

Is Self-Representation Hypothesis about Venus Figurines tenable?

The self-representation hypothesis is an ingenious interpretation of Venus figurines and is different from all the hackneyed ideas. Thus, it is one of the more likely hypotheses in comparison to many others bordering on the ridiculous. However, as I always believe prehistory by nature would hardly allow us to arrive at the finality of an idea. For the following reasons I couldn't agree with the arguments about 'the self-representation among pregnant women... communicating through the figurines' the autogenous visual information of their bodies. In a reply to critics Prof McDermott presented a strong case.

Self-Representation idea challenged the "the assumption that images of the human figure were first created from the point of view of other human beings" (McDermott, 1996). The self-representation argument also diverged from common thread of other arguments. The question that arose in my mind was "Are there any other ways to explain a phenomenon within the pre-existing paradigms?" If there is, does that explanation provide answers to all the key features of the phenomenon? I couldn't appreciate the advantage of self-representation interpretation which moved to the second degree of complexity without eliminating the first degree explanations by breaking away from both the possibility of 'other people's point of view' and more common arguments around fertility rites etc.

Another concern was the confounding nature of the hypothesis and the evidence supporting it or in other words, the "circularity" of main hypothesis and the explanation. The prehistoric woman created an image as self-representation. We try to show this by using a modern female and the way she sees herself. If the images we see in the Venus figurines are similar to the breasts and bellies we see in Fig 5 & 6 in the self-representation article (McDermott, 1996), then we have a case at hand. However, what we see in those Venus figurines are 'almost complete' female bodies. If we ignore the "abstract nature of the figurines", a woman herself and a figurine representing the 'more or less complete' body of the same woman surely should show

similar “bodily landscape” when viewed from similar angles. Thus I was concerned that the self-representation article didn’t provide external evidence, in addition to the above viewpoint, to support the hypothesis.

My third concern was about the internal inconsistencies that, I thought, were apparent in this interpretation. According to the self-representation argument, a woman had to bend down for the lower frontal view. The woman who thus viewed herself could represent her ‘somewhat hidden’ pubic area so well in the figurine while failing to show more of the more visible lower legs and feet. Why could the woman show her head, even the back of the head in such fine detail and her posterior so well in comparison to her own face which is much more personal to an individual and could easily be seen in a ‘water mirror’? Why did some women show their facial features while others didn’t? The argument about the more breakable upper and lower body elements proposed as a counter argument to Marshack (comments on McDermott, 1996), in my mind, is not consistent with the argument about “the attributes of the figurines receiving the priority over logic”. The lack of facial features and feet are the major features that I think one should explain.

McDermott, LeRoy 1996. Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic female figurines. *Current Anthropology* 37(2): 227-275.