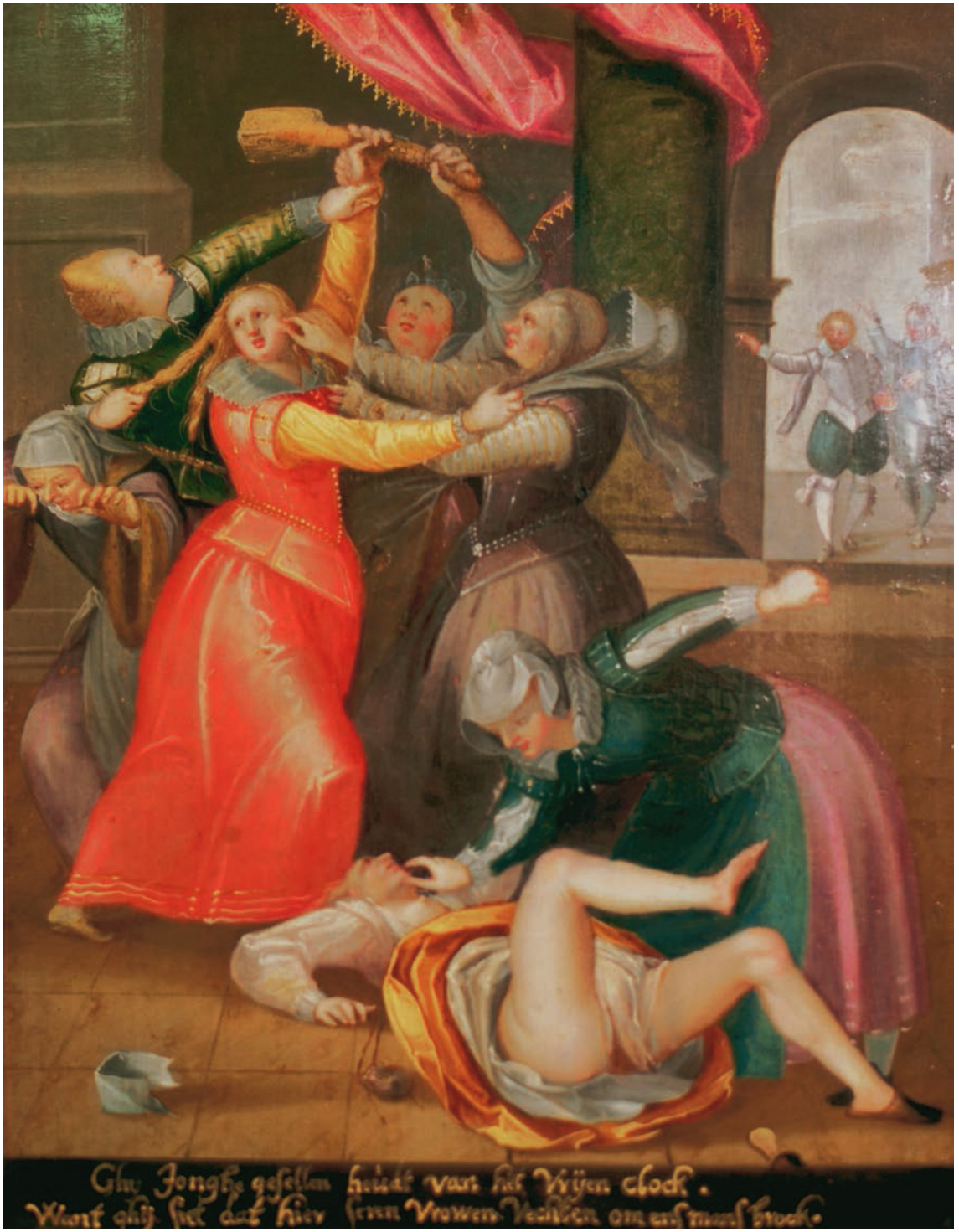
The image, after all, solicits the most abstract of all sense organs – the eye. Smell and sound are senses for close proximity; the eye, on the other hand, is a remote sense. The gap between the requirements of cultural development and the primary desires of the physical body can be bridged only in a voyeuristic way. For an image to refer to the text, or for an erotic text to quote from another erotic text, reinforces that apparent hiatus between body and intellect.

What was shut away from the public gaze and kept hidden following human society's intellectual decision to adopt a language- and book-oriented culture can now only return in a form of literature and art regarded as "under-the-counter" and libertine.

Seven women apparently wrestling for a penis, 17th century. Oil painting. Netherlands School. This is a Freudian concept which is extraordinary for its date and (comparatively puritanical) cultural background.

Western thought shies away from bodily connotations. Intellectual pursuits demand the control and suppression of physical urges. The body is virtually unmentionable. Yet now "libertine" literature has become more widely available, the erotic is no longer banned from intellectual understanding. Books may now openly talk about the processes and needs of the body. Words may once again become the magic wand of desire.

To the intellectual, a book represents the body in a verbal form. "Libertine" literature uses the intellect as a medium to emphasise the opposite. Words and sentences are used to reveal the body and its desires, to lay bare and unclothed all its physical needs and propensities.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