Even Centuries Apart

From early humans to the fallen Greek empire, women have always played a crucial role in society. Although women were not necessarily seen as the one with the upper hand when it came to making decisions nor did they have any authority, men knew that without women a civilization would simply not last. We are able to conclude this due to artifacts and art pieces that have been discovered. For example, in 1908, archeologist Josef Szombathy, in the town of Willendorf, Austria, discovered the statue, Venus of Willendorf (Witcombe). A few years earlier, in 1903, Sir Arthur Evans excavated the statue, Snake Goddess from the island of Crete (Witcombe). Although these two statues were created centuries apart, these two works of art have many similarities as well as differences.

The Paleolithic period, from which it is approximated that the Venus of Willendorf was created, runs from 24,000 BCE to about 22,000 BCE (Witcombe). This prehistoric work of art is one of “the most famous early images of humans” (Witcombe). During the Paleolithic period conditions were very difficult, it is estimated that this was the period of the ice age in which humans had to constantly move or adapt to their environment (Fiero, pg 3). Their lifestyle was hunting and gathering (Hoeschen). Paleolithic tools include things made out of bone, stone, ivory and ocher (Hoeschen). Early humans were in contact with the natural and spiritual world, so while we see sculptures and statues as a form of entertainment, they saw a meaningful item that was part of their rituals (Fiero, pg 3).

Fast-forward to the Minoans civilization that prospered from c. 3,000 to 14,000 BCE, unlike the Paleolithic culture, Minoans were a settled civilization in the island of Crete (Fiero, pg 31). Minoans did not have walls that surrounded their city, meaning they felt secure in their land. Inside the Knossos palace there were frescos on the walls (Fiero, pg 31). Implying that the Minoan civilization had a taste and appreciation for beauty and nature. As the cave paintings of the early humans, Minoan frescos contained similar themes, such as ceremonial processions and the natural world (Fiero, pg 31). The early Greeks also were very mythical and believed in multiple gods.

The extreme, hazardous climatic conditions during the Paleolithic period forced early humans to relocate themselves in order to survive. Meaning that any item that they owned had to be small and easy to carry from location to location. Hence why the Venus of Willendorf is 11.1 cm in height, which is equivalent to 4 3/8 inches (Witcombe). This was something one could easily carry in their hand without any inconvenience. The Snake goddess measures 13 ½ inches in height (Fiero, 31). Which in a way both of these statues are small enough to transport. Although the Snake Goddess is not as portable as the Venus of Willendorf (which can fit in the palm of the hand), by the Minoan period other tools such as the wheel had been crafted. Making both these statuettes very portable. Yet, because the Minoan civilization was established in the Crete Island there was no reason for them to be transporting such item.

The Venus of Willendorf and the Snake Goddess also share a theme. The Venus of Willendorf has enlarged breast, abdomen, pelvic area and legs all signaling an embodiment of fertility. Some archeologist believe that due to the grotesque body parts one can assume that she is pregnant (Witcombe). The Venus of Willendorf is also tinted in red orchre which one can relate with the womens’ menstrual cycle, and thus also symbolizing fertility (Koeller). Dissimilar to the Venus of Willendorf, the Snake Goddess has more of a proportional body to what human beings look like now. The Snake Goddess is wearing a gown that covers her body; yet, the gown is purposely opened in the chest area, revealing her breast. The exposure of the breast can also be associated with fertility; this is because breasts tend to be connected with childbearing and motherhood.

Both statuettes could also mean more than just childbearing. For instance the statuettes could be a religious or spiritual figurine. In the case of the Snake Goddess, the statue could ensure abundant crops, or production (Witcombe). While for the Venus of Willendorf the statue can be a good luck charm in order to have a good hunting season or outcome (Witcombe). The interesting thing is that the Venus of Willendorf has seven braids that cover the head completely. The Snake Goddess doesn’t have braids but has seven segments in her gown. Archeologists believe that the number seven was known as the “magic number to bring luck” (Koeller). Since both statues have the number seven in their own way, we can associate these statues with a religious or spiritual charm in order to bring their people good fortune.

However, the Snake Goddess and the Venus of Willendorf have many differences. The Venus of Willendorf has this very detailed seven lines circling the head. Archeologists have found other Paleolithic statues none of which had hair details, and therefore archeologist believe that the braided hair around the head had to be of “some significance” (Roach). Making this statue highly unlikely to be a representation of a person due to its’ lack of face (Roach). Unlike the faceless Venus of Willendorf, the Snake Goddess has a face, yet because it was the early Greek civilization there is no facial expression. As Christopher Witcombe states, in his research “the woman herself is unimportant, it is her significance and what she stands for which make her important”.

Moreover, the two statuettes represent their lifestyles at the time. For example, the Snake Goddess statue is dressed in this very elegant and elaborate gown. This displays the sense of fashion that the early Greek had as well as appreciation towards beauty (Witcombe). The bottom half of the gown has layers on it, perhaps showing a high level in the social class, or the expense and detail the creator went into (Hoeschen). While in the other hand the Venus of Willendorf is completely nude, with disproportional body parts. The statue Venus of Willendorf is very simple and primitive. There is not any sense of fashion or accessory. Thus showing the simplicity of the Paleolithic culture. Not necessarily does this mean that the Paleolithic people didn’t wear some sort of clothing. It is very unlikely that they walked around nude in below freezing temperatures.

Furthermore, since the Paleolithic people were simple and uncivilized their tools and lack of artistical knowledge demonstrated less elaborate and detailed sculptures. For instance the Venus of Willendorf is made out of limestone (Fiero, pg 3). The Venus of Willendorf is also tinted in red orchre (Roach). Limestone is not a material that is found in the Willendorf area, forcing archeologist to assume that the Paleolithic people had made the statue elsewhere (Roach). In the other hand, The Snake Goddess is made out of faience (Fiero, pg 31). Faience is earthenware decorated in tin-glazed (Webster). These two statues demonstrate how much technology had increased over the centuries as well as the tools and materials that the cultures had access to.

Art and other uncovered artifacts have allowed us to see what earlier generations believed in, did and lived their day-to-day lives. Throughout centuries human beings always share a common perception on the importance of the females’ role to have a stable and surviving civilization. Although, centuries apart the Venus of Willendorf statue and the Snake Goddess statue are just some of infinite pieces that prove this to be true.

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