



## Vive la différence!

LILIANNE MILGROM

Last summer when I was applying for an art residency in Paris to pursue work on female sexuality, I came across an article in [Time magazine](#) which piqued my interest. The article discussed a shift in attitude towards topless bathing in France. The findings of a recent French survey entitled *Women and Nudity* unearthed some unexpected new trends. Not only were many younger French women opposed to topless bathing, but a substantial percentage of them were self-confessed prudes!

*Mon Dieu!* What has the world come to? Was France no longer the France of my youth? Ah, those sun-kissed days spent with my monokini-clad *copines* on the beaches of Saint Tropez, dreaming of Jean-Luc or Philippe while pretending to inhale a Gauloise... My subsequent visits to France over the years only seemed to reinforce my impression of a *laissez-faire* culture comfortable in its own exposed skin. A nation where the presence of a president's mistress at his state funeral barely causes a raised eyebrow would lead one to assume that French prudishness is an oxymoron.

My excitement was high as I headed off to Paris earlier this year to pursue my artistic aspirations. I was also curious to see if I would encounter a French version of the conservative, prim and rather stuffy outlook on nudity and sex typically found in mainstream America. Choosing to be the official *copiste* of the most sexually explicit painting in the D'Orsay Museum placed me in an ideal situation to make some social observations. Gustave Courbet's 1866

painting *L'origine du monde* demands attention. After all it is not every day that one comes face-to-face with a realistically painted vagina, mounted in a gilded frame and exhibited in one of the world's most distinguished museums.

After just a few days of copying Courbet's painting and interacting with the public, I came to the conclusion that the French had not become pruders overnight. *Pas du tout*. Compared to their Anglo counterparts, French museum visitors –young and old- reacted to the painting in a largely intellectual, mature and unabashed way. They spoke in terms of Nature and Motherhood, all the while embracing the beauty and eroticism captured by the artist.

Outside of the museum environment, I kept a wary eye out for palpable signs of cultural change. As a frequent visitor to Paris, I knew enough not to expect Henri Bresson photo-ops at every turn, nor to expect streams of scantily clothed Brigitte Bardot look-alikes to come pouring out of the Métro. However, in an admittedly *unscientific* research approach, I went looking for potential indications of constraint in other aspects of the Arts.

I made it a point to look at movie billboards to see what Parisians were being offered. What I saw were the usual suspects: French-language films featuring complicated relationships punctuated by long silences, slapstick police fiascos and a smattering of dubbed Hollywood hits. However I did notice a prominently displayed billboard in a well-to-do neighborhood which reassured me that the pendulum had not swung too far in favor of conservatism!



Translation: 'Sex workers, and proud of it'

Anyone who is in the least bit familiar with France will have noticed that the French are a very literary nation. The Métro at rush hour is filled with book readers, the streets and boulevards are more often than not named after the country's literary heroes, streets abound with multi-

level bookstores and the Seine is lined with little *bouquiniste* stalls. Being a self-confessed bibliophile, one of my favorite pastimes in Paris is browsing the abundant bookstores of the Latin quarter. In one such randomly chosen *librairie* I decided to check out what I call *book candy* – those cute little pocket-sized volumes offered up for sale near the cash registries of bookstores. What I found was further proof that sexual open-mindedness and liberalism are alive and well.



Title translations from left to right:  
*Why men want sex*  
*A Guide to declaring love*  
*Making love in the United States*

Upon my return to the Washington DC area, I stopped by a well-known book store and remembered to check out the book candy on display...We're not in Paris anymore, Toto.



A picture says a thousand words