

The Evolution of the Female Image in Western Art from Aphrodite to Rosie the Riveter

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Abstract. In this paper, we will discuss the worship of fertility goddesses around the world and how these practices inform female figures as they appear in Western art. Aphrodite, or Venus, is a key figure in our discussion. In this study, we will focus on her origin, figures, and characteristics. We will also investigate female images from the later time when Europe became a fully patriarchal society. These images evidenced a shift from a muscular and curvaceous body to a soft and submissive-looking one. Once the feminist movement was underway, images from the ancient Greek and Roman period were revived and reemerged in new ways. In this paper, we'll use Rosie the Riveter as a modern example for study. As the message and intent of artists throughout history makes clear: the ancient goddess's expression of "Heroic Femininity" is still full of life in today's context. Venus, the goddess of love, sex, justice, and fertility, created with a body to be desired by man, has become, in a new world setting – a beacon for women's equal rights and freedom.

Keywords: Aphrodite; Rosie the Riveter; Hellenistic Art; Feminism.

1. Introduction

The goddess of love, sex, justice, and fertility – Venus, in Greek mythology called Aphrodite, was long a subject of worship in Apennines and Peloponnese. The earliest traces of such worship can be dated back to the 3rd century BC when the name Aphrodite first appeared on the island of Miletos as the sea goddess.[1] Though Venus, or Aphrodite, was renowned throughout Europe, she wasn't created spontaneously. Born in Cyprus and worshiped heavily on Paphos, most archeologists believed that she was a Greek, or Roman, version of the Eastern goddess Ishtar and Phoenician goddess Astarte, both fertility goddesses. [2] The worship of such fertility goddesses was later abandoned as the Hellenistic period ended. Females would become subject to rules and moral restraints for centuries to come. With the dawn of the early twentieth-century feminist movement, these classical figures were revived through the tradition of heroic nudity. Eventually championed by a type of modern-day heroic feminism in America, artists and activists would prove successful in moving empowered Venus-types - such as Rosie the Riveter - out of the realm of private intimacy into the public domain of work and equal rights.

2. Body

When we move back through time, we learn that Aphrodite, or Venus, had an origin story closely tied to sex ("In his *Theogony* (154-206), the poet Hesiod reports how the god Cronus, the son of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (earth, has separated his parents while they were lying together. He simply severed his father's membrum virile with a sickle, thus achieving two things at once. First ... Cronus separated Heaven from the Mother Earth. Second, by cutting off his father's genitals, thus making him a eunuch, young Cronus virtually dethroned his father to become himself the one and only ruler of the universe. As is known, no part of a god's body is allowed to be wasted. Consequently, Uranus' penis, cut off by his ambitious son, fell into the Mediterranean Sea. A white foam emerged from the divine organ, and Aphrodite was formed out of this foam...").[3] "In his *Theogony* (154-206), the poet Hesiod reports how the god Cronus, the son of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (earth, has separated his parents while they were lying together. He simply severed his father's membrum virile with a sickle, thus achieving two things at once. First ... Cronus separated Heaven from the Mother Earth. Second, by cutting off his father's genitals, thus making him a eunuch, young Cronus virtually dethroned his father to become himself the one and only ruler of the universe. As is known, no part

of a god's body is allowed to be wasted. Consequently, Uranus' penis, cut off by his ambitious son, fell into the Mediterranean Sea. A white foam emerged from the divine organ, and Aphrodite was formed out of this foam..." Her birthplace, the ocean, was the origin place for all, and her name, "Aphrodite" – meant "born from the waves". In other words, Aphrodite was a perfect creation born out of human delusion.

Another noteworthy fact is that the Greek mythology was like nothing of its kind. Its deities were of human nature, meaning that most of their interaction are resemblance of those on a normal person. For the most part, no female characters were at the center of stage. Aphrodite was no escaper of this rule, in many ways she acted more like a female character from a story instead of a goddess. To illustrate this, writers depicted Aphrodite as a beautiful woman who kept several lovers. She was not a perfect wife for any men, as a matter of fact, she was seen with hazard, guilt, pain, and evilness. Which is also what the Greek saw in heterosexual love besides being sweet and happy.

Moving on, to bear a child and carry the burden of motherhood is considered a heroic deed in every culture, and almost every one of them has its own fertility goddesses, which often have exaggerated secondary sex traits of females, for example, the Venus of Willendorf. [4] Coincidentally, "Venus" became the synonym for all fertility goddess figurines from the Eurasian region ("The *Vénus impudique*, which was the figurine that gave the whole category its name, was the first Paleolithic sculptural representation of a woman to be discovered in modern times. It was founded in 1864 by Paul Hurault, 8th Marquis de Vibraye at Laugerie-Basse in the Vézère valley. This valley is one of the many important Stone Age sites in and around the commune of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil in Dordogne, southwestern France. The figurines were mostly discovered in settlement contexts, both in open-air sites and caves."); [5]

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Starting in 7000 BCE, when pottery was first invented, people from across the Eurasian continent have always created sculptures of human and animals. Most of these pieces were tiny enough to be held with bare hands. The meaning of these pieces also varied from death, nurture to fertility.

Though these figurines came in different forms and sizes –sometimes with exaggerated curves and voluptuous bodies, others slenderer and lither; sometimes with pregnant belly and latent breasts -- they always served the same purpose: statuettes for worshiping or talismans.[6] Also many of these statuettes had a masked face of animals, as a way to associate the supernatural power with humans. In a lot of the mother-and-son statues, bears and deers were also their main body. These totems of survival and fertility are testimonies of early human's wishes for ample food and healthy reproduction. In other words, the harsh conditions of survival faced by early homo sapiens were reflected in the chubby body of the figurines. The amount of fat needed to support such a body type was nearly impossible to obtain at that time; thus, the fashioning of such full-bodied figurines was tantamount to creating a deity. [7]

When we look at some of the earlier forms of Aphrodite sculpture, the only body part the subject covered was her vagina. [8] However, this was later not the norm. Instead, the posture of the "modest Venus", or Venus Pudica, emerged, and this new Venus not only covered her vagina but also her breasts, appearing in a more modest posture. The most representative modest Venus models include the Capitoline Venus and the Venus de 'Medici. With the prior given its name from the place where it was stored – the Capitoline Museum, Italy; Vis-a-vis the latter from Florence. Both of which were derived from the Aphrodite of Cnidos by Praxiteles in 360 BC. Praxiteles took a different path to model this goddess as he planned to create this imposing statue that stands 193cm. He deliberated for a time before molding it to look as if the goddess just walked out of her bath -- as the vase on the side implies. The vase also served as a stand for Venus beside her two legs. Compared to the classical

Hellenistic Venus, which was more an “exhibitionist”, the Venus Pudica was shy and morally fitting for the Renaissance era – it was also one of the reasons why this type of Venus was the most popular among all other Venus models that were revived following the previous movement.[9] [10] Such favor even influenced the great Sandro Botticelli whose painting *The Birth of Venus* resembles this type (“Known as the “Birth of Venus”, the composition actually shows the goddess of love and beauty arriving on land, on the island of Cyprus, born of the sea spray and blown there by the winds, Zephyr and, perhaps, Aura. The goddess is standing on a giant scallop shell, as pure and as perfect as a pearl. She is met by a young woman, who is sometimes identified as one of the Graces or as the Hora of spring, and who holds out a cloak covered in flowers. Even the roses, blown in by the wind are a reminder of spring.”).[11] “Known as the “Birth of Venus”, the composition actually shows the goddess of love and beauty arriving on land, on the island of Cyprus, born of the sea spray and blown there by the winds, Zephyr and, perhaps, Aura. The goddess is standing on a giant scallop shell, as pure and as perfect as a pearl. She is met by a young woman, who is sometimes identified as one of the Graces or as the Hora of spring, and who holds out a cloak covered in flowers. Even the roses, blown in by the wind are a reminder of spring.” this is the description derived directly from the Uffizi Museum which currently keeps “Birth of Venus”.^{ix} Another Botticelli painting also features a similar Venus is “Spring”, or Primavera; It incorporated the Platonian philosophy – unity -- with Greek mythology by juxtaposing Venus in the middle with the Nymphs on the right and the three Graces on the left, on the furthest left – Mercury. But some still criticize this popular type for lacking in accuracy. Not only did this rendering fail to show the biological means of fertility and reproduction, but it also amounted to what can be considered a neutered and therefore less heroic mother. The only fit places for such a statuette were art collector’s homes or museums, not shrines and temples.

The change, though it seemed slight, was significant in the message that it conveyed. Indeed, some say that the Hellenistic period did not celebrate archetypes that reflect perfect gender equality. Prior to the spark of the Feminist movement, later periods seemed to dwindle with respect to body-positivity and an open approach to nudity and sexuality. Females likewise have been subjected to the notion that they should be in submission to males for a rather long time. The patriarchal society has essentially modeled the landscape and determined modern society. For example, in most societies in the world, whether they are subject to religious restrictions or not, women are only allowed access to certain occupations and laboring activities. Many of the highest-paid occupations which are open to women entail varying degrees of humiliation. Appointments as prostitutes, dancers, and servants – placed women in precarious conditions. Often suffering few or no interactions with the outside world, women were locked in interior spaces, hardly any of which were designed by women, nor did they reflect women’s needs, values, and lived-experience. Such interior domestic spaces were displayed in many famous paintings, some good examples would be the *Grande Odalisque* by the French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, also the *Venus of Urbino* by the Italian Renaissance artist Titian. But before that, let us discuss one common characteristics of those paintings which no one ought to ignore – the reclining nude. It was first featured in the *Sleeping Venus* created by Giorgione and finished by Titian. The reclining nude pose was an instant classic as it has been used by many painters to pose their models, and because of its ability to arouse the admiration for purity and aesthetic. In the *Grande Odalisque* and *Venus of Urbino* naked women made up the center of the composition, usually lying in an erotic and teasing manner, with a low-lit background featuring harems or boudoirs. Especially in the latter, where Venus took on laying posture that lines her body with the diagonal of the canvas, Venus was no more a goddess, she was lying like a mortal. Even if we consider the artist’s license brought a certain degree of reality out of the painting, they are the closest thing that modern-day researchers have to study the living space of women at the time. We can conclude that the harm –through limiting females’ freedom and stereotyping females – which patriarchal society has brought to women throughout history is severe, even today, nothing is enough to overturn that and heal the harm.

In these later artworks, though, females seem to have already lost their various body forms – as they might look muscular or heroic in Hellenistic Period art and before. Feminists in America and beyond have meanwhile taken on the mission to revive “heroic femininity.”

The feminist movement did not happen in the mid-early 20th century for nothing... In fact, most male workers in the factories were sent to the frontline of the battle and huge gaps were left for women to fill. As early as WWI, women have gone into the factories to fill up the need for workers. During WWII, nearly 10million US females were working in the factory, about 3 million of them were new to their post and the rest were working low-paid jobs prior to the war. Thus, by gaining more working rights, women also gained more political and social rights.

Back in the 1942, the song “Rosie the Riveter” was released by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb and was popularized by the famous band singer Kay Kyser. In 1943, to encourage women to enter the workforce, “Painted by Norman Rockwell, Rosie the Riveter first appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post.” [12] The more famous version that we know today, however, was created by J. Miller at the request of Westinghouse Electric & Manufacture Company and was widely used by the US government. It was featured on the We Can Do It poster. This “Rosie” was created to incite and encourage women working almost the same job of their male counterparts at the factories and shipyards. Although these artworks were reprinted so many times, there is still plenty of debate surrounding who was it based on. Some claimed her to be Roseline Walter who worked night shift in manufacturing the Vought F4U Corsair; others claimed her to be Rose Will Monroe from Michigan who was a worker of a larger process of manufacturing the B24 bomber. What’s easily discernible is that the two artworks featured different people (“This Rosie bears a striking likeness to Rockwell’s Rosie, but she is less masculine. While Rockwell’s Rosie has bulging arm muscles, this second Rosie poses with a flexed arm, hair gently tucked into a bandana, and perfectly applied makeup.”).[13]

Till the end of the WWII “Rosie the Riveter” was the star of many television programs and broadcasts. Yet, a large part of the discrepancy between the two “Rosie the Riveter” artworks is due to the different messages each version of the campaign was trying to convey. The former was made by an independent artist and thus it contained more personal colors. The first Rosie took on a prouder posture and was more muscular, much like the ancient goddess figures that we see in the museums. “This Rosie bears a striking likeness to Rockwell’s Rosie, but she is less masculine. While Rockwell’s Rosie has bulging arm muscles, this second Rosie poses with a flexed arm, hair gently tucked into a bandana, and perfectly applied makeup.” These traits gave the character a certain divinity that outshines the man. In Hellenistic Greek and Rome, many goddess sculptures possessed a masculine body. Statues of Athena Parthenos wore helmets and shields. Aside from the masculinity, the Rosie created by Rockwell was curvaceous, which is a trait found in many of the Aphrodite sculptures. Rosie the Riveter, by Rockwell, was a blend of many great goddesses and an immortal beacon in the mind of working-class American females. The US government version proved more artificial. She had make-up on and was only holding up her arms and showing off her biceps. She was more like Lauren Bacall or Rita Hayworth in working-class American female overalls. What many term a type of government propaganda – it seemed like she was from Hollywood, not Detroit. There are some historians and activists who argued the Government-made Rosie was propaganda designed to expand the labor force, and in that sense, reflect how the new and short-lived women’s fashion for hard labor was more opportunistic than empowering. Whether this is true perhaps will be a mystery but what is certain was that many throughout the years have mimicked Rosie. A new taste for wearing jean jackets and bandanas was seen by some as a way for women to maintain their femininity at work.

Rosie the Riveter was only a small representative symbol behind the vast feminist movement that overtook the world in the 1900s. From then on, Rosie the Riveter, much like Venus, has taken on many forms (Black Rosie, the Pakistani Rosie, etc.)

reflecting an increasingly diverse society in America. In a sense, Rosie was deified as a symbol for women to stand up in the patriarchal society.

In America over 6million female workers worked a war related job. These female workers came from different racial groups. One “Rosie the Riveter” shared her thought about her first working

experiences, saying that “the most exciting moment for me was when the B17 came off the assembly line; I couldn’t believe it – I really did it!” Interestingly, in 1944 when the winning momentum of the allies became irreversible for Nazi Germany, the American Government gave up propagating women to labor. Consequently, many women returned to office jobs; though there were some women reluctant to go back to office and stayed in factories, the overall female worker ratio among all factory workers still went from 36% to 28% in 1947. “Rosie the Riveter” was an inspirer for a social movement. In 1944, the female working population in America reached 20 million – 57% more than 1940. In contrast, only 1.7million unmarried male work in factory at the same year. Though “Rosie” was only a riveter, but female working forces have already spread into every branch of the nation’s industrial system. Women proved that they are ample to work a “man’s job”, and many jobs that labeled “man only” was forced to take off that tag.

Meanwhile, African American females received a huge benefit from this movement as many of them now have the same working experience of a white female. This made them more courageous to break the racial barrier that laid in the American society for many years.

By the end of the WWII, most people knew “Rosie the Riveter” and women are capable of working in the factory as well as men does. Nonetheless, the next time when such a massive female population goes to work would be in the 1970s – by then, the second wave of feminist movement has already arrived.

3. Conclusion

In the world BCE, cultures ranging from the Mediterranean to the Mesopotamian people have created figurines of fertility goddesses for worship. Around the world, such figures are prayed to for healthy offspring and adequate nutrition. Many of the goddesses have borrowed traits from each other – Aphrodite of Cyprus was derived directly from Ishtar of Babylon. These goddesses were given ultimate respect and received the same attention as Male deities. But as time passed by and men took over most of the public social and leadership roles, society turned patriarchal, and these goddesses were forgotten. Women became a subjugated second-class group and had less freedom. However, as history went into the modern and contemporary world, women were apt to fight for more rights and thus modern feminism was born. It quickly hit every corner of the world. Countless symbols were created, amongst which, perhaps the most renowned one is Rosie the Riveter. The character was first created to serve as war propaganda to call females to join the labor force. It had many characteristics that resembled those of a Hellenistic Goddess’s body. People later no longer treated it as propaganda, but it instead became a symbol for the gender equality movement. In different eras, the same “heroic femininity” served a different purpose — both beneficial to women.

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