Раздел 5. Теория и история культуры

Section 5. Theory and history of culture

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INTERPRETATION OF VENUS IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this work is to study the transformation of the image of the goddess Venus in contemporary Italian art. Various representations of the ancient deity were studied both in traditional and new types of fine art (installation, photography, video art, digital art).

Methods: The main methods were iconological and iconographic analysis, as well as a comparative approach.

Results: The author comes to the conclusion that from the second half of the 20th to the 21st century, the artists' approaches to the image of Venus have changed significantly: if in the 20th century they tended to preserve the ancient image and worked with its semantic by changing the context, in the 21st century the very appearance of the goddess began to undergo transformation. In addition, it has been found that contemporary artists tend to adapt the most recognizable images of Venus, thus not working with deep narratives, but with clichés.

Scientific novelty: This work is the first study of its kind, for the first time including the most relevant works created by Italian authors in recent years.

Practical significance: The results of the study can be used to prepare review texts on contemporary Italian art, exhibition projects, and methodological materials.

Keywords: Venus, contemporary art, Italian art, Arte Povera, postmodernism, sculpture, digital art, photography.

Introduction

Since the Renaissance, the Italian art has been closely associated with the classical antiquity. Although the 20th and 21st centuries have brought significant changes to the whole concept of art, Italian artists did not give up attempts to link their creativity to the Etruscan, Greek and Roman past. Most often, ancient motifs in contemporary Italian art served the purpose of establishing historical continuity between modern Italy and the "great past". But in the second half of the century, the country survived the II World War, freed from fascist dictatorship and began to rethink its own past in a different way, as it did the whole humanity. As wrote Russian art historian Nina Getashvili, "ancient "matrices" at the new stage of culture turned out to be saturated with different meanings than before" [1, 11].

We have analyzed the following works: the installation *Venere degli Stracci* by Michelangelo Pistoletto (1967, Castello di Rivoli), *Mimesi* by Giulio Paolini (1975–1976, FER Collection, Ulm), photography *Catherine Noyes for*

the Interview magazine Gian Paolo Barbieri (1986, Gian Paolo Barbieri Foundation), sculpture *Altolà al sudore* by *The Bounty Killart* (2013, property of the authors), sculpture *Metamorphosis* by M. Pelletti (2019, Barbara Paci Art Gallery), video/digital art objects *Pink noise* (2021, property of the author) and *Broken* (2021, private collection), both by the contemporary female artist Francesca Fini.

"Greek and Roman art provided an immense stock of figures standing, sitting, bending down or falling. All these types could prove useful in the telling of a story, and so they were assiduously copied and adapted to ever-new contexts" [2, 137] wrote Ernst Gombrich in his famous *The Story of Art*. Although he had in mind the early Christian art, the influence of the ancient forms and ancient narratives did not lose their importance even in the 20th century, when the very concept of the art underwent significant changes.

Main part

Contemporary Italian art tends to interpret ancient heritage in a postmodern way, suggesting copying and citation, irony and comprehension of problems of modernity through the classical image. The image of the goddess itself can both undergo transformation or remain unchanged, thus symbolizing the idea of "eternal value" and "unconditional beauty".

Attempts to interpret the image of Venus in an ironic manner were encountered in Italian art even before the onset of the era of postmodernism. A sarcastic interpretation of *Venus Pudica* was proposed Arturo Martini in 1932. His terracotta sculpture *Venere dei Porti* (1932, Museo civico Luigi Bailo) is distinguished by deliberately rough facial features and the imperfect body in contradiction to the traditional view of Venus as the goddess of love and impeccable beauty. Even less the role of the goddess corresponds to the social position of the woman, which is hinted by the very title of the work. "An impressive piece of novelty for the expressive brutality of the subject (a naked prostitute sitting on an armchair), but above all for its plastic rendering, a summary modeling in which the clay was neither smoothed to mimic the skin color, nor composed in the noble volumes" [3, 925], in this way Flavio Fergonzi described Martini's *Venere dei Porti*.

Martini rejected the hierarchy of images, in accordance with which the heritage of classical antiquity is elevated to the top of the aesthetic and symbolic "pyramid". As Natalia Lenyashina notes, "Martini's appeal to mythological images, to antiquity neither came from an "archaeological" interest < … > nor from didactic goals"

[4, 220]. Matrini was one of the representatives of so called "return to order" movement, in which "modernity is increasingly associated not with the fixation of the moment in its unceasing movement and metamorphoses, but with eternity, that is, with such a temporal regime when the differences between past, present and future become irrelevant" [5, 67].

Thanks to its title, Martini's *Venere dei Porti* enters into dialogue with an earlier work, *Venere dei Porti* by Mario Sironi (1919, Casa Museo Boschi di Stefano). Made in a generalized manner, a mannequin-like woman with emphatically feminine forms contrasts with the industrial environment of the port, representing either a symbol of liberation, or someone who is clearly out of place, or, maybe, "not < … > a real character but symbolizes the woman that the sailor finds in every port" [6, 59].

A similar method of opposing objects from fundamentally different worlds was used by Michelangelo Pistoletto, a representative of the Arte Povera movement, in his famous work *Venere degli Stracci* (1967, Castelli di Rivoli). Pistoletto turned to criticism of social relations and consumer society (the notorious "*nothing to wear*"), opposing it to the classical "timeless" canon. From a technical and compositional point of view, this is a very simple work, but the conciseness of the artistic expression is compensated by its enormous possibilities for interpretation. The ability of *Venere degli Stracci* to be understood in many ways makes it an ideal Umberto Eco's *Open Work* [7].

For his installation, Pistoletto used a concrete copy not of an antique, but of a neoclassical sculpture, *Venus with the Apple* by Bertel Thorvaldsen (1813–1816, Thorvaldsens Museum). Nevertheless, in addition to the character itself, it is related to ancient art by a common iconography: Thorvaldsen's *Venus* goes back to *Venere Colonna* from the Vatican Museums, and that, in turn, is considered a Roman copy from Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos. Aphrodite of Knidos*, in fact, gives rise to the type of *Venus Pudica*, which includes a huge number of images of Aphrodite-Venus, both ancient and modern (including above-mentioned Martini's *Venere dei Porti*).

The fact that Pistoletto did not use a copy of an antique statue but a neoclassical one made sense: he was working with a copy of a copy of a copy, that is, a third-order derivative of a long-lost original. This echoes the postmodern concept of simulacra, copies of something that does not really exist. Besides, Pistoletto made some other variants of *Venere degli Stracci*, using different materials for the statue. "The many reproductions challenge

the uniqueness of the original by making the classical Venus an almost ordinary, mass-produced object, comparable to the rags next to which she is positioned" [8, 364], writes about this work Roberta Minucci.

"The work of art is in a constant state of flux allowing multiplicity of meanings with the change of time" [9, 327], notes Dr P Prayer Elmo Raj in his article *Text and Meaning in Umberto Eco's The Open Work*. Pistoletto created *Venere degli Stracci* in 1967, under certain socioeconomic conditions. Italy at that time was experiencing unprecedented economic growth, including the development of the textile industry, accompanied by significant social stratification. The social implication was seen in this work by the first Arte Povera theorist Germano Celant, who viewed rags as a metaphor for the marginalized, or, in harsher words, the dregs of society [8, 364].

In the 21st century, the situation in Italy has changed, but the work has not lost its relevance. In September 2021, a new version of *Venere degli Stracci* was featured on the cover of Italian *Vogue* magazine. Nowadays, the same work has acquired a different meaning – ecological. The artist himself, in his interview to the magazine, admitted that he did not mean ecology when creating the work in the 1960s, but agreed that he had now come to this idea[1].

Another representative of Arte Povera, who works with copies of sculptures, is Giulio Paolini. Paolini created a cycle of works called *Mimesi* (1975–1976, FER Collection, Ulm) using copies of various ancient statues, including *Venere de' Medici* (1st century BC, Uffizi Gallery). These works use samples of pairs of sculptures, assembled in such a way that they look at each other and seem to carry on a dialogue. Thus, Paolini focuses on the "narcissism" of beauty and its self-worth, isolation in itself [8, 365]. Besides, Paolini's work can be interpreted as a reference to *Venus with a Mirror* by Titian (1555, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) or *Venus at her Mirror (The Rokeby Venus)* by Diego Velazquez (ca. 1647–1651, National Gallery, London). We should note that the use of the mirror is also an important part of Michelangelo Pistoletto's work.

The *Venus Pudica* type, which both Pistoletto and Paolini refer to, reflects one feature that is crucial to the perception of art in the postmodern era: the influence of a viewer. Venus, as noted by Russian researcher Alexander Sechin, hiding behind her hands, reacts to the viewer:

"The act of contemplation thus becomes the subject of the image" [10, 453], he writes.

The idea of beauty and aesthetics is conveyed by Gian Paolo Barbieri's photo of Catherine Noyes for *Interview* Magazine (1986, Gian Paolo Barbieri Foundation). In his work, obviously referenced by the *Venus de Milo* (150–125 BC, Louvre) the role of the goddess is played by a female actress. Moreover, the photographer places his model in such a way to create the impression of the absence of hands – the damage *Venus of Milo* is specially known for. The author is not trying to recreate the ancient past in its former form, but conserves the monument as we see it from the present. It seems a very important part of the perception of ancient heritage by contemporary artists.

It should be noted that in the above works, that is, the works of Pistoletto, Paolini and Barbieri, the image itself was practically not subjected to transformation. Pistoletto and Paolini did not make any significant changes to the copies of the sculptures. Barbieri, on the other hand, tried to imitate the sculpture, creating a photographic image as close as possible to the original.

The approach to interpretation of Venus by artists of the 21st century is quite opposite. The artists of the second half of the 20th century worked mainly with the context, in which "an already existing sculptural object is being deconstructed, a stereotype is being destroyed in the installation, the idea originally embodied in the sculptural object is being rethought and included in a different context" [11, 162]. On the contrary, the artists of the 21st century subject the source itself to a significant transformation. So, in the sculpture *Altolà al sudore* (2013, property of the authors) by the group *The Bounty Killart*, the prototype of *Crouching Venus* from the Louvre receives a bottle of deodorant in her hand, which is a hint of rituals and practices almost obligatory for the concept of the modern beauty. At the same time, the context remains the same: *Crouching Venus* is often called *Venus the Bather*, as a goddess is depicted performing her personal hygiene.

Sculptor Massimiliano Pelletti focuses on working with the material: he creates copies of famous sculptures, changing the texture of stone in such a way that the image becomes as if weathered. In the work *Metamorphosis* (2019, Barbara Paci Art Gallery), he, like Pistoletto, relies on *Venus*

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[1] Monico F. Cover d'artista: intervista a Michelangelo Pistoletto. Vogue Italia.– Settembre 2021.– URL: https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/michelangelo-pistoletto-intervista-esclusiva-cover-settembre

with the Apple by Bertel Thorvaldsen. But Pelletti's Venus is undergoing significant erosion, which, it seems, may also contain a hint of a change and blurring of the beauty canon in the 21st century. It is also curious that for an unprepared viewer, Pelletti's works often look more "ancient" than their originals. That is, we again, like Barbieri, see ruining as part of the perception of ancient sculpture.

Francesca Fini, who works in digital and video art, transforms a digital copy of the head of *Venus de Milo*. She defies the standards of beauty by deforming the contours of the sculpture, changing its usual color and providing it with spikes, as she does in her work *Broken* (2021, private collection). In her video performance *Pink Noise* (2021, property of the author), Fini raises the question of the transformation of the concept of beauty during the pandemic, when most people were forced to appear in public in masks covering their faces. "*It is an invitation to foretaste and to look forward to a beauty that will arrive. As an artist, I feel that the need for beauty is fundamental, and I am not talking about beauty as an aesthetic harmoniousness, but as something strong, which in art strikes and involves you*"[1], says the artist about her work.

Conclusions

Thus, the sculptural image of Venus in contemporary Italian art plays a dual role. On one hand, the traditional meaning of beauty is assigned to it, on the other hand, social changes are reflected, subjecting this concept to criticism and transformation. The other observation is that contemporary artists prefer not to dive deep into ancient narratives (as it did, for instance, Giorgio de Chirico in the first half of the 20th century), but work with the most recognizable, clichéd images.

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