
Obesity in Art – A Brief Overview

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Abstract

This brief overview of obesity in art will look at how fatness has been depicted in Western art and its antecedents from classical times to the present day; what, if anything, this can tell us about how prevalent obesity was in previous centuries, and how the meanings attached to being fat may have altered over the years.

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The earliest sculptural representations of the body all show it as female, large-buttocked, obese even, although the smooth contours of the Venuses of Willendorf (c. 30,000–22,000 BC; fig. 1), and Lespugue (c. 34,000–29,000 BC; fig. 2) contrast with the lumpy obesity of the Venus of Laussel (c. 25,000–20,000 BC; fig. 3). Nigel Spivey, writing about the emphasis on 'fatness and fertility' in primitive art, offers neuroscientist Vilanyur. S. Ramachandran's theory that

'in technical terms these [excessively fleshy] features amount to hypernormal stimuli that activate neuron responses in our brain . . . something that comes naturally to us because our brains are hard-wired to concentrate perceptive focus upon objects with pleasing associations, or those parts of objects that matter most. For palaeolithic people, the female *parts* that mattered most were those required for successful reproduction: the breasts and pelvic girdle. The circuit of the palaeolithic brain, therefore, isolated these parts and *amplified* them' [1].

Spivey argues that the tendency to distort images of the body recurs across many cultures and periods of history. In other words:

'The drift of all popular art is towards the lowest common denominator, and there are more women who look like a potato than the Cnidian Venus. The shape to which the female body tends to return is one which emphasises its biological functions . . .' [2].

Other theorists have denied the element of exaggeration in prehistoric art, pointing instead to the 'relative linearity of warm-dwelling peoples, and the relative globularity of cold-dwelling ones' at least as far back as the Palaeolithic era, so that, even allowing for some artistic licence, the figurines probably bear some credible relation to the models