The Venus: Mother or Woman?

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This paper explores the implications of the various theories surrounding Upper Paleolithic Venus figurines, and how they impact conceptualizations of these fascinating artifacts. I will argue that power relations are present in common understandings of the Venuses, and that approaches such as McCoid and McDermott's self-representation hypothesis and Nelson's attention to gendered approaches within archaeology denaturalize reductionist descriptions of the Venus figurines as fecund fertility symbols. In order to begin unearthing the multifaceted nature of the Venuses, a reconceptualization, moving away from sexualized objects towards a more inclusive image celebrating womanhood, is necessary.

“The Lady from Willendorf...remains in a way unique. Carved from limestone, once coloured a red of which traces remain, she is fat, faceless, and preoccupied; collected into herself and the fecundity of which she seems the total embodiment,” (Sandars 1985:40). The above quote exemplifies the common interpretation of the Venus figurines: fat, faceless, and preoccupied with their own fertility. These figurines have fascinated archaeologists for centuries as they appear to conceal a key element in understanding more about our ancestors and their conceptualization of life. However, according to Rice, “most experts believe there was but one motivation for the sculpting of Venuses, and that they served but one function in Paleolithic society – that of glorifying fertility,” (Rice 1981:402). I find these reductionist theories rather limiting. Instead, I will aim to prove that it is worthwhile to regard the Venus figurines as more than just fertility symbols, understanding them instead as representations of womanhood, rather than of motherhood alone. I will first examine examples of Upper Paleolithic androgynous and male figurines that differ from the typical “fecund female” depictions. Next, I will undertake a thorough examination of the self-representation hypothesis, attempting to explain the Venus figurines in terms of artistic creations made by female sculptors who aimed to capture the female form in the various stages of life. Lastly, I will look at normative masculinist scripts underlying the common conceptualizations of the Venus figurines and the possible implications of using the term “Venus”. The problematic nature of this term is the product of a gendered approach that has been prevalent in the discipline of archaeology over the course of its development and continues to be manifested in the interpretations surrounding the Venus figurines today.

Common Theories

In order to rethink the possible meanings of Venus figurines, prevailing theoretical perspectives must first be considered. While the discipline of archaeology often prides itself on its value-free, non-judgemental approach when examining material records of humans, “one exception to this restraint concerns the function of European Upper Paleolithic female figurines, usually called Venuses,” (Rice 1981:402). These small, three-dimensional sculpted or carved figurines have appeared at numerous sites in western Eurasia, estimated to originate between 31,000 and 9,000 B.P. (Dobres 1996:740). Forms, shapes and types of these figures vary greatly, and yet the common
interpretations have been strikingly reductionist, focusing on androcentric interpretations of their hypothesized functions in Paleolithic societies. Accordingly, the common explanations are that the representations of female anatomy, as seen in the Venus figurines, “were fabricated and used for erotic and sexual reasons by males and for male gratification and/or education,” (Dobres 1996:741), as sex toys, trophies for rape, or for glorifying the apparent male preoccupation with the fertility of womenfolk. Consequently, in this type of analysis, the Venus figurines become objects “made, touched, carved, and fondled by men,” (McDermott 1996:233) almost acting as a form of early erotica. Upon a closer reading of these theories, one cannot help but notice the absence of female agency in the process of creating these figures. Why is it automatically assumed that men were the artists and creators of figures that so intimately depicted the female body, with women reduced to sexualized objects? The “inherently androcentric and heterosexist bias in assumptions underpinning these accounts,” (Dobres 1996:741) colours our conceptualization of the Venus figurines, and only by recognizing these biases and departing from this paradigm can we begin to envision other possibilities for their existence.

Androgynous and Male Figures

The unearthing of “purposefully androgynous” (Dobres 1996:740) figures, as well as clear representations of the male body undermine the assumption that all Upper Paleolithic figurines functioned as fertility idols or as glorifications of female fecundity. Artifacts from the Brassempouy, Laussel, and Dolní Věstonice sites all point to the existence of male figurines from the same time period, as exemplified in one of the earliest finds, the Man From Brno, Czech Republic. “The muscular fragment of an ivory figure from Brno...with its more correctly proportioned stump of a penis at the base of the torso ...create[s] a realistic impression of masculinity,” (McDermott 1996:236). If such naturalistic representations of the male body have been unearthed, why are the female figurines then automatically cast as representations of a fertility cult depicting obese, offspring-producing machines, and not portraits depicting the many facets of real Paleolithic women? Again, undercurrents of biased female objectification are at play. Furthermore, while ambiguously gendered objects are clearly present, they are immediately cast as glorifications of female sexual characteristics, not taking into account their possible reading as masculine representations. For example, an ambiguous Dolní Věstonice artifact is often interpreted as portraying a “body [being] reduced to a mere stick supporting the breasts” (Sandars 1985:48), yet this is a very androcentric interpretation. If examined carefully where one sees a pair of disjointed breasts, one could just as easily perceive a pair of testicles or the whole male reproductive organ. Further, if these “rods” of Dolní Věstonice are reconstituted as a representation of masculinity, the gender of the sculptor comes under scrutiny. Instead of further supporting yet another theory which distils women to sexual objects interpreted, represented, and relished by men, the rods
could have very well been fashioned by a woman sculptor interacting with representations of a man (Nelson 1990:17).

**The Self-representation Hypothesis: Depicting Stages of Life**

The introduction of the female sculptor into the picture opens up a new avenue of possibilities for the existence of the Venuses. McCoid and McDermott (1996) put forth the challenge that women were not just passive spectators in the manufacture of the Venuses; instead, with each new Venus unearthed, we may be glimpsing an early self-representation of the female body by the female sculptor. This reconceptualization is necessary in order to destabilize the understanding of the Venus as simply a representation of a grotesquely obese female fertility symbol fashioned by male observers idealizing the female body. The self-representation hypothesis becomes substantiated in careful analysis of the often bizarre proportions of the Venuses. Instead of seeing pendulous breasts, enlarged hips, and foreshortened legs and feet as an idealization of a woman’s reproductive potential and fertility, they become products of the woman sculptor’s conception of her own body. McDermott asserts that “the oldest images of the human body literally embody ego-centric or autogenous (self-generated) visual information obtained from a self-viewing perspective,” (McDermott 1996:227). Essentially, this implies the notion of women looking down on their own bodies. The distorted dimensions of the Venuses thus cease to be a preoccupation with secondary sexual characteristics and become a woman’s attempt to imagine her body from the top down. According to McDermott, “standing erect with the head bowed presents to a woman's eye a strongly foreshortened view of the upper frontal surface of the thorax and abdomen, while the breasts, being close to the eyes, will loom large in the visual field,” (McDermott 1996:239). He proves this by carefully comparing the view that a modern woman has when she looks at her own body this way to the perspective which might have been taken by the sculptor of the Venus of Willendorf statuette. Striking similarities emerge when all possible views of herself are considered, including the upper frontal and oblique lateral views of the body, making it possible that the female sculptor chose to carve her likeness in stone in accordance with this perspective.

If this is the case, what could be the purpose of such realism and self-representation? McDermott asserts that, “the needs of health and hygiene, not to mention childbirth, ensure[d] that feminine self-inspection actually occurred during the Upper Paleolithic,” (McDermott 1996:247) and this inspection could have been recorded in stone for a variety of purposes. Whether for obstetrical and gynaecological aid or for the socialization and teaching of young women, “these figurines might have been used to gain greater control of reproduction,” (McCoid and McDermott 1996:323) and therefore their direct and practical purposes were for the spread of knowledge about the female body and its needs. Furthermore, these self-representations often depict more than just a fecund or pregnant woman. In fact, when the Venus figurines are examined in terms of
the age categories into which they fall, they actually represent women from all stages of life, from slender adolescence to distinguished old age. According to Rice:

...the largest group of Venuses represents nonpregnant adult females, while the smallest group represents pregnant adult females, [and] there is no evidence to support an interpretation focused exclusively on the fertility function. The Venuses apparently represent womanhood, not just motherhood. [Rice 1981:409]

Moreover, Rice (1981) argues that the distribution of these Venus age categories accurately represent the actual proportions within age groups of Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherer societies. By comparing the percentage of Venuses in each of the four age categories with the percentages found in Rice’s generalized hunting and gathering group, it becomes clear that these figurines accurately correspond to the composition of the foraging band. Therefore, the validity of casting the Venuses as fertility idols comes under scrutiny; when taken as a whole, the assemblage of the Venuses accurately represents Upper Paleolithic women, not simply mothers. As Rice posits:

...a cursory look at the entire collection of 188 Venuses calls into question the dominant focus on fertility; most figurines simply do not appear to be pregnant. If fertility were the only concern, why so few statuettes of pregnant women, why are none shown in actual childbirth, and why are none shown nursing babies or with children? [Rice 1981:402]

Viewing women as vessels of fertility, with childbearing as their prime function, reflects covert normative discourses that work against the supposed value-free, objective approach adopted by archaeologists. Upper Paleolithic women continue to be seen in such limiting frameworks, reflecting underlying gendered approaches which greatly limit our understanding of the scope of past and present women.

**Gender Scripts and the Real Meaning of the Term “Venus”**

Interpreting the Venus figurines as exultations of fertility through exaggerated sexual characteristics can be seen as “a kind of folklore...repeated, a folklore of the anthropology profession, too well known to require documentation,” (Nelson 1990:12). The meaning of the Venus figurines is taken for granted and echoed without much consideration of the validity of such ingrained assertions. Oftentimes, the attributes of fertility and the ability to bear children is seen as a matter of utmost importance in Prehistoric societies, a right and a duty for women to act as the bearers and rearers of children. “A wish for fertility,” or an adherence to the “mother goddess cult,” (Nelson 1990:16) continues to operate as the prevailing conceptualization of women’s worth in prehistoric societies, yet this constrains the available functions held by women. Nelson suggests that:
...culturally constructed gender roles, and our attitudes and beliefs about sex and reproduction, enter into the selectivity of reporting on the Upper Paleolithic figurines. The reading of the metaphors of the figurines derives from a masculist script. [Nelson 1990:19]

Interpreting the Venus figurines as sexualized fertility idols simply adheres to understanding women as upholding the goals and needs of men. One must wonder why it has taken so long to even consider a female perspective and agency in the sculpture process (McCoid and McDermott 1996:319), with women subjects reduced to objects made by men, only to be interpreted by men millennia later. It is normative for us to think that the male sculptor would revel in the fecundity and plentfulness of the figurine, subsequently imbuing the presence of abundant sexual characteristics with erotic and sexual overtones. However, once we depart from interpreting the figures in this masculinist discourse, and return agency and participation in the creation of the Venuses to Paleolithic women, it becomes irrelevant whether or not men happened to find these figures attractive. We are then allowed to focus on meanings which include the celebration of the entire life-cycle of womanhood including pre- and post-fertility, with the function of women expanding to include a wide array of roles.

However, in addition to imposing masculinist conceptualizations of gender and the function of women in society, the Venus figurines harbour another biased and fallacious interpretation. Casting the Venuses as representations of exaggerated fertility garners the Western androcentric interpretation of women as sexual objects, ethnocentrically projecting modern attitudes on Paleolithic societies. White argues that even the name “Venus” is incorrect and “stems directly from Western European racial/racist attitudes of the early twentieth century,” (White 2003:55). The term “Venus” is commonly used in the context of Classical and Early Renaissance art, yet when comparing the graceful beauty of Botticelli’s Venus to the Venuses of the Upper Paleolithic, one is struck by the mocking differences between the two. White (White 2003:54) argues that this mockery is rooted in racial distinctions that were applied when the first Venuses were unearthed by Western archaeologists such as Edouard Piette in the 1800s, with svelte figures labelled as “European”, while ample bodied, “negroid” statuettes were labelled as Venuses. Early archaeologists posited that the Venuses could prove the existence of a separate, early European race physiologically similar to certain populations in Africa. The Venuses were further racially profiled by claiming the presence of steatopygia, or the accumulation of fat around the buttocks, to explain the Venuses’ disproportionate features. This phenomenon occurs in some sub-Saharan populations and widely fascinated physical anthropologists in the nineteenth century. The tragic case of the “Hottentot Venus”, or Sartje Bartman, a San woman brought to Europe in 1810 to become a sideshow attraction for her protruding steatopygous buttocks, underlines the use of the term ‘Venus’ as a derision, applied to Sartje Bartman with a “tongue-in-cheek” nuance.
(White 2003:54). Bartman’s so-called “grotesquely proportioned body,” (White 2003:54) was jeeringly equated with the body the Classical Venus, and steatopygia was suddenly sought out and projected onto any interpretation of the supposedly “negroid” Paleolithic populations.

However, defining the Venus statuettes by the presence of steatogypia is not justifiable. Based on the tests done by Nelson of all the figurines known at the time, only three of one hundred and eighty-eight Venuses actually possess this trait and even this assertion is highly conjectural (Nelson 2004:129). For example, while the Venus of Willendorf is often used to exemplify steatopygia in common anthropological textbooks (Nelson 2004:129), her fat deposits are actually centered on the hips and not the buttocks. Looking for differential fatty tissue distributions corresponding to racial differences fit in with the biological evolutionist paradigms of nineteenth century anthropology, but when the Venus figurines are examined for steatopygia, the presence of this trait is statistically insignificant. If this is the case, why would the term “steatopygous Venus” (White 2003:54) be used so widely to describe these Upper Paleolithic figurines? It would appear that this stereotype was used in support of the racial determinist attitudes and fascinations with the “exotic other” present at the time of their unearthing. However, as these initial discoveries and generalizations were made nearly two hundred years ago, in today’s paradigms the term “Venus” can be seen as demeaning, both in its mockery of the representation style chosen by the artist of the statuette, as well as to the natural populations who actually exhibit the physiological attributes which have come to explain the ‘grotesque’, ‘obese’, and ‘corpulent’ Venuses. Even these commonly used adjectives imply disrespectful and subjective attitudes and should be abandoned in further discussion of these and other figurines. In summation, gendered, racist, and otherwise biased attitudes continue to colour our interpretations of any material remains which are unearthed in the effort to understand human nature throughout time. By gaining awareness of our preconceptions and abandoning our value judgements when it comes to representations of the past, we will depart from normative interpretations and consider other possible functions and realities presented to us.

Conclusions

In order to unearth the true meanings behind the fascinating Venus figures of the Upper Paleolithic, one must move away from the paradigm which casts the Venuses as fertile mothers, instead considering other possible explanations of their existence. By denaturalizing common interpretations of the Venuses, the emphasis on the glorifications of fertility becomes a very limiting approach, and the celebration of womanhood instead of motherhood should be considered as the impetus for the creation of the figurines. An examination of common theoretical perspectives pertaining to the Venuses’ function and emphasizing the common reduction of Prehistoric women to idols of fertility was juxtaposed to the existence of androgynous and male
statuettes from the same period, clearly demonstrating that female fertility was not the only possible subject of three dimensional Upper Paleolithic carving. The self-representation hypothesis gives another explanation for the disproportionate bodies of the Venuses, seeing them as top-down self-portraits of female sculptors instead of gross exaggerations of the female form by men. Attributing the authorship of the figurines to women also returns the concept of agency and cultural innovation to half of the Paleolithic population, with women ceasing to be simply objects of male sculptures but instead active agents in the process of creation. Furthermore, by examining the age proportions as represented by the Venus figurines and comparing this finding to present hunter/gatherer societies, a statistical correlation can be observed. This provides evidence that the Venuses in fact represent the entire life-cycle of Paleolithic women, with only a small percentage portraying pregnancy and reproductive viability. Creating meanings centered on female fertility stems from gendered scripts which plague the discipline of archaeology to this day, and by careful examination of the normative discourses present around the Venus figurines, gendered and even racists connotations emerge.

It is precisely this problem of gendered language and racist, ethnocentric thinking which makes this examination and reconceptualization of the Venus figurines worthwhile. Anyone, from an undergraduate anthropology student, to theorists attempting to explain human behaviour, can benefit from dialogues which challenge our preconceptions and assumptions regarding the place of women throughout the ages. Pregnancy and childbearing are simply one of the many stages in a woman’s life, and reducing women in any historical period to producers of children is very restrictive. Archaeology, like many other disciplines is not immune to a one-sided representation of women, and only by introducing new perspectives to an already-established paradigm can we begin to arrive at a multidimensional view of women both during the Upper Paleolithic, as well as today.

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