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History of Western Art
Part One – An Introduction to Art History

Assignment One – Exercise 2

Annotation of two paintings – Painting one

Double nude portrait: The artist and his second wife
Sir Stanley Spencer

Sources

Independent. 1996. *Arts: The secret kept by artists' wife and her lover*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/arts-the-secret-kept-by-artists-wife-and-her-lover-1349650.html>. [Accessed 5 July 2017].

Tate. 2017. *Sir Stanley Spencer: Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and his Second Wife*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spencer-double-nude-portrait-the-artist-and-his-second-wife-t01863>. [Accessed 5 July 2017].

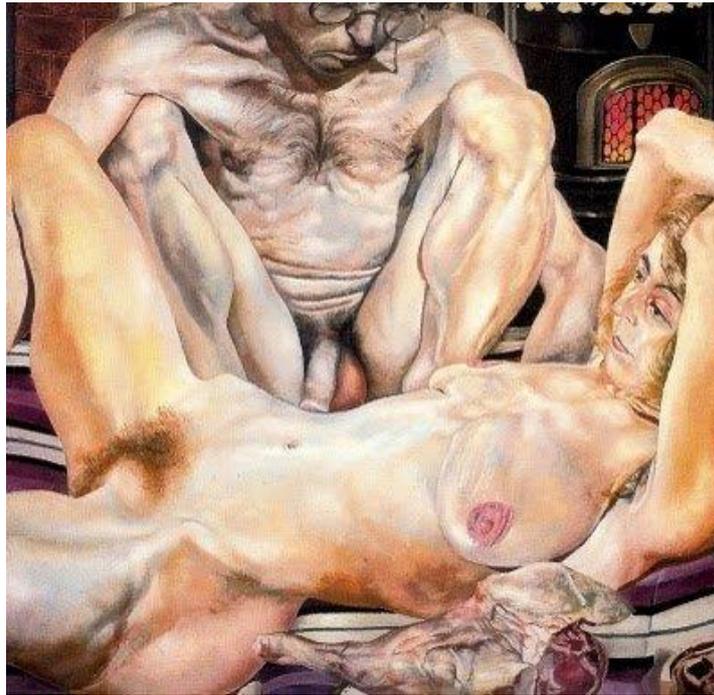
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Double nude portrait: The artist and his second wife
Sir Stanley Spencer
40" x 40"
Oil paint on canvas (1936)

The body of the artist is a pallid, a rather unwell-looking grey. We might expect warmth, pink/red/flushed tones in a sexually oriented painting, whether our subjects are pre/post-coital. The pink testicle looks out of place beside the flaccid grey penis.

There is nothing flattering about the depiction of either party. They both look skinny, bony and gaunt. No voluptuous curves or buxom, pert breasts.

The couple are not making eye contact. She stares stubbornly into the distance. He gazes rather forlornly at what? Possibly her body, his penis or the space between them?



The couple look unhappy; she is disinterested, disdainful, almost angry. He is disconsolate, resigned. He looks vaguely puzzled as if not sure how to behave.

Despite its explicit nature there is nothing sexual or titillating about this painting. It is graphic but not pornographic or in any way sensual. We are not meant to be turned on by this painting. It is almost melancholy and rather tragic.

The stove in the background is the only suggestion of warmth, contrasting strongly with the cold, grey tones of the couple.

Looking at the painting the eye is drawn first to the penis in the centre, then to the faces. We quickly realise this is not a picture of the happy couple.

Is this really a leg of meat we ask ourselves? Is the artist telling us that (these) humans are mere flesh and bone and nothing more? The angle of the meat is similar to that of the woman's leg. Is this intentional to emphasise the point?

The couple are the painter and his second wife, Patricia (nee Preece). One of only 7 Spencer nudes.

Apparently not titled by the artist, it was described as the Leg of Mutton Nude by executors. Thought to be the painting described in his papers as 36 Double Nude with Stove, as being the only one of Spencer's nudes featuring a stove. (Tate online)

Fascinatingly, despite what we may see in it, Spencer's own notes are very different. "The big double nude is rather a remarkable thing. There is in it male, female and animal flesh. The remarkable thing is that to me it is absorbing and restful to look at...there is something satisfying in looking at it. It was done with zest and my direct painting capacity I had. I feel all the time how much my shows need these nudes'....'I wanted in the nude section to show the analogy between the Church and the prescribed nature of worship, and human love'. (Tate online) Are we from this to see perhaps awe (and performance anxiety?) in the face of his new wife who is indifferent to his attentions? Preece was in a long-term lesbian relationship with Dorothy Hepworth, who, it appears accompanied bride and groom on their honeymoon. (Times Higher Ed supplement).

The marriage was reputedly unconsummated, perhaps supported by this article 'Preece later spoke with revulsion of her diminutive husband's curious tastes. He painted her nude, was fascinated by her legs, and bought her numerous pairs of shoes, gaudy underwear and frilly frocks. "He had to turn me into something horrible to obtain maximum satisfaction from our liaison. There was something appalling about Stanley," she said'. (The Independent, 1996) (note: Preece quote unsourced)

Personally, I find this portrait both compelling and tragic. That the artist finds it restful I find astonishing. Could his infatuation with a woman whom he must have suspected would never return his love have been so blind?