Obesity in Art – A Brief Overview

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Abstract

This brief overview of obesity in art will look at how fatness has been depicted in Western art and its antecedents from classical times to the present day; what, if anything, this can tell us about how prevalent obesity was in previous centuries, and how the meanings attached to being fat may have altered over the years.

The earliest sculptural representations of the body all show it as female, large-buttocked, obese even, although the smooth contours of the Venuses of Willendorf (c. 30,000–22,000 BC; fig. 1), and Lespugue (c. 34,000–29,000 BC; fig. 2) contrast with the lumpy obesity of the Venus of Laussel (c. 25,000–20,000 BC; fig. 3). Nigel Spivey, writing about the emphasis on ‘fatness and fertility’ in primitive art, offers neuroscientist Vilanyur S. Ramachandran’s theory that

‘in technical terms these [excessively fleshy] features amount to hypernormal stimuli that activate neuron responses in our brain . . . something that comes naturally to us because our brains are hard-wired to concentrate perceptive focus upon objects with pleasing associations, or those parts of objects that matter most. For palaeolithic people, the female parts that mattered most were those required for successful reproduction: the breasts and pelvic girdle. The circuit of the palaeolithic brain, therefore, isolated these parts and amplified them’ [1].

Spivey argues that the tendency to distort images of the body recurs across many cultures and periods of history. In other words:

‘The drift of all popular art is towards the lowest common denominator, and there are more women who look like a potato than the Cnidian Venus. The shape to which the female body tends to return is one which emphasises its biological functions . . . ’ [2].

Other theorists have denied the element of exaggeration in prehistoric art, pointing instead to the ‘relative linearity of warm-dwelling peoples, and the relative globularity of cold-dwelling ones’ at least as far back as the Palaeolithic era, so that, even allowing for some artistic licence, the figurines probably bear some credible relation to the models