

ONE

Assuming the Pose

An Introduction to Life Modeling

[Nude modeling is] a site for irreconcilable notions about nudity in art (good) and nudity in life (bad). For while the painting of the nude was respected, the unclothed lady who modeled for it was not.

—Borzello, *The Artist's Model*, 73

A 43 year old art and religion teacher at a Catholic high school has been asked to resign over his outside job: he moonlights as a nude model. The Rev. Michael Billian, Pastor and President of the school said “he didn’t object to nudes, such as Michelangelo’s paintings in the Sistene Chapel, but posing for such art is inappropriate for a high school teacher.”

—*The Oregonian*, June 13, 1996

LIFE MODELS

ACCORDING TO ANCIENT Greek and Roman mythology, the sacred streams dancing down the sides of Mount Helikon and Mount Parnassos were home to nine nymphs, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, collectively called “the Muses.” The Muses presided over music and song, poetry, and the fine arts. Mortal artists worshipped the Muses, dependent upon their guidance and approval for creative inspiration.

Today, the source of artistic creativity and inspiration remains largely mystical, unexplained by modern science. Nonartists tend to think of artistic creativity as inborn. Some people, we say, have artistic talents and sensibilities,

and some simply do not. How or why it is that some people are born with artistic talents is a mystery to us. What's more, even a talented artist, we believe, cannot create great works of art in the absence of inspiration. What allows or causes or prompts inspiration, however, is inexplicable.¹ Contemporary artists struggling to find inspiration still seek out muses. Rarely water nymphs, today's muses are more likely to be ordinary men and women. A life model acts as a muse, some sort of mysterious font of incalculable inspiration for an artist, who will, via some process we cannot really know or understand, turn that inspiration into art. Once worshipped for their ability to inspire, today's muses are often disdained as little better than strippers. And, while the nine muses of Mounts Helikon and Parnassos were ruled by Apollo, the god of oracles, contemporary muses are believed to be ruled by a more earthly force: sex.

In reality, the men and women who pose nude for artists and art classes, while respectful of artists' talents and what they call the "artistic process," see themselves and their work in far less romantic terms. Life models believe that a figure artist's sense of inspiration comes as the result of hard work on the part of his or her model. What's more, one does not simply wake up to discover that one is a muse. Good models are made, not born. Life models are aware that society looks with scorn upon their profession, but they are called to the work of a muse anyway. They hope that while their contemporaries may not respect them, people will one day look with honor and admiration upon the results of their work.

Little has been written about mortal muses. Most library collections of art history and analysis include multiple titles concerned with the depiction of the nude but few titles related to who that nude might have been. Although some art historians make reference to artists' models, most in fact are describing the depiction of models in art and changes in the representation of the nude, not the living person who posed for those depictions.² When authors have focused on life models, they have rarely gathered their information directly from the lived experiences of life models. France Borel's *Seduction of Venus: Artists and Their Models* and Frances Borzello's *Artist's Model* offer historical accounts of life models, notable for their careful and sympathetic writing, but neither work offers models' own words and explanations.³ Exhibition catalogs, such as that written by Martin Postle and William Vaughn to accompany the 1999 exhibit *The Artists Model in England* or Dorothy Kosinski's *Artist and the Camera* published by the Dallas Museum of Art to accompany a 2000 exhibit there, offer some of the most detailed information about specific life models.⁴ There also exist "technical writings" directed at artists, which focus on artistic technique and mention models indirectly as aids to achieving particular effects.⁵ For example, in his guide to *Modeling and Sculpting the Human Figure*, Edouard Lanteri advises artists to give a model frequent rests so as to prevent the model's pose from subtly shifting or drifting due to fatigue.⁶

It is not unusual to encounter life models in fiction. The nineteenth century, for example, produced Honoré de Balzac's *Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu* (1845), Émile Zola's *L'Oeuvre* (1886), Henry James's *Real Thing* (1892), and George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894). In popular accounts, the depiction of life models is highly romanticized and often takes a sexual tone. For example, the 1920s American magazine *Artists and Models* featured nothing about either artists or models in its text, offering instead pictures of chorus girls.⁷ In 1929, Alice Prin, a.k.a. Kiki of Montparnaasse, celebrated model for Man Ray among others, published her memoirs, which were reprinted in the United States in 1950, including an introduction by Ernest Hemmingway.⁸ In *The Education of a French Model*, Kiki shares the "loves, cares, cartoons and caricatures" of her life. Artists and models were a popular theme in some of the most famous erotica of the twentieth century, such as *Little Birds* written by Anais Nin,⁹ and more recently, in such critically acclaimed films as *Angels and Insects*. Even the popular 1990s television show *Ally McBeal* featured a story line in which the lead character had a sexual encounter with a life model.

Historical and biographical accounts, such as C. J. Bulliet's 1930 work, *The Courtesan Olympia: An Intimate Survey of Artists and Their Mistress-Models*, focus on real or imagined sexual liaisons between artists and their life models. Thus, Modigliani's model and mistress, Jeanne, is said in many accounts to have killed herself just one day after the artist died, broken-hearted by his absence.¹⁰ Monet and Bonnard both married their models. Lydia Delectorskaya acted as nurse, housekeeper, secretary, companion, and model for Matisse,¹¹ and even people unfamiliar with Andrew Wyeth's work may know about his fifteen-year-long relationship with his model, Helga Testorf. The popular conceptualization of the model-as-mistress takes two forms. First, the life model may become the artist's mistress over the course of a sitting. Alternately, there is a common belief that when an artist depicts a beautiful woman in his work, she is probably his mistress.¹² That is to say, the mistress becomes the model.¹³ In either case, it is assumed that life modeling involves some degree of sexual activity, and little effort is made to understand modeling as actual life models experience it. As writer and art historian Frances Borzello has claimed, "What is certain is that in the transition from fact to fantasy, the mundane work of modeling has been transformed into a profession of bohemian gaiety and glamour. And the reality of ordinary-bodied men and women posing for poor pay in a local art college has been lost in a mass of notions about models as mistresses, models as inspiration and models as naked and female."¹⁴

As a profession, life modeling seems to be strangely invisible to most of us. Although we have all seen paintings and sculptures of people, either in museums or galleries, on television, or in books, few of us have stopped to consider the men or women whose job it is to sit for artwork.

AESTHETIC FASHION AND THE PROFESSION OF LIFE MODELING

Not all artists use life models. Working from life is only necessary if an artist wants to depict the human form, and even then, only if the artist wishes to depict that form in what contemporary society recognizes as a “realistic” way.¹⁵ An artist who does not draw or sculpt people, whose work is abstract, or who works primarily from his or her own imagination need not necessarily refer to a living human being in creating his or her work. Therefore, historically, the importance of life models to the artistic process has waxed and waned with changing fads and fashions in artistic production.

There are scattered accounts of commissioned artworks that involved life models in ancient times. For example, there is the legend of the Greek painter Zeuxis, who was commissioned by the people to paint Helen and was given his choice of the most beautiful virgins of Crotona to serve as his model.¹⁶ In addition, Roman histories recount Apelles’s commission to paint Alexander the Great’s favorite concubine in the nude.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the dominant aesthetic of the time was one of idealization and generalization, not of realism or particularism. Artists subscribing to an idealistic aesthetic would strive to create a painting or sculpture that would capture the essence or greatness of Man, not the likeness of any particular man. The particular man carries with him the flaws inherent to being human: blemishes, muscular or skeletal idiosyncrasies, and so forth. As depicted in idealistic art, Man has no such flaws. Idealized images do not demand careful study of a life model. In trying to capture the essence of the ideal man, ancient artists worked more from the idea of Man, and less from an actual man.

The Renaissance, however, ushered in a gradual turning away from the supernatural and a turning toward the natural and worldly. Following a new ideology of empiricism, painters and sculptors started looking to the living people around them to serve as models for their artistic work, rather than working from an ideal, and the profession we recognize as life modeling was born. Historian John Moffitt emphasizes that the “naturalism” of the time described both form and content. That is, naturalism influenced both the artist’s style and his or her choice of subject matter. Moffitt sums up the naturalistic approach as “looking at the rose through world-colored glasses.”¹⁸ Early in the Renaissance, models worked primarily in individual artists’ studios or homes and outside of the accepted, recognized artistic community. But a turning point in the history of figure drawing and life modeling occurred when state-supported art academies in Italy decided to offer training for painters and sculptors and included living models in the coursework. In fact, Italy was home to the first official art academies, the *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence in 1563 and the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome in 1593.¹⁹ According to art historians Ilaria Bignamini and Martin Postle, early acade-

mies of art could be divided into two categories: those created by the state as “part of a system of cultural institutions designed to serve the policy of the central power,” and those created by individual artists in response to market demand.²⁰ The history of life modeling is inextricably entwined with the history of the early state-supported academies. Private studios isolated artists and were highly dependent upon the abilities and reputations of individual masters. Official academies, in contrast, brought together a group of artists, all working under the same instructors, provided a common vocabulary, and the sense of community prerequisite for the birth of a national pictorial school.²¹ Typically, the academies offered a sequence of courses in which artists began their figure studies by copying their professor’s drawings or by drawing from casts of Greek or Roman statuary. They then progressed to drawing from a live model as their skills advanced.²² Although the presence of nudes remained scandalous in many schools, where artists were restricted to working from casts, the state academies’ acceptance of working from life went far to establish working from nude models as a legitimate part of artistic training. No longer were artists expected to depict the ideal image of man but instead to portray particular men as realistically as possible. By the close of the Renaissance, drawing from the nude became *the* essential part of artistic training and the regular use of life models in academies spread across Western Europe, from Italy to France, Germany, and England. The earliest record of the employment of models in England was in Sir Godfrey Kneller’s Great Queen Street Academy, opened in 1711. In 1722, the academy on St. Martin’s Lane ran an advertisement announcing training “for the improvement of painters and sculptors by drawing from the naked.”²³

Unlike today, the majority of life models working during the Renaissance and into the Victorian era were male. A number of private studios and individual artists employed female models, but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that most of the state-funded academies in Europe began to admit female models. They would not admit female artists until even later. English academies were an exception, admitting female models as early as the eighteenth century. Historian Nikolaus Pevsner speculates that the fact that the Royal Academy in London was the first official academy to allow female models is best understood not as a reflection of progressive thinking or artistic goals, but as a reflection of the academy’s unusual non-governmental nature.²⁴ Although permitted, the use of female models in state academies in England remained controversial and exceptional. In fact, as late as 1860, Charles Adderly, MP, proposed that Parliament withdraw funding from any school employing nude female models.²⁵ And Frances Borzello notes that on the rare occasion that a woman did pose for the academy, during the late nineteenth century, “No outsiders except the royal family could enter the life class when a female model was sitting, and attendance was forbidden to students under twenty unless they were married.”²⁶ It was not uncommon, in

fact, for studios and academies to use male models as substitutes for the female, or for elements of an idealized male body to remain apparent in paintings of women's bodies.²⁷

Generally speaking, the existence of art academies helped to legitimize the role of models and, thereby, improved their social standing. In part, this was due simply to an increase in the number of people studying art both in the academies and in teaching ateliers, which grew in size and prestige throughout the century.²⁸ Ateliers, begun in France, were large studios offering intensive instruction in drawing and painting under the supervision of eminent artists and professors of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.²⁹ Demonstrating the increasing public appearance of life models, a male model known as Monsieur Suisse founded the Académie Suisse on the Ile de la Cité, Paris, where Cézanne, among many others, trained.³⁰ Still, most people continued to think of life models as being of lower class and questionable character. Women who modeled were often considered the social equivalent of prostitutes. To be fair, many early models *were* actually prostitutes, or members of other impoverished or discredited groups, a reflection of the aura of scandal attached to life modeling at the time and the assumption that only people with no other options would take such work. But the negative perception of models also reflected artists' desires to adhere to a more naturalistic aesthetic. For example, Caravaggio's work *The Gypsy Fortune Teller* is modeled on a gypsy woman who happened to pass the artist on the street. Caravaggio liked the gypsy woman both because she was readily available and because she represented a rejection of the "beautiful" models preferred by his predecessors.³¹ Likewise, van Gogh is well known for his insistence on painting ordinary people and may have intentionally sought out unattractive models.³² Although far from good, the reputation of male models was somewhat better than that of females. In a broadly patriarchal world, women were devalued; male bodies remained the standard for artists of the time. The fact that female models were barred from many state academies meant that artists wanting to employ them had to secure their sittings in private, further contributing to the suspect nature of female models' reputations.

In truth, life modeling was not particularly sought-after or profitable work for men or women. In England, for example, only the very poor would consider posing for payment, and payment was small.³³ Artists negotiated prices for different poses. In France, around 1850, a model might earn four francs for a four-hour session, though some particularly prized models could fetch as much as six francs.³⁴ Adding to a lack of profitability, modeling work was sporadic. Men were only able to begin securing full-time work as life models during the Victorian period in England, as middle-class homes sought to display their class standing through the acquisition of paintings.³⁵

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the bohemian community of Montparnasse became a center of European artistic activity, and

both men and women came to the city looking for work as life models. A striking number of these men and women came from Italy. Central to the bohemian image, which spread across Western Europe and England, was the dubious image of a sexually aggressive, heterosexual male artist and a correspondingly sexually submissive, female life model/mistress. Although the vast majority of life models never fit this image, the bohemian notion of the model as female, as mistress, as seductress was too powerful to fade, even coming to reshape the public image of life models as female, rather than male.³⁶

Bohemia served to replace outright social rejection of life models with a more nuanced social rejection tinged with sexual intrigue and titillation. The figure of the life model began to appear in the culture more widely, in its bohemian female/mistress guise. In 1894, for example, a South London music hall, the Washington, ran a sketch by Owen Hall titled *An Artist's Model, o' Eve before the Fall*, which toured the United States in 1896. And, in 1912, a play titled *The Model* by Augustus Thomas opened at the Harris Theater in New York.³⁷ In the public's mind, life modeling became ever more firmly associated with nakedness, strangers, and an exchange of money, a combination that looked a lot like prostitution. In fact, in some parts of the United States, brothels were given the name of "model studios," touting models for photographers or painters, as a cover for prostitution.³⁸

In 1837, the National Academy of Design in New York became the first school in the United States to offer drawing from life models.³⁹ But, even as the practice of working from nude models became common in European academies, the moral climate of the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made it difficult or impossible for most artists to work from nude life models. In chronicling the study of the human form in Philadelphia and the depiction of the nude in American art history, David Sellen notes that even in the nineteenth century, students of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts had to turn to prostitutes or their fellow students to find anyone willing to pose nude.⁴⁰ Indeed, nude models were considered so scandalous that as late as 1886, Thomas Eakins was given the choice of ceasing to teach figure drawing from nude models or resigning his position at the Pennsylvania Academy. He resigned.⁴¹

Despite pockets of moral condemnation, the bohemian era represented the peak of artistic interest in life models. To be a serious artist in the bohemian community was to paint nudes. And although their reputation remained questionable and their pay poor, there was work to be had by life models, male and female. After World War I, however, the French government began requiring all foreigners to register with the police, and as modeling was not considered an official profession in France, Italian models did not have regular working papers. They were required to return to Italy.⁴² By this time, the ateliers of France had become "deeply clichéd, the resort of gauche art students from Britain and America clinging to the remnants of a bygone

educational regime.”⁴³ The official art academies that played such an important role in establishing life drawing as essential to artistic training were in decline. And most importantly, the dominant artistic aesthetic of the day was changing, away from naturalism now, to expressionism and abstraction.⁴⁴

Once again, the skills of the life model became superfluous. Expressionism, pioneered by such artists as Munch and van Gogh, stressed the portrayal of the artist’s emotional state over his fidelity to visual reality. Gradually, painting and sculpting became accepted as an expression of the artist, rather than as a depiction of nature. This does not mean, of course, that artists no longer painted human figures or recognizable objects, but the artist’s goal was no longer to depict those objects in perfect mimetic fashion. Rather, the goal was to show how the objects looked to the artist, how the objects made the artist feel, or to provoke an emotional reaction in the viewer via the work’s composition.

Following the Second World War, in the United States, abstraction emerged as the major art movement of the time. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko stressed the importance of process, immediacy, and the unplanned in their artwork. Abstract artists used painting and sculpture to capture the workings of the unconscious mind. Rarely did this require careful or prolonged reference to a life model, so the demand for models further diminished. To be sure, there remained a core of “traditional” artists who still worked closely from life models, but abstract painters who did work from models typically used the model to develop ideas for images, rather than as a figure to be closely copied. Thus, even when used, the visible impact of life models on finished work declined.⁴⁵

In the second half of the twentieth century, many art schools stopped requiring life drawing as the foundation of all artistic training, and the fortunes of life models further dwindled. Elizabeth Hollander explains that twentieth-century artists tended to deal idiosyncratically with the human figure, “experimenting with different, often isolated, aspects of the figural presence in their images, eventually abandoning any suggestion that the coherence of a figure on a canvas derived from any physical body other than their own.”⁴⁶ Life modeling in the United States and much of Europe was once again part-time work, now primarily for women. Male models found little demand for their skills. The rise of photography, especially commercial photography, allowed new ways to efficiently capture an image, and contributed to the decline of life modeling as a trade. Commercial and fashion modeling rapidly overtook life modeling. Manufacturers or retailers no longer had to employ life models to pose holding their products while artists drew or painted: photographs made quick and cost-effective advertising. Interestingly, a tension or antipathy between life models and photographic media remains today.

Nevertheless, the profession of life modeling has survived. Anywhere in the United States where an art school, art classes, or art studios exist, you will

find men and women working as life models. In 1993, Robert Speller of *The New York Times* noted that life models “seem curiously archaic, relics of a bygone age when art students labored amid skeletons and anatomical charts, learning to draw the human body as painstakingly as medical students learn to dissect it. . . . Nonetheless, like waiters, these models are something New York never runs out of.”⁴⁷

CONTEMPORARY LIFE MODELING IN THE UNITED STATES

Although no longer considered essential to all artistic training, the use of life models is generally accepted as a necessary step in mastering the particulars of human anatomy and proportion. In some ways, drawing from life models remains a mark of the “real” artist. Thus, historian Elizabeth Hollander notes that models have “come to stand in some way for the value of technique itself, not just the ability to render, but the very discipline of seeing.”⁴⁸ And Kenneth Clark, famed art historian, believes that drawing the nude figure remains the primary link to our artistic past.⁴⁹

For most life models today, modeling is a part-time job, a few hours a week or month that supplements some other, more regular source of income. By all accounts, the majority of contemporary models are women, although in some cities the relative scarcity of male models means that men can find more regular modeling work than women can. In Portland, Oregon, where I live and conducted my interviews over a two-year time period, about 60 percent of the life model workforce was female. I conducted formal interviews with thirty life models, by all accounts, a majority of the models actively working in Portland at the time. I spoke informally with many more active and former models from the Portland area and beyond. Most of the models I met were young, between the ages of eighteen and forty, although I also spoke with models who were still working well into their sixties. In the United States, most studios and schools will not hire models under the age of eighteen, for fear of prosecution under child molestation or child pornography laws. The youngest children are intrinsically poor candidates for life modeling since they tend not to remain still for any extended period of time. Nevertheless, I did speak with one model who said that she occasionally worked with her three-year-old daughter, but this was clearly an exception for her and for models in general.

Historically, many life models sought the protections and legitimacy offered by the academies. But contemporary models in the United States often prefer working in artists’ private studios. Private studios typically offer better working conditions, better pay, and a more skilled artist. Opportunities to work privately, however, are rare, especially in smaller cities, so models make most of their income posing for groups in open studio sessions and art classes.

Most group sessions begin with a series of short poses, about ten to fifteen “gestures” that last about a minute each for drawing or a few minutes for sculpture. For the artists, this is a chance to learn to see movement, proportion, how bodies occupy space. Artists do not try to make complete depictions of what they see but rather to capture the essence of the body or gesture in space. For the models, gestures are the most athletic of their poses. Models will create poses that they would be unable to sustain for longer periods of time, such as extreme twisting, balancing, or holding an arm in the air. Gestures are usually followed by a group of three to five slightly longer poses, held for about five minutes. This gives the artist a chance to focus on particular parts of the figure in motion. Models usually have a repertoire of five-minute poses that are still quite athletic but that can be maintained longer than those of the first series. As one model explained to me, “*Those poses can still be pretty dynamic, but you probably wouldn’t want to hold a chair over your head.*” Five-minute poses may be followed by a group of fifteen-minute poses or a longer, half-hour to forty-five-minute pose. Most sessions conclude with a longer pose. The entire session may last about three hours. A model may pose once for a group or many times, maintaining a single pose for hundreds of hours, over the course of weeks or months.

Although artists or instructors may request a type of pose, such as standing or reclining, for most sessions the life model plans the poses that she or he assumes for the group. In an odd cycle of art-inspires-life-inspires-art, today’s models often try to take poses like ancient statuary. Once in a pose, the model is faced with the challenge of creating the energy or experience from which great works of art might emerge. For most life models, this means somehow rising above the passive object of the artists’ gaze to become an active muse.