

REVIEW

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THE BREAST IN ART: Representations exist in Stone Age figurines, such as the Venus of Willendorf (below), through more contemporary art, such as detail above from this painting by Gabet.

The breast laid bare

To examine the history of the breast, which defines us as mammals and helps differentiate us at sexual maturity, is to track western culture's attitudes toward women from the sacred to the profane.

STEPHEN HUME
VANCOUVER SUN

Fifty thousand Canadians — 11,000 of them in the Lower Mainland and Victoria — took to the streets last week in a public celebration of the female breast.

Officially, they raised \$4 million for medical research into breast cancer, the disease that will afflict almost 20,000 women this year and, if present rates prevail, 100,000 by the year 2003, the year in which this year's cases that are still cancer-free will be considered statistically "cured." By then, however, 25,000 of their unlucky sisters will also have died from the disease.

Unofficially, those who showed their solidarity with women battling breast cancer also provided one more manifestation of a complicated matrix of social values that wax and wane from century to century and generation to generation.

For the breast, this ubiquitous lobe of fatty tissue that defines us as mammals and differentiates us at sexual maturity, comes charged with an astonishingly vast array of symbolic meaning.

"No area of the female anatomy has aroused such intensely ambivalent feelings as the breasts," writes Prudence Glynn in *Skin to Skin*, a study of dress, eroticism and social values.

"In the view of society, authority, the media, but above all as an erogenous zone, the position of the bosom has been a trembling one. Alternatively essential, to be pursued and ravaged, or to be completely obscured or exposed only to indifference, the bosom has also been a focus for intense jealousy and particular spite."

History as recent as last week presents us with the breast as contemporary social crusade, as

scientific object, as signifier of femininity, as identifiable medical problem.

And yet there is also the politicized breast, the eroticized breast, the sanctified breast, the artistic breast, the commercialized breast, the liberated breast, the maternal breast, the breast as miracle, the breast as fate.

To examine the history of the breast is to track western culture's attitudes toward women from the sacred to the profane. And many of these often unacknowledged attitudes are revealed by the artistic images that over millennia have expressed the collective language of the human unconscious.

"Instinctively we feel that what an artist does to the image of the nude has bearing on what he intends for her kind. She is the metaphor of their relationship," says feminist art critic Janet Hobhouse in *The Bride Stripped Bare: The Artist and the Nude in the Twentieth Century*.

From Janet Jackson's cleavage on the cover of *Rolling Stone* to Alfred Stieglitz's study of a bare-breasted Georgia O'Keefe, from the Louis-Ernest Barrios bronze *Nature Revealing Herself to Science* to the nubile angels of John White Alexander's *The Apotheosis of Pittsburgh* to the air-brushed perfection of Alberto Vargas' Ziegfeld Follies girls of 1931 to the classic Greek



statues, the artist's focus on the breast reaches back to the origins of human time.

"Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body," says Lynda Nead in *The Female*

Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality.

"More than any other subject, the female nude connotes 'art.'"

The first representations we have of breasts are very old, perhaps 30,000 years, and they consist of Stone Age cave paintings and small figurines, the most famous of which is the Venus of Willendorf.

She is a voluptuous figure and her breasts are exaggerated, almost certainly representing some sympathetic magic that sought to reinforce woman's role as the source and custodian of new life.

Similar beliefs were almost certainly the trigger during the 14th century when a major school of Italian painting suddenly took to depicting the Virgin Mary with one breast bared.

It's no accident, art historians observe, that the "Nursing Madonna" tradition emerged in Florence just around the time of a great famine when 4,000 citizens starved to death.

The intensely masculine, patriarchal society of the day, rendered impotent by events, turned for solace in a new version of the sympathetic magic by evoking the sanctified image of maternity.

These bare-breasted Madonnas also signify, some historians argue, an attempt in time of crisis to both formulate and control "one of the most awesome powers of women, the power to nourish."

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