



## Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art

By Wendy Steiner

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**Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art** By Wendy Steiner

In *Venus in Exile* renowned cultural critic Wendy Steiner explores the twentieth century's troubled relationship with beauty. Disdained by avant-garde artists, feminists, and activists, beauty and its major symbols of art—the female subject and ornament—became modernist taboos. To this day it is hard to champion beauty in art without sounding aesthetically or politically retrograde. Steiner argues instead that the experience of beauty is a form of communication, a subject-object interchange in which finding someone or something beautiful is at the same time recognizing beauty in oneself. This idea has led artists and writers such as Marlene Dumas, Christopher Bram, and Cindy Sherman to focus on the long-ignored figure of the model, who function in art as both a subject and an object. Steiner concludes *Venus in Exile* on a decidedly optimistic note, demonstrating that beauty has created a new and intensely pleasurable direction for contemporary artistic practice.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

With *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*, University of Pennsylvania English professor Steiner weighed in on the NEA funding controversies and Rushdie fatwa, finding our age literal-minded about how artistic images function in society. *Scandal* was named a New York Times Best Book for 1996. In this follow-up, Steiner posits that, unlike in previous eras, female beauty is no longer "the central aim of art." Whizzing through literature, visual arts, architecture, etc., Steiner muses on this theme in eight sections with titles like "The Infamous Promiscuity of Things and of Women" and "The Bride of Frankenstein: At Home with the Outsider." (She skirts topics like film and dance since beautiful women are still at the center of things there.) One obvious problem with such an all-embracing study is any author's human limits of expertise, but Steiner's judgments throughout seem to have been made in haste and ignorance. She lumps together painters (Gustave Moreau, Alphonse Mucha, Pierre Bonnard, Norman Rockwell) and writers (Penelope Fitzgerald, Andrei Makine, Philip Roth) who have little in common apart from having once been thought "too pretty" and now acceptable, or else those who are "pointing us back toward beauty." Steiner thinks art should create a "win-win situation," where through "communication" and "mutuality" one begins to understand the "value" of "feminine" "beauty," but her engagement with the juggernaut of these terms, and of gender and representation in general, can be murky and baffling. ("[A] true prostitute's effects are indifferent to class, like the diseases she spreads," Steiner writes, unreflectively.) For Steiner, the art of the 20th century, "an art of garbage, babble, obscenity," is emblemized by Mapplethorpe's "classicistic renderings of gay sadomasochism." In trying to deal with all the arts, Steiner is illuminating on none of them.

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From Library Journal

Steiner (humanities, Univ. of Pennsylvania) examined the role of beauty in art in *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in the Age of Fundamentalism*. Here she shows how traditional forms of beauty disappeared from art in the 20th century, when artists rejected this ideal as placing undue importance on ornament while often objectifying the female body. She shows how representations of beauty disappeared from art, citing examples from literature, popular culture, visual arts, and even pornography in this heavily illustrated book. These artists, she argues, provided considerable food for thought but left a hunger for the pleasure of visual beauty. In the early days of the 21st century, Steiner sees a resurgence of female beauty in art but with the continuing struggle to see women as fully human. By examining what happened to art and popular culture when beauty became suspect, Steiner hopes to lead us to a better understanding of beauty as a kind of communication in human culture. Steiner is both a respected scholar and a talented and accessible writer, and her book is strongly recommended for all academic art and feminist studies collections. Drew Harrington, Pacific Univ., Forest Grove, OR

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From [Booklist](#)

Steiner, author of *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995), looks into why modern artists rejected the voluptuous female form, an aesthetic revolt that she sees as an all-out rejection of beauty. With references to the Kantian sublime and Mary Shelley's humanistic protest against the impersonalization of beauty in *Frankenstein*, Manet's *Olympia*, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, she interprets the abstraction of modernist art and its

fascination with purity of form as a refutation of women, ornament, decoration, and all classic images of beauty. The avant-garde believed that beauty had to be stripped from art to free art from the bourgeois values embedded in romanticism, a tradition that seemed hopelessly inappropriate for the horrific twentieth century. Scholarly but eminently readable, Steiner moves on to assess contemporary revivals of traditional beauty in art, which follow society's cycles of worship and vilification of women, both in the flesh and as representative of idealized beauty. *Regina Schroeder*  
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A lot of people always spent their particular free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them friends and family or their friend. Do you know? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you need to try to find a new activity this is look different you can read any book. It is really fun for yourself. If you enjoy the book that you simply read you can spent the entire day to reading a publication. The book *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* it doesn't matter what good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. They were enjoying reading this book. In the event you did not have enough space to bring this book you can buy the particular e-book. You can m0ore very easily to read this book out of your smart phone. The price is not too expensive but this book possesses high quality.

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