

Venus's Metamorphoses

The transformation of Ovid's Venus: Botticelli, Cabanel and Sherman



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (detail)

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis about the reception and transformation of Venus in the visual arts; how the Venus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is conceived by artists and how they applied her in their own art. The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to a certain awareness of how women are depicted in art over time and what the role of artists is in this process. In this thesis, I will apply the method of literature review. By using secondary analysis I will provide the reader with context, and it makes me able to investigate to what extent the artists Botticelli, Cabanel and Sherman have employed the mythical figure Venus for their own ends. I will use academic literature, information from the exhibition of Cindy Sherman, and quotes by artists to analyze to what extent Venus is picked up and transformed by artists. Whereas Venus is depicted as an active character in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Botticelli and Cabanel depict her as a passive and subordinated figure in their versions of the *Birth of Venus*. Cindy Sherman has deconstructed this myth by overturning this Venus-myth. The hoped-for result of this thesis is that the public is more aware of the role of women depicted in art, and artists more conscious of their role in society. To a certain degree, artists mirror society and are therefore an important factor in representing their culture, age and standpoint.

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Introduction

Ovid has been a source of inspiration for artists through the ages. Remarkably popular in his own age¹, this popularity continued during late antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Ovid's most extensive book *Metamorphoses* had its heyday in the Renaissance when it was used extensively by scholars and artists. Its popularity slowly declined thereafter, but themes and characters from the work continue to figure in literature, poetry and visual artworks. This is quite an extraordinary achievement in the light of the fact that *Metamorphoses*, a collection of Roman and Greek myths, is a pagan work which has survived the Christian late antiquity and Middle Ages² and, indeed, the wrath of Ovid himself.³

Venus is one of the most regularly depicted mythological women in history and is of great importance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the *Metamorphoses*, as I shall show in this thesis, Ovid depicts her in a variety of ways, alternately illuminating her as heroic, divine, manipulative, human, and vulnerable. In other words, she is more than merely erotic, but an active and important character in the various stories narrated in the *Metamorphoses*. I shall argue that this contrasts strongly with representations of Venus in literature and visual art of later ages where she seems to be 'tamed: in these cases, Venus is typically depicted as the symbol of sexual desire in service of a male spectator. From the ancient Roman period on, Venus is depicted increasingly as a shy, chaste and girlish figure. I shall illustrate my argument by discussing two representative works of visual art from the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. In the Renaissance, Alessandro Botticelli depicts Venus as an insecure and modest woman; at the moment of her birth, she attempts to cover her genitalia and breasts. In the 19th century, the academic painter Alexandre Cabanel continues this tradition by depicting Venus with her eyes turned away from the spectator, as if ashamed of her nudity.

Many 20th and 21st century artists have offered a strong counter-voice to this association of the Venus myth with passive female sexuality. Cindy Sherman, for example, portrays the powerful, self-conscious, and active character of women in her photographs. Artists often use their works to mirror society and, consciously or unconsciously, reflect various power structures and social and gender relations in their works. They may also actively create or challenge such structures and relations. Therefore, the purpose of my thesis is to analyze how the Ovidian myth of Venus has been taken up and transformed by artists working in visual media at three different historical moments. I

¹M. D'Hane-Scheltema, trans., *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Amsterdam: Athanaeum-Polak & van Gennep, 2011), p. 377

²W.C. Stephens, *Cupid and Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, (Philadelphia: American Philological Association, 1958), p. 287

³Ovid threw this book into the fire after August had summoned him into exile, but fortunately his friends had copies in their possession and therefore the work survived.

will examine depictions of Venus in three different media: from Ovid's written narrative, to the paintings of Botticelli and Cabanel, to the photographs of Sherman.

'Reception' is a key word in this thesis. I shall use the term 'reception' as the opposite of 'tradition'. It is not a direct take-over from past to present, but requires 'an active participation of readers', (including in this case, artists themselves)⁴. The myths written by Ovid are transformed when read and interpreted by a reader from another age or culture. According to T.S. Eliot: 'The past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past'⁵. I shall show that Botticelli, Cabanel and Sherman each have a different reception of the figure of Venus in the *Metamorphoses*: they do something with it to suit their own artistic ends. In doing so, they also comment on shape ways in which women are represented in their respective cultures and epochs.

The reception and transformation of Venus in the visual arts will therefore be the topic of this thesis. I will argue that in contrast to the active roles ascribed to Venus in Ovid's tales, European painting from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century transformed Venus into a passive object intended to satisfy the desiring gaze of a heterosexual male spectator. In some cases, this tendency can still be found in contemporary painting and photography that features imagery associated with the Venus myth. I shall focus on key works in the Renaissance and the 19th century to illustrate my argument and will then turn to works by contemporary artist, Cindy Sherman, in order to show how patterns of looking in portrayals of Venus have been challenged and overturned. First, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is discussed, and the role Venus plays in this work. In chapter 2, I will analyze and discuss the symbolic meaning in the paintings of Botticelli and Cabanel, and how these painters have depicted Venus as a passive character. Thirdly, I will discuss the role of feminism and how women are depicted in contemporary art by analyzing the ways in which Cindy Sherman deconstructs the myth of Venus.

⁴C. Martingale, "Reception" in *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) p. 298

⁵ C. Martingale, "Reception" in *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, p. 298

Chapter 1

Ovid's portrayal of Venus

The *Metamorphoses*

The *Metamorphoses* is the longest work written by Ovid; the work consists of 15 books, in total 11995 verses. In his age Ovid was celebrated as 'Poeta Laureatus', the best in poetry⁶. Since literature and poetry were very popular in the first century before and the first century after the birth of Christ, most people in elite circles could write and orally perform poetry. However, the writings of Ovid seemed to be of an exceptional quality. In the Roman tradition, the subjects of the poetry did not have to be original, and there was a fixed form of poetry. Therefore it is remarkable that Ovid could write such personal and sensitive verses⁷.

There are several political and social references in the *Metamorphoses* (Ovid was banished from Rome by Augustus because of these references⁸), but many generations of scholars have debated the meaning and function of this extensive work. W.S.M. Nicoll argues that the main theme is piety, since there is an obvious reward and punishment theme in most of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*: there is a refutation of impiousness.⁹ A clear example is the story of Philemon and Baucis who show great hospitality to the gods Jupiter and Mercury where no one else does. The others are punished, but Philemon and Baucis are rewarded. Identity is considered to be the most important theme by Fränkel: 'The poem is profoundly concerned with the question of personal identity, [...] transformation can be used to depict alienation from the self and divided identity'¹⁰.

However, most scholars agree that the main theme of the *Metamorphoses* is love. The reason why love is considered a main theme is because of the importance of Cupid (Ovid's favorite character) and Venus¹¹. Throughout the narratives, love is shown to be stronger than all forces. As a consequence, Venus becomes a crucial character. In the *Metamorphoses* Venus has three functions that are of major importance. The first, and most well known, is her role as the goddess of love; the second is her personification of love as a natural force; and the third is her personification of the

⁶M. D'Hane-Scheltema, trans., *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Amsterdam: Athanaeum-Polak&van Genneep, 2011) p. 378

⁷M. D'Hane Scheltema, trans., *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p.379

⁸M.T. Boatwright, et al. *From Village to Empire* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 301

⁹W.S.M Nicoll, *The Classical Review*, New Series, review of *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses* by J. Solodow (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Classical Association, 1990) p. 271

¹⁰L. Curran, *Transformation and Anti-Augustianism in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Cambridge: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 1972), p.73

¹¹W.C. Stephens, *Cupid and Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 286.

transformation of Troy into Rome¹². These three roles make Venus a complex character and she plays an active role in various narratives comprising the *Metamorphoses*. In this chapter I will examine four ways in which Ovid portrays Venus as an active character. I shall show how Ovid illuminates different aspects of her character as (1) dominant and manipulative, (2) the just goddess of love, (3) sensitive, and (4) weaker than she wants to admit but nevertheless a guardian of an empire.

Venus in *Metamorphoses*

1: The Empress of Love

Much Western visual art depicts Cupid as an innocent cherub and Venus as a beautiful, slightly innocent looking woman¹³. In the *Metamorphoses*, Venus and Cupid are the opposite of this frivolous image. As P. Johnson describes it: 'Venus and Cupid [are depicted] not so much as the inspirers of love but as the empress and commander in chief of an empire'¹⁴. In other words, Venus is a dominant and powerful deity. The characterization Johnson describes comes to the fore in several passages in the *Metamorphoses*.

Although Venus is not mentioned that often in the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, she does play a major role in all the love stories. The reader is aware of the role of Venus and Cupid because of the story of Apollo and Daphne at the beginning of the book. The world has been created and the gold, silver, bronze and iron age have passed; the Gods have won their gigantomachy and the human race has been restored when the story of Apollo and Daphne commences. Apollo boasts about killing the python snake (book 1, 441), and in his arrogance he insults Cupid. Out of revenge, Cupid the son of Venus, makes him fall in love with the nymph Daphne. This story, placed at the beginning of the book to indicate its importance and, shows that the power of love is stronger than all other forces. The great god Apollo has become a subject of love, showing that Cupid has indeed power over him because he can make Apollo fall in love. In other words, he does not have control over his own actions. This means that Venus and Cupid, as the goddess of love and her son, exercise considerable control over individual destiny. Furthermore, knowing that Venus and her son have much influence in who becomes the subject of love, the reader is aware of the potential power they can exert in all further love stories in the book.

In the passages where Venus is an active character in the book, rather than in the background as in the Apollo and Daphne story, her dominant character is explicitly indicated. Venus's first role as lead player is in the story about her adulterous relationship with the god Mars, the god of war (book 4,

¹² W.C. Stephens, *Cupid and Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p.295

¹³ P. Johnson, *Constructions of Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Maryland: Hopkins University Press, 1996)P.5

¹⁴ P. Johnson, *Constructions of Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p.126

167). The story is told by Leuconoë, one of the daughters of King Minyas who tell each other stories because they protest against the honoring of Bacchus. The Sun discovered the adultery of Venus and told her husband Vulcanus. Out of revenge, Venus makes him fall in love with Leucothoë. The Sun suffers and cannot resist any longer. Finally, by trickery, Leucothoë and the Sun consummate their love. The poor girl is put to death when her father finds out about this affair. The revenge of Venus knows solely victims; not only does Leucothoë die, but also Clytia, who loves the Sun in secret, also commits suicide. The story presents Venus as an independent woman who makes her own sexual choices, and is not dominated by her husband. It also highlights the idea that Venus is vengeful to those who undermine her powers: Venus is a dominant deity in this story.

In the next story, Venus shows her full power and manipulative abilities. In the story of the rape of Proserpina, Venus's motives are not entirely honorable. In this fragment, Venus is a divine power who decides over love. Furthermore, she is aware of this power. W.C Stephens has pointed out that the authority of Venus and Cupid, shown in the story of Daphne and Apollo, extends over all the gods¹⁵. Ovid's Venus is well aware of this power, and the fact that she knows it is made explicitly clear in the next story of the *Metamorphoses* in which Venus plays a major role. Venus is not merely depicted as a goddess of love, but displays a manipulative character and wants to increase her power over the rest over the other Olympic gods. In this story, the rape of Ceres's daughter Proserpina by Hades, god of the underworld, Venus acts in an almost military fashion as she tries to build an empire of love.

The rape of Ceres' daughter Proserpina by Hades, is part of a singing contest between the muses of the Helicon and the nine daughters of Piëros (book 5, 292). The muses tell Minerva of this singing contest and they tell her the story in which the muse Calliope sang in the competition (book 5, 341). The song Calliope sang was the story of the rape of Proserpina.

Venus sees the god of the underworld Hades in Sicily, Venus's island, and she calls for her son Cupid. While embracing her winged son, she says, 'Cupid, my son, my arms, my hands, and my might, take up those darts by which thou conquerest all, and direct the swift arrows against the breast of the God, to whom fell the last lot of the triple kingdom. Thou subduest the Gods above, and Jupiter himself; thou subduest the conquered Deities of the deep, and him who rules over the Deities of the deep. Why is Tartarus exempt? Why dost thou not extend the Empire of thy mother and thine own? A third part of the world is now at stake. And yet so great power is despised even in our own heaven, and, together with myself, the influence of Love becomes but a trifling matter. Dost thou not see how that Pallas, and Diana, who throws the javelin, have renounced me? The daughter of Ceres, too, will

¹⁵ W.C.Stephens, *Cupid and Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 288

be a virgin, if we shall permit it, for she inclines to similar hopes. But do thou join the Goddess to her uncle, if I have any interest with thee in favor of our joint sway'.¹⁶

In this fragment it is made clear again that Venus and Cupid have control over the other gods. Venus feels obviously neglected in the dividing of the Olympian kingdom. She wants to extend her empire via Hades/ Pluto, because by ruling him she is technically ruling the underworld, the third empire.

Also, by these words, Venus is responsible for the rape of Proserpina, Ceres's daughter. Thus Venus is linked with politics and speaks in a demanding and dictating tone. The words 'my hands, my might', 'darts by which thou conquerest all', imply a military tone. Her will to extend her empire and to control the third part of the kingdom has an imperial tone. However, her might is diminished by the virgin gods; Diana and Minerva have chosen to reject love and therefore they rebel against the policies of Venus. 'Venus's *imperium* is sexuality and, as she herself states, the enemies of her empire are females who choose to remain chaste' (P. Johnson)¹⁷. Venus's problem is in fact, that Proserpina too wants to remain a virgin since she has no intention of getting married and therefore diminishing and undermining Venus's policy even more. The refusal of sexuality and love decreases the empire of love by Venus and Cupid. By making Pluto falling in love and raping Proserpina, she has more control over him and Proserpina cannot remain a virgin. Venus wants to use all her tools to create more dominion over the other gods. She knows that love weakens the hearts and can control the strongest of powers, and she intends to use this power. By ruling the three largest powers – Jupiter, Pluto and Poseidon– she will be the mightiest of all, with Cupid as her helper. This Venus is ambitious and determined to extend her power.

2. Goddess of Love

The stories of Pygmalion and Hippomedes show another aspect of Venus' character. She is a strict, but helpful goddess of love. As described by W.C Stephens: 'Venus is shown as the helper of love, ready to grant prayers made to her. When mortals acknowledge her power, Venus is propitious, but when Venus is neglected or scorned, she punishes swiftly'¹⁸. This Venus is the true goddess of love: one should not despise a divine power, but receives a helping hand once paid full gratitude.

Pygmalion (book 10, 243), the sculptor, has no interest in women since the sinful Propoetides—who proclaimed that Venus was no goddess (book 10, 240-251), were changed into prostitutes and

¹⁶ H.T. Riley, trans. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (New York, London: George Bell & Sons, St., Convent Garden, 1893), book V. 374-385, p. 81

¹⁷ Johnson, *Constructions of Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 139

¹⁸ W.C. Stephens, *Cupid and Venus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 298

then turned into rocks by Venus. However, he has made a beautiful ivory statue in which he has fallen in love with. He prays to Venus and pays her proper respect. Charmed by this humility she grants his wishes; the statue is turned into a woman by the touch of Pygmalion.

The other side of the goddess is made clear already by the punishment of the Propietides, but also by the story of Hippomedes and Atalanta: if one ridicules Venus or shows impiety, she does not hesitate to punish him.

Venus, by accident herself victim of the arrows of Amor/Cupid, fell in love with the beautiful juvenile Adonis and tells him the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Atalanta was not meant to marry, by Apollo's advice. To scare off potential lovers she tells them she could only be won over by a running contest, and if Atalanta wins the contest, the suitor will die. Atalanta could produce a remarkable speed while running, but her beauty made many men decide to compete with her in any case. Numerous victims were the result. Even though warned by the many victims already fallen, Hippomenes, made crazy by his love for Atalanta, decides to compete with her in order to win her heart. Venus tells this story to Adonis and remarks that she was beautiful 'such as mine is, or such as thine would be, Adonis, if thou wast to be become a woman'¹⁹. Hippomenes, helplessly in love, in wants to win the competition and prays to the goddess of love: 'I entreat that Cytherea may favour my undertaking, and aid the passion that she has inspired in me.' And Venus tells Adonis: 'The breeze, not envious, wafted to me this tender prayer; I was moved, I confess it; nor was any long delay made in giving aid'²⁰. So, she gave him three golden apples which distracted Atalanta during the contest, making Hippomenes win the competition. However, Atalanta was in doubt whether to fetch the last apple since she would then loose the competition. Venus claims: 'I forced her to take it up, and added weight to the apple, when she had taken it up, and I impeded her, both by the heaviness of the burden, and the delay in reaching it. And that my narrative may not be more tedious than that race, the virgin was outrun, and the conqueror obtained the prize'²¹. Venus is shown here to be the helper of love, as said before. However, the story has not come to an end since Venus feels neglected and finds the two lovers ungrateful: 'And was I not, Adonis, deserving that he should return thanks to me, and the tribute of frankincense? but, in his ingratitude, he gave me neither thanks nor frankincense. I was thrown into a sudden passion; and provoked at being slighted, I provided by making an example, that I should not be despised in future times, and I aroused myself against them both'²². In pure lust the two lovers enter a temple of Cybele (mother earth), and disgrace this temple. Venus's rage for both ingratitude and the disgrace of the temple make her metamorphose Hippomenes and Atalanta into lions, guards of Cybele's temple.

¹⁹ H.T. Riley, trans. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 10, p.579

²⁰ H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 10, p. 637

²¹ H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 10, p. 676

²² H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 10, p.681

3. Venus as fragile

Ovid also describes Venus not only as a goddess, but almost humanlike with all her whims and woes. In the *Metamorphoses*, she shows not only her manipulative and military character; her strict nature in granting prayers and punishing as the goddess of love; but also her childlike characteristics: she will get what she wants, is often portrayed as vain, and displays cowardice in her love affair with Adonis

As mentioned above, Venus herself was made victim of Cupid's arrows. Venus pursues Adonis to be with this beautiful object of her love. 'She who has been always accustomed to indulge in the shade, and to improve her beauty, by taking care of it, wanders over the tops of mountains, through the woods, and over bushy rocks, bare to the knee and with her robes tucked up after the manner of Diana, and she cheers on the dogs, and hunts animals that are harmless prey'²³. She does not hunt on the dangerous animals in her fear of getting wounded or otherwise harmed. Venus advises Adonis to do the same, to avoid any dangerous animal, to show no bravery while hunting. However, Adonis himself does not follow this advice and is killed by a boar. Venus, in her lamentations for him, changes his drops of blood into flowers.

This short passage shows that Venus is a rather vain woman, and cowardice when it comes to the possibility of being harmed. This seems to contrast the "commander in chief of an empire" Venus and the just "goddess of love" Venus. Ovid has put many dimensions in his portrayal of Venus, some of which make her a whimsical figure, almost human in her wants and needs. In this fragment the human character of the goddess is predominant: she pleads with Adonis not to hunt dangerous animals and not to be brave, as she is not brave but rather weak. She cries, laments and tears her clothes apart in her grief over the death of her lover, actions that diminish her military and political character in earlier chapters.

4. Venus: The Guardian of an Empire?

In the last books of the *Metamorphoses*, Venus is displayed as the ancestor of Julius Caesar and Augustus. Augustus was not pleased with Ovid's version of Venus, since he diminishes her divine character into a merely human one. This indirectly diminishes the importance of the divine descent of Julius Caesar and Augustus, and therefore decreases the legitimacy of their rule.

Venus is introduced as the protector of Rome in book 14, where she protects the Romans from the Sabians. Juno has left a door to the city open and Venus, the only one aware of this intervention, creates Sulphur rivers to prevent the Sabines from entering the city (book 10, 786).

²³ H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 10, p.533

The next appearance of Venus is in book 15, where she is mentioned as mother Aeneas and therefore mother of the lineage of Caesar. Venus foresaw the conspiracy made against Julius Caesar and pleaded to every god she saw on the Olympia: ‘Behold, on how vast a scale treason is plotted against me, and with how great perfidy that life is sought, which alone remains for me from the Dardanian Iulus. Shall I alone be everlastingly harassed by justified anxieties? I, whom one while the Calydonian lance of the son of Tydeus is wounding, and at another time the walls of Troy, defended in vain, are grieving? I, who have seen my son driven about in protracted wanderings, tossed on the ocean, entering the abodes of the departed, and waging war with Turnus; or, if we confess the truth, with Juno rather? But, why am I now calling to mind the ancient misfortunes of my own offspring? Present apprehensions do not allow me to remember things of former days. Against me, you behold how the impious swords are now being whetted. Avert them, I entreat; hinder this crime, and do not, by the murder of the priest, extinguish the flames of Vesta’²⁴.

This pleading and begging Venus could not be further removed from the first “empress of love” Venus. She argues that the betrayal of Julius Caesar is not solely an unjust murder, but also as a conspiracy against herself as she says ‘treason is plotted against me’. Venus proclaims herself victim of pure injustice. Not only victimized by the mortals who have wounded her (Diomedes) and her son (Aeneas), but also by the fellow gods, especially Juno. This victimization does not fit a divine power, and again Ovid seems to have wanted to give her more layers, more human characteristics.

In addition, the empire of love that Venus intended to create has failed. Venus herself could not generate enough power to control the three most important divine forces. Jupiter himself, when the signs clearly state that Julius Caesar’s fate is to be murdered, tells Venus to acknowledge this, that she is not able to prevent fate from happening: ‘Dost thou, my daughter, unaided, attempt to change the insuperable decrees of Fate? Thou, thyself, mayst enter the abode of the three sisters, and there thou wilt behold the register of future events, wrought with vast labour, of brass and of solid iron; these, safe and destined for eternity, fear neither the thundering shock of the heavens, nor the rage of the lightnings, nor any source of destruction. There wilt thou find the destinies of thy descendants engraved in everlasting adamant. I myself have read them, and I have marked them in my mind; I will repeat them, that thou mayst not still be ignorant of the future. He (on whose account, Cytherea, thou art thus anxious), has completed his time, those years being ended which he owed to the earth. Thou, with his son, who, as the heir to his glory, will bear the burden of government devolving on him, wilt cause him, as a Deity, to reach the heavens, and to be worshipped in temples; and he, as a most valiant avenger of his murdered parent, will have us to aid him in his battles’²⁵. Venus has to bow to Fate, and to Jupiter as he is the ruler of all gods. Even though Venus has power over Jupiter by making him fall

²⁴ H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 15, p. 765

²⁵ H.T. Riley, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, book 15, p. 807

in love, her power cannot usurp his authority. Jupiter shows her that she is not strong and brave enough, and too erratic to become the empress she longed to be in the previous chapter.

Venus is described more extensively than any other deity. Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, and Diana have fragments in the book dedicated to them, but they all are one dimensional when compared to the multi-faceted depiction of Venus. As I have shown in this chapter, Venus portrayed as an important deity, an ambitious builder of an empire, and a goddess who grants wishes and punishes the unthankful. She is also, on occasion, as sensitive as a human being, a symbol for a force of nature, and the guardian of the city of Rome.

This multi-layered, active character has nevertheless been portrayed as a far more passive figure in the visual arts. The first artist to depict Venus naked was the Greek sculptor Praxiteles²⁶ (ca. 350 BC). This sculpture was refused at first by the city of Athens, but then accepted by the city of Cnidus. From this point on, Venus was typically depicted in Western art in this chaste position, covering her breast and genitalia. In the next chapter, this submissive role of Venus and how this is depicted will be analyzed in two *Birth of Venus* paintings by Botticelli and Cabanel.

²⁶ A.E.G Van der Meer, *Venus is geen Vamp: het Vrouwbeeld in 35.000 jaar Venuskunst* (Goesteren: Academie PanSophia, 2009) P. 20

Chapter 2

Silencing Venus: Botticelli and Cabanel

Renaissance art

Renaissance art is often associated with the rebirth of ancient culture; the depiction of mythological stories and gods became popular after a long period of medieval paintings of saints and biblical figures. However, the pagan gods and their companions were not forgotten in the Middle Ages, but still slumbered in the minds of medieval artists and thinkers, becoming visual in paintings and ornaments. Often, references to pagan gods were symbolic, included to indicate certain values in Christian paintings²⁷. Renaissance art should not, therefore, be viewed simply as a rebirth of ancient culture and cultural expressions, but as an aspiration to create realistic, naturalistic shapes that many artists thought had been epitomized in classical art²⁸.

Classical myths also provided a vast reserve of material to serve as subjects in visual. As Christoffer Allan puts it in *Ovid and Art*: 'Mythology was most obviously appealing in its rich repertoire of love stories. Whether ostensibly concerning gods or men, the human interest was immediate and universal, the human point of view inescapable. At the same time, the myths of the ancients were felt to be pregnant with moral and cosmological significance'²⁹ The main literary source on mythology in the Renaissance, was Ovid. His *Metamorphoses* provided a wide range of inspiring stories from ancient mythology. As Panofsky argues: 'No other classical author treated so great a variety of mythological subject matter and was so assiduously read, translated, paraphrased, commented upon and illustrated'³⁰. It is no wonder, then, that a main source of inspiration for Botticelli's mythological paintings is, indeed, Ovid.

Botticelli

Botticelli, was born in Florence around 1455 and died around 1510. The last decennia of the 15th century witnessed many innovations and renewals in the style of paintings; new techniques were developed to explore the dynamic aspects of the human form, and more and more the methods to

²⁷ J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in the Renaissance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 5

²⁸ M. Wundram, *Renaissance*, (Koln: Taschen, 2006) p. 9

²⁹ C. Allen, "Ovid in Art" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, by P. Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 338

³⁰ C. Allen, "Ovid in Art", p. 336

depict the human dynamics were employed³¹. Painters laid more emphasis on the spiritual side of life, after having explored most of the material world. Art became an investigation of how this spirituality manifested itself in societal changes³². Fifteenth century Florentine painters wanted to combine the Greek perfection and Roman grandeur in a way that would equal art of the antiquity. They added realism to the combination, creating this new style in art³³. In this respect, Botticelli is truly a product of his time; he produced both religious and mythological paintings, which express the Greek values such as freedom and democracy. These values also reflected the ideals of the Florentines. Botticelli was associated with the Medici's whose circle of moral and philosophical scholars influenced the painter with their ideas³⁴.

Botticelli, being a former silver smith, had a delicate and refined technique. It was at the end of the 15th century very popular among painters to paint sharp contours in the paintings and Botticelli applied this technique in his paintings. The most important innovations in Renaissance art are 1) the exploration of perspectives and proportion; 2) the new notion of a portrait as a resemblance of the individual and; 3) the beginning of the painting of landscapes³⁵. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* represents the high Renaissance period because in this painting Botticelli applies these three most important innovations, he applies the then popular technique of sharp contours and contrasts, and the mythological subject of the painting shows that Botticelli is a real product of his time.

³¹ R.M. Letts, *The Renaissance*, trans. W. Bruls (Utrecht: Z&K Utrecht, 1993), p. 58

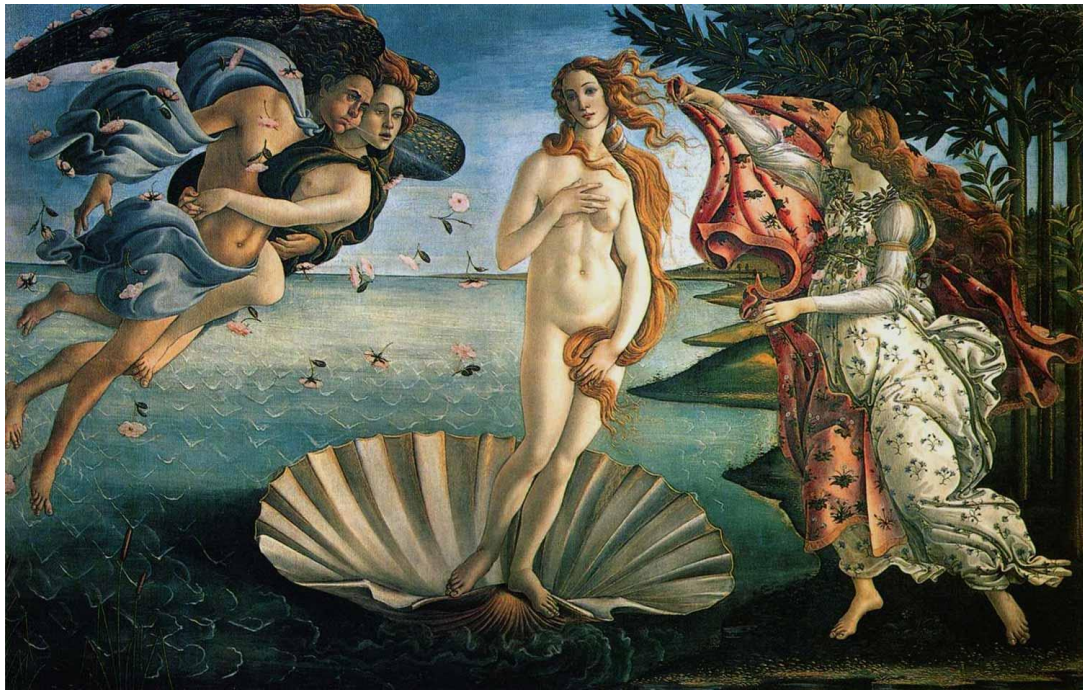
³² R.M. Letts, *The Renaissance*, p. 58

³³ R.M. Letts, *The Renaissance*, p. 71

³⁴ R.M. Letts, *The Renaissance*, p. 62

³⁵ M. Wundram, *Renaissance* (Koln: Taschen, 2006), p. 6

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*



Alessandro Botticelli, 'The Birth of Venus' ca. 1485. Tempera on canvas, 172,5x 278,5 cm. Florence, Galleria Degli Uffizi

According to Hesiod, Aphrodite means 'she who is risen from the foam'. This is a direct reference to the story of her birth. In Hesiod's *Theogony* it is explained that Kronos cut off the genitals of his father Uranus. These genitals fell into the sea and created foam. From this foam the goddess Venus was risen or born fully mature. Venus, being the goddess of love, is thus older than Jupiter, who is the son of Kronos³⁶

In the *Birth of Venus*, Venus stands in the middle of the painting on a seashell, looking vaguely at the distance. She covers one of her breasts with her right hand, and her left hand holds her hair which covers her genitalia. On her left stands the goddess of Spring (extensively described in Ovid's *Fasti*), and on her right the two wind gods Zephyrus and Auster are depicted³⁷. The shell from which Venus has been born is washed ashore by the winds, and the goddess of spring is ready to clothe her naked body. The wind gods produce a wind from their full blown round cheeks, causing the hair of Venus to fly about her body. Also the garments of the goddess of spring are twisted by the wind. This blowing of the wind creates an interesting playfulness in the painting; it creates an effect that all figures and shapes in the painting direct their gaze towards Venus. The goddess of spring is moving towards Venus and the mantle she carries guide the spectators gaze towards the subject of the

³⁶ H.G. Evelyn-White, *The Theogony of Hesiod*, accessed November 2012, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm>

³⁷ A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring*, accessed November 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/32463863/Aby-Warburg-1999-Sandro-Botticelli%E2%80%99s-Birth-of-Venus-and-Spring-En-A-Warburg-G-Bing-F-Rougemont-S-Lindberg-Edits-The-Renewal-of-Pag> p. 96

painting. Also the two wind gods blow their winds towards Venus, causing the flowers to fly along towards Venus as well. All the figures and shapes are in service of the main character Venus.

Symbolic meanings and references to Ovid of the *Birth of Venus*

Physical attributes, narratives and landscapes in Renaissance paintings often have symbolic meaning. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* contains some important references, to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The goddess of spring wears a girdle of rose flowers and a dress with depictions of cornflowers. The garland and girdle of flowers are of importance since they identify the woman as the goddess of Spring. The *Birth of Venus* is part of a diptych: The *Birth of Venus* and *Spring* both depict Venus, Spring and Zephyrus. In the painting '*Spring*', the goddess of spring, has the same attributes as in the *Birth of Venus*. The garland and girdle of flowers is a direct reference to the line 'And young Spring stood wreathed with a garland of flowers' in the *Metamorphoses* in Ovid (2.27). Botticelli has used Ovid in various ways, and this identification of the goddess of spring is one way he draws out the use of Ovid³⁸.

Other references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the waving of Venus's hair in the *Birth of Venus*³⁹. In the story of the abduction of Europa by Jupiter: 'The other shows us Jove, transformed for love into the shape of a fine, milk-white bull, carrying off his rich and cherished prize. She turns her face to the deserted shore with fearful glance; her lovely, golden hair sports in her bosom, caught by the opposing breeze; her garments flutter, wafting back behind; her one hand grips the bull's back, one its horn' (2.873). Ovid writes in his *Metamorphoses* many phrases of waving of Venus's hair. A few examples are the following: 'One of these, tossing her hair along the light breeze' (11.7) and: 'The breeze blew the streaming feathers on her speeding sandals behind her, and her hair was thrown back from her ivory shoulders. Ribbons with embroidered edges fluttered at her knees' (10.591)

The flowers which are blown to Venus by the wind gods Botticelli's painting are anemones and have symbolic meaning as well. Anemones are an important symbol of Venus since they refer to her lover Adonis. The story of Venus and Adonis is described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Venus, in her love for Adonis, warns him not to hunt on dangerous animals (as described in the chapter before). However, during the hunt he is wounded by a boar and dies. Venus, torn in sorrow, changes Adonis into an anemone: 'Adonis, there shall be an everlasting token of my grief, and every year an imitation of your death will complete a re-enactment of my mourning. But your blood will be changed into a flower. Persephone, you were allowed to alter a woman's body, Menthe's, to fragrant mint: shall the transformation of my hero, of the blood of Cinyras, be grudged to me?' So saying, she sprinkled the

³⁸ A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring*, accessed November 2012, p.102

³⁹ A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring*, accessed November 2012, p. 98

blood with odorous nectar: and, at the touch, it swelled up, as bubbles emerge in yellow mud. In less than an hour, a flower, of the color of blood, was created such as pomegranates carry, that hide their seeds under a tough rind. But enjoyment of it is brief; for, lightly clinging, and too easily fallen, the winds deflower it, which are likewise responsible for its name, windflower: *anemone*' (10.724).

The seashell in which Venus was born and is brought to shore with, was a sacred attribute to Venus. Already in Greek times, the shellfish was known as an aphrodisiac, which refers to the Greek name of Venus 'Aphrodite'. This reference to lust and desire in the painting the *Birth of Venus* does not stop there; the shellfish can also be seen as a symbol for the female genitalia and of fertility according to Baring and Cashford⁴⁰. The seashell was associated with Venus only from the fourth century after Christ and is not mentioned in the *Metamorphoses*. However, the Greeks already made the connection between the shellfish and female genitalia: The word for seashell in Greek is Kteis, which means both seashell and female genitalia. Also the sea and the coastline have symbolic meaning. The water refers to fertility; water brings to life and is of vital importance.⁴¹ The coastline is depicted in triangles, which also refer to fertility. The triangles in the coastline is from ancient times on a symbol for the female vulva⁴². The trees in the painting symbolize the changing of nature and its renewal. The orange trees have not yet come to blossom, which could indicate that spring is waiting for Venus's arrival.

Venus's passive role in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

In Ovid we have seen that Venus has an active role in the *Metamorphoses*; she makes her own decisions, is responsible for her own actions and even considers herself to be one of the most important gods of the Olympus. She has a decisive character and knows what she wants. Compared to Ovid's Venus, the central figure in Botticelli's painting is passive. She has covered her genitalia and her right breast as if ashamed of her nudity and vulnerability. She turns her head away from the spectator in a way that enhances her modesty. Venus's nudity makes her vulnerable and she is aware of the spectator's gaze.

In this painting, Venus has an uncomfortable position on the edge of her seashell; her legs bend to the right, her trunk to the left, and her head to the right again. Her attempt to conceal her genitalia is a reference to the *Venus Pudica*, or the *Modest Venus*.

⁴⁰ A.Baring and J.Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess* (London; Viking, 1991),p. 356

⁴¹ A.E.G. van der Meer, *Venus is geen Vamp: het Vrouwbeeld in 35.000 jaar Venuskunst* p. 207

⁴² A.E.G van der Meer, *Venus is geen Vamp: het Vrouwbeeld in 35.000 jaar Venuskunst*, p. 207



A restored version of Praxiteles' Venus of Cnidus, also known as the Venus Pudica

According to E.M. Moormann, references to classical mythology offered Renaissance artists a way out of strict religious norms; a greater range of thought and emotions could be expressed via the ancients. The *Birth of Venus* is a depiction of Venus just before being clothed by the goddess of Spring. Botticelli chooses this particular moment, where Venus is still naked and exposed to the spectators gaze. Anne Hollander stresses: 'Man's 'natural' state demands some sort of clothing, so that nudity is always an artificial, charged condition'⁴³. This idea that nudity is artificial is complemented by the former stating that mythological depictions created some freedom for the artist to paint nudity and sexually loaded paintings. According to Laura Mulvey, when a man depicts a woman, whether it be painting, making movies etc., the woman is objectified; men look at the images of women from a sexual, objectifying perspective: the male gaze⁴⁴. From this perspective, the depiction of Botticelli's naked Venus objectifies her for the visual pleasure of the audience: she is no longer the strong and independent goddess of love, but subject to the artist's expressions and the pleasure of the heterosexual male spectator. This phenomena is indicated by Mulvey as 'Scopophilia': 'pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight'.⁴⁵ This idea of sexual stimulation for the heterosexual male desires is strengthened by the symbolical meaning of the seashell. Depicting a naked woman on the symbol of female genitalia sends forth a strong sexually loaded message. This Venus of Botticelli, captured in shame, passivity and submissiveness contrasts with the active, self-controlled and self-determined portrayal of Venus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

⁴³ L. Silver, *Figure Nude, Historie e Poesie* "Jan Gossaert and the Renaissance Nude in the Netherlands" (Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 37, 1986). p. 1

⁴⁴ S. Gathercole, "'I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm': Art in the 1970s" from *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* by A. Jones (Oxford: Blackwell pub, 2006), p. 73

⁴⁵ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" from *Feminismus, Revised Edition: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, by R.R. Warhol and D. Price Herndl (Toronto: Rutgers University Press, 1997)

Cabanel and nineteenth- century art

This trend continues in the nineteenth century; Venus is depicted as a captured female, a prey for male arbitrariness⁴⁶. In the nineteenth century, mythological and other scenes from antiquity were still used to for the purpose of depicting nudity, for the satisfaction of heterosexual male appetites; the use of classical forms allowed risqué subjects to be treated in a ‘tasteful’ way⁴⁷. Their popularity can be indicated by the fact that in 1863 the French writer Théophile Gautier talked of a ‘Salon of Venus’ instead of ‘Salon Académie’.⁴⁸ As an Academic painter, Cabanel often painted female nudes under the pretence of mythology and antiquity. A few examples are *Nymph abducted by a Faun* (1861), *Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Condemned Prisoners* (1887), *The Nymph Echo* (1874), and the *Birth of Venus* (1863). The last mentioned work is of particular importance in this thesis because, in many respects, it represents the nineteenth-century view on the female nude in European painting.

To be able to argue whether Cabanel is representative for his age, and thus whether his *Birth of Venus* is representative of nineteenth-century art, we should take a look at the person Cabanel and his career. Alexandre Cabanel was born in the France village Montpellier in 1823, and died in 1889⁴⁹. Even though he died at the age of 66, he left a remarkably varied and extensive oeuvre. Cabanel was highly celebrated in his time and was noted for his refined technique⁵⁰. He was well educated by the historical painter François-Eduard Picot, at the École des Beaux arts⁵¹. But even though he was highly celebrated in his time, nowadays few people know about this artist. Arguably, his most famous work is the *Birth of Venus*. It was painted at the height of Cabanel’s celebrity, and is, to a certain extent, representative of nineteenth-century salon art in its depiction of female beauty and classical form.

⁴⁶ E.A.G. van der Meer, , *Venus is geen Vamp: het Vrouwbeeld in 35.000 jaar Venuskunst*, p. 21

⁴⁷ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty* (Montpellier: Musée Fabre, 2010), p. 13

⁴⁸ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, P. 13

⁴⁹ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p.113-115

⁵⁰ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 15

⁵¹ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 11

Alexandre Cabanel's *Birth of Venus*



The Birth of Venus, by Alexandre Cabanel 1863. Oil on canvas, 130x225 cm. Musée D'Orsay, Paris

In the *Birth of Venus*, the central figure stretches herself on a wave, with half-closed eyes, her hair wavering on the sea waves, and putti flying above her head. The goddess of love has just been born and will be washed ashore. The audience has a full view of her naked body while she turns her head away in a dramatic gesture. The use of soft and delicate colors creates an intimate image, and strengthens the innocent appearance look of Venus while also revealing her sensual presence.

In French nineteenth-century painting, female nudity was typically placed in the context of classical mythology in an attempt not to offend art audiences. In Cabanel's painting, the putti are the only reference to the mythological character of the painting. The art historian Robert Rosenblum notes: 'This [painting] makes Venus half an antique goddess and half a modern dream'.⁵² This quote is typical for depictions of the female nude in nineteenth-century art, where the challenge lay in appearing as a serious artist while still producing pleasing images for the heterosexual male spectator⁵³. Cabanel's *Nymph abducted by a Faun*, which depicted a naked nymph, can be seen as the foretaste of the *Birth of Venus*. The work was purchased by the Emperor Napoleon III, and its success encouraged Cabanel to paint his *Birth of Venus* with a nude woman as sole figure in the painting⁵⁴.

⁵² M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 13

⁵³ M. Hilaire, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 14

⁵⁴ S. Amic, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 60



Nymph Abducted by a Faun, by Alexandre Cabanel 1861, oil on canvas, 245x142 cm. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille

The resemblances between the two paintings are striking: the women have the same waving of hair, the same half-closed eyes, the blank and perfect body like a young girl. After the *Birth of Venus* Cabanel continued with painting nudes, with mythology as a justification. However, the erotic charge of his paintings did not go unnoticed, despite their allegorical references. Critics were not deceived by these references and publically discussed his paintings. Cabanel even had to apologize to his own family, who could not be soothed by the mythical pretext.⁵⁵ Even though the obvious eroticism of the painting, it did not cause such a scandal as Manet's *Olympia*: the fact that Venus in Cabanel's painting did not stare right at the audience as *Olympia*, and the fact that Venus was an idealized figure who seemed not made of flesh and blood, in contrast to Manet's *Olympia*, made the public opinion reacting mildly on the *Birth of Venus*, and rather harsh on *Olympia*⁵⁶.

The Venus in Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* is similar to Botticelli's painting in respect to scenery and use of colors. The main difference between the two paintings is that Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* has more references to the moment of Venus's birth; Cabanel's Venus could well be a young woman

⁵⁵ S. Amic, *Alexandre Cabanel: The tradition of Beauty*, p. 60

⁵⁶ Musée D'Orsay, accessed on December 2012: http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/the-birth-of-venus-7137.html?S=&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=2d4e4c9917&print=1&no_cache=1&

asleep⁵⁷. Furthermore, Cabanel's Venus is placed in an even more physically passive position, prostrate and maximally displayed for the visual pleasure of the spectator. Cabanel has painted her with her face turned away, with eyes half-closed, which enhances the figure's sexually loaded, albeit passive, look. Cabanel has painted a woman whose image is far removed from the active character of Ovid's Venus. Venus's pinkish nipples, abstract genitalia and softened complexion of the skin in this painting reveal a power structure in which the female figure is subordinated to the control of the male gaze.

As mentioned, Venus is fully displayed, but her genitalia are painted abstractly, which can be related to the ideas of the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey, women are the embodiment of castration: in contrast to men, women have no visually sexual organs. This embodiment of castration creates a threat for men: Women remind them of this unpleasure⁵⁸. Mulvey argues that women embody sexual difference because of their lack of a penis, which makes them a victim of the symbolic order in a male dominated society. The woman is subject to devaluation and objectification by men because of this sexual difference and because of their inherent reminder of castration, which makes them object of the heterosexual male gaze and erotic enjoyment⁵⁹. The way Cabanel has depicted Venus's genitalia suggests that she has no sexual organs, which is in accordance with the theory of Mulvey. Venus, as the embodiment of the perfect female and goddess of love, has no visual female sexual organs. She is displayed for the heterosexual male desire, but her female essence has been left out. This castration suggests a reason why male artists in art history objectify women by depicting them as passive images subject to the heterosexual male gaze: control.

Control seems to be an underlying motivation for artists to depict female nudes. For men, women are mysterious and inapprehensible creatures and there are two ways to remove this inconceivableness: By investigating them, and by demystifying the mysteries of the female sex⁶⁰. Investigation by painting to dissolve the woman's mysteries. As the artist searches for the essence of women, he is trying to depict her charms and the curves of her body. In the *Birth of Venus*, Cabanel seems to gain control by demystifying Venus. He has disarmed her by displaying her naked. Cabanel depicts his Venus passively and unclothed, and has abstracted her femininity and therefore devaluates the essence of women, or femaleness. He has created a sense of control by trying to uncover the female's mysteries and therefore by stripping her for some of her important weapons: self-consciousness, modesty and decency. Venus is meant to be the representation of the ultimate woman, but she is objectified by her nudity and subject to the desiring heterosexual male gaze. Cabanel seems to reach a certain understanding of women by investigating the ultimate Venus in his painting. At the

⁵⁷ S. Amic, *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty*, p. 60

⁵⁸ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 444

⁵⁹ L. Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 444

⁶⁰ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 444

same time, he disarms her and strips them from their female essences. Cabanel has not portrayed the ultimate woman in his *Birth of Venus* because she has lost most of her irresistible charms by portraying her fully disarmed and by castrating her female essence.

Another interesting point when it comes to the relation between depicting Venus and control is pointed out by Budd Boetricher: ‘What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspirers in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance’⁶¹. This quote refers to heroines in films, but could be extended to Venus in Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus*: In this painting, Venus represents the inspirer of love and erotic desire. Her role is restricted to inspire the audience by representing the idea of beauty. In herself, she has no other meaning than the embodiment of abstract forces. The hero, in this case, would be the male audience. This active and autonomous public can find inspiration and beauty in the passive representation of femaleness and embodiment of natural forces. Venus is depicted as a carrier of meaning, rather than a maker of meaning as the artist and the audience would be signified.

This heterosexual male gaze, and the male dominated power structure is challenged in contemporary art by female, feminist, artists. In the next chapter I will discuss to what extent the Venus myth is deconstructed by contemporary artist Cindy Sherman.

⁶¹ L. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema”, p. 442

Chapter 3

Cindy Sherman and Feminism

The complexity of twentieth-century art.

Contemporary art, in contrast to most other periods in time, has no clear framework and is hard to label. Part of the reason for this is the wide range of different media in which art has been produced since the end of the nineteenth century. Before twentieth-century modernism, a primary criterion by which art was judged was its capacity to embody beauty. 'The "purely" aesthetic; the pleasurable; the pretty; the well-designed; the elegant; the sublime; as antithesis to the conceptual, the analytic, the narrative, the didactic, the political, the abject; or as an absence of overt content in reaction to a perceived overly instrumentalized content'⁶². Contemporary art serves more goals than being beautiful, it has become a way to protest, to make a personal statement, to use ugliness for the purpose of countering art's association with ideals of the beautiful. According to Amelia Jones: 'Largely due to the vitality of the innovations of the visual art over the past 60 years, as well as the explosive growth of what Guy Debord in 1976 called the "Society of the spectacle", the visual arts are now arguably one of the most crucial areas of cultural practice in terms of understanding what and how people convey, contest, or otherwise negotiate aspects of contemporary life'.⁶³

A clear example of the idea behind this quote is the rise of feminist art in the 1970s and 1980s. As I shall show with regard to works by Cindy Sherman, much feminist art has tried to deconstruct the depiction of passive femininity in art as in the paintings of Botticelli and Cabanel. As an artist, and her own model, Sherman disguises and tests female stereotypes in art, including the pattern of looking established by the use of the Venus myth in visual art. Sherman's photography investigates different constructions of femininity in contemporary society. To do this, she uses all kinds of motifs, stereotypes, and symbols from art and popular culture. Importantly, she plays the role of different characters, questioning what is it to be looked at 'as a woman'. In other words, she takes up, plays with, ironizes, and undermines the pattern of looking established by treatments of the Venus myth in Western art. Many of her photographs test the Venus myth by explicitly considering the sexualized portrayal of women (e.g. *Sex Pictures* from 1992). For this reason, I have chosen Sherman's work as an example of the deconstruction of the image of Venus in contemporary art. Throughout this chapter, I will use the terms 'Venus' and 'Venus myth' to refer to passive, sexualized portrayals of woman in Western art. This chapter begins by contextualizing Sherman's photography in the development of art from the 1970s to the 1990s. I then move on to the emergence

⁶² M. Morgan, "Regarding Beauty" from *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), p. 164

⁶³ A. Jones, Introduction to *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), p. 3

of feminist art in the United States and consider how Sherman's photography develops the tradition of feminist art by deconstructing the passivity inherent in the Venus myth.

Art from the 1970s to the 90's

Cindy Sherman began her career as an artist in 1977. During this decade, art became increasingly engaged with political debate, creating more awareness of, and contributing to, social change in many countries. According to Sam Gathercole, American artist's 'positions became both entrenched and more difficult to sustain in the face of dramatic political events'⁶⁴, namely the Vietnam war and the Cold war. Gathercole examines ways in which artists challenged conventional opinions and social roles. As art became more politically engaged, small radical activist groups, 'groupuscules', were established in Europe and the United States. After decades of modernist formalism, many avant-garde artists felt freed from the idea that art was fundamentally autonomous and separate from political debate and societal matters⁶⁵. Alongside this growing awareness of the failure of modernist art, realist art saw a revival. According to Sam Gathercole, realist art became more popular, but not in the familiar forms. The interest in realist art grew along with the increasing interest in the political debate: '[realist art] essays to show power, to make power manifest as it is frequently encountered. [...] this is to show how it is, this is how power is configured in events and actions, and perhaps this is how it's abstractly structured in our society'⁶⁶.

What is important in this thesis with regard to the photograph art of Sherman, is the fact that many forms of media came to be recognized as 'art'. Not only the established forms, such as painting and sculptures, but also photography, performance art, body art, installation art, film, and books⁶⁷. These new media gave artists not only more opportunities, but also new challenges. Such new forms of art needed to attract a new public. In addition, the production and display of new art forms had to be redefined.⁶⁸

Increased political and social awareness visible in art production of the 1970s made it a fertile ground in which ideas about feminism could flourish. Critics and historians began to ask: Why are so few female artists represented and discussed in the canon of Western art? Linda Nochlin made a strong case that this was the result of key assumptions underlying the making of art-history: 'The white western male viewpoint, unconsciously adapted as the viewpoint of the art historian'⁶⁹. Nochlin argued

⁶⁴ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* from *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* by A. Jones (Oxford: Blackwell pub, 2006), p.61

⁶⁵ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p.61

⁶⁶ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p.62

⁶⁷ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s*, p.76

⁶⁸ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p.76

⁶⁹ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p.70

that 'the privileging of the white male was institutionalized and normalized to the point of being systematically accepted and overlooked'⁷⁰, not only in art, but in other fields, such as the academic world, as well. Linda Nochlin was not only the writer to be critical about the way in which women's contribution to art remained under examined. Griselda Pollock and Lucy Lippard have also made important contributions to this subject. According to Lippard, art world systems have failed to include women, she argues that 'there is a latent difference in sensibility, particular to women's art, and one that should be acknowledged and celebrated. If art comes from the inside, as it must, then the art of men and women must be different too'⁷¹. The consequence of this exclusion of women's thoughts and ideas would be that there is no representation of women's sensibility, but only the preferences of man. Meaning that women are not only excluded from visual culture but also 'the terms on which society was structured'⁷². Judy Chicago also claimed that women's art is in nature different from male's art. She argued that 'a women's artist is intent on arriving at an art that grown out of her experience'⁷³. According to Chicago, art, and thereby women's art, was able to go beyond the boundaries and limitations compelled by society.

From the 1970's onwards, feminist art has developed in different stages. In the 1970s, some artists made explicit references to biologically essentialist differences between men and women. Georgia O'Keeffe, Judy Chicago, Ana Mandieta and others, often used female genitalia and other body parts as a means of symbolizing female experience. According to feminist artists Martha Rosler, who refuted the idea of a natural female essence, the term 'female' is 'a social and political construction, and one that, because defined through patriarchal, masculine language, had to be rejected'⁷⁴. Accordingly, her aim is to change and influence society as a whole, and not only on the personal level⁷⁵.

As the feminist artist Mary Kelly points out, 'there is no preexisting sexuality, no essential femininity; and that to look at the processes of their construction is also to see the possibility of deconstructing the dominant forms of representing difference and justify subordination in our social order'⁷⁶. This idea underlines the argument of this thesis. Many feminist artists have sought to deconstruct the myth of women depicted in images as subjective and dependant of male constructions in and of society. According to the art critic Hal Foster, feminist art's project was to 'unveil visual desire's conventional captures (e.g. voyeurism, narcissism, scopophilia, fetishism), and, by doing so,

⁷⁰ S. Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p.70

⁷¹ . Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 71

⁷² . Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 71

⁷³ Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 73

⁷⁴ Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 73

⁷⁵ Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 75

⁷⁶ . Gathercole, *"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s* p. 79

to reflect back the (masculine) gaze to the point of self-consciousness'⁷⁷. This 'male gaze', implies, as Freud tells us, a system of control; looking is never indifferent but makes the subject's role, whose situation is coupled with sexuality, dependent on the viewer⁷⁸.

Some feminist artists, such as Vanessa Beecroft and Cindy Sherman, expose this role of the heterosexual male viewer. They position female subjects (in Cindy Sherman's art she positions herself), in a provoking way. Vanessa Beecroft argues that her art does not need to resist the male gaze, but rather that she makes the models in her art have power over the (male) viewers. The models walk in very revealing outfits, on very high heels. By confronting the public with these bodies, she addresses our society where the body is shaped by strict norms. The high heels are symbol of the suppression of women: 'the body as object of the gaze and the sexual politics that constructed it as such are entirely conflated. Beecroft underscores the essential sameness of her models' bodies even as she exposes them as culturally and psychically constructed phenomena'⁷⁹. Vanessa Beecroft's opinion is shared by photographer Cindy Sherman, who, being both the photographer as the subject of the image, also addresses the norms of female self-presentations and undermines the controlling power of the male gaze. As I shall argue in the following section, she assumes disguises and tests female stereotypes in art, including the pattern of looking established by the Venus myth.

Cindy Sherman and the deconstruction of the Venus Myth

Sherman has often been referred to as a feminist artist due to her denunciations on the female role in society. She photographs herself in different female personas – she is both the artists as the subject of the image– thereby, representing and exploring the 'construction of contemporary identity'⁸⁰. Using wigs, props, costumes, make-up and prosthetics, she disguises herself as various female characters, varying from film still actresses, historical figures, women from different social classes etc. Her photography addresses the different constructions of contemporary society and the role of women in this society. It has been argued that Sherman 'creates invented personas and tableaux that examine the construction of identity, the nature of representation, and the artifice of photography'⁸¹. The photographs project how it is to be a woman in a particular society and how women are represented in art. Countering the idea that woman are passive objects subject to a heterosexual male gaze, Sherman confronts the public with different female stereotypes in contemporary society. She confronts the audience with explicit reference to sexuality and the role of women in the pornography industry. For

⁷⁷ . Gathercole, "*"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s"* p.100

⁷⁸ Gathercole, "*"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s"* p.100

⁷⁹ . Gathercole, "*"I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm": Art in the 1970s"* p.100

⁸⁰ Explanation of Cindy Sherman's exhibition in MoMA, accessed on 15-12-2012,

<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1170>

⁸¹ Wall text from MoMA's Cindy Sherman exhibition, accessed on 14-12-2012, http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/4_sherman_walltext.pdf

example, in the series *Centerfolds*, a 12-color photographs series, ‘Sherman plays into the male conditioning of looking at photographs of exposed women, but she turns this on its head by taking on the roles of both (assumed) male photographer and female pinup’⁸².

Sherman addresses the constructions of femininity in contemporary society by different series about different types of women. In her first series, 69 (Untitled) Film Stills (1977–80), she enlarges the ‘masquerade of the female role in society’⁸³. In these photographs she poses as though the image is an actual film still. These poses are meant to reveal social expectations of how women should appear in contemporary Western society⁸⁴. Her historical portraits (1989–90), where she dresses up as historical figures depicted in old-masters paintings, denounces her complaint of the depiction of woman in art. She overturns the image of the subjective, passive woman by making her an active character, challenging the male gaze. Also her more recent work, where she represents herself as women of different classes, are a denunciation of the conventional image of woman in society, how women are supposed to behave and appear. A text accompanying the Cindy Sherman exhibition in MoMA stated: ‘Sherman’s interest in the construction of femininity and the mass circulation of images informs much of her work; the projects that take fashion as their subject illustrate the artist’s fascination with fashion images but also her critique of what they represent’⁸⁵. The photograph below, *Untitled #465*, is from the series *Society Portraits* (2008). This series portrays elderly, high-class women, who have to face the high standards of beauty in contemporary society. An indication that all women, from every social class, have to meet up standards set up for them by contemporary, male dominated society



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #465*, 2008; Chromogenic color print 63 3/4 x 57

1/4" (161.9 x 145.4 cm) Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

⁸² Press release for MoMA’s exhibition of Cindy Sherman, accessed December 2012, http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/4_sherman_walltext.pdf

⁸³ S. Gathercole, “‘I’m sort of sliding around in place...ummm’: Art in the 1970s” p.73

⁸⁴ Gathercole, “‘I’m sort of sliding around in place...ummm’: Art in the 1970s” from *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* by A. Jones (Oxford: Blackwell pub, 2006), p. 73

⁸⁵ Wall text of MoMA’s exhibition of Cindy Sherman, accessed December 2012, http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/4_sherman_walltext.pdf

As mentioned above Hal Foster's argument that feminist artists try to 'unveil visual desire's conventional captures, and, by doing so, to reflect back the (masculine) gaze to the point of self-consciousness'⁸⁶. Sherman's art seems to satisfy the voyeuristic traits present in most of us. She makes the public aware of their own act of 'looking' by giving them an insight into the conventional norms and demands of females in society and, importantly, by having her character return the viewer's gaze. This creates awareness and self-consciousness. The viewer is looking and (metaphorically) looked at .

Untitled #193, a deconstruction of the myth of Venus



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #19*, 1989; Chromogenic color print, 48 7/8 x 41 15/16" (124.1 x 106.5 cm); The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection

This picture from the series *History portraits* represents Cindy Sherman as an aristocratic woman, depicted in the traditional style of the old-masters. *Untitled #193* shows great similarity with François Boucher's paintings of Madame de Pompadour. Sherman uses the same scenery, position and appearance of the figure and use of colors as Boucher. The series is interesting for this thesis because in these photographs, Sherman investigates to what extent the role of the painter determines the image of woman in art. Being the 'painter' and also the model herself, the relationship between artist and model is faded, creating a new look on women depicted in art. The *History Portraits* are representations of paintings from different art-historical periods. By using existing paintings, Sherman

⁸⁶S. Gathercole, "'I'm sort of sliding around in place...ummm': Art in the 1970s" from *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* by A. Jones (Oxford: Blackwell pub, 2006), p.100

redirects the problem Mulvey has addressed: 'How to fight the unconscious structured like a language while still caught within the language of the patriarchy'⁸⁷. Sherman cannot make a completely new language while still caught in this patriarchal society, thus she uses the existing language to address its problems and errors. The images of the *History Portraits* series are very theatrical, since Sherman uses props and prostheses, thereby creating an artificial look. In the traditional canon of Western art, the 'old-masters' are men. Sherman does not address the question why the most famous painters are all men, but seems to add, via her *History Portraits* series a touch of femininity in the male dominated art-history, just as Griselda Pollock wants to add female painters in the Western art canon. The question therefore is: if Sherman structures photographs to look like the paintings of the old -masters, what does this imply for the way in which women are depicted in these images? In the series *History Portraits*, Sherman frequently depicts herself as a male, for the first time in her career. By portraying herself as women and men of paintings by the old -masters, the contrasts between them are immediately visible. According to film theorist Mulvey, traditionally males are equivalent to active, and women to passive: 'The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness'⁸⁸. This theory can be full applied to Sherman's *History Portraits*. The depicted women have no other occupation than showing themselves; they are beautiful, all dressed according to latest fashion in their days and stare passively at the audience. These matters are of no importance in the male paintings. The men wear clothes that magnify their importance, namely fur and large, wide robes. The men cannot be considered beautiful; Sherman has pronounced the uni-brows, messy hair and scruffy beards. Besides, all the men carry something in their hand, which creates the illusion that the men had other occupations but allowed the painter to paint them. Whereas the women in all paintings are depicted as if they had done much preparation work. The man makes things happen not to be shown in a exhibitionistic role as a woman⁸⁹. These differences enhance the idea that women and men depicted by a male painter are treated differently in the paintings, e.g. the active male versus the active female. Sherman points this out by representing paintings which depict both men and women. Sherman is a woman, depicting herself as a male who is portrayed by a male. This creates 'a sense of remove, pastiche, and criticality'⁹⁰, because she subjects existing portraits to her own critical interpretation. It is a 'remove' in the sense that Sherman removes herself from the male viewpoint in art, a parody because the props and make-up are very visible and create a comical enlargement of certain body parts.

⁸⁷ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 439

⁸⁸ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 442

⁸⁹ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema", p. 443

⁹⁰ Wall text from MoMA's exhibition, accessed on December 2012, http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/4_sherman_walltext.pdf

The photograph *Untitled #193* could be Cindy Sherman's answer to the male dominated perspective on the Venus myth in Western art. I have argued that Ovid represented Venus as an active character, with all her whims and woes, strengths and weaknesses. By contrast, Botticelli depicted her as a passive subject, prude and innocent, waiting to be visually consumed by a daunting, male dominated world. Alexandre Cabanel projected his Venus the same way as Botticelli; an innocent subjective woman, but with her entire body exposed for the visual pleasure of others. Crucially, Cabanel's Venus has her face turned away from the audience, giving the public a full view of her nakedness. My argument is that Sherman deconstructs the way Botticelli and Cabanel depict Venus. In *Untitled #193*, a dressed woman looks at the audience with a slightly arrogant, but determined look. She will not be looked upon, be made a subject to male gaze, as passive as the other Venuses. Her 'requirement' to live up to the demanding fashionable standards of her time are revealed as sacrifice: she wears a pearl necklace, a white wig, a dress, false breasts, all attributes of fashion. These 'props' reveal the figure to be all 'surface', a fantasy imagined by the artist to satisfy the pleasure of the heterosexual male onlooker. In this regard, Sherman turns the act of art production into an ironic commentary on identity production in society,

The woman in *Untitled #193* holds a mirror. The mirror, not only an attribute of vanity, is a symbol of reflection; a reflection of oneself and reflection on society. The photograph seems to show how both art (including art history) and society have imposed a role on women. Sherman uses the medium of photography, not to copy an existing painting, but to turn the reception of the image upside down. These factors change the impact of the image; they make it contemporary and the photograph is loaded with Sherman's ironic comments on the role that women have played as objects for the visual pleasure of other. Sherman takes a conventional image of a sexualized woman (an echo of the Venus myth) familiar from Western art history, and deconstructs the pattern of looking that underpins the power structure of its historical context.

Conclusion

Venus has been represented and transformed in many different ways in painting and literature over the ages. One of our main sources of ancient mythological narratives is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Roman writer has provided a framework from which many artists have derived mythological stories and figures. Over the ages, artists and writers have based their artworks in this framework, interpreting and transforming the narrative into a new image to be represented in their respective cultures. This 'reception' thus requires an active participation of the reader or viewer and is thus to be contrasted with 'tradition'. In this thesis, I have shown how three artists, Alessandro Botticelli, Alexandre Cabanel and Cindy Sherman, have transformed and interpreted one of the most important characters of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Venus. I argued that Venus, as the goddess of love, plays a prominent role in the *Metamorphoses*. She is a key-figure behind some alterations of others and is subject to transformations herself. Ovid's Venus is a multi-layered character in the book, she can be a dominant, manipulative, or weak, but also a sensitive character with divine powers. She makes decisions over herself and others, making her an active character.

The Renaissance artist Botticelli and the nineteenth-century, academic painter Alexandre Cabanel, can be regarded as representative painters of female women of their culture and epoch. Even though depicting female nudes was not very common in the Renaissance and the nineteenth century, both artists depicted an unclothed Venus. They used a mythological context in order to depict women in what would otherwise have been considered a risqué way. I have argued that in these works, Venus is no longer an active figure, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but a passive character. In Botticelli's painting, Venus stands in a chaste position, referring to the *Venus Pudica* of the Greek sculptor Praxiteles, and is surrounded by symbolic references to femininity. Similarly, Cabanel employs references to the mythological narrative of the birth of Venus (principally the putti in the sky and the wave on which the woman lies), but the body of the central figure is maximally exposed to the gaze of onlookers.

In contemporary art, feminist artists have tried to deconstruct this Venus myth and, importantly, the power structures that underpin sexualized depictions of Venus. I have focused on the way in which contemporary feminist artist, Cindy Sherman, has overturned the patterns of looking in portrayals of female beauty implicit in reworkings of the Venus myth. As artist and model, she depicts herself in different costumes, wearing wigs, make-up and uses other props to represent women of different social classes of society, as historical figures, as film-noir characters etc., to discuss the role of women in society. To illustrate my argument, I discussed her series *History Portraits*, in which Sherman confronts the public with their own staring since the depicted figures stare back. Sherman addresses the role of women in art history and the way they are depicted in contrast to male depictions in art history. For the first time, Sherman portrays herself as men as well, which highlights the contrast

between ways in which women and men have been portrayed in history (men as 'makers' and women as 'models'). This contrast of in the portraits is strengthened by Sherman's own role as an artists. As a female artist who bases her photographs of women on paintings made by men, she actively changes the context of their reception. Sherman deconstructs the male gaze focused Venus myth by changing established patterns of looking. All these representations of Venus in art history, show the many faces of Venus and how she has metamorphosed over time.

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