

Artwork of the Month September 2020

Albert Moore's *A Venus* (1869)

Marte Stinis, a PhD student at the University of York supervised by Professor Elizabeth Prettejohn, writes about one of the most important paintings in York Art Gallery, by the York-born Victorian artist Albert Moore, a pioneering figure in what is often called 'the aesthetic movement' and a precursor of modernist formalism and abstraction.



In Victorian London, the York-born artist Albert Moore (1841-1893) exhibited regularly, counting influential painters (including Frederic Leighton and James McNeill Whistler) among his friends. Yet his

personal life remains a mystery, as he secluded himself in his studio to devote himself entirely to his art. Known for painting highly detailed, colourful, and richly decorative pieces, Moore at one point planned to write his artistic theories into a cohesive account. Ultimately he decided against this: his art would speak for itself. This makes it difficult for twenty-first century viewers to decipher some of Moore's stylistic decisions, though we do have two primary sources: the paintings themselves and their titles.ⁱ Since 1864 the artist had been exhibiting regularly at the annual Royal Academy exhibitions, and in 1869 he showed *A Venus* to mixed responses. Some critics praised its beauty, while others derided its perceived meaninglessness. The depiction of full-length nude was a concern for many, despite the mythological associations and Moore's clear artistic skills.

A Venus depicts a nude woman reminiscent of a sculpture, her limbs and torso conveying the rigidity of marble. Indeed, the body was modelled on a mirror image of the [Venus de Milo](#), then, as now, in the Louvre, Paris.

Carrying herself in a gentle contrapposto stance (the weight resting on one leg, the other bent at the knee), the Venus raises her arms to tie her hair behind her head with a ribbon. Diaphanous sheets of fabric, white and light pink in colour, lie draped over a wooden chair to the left, providing a soft counterpoint to the hard-edged flesh. On the ground stand Chinese pots and vases, characterised by their blue-and-white decoration. In the 1860s, interest developed rapidly in both Chinese and Japanese artefacts, appreciated more for their visual beauty than any cultural connotations. The vases hold flowering azalea plants, known at that time as quintessentially Japanese, a few white blossoms having cascaded to the white matting and floor, while a yellow variety enters the picture frame on the right. One pink petal peeks out of the stark-white vase in front, its colour corresponding with the Venus's ribbon. Behind her, a large sheet of drapery obscures the wall, acting as a replacement dado (the lower part of a wall underneath the rail), or even a decorative piece of wallpaper, to complement the blue above. Moore has painted the fabric to fall in line with Venus's body, its creases corresponding to the positioning of her limbs. The colours are perfectly balanced, yet they do not glow or vibrate with richness and luxury. Instead, the painting seems mute, silent.

The striking combination of chinoiserie, a classicising nude, Greek draperies, and Japanese flowers is curious, and puzzled many critics at the time. Even at the risk of the result being criticised as anachronistic,

Moore nonetheless decided to combine his different influences to achieve a certain level of tonal harmony. Colour and form, to him, were the most important elements in his art. At a time when the Academy promoted narrative and moralistic scenes, Moore decided to paint something essentially without a subject, as it lacks a linear narrative or storyline. He asks his viewers, instead, to look at and appreciate the painting solely in its visuality, in its colours and forms.

If one clue as to how we should approach the painting lies in Moore's clear prioritisation of colour and form over narrative, another is in the work's title. Any blatant display of nudity on the Academy's walls aroused opposition at the time; accordingly, to avoid the charge of outright voyeurism, literary, biblical, or mythological associations were needed to validate a nude's existence. By choosing simply to paint 'A Venus', Moore appears to try and circumvent this restriction. The negative response his work garnered, however, meant he did not exhibit another nude at the Academy until 1885. His interest in the formal, visual aspects of painting rather than narrative representation became a major aspect of his work, as showcased in the exhibition *Albert Moore: Of Beauty and Aesthetics* held at the York Art Gallery in 2017. Instead of using the painting as illustration of a pre-existing narrative, Moore focused on what captivated him most: the formal qualities of an artwork, the beauty of a decorative surface, and the prioritisation of the painting as a *painting*, not an illustration.

Were it not for Moore's rigorous working methods, involving numerous studies, colour sketches, and grids in order to create a perfectly balanced composition, the result might have appeared garish, even crude. Contemporary critics were reminded not of oil paint but of stucco, as the thin, transparent layers of paint Moore applied give an indication of the rough linen canvas underneath. The effect is fascinating; instead of the illusion of reality, we are starkly reminded as viewers of the materiality of the artwork. Any illusionism is further shattered by the prominent inclusion of Moore's signature in the top-left corner. Moore had adopted the anthemion, a Greek decorative motif, in 1866, and used it as his signature thereafter. The prominent inscription of the date emphasises the anachronistic character of the painting: an English model posing nude in 1869, modelled on a classical sculpture, placed in a semi-classical interior, surrounded by Chinese and Japanese artefacts. 1869, as the date of both creation and exhibition, further confuses the time frame of the work, serving to reinforce the painted space as an imaginary one. While it can be related to contemporary approaches to academic classicism as practised by Leighton, George

Frederic Watts, and Edward Poynter, *A Venus* also lends itself well to modernist interpretation on a purely formal basis. Visually, the painting, simultaneously alluring and complex, captivates its viewer through its attention to surface detail, materiality, colour, and form, refusing to divulge anything but its own visual elements.

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September 2020

ⁱ There is also much of value in the account of Moore's life and works by his student Alfred L. Baldry, an essential resource for anyone seriously interested in Moore's theories and working practices: *Albert Moore: His Life and Works* (London, 1894). The standard modern account is Robyn Asleson, *Albert Moore* (London, 2000).