



Fig. 1. Anonymous, Standing Female Figures, 1200–900 BCE, incised and painted terracotta, variable dimensions, 8–17 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *Venus Arising from the Sea*, 1875–99, earthenware, 21.9 x 13.8 x 24.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Anonymous, *Virgin and Child*, 16th c., boxwood, 8.4 x 3.3 x 2.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 4. Jacques Lipchitz, *The Rape of Europa*, 1938, bronze, 38.6 x 52.8 x 33 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 5. Joe Talirunili, *Untitled (Migration)*, 1964, steatite, sealskin, bone, synthetic sinew, red paint, 33 x 19.7 x 30 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Among the Flesh: Sculptural Representations of Motherhood, Motherland and Everything in Between

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As one of the most explored themes in art, motherhood has expanded in meaning to encompass more than the connection between mother and child. This essay will examine notions of sexuality, conception, motherhood and motherland in a selection of sculptures from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' permanent collection, including seven pre-Columbian standing female figurines uncovered in Mexico (1200–400 BCE) (fig. 1), *Venus Arising From the Sea* (1975–89) (fig. 2), *Virgin and Child* (16th c.) (fig. 3), Jacques Lipchitz's (1891–1973) *The Rape of Europa* (1938) (fig. 4) and Joe Talirunili's (1893–1976) *Untitled (Migration)* (1964) (fig. 5). While these artworks vary across mediums and time periods, there is significant value in discussing them together under the critical contexts of female bodies and sexuality. I will also discuss how many of these themes fit into broader themes of mythology, religion and family history. Moreover, many of these works draw connection to notions of nation and land, testament to how considerations of conception might expand to encompass both body and territory. This inquiry will emphasize the sculptural medium behind each work in order to explore the ways in which sculptures may be conceived, used, disseminated and experienced.

The seven pre-Columbian sculptures belong to the Montreal Museum of Fine Art's collection of forty-seven standing female figures dating to the Middle Preclassic period (1200–400 BCE), discovered at Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico and at Las Bocas in the Mexican state of Puebla.¹

Each work is unique in shape, form, stance and expression, although little is known about their meaning and function. The documentation in the Museum's archive problematically describes these figures as "pretty ladies," pointing out their bare breasts and shapely hips and asserting that they embody "the ideal concept of womanliness."²



Fig. 1. Anonymous, Standing Female Figures, 1200–900 BCE, incised and painted terracotta, variable dimensions, 8–17 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This is not the first instance of fertility-based assumptions: Palaeolithic sculptures of nude women, such as the infamous *Venus of Willendorf* (28,000–25,000 BCE) (fig. 6), are called “Venus” statues and are commonly believed to have served the sole function of glorifying fertility.³



Fig. 6. Anonymous, *Venus of Willendorf*, 28,000–25,000 BCE, limestone, 11.1 cm (h.), Naturhistorisches Museum. © MatthiasKabel / Wikimedia Commons. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Willendorf.

These readings have been criticized for assuming a male-centric view that sexualizes representations of women based on little scholarly evidence instead of considering other possible functions, such as self-portraiture, anatomical education or artistic experimentation.⁴ The bodily features of the pre-Columbian statues vary drastically, encompassing round hips, thick thighs, broad shoulders, small waists and broad arms. Who is to say these are representations of women at all? These diverse traits are more suggestive of gender ambiguity than traditional representations of female bodies, unsettling many of the Museum's claims and further adding to the sculptures' mystery.

One of the most fascinating characteristics of these figures is their size. Ranging from eight to seventeen centimetres in height, their small size would have allowed them to fit into the palm of one's hand, thereby easing their production and dissemination. These sculptures are rendered in

terracotta, a medium that gains expressivity through manual manipulation. Raw clay is first worked and warmed between the artist's fingers. Once the sculpture has been made, it is baked until hardened in a kiln or oven. These figurines, in all their anthropomorphic splendour, embody traces of the individual who created them, even evoking a sensual connection between creator and object. Moreover, each of the sculpted figures' disproportionally small feet make it impossible for them to stand upright without a supportive apparatus. This suggests that the figurines likely would have lain on their backs, and that they were easily circulated, everyday objects. As such, these sculptures have the potential to reveal knowledge about the everyday rituals of their users and about the culture in which they were made, although further research is required. Nonetheless, through formal analysis alone, we can discover alternative meanings to those offered by museums and collectors. These sculptures, I argue, are intimate investigations of the human body rather than fertility or deliberately sexualized objects.

On the other hand, the sexual connotations of the ceramic sculpture *Venus Arising From the Sea* are clear based on the long tradition of depictions of the Roman goddess Venus in Western art.



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *Venus Arising from the Sea*, 1875–99, earthenware, 21.9 x 13.8 x 24.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

According to Roman mythology, Venus was the goddess of love, beauty and fertility, and even in some instances motherhood and fertility, the Roman counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite.⁵ She has inspired countless artworks over the centuries, perhaps most famously *The Birth of Venus* (1484–86) (fig. 7) by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510).

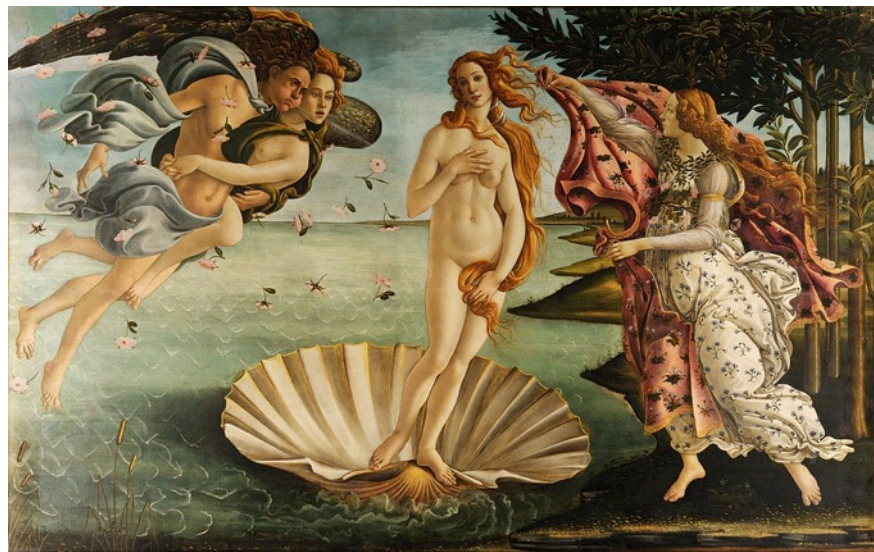


Fig. 7. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484–86, tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus.

Both in this painting and in *Venus Arising from the Sea*, Venus emerges from a seashell, alluding to the myth that she was born of sea foam.⁶ The latter work presents a bare-breasted woman opening her arms to the viewer in a maternal and welcoming manner. However, the draped wet cloth circling her nude body emphasizes her sexual allure.

Apart from her traditional associations with sexuality, Venus also holds an interesting tie to Rome as the mother of Roman civilization. Her son, Aeneas, supposedly founded Rome after

surviving the fall of Troy. In later years Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), dictator of the Roman Republic from 49 to 44 BCE,⁷ claimed Venus as his ancestor, erecting temples and celebratory festivals in her honour.⁸ As a result, the goddess came to embody Rome's imperial power, and her matronly attributes were regularly idolized by its female citizens.⁹ Signifying both motherhood and the Roman Republic, the figure of Venus implied that women could fulfill their roles as citizens by populating the nation. Moreover, as a maternal figure, Venus represents the birth of the Roman Republic, and is thus associated with notions of patriotism and motherland.

The most popular maternal figure in Western art is the Virgin Mary, who is portrayed in the sixteenth-century boxwood sculpture *Virgin and Child*.



Fig. 3. Anonymous, *Virgin and Child*, 16th c., boxwood, 8.4 x 3.3 x 2.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Mary's identity is inextricably linked to her role as a mother, having birthed the son of God and Christianity more broadly. In this sculpture, the Virgin holds baby Jesus in her left arm, while her right arm is delicately outstretched, perhaps either as a protective measure or as a maternal gesture. The baby looks warmly at his mother while holding a bushel of pomegranates, a classic Christian symbol representing eternal life and Christ's resurrection. Although both *Venus Arising from the Sea* and *Virgin and Child* portray maternal figures, the former is defined by her abundance of sexuality while the latter her negation of any.

Similar to the myth of Venus as the mother of the Roman Republic, Lipchitz's sculpture *The Rape of Europa* is based on a myth about the birth of Europe.



Fig. 4. Jacques Lipchitz, *The Rape of Europa*, 1938, bronze, 38.6 x 52.8 x 33 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Although its details vary, the myth generally describes how Zeus fell in love with Europa, taking on the form of a bull in order to seduce her before carrying her across the ocean to the ancient

island of Crete where they engaged in sexual intercourse.¹⁰ Europa then became queen of the first European civilization.

Although many would agree this myth problematically glorifies rape, its variations are so extensive that it has become more often associated with the birth of gods and nations. Indeed, the myth bears similarities to the story of the ancient Egyptian King Osis and his wife Isis, who gave birth to Horus, the ancient Egyptians' national patron god, and even resembles the narrative of Mary and Joseph and the conception of Christ, which signified the dawn of Christianity.¹¹ In these examples, the outcome of a sexual act is no less than the birth of a new civilization.¹²

Lipchitz's sculpture infuses the classical myth of Europa with the personal and the political. The Lithuanian-born American sculptor relates the violent and territorial elements of the myth to the Holocaust, which forced the artist to flee Europe during the Second World War.¹³ In many of Lipchitz's past sculptural renditions of Europa stabbing the bull with a dagger, Europa symbolizes Europe, while the bull represents Adolf Hitler (1889–1945).¹⁴ This version of the myth emphasizes destruction and territorial conquest rather than conception. The sculpture in question is quite abstract with little decipherable narrative, though it retains a sense of struggle and unrest that reflects the tense political atmosphere of the time. The daunting black bronze tint adds to the sculpture's dark, expressionist character. Yet true to the original myth, Lipchitz's work also evokes tender and erotic love, as the fluid, organic shapes blur the boundaries between beast and body. In its many variations, Lipchitz's *The Rape of Europa* visually manifests the intersection between sexuality and territory, both capable of encompassing aggression and creation. The incorporation of Lipchitz's sculpture with the other sculptures I have discussed is

such that notions of conceptions might be abstracted to include country and nationhood. As such, we might think of land as something that sustains communities and families, similar to a nurturing mother.

The significance of a motherland, a place that nurtures and sustains communities, is explored in Talirunili's mixed-media sculpture *Untitled (Migration)*.



Fig. 5. Joe Talirunili, *Untitled (Migration)*, 1964, steatite, sealskin, bone, synthetic sinew, red paint, 33 x 19.7 x 30 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This work references the incredible tale of a treacherous twelve-week voyage across Arctic terrain to the Ottawa Islands at the eastern edge of Canada's Hudson Bay.¹⁵ Among the forty migrants were the artist's grandparents and father, travelling by dogsled and battling the Arctic's formidable conditions in order to reach the annual festivities where the area's fur trading resources were located.¹⁶ This journey was extremely dangerous, resulting in many deaths and

near-starvation. When it seemed like all was lost for the weary Inuit travellers, the artist's grandmother encouraged the group to build an *umiak*—a traditional family or women's boat—in order to reach a nearby island.¹⁷ Mustering up the last of their materials and strength, the group only barely made it to their destination after firing sacrificial gunshots in the direction of the island as a final spiritual plea.¹⁸ Following in the storytelling tradition of the Purvirnituq, Talirunili has created a sculpture that immortalizes the legend behind his family's legacy. The artist captures not only the climate of fear and hope on the travellers' facial expressions, but also the strength of community in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

Untitled (Migration) evokes layers of personal and family history. Just as the artist's grandmother relied on ancestral knowledge to build an *umiak*, Talirunili has delved into his family's history to produce this work. This parallel is made evident by the fact that the sculpture contains the materials used to construct an *umiak*, including seal skin, wood and bone. *Untitled (Migration)* is one of many works in the artist's sculptural series investigating themes of migration and cultural heritage, although this piece uniquely pays tribute to the travellers of this journey by featuring their incised names on the bottom of the boat.

Talirunili's sculpture reveals his family's dramatic struggle for survival in their Arctic motherland. While the Arctic landscape is the foundation of Inuit culture, its tough climate also tests the survival skills of its inhabitants. The narrative on which this sculpture is based also emphasizes the role of the artist's grandmother, who, in devising a plan of refuge, carried her fellow travellers to safety and to new land. As such, *Untitled (Migration)* focuses on a maternal figure who sustains and protects her community.

As a final note, it is important to consider the sculptural mediums represented in the selection of artworks discussed in this essay, specifically the ways in which they are used, displayed and experienced. While the pre-Columbian figures and *Virgin and Child* are small and portable and therefore capable of being easily disseminated, *Venus Arising from the Sea*, *The Rape of Europa* and *Untitled (Migration)* are more cumbersome because of their size, heavier materials and/or sculpted pedestal. These latter works are static and meant to be viewed at a distance, more monumental than transportable. Moreover, while some of the sculptures discussed retain the traces of their makers' hands, others were carved with a tool. I highlight these sculptural traits to emphasize that these artworks, in all their apparent diversity, were constructed by a body and rely on a viewing body to give them meaning. They are meant to be experienced, touched, used and felt, making our discussion of the body, sexuality, motherhood and motherland all the more pertinent. Furthermore, many of these works have surpassed their period of conception, proving that, much like the stories they tell, they have been carefully preserved from generation to generation.

NOTES

¹ "Gerald Benjamin's World of 'Pretty Ladies'," *La revue du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal* (2008): 12–13.

² Ibid.

³ Petra Molnar, "The Venus: Mother or Woman?" *Journal of the University of Manitoba Anthropology Students' Association* 29 (2011): 1, <http://umanitoba.ca/publications/openjournal/index.php/mb-anthro/article/viewFile/32/34>.

⁴ Ibid; Sarah M. Nelson, "Diversity of the Upper Palaeolithic 'Venus' Figurines and Archeological Mythology," *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 2, no. 1 (January 1990): 11–22, <http://genealogyreligion.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/paper.pdf>.

⁵ *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, "Venus," accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.ancient.eu/venus/>; Irene Earls, "Venus," in *Renaissance Art: A Topical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 296.

- ⁶ “Venus,” Crystalinks: Metaphysics and Science Website, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.crystalinks.com/venusrome.html>.
- ⁷ Steven Fife, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, “Caesar as Dictator: His Impact on the City of Rome,” accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.ancient.eu/article/112/>.
- ⁸ “Venus.”
- ⁹ “Roman Venus,” The J. Paul Getty Museum, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/aphrodite/venus.html>.
- ¹⁰ “Europa and the Bull - The Mystery of Europe,” Peter Dawkins, accessed November 20, 2015, http://www.peterdawkins.com/articles/pd_europa_and_the_bull.htm.
- ¹¹ “Europa and the Bull - The Mystery of Europe.”
- ¹² “Europa,” Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, accessed November 20, 2015, http://www.gardnermuseum.org/collection/artwork/3rd_floor/titian_room/europa.
- ¹³ Alan G. Wilkinson, *Jacques Lipchitz, A Life in Sculpture* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989).
- ¹⁴ Nicole Barbier, *Lipchitz: Oeuvres de Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973)* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, 1978).
- ¹⁵ “Joe Talirunili: Migrations and Movements,” Art Gallery of Ontario, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.ago.net/joe-talirunili-migrations-and-movements>.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ “Joe Talirunili, The Approach to the Ottawa Islands,” CCCA, http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=49312&title=The+Approach+to+the+Ottawa+Islands&artist=Joe+Talirunili&link_id=2014.

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