

eroticism
& art





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15 Frederic Leighton
Athlete Wrestling with a Python, 1877

Described by the novelist Henry James as 'a noble and beautiful work . . . the whole story of which begins and ends with beautiful play of its muscles and limbs', this sculpture celebrates the male body and may be read as demonstrating an Apollonian homoeroticism, in so far as it recalls Apollo's killing of the female serpent Python.

between the older, wise male mentor, the *erastes* (lover) and the younger male pupil, the *eromenos* (beloved), as formulated in Plato's *Symposium*. Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus* (1869) explores this *erastes-eromenos* relationship through the story of a brilliant father and his naive son. Daedalus, with his dark skin and wrinkled face, acts as a visual foil to the beautiful subject of his gaze: the marmoreal body of Icarus who stands upright and nude apart from a scarf of silk which coyly covers his sex. It will be lost when he leaps into the air. He looks to the sun, which will lure him to his death, and to another greater master—Apollo, the sun god and more powerful male heroic ideal.

Leighton's compositions were often influenced by the reclining figures of the Elgin Marbles, and his technique reflects the rather stilted style in which he depicted drapery: he would paint the body and then 'append' the drapery, often resulting in unnatural swags and folds and a monumental air that again allowed eroticism to be safely controlled. However, we find little restraint in his bronze sculpture *Athlete Struggling with a Python* (1877) [15], a dramatic work referencing both the head of Michelangelo's *David* and the monumental *contrapposto* of *The Death of Laocoön and His Sons*, a sculpture (c.150 BC, unearthed in 1506) of a heavily muscled, heroic father and his young sons twisting as they struggle with serpents. The model for the athlete, Angelo Colarossi, was an Italian who sat for many of the leading Victorian painters (including John Singer Sargent, John Everett Millais, and George Frederic Watts). The sculpture's physical beauty, enhanced by the play of light on the surface of the dark metal, was not lost on the novelist Henry James who saw it exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1877 and wrote: 'it is a noble and beautiful work . . . Whenever I have been to the Academy I have found a certain relief in looking for a while at this representation of the naked human body, the whole story of which begins and ends with beautiful play of its muscles and limbs.'²⁸ His admiration was shared by critics who applauded Leighton's success at capturing motion and musculature in the rather unwieldy medium of bronze—a medium he had never worked with before. There is an eroticism in this choice of medium too, a 'sensitized aesthetic': we might compare the athlete wrestling with his python to Leighton wrestling with the medium of bronze and struggling to find a balance between ancient, academic classicism of Greek bronze sculptures (though Greek statuary was only known to the nineteenth century through marble copies), and erotic, tactile modernism.²⁹ Furthermore, since pleasure is allowed in this representation of the male, an alternative masculine model is presented, one which allows for male pleasure in looking at male bodies. Joseph Kestner goes further in his analysis of Leighton's representations of the





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The Erotic Body between the Wars

Artists in the inter-war period increasingly turned to eroticism as an explicit means of shocking their bourgeois audiences, rejecting the institutions of Family, Church, and State, and transgressing the taboos that society enforced on the individual. The influence of Sigmund Freud and the advances in psychology and the science of sexuality in general became increasingly evident not only in artists' symbolism and subject-matter but also in their manipulation of the findings of psychoanalysis to probe the psychosexual aspects of society. This was particularly true of the avant-garde, namely insurgent artists, writers, thinkers, and musicians whose ideas and techniques were ahead of their time and who strove to liberate art from academic tradition as well as from moral conventions. As the origin of the term 'avant-garde' indicates—a military term for the 'advance guard', those soldiers at the front of the battle line who bravely lead the way—these artists were determined not only to lead art in new directions but to lead society in new directions too. The first non-military use of the term is credited to Henri de Saint-Simon, who wrote of the emancipatory potential of the artist in his 1825 book *Literary, Philosophical, Industrial Opinion*, claiming 'the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious'.¹ Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant also wrote of avant-garde art in 1845, three years before the revolutions of 1848, as 'the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer', and aligned it to the exposure of 'all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society'.² This dialectical relationship with society—indeed an *antagonistic* dialectical relationship with society—was key to the concept of avant-gardism and to the rise of 'the avant-garde': those new artistic groups who identified themselves through manifestos, who advanced art in provocative directions but who also self-consciously battled to make art part of society rather than autonomous to it. Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism were among those avant-garde movements fighting for new modern means of formal expression and embracing

30 Hannah Höch

Tamer, c.1930

Höch's collage—juxtaposing athletic male arms with a fashion model's torso, a mannequin head and a sea-lion—challenges the viewer in its defiance of the gender stereotypes and body perfection of Weimar Germany as well as in the unfinished quality of its ripped paper surfaces.