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Giacomo Grosso
La Nuda, 1920

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GIACOMO GROSSO

(Cambiano 1860 – Turin 1938)

LA NUDA, 1920

Oil on canvas

Unframed: 90 x 200 cm

Framed: 125 x 235 cm

Signed lower left: 'Grosso 920'

Provenance

Private collection, Turin.

Exhibitions

Naples, Palazzo Reale, *la Esposizione Biennale Nazionale d'Arte della Città di Napoli*, May–October 1921, no. 1219.

Reference Literature

C. Corradini, *Giacomo Grosso pittore*, Turin, 1914

E. De Amicis, "Gli anni della fame di un pittore celebre," in *La Blouse*, Florence, 1906

R. Maggio Serra and R. Passoni (eds.), *Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino. Il Novecento. Catalogo delle opere esposte*, Fabbri, Turin, 1993, pp. 636–637 (entry by G. Auneddu)

G. L. Marini (ed.), Giacomo Grosso. *Il pittore a Torino fra Otto e Novecento*, exh. cat. (Turin, Società Promotrice delle Belle Arti, 22 Nov. 1990 – 17 Feb. 1991), Fabbri, Milan, 1990

A. Mistrangelo (ed.), *Giacomo Grosso. Una stagione tra pittura e Accademia*, exh. cat. (Turin, Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Albertina / Museo Accorsi-Ometto / Palazzo Madama, and Cambiano, Palazzo Comunale, 28 Sept. 2017 – 7 Jan. 2018)

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A life-size female nude reclines across a disordered bed of pearly white sheets, set against a softly brushed, almost abstract ground of warm creams and tones of grey. The model lies stretched on her front, presented in a frankly sensuous dorsal view. The swelling curve of her hip and backside occupies the luminous centre of the canvas, the back tapering to the right toward her shoulders. Her head is turned out over her shoulder to meet the viewer's gaze, inverted and dark-eyed; the small red mouth parted in a faint, knowing smile. It is this direct, near-photographic engagement of the face that forms the picture's psychological hinge. The model wears only sheer white stockings, rolled at the thigh, and a pair of pale silver-grey high-heeled mules. Accessories such as these fix her in the contemporary boudoir rather than anchor her in myth as if to say this is a modern woman, not Venus; or perhaps the latter as the former. Her abundant blue-black hair spills loose across the sheet to the right, where it unfolds in a single deep accent of an otherwise high-keyed, pale composition; a flush of warm rose runs through a discarded garment beneath her legs at the left.

The bravura of the handling can be seen in the way the flesh is built into creamy, lightly scumbled impasto, how warm pinks and corals modelled against cool, pearly half-tones, and the broad, summary, almost Impressionist strokes the sheets and bedhead are swept with. The paint is dragged and feathered so that the figure's solidity gains form against a deliberately atmospheric surround, whose palette is keyed to a soft, *ovattata* luminosity. Only her black hair and rose drape appear as saturated note, under a light that is diffuse and enveloping, raking gently across the body. The long horizontal format and the diagonal recession of the figure give the composition a languid, frieze-like sweep, the lower register carrying the body while the upper half is surrendered to a loosely brushed cloth.

The picture occupies a prestigious position within the artist's own oeuvre, for it is his mature reprise of the single most celebrated nude of his career. In 1896, Grosso showed at the Turin Triennale a horizontal reclining nude titled *La Nuda*, featuring a dark-haired woman stretched on a white bearskin, her smiling face turned to the viewer (fig. 1). Her velvety sensuality at the time drew fierce obloquy. The painting provoked precisely the mixture of admiration and controversy that would come to define the artist's public reputation. Contemporary critics praised its extraordinary painterly freedom, seen in the soft atmosphere, the luminous treatment of flesh and the effortless assurance of its execution, while others condemned its unapologetic sensuality. The present painting repeats the composition at a comparable scale, the figure now laid on white linen in place of the dark pelt. Grosso habitually returned to his successful inventions, and a signed, full-size autograph version of his signature image, made a quarter-century later at the height of his maturity, is a rare survival. Here, he renders the same composition in a decidedly more atmospheric manner, demonstrating the evolution of his artistic and stylistic capabilities.

Just a year earlier, at the very first Venice Biennale, Grosso's *Il Supremo Convengo* (1895) entrenched his reputation as a painter of the provocative nude and is the immediate seedbed from which the *Nuda* paintings arise (fig. 2). This vast and notorious canvas of naked women crowded around the open coffin of a dead libertine was condemned by the Patriarch of Venice, the future Pius X, and was cordoned off to its own viewing room. Despite, or perhaps, those reasons, the painting won the popular prize and subsequently carried his name across

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Europe. Unfortunately, the painting was destroyed by fire while touring the United States and survives only in photographs. The present *Nuda* is, by contrast, a tangible, full-scale embodiment of exactly the sensual genius the lost masterpiece can now only document at second hand. While Grosso pursued the nude throughout his later life, it was the reclining *La Nuda* that became his most recognisable and coveted image, and of that signature type the present campus is a prime, fully resolved exemplar. The painting was included in the *la Esposizione Biennale Nazionale d'Arte della Città di Napoli*, held at the Palazzo Reale from May to October 1921, where it was exhibited as no. 1219, as recorded on the exhibition label affixed to the reverse.

For all its candour, the image Grosso constructs is a deeply learned one, and it asks to be measured against the greatest testaments of its theme. The full-length female nude laid across a bed belongs to a lineage that runs through the most famous canvases in Western art, recalling masterpieces such as Diego Velázquez's *Toilet of Venus* (c. 1647–51) at The National Gallery, London (fig. 3). The affinities extend well beyond the obvious correspondence of pose. Like Velázquez's celebrated Venus, Grosso's figure is conceived primarily through the expansive rhythm of the back, whose gently undulating contour becomes the principal site of sensual expression. In both paintings, the body unfolds as a continuous sequence of luminous transitions, demonstrating a view of flesh as generated through paint itself. Velázquez dissolved contour within delicate tonal modulations, allowing the body to emerge almost imperceptibly from its surrounding atmosphere; Grosso adopts a remarkably similar strategy, building volume through supple passages of broken colour rather than linear precision. Velázquez's Venus, however, reveals her back while her face remains elusive, glimpsed only indirectly through Cupid's mirror, so that desire is mediated by pictorial ambiguity. Grosso overturns this carefully sustained reserve by having his model turn directly toward the spectator, her gaze meeting ours without mediation.

Equally significant is Grosso's dialogue with *Grande Odalisque* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (c. 1814), held at the Louvre, Paris (fig. 4). The painting subordinates anatomical plausibility to ideal beauty, extending the spine, elongating the limbs and refining every contour into an exercise in linear perfection. His odalisque exists within a realm of calculated artifice, where the body is elevated into an ideal form. Grosso inherits much of this compositional vocabulary, from the sweeping diagonal to the elegant torsion of the back to the exposed spine but fundamentally redefines its purpose. The polished enamel surface of Neoclassicism yields instead to richly tactile brushwork, idealised contour gives way to atmospheric modelling, and the Orientalist fantasy is replaced by the recognisable interior of a modern bedroom. In doing so, Grosso retains the grandeur of the academic nude while relinquishing its dependence upon fiction and exoticism. The transformation is emblematic of the broader trajectory of European painting in the decades surrounding 1900, wherein the ideal body gives way to the observed body, and painterly vitality supersedes linear perfection.

The implications of this transformation become clearer still when the painting is considered alongside *La maja desnuda* (c. 1795–1800) by Francisco de Goya, presently at the Museo del Prado, Madrid (fig. 5). If Velázquez established the great Baroque paradigm of the reclining nude, Goya decisively severed its dependence upon mythological disguise. His *Maja* was

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revolutionary precisely because it dispensed with the conventional fiction of Venus altogether. The sitter is neither goddess nor allegorical abstraction, but a contemporary woman whose identity resides unapologetically within the present. It was this collapse of the distance between art and life, as much as the unprecedented frankness of her nudity, that rendered the picture so provocative within late eighteenth-century Spain. The body is no longer ennobled through classical precedent and instead derives its legitimacy from the painter's uncompromising fidelity to lived reality.

If Goya supplied the modern nude with psychological independence, it was *Olympia* (1863) by Édouard Manet, now at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, that irrevocably transformed the act of looking itself (fig. 6). Few paintings altered the history of European art so profoundly. When *Olympia* appeared at the Salon of 1865, its scandal lay not simply in the representation of a prostitute, nor even in the conspicuous absence of mythological disguise, but in the unprecedented directness with which the sitter returned the spectator's gaze. Manet dismantled the comfortable fiction that the nude existed merely to be viewed. Instead, the viewer became implicated within the exchange, transformed from invisible observer into participant. The picture exposed the social and psychological mechanics that earlier traditions had sought carefully to conceal. Although Grosso remained fundamentally committed to the technical ideals of academic painting, *La Nuda* demonstrates a remarkably sophisticated awareness of this modern reconfiguration of spectatorship. His sitter's over-the-shoulder glance performs much the same function as *Olympia*'s unwavering stare, establishing an encounter founded upon mutual recognition rather than unilateral observation. Yet while Manet employs confrontation to undermine convention, flattening form, suppressing illusionistic modelling and exposing the constructed nature of pictorial representation itself, Grosso's concern remains above all with the expressive possibilities of paint, or rather, the sensuous rendering of flesh, light and atmosphere that academic naturalism had cultivated to extraordinary refinement.

This synthesis constitutes one of the painting's most remarkable achievements. By 1920, the great European tradition of the reclining nude had become burdened by centuries of repetition, its principal compositional formulae seemingly exhausted through continual reinterpretation. Grosso demonstrates that the type remained capable of genuine renewal. It is precisely for this reason that the present canvas occupies such an exceptional position within Grosso's own oeuvre.

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Fig. 1. Giacomo Grosso, *La nuda*, 1896, oil on canvas, 104.9 x 205 cm, signed and dated top left: "Grosso 96," Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin, inv. P/1148



Fig. 2. Giacomo Grosso, *Il Supremo Convegno*, 1895, destroyed in a fire.

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Fig. 3. Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus* ('*The Rokeby Venus*'), c. 1647-51, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 177 cm (48 1/4 x 69 5/8 in.), National Gallery, London, inv. NG2057



Fig. 4: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Une odalisque, dite La grande odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, 91 x 162 cm (in.), The Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. RF 1158

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Fig. 5. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *La maja desnuda*, c. 1795-1800, oil on canvas, 97.3 x 190.6 cm (38 1/4 x 75 in.), Museo del Prado, Madrid, inv. P000742.



Fig. 6. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130.5 x 191 cm (51 3/8 x 75 1/4 in.), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, inv. RF 644

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