

Historicizing pose: the body in the modern era

Review of:

Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art & the Remaking of Human Disposition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 352pp., \$55.00 hdbk, ISBN: 9780226745046, \$54.99 pdf & epub, ISBN: 9780226745183.

Shana Cooperstein

A figure stands in contrapposto, poised so that one leg supports the body's weight. Another sits slumped over; their pelvis is posteriorly tilted while their upper back rounds forward. Whether looking as far back as *Doryphoros*, Polykleitos's fifth-century BCE sculpture of a freestanding nude, or to *The Thinker* (model 1880, cast 1901), Auguste Rodin's century-old poet cast in bronze, representations of posture are laden with meaning. Pose is an inescapable feature within the history of art. Composite, pudica, serpentine, odalisque. The organization of the body, from unconscious gestures to carefully contrived attitudes, has the capacity to communicate heroism and power, elegance, quiet contemplation and modesty (or virtually any other characteristic which might come to mind).

Body language is the starting point of Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen's recent publication, titled *Modern Art & the Remaking of Human Disposition*. Within the Euro-American tradition, life drawing sat at the core of an artist's training, the primacy of which ensured a longstanding focus on the body's carriage. For centuries, Italianate art academies privileged classical models. Lateral rotations, oblique angles, flexion and extension: the ability to capture a heterogenous range of motion represented a mark of a proficiency in the arts. By the end of the nineteenth century, the established canons of posing figures began to break down across Europe. Why?

Modern Art & the Remaking of Human Disposition investigates the conceptual significance of this formal shift. By 1880, pressure for bodies to conform to classical models, like *Doryphoros*, lifted. Over the next few decades, stiffness, inaction, and frontality became controversial tendencies within modern art. An emphasis on curvilinear form was supplanted by sturdy figures with straight spines. Limbs went from being extended in space to being restrained close to the core. Compositions with complex figural relations gave way to homogeneously-posed groups. This phenomenon, far from being medium specific, found voice in painting, sculpture, and choreography. Anchored by George Seurat's (1859-1891) oil on canvas titled

Poseuses (1888), Gustav Klimt's (1862-1918) mural *Beethovenfries* (1902), and Vaslav Nijinsky's (1889-1950) performance *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), Butterfield-Rosen skilfully highlights the breadth of this impulse.

This scholarship primarily foregrounds artworks from the brilliant careers of three men: a French Salon painter, a member of the Vienna Secession movement, and a Russian choreographer. After training at the *École des beaux-arts* between 1878 and 1879, Seurat advanced a new technical procedure grounded in scientific theories of colour and perception. Termed 'Divisionism', he executed modern urban scenes using this system of unblended, coloured points. A few years after Seurat's untimely death in 1891, Klimt became president of the Vienna Secession (an artistic movement formed in 1897 in protest of classical art). Klimt's practice employed brilliant colours and an abundance of ornamentation. These formal features were invoked to depict a range of figures and settings drawn from life and mythology.

The third figure of the study was as enthusiastic to break with tradition as was Klimt. Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune* marked a new direction professionally and artistically. In the years leading up to his debut as choreographer, he was a dancer for the Ballet-Russes (a company started by Sergei Diaghilev in 1907). In 1912, Nijinsky rejected the very components of ballet which earned him acclaim, notably his ability to resist gravity's pull with lofty leaps.

L'après-midi d'un faune was a twelve-minute dance representing an encounter between a faun and nymphs. To call it a 'dance' seems to be a misnomer. Marketed as a *tableau choréographique*, the performance emphasized stasis and rigid motion. Barefoot performers arranged their bodies in twisted perspective. Butterfield-Rosen sets the scene: groups of nymphs contort 'their torsos to maintain a posture that appeared stiff and two-dimensional, the trunks of their bodies face outward toward the audience, while their feet and heads point sideward, in constant profile to the viewer.'¹ Nijinsky's performers did not take full advantage of a set's depth. Organized like a bas-relief, he chose to limit the dancers' movements to a plane instead.

Thanks to Butterfield-Rosen, these diverse figures share one stage. These men did not run in the same circles, nor were their works necessarily geared toward identical audiences because each enjoyed cultural influence a decade apart. Together, these men nonetheless provide a compelling narrative about the historical significance of pose in modernity over the course of thirty years. Yet, *pose* and related terms, like 'posture', fail to communicate the intellectual rigor of Butterfield-Rosen's study. The author's introduction makes an excellent case for organizing her analysis around the concept 'disposition.'

¹ Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art & the Remaking of Human Disposition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 172.

Disposition's dual meaning best captures the point of the research. Disposition refers to a human-being's inner constitution and their physical comportment. Already, this alludes to the weight pose carried. The rigid postures featured in her analysis set into motion competing and contradictory ideas about what it meant to be capable of human thought. By the second half of the nineteenth century, bodily mechanics were entangled with new theories of mind. Psychological research, evolutionary biology, and even the importation of Buddhist thought led to swift changes in the received ways human consciousness was understood. Ideas about automatism, hypnosis, and somnambulism, among other states, threw into question the authority of intellect over an individual's behaviours. Animal ancestry and human psychology could operate as a check on agency and conscious thought.

Butterfield-Rosen offers a new vantage from which to consider the impact of evolutionary theories on art-making. Existing scholarship in this field typically considers the intersection of art and anthropology, concepts of race, nature, and prehistoric man.² *Modern Art & Remarkings of Human Disposition* shows how these ideas informed artwork even without an obvious visual relationship to these theories. When artists broke with the traditional ways of posing figures, Butterfield-Rosen adds, novel literature on psychology and biology funnelled into the critical reception of their work.

'Figures of Thought: *Poseuses* and the Controversy of the *Grande Jatte*', the first and longest chapter of the study, analyses the debates generated by Seurat's representations of standing figures *de profil* and *de dos*. When he revealed *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte-1884* to the public, Seurat's painting was met with a certain degree of resistance. It was not the application of paint according to the principles of divisionism which bothered critics. Instead, it was the way he positioned rectilinear figures in profile. Responses crystallised a growing fear: humankind had the capacity to be mindless automatons. The visual similarities drawn between Seurat's figures and inanimate models (like mannequins and toy soldiers) made the work particularly troubling. For some, it was this feature which made the work appear 'primitive'.

Primitivism was, in some ways, a point around which distinct critical perspectives were staked. In the late nineteenth century, 'primitivism' was a broad category used to describe cultures perceived by Euro-Americans as archaic, and more in touch with the 'unconscious', 'instinctual' and 'irrational'. To oppose the stronghold of reason and conscious thought on modern society, some avant-garde artists appropriated visual idioms from groups they identified as 'primitive' to

² Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer (eds), *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2009; Fae Brauer and Serena Keshavjee (eds), *Picturing Evolution and Extinction: Regeneration and Degeneration in Modern Visual Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015; Linda Nochlin and Martha Lucy (eds), 'The Darwin Effect: Evolution and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture', *Special Issue of Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 2003: <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org>.

invigorate their practice. This pictorial language was not unanimously well-received. In the case of Seurat, his 'hieratic', 'frontal' figures became a sticking point for his champions and critics alike. Arguments by the Danish art historian Julius Lange are used to clarify the complaint. Lange's text on the history of ancient Greek art aligned classical figuration (obliquity) with thought and frontality with primitivism.³ 'Primitive art', from this perspective, lacked the expressive capabilities of classical figuration.

Seurat's inclusion of a monkey only exacerbated anxieties about interiority, reason, and consciousness. Within the history of art, monkeys often carried symbolic meaning related to mimicry. In light of the popularity of evolutionary theory, the inclusion of a primate signalled something new: humanity's proximity to animal ancestors. Seurat would have been well-versed in this literature; as recently explored by Anthea Callen, this was a component of the anatomy courses taught at the *École des beaux-arts*.⁴ Critics too were inclined to read the juxtaposition of figure and monkey in relation to Darwinism and as a reminder of humankind's proximity to animals.

At the same time as the *École des beaux-arts* incorporated modern scientific knowledge into its curriculum, the institution upheld ancient ideals. If *Grand Jatte* failed to align with the Academy's emphasis on the classical canon of proportions, *Poseuses* represented a chance to redeem himself as an adept student of human figure study. Exhibited a few years after *Grand Jatte*, *Poseuses* is a large-scale genre painting of a model in the artist's studio. At the centre of the composition, a nude female stands *de face*. She stands alongside her representation in *Grand Jatte* (in which she stands *de profil*). The new pose is significant. It could be read two ways: 1) it showcases his knowledge of antique statues; 2) it resembles experiments in hypnosis. For some, the nude's pose emulates Polyuektos's *Demosthenes* (280 BCE), a freestanding Hellenistic statue of a celebrated orator (copies of which Seurat had access). Yet, she was equally read as lacking consciousness and existing in hypnotic state, recalling the popular experiments of Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière. A tension, then, emerges in the figure as both capable of contemplation and denied conscious thought.

Fin-de-siècle critics were not troubled only by Seurat's 'postural primitivism' (as Butterfield-Rosen describes it). The corporeal expressions used to indicate 'genius' kindled heated debates outside the limited context of France. As an example of this, the second chapter looks to the Klinger-Beethoven exhibition. Staged in the spring of 1902, the Klinger-Beethoven exhibition celebrated the

³ Julius Lange, *Billedkunstens Fremstilling af Menneskekikkelsen i dens oeldste Periode indtil Højdepunktet af den groeske Kunst*, Copenhagen: F. Dreyer, 1892. Translations of Lange's writings appear in the December 2021 issue of *Journal of Art Historiography*: <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/25-dec21/>.

⁴ Anthea Callen, *Looking at Men: Art, Anatomy and the Modern Male Body*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

musical achievements of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), a German composer. The organizers brought together work by the German sculptor Max Klinger (1857-1920) and Klimt, among many other Secessionists. Klimt was responsible for executing a series of murals to house Klinger's 'idol', a nearly five-foot tall sculpture of Beethoven.

Titled 'Beethoven's Farewell: The Creative Genius "in the Claws of the Secession"', Butterfield-Rosen assessed the contradictory modes of representing virtuosity. While their contributions were meant to celebrate Beethoven's 'genius' in unison, the strategies used to visualize creative faculties were read, at least by some critics, as disjointed. Klinger's so-called *Beethoven-Denkmal* features a semi-nude figure hunched over slightly, his crossed legs concealed by drapery. A pedestal elevates his seat, a richly ornamented chair. To depict Beethoven, Klinger employed a familiar pose: a clenched fist rests on top of his right knee. Klimt, on the other hand, produced a frieze that exceeded 34 meters and decorated three walls. Female figures float in water toward a series of figures standing upright. Nude Gorgons surround a monster from Greek mythology. The rich ornamentation of the design was read by the public in relationship to Darwinian evolution and sexual selection.

The 'father of modern sculpture', Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), is invoked to clarify how Klinger and Klimt conformed to – and defied – existing representations of creative genius, respectively. *Penseur* and *Monument to Balzac* (1891-1898), statues executed by Rodin, depict thinkers using two distinct strategies. Balzac, like Klimt's frieze, undermined seasoned methods of representing human thought that were harnessed to 'metaphors of grasp and gravity'.⁵ When Rodin represented Balzac, he replaced the seated, brooding *Thinker* with his head hunched over onto his fist with an imposing, standing (and literally, erect) monument. Whereas the creative energy in *Penseur* stems from ponderation (and the weight of the head), Balzac's genius is procreative (and communicated through his bulge).

Klimt's murals are also connected to ideas about creative genius, albeit in a less obvious way. In Klimt's *Beethovenfries*, he depicts a 'Choir of Paradise Angels' positioned in multiple rows and levitating in an undefined space. In the front row, flattened angels lift their arms up and adopt the *vitarka murdā* (a gesture associated with the Buddha and mindfulness). The levitating angels contradict the weight of conscious thought represented by Klinger and which was concretized by leaning the body forward and tightly clenching Beethoven's fists. In fact, critics remarked on the unnatural weightlessness of Klimt's bodies which served as a foil to Klinger's sturdy sculpture. Together, their work juxtaposes 'old' and 'new' theories of creative faculties.

'The Mise-en Scène of Dreams: *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*', Butterfield-Rosen's final case study, examines the critical reception of Nijinsky's ballet. Like Seurat and Klimt, Nijinsky's performance is illuminated by contemporaneous developments in

⁵ Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art*, 124.

the field of psychology. In the years leading up to Nijinsky's debut, the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was hard at work systematizing psychoanalysis (which sought to treat psychological illness through unconscious thoughts). Nijinsky's ballet offers, so it is argued, a visual counterpart for Freudian theory.

The dance's origin point was a poem written by Stephane Mallarmé. Mallarmé's verses describe a surreal, erotic encounter between a faun and nymphs. In 1894, Claude Debussy (1862-1918) adapted Mallarmé's work into a 10-minute symphonic poem. The final ballet translated Mallarmé's prose to a series of constrained movements set to Debussy's composition. The performance alluded to new ideas about unconscious thought, from infantile sexuality to dreaming. The author explains that the work reproduces the 'mechanics of dreaming' by merging 'two of the key metaphors Freud exploited to define and rhetorically *picture* his new conception of the psyche—ancient archaeology and the modern mechanical apparatus.'⁶

From today's perspective, the significance of the body's presentation is unsurprising. Posture has held a particularly privileged place within Euro-American societies over the past century. By the turn of the twentieth century, posture was connected to an individual's health and wellness. Medical guidelines, in fact, recommended exercises designed to improve one's physical comportment. The historian Sander Gilman notes that the stakes were not only pathological; the discipline requisite for 'good' posture was also connected to morality, and – in the case of its absence – its degeneration.⁷

For some, it might seem odd that the author omitted much discussion of the adjacent literature on posture from its purview. Slouching might not have been part of the book's scope, but it was a feature present in at least a few of Seurat's paintings. In *Bathers at Asnières* (1884), for instance, figures appear free from the constraints of formal attire, uncomfortable furniture, or any other feature that would have otherwise prevented them from hunching over, spines curved. In the years leading up to 1900, posture held cultural significance in western Europe. Posture, as Gilman argues, is connected to dance, sport, and military history (drill formation being a mode to train soldiers to stand erect and which symbolized discipline). Figures that appear standing, seated, and recumbent are linked to a range of cultural norms – from ideas about discipline and etiquette to theories of human evolution. That being said, the broad scope of the book often obscures the significance of individual poses themselves.

It would be remiss to fault this text for upholding its commitment to 'disposition'. Butterfield-Rosen's refusal to compromise on this concept is

⁶ Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art*, 178.

⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Stand Up Straight!: A History of Posture*, London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2018.

commendable. As a unifying principle, it allows her to meaningfully transgress national boundaries, artistic identities, and medium specificity in an exciting, focused way. Existing scholarship on modern art is often circumscribed by a particular artist, place, or technical practice. *Modern Art & the Remaking of Human Disposition* offers a fresh path. In that sense, it is an outstanding model for scholars seeking to move beyond artist monographs and to embrace thematic categories around which art can be organized.

Even more impressive is the way Butterfield-Rosen confidently weaves together such a broad range of information. Period critics, art historians, and scientific knowledge – be it evolutionary biology and experimental psychology – are brought together with ease. The results are generative. Relinquishing the classical figure in favour of Egyptian, Assyrian, and Archaic Greek prototypes is given new meaning.

Readers might feel sorry that the book neglects to develop a few points which speak to the work's historiographical significance. Throughout the text, she invokes art historical accounts from the late nineteenth century to show how frontality and obliquity were harnessed to the unthinking and thought, respectively. How have Julius Lange's *The Representation of the Human Figure in Its Earliest Period until the Apogee of Greek Art* (1892) and Emanuel Löwy's *The Rendering of Nature in Earlier Greek Art* (1900) continued to inform the ways we write art history and think about pose?⁸ What might this analysis say about the accepted methods scholars use to discuss and teach art?

Butterfield-Rosen explicitly identifies how her text might disrupt the received ways we have come to understand modern art and posthumanism. In the introduction, she argues: 'One of this book's historiographic hypotheses is that bodily posture is a site where we might identify most clearly a shift from mimetic to symbolic or non-naturalistic representation in European art after Impressionism.'⁹ While she connects the use of the term frontality to abstraction, the broader significance of this claim is left unexplored. Moreover, she provocatively situates the work relative to posthumanism without exploring the stakes of her contribution. In each instance, readers are left wanting more of her compelling insight.

To ask more of such a rich and rigorously-researched account feels unfair. If readers are left unsatiated on these accounts, it should only speak to the strength of her analysis and a desire to learn more from her insight. *Modern Art* is nothing other than a tour de force.

⁸ Lange, *Billedkunstens Fremstilling af Menneskekikkelsen i dens oeldste Periode indtil Højdepunktet af den groeske Kunst*; Emanuel Löwy, *Die Naturwiedergabe in der ältern griechischen Kunst*, Rome, 1900.

⁹ Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art*, 27.

Dr. Shana Cooperstein joined the faculty at Anne Arundel Community College in 2021 after holding positions at the University of Chicago, Villanova University, Community College of Philadelphia, and McGill University. Her interdisciplinary scholarship is motivated by unresolved questions about the role of human sense perception in the development of art-making strategies. 'Habit's Demise: Drawing Pedagogy in Modern France', a book manuscript she is developing from her doctoral research, examines schematization, the education of the eye and other problems central to the history of art instruction in the mid to late nineteenth century.

scooperstein@aacc.edu / srcooperstein@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)