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How should we look at Victorian nudes? John Collier's *Godiva* (1898)

Victorian nudes have been in the headlines in 2018: how should we exhibit, study and look at works depicting young women and even girls in sexualised poses? This article examines Coventry's famous painting *Godiva* by John Collier. It sets out new information about the model for the painting and contextualises the image in Victorian debates over nudity in art.

Kate Nichols

Collection: [Herbert Art Gallery & Museum](#), Coventry

Keywords: John Collier, *Godiva*, Victorian nude, morality, representation

In January and February 2018, the Victorian nude became a twenty-first-century global news story. Manchester Art Gallery, working with contemporary artist [Sonia Boyce](#), temporarily removed [John William Waterhouse's](#) painting [Hylas and the Nymphs](#) (1896) from display. In the blank space left by the painting, the gallery posed a series of questions, and visitors were encouraged to leave post-it notes with ideas about how this image of nude teenage girls ought to be displayed in contemporary Manchester.¹ The temporary removal of Waterhouse's painting caused an outcry. Boyce's desire to involve the public in curating, and to raise questions about the ways in which gender, sexuality and race are presented in public galleries were largely overlooked. Instead, it became a news story about censorship, and was deemed a cheap publicity stunt rather than a stimulus for a much-needed debate.²

Art galleries around Britain are full of nineteenth-century images of unclothed women – indeed, girls – painted almost exclusively by men. There are, of course, Victorian male nudes – but not in the same volume, and (with important exceptions), these men tend not to be presented as passive, sexually available objects.³ Boyce's intervention sought to draw public attention to these images and the complex issues that surround them. Understanding and displaying these images to the public today has its challenges, but also huge opportunities for discussion of a range of issues, from the role art plays in legitimising expectations of male and female behaviour, to the history of laws governing the age of consent.

My focus here is not Manchester, nor Waterhouse, but what is perhaps the most iconic image at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum in Coventry; [John Collier's](#) 1898 painting *Godiva* (fig.1). It is the image which greets the viewer on entering the *Godiva* gallery, a display opened in 2008 to showcase the gallery's unique collection of *Godiva* imagery.⁴ It adorns tea towels, mouse mats, book covers and keyrings, and accounts for around 90% of the total reproduction rights requests made to the Herbert. *Godiva* is one of those images which has become so familiar, such a marker of a well-known story, that its interesting, peculiar and

troubling aspects have slipped out of view. The painting depicts in profile a slender, unclothed young woman, head down and demurely avoiding eye contact with the viewer, astride a rather bombastic horse. I do not think that Collier's *Godiva* needs to be censored. But I do think it could be a point of departure for important conversations and interventions about the public responsibility of museums, the representation of women and girls, and the formation of norms and expectations around gender, sexuality and class (given Godiva's aristocratic position), which is why I've introduced Coventry via a detour to Manchester. In this short piece, I aim to set out some of the Victorian debates over nudity and spectatorship from which this image emerged.

The Godiva legend has a particular power to make us question our position as viewers. The painting presents the body of an unclothed pubescent girl for public scrutiny in Coventry's civic art gallery. Yet, according to the Godiva legend, the pre-condition that Godiva remove her clothes was that the townsfolk avert their eyes from her nudity. As viewers, we are looking at a forbidden sight, and are immediately positioned as the infamous voyeur 'Peeping Tom', who was unable to resist looking at Godiva's naked body. This is a paradox which besets all works of visual art depicting Godiva. Indeed, [Edwin Henry Landseer's](#) 1865 *Lady Godiva's Prayer* (fig.2) draws this to our attention – the servant holding Godiva's horse has her eyes tightly balled shut.⁵ In Collier's painting, the only person present is Godiva herself, the fleshy focus of attention.

Collier's studies for Godiva (fig.3) show her initially facing the viewer – although still with downcast eyes. An arm and a swag of auburn hair conceal her torso – perhaps leaving it to the viewer's imagination. As Daniel Donoghue has pointed out, the relaxed foot and leg muscles make her seem less self-conscious than (for example) Landseer's Godiva – and perhaps less aware that she *is* the subject of our scrutiny.⁶ Her stillness and composure contrast with the alert vitality of the muscular horse that she sits astride, and which, with ears pricked and head tossed, strides off to the left of the painting.

Correspondence in the object file for this painting suggests that the model for Godiva may have been Mabel Violet Hall, who later became well-known on the Edwardian stage as Mab Paul (fig.4). Mab Paul would have been around 16 years old when she sat naked for Collier (then aged 48).⁷ In 1902 Collier painted her portrait, making her a subject in her own right, not a stand in for a famous nude Anglo-Saxon; she also apparently modelled for [The Prodigal Daughter](#) (1903, Usher Gallery, Lincoln) – her theatrical presence perhaps contributing towards the staginess of this painting.⁸ As Paul's celebrity began to grow, she was given a backstory; *Tatler* claimed that 'She started her career as an artist'.⁹ I've been unable to trace any works by Paul, but perhaps she, like many other models, entered the modelling profession as an attempt to gain a foothold in the art world. She may well have been a young woman entirely in control of her own image, and not a hapless victim. Indeed, the Godiva myth attracted independent professional female models – as Alison Smith has

documented in her discussion of the equestrian skills of the women who performed in Coventry's Godiva processions and pageants.¹⁰ But what should we do with this information? How can it be used to raise questions about what we deem acceptable and unacceptable in an image? How would our responses be different if this was not an oil painting but a photograph of a nude 16-year-old girl? What did contemporaries make of this image?

Nudes were rare in art exhibitions in Britain in the 1840s and 1850s. The Victorian nude only really emerged in the 1860s. It tended to be based primarily on classical statuary, and was still regarded as a more specialist, art-world concern. The display of paintings depicting nude female bodies in public art galleries, and the employment of female models in art schools was the subject of intense debate from the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s. As Alison Smith has shown, these debates were part of new understandings of the relationship between art and morality. Some argued that art should be understood as a realm apart from any 'real world' aspects – art's focus should be visual, [aesthetic](#) pleasure, not social responsibility. However, these discussions took place at a time of campaigns and new laws about sexual morality and sexual exploitation, notably the [Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885](#), which raised the age of consent for girls from 13 to 16. In this context, some argued that art had a new, important moral position, and that displaying the unclothed female body would promote respect for women. Others saw female nudes as exploitative (especially of the women who posed for them) and a danger to public morality and even public health. These debates were as complicated in the 1880s as they are today, uniting (for very different reasons) radical feminists and conservative moralists. All were concerned with the power that the nude in exhibited art might hold – whether for good or for bad.¹¹

Collier painted *Godiva* over a decade after this debate. By this point the idea that art should be enjoyed purely for 'its own sake', and should not be bound up in moral concerns, had come to dominate through the [aesthetic movement](#). However, it is impossible to separate this painting from the 1870s and 1880s debates about the artistic nude, which were formative for Collier. He received the British part of his art education at the Slade under [Edward Poynter](#), a keen painter of the nude whose art writings advocated for the separation of art and morality.¹² The painting at the centre of 1878 debates, [Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Sculptor's Model*](#) (1877, Private Collection) had been commissioned by Collier's father as a gift and training tool for his son, who apparently sat in Alma-Tadema's studio to witness the making of this work.¹³ Today Collier is not especially well-known and is regarded primarily as a portrait painter, but from the mid-1880s onwards he painted a number of nudes, and clearly set out the importance of painting from life models in his book *A Manual of Oil Painting* (London, 1886): 'without study from the nude there is no serious figure painting possible'.¹⁴

In June 1898, *Godiva* was exhibited at The New Gallery in London, where it was deemed ‘the picture of the exhibition’, praised for displaying ‘firmness of touch as well as gracefulness of outline’.¹⁵ In September 1898, the painting was on display at the [Royal Birmingham Society of Artists](#)’ New Street Gallery, where it was noted as one of a number of works to ‘arrest attention’.¹⁶ Although unanimously positive, these responses to *Godiva* were inescapably rooted in earlier debates over the morality of the nude. Some focus exclusively on artistic qualities (‘gracefulness of outline’ – which, however, could be read as a comment on the model’s body). Other reviewers overemphasise the image’s total divorce from sensuality (while dwelling perhaps too closely on every inch of the young woman’s body): ‘Modesty was Lady Godiva’s, and not prudishness, and modesty Mr Collier suggests. From chestnut head to delicate foot, the figure is drawn with sensitiveness – is painted charmingly’.¹⁷

As Lynda Nead emphasises in her landmark book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London, 1992), the artistic nude is a means of regulating the female body. The nude itself also requires continual regulation and policing, always in danger of sliding from acceptable into obscene. The perpetually outraged media discussions in response to the Manchester removal of *Hylas and the Nymphs* have tended to rage against this action (rather predictably) as part of an ‘over sensitive’, ‘snowflake’, ‘politically correct’, and ‘prudish’ social climate.¹⁸ But what if something much more interesting – a reconceptualisation of the nude – is taking place? If, as Nead argues, it took considerable institutional work to create the female nude in art as a suitable subject for a mass viewing public, are we currently witnessing a new de-familiarisation or de-legitimisation of the female nude?¹⁹ Is it significant that the institutions which have historically legitimised the nude (in this case, the art museum) are now starting to question its legitimacy? Or is this just another moment in the ongoing maintenance of these boundaries?

It is certainly true that Collier’s 1898 painting has somehow clothed itself in respectability and continues to do so today. Despite the centrality of nudity to the painting, and the fact that the person we are looking at is quite obviously very young, it is easy to look past these issues and to see it as simply an iconic image for the city. There are many other aspects of this image to explore; I’ve barely considered the horse and its presence and role in the image. The relationship between the painting, the politics of looking that it raises, and Coventry’s *Godiva* pageants are also significant – as is the influence the painting exerted on new cinematic media.²⁰ The sexual politics of the painting are not just to do with the fact that it represents a naked teenager. *Godiva* could be seen as an early example of a woman asserting her political presence; her naked horse ride was, after all, a protest against unfair taxation. I’ve not examined in any detail *why* *Godiva* was such a figure of interest to Collier in particular, or the Victorians more generally.²¹

This essay has sought to de-familiarise *Godiva*, to remind us quite how strange this painting is. It is important that we do not shy away from the nudity at the core of this image and take

up the challenges that Collier has (perhaps inadvertently) laid down for us. We are used to contemporary art opening up difficult conversations, but nineteenth-century art can be just as, if not more provocative. We need to acknowledge that the nude has a history, to explore the changing acceptability of such images, and the social and political context in which they were made. The Godiva myth in general, this particular iconic image of Godiva, and the age of the model likely used in this painting, offer a useful opportunity to discuss the power imbalances involved in looking at, and indeed making, art works. This is, after all, a painting depicting a scene that no one was supposed to look at.

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Images

- Fig.1 John Collier, *Godiva* (1898), oil on canvas, 142 x 183 cm, Courtesy Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.
- Fig.2 Edwin Landseer, *Lady Godiva's Prayer* (1865), oil on canvas, 143 x 112 cm, Courtesy Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.
- Fig.3 'Studies for "Lady Godiva"', from 'The Harvest of the Year', *Artist: An Illustrated Monthly Record of Arts, Crafts and Industries*, 22 (May 1898), pp.1–35. Via British Periodicals Collections. Image published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.
- Fig.4 Postcard of Mab Paul, before 1904. Author's collection.

¹ Manchester Art Gallery's perspective and further information can be found here: 'Presenting the Female Body – Challenging a Victorian Fantasy', *Manchester Art Gallery*, <http://manchesterartgallery.org/blog/presenting-the-female-body-challenging-a-victorian-fantasy/>, accessed 31 July 2018.

² Charlotte Higgins, "'The vitriol was really unhealthy": artist Sonia Boyce on the row over taking down Hylas and the Nymphs', *Guardian* (19 March 2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/19/hylas-nymphs-manchester-art-gallery-sonia-boyce-interview>, accessed 31 July 2018.

³ On Victorian male nudes, see: M. Hatt, 'Physical Culture: the male nude and sculpture in late Victorian Britain', in E. Prettejohn (ed.), *After the Pre-Raphaelites. Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester, 1999), pp.240–56; J.J. Kim, *Painted Men in Britain 1868-1918. Royal Academicians and Masculinities* (Farnham, 2012).

⁴ For a useful catalogue of Godiva imagery, see R.A. Clarke and P.A.E. Day, *Lady Godiva. Images of a Legend in Art and Society* (Coventry, 1982).

⁵ For further exploration, see D. Donoghue, *Lady Godiva. A Literary History of the Legend* (Oxford, 2003), pp.69–80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.113.

⁷ M. Beck, 'John Collier's Lady Godiva', email to curator, 10 October 2012, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, object file for John Collier, *Godiva*. This email states that Mab Paul was born in 1882.

⁸ This image was printed in popular society magazine *Tatler*: 'The Hon. John Collier's Picture of a Play Actress', *Tatler* (5 February 1902), p.262.

⁹ 'A Young Actress with Mr. Beerbohm Tree', *Tatler* (11 September 1901), p.528; on Paul's hobbies, age ('not yet 20'), and height (5'11"), see 'News from the Playhouses', *Tatler* (18 September 1901), p.574.

¹⁰ A. Smith, 'Modelling Godiva. The female model as performer in Victorian England', in J. Desmarais, M. Postle and W. Vaughan (eds), *Model and Supermodel: The Artist's Model in British Art and Culture* (Manchester, 2006), pp.61–74.

¹¹ See A. Smith, 'The "British Matron" and the body beautiful: the nude debate of 1885', in Prettejohn (1999), pp.217–39.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.226–7; p.232. For more on Collier, see J. Springell, 'Collier, John (1850-1934)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, May 2006.

¹³ W.H. Pollock, 'The Art of the Hon. John Collier', *Art Annual* (1914), p.2. On Alma-Tadema's painting and the nudity debate, see Smith (1999), pp.221–5.

¹⁴ John Collier, *A Manual of Oil Painting* (London, 1886), p.29. Nudes/semi-nudes by Collier in other British public collections include *Lilith* (1887, Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport, transferred from Bootle Art Gallery, 1970s); *Death of Cleopatra* (1890, Gallery Oldham, purchased from the artist, 1891); *In the Venusberg* (1901, Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport, purchased, 1902) *Clytemnestra* (c.1914, Worcester Museums, gift from Kay Kilbourne, 1939); *An Incantation* (1887, Russell Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, gift from Mrs Harris, 1941). Information sourced from www.artuk.org

¹⁵ 'The Picture Shows', *Belgravia: a London magazine* (June 1898), p.196; 'The New Gallery', *Illustrated London News* (21 May 1898), p.741.

¹⁶ 'Notes on Current Events', *British Architect* (2 September 1898), p.163.

¹⁷ 'The New Gallery', *Standard* (25 April 1898), p.5; see also 'Lady Godiva's Dress as Designed by a Great Problem-Painter', *Sketch* (14 August 1907), p.10.

¹⁸ See, for example, A.N. Wilson, 'How long until the New Puritans stop us seeing all these treasures?' *Daily Mail* (1 February 2018), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5342349/Manchester-Art-Gallery-removes-picture-naked-nymphs.html>, accessed 30 July

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2018; Jonathan Jones, 'Why have mildly erotic nymphs been removed from a Manchester gallery? Is Picasso next?', *Guardian* (31 January 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/31/hylas-and-the-nymphs-jw--waterhouse-why-have-mildly-erotic-nymphs-been-removed-from-a-manchester-gallery-is-picasso-next>, accessed 30 July 2018.

¹⁹ L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London, 1992), pp.42-6.

²⁰ On pageants and performers see Smith (2006); on early cinema, Donoghue (2003), pp.114–5; pp.122–3.

²¹ Donoghue (2003), pp.81–102, provides a useful overview of Victorian *Godiva*.