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MNEMOSYNE

Antonio Canova and the Whatever Body

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This article looks at the persistence of classicizing art in postmodern imagery. Specifically, I posit the art of Antonio Canova as a precursor to contemporary fashion advertising, arguing against the notion that his oeuvre is wholly irrelevant to contemporary culture. I focus on a selection of paintings by Canova, works that, having received scant attention from scholars, are obscure in relation to the artist's corpus of sculpture. At first glance, these paintings are little more than odd pastiches of 16th century old master works, only with figures marked by a highly refined and conspicuously modern appropriation of ideal beauty. Rather than marginal curiosities or footnotes to his figures in marble, these paintings will be discussed for their distinctive treatment of the female form. I frame the artist as a transitional figure, one whose overturning of moralizing deployments of ideal beauty initiated a new corporeal type that endures in the figure of the fashion model. Returning Canova to the central position he once occupied in the nineteenth century, I incorporate the work of Giorgio Agamben, John Berger and Frederic Jameson. Like Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, my argument is largely founded on the eloquence of the images themselves.

In their 2012 exhibition 'Why goddesses are so beautiful: love and beauty in antiquity' the Het Valkhof Museum in Nijmegen, Netherlands included a series of images by contemporary Italian artist Anna 'Utopia' Giordano. Entitled *Venus vs. Venus*, the series intended to illustrate the apparent disjuncture between the naked female form in classicizing art—that is, art that in some way conforms to a norm of beauty rooted in Hellenic sculpture—and the body of the archetypal twenty-first-century fashion model (**Fig. 1**). Photographic reproductions of ten pre-1900 paintings were placed side by side next to digitally manipulated versions of the same work. Each pair consisted of an 'original' contrasted against an adaptation, in which the body of the goddess-protagonist had been edited to conjure a thinner, present-day ideal. The paintings chosen ranged from instantly recognizable, including Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, to a largely unknown work, *The Bower of Venus* by Richard Westall, a forgotten British artist of the early nineteenth century. Completing the cycle were Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, saccharine reveries by *fin de siècle* classicists William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Alexandre Cabanel, *Venus Anadymene* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Diego Velasquez's *Venus and Cupid* (the Rokeby Venus), Artemisia Gentilischi's *Sleeping Venus* and a standing version of the

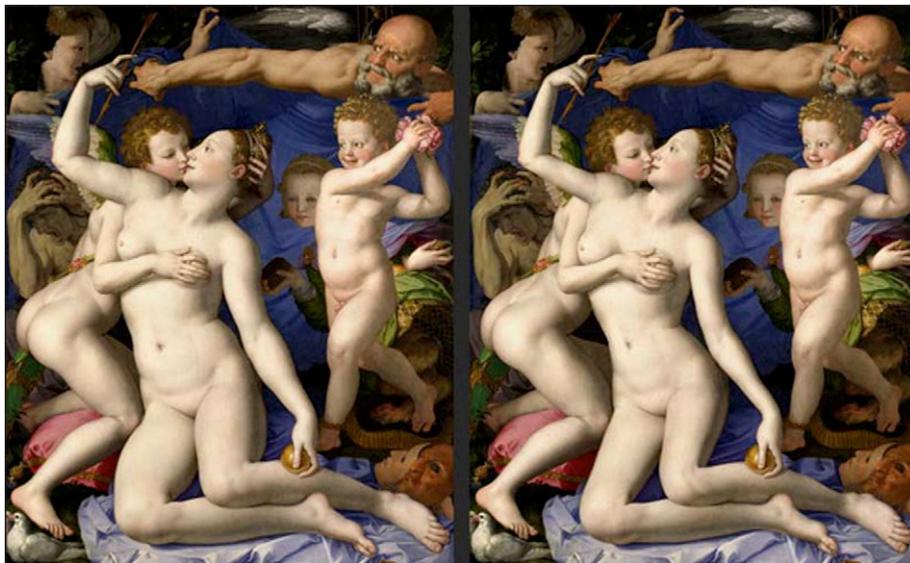


Figure 1: ©Anna 'Utopia' Giordano, *Venus vs. Venus*, 2012. Detail retrieved from annautopiagiordano.it.

goddess by Francesco Hayez. Arranged at random, or at least not in a chronological order, the consolidation of these paintings evoked an online image search. With its decontextualized parts, *Venus vs. Venus* was powerfully evocative of its time.

Unsurprisingly given popular culture's fixation on the fashion model, Giordano's work seemed to resonate with the public. Several newspapers picked up the series, including *The Daily Mail*, which published an article under the typically glib headline, 'What if Botticelli had Photoshop?' (*The Daily Mail*, 2012: n. pag.). The response in the press was uniform. Accepted automatically was the notion that within the original paintings the body of Venus exists untouched by the rules of perfection that inform their digitally manipulated counterparts and, in turn, images of models in fashion advertisements. Goddesses by artists as disparate as Titian and Cabanel, among the others, were brandished as emblems of a single bygone era—history itself—in which the ideal female form was nourished, fleshy and free.

As striking as Giordano's juxtapositions may appear, they rest on a false premise: that the female body of classicizing art and the female body of fashion advertising are not only distinct, but genealogically unrelated. Each of the paintings selected for *Venus vs. Venus* could readily serve as a compelling point of departure for the dismantling of this assumption. Yet there is one artist in particular whose works can be seen actively to negotiate the corporeal types Giordano holds asunder. More than any other canonized artist, Antonio Canova straddles traditional conceptions of ideal beauty and the commodification of female beauty inherent to contemporary fashion imagery. Over the course of Canova's lifetime, the former began to cede into a nascent form of the latter, facilitated by the rapid growth of industrial capitalism following the Napoleonic Wars. And the continuity between Canova's art and fashion advertisements subsists not just in the revelation and form of the body, but through surface, colour, lighting and the deliberate execution of other atmospheric effects.

In his landmark but now dated *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes that it is 'a mistake to think of publicity supplanting the visual art of post-Renaissance Europe; it is the last moribund form of that art' (Berger, 1981: 139). Despite the acclaim of Berger's text among readers across disciplines, this assertion has been insufficiently acknowledged and unpacked. Rarely are classicizing painting and sculpture

considered as harbingers of the images, particularly of women, that dominate the cultural landscape of late capitalism.¹ It is undeniably the case, however, that while the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual exile of the classical ideal from fine art, the fortunes of a generic typology of the beautiful body lie not in painting and sculpture but in fashion photography. In other words, as the artistic pre-eminence of ideal beauty faded away, it was reborn as spectacle in fashion advertising. The current, very un-fashionable status of Canova's art masks the enduring relevance of its visual language. One glance at the blank smiles of his slightly-larger-than-life-size *Danzatrici*, for example, with their delicate hands cocked on their hips or fingers coyly pressed to their anonymous faces, and it is clear how much more in common these objects have with the world of luxury billboards than with our still modernist criteria for what constitutes 'great art'.²

The view of classicizing painting and sculpture as a prefiguration of our image-addicted culture lies at the limits of art history. Paradoxically, Aby Warburg stands as an author entrenched in a discipline reticent to put his late work's transcendence of chrono-stylistic order into practice. Nevertheless, the montage approach of his *Mnemosyne Atlas* offers a methodological foundation for assessing the kinship between seemingly disparate classes of imagery. Building on the *Atlas* and its visual navigation of Hellenic antiquity's modern afterlife, this article has two overarching aims: firstly, to position Canova as a pivotal figure in a diachronic teleology of ideal beauty that reaches its apotheosis in the figure of the fashion model. Then, to explore the continuity—both mimetic and atmospheric—between a selection of oil paintings by Canova and some examples of contemporary fashion advertising. I will not attempt to chart the evolution of ideal beauty from Botticelli's *Venus* to the catwalk. Such a survey would require book-length attention and a thorough investigation of fashion plates, theatre, dance and cinema, as well as proto-modernist illustrators: including

¹ My use of the term 'late capitalism' follows the work of Frederic Jameson (1991), whom I shall cite throughout this article.

² In his book *Desire and Excess: the Nineteenth Century Culture of Art*, Jonah Siegel writes of a 'modernist sensibility at war with tradition' (Siegel, 2000: 8). This is, undoubtedly, still the dominant approach to the evaluation of art today.

Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley and Paul Poiret. Rather, I will deploy Canova's oil paintings as a tool for observing the persistence of classicism within our visual culture, characterized, as it is, by a devotion to idealized images of mostly female bodies. Before Canova can be placed centre stage, it is necessary to provide some basic context.

1.

Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has aptly termed the Western concept of the *beau ideal* a 'cobbled-together but cherished fiction' (Grigsby, 1998: 329). Certainly by the time of what is considered the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of a universal norm of beauty inherited from classical Greece and filtered through Roman civilization stood as a kind of *bricolage* composed of various sources, ancient and modern.³ As an artistic method it had been cultivated during the quattrocento and later incorporated into key French and Italian art theoretical texts, notably by seventeenth-century painter-writers Charles-Alphonse du Fresnoy (1783) and Giovan Pietro Bellori (2005).⁴ Despite consistent challenges, the *beau ideal* endured as the foundation of academic art in Europe throughout the next three centuries, lubricated by landmark texts by German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, including his 1764 *History of Art in Antiquity*. In practice, ideal art demands that the human form be re-designed according to the template provided by Hellenic sculpture, objects thought to incarnate an ideal beauty based on a generalized abstraction of each corporeal feature. Plainly visible nature is 'perfected' so that its irregularities and 'defects' are dissolved to match the contours of the statue, and all elements refined until a generic type emerges. Adapted by individual artists, however, this process was not as consistent as it strove to be. Depending on circumstance, preference, social or geographic mobility and training, it could be taken to various extents, as indicated by the flushed,

³ For an in-depth discussion of the Platonic and Aristotelian foundations of ideal beauty see Arthur Pontynen's *For the Love of Beauty: Art History and the Moral Foundations of Aesthetic Judgement* (2006).

⁴ A major work by du Fresnoy was his poem *De Arte Graphica*, first translated from Latin to French by Roger de Piles in 1668. With the English title *The Art of Painting*, a later edition featured annotations by Joshua Reynolds (1783).

neo-Venetian tactility of ideal nudes by Westall, for example, set against the colder, serpentine delineations of his younger contemporary Ingres.

As the possibilities held out by digital technologies increase, we find this same approach thriving in the world of advertising, its relationship to art of the past remaining buried, obscure to the average consumer. One example of the continuity between this system and the present-day apparatus of bodily idealism occurred in 2011, when, as part of a swimwear campaign, Swedish company H&M was exposed for placing various models' heads on the same artificially generated body (Krupnick, 2011: n. pag.). Each of the five models had different skin tones and the reoccurring template was digitally altered to correspond to the various shades of their faces (Rees, 2011: n. pag.). Shocking to some, the incident would have been familiar to anyone aware of a legend surrounding the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, cited by both du Fresnoy and Bellori, among countless other art theorists. For the creation of his Helen of Troy, Zeuxis is said to have selected individual body parts from five different local virgins to forge the most perfect female form imaginable. H&M's corporeal collage stands as one of the better-publicized instances of the *beau ideal*, or, rather, its mutated, anachronistic survival.

From Caravaggio to William Blake to Cubism, much of the fine art valued at present derives its value from the ostensible disavowal of conventional idealisation. It is ironic, then, that the idealising method is not only still with us; put to use in the service of commerce it has been sharpened, amplified and dispersed throughout the world. Nurtured by advancements not just in digital technologies but also in plastic surgery, the authority of the sculpted body is increasing. Amid this process of sharpening, amplification and dispersal, the ideal has taken on a thinner, more elongated shape. Distilled within the promised lands of advertising, digitally enhanced fashion models—human mannequins—now set the universal abstract type. Over two decades ago, Giorgio Agamben could assert that '[n]ever has the human body—above all the female body—been so massively manipulated as today, and so to speak, imagined from top to bottom by the techniques of advertising and commodity production' (Agamben, 1990: 48). Now such 'techniques' have become more sophisticated; through the invention of inexpensive photo editing 'apps', they are widely accessible as a means of regulating and safeguarding a normative idea of corporeal perfection.

It was only in the late eighteenth century, just prior to the first bloom of industrial capitalism in Europe, that the notion of ideal beauty began to be separated from the moralizing principles of early modern art theory. In the seventeenth-century texts mentioned above, ideal painting and sculpture were not championed purely for the enjoyment of the beholder. Rather, the type of perfection consolidated in the Hellenic body was seen to ennoble those that gazed upon it, inspiring them away from hedonistic pleasure—the ephemeral reward of capitalism—and toward acts of virtue. This function of ideal form is anathema to the luxurious deployments of what is fundamentally the same idea within contemporary culture. With few exceptions, painting and sculpture that reproduced the universal type came to possess an elevated role among an exclusive, implicitly male audience. Here lies the basis for the very concept of ‘high art’, particularly grand-scale, allegorical history painting.

Eventually this discourse took on an overtly political significance. In the Anglophone world classicizing art had always been an overseas import, so it makes sense that here ideal beauty was first enlisted for an ideological cause. Considered the material incarnation of rationalism, harmony and order, Hellenic sculpture and its imitation were mobilized to express the fundamental liberty of the upper-class male subject. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the school of thought identified as ‘civic humanism’, promoted by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, mapped classical republican values onto the idealized human form (Barrell, 1995). The perceived universality of ideal beauty allowed it to be posited as a means by which noblemen, free from the shackles of monarchic dictatorship, could be steered away from the trappings of luxury on honourable missions in the name of the commonweal. As John Barrell (1989) and JR Hale (1976) have explored, the naked female form did not fit comfortably within this agenda. With the exception of the emphatically de-sexed Athena/Minerva type, women’s bodies were seen to be innately seductive, and thus threatened to distract and corrupt the beholder, rather than guide him on the noblest path (Warner, 1985: 38–62). In his instructions for how best to depict an allegorical personification of Pleasure—‘a middle character between the Person of a Venus, and that of a Bacchinal Nymph’—Shaftesbury had carefully specified that the figure must appear utterly passive and silent so as not to divert the eye (Cooper, 1914: 43–6). In the kind of moralizing high art proffered

by Shaftesbury, such characters must simultaneously entice and warn against the pitfalls of their allure.

Amid the growing societal unrest that marked the second half of the eighteenth century, this discourse, specifically its poetics of liberty, was to an extent democratized. Barrell states that in the years between the American and French revolutions civic humanism began to be 'appropriated by representatives of the very vulgar whose citizenship it had sought to deny' (Barrell, 1995: 71). Indeed, contained within civic humanist ideology were the seeds of its own dissolution. As Whig visions of liberty were brought down from their lofty and exclusive station, ideal beauty—a concept rooted in an ancient past already mythologized for its democracy—came down to earth with them. For a brief period the Hellenic body emblemized the set of universal rights claimed by the pro-revolutionary activist. In the writings of prominent radicals Thomas Paine (1776), Mary Wollstonecraft (2008) and William Godwin (1809), for example, we see ideal nakedness take on a rhetorical charge as a utopian metaphor for freedom.

In France, the construction of a new order relied on the engagement with ancient Greek and Roman civilizations to facilitate and elevate the wiping clean of modern history. The revolutionary and post-revolutionary works of Jacques Louis David reveal an ideal beauty caught up in the conflict between tradition and its total eradication. Naked forms, like that of his dying martyr Joseph Bara, begun in 1794, cannot relinquish their connection to art theoretical texts, works by the great Italian masters, nor even the artist's immediate Rococo forbears. Yet, appearing in a self-consciously archaeological, even 'primitive' guise, the ideal body is simultaneously posited as an intervention into these traditions, or at least their implied decadence and aristocratic taint. This dilemma is central to each one of the publicly exhibited history paintings achieved by David between the 1780s and his post-war exile in Brussels. Perhaps the unique temporality of the *beau idéal*—that 'cherished but cobbled-together fiction'—goes some of the way to explaining the particularly sharp, crystalline linearity of the artist's naked forms (Grigsby, 1998: 329). It is easy to see how, by the decade following 1815, corporeal idealism had been exhausted by its repeated and often tenuous mobilization on behalf of moralizing causes. Industrial capitalism revived the image,

but not the capacity to signify prescribed meaning. While classicizing art in various media continued to be consumed throughout the century, it evolved, by and large, into an art purged of its former articulacy.

2.

Between 1790 and 1820, a shift occurred not necessarily in the type of body that was considered ideal but in the function of that form. Toward the end of this phase, the Hellenic ideal had relinquished its moral implications, as indicated by the vitriolic reception of several public monuments at this time.⁵ Stripped of its semiotic potential in the reactionary post-war milieu, the traditionally ideal body endured as a mannequin onto which an array of fantasies could be mapped. While art theorists had always prioritized the male form, the female body now became the focus of attention, paving the way for the hedonistic deployment of beauty that is found everywhere in contemporary culture in the twenty-first century.

As mentioned earlier, artists, especially history painters, had long struggled with the task of how effectively to moralize using naked female bodies. Within art theory and civic humanist ideology alike, the moral capacity of the ideal female type was perpetually threatened by womankind's association with the pleasures of the flesh. Considered in these discourses to be essentially ornamental artists, Venetian Renaissance painters came to be viewed as the paradigm of a more decadent approach to corporeal beauty. Privileging colour, sensuality and painterly effect over ideal design, artists like Giorgione, Titian and Veronese stood as a diametric counterpart to the morally charged version of the *beau ideal*. It is precisely this tension between the restrained, rational beauty and its sensual foil that makes Canova a key figure. A Venetian artist of a later generation who made his name in Rome, Canova balanced a soft, alluring sensuality with a rigid Hellenic norm. It is reductive to suggest that the artist's commitment to the former stemmed from his birth in a province of Veneto. This, however, was a natural assumption during the artist's

⁵ To name but one example, the installation of Richard Westmacott's *Wellington Monument* in 1821 at Hyde Park generated a phenomenal amount of negative press, most of which centered on its depiction of a naked hero. F. Darrell Munsell's book, *The Victorian Controversy Surrounding the Wellington War Memorial: The Archduke of Hyde Park Corner* (1991) examines the work's reception later on in the century.

lifetime. David Bindman notes that 'even the most admiring of Canova's supporters... believed that his art needed to be kept under tight control lest his "Venetian" facility should rise up and overcome his "Roman" seriousness' (Bindman, 2014: 15–18). Likewise, in 1804, the painter Henry Fuseli—an early translator of Winckelmann into English—was said to have quipped: 'What could be expected from a man coming from Venice, in respect of correct design? Where to know an *anle* [sic] from a *gizzard* was the extent of their observation and accuracy' (Grieg, 1923: 181). In the twentieth century, the tendency to view Canova as part of a lineage of Veneto-born artists with a common material heritage has been continued by Giulio Carlo Argan (Stefani, 1992: 1). While it might be convenient to view the sensuality of Canova's art solely in relation to his regional origins, it is also true that the artist was responding directly to the changing, definitively cosmopolitan world around him. More than any other European artist active during the period 1790–1820, Canova embraced ideal beauty's loss of prescribed meaning. While the coextension of liberty and Hellenic sculpture was at its height, his early works were already carving out a space for a self-consciously disinterested visual classicism. By the post-war period his commercial success had surpassed that of all other living artists, and he was the most celebrated sculptor in the developed world.

Why was Canova so much more successful than other classicizing sculptors of the period, such as John Flaxman for example, or Joseph Nollekens? While these British artists were content to restore ancient statuary and produce works that resembled Hellenic sculpture in almost every respect, the central source of Canova's appeal was his capacity to innovate, especially in terms of the exquisitely sensual patinas of his works in marble. In such achievements, particularly those representing female figures, the ideal body becomes otherworldly through the ethereal, even supernatural, emphasis on finish. In this sense, his art is already withdrawn from humanist values, with moral concerns around the pitfalls of ornament reigned in by his almost religious devotion to superficial beauty. At the same time, the heightened attention the artist paid to the exterior of his works—their skin-like softness of surface, gradation and tonal depth—brought ideal beauty closer than ever to the bodies

of actual women. It is not a great leap to suggest, therefore, that Canova's coveted figures, including his *Danzatrici*, graces, sleeping nymphs or various goddesses, were arguably the first supermodels. As bodies destined for hedonistic consumption they rely on a beauty that is mute yet vibrant, potent and affecting by way of its very blankness. It is all the more significant, then, that a tangible relationship between Canova's figures and some of the women credited as the 'first supermodels' both preceded and followed his commercial success. The 'attitudes' of the feted performer Emma Hamilton were said to have inspired the artist fairly early on in his career (van de Sandt, 1998: 309). Later on, some of his critics could complain of the way in which his sculpture mixed 'two things most incompatible, [the antique] and opera dancing' (Hazlitt, 1894: 270). Still later, in 1864, the American actress Adah Isaacs Menken justified her risqué performances with reference to the artist, stating that she had 'long been a student of sculpture, and [her] attitudes, selected from the work of Canova, present a classicality which has been invariably recognized by the foremost American critics' (Smith, 1999: 66). There are other instances of Canova's art persisting on the stage, through *tableau vivant* and 'living statuary' (Smith, 1999: 69–70; Callaway, 2000: 61, 72–4).

The centrality of the artist's legacy to popular culture, however, did not guarantee his ongoing relevance to fine art. While his fame was so great that his lifetime could be designated 'the Age of Canova', it also helped to usher momentous changes in taste. Despite the success of other classicizing sculptors (some of whom he had trained in Rome) following his death in 1822, there was a growing interrogation of the perceived universality of ideal form in the decades following the culmination of the Napoleonic Wars. A new premium was being placed on naturalistic and local modes of representation. While sculpture was inflected by this shift in slow, gradual increments, it bore great consequences to academic oil painters; during these years grand-scale, allegorical history painting became almost obsolete.

As many artists were moving away from the Hellenic norm, the notion of ideal beauty was increasingly mapped back onto the bodies of living, breathing women. The publication of Alexander Walker's *Beauty, illustrated chiefly by analysis and*

classification of Beauty in Women (1836) signalled the emergence of a newly systemic attitude toward the outward appearance of the female body, not in art but in everyday life. Selling itself as the first book ever written on this 'deeply interesting' subject, the text draws on Winckelmann and Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, among other writings on painting and sculpture. Walker combines sections on diet, ageing and personality with a discourse on 'Ideal Greek Beauty', continually aligning the animate female body with its representation in art. The most striking feature of this lengthy, pseudoscientific treatise is its lithographic illustrations, designed by British painter Henry Howard, the Royal Academy's Professor of Painting between 1833 and 1847. The frontispiece reproduces the statue that had long stood for the archetypal female Hellenic ideal, the *Venere de' Medici* (**Fig. 2**). In the print, the statue has morphed into an actual woman, making reference to the popular myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, which Howard himself had painted in 1802 (**Fig. 3**). The copy of Walker's *Beauty* at the Yale Center for British Art, an 1852 edition, includes lithographs that

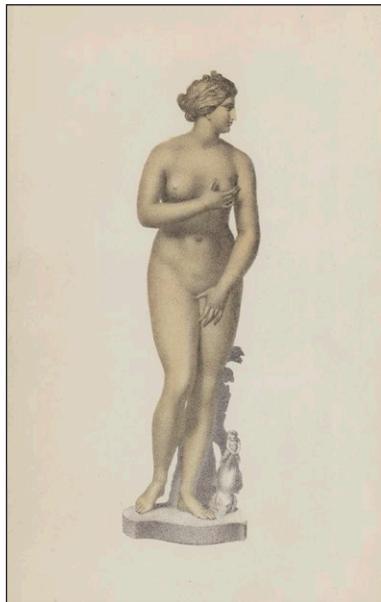


Figure 2: M. Gauci and Richard James Lane (1800–1872) after Henry Howard (1769–1847), frontispiece, “The Venus de Medici” from *Beauty illustrated by an analysis and classification of beauty in woman, with a critical view of the hypotheses of Hume, Hogarth, Burke, Knight, Alison, etc.*, by Alexander Walker (1779–1852), London, Henry G. Bohn, 1852, lithotint, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



Figure 3: ©Henry Howard, *Love Animating the Statue of Galatea*, 1802, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, oil on canvas.

are hand-coloured, the Venus-Galatea figure afforded a warm flesh-tone and light blonde hair. Contrasting against her skin, the white marble pedestal remains intact.

Both the publication of Walker's *Beauty* and the success of Canova's art coincided with the first bloom of industrial capitalism. While cosmetics had not yet been industrialized on a major scale, women could now buy fashion magazines ordering them to preserve 'an agreeable complexion' so as to avoid being a 'Juno-featured maid with a dull skin' (*The Mirror of the Graces*, 1813: 34). The systematization of female beauty emergent during the period indicates the birth of a new figural type: the anonymous mannequin. Several scholars, including Elizabeth Wilson (1985), acknowledge the radical capacity of fashion to blur the boundaries between class divisions. Implicit in this phenomenon is the idea of a standardized female form: a blank, beautiful body ready to serve a commercial agenda among the disparate strata of society. The certain affinity between Canova's marble sculptures and plastic mannequins in shop-windows warrants future investigation (**Fig. 4**).

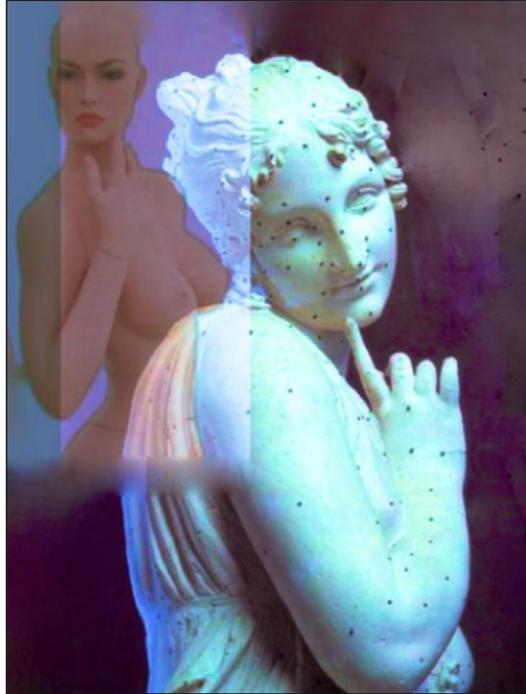


Figure 4: Author's own image, 2016, digital collage.

Malcolm Baker has observed that Canova's technical practice ushered in a new way of looking at sculpture that aligned with these developments (2000). Sculpture in the round had hitherto been designed to be viewed at a distance, intended to cut an imposing contour into the interior, or usually exterior, space into which it was installed. By contrast, Canova's works, including the famous *Tre Grazie*, demanded a more intimate encounter. With this particular statue, its 'modulations of surface and the shifts from polished to more obviously carved areas need to be seen from relatively close' (Baker, 2000: 164). Baker acknowledges that this scopic shift relied on a blurred line between the inanimate and the living. Emphasis on surface plays 'on the tension prompted within the spectator between the group perceived as a delicately carved marble and as a representation of three women' (Baker, 2000: 164). The close scrutiny essential to appreciating the sculpture underscores its distance from the moral didacticism formerly associated with the Hellenic ideal. In place of virtue we have a prototype for the invasive angles of the camera lens and the close-up beauty shot. In fact, make-up was applied to one of Canova's marble sculptures

by a descendant of its original owner (Norman & Cook, 1997: 57). While it is virtually inconceivable to imagine cosmetics on any other art object, this kind of intervention seems almost logical in the context of Canova. The artist himself experimented with 'golden-yellow' flesh tints on a version of his *Hebe*, noting that if he applied a 'tiny' bit of rouge on the lips and cheeks' the statue could be at once transformed into a Bacchante (Norman & Cook, 1997: 51). In the same vein, present-day supermodels are often referred to as 'blank canvases', their ideal bodies sites of powerful and dramatic transformations which are the essence of fashion itself.

3.

Thus far I have posited Canova as a transitional figure in a teleological history of ideal beauty. From early modern art theory to nineteenth-century fashion magazines, we have observed how the female form comes to supplant the academic authority of the male *beau ideal*, yet only as a result of the changing function and consumption of art over the course of these years. I have made the case that Canova's sculptures are commodified bodies, bodies that simultaneously resemble and transcend those of real women. As such, they help bring into being the viewing conditions for the fashion model: a link that is confirmed by the reception of Canova's statuary in the performing arts.

The final and crucial part of this article will explore the mimetic and atmospheric continuities between a selection of oil paintings by Canova and fashion advertisements. While such a task may read like a spurious leap into the present, it is precisely Canova's historical position that allows this connection to be forged. During the time in which the artist rose to unprecedented commercial success and celebrity, art of the past was more readily available than ever before. The ubiquity of cheap, mass-produced steel engravings after old master works signified the democratization of formerly elite taste. British publications such as the *Art-Union* were founded, attracting subscribers based all over the empire. Although Canova achieved most of these paintings during the 1790s, just prior to his widespread international acclaim, they foreshadow the increased access to all kinds of objects that characterizes the era in which he found great fame. More than his investment in Hellenic sculpture, they reveal his contrapuntal regard for sensuous Italian painting of the sixteenth century.

And as two-dimensional objects they allowed the artist to experiment with these influences in ways that his sculptural practice did not allow. We have observed that in his sculptures, Canova placed emphasis on the surface and tone of marble skin, so that a close, camera-like inspection was required in order to appreciate them. Uninhibited by the cost and labour of sculptural practice or the stricter mimetic laws then governing the plastic arts, these paintings go a step further.

For much of his career, Canova's studio in Rome was a popular tourist destination. His oil paintings were not displayed outside this space, nor did private patrons commission them.⁶ They are highly finished, however, and on a fairly large scale. In terms of scholarship, their total eclipse by his sculpture suggests the difficulties in incorporating them into a satisfactory art historical narrative. Like other methodologically unwieldy works they have been dismissed as inferior. But precisely because they were neither commissioned nor publicly exhibited, these paintings offer a behind-the-scenes insight into the aesthetic priorities driving the artist's wider practice. Their kinship with present-day fashion advertising is not merely a visual coincidence. Agamben writes that, although the commercialization of the human form in advertising has been credited to around the 1920s, this process actually began a century earlier. Building on the work of Walter Benjamin, the philosopher states that new technologies in the reproduction of images, most notably lithography, were instrumental in extracting the body from fine art and placing it within a new context: 'advertising images, and in the gait of the fashion models' (Agamben, 1990: 47). Rather than autonomous objects destined for rarefied aesthetic contemplation, Canova's oil paintings demand to be viewed as contributions to this new dawn in the usage of the human form. Some of them were reproduced as affordable prints that continued to appear throughout the century. After observing the ways in which these paintings enhance and update the traditional understanding of ideal beauty, we will consider how their materiality strengthens their connection to contemporary fashion advertising.

⁶ These paintings are currently on display at the Museo Canova in the artist's hometown of Possagno, in the province of Treviso, Veneto. Some of them have been displayed elsewhere including the Galleria Borghese in Rome for their exhibition 'Canova e la Venere Vincitrice', October 18, 2007–February 3, 2008.

Painted in 1792, Canova's *Venere con Fauno* presents a goddess that, with an alert but calm glance into the eyes of the spectator, reveals her nakedness from beneath sumptuous gold and embroidered blankets (**Fig. 5**). The slightly rounded abdomen and small spherical breasts of antique statues such as the *Venere de' Medici* find their way onto this body. Only here is an ideal that has surpassed the template to which the artist's contemporaneous sculptures adhere. Her legs and arms are conspicuously thin. She is elongated, but lacks the robust musculature of lengthened bodies by Michelangelo and his imitators. The protraction of her form is further exaggerated by the Faun to her right, whose squat, ivy-crowned head protrudes from the edge of the scene. Gazing lasciviously into space rather than at his companion, the faun and his ugliness throw Venus's elegant, tapered extremities further into relief.

In three dimensions the proportions of this Venus would have appeared disturbing in their distance from convention. Staged within the boundaries of the canvas, however, and the ideal body is permitted to shirk the pact figurative sculpture must negotiate.⁷



Figure 5: Antonio Canova, *Venere con Fauno*, c. 1792, © Canova Museum, Possagno, oil on canvas. Image retrieved from Ottorino Stefani, *Canova Pittore*, 1992, p. 37.

⁷ For a thoughtful discussion on the divergences between painting and sculpture see Diderot's reflections on Augustin Pajou's *Bust of the Maréchal de Clermont-Tonnerre* (Goodman, 1995: 306).

A similar sense of limitlessness characterizes the fashion photograph. Roland Barthes reflects on the peculiar 'lexicon and syntax' of fashion photography, noting how this variety of imagery is distinct from 'the news photograph' (Barthes, 1983: 4), in that it does not set out to communicate truth. It is this irresponsibility of fashion photography that has rendered it the perfect destination, as it were, for classicizing forms.⁸ While airbrushing techniques have existed since the dawn of photography, software like Photoshop has an endless scope for intensifying and advancing ideas of corporeal perfection. Advertisements for the globally popular lingerie brand Victoria's Secret, for example, have long relied on a female body that approaches a supernatural state, becoming post-human in its extreme, generalized abstraction (**Fig. 6**). Often, Victoria's Secret models gaze, like Canova's reclining Venus, straight into the eyes of the spectator. As with much fashion advertising, the unabashedly edited quality of their bodies is designed to make consumers believe that they too could achieve these proportions, if only they purchased the same products.



Figure 6: Author's own image, 2015, digital collage.

⁸ Compellingly, Barthes describes fashion as stemming from 'vulgate of classical culture' (Barthes, 1983: 254).

The only scholar to have carried out extensive research into Canova's paintings, Ottorino Stefani, grapples with how to describe Canova's painted ideal. In *Canova Pittore: Tra Eros e Thanatos*, he acknowledges the 'strange ambiguity' of such bodies as the one we meet with in *Venere con Fauno* (Stefani, 2004: 36). In the face of the liminal status of this corporeal type, Stefani attempts to locate these paintings within a strictly art historical lineage, positioning them in relation to artists active both during and after the artist's lifetime, including Flaxman and Manet. Yet because the lineaments of Canova's painted ideals far exceed those of other artists, with the exception, perhaps, of Ingres, this approach proves inadequate. Struggling to afford these bodies a fixed definition, Stefani turns to more recent terminology. We could, he suggests, label them either 'postmodern' or 'hyper-mannerist'. This duality of terms is worth taking time to unpack.

Remember that Canova's sculpture liberated the Hellenic ideal of its moralizing implications, allowing the beautiful body to endure as a mannequin. In the essay version of his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson posits the translation of the human form into commodity and spectacle as the definitive feature of postmodern visual culture (Jameson, 1984: 56). Andy Warhol's screen prints of Marilyn Monroe are cited as flagstones in the construction of a wholly superficial view of the body that implicitly intersects with the rise of the fashion model. At this moment, in the second half of the twentieth century, what we witness is the triumphant return of ideal beauty to the sphere of fine art, but in vernacular form. But in postmodern imagery—for which Pop Art is paradigmatic—the human form 'turns centrally around commodification', and icons such as Monroe are 'transformed into their own images' (Jameson, 1984: 61). According to Jameson, the 'supreme formal feature' of such art is a 'kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' (Jameson, 1984: 60). By elongating, slimming and streamlining the Hellenic norm, Canova's painted ideals become simulacra, or images of images. Thus they anticipate the postmodern body on a mimetic level: a body inextricable from its inevitable consumption. In terms of Jameson's definition, then, Stefani's label 'postmodern' seems justified.

Stefani's second term 'hyper-mannerist' addresses a more traditional aspect of Canova's painted ideal. As with other categories such as 'Baroque' and 'Neoclassical', the very existence of Mannerism as an independent aesthetic is frequently contested. What Mannerism does demarcate, nonetheless, is a variety of art marked by a devotion to style, and moreover the final image itself over prescribed meaning. For Bellori and other seventeenth-century art theorists, the emergence of the '*maniera*' marked a period of decline following the death of Raphael in 1520 (Bellori, 2005: 71). In the seventeenth century, a narrative developed that after Raphael and the diffusion of modern Italian art across the continent, ideal beauty lost its footing in ancient sculpture, becoming intellectually vapid and impure, as well as physically distorted, warped and unnatural. Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* stands as an example of the *maniera* at work, the instability of the goddess's kneeling pose creating a flat, highly artificial shape that is characteristic. Mannerism is a precursor of Postmodernism; both approaches are marked by a studied lack of integrity consolidated in the image of the human form.

As a wider aesthetic category Mannerism may be a useful point of reference for thinking through the figures in Canova's paintings. But a tangible relationship between late sixteenth-century works classed as Mannerist in historiography and Canova's practice is non-existent. Not only are his forms much thinner than those in archetypally Mannerist painting and sculpture. They are also emphatically feminized, combining elongation with a reduction of flesh and a cancellation of all muscle and anatomical detail. Furthermore, Mannerist painting and sculpture was often scorned by artists of Canova's generation, who tended to follow Bellori's theory of post-Raphael decline. Stefani's term '*hyper-mannerist*' is useful in that it attests to the artist's regard for style over substance, a preference located in the shape of his Venus.

Another painting by Canova presents an even more distinct physique and, as it does not claim to be a representation of Venus, a more complex image in general. Although it is known as *La Sorpresa*, the artist does not seem to have afforded the work an official title (**Fig. 7**). In 1804 a Neapolitan collector named Giuseppe Lucchesi Palli wrote to Canova requesting a copy of the painting, which he had glimpsed in



Figure 7: Antonio Canova, *La Sorpresa*, 1798–99, © Canova Museum, Possagno, oil on canvas. Image retrieved from Ottorino Stefani, *Canova Pittore*, 1992, p. 40.

the artist's Roman studio, referring to it simply as 'that half-figure of a girl exiting from the bath' (Fardella, 2002: 48–9). The work depicts a single naked young woman unaccompanied by other figures: no putti or faun allow her to be interpreted as a goddess, nor even as a generic nymph. What is more, the coral and white garments that the anonymous girl clutches to her chest are not antique. At the centre is the unmistakably modern puff of chemise sleeves common during the period in which the painting was made. There is no carmine curtain framing the scene, such as we find in the *Venere con Fauno* and the later *Venere con Amore* of 1798–9. Instead, we find a bed topped with pillows and a plain wooden dressing table on which matching coral and gold bracelets have been left. While the unnatural shape cut by the figure might transcend these more realistic details, we have without question entered the space of the living woman.

The design of the figure in *La Sorpresa* does not fit in with established artistic convention. Covering herself in an instant of coy self-consciousness, she is presented in a strange, sidelong view. The curvature of her neck, shoulders and back down to her rear projects with a soft contrast against the darker background. Forcefully sculptural, the figure ends up resembling an unhewn block rather than a carved statue. Both soft and stiff, this solidity grants the figure a moribund quality. Sifting through artworks from the same period will not help contextualize her form. One is bound to find a life drawing that captures a similar pose, but this not a sketch but a final image. Instead we must look elsewhere. The cover of *Vogue Brazil* for May 2015, the magazine's 40th anniversary edition, features a body bent to an analogous shape (Fig. 8). The model is Gisele Bündchen and she is pictured entirely without clothes. Her upper back creates an almost hunching line that echoes Canova's figure, yet gone is the coquettish modesty expressed by the clutching of garments. Along with colour, any dregs of emotional resonance that found their way into Canova's image have been drained, replaced by a 'glacé x-ray elegance' typical of postmodern visual culture (Jameson, 1984: 60). Like the living goddess in Howard's illustrations



Figure 8: Author's own image, 2017, digital collage.

for Walker, Bündchen is placed on a plinth to accentuate her Galatea-esque display. As the world's top-earning fashion model, Bündchen's success rests on the continual commodification of her physique, its versatility and capacity to serve, again and again, as a blank canvas.

That the figure in *La Sorpresa* is neither an allegorical nor a mythological personage is significant. Agamben credits advertising images and fashion models with emancipating the body from its 'theological foundations' in European culture (Agamben, 1990: 47). He names this newly 'illuminated' human form 'the whatever body', the word 'whatever' (*qualunque*) signifying 'a resemblance without archetype'. While, despite their long limbs, the painted goddesses by Canova conform, to some extent, to an established convention for depicting female nakedness, *La Sorpresa* is a far less typical image. It is true that the painting can be inserted into the lineage of works voyeuristically portraying women at the bath or toilette. Compellingly, Liz Conor points out that in the 1920s this particular trope found its way onto the screen, proving a link between classicizing art and cinema, another destination of ideal beauty following its exile from fine art (Conor, 2004: 2). Akin to the film stars mentioned by Conor, Canova's anonymous bathing girl is simultaneously traditional and thoroughly of her time. The artist would repeat the same figure in his famous *Venere Italica*, a sculpture noted for its originality by Hugh Honour (1972), who does not mention the earlier painting (**Fig. 9**). Commissioned in 1803, the *Venere Italica* was made to replace the *Venere de' Medici* after its looting by Napoleonic troops the previous year. Produced within just a few years of each other, both *La Sorpresa* and the *Venere Italica* centre on a coiffured girl covering her nakedness with an armful of clothing. It is striking that a highly finished, three-quarter-length portrait and a statue destined for the Uffizi orbit around such a transient moment that occurs outside of a recognizable narrative. Both works translate contemporary femininity into the rarefied media of oil paint and marble. The modernity of the *Venere Italica* did not go unnoticed during the period. Often quoted in relation to the sculpture is the response of the poet Ugo Foscolo, Canova's contemporary, who gushed that while 'the *Venere de' Medici* is a beautiful goddess', the *Venere Italica* is 'a beautiful woman' (Palacios, 1996: 7).



Figure 9: Workshop of Antonio Canova, *Venere Italica*, 1804–12, © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, marble. Image retrieved from Metmuseum.org, 2003.21.1.

La Sorpresa challenges Honour's argument that Canova 'invented' the *Venere Italica* in 1803 purely in response to the task of providing a replacement for the stolen statue. For the pose of the new Venus, the artist chose to reproduce, in stone, the anonymous, distinctly modern figure in his earlier, largely unknown painting. And with the *Venere Italica*, as with the figures in his paintings, Canova reconfigured the Hellenic norm. The *Venere Italica* is slightly taller and thinner than the *Venere de' Medici*. Critic Leigh Hunt, another of the sculptor's contemporaries, lambasted this aspect of the *Venere Italica* and the other un-ideal, or rather hyper-ideal attributes of the work: 'Venus, above all goddesses, ought to be a woman; whereas the statue of Canova, with its straight sides and Frenchified head of hair is the image (if of anything at all) of Fashion affecting Modesty' (Hunt, 1891: 341). Here we have a reversal of Foscolo's anthropomorphizing. For Hunt, the problem with the sculpture is that it does *not* resemble an actual woman, but instead has become a simulacrum. Hunt asserts the depthlessness of the *Venere Italica*. His reaction affirms that the early

nineteenth century did in fact witness a tremendous shift in the way ideal beauty was appropriated and consumed, and that Canova was one of its architects. Like Agamben, Hunt recognizes the instrumental role of fashion in driving this process along.

In spite of the lack of precedents for the pose of *La Sorpresa*, the subtle play of light and dark upon the block-like body, and the overall atmosphere of the painting, call to mind works by sixteenth-century Emilian old master Correggio.⁹ At the same time, this soft-focus and dream-like quality look forward rather than backward in time, conjuring what Ernst Bloch calls the aesthetic of 'poetically plotted sweetness' found in magazines and best-seller novels (Bloch, 1996: 349). In an earlier painting, entitled *Venere con lo specchio*, we know more about the artist's intentions when creating these atmospheric effects (**Fig. 10**). Not long before this work was made, Canova had produced another painting made solely with the aim of tricking some of



Figure 10: Antonio Canova, *Venere con lo specchio*, c. 1785, © Canova Museum, Possagno, oil on canvas. Image retrieved from Ottorino Stefani, *Canova Pittore*, 1992, p. 33.

⁹ Stefani briefly mentions the influence of Correggio on Canova, which was mediated by his dear friend, the French painter Pierre Prud'hon (Stefani, 1992: 30).

his peers, including the painter Angelica Kauffman. The story goes that, in order to trick his friends and show off his skill in a media with which he was not associated, Canova took advantage of rumours of a lost self portrait by Giorgione. Allegedly he scratched the surface off an unidentified *Holy Family* and replaced it with a skilful attempt at Giorgione's likeness in an imitation of the Venetian master's hand, complete with artificial ravages of time (Wassyng Roworth, 2007: 25). The artist then shipped the creation from Venice to Rome, where it was unwrapped under the pretext that it was the long lost Giorgione. The group of artists is said to have been instantly duped, convinced straight away that the painting was genuine. According to the poet and collector Faustino Tadini, Canova's painting *Venere con lo specchio* was forged under similar circumstances (Tadini, 1795: 42–3). With this work, Canova is said to have manipulated the materiality of the painting in order to fool onlookers into thinking it was an authentic Titian.

Surely the distinctive, elongated quality of the body in *Venere con lo specchio*—similar to that of the goddess in *Venere con Fauno*—would have given the artist away. But this study is not concerned with how Canova's deception might speak to the period's reading of old master works, nor of the traditional debate over the importance of ideal *disegno* versus sensual *colore*, but rather the artist's simulation of the historical past through special effects. Biographer John Smythe Memes quotes Tadini when he mentions that, on the surface of *Venere con lo specchio*, Canova 'skilfully imitated' the 'slight cracks and other effects of time' one finds on aging oil paintings (Memes, 1825: 374). In his discussion of cinema, Jameson writes of the propensity within postmodern films to convey 'pastness' through 'the glossy qualities of the image', in other words, to mimic a bygone period in time through the artificial simulation of a temporal atmosphere (Jameson, 1984: 67). Jameson posits 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion' as another central tenet of postmodern imagery. With its tromp l'oeil craquelure, *Venere con lo specchio* is more of a novelty object than an autonomous artwork. As such, it stands as an early symptom of the superficial historicism that would become ubiquitous in the late twentieth century.

With its combination of an ideal form that extends and updates Hellenic sculpture, Venetian-style tints and synthetic decay, the painting is composed entirely of ‘the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past’ (Jameson, 1984: 68).

Like postmodern cinema, the painting is awash with ‘the spell and distance of a glossy mirage’. In the world of fashion advertisements there are countless examples of this, including a 2013 campaign by French brand Chanel (**Fig. 11**). Here model Cara Delevingne is depicted as Mary Antoinette reborn, a reclining Venus and an androgynous Warhol waif all at once. The colours are saturated and the model’s skin is rendered as pale and smooth as Carrara marble. Like *Venere con lo specchio*, this advertisement relies on the increased access to all kinds of images and objects from the past and present, as well as the tools to conjure them quickly. To simulate the look of earlier Venetian painting, Canova possibly employed additional medium modifiers in combination with oil and pigment. Termed ‘nostrums’ during the period, such substances were everywhere in late eighteenth-century Rome, though their use was frowned upon.¹⁰



Figure 11: Author’s own image, 2017, digital collage.

¹⁰ In a letter from the Irish history painter James Barry to Edmund Burke, the ubiquity of this practice during the 1760s is noted (Fryer, 1809: 137). Throughout Canova’s lifetime, such substances were particularly common among British artists, most notably Joshua Reynolds, whose works were often prematurely decayed by the application of volatile materials.

Between 1793 and 1798, about a decade after the painting was complete, *Venere con lo specchio* was engraved by Pietro Vitali. With the caption 'Venus Transtiberina' the print retains the original's status as a representation of the goddess of love, the word Transiberina referring to the region of Rome on the west bank of the Tiber. However, when the painting was eventually reproduced again by another printmaker, the figure ceased to be a representation of Venus. Gaetano Venzo's version, a stipple engraving printed in colour, was made after Canova's death, towards the middle of the nineteenth century (**Fig. 12**). In place of the previous caption or the original title, the image is given a new epigraph: 'Fille Romaine Peinte Aprés Nature'. In this print, the goddess has evolved into another anonymous body, another simulacrum. As bright colouring alters the Venetian mood of the original, the thin, streamlined body survives intact. Of all the images discussed so far, Venzo's re-interpretation of Canova's painted ideal aligns most succinctly with the contemporary fashion advertisement.



Figure 12: Gaetano Venzo after Antonio Canova, *Fille Romaine Peinte d'Après Nature* c. 1830. © British Museum, London Image retrieved from Britishmuseum.org, 1901, 0417. 37.

Conclusion

While the spheres of high fashion and contemporary art are increasingly coextensive, classicizing painting and sculpture remain, by and large, out of style. Canova's art stands as a case study for this tension. While recognized as a major figure within the historiography of European sculpture, his achievements are often interpreted as too 'kitsch' to be valued on the same terms as other, ostensibly more progressive and original objects. His work, therefore, demands to be considered within a wider cultural context. I have observed the engagement with his sculpture among stage performers in the nineteenth century, women who have been conceived of as the first supermodels. Reproductions of his best known works frequently surface in the form of garden statuary (Fig. 13). When they appear this arena, the figures are often adapted so that their legs are even longer, their even waists slimmer. Outside the sphere of fine art,



Figure 13: Antonio Canova, *La Venere viva a Capri*, 2011, photograph by the author.

Canova's forms continue to offer a modular corporeal type that, like the bodies of fashion models, can be constantly updated, edited and consumed anew.

Agamben describes fashion imagery as orbiting around a body detached from prescribed meaning: a 'whatever body'. Absolutely central to our visual culture in this age of image-worship, fashion models—archetypal whatever bodies—are the unknowing heirs to Canova's figures. By locating Canova and some of his little-known paintings in terms of the changing regard for ideal beauty during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, postmodern visual culture is afforded a more complex art historical ancestry. It is my hope that such a connection might ease the pressures many of us face in navigating a world in which gendered ideals seem to loom from every plane: on the underground platform, or at the bus-stop, or on the front page of a newspaper. And while it is not hard to notice these visual connections, the precedent set by Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* urges their retrieval from the limits of art history.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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