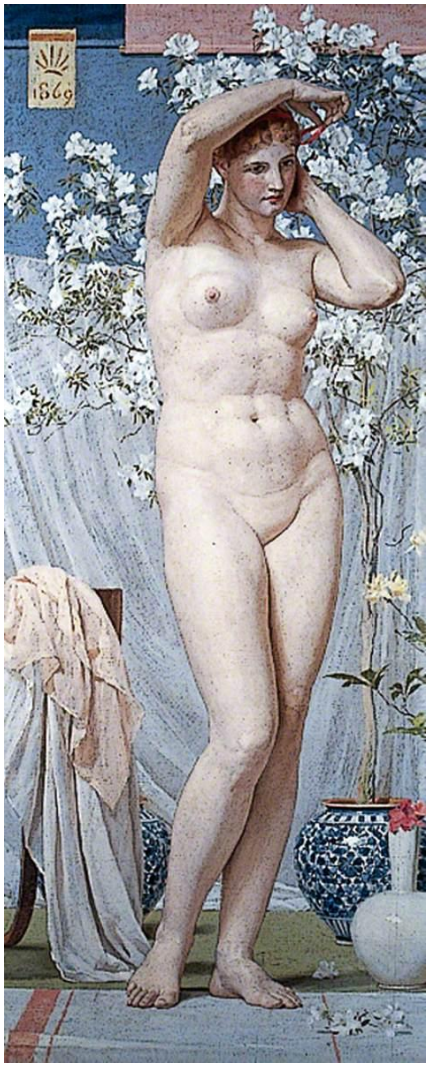
Artwork of the Month November 2026

Albert Moore: *A Venus*

Nicholas Dunn-McAfee, a member of the Friends Committee, talks about the reception of a boldly experimental work by the York-born artist Albert Moore, an important figure for Victorian Aestheticism. He explores the aesthetics of surface, and whether the painting should be seen as 'refined' or 'coarse'.

'Refined or Coarse?: Moore's *A Venus* and the Aesthetics of Surface'



Albert Joseph Moore, *A Venus*, 1869, oil on canvas, 160x76.2cm.
York Art Gallery YORAG : 698. Bequeathed by Cecil French, 1954.
Credit: York Museums Trust

> The figure is in no way obnoxious to good morals; indeed, it is too ugly and repulsive to be objectionable except to taste.[1]

That was *The Art Journal*, on 1 July 1869, reviewing a life-size nude hung at the Royal Academy — the great annual London exhibition, where any ambitious painter wanted to be seen. The critic wants us to know two things: first, that the picture is perfectly conducive to morality; second, that the reason it is perfectly conducive is that it is far too ugly to be anything else. What interests me isn't that this critic disliked the picture. It's *what* he disliked. He doesn't complain about the nudity. He doesn't complain about the subject. He complains about the picture as a made thing: its 'rawness, opacity, and a surface as of plastered wall'.[2] Not a nude woman, and all the interesting thinking and feeling that might enable or complicate, but a *plastered* wall. And he is far from alone. Other reviewers that spring and summer reach, again and again, for the same words: plaster, stucco, stone, fresco. When they do use the word flesh, it's mostly to tell us that it's something else.

A small note about the keywords in my title: 'Refined' and 'Coarse'. 'Coarse' belongs to Edward Godwin, writing in *The Architect*, who thought some of the modelling looked 'rather coarse.'[3] 'Refined' — or rather 'refinement' — belongs to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which praised the picture's 'knowledge and refinement.'[4] Two reviews, published within a week of each other, of the same picture. That is the question the painting put to its first audience, and we are its most recent audience. I will suggest that those critics were looking very carefully. They noticed exactly the right thing. They just drew, I think, the wrong conclusion — because the thing they disliked, the surface, is where this picture's beauty is at its most materially manifest, and its most fascinating. The argument runs in three steps: the title of the painting, which is doing something rather sly with its smallest word; the paint, which is where the critics' trouble began; and the surface in the broadest sense, because the same reviewers who found it

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[1] 'The Royal Academy', *The Art Journal*, new series 8 (1 July 1869), 197–204 (201). A note on sources: quotations from the 1869 reviews follow the transcriptions on Dennis T. Lanigan's *Victorian Web* entry on *A Venus*, to which I am indebted for drawing several of these reviews together.
[2] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201.
[3] E. W. Godwin, 'Royal Academy', *The Architect* (5 June 1869), 289–90 (289).
[4] Pall Mall Gazette, notice of 31 May 1869, quoted in A. L. Baldry, *Albert Moore: His Life and Works* (George Bell and Sons, 1894), 38.

so hard to forgive still kept admitting, through gritted teeth, that something in it was exquisite.

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So what is actually here? Not much, and that is the first thing worth saying about it. A woman stands in the middle of a tall canvas with both arms raised to her hair. One hand, lifted high over the crown of her head, draws a red ribbon (a fillet) across it; the other is bent back beside her ear. Behind her a curtain of white cloth falls to the floor, so that the blue-grey wall shows only at the top, where a band of pinkish terracotta runs along the edge. In the upper corner a small panel holds an ornament and the date, 1869: the painter's signature, not a name but a device, an anthemion (a Greek ornament, a stylised honeysuckle). A peach-coloured gown is slung over a chair. At the right, a white azalea in full flower rises from a blue-and-white porcelain pot and spreads its branches up behind her head like a crown; in front of that pot stands a plain white vase with a single red flower, and a second pot of the same blue and white, half hidden by drapery, sits at the lower left. A pale mat lies underfoot, with a few fallen petals. The palette is strikingly limited: flesh, white and blue, with a few small touches of red.

She is also about our size. The canvas is 63 by 30 inches (about 160 cm tall) and F. G. Stephens, in *The Athenaeum*, called it life-sized.[5] Which matters for how we stand in front of her. The shape matters, too: more than twice as tall as it is wide. That is not the shape of a window, but of a panel, the kind of tall, narrow field you might find set into a wall or a door. And there is very little depth: a wall, with a curtain of white fabric in front of it, closes the space off behind her, so that everything happens on a shallow stage, like figures on a frieze (the band of carved sculpture that runs around a Greek temple) an idea that will matter later. And what isn't here is just as striking. No sea. No shell. No Mars, no Cupid, no Adonis — no Paris with his apple, if we wanted to identify the Roman Venus with the

[5] F. G. Stephens, 'Fine Arts. Royal Academy', *The Athenaeum*, no. 2170 (29 May 1869), 738–39 (738).

Greek Aphrodite. Nobody we can see is watching her. It's not even akin to something like Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c. 1538), where she makes eye contact with us, accompanied by a little doggy sleeping on the bed and two maids rummaging through a chest in the background. The most dramatic thing happening in this picture is that somebody is doing her hair. And yet it is called *A Venus*.

So let's think about that title, and start with its smallest word. *A Venus*. Not Venus; not The Birth of Venus, or Venus and Mars. Just a Venus: one of them, any of them, all of them. If you went to the Academy in these years, you met a great many Venuses, and the figure has had a long career in European painting. She's born out of the sea; she's caught in bed with Mars; she's handed a mirror, a shell, a pair of doves. And calling a woman 'Venus' did two jobs at once. It gave her a story. And (not coincidentally) it gave a nude a respectable alibi. John Berger, in his seminal *Ways of Seeing* (1972), published about a century after this painting was shown, draws a famous distinction between the naked and the nude, responding to one made by the art historian Kenneth Clark.[6] 'To be naked,' Berger writes, 'is to be oneself.' To be nude is something else: to be a body arranged for somebody else's looking — and in European painting, that somebody is usually a man. In those terms, this isn't a painting of a naked woman; she's a nude goddess, and goddesses are classical, and the classical and classicism is allowed. But Moore gives up both the story and the alibi. Alison Smith, whose work on the Victorian nude is the place to start, has read that little indefinite article as a sign that Moore wanted to evoke a general ideal of beauty rather than the goddess of Roman myth.[7] Not the goddess, but the idea, or the idea that the physical female form might come to embody that ideal.

But she isn't without a source. Three of the reviewers spot it at once: the torso is potentially a visual quotation of the Venus de Milo — the armless goddess now in the Louvre, found on the island of Milos in 1820.[8] Moore takes that torso, and gives it arms — and gives the arms a job. The

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[6] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972); see Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (John Murray, 1956).
[7] Alison Smith, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (Tate Publishing, 2001), 94
[8] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201; J. B. Atkinson, 'The London Art Season', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 106 (August 1869), 220–39 (224–25); 'The Royal Academy', *The Saturday Review* 27 (5 June 1869), 743–45 (744).

job comes from somewhere else in Greek sculpture: a type called the *diadumenos*, made famous by the sculptor Polykleitos — an idealised young male athlete, still nude after the contest, lifting his arms to knot the diadem, the headband that marks him as the winner.[9] So what Moore has made is potentially a strange composite. This picture depicts no scene, and no particular woman either. She may well be assembled from other works of art: the torso of a famous female statue, the gesture of a famous male one — a goddess of love, knotting her hair like a victorious athlete. Before she is paint, she is sculpture, twice over. Which is exactly what the title promises: not *the* Venus of any story, but *a* Venus, a type.

There is one last place where a story could hide, and that is the face; and Moore — had he wanted to — might have configured the face to tell us something: modesty, coyness, triumph, invitation. The *Pall Mall Gazette* — one of the friendly critics — found this one 'inexpressive,' its beauty self-sufficient, of 'the Athenian ideal.'[10] And this is where Berger becomes useful. Titian's *Venus* looks straight out at us; she knows she is being looked at, and the whole picture is built around that exchange. Moore's *Venus* doesn't meet our eye. She looks away, her eyes lowered a little, her mouth closed, her expression calm and rather distant. Her hands are busy with the ribbon, but her mind might not be entirely on it. Self-sufficient, as the *Gazette* says: she isn't performing for anybody. Berger wouldn't let Moore off quite so easily, though. The raised arms that keep her busy also lift the ribcage and open the whole torso to view. The same gesture that turns her away from us puts her body on display — though that raised arm also throws a little shade over her face, a small veiling. So three places where a Victorian viewer might have expected a story to 'read' (the title, the gesture, the face), and each has been quietly put out of action. If we take away the myth, the plot, and the expression, what is left to look at? The paint, which is what we are *always already* looking at.

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[9] Dennis T. Lanigan, 'A Venus by Albert Joseph Moore, ARWS (1841-1893)', *Victorian Web* (18 May 2022).
[10] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 May 1869, quoted in Baldry, 38.

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The paint is what the critics noticed first — perhaps more so than the nudity, as Alison Smith has observed of the picture's reception.[11] This is what the reviewers of 1869 said when they looked at this woman's skin. Godwin in *The Architect* complained that the position and the light did the picture no favours. What he saw was flesh that looked 'as if it had been built up by a long process of stratification.'[12] Stratification: the arrangement or division of something into separate, distinct layers, levels, or groups. That is geological and sociological; he is talking about a woman as though she were a cliff, or a class system. The *Art Journal* referred to 'a surface as of plastered wall.' The *Illustrated London News* noted that 'the flesh is stone itself,' spoke of 'bas-relief' — sculpture carved shallowly out of a flat surface — and finally dismissed the picture as 'a studiously flat conventional wall-decoration.'[13] The *Spectator* found the colour 'chalky' and 'artificial' and — goodness knows how to quite square this third descriptor with the first two — the texture 'leprous': infected with, or resembling, leprosy, though I wonder how much projection and vitriol is at play here.[14] The *Saturday Review*, a little kindlier, compares the method to tempera and fresco: paint bound with egg, and paint laid onto wet plaster, both the old materials of panels and walls.[15] And Atkinson, in *Blackwood's*, says the figure is 'neither marble, paint, nor flesh, but stucco', a kind of decorative plaster.[16] Strata, plaster, stone, stucco, fresco, tempera. Hardly anyone says skin or flesh in a literal, human sense.

Atkinson's sentence is the best of them: he has gone through everything a Venus might be made of, and ruled each one out — not marble, though it starts from a marble; not flesh, though it's a woman; and,

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[11] See Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester University Press, 1996).
[12] Godwin, *The Architect*, 289.
[13] 'Fine Arts. The Royal Academy', *The Illustrated London News* 54 (22 May 1869), 526–27 (526).
[14] 'Art. The Royal Academy', *The Spectator* 42 (12 June 1869), 705–06 (706).
[15] *Saturday Review*, 5 June 1869, 744.
[16] Atkinson, *Blackwood's*, 224–25.

to his indignation, not properly paint, either. Turn that the other way round, and it becomes rather interesting. Most paintings of the nude want you to forget what they are made of: the paint is supposed to pass as skin. This one won't pass. What is left is the thing itself: paint on canvas, behaving rather like plaster. To see how unusual that is, imagine a different Venus: Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* (1863), a sensation at the Paris Salon (the official annual exhibition) and bought by Napoleon III. You will remember the skin: smooth, warm, luminous, and not a brushstroke in sight. That is what oil paint is for, in the long tradition of the painted nude: thin, translucent layers, light passing in and coming back out, so that paint seems to become skin. The *Art Journal* critic (remember, a man who hated this picture) names exactly what he missed here, 'the translucency and juiciness of oils', and 'juiciness' is rarely a word one hears in art criticism.[17] Moore does something of the opposite. The picture's palette is pale and its canvas coarse; the weave can be seen through the paint, which is dry and matte rather than glossy, and the richness for which oil is famous has been deliberately held back. Where Cabanel hides his paint, Moore lets the weave of the canvas speak through it. Up close, you can't pretend you're looking at a body. You are looking at pigment on fabric, tacked over a wooden stretcher. Alison Smith has described how this restrained handling of oil gives the surface the quality of a wall painting.[18]

Which raises an obvious question: why paint like this? The *Art Journal* critic has a theory. Moore, he says, 'may, perhaps, have in some measure spoilt himself for the painting of easel-pictures by the practice of mural decoration', painting directly onto walls.[19] His paint behaves like wall paint because he'd been painting walls. But think about what a wall painting has to do. Since the Renaissance, the easel picture — the portable painting on a stand — had been imagined as a window, in Alberti's famous image: an opening through which you look into another world. A mural can't be a window. It *is* the wall: it has to stay flat, so as not to punch a hole in the architecture, and often matte, like the plaster it sits in. Which is exactly what the picture gives us — a tall, upright panel, a shallow stage, a matte, chalky surface. The critics saw it; they simply didn't like being shown it. The picture was made for the collector Frederick

[17] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201.
[18] Smith, *Exposed*, 94. See also Lanigan's comments on this.
[19] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201.

Leyland, who a few years later would end up with Whistler's Peacock Room — a London dining room transformed into a total work of art. More importantly, this is someone who patronised figures like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, and demonstrated what I would call 'good taste'. And here is the oddest thing. The *Art Journal* critic finds the whole effect 'intolerable save at a distance.'[20] The *Saturday Review* says much the same: 'the artist gains by his method light and force, especially at a distance.'[21] Two critics who agreed about almost nothing else, both reporting that the picture improves the further away you get. So this isn't a badly made picture, even on these terms, but it is a picture made for a distance. Up close, the surface insists on itself; from across the room, it resolves into light. That's the coarse: dry, chalky, opaque, grainy, a surface that talks about itself. If that were all there was to say, the critics would have been right. But there's something more to be said about refinement.

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The same reviewers who disliked the surface kept, almost against their will, admitting that something in the picture was exquisite. The critic of the *Illustrated London News* critic, remember, told us the flesh was stone. In the same paragraph he allows that 'the design is good, the contours are very firmly drawn,' and that the colouring is 'not disagreeable, regarded merely as a harmonious arrangement for decorative purposes of an extremely limited scale of hue.'[22] Which, given how people praise Moore's delicate low tones, is quite the compliment. Stephens, in *The Athenaeum*, liked it rather more, calling it 'a rare enjoyment of beauty'.[23] But the critic I want to spend time with is the one at the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He describes the picture as 'a balance or comparison, not of tints, but of tones' — one in which, he says, 'the relations, and not the local truth, of the various coloured surfaces are reproduced.'[24] 'Local truth' is the old idea that each thing in a picture ought to be the colour it actually is: skin skin-coloured,

[20] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201.
[21] *Saturday Review*, 5 June 1869, 744.
[22] *Illustrated London News*, 22 May 1869, 526.
[23] Stephens, *The Athenaeum*, 738.
[24] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 May 1869, quoted in Baldry, 38.

wall wall-coloured. ‘Relations’ is something else entirely: how one colour stands to the next. A picture of relations is one where what matters isn’t how like the world each patch of colour is, but how the patches sit together. And notice his vocabulary: a ‘scale,’ with ‘intervals,’ running from salmon and gold through blue and green, with white at the top. You can check that against the picture: salmon in the flesh and the robe, gold in the pale blossom at the right-hand edge, blue in the pots, green in the leaves. The language is borrowed from music — and even the *Illustrated London News*, which hated the picture, speaks of a ‘scale’ of hue. Think about what that scale means for a nude. In many painted nudes the body is the brightest thing in the picture, and everything else is pushed back into shadow so that she (or he, if you look at some of William Etty’s works at York Art Gallery) can glow. Here the highest note in the scale is white — the hanging, the blossom, the little white vase. The body takes its place in the scale: one voice among several, rather than the soloist.

Now, the word ‘refinement’ is the *Gazette*’s too: the modelling — the way outline and shading make a form look solid — recalls, he says, ‘no later master than Flaxman.’[25] Flaxman was a Neoclassical sculptor, reviving the Greek style, whose outline drawings are almost pure line: no shading, just a clean edge. The *Gazette* finds the lines of the body ‘firm, chaste, and severe,’ and you can see it in the edge of her body against the white drapery: warm flesh against cool white, held in place by a firm contour and only the lightest help from shadow. That is the other half of what the *Illustrated London News* complained of: ‘the elimination of shadow.’[26] He was exaggerating, of course. She does cast a slight shadow, and so do the pots, the vase and the chair, all falling a little down and to the right, as if the light came from up and to the left, outside the picture. She even puts herself a little in shade with that raised arm. But it is all so soft that you can almost forgive him for missing it. Shadow is kept to a whisper, which one critic called elimination, and another refinement.

What to make of this all? If you paint a nude in glowing oil, with deep shadow and a body that seems to breathe, we look *through* the paint, and imagine that we have seen its subject. Moore closes that road. He keeps the shadow to a whisper, damps down the colour, brings the wall and the

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[25] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 May 1869, quoted in Baldry, 38.
[26] *Illustrated London News*, 22 May 1869, 526.

curtain right up behind her, and leaves the grain of the canvas where we can see it. We can't look through this surface. So we look *at* it. And what we find isn't a story, or even quite a person. It's relations. Warm flesh against cool white. Blue returning — wall, pots. White against white: the drapery, the blossom, the plain white vase. And two small notes of red, the ribbon in her hair and the flower at the bottom right, answering each other across the whole height of the canvas. A few colours, rhyming like a chord. And this is why the coarse surface matters. Imagine this picture with Cabanel's glossy finish: the body would gleam and come forward, the room would fall back, and the quiet differences between one white and the next, one blue and the next, would be drowned out by the drama of light on flesh. The dry, matte surface, with its suggestion of shadow, keeps everything at one volume, so that the small differences can be heard. The coarseness isn't a failure of the refinement, but what makes the refinement visible. In 1890, twenty-one years after this picture was shown, the French painter and critic Maurice Denis wrote a sentence that has been quoted ever since: 'Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' A nude woman: she is on the list of things a picture is *before*. Now, you don't *need* to think Moore is some kind of arch-Modernist (though this is obviously modern art), but I do think this picture makes that sentence visible twenty years early.

The *Gazette* critic ends his review with the most precise account of the subject that anyone gave. Moore, he says, 'has rendered at once, with intense sympathy, and with the skill of a master, the associations which the highest culture has gathered around the name of Aphrodite.'[27] Not Aphrodite, but the *associations*: everything a culture has piled up around a name — marble, line, calm, proportion. That is the subject: beauty as a cultural idea, not a story about a goddess. And Moore paints it not in the glow of oil, which would turn her into a person, but in a dry, chalky, wall-like film that keeps her an idea. 'Neither marble, paint, nor flesh,' as Atkinson put it, in disgust. So: refined or coarse? The critics treated it as a choice: you either admire the line, or you object to the surface. But the picture won't let the two come apart. It is coarse so that it can be refined. When beauty, rather than narrative, is the subject of a painting, the surface

[27] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 May 1869, quoted in Baldry, 38.

has to do the work, because there is nothing else to hold on to. And that, I'd suggest, is where this picture's beauty comes from — not from what it is *of*, but from what it is *made of*.

To return to where I started, the *Art Journal* critic did not like the picture; he thought the figure too ugly to be immoral, and yet he gave her the most generous sentence any hostile critic ever managed. From the far side of the room, he admitted, the figure 'tells out with somewhat of the light-giving power of fresco.'[28]

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[28] *Art Journal*, 1 July 1869, 201.