

# The Luxury of Experience

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MANILA BULLETIN

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## THE LUXURY OF ART

# Erotic Art in Paris Museums

A titillating, stirring, and stimulating exploration

Ever since the Orsay started using sex to attract customers, everyone else has had to counter-attack, using similar tactics.

By **MANNY GONZALEZ**

**O**ne good thing about Paris is you can always be sure to see lots of naked women in museums, shows, and even subways and restaurants. This means there is a lot of competition for your attention span, but also a lot of deceptive advertising going on. Purely in the interest of rendering a public service to time-challenged tourists, I took the trouble to sift through some of the so-called erotic art and whatnot in Paris.

For two painstaking weeks I trudged through museum after museum, in search of the Truth. Now I can share with you, dear reader, the fruits of my labor.

►SSE2



Rolla by Henri Gervex



## Erotic Art in Paris Museums ◀SSE1

### Musee d'Orsay

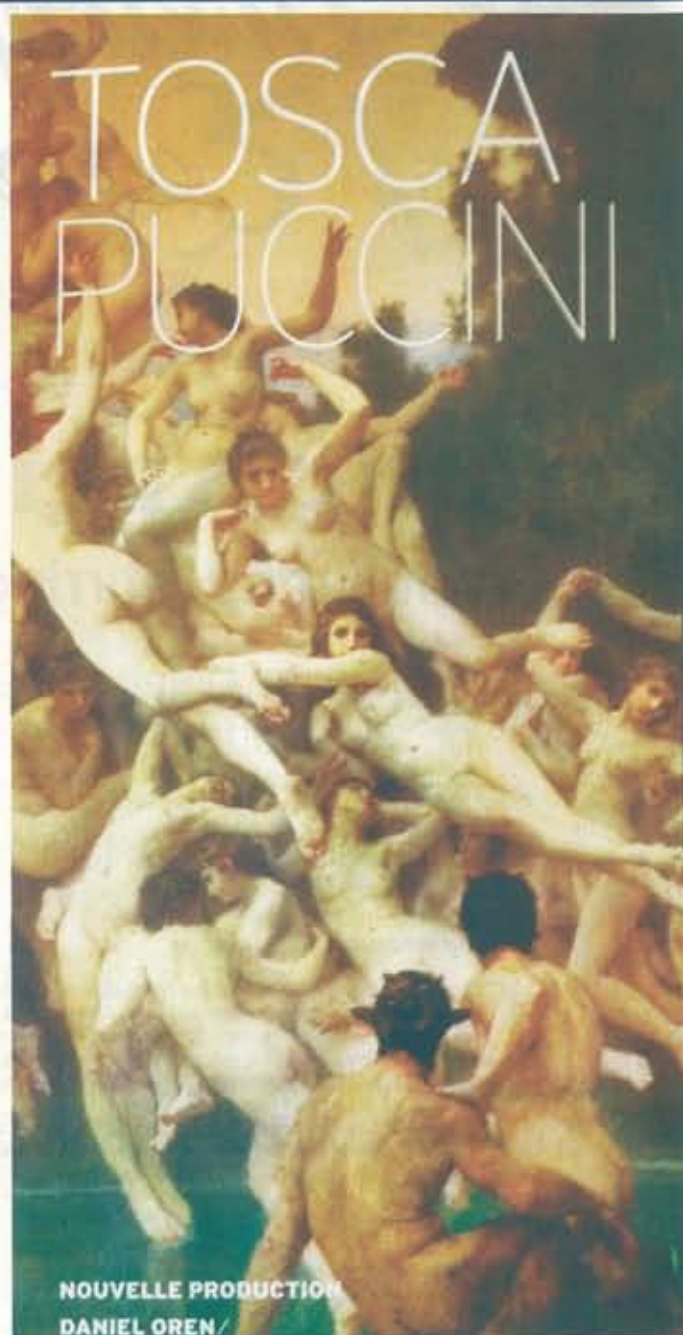
Let's start with the Orsay, one of the more sexually aggressive museums around town. Though better known as the repository of a large collection of Impressionist and other art, last year they ran an exhibit about naked men (some with truly gigantic equipment.) This year, they're exploiting the Marquis de Sade, using advertising videos such as this: Promo video for the Sade exhibit at the Orsay. Upon seeing this, naturally you rush to the Orsay with high hopes. Well, don't. "Sade: Attacking the Sun" is one of the most insipid exhibits ever mounted. I was utterly unable to find the video depicted here, and there was nothing to compensate. The exhibit was interminable, showing works with zero titillation value, and wispy or purely hypothetical connections to the subject ("This 20th century artist was possibly influenced by Sade's 19th-century novels..."). Although I am generally fairly competent at ferreting out erotic material in even unlikely

places, this was a bust. Victor Hugo was the guy who wrote *Les Mis*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and though he never wrote anything really sexy, his real-life adventures were. If you visit his apartment on the Place des Vosges (ploss day VOHJ), you will see this picture of his long-time mistress Juliette Drouet, a truly gorgeous stage actress with an inviting come-hither half-smile. It beats the *Mona Lisa* hands-down. Though Juliet is undeniably clothed in the picture, she is just in a flimsy nightgown (I imagine), and with only a short leap of faith I can also visualize her proud, upturned breasts and slim waist, her straining hips...

If you are a little weak on erotic imagination, may I direct your attention to one of her love letters to Hugo, which is on display, and reads something like this: "After the show, let us meet as planned... I will give myself to you entirely, and you can enjoy every part of my body..." Then look at the picture again, and let your mind wander below the frame. Victor Hugo's paramour, Juliette Drouet *Le*

*Train Bleu* (uh trahn bleuh).

Though not exactly a museum, this is a venerable restaurant located in the Gare de Lyon (Paris's busiest train station), named after a train, which used to run from Calais (where British tourists landed after crossing the Channel) to Nice (last stop on the French Riviera). Now, you wouldn't think there's anything very sexy about a train station, and this restaurant is immense, but with my rapid-scanning technique perfected over a very long and well-spent adolescence, I found this among the destination-themed paintings covering the entire ceiling. The *Train Bleu* is a gigantic restaurant, and its barreled ceiling is entirely covered with paintings of touristic destinations. The carved figure is, of course, a naked woman with succulent, cone-shaped breasts. The painting, which is no doubt wishful thinking, shows an Algerian dancing girl whose breasts are dangling out of her shirt (a serendipitous accident while dancing, perhaps?). This makes the *Train Bleu* the restaurant with the most erotic ceiling in Paris.



Sex at the Opera

### The Opera

Ever since the Orsay started using sex to attract customers, everyone else has had to counter-attack, using similar tactics. This is a poster advertisement for a performance of *Tosca* (by Puccini, the same guy who wrote *Madame Butterfly*). Sex at the Opera. Observe the naked women, and the satyrs eyeing them lustfully. But if you think you're going to see any satyrs chatting up naked women in *Tosca*, you are an optimist. *Tosca* is about love, unfulfilled lust, predictable betrayal, surprise counter-betrayal, and fulfilled suicide. To be quite honest I have never sat through it, but I am pretty sure no one gets even remotely naked in it. And if anyone did, they would be fat opera singers.

### The Lady and the Unicorn

In the heart of the Latin Quarter sits the National Museum of the Middle Ages. Its prize possession is a series of six tapestries collectively called "The Lady and the Unicorn." Though the tapestries are considered among the greatest of European art treasures from the Middle Ages, the sad truth is that tapestries are not a big tourist draw. To attract visitors, they have had to resort to deliberately provocative and suggestive language. The focus is always on the sixth tapestry, which is said to represent (see blue book on left) "the mysterious desire of the Lady and the Unicorn." (The first five tapestries deal with the five senses.)

How to Support an Entire Museum by Hinting at the Erotic. What could this "mysterious desire" be? Well, as you see, this unicorn has a really long *whatchamacallit*. What that represents is fairly clear. But

there's more. The unicorn's hoof is pushing aside the folds of the Lady's tent, seemingly demanding admission. Hmm. The tent is labeled "My Sole Desire." Double hmm. The Lady is also opening her box to expose her jewels, including a conspicuous single dangling pearl. Oooh. And now the whole picture is clear, at least as the

Museum would have you understand it: Whoever this Lady was, her Sole Desire was to have a Unicorn with a Very Long *Whatchamacallit*. Open Her Tent and gaze upon her Jewels, most especially her Pearl. The unicorn looks pretty pleased with himself. The Sixth Tapestry: What this Lady most desires from her unicorn.



How to Support an Entire Museum by Hinting at the Erotic



This life-size bronze statue used to welcome customers at a jewelry store

### The Carnavalet

This is a museum of Paris history, and the pickings for erotic art are slim. They reconstructed the reception lobby of a Belle-Epoque jeweler, named Fouquet, however, and the lobby featured this bronze: This life-size bronze statue used to welcome customers at a jewelry store. The room was fairly dark (possibly so that spinels could be passed off as rubies), so I had trouble taking this shot. Still, if you look carefully you will see that the lady has proud, luscious breasts, etc., and that what's left of her clothing is draped over just one thigh, halfway down. Let your imagination take it from there.



A Baccarat creation in silver

### The Petit Palais Baccarat Exhibit

The Petit Palais is one of the loveliest buildings in all of Paris, and was built expressly to house temporary art exhibitions. Recently, they featured Baccarat, which as you know is a famed manufacturer of fine crystal. You wouldn't think there's much scope for crystal to be erotic, but they gave it their best shot: A Baccarat creation in silver. This is an inkwell (for dipping your quill in, in the olden days before invention of the fountain pen). It has to be suspected that it was commissioned by a well-heeled gentleman, whose girlfriend was well and frequently dipped into, at least judging by her satisfied appearance.

### The Most Erotic Work of Art in all Paris

There is really not much room for disagreement on this matter. It is a painting owned by the Musee d'Orsay, called *Rolla*. Unfortunately for you, the painting is not in Paris but on permanent loan to the Fine Arts Museum in Bordeaux, which is a long way from Paris. Well, okay. I took you this far, I might as well show it to you.

Here it is, from Bordeaux: This 1878 work is by Henri Gervex, whom you've probably never heard of, but was, as you see, a genius. *Rolla* is the partly dressed guy by the window. He is about to commit suicide. Marion, on the bed, is not about to commit suicide. In fact, Marion looks pretty darn satisfied with life. Conclusion: *Rolla* is an idiot. (This

is all from some poem, written 50 years before Gervex did the painting.) In 1878 Gervex submitted the painting for inclusion in the Paris Salon (an annual event which artists fought tooth and nail to get into), and it was brutally rejected by the Salon Selection Committee on the grounds that it was "immoral." By golly, I agree.

### The Painting Tells a Story

As the Committee reportedly elaborated, it is not the painting itself but the story it tells that is immoral. Although the suicide part is a little speculative, here is my version of the story, as suggested by the visual evidence: The day before, Marion has a full Brazilian wax, leaving not even a runway. Then she puts on a loose corset, dresses in a fine satin skirt with silk blouse, and goes out with *Rolla*, splendid in his evening wear and top hat. Throughout the evening, Marion inflames *Rolla* by telling him what she is wearing beneath the corset, which is nothing. And nothing. And still nothing. When they finally get back to *Rolla*'s pad, Marion goes straight to the bedroom, and slowly, teasingly, removes her blouse, revealing her smooth, creamy flesh. Then she slides out of her lower garments, exposing

her plump, peach-smooth [five-letter word deleted by editor]. *Rolla* goes wild. Still in full evening attire, he rips off the corset, leaving her totally naked. He presses hot kisses all over her; then uses his walking stick to stroke her slim thighs and smooth bottom. He strikes her lightly with the stick, making her squirm with pleasure and pain. Finally she is panting and ready for him. Tossing his top hat and stick over her discarded clothes, *Rolla* roughly pushes her down on the bed. For the next several hours, he makes love to every part of her body, over and over, until she is totally satisfied and limp with sweet exhaustion. *Rolla* rises and gets partly dressed (maybe to go for a baguette, it now being 5 a.m.). He gazes down at her sweet mouth and her lush, spent body. . . And it is at this point that I develop serious reservations about

the suicide angle. But I think most true connoisseurs of fine art will agree with my version of what story *Rolla* tells, and will agree with the Salon Committee that this picture is immoral. (All of Paris agreed, too: when Gervex found a private gallery to display it in, the lines went around the block, and lasted months.) And, immoral though it may be, it is nonetheless fine art, so you can look at it, and re-read my story, as much as you like. Enjoy. Though it is in Bordeaux, this is an immoral painting, which really belongs in Paris and which, in my opinion, is the most erotic work of art, in any medium, by any artist, of any era, in any museum in the world. So there you are. I've done the hard work for you. Now all you have to do is follow this guide, and you will avoid the dogs, while seeing lots of erotic art in Paris museums.



## **Erotic Art in Paris Museums**

*Travelogue/Humor by Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa*

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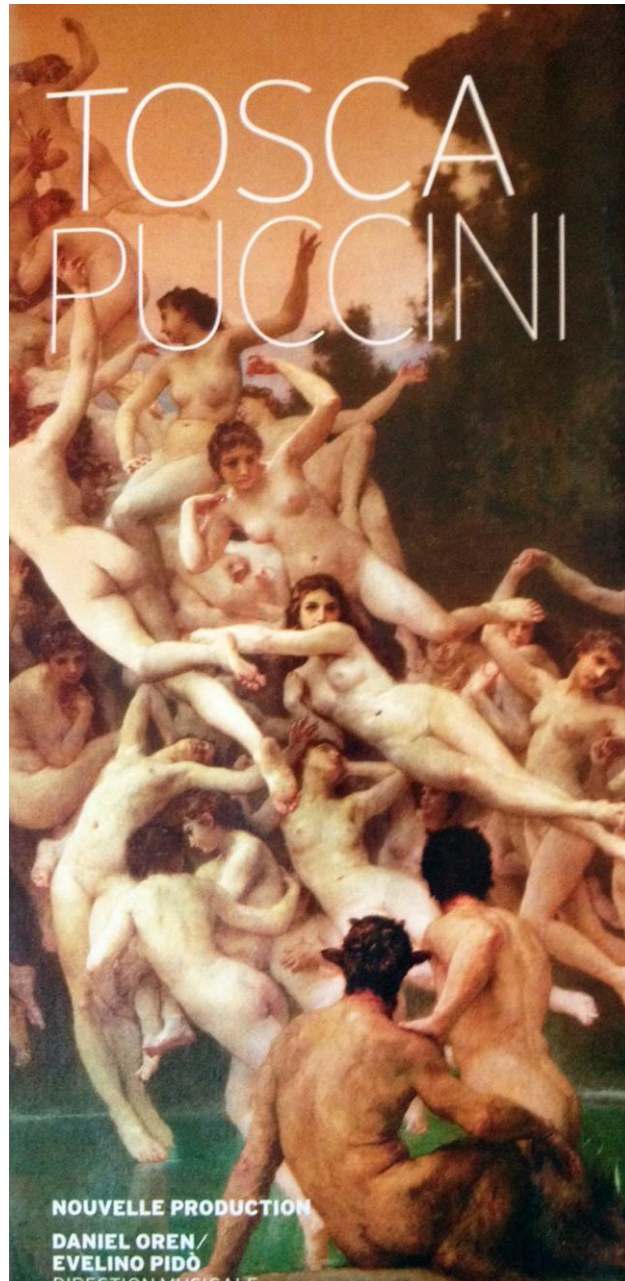


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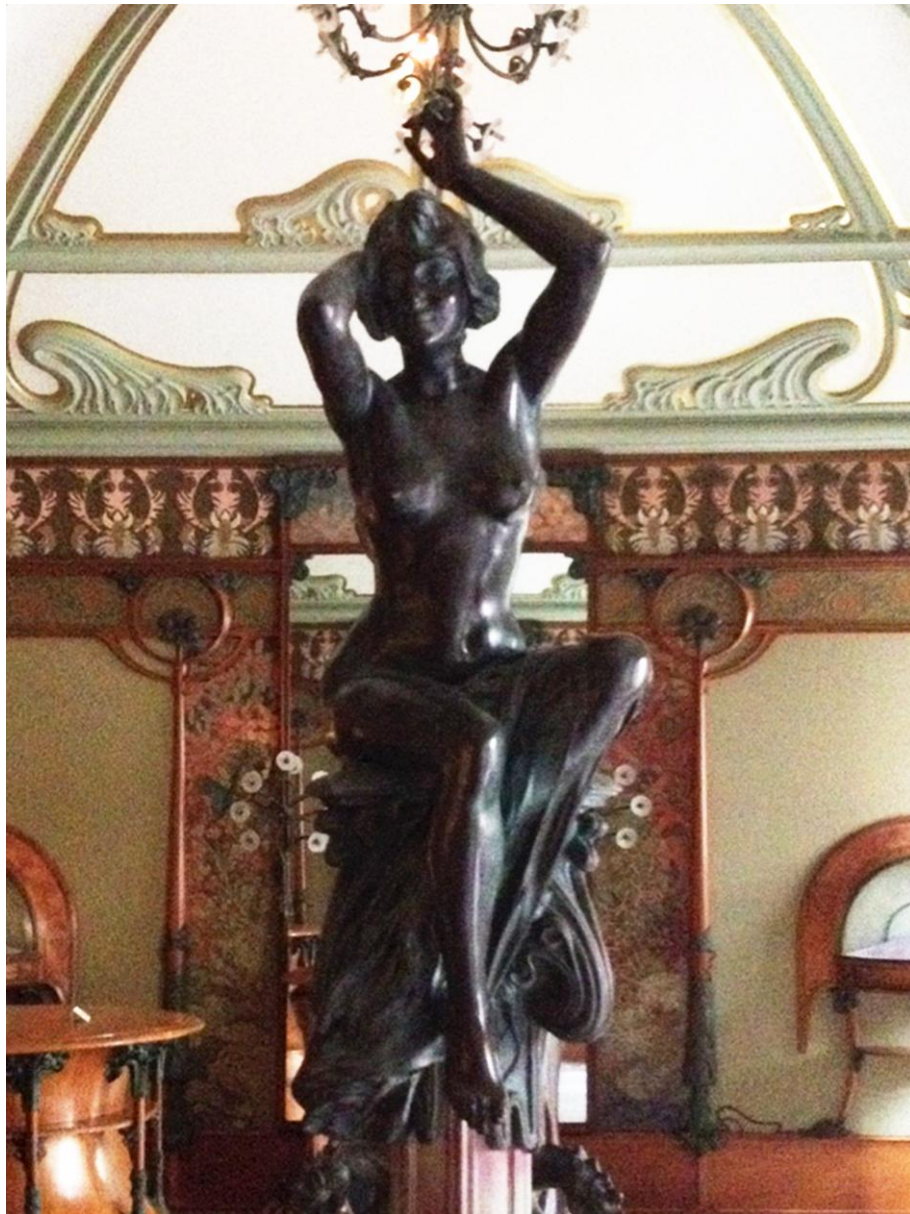
*Sex at the Opera.*

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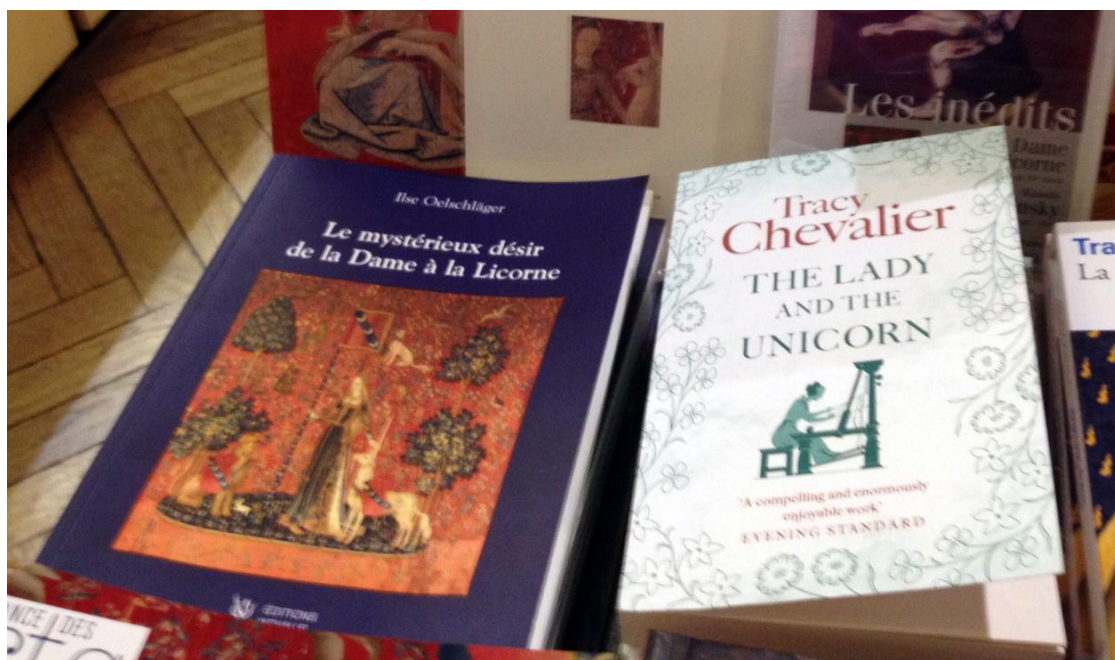
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