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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

STEERING THROUGH STYLE:

A NEW LOOK AT THE NEW ENGLISH NUDES OF PHILIP WILSON STEER

BY

MURRAY E. HUPFER



A THESIS

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

IN

THE HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN

DEPARTMENT OF ART AND DESIGN

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 1990



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ISBN 0-315-64938-0

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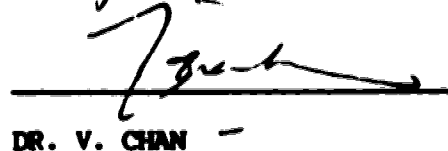
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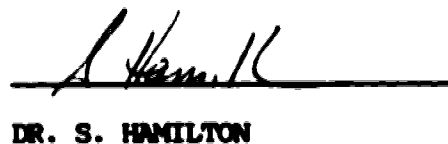
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ABSTRACT

STEERING THROUGH STYLE:

A NEW LOOK AT THE NEW ENGLISH NUDES OF PHILIP WILSON STEER

Between 1896 and 1902, Philip Wilson Steer painted a series of nudes which may be divided into two distinct stylistic groups. One group is characterized by loose brushwork and provocative or mythological titles in the tradition of the eighteenth-century French Rococo, while the second group is typified by smoother brushwork, generic titles, and a more "avant-garde" style of depiction. Steer exhibited four of these nudes at the New English Art Club (NEAC) during the time frame under consideration. In 1896 he showed A Nude, later known as Nude Seated on a Bed, which belongs to the first stylistic group. Steer exhibited Sleep in 1898, and in 1901 he showed The Mirror, both of which fall into the second stylistic category. In 1902, Steer submitted A Nude, later known as Wood Nymph, and this "Rubenesque" example seems to fall between the two groups, with its combination of a simple descriptive title and looser brushwork.

Steer's stylistic diversity has been discussed by twentieth-century art historians as an intuitive search for personal style and a lack of coherent aesthetic vision, while his historical references have been dismissed as anachronistic pastiche. However, this form of scholarship, based upon an art historical standard of consistent formal innovation, leaves many unanswered questions. How did these images function? How were they received? What other theories could explain an artist painting nudes in two such different

styles during one time frame? A response to these questions inevitably involves not only a consideration of the particular deficiencies within Steer scholarship to date, but also a questioning of the problematic distortions of fact which have been generated by an uncritical acceptance of modernist ideology. An investigation which locates Steer within a specific historical and social context reveals that his strategy of moderation as well as his interest in painting as a visual language are two factors which explain and unite these two series of nudes. Thus, not only does a "new look" at the New English nudes solve the problem of style, but more importantly, this thesis restores an aspect of this British fin-de-siècle visual culture in which Steer participated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Chan of my supervisory committee for their assistance and advice, and especially Dr. Bridget Elliott, for her constant support and encouragement throughout the course of my studies in Art History at the University of Alberta.

My gratitude is also extended to the colleagues, friends, and family members who helped me during this project. Above all, thanks to my mother, U. Rosaline Hupfer, who made everything possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1896 and 1902, Philip Wilson Steer painted a series of nudes which may be divided into two distinct stylistic groups. One group is characterized by loose brushwork and provocative or mythological titles in the tradition of the eighteenth-century French Rococo, while the second group is typified by smoother brushwork, simple descriptive titles, and a more "avant-garde" style of depiction. Steer exhibited four of these nudes at the New English Art Club (NEAC) during the time frame under consideration. In 1896 he showed his A Nude, later known as Nude Seated on a Bed (Fig. 1), which belongs to the first stylistic group. Steer exhibited Sleep in 1898, and in 1901 he showed The Mirror, both of which fall into the second stylistic category (Figs. 2 and 3). In 1902, Steer submitted A Nude, later known as Wood Nymph (Fig. 4), and this "Rubenesque" example seems to fall between the two groups, with its combination of a simple descriptive title and looser brushwork.

Steer's stylistic diversity is discussed by Bruce Laughton in his 1971 monograph, and he attributes this inconsistency to the artist's search for a suitable personal style.¹ In the most recent study of Steer, Jane Munro not only adopts Laughton's theory, but also uses it as a basis for her own pejorative judgment: "Today appreciation of Steer's achievement is clouded by the considerable fluctuations in his style, which offer little sense of coherent artistic vision, or of adherence to a specific aesthetic program."² Munro's conclusion is not surprising, given her respect for Laughton

and her belief that his Steer monograph constitutes the canonical reference.

However, this form of scholarship, based upon an art historical standard of consistent formal innovation, leaves many unanswered questions. How did these images function? How were they received? What other theories could explain an artist painting nudes in two such different styles during one time frame? Rather than relying upon the convenient and superficial hypothesis established by Laughton, a more thorough investigation which locates Steer within a specific social and historical context is necessary. This thesis will therefore provide a "new look" at the New English nudes of Philip Wilson Steer. Key areas of investigation include the exhibition and viewing context of the NEAC, critical discourses, Steer's relationship to the avant-garde as well as the Academy, and the complexity of a revival of eighteenth-century style during this period. Furthermore, the thesis will explore Steer's apparent interest in maintaining a strategy of moderation, as well as the manner in which his moderate stance led critics and art historians to exclude Steer from the subsequent modernist canon of High Art.

FOOTNOTES

1 Bruce Laughton, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971): Chapter VII "In Search of Style," 68-82.

2 Jane Munro, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum and Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986): 21.

CHAPTER ONE

NUDES, IMPRESSIONISM, AND THE NEW ENGLISH ART CLUB

A study which seeks to locate Steer's nudes within a specific historical and social context must consider preconceived notions regarding the proper standards of decorum and aesthetic conventions involved in painting the female nude in Britain during the fin-de-siècle. Although nudes comprised a significant portion of the exhibits at the Royal Academy, Grosvenor Gallery, and New Gallery, Steer chose to exhibit his work at the New English Art Club. Therefore, an assessment of this "anti-academic" viewing context in comparison with other more established venues is required. Furthermore, because Steer was generally discussed as an "impressionist" artist, the complex terms and strategies of the impressionist debate must also be addressed as a preliminary component in reconstructing the meaning which Steer's nudes held for contemporary viewers.

It should be noted that the nude *per se* was not problematic for Victorian viewers, provided that aesthetic conventions and standards of decorum were observed. One of the most popular means of presenting the nude was to "cloak" the body within the guise of a mythological or historical context. William Etty is often cited as the only British painter before Steer to paint the nude in all its glory.¹ Nevertheless, even Etty took advantage of historical and mythological narratives in order to avoid being criticized as lewd or immoral. Despite these efforts, Etty's work often became the subject of controversy, since the facial types and hairstyles

of his nudes were perceived as "modern" in terms of their "nineteenth-century" features which originated from studio models.² In contrast, an acceptable nude had to be depicted not only within a narrative removed from the real and everyday, but the body itself had to be both generalized and idealized, which thus elevated it to the status of High Culture. Hence Victorian painters of the nude ventured upon slippery ground. According to Kate Flint, the persistence of Rusinian thinking meant that art was perceived as a didactic tool to promote the moral good of society, and the logical reverse of this proposition meant that art could have an equally negative influence. Furthermore, the "most obvious grounds for condemnation of content was the exposure of an undesirably suggestive amount of flesh."³

Of particular concern was the effect which nude paintings might have on female viewers, especially since women were widely perceived as the upholders of moral virtue in Victorian society. "A British Matron" writing to the Times in 1865 demanded to know if "...anyone [could] venture to deny that, at an exhibition purporting to be for general education or entertainment, no picture should find place before which a modest woman may not stand hanging on the arm of father, brother or lover without a burning sense of shame?"⁴

Favourite targets of adverse criticism included the Salon canvases of Cabanel and Bouguereau in particular, as well as the nudes of French painters in general.⁵ In an 1867 article entitled "French Influence on British Art," Alfred Beaver compared the English nude with its French counterpart, noting that although the French were "brilliantly skilful in the delineation of the nude," they "indulge[d]

this capability to a really tiresome excess. . . . More seriously still . . . these subjects sometimes verge[d] very dangerously upon the indecent." An example of such indecency was to be found in a picture called Une Tentation:

 painted by one of the best French painters, and reproduced by one of their best engravers, in which a nude woman display[ed] the allurements of her person to a solitary hermit in his cell. This picture [was] conceived in so gross a spirit, that it would be indecent in any age or country in which public morality has been regarded, and both artists deserve our severest reprobation. . . .

The wholesome contrast to works such as these was to be found on the walls of England's Royal Academy. "To people who would see immodesty in the works of Watts, Poynter, or Alma-Tadema," admonished Beaver, "drapery would be no bar."⁶

While the artist was expected to observe standards of decorum when painting the nude, the critic was responsible for castigating those unfortunate enough to overstep the "crucial dividing line between the naked, with its unmistakable carnal overtones, and the nude, with its artistic potential."⁷ This artistic potential seemed to reside in the notion that realism should not be pushed to excess; rather, the artist was expected to idealize and emphasize elements of beauty, and to minimize or edit any unpleasantness or ugliness.⁸ As R.A.M. Stevenson noted, the "sight of the human form does not offend our eyes in any way, provided that it be presented in an artistic spirit and painted in an artistic way."⁹

Thus the art critic was expected to perform the role of moral guardian as well as that of artistic and technical judge, and it was precisely the intersection of these two critical roles which

made discussion of nude paintings so difficult. "Any show of dislike on the writer's part, even if prompted by purely technical considerations, was bound to be taken in by someone else as a manifestation of prudery."¹⁰ "Overmuch prudery," as Beaver pointed out in his 1887 article, was "almost equally prurient" as indecency, particularly if a buyer were "constrained by the mock modesty of his friends, to hide a most beautiful picture . . . in a garret." Beaver continued:

This subject of the nude is, in the present timid state of the national mind, a difficult one, which has engaged the serious attention of many worthy people, and one in which, from a national point of view, we had better err on the side of over scrupulousness than in excess of license. Its treatment in art is objected to altogether by some (let us hope their numbers are few only) on the ground of immodesty. But surely, immodesty, where it does exist, must not be alone in the thing itself, but either in the subject or the thoughts of the spectator. The first, of course, the artist is responsible for, but we have no right to blame him or to circumscribe his practice, for the second.¹¹

Significantly, Beaver's remarks emphasize the shared participation of the artist and spectator in the construction of the subject. Obviously the representation of the nude female body during this time period posed difficulties which both parties had to negotiate.

By the time that Steer began to exhibit his nudes at the New English Art Club in 1896, British critics and audiences at the Royal Academy, Grosvenor Gallery and the New Gallery had grown accustomed to viewing nude figures in paintings. Reproductions of nude works shown at these venues comprised a significant portion of the content of publications such as Academy Sketches, the Magazine of Art's Royal Academy Pictures, and the Fall Mall Magazine Pictures of the Year.

Almost without exception, these works depicted the female form as either a personification of nature, some form of allegorical figure, a Biblical character, or the subject of classical mythology.

Leighton and Alma-Tadema were particularly favoured for their depictions of lovely female bodies safely removed to the realms of history or myth.¹² Poynter was also praised for his attempts to "fix for the female form the proportions as those for the male form were fixed by the classic Greek sculpture, the Diadumenos."¹³ Philip Hook has argued that Leighton saw his art as a means to enoble British society through the inculcation of Greek ideals of beauty, and thus reaffirm Britain's supremacy among nations.¹⁴ The canvases of Alma-Tadema and Poynter, Hook believes, appealed to the materialist and patriotic Victorian imagination through the association of Greece and Rome with England.¹⁵ Certainly,

part of the appeal of this Classical revival to the average gallery visitor was that it provided a respectable pretext for seeing large expanses of naked female flesh, at all other times so sedulously denied to him. It would be excessive to suggest that it fulfilled a pornographic function, but no doubt Victorians found it titillating.¹⁶

While nude works may indeed have been consumed as erotica by Victorian gentlemen, the "Olympian" artists were nevertheless protected from charges of impropriety because their work was felt to embody the Philistine virtues of valour, sanity, temperance, as well as emotional and intellectual control. According to D.S. MacColl, the "Olympian is the Philistine raised to his highest power."¹⁷

Although the nudes of Alma-Tadema, Leighton, and Poynter may have been above reproach, Steer did not adopt the visual conventions established by these artists, nor did he exhibit at the Royal Academy

after 1896. Therefore, it seems plausible that the critical attention devoted to his nudes of the 1890s and early twentieth century was partially determined by the New English Art Club context in which they were exhibited. It should be emphasized that this exhibiting society, formed largely in reaction to the teaching methods and jury system of the Royal Academy, was characterized as "anti-academic" from the time of its inception in 1886. Alternative names proposed for the Club included the New English Institute, the English Renaissance, the Pall Mall Gallery or Institute, and the Society of Anglo-French Painters.¹⁸ The latter suggestion, in particular, drew attention to the Parisian training of the NEAC's leading members, and provided an indication of the new group's defiance of the Royal Academy's attempt to establish a national English school of painting.¹⁹ The interest in labels such as "new" and "Renaissance" also implies that the group intended to revitalize and modernize British art with their production.

Early notices which appeared in London art periodicals made it evident that many writers approved of the challenge which the New English Art Club offered the "complacency and commercialism" of the Academy.²⁰ The Art Journal felt the NEAC

may be considered to have been in great measure promoted by the scant justice that has hitherto been shown by the already existing Art societies to the younger artists, who strive by their work to protest against Art traditions that have become obsolete, and against methods of practice that are inconsistent with modern aims and modern aspirations.²¹

Writing for Science and Art, T.L.M.H. added his note of approval to that expressed in the Art Journal. He felt that the "new venture"

had commenced on "thoroughly sound lines" and noted that the "uncompromising attitude of the bulk of the Royal Academicians towards the very reasonable demands of the malcontents rendered the formation of a rival institution a necessary step in self-defense."²² The Artist enthused that this "newest of art societies is justifying its existence in an eminently satisfactory manner, and is laying the foundation of an exceptionally favourable reputation."²³

The Club itself quietly announced in the 1887 edition of the Year's Art that the membership consisted of "artists who felt that their work was out of sympathy with the general quality of works at other exhibitions," a statement which must have been a compromise between the conservative and the more avant-garde factions of the Club.²⁴ It seems unlikely that all of the NEAC members would have been interested in acting as defiantly as Sickert and Steer, who submitted pictures to the Royal Academy in 1890, and subsequently expressed gratitude for their rejection in the Pall Mall Gazette.²⁵

The positive response to the NEAC's anti-academic character continued to be a prominent feature of reviews throughout the 1880s, 1890s, and early twentieth century. The Artist predicted that the "great work" of the Club would have a "decided influence on the future of art," while the Messenger of Art noted that the "originality, earnestness and honesty of purpose" of this "body of young men" was "already bringing with it public recognition."²⁶ In addition to their commendation of the Club's jury system, many reviewers also expressed their approval of what Alfred Thornton later described as the NEAC's "utter revolt against the prettiness and anecdotal

nature of the work at home."²⁷ The Magazine of Art noted in 1889 that the majority of the exhibitors had "cast off the hide-bound traditions of the schools, and realise[d] that the chief merit of a picture [lay] not in its subject, but in some new arrangement of line or combination of colour."²⁸ In 1901, the Pall Mall Gazette noted that NEAC work could be "best described as un-Academic. It tells no story, and rarely treats even an incident. It is skilled work, which is mainly, not wholly, of the moment in its method."²⁹

It is clear that this widespread approval of the NEAC's "un-Academic" work was directly related to the growing belief among the "New Critics" and NEAC supporters such as George Moore and W.J. Laidlay that the Academy could no longer be considered a completely viable institution. As Kate Flint notes, attacks on the Royal Academy became a recurrent theme of George Moore's writing, and in his Modern Painting (1893), a reworked version of previous articles for the Speaker, Moore commented that it was a "matter of common knowledge" that "nearly all artists dislike and despise the Royal Academy." However, despite this "immense fund of hate and contempt," the Academy's position seemed "impregnable", having "successfully resisted a Royal Commission, and a crusade led by Mr. Holman Hunt in the columns of the Times. . . ."³⁰

W.J. Laidlay launched his own attack in 1898 with the publication of The Royal Academy: Its Uses and Abuses, in which he accused academicians of managing the Academy for their own interest and advancement, and for neglecting and discouraging national art. He believed that the institution's hanging practices were unfair, in

that they rewarded popular work and therefore promoted a "mercantile spirit". Laidlay also disagreed with the Academy's practice of discouraging landscape and felt that the restrictions placed on foreign art diminished the educational value and interest of the exhibitions.³¹

While the New English Art Club was congratulated from the outset for its stance against the Academy, its association with "modern French . . . training and ambition" was viewed with suspicion.³² The Portfolio commented that the NEAC contained a "Parisien clique of stylists," while T.L.M.H., the contributor to Science and Art, agreed that "the whole exhibition [had] more or less a Parisian flavour, some contributors manifesting unmistakable signs of training in some Montmartre studio."³³ The Magazine of Art remarked in 1886 that "one characteristic of the school [was] a certain tendency to ugliness for its own sake," and in an 1887 issue of the same periodical, the Club's exhibits were described as showing "the influence of Continental methods, as well as in some cases a decided tendency towards eccentricity."³⁴ As Alfred Thornton wrote in his 1935 history of the NEAC, the French style in painting connoted "lubricity" and a "pursuit of the ugly".³⁵ Among the more conservative critical factions, modern French art was regarded as decadent and degenerate, and this cultural xenophobia became even more pronounced after Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895.³⁶ Because Steer was generally discussed as an "impressionist" artist, such opinion undoubtedly affected the reception of the nudes which he exhibited between 1896 and 1902, and obviously had particular impact when Steer chose to directly rework or refer to the French avant-garde.

Although the Art Journal's critic had commented on the NEAC's domination by the "small school of English impressionists" as early as June 1889³⁷, the Goupil Gallery's December exhibition entitled "London Impressionists" became the decisive factor in cementing the New English Art Club's reputation for impressionist painting. Although this was not a Club exhibition, several NEAC members were featured, including Sickert and Steer. The introduction to the catalogue, written by Sickert, expressed a doctrine similar to the philosophy expounded by Whistler in his "Ten O'Clock Lecture".³⁸ Rather than a discussion of the technical aspects of Impressionism, the introduction elaborated upon the group's professed artistic aim of beauty. The "London Impressionists" had essentially adopted an English format of updated realism, although they borrowed their lighter tonality and somewhat "less finished" quality from the French.³⁹

During the course of an interview with Herbert Vivian of the Sun, Sickert conceded ironically that although he did not know exactly what an Impressionist was, he was quite sure that the label was one which the press would attach to the group.⁴⁰ Sickert's statement proved to be prophetic. Despite the fact that their work often remained more "realist" than "impressionist", the association of the New English Art Club with an art for art's sake doctrine, and an exhibition entitled "Impressionist" were sufficient to categorize Sickert, Steer, and other NEAC artists as Impressionist for years to come.⁴¹ The inclusion of works by French Impressionists such as Degas, Monet, and Renoir throughout the 1880s and 1890s⁴² could have only further strengthened these associations for the British

audiences and critics.

The paintings at the New English Art Club created a sense of outrage, generated primarily by objections to the "squalid" and "ugly" subject matter.⁴³ The 1890 appointments of George Moore as art critic to the Speaker, and D.S. MacColl to the Spectator fueled the debate. The Spectator's solid, thoughtful, and respectable readers were particularly upset with their art critic's support of the NEAC.⁴⁴ In Victorian Painting, Reynolds claims that the controversy over the NEAC made the previous hostility toward the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood seem a mere ripple in the art world.⁴⁵ Soon after the appointments of MacColl and Moore, J.A. Spender, under the pseudonym of "A Philistine", responded with a series of articles protesting the art for art's sake doctrine in painting. This critical war between Spender and MacColl was waged primarily on the pages of the Westminster Gazette and the Spectator, and erupted over the exhibition of Degas's L'Absinthe at the Grafton Gallery in 1893.⁴⁶ Because Degas was the "French artist most widely praised by the New Critics, and by MacColl in particular, the Philistine and his associates hoped to blacken the reputation of their journalistic rivals, to undermine their credibility, by associating their entire critical ethos with . . . the most depraved subject matter."⁴⁷

George Moore seemed to believe that the close relationship between the NEAC and the New Critics had drawn the Club into the raging controversy, since he published the following statement in support of the NEAC in his 1893 Modern Painting:

The New English Art Club is very typical of this end of the century. It is young, it is interesting, it is

intelligent, it is emotional, it is cosmopolitan . . . rather an agreeable assimilation of the Montmartre café of fifteen years ago. Art has fallen in France, and the New English seems to me like a seed blown over-sea from a ruined garden. It has caught English root, and already English colour and fragrance are in the flower. A frail flower; but, frail or strong, it is all we have of art in the present generation. It is slight, and so most typical; for, surely, no age was ever so slight in its art as ours? As the century runs on it becomes more and more slight and more and more intelligent. A sheet of Whatman's faintly flushed with a rose-tint, a few stray verses characterised with a few imperfect rhymes and a wrong accent. . . .⁴⁸

Although George Moore apparently meant to praise the NEAC by describing it as young, interesting, and intelligent, his metaphorical association of the Club with a frail flower from a ruined garden, and with stray verse of imperfect rhyme, must have also evoked associations with English literary and artistic decadence for at least some of its readers. Moore's statement was certainly a double-edged sword in this respect.

The NEAC's relationship with the decadent movement was emphasized when Aubrey Beardsley joined the Club. The subsequent appearance of the Yellow Book in 1894, with its scandalous reputation, only strengthened public conviction that the Club was an immoral group, especially since Beardsley chose works by several of its members for Yellow Book illustrations.⁴⁹ Among the artists featured were Beerbohm, Conder, Sickert and Steer. Perhaps Steer's association with the unsavoury Yellow Book affected the reception of the nudes which he began to exhibit at the NEAC in 1896, since these paintings were variously described as "utterly devoid of beauty", "uncompromisingly hideous", and "crude".⁵⁰ Furthermore, because of Steer's prominent status within the Club, these works also seemed

to contribute to the widespread perception of the NEAC's eccentric pursuit of ugliness.

Evidently conservative critics of the period felt that Impressionism was yet another indication of fin-de-siècle moral degeneration. The public believed that these painters deliberately sought to offend and "disgust" viewers, through their selection of subject matter which was "repulsive", "ugly", "hideous", and "sordid".⁵¹ An 1886 article dealing with the corresponding literary movement equated it with the growing "agnosticism, pantheism, and positivism of the age," which was "the natural reflection in literature of the general collapse of dogmatic and moral and spiritual conviction."⁵² As Flint notes, the "artistic decline which the more conservative critics thought they perceived towards the end of the century was frequently spoken of in terms of disease and decay: symptomatic of a far wider moral and spiritual degeneration."⁵³

Established artists also felt compelled to enter the critical fray, and they, too, couched their opinion in the rhetoric of pathology. Edward Armitage, an exhibitor at the Royal Academy between 1848 and 1893⁵⁴, wrote that the "art decadence" of the French Impressionists could perhaps be viewed with "indifference" or "regret" if England were not in danger of "being infected" by the "suddy tide." Armitage's description of these artists as "lunatic" and "childish"⁵⁵ also indicates his desire to classify them in opposition to the norm which he represented as an adult male heterosexual.⁵⁶ Frith's strategy in "Crises in Art: 'Pre-Raphaelitism' and 'Impressionism'" was remarkably similar. He argued that French Impressionism had

"tainted" British art, and continued:

That Nature could ever have made such an impression at all, unless the receiver of it was in a state of disease, I take leave to doubt; but if any human mind is unfortunately sensitive to such impressions, the owner has no excuse for exhibiting them to the world.⁵⁷

Clearly Frith was concerned that the mental degeneracy of the impressionist artists might prove contagious for viewers.

Despite the fact that many critics agreed upon the moral bankruptcy or eccentricity of Impressionism, no consensus existed as to what the movement might constitute in a formal sense. Although French Impressionist works had been shown in London during the early 1870s at Durand-Ruel's, and again in 1883 at Dowdeswell's⁵⁸, these exhibitions did not achieve a widespread formal understanding. Impressionism meant many things, and perhaps the most popular and broadest definition was the creation and or reproduction of an "impression", which was invariably described as "sketchy", "momentary" or "blurred".

Although the Impressionist movement was usually spoken of as "modern" or "new", it was frequently associated with past art as well. Impressionist precursors were considered to include the seventeenth-century Dutch painters, Velazquez, Reynolds and Turner. It appears that historical parallels such as these were first drawn by Frederick Wedmore in a Fortnightly Review article from 1883, where he argued that the common principle which united contemporary and past artists was the belief that art should be of its own day, a version of Baudelaire's modern life aesthetic.⁵⁹ Wedmore's analysis was the first significant piece of English writing to be published

on the French Impressionists, and to a certain degree this article established the terms of the impressionist debate in Britain.⁶⁰ Supporters of the movement took advantage of Wedmore's proposal in order to claim that current day Impressionists were merely carrying on a venerable tradition, while detractors held up the historical examples as "true Impressionism", in contrast to the debased version of the nineteenth century. Frith, for example, believed that all art was impressionist in the "true and wide sense of the term" and produced Vandyke's "impression" of Charles I as evidence. This version of "impressionism" was obviously preferable to "Impressionism", which produced the momentary effects of nature in an absurd, outrageous and sketchy format - one in which men were "denied the usual complement of features, or legs, or arms, according to impression."⁶¹ Steer himself viewed Impressionism as linked with the tradition of artistic dependence upon nature. If Impressionism were modern, it was because this nature which the artist relied upon was that which he saw around him every day. He felt that art was "the expression of an impression seen through a personality," and could thus view Fragonard, Velazquez, and Manet as offering an Impression in the broad sense of the word.⁶²

The 1889 "London Impressionist" exhibition which included Steer and Sickert, merely added to the confusion. The catalogue introduction could have accommodated almost any number of "impressionisms", and when Sickert was urged to produce a definition, his strategy was to fall back once again upon the respectable past. "The main article of the creed would perhaps be a study of and reverence for the best

traditions of all time. Velazquez was an Impressionist, Leech was an Impressionist, and Holbein was an Impressionist."⁶³ Sickert's evasive pronouncement was greeted with little enthusiasm. E.F. Spence, for example, remarked that one could hardly expect critics to define the aims of Impressionism, when the artists themselves either could not or would not attempt to do so.⁶⁴ The critic for the Art Review admitted that the term was adopted "mainly on the authority" of the painters, for neither the introduction nor the paintings themselves demonstrated a "clear way of dealing with a question which, perhaps, need never have been raised."⁶⁵ By 1892, usage of this key word had reached the stage where, according to Charles Furse, it was "one of the commonest in the art jargon of the day," and had "the peculiar advantage of being, to most people, a mere phrase, utterly unintelligible, and consequently suggestive of high culture." Furse added that few people gave it "the credit of having a real meaning; painters are as vague as critics, and critics even vaguer than usual."⁶⁶

Perhaps Furse was justified in criticizing the artists for their failure to propound a precise definition of Impressionism. Indeed, rather than attempting to describe modern impressionist technique or formal criteria, those artists and critics who were sympathetic to the movement continued to mobilize art historical precedents in their discussions. Several such definitions of Impressionism as an age-old tradition appeared in the Art Journal's 1893 compilation of "Some Remarks on Impressionism."⁶⁷ However, the fact that this article appeared during the MacColl-Philistine debate suggests that

this strategy represented a form of defense against "Philistine" attacks, rather than being indicative of vagueness or lack of critical acuity. Undoubtedly, the desire among supporters to position Steer and other NEAC artists as the modern heirs to respectable painting traditions grew even stronger after the Wilde trial in 1895.

For Victorian critics and audiences accustomed to the highly polished works on the walls of the Royal Academy, the "less finished" quality of impressionist works became a major issue of contention. As Kate Flint notes, the degree to which these works were perceived as hasty in execution invariably affected the critical response. This sketchiness could result in a certain amount of leniency from those who were sympathetic to the movement; these critics would not look for highly finished works because they were not to be expected.⁶⁸ As the writer for the Magazine of Art noted in 1888, "the whole movement" was "an experiment, and for the present, to be estimated accordingly."⁶⁹ The critic for the Art Review felt that lack of finish should not be considered a justifiable deterrent to "the true development of artistic appreciation" for Impressionism, and this opinion was largely based on his approval of the movement's stance against the narrative painting of British High Art. This critic asserted that it was "indeed time that the British public should have set before them in some concise way the fact that the object of painting [was] not to be narrative but simply suggestive and beautiful." "One beautiful fact of nature incompletely represented [was] worth more than any number of completed lies."⁷⁰

Those who placed their faith in a highly polished and narrative

work of art viewed Impressionism as an affront to public dignity, established canons of representation, and their pocketbooks. Charles Furse, for example, observed that when the "outward and visible sign" was unfamiliar, the public was "apt to hastily conclude that there [was] no inward and spiritual grace, and that wilful eccentricity and a vulgar striving after novelty were the sole objects of the artist." According to Furse, the average layman perceived the Impressionist as one who endeavoured to determine what the public disliked most, and then to "perpetrate it" by using "public indignation and disgust as stepping stones to notoriety." While subject matter obviously formed a significant component of this strategy, Furse noted that the public also objected to "painting with lumps of neat colour and trowelsful of paint, or else with a genial but aimless scratching and scrawling of a particularly bristly and oversized brush. . . . [like] a 'concomb who throws paint at the public's head'."⁷¹ Furse was obviously comparing the Impressionist debate with the 1878 Ruskin-Whistler trial, during which Ruskin accused Whistler of attempting to foist hastily painted and spurious art upon an unsuspecting public at vastly inflated prices.

Within the context of the NEAC, both supporters and detractors of Impressionism mobilized this myth of hasty execution in their reviews of Steer's nudes. The more conservative critics tended to describe these paintings as studies or sketches, and were thus able to marginalize disturbing examples as incomplete and therefore insignificant. Steer's admirers also labelled these nude paintings as studies, but did so in order to downplay any worrisome aspects

of style or subject, on the basis that these works were unfinished and thus experimental.

Despite efforts by supporters to clarify the painstaking nature of the technique⁷², the "myth of haste remained, and furnished a formidable weapon to the detractors of Impressionism, who played on their audience's belief in value for money in a work of art."⁷³ As long as lack of finish could be equated with a corresponding dearth of artistic labour, Impressionism could be maligned as an elaborate hoax being perpetrated against the art-buying and viewing public. At the very least, it provided journalists with fodder for humorous columns, such as this example from the *Globe*:

"What is an 'impressionist picture?' asked the country cousin of the art critic. "An impressionist picture," said the critic, "is one that leaves on your mind the impression that it is the picture of a cow, until you look at the catalogue and find that it is the picture of a water-spaniel."⁷⁴

Because this item was reprinted by the *Artist*, presumably their professional and amateur artist readership⁷⁵ was expected to enjoy or at least appreciate the humour involved. However, such characterizations would have also presented a stumbling block to any widespread acceptance of Impressionism as a serious art movement. Indeed, as the critic for *Art Journal* noted in an 1894 review of the NEAC: "Content with schemes of colour and composition which contain no superlative difficulties, the newer ideas which these artists strive for have very little chance of expansion and of acceptance by any but a small section of the community."⁷⁶ Certainly these notions allowed conservative critics to dismiss problematic works in a peremptory fashion, as in 1902 when Steer's *A. H. H. H.* (Fig. 4)

was described as a "subtle piece of humour."⁷⁷

Although many writers used economic rhetoric to argue against Impressionism, other opponents based their opinion on scientific theory. Perhaps the most insidious as well as ingenious argument against impressionist art was put forth in Max Nordau's Degeneration (English edition 1895), in which Nordau argued that this modern art form could be easily explained by theories of hysteria.

The curious style of certain recent painters - "impressionists", "stipplers", or "mosaists", "papilloteurs" or "quiverers", "roaring" colourists, dyers in gray and faded tints - becomes at once intelligible to us if keep in view the researches of the Charcot school into the visual derangements in degeneration and hysteria. The painters who assure us that they are sincere, and reproduce nature as they see it, speak the truth. The degenerate artist who suffers from nystagmus, or trembling of the eyeball, will, in fact, perceive the phenomena of nature trembling, restless, devoid of firm outline, and, if he is a conscientious painter, will give us pictures reminding us of the mode practised by the draughtsman of Fliegende Hölzer when they represent a wet dog shaking himself vigorously.⁷⁸

Nordau was also able to explain the brighter Impressionist palette with his theory of derangement. Painters suffering from hysteria and neurasthenia could reasonably be expected to prefer violet, while red was particularly favoured by the hysterical, because of its "dynamogenous" or force-producing qualities.⁷⁹ Steer's critics seemed to be familiar with Nordau's theories, since the vivid red drapery in his 1898 Slam (Fig. 2) was variously described as "vivid", "flaming", "violent", and "screaming", all of which suggest a rhetoric of hysteria as a strategy of marginalization.⁸⁰

Nordau, like Frith, was concerned about the "infectious" nature of impressionist painting. Because he believed that society formed

ideals of morality and beauty through the production of art and literature, any sign of madness in these areas was cause for concern.⁸¹ Nordau connected the disruption of established artistic order engendered by Impressionism with the potential for social upheaval occasioned by new political theories. While Nordau's theory of hysteria may have been unique, Kate Flint demonstrates that his association of Impressionism with socialist politics, anarchy, or revolution was a theory which achieved popular currency during the nineteenth century.⁸² Thus, as Sickert later wrote, the word "Impressionism" might be uttered with a sneer, "much as a lady might use the word 'Socialist' in a drawing room,"⁸³ but it could also be carried to the extreme example of Wake Cook's Anarchism in Art and Chaos in Criticism (1904).

D.S. MacColl attempted to place the raging controversy upon a more reasonable basis in 1896, with an important series of four articles for the Artist, entitled "Impressionism or the Logic of Modern Painting." He began by noting that the term was still fraught with difficulty. "I hesitate to use the word Impressionism to cover the subject of these notes, because like all slang words that emerge and take office to describe a new thing it has been seized upon to do many duties, to describe many things for which a new word was wanted."⁸⁴

MacColl was anxious to counter the notion of Impressionism as "hasty dashing sketching" and he isolated one of the major issues as "blurred definition."

Complaints of mistiness, smudging, want of finish, resolve themselves into this, and the defender of modern painting

must make out a reasonable case for the procedures that give rise to these complaints. This obliterating, attenuating, swamping of details will be found to arise from two sources, the first being their actual aspect to the disinterested eye from a chosen point - the effect of distance, focus, and so on; the second being the degree of importance given to them by the interested eye, regarding things in an order of attention.⁸⁵

MacColl then referred to the teachings of Joshua Reynolds regarding the general and ideal, as opposed to the minute and particular, in an attempt to establish an authoritative historical precedent for both the Impressionist movement and his own theorizing. MacColl believed that Reynolds was thinking of the "totality of impression, not fleetingness; not of the whole being effaced, but of that sense of a whole which requires the sacrifice of some parts to the advantage of others," and assured his readers that if Reynolds ever indeed used the word "Impressionism", he "would have meant . . . painting things in the order of attention." While MacColl acknowledged that this idea did not apply to every case of "blurring", he nevertheless maintained that no picture appeared perfect from all viewing distances, and that the aim of the Impressionist picture was "to yield a decorative coherence at every distance" but a "significant coherence" at only one specific vantage point.⁸⁶

The second article in the series concentrated on further development of MacColl's conception of Impressionism as a theory of "interested vision". In this instance he appealed to the authority of science as well as the art historical precedent of Velasquez in order to shore up his argument. He discussed in scientific rhetoric the notion that the human eye was capable of focusing upon only one area at a time, and that those areas which were not being concentrated

upon were "out of focus" or blurred in definition. He hastened to point out that it was no simple matter to convey this on canvas.

When we turn to the masters, we find they do allow for right distribution of attention. Velazquez does not paint two people on a canvas as if there were only one to be looked at, nor the full length of a man as if there were only his head to be looked at, nor his dress as if that was as important as his head; all of this of course with barely perceptible changes of definition. So Degas, if he renders several distances, chooses his focus and tempts the eye to slip over the intervening forms.⁸⁷

MacColl's citation of Degas was highly appropriate to an argument which sought to repudiate charges of faulty drawing and poor definition of form, because Degas had received his training in the studio of Ingres, the master draughtsman. The choice of Velazquez was equally obvious; MacColl's companion in "New Criticism", R.A.M. Stevenson, had just published his monograph on Velazquez, "the great Spanish Impressionist."⁸⁸

In his third article, MacColl returned again to the issue of blurred definition in order to clarify that Impressionist methods were far from simple and in no way involved the "smudging" of a painting created with "the ancient system." He adopted the rhetoric of science once more in his discussion of the Impressionist concern with colour theory, and noted that colour was modified by light, angle, and the presence of other colours.⁸⁹

The final article consisted of a reiteration of previous issues, including the rejection of the notion that Impressionism took "no account of the significance of the image, but only of its beauty of pattern." "How technique can be considered except as it springs from a vision of the subject I have never been able to understand."⁹⁰

MacColl thus attempted to dissociate Impressionism from both aestheticism and decadence by declaring the art for art's sake movement a "fallacy", while his mobilization of scientific language and his description of the natural "logic" of Impressionism further widened the critical space between the Impressionists and the unnatural, artificial decadents. Significantly, these statements differ markedly from the position MacColl defended during the "Philistine" debate of 1893, when he "amplified his view of subject matter's subsidiary relation to a painting's formal qualities."⁹¹ It seems likely, therefore, that MacColl believed a certain amount of critical backtracking was required during the aftermath of the Wilde trial. Most importantly, however, MacColl's demonstration of the historical authority for Impressionism through the venerable English example of Joshua Reynolds can be located as an attempt to establish credibility for the movement as a reasonable artistic evolution, thus implying that Impressionism was progressive and modern, rather than degenerate or revolutionary. Impressionism was not a hoax, nor was it symptomatic of hysteria; rather, it was the logical and thoughtful assimilation of Victorian-age science within accepted aesthetic theory.

Perhaps the ultimate response to opponents of Impressionism was put forth by Wynford Dewhurst in 1900:

As Impressionism is the quintessence of Art appealing only to the intelligent, so it requires for its successful manifestation, the cultivation to the highest degree, of the analytical and synthetical faculties, together with an expression of the strongest spiritual emotion and élan. Its object is to picture an abstract or résumé of the general aspect of any scene or object, rather than the mere photographic delineation of actual observed fact.⁹²

According to Dewhurst, Impressionism demanded greater intellectual effort from both creators and critics than mere photographic realism, and thus he suggested that any objections to the movement were founded upon ignorance.

Regardless of the "aesthetic ignorance" among opponents of Impressionism, they certainly possessed a formidable arsenal of weapons for deployment against artists and critics who supported the movement. At the very least, impressionist artists could be humorously dismissed as misguided, but they might also be diagnosed as degenerate or hysterical. Their loosely-worked paintings were marginalized as studies, and their subject matter was attacked for its crudity, ugliness, or eccentricity.

It is tempting to conclude that if the impressionist depiction of ballet dancers, "with their dreadfully short skirts,"⁹³ could provoke public indignation and disgust, then Steer's nudes at the NEAC must have been greeted with howls of outrage. It is undeniable that this venue had developed a reputation for dubious subject matter and eccentric technique, and one might assume that critics attending the NEAC exhibitions would be predisposed to condemn rather than praise. Nevertheless, Steer's nudes did not provoke complete critical disapprobation, and in fact, The Mirror (Fig. 3) met with widespread approval. Clearly other factors were at work. Steer's nudes must also have been evaluated in terms of the particular artistic traditions which he chose to rework, and the meanings which these traditions in turn held for viewers. The presence of other nude and figural work at the NEAC must also be considered, as Steer's work was often

compared with that of other Club exhibitors. Furthermore, these issues need to be weighed against Steer's reputation as a landscapist, since late nineteenth-century commentary increasingly elevated Steer's landscapes over his work in other genres of painting. It is evident that a more thorough contextual analysis of each nude on an individual basis is necessary before the meaning of Steer's nudes can be reconstructed. Only then can one attempt to solve the problem of Philip Wilson Steer's style.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Bruce Laughton, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971): 67.
- 2 Ronald Pearsall, Tell Me, Pretty Maiden: The Victorian and Edwardian Nude (Exeter, England: Webbs and Bower, 1981): 37.
- 3 Kate Flint, "Moral Judgment and the Language of English Art Criticism 1870-1910." Oxford Art Journal 6:2 (1983): 59.
- 4 A British Matron, "A Woman's Plea: To the Editor of the Times," Times (20 May 1885): 10.
- 5 Flint, 59.
- 6 Alfred Beaver, "French Influence on British Art," Artist 8:94 (October 1887): 309. I have been unable to locate a reproduction of Une Tentation.
- 7 Flint, 59.
- 8 Flint, 60.
- 9 R.A.M. Stevenson, "The Picture Galleries - V," Saturday Review (2 June 1883): 697.
- 10 Flint, 59-60.
- 11 Beaver, 309.
- 12 Pearsall, 75.
- 13 "The Royal Society of Artists, Birmingham (Critical Notices)," Artists' Record and Art Collector's Guide 3 ns. (September 1887): 62.
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- 15 Hook, 126.
- 16 Hook, 125.
- 17 D.S. MacColl, Nineteenth Century Art (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1902): 109.
- 18 W.J. Laidlay, The Origin and First Two Years of the New English Art Club, (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1907): 6.
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"Art in May: The New English Art Club," Magazine of Art (May 1888): xxix.
- 27 Alfred Thornton, The Dairy of an Art Student of the Nineties (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1938): 8.
- 28 "Art in May: Exhibitions of the Month," Magazine of Art (May 1889): xxix.
- 29 "The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (13 November 1901): 2.
- 30 Kate Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984): 65.
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- 31 W.J. Laidlay, The Royal Academy: Its Uses and Abuses (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1898): 5-6.
- 32 "Art in May," Magazine of Art (May 1886): xxx.
- 33 "Art Chronicle," Portfolio (January 1887): 165.
T.L.M.H., 30.
- 34 "Art in May," Magazine of Art (May 1886): xxx.
"Art in April," Magazine of Art (April 1887): xxv.
- 35 Thornton, Fifty Years of the New English Art Club, 7.
- 36 Andrew Forge discusses this backlash against decadence in his P. Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1960): 10.

- 37 "The Grosvenor Gallery," Art Journal (June 1889): 192.
- 38 D.S. MacColl, Life, Work and Setting of Philip Wilson Steer (London: Faber and Faber, 1945): 175-176.
- 39 Douglas Cooper, The Courtauld Collection (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1954): 34.
- 40 Herbert Vivian, "Impressionism and its Council of Ten," Artist 10:119 (October 1889): 294.
- 41 Thornton, Fifty Years of the New English Art Club, 7.
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- 51 Charles Furse, "Impressionism - What it Means," Albion Review 2:2 (August 1892): 47.
- 52 "Literary Impressionists," Spectator (19 June 1886): 811.
- 53 Flint, "Moral Judgment and the Language of English Art Criticism 1870-1910," 62.
- 54 Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 81.

55 Edward Armitage, "The Impressionists," Athenaeum (23 July 1887): 123-124.

56 See Flint's "Moral Judgment and the Language of English Art Criticism 1870-1910," for a discussion of this issue.

57 W.P. Frith, "Crazes in Art: 'Pre-Raphaelitism' and 'Impressionism'," Magazine of Art 11 (June 1888): 191.

58 Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 2-4, and 6.

59 Frederick Wedmore, "The Impressionists," Fortnightly Review 33 (1883): 75-82.

60 Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 46.

61 Frith, 191.

62 Laughton, 54 and 64.

63 Vivian, 294.

64 E.F. Spence, "Impressions of the Impressionists: Couleur de Gris," Artist 11:122 (January 1890): 8.

65 "Paintings by London Impressionists," Art Review 1:1 (January 1890): 18.

66 Puse, 47.

67 "Some Remarks on Impressionism," Art Journal (April 1893): 103-104. H.B. Brabazon, for example, stated that in "its right and true sense, Raphael [was] as much an impressionist as Monet or any of his school." Brabazon also noted that "Paint your impressions," was one of Turner's favourite sayings, and added that it was only the "true and great artist" who possessed "beautiful" impressions, as well as the ability to "communicate to the spectator a feeling of delight in the contemplation of that beauty he has himself so strongly felt." Brabazon's reference to contemplation and distillation of emotion was echoed by Edward Stott, who described his personal definition of Impressionism as being the "combined impression of the artist's feeling - colour and form with the character [sic?] of the subject, whether light and delicate, or strong and powerful; in short, a recording of the impression on the painter's nature." George Clausen remarked that it was a "pity" that the term "impressionism" had come to be used in the narrow sense of rendering the effects of light, since "if its aim [was] to present, not a literal transcript of nature, but the impression or emotion which nature gives to the painter, no exception [could] surely be taken to it, it [was] the base of all good Art." Francis Bate was also interested in establishing an honourable heritage for

Impressionism, and believed it was "animated by an enduring truth clearly traceable in its evolution from the beginning of art." Bate also differentiated English Impressionism from the "mushroom growth" of French Impressionism, presumably in an attempt to separate the wholesome truths of English art from the poisonous decadence of the French example.

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- 70 "Paintings by London Impressionists," 18.
- 71 Furse, 47-48.
- 72 Edward M. Rashdall, "Claude Monet," Artist 9:103 (July 1888): 195-197.
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- 74 Globe, "What is an Impressionist Picture?" Artist 13:151 (June 1892): 163.
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- 81 "New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (16 April 1898): 7.
D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review (23 April 1898): 552.
- 81 Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 138.
- 82 Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 14.

83 Osbert Sitwell, ed., A Free House! Or the Artist as Craftsman: Being the Writings of Walter Richard Sickert (London: Macmillan, 1947): 92-93.

84 D.S. MacColl, "Impressionism, or the Logic of Modern Painting," Artist 17:195 (March 1896): 111.

85 MacColl, "Impressionism, or the Logic of Modern Painting," 111.

86 MacColl, "Impressionism, or the Logic of Modern Painting," 111-112.

87 D.S. MacColl, "Impressionism, or the Logic of Modern Painting - II," Artist 17:196 (April 1896): 157.

88 R.A.M. Stevenson, Velazquez, ed. Denys Sutton and Theodore Crombie (London: G. Bell, 1962): 164.

89 D.S. MacColl, "Impressionism, or the Logic of Modern Painting - III," Artist 17:198 (June 1896): 252.

90 D.S. MacColl, "Impressionism: Or the Logic of Modern Painting - IV," Artist 17:200 (August 1896): 339.

91 Flint, "'The Philistine' and the New Art Critic: J.A. Spender and D.S. MacColl's Debate of 1893," 6.

92 Wynford Dewhurst, "Claude Monet - Impressionist," Pall Mall Magazine 21:85 (1900): 215.

93 Furse, 47.

CHAPTER TWO

STEER AND THE AVANT-GARDE

The seventeenth exhibition of the New English Art Club differs in no material respect from its predecessors. It contains the usual percentage of productions whose ugliness or slovenly execution seems to have been relied on to arrest the eye, and so apparently fulfill the only aim in view.¹

This was the Morning Post's estimation of the art on view at the New English Art Club's Winter Exhibition of 1896. One of the works on display was Steer's A Nude (Fig. 1). Not all the critics were quite so harsh; the Daily News believed the NEAC shows were always "interesting," and in fact seemed pleased that this exhibition had "less of the eccentric and the daring" than had previously appeared.² The Magazine of Art went one step further and stated that the "seventeenth exhibition of the New English Art Club does not present such that is violently opposed to the recognised canons of art; indeed, some of the works are distinctly academic in character."³

Whatever their perception of the exhibition as a general entity, most critics evidently believed that there were at least some examples of daring, eccentric, or anti-academic work, even though such examples were fewer in number compared with the eccentric component of earlier NEAC shows. Both the quality and the quantity of the commentary which Steer's nude received suggest that A Nude was widely perceived as one of the more outrageous exhibits. However, not every work shown at the NEAC fell prey to preconceived notions which characterized the Club's exhibits as squalid in style and slovenly in execution, and it would be misleading to propose that these perceptions in

themselves could explain the critical discourse surrounding Steer's nude. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to contend that this work actively contributed to descriptions of the NEAC artists as "ultra-progressives" or "intransigents".⁴

Landscapes comprised by far the greatest proportion of works shown at this exhibition, and according to the Daily Chronicle, these works represented the NEAC's chief merit.⁵ After landscapes, the majority of the remaining exhibits consisted of portraits and interior genre. Therefore, Steer's nude must have attracted a certain amount of attention simply because few nudes were shown. Nevertheless, this fact alone cannot account for the outrage which greeted A Nude, since two other nudes exhibited by Tonks at this same show did not receive similarly negative reviews.⁶ The Picnic, a painting of nude figures frolicking in an Arcadian setting, received little comment, but the few remarks which did appear were entirely favourable. This work was described in the Standard as a "pretty, Watteau-like fancy," and was similarly referred to by Q.E.D. as a "brilliant little fantasy."⁷ The Picnic also received mention in the Daily Telegraph and was declared "charming" by the Daily Chronicle, who appreciated the "pale white and rose figures dancing through the flicker of sunshine and shadow."⁸ Such commentary indicates that The Picnic was entirely compatible with the established Academy or Salon tradition of wood nymphs or bathers, with their dainty rosy-creamy bodies displayed in an Arcadian or pastoral setting. Tonks's other nude image, Silenus, elicited only a brief comment from the Daily Chronicle reviewer, who believed the "rich brown nudes and bits of sumptuous

drapery like a little Stothard."⁹ The paucity of comment regarding Silenus indicates that the work was rather unremarkable. Not only had Tonks resorted to the respectable formula of classical mythology, but the presence of rich brown bodies suggests that Tonks had only included the masculine bodies of the sileni, or older satyrs, in his image.

It is therefore apparent that the flurry of response occasioned by Steer's A Nude cannot be attributed to the fact that he had dared to paint a naked female body. The nude was an entirely acceptable genre at the Royal Academy, the New Gallery, and the Grosvenor Gallery, provided that artists adhered to certain standards. Certainly the favourable critical reception of Tonks's nudes demonstrates that the NEAC was no exception. One assumes, then, that Steer must have violated some convention or sense of decorum, given the outrage his picture provoked. In fact, an analysis of A Nude and the critical commentary surrounding the picture reveals that Steer's image was problematic on several levels. Critics were confused by his style, disturbed by his treatment of the subject matter, and unsettled by his sources of artistic inspiration.

The most obvious source for A Nude is Edouard Manet's inflammatory Olympia of 1863. After his attendance at a posthumous Parisian exhibition of Manet's work in 1884, Steer described Manet's nudes as "blown-out looking things."¹⁰ Evidently at some point following this exhibition, he became interested in producing a smoothed out, toned down, and less controversial English version of the Olympia. A comparison of Steer's nude with Manet's reveals marked differences,

especially in terms of the inclusion of accessories and background detail. Steer's figure is relatively unadorned, while Olympia wears jewellery, slippers, and an orchid in her hair.¹¹ While Manet includes a black servant girl offering a bouquet, a spitting cat, and opulent linens, Steer omits these elements and provides a much more austere setting. The bed linens are much less elaborate, and Manet's fringed coverlet is absent. However, Steer does include greenish-coloured curtains which are similar to those in Olympia, but in A Nude, these curtains become a much more dominant compositional element, partly because the bed and figure are placed further into the picture plane. In both paintings, the sheets are somewhat rumpled, and expose a section of what appears to be a mattress.

Although Steer's composition could be described in a general sense as a reversal of Manet's, the overall effect is quite stiff and awkward in contrast to Manet's image of luxuriant relaxation. Steer's nude does not recline against billowy pillows; instead, her arm supports the weight of her body. The figure's spine is erect with the face uplifted and turned toward the viewer, producing the strained and tense appearance of the neck. Both legs are extended rigidly, and almost form a perpendicular angle with the line of the spine, while the feet are rather uncomfortably flexed.

Although Steer did pare down and alter the pictorial format introduced by Manet, two significant similarities remain. Both women meet the viewer's gaze, and both wear black ribbons around their necks. The black ribbon in particular appears to have been the sign by which reviewers identified the Manet reference. The Daily Chronicle noted

its presence, and then asked: "Where is the negress, where the bunch of flowers to complete the composition? For this surely is but another version of Manet's famous 'Olympe' in the Luxembourg."¹² While the Westminster Gazette did not specifically refer to the Olympia, he wanted to know what one was "to think of Mr. Steer's naked lady sitting bolt up in bed, with the brand of Edouard Manet round her neck?"¹³

Within the context of the NEAC, it is likely that Steer's quotation from this modern French example would have been perceived as another attempt to defy the Royal Academy. Manet's controversial reputation had long since been established in English critical circles, and Steer's reference to a Manet painting, so soon after Wilde's trial, could have only served to confirm the conservative opinion that the NEAC had become the primary exhibition venue for morally decayed work. As early as 1874, Manet was placed among a school of French painting in which one could see "evidence of as wild a spirit of anarchy at work" as in French politics. "In what his admirers, we suppose, would call simplicity and frankness, he far out-Courbets Courbet."¹⁴

Even though most writers thought that Manet's subject matter was deplorable, they usually admitted, albeit reluctantly, that he was a talented and capable painter. N. Garstein, writing for the Art Journal in 1884, noted that Manet's taste was "worse than questionable - it is often revolting. How seldom can we stand in front of even his best-painted canvases without asking, 'But why was it painted at all?' Despite Garstein's objections to the artist's subject matter, he acknowledged Manet's influence on outdoor painting, and perceptively noted that this artist would have led a calmer

existence had he been either a greater or lesser man. "Had he been a lesser man the world would not have troubled itself to get angry about him; had he been a greater one he would have compelled acquiescence and homage."¹⁵

In 1897, the Quarterly Review expressed a similar view about the work of both Manet and Degas, noting that:

we may regret that talent so rare and powers of so high an order should never have been devoted to similar uses. We may lament the strictly limited range of their vision, and deplore their lack of elevation and inability to realize the higher side of humanity and the finer issues of life. But we must own that they have enriched the world with new sensations, and enlarged the borders of art. And they have certainly succeeded in leaving posterity a complete and living record of a remarkable phase of modern society.¹⁶

Those critics who were more sympathetic to Manet's work resorted to interesting theories in an attempt to downplay his questionable thematic choices. P.G. Hamerton, editor of Portfolio, suggested that subject matter was of little importance to Manet's creative process, and referred to Zola's account of Manet grouping his models "rather accidentally", and then painting the assemblage as he viewed it. For Hamerton, this became an "admission that he worked rather by the eye than by the mind - that there was neither thought nor composition in his work. . . ." Because Manet was improvising "in the presence of nature," the quality of his painting was "very unequal, especially in the texture and colouring of the flesh. However, the absolute sincerity of it gave a claim to serious consideration, and the artist's resolute study of nature endowed it with novelty and freshness."¹⁷ Hamerton's argument was one which capitalized on the perception that impressionist works were hastily conceived and executed; he essentially

implied that Manet's preoccupation with capturing an impression in paint would have left him no time or energy for thinking about offensive subject matter.¹⁸

George Moore recounted that one was "taught at the Beaux-Arts to consider Manet . . . an *épateur*, who, not being able to paint like M. Gérôme, determined to astonish."¹⁹ However, Moore felt that audiences experienced difficulty with Manet's paintings because of his artistic genius, rather than because of his choice of subject matter, adding that:

in Manet there is nothing but good painting, and there is nothing that the nineteenth century dislikes as much as good painting. . . . During his life the excuse given for the constant persecution waged against him by the "authorities" was his excessive originality. But this was mere subterfuge; what was really hated - what made him so unpopular - was the extraordinary beauty of his handling.²⁰

According to D.S. MacColl, the true problem underlying the whole debate was the feminine taste of English audiences. In his December review of an 1896 Paris exhibition of Manet's paintings, MacColl stated that, "Manet has the masculine virtues in painting, and these are not likely to be popular in a country where taste is thought to be an affair for women only."²¹ By characterizing the English viewer as feminine, MacColl adroitly reversed the familiar argument which referred to the hysterical feminine nature of the Impressionist artist. MacColl's position also implied that the connoisseurial abilities of the English public were limited to the appreciation of the dainty, mindless and tasteful, as opposed to a masculine apprehension of equally masculine artistic genius.

Because of the controversy surrounding Manet's work, it is

possible that a reference to any one of his paintings by an New English Art Club exhibitor would have appeared as an act of rebellion against the Royal Academy. Even more significantly, Steer not only quoted Manet, but chose Olympia, the subject of heated debate on both sides of the Channel. For the New Critics, such as Stevenson, MacColl, and Moore, Manet's Olympia was a work of Art; Moore went as far as stating that destruction of this work would create an "appreciable gap in the history of nineteenth-century art." Olympia was "remarkable not only for the excellence of the execution, but for a symbolic intention nowhere else to be found in Manet's works."²² Nevertheless, such support from progressive critics in France and England could not have deflected the adverse reaction of pro-Academy English viewers. Indeed, the New Critics's approval of Olympia probably magnified the offensiveness of Steer's quotation of the painting, since the New Critics themselves had already been identified as "anti-academic". This label stemmed from their earlier arguments with "The Philistine", their consistent support of the French Impressionists and the NEAC²³, and in particular, George Moore's attacks on the Academy. Finally, the artistic merit of Olympia still remained a matter of debate among academic circles in France. In 1896, the work was housed at the Luxembourg, since the Louvre had refused to accept it and would not do so until 1909.

The English critics who reviewed Steer's nude indicated that they were acquainted with this controversy, and were aware that Manet's work still lay beyond the pale of official recognition. The Daily Telegraph felt that Steer was "haunted by one of Manet's most hotly

discussed performances, the ugly yet fascinating 'Olympia,' presented some few years since by a group of artists to the Luxembourg."²⁴ The Guardian noted that the figure was "sitting up in bed like Manet's 'Olympia' in the Luxembourg,"²⁵ while the Standard expressed the opinion that Steer's nude deliberately recalled the "Manet of the Luxembourg."²⁶ V., writing for the Academy and Literature, commented that Steer's nude "directly challenge[d] comparison with Manet."²⁷

Perhaps because Steer's A Nude was so strongly identified with the Olympia, the general tenor of previous Manet criticism seemed to spill over and affect discussions of Steer. Most reviewers were in agreement that Steer was a capable painter, and that his nude bore evidence of his abilities, even though many objected to what they described as the eccentric or sensational nature of the painting, and appeared at a loss to understand why an artist of Steer's talent should have desired to paint such a work. If the critics had simply believed that A Nude was only a bad piece of painting by an incompetent artist, surely they would have given it a summary appraisal or perhaps even ignored it entirely. However, these writers devoted a considerable amount of print to their discussion of Steer, and Stevenson noted that A Nude was "not to be passed over, if only because its bold strength at once captures the eye."²⁸

By 1896, Steer had established a considerable reputation, and could even be referred to as the "chief prophet" of the New English Art Club."²⁹ Conceivably, this reputation and the expectations of readers might have compelled critics to write about A Nude regardless of their opinion concerning the work. However, sixteen of the eighteen

reviewers commented favourably on Steer's technique, and these remarks do seem genuine rather than gratuitous in nature.³⁰ Both conservative and progressive critics described the work with conventional masculine adjectives, and presumably they also felt that A Nude demonstrated an adequate degree of finish, because they did not mention any sketchiness in their discussions.

The Globe felt that A Nude was "one of the most serious and completely handled technical achievements" that Steer had ever produced, and noted that the figure was "drawn with considerable knowledge", was "good in colour", and "painted with real power."³¹ The Morning Post deemed the work "remarkable for its spirited brushwork and general vigour of style," and added that the figure was "drawn and modelled with undoubted skill."³² In a similar vein, the Westminster Gazette commented on the sureness of the drawing, as well as the "simplicity and directness of the handling and the sober strength of the tones."³³ The Art Journal expressed wholehearted approval of this work which was "learned in style, searching in technique, and fine in drawing, depending to an extent unusual in [Steer's] work upon absolute realisation rather than clever suggestion."³⁴ The St. James Gazette described A Nude as a technical "advance upon this artist's previous productions," while the Daily Telegraph praised the "cunning combination" of colour, and noted the "great force of visual impression . . . like everything else this artist does."³⁵ D.S. MacColl joined the chorus of those who responded favourably to Steer's use of colour, adding that this "gift" gave him "a place apart in his generation," while R.A.M. Stevenson

and the Daily News appreciated the skillful painting of the model's upper leg.³⁶ Other reviewers described the work as a "remarkable piece of technique" which was "clever", "well-drawn", and "exceedingly dexterous."³⁷

Although approval of Steer's technique was widespread, it was not universal. Two of the eighteen critics, H.S. of the Spectator, and Q.E.D. of the World, refused to admit that A Nude might be competently painted. However, their refusal to acknowledge the technical merit of this particular painting seemed to be based on factors other than the work itself. H.S., perhaps Heathcote Statham, appears to have been appointed art critic for the Spectator after MacColl's departure in 1896, and his writing is markedly reactionary, as if an attempt to rectify the damage wreaked by MacColl's New Criticism.

Some people consider the New English Art Club as the sanctuary where the future of art resides, and further believe that Mr. Steer is the chief prophet. This year we should fancy these believers must be rather tried in their faith. Until Mr. Steer condescends to paint something rather more beautiful than A Nude (No. 68) many will prefer to remain outside the temple with the heathen.³⁸

In contrast to these rather acid remarks, H.S.'s reviews of the Royal Academy exhibitions were distinctly favourable. Presumably he wanted British painting to remain on a wholesome and "Philistine" basis, and Steer's painting became a convenient target for his critical ammunition.

While H.S. obviously had difficulty believing that "some people might regard Steer as a talented artist, Q.E.D. counted himself among Steer's admirers. Nevertheless, this critic felt that A Nude was

"not satisfactory in either drawing or modelling," and his opinion must have been at least partially based on his belief that Steer was guilty of artistic plagiarism. He commented:

Mr. Wilson Steer, whose works are always interesting, exhibits what he is reported to consider his masterpiece, 'A Nude'. The many admirers of his work, of whom I claim to be one, think better of him than to accept a manifest plagiarism of Manet's 'Olympia' as being the masterpiece of so original an artist as he.³⁹

Q.E.D. was not the only Steer supporter to comment negatively about the Manet quotation, as R.A.M. Stevenson observed that A Nude was "both less imaginative and conventionalised," as well as "strikingly less true than the Luxembourg picture."⁴⁰ Perhaps because Steer had referred to a painting which was renowned for its controversial anti-academic status, three other reviewers hastened to castigate Steer for resorting to the anti-academic practice of slavish copying. Usually their remonstrations dealt with the issue as a battle of the brush from which Manet emerged victorious. The Manchester Guardian described Steer's nude as "small and toylke, without the grandeur and the conventionality of 'Olympia'," while V. remarked that there was no artist which Steer was "not clever enough to imitate," but in this instance, Manet was declared the winner.⁴¹ The Daily Chronicle pointed out that imitation or borrowing were entirely acceptable academic methods, but Steer had not contributed anything of his own.

To go to the great masters for inspiration, to borrow their schemes, to carry on the work, or reform, perhaps, which they began, is merely what every painter nowadays, however original, must in a measure do. Even the genius cannot be independent of the past. The chances are that Manet himself would not have painted his 'Olympia' but for 'The Danae' of Titian, or that beautiful nude in the Madrid

Gallery. But Manet, appropriating the old Venetian's idea, worked it out entirely in his own way - an essentially modern way. When you look at the picture in the Luxembourg you see Manet, not Titian; when you look at the nude in the Dudley Gallery, you see Manet, not Steer. Of the cleverness of the painting there is no question. But it is because of its cleverness that we wish Mr. Steer would bare the courage to be himself.⁴²

Shortly after Q.E.D., the Guardian and Chronicle had presented their cases, D.S. MacColl defended Steer against charges of plagiarism by reversing the argument of imitation and adaptation.⁴³ MacColl wrote:

They must have blunt eyes who think its [A Nude's] form and colour the least like the character of form and colour in that picture [Olympia], and they must have an oddly limited knowledge of the history of art who think the general affiliation in conception and pose of Steer's Nude to Manet's anything but what has always happened where painting was going on. . . . every artist who has known his business, has taken his forerunners's picture and gently given it his own turn, knowing how small a part the individual plays on the general framework of invention.⁴⁴

Despite this professed concern with originality, it seems that the true point of contention among critics who charged Steer with plagiarism was his choice of Manet as a reference. Indeed, reviews of other 1896 NEAC exhibits indicate that a reworking of previous art historical examples should have been relatively unproblematic. For example, Steer's mobilization of past art in his Yorkshire Landscape did not become an issue. Rather, he was praised for his evocation of earlier Dutch and English landscapes.⁴⁵ As McConkey has demonstrated, a strengthened awareness of Britain's national heritage had led to a renewed interest in the British landscape tradition.⁴⁶ Apparently, certain historical examples were more cherished than others, and a quotation from the Dutch or English

landscape tradition was altogether different from a reference to sexual themes from avant-garde French painting.⁴⁷

While it is conceivable that Steer fell victim to emerging thought concerning the desirability of formal innovation, this modernist stress on individuality was much more a component of later twentieth-century assessments, rather than a significant determinant of the 1896 commentary. For example, objections which Steer encountered regarding his Yorkshire Landscape were generally directed toward his avant-garde flattening of the scene into a tapestry-like image, rather than any discussion of his artistic originality or lack thereof.⁴⁸ The conservative reaction to A Nude also suggests that it was novelty and modernity which these critics found upsetting. Although the New Critic, D.S. MacColl, approved of the figure's "éclat", the conservative Magazine of Art termed the work "sensational".⁴⁹ The Globe commented on the "eccentricity" of pose, while the St. James Gazette believed Steer had aimed "too decidedly at the odd and startling to be completely satisfactory."⁵⁰ The Westminster Gazette wondered "what one [was] to think" of this painting, and the Daily News noted with some consternation that Steer "must be serious in the strange canvas which he calls 'A Nude'"⁵¹ Apparently because of Manet's unsavoury reputation, Steer's quotation of Olympia was seen as an offense, rather an agreeable reworking of tradition. One is forced to conclude that those critics who charged Steer with plagiarism did not have any difficulties with "borrowing" per se, but rather, accused Steer of copying in order to dissuade him from persisting with these problematic sources of inspiration.

By choosing to paint an English version of Olympia, Steer was violating academic respect for the critical barrier between the naked and the nude, and this transgression did not pass without comment. The Daily News described Steer's nude as "a girl absolutely undraped," while the Westminster Gazette characterized the figure as a "naked lady."⁵² V. commented that Steer had painted a "woman, more inartistically naked than any woman would permit herself to be, perched upon a bed. She is naked enough, in fact, to be efficacious as the cure of love recommended by the Anatomist of Melancholy."⁵³ V. was relying upon his highly literate audience to understand his reference to Robert Burton's 1621 Anatomy of Melancholy, in which Burton recommended the perusal of a naked woman as a cure for lust or love-melancholy. Burton counselled that if a man were able to view the object of his affections "undrest" or "out of her attires", it was possible that she would appear "loathsome, ridiculous, thou wilt not endure her sight. . . ." The Anatomist of Melancholy also noted that Montaigne had recommended a "full survey of the body" as a "remedy of venerous passions" because:

The love stood still, that ran in full career
When once it saw those parts should not appear.⁵⁴

Despite these critical references to a lack of clothing or drapery, the fact remains that Steer's A Nude did not expose any more female flesh than the eminently respectable nudes shown at the Academy, New Gallery, or Grosvenor Gallery. Why, then, was Steer's figure felt to be "inartistically naked" rather than "aesthetically nude"? Obviously one cannot resort to a simple formula wherein indecency directly corresponds to square inch of naked female form. Nor is

it possible to arrive at an inverse drapery-to-flesh ratio of respectable titillation. The Victorian veil of aesthetic modesty was a much more complex construction, as the following selection from an 1899 issue of the Windmill indicates:

The idealism of nudity as represented by our great artists is attractive almost because the lines of the ideal are impossible of actual realisation in a single human being, and the ideal representation of sex thus assumes the character of sexlessness, in the same way that the amours of the gods and goddesses of Greece are unexciting because the heroes and heroines are more than human. The realism, on the other hand, which paints a nude woman of to-day amid surroundings that imply privacy is repulsive to good taste, both because of the apparent breach of confidence involved and because of the suggestive motive underlying it.⁵⁵

Nudity, then, was ideal and general, and concerned the public elevation of the mythical, while nakedness was real and specific, and involved the violation of the private and modern. Nudity somehow became sexless, yet attractive, but nakedness was sexual and repulsive.

Steer evidently overstepped these boundaries in several respects in his representation of the nude, or rather, naked female body. Firstly, he neglected to provide viewers with any sort of a narrative, let alone a mythical one. Indeed, the Magazine of Art noted with some dismay that this painting was of "a nude figure, and simply that," while the Morning Post referred to Steer's "tersely-named 'A Nude'."⁵⁶ Reviewers also seemed to sense that the painting represented an intrusion into the private sphere, since some mentioned that the nude was seated "on a bed", while others even spoke of the figure as being "in bed", a choice of words which indicates that Steer's setting was perceived as a private bedroom, rather than an artist's studio. Not only did reviewers comment upon the bed, but

they also discussed the model's pose in terms which suggest that this intrusion contained an element of surprise or sudden violation. The model was described as sitting "upright", "bolt upright", "bolt up in bed", "up in bed", "perched upon a bed", and "ruthlessly displayed".⁵⁷ One reviewer noted that "the bedclothes [had] just been thrown back, at one end you see a bit of the mattress."⁵⁸ Although the critics did not comment on it, the pillow shows an indentation where the woman's head may have rested only moments ago.

Steer's omission of accompanying "text" must have presented considerable difficulty for the general audience, and particularly for the critic. A.L. Baldry, writing in 1894, noted that the general public concerned themselves with pictures only to the extent that they successfully illustrated familiar narratives.

Watch the average person as he goes round a picture gallery. He reads the labels on the frames; if the label interests him he looks at the picture, if it does not he passes on to the next - label. And the function of the critic is to write these labels to explain what the artist meant when he painted the picture."⁵⁹

It appears that the reviewers felt as though they had inadvertently stumbled into a scene where some sort of startling action had just taken place. However, in the absence of a narrative they were at a loss to know what exactly had occurred, and were thus unable to perform their explanatory role. Furthermore, this nude woman was aware of her audience, and met the viewer's gaze with her own. Victorian audiences could negotiate themes of intrusion upon privacy, especially if they involved the tales of Susannah or Bathsheba, but pictorial renditions of these narratives invariably included a crowd of peeping men for the male viewer to identify with, and a female

who was blissfully unaware of any of these male gazes. Steer's nude, however, simply did not permit this leisurely consumption. In fact, the woman's gaze seems to have implicated the viewer as an intruder upon her private sphere.

Reviewers may have also believed that Steer had transgressed the barrier of respectable nudity by choosing to depict a subject which was both modern and repulsive - the prostitute or courtesan. The critics knew that Steer was reworking Olympia, and presumably they would have been acquainted with English writing which inferred that Manet's woman was a courtesan. Some writers, such as P.G. Hamerton, were more reticent with regard to this subject matter than others, but nevertheless the suggestion was apparent. According to Hamerton, "Manet had a way of translating old themes by modern examples. In this way some of his pictures, that were considered coarse, vulgar, and even immoral, were merely experiments in the modernisation of Dutch and Italian themes that no one ever objects to in the old masters."⁶⁰ George Moore, however, provided a much more ominous description which characterized the female sex as universally arrogant, devouring, and powerful. According to Moore:

in 'Olympe' we find Manet departing from the individual to the universal. The red-haired woman who used to dine at the Mazarin does not lie on a modern bed but on the couch of all time; and she raises herself from amongst her cushions, setting forth her somewhat meagre nudity as arrogantly and with the same calm certitude of her sovereignty as the eternal Venus for whose prey is the flesh of all men born. . . . the picture would do well for an illustration to some poem to be found in 'Les fleurs du Mal.'⁶¹

Shortly after Steer exhibited A Nude, an article which appeared in the Quarterly Review identified Manet's Olympia as the "modern

counterpart of Titian and Correggio's goddesses,"⁶² and a few years later D.S. MacColl wrote in his Nineteenth Century Art that "Titian's nude courtesan and attendant are transposed into the modern equivalent in the 'Olympia' with her black servant. The touch of witty malice in this translation aroused a fury of anger; voluptuous in Titian's picture was venerable, in Manet's indecent. . . ."⁶³ Admittedly, these comments concerning Manet's "courtesan" were published after Steer had exhibited his painting. However, it is still possible that critics were aware of Olympia's occupation, as Hamerton's and Moore's remarks seem to imply this knowledge even though they do not state it directly.⁶⁴

Even if reviewers suspected that Steer's A Nude was a depiction of a mistress, courtesan, or prostitute, none of the eighteen in fact explicitly identified this woman in such a manner.⁶⁵ It is the very absence of comments on the picture's subject matter which seems significant, since detractors of the NEAC frequently took these artists to task for painting squalid subjects. However, even those reviewers who could be characterized as the more conservative opponents of the Club were silent on this issue. Although one might expect MacColl or Stevenson, as New English supporters, to have said something in defense of Steer's theme, perhaps their absence of commentary indicates the extent of the taboo surrounding discourses of sexuality. It is equally possible that these men were simply unable to consciously formulate and concisely express their reasons for being disturbed by this image. Nevertheless, this discomfort still surfaced, albeit in an altered form. Critics adopted a strategy of displacement whereby

their unease regarding this nude female body became articulated through comments on Steer's setting and style.

In choosing to paint an English version of Olympia, Steer was engaging in a problematic subject for Victorian viewers. Women were traditionally perceived as the upholders of moral virtue for all society, but the prostitute transgressed this code of behaviour and therefore contributed to the breakdown of society. Prostitution was believed to be spreading and infecting the respectable world in both the moral and physical sense by threatening the cherished institutions of family, home, state and empire.⁶⁶

However, the subject of prostitution could still be presented in a manner which allowed viewers to negotiate their anxieties. Indeed, representations of this theme had been a staple item at the Royal Academy exhibitions since the 1840s. Acceptable renditions of the subject included the fallen woman as either repentant or destitute, diseased and suicidal.⁶⁷ In short, the prostitute had to atone for her sins or bear the consequences. By emphasizing the suffering of these women, the artist allowed the viewer to define the prostitute as a victim rather than a danger to society. The viewer could thus negotiate fears by feeling sympathetic; a discourse of temptation, fall and guilt defused the powerful threat which the prostitute represented.⁶⁸

In addition to providing a clear moral lesson, the artist who chose to paint the prostitute or fallen woman was also expected to produce a realistic image, and this required an articulation of the widespread belief that social and cultural deviancy was demonstrated

in terms of physical abnormality. Studies in phrenology and physiognomy indicated that the prostitute should show physical signs of her decay.⁶⁹ However, the artist also had to contend with an audience which expected that their desire for woman as beautiful object would be satisfied. As Lynda Nead demonstrates, the painted resolution of these competing demands meant that associations of disease and physical decline were displaced onto the setting and location of the image.⁷⁰

However, Steer's image did not comply with these unspoken rules. As the Daily Telegraph noted, "the unfortunate model, thus ruthlessly displayed, has neither physical attraction nor pathetic significance."⁷¹ Although the physical attributes of the figure seem pleasant enough, reviewers tended to describe her appearance as ugly. Perhaps the critics were more comfortable with a discussion of the figure's unattractiveness and the painting's eccentricity than they were with an articulation of the moral undesirability of prostitution. It is almost as though concerns for the social body of England could be mapped onto, or expressed through, the description of this female's physical attributes. The Standard felt that although the painting was inoffensive, the woman was "in no wise comely," and as a possession, the work was "scarcely covetable."⁷² The Westminster Gazette notice referred to a "by no means idealised little model," while the Daily Graphic commented that "if no better model were to be obtained, than the one selected it would have been wiser to have left the subject unpainted."⁷³ The Magazine of Art noted that the figure was "utterly devoid of beauty," and V. remarked that "beauty

was never a New English weakness."⁷⁴ According to H.S., as long as Steer considered a figure such as this to be beautiful, there would be many who remained "outside the reach of his art."⁷⁵ Even D.S. MacColl admitted that Steer's painting was "not a gravely poetic or a grand treatment."⁷⁶

The perception that this woman's body did not conform with the soft, alluring and creamy-rosy tradition of academic flesh painting probably contributed to comments regarding the figure's utter lack of beauty. Significantly, however, the figure was further described as thin and white. During the 1890s in England, the New Woman became physically stereotyped in literature as a pale, thin "bundle of nerves."⁷⁷ While the critics did not comment on the long legs of Steer's nude, they may have associated her height with New Woman iconography. Thinness was also associated with prostitution, and Gilman has pointed out that the body type of Manet's Olympia was perceived by the French critics as being much like those of actual prostitutes during the 1860s.⁷⁸ A slight frame might also be the result of tight-lacing, a practice which simultaneously asserted female sexuality and jeopardized health and fertility.⁷⁹ Even though the New Woman's ostensible asexuality differed from the prostitute's available sexuality, both female types represented deviations from the norm of respectable femininity. "Furthermore, because they took the initiative in sexual relationships, New Women were often compared to soliciting streetwalkers."⁸⁰ It seems likely, then, that Steer's representation of a pale and thin body type, whether prostitute or New Woman, would have suggested a female who challenged existing sexual

and social norms. Although only the critic for the Daily Telegraph commented on the figure's hair, an additional sign of the prostitute was believed to be thick black hair.⁸¹ This particular critic also seemed to be aware that the summation of these various attributes held significance for viewers:

The girl, thin as Botticelli's Venus, sits upright on a bed. A black ribbon is tied round her throat; her black hair is brought low upon her forehead. The bedclothes have just been thrown back, at one end you see a bit of the mattress.⁸²

Surely this reviewer must have at least suspected that Steer had painted a prostitute.

Despite the fact that reviewers made no mention of the figure's confrontational gaze, they could have hardly failed to notice this element. If they were aware that the prostitute was believed to possess a hard glance⁸³, or that a gaze which met the viewer's had become a popular device in erotic photography⁸⁴, the critics would have found this image all the more disturbing. At the very least, the woman's gaze denies the spectator's customary privilege of undetected and leisurely perusal of female form. This woman looks out at the viewer, seemingly aware of her own sexuality. She conducts her own sexual appraisal, rather than passively waiting to satisfy a lover. This sexual awareness would have been disturbing at a time when studies such as Gaddes's Evolution of Sex (1889) were topical issues of discussion. Feminine abandonment of a supposedly natural passivity violated biological laws, and therefore threatened the evolution of the species.⁸⁵

Those viewers who believed or suspected that A Nude represented a prostitute would have been faced with a further disruption of

prevailing beliefs about gender categorization. This woman has entered the forbidden territory of the public and economic spheres through her exchange of sexual favours for money. Furthermore, she can sell herself repeatedly without ever being owned, and her participation in the economic cycle could conceivably continue without interruption by pregnancy, because birth control information had been widely available since the 1880s.⁸⁶ A nude woman has been given power when ideally she should remain powerless, and this transgression of gender roles further impedes the spectator's ability to possess the body on display.

At least two critics seemed to be aware of this female's invasion of the public sphere, since they described her in terms which suggest the actress, another female public interloper who could expect to earn financial rewards similar to those offered by prostitution.⁸⁷ In his notice for the Saturday Review, D.S. MacColl characterized the scene as one of public exhibitionism. "There it is; the curtains pompously withdrawn from the captivating little doll, all vanity and gleaming flesh. . . . you cannot have *éclat* in everything, and *éclat* here is reserved for the woman."⁸⁸ The Daily Telegraph seemed to believe that Steer's nude used cosmetics, and he noted that "her head is that of the expressionless doll to whose cheeks and lips a little red has summarily been given."⁸⁹ Victorians often drew parallels between the woman of the stage and the street, as both professions were associated with late hours, unchaperoned work, the use of cosmetics, and participation in the public spectacle. The actress was frequently assumed to be a prostitute as well.⁹⁰ Therefore, by

discussing this woman as an actress, these two critics were able to imply an unsavoury occupation, without directly referring to her as a prostitute. In addition, a reference to the dramatic artifice of the stage could have allowed viewers to negotiate Steer's image as a piece of sordid fiction rather than a disturbing selection from real life.⁹¹

Both conservative and progressive critics further attempted to reduce the threatening power of Steer's nude by describing her appearance as doll-like. MacColl and the Daily Telegraph reviewer seemed to conflate the notions of doll and actress, as did the critic for the Daily News, who felt the figure's head resembled that of a painted doll.⁹² In a separate review for the Studio, MacColl also commented on the "very posed" nature of the picture, as well as "the fallacy of finish," which suggests that he perceived the figure's "gleaming flesh" as being similar to the texture of a china doll.⁹³ It was the combination of facial appearance and disturbingly stiff posture which prompted H.S.'s objections.⁹⁴ Other reviewers, however, mentioned only the body. Q.E.D. described the figure as a "Nuremburg doll sitting on a bed," the Guardian remarked upon the nude's "small and toylke" physique," and R.A.M. Stevenson commented that the work was "tight, small and somewhat suggestive of a wooden doll."⁹⁵ Similarly, the Morning Post believed that the "position of the woman, sitting bolt upright, so that the straightly extended lower limbs form with the trunk a severe right angle" lent the figure a "somewhat ridiculous, doll-like character."⁹⁶ It is apparent that the figure's awkward posture does somewhat resemble the pose of a jointed doll, and

it is equally true that the flesh texture appears rather hard and polished. However, the fact that eight critics chose to describe this nude female figure as a doll suggests that more than a purely formal discourse was at stake.

It is possible that viewers well acquainted with New English Art Club circles may have recognized Miss Geary, the model who likely posed for this painting. One might argue that if Laughton could identify her in his 1971 monograph, that Stear's contemporaries could have as well.⁹⁷ R.A.M. Stevenson, and the critics for the Daily Graphic, the Daily Telegraph, and the Westminster Gazette all made some reference to "the model." No one specifically mentioned her name, but certainly it would have been indecent to do so. If they were aware of her identity, such recognition would have stripped the image of universality; instead of the body in general, the representation would have become one of a body in particular. Even if Miss Geary's persona went unnoticed, it is reasonable to assume that viewers were still disturbed by the immediacy of the image. It is worthwhile noting that it was not the figure's facial features, but her pose, black ribbon, and setting which identified the Manet reference. If the model's face had appeared "typically" French, surely the critics would have mentioned this in an attempt to marginalize the work. The fact that they did not do so suggests that her features appeared uncomfortably and unmistakably English. Because an objectification of the figure as doll allowed critics to imply that Stear had not studied an actual living and breathing naked woman, those critics who described this woman's head as doll-like may have

been attempting to deny the immediacy of the image and possibly their familiarity with the woman who posed for it. By describing this nude as a doll, critics suggested that this female was not only harmless, amusing, and even ridiculous, but to a certain extent, inanimate and unreal, much like the metaphor of the stage could make the body seem fictitious.

Most importantly, however, an attribution of doll-like qualities allowed male viewers to reassert their control over a female body which threatened to elude their grasp. This image was unreadable to the extent that the woman's face could be termed "expressionless,"⁹⁸ and Steer's omission of a descriptive title would have frustrated and bewildered those viewers accustomed to treating figures in paintings as the equivalent to characters in novels. Nor is this woman classifiable as any of the standard visual types. She is not quite a *femme fatale*, nor is she the typical fallen woman. It is equally difficult to determine the position she might hold in economic or social class structure. These slippages must have all created havoc with viewer expectations and disrupted any smooth process of reading.

Surely it cannot be coincidental that some critics, albeit likely at a subconscious level, wanted to make Steer's nude over into the image of a doll, a completely passive plaything which exists only to provide amusement, visual pleasure, and an indication of the owner's taste and status. The owner also sets all terms and conditions of use; the doll itself does not play but is played with, and has no influence on the type or form of scenario being constructed. The

toy is utterly silent, completely powerless, and can be acquired, used and discarded at will. Operating at a more conscious level may have been the awareness that doll-play allowed young girls to try out their future roles as wives and mothers. Perhaps this association with the private sphere acted to bring Steer's female within closer range of the perimeters of respectable femininity, by allowing the critics to contextualize Steer's nude as a privately kept and somewhat vulnerable mistress as opposed to the publicly parading and more powerful prostitute.

In addition to leaving the desire for woman as beautiful object unsatisfied, Steer also placed his figure in a rather comfortable, though austere, bedroom setting. Not only did this setting confound critics who expected some association with disease or physical decline, but it also activated a shifting set of class symbols. Victorians were able to contend with the idea that a working-class woman might be driven to prostitution by poverty, and once a woman had fallen, her subsequent decline was inevitable. Perhaps because the squalor which critics expected was absent, they attempted to inscribe it textually upon Steer's scene and style with a discourse of filth.

For some critics, this inscription seemed to be related to the broad strokes of greyish pigment which Steer used to indicate shadows on the bed clothes, and this led reviewers to describe the sheets as grey or dirty. D.S. MacColl, for example, commented that "Washwomen, I am given to understand, are discontented with the tone of the sheets," while the Daily Telegraph remarked that the "cunning combination of bottle-green, greys, and greyish-whites, steely

under a cold light, is interesting if unlovely."⁹⁹ The Guardian also seemed to be concerned about the cool tonality, since this critic hoped that the work would "improve with time" and that its colour would "acquire a patina and a glow which it very much needs."¹⁰⁰ H.S. seemed to equate the lurid subject matter with the background, because he put forth the surprising assertion that the background was "livid."¹⁰¹ Comments regarding the cool tonality and greyish shadows of the background were also juxtaposed to the paleness of the body, although this comparison could be made in a favourable sense, as in the Margazine of Art's observation that "the dark green hangings of the bed serve[d] as an admirable foil to the white figure of the girl," or the Daily News's remark that the "cool greys and shaded greens" made "pleasant support for the flesh tints."¹⁰² R.A.M. Stevenson, however, objected to this technical point, feeling that the flesh was "exaggerated in brightness compared to the brightest white of the sheets," and V. noted in a similar fashion that the "same light that whitens her skin has the effect of turning the sheets grey."¹⁰³ Q.E.D.'s outrage at what he described as Steer's "manifest plagiarism" seemed to spill over into the remainder of his remarks, for he accused Steer of trickery, and believed that this deceit, which involved

making the sheets and bolsters of the bed an uncompromising grey instead of white, so as to accentuate the flesh-tints and give them the relief that should be owing to the artist's manipulation of values, should be beneath Mr. Steer's dignity.

Intriguingly, Q.E.D. went on to compare this deceit with the methods of Edmund Russell, an American interior decorator who painted rooms in "dirty tones so as to make the women's faces look clean."¹⁰⁴ It

appears that Steer's nude resisted familiar categories to the extent that reviewers were driven round in critical circles, and the stylistic divergence between the polished body and loosely worked background seemed to further confuse and frustrate their attempts to resolve and classify this image. Probably because of their experience with Royal Academy paintings of prostitutes, they wanted to attribute some form of dirtiness to the scene as an indication of this woman's moral filth. At the same time, however, even though they went through the customary critical motions by describing the sheets as grey, they seemed to believe that Steer's use of grey shadows somehow cleaned up the figure instead of reinforcing associations of disease and decline.

At least one critic noticed the somewhat disconcerting contrast between the more smoothly treated figure and the broader brushwork of the background. "The picture seems to fall between two stools, to tell truth. The figure is painted in one convention, and the surroundings in another; the result is an incongruity and a vague sense of discomfort."¹⁰⁵ Perhaps this reviewer's discomfort stemmed from the way in which the flattening out of the image seems to displace the spectator. Viewers may have also been reminded of the similar visual flatness of pornographic stereoscopic photographs, which Gerald Needham has proposed as a source for Manet's Olympia. According to Needham, this form of pornography had been widely available in London since the 1850s, and the proliferation of shops where these images could be purchased had become the subject of indignant articles in widely read periodicals such as the Saturday Review. Further points

of similarity between stereoscopic pornography and Steer's nude include a gaze which meets the viewer's, the use of an academic pictorial format of background drapes, and a contrast between the "suggested luxuriousness of the setting and the everyday reality of the model, usually from the lower ranks of prostitution." Finally, Needham has pointed out that in contrast to academic softening and idealization of the body, the photograph emphasized the angularity of the human form, and he believes that it was Manet's emphasis on Olympia's angularity which lent the figure its startling immediacy and reality.¹⁰⁶ It seems entirely possible that this factor affected readings of Steer's nude in a similar fashion.

In The Dark Angel, Fraser Harrison has proposed that the "pained stiffness" of A Nude¹⁰⁷ is related to Steer's anxiety in front of the unadorned, unnarrated, and indisputably naked female body. Harrison places Steer within the context of sexually repressed Victorian men who could contend with the body only if an intermediary were present, and believes that this inability to confront the sexual explains the stiff and smooth appearance of the 1896 nude, as well as the series of similar works which followed it. Harrison argues:

the nudes themselves are characterless and seem to possess no sensual or even companionable quality. When he did at last screw his courage to the point of taking off their clothes, he appears to have been terrified by what he discovered beneath, and only by depriving them of their sexual attractiveness could he bring himself to paint them. He treated their bodies as inanimate lumps of flesh and, as if to emphasize their sameness, he frequently imposed impossible distortions on their limbs, or required them to hold themselves in positions of ungainly painfulness.¹⁰⁸

Harrison's methodology is extremely problematic and the conclusions he draws are equally contentious. To begin with, he

commends Steer for having attempted to paint the "fleshly, hairy reality" of female sexuality, meaning essentially that Steer had not eliminated pubic hair.¹⁰⁹ However, the 1896 A Nude (Fig. 1), the 1897 Seated Female Nude (Fig. 5), and the 1898 Seated Nude - The Black Hat (Fig. 6) are posed in such a manner that the pubic area is obscured rather than revealed. The pubis of A Nude Seated on a Sofa (Fig. 7: 1896-98) is also somewhat concealed by the position of the legs; although the area is shaded, the shadows below the left breast and above the right collarbone are similarly indicated. The same type of shading is evident in the 1896-98 Standing Female Nude (Fig. 8) as well. Harrison seems to have read more into these images than actually exists.

Furthermore, his assertion that Steer coped with his sexual anxieties by defacing the female body ignores the evidence of the many freely drawn and unaffected nudes in his sketchbooks. Presumably, if the observation of the naked female form were so fraught with difficulty, this should be most evident at the actual stage of confrontation. However, the bleak stiffness which Harrison refers to is much more characteristic of the advanced studies or finished products than the drawings from the model. Finally, it seems inconceivable that an artist who had trained with Cabanel and Bouguereau should have been so distressed by the thought of representing nude female bodies.¹¹⁰

Harrison further believes that a similar motive of masculine self-defense is evident in the nude paintings of Leighton, who depicted women in "defenceless but self-observing nakedness" or

helplessly reliant on "masculine enterprise," and he applies his theory of formal defacement through exaggeration of pose and proportion to these works as well.¹¹¹ Harrison concludes that Leighton's images were "designed to console and reinvigorate his beleaguered male audience" as compensation for the "fast-vanishing spirit of traditional femininity" during the 1880s and 1890s.¹¹² One wonders how Harrison would account for Ingres's distortion of female proportion in paintings which were executed before the onslaught of late nineteenth-century feminism. In addition to these problems, the fact that he attributes similar motives to Steer and Leighton, without fully acknowledging their divergent positions within the NEAC and the Academy, indicates that he selected their images on the basis of a superficial compatibility with his preconceived and primarily literary theory.

Unfortunately, in his attempt to provide a twentieth-century decoding of these paintings, Harrison takes no account of how Steer's presumably equally sexually repressed audience responded to A Nude. Had he investigated the reception of this work, he might have realized that his own theories about Steer and the 1896 critical commentary are remarkably similar. Both parties were more or less disturbed because the image defied the leisurely consumption to which male viewers had been, and to a large extent, are still accustomed, and both used their perceptions of the figure's awkwardness as a means to marginalize the work. While the 1896 critics seemed to have desired an English version of a Rococo-style nude, Harrison wishes that Steer could have united the unaffected bodies of his "bleak" nudes with the Rococo freedom of the more luscious series, suggesting that

Harrison desires a pleurably digested English Renoir.¹¹³

In addition to his theory of painterly mutilation as coping strategy, Harrison further contextualizes Steer's anxiety-ridden attempts to paint the nude within a biographical and developmental framework of increasingly adult sexual preference. Because of Steer's relationship with the adolescent Rose Pettigrew, Harrison believes that Steer's A Summer's Evening (Fig. 9: 1887-88), as well as various "chemise" representations of Rose (Figs. 10 and 11: 1892-94) can be read as evidence of Steer's platonic but sexually-charged obsession with pubescent females. Harrison also argues that Steer graduated to a suitably mature interest in adult female bodies after his falling-out with Rose, and therefore explains the later 1890s nudes as evidence of "a radical change in his sexual proclivities which can be dated with some precision as taking place soon after the termination of his engagement to Rose."¹¹⁴ "As far as [Steer's] painting was concerned, the immediate result of his separation from Rose was that he became obsessed by the nude."¹¹⁵ Hence Harrison implies that Steer's sexual immaturity would not allow him to use Rose as a nude model, but that once their relationship had ended, Steer somehow achieved sexual maturity, and became interested in adult female bodies. What Harrison's theory overlooks is the fact that it would indeed have been remarkable if Steer had exhibited nude representations of his fiancée, since her identity would have been immediately recognized. Several paintings of Rose had been exhibited at the New English Art Club's previous shows, and she had posed for many well-known academic artists as well. Instead of accepting Harrison's problematic theory

of sexual development, a much simpler and more reasonable explanation can be substituted. The 1896 to 1902 nudes should be considered as the next phase in Steer's continued exploration of two recurring issues: female sexuality and painting style as a visual language.

Steer's repeated representation of the female nude seems to have stemmed partially from an interest in experimenting with various visual traditions. Isolation and repetition of the nude allowed him to study the way in which different inflections of style could affect subject matter, similar to the fashion in which a speaker's choice of particular words contributes to the message's content.¹¹⁶ Instead of stylistic groping, Steer's formal "inconsistency" becomes a form of rather sophisticated experimentation with style as a visual language in which the paintings speak for themselves.¹¹⁷ Obviously more was at stake than the painting of pastiche. It seems unlikely that Steer would have described A Nude as his masterpiece, much less exhibited it at all, if he had believed it to be a mere copy. Furthermore, once he had shown the work and been charged with plagiarism, it seems doubtful that he would have persisted with this visual experimentation, and continued to exhibit these nudes, if he were not convinced that his work was significant.

The fact that both the stiffly posed nudes and the more luscious Rococo-style bodies were painted during the same time frame further supports a theory that Steer regarded the two series as being parallel, rather than mutually exclusive. Issues overlapped and merged; the pose of A Nude Seated on a Sofa found its way into The Toilet of Venus (Fig. 12), while an intriguingly rigid body became the subject of

Sleep (Fig. 2).

Steer also seemed to be incorporating a critique of the social within a study of the sexual, a strategy which shared much in common with Aubrey Beardsley's. Steer and Beardsley may not have been personal friends, but they were at least professional allies; Beardsley belonged to the NEAC, and Steer's "chemise" images had been published in the Yellow Book (Fig. 11). The preponderance of female images among Beardsley's works for the Yellow Book suggests a deliberate exploration of female sexuality and social placement, and he, too, appeared to be interested in a conflation of the New Woman and prostitute.¹¹⁸ It seems entirely possible that Steer was attracted by similar issues, and attempted a version in coloured oils of what Beardsley was creating in black and white illustration. Perhaps Steer's familiarity with Beardsley's style and subject matter prompted his own creation of the off-putting stiff pose and polished body of A Nude, and it may be that Steer deliberately conceived the work as both an artistic challenge to traditional patterns of viewing and a social critique of Victorian middle-class morality.

Steer continued to experiment with the unsavoury edge which pornography provided, as well as a corresponding visual bite with smoothly painted bodies and awkward poses. He also dallied with the erotic titillation of the partially disrobed or nearly naked, and this incorporation of yet another convention of the pornographic photograph¹¹⁹ occurs in Seated Female Nude, which features a woman removing her black stocking, and in Seated Nude - The Black Hat, which depicts a nude woman displayed among her discarded clothing,

but still wearing her hat. While A Nude Seated on a Sofa, Standing Female Nude, and Seated Female Nude were probably studies, not intended for exhibition, the 1898 nude with the black hat is a more finished work which Steer probably would have exhibited, except for the advice of friends who persuaded him that the painting was "indecent". Probably this woman in a black hat, and nothing else, shared too much in common with her sisters in stereoscopic pornography to be acceptable as High Art. Nevertheless, a picture was worthless unless it had "sting".¹²⁰ The creation of visual "sting" seems to have been an issue which Steer was very much interested in pursuing, and in the case of A Nude, this bite was achieved with disquieting style, suspicious subject matter and inflammatory sources of artistic inspiration. Faced with this aesthetic dilemma, Steer apparently decided that it was simply less botherto leave Seated Nude - The Black Hat in the studio, and approach the same problem from a slightly different angle. Therefore, Steer turned to his parallel "Rococo" series for a picture which straddled the fine line between the controversial and the contemptible, and subsequently Sleep became the next of his nudes to appear at the New English Art Club in 1898.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "The Dudley Gallery," Morning Post (16 November 1896): 6.
- 2 "The New English Art Club," Daily News (14 November 1896): 2.
- 3 "The Chronicle of Art. - February," Magazine of Art 20/21 (February 1897): 231.
- 4 "The New English Art Club," Daily Telegraph (19 November 1896): 4.
- 5 "The New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (14 November 1896): 3.
- 6 There may have been three nudes shown by Tonks. I have been unable to locate a reproduction of his A Lady Undressing, which was praised by the Standard critic as "admirably harmonious and reticent. We doubt whether such beauty has ever been beheld before by mortal eyes." "The New English Art Club," Standard (16 November 1896): 3. Q.E.D. stated briefly that the work was "full of charm and silvery in tone," while the Daily Chronicle reviewer expressed admiration for the "exquisitely suggested" pattern of curtain and carpet, and the "red skirts thrown upon a chair to the left holding the picture so well together." While the title of the work is certainly suggestive, the tenor of their remarks seems to indicate that the figure was probably still wearing a chemise and petticoat, rather than being completely nude.
Q.E.D., "In the Picture Galleries: Grafton - New English Art Club," World (18 November 1896): 14.
Daily Chronicle, 3.
Another possibly nude work was Arning Bell's Battledore and Shuttlecock, which was also quite widely praised. However, some reviewers commented on the flowing draperies worn by the girls, and therefore it seems safe to eliminate this work also.
- 7 Standard, 3.
Q.E.D., 14. The Picnic is not reproduced in this thesis. However, a reproduction is available at the Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.
- 8 Daily Telegraph, 4.
Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 9 Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 10 John Rothenstein, A Pot of Paint: Artists of the 1890s (1929; Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970): 138.
- 11 T.J. Clark, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984): 93.

- 12 Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 13 "New English Art Club," Westminster Gazette (20 November 1896): 3.
- 14 "Society of French Artists, New Bond Street," Times (27 April 1874): 14.
- 15 N. Garstein, "Edouard Manet," Art Journal (April 1884): 110-111.
- 16 "Modern French Art," Quarterly Review (April 1897): 377.
- 17 Kate Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984): 92-93. [Reprint of P.G. Hamerton, "The Present State of the Fine Arts in France: Impressionism," Portfolio ns. 13 (February 1891): 67-74.]
- 18 Hamerton also believed that Manet was merely interested in the updating of older artistic themes.
- 19 George Moore, Modern Painting (London: Walter Scott, 1893): 38.
- 20 Moore, 29-30.
- 21 D.S. MacColl, "Manet," Saturday Review (12 December 1896): 621.
- 22 Moore, 40-41.
- 23 See Kate Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 86.
- 24 Daily Telegraph, 4.
- 25 "The New English Art Club, London," Manchester Guardian (14 November 1896): 8.
- 26 Standard, 3.
- 27 V., "Art," Academy and Literature (28 November 1896): 466.
- 28 R.A.M. Stevenson, "The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (20 November 1896): 3.
- 29 H.S., "The Autumn Exhibitions." Spectator (28 November 1896): 764.
- 30 I have located eighteen reviews of Steer's A Nude. There may be more.

- 31 "Art and Artists," Globe (25 November 1896): 8.
- 32 Morning Post, 6.
- 33 Westminster Gazette, 3.
- 34 "Recent Exhibitions in London," Art Journal (January 1897): 30.
- 35 "Two Picture Galleries: The New English Art Club," St. James Gazette (16 November 1896): 12.
Daily Telegraph, 4.
Daily News, 2.
- 36 D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Studio 9 (1896): 286.
R.A.M. Stevenson, 3.
Daily News, 2.
- 37 Magazine of Art, 231.
Standard, 3; and Daily Chronicle, 3.
Guardian, 8.
Daily Chronicle, 3; and V., 466.
- 38 H.S., 764.
- 39 Q.E.D., 14.
- 40 R.A.M. Stevenson, 3. Stevenson probably did not intend to accuse Steer of plagiarism; rather, he was likely attempting to downplay the inflammatory Manet reference.
- 41 Guardian, 8.
V., 466.
- 42 Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 43 MacColl may have also been responding to the opinion of R.A.M. Stevenson. Although their reviews were both published on 21 November, the two were colleagues in New Criticism, and may have discussed these issues together before their notices appeared. V.'s rather reactionary commentary appeared on 28 November, and without any evidence of friendship or association between MacColl and V., it is not possible to determine whether or not MacColl knew of his opinion as well.
- 44 D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review (21 November 1896): 540.
- 45 According to the Daily News, this work was "painted in the style of the Old English school, with a Dutch feeling for

tone. . . one of the most satisfactory pictures we have yet had to notice." (2) According to Bruce Laughton, a Yorkshire Landscape reproduction is not available. Bruce Laughton, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971): 136.

46 Kenneth McConkey, foreword, Edwardian Impressions (London: Pym's Gallery, 1981): n. pag.

47 It is also worthwhile to note that Fry was praised for his Valley of the Seine, which the Standard felt recalled Richard Wilson (3).

Tonks was commended by the Standard as well for the "Watteau-like fancy" of The Picnic (3).

Conder was similarly praised for his Watteau-like Almond Blossoms by the Daily Chronicle (3). Evidently, references to these previous artists were relatively unproblematic.

It should be noted, however, that objections to a Manet quotation cannot be explained simply in terms of cultural xenophobia, since some modern French painters could be accommodated quite easily within the English critical canon. Legros, for example, had been invited to participate in this 1896 exhibition, and received widespread acclaim for his two landscapes and selection of drawings. The Guardian felt that Legros's inclusion was "the most notable feature of the present exhibition," and attempted to secure a place for his work among British art. "He is not, except by naturalisation, and [sic] Englishman, but he had taught a great many Englishmen, and for years he has set an example of a high and severe cult of beauty" (8). Manet's Olympia was obviously more controversial than Legros's landscapes and drawings.

48 For example: The Yorkshire Landscape is "pleasant to look upon, with the . . . greens of its thicket of trees and its delicate sky of green and pink. It is, however, as flat as tapestry, and less like any conceivable aspect of Nature than some pre-conceived ideal of what the artist deems she should in this instance be." Daily Telegraph, 4.

49 MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review, 540. Magazine of Art, 231.

50 Globe, 8.
St. James Gazette, 12.

51 Westminster Gazette, 3.
Daily News, 2.

52 Daily News, 2.
Westminster Gazette, 3.

53 V., 466.

- 54 Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, ed. A.R. Shilleto, Vol. 3 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1904): 240.
- 55 Robert Young, "The Japanese and the Nude," Windmill 2 (January 1899): 84.
- 56 Magazine of Art, 231.
Morning Post, 6.
- 57 Daily Chronicle, 3; and Daily News, 3.
Standard, 3.
Westminster Gazette, 3.
Guardian, 8.
V., 466.
Daily Telegraph, 4.
- 58 Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 59 A.L. Baldry, "Critics and Criticism," Art Journal (November 1894): 327.
- 60 P.G. Hamerton; in Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception, 93.
- 61 Moore, 41.
- 62 "Modern French Art," 375.
- 63 D.S. MacColl, Nineteenth Century Art (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1902): 150.
- 64 One reviewer connected Manet's Olympia with Titian's Danae. However, he did not explicitly describe any of these figures as courtesans. Daily Chronicle, 3.
- 65 Again, I have located eighteen reviews of this exhibition. There may be more, and possibly one of these might use the word "prostitute". However, it is still significant that eighteen critics do not.
- 66 Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988): 138.
- 67 Susan P. Casteras, The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982): 36-38.
- 68 Nead, 138-139.
- 69 Nead, 172.

70 Lynda Nead, "A Definition of Deviancy: Prostitution and High Art in England c. 1860," Block 2 (Winter 1985/86): 41-44.

71 Daily Telegraph, 4.

72 Standard, 3.

73 Westminster Gazette, 3.

"The New English Art Club," Daily Graphic (25 November November 1896): 12.

74 Magazine of Art, 231.
V., 466.

75 H.S., 764.

76 MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review, 540.

77 A.R. Cunningham, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890s," Victorian Studies 17:2 (December 1973): 180.

78 Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," Critical Inquiry 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 231.

79 Bridget J. Elliott, "New and Not so 'New Woman' on the London Stage: Aubrey Beardsley's Yellow Book Images of Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Réjane," Victorian Studies 31:1 (Autumn 1987): 52.

80 Elliott, 44.

81 Gilman, 226.

82 Daily Telegraph, 4.

83 Gilman, 226.

84 Gerald Neadham, "Manet, 'Olympia' and Pornographic Photography," Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970 Ed. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (New York: Newsweek, 1972): 81.

85 Carol Bauer and Laurence Ritt, Free and Ennobled: Source Readings of the Development of Victorian Feminism (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Paris and Frankfurt: Pergamon Press, 1979): 29-33.

86 See Fraser Harrison, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality (London: Sheldon, 1977): 52; regarding availability of contraceptive information.

This notion of ownership may well have been significant. Critics could have been familiar with French Rococo nude paintings of mistresses, commissioned by members of the upper classes and aristocracy in which part of the appeal was based on the fact that

the spectator owned the real woman who posed for the work, as well as the painted body.

87 Tracy Davis, "Actresses, Demi-Mondes, and Prostitutes in Victorian London," Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada Newsletter 13:1 (Spring 1987): 36.

88 MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review, 540.

89 Daily Telegraph, 4.

90 Elliott, 45.

91 See Elliott 39-40 for discussion of a similar process of marginalization in literature and drama.

92 Daily News, 2.

93 MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review, 540.

94 H.S., 764.

95 Q.E.D., 14.
Guardian, 8.
R.A.M. Stevenson, 3.

96 Morning Post, 6.

97 Loughton, 69.

98 Daily Telegraph, 4. Others who described the face as doll-like may have been referring to her inscrutable expression.

99 MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review, 540.
Daily Telegraph, 4.

100 Guardian, 8.

101 H.S., 764.

102 Magazine of Art, 231.
Daily News, 2.

103 R.A.M. Stevenson, 3.
V., 466.

104 Q.E.D., 14.

105 Westminster Gazette, 3.

106 Needham, 81-83.

107 Harrison, 149.

108 Harrison, 152.

109 Harrison, 152.

110 Laughton, 3.

111 Harrison, 83.

112 Harrison, 87.

113 Harrison, 150.

114 Harrison, 149.

115 Harrison, 147.

116 Steer also seemed to subject the landscape to a similar form of experimentation.

117 "I had only just begun. . . ." World of Art Illustrated 1:6 (May 1939): 6. In this interview, Steer is quoted as having said, "Pictures speak their own language. . . . I cannot talk in public and I never do it."

118 Elliott, 33, 44 and 56.

119 Needham, 82.

120 John Rothenstein, "Two Visits to Steer," Burlington Magazine 85 (1944): 205.

CHAPTER THREE

STEER AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Steer continued to explore female sexuality with something of a visual sting in the nude paintings which he showed at the New English Art Club in 1898 and 1901. However, in Sleep and The Mirror (Figs. 2 and 3), he utilized stylistic devices from the eighteenth-century French Rococo, rather than the nineteenth-century French avant-garde. Steer likely created a parallel Rococo series in order to pursue similar issues, yet avoid the animosity and adverse response which had greeted A Nude in 1896. Perhaps Steer had also considered the favourable reception accorded Tonks's "Watteau-like fancy" at this time.¹ The trial of Oscar Wilde may have also acted as a cautionary lesson for an artist who dreaded notoriety as Steer did. The marginalization of Beardsley's images of New Women on the basis of their implicit critique of Victorian middle-class morality might have also impressed upon Steer the need for subtlety if sting were to be effective.²

Certainly Steer and many others were aware that an appeal to eighteenth-century tradition allowed artists to paint the nude body without serious repercussions. Frederick Wedmore had noted in his 1885 Notes on French Eighteenth Century Art that Boucher's "notion of Olympus was chiefly that it was a mountain on which the human form might be undraped with impunity."³ The equation of female form and natural beauty established during the Rococo was seized upon by many of Steer's English contemporaries, and works which

capitalized on this tradition were exhibited consistently at the Academy and New Gallery during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴

However, just as the sources for Manet's Olympia or Steer's A Nude could be as respectable as Titian's Venus of Urbino or as disreputable as modern erotic photographs, a reworking of the French Rococo tradition could carry associations as venerable as Boucher or Fragonard, as questionable as Beardsley, or as unsavoury as the debased version of eighteenth-century style used for popular pornographic prints.⁵ Therefore, by evoking the eighteenth century, Steer continued his experiments with disturbing allusions to pornography, and also introduced a new wealth of associative meaning which played upon paradoxes and oppositions between the nature of artifice, the revival of decadence, and the modernity of tradition.

In order to assess Steer's relationship with the French Rococo, the complexity of the fin-de-siècle's construction of the eighteenth century must be addressed. Just as historians drew decadent parallels between the Roman and British empires, similar comparisons were made between fin-de-siècle and eighteenth-century Britain. Those who referred to Britain as a modern-day Rome often did so in order to draw agreeable parallels of imperial strength, but just as frequently, these historical associations took the form of a cautionary lesson which demonstrated points of similarity between nineteenth-century decadence and the last gasps of the Roman Empire.⁶ In a similar fashion, the eighteenth century might be held up as the period of Imperial strength before the loss of the American

colonies and the threat posed by the French Revolution, but the aftermath of these events could also be quoted as an ominous foreshadowing of the nineteenth century's Boer war and Irish conflict.⁷

Karl Hillebrand addressed these competing definitions of England's eighteenth century in an 1880 Contemporary Review article, in which he countered the view expressed by G.H. Curtis in a series of 1871 Oxford lectures. According to Curtis, there "is no one, probably, now living who does not congratulate himself that his lot was not cast in the Eighteenth Century. It has become, by general consent, an object for ridicule and sarcasm. Its very dress and airs had something about them which irresistibly moves a smile."⁸ Hillebrand, however, preferred to characterize the eighteenth century as an "era of increased political liberty, of revival in literature, and of remarkable religious development," and believed that "such a century need not shrink from comparison with any other, even in the glorious annals of English history."⁹

Frederic Harrison also discussed the eighteenth century as a Golden Age, and defined this temporal context for England as "between the death of Anne and the great war with the Republic (1714-1793)," and believed the "eighty years of comparative non-intervention and rest are for Englishmen at least the typical years of the eighteenth century."¹⁰ Harrison agreed with Hillebrand that this period was characterized by peace, industrial prosperity and expansion, and he, too, took care to address the opposing view of the century.

The era as a whole (so far from being trivial, sceptical, fraudulent, or suicidal) was, in all its central and highest moments, an era of hope, enterprise, industry, and humanity, full of humane eagerness for improvement, trusting human nature, and earnestly bent on human good. . . . the hurly-burly at Versailles and the Reign of Terror are no more the essence of the eighteenth century, than the Irish atrocities and the commune of Paris are the essence of the nineteenth.¹¹

According to Harrison, the English painters and sculptors of the eighteenth century still remained among the "greatest", and unsurpassed in "their own line."¹² Harrison's selection of English examples was dictated by his topic, but certainly the fact that he was able to praise these artists so highly reflects the increasing awareness and appreciation of national heritage at the end of the century.

The British enthusiasm for French art of the eighteenth century had also attained such heights that one writer referred to it as a "mania".¹³ Several exhibitions of old master paintings took place in the London area over the last quarter of the century, and particular favourites at these shows were Reynolds, Gainsborough, Rubens, Hals, Boucher, Watteau, and Fragonard.¹⁴ The 1897 bequest to the British nation of the Wallace Collection, with its eighteenth-century masterpieces, was also a subject of great excitement. Presumably Steer and his British audience were familiar with the collection's contents, as many of the items had been loaned for public exhibition in shows such as the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, and the 1890 Royal Academy Old Masters Exhibition. Furthermore, a large portion of the collection had been loaned to the Bethnal Green Museum from early in 1872 until April 1875, where

it was viewed by some five million visitors. Following the bequest, a great deal of debate ensued regarding the appropriate housing and display of the works¹⁵, but eventually the Government decided that the collection should remain at Hertford House, and the museum formally opened its doors in June 1900.¹⁶

The art of the eighteenth century had also been popularized through a wide range of engraved reproductions, as well as art historical discussion in periodical reviews, monographs and general studies of the period. During the 1890s and early twentieth century, monographs which treated Velazquez, Gainsborough, Rubens, Watteau, as well as a more general survey entitled English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art, were published in a series by Portfolio. According to Claude Phillips, the author of the Watteau monograph, the "irresistible fascination" for Watteau had been stimulated by the publication of the Goncourt Brothers's L'Art du XVIII^{me} Siècle.¹⁷ This three volume study, which appeared between 1881 and 1895, examined several French Rococo artists, including Watteau, Chardin, Boucher, Greuze and Fragonard.

In his article for Nineteenth Century, Ferdinand Rothschild attributed this passion for Rococo art to a more general upswing of interest in French subjects. He believed this new interest had been stimulated by the development of luxurious tastes in the British Empire since the mid-nineteenth century, and resulted partially from an awareness of Parisian life-style through reports in the daily press. Like others who sought to establish traditional precedents for the impressionist movement, Rothschild believed that

modern variations in art "chiefly consisted in a return to the style of the eighteenth century." Significantly, he also argued that this revival of decadent taste was particularly suited to degenerate modern life.¹⁸

Evidently an evocation of the eighteenth century possessed layers of meaning which simultaneously encompassed and shifted between the poles of "Augustan glory" and "delicious decadence".¹⁹ The signification of Rococo style or subject could also move between a nostalgic view of England's Golden Age and the modern social critique of Beardsley and the decadents. For certain viewers, loose brushwork and bravura paint handling might mean "Rococo", while others perceived this technique as "modern". The New Critics and many of the NEAC artists seemed able to accommodate comfortably both "old" and "new" under the impressionist umbrella. Steer, for example, owned a few Etty paintings, and collected engravings after Watteau, Fragonard, and Boucher, as well as photographs of Degas's work.²⁰ It is entirely possible that it was precisely this richness of association and shifting complexity of semantic potential which attracted Steer to the French Rococo, and provided further stimulus for the exploration of painting as a visual language in Sleep (1898) and The Mirror (1901).

Similar to the 1896 viewing context, at least two other nude or semi-nude representations of the female body, in addition to Steer's own Sleep, appeared at the 1898 NEAC Summer Exhibition. The first of these, Charles Shannon's Wounded Amazon, depicted an armored female warrior with one breast exposed and the other

partially covered, The figure is seated on the ground in a forest setting, and the body fills the canvas.²¹ Although Shannon received some minor objections regarding his draughtsmanship²² and "dirty-greenish flesh tints,"²³ the fact that Wounded Amazon had recently received a gold medal at the International Art Exhibition of Munich probably ensured a favourable reception at the NEAC as well. The Daily Telegraph drew attention to this illustrious background, then commented that Shannon's work and Charles Furse's portraiture stood "above" all others in the exhibition, and furthermore placed these two artists in "absolute contrast" to Steer.²⁴

The other nude entry in this exhibition was William Strang's Diana.²⁵ Strang's "inherent love of ugliness" enraged Q.E.D., who described the figure as a "fat, middle-aged woman with corns on her toes!"²⁶ Most critics, however, responded to Diana in a somewhat more positive fashion. The Morning Post, for example, commented upon the "Flemish" physique of the goddess, and noted that this figure and those of the attendant nymphs were "solidly painted and modelled with zealous skill. Their flesh tints combine harmoniously with the rich hues of the landscape."²⁷ The Standard believed that the merit of this "singular mixture of the grotesque and the good" resided "entirely in the modelling and painting of the opulent foreground figure,"²⁸ and the Daily Telegraph reacted similarly, describing the "fleeing female figure in orange draperies" as "grotesque in both design and action," and singling out the "too muscular and masculine Diana, whose ample form is powerfully modelled," as the "best feature in the design."²⁹ The Daily News

added, "How accurately [Strang] can model is seen in 'Diana,' although there is little that is classical in the three goddesses. . . ." Nevertheless, according to this critic, the nude "such as this, is void of all offense, but the same cannot be said of 'Sleep,' by Mr. Wilson Steer, which is as uncompromising in colour as in pose."³⁰ Although the robust form of Diana seems to have posed difficulties for certain viewers, this nude was evidently preferable to Sleep.

Whether the critics were offended or pleased with Steer's nude, these reviewers were more or less compelled to comment on the work, given Steer's increasing reputation, which no doubt resulted in the favourable placement of Sleep among the other NEAC exhibits. The Daily Graphic seemed to approve of the work's "principal position," but the Times felt that Steer's nude possessed "undeservedly the first place in the room."³¹ Truth remarked that it was "an ill-advised act on the part of the Hanging Committee to accord the place of honour" to Sleep.³² Although the work's prominent position meant that critics were unable to avoid the issue entirely, the more conservative critics tended to circumvent the subject, as did the Globe, who buried a brief mention of a "nude figure" by Steer within a listing of several artists and paintings.³³ The Magazine of Art chose to satisfy readers who expected a "Steer review" by mentioning his A Vista in a selection of "remarkable" paintings, and completely omitting discussion of Sleep.³⁴ The Sunday Times preferred a strategy of brevity and condemnation, simply noting that Steer's nude was "quite repellent,"

while the Times would "say only that we have seen better pictures of the same subject."³⁵

In complete opposition to the negative opinions published in the Times, Sunday Times, and Daily News, were the entirely favourable reviews of Sleep printed in the Daily Graphic and the St. James Gazette. The Daily Graphic writer believed that the "flesh painting" in this representation of "a nude girl slumbering on red drapery" was "delicate in colour and skilfully modelled,"³⁶ while the Gazette expressed the opinion that "Mr. P. Wilson Steer's beautiful nude figure . . . is a delightful example of the fact that painting - modern oil-painting, that is - is the most flexible of all the arts, capable of the most sudden response to strong impressions and of the most exquisite delicacy of differentiation."³⁷ As neither the Daily Graphic nor the St. James Gazette seemed to be proponents of New Criticism, their complete approval is somewhat surprising, especially since the two New Critics and acknowledged Steer supporters, MacColl and Stevenson, were hard pressed to find any favourable aspect to comment upon. However, the remarks in the Graphic and the Gazette seem to be formulated in terms of a stock response to a nude painting, in which the reviewer comments favourably about delicate flesh tints and graceful pose. Certainly the Daily Graphic's description of Steer's colour treatment as delicate calls his critical abilities into question. Perhaps both critics noted the work's favourable placement by the MEAC's Hanging Committee, and gauged their response accordingly. It is also possible that Steer's descriptive title and mobilization of the Rococo allowed

them to view the image without problematic disruption.

The other ten reviewers, conservative and progressive alike, responded to the 1898 Sleep using a critical format similar to that which characterized the reception of Steer's 1896 A Nude. This format consisted primarily of acknowledging Steer's technical expertise and reputation, raising specific objections to the subject matter and form of Sleep, and questioning Steer's motives for producing such an image. Truth noted that Sleep was "painted with considerable force," as did the Daily Telegraph, who also reluctantly admitted that the "cleverly disposed" draperies and couch made for "cunning harmonies."³⁸ The Daily Chronicle prefaced his notice with the assertion that Sleep was a "capital study of a woman outstretched on a couch, graceful in pose and line," while the Morning Post commented favourably on the "strength of lighting" and the "painting of some red drapery."³⁹ R.A.M. Stevenson felt that Steer's "principle of execution [was] well enough and the accessory good," and D.S. MacColl believed that although Steer had blunder[ed] significantly" in this instance, "it would be hard to find a man who could fail so far on towards success."⁴⁰

The fact that Steer was positioned as one of the leading NEAC painters by 1898 might have assured him a certain amount of critical attention, but it obviously did not guarantee him favourable reviews. Indeed, some critics were inclined to judge him more harshly because of their acquaintance with his undeniable abilities. Thus the Standard wrote: "We judge Mr. Steer, of course, by high standards - are ready, that is, to pronounce him disappointing in work which

would be very promising indeed in a man of whom little was known."⁴¹

A.H.P. discussed this issue at some length in his Westminster Gazette review:

With Mr. Steer my quarrel is almost a serious one. Here is a man who in point of knowledge of the technical side of his art has hardly a superior, either in England or elsewhere. He has learned his painting in a good school, he has courage to the verge of audacity, and he seldom, if ever, fails entirely. His last year's nude showed what a complete mastery he has over the toughest problems of drawing. He has shown again and again a subtlety of insight into colour and the power of co-ordinating the most difficult effects into a synthetic whole that evince a maturity of knowledge and a mastery of touch that puts hardly any conceivable limit to the possibilities of his achievement. . . . Of the three pictures we have here doubtless the most ambitious is the large nude entitled 'Sleep.' It does not need a very acute eye to remark the very wonderful triumphs that are embodied in this exceedingly unpleasant canvas. It is no exaggeration to say that the red-lined robe is simply masterly. And yet how futile a masterpiece! . . . It cannot be altogether an easy thing for a man of Steer's rare capacity to make, in many respects, so careful a study of the nude and yet succeed in making it so uncompromisingly hideous. . . . I think the more sincerely one admires [Steer's] unique powers as a painter, the more heartily one would deplore the strange misuse of them which he has displayed this year.⁴²

A.H.P. was obviously unsettled by the fact that an artist of Steer's calibre would "deliberately" produce such revolting work.

Three other critics sensed that Steer's technical ability contained a subversive strategy in which painterly virtuosity drew the unsuspecting spectator's gaze to an otherwise deplorable painting. The Standard, for example, remarked that although Steer was an "artist of occasional aberrations," he was "habitually interesting, because up to a certain point, we are quite sure that we shall find him clever."⁴³ Truth commented on Steer's "clever, showy effects,"

and observed that this artist seemed "determined to startle and surprise rather than to satisfy,"⁴⁴ and the Daily Telegraph echoed this assessment, noting Steer's "showy dash and undeniable cleverness," and cautioning readers that "the desire to dazzle and astonish, coupled with the power in a certain sense to fully achieve what is sought for in this direction is not in itself enough to establish a solid and enduring artistic position."⁴⁵

The reviewers for Truth and the Daily Telegraph also seized the opportunity to remind their readers that however "dazzling" or "clever" Steer's artistic production might be, it also demonstrated a great deal of stylistic inconsistency. Truth asserted that Steer had "been not unaptly termed 'a Proteus of the brush.' But unfortunately, in his eagerness to shine as a Jack of many styles, he has made himself a master of none."⁴⁶ The Daily Telegraph also characterized Steer as a "master of the brush, a very Proteus, who can put on now one form, now another, of those most familiar in modern art. But - we have said it more than once before - he has not as yet revealed any true artistic individuality of his own. . . ."⁴⁷ Possibly these two critics recalled the accusations hurled at Steer's 1896 A Nude, as their comments imply that he was more interested in clever copies than genuinely original work. Their assessment of formal inconsistency may also indicate an awareness of the stylistic divergence between the 1896 work and Sleep. Furthermore, they seemed convinced that Steer was being deliberately perverse in producing nude images which defied the traditional canons of representation and thus denied the spectator's

customer's privilege of possession. The two critics conveyed this belief through the convenient "shorthand" of classical mythology, as Proteus, the herdsman of Neptune, was able to adopt different forms at will, and did so in order to avoid capture and confinement. Not only did Steer's female bodies disrupt established patterns of viewing, they eluded the critical grasp as well.

In choosing to paint a sleeping woman, Steer was once again working with a theme which was perennially popular in Royal Academy exhibitions. As Adeline Tintner has demonstrated, between the late 1860s and the late 1890s in England, the sleeping woman became an "almost obsessive subject," with the female figure "in a pose of sleep and unconsciousness which she had never really taken previously in Western art." According to Tintner, the compulsive repetition of this theme by artists such as Leighton, Moore, and Burne-Jones indicates a desire on the part of these men to provide a nostalgic retreat from the frantic pace of modern industrial England, and to "freeze" women pictorially because of male discomfort with changing female roles at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

The sleeping woman loses her sexual power and becomes passive when asleep. In folklore the sleeping cyclops, the sleeping ogre, the sleeping giant temporarily lose their viciousness. They become unconscious and hence safe. Also, the sleeping woman becomes an object in sleep, yet not dead. She becomes a still-life that is paradoxically alive.⁴⁹

These women may have forfeited sexual power, but they retained sexual appeal. Part of the renewed interest in the Sleeping Beauty legend during the Victorian period can be attributed to the fact that the Princess's virginity is intact and her sexual awakening

will be postponed until the moment of the Prince's kiss. Sexual control is assigned to the male gender, and the male spectator is granted similar power in the sleeping woman tradition as established by Leighton, Moore, and Burne-Jones.

Bram Dijkstra, in his Idols of Perversity, discusses paintings of the sleeping woman as evidence in support of his thesis that a "virulent misogyny infected all the arts" of fin-de-siècle culture.⁵⁰ According to Dijkstra, "portrayals of women whose obvious inanition seemed to prove that sleep was death and death was sleep became a source of endless delight among late nineteenth-century painters." This fetishization of sleep allowed the male viewer to indulge in "pleasurable morbidity, in thoughts of sensual arousal by a woman who appeared to be safely dead, and therefore also safely beyond actual temptation. . . ."⁵¹ In an alternative reading of the sleeping woman, Dijkstra hypothesizes that this feminine state of exhaustion represented the aftermath of masturbation.

This theme was obviously closely allied to the more decorous representations of the sleep-death equation favored by the Pre-Raphaelites. However, rather than appealing to the viewer's appreciation of the woman as self-sacrificial martyr, this variation based itself on a generalized assumption of the ability of woman to satisfy her own physical needs, thus clearly removing the male from sexual responsibility and allowing him once more to enter into a voyeuristic, passive erotic titillation within a soothing, undemanding context conducive to a state of restful detachment.⁵²

Dijkstra believes that these sleeping woman images, and many other "idols of perversity", are directly related to the widespread late nineteenth-century "war on woman", as men struggled to oppress

increasingly resistant women and maintain designated gender roles.⁵³

Despite their differences in interpretation of the sleeping woman, Tintner and Dijkstra agree that the painted representation of the sleeping female enabled the artist and audience to deny the changes which were taking place in the female role during this late-nineteenth century period. According to their arguments, these works encouraged pleasurable or perverse fantasization in which the reassertion of male dominance became the key ingredient. However, in their broad application of a "Zeitgeist" methodology, both Tintner and Dijkstra neglect evidence of a widespread fascination with mental processes and the workings of the conscious and unconscious mind, which appeared in the mainstream British press during this period. Although Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams would not be published until 1909, the exploration of the psyche had attracted many scientists, writers, and artists since the age of Enlightenment. During the Victorian era, this subject became the topic of many articles and narratives published in widely read periodical reviews. This popular interest in the mind's functioning was such that publishers of novels were able to predict the avid consumption of either sensational thrillers or "anything connected with mental processes of thought."⁵⁴ Clearly, any theory which attempts to explain the creation and reception of these sleeping images should investigate the meanings which sleeping, dreaming and related mental activities held for Victorian artists and audiences.

Sleeping and dreaming were often equated with the natural

realm, in which "the mystery of your being is more clearly revealed to you in certain dreams than in the waking state. . . ."⁵⁵ Writers also speculated that human "Will" was relaxed during sleep, which presumably allowed this revelation of natural character in the absence of restrictive codes.⁵⁶ Perhaps because certain inhibitions were removed during the sleeping and dreaming state,

those faculties are most in action which have been least exhausted during the day. . . . Dreams are sometimes said to be the reflex of our waking thoughts, and the exponents of the soul's character. . . . Hence we conclude that some dreams originate from ourselves, from our bodily sensations and mental proclivities, and as such are often vain and idle like ourselves, whilst some are positively devilish and solicit us to evil.⁵⁷

Considering that dreams were believed to reflect one's true character as well as influence waking thought, feeling and conduct⁵⁸, it is hardly surprising that most Victorian artists who portrayed the sleeping woman represented her as harmless, passive and vulnerable. Such representations not only conformed with widely held opinion regarding the passive female nature, but also acted as a prescriptive which encouraged these desirable feminine qualities. Therefore, the sleeping woman theme represents not so much a deliberate reassertion of male dominance, but rather an engagement with a topical discourse which required a statement regarding the true character of the sleeper portrayed. The fact that the female body was selected rather than the male figure can be explained partly in terms of the convention that a beautiful object (the woman) represented an eminently suitable choice of subject for a beautifully painted object (the work), and partly as the extension of the tidy ideological equation between the dream

as natural and the woman as closer to nature.

The outrage which the New English Art Club critics expressed in their reviews of Steer's Sleep was generated primarily by what reviewers must have perceived as a complete denial of the sleeping woman tradition of passive and vulnerable female bodies, artfully displayed for the viewer's inspection. Instead of a sweetly slumbering beauty, viewers were greeted with an actively sexual woman who clutches her left breast, and parts her thighs with the left knee held up and away from the sofa in a manner utterly inconsistent with the relaxation of the body during sleep. As the Daily News remarked, this female has "no charm of attitude, none of that feline inertness of muscle which makes a sleeping woman so beautiful a thing."⁵⁹ R.A.M. Stevenson felt that Steer's picture showed "no sentiment and no feeling for the subtleties of the thing treated," while the Daily Telegraph pronounced the work "vulgar in its literalness."⁶⁰

The critical commentary indicates that reviewers were concerned about the implication of the hand on the breast, how this might be related to the impossibly awkward pose, and why Steer would have entitled the work Sleep. The Daily News noted the "uncompromising" nature of the woman's pose, while R.A.M. Stevenson described the figure as a "stiff doll, right in the rough, but rudely shaped."⁶¹ A.H.P. pronounced the pose "graceless and vulgar" and continued: "Is it so certain that composition and the arrangement of the female form into some kind of pattern that is pleasing is so utterly unworthy of a man's attention that he should deliberately

choose a pattern that is revolting? For this is what Mr. Steer has done. . . ."⁶² Similar to Stevenson's remark, Truth noted the "impossibly wooden" pose, and further commented that "the pose is unspeakably awkward and constrained, especially for a woman who is supposed to be asleep, and as to her limbs, you could positively knock nails into them."⁶³ The Daily Telegraph believed the "form of the sitter" to be "ill chosen" and "painted with more force than truth, variety or subtlety; the attitude is the awkward and constrained one of the unintelligent model: There is nothing of sleep or repose suggested, but, on the contrary, every muscle appears tense in the effort to keep the pose."⁶⁴ The Standard commented on the dubious nature of the title as well, asking, "And does his nude figure of 'Sleep' quite justify itself and its title? The head sleeps, and the hand sleeps, but the rest of the figure - is it really quiescent? Has it no conscious effort, no muscular action?"⁶⁵ Finally, D.S. MacColl objected that there was "nothing in the gawky attitude or stiff modelling to redeem the affair; least of all in the obviously mendacious title 'Sleep'."⁶⁶

In some senses, these comments directed at Steer's drawing and modelling could have been intended by the conservative critics as evidence of a badly painted and therefore insignificant work. However, the concern expressed regarding the title's veracity came from all quarters, including the more reactionary critics as well as NEAC supporters such as Stevenson and MacColl. Viewers were obviously disturbed by the sexual implications of the pose of this seemingly sleeping woman, and certainly Steer's impossible

combination of pose and title presented viewers with an awkward dilemma. It appears that this female is experiencing a form of sexual pleasure that does not require male participation.⁶⁷ Somehow this issue had to be reconciled with the belief that feminine desire was pathological and deviant, and that the respectable woman did not regard intercourse as pleasurable, but submitted to her husband in order to bear children and satisfy his desires. Steer's reference to the natural realm of sleep thus became highly problematic, as it implied that this woman's true nature, and perhaps that of all women, was essentially sexual and therefore naturally deviant. Without direct evidence, one cannot state unequivocally that Steer had intended a universal statement. However, it seems possible, as he gave the work an all-encompassing title and also included other natural signs, such as the bouquet of flowers at the bottom right, and the painted landscape on the back wall. Certainly, any suggestion that feminine nature was pathologically deviant would have been extremely disturbing during a period when so much attention was directed toward solving the "Woman Question" and thereby preserving the familial and imperial foundation. Those critics who refused to accept that Steer's nude was sleeping were confronted with an equally disturbing possibility. If this woman were awake, and therefore aware of her behaviour, then she was purposefully deviant and deliberately perverse.

In order to negotiate the discomfort which Steer's Sleep provoked, the critics resorted to a strategy of displacement and marginalization which shared much in common with the 1896 commentary

regarding A Nude. In addition to the rigid pose, reviewers also objected to the "violent" red drapery, and the figure's "brown" skin. While these issues could be discussed strictly in terms of Steer's brighter "impressionist" palette, as well as his departure from the academic tradition of darker-toned masculine bodies as opposed to pliant and pearly female flesh, the language which these writers selected also enabled them to "explain" the figure's sexuality with a discourse of deviance. By using various oppositional categories, they were able to position this female as "Other" and thus marginalize any threat posed by the image.

Nine out of fifteen reviewers made some comment with regard to the red drapery in Sleep, and although much of this attention must be attributed to the dominance of the drapery as a compositional element, their descriptive language indicates that the form, colour and luxurious appearance of the material created disturbing associations for certain viewers. Because the upper arms and shoulders of the figure were enveloped in the material, three critics read the drapery as a discarded item of clothing, perhaps making this body naked rather than nude. Truth noted that the figure was "clad, or rather unclad in a crimson-lined cloak," while A.H.P. referred to a "red-lined robe," and Q.E.D. described the garment as a "vermillion lined Japanese kimono," and further remarked upon the "scarlet" mass of colour.⁶⁸ The Daily News similarly described the drapery colour as "vivid scarlet," and the Daily Telegraph termed it "flaming scarlet."⁶⁹ The Daily Chronicle noted that Sleep was a "little violent in the red of the drapery," while D.S. MacColl

remarked upon the "screaming red" and believed that this red "conquere[d] and the flesh retire[d] defeated as something brown."⁷⁰ MacColl's criticism, with its vaguely biblical allusion to weakening of the flesh, suggests that the moral spirit of this woman had been overcome by worldly and fleshly evils, and she was therefore a fallen woman. The choice of the adjective "scarlet" implies that critics may have even had a particular fallen or "scarlet" woman in mind, being the adulteress Hester Prynne of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850). Because Hester Prynne had "fantastically embroidered and illuminated" her scarlet letter 'A', the emblem which this "brazen hussy" had been ordered to wear as shameful punishment was effectively transformed into a form of ornament which proudly flaunted her sexual transgression.⁷¹ Hester's regrettable lack of reticence as well as her suspicious love of finery also coincided with popular Victorian notions regarding the prostitute and fallen woman. Not only was showy attire felt to signify the fallen woman, but the very urge to possess finery was believed sufficient enticement to lure women astray.⁷² Possibly NEAC viewers sensed a resemblance between the "scarlet woman" and Steer's sexual sleeper with her vivid red drapery. Certainly this image did not conform with the academic tradition of the fallen woman as suffering or repentant, and indeed, this woman seems to self-consciously flaunt her sexual transgression. However, by categorizing her behavior as that of the sexually aware fallen woman, reviewers managed to avoid the implication that Steer may have intended a universal statement regarding feminine nature.

The description of the drapery as "vivid", "flaming", "violent",

and "screaming" also suggests a rhetoric of hysteria. Critics may have recalled Max Nordau's theories of derangement as applied to impressionist painters, and his assertion that red was a particularly favoured colour among sufferers.⁷³ These adjectives, then, may have implied that Steer's Sleep was the product of a deranged mind and not worthy of serious consideration. However, MacColl's description of the red as "screaming" should also be considered within the context of his noted distaste for highly keyed palettes. Given his repeated championing of Steer, it is unlikely that he intended to marginalize him as deranged or hysterical. R.A.M. Stevenson, also considered a Steer supporter, did not include a description of drapery colour in his review, but his reference to the crudity of the image may reflect his customary negative response to bright colour as well. Both MacColl and Stevenson consistently attacked chromatic brilliance as vulgar, insincere, and gaudy.⁷⁴

The language of hysteria may also represent attempts to express a sense of claustrophobia or spatial compression, as Steer's layers of patterning and painterly brushstrokes tend to flatten the image and exclude or dislocate the spectator in a confusing or disturbing fashion. None of the fifteen reviewers commented on this aspect of style, but perhaps they did not possess the modernist critical vocabulary which would have enabled them to formulate and articulate such perceptions.⁷⁵ Kate Flint has pointed out that even D.S. MacColl, who seemed to understand Impressionism more completely than his English contemporaries, had great difficulty in accepting the modernist assertion of flat canvas surface. Furthermore, she charts

an increasing conservatism and preference for sculpturesque form in MacColl's critical judgments toward the end of the century, and both factors help to explain MacColl's negative commentary regarding Sleep.⁷⁶ R.A.M. Stevenson's preference for what he described as "aerial volume" or "enveloping air" may also explain his belief that Sleep lacked refinement, because of its flattening, rather than amplification of space.⁷⁷

Critics may have also associated hysteria with the figure's rigid and sexual pose, as masturbators were also believed to suffer from various forms of mental derangements, including hysteria.⁷⁸ Intriguingly, hypnosis was advocated as a treatment for mental disorders and the "correction of vicious habits,"⁷⁹ and parallels were frequently drawn between natural sleep as auto-suggestion and hypnotism⁸⁰, as well as mesmerism, animal magnetism, induced sleep and artificial sleep.⁸¹ Rigid posture and muscle spasms could occur in hypnotized or mesmerized subjects⁸², and a lack of muscular relaxation had been observed in states of artificial somnambulism as well. "The eyes are closed or half-closed; when left to himself, the subject seems asleep, but even in this case the limbs are not in such a pronounced state of relaxation as . . . with lethargy."⁸³ Perhaps a further behavioural parallel might also be drawn between the addictive power of self-abuse and the increasing susceptibility to hypnotism with repeated exposure. Certain writers expressed concern about this escalating susceptibility, primarily because they believed that the personal influence of the hypnotist could gain ascendancy over the subject's own will, and provide occasion for abuse by "shady

operators."⁸⁴ If NEAC critics were aware of these issues, all of which had been discussed in accessible periodical reviews, and widely read manuals of health and religion⁸⁵, Steer's image would have become problematic on several levels. Perhaps this woman was a hysterical masturbator, or perhaps she was under the control of someone responsible for her sexual perversion. However, such a complete transgression from the wholesome morality ascribed to the female gender, albeit disturbing, would have also assisted viewers in marginalizing this woman as completely aberrant and atypical. Nevertheless, while these strategies did help viewers to avoid the universal implications of the all-encompassing title, Steer's audience still had to contend with the problem of a deviant as the subject of an art which should in fact aim to be "universal".

In addition to the pose and drapery, certain reviewers also objected to Steer's use of golden pigment and reddish shadows to model the form. On a formal level, this issue can be read as distaste for Steer's technique of coloured shadows and reflected light, as opposed to the carefully blended half-tones of cream and rose used by Academic painters. Although the conservative reaction can be understood partially in terms of adverse reaction to Steer's somewhat impressionist technique, it was probably his equation of bright colour and vulgarity which prompted D.S. MacColl's negative response to Steer's hot red shadows on a glowing golden body. Bruce Laughton has argued that MacColl "continually came down against Steer's 'impressionist experiments',"⁸⁶ but Laughton's hypothesis does not mesh with MacColl's earlier advocacy of impressionist artists, or

his repeated attempts to define the movement in British periodicals. Furthermore, in the same review, MacColl wrote favourably regarding Steer's A Vista⁸⁷, in which he noted the influence of both Monet and Constable. Finally, the same technique, with more conventional colouring, would be praised by MacColl when he reviewed a Steer nude at the NEAC 1901 Winter Exhibition.

The critics who disputed Steer's treatment of colour referred to the model as brown-skinned, a description which suggests the racial Other.⁸⁸ D.S. MacColl and the critics for Truth, the Daily News, and the Daily Telegraph all commented on the figure's "brown" or "brune" skin, while G.E.D. noted that it was not "possible that living flesh could be of exactly the same tint and value as the drab linen that covers the sofa."⁸⁹ R.A.M. Stevenson believed that the figure appeared "as if whittled out of brown wood with a penknife," similar to his 1896 comments regarding A Nude, which he described as a wooden doll.⁹⁰

An invocation of the racial Other provided viewers with an acceptable explanation for this "sleeping" woman's sexuality, as women of other races were believed to be "naturally" primitive, exotic, and sexually voracious. Sander Gilman has argued that black skin became the Victorian icon for deviant sexuality, in a sign system which expressed the need to control female sexuality in terms of colonial control over native populations.⁹¹ Furthermore, according to George Mosse, degeneration and deviancy became closely linked in a form of racist pathology.

The concepts of degeneration and the survival of the fittest inevitably became embroiled with European racism. The

characterization of inferior races was similar in almost every respect to that applied to so-called sexual degenerates. The stereotypes of beauty and ugliness were the same, and so were the fears which inspired them. Lack of morality was thought to be characteristic of an inferior race, part of its lack of self-discipline and proper spirituality.⁹²

Evidently, the distancing of Steer's nude as racial Other permitted viewers to account for the figure's sexual behaviour, as well as provide reassurance that this deviance posed no threat to the British family, society, or Empire.

Approximately half of the reviewers also attempted to label Sleep as a "study" in order to reduce viewing anxieties. Truth described the work as a "study of the female nude figure," and D.S. MacColl, as well as the critics for the Morning Post, Times and Daily Chronicle, all made similar references to this painting as a study.⁹³ The Daily Telegraph believed this "study of a nude" was artistically insignificant," and stated that although "studies" such as Sleep were "very well to 'keep one's hand in;'" they need not, however, be dragged before the public."⁹⁴ A.H.P. was also disillusioned with Steer:

Year after year, his admirers are subjected to the irritating disappointment of seeing him confine his production almost entirely to what, for want of a better name, I would call studio studies. The strange thing is that a man with such a maturity of capability should rest satisfied with such a strange immaturity of artistic conception.⁹⁵

This critical strategy, which positioned Steer as an "immature" artist, incapable of producing serious "adult" work, was characteristic of the format often applied to impressionist artists⁹⁶, and allowed viewers to marginalize Sleep as unfinished and "insignificant". This strategy may have also allowed critics to explain the disturbing

spatial dislocation produced by the contrast between the loosely worked background and the more finished appearance of the body. Finally, a description of Sleep as a study would have recalled the academic tradition of sterile anatomical study in life class, and may have provided a comforting counterbalance to the work's sexual content.

Evidently, Steer's evocation of the Rococo recumbent nude went unnoticed, as reviewers expressed no opinion regarding this aspect of style. Perhaps they remained silent because of an awareness that a debased version of the style had been taken up by purveyors of pornographic prints. They may have even known that the revelation of an erotic dream sequence experienced by a female character had become a popular device in Victorian pornographic literature.⁹⁷ Certainly the perceived modernity of Steer's nude outweighed the strength of any associations with the eighteenth century. Even the St. James Gazette, who had commented so favourably on Sleep, thought the work was an example of "modern" oil painting⁹⁸, while other reviewers who were less impressed by Steer's nude believed it modern to the extent that it represented a deliberate refutation of art historical tradition. A.H.P. declared Steer to be the "genuine and perhaps the only disciple of Manet," and explained that "what makes one almost angry is the curious want of sensitiveness to what should be the very simple canons of composition. . . . Do the whole conventions of past masters go for nothing with him?"⁹⁹ The Daily Telegraph, who commented on Steer's ability to imitate any "modern" style, felt that Steer had even topped Manet's efforts,

and observed how "far we are here from the delicious 'La Maja' of Goya . . . or even from the much abused 'Olympia' of Manet at the Luxembourg!"¹⁰⁰

Steer's evocation of eighteenth-century style and subject in The Mirror (Fig. 3) was much more favourably received by the reviewers who attended the NEAC Winter Exhibition of 1901. In contrast to the largely negative response which greeted his previous nude exhibits in 1896 and 1898, Steer's 1901 work became the subject of widespread approval. F.J.M. referred to the "adroit handling and general wealth of effect," while Vera Campbell believed the "whole picture" was "delightfully and originally decorative," and the Pall Mall Gazette described The Mirror as "brilliantly accomplished."¹⁰¹ Truth stated that Steer's work was "a triumph in the school of the nude," and the Athenaeum concluded that the work was a "genuine masterpiece."¹⁰²

In general, the entire range of reviewers from the conservative to the progressive felt that Steer had at last produced a work worthy of his talents. H.A.K. noted that "the first honours of the society usually go to Mr. P. Wilson Steer and Mr. Steer this year justifies the interest we feel in him completely."¹⁰³ Frank Rinder stated that The Mirror was "one of the very best things that Mr. Steer has given us," while the Times believed that in The Mirror and The Rainbow (Fig. 13), Steer had at last "found the right note after various experiments."¹⁰⁴ Truth observed:

Mr. Wilson Steer, for example, seems to have wearied of the daring experiments he used to be so frequently making. He has lost - let us hope permanently - that perversity which used to induce him to irritate all those who were really anxious to admire. Both in his landscape and in his figure painting he has never been more unlike his earlier and

irrepressible self than he is in the present Exhibition, and has certainly never been more satisfactory.¹⁰⁵

The Athenaeum remarked that although Steer's "extraordinary powers as a colourist" and the "purity of his artistic intentions" had never been doubted, his progress had been "subject to deviating influences."

Sometimes one has admired his construction, or his placing of the form in the picture; almost always one has delighted in his colour; generally one has had to lament the imperfect quality of his paint, but here at last, in The Mirror (76), all the qualities of painting unite.¹⁰⁶

The Mirror was considered to equal or surpass Steer's two landscape contributions to the 1901 exhibition as well. In comparison to The Rainbow and The Grove (Fig. 14), Rinder believed The Mirror to be "the most complete, the most triumphant, far and away the most beautiful."¹⁰⁷ Along with The Rainbow, the Messenger of Art ranked this "figure composition, gracefully designed and well handled" as "striking" work by Steer, and F.J.M. regarded the nude as "infinitely more attractive than his latest and spottiest essay in theatrical landscape on the same wall."¹⁰⁸ The Standard observed that The Rainbow and The Mirror were "two pieces which court attention and exact praise," while the Daily Graphic discussed these two works as evidence of Steer's success in both figure painting and landscape.¹⁰⁹ The Athenaeum reviewer, who had described The Mirror as a masterpiece, thought The Rainbow was "less remarkable", but even so, no other landscape in the room "could [hold] its own" against it.¹¹⁰

Steer's nude was also perceived favourably in comparison with the other figural works on display. Vera Campbell and the Times noted the regrettable absence of Charles Furse's portraits at this exhibition, while the Globe commented on the "dearth of good figure

pictures; but Mr. Steer sends one that is very well worthy of attention."¹¹¹ Tonks, who had contributed nudes to the previous NEAC exhibitions, appeared to have refrained this year in favour of depictions of a farmyard, an outdoor terrace, a portrait of Miss Rosa Waugh, and The Recitation, presumably an interior genre work.¹¹² Miss Rosa Waugh and The Recitation received only brief mention, while extremely little notice was taken of the other two works. William Strang, whose 1898 Diana had been compared favourably with Steer's Sleep, contributed the biblical subject Samson to the 1901 show, and was widely criticized for his eccentricity and willful ugliness. The Daily News, which had previously compared Steer's uncompromising Sleep with Strang's inoffensive Diana, now held up Steer's The Mirror as an example of what figure painting should be, in contrast to the "repulsive" Samson.¹¹³

Indeed, it appeared that the favourable reception of Steer's nude contributed to an overall perception that the New English Art Club artists had shed their former eccentricity and were now settling down to produce good serious work. The Morning Post noted that the 1901 exhibition "numbered among the most successful of the shows arranged by the New English Art Club," while the Daily Chronicle observed wistfully that the Club had "passed through its period of rebellion," and had reached a "staid and respectable age."¹¹⁴ According to Vera Campbell, the "N.E.A.C. ha[d] sobered down from its early eccentricities," but it "still retain[ed] its admirable note of sincerity and earnest striving after improvement."¹¹⁵ Significantly, Truth termed the exhibition "somewhat dull", and proceeded directly

to a discussion of Steer's abandonment of perverse experimentation.¹¹⁶ The Athenaeum drew a similar parallel between Steer's work and the exhibition as an entity: "If it were remarkable for nothing else, this year's show would be noteworthy for Mr. Steer's triumphant and undeniable success."¹¹⁷ Just as Steer's previous nude entries had helped to form perceptions of the Club as willfully eccentric, in 1901, his "reversion" to Fragonard led at least one reviewer to suspect that the NEAC had abandoned "modern ideals for standards that, in some cases, seemed old before the club was founded."¹¹⁸

Perhaps because of this widespread opinion that the NEAC artists had returned to more traditional practices of art-making, the reviewers wrote more explicitly in 1901 regarding their positions on innovation and tradition than they had previously. Certain art historical precedents were seen in a more favourable light than others, and the artist was also expected to add a certain note of "individuality" or "freshness". The Standard specified the examples deemed appropriate as sources of artistic inspiration, and further observed:

The men [at the New English Art Club] see the world freshly, and when they do not see it freshly altogether, they at least see it not in the way of mediocrities, but in the way of the true Classics. . . Constable as well as Turner, Watteau and Fragonard as well as Michael Angelo and Raphael.¹¹⁹

The Pall Mall Gazette described the issue similarly, stating that the "members of the New English Art Club, if they paint under an 'influence', do not cast their own individuality."¹²⁰ This desire for "freshness" appears on the surface to refer to the modernist stress on "individuality" and innovation. However, the specific

commentary regarding individual artists suggests that the NEAC reviewers were in fact more concerned with modern and "ideal" realism, and a sense of Englishness, than with a step forward in the inexorable march of formal innovation. The Times, for example, discussed the Rubens influence apparent in Steer's The Rainbow.¹²¹ The Daily Telegraph, however, preferred to make this work over into an up-to-date version of the "great English master" Constable, while Truth attributed Steer's triumph to "his skilful assimilation of the lessons taught by the 'Old English' artist - John Constable."¹²² Conversely, Conder, another NEAC artist who reworked the French Rococo, was criticized by the Daily Telegraph for "curiously un-English art."¹²³

Evidently the critics believed that Steer had achieved an attractive combination of modern innovation and reliance upon tradition in The Mirror. The Athenaeum remarked that Steer's use of grey tones compared favourably with that of Chardin, and the Pall Mall Gazette likened Steer to Fragonard.¹²⁴ Possibly the Truth critic also had the French Rococo in mind, as this reviewer felt that Steer had achieved his "triumph in the school of the nude" by "keeping to the footprints left on the sands of Art by those who have trodden before, rather than cutting out a new path for himself."¹²⁵ Perhaps these "triumphant" nudes reminded this reviewer of the adolescent female bodies of the French Rococo, particularly those of Watteau and Fragonard. At the same time, however, their body types also resemble those represented in more recent English academic nudes by artists such as Alma-Tadema. Similarly, the hairstyles of Steer's figures recall those depicted in eighteenth-century French

work, but are also much like the styles worn by Steer's contemporary portrait subjects. The fact that Steer had managed to blend hallowed tradition with agreeable modernity in an entirely successful fashion was alluded to by Vera Campbell, who pronounced The Mirror "delightfully and originally decorative."¹²⁶ The Daily Telegraph agreed, believing that "where [Steer] proves himself, for once, genuinely an inventor is in the pretty and decorative piece 'The Mirror'."¹²⁷

In contrast to the distaste and bewilderment expressed regarding his 1896 and 1898 nude exhibits, Steer's representation of female form in The Mirror received warm praise from conservative and progressive critics alike. The fact that all of these reviewers described these bodies with the conventional rhetoric of nature, charm and beauty indicates that The Mirror generally allowed viewers their accustomed leisurely and pleasurable perusal of form, and did not pose any serious difficulties to the viewing process as had Steer's previous efforts. In fact, according to D.S. MacColl, in "the capturing of charm and daintiness in such a subject the picture marks a real advance."¹²⁸ H.A.K. discussed the "vitality and graciousness of the appreciation of the feminine form," and the Daily News praised the "pulse of life in the figures," while Frank Rinder commented favourably on this "radiant study of two seated nude figures."¹²⁹ The Times, Globe, and Standard all described the work in terms of elegance, and the latter also admired the "natural and spontaneous pose."¹³⁰ Intriguingly, the Daily Telegraph agreed on the "fair form" of these figures, but praised their poses or

"attitudes" for being "designedly and not inappropriately artificial," as they "disport[ed] themselves on cushions."¹³¹ This writer appeared aware of traditional conventions of nude painting as they operated in The Mirror, but seemed to feel that Steer's compliance with these unspoken rules had enhanced rather than impeded appreciation of the work. Certainly neither of the two figures demonstrates an awareness of their sexuality through action or confrontational gaze. Any possibly discomfiting exposure of the pubic area was avoided through the position of the legs and discreetly arranged drapery. Furthermore, an appeal to beautiful female form as established by the Rococo, and perpetuated in Salon nudes, would have provided the necessary quotient of idealization, and the fact that the two women are virtually identical provided comfortable generalization as well. The critical commentary in general indicates that the two figures were entirely unproblematic in terms of pose and physical type.

Steer was also accorded a favourable reception for his modelling of form with light and colour. Although he used a format of reddish-coloured shadows on the body similar to those in Sleep, on this occasion he received no adverse comment regarding either draughtsmanship or the tone of the flesh. Certainly Steer's flesh tints in The Mirror were much more conventional than either the golden tone of Sleep or the polished white body in A Nude, and his coloured shadows were read as "the clever manoeuvring of light and shade on the nude figures," rather than any indication of racial or sexual deviance.¹³² Nor did reviewers attach any importance to the thick grey and brown strokes with which Steer indicated drapery

folds, or feel the need to describe the scene with a rhetoric of dirt or disease. Apparently in this instance, Steer's painterly brushwork was taken as evocation of the acclaimed Rococo rather than evidence of degenerate Impressionism. Almost all of the reviewers read the image as a delightful exploration of sunlight and female form, and discussed The Mirror in terms of a naturalizing discourse. D.S. MacColl, for example, appreciated Steer's "happy contemplation" of "what light makes of the bodies of women, the leaves of trees, the ranges of space. . . He is friends with light and he is friends with paint and on these simple terms becomes friends with beauty as hardly one of his contemporaries attains to be."¹³³ H.A.K. wrote of Steer's "intense appreciation . . . of the qualities of light as it disports itself indoors," while the Standard remarked upon The Mirror's "luminous and refreshing quality."¹³⁴ The Athenaeum appreciated Steer's ambitious transcription of "the effect of sunlight on flesh in an interior, contrasted with the dazzling haze of a sunlit river seen through the windows," and believed this effect was "rendered convincingly without straining in the least."¹³⁵ Vera Campbell seemed to believe that the sunlight provided the necessary "excuse" for the decorous representation of the nude female body:

The treatment of the bright daylight and reflected light from the mirror playing on the delicate flesh-tints is charming; the colouring is so warm that one feels there is a certain excuse for the ladies' costumes of 'airy nothings' by an open window with the snow on the ground outside. . . .¹³⁶

In addition to commending Steer's treatment of form with light and colour, many reviewers further remarked that the particular

combination of hue and tone in The Mirror was also worthy of admiration. Steer's colouring in general was referred to favourably by B.N., Frank Rinder, and the critics for the Times and Globe.¹³⁷ The Daily Telegraph reviewer specified that the "clear harmony, chiefly of grey, buff, and half-effaced pink" was "delightful," and H.A.K. also remarked upon "the beauty and silvery restraint of the colouring."¹³⁸ The Daily News noted in a similar fashion that the "silvery greys and greens in such happy apposition to flesh tints" was "delightful for its subtlety."¹³⁹ The Athenaeum asserted that it was:

in the transparent and luminous colour that the great delight of the picture is to be found. Surely since Chardin no one has painted such nacreous greys as the half tones of these nudes display. . . . relieved by the most delicate notes of apricot, coming here and there to an accent of red.¹⁴⁰

With a few exceptions, most critics commented favourably on Steer's incorporation of the mirror in this nude work, and appreciated the excuse it provided for the display of his painterly prowess through the depiction of sunlight and reflected light. The Pall Mall Gazette noted the "complicated" effect of the "cross lights and reflections - a tumult that is altogether interesting and distinguished," while the Daily Telegraph believed that the picture was "made gayer, too, by the dazzle of the complicated lights and reflections."¹⁴¹ Vera Campbell also appreciated Steer's use of reflected light, and F.J.M. referred to the "general wealth of effect."¹⁴² The Times, however, seemed to believe that Steer had gone too far in showing off his abilities and managed to address this issue with a curious underhanded compliment: "Mr. Steer's 'The Mirror' . . . has elegance of line and beauty of colour, though the design is too fantastic to please

anybody who asks in a picture for more than these."¹⁴³ The Daily News declared The Mirror "delightful for its subtlety," but then went on to say that "too much has been crowded on to too small a canvas, and the eye feels the want of a vacant space."¹⁴⁴ Because this writer also believed that the "concentration of interest in the mirrored torso is as happy as it is original," and therefore approved of the mirror in principle, this objection can likely be attributed to the presence of the two additional wall mirrors and their reflections. One mirror, apparently, was "happy" and original, whereas three were excessive.

In addition to providing a vehicle for the presentation of artistic virtuosity, the mirror also multiplied the expense of lovely female flesh on display. Again, critics tended to respond favourably to what many of them perceived as the creation of a third nude body by means of reflection in the oval mirror. Perhaps reviewers associated this depiction of three similarly idealized and generalized bodies with the theme of the Three Graces. B.N., for example, commented on Steer's "ingenious arrangement of nudes, one girl holding a glass to reflect another, and thereby giving the effect of three figures in the composition. It is as pretty a piece of light and graceful paganism as one would wish to see. . . ."¹⁴⁵ H.A.K. similarly observed that the "large oval mirror reflecte[d] almost completely the figure of the former girl," and the Daily Telegraph noted that reflection of "fair form, from a different aspect, assists the graceful design by a third figure."¹⁴⁶ Vera Campbell regarded Steer's use of reflection, which brought "three figures as it were into the

picture" as an "extremely clever composition," while Frank Rinder termed the pictorial scheme "indisputably poetic."¹⁴⁷ According to the Athenaeum, the "linear framework is of rare beauty, the repetition of one of the nudes in a mirror giving to the undulating lines a closer interdependence than is usually to be found in nature."¹⁴⁸

Steer's choice of a mirror as a compositional and thematic focus also represented a pictorial element with associations of both the modern and traditional, linking the work with many other modern "mirror" paintings executed during this period by NEAC, French avant-garde and English academic artists, as well as placing it within the centuries-old context of vanitas themes. Sketchbook evidence indicates that the composition and motif of The Mirror were derived directly from the 1649 Rokeby Venus of Velasquez. Steer's audience was probably familiar with this mirrored nude by Velasquez, since it had been shown at the Royal Academy Old Masters Exhibition in 1890.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, R.A.M. Stevenson's Velasquez had been published in 1895, and his study discussed this artist as the forerunner of modern-day Impressionism. Viewers may not have directly associated Steer's work with the Velasquez, as the Rokeby Venus was not mentioned as a source, but their commentary regarding Steer and tradition indicates that they were comfortable with placing The Mirror within the broader art historical context of vanitas paintings.

As John Berger has demonstrated, the vanitas tradition enabled the viewer to consume the female object which the painter had

displayed.

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as first and foremost, a sight.¹⁵⁰

In the case of Steer's image, viewers seemed to feel that the mirror's function as an object to be gazed at, and looked into, encouraged their own gaze at the nude bodies on display. For most critics, the fact that neither woman was using the mirror did not seem to matter. The mirror and its reflection were unproblematically consumed as delightful pictorial conventions which provided the necessary decorous excuse for an unhurried perusal of the naked female body.

Somewhat surprisingly, given his assertion of the primacy of painting's formal qualities during the 1893 Philistine debate¹⁵¹, D.S. MacColl was among those critics who objected to the fact that these women were not examining their own reflections. According to MacColl, the

most ordinary illustrator would have remarked that in the Mirror neither of the girls is in the least concerned with the ostensible motive of the piece, the mirror. No one is using the mirror, or pretending to, except Mr. Steer, who gets a third uniting figure by its reflection of one of them. I think this disrespect for the ostensible motive of action makes things a little uncomfortable.¹⁵²

Perhaps MacColl was taking the opportunity to demonstrate his critical prowess. He may have believed that his own position as exhibitor in the NEAC shows placed his critical judgments in doubt, and thus felt that an assertion of connoisseurial ability was occasionally

required. However, the discomfort which he expressed also indicates that MacColl continued to believe that the title of the work should construct the viewing process. Therefore, the women should be gazing into the mirror, and the painted reflection should be consistent with reality.

The Pall Mall Gazette was equally concerned that the motive for the work was "hardly explained."¹⁵³ In addition, the Daily Chronicle expressed a rather cynical opinion regarding the viability of Steer's mirror as a pictorial justification for nude bodies. "The composition is amusing, the two nude figures and the reflection of one in the glass are extremely well-painted. But the result is hardly a picture; rather a study of two models, at which you could fancy Mr. Steer himself looking with a critical, if approving eye."¹⁵⁴ Neither MacColl nor the critics for the Gazette or Chronicle seemed to recognize, as did others who commented favourably on the "reflection" of the recumbent body from a "different aspect", that the mirrors of many vanitas paintings, including the Boisby Venus, do not always reflect exactly as they "should". Because the expectation created by Steer's title was disrupted by the inaccuracy of the mirror's reflection and the inattention of the women depicted, the result was an uncomfortable slippage in the viewing process for a small sector of Steer's audience.

Assuming that Steer maintained an interest in creating a visual sting, this disruption of the viewing process may have been entirely deliberate. His choice of the mirror as pictorial format shares much in common with the decadent fascination with the toilet-table

motif and the theme of feminine self-absorption, and Steer draws attention to the opposition between artifice and nature by juxtaposing an interior with three mirrors against a sun-splashed river scene in the background. However, the preoccupation with appearance suggested by the inclusion of three mirrors is contradicted by the fact that no one is using any of them. Steer could have explained their inattention if he had given either of the two women a coy or limpid gaze in the direction of the viewer, as if awaiting the spectator's approval of the female bodies on display. Perhaps Steer's refusal to do so was meant as an intentional contradiction of popular beliefs regarding feminine concern with appearance and approval, and thus he attempted to offset this vision of ideal femininity with a slight disruption of the viewing process.

Steer's interest in shifting signification is also demonstrated by his blending of English and French signs with those of the modern and eighteenth century in setting as well as style. His depiction of items such as a chaise longue, eighteenth-century English-style console tables, and a Leda and Swan figurine apparently allowed his audience to characterize this comfortably appointed interior as tastefully modern. A reading of these objects as either costly originals or "classic revivals" would have contributed to this perception of modern decorative elegance which H.A.K. and the Pall Mall Gazette commented upon.¹⁵⁵ Possibly the creation of a more coherent space in The Mirror, as opposed to the disturbing compression of Sleep, became a factor in its favourable reception in 1901.

Most importantly, however, the depiction of two dainty and

generalized bodies holding an oval mirror was so strongly evocative of the eighteenth century that the majority of reviewers were able to consume this image as an admirable extension of the lineage of painterly flesh. The strength of tradition subsumed all signs of modernity to the extent that Steer's visual bite lost its sting and became an agreeably updated sensibility. It is doubtful that Steer deliberately courted or desired the overwhelmingly negative response to A Nude in 1896 or Sleep in 1898, and certainly The Mirror's closer links with tradition suggest a strategy of moderation in the aftermath of animosity. Nevertheless, it became equally clear that Steer was not entirely satisfied with The Mirror's lack of provocative power, for the next of his New English nudes to appear a few months later in 1902 returned to the format which favoured transgression over tradition and the modern over the moderate.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "The New English Art Club," Standard (16 November 1896): 3.
- 2 Bridget J. Elliott, "New and Not so 'New Women' on the London Stage: Aubrey Beardsley's Yellow Book Images of Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Réjane," Victorian Studies 31:1 (Autumn 1987): 57.
- 3 Frederick Wedmore, Notes on French Eighteenth Century Art (London: Fine Art Society, 1885): 11.
- 4 Reproductions of all these examples appeared in Pall Mall Magazine Pictures of the Year.
 - 1896: Royal Academy - Birth of Love Solomon J. Solomon
 Cupid Bound by the Nymphs J.R. Macquelin
 New Gallery - Blinded by Love Mrs. H.M. Stanley
 - 1897: Royal Academy - The Sea-Maiden Arthur Hacker
 An Idyll Richard Jack
 New Gallery - A Summer Idyll Edward Stott
 Fawn Sprite H.J. Draper
 - 1898: Royal Academy - In Evening Shade G.A. Storey
 Diana T.B. Rannington
 New Gallery - A Water-lily Mrs. H.M. Stanley
 Woodland Symphony W. Hounson Dyles
 - 1899: Royal Academy - Nature's Rhapsody Henry J. Stock
 New Gallery - Musings Edward Slocombe
 An Intrusion W. Hounson Dyles
 - 1900: New Gallery - The Water Baby H.J. Draper
 April Harold Speed
 The Song of the Sea W.G. Von-Glehn
 An Idyll Edward Slocombe
 - 1901: Royal Academy - The Cloud Arthur Hacker
 The Coming of Day H.S. Tate
 The Capture: "Where land and water kiss."
 H.J. Draper
 - 1902: Royal Academy - A Tuscan Pastoral G.H. Boughton
 Study for Psyche Solomon J. Solomon
 A Fallen Angel G.H. Boughton

For a useful catalogue of images which evoke the eighteenth century during this period see: Laurel Ellen Bradley, "Evocations of the Eighteenth Century in Victorian Art," diss., New York U, 1986. However, her analysis of this revival is problematic in that she reads it as much more of a nostalgic phenomenon, rather than acknowledging the decadent critical reworking of the period.

- 5 Fraser Harrison, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality (London: Sheldon, 1977): 147.

6 For discussion, see: Raymond F. Betts, "The Allusion to Rome in British Imperialist Thought of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," Victorian Studies 15:2 (December 1971): 149-199.

Also: Linda Dowling, "Roman Decadence and Victorian Historiography," Victorian Studies 28:4 (Summer 1985): 579-607.

7 See Sidney Low, "The Darkest Hour for England," Fortnightly Review 72 (December 1899): 958-967.

Also: F. Bayford Harrison, "Home Rule in the Eighteenth Century," Fortnightly Review 40:235 (July 1886): 68-78

8 Karl Hillebrand, "England in the Eighteenth Century," Contemporary Review 37 (January 1880): 1-30.

9 Hillebrand, 30.

10 Frederic Harrison, "A Few Words About the Eighteenth Century," Nineteenth Century 13 (March 1883): 392.

11 Frederic Harrison, 387.

12 Frederic Harrison, 402.

13 Ferdinand Rothschild, "French Eighteenth-Century Art in England," Nineteenth Century 31 (March 1892): 375.

14 Jane Munro, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum and Arts Council, 1986): 17.

This series of Old Master Exhibitions included:

1878: Art Treasures Exhibition at Manchester

1888: Grosvenor Gallery series of exhibitions

1890: Royal Academy Exhibitions of Old Masters

1897/98: Guildhall Art Gallery exhibition

15 For example: M.H. Spielmann, "The Housing of the Wallace Collection," Contemporary Review 72 (July 1897): 91-104.

16 Hartford House. A General Guide to the Wallace Collection (1958; London: Hartford House Trustees, 1966): 23, 28, 30 37-38.

17 Claude Phillips, Antoine Watteau, Portfolio Artistic Monographs (London: Seeley, 1895): 5-6.

18 Rothschild, 389-390.

...we live in a practical age when scientific improvement has affected the tenour and mode of our lives in their every detail. A return to the classical period for its decorations, furniture, tapestries, potteries, even for its paintings, is only possible to the collector - who can set them apart for a room or a gallery; but a general adoption of the art of the Renaissance, so that its feeling could pervade our everyday existence, would be out of keeping with all the essentials of modern life. French eighteenth-century art became popular and sought for, because of that adaptability which more ancient art lacks. Let the classical moralist inveigh to his heart's content against

a sensuous age that produced a sensuous art: the classical purist may call it rococo, affected, effeminate, meretricious, trivial - what you will - and lash himself into virtuous indignation at the decayed taste that indulges in a degenerate art. Fashions will fluctuate, but French eighteenth-century art seems destined to maintain its spell on society, and tighten its grip on the affections of the collector, so long as the present social, economic, and political conditions prevail, and until some unlooked-for catastrophe revolutionises the fate of the world, of art, and of art collectors.

19 Randall Davies, English Society of the Eighteenth Century in Contemporary Art, Portfolio Artistic Monographs (London: Seeley, 1907): 1. The author wished that Watteau had done more painting in England, to help recall further the "glories of the Augustan age!"

Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, L'Art du XVIII^{ème} Siècle, 3 vols., (Paris: Charpentier, 1881-1895): 196. The Goncourts refer to Boucher's "delicious decadence".

20 Bruce Laughton, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971): 74.

21 An undated reproduction of a work with the same title is located in the Witt Library of the the Courtauld Institute of Art.

22 "New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (16 April 1898): 7.

23 Q.E.D., "In the Picture Galleries: New English Art Club - Dunthorne's," World (20 April 1898): 34.

24 "The New English Art Club," Daily Telegraph (15 April 1898): 9.

25 I have been unable to locate a reproduction of this work.

26 Q.E.D., 34.

27 "The Dudley Gallery," Morning Post (16 April 1898): 2.

28 "The New English Art Club," Standard (15 April 1898): 2.

29 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.

30 "The New English Art Club," Daily News (18 April 1898): 9.

31 "The New English Art Club," Daily Graphic (16 April 1898): 4.

"New English Art Club," Times (18 April 1898): 3.

Unfortunately, other than these comments, and the exhibit number (84), I have no evidence of exactly where Slings might have been placed.

32 "Art Notes: The New English Art Club," Times (21 April 1898): 997.

- 33 "New English Art Club," Globe (16 April 1898): 6.
- 34 "The Chronicle of Art. - June," Magazine of Art 22 (June 1898): 454.
- 35 "Art and Artists," Sunday Times (17 April 1898): 8.
Times, 1898: 3.
- 36 Daily Graphic, 1898: 4.
- 37 "The New English Art Club," St. James Gazette (18 April 1898): 5.
- 38 Truth, 1898: 997.
Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.
- 39 Daily Chronicle, 1898: 7.
Morning Post, 1898: 2.
- 40 R.A.M. Stevenson, "The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (16 April 1898): 3.
D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review (23 April 1898): 552.
- 41 Standard, 1898: 2.
- 42 A.H.P., "The New English Art Club," Westminster Gazette (26 April 1898): 3.
- 43 Standard, 1898: 2.
- 44 Truth, 1898: 997.
- 45 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.
- 46 Truth, 1898: 997.
- 47 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.
- 48 Adeline R. Tintner, "The Sleeping Woman: A Victorian Fantasy," Pre-Raphaelite Review 2/1 (1978): 12-14.
- 49 Tintner, 13.
- 50 Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986): vii.
- 51 Dijkstra, 62.
- 52 Dijkstra, 78.

- 53 Dijkstra, vii.
- 54 "In the Days of Dandies," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 147 (January 1890): 1.
- 55 C.B. Radcliffe, "A Speculation About Dreaming," Contemporary Review 40 (July 1881): 111.
- 56 Frederick Greenwood, "Imagination in Dreams," Contemporary Review 62 (August 1892): 172.
- 57 "Dreams," Temple Bar 58 (April 1880): 510, 515, and 522.
- 58 Greenwood, 182.
- 59 Daily News, 1898: 9.
- 60 Stevenson, 3.
Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.
- 61 Daily News, 1898: 9.
Stevenson, 3.
- 62 A.H.P., 3.
- 63 Truth, 1898: 997.
- 64 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9. The description of the model as "unintelligent" also suggests a mapping of this woman's sexuality onto the working class. This was the only reviewer to adopt this strategy.
- 65 Standard, 1898: 2.
- 66 MacColl, 1898: 552.
- 67 In some senses, there does exist a tradition of erotic images structured for a male gaze which depict women experiencing sexual pleasure without man (Courbet's lesbian lovers, for example), but these images were intended primarily for private consumption rather than public exhibition. Steer's audience may have been aware of works like these, but they certainly would not have expected to see them at the NEAC shows.
- 68 Truth, 1898: 997.
A.H.P., 3.
Q.E.D., 34.
- 69 Daily News, 1898: 9.
Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.

- 70 Daily Chronicle, 1898: 7.
MacColl, 1898: 552.
- 71 Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (1850; New York, Toronto, London: Bantam, 1965): 51.
- 72 Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," Victorian Studies 32:2 (Winter 1989): 178-179.
- 73 Max Nordau, Degeneration, ed. George L. Mosse (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968): 28-29.
- 74 Kate Flint, "Moral Judgment and the Language of English Art Criticism 1870-1910," Oxford Art Journal 6:2 (1983): 62.
- 75 Perhaps Truth and the Daily Telegraph critics also intended to address this issue with their "Protean" strategy.
- 76 Kate Flint, Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception (London, Boston, Melbourne and Hanley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984): 22.
- 77 Flint, Impressionists in England, 17.
- 78 Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud; Volume I, Education of the Senses (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984): 294-318.
- 79 Chas. Lloyd Tuckey, "The New Hypnotism - A Reply," Contemporary Review 63 (March 1893): 422.
- 80 Chas. Lloyd Tuckey, "The Applications of Hypnotism," Contemporary Review 60 (November 1891): 675.
- 81 Ernest Hart, "Hypnotism and Humbug," Nineteenth Century 31 (January 1892): 24-25.
- 82 "Mesmerism and Hypnotism," Quarterly Review 171 (July 1890): 248.
- 83 C. Theodore Ewart, "The Power of Suggestion," Nineteenth Century (August 1890): 255.
- 84 Tuckey, "Application," 678-686.
- 85 Gay, 204-318.
- 86 Laughton, 65. Andrew Forge also writes about this attempt by MacColl to dissociate Steer from Impressionism, but implies that it arose more as an effort to make him more "English", rather than as a formal distaste for Impressionist style. See Andrew Forge, intro.,

P. Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (London: Arts Council, 1960): 6.

87 No reproduction of this work is available. Laughton, 137-138.

88 If critics associated this golden flesh with male desire, and the traditionally darker colours reserved for masculine bodies, they may have also been reacting to the figure's sexuality in terms of a female masquerading as a male.

89 MacColl, 1898: 552.

Truth, 1898: 997.

Daily News, 1898: 9.

Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.

Q.E.D., 34. (This writer also mentioned a Japanese kimono.)

90 R.A.M. Stevenson, 3. [See also: R.A.M. Stevenson, "The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (20 November 1896): 3. This repetition suggests that both images were read as sexually aware women, prompting similar defensive reaction from Stevenson.]

91 Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," Critical Inquiry 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 209 and 237.

92 George L. Mosse, "Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," Journal of Contemporary History 17:2 (April 1982): 230.

93 Truth, 1898: 997.

MacColl, 1898: 2.

Morning Post, 1898: 2.

Times, 1898: 3.

Daily Chronicle, 1898: 7.

94 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 7.

95 A.H.P., 3.

96 Flint, "Moral Judgment," 64. Again, it is doubtful that MacColl intended to label Steer as "immature". Most likely he was attempting to downplay the work as a bad experiment or "blunder".

97 Gay, 374.

98 St. James Gazette, 1898: 5.

99 A.H.P., 3.

100 Daily Telegraph, 1898: 9.

101 F.J.M., "Art: Society of British Portrait Painters - New English Art Club," Speaker (30 November 1901): 251.

Véra Campbell, "In the Picture Galleries: New English Art Club - British Artists' - New Gallery - Forbes and Paterson," World (20 November 1901): 26.

"The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (13 November 1901): 2.

102 "Art Notes: The New English Art Club," Truth (21 November 1901): 1357.

"The New English Art Club," Athenaeum (30 November 1901): 741.

103 H.A.K., "Some Picture Exhibitions," St. James Gazette (12 November 1901): 5.

104 Frank Rinder, "In the London Picture Galleries," Art Journal (January 1902): 27.

"Gainsborough's 'Duchess,' and Other Pictures," Times (13 November 1901): 7.

105 Truth, 1901: 1357.

106 Athenaeum, 741.

107 Rinder, 27. Re: The Grove - According to Laughton (141) either this work, now known as The Oak Grove, Bridgnorth, or The Grove, Bridgnorth, was shown at the NEAC 1901 Winter Exhibition.

108 "The Chronicle of Art. - January," Magazine of Art 26 (January 1902): 139.

F.J.M., 251.

109 "The New English Art Club," Standard (11 November 1901): 4.

"New English Art Club," Daily Graphic (9 November 1901): 13.

110 Athenaeum, 741.

111 Campbell, 26.

Times, 1901: 7.

"The New English Art Club," Globe (9 November 1901): 6.

112 Jane Johnson, comp., Works Exhibited at the Royal Society of British Artists 1824-1893 and at the New English Art Club 1899-1917, Volume 2 O-Z and at the New English Art Club 1899-1917 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collector's Club, 1975): 611. I have not been able to locate reproductions of these works.

113 Daily News, 1898: 9.

"The New English Art Club," Daily News (11 November 1901): 6. I have not located a reproduction of Ennui.

- 114 "Dudley Gallery," Morning Post (12 November 1901): 2.
 "The New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (9 November 1901): 2.
- 115 Campbell, 26.
- 116 Truth, 1901: 1357.
- 117 Athenaeum, 741.
- 118 Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.
- 119 Standard, 1901: 4.
- 120 Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.
- 121 Times, 1901: 7.
- 122 "New English Art Club," Daily Telegraph (14 November 1901): 7.
Truth, 1901: 7.
- 123 Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7. In addition to the Telegraph's comment, Conder's nude, Bathers, was criticized by the Daily News (1901: 6) for figures which disturbed the "serenity of the landscape." Vera Campbell (26) and the Standard (1901: 4) thought that Conder should go back to fan painting. Jeremy Maas' Victorian Painters (1969; London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1988): 169, includes an undated reproduction of a work by this title. (Fig. 15)
- 124 Athenaeum, 741.
Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.
- 125 Truth, 1901: 1357.
- 126 Campbell, 26.
- 127 Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7.
- 128 D.S. MacColl, "Picture Exhibitions of the Month," Saturday Review (7 December 1901): 712.
- 129 H.A.K., 5.
Daily News, 1901: 6.
 Rinder, 27.
- 130 Times, 1901: 7.
Globe, 1901: 6.
Standard, 1901: 4.
- 131 Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7.

- 132 F.J.M., 251.
- 133 MacColl, 1901: 711-712.
- 134 H.A.K., 5.
Standard, 1901: 4.
- 135 Athenaeum, 741.
- 136 Campbell, 26.
- 137 B.N., "New English Art Club," Westminster Gazette (13 November 1901): 3.
Rinder, 27.
Times, 1901: 7.
Globe, 1901: 6.
- 138 Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7.
H.A.K., 5.
- 139 Daily News, 1901: 6.
- 140 Athenaeum, 741.
- 141 Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.
Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7.
- 142 Campbell, 26.
F.J.M., 251.
- 143 Times, 1901: 7.
- 144 Daily News, 1901: 6.
- 145 B.N., 3.
- 146 H.A.K., 5.
Daily Telegraph, 1901: 7.
- 147 Campbell, 26.
Rinder, 27.
- 148 Athenaeum, 741.
- 149 Munro, 17 and 48.
- 150 John Berger, Ways of Seeing (1972; London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1967): 31.
- 151 Kate Flint, "'The Philistine' and the New Art Critic: J.A. Spender and D.S. MacColl's Debate of 1893," Victorian Periodicals Review 1 (Spring 1968): 3-8.

152 MacColl, 1901: 712.

153 Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.

154 Daily Chronicle, 1901: 3. This reviewer also resorted to the strategy of describing the work as a study, and made it clear that this description was intended in a pejorative sense. The Times (1901: 7) reviewer, who believed the design was "fantastic", also described The Mirror as a study, probably to convey similarly negative meaning. The only other reviewer to use this description was Frank Rinder (27), and the warmth of his praise for the work makes it clear that no slight was intended. Given the small size of The Mirror (40.9 x 55.2 cm) one might expect more reviewers to have referred to it as a study. The fact that they did not further indicates the strength of The Mirror's evocation of intimately scaled Rococo works.

155 H.A.K., 5.

Pall Mall Gazette, 1901: 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DELICATE BALANCE

Steer's 1902 A Nude (Fig. 4) was the last of the four nudes which were shown at the New English Art Club between 1896 and 1902, and in many respects, this work sums up his investigation into the visual language of painting the female nude. Steer's 1902 depiction of a golden body, modelled with red shadows and posed in a controversial manner, resembles the format used for Sleep in 1896, while the simple title and confrontational gaze recall the 1896 A Nude. However, instead of directly reworking the French avant-garde, or appealing to eighteenth-century tradition, in 1902, Steer mobilized the art historical examples of Rubens and Etty in his pursuit of a Degas-flavoured English nude. Because of the critics' desire to view NEAC artists as the modern heirs to British painting traditions, the evocation of Etty in particular allowed Steer to engage in a delicate balancing act between modern corporeal reality and the traditional art historical canon. Thus he was able to show a work which might otherwise be considered too inflammatory for public exhibition.

Reiterating their discussions of 1901 regarding the NEAC, reviewers continued to agree in 1902 that the Club was gradually abandoning the eccentricities and extravagances which had characterized its earlier exhibitions. Significantly, critics attributed the new sobriety and maturity demonstrated by the NEAC artists to their return to earlier nineteenth-century English painting

practices. The Daily Telegraph observed that this show displayed

as a whole, an agreeable and distinguished aspect, but at the same time a look of greater calmness and sobriety than it wore in its earlier years. Its days of militant impressionism in the wake of the Continental painters are over; Constable reigns supreme where before Manet, Claude Monet, Renoir and their fellows were worshipped.¹

The Sunday Times noted that some of the painters seemed to "have sought refuge in the quietest traditions of the Victorian era," while the Guardian commented likewise on the "mid-Victorian aspect of so many of the pictures," and observed that it "might be put forward with some show of reason that the New English Art Club is the only real descendant of Old English art."²

Once again, the exhibition as an entity was characterized by the preponderance of landscapes, portraits, and the "genteel interiors" which F.J.M. believed were "the body and spirit of the club."³ The Daily News believed this "success of sobriety" came "close to lugubriousness," and attributed the "depressing welcome" to "half a dozen life-sized portraits in black with dark backgrounds, and nearly as many night landscapes, aided by a few black frames. . . ." Fortunately, this depression was "not permanent. Mr. Wilson Steer's 'A Nude' (No. 113), the central piece on the long wall as we enter, is the most emphatic protest against the prevalent gloom. It is a cheerful figure, cheerfully sketched. . . ."⁴ The Daily News seemed to appreciate the contrast which Steer's nude formed with the dark tonality of other NEAC exhibits, but this notice was one of only three favourable commentaries which Steer received regarding A Nude. Fifteen other reviewers were quite unable to regard Steer's nude with the appreciation expressed by D.S. MacColl, and the critics

for the Daily News and the Athenaeum.

By this time, Steer's position as the NEAC's leading landscapist was virtually an established fact among critics. As the Times noted, the "unexpected does not generally happen in a picture gallery. On these walls one naturally looks for Mr. Wilson Steer's landscapes. . . ."⁵ In 1902, as in previous years, many critics expressed a definite preference for Steer's landscape work, and published generally favourable notices of his Bridgnorth as well as his portrait of Mrs. Spencer Butler.⁶ Those critics who were particularly pleased with the two works hastened to position them as exemplary extensions of the British landscape and portrait traditions. C.L.H., for example, described Steer's "Constable-like landscape" as a "dashing presentment of infinite space on a little canvas," and believed that in his portrait, Steer had "dared to be commonplace with triumphant success."⁷ The Daily Telegraph commented on the "simple", "masterly", and "wholly realistic" aspects of the portrait, and declared, "the same artist's landscape, 'Bridgnorth,' is Constable out-Constabled. . . ."⁸ D.S. MacColl, who observed that Mrs. Spencer Butler was "singularly quiet good work," went so far as to propose that if Steer's landscapes were hung beside those of Constable, the effect would be "magnificent."⁹ The Guardian also believed that Steer's success was entirely due to his adoption of respectable English art practices.

With Mr. Steer and Mr. Rothenstein (to mention two of the leaders here) a long lane of foreign study and experiment seems after many turns have led them to the inheritance of the old English tradition. . . . Perhaps the best example of this sincerity in painting is Mr. P. Wilson Steer's portrait of 'Mrs. Spencer Butler,' a plain

statement in black and grey, full of insight and human sympathy. In his landscape 'Bridgnorth' one finds the same qualities. . . .¹⁰

Not only did Steer's A Nude suffer by comparison with his own work in landscape and portraiture, it also fared poorly in contrast with Douglas Robinson's White Peignoir, a nude which the more conservative critics praised for its affinity with those by English academic artists.¹¹ The Standard observed that "Mr. C.H. Shannon's themes and methods are recalled a little by the 'White Peignoir' of Mr. Douglas Robinson - a dignified treatment of the nude against drapery, with sofa of olive green and a wall of chocolate grey."¹² Vera Campbell described the work as a "pleasant nude study, which in ease of pose and softness of colouring somewhat recalls the work of Albert Moore."¹³ The Daily Chronicle proceeded directly from a discussion of the "heavy and unrefined" "ugliness" of Steer's nude, to a generally favourable assessment of Robinson's exhibit. "Really, it is pleasant to turn to Mr. Douglas Robinson's nude, 'White Peignoir,' far weaker in drawing and modelling, but with a feeling for beauty in the pose of the woman, in the lines of her body, in the folds of her drapery, as well as in the quiet colour scheme."¹⁴ Steer may have demonstrated greater technical proficiency than Robinson, but the Daily Chronicle apparently admired Robinson's feeling for beauty much more than Steer's unrelenting frankness.

Apart from the favourable commentary of D.S. MacColl, the Athenaeum, and Daily News, in general the response to Steer's nude was negative in character. Of the fifteen other reviewers, the Times, Manchester Guardian, Daily Graphic, and Magazine of Art entirely

omitted discussion of A Nude in favour of Steer's Bridgnorth and Mrs. Spencer Butler, while Truth, Vera Campbell and F.J.M., also among the most conservative of the NEAC critics, published brief and condemnatory notices.¹⁵ The remaining twelve reviewers responded to Steer's nude with comments that echoed the critical discourses of 1896 and 1898, in their mixture of praise for certain technical elements, combined with uneasiness or even outrage regarding pose, colour, and perceived subject matter.

Once again, critics tended toward a strategy of displacement in their discussions of A Nude. However, instead of explaining this woman's sexuality in terms of pathological deviance or racial Otherness, the "coarse flesh", "graceless pose", and "ample" physique of Steer's nude became signs which enabled critics to clearly identify this female as a member of the lower classes. Interestingly, these allusions to the woman's social position appeared in favourable, lukewarm and negative reviews. In Myths of Sexuality, Lynda Nead has demonstrated that the "working classes were perceived by the middle classes as an 'other' order," and the immoral and dangerous character of the lower classes was believed to represent a threat to British society and Empire.¹⁶ Furthermore, the "animal lusts" attributed to this group raised the "spectre of sexual depravity and reckless breeding."¹⁷ This rapid and indiscriminate reproduction, which threatened to overtake the growth rate of the respectable middle class, generated widespread concern, but was especially alarming to those who ascribed to nineteenth-century eugenic theory. Certainly the immorality and sexuality of the working-class woman stood in contrast

to the morally pure and "asexual" norm of femininity. Therefore, the fact that NEAC critics mobilized a working-class rhetoric in their discussion of A Nude indicates that they did in fact perceive the image as disturbingly sexual rather than passively erotic, and thus felt the need to position this woman outside their own middle class.

For the more conservative viewers, it was Steer's use of golden pigment in the body, modified by warm shadows and reflected light from the red drapery, which seemed to prompt their reading of the figure's "coarse" flesh. Nevertheless, Steer's somewhat impressionist technique did not generate the same degree of controversy which this style had provoked in the 1898 Sleep. Generally, progressive reviewers who were pleased with A Nude praised Steer's colour and modelling, while the more reactionary critics seemed disturbed by this aspect of his style. D.S. MacColl, who had commented on the "defeated" brown flesh of Steer's Sleep, now praised him for the "golden colour, its shadows filled with warm reflections from a drapery."¹⁸ The Athenaeum also appreciated the "solidity of relief and the exuberance and sumptuousness of colour" in Steer's figure, while the Daily News compared the colour scheme with the "palette of Romney."¹⁹ While these critics who admired the work described the flesh as warm, sumptuous, or exuberant, detractors deemed the body "rather unnecessarily hot in colour," and perceived a disturbing divergence from the rose and cream bodies of academic or Salon nudes.²⁰

The Daily Telegraph and Daily Chronicle in particular seemed to read Steer's warm palette as a sign of the figure's sexual nature. The Telegraph, for example, spoke of the "agitated crimson draperies"

and the "scintillating colour" which recalled Monticelli, and concluded by describing this image as an example of "crude voluptuousness."²¹ The Daily Chronicle regarded the work as Steer's attempt "to say, here is my model as I found her, heavy and unrefined, her flesh coarsened by the hot red shadows that I have not attempted to tone down. . . ."²²

In addition to objections regarding the quality of female flesh, Steer was also criticized for the graceless pose and unrefined body of A Nude. The corpulent frame of this female nude utterly denied the Greek canon of proportions, and thus suggested an aspect of corporeal and sexual reality instead of a timeless evocation of ideal and "sexless" beauty. The figure's hand, which clutched the pubic area, further emphasized the sexual element, rather than serving as an appropriate shield of modesty. Finally, the woman's rather threatening gaze up at the viewer not only indicated her awareness of the spectator, but similar to the 1896 A Nude, also seemed to implicate the viewer as violator of her privacy. Because of the absence of a descriptive title, such as Steer had given the 1898 Sleep, on this occasion critics were unable to express their discomfort regarding this controversial pose in terms of a specific dispute over the ostensible theme of the painting. Nevertheless, their uneasiness about this woman's animal-like sexuality surfaced in descriptions of the body and the painting as crude, coarse, and brutally honest. B.N., one of the more conservative critics, noted the figure's "graceless" quality, and Vera Campbell agreed that Steer's nude was "absolutely inexcusable in ugliness and lack of grace."²³ P.J.M.

preferred to dismiss this "india-rubbery female figure" as a "subtle piece of humour."²⁴ C.L.H., whose commentary was less reactionary, observed that Steer always showed "truth and vigour," but seldom "beauty and grace," and described this nude as "honest to the point of brutality."²⁵ The Daily Telegraph noted the "ample rather than symmetrical" proportions of Steer's figure, and added that it was "no hymn even to the beauty of earth - such as the Venetians sang when they painted their lovely courtesans - but a deliberate presentment, a little sinister in its coldness, of crude voluptuousness."²⁶ The Daily Chronicle responded with similar observations:

She is by no means a beautiful model; she would be gross even by the side of Rubens' most flamboyant women; and Mr. Steer has painted her with unrelenting frankness. He seems to say, here is my model as I found her, heavy and unrefined. . . if she is not beautiful in her ugliness the fault is hers, not mine. You can fancy him washing his hands of all responsibility.²⁷

Although none of the critics referred to the avant-garde French sources which may have influenced A Nude, perhaps they sensed a resemblance between the coarsened figure of Steer's A Nude, and the large-bodied nudes by Degas. Even before the eruption over his L'Absinthe, which sparked the MacColl-Philistine debate of 1893, Degas's common and crude subject matter had received comment in the mainstream British press.²⁸ In his 1891 Impressions and Opinions, George Moore drew further attention to the peasant class from which Degas selected his nude subjects, and also provided an artist's statement which attested to Degas's interest in positioning the spectator as voyeur:

'Hitherto,' Degas says, as he shows his visitor three large

peasant women plunging into a river, not to bathe, but to wash or cool themselves (one drags a dog in after her), 'the nude has always been represented in poses which presuppose an audience, but these women of mine are honest, simple folk, unconcerned by any other interests than those involved in their physical condition. Here is another; she is washing her feet. It is as though you looked through a key-hole'.²⁹

Two years later, the "Philistine" debate polarized the conflict between the conservative and New Critics as they argued over the respective importance of subject matter versus the formal qualities of painting. While the New Critics held up Degas as a modern master, and elevated his technical abilities, the "Philistines" criticized him for his unsavoury, immoral and common subject matter. Neither side managed to change the opinion of the other; if anything, the debate acted primarily to solidify these opposing views.³⁰ Therefore, one might expect the New Critics to look upon a Steer reference to Degas in a favourable manner, while the more conservative critics would likely be disturbed by such a reference.

The fact that Degas was not brought up as a possible modern source for A Nude should be considered within the context of the English backlash against the "decadent" French avant-garde which occurred in the wake of the Wilde trial.³¹ Any direct mention of Degas, with his unsavoury reputation, would be avoided by those who favoured A Nude, lest it "stain" Steer's work by association, and the conservative critics probably preferred to ignore this taboo subject entirely. Viewers were probably disturbed by the woman's rather malevolent gaze, and may have believed that Steer intended to position them not only as Degas-style voyeurs, but as violators whose unwelcome presence is observed by the woman whose body has been so

frankly revealed. As in 1896, Steer received no comment with respect to this confrontational gaze, but again, critics may have been unwilling or unable to voice their objections. Despite silence on these issues, the commentary of both conservative and progressive factions indicates that certain reviewers did in fact perceive this nude as a blending of modern and past art references. To a certain extent, this perception is demonstrated by their adoption of generally the same critical format for Steer as had been applied to Degas. Disapprobation or approval of the image's modernity surfaced in specific remarks as well. The Pall Mall Gazette, for example, noted with some relief that "the richness of the drapery in the background gives a rather welcome note of convention," while F.J.M. commented on Steer's "eternally youthful" vision, but then hastened to assure readers that "his capacity for being influenced by others - not moderns, but the best of the dead - has no bounds."³² The Athenaeum notice, however, indicates that this reviewer found Steer's combination of past and modern references entirely agreeable.

His nude figure (113) shows the influence of Rubens, but it is none the less marked by a personal feeling for the quality of the flesh. . . . He does not, it is true, find in the nude its finer qualities of imaginative expressiveness. His types are not select and even common, but his perception of the simple sensuous charm of colour and modelling is scarcely equalled among modern artists.³³

Finally, D.S. MacColl observed that Steer would have produced "something very fine. . . that English art has not yet compassed," if he had "completely worked out" his pictorial scheme.³⁴ MacColl's remarks indicate both his belief that Steer was attempting to produce a modern English nude as well as his approval of that ambition.

While Degas went unmentioned, many critics sought to establish historical precedent for Steer's frank portrayal of female form through the citation of Etty and Rubens. One might explain this aspect of the 1902 commentary by noting that more works by Rubens and Etty, as compared to those by Degas, had been exhibited in London during the fin-de-siècle, and that the reference to Etty and Rubens was the inevitable result of greater familiarity. However, the manner in which these historical examples were mobilized by the various critical factions demonstrates that much more than familiarity, connoisseurship, or art-historical fact-finding was at stake. Because these "Old Masters" were also positioned as stylistic forerunners of modern Impressionism, they could be called upon by the progressive critics as unproblematic authority for Steer's nude. Rubens was a particular favourite among the New Critics, who held up his vibrant colour and swirling brushwork as a foreshadowing of modern technique, while his democratic subject matter was used to advantage in their arguments with the "Philistine" over the priority of formal resolution and content.

George Moore ranked Rubens with "Michael Angelo" and Velazquez as the greatest painters in history, and posited a critical lineage which linked Rubens, Watteau, Turner and Gainsborough.³⁵ R.A.M. Stevenson declared his admiration for Rubens in an 1898 monograph, but noted with derision that "persons who are disquieted about the bearing of art upon morals turn round Rubens like a sanitary inspector sniffing about the apertures of a suspicious system of drainage."

Rubens has proved a stumbling block to the modern Purists and Aesthetes, who can scarcely hear his name without agitation. . . . 'Oh those horrible fat women,' say all who confuse art and nature, who cannot separate the contemplation of beauty from the animal distaste or desire of possession. When asked to look at Rubens's pictures, one is not asked to fall on the necks of his models any more than one is required to feel bloodthirsty when looking at a battle-piece. Anything strong and consistent in character may be fit for a scheme of formal art; for the working out of a pattern. And when we deal with impressionistic art, who shall say what is an unfit motif?³⁶

Compared with Rubens's controversial status, Etty's position as a late great member of the Royal Academy conferred a certain aura of respectability upon his artistic production. The nudes which Etty exhibited at the Royal Academy between the 1820s and 1840s were criticized at that time for being "entirely too luscious for the public eye,"³⁷ but by 1887, British opinion had mellowed to the extent that Alfred Beaver was able to cite Etty's work, and that of late nineteenth-century academicians as appropriate sources of inspiration for those who wished to paint the "unspeakable beauty of the human form." "With a very few exceptions, of whom Etty was the most remarkable, the English have never, until the present day, been successful in depicting the nude form. . . ."³⁸ In 1888, Etty's work was also accorded the honour of inclusion in the Grosvenor Gallery series of Old Master Exhibitions. On this occasion, the early nineteenth-century constraints of "style" and "classic" subject were lamented by the Artist's reviewer, who believed that Etty's "inventiveness and quick perception were first weakened and ultimately destroyed by the necessity laid upon him to please the habit of thought of his time." "As a modern Impressionist, and amid the surroundings of the present day, he would probably have gained a far

greater place in the art world than can now be given him."³⁹ In 1906, Frederick Wedmore discussed Etty as the nineteenth-century heir to Boucher, and observed that this artist was "sometimes . . . at his best in the larger and simpler of his studies of the Nude. They reveal the beauty of Nature into which he penetrated so deeply. . . ."⁴⁰

In contrast to Etty, Rubens's reputation as an "impressionistic" painter of amply proportioned female bodies allowed the Athenaeum and Daily News to position Steer as the modern exemplar of this tradition. Detractors also noted the influence of Etty and Rubens, but likely turned to such historical examples as a means of distancing Steer's nude from the present, and thereby negotiating anxieties regarding the work's relationship with the real and the modern. However, because of their distaste for A Nude, as well as the customary critical format which favoured past examples of "impressionism" over the debased modern version, these critics could not allow Steer's nude a place within the secure tradition of painterly flesh. These two competing sets of associations obviously posed serious difficulties for critics who attempted to negotiate A Nude by appealing to art historical precedent, yet still make it clear that Steer should be excluded from this respectable lineage. B.N., for example, observed "hints of Rubens and Etty," but believed the figure "so graceless that the ordinary spectator must be excused if he fails to appreciate their presence," while C.L.H. described Steer's "Rubens-like nude" as "honest to the point of brutality."⁴¹ The Morning Post seemed to have a Ruskinian version of ideal Nature in mind, as this reviewer remarked that Steer's recollection of Rubens was painted with "an

impetuous force which would have born tampering by the limitations consequent on a more accurate study from Nature."⁴² The Daily Chronicle felt that Steer had outdone even "Rubens' most flamboyant women," while the Daily Telegraph held up Steer's nude with its "savour" of Etty and Monticelli, as a "crude" and even "sinister" contrast to the "lovely courtesans" of the "Venetians."⁴³ While all of these reviewers encountered some difficulty in merging the two divergent critical paths, the Standard's circular argument in particular exemplifies the confusion among the conservative faction.

Mr. Wilson Steer's somewhat Rubens-like, or somewhat Jordaens-like nudity (No. 113), makes no pretension, of course, to the most admirable beauty of last year's picture of two women with a mirror upheld between them. But in connection with it we have mentioned great names, and it cannot be without merit.⁴⁴

In 1902, as in previous years, the NEAC critics persisted in the classification of Steer nudes as sketches or studies, and again, this strategy was taken up by reviewers who intended the description in a pejorative sense, as well as by those who praised A Nude. Labelling the work as a study may have allowed critics to explain the stylistic difference between the more finished body and the sketchy background⁴⁵, as they had done in the 1898 Sleep commentary. However, in 1902, the term seems to have also raised the issue of how successfully Steer referred to Etty and Rubens. Those reviewers who invoked the study in order to marginalize A Nude apparently shared the opinion that although nudes by Etty and Rubens might be direct or even flamboyant, Steer's similar interest in corporeal reality over-stepped the established boundaries of taste by being deliberately crude and unrelentingly frank. B.N., the reviewer who believed the

spectator should be excused for his/her failure to notice the influence of Etty and Rubens in this "graceless" nude, described the work as a "nude study," as did the Truth critic, who observed that A Nude was "too suggestive of Etty trying to paint like Rubens to be wholly satisfactory."⁴⁶ The Morning Post reviewer, who believed that Steer's "impetuous force" could have "born tempering," also noted that this Rubens-inspired work was "more rightly to be described as a large sketch."⁴⁷

The Daily Telegraph and Daily Chronicle both seemed to have resorted to such descriptions in order to equivocate. Pronouncing the work a "brilliant study," the Telegraph noted the influence of Etty and Monticelli, but further described this "deliberate presentment" as "sinister" and "crude." This was an ambivalent assessment which managed to convey concern regarding A Nude's lack of refinement, but at the same time, excused or explained this crudity by discussing the work as experimental or unfinished.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Daily Chronicle described this challenging picture as a "strong study of a model," but believed that Steer's nude figure "would be gross even by the side of Rubens' most flamboyant women."⁴⁹ While calling the work a study enabled the Telegraph and the Chronicle to straddle the critical fence, the same label allowed MacColl and the critic for the Daily News to excuse any disturbing aspects of the picture's style and content, since there were different standards for studies as opposed to "finished" work. MacColl, for example, felt that Steer's nude would have become a notable achievement in English art, had he carried out his pictorial scheme to completion.⁵⁰

The Daily News appreciated Steer's protest against the "prevalent gloom" of other NEAC exhibits, and declared this nude a "cheerful figure, cheerfully sketched," which expressed the "vigour of Rubens, with the palette of Romney." Having said this, the Daily News then went on to emphasize that these remarks were not intended to detract from Steer's achievement. "It is seen that it is always a picture, that is to say, something more than a mere study, and, justified within its own limits by its own method."⁵¹

A Nude's element of modernity and implication of reality obviously presented the more conservative NEAC reviewers with critical difficulties. It is extremely doubtful that Steer's nude would have generated such controversy had it only been thought of as a poor, indifferent, or even good imitation of Rubens or Etty. Indeed, the strength of their efforts to divorce this image from the present and situate it in the past demonstrates that Steer's nude was uncomfortably modern and threatening. Nor were attempts to categorize this woman as working class entirely successful in negotiating viewing anxieties, as this class discourse could not marginalize the image in the same way that invoking the racial Other, for example, had stripped Sleep of any disturbing implications for British society and Empire. Critics could displace A Nude from their own middle class, but the threatening social presence of the working class was an aspect of modern British life which could not be denied, distanced or displaced to more exotic locales. Still, the relationship of Steer's A Nude with the past allowed a temporary straddling of that fine line between the contemptible and the controversial.

The debate over A Nude evidently reached a climax some three weeks after the opening of the NEAC 1902 Summer Exhibition. On May 3, 1902, Walter Severn of the Egyptian Hall's Dudley Gallery Art Society wrote the following note to Steer:

I am sorry to find that you are exhibiting another very ugly specimen of the "nude" in my gallery, and I must request that you will at once have it removed from the Exhibition - If I find that it is not gone by next week I will take steps to have it (No. 113) taken down. Do not imagine that I object to pictures of the "Nude" - What I dislike, and what all the artists I have spoken to dislike, is the ugly clumsy and brutal manner in which you treat the subject.⁵²

Whether or not Steer withdrew A Nude voluntarily, or if Walter Severn were obliged to "take steps" to remove this work is unclear. Certainly the nude remained in place long enough to allow critics to form their opinions and write their reviews. The Times, Daily Graphic and Guardian all omitted mention of A Nude, but these reviews were all published long before May 3.⁵³ The NEAC notice which appeared in the July issue of the Magazine of Art also passed over this nude, but since this critic had omitted discussion of Steer's 1898 Sleep, this silence does not necessarily prove that Steer's nude had in fact been removed from the exhibition. The fact that the merits of A Nude must have been vigorously debated for at least one month demonstrates that Steer certainly achieved his desired visual bite.⁵⁴ However, the critical uncertainty and hesitation which characterized the reception of his 1902 nude indicate that he had at last succeeded in sheathing this sting within the respectable guise of High Art and tradition.

Steer's appeal to respectable art traditions enabled him to exhibit work which otherwise would have been considered too controversial for public viewing, and this mixture of transgression

and tradition indicates his desire to create a space for himself that was removed from both the Royal Academy and the decadents. Steer's lifetime commitment to the New English Art Club separated him from the Academy, while his academic training with Bouguereau and Cabanel, as well as his insistence upon nature and tradition set him apart from the decadents.⁵⁵ This negotiation of a moderate position also seems to have allowed Steer to question some prevailing views of female sexuality, while improving the chances that his art would be exhibited and receive critical comment. However, this moderate position would also have contributed to a reputation as one of the more conservative members of the avant-garde. This was exactly how Sickert characterized him in 1894:

The painter is evidently not, fortunately for his enduring reputation, *dans le mouvement*. If his work is not destined to become old-fashioned, it is because he has never been new-fangled. He is not *à la mode*, "up to date," or *vingtième siècle*, or *nouveau salon*. He is not a decadent nor a symbolist, nor a Rosicrucian. It is impossible to fit him with any of the labels of *chic* journalism. He belongs to no local or temporary school.⁵⁶

Unfortunately for Steer's "enduring reputation," comments such as these have also contributed to his subsequent devaluation by art historians who wish to construct the discipline as a smooth upward progression of formal innovation and abandonment of narrative toward the rarified heights of pure painting and twentieth-century abstraction.

The greatest barrier to investigation into Steer's choice of stylistic idioms has been the persistent characterization of this artist as an inarticulate, eccentric, anti-intellectual and "naturally" gifted painter.⁵⁷ Acceptance of this description automatically precludes

the possibility that Steer indeed was making conscious intellectual and aesthetic choices. The moderate position which Steer attempted to negotiate has thus been interpreted as a lack of "coherent artistic vision."⁵⁸ His references to past art have prompted writers such as Douglas Cooper to observe that Steer "switched continually from one borrowed style to another and his work is pastiche. . . ."⁵⁹ G.S. Whittet later wrote that the 1890s nudes and portraits were merely anachronistic derivations.⁶⁰ Curiously, Wendy Baron believed that Bruce Laughton's monograph "exploded" the legend of Steer as a "lazy, passive, almost unthinking man," and remarked that "Steer's ability to assume different styles, to juggle with them and manipulate them for their own sake, may be claimed as a daringly modern characteristic."⁶¹ However, it is difficult to determine how she might have arrived at such a conclusion, especially since Laughton had written that between 1895 and 1903, Steer "aspired towards style, without being able to create one specifically for his own requirements."⁶² In the end, Baron's review of Laughton's book revealed more about her own agenda to elevate "British Impressionists" such as Sickert and Steer, and the corresponding necessity of finding some type of place for Steer within the modernist canon. Surely, however, this real issue is not one of accommodating Steer within the discipline's artificial and self-imposed developmental model of style, but rather, investigating Steer's position within the visual culture of his time, and how Steer's strategies, as well as those of his critics, fed into and intersected with the development of various modern myths and legends.

Andrew Forge, in his 1960 introduction to the Arts Council Steer exhibition, drew attention to these myths and the manner in which they affected Steer's position within the canon, but unfortunately, his perceptive location of Steer within a specific social and historical context seems to have been overlooked in subsequent studies of this artist. According to Forge:

Sickert kept up a familiar chumminess with the artists of the past. . . but he was invariably modern. Steer's relationship with his own times was equivocal. Capable of far greater originality than Sickert ever was, he looked at the old masters with nostalgia, with something of the passive devotion of the connoisseur, and he used them in a way that Sickert never did. He addressed the onlooker in the accents of their style. This difference between the two artists was fundamental, and it explains how it was that Steer was, comparatively speaking, a success during his lifetime, and it explains why it is that now the slightest scribble from Sickert holds our attention while much of Steer's work seems but off from us by an intangible barrier of period and taste.⁶³

Apparently Steer's evocation of the past appealed to the late nineteenth-century appetite for pleasurable reminiscence, in which the "stinging present [was] replaced by an imaginary time, nostalgic, drifting, the eighteenth century of Beardsley's *Under the Hill* or Conder's fans."⁶⁴

Forge also addressed Steer's relationship with Impressionism, and the motivation behind late nineteenth-century British attempts to construct this movement as English in origin. According to Forge, it

was not surprising that during the course of that remarkable revulsion of taste which followed Wilde's conviction, the collapse of the aesthetes, that opinion should turn against everything which was modern and French (decadent) for purely parochial reasons. The Impressionists were sorted through for anything which could be related to the groundwork of English painting . . . Connoisseurship

referred the Impressionist touch back to Gainsborough and indeed every painter whose handling had bravura and vibration.⁶⁵

Countless examples of this form of art historical reworking could be cited, but perhaps the most noteworthy was Wynford Dewhurst's

Impressionist Painting: Its Genesis and Development. According to Dewhurst in 1904:

It cannot be too clearly understood that the Impressionistic idea is of English birth. Originated by Constable, Turner, Bonington, and some members of the Norwich school, like most innovators they found their practice to be in advance of the age. British artists did not fully grasp the significance of their work, and failed to profit by their valuable discoveries.

Nevertheless, after a period of decline in English art, revitalization came "from France in the shape of Impressionism, and English art received back an idea she had, as it proved, but lent."⁶⁶

Given these circumstances, it was virtually inevitable that English writers should want to place Steer, as one of the leading landscapists, into their revamped history of Impressionism. Forge has argued that Steer fell victim to this "retrograde and chauvanistic notion of English art," but did not point out that Steer, and other NEAC artists who consciously played on the past, also took advantage of these circumstances.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, as Forge has noted, and as the NEAC commentary proves, from "the first [Steer] was discussed not so much as an advanced artist but as an heir to the past. . . . This was to be the constant tenor of Steer criticism: a modern Constable whose vision was true to the frank, lyrical, nature-loving unintellectual spirit of English art."⁶⁸

Primarily because Steer's landscapes were much more easily

subsumed under this new British umbrella of Impressionism, writers tended to lavish more praise, or at the least, devote more attention to these works in comparison with the figure paintings. Writers began to privilege Steer's landscape work as early as the 1890s, and after the Wilde conviction, the desire to view Steer as the modern exemplar of the Constable tradition grew even stronger. Reviewers continued to appeal to this critical lineage in their 1909 notices of Steer's show at the Goupil Gallery. The Times, for example, devoted most of a rather lengthy review to a discussion of the landscapes, and declared Steer the "modern successor of Constable."⁶⁹ This heritage was reiterated upon the occasion of Steer's 1924 Goupil Gallery exhibition, when the Daily Telegraph held up this artist as the "modern champion" of the "Constable tradition and example," and furthermore believed that Steer had "directed the Constable tradition back to its natural road."⁷⁰

The established preference for Steer's landscape gained its greatest momentum during the late 1920s and 1930s, when failing eyesight increasingly confined Steer's production to the lyrical and abbreviated watercolour landscapes for which he is so well known. By 1935, Steer's reputation as the greatest English landscapist since Constable was utterly entrenched, as indicated by the following comments which appeared in the Manchester Guardian on the fiftieth anniversary of the NEAC.

He is by general consent of his profession the most distinguished landscape painter of our time, the successor Constable. He is the only living painter who has the Order of Merit. His self-portrait hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and he is represented in those galleries of this country where art is the chief consideration, and in

the Dominions. His water-colours are now the most sought after among those of living artists. He has endowed Impressionism with much of that affectionate loveliness that Gainsborough gave to the landscape of the Dutch masters. He has the lyrical, wayward note that is the heart of English art.⁷¹

Descriptions of this sort have persisted in exhibition catalogues, general surveys, and Steer monographs, and the most recent Steer exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1986 was no exception. According to Munro, in a "more relaxed mood, Steer proves himself a true heir to Constable in his unrestrained delight in rendering climatic variation. . . ."⁷²

In conjunction with the construction of Steer as the painter of nature was the closely interwoven myth of Steer as the natural painter. Not only did Steer paint landscapes and the "natural" subject of the female nude, but his treatment of these subjects was believed to be instinctive rather than intellectual.⁷³ Obviously, this myth must take its place among similar nineteenth-century Romantic notions of the artist. Janet Wolff has demonstrated that "artistic work came to be seen as distinct, and as really 'creative', as work in general increasingly lost its character as free, creative labour, and as artists lost their integrated position in society and became marginalized and 'isolated'."⁷⁴ Wolff traces this notion of isolated artists to the rise of individualism which accompanied industrial capitalism, and to the separation of the artist from a distinct social classification, as well as from a secure form of patronage following the rise of the dealer-critic system.⁷⁵ As noted by D.S. MacColl in his Nineteenth Century Art, the British artistic mainstay of portraiture was being threatened by the increasing

popularity of the photograph. "The artist was so little in demand by any customer, so little in the way of taking orders, that he claimed to paint only to please himself, and was happy if unintentionally he pleased one or two others to the pitch of buying his pictures."⁷⁶

Certainly by constructing Steer as a "natural " painter, and implying that his work was creative or unalienated labour, his supporters effectively distinguished his work from the products of the Academy "picture mill".⁷⁷ They also set up Steer's paintings as the unique offspring of his creative genius, thus emphasizing the distinction between Steer's art and the mechanically produced lithograph or photograph.⁷⁸ This construction of Steer as a thoughtless but gifted painter of the English countryside also removed him from the artifice and unwholesome reverie of the decadents, and allowed Steer's admirers to excuse any disturbing aspects of subject or style on the basis that they could not possibly be intentional. Thus in 1896, the year after the Wilde affair, D.S. MacColl wrote with regard to Steer's process of artistic conception:

a picture takes its rise almost accidentally in the presence of things. Not by forethought or planning, but by coming upon something in nature does he begin; the picture swims up half stupidly, and conscious ideas of style intervene later, to disentangle and prune what has been seen.⁷⁹

Just as the Constable lineage bore constant repetition, so did the myth of Steer as the natural painter. According to the Referee in 1924, Steer's work demonstrated "no heavy thought, no comic defiancies." "His style is the least academic and most intensely individual thing in modern British painting, and it grows, as somebody

has said, like the grass: the good God sent it and that's all there is to it."⁸⁰ Although Robin Ironside's remarks were phrased more eloquently in his 1943 Steer monograph, the message was identical.

The poetry of Steer's vision . . . is perhaps the most complete instance in modern English painting of that receptivity and skill which is the quality of the great natural, the great extravert painters. . . . No contemporary English painter, however, has seemed to possess such a singleness of heart, such a freedom from the restraints of tendentiousness, almost, one might say, from the encroachments of the intellect, as are revealed in Steer's innocent and forthright art.⁸¹

This vision of Steer's intuitive groping for a suitable means of expression is perpetuated in Laughton's 1971 monograph. Despite his acknowledgment of Steer's laborious painting efforts, the fact that he does not look for any conscious intellectual agenda in Steer's work leaves the myth untouched. Dennis Farr, for example, in reviewing Laughton's book, concurred that Steer's figure paintings between 1896 and 1911 were "some of the most unhappy results of this search for, one might almost say, a personal identity." "At his best he is a natural painter."⁸² Finally, in 1986, Jane Munro wove the myth of the natural painter with Steer as the painter of nature into the fabric of modernism.

As an intuitive painter who relied upon concise expression for success, watercolour was in many respects better suited to his unlaboured translations of the natural world. . . . In these masterpieces of understatement Steer finally found a means of expression best suited to his own reserved and withdrawn nature. For this reason, they are perhaps the most personal achievement of his art.⁸³

Apart from the evidence of the works themselves, and the comments they provoked, very few statements have counteracted the prevailing assessment of Steer's unthinking painterly gift. Steer himself

dreaded public speaking and generally refused to discuss his work, on the grounds that his pictures should speak for themselves. On the rare occasion when he did allow an interview, his comments contradicted the popular perception of his witless wizardry, as in the 1939 World of Art Illustrated article, when he noted that: "In fact, too frequently, when one is overpleased with one's work, it is just a sign that one's critical faculty has gone to sleep."⁸⁴ In 1912, Sickert noted that Steer had "the rare faculty of putting a witty and silent finger, like the advertisement, on the spot, with deadly certainty, none the less deadly for that he, wise man, elects to diagnose *in camera*" In the same article, however, Sickert also pointed out that "modern criticism" was "obsessed with the word 'temperament'," and implied that critics of the day believed that art suffered if the intellect were engaged."⁸⁵ Because Steer did prefer to display his wit behind the safety of closed doors, if at all, and because Steer's admirers would have preferred to emphasize his intuition over his intelligence, comments such as Sickert's are the exception rather than the rule. More typical are the efforts of Tonks, Steer's fellow NEAC exhibitor and colleague at the Slade, who believed that Steer was the "greatest living painter" of his era, and therefore highlighted his creative genius in accordance with that belief:

To Tonks and the rest of his friends art was something of a sacred mystery: this was one of the reasons for their horror of Fry's theorizing. Steer, with his thoughtless talent was the epitome of the mystery. And in playing the part of the intuitive, the heavily-built fool of art he was doing himself an injustice at the same time as he was flattering the lean and hungry intellectuals who surrounded him.⁸⁶

Thus we arrive at the late nineteenth-century legend of Steer's "natural" gift, and the mysterious creative ability which allowed his paintings to swim up half-stupidly or grow like the grass. It is highly problematic that twentieth-century studies have perpetuated these myths, rather than taking pains to unravel the motivation behind such constructions and the historical specificity of their development. Instead of investigating the complex meaning created by Steer's historical borrowings, art historians have used Steer's supposed stupidity as the basis for denigrating his references to tradition as pastiche, and in doing so, have merely added an obscuring layer of sediment to the nineteenth-century foundation. Indeed, the very factors which contributed to Steer's success and popularity during his lifetime have been taken up as evidence in support of his exclusion from the subsequent modernist canon of High Art. Hence, the inevitable conclusion to the legend interprets Steer's negotiation of a moderate position as the "Old Pussy's"⁸⁷ lack of modernist conviction, courage and virility.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "New English Art Club," Daily Telegraph (21 April 1902): 10.
- 2 "Art and Artists," Sunday Times (13 April 1902): 2.
 "The New English Art Club," Manchester Guardian (5 April 1902): 8.
- 3 F.J.M., "The New English Art Club," Speaker (26 April 1902): 106.
- 4 "The New English Art Club," Daily News (8 April 1902): 5.
- 5 "Art Exhibitions," Times (7 April 1902): 5.
- 6 Laughton lists many "Bridgnorth" pictures in his Steer catalogue, but none of these are listed as entry #66 in the NEAC 1902 Summer Exhibition. Also, according to Laughton, a reproduction of Mrs. Spencer Butler is not available. See Bruce Laughton, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971): 141-142.
- 7 C.L.H., "Art: New Men and Old Manners," Academy and Literature (12 April 1902): 391.
- 8 Daily Telegraph, 10.
- 9 D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review (12 April 1902): 460.
- 10 Manchester Guardian, 8.
- 11 I have been unable to locate a reproduction of White Peignoir.
- 12 "The New English Art Club," Standard (5 April 1902): 5.
- 13 Vera Campbell, "In the Picture Galleries: New English Art Club - Dowdeswell's - Carfax's - Woodbury - Goupil's," World (30 April 1902): 29.
- 14 "The New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (5 April 1902): 3.
- 15 MacColl, 460.
 "Fine Arts: New English Art Club," Athenaeum (12 April 1902): 473. [Probably Roger Fry.]
Daily News, 5.
Times, 5.
Manchester Guardian, 8.
 "The New English Art Club," Daily Graphic (7 April 1902): 9.
 "The Chronicle of Art. - July," Magazine of Art 26 (July 1902): 430-432.
 "Art Notes: The New English Art Club," Truth (10 April 1902): 947.

Campbell, 29.
F.J.M., 106.

16 Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988): 76.

17 Nead, 22-23.

18 MacColl, 460.

19 Athenaeum, 473.
Daily News, 5.

20 "New English Art Club," Globe (5 April 1902): 8.
The Pall Mall Gazette noted the "golden note in the flesh," and then observed that the drapery added a "rather welcome note of convention." "The New English Art Club," Pall Mall Gazette (16 April 1902): 2.

21 Daily Telegraph, 10.

22 "The New English Art Club," Daily Chronicle (5 April 1902): 3.

23 B.N., "New English Art Club," Westminster Gazette (8 April 1902): 4.

Campbell, 29.

24 F.J.M., 106.

25 C.L.H., 391.

26 Daily Telegraph, 10.

27 Daily Chronicle, 3.

28 "Modern Man: Degas," National Observer (31 October 1891): 603-604.

29 George Moore, "Degas," Impressions and Opinions (London: David Nutt, 1891): 318.

30 See Kate Flint, "'The Philistine' and the New Art Critic: J.A. Spender and D.S. MacColl's Debate of 1893," Victorian Periodicals Review 1 (Spring 1988): 3-8.

31 Andrew Forge discusses this backlash against decadence in his P. Wilson Steer 1880-1942 (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980): 10.

32 Pall Mall Gazette, 2.
F.J.M., 106.

33 Athenaeum, 473.

34 MacColl, 460. This remark should also be considered within the context of MacColl's increasing preference for sculptural form by the end of the century.

35 George Moore, Modern Painting (London: Walter Scott, 1893): 4 and 14.

36 R.A.M. Stevenson, Peter Paul Rubens, Portfolio Artistic Monographs (London: Seeley, 1898): 5-7.

37 Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud, Volume I, Education of the Senses (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984): 388.

38 Alfred Beaver, "French Influence on British Art," Artist 8:94 (October 1887): 309.

39 "From Month to Month," Artist 9:98 (February 1888): 53.

40 Frederick Wedmore, Whistler and Others (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1906): 126.

41 B.N., 4.
C.L.H., 391.

42 "New English Art Club: Spring Exhibition," Morning Post (8 April 1902): 4.

43 Daily Chronicle, 3.
Daily Telegraph, 10.

44 Standard, 5.

45 Daily Chronicle, 3. Only the Chronicle commented on the background, and this reviewer described it as "what appears to be a romantic landscape roughly sketched in."

46 B.N., 4.
Truth, 947.

47 Morning Post, 4.

48 Daily Telegraph, 10.

49 Daily Chronicle, 3.

50 MacColl, 460.

51 Daily News, 5.

52 Walter Severn, letter to Philip Wilson Steer, 3 May 1902, Steer Papers, British Museum, London.

53 Times, 5. [7 april 1902]
Daily Graphic, 9. [7 April 1902]
Manchester Guardian, 8. [5 April 1902]

54 Severn himself may have welcomed the controversy for drawing crowds, even if he felt compelled to go "on the record" as having asked Steer to withdraw A Nude.

55 John Rothenstein, A Pot of Paint: Artists of the 1890s (1929; Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970): 130.

56 Walter R. Sickert, "Mr. Philip Wilson Steer's Paintings at the Goupil Gallery," Studio 2 (1894): 223.

57 For example: D.S. MacColl, Life, Work and Setting of Philip Wilson Steer (London: Faber and Faber, 1945).

58 Jane Munro, Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum and Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986): 21.

59 Douglas Cooper, "The Literature of Art: Life, Work and Setting of Philip Wilson Steer by D.S. MacColl," Burlington Magazine 88 (July 1946): 179.

60 G.S. Whittet, "London Commentary," Studio 161:814 (February 1961): 66.

61 Wendy Baron, "Philip Wilson Steer 1860-1942 by Bruce Laughton," Burlington Magazine 115:838 (January 1973): 50.

62 Laughton, 68.

63 Forge, 5.

64 Forge, 10.

James Laver, Portraits in Oil and Vinegar (London: John Castle, 1925): 80. Laver makes a similar observation in 1925: "It has long been a commonplace with critics that there is in Mr. Steer an eighteenth century graciousness all too rare in our own bustling times."

65 Forge, 10.

66 Wynford Dewhurst, Impressionist Painting: Its Genesis and Development (London: George Neumes, 1904): 4-5.

67 See Kenneth McConkey, "Bradford, Cartwright Hall; Philip Wilson Steer," Burlington Magazine 128:1001 (August 1986): 625-627; for an intriguing suggestion regarding the role which patrons such as Hugh Hammersley, Sir Cyril Butler, and Sir William Eden may have played in "driving the emergent Slade generation back to the turn of the century." "Their collections have not been fully explored, nor has the fact that Hammersley's house at The Grove, Hampstead had become a regular meeting place by the turn of the century" (627). One hopes that McConkey's suggestion will be acted on at some point. Unfortunately, a study of patronage is outside the scope of this thesis.

68 Forge, 11.

69 "Art Exhibitions: The Goupil Gallery," Times (22 April 1909): 13.

70 "Great Art: Mr. P.W. Steer's Exhibition," Daily Telegraph (13 March 1924): 13.

71 J.B., "New English Art Club: 50th Anniversary - Mr. Wilson Steer Looks Back," Manchester Guardian (24 October 1935): 9.

72 Munro, 17.

See also:

Laver, 81. Steer is the "greatest English landscapist since Constable."

National Gallery, Millbank, Catalogue: Loan Exhibition of Works by P. Wilson Steer (London: National Gallery, Millbank, 1929): 4. Steer's chief contribution is "the grafting of French Impressionism on English stock" and this the "great tradition of English painting from Wilson, Gainsborough, Turner and Constable has been worthily continued to our own days. . . ."

Martin Hardie, foreword, Catalogue of an Exhibition of Water Colours and Oil Paintings by Peter de Wint and P. Wilson Steer (London: Falsar Gallery, 1937): 3. Steer is the "great modern master who has followed the highest tradition of our English Water Colour School." He "extracts. . . the distilled essence of Nature."

British Council, Exhibition of Contemporary British Art (London: British Council, for British Pavilion at New York World's Fair, 1939): N. pag. Steer is the "chief contemporary exponent of the tradition of Turner, Constable and Gainsborough."

D.S. MacColl, Memorial Exhibition of the Works of Philip Wilson Steer O.M. 1860-1942 (London: Organised by the Tate Gallery at the National Gallery, 1943): 1. "Steer was beyond a doubt the greatest of our landscape painters since Turner and Constable, inheriting the ethereal glow of the one, vying with the other in his pursuit of the 'windy, silvery and delicious', and blending French 'Impressionist' strains with these in a new creation."

Robin Ironside, Wilson Steer (London: Ffaldon, 1943): 5. "The art of Steer may be unhesitatingly placed in that category of English painting of which the frank vision of Constable has furnished

the most conspicuous and lovely examples. . . ."

P.H. (Philip Handy?), Philip Wilson Steer O.M. 1860-1942 (Leeds: Leeds City Art Gallery and Temple Newsam House Committee, 1944): 3. "No painter has ever followed Constable more closely. . . ."

73 This "naturalization" of the nude female as the "natural" subject of art and the painter's gaze has persisted to the extent that even today, the life class usually involves drawing the female body. Furthermore, since male desire is normally constructed as natural and instinctive, this link between Steer's nude painting and his painterly instinct (rather than intellect) can hardly be coincidental.

74 Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981): 19.

75 Wolff, 11.

76 D.S. MacColl, Nineteenth Century Art (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1902): 16.

77 Later art historians who wished to distance Steer from the embarrassing academic problem picture would also resort to a similar device. For example: David Bell, foreword, Wilson Steer Exhibition: Festival of Britain (Birkenhead: Williamson Art Gallery by arrangement with Arts Council of Great Britain, 1951): 1. "There is something in the English attitude to life which regards painting as a pleasure merely, almost a pastime, and finds it hard to accept the conception of it as a business or a profession. . . . And Steer was a reflection of this attitude. . . he remained throughout his career an amateur painter, even if a great one."

78 For a discussion of a similar process of construction in literary circles, see Mary Poovey, "The Man-of-Letters Hero: David Copperfield and the Professional Writer," Unruly Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: Virago, 1988): 89-125.

79 D.S. MacColl, "The New English Art Club," Saturday Review (21 November 1896): 540.

80 Yvain, "Today's Art," Referee (16 March 1924): 2.

81 Ironside, 5-6.

82 Dennis Farr, "A Prisoner of Circumstance," Apollo 96:128 (October 1972): 362.

83 Manro, 24-25.

84 "I had only just begun. . . ." World of Art Illustrated 1:6 (3 May 1939): 6.

85 Walter R. Sickert, "A Critical Calendar," English Review 10 (March 1912): 714-715.

86 Forge, 11.

87 MacColl, Life, Work and Setting of Philip Wilson Steer, 61. Apparently in the MacColl household, Steer was referred to as "Old Pussy Steer" because of his affection for cats, as well as his similar "sommolence when at peace" and preference for cozy fireside seats over the "chilly outer airs."

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that twentieth-century attempts to shape Steer's production into conformity with the modernist canon have largely ignored the historical constructions of creative genius and "natural" painting ability. Indeed, the whole-hearted adoption of these myths as a component of modernist ideology has permitted the elevation of Steer's early Walberswick pictures and late landscape watercolours, and the simultaneous devaluation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century figure paintings. By rejecting art and artists which cannot be satisfactorily accommodated within the canon, art historians in general have perpetuated serious distortions of fact. In the case of Steer, this pattern of scholarship has effectively negated the contribution of several years of painting and exhibition, and has therefore seriously impeded any understanding of Britain's visual culture at the turn of the century. Hence, this thesis is intended not only to address particular deficiencies within Steer scholarship to date, but also to challenge the problematic distortions which have been generated by an uncritical acceptance of modernist ideology. Obviously, a revision of the canon is quite beyond the scope of this exercise. Nevertheless, by isolating the four nudes which Steer exhibited at the NEAC during these years, and by reconstructing the period's artistic terrain through analysis of contemporary exhibitions, critical discourses, and patterns of viewing, an excavation of a small portion of this buried history becomes possible.

Steer, his NEAC colleagues, and their critics and patrons were all very much interested in the role which tradition could play in the creation of modern art. Because this interest led Steer to propose a definition of "Impressionism" which borrowed from the past, his engagement with topical artistic and social debates at the turn of the century has been ignored by historians who believe that challenging subject matter can be conveyed only through avant-garde style. However, it is evident that Steer's audience did in fact find his nudes innovative and even disturbing, not only because of his persistent disruption of established conventions of viewing, and reference to unsavoury sources of inspiration, but also because of his transgression of Victorian notions of female gender. Steer's conflation of the New Woman and prostitute in his 1896 A Nude suggests an exploration of female sexuality similar to Aubrey Beardsley's Yellow Book images with their implicit critique of fin-de-siècle morality, and he continued to investigate deviant female sexuality in the 1898 Sleep. However, in an attempt to downplay or disguise the controversial content of this work, Steer utilized stylistic devices of the French Rococo, rather than the nineteenth-century avant-garde in his depiction of a sexually self-involved "sleeper". Certainly the fascination with the eighteenth century was one which Steer shared with a great many of his contemporaries, and it seems that he regarded dix-huitième style as a rich blend of delicious decadence and pleasurable nostalgia. While he continued to work with eighteenth-century style and the female nude, in his 1901 The Mirror, Steer created a sample of ideal femininity, and then countered

this vision of loveliness with a mirrored reflection which contradicted reality. He returned to a more disturbing depiction of female sexuality in his 1902 A Nude, with its reference to Degas's working-class women masquerading under the guise of Rubens and Etty.

These four nudes which Steer exhibited at the New English Art Club between 1896 and 1902 were complex intellectual and aesthetic constructions with an intentional pictorial "sting". Steer's reworking of past styles was hardly an intuitive search for a personal idiom, but rather, a conscious and sophisticated process of experimentation with painting as a visual language in terms of the female nude. Furthermore, this mobilization of the respectable past allowed Steer to exhibit work which otherwise would have been marginalized as indecent and inflammatory because of its implicit questioning of entrenched opinion about feminine nature. Finally, this strategy of moderation and interest in visual experimentation are the two factors which explain and unite the series of generically-titled and smoothly-treated nudes with their provocatively-named and luscious Rococo-style sisters. Thus, not only does a "new look" at the New English nudes solve the problem of Philip Wilson Steer's style, but more importantly, this thesis restores an aspect of the British fin-de-siècle visual culture in which Steer participated.

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