

Woman of Willendorf

Paleolithic (c. 24,000-22,000 BC), Limestone, 11 cm high, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna

Text from Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, The Venus of Willendorf
<http://arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/willendorfwoman.html>

The sculpture shows a woman with a large stomach. A roll of fat extends around her middle, joining with large but rather flat buttocks. Her thighs are also large and pressed together down to the knees. Her forearms, however, are thin, and are shown draped over and holding, with cursorily indicated fingers, the upper part of her large breasts. Small markings on her wrists seem to indicate the presence of bracelets. Her breasts are full and appear soft, but they are not sagging and pendulous. The nipples are not indicated.

In spite of what one may think, the sculpture does not represent a fat woman. Her large breasts and the roundness of her stomach, suggests that the "subject" of the sculpture is female procreativity and nurture and the piece has long been identified as some sort of fertility idol.

From the front, the place where her face should be seems to be largely concealed by what are generally described as rows of plaited hair wrapped around her head. Close examination, however, reveals that the rows are not one continuous spiral but are, in fact, composed in seven concentric horizontal bands that encircle the head, with two more half-bands below at the back of her neck. The topmost circle has the form of a rosette. The bands vary in width from front to back to sides, and also vary in size from each other. Cut across the groove separating each band at regular, closely-spaced intervals is a series of more or less lozenge-shaped deep vertical notches, some wide, others narrow, that extend equally into the band above and into the band below. These notches alternate between bands to produce the effect of braided or plaited hair. That it is intended to be understood as braided hair seems clear, although it has been suggested recently that the figure is in fact wearing a fiber-based woven hat or cap.

Another characteristic of Paleolithic "Venus" figurines is the lack of feet. In the archaeological report of her finding, the Willendorf statuette is described as perfectly preserved in all its parts, so it appears she never had feet. It has been suggested that possibly the intention was to curtail the figurine's power to leave wherever she had been placed. A more common explanation is that because the statuette served as a fertility idol, the sculptor included only those parts of the female body needed for the conception and nurture of children. Even if she had feet, though, it seems unlikely that she was meant to stand up.

What her identity and purpose may have been, why and for what reason she was carved, becomes an even more pressing question. If we dismiss all associations with goddesses and fertility figures, and assume an objective response to what we see, she might be identified as simply a Stone-Age doll for a child.

But this strikes us as unsatisfactory, not the least because of the very high degree of artistic ability exhibited in the sculpting of her forms. Compared with the other Paleolithic figurines the woman of Willendorf is a remarkably realistic representation of a fat woman.

You can download good images of the artwork from <http://www.donsmaps.com/willendorf.html>