Talking about Nudity in Art

Why is that person NAKED?

This is a great resource for families!

The Ringling
Most adults who bring children into an art museum dread this question. Some people do not feel equipped to answer the question correctly and others feel uncomfortable addressing nudity in general.

To be honest, this is a question most museum visitors have. This guide is designed to help you have a productive discussion about nudity in an art museum.

**QUICK TIPS**

1. **Relax**: Take a “no big deal” attitude about the subject. Your group will follow your lead!

2. **Respect**: Be sensitive to the cultural and religious backgrounds that produced these works and be polite to the interest and questions of your companions.

3. **Remember**: Nudity does not mean the same thing to every culture or every person and people will have different reactions to nudes. All of these feelings are valid.

4. **Revisit**: The more times you have the conversation, the less intimidating it gets!

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*The body is timeless*

While clothing fashions can change quickly and drastically, the unclothed human body does not. Since the time of Ancient Greece, depicting the nude human body has been considered a marker of artistic skill that lasts the test of time.

*The human body is something we all have in common*

![Figures from 100s, 1500s, 1900s showing the evolution of human representation through the ages.](image-url)
Figures can be nude to show a defining mark or characteristic—or lack thereof! For example, images illustrating stories from the Christian Bible often show the infant Jesus undressed to show that he is a fully human boy although Christians also believe he is the divine son of God.

Sometimes nudity helps to accurately tell a story. For instance, Roman legend says that Romulus and Remus were raised in the wild by a mother wolf. In the context of this story, showing the boys clothed would not make sense so the artist chose to show them nude.

Nude male babies called putti (from the Latin “putus” meaning “boy”) can be found in art dating back to Ancient Greece. Putti have many different purposes: they can show human emotion, represent the presence of God, or symbolize romantic love. The next time you see putti, try to guess why the artist decided to include them!

Some figures in art are taking a bath or nursing a baby, activities that usually do not require clothing. Rules about dress have also changed over time. In Ancient Greece men exercised nude, so artists represented athletes without clothes.
“To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word ‘nude,’ on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled, defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body.”

– Kenneth Clark, The Nude, 1956