



Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus at a Mirror*, c. 1615 Diego Velazquez, *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, 1647-51

Verity and Vanity

By Etta Harshaw

Aside from the Virgin Mary, Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, as she is known in Roman mythology, is probably the most widely depicted female figure in all of painting. From her birth, to scenes with her husband – Mars, the god of war – to her peaceful slumber, artists have long attempted to capture the essence of fairness through sculptures and paintings of the goddess. Two of the most unusual images of the goddess are Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus at a Mirror*, ca. 1615, and Diego Velazquez's *Toilet of Venus*, 1647-51, which is more commonly known as *The Rokeby Venus*, which both depict Venus at a mirror. The most notable aspects of

Rubens' and Velazquez's works are Venus' sense of vanity in her reflection and her sensual stare, and the ambiguous reflection that challenges the viewer, respectively. Scholars debate what statement the artists make concerning the position of the viewer and the sexual nature of women. While the subject matter is more or less the same, there are numerous nuanced differentiations that each artist makes, which create differently balanced compositions and drastically different conclusions regarding what each seems to say about the goddess. While the two Venuses project contrasting moralities, both make a claim to women's agency that defies the typical latency of the female nude.

Academic discussion of Rubens' 1615 *Venus at a Mirror* is largely dominated by the analysis of the Venus' invitation to be perceived sexually. As opposed to the abashed and naive nude of the Renaissance, Rubens' Venus is all but demure. She peers at the viewer, lustfully, vainly aware of her beauty. Her eager glance is created to be met by the male gaze. Scholarly analysis of Rubens' 1615 *Venus Before the Mirror* is consumed by the figure's knowledge of her own beauty. She admires herself keenly, with the reassurance of her female attendant and her son, Cupid. Most scholars describe this as a portrayal of female narcissism¹. The goddess adores herself in her brilliant reflection, which appears prettier and more delicate than the actual outline of her face which can be partially seen. It is clear that the goddess does not only admire herself, as she begins to look at the viewer, but she confronts him with a confident seduction, she asks - if not expects - to be desired. Unlike the nudes of the classical past, Venus is not demure. She does not cover herself or look away, shyly. This Venus feels emblematic of vanity², she is not a hidden

gem that the viewer has stumbled upon by some act of luck. The Venuses of Rubens' predecessors like Boticelli present a more modest figure, an unexpecting being, not so explicitly aware of her power. Rubens depicts a woman naked by choice, not by chance. Theorists also find the woman's body type peculiar, noting that while the usual waist-to-hip ratio for a female nude averages at .70, Rubens' figure has a ratio of .76³. The typical ratio is decidedly the perfect ratio for expressing a woman's fertility, indicating that Ruben's decision is an aesthetic, intended to display non-reproductive sexuality. As opposed to a fertility figure that emphasizes feminine traits that relate to reproduction, it seems that Venus is reduced to her ability to provide aesthetic and sexual pleasure, rather than being praised as a creator of life. The presence of Cupid, however, complicates this notion, as it would seem to emphasize her motherly aspects. Nonetheless, her sexual desirability dominates the scene as she looks into the mirror, disregarding the efforts of her straining son. Beauty triumphs love as Venus' domain – the goddess begins to act as an object of desire, or seductress, rather than the giver or receiver of heartfelt or romantic love. Rubens' emphasis on flesh reinforces the relevance of lust and vanity – sins of the flesh. Typical of Rubens' work, he carefully creates the most minute gradations to depict every detail of the figure's flesh. There is a tactility that draws in the viewer, that makes Venus tangible, that allows her to become a physical object to be examined, felt, and sexualized. The overarching academic opinion, even despite the work's many nuances, is that Venus acts as a personification of narcissism⁴, which the viewer uses to justify his sexual gaze upon the goddess.

Academicians most commonly discuss how daring Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* is for its contextual provocativeness and the curious depiction of Venus' reflection. Both Rubens and Velazquez worked in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, meaning that art - inextricably linked with wealth, power, and politics - became inextricably linked with religion and adherence to techniques and regulations of representation that supported patrons' religious motives. The life-sized nature of Velazquez's Venus was typically reserved for religious images at the time; for Christian images. The figure takes up nearly half of the 5'10" composition. By depicting this Venus at such a large scale, Velazquez raises her to the same esteem as a Christian figure. He undermines not only the Spanish rule, not only Catholicism, but monotheism as a whole⁵. Even given this scandalous subversion of artistic-religious practices, most of the discussion of *The Rokeby Venus* harps upon the discussion of the figure's reflection. Velazquez's arguably most famous work, *Las Meninas*, too, has perplexed art historians with its use of reflections. The reflection of Venus is ambiguous, her face cannot be discerned, even upon careful inspection. Despite the vast collection of paintings featuring the goddess of love and beauty, which set an aesthetic precedent for her facial representation, Velazquez chooses to keep her facial features unclear. The paint applied to this small portion of the canvas is, in fact, thinner than that of the rest of the canvas, making the reflection's presence even more questionable. Scholars cite reasons for this, which extend to both Velazquez's stance on the male gaze and his explorations of the art of painting. The primary explanation of this decision is that this Venus is meant to refute the justification of the male gaze in her refusal of it and that Velazquez reinterprets beauty

itself⁶. Beauty must no longer be found in naive abundance, but in knowing scarcity. Venus's reflection may represent a manifestation of her view of her interior self. Perhaps it is not the actual image of her, but a mirror to her inner thoughts - not her actual reflection, but a representation of her self-reflection¹.

It is also posed that the physical body of Venus is meant to further separate the viewer from her reflection – both physical and mental blockades to the reflection of the goddess exist. The angle of the mirror makes this formally ambiguous image spatially ambiguous as well. It is unclear if the viewer glimpses Venus's reflection or his own. Perhaps it is the goddess, but it might also implicate the viewer as one of Venus' lovers, or perhaps the viewer is an image of Venus herself⁶. This separation may also complexify the character of Venus; while her appearance is the main domain of her power, she cannot so easily be consumed by one visually¹. The nature of this confused relationship may be a reflection of Velazquez's definition of art. Velazquez brings again into question the nature of pictorial truth, creating an effect of a painting within a painting. Velazquez breaks the spell of his own naturalism – he disrupts the process of viewing his work by reminding the viewer of the subject's inherent falseness. One is reminded that this is not Venus herself, but a painting of Venus. This both speaks to the aesthetic value of painting and the importance of the painter himself. The thinning of the paint for the reflection of the figure exposes the weave of the work's canvas. Given that the work was based on a live model, the mirror is the tool through which Velazquez would've seen the model; this reinforces firstly the artist as the translator of reality into image, secondly the artist's presence in

composition, and finally that the artist has carefully interpreted the scene using theories of artistic depiction. Rather than depicting the model for the painting, he depicts the canvas, reminding the viewer that he is the most important figure for the work, not the subject alone. The interpretation of this reflection as a painting also suggests that art itself is beauty. If the reflection of the figure is the representation of the art of painting itself, and it replaces the depiction of the goddess as beauty, Velazquez therefore suggests that painting itself is beauty⁶. Thus the provocative work is not only an investigation of womankind and her powers through beauty, but also of art and aesthetic theory, and an assertion of the artist's importance.

The two depictions of the scene of Venus and her mirror share most of the same compositional elements; Venus, her mirror, her son, Cupid, and some sort of drapery. In Ruben's scene of Venus, she is also accompanied by a black servant, who is absent from Velazquez's rendition. In each, Cupid supports the mirror in some way. Velazquez depicts Venus' son draping some sort of pink ribbon over the mirror's frame, which matches the blue sash he wears across his softly rounded torso, unifying the two. He rests carefully upon the bed on which Venus lays and his wings are softly and relaxedly outstretched behind him. He looks towards the mirror with playful curiosity, perhaps at the ribbons he adorns the frame with, or perhaps and the reflection of his mother. The cupid in Rubens' depiction strains to hold the mirror a bit, arms stretched widely. His back bends uncomfortably as he reaches as far as he seems to be able to, to hold the mirror up at his mother's seated height, and his dark wings fold in sharply, withdrawn into his back as he stands. There is a sense of tension and struggle created that is lacking in Velazquez's

hazy and eternal scene. Ruben's supple Cupid looks up towards his mother as she sits upright, turning her right cheek towards the face of the mirror and her attendant caresses her shimmering blonde hair. Both Venuses are positioned with their backs to the viewer, Rubens' figure is covered minimally with a white, transparent cloth and a jeweled band around her arm.

Velazquez's figure reclines, similarly to Titian's Venus of Urbino, an artist whom Velazquez studied rigorously, the most significant difference being that Velazquez's figure faces away from the picture plane; The inversion of this masterwork hints at Velazquez's intention to begin to question the artform. Velazquez chooses to depict his figure completely nude, the cloth falls only onto the bed on which she lays, and she is absent of any jewels, something extremely abnormal for depictions of the goddess. While Rubens' Venus' long, wavy, blond hair cascades down her neck, into the hands of her attendant, Velazquez has portrayed her with her dark hair tied up, revealing her neck. Rubens opts for the classical idealized form of Venus, with her softened, voluptuous hips and tender back and arms, whereas Velazquez chooses an unusually thin portrayal of the goddess. A similar shadow is cast upon the lower back, and on the curvature where the waist and hip meet on the right side of each of the central figures' torso. Even given these disparate theoretical adaptations of the scene, the works remain rather similar in terms of subject, absent of contextualization.

The most central – thus most important – feature of the two scenes is the depiction of Venus' reflection, especially how both her features and gaze are treated in each work. In Rubens' *Venus at a Mirror*, Venus looks to the side, the mirror displaying a quarter profile, with her head

at a slight tilt to her left. As her gaze passes her round and blushing cheeks, it is clear that she does not look at herself, but directs her attention beyond the picture plane, in the general direction of the viewer as he stands in front of the painting. With a soft raise of her eyebrows and a subtle smile, she seems to welcome the viewer; she discreetly invites his gaze as she poses. It is as if her body and reflection do not match, as the edge of her iris peeks into visibility on her left, yet they appear central in the view of the mirror. Her features are soft with diffuse shadows yet made distinct with a sharp highlight. Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* reclines sincerely, placing her weight on her right arm, as she faces the mirror. Unlike Ruben in his clear image of beauty in the depiction of the goddess of love, Velazquez obscures Venus' face with swift, light, imprecise brushstrokes. Velazquez's Venus seems to be dimmed by the silver of the murky, dull mirror, whereas Ruben's Venus is warmly illuminated by the crystalline surface of her mirror.

A similarity taken for granted in the context of Western art that exists between the two depictions of Venus is the purity of her skin tone. As the Rokeby Venus' body is splayed horizontally across the bed, a diffuse highlight brightens the lifted side of her body to a nearly pure white. While the overall yellow tone of Ruben's composition warms Venus' flesh to a warmer, more naturalistic tone, the dark skin of her Black attendant reinforces Venus' whiteness. The contrast between the laywoman and the goddess, the ordinary and the divine, becomes black and white, literally. Whiteness becomes an essential characteristic of beauty, and darkness becomes subordinate. Standards of beauty here fall within the Western, racially defined canon of beauty. Other than the whiteness and femininity of her slim yet curvaceous body, the Velazquez

Venus is nondescript; Velazquez does not define beauty as any certain arrangement of facial features. The artists employ different methods for creating a dynamically balanced composition. Rubens depicts a vertical Venus, balanced by the bright cupid and the darkly framed mirror on her lower left, and her dark-skinned attendant and Venus' bright yellow locks to her upper right. Velazquez's composition approaches Raphael's golden ratio as the eye moves from Venus' head, arches through her curving body, up and over the small cupid, and back down to the mirror and into the fuzzy rounded reflection of the goddess. She lies down, her horizontality and relaxedness informs us that she has chosen not to address us, unlike Rubens' Venus, who purposefully catches our eye. The constant odds at which the Spanish and Flemish rulers found each other during the 17th century, would suggest that the subject matter and stylization of the artworks produced in each state be drastically different, yet Velazquez's experimentation in his private work allowed him to produce a work devoid of many of the values his royal patronage would insist upon, leading him to a work overall formally similar to the Flemish artist, Rubens.

While the societies in which these two works were made were theologically opposed, both artists were trained in the Catholic tradition. This work was produced in the period in which Rubens converted to Calvinism, from Catholicism, but the stylistic aspects of Catholic art are still dominant. Velazquez too strayed from his Catholic faith, primarily in his creation of this work. At the time of the Rokeby's creation, the Spanish Inquisition meant that depicting a nude subject put Velazquez at risk for excommunication. Both artists spent time studying in Italy, and the two resemble in different ways the works of Italian masters, like Titian whose Venus of

Urbino has a similar position to Velazquez's and a similar curvaceous figure to Rubens'.

Rubens' later style was extremely influenced by Titian and Velazquez also studied Titian's nudes in preparation for the completion of *The Rokeby Venus*.

Despite the artists' practices in naturalism, both engage in a sense of illusionism by infusing the work with a fantastical sheen. The coppery brown hair of Velazquez's Venus and Cupid refracts a divinely bright highlight and the blond hair of Rubens' Venus appears nearly gold as the light hits its luscious waves. The pink ribbon around Velazquez's mirror shines brilliantly as it folds over the frame, and Rubens' mirror refracts light at the glass' cut at the edge, drawing attention to Venus' reflection. Despite Velazquez's comparatively dull composition, the two still express the unearthly aspects of the goddess with this pointed illumination. This ethereal light imbues both women with an aspect of divine aptitude and authority.

Surprisingly, in comparing the two works, whose subjects' attitudes seem to be diametric, they both make a claim to feminine power, despite the genre's association with the male gaze. It is not that Rubens' Venus does not cater to the male gaze, she does. She looks seductively at the presumably male viewer, but unlike most nudes which feel utterly demure and innocent, this Venus projects agency in her sexual nature. Perhaps one could consider this a precursor to Manet's *Olympia*, the work depicting a prostitute reclining on a bed in her brothel, whose direct gaze famously shocked viewers and undisputedly changed the course of Modern art. The goddess of love and beauty does not allow the power of her beauty to be left to the beholder, she

commands it. While the goddess is still reduced to her appearance, she still represents an extremely powerful figure. The two figures in the scene look at her devoutly; while she emulates lust for the viewer, she is respected devoid of her sexual desirability by her son and the woman who tend to her. Given the control that Venus holds over her counterparts and Rubens' compositional power dynamics, it would be far-fetched to call the figure submissive. Venus is given this place of regard, but not in a moral sense. She does represent vanity, she is the controlling force of these sins of the flesh. She becomes antagonistic, even deceptive, as she takes control of her image, she manipulates the male gaze. It is precisely this knowing beauty that is used to justify the male gaze. There is an unprecedented sense of consent, which in the hands of a patriarchal, Christian society takes an ethereal figure and transforms her into an entrapment for sin. Her temptation becomes threatening. Whether or not the artist approves of this feminine dominance, or seeks to criticise it is up to debate, but it certainly exists.

The formal analysis of *The Rokeby Venus* leads to a different conclusion about the form of power a woman can take; rather than control through her overt sexuality, she conservatively holds power over the viewer in her inaccessibility. As she turns away from the viewer, her back separates the viewer from her immaterial reflection. As the eye attempts to pass her, as one tries to define her identity, she disappears. Rather than the viewer being aware of a naive subject, as in other, more traditional nudes, the viewer is unable to discern her image, despite being aware of her presence. She is very accessible in that she is completely uncovered, but she has the power to turn away. Even though no material is in the way, she is concealed, she has chosen for the viewer

not to see her. Venus refuses the viewer and his gaze. Unlike Rubens' goddess, there is no evidence of Venus' self-admiration. It is completely unclear whether or not she looks at herself. The avoidance of facial depiction seems to signify an utter lack of narcissism, after all, it makes little sense that the goddess of beauty would be so awe-stricken by her own image. This lack of narcissism goes again to disprove the acceptance of the male gaze. Rather, she tempts the viewer to engage with the idea of beauty critically. The image of beauty is denied, but the mirror tempts the viewer to create the face of beauty. Cupid looks at his mother with adoration, but not attraction. Something about their relation to one another feels casual, the viewer is again asked not to sexualize this woman although she is nude; while in profile as opposed to exposing his backside, Cupid is just as naked as she is. The viewer is not welcome into this scene; he is lesser than the divine figures who engage with the scene and he is refused the knowledge that the mother and son are permitted. Rather than the woman becoming the other, the object to be studied, she is the keeper of pleasure that is inaccessible to the viewer. While most nudes grant the viewer the omniscient position of stumbling upon the bare female, while she is blissfully unaware, Velazquez reverses these roles, giving Venus an active role in the discovery of beauty and forcing the viewer into an eternal obedience to Venus' refusal of his admittance. Both depictions of Venus and her reflection challenge the ease of the male gaze, but Rubens goes as far as to challenge it with the female gaze. Perhaps this revolutionary depiction of the female nude comes from each artist's work with noble Spanish women.

The depictions of Venus by Rubens and Velazquez provoke numerous questions about the function of female sexuality. While the artists have chosen the same scene, their inquiries on the capacities of the female nude venture in different directions, thus they utilize different compositional structures and symbolism but share an ethereal tone. Even despite Rubens' aggressive sexualization of the female form, and Velazquez's questioning of this sexualization, both artists depict a feminine control over the objectification of the body. For works of the 17th century, the versions of Venus that Rubens and Velazquez created feel inexplicably modern. Rubens' Venus owns her sexuality; she knows her seductive powers and is not afraid to utilize her charms. Velazquez's Venus begins to neutralize her body; the mother calmly lays and forces the viewer to readjust his expectations of what ownership he is right to expect from the female body. The typically contested subject of the nude, with the unquestioned sexualization of the female form, may very well be in similar company with these two works. But perhaps these are two symbols of different aspects of a woman's choice of her body's exposure, far ahead of their time.

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