

CONCLUSION

William Hogarth's frequently reproduced engraving of 1752 summarizes the central position that the ancient sculpture of the naked Venus holds in Western imagination (137). The engraving depicts the courtyard of John Cheere's sculpting studio, where copies of ancient statues were created for English aristocratic residences – at the center is a copy of the ancient Venus Medici. In the comment on the engraving, Hogarth quoted a sentence from the famous Renaissance tractate of Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, which ends with: *Venus the goddess of divine beauty, from whence all the beauty of inferior things is derived.*¹ If this were indeed the case, the naked Venus would have dominated modern sculpture. Despite thorough preparation, numerous attempts and authoritative proclamations, however, this never happened.



137. William Hogarth, Statue of Venus as the Embodiment of Beauty, engraving, 1753.

The goal of this book has been to explore how and why the depiction of the seductive goddess over the centuries has come closer to or farther away from what real women look like. This has proved to be a problem since the statue's creation until the present, and is one that visual artists have had to deal with continually in order for their creations to meet the requirements of their time. From antiquity until the 21st century, sculptors and painters have oscillated between the ideal (and therefore insipid) beauty characterizing the goddess and the seductive shapes of the body of a

¹ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*. Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste (London, 1753), xvii. Cf. Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* (Milan: Paolo Gottardo Pontio, 1585), 99.

living woman, which for various reasons could never fully prevail. In antiquity, this was prevented by the fact that the statue was a depiction of a goddess; in post-ancient Europe, it was primarily due to the taboo of depicting female nudity. Venus could have been depicted as a naked woman with all the racy details, but such a depiction would hardly be taken seriously by the viewer. The artist could have eliminated attractive references to the female body from her portrayal, but how would the viewer be expected to believe that she represents the goddess of love?

The oldest depictions of Aphrodite from the 8th to 7th centuries BC depicted the goddess clothed, including a veil over her face. Very little of her body was visible, making it clear that she was a goddess. The Greek goddess of sex is characterized by the fact that she revealed herself in the visual arts slowly and intermittently. A careful transformation of her appearance took place in the 5th century BC, when the oldest monumental statues of Aphrodite are attested. The goddess is depicted in a relaxed pose, as if we were gazing into the privacy of her bedroom, bath or garden, but she is dressed, and only the upper section of her bust is slightly revealed. Only at the end of the 5th century was the goddess first depicted with one breast completely unveiled.

The first depiction of the wholly naked Aphrodite appeared around 360 BC, when Praxiteles elegantly solved the problem that had plagued his predecessors. He was the very first sculptor in the world to create an inaccessible goddess who was at the same time erotically attractive. Praxiteles used an ingenious strategy to connect both contradicting poles in the statue he created for Knidos, heightening the intensity of some potentially erotic traits to their maximum. The most striking element is the distinct differentiation of the free and supporting leg, which evokes the seductive figure of a dancer. This feature became essential of all later depictions of naked Venus. On the contrary, Praxiteles turned the other potentially erotic traits down to the minimum or eliminated them. This primarily applied to the genitals, the most important part of the female body's sex life, the unmistakable absence of which defined the depicted woman as a goddess beyond all doubt.

As can be expected, modern scholars have approached ancient sculptures of deities just like any other work of art; this, however, was not the case in antiquity. Ancient sculptors creating likenesses of a deity to a certain degree contributed to the way in which people imagined her. However, visual artists held a wholly different position and function in antiquity than they do today. Although they were sometimes admired, their social status corresponded to that of today's craftsmen and their creative freedom had clearly defined boundaries. They naturally dealt with artistic problems while creating sculptures of deities, but always exclusively treated them as tools via which they satisfied the contemporary needs of embodying a deity. This is without a doubt evidenced by the taboo concerning the depiction of Venus's genitals, which was adhered until the end of Greco-Roman antiquity.

At the beginning of the 5th century BC, the statue and the depicted deity was differentiated. This differentiation allowed for dynamic developments in depicting the gods. However, developments in the depiction of Greek Aphrodite or Roman Venus were never the result of the development of artistic form exclusively; this development only created new tools and opportunities to bring the gods closer to mortals. Already at the end of the 5th century BC, deities were differentiated from the statues that depicted them in Athens. Athenians began to return for political reasons to famous

temples, statues and paintings from the past. The original references of these works, which had been canonized by tradition, may have been partially or completely overshadowed by what they meant for the following generations, for whom these works became a part of their cultural heritage, which legitimized the present. Taking a work out of its original religious, political and social context was a basic prerequisite for the birth of what we call classical art. It is the art of the past to which later generations return, not because of what it depicts, but because of the associations that it evokes in the audience, which returns to this art as a generally binding model. For Aphrodite's statue, which became a part of classical art, it is no longer so important *who* is depicted, but above all, the form of depiction has become the bearer of meaning.

In the Greek imagination, statues of deities in the 4th century BC began to live their own separate lives, which to a large degree were independent of the deities. In the late Republican and early Imperial Rome, the cult of famous Greek statues from the "classical epoch," i.e. from a half-millennium earlier, became an integral part of culture and also of social and political life. Thanks to this fact, depictions of Aphrodite, whom Romans venerated as Venus, ceased to be exclusively linked to religious rituals. It also became a means of self-representation of members of the political elite, who publicly exhibited them and used them to decorate their private residences. Owning famous originals or their copies heightened social prestige in Rome, which explains the existence of a vast number of Roman versions of famous Greek statues and variations of them made from different materials and in different sizes.

Post-ancient Europe knows Greek Aphrodite primarily thanks to the countless Roman versions of unpreserved Greek originals. However, the Romans adopted Greek models to fit their own specific needs. An original Roman version can be found on coins of the first Roman emperor Augustus, who had them minted in 32-29 BC as he prepared to take over power. In order to do so, he skillfully used a depiction of Venus, which the Romans venerated as their progenitress. Augustus transformed Rome into a second Athens, but systematically utilized Roman tradition simultaneously for purposes of propaganda. Augustus's goddess is depicted naked after the Greek model, but we see her from behind in order to cater to Roman prudery. We do not see what is most important, and in this respect Praxiteles's artistic strategy was taken to the extreme. At the same time, it was modified to satisfy Roman pragmatic thought. Contrary to the Cnidia, whose genitals were erased by Praxiteles, Venus may theoretically have both genitals and breasts on Augustus's coins. Nonetheless, the viewer sees nothing of the sort, as the goddess has turned her back to him. The relief or painting that the coins reproduce is now irretrievably lost, but its echo was known by every Roman from the coins which they could inspect in the palms of their hands whenever they felt so inclined.

Depictions of deceased Roman women were also typical of Roman artistic culture and combine the physiognomic portrait with an ideal naked body. The depiction of the unseemly and old face of a deceased Roman woman came from local "Roman" artistic tradition; the "Greek" style was used to depict her young and beautiful body, which is a reference to statues of Venus. Simultaneously, these statues were meant to celebrate the deceased woman by linking her with the tradition of Greek culture and Roman state ideology, in which this goddess held a central position. These

statues of Roman matrons as Venuses are characterized by the unity of their sensual experience, religious respect and political loyalty, which has no parallel in post-Ancient Europe.

After the rise of Christianity, Venus became a pagan demon. Still, the goddess survived the demise of the ancient Roman Empire and remained a permanent part of collective memory, even though her character was at odds with Christian morality. In the Middle Ages, the ancient statue of naked Venus had no justification, and there were excellent reasons for it to disappear from the cultural horizon for good. Nevertheless, it never disappeared. There was a never-broken tradition in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in Constantinople. In the capital of the Byzantine Empire, nude statues of Aphrodite were on display until its conquest by the Ottoman army in 1453. In the same century, the statue of Venus retook centre stage in Rome after a thousand-year hiatus. At the beginning of 16th century, the public display of ancient statues of the naked Venus in the Vatican's Belvedere demonstrates its full rehabilitation by the head of the Catholic Church. This rehabilitation, while surprisingly vigorous, was not permanent. The immense popularity of ancient Venus statues has therefore not resulted in their reception in contemporary monumental sculpture.

Until the mid-16th century, no significant sculptor had created a statue of the goddess, whose ancient form was known and admired by every prominent individual of the time. Proof of this admiration is found in the drawings of ancient originals and the small statuettes and paintings inspired by them, which depict Venus in life size. The absence of a monumental statue of Venus in the high Renaissance was the result of the lingering medieval concept of Venus as an evil demon, which was deeply rooted in Europe. In the second half of the 16th century, the attempt to integrate the ancient concept of the world and Christian faith came to a definitive end, but did not spell a return to the previous state.

Thanks to the condemnations and bans by the Christian Church, the depiction of Venus was given the status of a prestigious object, which the social elite hid in their private residences to show off their privileged position. Giambologna created statues of Venus for these residences that respected the morality and religious taboos of the time but were made in monumental dimensions and on an aesthetic level comparable to ancient models. He was dealing with the same problem Praxiteles had dealt with, but his task was much more difficult. Praxiteles could not have depicted Aphrodite as a naked woman with all her anatomical details. Giambologna had to depict Venus as neither a naked woman nor an ancient goddess, as nakedness and pagan antiquity in his time were a veritable "minefield" for sculptors.

Giambologna's statues of Venus distanced themselves both from ancient models and traditional mythical tales and situations. The fact that they are naked and bathing is the only thing Giambologna's Venuses have in common with their ancient predecessors. They tell no stories and their shapes and postures come from live models, but the life-inspired movements and details are always placed into abstract patterns, stripping them of meaning. The patterns, which depict nothing, take the role of the clothing that veils female nudity, which had begun to be viewed as a fundamental problem. The erotic attractiveness of Giambologna's statues was ensured by the masterfully conceived details of the female anatomy. Thanks to these details, he

created an impressive illusion of optical contact with female nudity, an element which, however, he cast doubt upon by using improbable poses that were given no justification. The rich folds of the drapery, which carry little meaning, serve to evoke the effect of reality and at the same time to weaken it. In addition, the overly complicated nature of the depicted postures, which would require an exceptional exertion of strength, contrasts with the absence of emotion in the facial expression, which is a typical attribute of Giambologna's statues. The extreme twist of the torso and all the limbs promised a specific action and the strong emotions linked to it; viewers, however, found nothing of the sort on the statue, even when they observed it from all possible angles. It is as if the naked ancient goddess disappears from view the moment someone attempts to approach her. In short, Giambologna carried out his reform of the depiction of Venus by breaking the boundaries between depicting the goddess and a mortal woman, and between a clothed and naked woman.

The most ambitious sculptors of the time passed through Giambologna's workshop in Florence, and thanks to them the new concept of the statue of Venus spread throughout all of Europe. However, the territorial spread did not affect the way Venus was depicted; her statues, wherever they were created, did not bring anything fundamentally new. The waves of returns to the classical tradition in the 17th-19th centuries, did not change this much. Nevertheless, sculptors' returns to this theme show the great prestige the ancient models enjoyed (138). Thanks to this prestige, Venus de Milo and other statues of the naked ancient goddess could also become emblems of the states that identified with them. However, the politicization of ancient statues of naked Venus and their association with the conservative establishment negatively affected their reception in the 20th century. In any case, it is true that when artists did exceptionally depict Venus in the second half of this century, they mostly problematized her. For the vast majority of artists, the depiction of Venus was conceivable only as a parody.

In the 20th-century avant-garde artists' milieu, the ancient statue of Venus became a symbol of the past to which few people openly subscribed anymore, and all of them distanced themselves from it somehow. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the history of Western art is proving to be a never-ending confrontation with the works that arose in ancient Greece and Rome. Jim Dine created the largest ever sculptures of Venus in the United States, and Michal Gabriel in the Czech Republic surprised us with a monumental sculpture that depicts the traditional theme of the birth of the ancient goddess with contemporary means and from today's perspective. Ancient statues of Venus are once again fascinating, as they are a visual representation of eternity but also exist in the "here and now." They tell the story of a goddess with all the attractive anatomic details of the female body captured in a situation that all people can imagine, thus allowing them to identify with the bathing goddess and the person who has surprised her in this intimate moment. This development is not surprising; the perception of the ancient statue of Venus constantly oscillated between power and erotic symbol, artwork and depicted reality, goddess and naked woman. From antiquity to the present, Venus statues characterise a contradiction between what the public wished to see and what can be depicted.

A statue has immense power – the moment a person creates one, it may continue to address viewers millennia later. Regardless of what one thinks of it, it

awakens in artists a desire for a work of art that will also last an eternity – and this can be said of no other statue more than the ancient Venus. The eternity of a statue is its most important aspect, but it is also the main obstacle that prevents us from understanding it. Indeed, the permanence of a sculpture's existence implies the impression that it is something that has been there from age to age without change so that its tradition-sanctified meaning does not change either. The same applies to works inspired by ancient Venus. The sculptural type of naked Venus has not changed much since it was created in ancient Greece. Later artists have merely varied the attitude and attributes of Praxiteles' statue, which may lead to the erroneous conclusion that they too have merely retold the contents of the Cnidia in their own words. A closer look reveals that each epoch has infused this sculptural type with new meanings, and its functions have changed just as radically. If the hitherto commonly shared self-evidency of the Venus statue was challenged, the purpose of this book has been served.

Each of the statues of Venus we discussed in this book tells its own story and tells it differently to each generation. That was the reason we followed the Venus statues from the beginning to the present day. What will happen next? How will Venus statues and the reception of their ancient models evolve? The development from the Italian Renaissance to the present day shows a clear tendency, which has no clear outcome. In England, in the 17th and 18th centuries, we saw the emergence of the cult of Venus statues and their subsequent defilement. We observe similar reversals in Western culture in later centuries, so we can assume that Venus statues will forever oscillate between the two opposing poles of icon and victim in the future.



138. Abraham Bosse, A Sculptor Presenting his Statue of Venus and Cupid, etching, 1642 (detail).