Madame Paul-Sigisbert Moitessier, Standing 1851
Oil on canvas, 147 x 100 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington

JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES

In the long dream-sequence that makes up chapter fifteen of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the feelings and fantasies of the book's main characters are given free rein. At one point Leopold Bloom finds himself in court, on trial for sending obscene letters to 'several highly respectable Dublin ladies'. Three of the ladies appear to denounce him. In language that parodies court reporting, and society pages, and light pornography, each of these severe and magnificent women is portrayed as a high bourgeois divinity, a giantess dominatrix, lapped in kinky luxury.

First is 'MRS YELVERTON BARRY *(in lowcorsaged opal balldress and elbowlength ivory gloves, wearing a sabletrimmed brickquilted dolman, a comb of brilliants and panache of osprey in her hair*) Arrest him constable. He wrote me an anonymous letter in prentice backhand when my husband was in the North Riding of Tipperary on the Munster circuit, signed James Lovebirch. He said that he had seen from the gods my peerless globes as I sat in a box of the *Theatre Royal* at a command performance of *La Cigale*. I deeply inflamed him, he said . . .'

Next 'MRS BELLINGHAM (*in cap and seal coneymantle, wrapped up to the nose, steps out of her brougham and scans through tortoiseshell quizzing-glasses which she takes from inside her huge opossum muff*) Also to me. Yes, I believe it is the same objectionable person . . . He addressed me in several handwritings . . . He lauded almost extravagantly my nether extremities, my swelling calves in silk hose drawn up to the limit, and eulogised glowingly my other hidden treasures in priceless lace which, he said, he could conjure up.'

And third, 'THE HONOURABLE MRS MERVYN TALBOYS (*in amazon costume, hard hat, jackboots cockspurred, vermilion waistcoat, fawn musketeer gauntlets with braided drums, long train held up and hunting crop with which she strikes her welt constantly*) Also me . . .'

Grandeur and innuendo. The fashion notes, with their pedantic and opulent detailing of costumes and accessories, are positively intrusive. They direct attention to the body – the naked flesh – that these fine accoutrements enclose and adorn. In fact, the dress descriptions are entirely in tune with the salacious euphemisms of the indecent letters: the peerless globes, the nether extremities, the hidden

treasures. And the 'huge opossum muff' could appear in either context.

These women are portrayed as both goddesses and dolls – massively powerful, and passive objects to be dressed up. They are like statues, simultaneously mighty and incapable, untouchable and all too touchable. They are like portraits by Ingres.

The formal, female, upper-middle-class portraiture of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres is an extraordinary spectacle. It's inspired by a mixture of classical ideals and high fashion. The sitters are gift-wrapped trophy wives. Their poses come from antique statues and from Raphael. They are objects of worship and items of property, incarnations of money and beauty, expensive fabric and expensive skin. Ingres' rendering of texture, pampered flesh, coiffured hair, silks and velvets and furs, is perfect. Its realism almost disguises the fact that these women are not quite human.

Like the haute couture dresses they inhabit, their bodies are creations, put together. The anatomies don't properly articulate. The limbs go soft and limp. They seem to be filleted, or like empty skins filled with water, lolling. They're not really attached to the rest of the frame. Their flesh becomes tender morsels of swelling chubbiness, swathed in gorgeous stuffs.

There's a general air of molestation and handling – of voyeurism, or the tactile equivalent of voyeurism. The dresses and pillows are prinked and patted and flounced, tweaked and stroked and plumped. There's a consciousness that a clothed body is a naked body that's pressed all over. And this feeling is picked up by the exquisite brushwork. The meticulous finish of each depicted surface becomes, so to speak, the painter's finishing touch. These are portraits in which at every point (to use the old divorce court phrase) intimacy occurs. The statue serenely holds its pose, while everything is fingered.

The portrait of *Madame Paul-Sigisbert Moitessier, née Marie-Clotilde-Inès de Foucauld, Standing* is the supreme example. Fascinated with this lady, and taking endless pains, Ingres painted her twice. He tried out various poses and costumes. The other picture, *Madame Moitessier, Seated*, head in hand, in oceans of floral dress, in the National Gallery in London, is probably better known. But this upright version in a dark frock is Ingres' masterpiece of the ambiguous statuesque.

She stands before us, a theatre of the body. Her shoulders are moulded into an hourglass curve of beauty. Her left arm hangs half-limp and dislocated, decorated with jewels. She has an anatomy whose visible parts are only joined by the dress from which they emerge. The head and neck are jawlessly fused. There is nothing to suggest that this body could occupy a different position from the one it's pictured in.

Her face is fixed, symmetrical. It lies firmly on the picture's centre-line, and it faces directly out, and it's framed by a perfect centre parting (the dark curtains of hair echo the opening décolletage of the dark dress). It has the features of a stern Roman matron, but set between chubby cheeks and ending in a sulky pout. The blank, lazy eyes do not make contact. They drift off in divergent directions towards the sides of the face. Sedate and sedated, she is a kind of zombie.

In this portrait, Ingres demonstrates how power and passivity meet in impassivity; how inertia can be both helplessness and strength. The goddess is a dolt, a body, a posh clothes horse, but her monumental dumbness makes her superb. The image is a triumph of 'objectification'. It suggests that for a human being to be turned into a commodity – a parcel of sex and money – is actually a kind of apotheosis. And to all the obvious lines of moral and political criticism that a picture like this invites, Ingres simply replies: 'Yes, and how marvellous, how divine!'

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) used to be thought a terrible old square, the last word in reactionary academic art. Now he's often seen as an exciting weirdo. His art is an unstable mixture of lots of different things – classicism, pornography, photographic realism, exotic fantasy, historical revival, modern fashion. Bizarre and artificial myth and religious scenes were produced alongside luscious fields of nudity and brilliantly vivid portraits. He was one of the greatest draughtsmen in the European tradition. His true heirs were Degas and Picasso.
