

The Kimbell Art Museum

Renoir: The Body, The Senses

An Acoustiguide Tour

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STOP LIST

- 500. INTRODUCTION (SELF-PORTRAIT, C. 1875)
- 501. BATHER WITH A GRIFFON DOG – LISE ON THE BANK OF THE SEINE, 1870
- 502. STUDY. TORSO OF A WOMAN IN THE SUNLIGHT, 1875-76
- 503. BLONDE UNTANGLING HER HAIR, 1886 (RENOIR) AND WOMAN BRUSHING HER HAIR, C. 1884 (DEGAS)
- 504. BLONDE BATHER, 1881
- 505. BATHERS (STUDY FOR THE GREAT BATHERS), 1884-85
- 506. BATHERS PLAYING WITH A CRAB, C. 1897
- 507. THE BATHERS, 1895-1900 (DEGAS) AND THE BATTLE OF LOVE, C. 1880 (CEZANNE)
- 508. RECLINING FEMALE NUDE, 1906 AND LARGE NUDE ON CUSHIONS, 1907
- 509. BATHER SEATED IN A LANDSCAPE, CALLED EURYDICE, 1902-04
- 510. THE BATHERS, 1919
- 511. THE BATHERS, 1920-21, PABLO PICASSO

500. INTRODUCTION (SELF-PORTRAIT, C. 1875)

ERIC LEE:

Hello. I'm Eric Lee, Director of the Kimbell Art Museum. Welcome to *Renoir: The Body, The Senses*.

You are standing in front of a self-portrait by Pierre-August Renoir. He paints himself as a slightly disheveled yet fashionable Parisian man in his 30s, with great ambition but, as yet, little success. The son of a tailor and a dressmaker, he began his artistic career as a decorator, painting small landscapes or mythological scenes on porcelain.

Today, one hundred years after his death, his colorful scenes of modern life and his many paintings of the human figure still fascinate and delight us. This exhibition is the first to focus on Renoir's treatment of the nude figure, a subject he pursued with ever-increasing dedication until his death in 1919.

George Shackelford, co-curator of this exhibition and deputy director of the Kimbell.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Towards the end of his life, Renoir said to his son that he wished he had only painted one painting again and again throughout his career. In a way, in this exhibition that's what we've tried to [00:05:05] do, which is to bring together one subject that Renoir treated again and again, and that is the human body.

It's a subject that he went back to again and again because it was, in a way, *the* subject. Since the days of Titian in the Renaissance, to Boucher in the 18th century, and to his predecessors like Courbet in the 19th century, it was the subject that you had to master if you were going to be a proper painter.

ERIC LEE:

During this tour you'll be hearing more from George Shackelford. You'll also hear from Esther Bell, who is Robert and Martha Berman Lipp Chief Curator at the Clark Art Institute, and Colin Bailey, who is Director of the Morgan Library and Museum.

I hope you'll enjoy the exhibition.

NARRATOR:

This is an Acoustiguide production.

[word count: 313]

501. BATHER WITH A GRIFFON DOG – LISE ON THE BANK OF THE SEINE, 1870

NARRATOR:

In this painting, a statuesque woman with flushed cheeks and dark hair stands along the River Seine. She seems to have just undressed, and she turns her head demurely to one side as she covers herself with her hand. Esther Bell, curator at the Clark Art Institute and co-curator of this exhibition.

ESTHER BELL:

To give the painting an air of gravitas and respectability, Renoir is citing a well-known Roman sculpture the Louvre had acquired in 1861, Praxiteles “Venus”. The average museumgoer would have understood this reference. The way that she’s holding her hand in front of her body; even her hairstyle cites this sculpture.

NARRATOR:

Renoir grew up near the Louvre, in the heart of Paris. He spent many hours there, sketching the idealized human form in the Greek and Roman sculpture galleries, and making copies of the old master paintings. At the end of his life, he claimed:

ACTOR (RENOIR):

I never thought of myself being a revolutionary painter; I just wanted to continue in the tradition of the Louvre.

NARRATOR:

But this painting *is* revolutionary. Inspired by other modern artists like the Realist Gustave Courbet, Renoir boldly hints that this is no classical Venus, but rather a shockingly real woman. His lover Lise Tréhot posed for the painting. The heap of garments at her feet would have been recognizable as the most fashionable clothing available in Paris. And her little lapdog is a thoroughly modern touch.

Nearby, you can see more evidence of Renoir’s early interest in Realism. On the left is another painting of Lise. She plays the part of a nymph stretched out along a riverbed. On the right is Lise’s little brother, cradling a cat near his face in a striking and original composition.

[word count: 286]

502. STUDY. TORSO OF A WOMAN IN THE SUNLIGHT, 1875-76

NARRATOR:

Colin Bailey, director of the Morgan Library and Museum.

COLIN BAILEY:

The painting *Study: Torso of a Woman* is one of the greatest of impressionist figure paintings. A young woman, hair falling over her shoulders, is just enveloped in this gorgeous summer sunlight. She's completely alone, and completely luxuriating in the hot summer afternoon. We can almost feel the leaves and the grasses and the flowers as they encompass her. She's, in a way, woman as garden; the nude as sense of burgeoning life.

NARRATOR:

This is the only nude Renoir exhibited with his fellow Impressionists. Instead, he showed clothed figures, in paintings like the *Sleeping Girl* and *Woman Crocheting*, also on view nearby. For some critics, nudes were associated with the outdated traditions of the official art world. The influential writer Edmond Duranty, for example, was interested in subject matter that focused explicitly on the modern world.

COLIN BAILEY:

“What we need now,” Edmond Duranty wrote in 1876, “is the human form on the streets in natural surroundings in customary places.” I’m paraphrasing an important call to artists made in *The New Painting*. What Duranty talked about was everyday life; modernity; the streets and the scenes and the scents of Paris. What he was not talking about was the classical tradition and the nude.

NARRATOR:

We only know of about ten nudes from Renoir’s early career. But from this point forward, Renoir explored the nude with ever-increasing devotion. In the final two decades of his life, he painted more than 200. In 1912, one critic wrote,

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE (ACTOR):

The suppression of the nude for ten years is the unwitting consequence of a subliminal decision made by nearly all modern artists. Yet the aged Renoir, the greatest painter of our time and one of the greatest painters of all time, devotes his final days to painting these admirable and voluptuous nudes, which will command the admiration of generations to come.

[word count: 295]

503. BLONDE UNTANGLING HER HAIR, 1886 (RENOIR) AND WOMAN BRUSHING HER HAIR, C. 1884 (DEGAS)

NARRATOR:

Take a moment to compare these two paintings. The one on the left is by Renoir. The one on the right is by his friend and fellow great painter, Edgar Degas. In both, a woman sits with her back to us, seemingly unaware of our gaze, and combs her own hair. But that's where the similarities end. George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

If you look at the Degas, you'll see that the artist is standing up, looking down onto a woman who is sitting on a cushion on the floor, and she's having a terrible time getting the comb through her hair. Degas is concentrating on the movement of her hands and the way she crouches over trying to comb her hair. Everything is about the sort of frustration that she's having on a very particular and intimate and really individual level.

This is not what Renoir does. In fact, this is what Renoir *never* does, and instead in his painting what we see is the beauty of her form and the beauty of her hair. Her hair *never* has a tangle. Her hair can be combed or plaited or arranged with never any trouble, and her back is never lumpy; it's always incredibly smooth and beautiful.

And this is the difference that sets Renoir apart from his contemporaries. Renoir very, very rarely touches on anything that is unpleasant. Renoir is interested in a world that stands apart from daily life, a world of the studio that exists only in a kind of idea of fine art.

[word count: 254]

504. **BLONDE BATHER, 1881**

NARRATOR:

In *Blonde Bather*, Renoir paints his lover and future wife Aline Charigot in the sun-soaked landscape of Naples. Colin Bailey.

COLIN BAILEY:

The cliffs, the landscape, the water behind, are still more impressionistic in the way they're handled; they're more abbreviated. But there is real solidity in the way Renoir creates the form of this eternal nude. He labored on it, I think quite hard. And so he was all the more distressed when, after it was submitted to be one of his two pictures at the Salon of 1881, it was refused.

NARRATOR:

Unlike his Impressionist contemporaries, in the end Renoir would not turn his back on the Salon, the annual exhibition sanctioned by the official art world. And he was well-received there as a portraitist. In fact, at the same time the Salon rejected this painting, his other submission, a small portrait of a little girl, garnered enthusiastic praise.

COLIN BAILEY:

That painting was in a way no more or no less modern than *Blond Bather*. But the challenge here is that when you approached the canon of great art, when you approached the female nude, with its associations of Venus rising, of classical antiquity, the stakes were much higher, and Renoir is uncompromising in his language. He is showing the eternal feminine as a recognizable, almost Parisian type. And this was profoundly distressing to the conservative art establishment for many, many years to come.

NARRATOR:

Renoir's treatment of the nude would be a lifelong dance between his embrace of a new style of painting and his deep appreciation for the history of art. To your right is *Diana Leaving the Bath*, by the eighteenth-century painter François Boucher, which has been in the Louvre since Renoir was a boy. He once told a friend:

ACTOR (AS RENOIR):

Diana [Leaving Her] Bath ... was the first painting that grabbed hold of me, and I have continued to love it my entire life, as one does to one's first love...

NARRATOR:

Esther Bell.

ESTHER BELL:

[00:36:30] **Renoir must have appreciated this painting for the centrality of this notion of tactility. Diana holds a strand of pearls between her fingers. She dips her toes into the water's edge. [00:37:02] "Blonde Bather" is also a celebration of the notion of touch. Look at the way that she grasps the fabric between her fingers.**

[word count: 377]

505. BATHERS (STUDY FOR THE GREAT BATHERS), 1884-85**NARRATOR:**

In the mid-1880s, Renoir produced his most ambitious painting of the nude thus far, a view of bathers in a landscape. The finished painting, now at the

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Philadelphia Museum of Art, can't leave the museum—but we're lucky to have three of the large-scale drawings he made while preparing that canvas. In this large sheet, he carefully plotted out the postures of two nude women: one looks on as the other fends off a playful splash from a third, unseen figure. That splashing figure, seen in the two drawings to the left, was also part of the final composition—look for a photograph of the painting nearby. Colin Bailey and Esther Bell.

COLIN BAILEY:

The drawings that have been brought together here give us a sense of how Renoir was thinking and laboring and changing his mind. To create this picture, Renoir went back, in a way, to the traditions of the Renaissance and produced large scale figure studies, working on each of the three major figures separately.

ESTHER BELL:

Over the course of several years, Renoir created almost 20 monumental figure studies, like the ones you see here. He's experimenting with a variety of media: red and white chalk, black chalk, conte crayon. These drawings are very much an homage to the old master artists that he most admired, the Italian old masters as well as the great draftsmen of the 17th and 18th centuries.

NARRATOR:

In both his preparatory process and his chosen subject, *The Great Bathers* project reflects what Renoir saw during his first trip to Italy, taken a few years earlier when he was 40 years old. In the past, he had scoffed at the tradition of French artists traveling to Italy to study the old masters, declaring:

ACTOR (RENOIR):

Painters return with the ambition of emulating Raphael, or another Italian master, which renders them ridiculous.

NARRATOR:

But seeing the Italian paintings and frescos for himself changed his mind.

ACTOR (RENOIR):

I have seen the Raphaels. I should have seen them earlier. ... They are full of knowledge. ... His frescoes are admirable in their simplicity and grandeur.

NARRATOR:

These beautiful, large-scale drawings capture those qualities, mixing grandeur of form and simplicity of execution.

[word count: 360]

506. BATHERS PLAYING WITH A CRAB, C. 1897

NARRATOR:

This lush, joyful scene is set in a vividly colored landscape, where the central blonde nude teases her friend with a small crab. The bathers' graceful curves echo the curves of rocks, waves, and clouds, evoking total harmony with nature.

Here, ten years after *The Great Bathers*, Renoir returns to painting a group of women bathers set against a landscape. This subject matter, popular since the Renaissance, demonstrated the artist's ability to arrange multiple figures within a setting. George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Now, at first glance, you might think that this is set in some kind of Arcadian past, in some kind of world that exists in the ancient mythological realms of Greece or Rome. But while Renoir wants you to think first of that, he also wants you to remember that these are, in fact, modern girls, and he insists on that by painting the polka dots on their dresses, or showing their hat with a feather or red jacket with a white ruffle.

Renoir is taking the classic old idea of a multi-figured composition of nudes and kind of shaking it up, and coming up with his own version of that, which straddles the past and the present.

NARRATOR:

Nearby, on the wall to the left, you'll see how Renoir's contemporaries Paul Cezanne and Edgar Degas also explored bathers in a landscape in their own unique ways.

[word count: 225]

507. THE BATHERS, 1895-1900 (DEGAS); THE BATTLE OF LOVE, C. 1880 (CEZANNE)

NARRATOR:

In his *Bathers Playing with a Crab*, hanging nearby, Renoir re-interpreted a classical subject: bathers arranged together in a landscape. Here, one of Renoir's contemporaries, Edgar Degas, tackles the same type of scene. In this seemingly unfinished composition in pastels, he explores the postures and movement of four women.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Degas is really grappling with how to make something that is at once mundane, and also kind of poetic. How to balance the figure in the center, who hides her face with her elbow, that has a kind of a wistful, melancholy quality to it, how to balance that with the figure sitting next to her, who's pulling on her blue stocking. Like Renoir, Degas mixes elements of modern life and the classical idiom.

NARRATOR:

To your right is another group of bathers, by Paul Cezanne. His *Battle of Love* is a mysterious scene in which the nude figures seem to be wrestling. In contrast to Renoir and Degas, who include hats or stockings, Cézanne creates a world that exists only within the painting. There's no sign of the modern world at all.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

I think it's really interesting to know that this is a painting that Renoir bought. When Cézanne's works were shown in 1895 in Paris, Renoir purchased this work, two years before he set to work himself on the *Bathers With a Crab*, another scene of playful wrestling in a landscape.

[word count: 231]

508. RECLINING FEMALE NUDE, 1906 AND LARGE NUDE ON CUSHIONS, 1907

NARRATOR:

Renoir painted both of these monumental reclining nudes in his studio near the French Riviera, where he settled after leaving Paris.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

They're posing on a kind of daybed that was set up in his studio where cushions of various shapes and sizes and colors were arranged, a cloth laid down beneath the figure, curtains hung behind, to create a kind of luxurious, maybe even slightly exotic, setting for painting a reclining body.

NARRATOR:

Often, Renoir's models were members of his own household staff. Gabrielle Renard, the dark-haired woman in the painting on the left, was one of his favorite models in later life. A cousin of Renoir's wife, she cooked for the family and cared for the children. Colin Bailey.

COLIN BAILEY:

In 1911, Julius Meier-Graefe, who was an art critic, a dealer, and a real identifier of the modern in art, visited Renoir. And he wrote, "Renoir cannot paint without a model being present. But whether he ever looks at her is another question."

These models in a way are a platform for him. He takes certain things from them, sometimes their hair color, sometimes their form. But he also imposes his own ideal all the time. We must remember that Renoir creates every model as a Renoir.

NARRATOR:

Carefully arranged studio paintings like these show how Renoir's approach to art-making embraced both tradition and artifice. He mused:

ACTOR (RENOIR):

I have returned to the old style of painting, soft and light...These masters of the 18th century...who seem not to work after nature know it better than we do.

[word count: 258]

509. BATHER SEATED IN A LANDSCAPE, CALLED EURYDICE, 1902-04

NARRATOR:

Renoir has intentionally amplified this bather's body to such a degree that she dominates the canvas. She's an exaggerated ideal—the source of all life.

But she may look strange to our modern eyes.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

People react very strongly to the shape of Renoir's bodies. As exemplified in *Bather Seated in the Landscape*—the massive shape of the lower body, the bulbous form of her buttocks, her calves, her legs, her arms. Perhaps in an age of obsession with diet and physical regime, these bodies seem odd and unnatural and maybe even undesirable.

NARRATOR:

But Renoir's younger contemporaries, artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, revered images like these. Picasso, the Spanish painter who would redefine the female nude through Cubism, purchased this very painting just after Renoir's death.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This is the kind of work that artists in his own time admired so greatly. And it seems to me that we have to step back from our gut reactions, and reexamine them in a historical context. Can we put ourselves into the mindset of Pablo Picasso and look at this painting, which he cherished and kept all his life? Can we look at this as a work of art by one of the classic masters of Impressionism who, here, at the dawn of a new century, is creating a new figural type? Something that's fundamentally different from what he had done before.

[word count: 230]

510. THE BATHERS, 1919

COLIN BAILEY:

It's a very hot afternoon by a stream in the resplendent southern landscape. Two friends have just removed their summer finery—their hats, their petticoats, their dresses. Maybe they've just finished bathing, and they're reclining, talking to each other...a sense of intimacy, affection and friendship.

It's one of Renoir's greatest, most moving, elegiac portrayals of the feminine and the female nude. It requires us to slow down and marvel at the command of the figures, the heat of the landscape, the joyfulness and innocence of the Arcadian world that he is representing for us.

NARRATOR:

This is Renoir's last painting of nudes in a landscape. He expended an enormous amount of energy creating it, despite his ill health. And he died the same year it was completed.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In the last 20 years of his life, Renoir settled in the town of Cagnes-sur-Mer, where he lived in a villa with his large family, surrounded by a beautiful Mediterranean landscape. This bucolic, Arcadian setting saw Renoir grow progressively more frail. He was struck with arthritis, and in the last decade of his life, was mostly confined to a wheelchair. As the years went on, his hands grew more and more bent and crippled.

When Renoir was to paint, his hands would be wrapped with a kind of linen tape, and the brush inserted between his fingers so that he could manipulate it. He was no longer able to reach down and pick up the brush for himself. So we see in Renoir's late years an artist who is grappling with a real physical disability that has not in any way affected his mind.

NARRATOR:

It was this age-worn but vital artist that so impressed the painter Henri Matisse when he moved to the south of France in 1917. Matisse praised this painting of bathers as "one of the most beautiful pictures ever painted."

[word count: 308]

511. THE BATHERS, 1920-21, PABLO PICASSO

NARRATOR:

Pablo Picasso finished this painting a year or two after Renoir's death. It's a kind of memorial or homage to Renoir and his nudes.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

When we look at this work by Picasso, I think it's not out of line to associate the man standing at the center with dark hair and a sort of Mediterranean complexion, with Picasso himself. And to see him in this painting flanked by women who are like his muses, but who are almost as if they were lifted from works by Renoir. Their bodies have the ample form of Renoir's classic bathers; the kind of works that Picasso admired and had actually acquired for himself.

NARRATOR:

Other works by great 20th-century artists surround you in this gallery. We can see Renoir's influence on each of them. Some are captivated by his use of color. Some are impressed by his mastery of form in two or three dimensions. Others share his preoccupation with the body as subject matter.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

By bringing these works of art together, we wanted to show how Renoir mattered so intensely to artists like Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, Maillol, Leger, Valadon. And by virtue of their fascination with him, to rekindle in us a fascination for Renoir in our own time, in the 21st century. We hope that we'll leave you here with a new sense of Renoir's greatness and importance, expressed by his fascination with and focus on the the body and the senses.

[word count: 240]

[end]