

# THE **BIRTHDAY SUIT** VISIT

From the statues of ancient Greece to the paintings of modern masters, the nude has been one of the most consistently interpreted subjects throughout the history of art. Sneak a peek at some of the museum's leafless treasures, and discover what inspired these artists to go *au naturel*.



GALLERY 156

## *Statuette of Hercules* (2nd century AD), Greece

If you've got it, flaunt it. With the exceptions of his club and Nemean lion skin (both missing from this bronze statuette), the great mythological hero and world's strongest man is typically depicted in the buff. His weary posture and the three golden apples held behind his back indicate our hero has just returned from his eleventh labor, as commanded by his cousin, the king Eurystheus. In order to steal the golden apples from Zeus' garden, Hercules had to face the Hesperides, nymphs who protected the garden with the help of a hundred-headed dragon named Ladon. The vine leaves and fruit around his forehead, possibly a Roman Imperial addition to the Greek original, suggest the pleasures of the banquet await the hero for completing the task.



GALLERY 263

## *The Boxer* (1942) by Richmond Barthé

Richmond Barthé came to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1924 after being denied entry to art school in New Orleans on account of his race. It is perhaps all the more radical then that the artist frequently depicted nude African American males in his work as a means to express, however veiled, his still-closeted homosexuality. *The Boxer*, his most famous piece, was modeled from memory after the Cuban featherweight, Kid Chocolate. The elegant agility of his nude figures was likely informed by Barthé's background as a dancer in Martha Graham's studio. After graduating from the SAIC, he moved to New York City, where he became a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Many of Barthé's patrons and subjects were men from Harlem's gay community, as reflected in his subsequent work, almost all of which depicted masculine black males in intricate detail.



GALLERY 248

## *Day (Truth)* (1896/98) by Ferdinand Hodler

Originally a realist of the landscape tradition, Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler is best known today for the kind of iconic imagery seen in this full-length nude portrait. Though based on a real person—the artist's future wife, Berthe Jacques—Hodler sought to create figural symbols evoking universal or spiritual principles. The model's grave appearance may reflect something in the title of the work, but it could also be informed by the artist's profound connection to death. Hodler survived his parents and five siblings, all of who died of tuberculosis. The young woman's imposing stance and stark appearance give her an emblematic power beyond her physical features. Less nude than naked, Hodler has stripped away any pretense of feminine beauty to give this totemic figure the enduring strength suggested in the painting's title.



GALLERY 226

## ***Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys* (c. 1860)** by Edgar Degas

Anything you can do I can do better. Unique among the city-states of ancient Greece, Spartan girls not only received an education; they were encouraged to the same levels of athleticism as the boys. Under Sparta's rigorous agoge education system, the girls would taunt their male counterparts into competitive play, like racing and wrestling, and it was required that the boys accept the invitation. The hope was that the boys would be goaded to higher levels of athletic excellence through the humiliation of being provoked by girls. Degas subversively chose to depict this Spartan battle of the sexes at a time when France's salon culture highly valued classical themes. Though historically accurate, Degas often used themes from antiquity to comment on modern life. The so-called "woman question" was a contentious issue in contemporary France, and perhaps it was for this reason that Degas had reservations, deciding to show his equal opportunity depiction at the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition instead of the more conservative Paris Salon.



GALLERY 223

## ***The Bathers* (1884) by William Adolphe Bouguereau**

Over the course of a long career, Bouguereau enjoyed great popularity at the Paris Salon and eventually came to represent the old guard as the head of the French academy. His beautifully rendered female nudes provided an elevated means for titillation and sold very well both in Europe and abroad, particularly among the nouveau riche. A vocal critic of the young Impressionists, Bouguereau's devotion to classical realism made him a central target of the avant-garde. Unrenowned painters of the day such as Cézanne and Degas regarded him with enough disdain as to coin an epithet, "bougureauté," from his namesake, meaning that which is overly polished or idealized. It seems that history has been far kinder to Bouguereau's detractors. Since the rise of modernism, his name has largely gone unmentioned in the canons of art history.



GALLERY 391

## ***Departure of Summer* (1914) by Man Ray**

The clashing figures in this Man Ray painting are a far cry from the serenity of your typical pastoral nude. Early in his career, Man Ray joined a group of friends on a camp-ing trip outside Ridgefield, New Jersey and observed some female companions bathing in the stream. Having just seen some of Cézanne's work at a recent exhibition in New York, he decided to try his hand at a similar nude-in-nature motif. Based solely on his memories of the camping trip, he painted a series of "imaginary landscapes." While directly inspired by Cézanne both in form and subject, Man Ray's female figures evoke a different palette of emotion. Whether the two women are helping or harming the third remains unclear, but the barren trees and autumnal ochre of the piece share little of the communal atmosphere of Cézanne's bathers.

### ***Looking to accessorize?***

*Altered and Adorned: Using Renaissance Prints in Daily Life* brings to life the experimental world of printmaking in the mid-15th and 16th centuries, with an array of decorative objects that were once a central part of everyday life—used, abused, adored, and adorned by their owners. See these rare acts of vandalism exposed to the naked eye, starting April 30.