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**Self-Representation in Upper
Paleolithic Female Figurines
Examined Through
Contemporary Applied Studio
Practice**

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Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic Female Figurines Examined Through Contemporary Applied Studio Practice

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility that the first stylistically consistent representations of the human figure were made from the point of view of self, and concludes that Upper Paleolithic 'Venus' figurines may be visually derived from ordinary women's experiences of viewing their own bodies. Anatomical omissions and proportional distortions found in Gravettian style female figurines occur naturally in autogenous, or self-generated, visual information. The size, shape, and articulation of body parts in early figurines appear as they would be determined by their relationship to the eyes and the relative effects of foreshortening, distance, and occlusion rather than as representations of symbolic motivations.

This is evidenced in controlled drawing exercises executed by students enrolled in Life Drawing courses at the University of Central Missouri from 2006-2013. Initially blind to the hypothesis, individuals participating in the study produce drawings depicting self-viewing vantage points of the foreshortened body. Anatomical divisions, shape, and relative scale represented in the results sync with the articulations of early figurines.

The collaborative approach in research and drawing practices seeks to synthesize historical, anthropological, and cultural implications inherent in considering an autogenous point-of-view in Upper Paleolithic 'Venus' figurines with modes of self-representation in contemporary studio practice. The results examine the phenomenological and physiological aspects of visual experience and a legacy of self-representation.

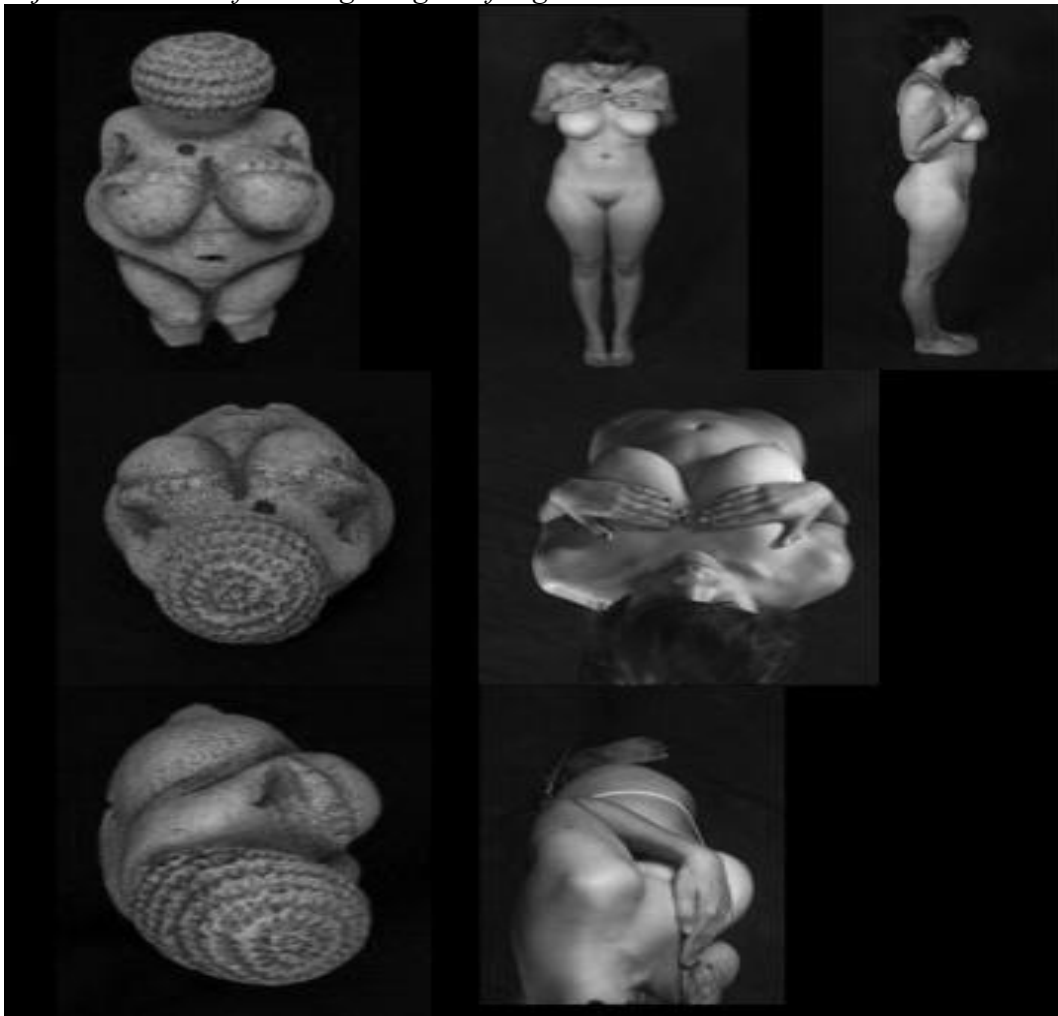
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An Observational Study of Self-Drawing Behavior

The world's oldest stylistically related works of art representing the human figure are found in archaeological strata now identified with regional variants of the Gravettian culture in the European Upper Paleolithic about 30,000 to 20,000 years ago. In the 150 years or so since their discovery the possibilities raised by numerous comparative and interpretive studies have yet to generate a consensus about why our ancestors began to create objects and images representing the human body or what functions they initially served (Delporte 1993; Giedion 1968; Leroi-Gourhan 1968a, 1968b). In 1996, McDermott presented the theory that the central tendency of style in Gravettian figurines originated from the immediate visual and tactile experience of one's own body seen without benefit of reflective technology, such as mirrors.

Figure 1. *Comparative images of a museum quality cast of the 'Venus of Willendorf no. 1', and a contemporary female model, which illustrate the objective and "self-viewing" angles of regard*



Specifically, he proposed that Gravettian style figurines represent ordinary and normally proportioned women at different stages of their reproductive lives, but as seen from the point of view of 'self' rather than from the point of view of 'other' human beings as is universally assumed. Gravettian style figurines may thus represent the women who carved them and should be recognized as a form of bodily self-portraiture. Known traditionally as 'Venus Figurines', most being nude women, (Marshack 1991, McDermott 1985), the visual information generated from the fixed point of view inherent in self-viewing parsimoniously suggests that a host of general and particular features of the Gravettian style are not necessarily the result of arbitrary symbolic choice by presumed male artists since these features occur naturally in routine daily acts of self-inspection and hygiene. Thus, like Upper Paleolithic images in general, Gravettian style figurines are derived from the natural appearances of the outside world (Roebroeks 2000), except that they have been carved as if seen from the point of view of self instead of other. Meanwhile the influence of this alternative way of representing the human figure has been mostly overlooked.

The possibility that the visual self-inspection and grooming routines of daily life may have been a significant factor in the Gravettian style has escaped prior notice partially because those functions are today accomplished with the assistance of mirrors, which did not exist in the Upper Paleolithic. Mirrors also profoundly alter our relationship with our visual selves. They make it possible for us today to see ourselves from the point of view of 'other', which would have been impossible in prehistory. However, it is the original direct point of view of self as seen before mirrors were invented that best fits the physical evidence embodied in the Gravettian style. Although these figurines appear observationally and realistically made, they have actually been defined more by how they depart from accurate anatomy. Those distinctive anatomical omissions and proportional distortions long recognized as defining the Gravettian style of female figurines occur naturally when seen from the proposed point of self-view. Thus, the unique size, shape, and articulation of body parts seen in Gravettian figurines are attributable to the effects of foreshortening, distance, occlusion and other compositional factors associated with the physical facts of unassisted self-viewing rather than by symbolic distortion.

The potential interpretative power of the self-representation hypothesis has been investigated in an ongoing study of controlled drawing exercises executed by students enrolled in the Life Drawing and Figure Construction courses at the University of Central Missouri from 2006 to the present. Initially blind to the hypothesis, students participating in the study were given assignments requiring them to produce drawings depicting a series of self-viewing perspectives of the foreshortened body.

Through a collaborative approach in research and visual recording, this study sought to synthesize artistic, anthropological, and cultural implications inherent in reconsidering the figurines' authorship and purpose with phenomenological and physiological aspects of visual experience in drawing

practices, and the artistic legacy of self-representation. Methodologically, the study employed natural history models of unobtrusive observation with the systematic recording of behavior. With the assistance of faculty colleagues accumulated drawings were repeatedly sorted to reveal natural categories of imagery.

Upper Paleolithic 'Venus' Figurines

Some of the most widely recognized objects from the Upper Paleolithic are the so-called 'Venus' figurines, of which there are approximately 40 largely intact examples and perhaps two or three times as many fragments known. The Gravettian style female images that constitute this formal paradigm and the cultural infra-structure which supported it, demonstrate considerable chronological and stylistic homogeneity through out an immense geographic area and period of time. These sites span a 3,000 km-long cultural corridor from the northern slopes of Pyrenees to the river valleys of European Russia (Abramova 1962, 1995; Mussi 2001), with late examples found in northern Italy. This cultural corridor corresponds with proposed multi-directional migration patterns and movements largely related to the Pleniglacial maximum (LGM) (28,000 to 25,000 yr BP) and recession. (Kozłowski 1992). This expansion and recession of the last ice age glaciers, is thought to have controlled access to these routes and such movements are preserved in the resulting differential distribution of cultural traits. The immense geographic area impacted by variants of the Gravettian techno-complex as well as the stylistic and chronological cohesiveness of such finds as shouldered points, suggest that these so-called 'Venus' figurines are indicative of the systematic spread or dissemination of the stylistic tradition identified with the Gravettian style figurine (Delporte 1993, Svoboda 2007, 2008, Verpoorte 2001).

Generally speaking the study of Gravettian figurative art is today in a terrible muddle, with little current agreement even on the physical properties of the style. Many factors contribute to the reigning confusion, which is ultimately attributable to the failure to develop an interdisciplinary methodology appropriate to the subject. In recent years it would appear that academic turf issues are increasingly contributing to this muddle with Anthropology being particularly energetic in defending what many in that important cultural field obviously consider their territory. The rejection by Anthropology not only of an overly narrow and limiting Eurocentric definition of art, but of all that is known about image making by Art History bodes ill for future efforts to understand Paleolithic images.

There is progress (Conkey, *et al*, 1997; Cook 2013; Svoboda 2008) even though much energy is being consumed in defending disciplinary boundaries instead of more productive interdisciplinary cooperation. For example, our understanding of the true variety of Upper Paleolithic images has been enhanced by establishing the chronological positions of the earlier Gravettian and later Magdalenian phases of the Upper Paleolithic (Ucko 1977). Figurines produced during the Gravettian period tend to be sculpted in the round, as opposed to the engraving and relief representations common to the

Magdalenian period. The stylistic paradigm established in the Gravettian differs significantly from the linear, stylized, and perhaps more symbolic treatment of form that is representative of imagery produced during the subsequent Magdalenian period. The two developmental trajectories should not be collapsed together.

There is no doubt that Gravettian style figurines represent nude women, but there is little agreement beyond this fact. In spite of what appear to be significant distortions of proportion the features remain easily recognizable but are far from what would be considered anatomically correct. The absence of anatomical exactitude has led many researchers to see them as 'reflecting arbitrary convention and abstract schematization rather than observational reality' (McDermott 1996; Dobres 1992; Leroi-Gourhan 1968b). In fact, it is the specific manner in which reality is integrated with presumably conceptual departures from anatomical objectivity that best defines this style of image (McDermott 1985). Let us consider some of the properties of a self-representation paradigm for the so-called Venus Figurines of the Gravettian.

Figure 2. *Leroi-Gourhan's 'lozenge composition,' a product of the mental combination necessary to create a full-length image from the separate views required by female self-inspection of the anterior aspects of the body*

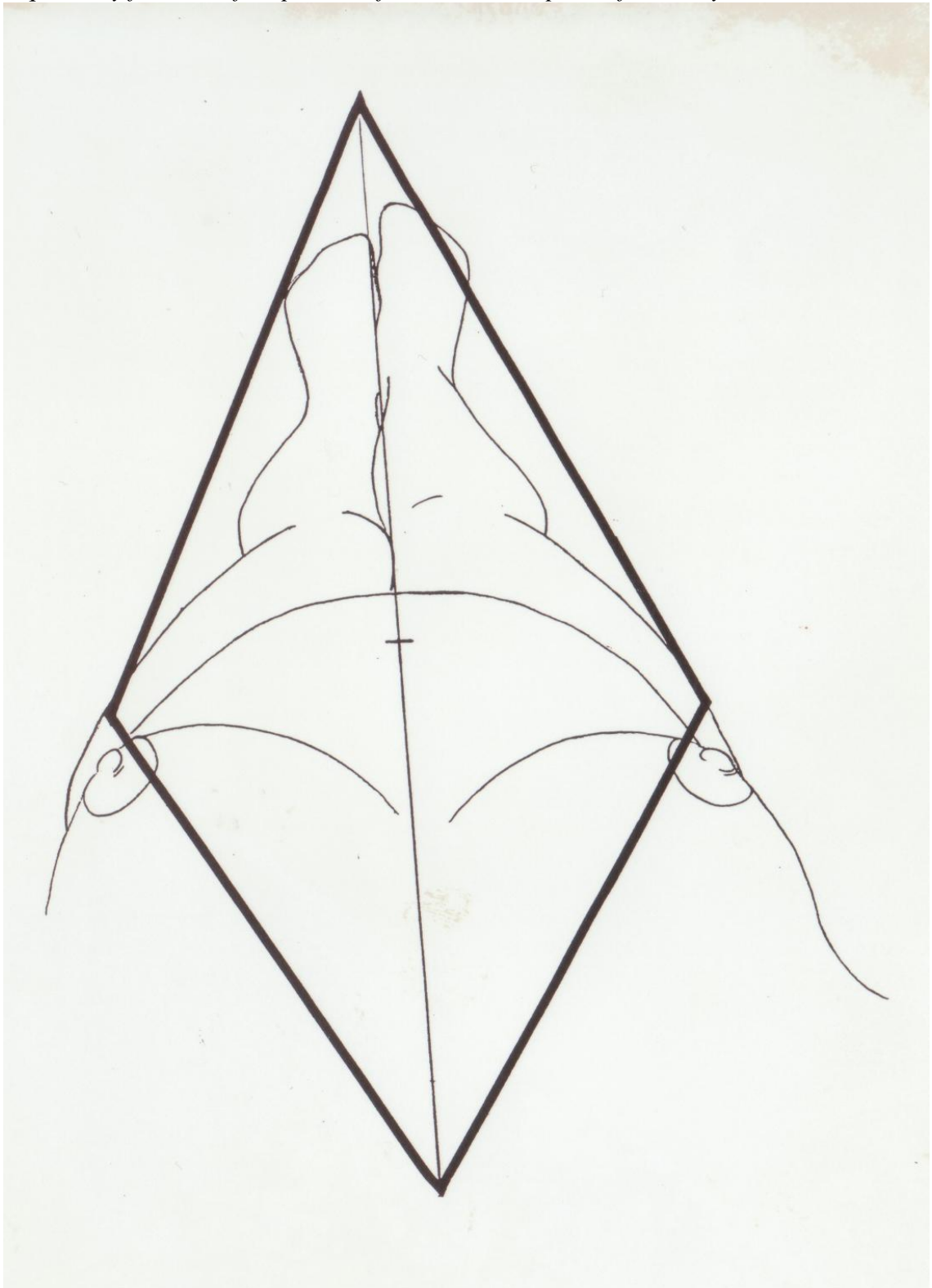


Figure 3. Anatomical distortions encountered in Gravettian style figurines (redrawn after Leroi-Gourhan 1968), showing the relationships Leroi-Gourhan called the 'lozenge composition': an abdominal circle with a diameter defined by the greatest width of the image (a,b), the incorrect proportions seen in the upper and lower body (c, d), and the unnatural elevation of the vertical midpoint and greatest width of the female body (a-h). a, Lespugue; b, Grimaldi 'lozenge'; c, Kostenki no.3; d, Gagarino no I; e, Willendorf no. I; f, Laussel 'woman with the horn'; g, Doni Vestonice no. I; h, Gagarino no. 3

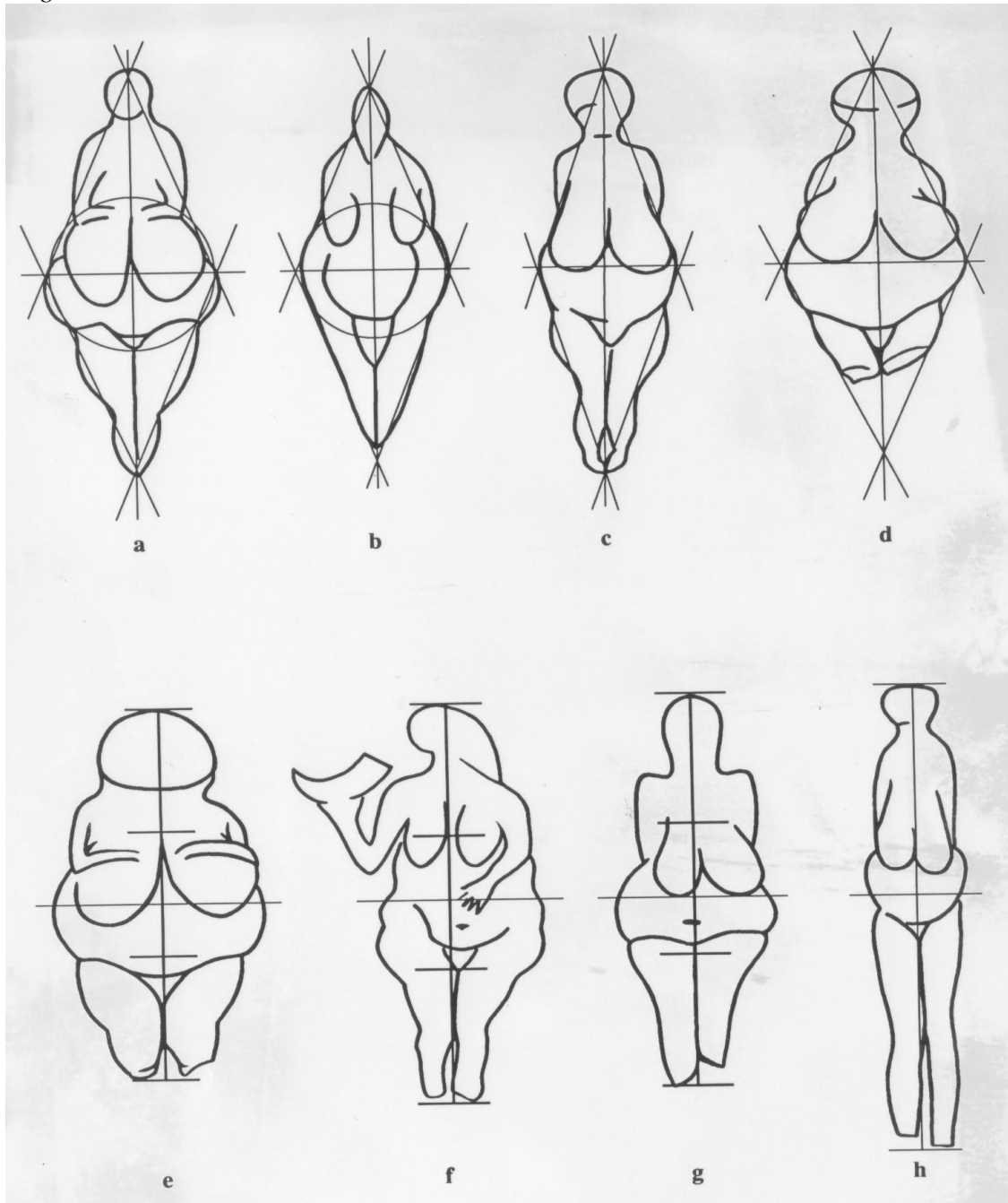


Figure 4. *A contemporary female model assuming the angle of regard for each of the observed six 'primary vistas'*



Firstly, one should remember that we cannot see ourselves as an independent whole and any internal mental or external physical image of self must be mentally assembled from the multiple vistas required for self-inspection. This distinguishes the experience of viewing the human figure in the round from a more intimate personal perspective. The Gravettian figurines may represent structural regularities in human anatomy that are seen from the self-viewing angle of regard, but that are not necessarily present from the point of view of other. When approached literally, proportion, relative distance, and relative scale relationships would cause regions of the anatomy closer in the field of vision to appear larger than those farther from the retina, thus the breasts and upper torso would appear larger in the field of vision than the lower extremities when regarded from an anterior aspect. Instances of anatomical overlap and occlusion would lend to the perception of the compression of planes and volumes, causing the body to appear wide and squat or foreshortened from the elevated viewpoints of 'self'. Finally, 'since one cannot

visually apprehend one's own body as a whole, any image of self as an independent three-dimensional entity must be the mental combination or integration of the multiple viewpoints required for direct visual inspection. These multiple viewpoints, having more or less finite if overlapping boundaries, are an every day experience and an inherent requirement for all (technologically unassisted) human self-inspection. Operating together, these structural regularities provide a material origin for the "lozenge" composition.' (McDermott 1996)

In studies involving a modern, live nude model as well as in the observation of students engaged in the act of self-inspection from this vantage point, there seem to be consistently five or six primary vistas imposed by anatomy on visual self-inspection routines. The vistas, when combined, create a near complete view of the body with the exception of the head and neck and the direct posterior aspect, suggesting the availability of a near complete understanding of the three-dimensional 'self' when considered with tactile information gleaned through self-palpitation. Comparative images of the anterior view with the feet occluded and the torso stacked over the feet demonstrate that an elevated angle of regard imparts similarities in shape and contour. It is interesting to compare the minimal vistas of self first proposed by McDermott in 1996 with those revealed by this study through its repeated sorting of student drawings working on self-representation projects assigned in the Life Drawing class. Generally speaking, students working on self-representation projects tend to replicate the same basic views. Sometimes this point of view can be very specific.

The view of the lower torso and legs especially demonstrate an angle that emphasizes the outer contour of the vastus lateralis muscle of the upper leg in a graceful contour sweeping over the knee, which occurs only from an elevated vantage point. The lateral viewpoints or vistas demonstrate distinctive similarities in shape of the distorted gluteal region. What appears to be a stylistic exaggeration in the figurines from an objective vantage point corresponds with a great deal of accuracy to the phenomenon of foreshortening of the torso, hip and leg as seen from close range inherent in a more intimate vantage point. In all of these views, what has been interpreted as symbolic anatomical distortion from an objective point of view of other seem to be faithful to perceived anatomical occurrences when both artifact and contemporary evidence are considered from a 'self-viewing' vantage point, and are not seen from an objective point of view.

Both the photographic reproductions of the self-viewing vantage point and self-portrait drawings executed by students indicate that these artifacts could logically have been created from the point-of-view of self (self-portraits) and could potentially represent both a woman's individual physical features and significant events inherent in female experience. If we consider the possibility that these figurines could have been made by women for women, we can begin to consider the degree of intimacy and necessary proximity inherent in the act of self-inspection.

Figure 5. *Comparative images of a cast of the 'Venus of Lespugue' and a contemporary female model (self-portrait photograph) illustrating the anterior aspect of the proposed angle of self-regard*



Student-Generated Drawings

Beginning in 2006, students enrolled in Johnson's sections of Life Drawing and Figure Construction at the University of Central Missouri were assigned an exercise to make drawings of their own bodies without the aid of a mirror or other imaging devices. As the assignment was given late in the semester, students' previous experience drawing the human figure equipped them with an understanding of the application of certain spatial cues such as overlap and relative distance as well as a sufficient knowledge of human anatomy, and those skills were then applied to and enhanced by this assignment. Mutually beneficial to our study and the objectives of the course, the assignment challenges students to apply observational drawing skills and to consider the conceptual implications inherent in both the process and resulting drawings. On a very basic level students were asked to identify and articulate, through drawing, structural aspects and volumetric masses of the human form. Prior instructional experience in observational drawing and knowledge of anatomical structure led us to anticipate that if individuals participating in the study assumed a fixed point of view while looking down on their own body, they would see parts of the body as overlapping, occluded, and subject to relative scale change. If reflected in the drawings, we reasoned that the resulting visual information could serve as a comparison to the photographic evidence used to substantiate McDermott's self-viewing proposal (McDermott 1996).

Figure 6. Student generated drawings illustrating the observed six 'primary vistas' and correlating aerial view of the 'Venus of Lespugue'



Throughout the duration of the class assignment we saw frequent parallels in both the form and content of contemporary drawings by students and the physical properties of Gravettian female figurines when similarly seen. Generally speaking, there is a decided tendency for student drawings to share many of the boundaries marking the primary vistas or perspectives required for self-viewing. This, too, is consistently evidenced by student work and by observing students' actions during the drawing process (See Figure 6). Based on this information, the assignment was narrowed to address six or seven student-selected angles of the body (usually one variation of a direct anterior view and three mirrored lateral views). The majority of the drawings were executed in line to more clearly depict planar divisions. All of the drawings were to be created in response to direct observation while standing, and students were requested to wear form-fitting clothing or to remove clothing at the students' discretion. No instruction or image examples were otherwise given and students were blind to the hypothesis and details of the research.

Students were observed in preliminary stages of the assignment from 2012-present.

While both male and female students participated in these drawing exercises, for the purpose of illustrating the study we examine drawings produced by female students enrolled in the Life Drawing and Figure Construction courses from 2006-2013. We compare the findings to similar photographically documented angles of museum casts of the 'Venus of Lespugue' and the 'Venus of Willendorf no. I.' Through this comparison we propose that this point of view is logical in understanding a normal, non-obese, female human form from an aerial perspective.

To appreciate the significance of the assignment and the correlations we seek to investigate, it is necessary to point out relevant concepts in applied studio drawing practice. Students enrolled in the Life Drawing and Figure Construction courses would have completed a minimum of two semesters of college level drawing instruction. It may be generally assumed that students have an interest in the human figure as a drawing subject, though for many it is their first exposure, and most are able to approach the subject with a basic knowledge of observational drawing principles such as sighting and measuring, linear perspective systems, and atmospheric (aerial) perspective. Individual skill sets and academic level of engagement with the subject matter vary significantly from student to student and result in variables and occasional distortion in observed proportional relationships and specificity. There is a wide range in the overall degree of accuracy with which students are able to translate three-dimensional form to a two-dimensional surface. Despite these variables there seem to be consistencies in approaches to seeing and depicting the foreshortened self.

Though biased towards a traditional schematic of the figure based on contemporary view-points of 'other', UCM students would already be familiar with common approaches to identifying major anatomical masses and plane changes and would have little difficulty in recognizing the primary divisions and angular shifts of plane inherent in self-viewing. The more technically proficient the student the less likely they were to have difficulty with the assignment. Also conducive to approaching the assignment is the students' increasing understanding of the foreshortened figure. When working extensively with the figure, one acknowledges the artificiality of the widely referenced schematic of the seven-and-a-half heads figure seen at eye level. This is rarely, if ever, applicable to observational figure drawing or ordinary human interaction. The foreshortened figure is dealt with very intentionally to increase the students' understanding of spatial context. Overlap and occlusion result from the perceived compression of planes due to the effects of relative distance to the angle of viewing (Goldstein 1993). While this phenomenon is a common occurrence in drawing the reclining or seated figure, the ability to identify and translate the overlap of planes is a learned behavior. A note in understanding the structural anatomy of the female form as opposed to the more widely schematically illustrated male form may also be of relevance (Hale 1971), and students would have both theoretical and applied knowledge

in respect to gendered anatomical tendencies. In both the drawings and the figurines, the naturally occurring fatty deposits of the flanks, gluteal region, and thighs in non-obese women contribute to the consistent articulation of the relationship of these volumetric forms from a self-viewing angle.

Certain elements of concern in a drawing class stand out. Anatomical markers, divisions, shape, and relative scale represented in the resulting drawings done from direct observation consistently correlate with those found in early figurines. When asked to capture the visual appearances of their own body as visually available to themselves and by extension to our ancestors, students in today's drawing class seem to be representing the unique forms observed in Gravettian female figurines.

Figure 7. *Image comparison of the anterior aerial aspect of a cast of the 'Venus of Lespugue' and a corresponding student generated drawing from a self-viewing angle*

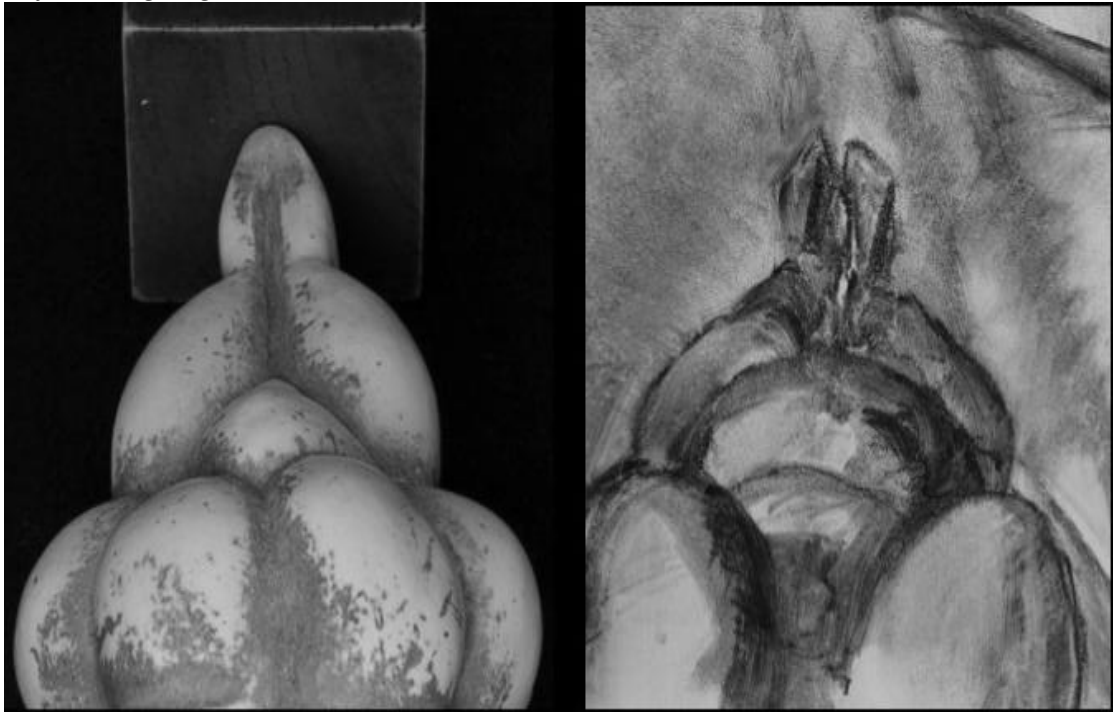
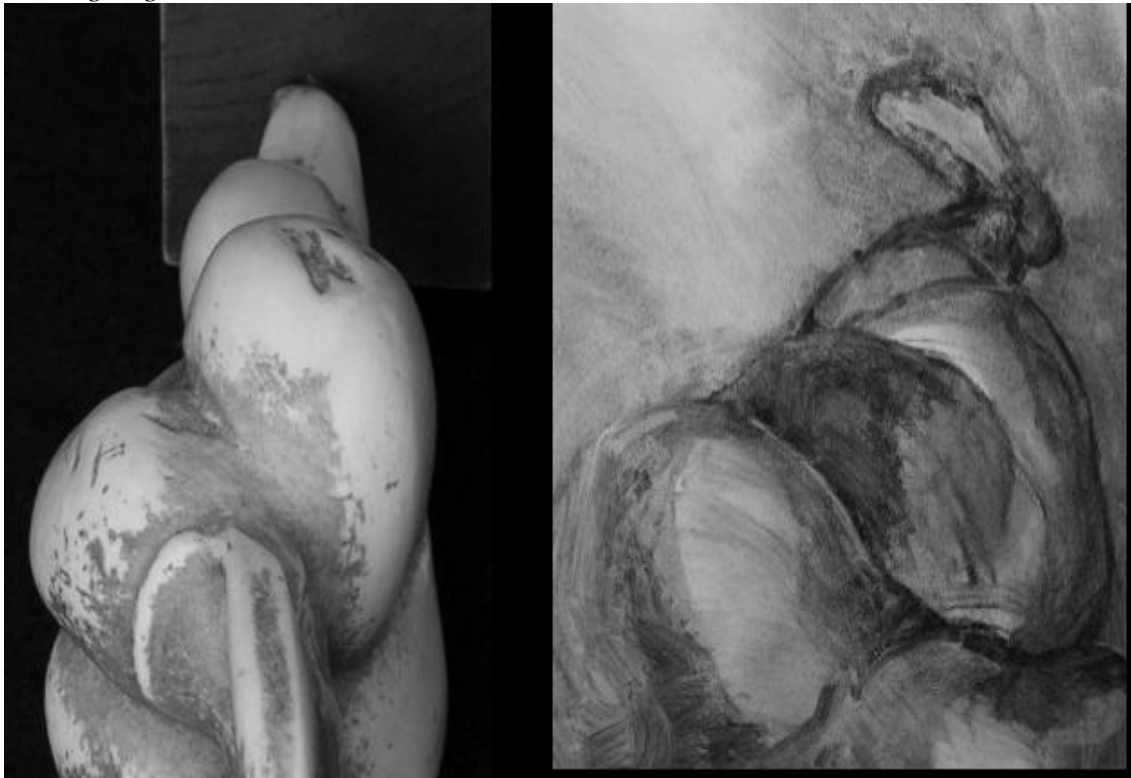


Figure 8. *Image comparison of the lateral aerial aspect of a cast of the 'Venus of Lespugue' and corresponding student generated drawing from a self-viewing angle*



Student drawing examples of the anterior views consistently exhibit similarities in shape and contour when compared to similar aerial vantage points of the 'Venus of Lespugue' and the 'Venus of Willendorf no. 1' in our study. Repeatedly, results yield similarities in the perceived shapes of the abdomen and thigh as well as the relative scale and shape of the breasts compared to the rest of the body. The articulation of the outside margin of the vastus lateralis of the thigh and the manner in which its outer contour sweeps over the knee as seen in self-viewing, but not from the point of view of 'other', is also of significance.

The extent and nature of the distortions of the gluteal region as seen in the lateral and posterior views are far too complicated to be treated at this point, especially when previous consideration of the region seems to allow for interpretations that may be anatomically incorrect, inaccurately represented or simply changed to fit the evidence. Simply stated, the reluctance to consider the possible perspective of self in these gluteal regions has led to some amazingly imaginative and fanciful claims.

One of the most common errors encountered in several contemporary anatomical interpretations involves mistaking the largest muscle mass of the posterior aspect, the gluteus maximus or buttocks proper, for what is actually the gluteus medius. Interestingly though, when considered from an aerial perspective and with an understanding of muscular structure and divisions in

human anatomy, the gluteus maximus, gluteus medius, and vastus muscles of the thigh assume equal priority in the field of vision resulting in shapes strikingly similar to those distortions found in the same anatomical region of Gravettian style figurines. Again, these similarities are evidenced repeatedly in student-generated drawings. Since most students can be expected to have had little experience with any point-of-view of these rare artifacts, this visual correspondence of form seems significant.

Discussion and Results

Typically, students are initially oblivious to the possibility of depicting themselves in their own field of vision, the concept of ‘self’ seems to be a much more abstract notion. The common interpretation of the assignment when approached collectively and without guidance in the classroom environment seems to rely heavily on the students’ memory of their reflections or stylized representations of the descriptive qualities of facial features. Exercises in self-palpitation of the head and face and prompts that encourage examination of the available information in the students’ field of vision generally leads to the identification of the proposed ‘self-viewing’ angle as a means of self-examination and representation.

Because students are relatively unfamiliar with this vantage point, they are forced to rely more heavily on the visual information presented rather than on preconceived notions of accuracy in constructing their drawings. Utilizing a set of developing perceptual skills, organizational principles of form, and a process of trial and error, the student struggles and eventually succeeds in translating through mark an experience of observing three-dimensional form (looking at one’s own body) to the two-dimensional surface of the drawing. Recording this information through the drawing process provides a record of the act of ‘noticing’ and assigning importance, what J.J. Gibson terms ‘invariants noticed in the course of learning to perceive’ (Gibson 1979). Approaching the figure in what for many is a previously unfamiliar manner sparks awareness in the draftsman of the influence of established paradigmatic representations of the human figure. Often, this previously acquired knowledge of visual schematics paradoxically tends to hinder one’s ability to ‘see’ shape, mass, and proportional relationships of the human figure objectively. It is interesting to consider that Gravettian era imagery would have been produced without the influence of any known previously established structural anatomical paradigms of the human figure, and when considered from a self-viewing angle possess a high degree of representational accuracy. The commonalities in selectivity between Gravettian female figurines and contemporary drawings of the self-viewing angle create a connection between those decisions and acts of translating a visual experience had by our ancestors and those of contemporary individuals engaged in the drawing process today.

The pedagogical, artistic, and intellectual implications of this experience are rich. Once this angle of regard is considered as a possibility for the depiction of one’s ‘self’, group conversations among students quickly turn to appropriate topics of spatial navigation, physical proximity and intimacy, and

themes of human empathy. Anecdotal information and interaction with students reveals an increased awareness in phenomenological and physiological acts of perception and recording, as well as a consideration for socio-culturally influenced interpretations of identity and self-representation.

Considering Gravettian style figurines from the vantage point of self-viewing in conjunction with the results of related student-generated drawing exercises underscores the legacy of self-representation as a form of self-understanding. There is increased awareness of the fact that our most intimate interactions with others and with our own bodies are not experienced from an objective point of view. We see the same visual structure in those proximally closest to us. Such an approach provides evidence that enables us to imagine our ancestors as socially empathetic and keenly aware, capable of depicting the intimate details of individual existence in a visually and intellectually sophisticated manner.

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