

The Reclining Figure

Oil Painting Class Sadie Murdoch



Vishnu Sleeping on the Serpent Ananta
circa 1840. Opaque pigments and gold on wasli
20 x 7.6 cm.

The reclining figure in art is a tradition which dates back many centuries - we can see it in sculpture, painting, drawing and printmaking. Today we are going to look at some examples in oil painting with a few sculptures, drawings and prints thrown in..! We will also be painting our own reclining figure.

The reclining or 'recumbent' body in art is an odd thing; neither a portrait (in painting, drawing and printmaking, it is generally in landscape format), nor a landscape (it is a figure), the horizontal placement of the body tends to convey the fact that she or he is either asleep or resting. It is a European, Post Enlightenment academic tradition in some respects, yet we also see it in the sculpture and pictorial arts of Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as in early Asian and South East Asian art forms. Here the recumbent body used to tell stories, most often where dreaming and lack of consciousness was part of the narrative. Myths and legends, tales of gods and deities, like the painting of Vishnu sleeping on the serpent Ananta, above. The image is from The Devi Mahatmya or Devi Mahatmyam ("Glory of the Goddess"), a Hindu

religious text describing the Goddess as the supreme power and creator of the universe. It is part of the Markandeya Purana, and was composed in Sanskrit, between 400-600 CE. The blue-skinned god Vishnu is wearing a yellow dhoti. His wife Lakshmi is dressed in orange and gold and massaging her husband's foot. Together the couple are resting upon a multi-headed serpent Antana. They are all resting on the "Ocean of Bliss", with deities Brahma and Durga above and the demons Madhu and Kaitabha entering on the right. The bright colours contrast with the cool grey of the sea, in which little fishes and other sea creatures are swimming.

Sleeping Ariadne is a Roman copy of an Ancient Greek (Hellenic) sculpture of the 2nd century BC. It portrays the Goddess Ariadne reclining, in a state between sleeping and waking. It is currently located in the Vatican in Italy, and is one of the most renowned sculptures of Antiquity.



Ariadne Sleeping, Marble, 2 BC

The reclining figure in western art is, more often than not, a female body. The convention of the reclining nude in academic western painting and sculpture partly accounts for this, although we can also see male figures, androgynous figures, indeed other species entirely, lying down and at rest often captured in drawings or prints. Cats, dogs, lions - a whole menagerie in fact!



Rembrandt van Rijn, Lion Resting, Ink drawing, 1650



Albrecht Dürer, Dog Resting, Silverpoint drawing, 1520.

This ink drawing by Rembrandt van Rijn of a lion, and an engraving of a dog by Albrecht Dürer are great examples of superb draftsmanship, fine detail and observation. Rembrandt's drawing is more spontaneous, and you have the sense that the lion will not be resting for long. In the case of the contemporary American sculptor Kiki Smith, we get both human and animal as reclining figures!



Kiki Smith, *Rest Upon*, 2009, bronze, 34" x 82" x 39"

The reclining figure as a place where we can represent the real and the imagined is a useful tool for artists to include the fantasy of the dreamer. Nowhere more clearly can we see this than with Henri Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy*, pictured below. Is the lion real, or just a figment of the sleeper's imagination?



Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, Oil on Canvas, 1897

As well as animal studies, Rembrandt made many studies for his wife Saskia van Uylenburgh, who was very often the model for his historical and mythological paintings. His drawings of the domestic realm offer an intimate look at the people in his life.



8 Rembrandt, *Woman lying awake in bed*. Drawing, pen and brown ink, c. 1635–1640.

Rembrandt's pen-and-ink drawing, "Woman Lying Awake" is thought to represent his wife, who may have been confined to bed during child birth, or because of ill-health. In the drawing, Rembrandt concentrates on the drapery folds, turning a private moment into a careful examination of line.



Georges Seurat, Bathers at Asnieres, Oil on canvas.1884

So, the reclining figure allows us to study a person in a different way to a portrait. It can allow the capturing of an informal moment, often in the context of domestic intimacy or a casual scene in a public place. Some artists used the convention of the reclining figure to capture friends and family in just such a moment. The effect of the reclining figure is both a formal device and informal pose - someone lounging on a bed or couch, chilling out in the park or on the beach or like Seurat's painting above, just hanging out on the river bank.



Chantal Joffe, Reclining Venus: Esme on the Blue Sofa, Oil on canvas (2018).

It can allow the capturing of an informal moment, often in the context of domestic intimacy. There are also often similarities in the poses - head propped on one hand, as we see with Ariadne and Rembrandt and British artist Chantal Joffe. Joffe's paintings of family members are a mixture of the uncompromisingly honest and exuberantly expressive - seeming contradictions, but her work unites these two positions.

In Modern and Contemporary art, artists have used the tradition of the reclining nude to challenge artistic convention.



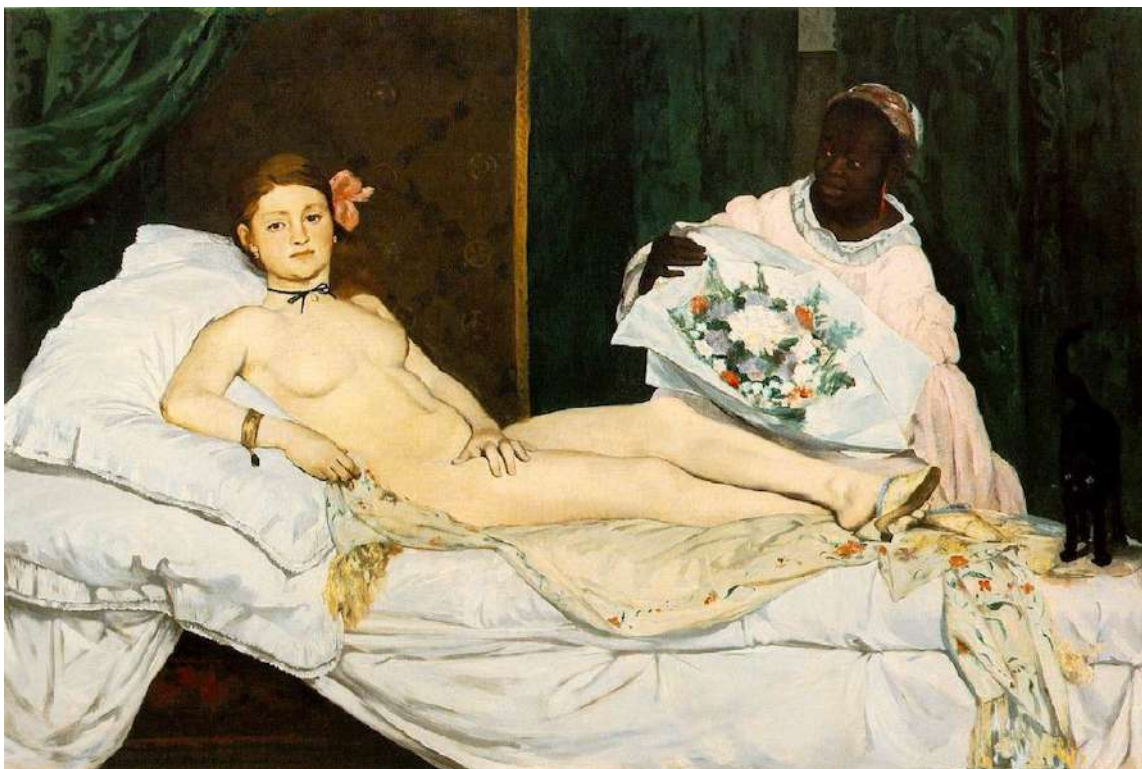
Matisse, Large Reclining Nude, Oil on Canvas, 1935

French Fauvist painter Henri Matisse's Large Reclining Nude of 1935 radically simplifies the shape of the female body.

Many of British artist Henry Moore's sculptures evoke a figure that has been highly simplified and abstracted, but the shape is always somehow recognisable as a human figure. Here, it is as if he has taken the Matisse and further simplified it.



Henry Moore Recumbent Figure, Wood, 1938



Edouard Manet, Olympia, Oil on canvas, 1863

In the 19th Century, Manet's reclining nude, Olympia caused shock and outrage. What upset the academicians in 1863 was the fact that the model was staring back at the viewer in a way that was considered too assertive. The model was also allegedly a prostitute which caused further upset to conservative viewers. Compare

this to the coy expression of Titian's Venus of Urbino painted almost 300 years earlier, where incidentally there is a little dog reclining too!



Titian, Venus of Urbino, Oil on Canvas, 1534

One of the most famous reclining figures in painting is Velasquez's "Rokeby Venus" (see Chantal Joffe reference above).



Diego Velasquez, Rokeby Venus, Oil on canvas, 1647-51

It is remarkable because of the way in which the female nude is regarding herself in the mirror, held up by the helpful cherub. So, we can see her seeing herself, but she can also perhaps see us, reflected in the mirror. Some artists have tried to reverse what is considered by many feminist art historians as an 'objectifying gaze', that has often made the female body a kind of erotic spectacle. Velazquez's painting in a way both epitomises and curiously undermines this objectifying gaze, as the female figure could be staring back at us through the mirror. If you remember last week's Oil Painting Class Handout "How to steal like Picasso" you will see how Velasquez used a mirror to complicate the position of the viewer in "Las Meninas".

Here we have Sylvia Sleigh who made many portraits of nude men reclining in the 1970s.



Sylvia Sleigh, Philip Golub Reclining, Oil on Canvas, 1971

She has reversed the gaze entirely by including herself reflected in the mirror, and made a very interesting reference to Velazquez's painting.

So, this week's task is: Choose a good subject for your reclining figure painting. It is best to ask a friend or family member as you will be able to study them for longer. If indoors you can use acrylics or gouaches if you are able. If outdoors go to a park, take some pastels or watercolours and enjoy the weather! It might be good to give your subject something to occupy them while they pose - a book or magazine, or laptop/phone. Make sure they are comfortable. Pets - cats and dogs- are great to draw or paint, if they are obedient!

In all cases human or animal, do quick sketches to start with in coloured pencil or pastel to get a sense of the pose, then work up to a more finished version. Think about the setting, and make clear where the figure is, rather than 'hanging in space'.