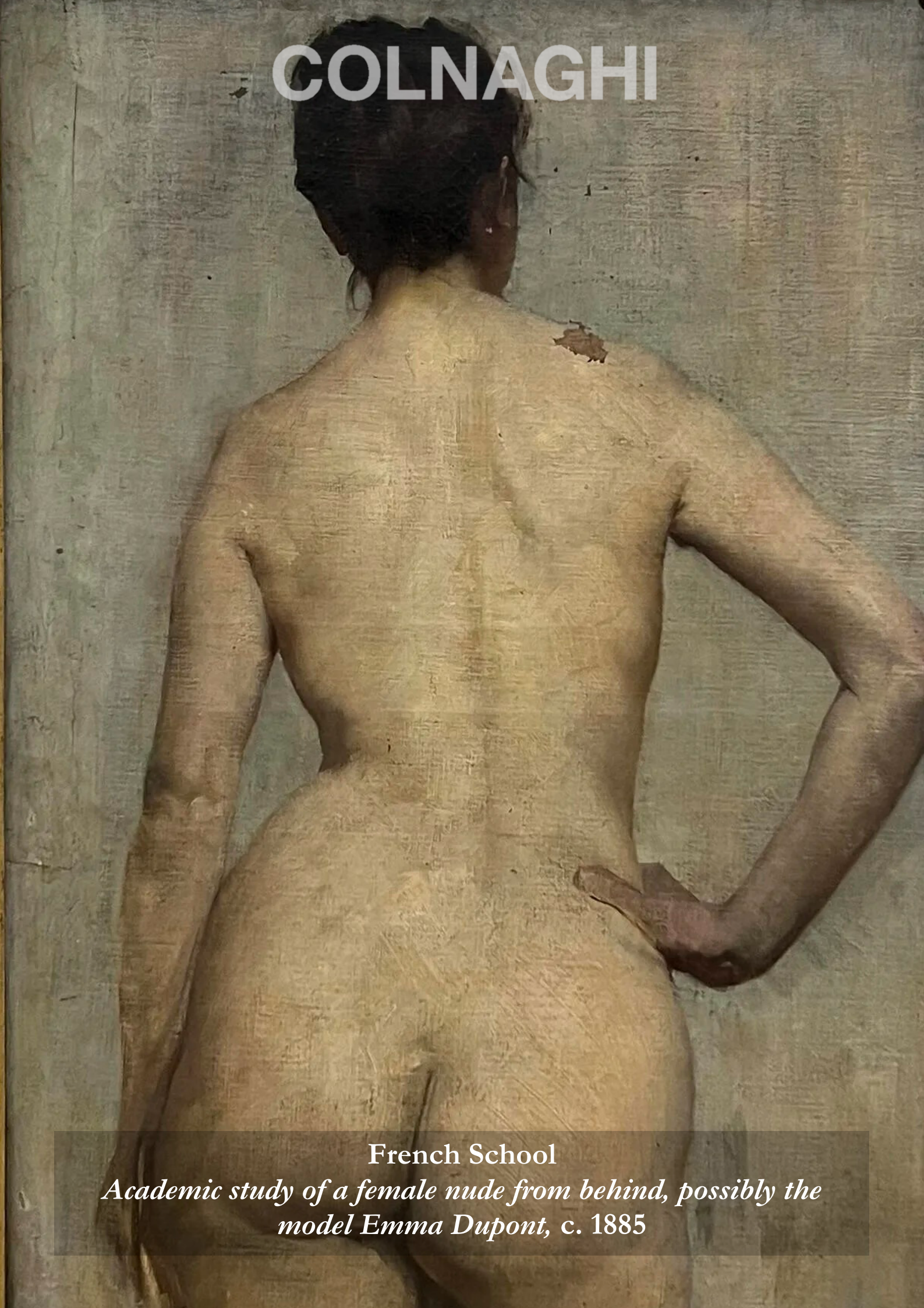


# COLNAGHI

An oil painting of a female nude figure from the back, showing the spine, shoulders, and hips. The figure is standing with her right hand on her hip. The background is a textured, light-colored wall. The painting is signed 'COLNAGHI' in the upper left corner.

French School  
*Academic study of a female nude from behind, possibly the  
model Emma Dupont, c. 1885*

FRENCH SCHOOL

*ACADEMIC STUDY OF A FEMALE NUDE FROM BEHIND, POSSIBLY THE MODEL  
EMMA DUPONT, c. 1885*

Oil on canvas  
57 x 38 cm.; 22 1/2 x 15 in.

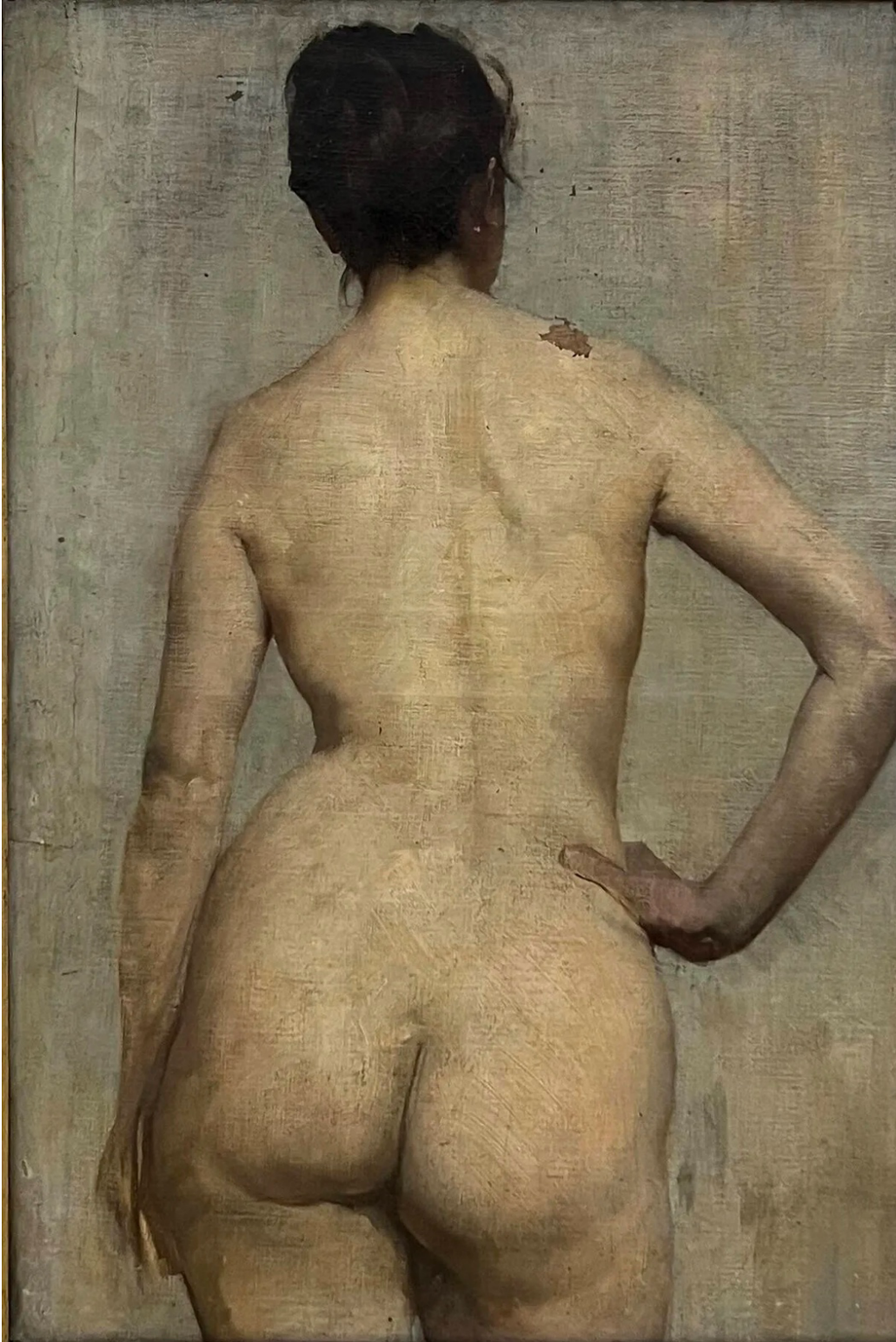
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Provenance

Private collection, Paris

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# COLNAGHI



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Among the most enduring and compelling motifs in European art is the standing female nude viewed from behind. Simultaneously revealing and enigmatic, the pose offers the artist an ideal vehicle through which to explore anatomy, movement and beauty while withholding the individuality and psychological specificity conveyed by the face. Nothing is concealed physically, yet something remains unknown. The viewer is invited to contemplate the figure while being denied direct access to her identity. This tension between revelation and concealment has long contributed to the motif's fascination, imbuing it with a subtle erotic charge while preserving an atmosphere of distance and mystery. Across centuries, artists repeatedly returned to the pose, attracted not only by its technical challenges but also by its peculiar combination of sensuality, intimacy and ambiguity.

The origins of the standing female back nude lie in the ancient world. Greek sculptors were among the first to recognise the expressive possibilities of the pose, exploring the elegant movement of the spine, the asymmetry of the shoulders and pelvis, and the subtle shift of weight through the body. These discoveries remained fundamental to European art long after antiquity itself had passed. During the seventeenth century Peter Paul Rubens transformed the motif into one of the defining images of the Baroque. The central figure of his celebrated *Three Graces* (fig. 1) remains among the most memorable female back views in Western art, while numerous studies by the artist reveal a sustained fascination with the sculptural and anatomical complexities of the pose. Jacob Jordaens continued this tradition (fig. 2), where the standing female nude seen from behind became a vehicle through which artistic invention and anatomical mastery could be simultaneously displayed. During the eighteenth century artists such as François Boucher further developed the motif, which increasingly became both a celebrated artistic subject and a central component of academic training.

By the nineteenth century the standing female back nude occupied a privileged position within European art. No subject was more important to the academic painter than the human figure, and mastery of the nude was regarded as the foundation of all higher artistic endeavour. Whether working in history painting, mythology, religion, allegory, Orientalism or genre scenes, artists were expected to demonstrate complete command of anatomy, proportion and form. The female nude therefore became one of the principal measures of artistic accomplishment. Among the leading painters of the age, none was more closely associated with its idealised representation than William-Adolphe Bouguereau (fig 3), whose celebrated nudes embodied the technical ambitions and aesthetic values of the academic tradition. Yet behind the finished Salon masterpieces lay a rigorous culture of study from life, in which artists honed their skills through the sustained observation of professional models.

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The present painting belongs convincingly within this world. Stripped of narrative context and theatrical embellishment, it focuses entirely upon the figure itself. A restrained palette and neutral background direct attention towards the elegant rhythms of the body, while the subtle contrapposto animates the figure and emphasises the graceful movement of the spine and hips. The artist combines academic discipline with direct observation, creating a figure that possesses both sculptural clarity and physical presence. The sophistication of the modelling and the unusual degree of finish elevate the work beyond a routine academy study, transforming it into a self-sufficient image of considerable aesthetic appeal.

Although the absence of a signature precludes a secure attribution, the available evidence permits certain broader conclusions. The painting's closest analogies are not found among the finished Salon compositions of the period but among the most accomplished academic studies produced within the Parisian atelier system during the 1880s. Its restrained palette, neutral background, concentration upon anatomical structure and emphasis upon the standing female back nude all point towards the culture of artistic training that flourished in Paris during the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Particularly significant is the apparent relationship to the international artistic milieu that gathered around the Académie Julian. Founded by Rodolphe Julian, the academy became one of the most important centres of artistic education in Europe, attracting students from France, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Belgium, Russia, Britain and the United States. Under the guidance of celebrated professors including William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jules Lefebvre and Tony Robert-Fleury, generations of artists were trained through the disciplined study of the nude from life.

The surviving studies of artists associated with this milieu provide illuminating comparisons. During his years at the Académie Julian, where he studied under Bouguereau and Robert-Fleury, Lovis Corinth repeatedly explored the standing female back nude, producing works that demonstrate many of the same concerns with structure, weight and anatomical truth evident in the present painting (fig. 4). Likewise, Félix Vallotton's study (fig. 5), executed while training at the Académie Julian under Jules Lefebvre, reveals a comparable commitment to disciplined observation and academic rigour. The recurrence of closely related poses and compositional solutions among artists of different nationalities reflects the central role played by the professional model within the Parisian academy system. Such comparisons are valuable not because they suggest a specific attribution, but because they place the present work within the artistic environment of late nineteenth-century Paris, where students from across Europe absorbed a common academic language through the sustained study of the nude from life.

The painting further evokes the world of the professional artist's model, an indispensable component of academic training. Far from being anonymous participants, many models became familiar figures within Parisian artistic circles, posing repeatedly for professors, students and established Salon painters. The celebrated Emma Dupont, immortalised in several works by Jean-Léon Gérôme (figs. 6 and 7), is among the best-known examples. Although most closely associated with Gérôme, she also worked for other artists and exemplifies the small community of professional sitters upon whom the Parisian academy system depended. Given the probable date and Parisian academic context of the present work, it is tempting to speculate that the model may have belonged to this same circle of professional sitters. Indeed, the possibility that she is Emma Dupont herself cannot be excluded. Whether or not her identity can ever be established, the figure clearly belongs to the rich tradition of professional models that shaped the artistic education of an entire generation.

While certainty remains impossible, a date in the 1880s and an origin within the orbit of the Académie Julian represent the most plausible conclusions suggested by the available evidence. The comparisons with the Paris-period works of Corinth and Vallotton are particularly persuasive, not because they imply a direct connection, but because they demonstrate the remarkable consistency of academic practice within the institution during its period of greatest influence. The present work appears entirely at home within that environment. It is tempting to view it as the product of one of the many talented artists who studied under Bouguereau, Lefebvre or Robert-Fleury during the decade in which the Académie Julian stood at the centre of European artistic education.

More than a studio study, the present painting stands as the latest expression of a tradition extending from classical antiquity to the ateliers of nineteenth-century Paris. Combining the timeless appeal of the standing female nude seen from behind with the rigorous observational methods of academic training, it demonstrates why the human figure remained, for generations of artists, the ultimate measure of artistic achievement. Viewed in this context, the work emerges not merely as an academic exercise, but as an exceptionally accomplished example of one of the most enduring and respected traditions in European art and, in all probability, a product of the remarkable artistic culture that flourished around the Académie Julian during its golden age in the 1880s.



Fig. 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, 1630, oil on panel, 221 x 181 cm, Prado

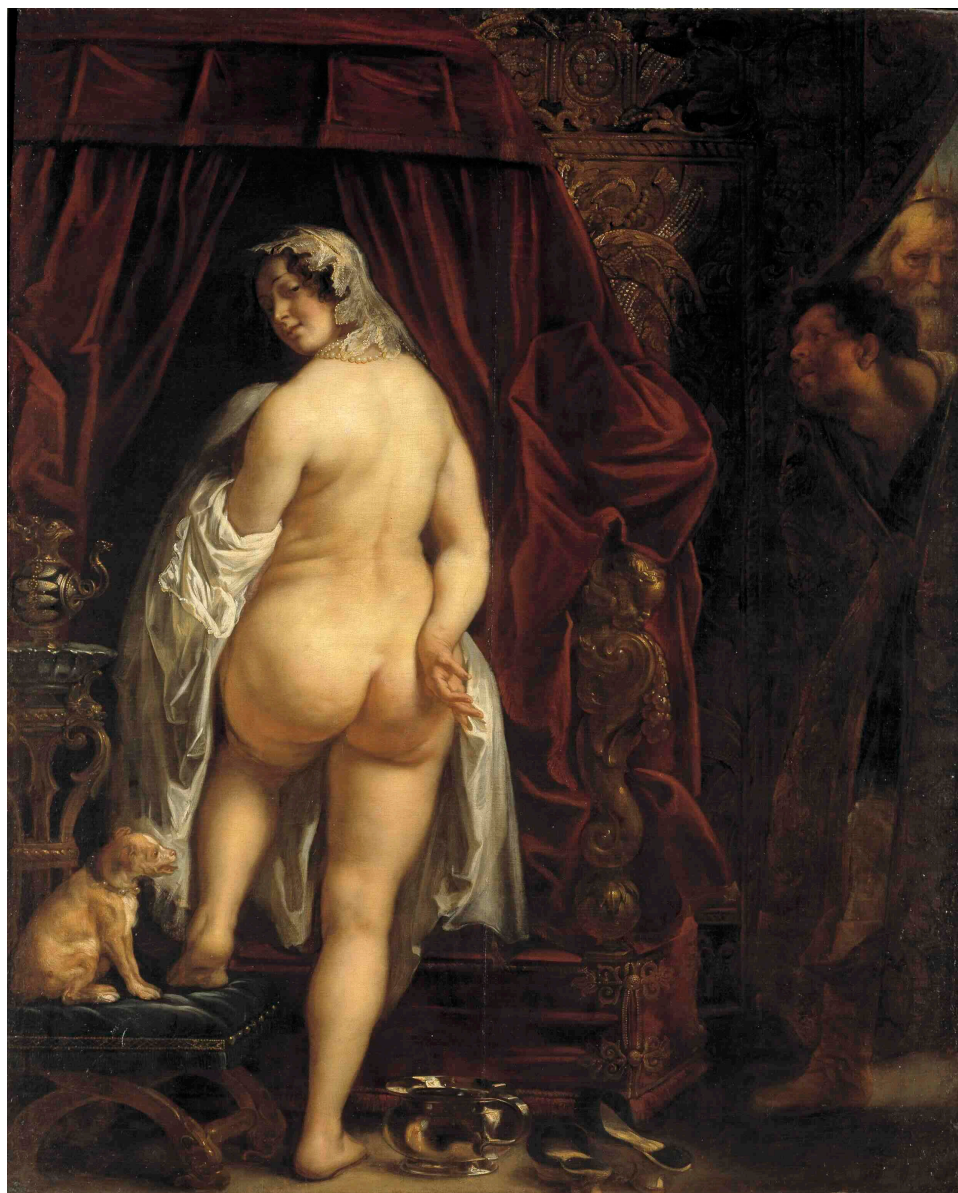


Fig. 2. Jacob Jordaens, *King Candaules of Lydia showing his wife to Gyges*, 1646, oil on canvas, 193 x 157 cm, Nationalmuseum



Fig. 3. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Bathers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 201 x 129 cm, Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 4. Lovis Corinth, *Nude from behind*, 1884, oil on canvas, 90.5 x 56 cm, Private Collection

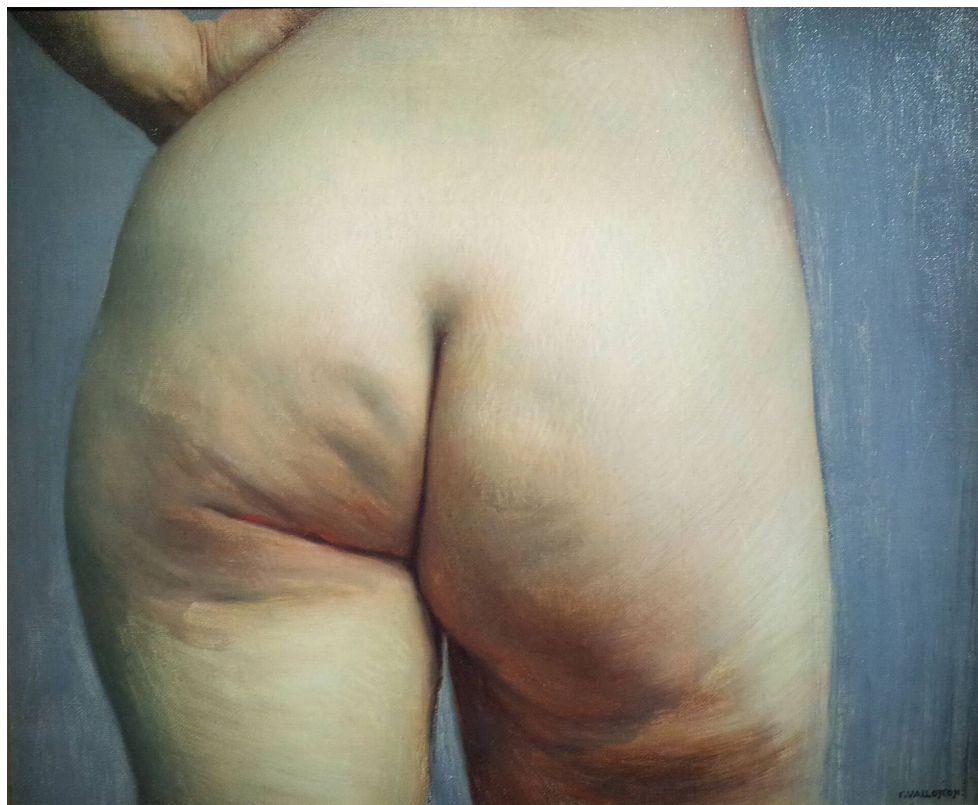


Fig. 5. Felix Vallotton, *Étude des fesses*, 1883, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 6. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Emma Dupont*, c. 1885, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 45 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 7. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The End of the Session*, 1886, oil on canvas, 33 x 27.5 cm, Private Collection

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