

# Upper Paleolithic Venus Figurines and Interpretations of Prehistoric Gender Representations

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Interpretations of Upper Paleolithic Venus figurines pose an interesting challenge for archaeologists. Scholars who have studied these prehistoric representations of the female form have reached a variety of conclusions that may be better seen as a reflection of modern sociocultural values and ideals than being representative of the peoples who made the Venuses. I argue that by transposing our own ideals onto the Venus figurines, we act as colonizers and appropriators of the past. Reviewing archaeological literature regarding the Venuses, we gain a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to interpreting representations of gender. These lessons serve as a starting point for constructing archaeological methods of interpreting representations of gender and gender relations in a way that more accurately reflects the ancient peoples who crafted these figurines.

*Keywords:* Upper Paleolithic, Venus figurines, gender, feminist archeology, Goddess movement

## Introduction

During the Upper Paleolithic, which lasted from 50,000 to 10,000 years ago, representations of the female form, called "Venus" figurines, were created. Since their initial discovery they have been controversial, even spawning a quasi-religious movement in some modern feminist circles (Rountree 2001). These statuettes emerged from the ground and into a world where scholars have tried to interpret them through their own sociocultural frame of reference and ideologies, thereby appropriating the Venuses and acting as colonizers of the Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers who created these figurines. In doing so, I believe that many reductionist theories have emerged regarding the Venuses, Upper Paleolithic representations of gender, and inferences about gender relations. In this paper I examine anthropological perspectives used to interpret these figurines. I will explore assumptions and underlying problems regarding creatorship of the Venus figurines, and some proposed interpretations of the figurines along with their implications. I will discuss inherent flaws in our current understanding of the Venuses and the Upper Paleolithic people that they represent, and propose alternative methods of understanding representations of gender, gender relationships and social dynamics in prehistoric societies through the interpretation of their artifacts.

## The Venus Figurines

Small figurines depicting the female form, as evidenced by the depiction of primary and secondary sex characteristics, were first brought to the attention of

modern society during the 1890s when they were discovered in southwestern France and northern Italy by Edouard Petite and Salomon Reinach, respectively (McDermott 1996). These statuettes are the earliest examples of art created in the human image, the oldest of which was discovered in 2008 at Hohle Fels cave in Germany, dated to over 35,000 years old (Curry 2012). Since their initial discovery, hundreds of figurines of Upper Paleolithic origin have been found. A wide variety of images exist; many are obviously female, some are male, others lack obvious gender, and still others are anthropomorphic animal figures.

These female figurines, known as Venuses, have been found stretching across Eurasia from southern France to Siberia, as shown in Figure 1. These figurines are small in stature, standing on average 150mm in height, small enough to be held in the hand (McDermott 1996). They were made from a variety of raw materials, such as stone, bone, ivory, jet, hematite, limonite, horse teeth, and fired loess (Beck 2000). It has been hypothesized that they were being made from perishable materials long before the oldest known Venuses were created (Russell 1998). The figurines vary in form as well; some are highly stylized and abstract, others detailed and exceptionally realistic, and still others rough and unfinished (Beck 2000). Figure 2 shows three of these figurines. The Venuses have generally been characterized as being faceless, grotesque, rotund, and having exaggerated sex organs (Nelson 1990), while others argue that a great deal of diversity exists among the statuettes (Rice 1981).





Figure 1 Venus figurines have been discovered across the European continent; some locations where Venuses have been found are depicted on the map above (map created by author, using Hitchcock 2014).

The people of the Upper Paleolithic who created these Venus figurines were nomadic hunter-gatherers. The Upper Paleolithic, from roughly 50,000-10,000 years ago, predates the advent of agriculture, and marks a transition to modern human cognitive behavior and the advent of many new technologies. Examples of these changes include, but are not limited to, increasingly sophisticated blades and hunting tools, routine use of body decoration, and the appearance of artwork in the form of carved figurines or paintings and engravings on cave walls (Bar-Yosef 2002: 365-366). Behavioral changes coincide with changes in the climate; the Last Glacial Maximum was followed by a period of oscillation between warm and wet, then cold and dry. The creation of these Venuses can be seen as a response to the world in which they lived (Bar-Yosef 2002).

### Androcentric and Feminist Interpretation and Appropriations

Androcentrism, or the practice of treating males or masculine world views as the center for one's world view and interpreting culture and history as such, has been common practice in much of western scholarship. Androcentric interpretations of the Venus figurines were the starting point for archaeological understandings of this Upper Paleolithic art form. Androcentric interpretations of these figurines largely focus on men as the creators of the figurines, with an objectified understanding of representations of females. This androcentric approach was a reflection of sociocultural values of the Victorian era during which they were found, and an interpretive bias that disallows other possible, indeed probable, explanations.

These interpretations did not arise with malicious intent, but the effects were damaging and despite the passage of time, androcentric perspectives of the Venus figurines are still common (Nelson 1990). By ignoring the possibility of female agency, and trying to understand the complex nature of the Venuses in oversimplified terms, the interpretive framework reduces all possible answers to whether or not they can be situated into a simple understanding.

In an effort to counter androcentric tendencies that dominated Western scholarship, feminist scholarship, which emerged during the second feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, works to challenge received wisdom in academia regarding gender and gender relationships. Interpretations given to the Venuses began to be scrutinized during this time, allowing for new understandings to emerge. Efforts have been made by a number of scholars to re-conceptualize gender in archaeology, including what is meant by gender, how the material culture of a people reflects social relationships, amongst other reforms to approaching gender-related items (Conkey 1997).

Out of this same feminist movement came the modern Goddess movement. The Goddess movement is a political and spiritual reclaiming of a woman's femininity in terms that are free from the perspectives, definitions, and values attached to it by men (Rountree 2001: 6). Goddess feminists are also associated with the feminist agenda of the 1960s and 1970s, and have portrayed the Venus figurines as representations of the Upper Paleolithic pan-European Mother Goddess, a deification of female sexuality and fecundity (Russell 1998). Much of this movement has been mythologized, with literature largely reflecting popular views rather than archaeological evidence. Some attempts at combining modern mythology and academia have been made, resulting in poor scholarship based on cherry picking through the archaeological record, much to the chagrin of feminist archaeologists still attempting to make a name for themselves in a traditionally male-dominated field (Rountree 2001).

### Interpretations of the Purpose and Function of the Venus

As varied as the approaches to understanding the Venus figurines have been, interpretations of their authorship, meaning and function are even more diverse. To explore the varied interpretations, I begin by discussing the question of creatorship, including assumptions of male agency and a recent study with compelling evidence for female self-representation (McDermott 1996). I then examine some overarching themes in the scholarly literature regarding the possible meanings and functions of



the Venus figurines. These themes include: sex, fertility and beauty; religious functions and matrifocal societies; and representations of actual people with practical functions.

It traditionally has been assumed that the Venus figurines were created by men to serve male agendas as erotic representations of sexuality, beauty and fertility. This androcentric view of the Venuses has been espoused both in archaeological and art history scholarship. For example Berenguer, as quoted by Nelson, questioned "How did the artist's vision, which reflected the ideal of his time, see her? For as with man, we can never know what she really looked like...so we have to make do with the version her companion, man, had of her" (1990:16). This leaves no room for doubt that the use of "man" in this context is not generic, but specific to the male sex. In a similar way, Leroi-Gourhan is also quoted by Nelson as mentioning that the "first figurines representing man – or at least his wife," (1990:16) which once again demonstrates androcentric understandings of who was making the figurines and for whom they were intended. The androcentric understanding of the figurines assumes that women were acted upon,

rather than exerting any agency over themselves or their image.

A challenge to the androcentric line of thinking has been issued however, by McCoid and McDermott, and research has since been conducted that hypothesizes the Venus figurines were a form of self-representation by Upper Paleolithic female creators. McCoid and McDermott argue that rather than viewing women as "passive spectators", the statuettes were created by women through the only means of self-examination available to them (1996). For example, proportions that seem stylized when viewed from the front, back, and sides, take on an entirely different appearance when observed from the top down. During the Upper Paleolithic, mirrors were unavailable, and for a woman to know what she looked like, she could only look down upon herself. By recreating that perspective with modern photography, it has been shown that the view of a woman looking down upon her own body would appear similar to the view looking down on a Venus. McDermott and McCoid argue that this perspective would explain why many Venuses lack defined faces, possess smaller heads, and why the legs seem to disappear to a point in what has



Figure 2 From left to right are the Brassempouy Venus, Moravany Venus, and Yeliseevichi Venus. These Venuses are vastly different in style, level of detail and portrayal of the female form; this variety has not traditionally been acknowledged in descriptions of the Venuses (Hitchcock 2013, 2014). Photos: Cropped to front view only from *Front and side view of the Venus of Brassempouy* by Jean-Gilles Berizzi/Public Domain; *Venus von Moravany* by Don Hitchcock at donsmaps.com/Permission granted by photographer; *The Yeliseevichi venus* figure by Don Hitchcock at donsmaps.com/Permission granted by photographer.



been termed the "lozenge composition" by the French archaeologist Andre Leroi-Gourhan (McDermott 1996: 228). While we may never have any conclusive evidence to prove one way or another who was creating these figurines, this simple shift in our perspective of the Venus figurines as being created by either males or females opens up a whole range of interpretations that were previously unavailable, and thus unexamined.

A common theme to interpretations of the Venuses is to describe them as representations of fertility, sexual desire, and beauty. This idea has been repeated since they were first discovered, and is still touted in scholarly literature today (Nelson 1990). Much of the literature to this effect assumes male agency in their creation. Berenguer theorized that these statuettes were expressions of "man's obsessive need for women who would bear him lots of children" (Russell 1998:262), and are frequently described as "heavily pregnant", as Ardrey states (Russell 1998:263). Another theory regarding the use of the figurines, as proposed by Augusta, was that they functioned to ward off difficulties in childbirth, although the rationale behind this theory was not provided (Russell 1998:263). They were also thought to be portrayals of Upper Paleolithic beauty standards and expressions of sexuality. When discussing the Venuses, Mellaart asserted that eroticism in art "was inevitably connected with male impulse and desire" (Russell 1998:263); Seltman reflected, "these figurines must indicate what the men who produced them found interesting and desirable" (Russell 1998:263). Again, these interpretations are largely androcentric in that they assume male agency, and serve male goals.

I believe it is necessary to challenge some underlying assumptions for several reasons. First, evidence that men created these figurines is inconclusive. There is no way it can be determined that the Venuses were created by men and only by men that stands up to the scrutiny of reasonable doubt; this serves as an example of the ways the received knowledge can color our perceptions. Next, it is assumed by the Victorian-era archaeologists who found the figurines that nudity indicated eroticism, as it has more recently, but it is unlikely that the people of the Upper Paleolithic viewed nudity as western society does today. In this way, we are imposing our own cultural standards and values upon ancient peoples. Third, it is probably incorrect to view fertility as a goal of hunter-gatherer peoples. It is more likely that they tried to control the frequency of pregnancy due to constraints imposed by mobility needs and subsistence strategies, as can be evidenced by modern hunter-gatherer groups (Rice 1981). This is another way in which we impose the values of our society upon the makers of the Venus figurines, something that academia needs to be wary of (Conkey 1997).

Another common theme in scholarly examinations of the Venus figurines is they served a religious function or reflected matrifocal social organization. This line of thought has become heavily entwined with the Goddess movement, and myths of matrifocal societies worshipping a pan-European Mother Goddess (Rountree 2001). There are many problems with these lines of inquiry. First, there is no evidence to prove or disprove the existence of matrifocal societies in the Upper Paleolithic, and as such the assertion is inherently flawed. There is also no evidence of a pan-European monotheism during the Upper Paleolithic (Russell 1998). In fact, the very concept of widespread monotheism is highly reminiscent of modern Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition of one god, and only one god. A number of scholars have attempted to entwine mythology with archaeology, resulting in poor scholarship (Rountree 2001). The resulting literature has been met with accusations of "hijacking" the figurines for "purposes other than academic archaeological study," per Hamilton (Rountree 2001:8). It has been suggested that, if indeed the Venuses represent a Goddess, it is better to think of her as "one in a varied pantheon of male, female and sexless supernatural beings", which better addresses the variety of figurines found that are not female. Other interpretations viewing the Venus figurines as serving a religious function, as proposed by Ucko, purport that the figurines were the function of priestess or initiation figure, or as a protective talisman over dwelling places per Waechter (Russell 1998:266-267).

There are others who suggest more practical functions of the Venuses and their interpretation, which is the third common theme I address in this paper. Patricia Rice hypothesized that the Venuses were representations of women throughout the lifespan (1981). Through this study, Rice assigned the figures to three different age groups and compared composition of the figurines to modern hunter-gatherer peoples. Rice found a strong correlation between age representation in the Venuses and composition of modern hunter-gatherers, which led her to conclude that it is the lifespan being depicted rather than just the reproductive years. Abramova offers another suggestion as to what is being depicted, noting that the Venus figurines and other Upper Paleolithic figurines were simply portraits of actual ancestral people. Other practical uses suggested by scholars include: good luck amulets; puppets or dolls for children; worry stones; representations of witches; or figurines intended to keep strangers away (Russell 1998:266-267).

#### **Current Understandings and Future Potential**

Having reviewed the frameworks used for understanding the Venus figurines, and interpretations that have arisen, I believe that it is safe to say there is room for



improvement in our approach to understanding the Venus figurines. These enigmatic figures have taken hold of the imagination for over a century, producing interpretations that I would argue are more indicative of our own society's values and beliefs, and our ideals and desires for the future. The Venus has acted as a mirror through which we can understand our own perceptions of gender and gender relationships, but also serves as a strong example of why archaeologists must be wary of bias in interpretation. Furthermore, interpretations of the Venus figurines illustrate the need for archaeological constructs that acknowledge prehistoric societies and their social dynamics that acknowledges different approaches to gender. When conducting archaeology of gender relationships and depictions of gender, we must tread cautiously or risk creating a past that is suspiciously like society today.

It is important that scholars take great care when conducting research and drawing conclusions about prehistoric peoples. It is an impossible expectation to find a researcher completely void of bias, but when dealing with the remains of an archaeological culture that is incapable of speaking for itself, archaeologists must be careful to avoid reproducing their own culture's gender roles, ideals or sociopolitical organization (Conkey 1997). By attaching our own values to their material culture, we act as colonizers intent upon making what was theirs seem more like ours and providing further justification for our own worldview. We also must be cautious not to right the wrongs of past interpretations, colored by an androcentric worldview, by veering so far into feminism that we end up creating our own idealized concept of the prehistoric world (Rountree 2001). Drawing conclusions without adequate evidence is inappropriate, no matter what "side" one is on, and therefore, should be avoided. I also assert that the people of the past may not have been as concerned with gender as modern people are, and that a binary interpretation of gender is unlikely to reflect the people of the Upper Paleolithic (Clark 2003). In addition, I would emphasize that responsible archaeology regarding gender depictions and relations involves addressing one's own cultural bias (Conkey 1997), and challenging some of our common misconceptions about the way we view objects, such as binary views on gender, and acknowledging objects as dynamic facets of social relationships (Orton 2010). It is important to recognize that the Venuses are but one depiction of women from the Upper Paleolithic; any conclusions we draw about the men and women who created and used the Venuses based solely upon the figurines would reduce the complex and nuanced nature of human society to a single aspect of their material culture. If we want to understand the gender dynamic that existed in Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherer groups, we need to

gather information from a variety of sources available to us in order to make well-rounded inferences about gender role (Gibbs 1998).

### Conclusion

Since their discovery, the Venus figurines have been an endless source of fascination for the scholarly community. These figurines were created by nomadic hunter-gatherers across Eurasia during the Upper Paleolithic, are diverse in form, and have sparked numerous interpretations. Initial emphasis on androcentric interpretations has begun to give way under the scrutiny of feminist archaeologists since the 1960s and 1970s and archaeological knowledge has been merged with mythology with the genesis of the modern Goddess movement. Interpretations range from the Venuses as representations of sexuality, fertility, beauty, religious objects, indications of matrifocal social organization, to serving many other practical purposes. Both old and new understandings must be passed under the strictest scrutiny to ensure minimization of bias in interpretation. I assert that it is of the utmost importance to interpret objects representing gender, and thereby interpretations that assume gender relations and social dynamics, in a manner that avoids reductionist theories. Theories must be based upon as many different aspects of gender representation as is possible, or the picture we get of prehistoric peoples is likely to be a misrepresentation. By learning to understand gender and the manifold ways it is represented in prehistory, we can gain a richer appreciation of the people and material culture that have come since.

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