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Exhibition project
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Fall 2018

Venus in the frame

Narrative section

This exhibition sets out to analyse and inform the viewer about some representations of the figure of Venus. The exhibition's objective is to create a narrative about how the subject has been represented differently throughout time and aims at stimulating the viewers' critical opinion and judgment about the female body representation. Moreover, the viewers will be looking at different canons of beauty and will be able to see how much the female body's perception and standards have changed throughout time.

The first painting exhibited is The Birth of Venus by Botticelli. This painting is one of the main artworks depicting Venus in a shell coming out of the water. It was painted between 1482 and 1485 and became a landmark of xv century Italian painting. The painting is the first example of painting on canvas in Tuscany. The alabaster powder was used to make the colours even brighter and timeless. , and it was meant to be considered as an ode to the wealthy Florentine family who contributed to the development of a reign of prosperity and culture in the city. The wind blows her hair and gently caressed with a shower of rose. On her right side, Ora is waiting for her to get closer and cover her naked body.

Interestingly, she is covering her private parts with her hand and hair as a sign of respect. The painting connects well with Neoplatonism, a current of thought that combined the Greek and Roman cultural heritage with Christianity. From a Neo-platonist point of view, the work means the birth of love and spiritual beauty as a dominant force in life.¹ The actual scene represents the

¹ "Birth Of Venus | Artworks | Uffizi Galleries". 2018. *Uffizi.It*. <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/birth-of-venus>.

verses of Homer, who tells that after her birth, Venus rode on a seashell and seafoam to the island of Cythera. It has been discussed that much attention was placed on Venus' hair which reflects the trend of the fifteenth century and gives her a very romantic image. Botticelli depicted her with a perfectly shaded face and unblemished skin. Nudity wasn't widely diffused as a subject of paintings, and he probably used as models the Capitoline Venus or the Aphrodite of Cnidus. Botticelli contoured her body to make it easier for the audience to distinguish it from the background. It has been noticed that the pale colour of her skin results similar to marble and her overall body-structure seems to be pretty sculpturesque. In this case, the specific subject matter has been approached in an exquisite way reflecting the humanistic tendencies which developed at the time.²

The second painting to be exhibited is The Venus of Urbino by Tiziano. This choice was made to emphasise Tiziano and Botticelli's different purposes and the differences between Florence and Venice's school. Titian Painted in 1538, for the Duke of Urbino this work as a gift from the Duke to his wife. The painting is an allegory of marriage and was intended to be a teaching model for the young spouse. Therefore, this painting showcases very well the values of eroticism, fidelity and motherhood. The overt eroticism suggests the marital obligations that she was expected to fulfil. In this case, Venus is represented as a sensual and delectable woman staring at the viewer who cannot ignore her beauty. Her body is lit up by warm tones which contrast with the darker background. Other symbols are the dog which symbolises the marital fidelity, the young girl in the history and the maid looking at her expresses motherhood. This painting is overall very sensual, but this is due to the private and domestic purpose it is supposed to fit in. some have argued that the perfect balance of colours and contrast; subtle references and meanings, makes the subject the ideal renaissance woman who embodies all traditional attributes of Venus: love, beauty and fertility.³

² "Botticelli's Birth of Venus – Italianrenaissance.Org". 2018. *Italianrenaissance.Org*.
<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/botticelli-birth-of-venus/>.

³ "Venus of Urbino By Titian At Uffizi Gallery Florence". 2018. *Visit Florence - Uffizi Guide*.
<https://uffizi.visitflorence.com/artworks/venus-of-urbino-by-titian/>.

Then, the exhibition will bring the visitors into another will move into another European country to showcase how the same subject was depicted and perceived in another state and at a different period. In Spain, Velasquez was a leading painter usually associated with the romantic movement. Velasquez painted the Toilet of Venus in 1651. The goddess is depicted while looking at herself in the mirror as a form of divine contemplation. It is unsure who commissioned the painting, but this is the only nudity painted by Velasquez mainly because during the baroque time in Spain depicting nudity was believed to be a mortal sin punished by law. The figure of Venus is smooth, and her gentle curves are emphasised by the draperies and the excess of fabric she is laying on. Interesting and disputable is the meaning of the ribbon with might be believed to blind cupid from the actual idea of beauty as he is used to the beauty of the goddess.⁴

On the other hand, always in Spain, Goya painted la Maya Desnuda. He did not intend to state exactly who the female figure is: she can either appear to be the goddess of love and beauty, a concubine, or an odalisque. This painting is an oil on canvas painted in 1795-1800. The subject seems to be the Duchess of Alba depicted as a reclined Venus laying on a green velvet divan with pillows and a spread. This work was intended to please the eye of a private viewer probably Godoy Due to the explicitly of the subject, it has also been sequestered by the Inquisition as it was believed to be too sexual and explicit. Goya is considered the father of romanticism, and with this painting, he challenged severely the very strict mentality of the time, still dominated by the Inquisition. Notably, the sitter has a strong facial expression which engages firmly with the audience, and this element can be associated with other paintings exhibited.⁵

Then the viewers will admire The Great Odalisque the world most famous paintings will be exhibited. The Great Odalisque is a very important painting, rich in symbolic references and determines a stylistic evolution as well as a very different approach to female sensuality and body confidence. , and it is an oil on canvas. In this painting, his romantic tendencies can be noticed.

⁴ "The Toilet Of Venus". 2018. *Artble*.

https://www.artble.com/artists/diego_velazquez/paintings/the_toilet_of_venus.

⁵ The Naked Maja - The Collection - Museo Nacional Del Prado". 2018. *Museodelprado.Es*.

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-naked-maja/65953b93-323e-48fe-98cb-9d4b15852b18>.

In this specific case, the way the nude is represented seems to be following the tradition of the great Venetian masters and analogies with Titian's Venus might be noticed. Therefore, it might be interesting to exhibit these two paintings facing each other as they can be interesting to compare and contrast.

However, a closer look might show that *The Great Odalisque* is not a classical painting: Ingres created an exotic picture where the eroticism of the subject is accentuated. He incorporated many exotic elements in the picture such as the peacock, the fan, the turban, the pearls, the hookah. However, more importantly, the title itself reminds of the French conception of the Orient. In this case, the painting is intended to the male gaze: the subject wants to link to the common perception of women in the Eastern world and stimulate a sense of fear and desire in the viewer. Ingres depicted the female body in a more sexualised way: the pose, her gaze and the setting are explicit. However, the subject sexuality seems to be slightly polished, regal and in porcelain like style which makes this painting acceptable and pleasing to the European audience. Moreover, in contrast to Titian's Venus, the objects of desire are covered promoting a more distant and veiled approach to sexuality. This painting is associated with expansionistic and colonial views on the Eastern, exotic world which developed at the time due to France's expansionistic ideas.⁶

Finally, the visitors will be able to see Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Although the main subject is not specifically Venus, this painting is still significant due to the explicit and slightly aggressive way in which the female body is portrayed. The subjects depicted are somewhat active and force a state of passivity onto the viewer defining the agony and scourge of prostitution. In this painting (1902-01), the traditional idea of beauty is considerably challenged and once again the slightly exotic look of the figures is associated with sex.⁷

⁶ "Between Neoclassicism and Romanticism: Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*". 2018. *Khan Academy*. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-france/a/ingres-la-grande-odalisque>.

⁷ Chave, Anna C. "New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism." *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (1994): 597-611. doi:10.2307/3046058.

Design section

The viewers are invited to observe and appreciate the selection of masterpieces. Therefore, even audience members who are not art history expert can understand and be interested in the topic because the painting is very well known works of art. Moreover, those paintings have also been selected considering the geographical area that they belong to. Some were made in Italy, some in France and some in Spain. This contributes to making the narrative more vivid and more interesting for the visitors who might come from all over the world or who might not have travelled to a specific destination where the work is usually exhibited. Those who are art history experts can also refer to the painting considering the artistic movement the paintings are associated with but will be interesting indeed to everyone to observe the evolution and the differences between different styles of different eras. Therefore, this exhibition is a tremendous educational tool, and students can benefit from it as they can observe paintings that are generally considered iconic. Moreover, all the paintings contain many examples of symbolism which is always an exciting element for viewers as they might be elements that they can remember about the exhibition.⁸

This exhibition welcomes everyone. No architectural barriers will obstacle the access to disabled, people with wheelchairs and strollers. Ramps will be installed in proximity of steps and whether disconnections with the floor might be encountered. Moreover, wall labels will be provided with tactile sensors for those with visual disabilities. Upon request, stewards and trained tour guides could offer assistance to those with all sorts of limitations and need. A form can be found on the exhibition website. However, guided tours will be available for groups, schools, families, and whoever is interested in having a more detailed and didactical experience. For those with shorter attention span or less time available; audio guides will be available at the entrance and purchasable with a small addition of price. The exhibition will be open for three months ideally from February to may. These months are usually good ones as Easter holidays typically happen to be at this time of the year, half term and bank holidays. Therefore, we expect families, tourists, and groups to be more active at this time of the year. Also, right after Christmas, there are fewer opportunities for

⁸ Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp 19-21

people available, and this might be a good excuse to leave the house on weekends. Therefore, twice a month, family workshops and visits will be organised.⁹

The price will be family friendly and the activities suitable for every age. Parents are invited to come along; tailored tours for the little ones will be provided with activities for them to make it more enjoyable. We understand that the topic and the images might be a bit strong for a younger audience as we are mainly dealing with sexuality and gender. Therefore, we will work with psychologists to approach the topic in a very neutral and professional way. This might be an opportunity for parents to learn how to deal with the matter and nudity as well as for the child to develop an understanding of the topic. Moreover, we aim at helping children to build non-judgmental views on the matter and getting them used to the idea that those were actual representations of the female body which celebrated its ability to carry and nourish children. The intent is to make people familiar again to objective and accurate body representations, which are very different to what we are used to seeing with the over-use of Photoshop, and filters.¹⁰

The museum chosen to host the exhibition is the Victoria and Albert Museum. Situated in the heart of London, in a very accessible area for tourists due to its proximity to many other institutions. Moreover, the museum is close to universities and schools which makes it even easier for visitors to come and visit the exhibition. Besides, The V&A has been a pioneer institution in developing new narratives associated with tradition. Space which might be used is the upstairs area usually dedicated to temporary exhibitions. This space is close to the fashion section of the museum which is very beneficial for the display as those who love fashion can also be interested or curious to see what the exhibition is about. Space will be vast and spread out. Since space is open, it might be necessary to install panels to create a sense of division between the paintings. Firstly, all the paintings exhibited are pretty big therefore they need to be all well-spaced. Also, due to the groups and tours, we hope to have, there needs to be enough space for everyone to let them move freely and don't feel constrained. The overall atmosphere will be cosy and warm, and it should roughly remind of a private space because these paintings were usually displayed in a private environment.

⁹ Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp 40-56

¹⁰ Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp 25-27

Moreover, we want the audience to feel entirely comfortable with what is exhibited. Visitors need to feel confident observing, discussing, comparing the different works. Therefore, space has to help them. Sofas will be provided to let the visitors rest, take a break or just read or sketch the paintings. What has to be avoided is the development of a formal space which might approach the topic in a distant or vulgar way. The overall exhibition is a celebration of the female body which is approached gracefully and elegantly.



<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2012/12/13/yale-university-art-gallery-opens-its-expanded-space-and-masterpiece/iCSepRYDchUH5BoL2GLuYK/story.html>

V&A upstairs exhibition space



To stimulate also the other senses interactive systems will be associated with the paintings to make the experience more complete. For instance, Botticelli's Venus will be provided with an audio system which replicates the sound of the sea and the moving of the plants. On the other hand,

Titian's Venus of Urbino will be exhibited alongside with samples of the fabrics which are depicted in the painting. This will engage the audience who will be stimulated and have a more impactful experience of the exhibition.¹¹

The paintings will be hung chronologically. This system will help the viewer to orientate and move around the exhibition without getting lost or missing the narrative. One of the aims is also to reflect on how the female body has been represented differently throughout time. Therefore, a direct approach might be beneficial to help the visitors navigate the exhibition. This approach is more rigid, but since we aim at attracting students, it will be easier for managing groups and tours. The system is favourable for a more didactic and academic approach to the subject and the chances for the audience to leave before the end of the exhibition are way minimal.¹²

The lighting will be mainly very bright. The visitors need to feel comfortable and see the masterpieces. Moreover, all the paintings are quite colourful, so it will be necessary to develop a good lighting system to make them pop up. Maybe the walls could be covered with bright red or in a lighter shade of pink to make the painting stand out.¹³

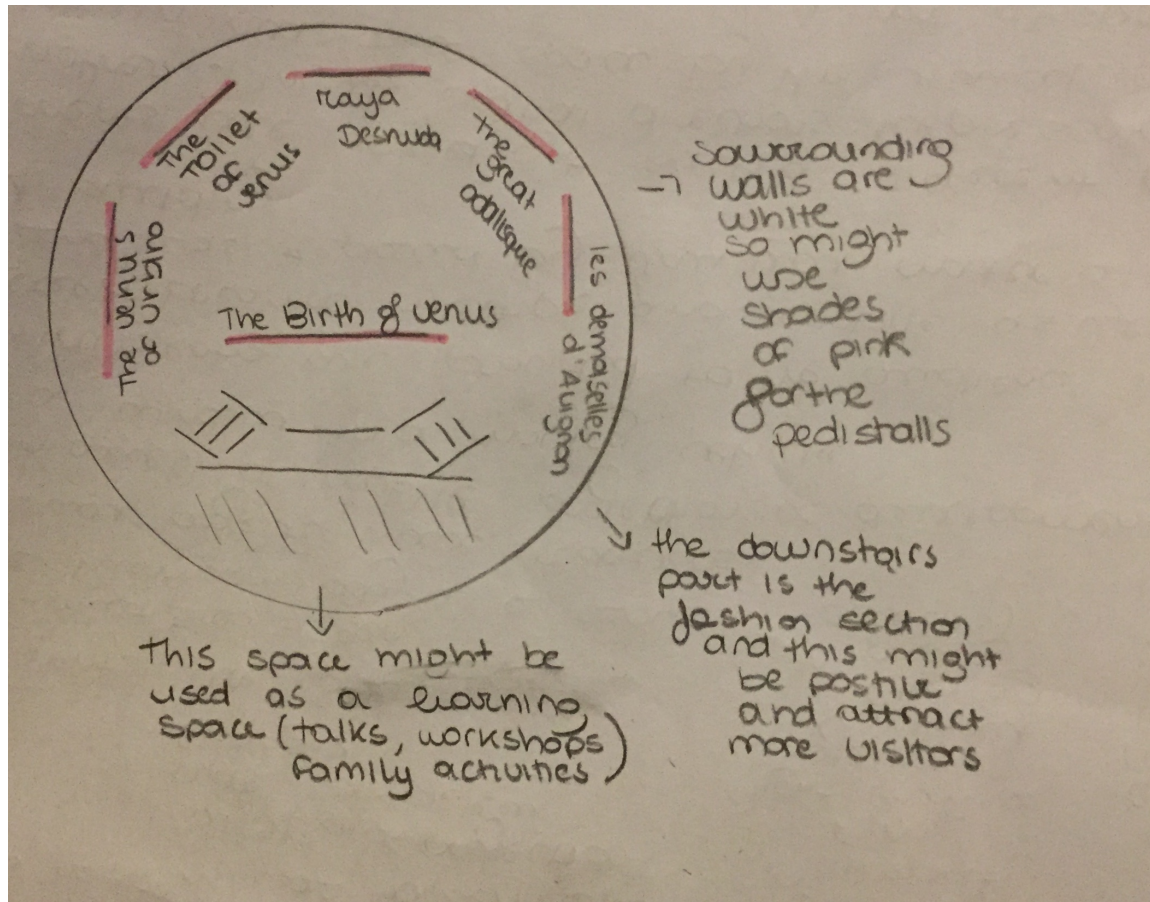


¹¹ Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp 24-29

¹² Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp 56-60

¹³ Dean, David. 1994. *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. Pp.32-37

Exhibition layout/ floor map



Exhibition leaflet



Wall Label example

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres,
La Grande Odalisque, 1814 oil on canvas
36''x63''(91x162)

The reclined body is set in a sumptuous interior. The overall atmosphere is slightly exotic; some of the objects that Ingres included are the peacock, the fan, the turban, the large pearls, the hookah (a pipe for hashish or perhaps opium). The painting was commissioned by Caroline Murat (Napoleon's sister)

He never revealed the identity of the sitter but aimed at representing a gorgeous female figure who is an object of desire. Ingres was inspired by old masters such as Giorgione, Titian, and Velasquez. The female body seems to be similar to Parmigianino's Madonna with the long neck, particularly for the distorted shaper of her body. Her back appears to be too long, and the position of her lower leg is unnatural as it is not possible that her left leg meets with the knee in the middle of the painting. One of her arms looks shorter than the other, and her pelvis appears distorted, but this is because he intended to purely depict a real stylistic figure to make her look more sensual and elegant. He wanted to portray a female figure which reflects an idea of fantasy.¹⁴

In conclusion, this exhibition project outlined an exhibition focused on the figure of the Venus and the female body's representations. The topic of choice was the figure of Venus and body representation. This topic is particularly relevant nowadays due to the over-attention placed on women's body. Moreover, body representations appear to be slightly unrealistic and not objective these days, and this exhibition intends to demonstrate how women's body naturally is and how much the standards have changed. Moreover, the social role of women can also be analysed throughout the whole exhibition as the painting showcased belong to different geographical areas and time periods. This is an excellent opportunity for art historians to observe masterpieces, make a connection and develop the multiple narratives.

¹⁴ "Grande Odalisque, J.A.D. Ingres: Analysis, Interpretation". 2018. *Visual-Arts-Cork.Com*. <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/paintings-analysis/grande-odalisque.htm>.

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