

**What happens to Venus when the marble goddess turns metallic? Transformation of physical materials and of visual models in the 'Metallic Venus' by Jeff Koons.**

'Metallic Venus' is a contemporary sculpture made of mirror-polished stainless steel that was presented publicly for the first time in 2012 in Frankfurt as a part of the exhibition "Jeff Koons. The Sculptor". The figure underwent artistic transformations: white marble was replaced by turquoise steel and the goddess's body synthesised two classical visual models. The central question is what happens to the goddess when she undergoes transformations . So the essay sets out to further define the place ancient art holds in modern visual culture and the ways in which classical representations of idealised bodies still affect our modern notion of beauty. The essay will contextualize Koon's statue with reference to two ancient works - the Farnese Venus Callipyge and Venus of Knidos - and selected modern sculptures responding to the motif of Venus from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.



*Figure 1 Jeff Koons, Metallic Venus, mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colour coating, live flowering plants, 2010*

## **Consumptionist Venus**

The glossy sculpture of mirror-polished steel that reflects its surroundings is an over-life sized, shining figure of the ancient goddess of beauty and love. The turquoise Venus dynamically but at the same time clumsily is taking off her clothes and so uncovering the most intimate segments of her both frontside and backside which creates a strongly erotic tension. She strikes the viewer with artificial, almost plasmonic blue that may remind of vivid colours used in advertisements or even of nail varnish. The surface itself is a mirror-polished stainless steel that as opposed to classical white marble evokes the industrial production exemplified by, say, polished cars and functionality of metallic objects of every-day use. Moreover, white petunias in a pot next to the goddess are real, fresh flowers that are dictated to by the artists to be provided daily by the gallery staff and so thrown away in the evening and replaced over again in the next morning. Both these visual characteristics and the practice may evoke the consumptionist approach towards object as an example of the 'throwaway culture' of modern capitalism. The impression of consumerist glamour pervades the sculpture. However, should one assume it is a sufficient reading, as many some critics seem to believe? For instance, Pistoletto's 'Venus of the rags, although initially boiled down to a demonstration of consumption cycles, proved to hide a myriad of captivating conceptual nuances and so became an icon of classical reception in modern art.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that 'Metallic Venus' has much more to show; under the trivial cover of shining steel there is a complex and dynamic rethinking of the visual traditions of antiquity.

## **Ancient versus modern Venuses**

To understand this visual dialogue, one needs to appreciate Koons' inventive approach towards ancient models of his Venus.

One possible point of comparison is the Venus aux belles fesses, a part of the Farnese collection. The pose of 'Metallic Venus' is very similar to the one of Venus Callipyge; not only the setting of their legs is strikingly familiar, but most importantly the gesture of deliberate lifting the robe and so uncovering the body, although is not the same, also creates an impression of parallelism. The interplay between light and shadow, the plainness of the surface and the vibrant texture of the goddess's clothes further support the point of comparison.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/pistoletto-venus-of-the-rags-t12200> accessed 27 July 2017



Figure 2 Callipygian Venus (Venus with beautiful buttocks), white marble, dating from the time of Emperor Hadrian, National Archaeological Museum of Naples;

The ancient goddess does not look at the viewer or anything else around; with her head turned back, she gazes at the own body, or more precisely, her own buttocks. This is a visual device that also directs the sight of the spectator to Venus's backside. The focus is no longer a face or an overall shape of her body, but one of the most sexualized segments of female body. Furthermore, this gesture questions a more conventional relationship between the ancient viewer and the nude-objectified statues. While some of ancient nudes were based on 'to-be-looked-at-ness', a phenomenon where a woman is turned into an object of vision (a sight)<sup>2</sup>, the self-absorbed Venus Callipyge becomes a conductor. Furthermore, the tightly-tied girdle-knot strongly suggests that the lifting of the robe is not a stage in a normal process of undressing (*the anasyrma gesture*); Venus's fully aware aim is to expose the lower segment of her body.<sup>3</sup> This observation inspires a conclusion that if *nakedness* is just being stripped down while *nudity* is a form of a dress<sup>4</sup>, Venus aux belles fesses definitely exemplifies nudity. She uncovers her buttocks not as a stage of undressing, but naming it colloquially of a striptease.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Squire, 2011, p. 74-75

<sup>3</sup> G. Saflund, 1963, p. 45

<sup>4</sup> M. Squire, 2011, p. 76-77

Not only does she seem to be objectified by choice to deliberately lift her robe, but the goddess simply aspires to control the subject to look at her buttocks as she pleases. This independence and control over the viewer links to Venus's religious authority, but even in lay terms expresses self-awareness of own body. However, Koons does not only retrace one single model of classical body; he offers a more complex and challenging configuration.



*Figure 3 Praxiteles, Aphrodite of Knidos, c. 350-340 BCE, Musei Vaticani, Rome*

Although the manner of lifting the robe comes from Venus Callipyge, Koons invited Venus of Knidos to become a part of his 'Metallic Venus' too. The Knidian ceramic jug covered with a piece of cloth was ironically – Koons seems to diminish the rank of a classical ancient jug to an ordinary pot – transformed into a stand for a pot of white petunias. The composition of vertical lines of both the goddess's shape and the stand remains strikingly similar. Likewise, the artist translated the language of the Knidian everyday reality to the modern standards; as the jug with water and the piece of cloth next to the Aphrodite expressed a daily routine to the Greeks, the process of taking off one's clothes is a daily routine to us. So, Metallic Venus takes from the Knidian goddess in the bottom part the stand for her flowers and in the upper part the expression of a woman's daily routine. Koons, therefore, went even farther than Zeuxis: in his ironic dialogue with ancient fetishization of female body, the artist idealized his sculpture using two other goddesses.



Koons' self-ironic aiming for idealised models of divine beauty further situates the expression of 'Metallic Venus' within the classical tradition. Take the legend of Zeuxis (Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*)<sup>5</sup>, a painter from Heraclea, who was given a task to paint an image of Helen of Troy, 'a silent image that embodied the surpassing beauty of womanly form'.<sup>6</sup> The instant question that arose in his mind was: "Where to find a model?". The artist supposedly selected five specimens in order to reproduce the best parts of each, since the beauty he was looking for was 'unattainable' for one woman. This paradigmatic tale illustrates artistic objectification: woman is reduced to a line-up of fetishized segments, such as breasts, hips, buttocks etc. 'Metallic Venus' rethinks such patterns of idealisation – not only is she a composition of two models, but these models are both goddesses! Zeuxis used five mortal maidens, while Koons decided to combine two goddesses – Venus Callipyge and Venus of Knidos. Koons, therefore, went even farther than Zeuxis: in his ironic sculpture with ancient fetishization of female body, he idealised his sculpture using two other goddesses.

### **Transforming physical materials**

Before further analysing the self-awareness of own divine body of Koons' Venus, the physical transformation of marble turned into steel needs to be scrutinized. Following the aesthetical debate over the death of marble sculpture, one may think Koons replaced it in order to move as far away from the 'dead' art as possible<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, ancient sculpture partly gained its prestige thanks to permanence of marble, whereas 'the allegedly eternal quality conferred by it interfered with modern life characterized by its very evanescence'<sup>8</sup>. However, the supposed escape from an apparently traditional ancient material seems less the case if taken into account the supposed origins of the Venus Callipyge. Some evidence available, such as the dead area between the lower left leg and the drapery, suggests that the Farnese statues is a marble paraphrase of a lost bronze original. If this were the case, this section would have a vital role in the marble statue as a support and reinforcement for the small volume of the leg, while in bronze it could simply stand free.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Koons does not copy the ancient traditions; it is still polished steel, not the Locrian bronze. However, although the technique is not the same, metal builds a visual bridge between the age of 'glass and steel' and the ancient era, a bridge some would find unlikely to construct.

Furthermore, the vivid colour of the surface creates another connection. In contrary to predominantly white ancient statues in modern galleries, Koons' Venus hits the spectator with a shining, almost plasmatic blue. Again, one may think and not be wrong that this

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<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, Book XXXV, Chapter 36

<sup>6</sup> M. Squire, 2011, p. 81

<sup>7</sup> L. Ostermark-Johansen, 2010, p. 181

<sup>8</sup> K. Savage, 2010, p. 10

<sup>9</sup> G. Saflund, 1963, p. 38-39

gradient serves to bring out beautiful shapes of Venus's body in pursuit of the tactile exploration of shape rather than of semblance and visual appearance.<sup>10</sup> However, looking back at the origins of Greek and Roman sculptures in general provides a captivating perspective: ancient Greek and Roman sculpture throughout antiquity was largely polychromed<sup>11</sup>. In many cases, even flesh wasn't left blank, although colours disappeared because of conditional damage, such as light and air.<sup>12</sup> Again, although the synthetic blue is far from more naturalising polychromies, this move away from white marble creates a complex connection not only to consumer glamour, but also to ancient colourful sculptures.

Therefore, Koons's dialogue with ancient visual traditions in his 'Metallic Venus' is not simply a process of adapting a traditional statue to standards of a modern art gallery; it is rediscovering the essentials of the ancient nude in modern galleries, or even conversely. Building a bridge between visual culture of our times and art of the ancient era not only proves there is room for modern art to find inspirations in academic scholarship of ancient material culture, but also poses a question if we perhaps share even more than general visual traditions. Let us think closer of Koons' transforming of the classical models of the 'Metallic Venus' to further understand this process.

### **Rethinking idealisation**

The ironical interplay with the ancient traditions of fetishization observed above does not end up at combining two goddesses. Koons' reinterpretation of Venus's gesture and face as well as the participation of white flowers and mirror-polished steel have further implications for the problem of self-consciousness of own body and idealisation.

Let us set off from the sculpture's gesture: whereas the Farnese original sensually lifts the robe to deliberately uncover her buttocks, 'Metallic Venus' seems to be simply taking off her night gown or other garment. No matter what type of clothing it is, Koons' goddess is clumsily trying to take it off as opposed to the ancient goddess who almost manipulates her gesture in a seemingly conscious manner and, consequently, the viewer's sight. In terms of self-awareness of own body, Metallic Venus does not seem to purportedly use her buttocks or any other part to attract attention or tease the spectator and so she might appear 'liberated' from the ancient sexualized theatre of playing with own body in front of the spectator, as presented by the Farnese statue. In contrary to the ancient original that carefully manages the chiton and the robe to look as beautiful as possible in this game, she simply takes it off and does not seem to care whether the spectator is impressed by her buttocks or not. The

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<sup>10</sup> R. Panzanelli, E. Schmidt, K. Lapatin & A. Potts, 2008, p. (the last chapter by Alex Potts)

<sup>11</sup> R. Panzanelli, E. Schmidt, K. Lapatin & A. Potts, 2008, p. (the last chapter by Alex Potts)

<sup>12</sup> G. M. A. Richter & L. F. Hall, 1944, p. 235

act of dynamic taking off the clothing as well as the impression of being less absorbed by own body makes Koons' Venus appears much more 'liberated' not to say freed from the Farnese sexualized protocols of absorption with own body.

The impression of liberation from such an absorption is further enhanced by the white flower standing next to her. As it had already been mentioned, the bunch of white petunias is provided daily by a museum worker – thrown away after a museum closes and replaced before the first spectator comes in. This process becomes a sort of a ritual. However, even if the 'worshipper' realizes that this act of bringing white flowers every single day to the goddess is a form of secular veneration, is Venus aware of being revered? Again, the goddess is somehow ironically, struggling with some clumsiness to take off her gown rather than having in mind the worship ritual going on around. Thus, the goddess seems either not to be aware of being venerated, or she does not care about this makeshift form of reverence. Her self-consciousness of own divinity provokes further questions.

Moreover, not only does the statue seem to undermine the goddess's consciousness of her own divine authority, but also any claims to of individual identity at all. One should note an important feature of Metallic Venus starkly distinguishes her from Venus Callipyge and Venus of Knidos: the modern goddess has hardly facial features. Of course, she has a beautiful and round head, but on her face, the viewer finds an almost flat surface. No eyes, no nose, no lips, no cheek bones. The impression of a 'dissolving face' can be compared to the "Muse" by Constantin Brâncuși (1876 – 1957) who tried to translate abstraction into the sculptural language. The series called 'Sleeping Muse' consists of multiple pieces made of bronze and marble that present an oval head of a muse; whereas some of the works have clearly marked parts of her face, such as eyebrows or nose, a couple of 'Muses' have almost 'absent faces'.



Figure 4 Constantin Brâncuși, *Sleeping Muse II*, ca.1925, Kunsthau Zürich

The reference to the 'Muse' relies not only on metallic material and polished surface, but most importantly on the 'dissolving features' as a symbol of lack of self-consciousness. She is asleep and so has little self-awareness, as she is dreaming unaware of what is going on around. Likewise, Venus's 'empty face' transforms the goddess's into more of a form than of a specific person. The sculpture turns into both a more universal and objectified form that finds its place in mass culture of our times. She is no longer self-conscious of own divinity, identity and body. Venus's self fades away in the lack of self-awareness, in the lack of the individual self.

But what is the reason that the ancient goddess loses the sense of own identity and self-consciousness? As implied by the shining, plasma-like surface of stainless metal, Venus's identity and awareness of the self seem to be drowned in unreal idealisation of female body. In her case, idealisation based on two other goddesses. However, this transformation is not restricted not only to the figure itself.



*Figure 5 Jeff Koons, Metallic Venus, mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colour coating, live flowering plants, 2014*

The mirror-polished surface is able not only to reflect light. Most importantly, 'Metallic Venus' reflects her spectator. It is crucial that Metallic Venus's curved shapes and convex reflecting surfaces of the body work like a *curved mirror*. As shown on the photo above, everything around Venus – walls, other artworks, people – is deformed. So whenever the viewer approaches Venus, the goddess of beauty, his/her own image reflected by her is deformed;



either his/her or head too big, waist too vast, or legs too short. Obviously, neither the Farnese Venus aux belles fesses, nor the Knidian Aphrodite, enjoyed such a polished surface to deform the spectators around, but they were curved mirrors too. The problem 'Metallic Venus' is trying to highlight is not only the idealization and fetishization of human body, but also the apparatus of judging one's beauty in relation to the unreal ideals. The message Venus manifests is that if you look at yourself in the prism of idealism, you will always be deformed. As a result of such a degree of idealisation, Venus's own identity and her awareness of the self fade away. Because of judging beauty in terms of unreal degrees of idealisation already deprived of individual features, Koons' statue shows how the viewer's image of the self risks deformation through dangerous liaisons with the classical and modern ideals.

## **Conclusions**

Although 'Metallic Venus' might be read merely as a product of Koons' fascination with consumerist glamour, the sculpture has much more to show in relation to classical scholarship. The transformation of physical materials – white marble into blue steel – is a consequence of a complex rediscovering the ancient traditions of female nude already present in modern visual sphere rather than of throwing traditional ideas into current exhibitions out of any context. 'Metallic Venus' shows there is room for antiquity in visual culture of our times. Moreover, the transformations undergone by the sculpture are not limited to marble and metal. Koons' work being a visual model synthesising two other divine bodies – Venus Callipyge and Venus of Knidos – achieves a new degree of idealisation of the body. Such a high level of fetishization is accompanied by dissolving Venus's face; the goddess's sense of own identity as well as her self-awareness of the body fade away. The spectator, too, is deformed in the paranoia of idealisation – whenever he or she looks at the Venus, is deformed by the curved mirror of her perfectly unreal body. Idealisation both erases the sense of the self of Venus and deformed the one of the viewer. The metallic goddess proves not only that ancient art is still compatible with our visual culture, but most importantly it served to unmask the modern mechanisms of constructing beauty: if you look at yourself in the prism of idealised forms without necessary caution, you will always believe to be deformed.

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