

This paper discusses the problem with nudity academics often face when teaching a History of Greek Art class and asks whether or not the syllabus should include a disclaimer that nudity, and at times obscenity, is a large component of the examination of Greek sculpture and vase painting. A number of American students nowadays tend to interpret ancient material involving nudity as pornographic in nature. This is especially true with students at conservative institutions in the US. For example, once I showed images of Hermaphrodite in my Art History class and students wrote to the chair of my department claiming they were exposed to pornographic material; in reality, I attempted to elucidate sexuality according to ancient norms and apply theoretical approaches in order to inform and educate the student by examining these norms through a modern lens. When academic freedom is threatened to be taken away from the instructor and efforts are made to dictate what is appropriate in the classroom and what is not, who will protect the professor? The problem is bigger when the professor is junior and untenured faculty.

Art History is by nature a discipline that relies on images. If images are edited to conform to the preferences of the targeted audience, then the academic is left with half a lecture and the students with an incomplete understanding of the ancient culture. The paper will ask the question that has been in the minds of many academics: if images of material culture are utilized according to the norms of a given campus or a student body, is the academic ultimately silenced? What is more, should the images be given a rating system similar to that of film and media in general? If this occurs, that is to say, a rating of XXX applied in ancient material culture, is the academic a teacher of a discipline, or is the discipline becoming entertainment for the masses? The paper will conclude by showing that, whereas students are ready to characterize nude images from Greek and other cultures (e.g., Indian) as pornographic, they use different standards to decode nudity in modern visual representations.