

Sex *in the Cities*



BERLIN

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Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde* or *The Origin of the World*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 46 x 65 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



A Geography of Pleasure

The Erotic Museum in Berlin invites you to take a special journey, one that will open up a vista of pleasures and desires.

An abundance of images and objects from both art and cult present eroticism and sexuality as a universal, fundamental subject. By opening ourselves to the exhibits' origins in a variety of cultures, some of them strange, we may enrich our own cultures as well.

The many and varied points of view encountered in this museum demonstrate the multifarious aspects of sexuality. The exhibits reveal that nothing is more natural than sexual desire; and, paradoxically, nothing is less natural than the forms in which this desire expresses itself or finds satisfaction.

Items long hidden in the vaults of public museums and galleries of private collectors can be seen here. Many of these images and objects were forbidden in a western society which was less open to sexuality and anything associated with it. So they grant us a rare, and therefore more fascinating, glimpse of what is part and parcel of human nature.

Eastern societies, on the other hand, have always known how to integrate the sexual and erotic into their art and culture. For example, Chinese religion, entirely free of the western notions of sin, considers lust and love to be pure things. The union of man and woman under the sign of Tao expresses the same harmony as the alternation of day and night, winter and summer. One can say – and rightly so – that the ancient forms of Chinese thought have their origins in sexual conceptions. Yin and yang, two complementary ideas, determine the universe. In this way, the erotic philosophy of the ancient Chinese also encompasses a cosmology. Sexuality is an integrated component of a philosophy of life and cannot be separated from it.

One of the oldest and most stimulating civilisations on earth thus assures us through its religion that sex is good and instructs us, for religious reasons, to carry out the act of love creatively and passionately. This lack of inhibition in sexual matters is mirrored in art from China.

The great masters of Japan also created a wealth of erotic pictures, which rank equal with Japan's other works of art. No measure of state censorship was ever able to completely suppress the production of these images.

Shungas depict the pleasures and entertainment of a rather earthly world. It was considered natural to seek out the pleasures of the flesh, whichever form they took. The word vice was unspoken in ancient Japan, and sodomy was a sexual pleasure like any other.

The art of *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating, transitory world) inspires works that are technically and artistically perfect. The fantastic and the grotesque blossomed early, especially in Japanese art, as well as literature.

Sexuality and its associated matters have more than 10,000 representations, different ones in different cultures. In India, eroticism is sanctified in Hindu temples. In Greece, it culminates in the cult of beauty, joining the pleasures of the body with those of the mind.

Chinese *shunga*
(Images of springtime),
19th centuries.
Painting on silk from
a marriage book.





Indian Tantra relief, 11th-13th centuries. Marble.



Lovers. Marble relief with Greek motif.



Indian miniature painting.

Greek philosophy understood the world as interplay between Apollo and Dionysus, between reason and ecstasy.

Only Christianity began to view eroticism in a context of sin and the world of darkness, and thus creating irreconcilable differences. “The devil Eros has become more interesting to man than all the angels and all the saints,” a tenet held by Nietzsche, which would probably find no sympathy in Far Eastern Japan: Eros was never demonised there. In fact, that which Nietzsche lamented in the West never occurred in Japan, nor in many other Eastern cultures. “Christianity,” in Nietzschean words, “forced Eros to drink poison.”

In Western Europe, erotic depictions were banished to secret galleries. The floating, transitory world was held in chains, and only with great difficulty was science able to free sexuality from prejudices and association with sin. It is, therefore, no wonder that sexology developed wherever the relationship between sexuality and eroticism was especially ambivalent or troubled. It is to celebrate this relationship that a monument has been erected in the shape of the Magnus Hirschfeld Museum in Berlin.

Our cornucopia of a colourful, erotic world of images and objects shows that Eros can be an all-encompassing and unifying energy. These items provide an opportunity to steal a glimpse of an essential, human sphere – usually taboo – through the eyes of many artists with a continuously changing point of view.

Pornography? “That which is pornography to one person, is the laughter of genius for the other,” countered D.H. Lawrence.

Unlike pornography, which often lacks imagination, erotic art allows us to partake in creative joy. Even if some of the pictures seem strange to us or even annoy and force us to confront taboos, we should still open ourselves to that experience. Real art has always caused offence.

Only through a willingness to be affronted can this journey through the geography of pleasure also be profitable, namely in the sense that this fantasy journey enriches our innermost selves.

The humour evident in many of the exhibits is only accessible to those who can feel positive about claiming the erotic experience.

Pictures of the pleasures of the flesh promise a feast for the eyes, albeit a distanced pleasure. Yet, is not the essence of eroticism that it should be just beyond reach?

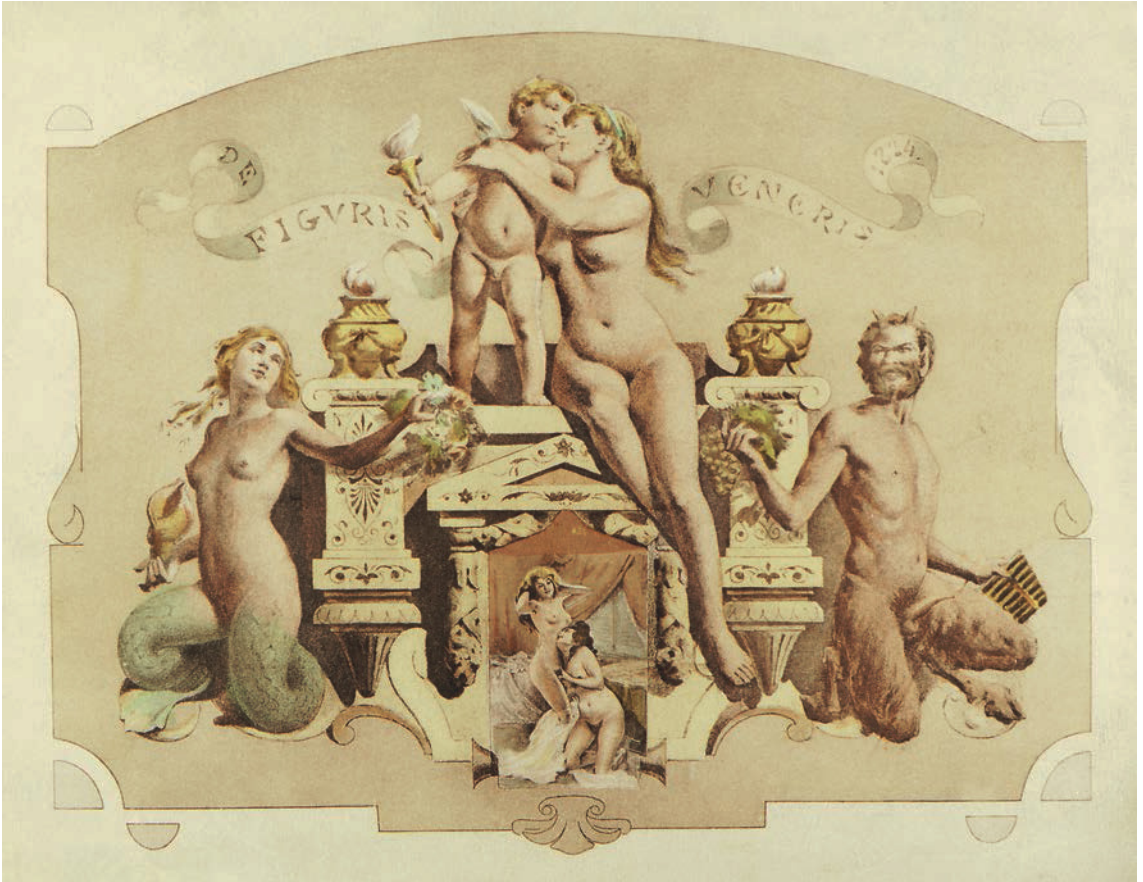
Aspects of the cultural history of humankind in this museum can help to extend the limits of tolerance by helping to expand the visitor's points of view. They can liberate minds from clichés, which may occupy our fantasies and imagination today, but hopefully not after this book has been read.



Indian temple relief (copy), 19th century.



Arab slave trader, c. 1910. Bronze.



Paul Avril, illustration for *De Figuris Veneris*, 1906. Coloured lithograph.



Erotic Art or Pornography?

The term 'Erotic Art' is muddied by a miasma of ambiguous terms. Art and pornography, sexuality and sensuality, obscenity and morality are all involved to such an extent that it seems almost impossible to reach an objective definition, which is not unusual in the history of art.

How is it possible to speak of erotic art?

This much is certain: the depiction of a sexual activity alone does not raise a work to the nobility that is erotic art. To identify erotic art only with its content would reduce it to one dimension, just as it is not possible to distinguish artistic and pornographic depictions only by describing their immoral contents. The view that erotic works are created solely for sexual arousal and so cannot be art is erroneous as well.

Does the creative imagination brought to erotic art distinguish it from pornography? Yet pornography is also a product of imagination. However, it has to be more than just a depiction of sexual reality, or who would buy it? Gunter Schmidt states that pornography is “constructed like sexual fantasy and daydreams, just as unreal, megalomaniacal, magical, illogical, and just as stereotypical”. Erotic daydreams – they are the subject of erotic art as well.

Anyhow, those making a choice between art and pornography may have already decided against the first one. Pornography is a moralising defamatory term. What is art to one person is the devil’s handiwork to another. The mixing of aesthetic with ethical-moralistic questions dooms every clarification process right from the start.

In the original Greek, pornography means prostitute writings – that is, text with sexual content – in which case it would be possible to approach pornography in a freethinking manner and equate the content of erotic art with that of pornography. This re-evaluation would amount to a rehabilitation of the term.

The extent to which the distinction between art and pornography depends on contemporary attitudes is illustrated, for example, by the painting over of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. Nudity was not considered obscene during the Renaissance. The patron of this work of art, Pope Clement VII, saw nothing immoral in its execution. His successor, Paul III, however, ordered an artist to provide the *Last Judgement* with pants!

Another example is the handling of the excavated frescos of Pompeii, which were inaccessible to the public until the dawn of the 21st century. In 1819, the Gallery of Obscenities was established in the Palazzo degli Studi, which was chosen as the national museum. Only people of mature age and known high moral standards had access to the locked room. The collection changed its name to the Gallery of Locked Objects in 1823. Again, only those with a regular royal permit were able to view the exhibited works.





Otto Rudolf Schatz, *Tit Fuck*. Watercolour.

Jean de l'Etang, *Tit Fuck*, from the *Trente et quelques attitudes* series, c. 1950. Coloured lithograph.