Sleeping Venus, by Giorgione, shows a majestic goddess under the power of sleep. Completed around 1510 (the year of his death), no artist before him had created a piece that was so focused on pure feminine beauty in the form of a sleeping woman, stretched out across the canvas. The painting was not entirely finished when Giorgione died and was actually completed by the then-young Titian, who made a copy, Venus of Urbino, 28 years later. Sleeping Venus was one of the most popular paintings of the time, with its influence spanning from Titian and a host of Venetian artists all the way to impressionists like Manet.1 There was something different about this sleeping woman, something mysterious and very powerful.

The painting was a part of a large movement in the Renaissance called all'antica, or “from antiquity.”2 It is believed to be commissioned as a wedding present for Girolamo Marcello. It was most likely displayed on the front panel of a hope chest, a piece of furniture that was traditionally for a woman to use to store linen before her marriage. The image of Venus would have been appropriate, as the goddess of love, encouraging a prosperous marriage.2

The pose of the goddess herself is perhaps the most striking aspect. According to art historian Rona Goffen, the subject of the painting is actually a combination of 2 or 3 different classical poses. She is in the “pudica” pose which shows a sense of modesty, as well as reclining in a classical sleeping posture. The right arm bent behind her head in this classical arrangement is reminiscent of figures like Ariadne, various nymphs, and the Barbarini faun, among others, which were so popular in ancient Greek and Roman art.4 Stretched out across the canvas, Giorgione masterfully forms one long, continuous, flowing line in an image of complete grace.5 Unlike many other pictures of sleeping figures, however, Venus is sleeping alone. She is not a part of a discovery scene (like many representations of Ariadne and nymphs). Additionally, in the final version, she is not even accompanied by Cupid. Many classical sleeping figures were partnered with a small, winged figure, such as Cupid or Hypnos, the god of sleep.6 The original piece that included Cupid would have more clearly represented a Venus dreaming of a loving marriage.4 The absence of Cupid, however, is only one aspect where the painting departs from the classical canon.

Many artists during the Renaissance embraced the classical while inventing their own aspects of myths and style to fit their own visions.2 Whereas in ancient Greek and Roman art, a sleeping figure would most likely have been in the middle of nature, resting on rocks, here, although still in nature, Venus is resting on a couch. Not only that, but up until now, Venus had never been shown asleep at all. The painting also departed from earlier conceptions of sleep and femininity. Throughout the history of art, from classical times to the era of Picasso, a sleeping woman has been a display of her sexuality, whether gazed upon by men or in the implication of her dreams.2

In Renaissance Venice, however, a different perspective was growing. Even before Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus, Botticelli painted Venus and Mars, showing the goddess looking upon the god of war asleep, a beautiful assertion of the power of love over war. Even with Venus asleep in Giorgione’s image, she is not under the power of anyone else.6 She is not only beautiful; she is beauty itself.7 Instead of a sexual beauty, she is painted as a representation of powerful, spiritual love and the embodiment of sleep itself.

The Renaissance in Venice changed the perspective of sleep. Whereas in medieval times, sleep (especially in women) represented sloth and a loss of morality, in the new Venetian culture, sleep represented peace. The town gained the nickname “La Serenissima,” known for its culture that strove for peace.6 Sleep was important to them, even in a religious sense—they embraced the idea of a vacatio, a space in which, during sleep, one could come into contact and receive messages from the divine.8 The painting shows a harmony between Venus’ inner and outer peace and not only a marital but also pure spiritual love.7 As one scholar writes, Sleeping Venus was masterful in its “rhythmic intervals of space and sleep.”3 The Venetian artists did not see sleep as a symbol of death, sex, or immorality but rather as a time of contemplation, in tune with the beat of the real world. One of the first of its kind, the resting Venus was an inspiration to great artists of Venice for the purity of the peace that was sleep itself.
Disclosures

Authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

References