

# Visión Doble

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**Título:** Rafael Argullol's Sensual Education

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**Resumen:** Una educación sensorial (A Sensual Education) is an example of how art can reveal essential keys for living. The text is not only a reflection on eroticism but a history of the nude in Western painting from the author's own subjective standpoint. This subjectivity is one of the most attractive yet most ambiguous aspects in Rafael Argullol's text. [Bilingual version].

**Palabras clave:** Desnudo , Ingres , Pompeya , Rafael Argullol

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# Rafael Argullol's Sensual Education

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When I look at Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*, I experience the sensual pleasure that comes from observing all the supple qualities, the satin of the sheet, the velvet of the curtain, which then lead me irretrievably across the soft naked body of the woman, illuminated with such acumen and sensitivity that I have no choice but to feel that I am caressing her, traversing her body from head to toe with my eyes. I then want to look at her, and only her, and eternally love that magnificent beauty.

In Neoplatonic theory, the exchange of gazes represents an exchange of souls and this exchange produces an intimate and deep, as well as sublime, knowledge of the visible world. This Venus looks at us through the mirror, which piques even greater curiosity in the viewer, overwhelmed by so much beauty, eager to know more, to understand more, to see more. A beauty thus experienced will have its echo in other contemplations for the rest of our lives, as Quevedo expresses in the following verse:

Basta ver una vez grande hermosura;  
que, una vez vista, eternamente enciende,  
y en l'alma impresa eternamente dura.

[It is enough to see great beauty only once

Which once seen, eternally burns

And, eternally inscribed upon the soul, endures.]

The contemplation of beauty is a step that leads us to the knowledge of the truth and, once this transformation has been experienced, which will last forever, our vision of the world and of works of art, will go rise upon an ascending path that leads to ultimate perfection.

Rafael Argullol, professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, tells us about his experiences of contemplating the female body in his work titled *Una educació sensorial* [A Sensual Education], a personal history of the female nude in painting, published for the first time in 2002.

During a trip to Pompeii, the author becomes utterly hypnotized by one of the figures at the Villa of the Mysteries, specifically that naked dancer whose sweet movements are made palpable by the elegant curve of a veil forming a perfect arch. He cannot take his eyes off that figure, and although he proceeds onward to other mysterious scenes, it always ends up producing “an insurmountable magnetism.” That attraction, the author posits, must have come from a distant feeling. It is then, suddenly, that the dancer becomes divested of color and appears in black-and-white memory, reproduced in the pages of an old book.



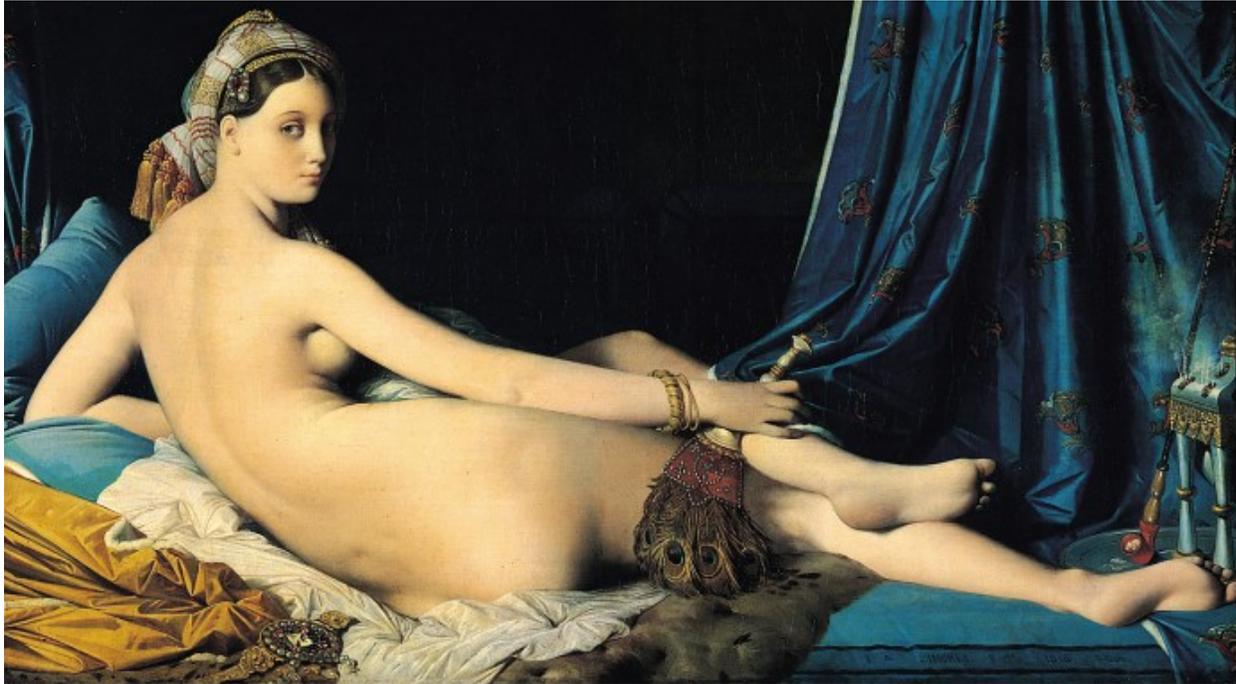
Fresco from the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.

Rafael Argullol sees himself, as a boy of 13, sitting in an armchair in his grandfather’s library, clutching a book of art history. Actually they are a three-volume set bound in worn green leather, with an image of the Lady of Elche on the cover: the classic art history text by José Pijoán, which fell into his hands in a 1923 edition. In the prologue to the book, the author confesses that it was that art history text that gave him what life had not yet given him and it was through the nudes which he gazed at in Pijoán’s text that he experienced all the other nudes of his life (“It is enough to see great beauty only once...”).

*Una educació sensorial* is an example of how art can reveal essential keys for living and is not merely a reflection on eroticism, but a history of the nude in Western painting, made from the subjective standpoint of the author. This subjectivity is one of the most attractive yet most ambiguous points of the work: Is it an essay, an autobiography, a novel or a history of art?

Perhaps we should approach it as a “transversal” text, as defined by the author himself, and enjoy the analysis of the works chosen and contextualized historically and culturally.

Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* are all analyzed by Argullol in the light of his adolescent memories, while he also reflects on the dual nature of Venus and the noble ways of love. From famous works of the Renaissance and the Baroque, he proceeds to more modern ones such as Manet's *Olympia* or Klimt's *Danaë*, pausing to reflect on Goya's *Nude Maja* and Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. La Grande Odalisque (1814). The Louvre, Paris.

If the female nude is presented to us through variations on the theme of Venus and the nobility of love, the male nudes are presented as variations on the body of Christ, in their excruciating martyrdom, with a highlighted ambiguity between pleasure and pain in the multiple images of St. Sebastian.

More than 70 images offer us the possibility of looking at the male and female body reconsidering our own sensual education. Returning to the initial approach of Neoplatonic theory and the gaze, our eyes are opened yet again, now with a sense of freedom, and with the certainty that contemplation will open the path of knowledge through pleasure.

*Una educación sensorial* received the Casa de América Award in 2002, the year of its first edition via the Fondo de Cultura Económica, and was reissued by Acontilado in 2012.

**Translated by the students of TRAD 6640, Graduate Program in Translation, University of Puerto Rico.**

VERSIÓN EN ESPAÑOL