

membrum virile

Photo Essay

JAN H. ANDERSEN



Introduction

Works of art—music, paintings, sculpture, and photographs—should not need an introduction. After all, they speak precisely what words cannot, and that is their great power. Nevertheless, given the, alas, still controversial nature of the theme of the following selection of the work of the Danish photographer Jan H. Andersen, some words of introduction are in order.

Mr. Andersen does not title individual images, only collections, including the six images he

has graciously given us permission to reproduce here. The common theme of the photographs—which I am calling *membrum virile*—challenges the eye in each case with candor and humor. A very serious but neglected theme since the Enlightenment is the phallus, the erect penis.

Jung offered that *phallos* is an archetype of the numinous. In its magical transformation from penis (an organ of elimination) to phallus (a temporary extension of the male body), this part of the male body is one of the central objects of myth, art, and of course psychoanalytic deliberation. The Latin medical euphemism, *membrum virile* (male limb) I have chosen, says a lot about how difficult it still is to speak about, let alone look at, what is certainly the defining feature of the male body. Ever controversial, it is part of the everyday as well as the exceptional experience of half of the world's human population. This organ with its accompanying “witnesses” (the testes) is still a surprise when it appears on a statue such as the Michelangelo *David*. It is obscured in paintings and deemed obscene in the media.

Mr. Andersen comments:

The seminude male body is tolerated in the streets where we consider it quite normal for both young and older males to run around shirtless, but photos of nude males and especially male genitalia are considered socially unacceptable or at least connected solely with homoeroticism.

Indeed the erect penis is regularly associated with pornography. The terms well known in slang—cock, dick, prick, schlong, one-eyed monster—have a harsh ring. They are often uttered in anger or derision. Or they are meant to divert our attention by causing dismissive laughter. The words evoke the shame that boys are taught to feel about a part of them that is at the same time overvalued. Yet nearly all of a male's experience of his self and identity is somehow connected with—and what shall we call it, without invoking euphemism, or suggesting the salacious, “dirty” or shame-inducing, or reducing it to a joke?

These images are so important because in our reactions to them lurks evidence of how inexperienced we still are as a culture with the most intimate parts of the life of the male. There is much more to him, but the *membrum virile* cannot be ignored, even if it hidden. Until we are able to overcome the learned sense of foreignness of this most natural and important part of male experience, we will not progress very far in understanding what is unique about the bodies and emotional life of boys and men. Offering these images is meant to open an essential discussion.

It goes without saying that Mr. Andersen's subjects in these photographs have formally agreed to permit the representations of their bodies to be reproduced. The men photographed are of legal age. All images are under copyright by Jan H. Andersen.









Jan H. Andersen is a Danish photographer, software developer, and author specializing in topics surrounding children and teenagers. With a degree in child care and many years experience working with troubled kids and families, he writes with passion about child psychology, boys issues and parenting. You can read more at his website www.janhandersen.com and reach him at jha@jhandersen.com.



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