



The Sublime as an Expression of
the Feminine Divine. The Emergence
of Spirituality Through Stone

Theopisti Voga

The Sublime as an Expression of the Feminine Divine. The Emergence of Spirituality Through Stone.

By: Theopisti Voga

The concept of the Sublime, as it first appeared in the rhetorical art and drama of Ancient Greece, was later established as a significant notion in philosophical aesthetics, literary theory, and art history. From the earliest study of the Sublime, *On the Sublime* by Longinus (Περὶ ὕψους 2, 7.2-8.1, 10, 1)—a treatise attributed in various manuscripts to an anonymous author, Dionysius or Longinus, or Dionysius Longinus (1st century CE)—where the grandeur of elevated thought and language is described, we move to the 18th century, when the concept of the Sublime underwent a conceptual expansion.

Notable thinkers such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury in his work *The Moralists* (1709), John Dennis in his book *A Journey Over the Alps* (1688) and Joseph Addison in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) extensively expressed the pleasure derived from the boundless forms of nature and, consequently, the awe and reverence they inspire. The transformation of the Sublime and its highly contrasting aesthetic properties were particularly influenced by the descriptions of British writers who traveled through the Alps. In their accounts, the wild grandeur and beauty of the mountains are recorded as prime examples of this aesthetic experience.

The idea of pleasure accompanied by terror and awe was further developed through these experiences, establishing the Sublime as a concept that merges contradictory emotions such as pleasure and fear, attraction and

repulsion. The delightful kind of terror, the grandeur, the extraordinary nature, and the beauty of the Alps summarize the British description of the Sublime. The concept of the Sublime and the majestic mountain has since often become synonymous, with the viewer reflecting both pleasure and aversion, where the Sublime is not merely an aesthetic quality opposed to beauty but a quality of greater significance.

A significant contribution to understanding the sublime, was made by Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, 1764 and *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790), who distinguished it into three forms: the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying. According to Kant, the Sublime is not limited to the aesthetic pleasure of beauty, but transcends normality, reaching levels that may cause terror or awe. Schopenhauer also focused on the sense of human insignificance in the face of the vastness of nature, attributing an existential dimension to the Sublime—one that encompasses mortality and the simultaneous unity of humanity with the Universe (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1818, vol. III).

Equally interesting is Friedrich Hegel's interpretation, who recognized the tendency of "Eastern" cultures to express the Sublime through formless artistic creations. Hegel presents this idea in his work *Lectures on Aesthetics* (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1835–1838). Specifically, in his analysis of the forms of art, Hegel describes

symbolic art (*Symbolische Kunst*) as characteristic of Eastern cultures, where the Sublime is often expressed through indefinite, exaggerated, and formless artistic creations. According to Hegel, this tendency reflects the spirit's effort to express the Absolute, though without yet fully capturing it in a clearly defined form, as seen in the classical art of ancient Greece.

The intricate details of Chinese and Islamic art, often depicting patterns and abstract shapes, highlight a sense of spiritual grandeur that transcends form and material, directing the viewer toward the divine. The quest for grandeur that evokes awe, fear, and a profound aesthetic experience continues to be examined and reinterpreted, but it always remains an expression of the human desire for the incomprehensible and the eternal. Finally, the Goddess movement was a revivalistic Neopagan religious movement which includes spiritual beliefs and practices in the late 60's. It revolves around Goddess worship and the veneration for the divine feminine. An anthropologist such as Johann Jakob Bachofen with *Das Mutterrecht*, 1861 (Original title: *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*) and Ernest Borneman with his work *Patriarchy, Das Patriarchat. Ursprung und Zukunft unseres Gesellschaftssystems* (1975), examined the ideas of prehistoric Matriarchal Goddess Cultures in the Mediterranean region.

Today, in the era of innovation in digital technologies and artistic production, new media art, bioart, and genetic art based on computers and Artificial Intelligence have emerged, while new technologies weave a new kind of Sublime: the "technological Sublime."

As the Sublime is found in the cosmic dimension and, at the same time, science points out that the elements that compose humans are shared with the inorganic elements of matter, it becomes evident that humans are also part of it, even as a memory through the cellular memory of ancestral cells that all living organisms possess. Furthermore, subatomic particles as elements of matter yearn, once they have transformed into known cosmic beings, to return in decay to what they originally came from, as Anaximander (611-545 BC) mentions. Thus, the stardust that created the Earth and the mountains is the same that, through other bonds, evolutionarily produced a being with a consciousness of its existence.

Before human language was produced, thought was non-verbal, and language was non-cognitive. Over time, action gained subjective meaning, that is, it became consciously purposeful. The prehistoric Cro-Magnon, in contrast to the Neanderthals, had higher-order consciousness and a more advanced brain and were the main precursors of the first representational art. Between Neanderthals and early Homo Sapiens, the first representational art of the Upper Paleolithic emerged, along with early naturalism in depiction, with much of prehistoric art found either deep within caves or produced from the primary material of caves and mountains. The Venus figurines, delicately carved, are considered not only symbolic expressions but complete works of art. These earliest known depictions of the human female form, which are the initial imprints of symbolic behavior, reveal the ability to hold an abstract concept in mind, sharpening their evolutionary edge in the struggle for survival. Relating the representational art of Venus figurines to the natural char-



The Venus of Hohle Fels,
Germany, 35.000 BCE



The Venus of Galgenberg,
Austria, 30.000 BCE



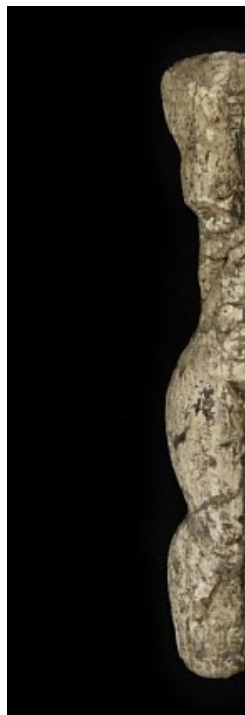
The Venus of Dolní Věstonice,
Czech Republic, 29.000 BCE



The Venus of Moravany,
Slovakia, 23.000 BCE



The Venus of Brassempouy,
Slovakia, 22.000 BCE



The Venus of Yuliyevskaya,
Russia, 16.000 BCE



The Venus of Vestonice,
Czech Republic, 28,000 BCE



The Venus of Lespugue,
France, 26,000 BCE



The Venus of Willendorf,
Austria, 24,000 BCE



The Venus of Willendorf,
Austria, 24,000 BCE



The Venus of Monruz,
Switzerland, 11,000 BCE



The Venus de Milo,
Greece, 2nd century BCE

acteristics of mountains brings forth the phenomenon of pareidolia in prehistoric minds. There is an inherently designated area of the visual brain specialized in detecting and encoding human contours and another for animals. Visual representation facilitates perception, so if subjects imagine a form, they are more likely to detect a degraded version of an object. We know that the human brain is tuned to detect human forms and animals. This can be observed in certain perceptual phenomena, including illusory lines and shapes, filling in, line continuation, and predictive hypothesis. The tendency to see imaginary forms in response to ambiguous arrays of materials activates the visuo-neural system. For the prehistoric artist, possibly a woman as we will discuss later, observing the evocative contours of rocks leads to projective super-images that are transform into re-representations through stone carving. One of the most interesting discoveries in visual science is that human behavior can be biased or influenced by external stimuli that are not consciously registered. In the prefrontal cortex, mirror neurons create mental representations, and it appears that at least some aspects of language are rooted in the way humans see, touch, and feel the world. Silent perceptual processes, however, influence behavior that individuals remain unaware of. Therefore, it can be said that the evocative features of mountains served as unconscious elements that activated either the perception and production of female forms in cave interiors or the crafting of figurines from parts of stone that resembled the female body type, sometimes utilizing a crack or crevice in the rock to represent external features of the female gender, thus turning a silent signal into a symbol.



Example of pareidolia

The sanctification of mountains, which evidently dates back to prehistory, is revealed both through physical identification with the primal cosmic material, as mentioned earlier, and with the innate tendency for elevation toward what is high. The ascent journey upward the Transcendent was for millennia the essence of the creator of the world, and this upward direction is considered the path toward divinity or spirituality. In this transcendent journey is inscribed the memory—whether it is memory or perhaps a cellular memory in the depths of the cells—the feeling of absolute emotional security in a community that had not yet discovered individuality, otherness, isolation, and loneliness. Just as the infant cannot distinguish the boundaries of itself from the mother, so too could Paleolithic man not distinguish from Mother Nature. The relationship between the two sexes was more balanced than in any subsequent phase of humanity. The oldest human skeletons that have been found show minimal height differences between men and women, as there was no division of labor and thus no gender dominated the other. However, the guiding role of the female in wild animal packs allows us to hypothesize that human packs were also led by women. The female hunter continued for a long time to play an equal role with the man, in some cases even a leading

one, creating a matrifocal culture. The myths of the Mistress of Animals, the Prehistoric Huntress Goddess, are so numerous and widespread across all cultures worldwide that they leave no doubt that they contain a deep core of truth. Although there is debate and different readings from researchers, the significant archaeologist Gimbutas, (*The Living Goddesses*, University of California Press, 1999) speaks of a matrilineal society where the craftsman or craftswoman of the Venus figurines confirms the spirituality and emergence of symbolic thought in the effort to communicate with the Great Goddess. The pregnant Venus figurines promote the active, dynamic Female force that generates Life through the spiral pattern of birth, life, death, and rebirth. The inverted triangle of the pubis, which symbolically contrasts with the triangle of the Mountain, points to the path to the earth that gives birth, the underground with its chthonic forces of death and the rebirth of nature that culminates at the highest point of the Mountain. By creating these figurines, prehistoric humans undoubtedly transformed the recognition of Life, Health, and Fertility into cultural symbols.

The oldest depictions of the female form found so far in many locations across Europe number around 250 figurines and belong to the Upper Paleolithic Period 45,000-13,000 years ago. It is debated whether two of them, the Venus of Tan-Tan and the Berekhat Ram Venus, could belong to the Middle Paleolithic Period, 200,000-500,000 years ago. These images of full-figured mature females were mainly made from limestone, like the famous Venus of Willendorf, or from clay, ivory, and bone, and in some cases, they take the form of reliefs on rock surfaces. The choice of

Mountain material for the creation of the figurines aligns with the fact that the Alpine range in Europe is almost entirely formed of limestone, and large, compact masses of limestone show pits, caves, openings, and formations due to erosion.

The identification of the primary material of the mountain with its semantic meaning in early human artistic production also identifies the form of the Mountain with the content and symbolism attributed to it. It is impressive that the evolving human brain grasped this meaning and created the artistic equivalent, transforming it into the first recorded sacred, religious, and ritualistic narrative. The evocative sacred mountain is depicted softly in that which did not exist before, in a primal conception revolutionary and decisive for human civilization. It is not clear whether humans created art or whether art created humans. What is certain, however, is that the imposing mountain, both materially and symbolically, through the concept of the Sublime it reflects, played a decisive role in the malleable, adaptable, nascent human brain. From the earliest forms of atavistic Art to the modern Digital Sublime, the artist approaches the concept of the Sublime through their anxious effort to soar to celestial heights, seeking spiritual transcendence and enlightenment. Beyond their height and the awe they evoke, the stone masses are the primal material that is transformed into female, mother, and fertility by the first creators. The stone Venuses emerge from the material of the Sacred Mountain to rise again, this time to worship birth, earthly life, and mortality. Subsequently, all ancient civilizations will connect their traditions with Sacred Mountains, as places of worship, the abode of gods, and spiritual contemplation. The Sublime, offering the in-

exhaustible and vast, works dynamically and evolutionarily toward the viewer, who, by marshaling their mental powers to grasp it, transcends the boundaries of the human, mortal, and finite, in order to reach its height. The Paleolithic Venus figurines may be realistic depictions of real women, ideal representations of beauty, or symbolic fertility icons in an era when Europe was in the last ice age, and thus fat on fertility points symbolized hope for survival and longevity in a dangerous environment. A significant study conducted by the Dutch Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine Niko Tinbergen Nikolaas (1907–1988), on gull chicks demonstrated the relationship between the intensity of the stimulus and the expected outcome. This may perhaps provide an answer as to why, while the figures have exaggerated breasts, bellies, genitals, and buttocks, conversely, the head, face, arms, and legs are merely suggested or entirely omitted. The hypothesis of the great neurologist Professor Ramachandran in *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (2010), supports that an over-emphasized element of gender in a figurine may better signal what it wants to convey and thus serve as a spiritual guide. The prehistoric Venuses bear the religious, sacred role of the Great Mother Goddess, drawing their power from the supernatural, magical forces of the stone extracted from the beloved mountain.

In today's rapidly shifting and transitional era, art embraces technology, science, and social imperatives. Within this framework, the Divine Feminine and the Sublime unexpectedly influence artists, expanding the field of inspiration and contemplation.

The Divine Feminine is no longer confined strictly to the female form and

motherhood. Instead, it is redefined, touching upon the concept of creation itself, energy, and interconnection with nature—a transformation reflected in contemporary artistic movements such as biotech art, virtual reality (VR), and Land Art. Artists such as Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramović explore the relationship between the female body and the landscape, drawing inspiration from archaic and pagan traditions. At the same time, many emerging and established artists employ new media, such as digital sculpture, to reimagine the form of the Great Mother in a digital world. The Sublime, long associated with awe and transcendence, is being redefined in contemporary art, both through natural experience and technological advancement, giving rise to the concept of the "Technological Sublime".

The sense of awe, once evoked by mountains, oceans, and the grandeur of nature, now emerges from electronic data, artificial intelligence, and the vast expanses of the digital universe. A new generation of artists seeks a novel and unprecedented experience within virtual environments, the metaverse, and works that explore humanity's relationship with infinity, investigating the Sublime beyond the physical realm in digital space.

Contemporary artists, navigating between past traditions and modern technological evolution, propose a new approach to the representation of the female form and essence, while at the same time expressing deep concern for the wounded natural world. Furthermore, as each civilization shapes its own perception of space, today's emerging digital space inspires artists to explore new forms of spirituality and awe. This reaffirms the idea that art continues to serve as

a bridge between the human and the divine, from the Paleolithic Venus figurines to the age of algorithms.

Some notable contemporary artists excelling in this field include:

Yannis Melanitis is a Greek artist active in BioArt, Art philosophy and science combining biology with art and technology. His work explores the relationship between humans and genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and post-human evolution, creating artworks that redefine the boundaries of the body and identity.

Kevin Mack is a digital sculptor and award-winning visual effects artist who creates abstract organic forms using AI and generative art.

Marco Brambilla uses video and VR to reinterpret mythological and religious figures in new digital worlds.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer creates interactive installations that explore the relationship between the body, technology, and motherhood.

Harm van den Dorpel explores digital sculpture through algorithmic forms that suggest post-human entities.

Jon Rafman works with 3D sculpture and virtual worlds, incorporating mythological and symbolic elements.

Freeka Tet creates surreal, monstrous digital figures that play with the concept of creation and motherhood.

Sofia Crespo works with AI and 3D modeling, creating biomorphic forms inspired by nature and fertility.

Auriea Harvey is a digital sculptor combining mythological elements, human forms, and 3D technologies to

explore femininity.

Marguerite Humeau constructs bionic totems and archetypes using 3D techniques to reinterpret the mystical history of motherhood.

Summarizing, although this form of art may appear primitive compared to the great achievements that followed and continue to emerge, it still inspires visual artists, neurobiologists, anthropologists, and writers. The timeless archetypes and the human biological response to symbolic art and the universal Sublime resurface in contemporary artistic creation.

Beyond its immense significance for understanding the evolution of symbolic thought, its reinterpretation through new perspectives in the fields of arts and sciences serves as an example of artistic abstraction and purposeful artistic documentation, combined with scientific rigor and innovation. Above all, however, it proclaims that Art, which operates within the collective unconscious, is the threshold humanity must cross to reach its ultimate pursuit: spirituality through poetry in all its forms

Bibliography

Balter, Michael. 2009. "On the Origin of Art and Symbolism." *Science* 323 (5915): 709–11. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.323.5915.709>.

Borneman, Ernest. 1975. *Das Patriarchat: Ursprung und Zukunft unseres Gesellschaftssystems*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Brambilla, Marco. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://marco-brambilla.com>.

Crespo, Sofia. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.sofiacrespo.com>.

Dinopoulos, Andreas. 2008. *Egefalos kai Tehni (Brain and Art)*. Athens: Kastaniotis.

Dixon, Barnaby J., and Alan Dixon. 2010. "Venus Figurines of the European Paleolithic: Symbols of Fertility or Attractiveness?" *Journal of Anthropology* 2011: 569120. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2011/569120>.

Fokas, Athanasios. 2023. *Monopatia Katanoisis (Understanding Paths)*. Athens: Crete University Press.

Gimbutas, Marija. 1989. *Return of the Goddess*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harvey, Auriea. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://aurieaharvey.art>.

Hodgson, Derek, and Paul Pettitt. 2018. "The Origins of Iconic Depictions: A Falsifiable Model Derived from the Visual Science of Palaeolithic Cave Art and World Rock Art." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28 (1): 37–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774317000727>.

Humeau, Marguerite. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.margueritehumeau.com>.

Klein, Jennie. 2009. "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s." *Feminist Studies* 35 (3): 575–602.

Knight, Chris. 1991. *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.lozano-hemmer.com>.

Mack, Kevin. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.kevin-mackart.com>.

Mithen, Steven. 1999. *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2009. *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*. Chichester: Wiley.

Rafman, Jon. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://jonrafman.com>.

Ramachandran, V. S. 2010. *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Tet, Freeka. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.freekatet.com>.

Ucko, Peter J. 1962. "The Interpretation of Prehistoric Anthropomorphic Figurines." *American Journal of Archaeology* 66 (3): 284–432. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2844320>.

Van den Dorpel, Harm. n.d. Official Website. Accessed March 2025. <https://www.dorpel.net>.

Zaidel, Dahlia W. 2013. "Art and Brain: The Relationship of Biology and Evolution to Art." In *Progress in Brain Research*, vol. 204, 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-63287-6.00011-7>.



Theopisti Voga, *Brain MRI*, acrylic on canvas, 50x70cm

