

# XI WHERE DOES THE VENUS COME FROM?

Silberkuppe at Wiansowski and Harbord

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Kaucyila Brooke  
Dr. Julia Savage presents:  
'Where Does the Venus Come From?' 2009



Hello, I am Dr. Julia Savage and welcome to my world.

## LECTURE NOTES

Today I want to entertain some questions about the origin of the prehistoric figurine that is known – both commonly and by the state institution that keeps it within its collection – as the ‘Venus von Willendorf’. You know, it is really quite extraordinary that so many artistic theories, scientific truths, devotion and cultural art objects have been inspired by this one ancient object. I think it is useful for further thinking about where we are today to consider why this particular figurine has achieved a status and become a focus in our collective memory and others have not. The object has been called: *The Venus of Willendorf*, *The Woman of Willendorf*, *The Goddess of Willendorf*, *The Great Mother of Willendorf* and of course, at the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna where it is housed amongst what was formerly the Hapsburg collection, it is called *The Venus of Willendorf*. It is almost as if ‘she’ hails from the royal family of Willendorf on the Danube. One can always dig up these royal roots when passing through the Holy Roman empires of the past – it just takes a bit of spit and muscle to unearth these lines of power throughout the geological layers of central Europe.

Like many college students I first learned of the *Venus of Willendorf* while taking an art-historical survey class. She was said to be one of earliest known art objects along with the cave paintings of Lascaux in France. I really had no idea why she was called that, but then again what did I know about the history of the world? Even though as a budding young feminist I was already beginning to realize that there were gender biases in both the decision about what was talked about and how meaning was assigned. I was just trying to remember all the information that I was expected to learn. Because of the unanimated lecturing style of my art history professor, it is clear that after passing the slide test, I would have forgotten what I learned about the ‘Venus’ except for the fact that my roommate was fascinated by this tiny art object and was making feminist art inspired by its luscious body. There were big and small Venuses piling up around the apartment and they were made out of everything she could think of. There were Venus pillows, next to her cunt pillows, and Venus paper cut-outs hanging in the windows. The small figurine has inspired many contemporary artists to adopt her as an icon for use in their creation of personal and political pantheons. Although I am certain that many of you here today can cite examples of other works by artists that you have know. For example, a 1984 performance piece by Los Angeles artist Cheri Gaulke entitled *Revelations of the Flesh* and also from the mid ‘80’s a large hand-coloured black and white photograph by Mitchell Syrop entitled *Demenstruation* and alternately called *fountain*.

Our journey today begins at Naturhistorisches Museum Vienna where the Venus is kept and – since last summer – where the Venus has been lauded and celebrated and where she once again travelled out from the museum – this time by helicopter to the discovery site in Willendorf where she attended a ceremonial affair to commemorate the centennial of her unearthing at an archaeological dig. But wait, we are getting ahead of our story a little bit. Following the 1850 “Es ist Mein Wille” decree by Franz Joseph I, the 13th-century city walls were destroyed and Ringstrasse constructed – in order to modernize Vienna, control the movement of the angry mob who had rioted in the 1848 Revolution, and show the grandeur of the Austro-Hungarian Empire through the classical Renaissance design of the state architecture placed around the Ring. Among the building works were the twin museums – the Kunsthistorisches Museum on the right and on the left the Naturhistorisches Museum – both built for the royal collection.

As you will recall, from my days in college I had a strong curiosity about and awareness of the importance of the Venus, and on my first visit to Vienna, I was thrilled to be able to acquaint myself with her in person – so to speak. Upon entering the

Museum, I was seduced and entranced by the patterned floors, the decorated ceilings and ship models sailing overhead, and as I ascended the first tier of the grand entrance staircase I came upon two very excited young women. I wondered what had captured their curiosity... I entered the upper floors, and again following the repeated tile patterns on the floor and the illuminated vitrines of dinosaur remains – reconstructed – I found myself wandering through the shadow lands of prehistory. But what actually is prehistory? The term itself was first used in French in the 1830s to describe the time before writing, and the word ‘prehistoric’ was introduced into English by Daniel Wilson in 1851. What we think we ‘know’ about these time periods is actually informed by the various fields of the natural and social sciences. I arrived at the room that I was seeking. Room 11 – the Stone Age, and there, surrounded by prehistoric finds from Central Europe – was a modern vitrine that displayed – I learned later – a copy of the figurine that I sought. By now I was beginning to recognize that the Venus is not only an object but a site for contemplation even for contemporary women. Not wishing to disturb her moment in front of the vitrine, I waited until there was the space to approach. Here in this slide you can see how she was displayed when I saw her in 1998 on my first visit to Vienna, displayed in a simple modernist vitrine, positioned on top of an abstract depiction of geological layers. Her feet were supported by a small rod to enable her to stand erect on the top of the mountainous layers of time, and the four-sided glass vitrine allowed the visitor to circumnavigate and see the figure from all sides. Even though the Venus was totally exposed behind the didactic display of the Venus vitrine, transparencies showed photos of the figure from every side and emphasized the anthropometrical identification methods of the nineteenth century (popularized by the French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon in the late 1800s) and further diagrams of the figures schematized their geometry and compared their breasts, bellies and buttocks proportionally. More about that later, but more importantly for my questions about the origins of the Venus, there was a photograph and information about the discovery site in Willendorf. Willendorf is located on the Danube in a now famous Austrian wine-growing region known as the Wachau. A friend suggested that a trip to Willendorf was not so difficult to manage from Vienna.

The route was well marked, and when I arrived in Willendorf, information about the discovery of the object and the site of its discovery was impossible to miss. And following on from my experience at the museum, I came across a group of women who were also seeking it.

The figure was found in 1908 by the archaeologist Josef Szombathy (at the time director of the Anthropology Department of the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna), in an Aurignacian loess deposit in a terrace about 30 metres above the River Danube at an archaeological dig on the site of a new railroad bed that was being constructed. Even the event of her discovery is clouded with mystery and professional jealousies. In one account it was found by the worker Johann Veran, who laid it in a group of objects found at the same time. Dr. Szombathy later recognized it as something important. In 1925 Hugo Obermaier wrote to his friend Menghin, head of the Institute of Prehistory and Early History at Vienna University, that no one had been present when the statue had actually been found. Shortly afterwards Josef Bayer identified the correct geological level, something Szombathy got wrong initially.

[Break here to discuss methodology: In keeping with their idealist materialism, archaeologists have largely filtered out the context of discovery, relegating the topic to the history of archaeology as a curious but inconsequential sideshow. Important for our discussion – shows the shifting information/knowledge used to construct the figure’s place in history]

[...]

Here at the discovery site of the Venus they display a cut-away of the earth showing the level at which she was found. It is carved from oolitic limestone that is not local to the area, and tinted with red ochre. When first discovered the *Venus of Willendorf* was thought to date to approximately 15,000-10,000 BCE. In the 1970s this was revised to 25,000-20,000 BCE. In the 1980s it was revised again to c. 30,000-25,000 BCE. In 1990 a new analysis of the stratigraphic sequence revised the date to 24,000-22,000 BCE. In 2007 reflected-light microscopy set the current date at 25,000 years ago.

But apart from all the scientific issues of accuracy and method I noticed that the women making the pilgrimage to the discovery site of the Venus performed an explicit, sexualized act with the enlarged monument to the small figurine that exists there. Given the time of year and the presence of the small flower offering at the base of the statue, I wondered if the act was a seasonal ritual. In my curiosity to discover if there were other occurrences of social rituals at other times of the year I visited Willendorf during the late autumn several years later. And then I observed seasonal food celebrations, a savings club, a museum, a monument to the Venus erected to commemorate the 80th year of her discovery, as well as symbols of the spring, several restaurants, a Venus altar and finally the Venus bench where one could rest after participating in all the activities that were available. All the signs of a Venus cult of sorts seemed to be there in Willendorf – rituals, ceremonies, shrines...

Heading back to the Naturhistorisches Museum, I discovered that in 2002 the figurine had been reinstalled in a kind of Venus temple – and again on a later visit more signs of the primitive and the classical had begun to cloud the issue of her origin even more. Upon entering the ‘temple’ or museum installation that holds the Venus, I learned that the object I had observed in my first visit had been a replica and that due to the museum’s increased security and the security of the new vitrine, I was now going to see the original – the authentic figure from Willendorf – this was not a key chain or a plaster cast made for the purpose of preservation. However there were reproductions of other Venus figurines displayed in the cases along the walls of the Venus temple for the purpose of establishing an historical context for the Austrian treasure. Strangely enough, her position in this new installation is no longer erect, she is now supine, and although one is no longer able to walk completely around the body, the reflections in the glass of the vitrine permit the doubling effect that still allows for the identificatory views of her body.

I decided to liberate the figurine from her temple – to take her on a kind of journey of self-discovery – to give her a chance to discover something about what has been said about her over the past 100 years since her discovery. We began with the room in which her vitrine stands:

*active male*  
*sedentary female*  
*cooking female*  
*scale of the figures in the model*  
*security guard at entrance*  
*lighted sign on the street at night –*  
*Zeigen Sie Uns! or Show Us!!!*

As my German is almost non-existent and I am not at all sure of her language – as I pointed out before, prehistoric also means pre-linguistic or before written language has been documented – I was not sure if this sign would give us a clue or direction. We waited until the next morning to see if it was only a vision in the night or if the instruction remained...

*Venus next to clocks*  
*chocolate Venuses of Willendorf*  
*bread in the shape of the Venus*  
*Venus soap*  
*Venus pinup in Marilyn Monroe dress*

*Attempts at a possible interpretation:*  
*Fertility symbol? Image of Palaeolithic women? Pinup? In honour of women? Domestication of women? Puppet? Familiar spirit? Tribal mother? Mistress of the animals? Goddess? Strong women? Tool? Portrait? Self-portrait?*

As many who have searched for the origin of identity have done before, I decided to start at the library. Why not go to Los Angeles and the library at CalArts? We crossed the ocean. We arrived in February of 2007 during WACK – the international, encyclopaedic feminist museum art show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles – and coincidentally the students at CalArts, as in many satellite shows in Los Angeles at the time, had installed their own feminist show throughout the school with an intergenerational symposium of artists brought together to discuss the current state of affairs in feminist art. But we were on a mission. We went right to the library to find out what we could.

*Janson's History of Art*  
*1969 – first edition*  
*1991 – fourth edition*  
*2002 – sixth edition*

The first prehistoric female figurine was found by the Marquis de Vibraye and called *La Vénus impudique* or *the immodest Venus*. The Marquis, of course, was playfully reversing the appellation of ‘Venus pudica’ or ‘modest Venus’ that is used to describe the Classical Venus, which shows, as in the Capitoline Venus for example, the goddess attempting to conceal her breasts and pubic area from view. The inference the Marquis makes is that this prehistoric Venus makes no attempt to hide her sexuality.

Hundreds of these figurines have been found across the Eurasian continent from France to Siberia and have been dated to around 25,000 B.C.E. Generally the Venus figurines are thought to be small stone sculptures of nude women with pronounced sexual characteristics who are either voluptuous or pregnant with no face, arms, or legs...

The most common feature to be singled out is the breasts, described as ‘large’, ‘generous’, or ‘pendulous’. All but one of the texts characterize the figurines as having exaggerated sexual characteristics. The figurines themselves only have their gender in common. They are diverse in shape, in pose. Yet the textbooks tend to represent the figurines as all the same, and then to leap from this purported sameness to a supposed common function for all figurines over their 3000-mile and perhaps 10,000-year spread.

*Venus of Laussel*  
*Venus of Lespugue*  
*Dancing Venus of the Galgenberg*  
*Venus of Brassempouy*

The earliest theories about the figurines were developed by the male excavators and scholars of the late 19th century. It is perhaps understandable that these nude female representations had such an impact on the developing scientific community of the prudish Victorian age. Theories regarding their racial origin, use as erotic objects, or as expressions of fertility and reproduction, were some of the first presented.



The voluptuous body shape depicted in the first few figurines that were found led scholars to the initial interpretation that they represented an African influence... nineteenth-century science was preoccupied with identifying the race represented; and then there was the steatopygous fascination of Sartje Baartman, also referred to as a *Venus*, or the *Hottentot Venus*, who was exhibited as a living ethnographic curiosity to connoisseurs in Paris early in the nineteenth century.

We crossed the ocean once again to look at European collections both classical and modern in the hope that through comparison we might find a continuum in which the Venus of Willendorf might find her place.

*Glypotek, Copenhagen – prehistoric figurines, Etruscan figures, figures of reddish colour in glass cases, classical sculptures on pedestals, comparison with scale of male genitals on sculptures*

*Louisiana Museum of Modern Art – sculpture park, Henry Moore, reclining figures, Giacometti*

We travelled throughout Europe and the Western United States looking at a listening station in Austria, red rock landscapes, Utah, Arches National Park, Monument Valley, Zion National Park... Finally in the California desert we came upon the Integratron.

The Integratron is a dome-shaped structure constructed out of plywood and fibreglass by George Van Tassel. He built the structure in Landers, California, as a "rejuvenation machine", supposedly following instructions provided by visitors from the planet Venus. Tassel claimed that he had been contacted both telepathically and later in person by Venusians, who gave him a technique to rejuvenate human cell tissues. Van Tassel, acting on these instructions, began constructing the Integratron in 1954. Construction costs were paid by a series of successful annual UFO conventions, the Giant Rock Spacecraft Conventions, which continued for nearly 25 years. Construction of the Integratron was supposedly complete in 1959, but Van Tassel continued to make minor modifications until his sudden death in 1978.

The workings of the Integratron, according to Van Tassel, rely chiefly on two principles. The first principle involves the occult sacred geometry of domes, and their ability to concentrate mystical 'energies' within the earth. The Integratron is also said to be constructed atop a powerful 'energy vortex'. According to adherents of this belief, the dome shape naturally concentrates the energies of the vortex for the benefit of users. The second part of the theory centres around the belief that human beings are truly electrical in nature. It is believed that the multiple wavelengths of energy put out by "focusing and concentrating devices" such as the Integratron will find a 'resonance' with the individual's basic harmonic frequency and 'recharge' his cellular structure, as if he were a battery.

It was here at the centre of the Integratron's vortex that I lost track of the *Venus of Willendorf*. I will continue my search for the meaning and the origin of the Venus, and I hope you too will help to further the research and procure the resources necessary to explicate this important cultural icon.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.