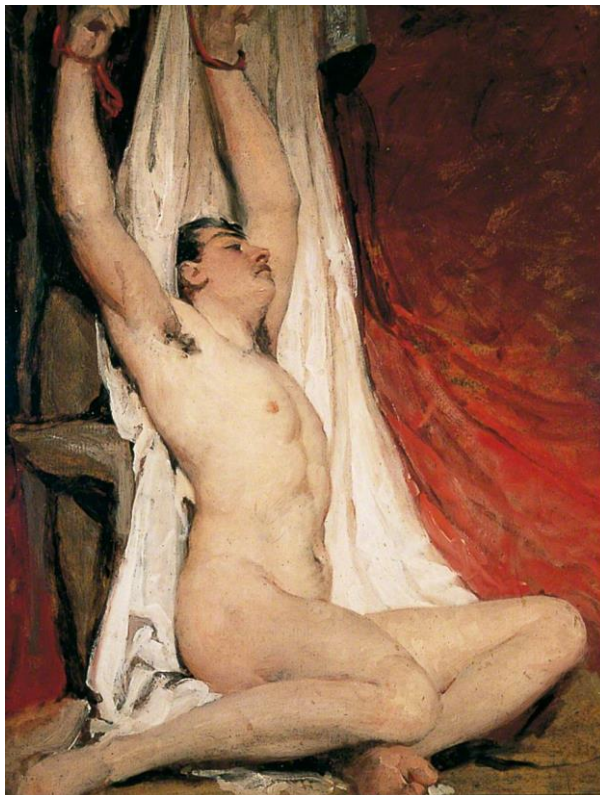


In this essay Dorothy Nott explores the controversial nature of William Etty's nudes, both male and female, and how they may have been seen in his lifetime and how they can be seen today in the twenty-first century.

Artwork of the Month June 2022

William Etty (1787-1849), *Male Nude with Arms Up-Stretched*



William Etty (1787-1849), *Male Nude with Arms Up-Stretched*, c. 1828-30, oil on millboard, 59.7 x 47cm. York Art Gallery, YORAG: 74
Image courtesy of York Museums Trust ©

You may wonder why I have chosen this painting to talk about. I can't say it is my favourite work in the gallery and not even my favourite Etty, for I much prefer others, for example *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball* currently hanging in the Burton. I have always admired the sensitive portraiture of his friends such as Dr Atkinson, John Brook, and John Harper. So why have I chosen *Male Nude with Arms Upstretched*? The prosaic answer is that I came upon this by a process of elimination, having suggested at least two other paintings for a talk only to discover that they had already been the subject of an earlier presentation to the Friends. This, combined with a feeling that this work may not be at the top of the list for a closer look, made my choice for me.

William Etty was one of those artists who was at one and the same time praised and criticised – sometimes for the very same thing – generally his ‘penchant for fleshiness’. He was what might be termed a ‘marmite’ figure, and probably, after Turner, the artist who divided opinions most vehemently in the first part of the 19th century. When York Art Gallery curated an exhibition on Etty in 2010, it was aptly entitled *Art and Controversy*.

Etty was born in 1787, just two years before the French Revolution, in Feasgate, York. His parents were millers turned bakers, and his mother’s gingerbread was famous. Even as a young child Etty showed an artistic flair by drawing in chalk on the floor of the bakery. Educated, first at Bedern and then in a school in Pocklington run by Mr Hall, he became apprenticed as a compositor in a letter press printing office in Hull, but hated it and, in a bid to improve his artistic skills, studied plaster copies from the antique in a plaster-cast shop. Luckily for him he had a more affluent uncle who recognised his early talent, and in 1807 paid £100 for him to be apprenticed to Sir Thomas Lawrence with whom he stayed for a year. Lawrence was very much in demand at the time, so much so that he would pass on commissions he had insufficient time or inclination to carry out himself. This gave Etty valuable experience, allowing him to copy artists such as Joshua Reynolds, artists whose work Etty would not previously have had the opportunity of seeing, let alone studying. It has to be remembered that there were no public art galleries until 1822 when Dulwich Picture Gallery opened its doors, followed two years later by a very scaled-down National Gallery.

At the end of this apprenticeship Etty was enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy School, where he delighted in the Life Class which became a lifelong obsession with him, Lawrence referring to him as ‘its most assiduous student.’ As Martin Myrone has suggested in the catalogue (edited by Sarah Burnage, Mark Hallett, and Laura Turner), could this assiduous attendance be related to Etty’s social insecurity as a provincial without the connections and confidence of his fellow artists? For him, getting to London and to the Royal Academy school was an achievement in itself and not one he was likely to let go of lightly. In turn, did this persistence lead to a criticism that he was ‘simply too professional’, allowing his adherence to the rules to obscure his imagination and to develop ideas as seen, for example, in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood later in the century? Etty was by now calling himself an artist. A few years later he was able to study further by travelling in Europe, where he saw and copied from many of the old masters, including Titian whose *Venus of Urbino* he reproduced.

During his lifetime Etty was criticised more for his depiction of female nudes, critics writing of his 'wanton delight' in his portrayals, and the 'degraded character of his naked females'. This may seem strange to a modern audience as we wander through the portals of the National Gallery and Royal Academy. As an unmarried man he laid himself open to snide comments suggesting that painting these nudes was his only outlet for his passion. There is no doubt he suffered from a highly critical and sometimes vindictive press, the Morning Chronicle fearing he will 'never turn from his wicked ways and make himself fit for decent company'. Etty defended himself by saying that the naked figure was innocent and highly spiritual, and that 'to the pure in heart all things are pure.'

He did have his supporters though, and his Academy entry for 1821, *The Arrival of Cleopatra in Cilicia*, was a great success, described as belonging to the highest class of art and it was not long before he was elected in 1824 an associate of the Royal Academy (ARA) and in 1828 a full member (RA), the year before and in preference to John Constable. Yet even his admirers thought he overused the naked form, showing 'tawdry taste' and 'vulgar theatricality'.

At the time, male nudity was seen more as heroic or profiling energetic displays of an athletic nature, though this hardly describes this painting. However, Etty certainly did paint several representations of athletic, vigorous and heroic men, for example, [The Wrestlers](#) in York's collection. This is a very physical painting of two male bodies in close, violent contact and where you can see the muscular effort exerted by both men as they strive for supremacy. Following the acquisition of *The Wrestlers*, Hans Hess, the then curator and initiator of the Friends of York Art Gallery, said that there had never been an English artist whose paintings of the nude figure were more accomplished. Although one could hardly say that this painting is athletic, holding the pose in itself would have required some little effort. It is probably true to say that a modern audience is far less troubled by the amount of female flesh though it may balk at the sight of the male nude, particularly when in a private, non-heroic setting as here. Why then was this painted? What was Etty trying to achieve? I suggest that, despite our initial discomfort, paintings like this one have to be seen within the context of Etty's assiduous attendance at the life-class, constantly honing his skill by studying different poses; and we also need to remember that, throughout the 18th and into the 19th century, the classical nude was held out by the Royal Academy as the exemplum of artistic practice.

Etty employed many male models, picking some up in the Turkish Baths; others were life-guardsmen from the nearby barracks. It is said that his male models were his 'only sunshine' in the bleak fog of London, and that when he returned to York they were very sad to see him go. It seems clear that he was very much a part of that LGBT community, and this painting could be seen as softcore sadomasochism in the pose adopted. The young man is slumped with arms raised, arching his back slightly against the background of soft white material. His knees are bent under him and his hands are raised above his head, loosely supported by blood red ropes. These supports were regularly used in the Royal Academy school to assist models to sustain a pose and can be seen in Johann Zoffany's painting of the Royal Academicians in a life class. On the model's right palm there is evidence of the stigmata. The head is inclined backwards with semi-closed eyes and an expression which could amount to resignation or possibly ecstasy. It is not difficult to see resonances of Rubens' [Descent from the Cross](#), the white cloth acting as a winding sheet and the whole body pose signifying sacrifice.

But this is not the only possible analysis. In his essay in the Etty catalogue Jason Edwards invites the viewer to consider the painting at a 90-degree angle where the model is lying down and becomes instantly more relaxed, with the brown objects behind his back acting as supporting cushions. Instead of a Christ-like figure, the model is transformed into a sexual and homoerotic object. I shall leave the interpretation to the individual viewer, but if the latter, then this is firmly within York's queer history; and the work is today being exhibited within the context of a partnership between York Art Gallery and York LGBT Forum. In these times when sexuality and gender identity are fluid, it is apposite to revisit paintings such as Etty's which were executed when our current terminology was not available. Here Etty's nude is seen alongside a 20th-century painting of wrestlers by Keith Vaughan, the subject Etty himself painted in about 1840, and is next to Juan Carreno de Miranda's [St Sebastian](#) who, patiently suffering death by arrows, is said to be iconic in queer circles. The third member of the group is by York's own Henry Scott Tuke (1858-1929), an artist known for his portrayals of naked young boys bathing, though never explicitly sexual.

Etty was very much admired for his flesh tints and the corporeality of his figures, one reviewer stating that he was the greatest colourist of the English school and that no other living artist could paint flesh like him. He delighted in contrasts of skin tone. First, he would sketch out in white chalk or charcoal, and then apply a base colour. His notes indicate that he would paint with one or at the most two colours at a time and allow the lower layers to show through by scumbelling, that is using the thumb to remove

part of the uppermost layer or layers, to give a depth to the fleshiness. In this case Etty worked in oil on millboard. The paint was applied in soft strokes and not with great precision. On looking at the right foot it is evident that it is not really finished, and it may well be that, having achieved the pose and the skin tone he wanted, Etty was not very concerned to bring the painting to completion. I suggest that this might indicate that this painting is a study for part or the whole of a later painting, which as far as I am aware was never executed, even though this work was completed by 1830, many years before Etty's death in 1849.

The painting was given to the gallery under the Sir Claude Phillips Bequest in 1924.

© **Dorothy Nott**
June 2022