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## In Search of the American Venus

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What waters washed our American Venus ashore? Was it the waves of the Pacific, that lap and beat at the Californian coast? Or was it the Atlantic, like the crystalline tides of the Gulf of Mexico? Maybe she made her way up north, surfacing caught in a bursting net amidst blue crabs in Baltimore? Perhaps she's from the Jersey Shore—were her first steps on land splintering as she tiptoed along the Ocean City boardwalk? She might even be a native New Yorker, cracking open the porcelain walls of her shell to find the glittering lights of the Wonder Wheel at Coney Island. We don't know for certain where she came from—it could have been any bustling city or rustic small town across the fifty states. What we do know for sure is that she's here now, and she isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

The original Venus is the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, as well as the subject of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. In his work, Venus emerges from the sea as the purist personification of beauty, and is immediately met and tended to by the other figures in the painting. She is bestowed with flowers and fine cloaks upon the very moment of her birth—she is no stranger to adoration and declarations of love. So, who is the American Venus? Chances are, you've conjured up the image of her already. She's the all-American celebrity it girl; she exists at the forefront of American beauty and entertainment. She is bolstered by the entertainment industry as the ideal woman—you've seen her image on your phones, on your

screens, towering above you on billboards, and plastered below you on the walls of subway tunnels. She is worshiped in the same vein as the original Venus—she is the idol for legions of loyal fans who are mobilized through social media, her likeness is seen or worn or heard by millions of people daily, and she is driving the current cultural conversation of the moment. She is also—more likely than not—an artist. Excluding the cases in which she is manufactured by the entertainment industry, the American Venus has risen to her pedestal of fame and adoration as a result of her unique artistic vision and creative output. Where the two versions differ is that the American Venus is not a myth like her 15th century counterpart. She was not born from the sea perfectly whole like the pearl inside of a scallop shell, and in spite of how the worship from her devoted followers might make her appear, *she is no goddess*. The American Venus is an artist, and is, therefore, irrevocably human. She lives to reflect and embody her interpretation of the human experience. It's important to remember this aspect of the American Venus, because it is her humanity that makes her vulnerable and susceptible to the forces of celebrity culture and the American entertainment industry.

In her 2004 book, *The Importance of Being Famous*, author and Vanity Fair journalist Maureen Orth coined the term “celebrity-industrial complex” to describe the social and economic construct built upon the symbiotic relationship between celebrities and corporations. The mutually beneficial relationship is one that is well-documented throughout American entertainment history—celebrities’ desire for fame and attention is sustained by corporate backing, whilst the corporate desire for maximizing profit is sustained by the likeness and continued relevance of the celebrity. When the interests of these two align, we see the rise of massive mainstream successes—the births of global cultural phenomenons. However, the relationship between artists and corporations greatly contrasts the nature of the former

relationship—the two are antagonistic, if not entirely opposed. It is the role of the artist to most authentically express their creative interpretation of humanity—to challenge preconceived notions, to question our place in this world, and to criticize the institutions and preordained systems that govern our everyday lives. The artist's works and experiences act as a mirror of society; it is their role to invite us to determine if we like what looks back at us. It is the role of corporations to sell and market products. It is difficult to market a truly unique artistic vision—it isn't going to resonate with the entirety of the masses. Everyone is going to take away something different from true art, and that to a corporation is an unpredictable, unreliable, and unprofitable product. It is because of this that artistry is always going to be at odds with the blind pursuit of profit. Once the American Venus leaves her core audience and local scene, and crosses the threshold to widespread mainstream appeal, her artistic autonomy is put in a dangerous position. She is at the behest of those who wish to capitalize on her work and her likeness while simultaneously having no concern for the integrity of her vision, her values, or her personal well-being. Their only interest is making as much money from as many people as possible. This often leads to the disfiguration of Venus—the muddying of her vision, of her creative project. Venus is no longer tasked solely with executing her artistic vision—she is now burdened with the prison of remaining likable and digestible to the masses.

The American Venus cannot exist without the support and admiration of her audience. She relies on their consumption of her art; she thrives when we identify with her work, when we resonate with it, when we choose to invite it into our lives. There is no greater gratification for the American Venus—let alone any artist—than knowing that your art is valuable and influencing people. However, the tradeoff is that once she puts her art into the world, she no longer has control over *how* it influences people. Her work is no longer hers—it belongs to all

who bear witness to it. The original context is entirely separate from what it becomes in the cultural zeitgeist, and people are free to interpret or represent her artistic vision however they like. This phenomenon has been greatly exacerbated with social media, where anyone in the world can consume and opine on the work that Venus creates. Furthermore, social media has removed the unapproachability that once came warranted with celebrity status; we are invited to view pieces of celebrities' personal lives in the form of stories and posts, we're able to see who these celebrities follow and the posts they like, and if someone wants to get in contact with their favorite celebrity, they can theoretically just shoot them a private message (even if they would never respond). It is this illusion of familiarity created by social media that leads many people to believe that they are entitled to the American Venus's very life. They opine to and bully her online, they trace information over the internet to stalk and harass her in public, they tirelessly critique her body and her looks, they exaggerate her shortcomings, they form parasocial relationships. Corporations, assuredly, will not intervene. In fact, the celebrity-industrial complex itself is responsible for her plight. The industry drives her to be *bigger*—to be more accessible to her fans, to forgo personal boundaries, to create endless streams of content for social media. We've seen this very phenomenon play out in real-time with the case of Chappell Roan, whose very recent meteoric rise to fame has thrust her into the scrutiny of the public eye and social media. She has been subject to many of the unfortunate realities of modern fame—stalkers, social media tirades, and nonconsensual and invasive fan interactions. However, the difference between her and many other cases is that she refuses to accept these immoral acts as a part of the price of fame. She has taken to social media to protect herself and make her priorities known: "I chose this career path because I love music and art and honoring my inner child. I do not accept harassment of any kind because I chose this path, nor do I deserve it," Roan concludes in a recent

*Instagram* post. Chappell Roan is absolutely justified in her prioritization of her wellbeing, yet she has been slammed as “ungrateful” and “bitchy” by her critics for not making herself endlessly accessible to her fans. It is uncommon for a woman in a position such as Roan’s (or any other Venus) to accost her fans for their nasty behavior. By doing so, Roan exhibits an acute awareness of how to survive in the industry while still prioritizing her happiness. Typically, Venus suffers in silence—fans and corporations alike will watch as Venus suffers as a result of her constant perception, and eventually she succumbs to her massively publicized destruction, all in the name of show business. After all, show business is like any other business in that it’s kept alive by the pursuit of profit—and there’s hardly anything more profitable than the obsession of fandom.

The rise and fall of an American Venus is not a story that we’re unfamiliar with—we’ve seen it unfold countless times. Women who are suddenly given everything they could have ever dreamed of, and must come to terms with the price that comes with fame and fortune. Some women are unable to pay the price and are cast out of the limelight when someone younger or prettier comes along. Some women succumb entirely to the will of their capitalist backers and lose their artistry entirely in the pursuit of greed and fame. However, the women who tend to be the most happy and fulfilled are those who are able to prioritize their well-being and artistry over the interests of industry, much like what Roan is working to achieve. Those who refuse to be made malleable to the will of corporations, who are firm in who they are and the vision that they have for the world. It is crucial to her survival that the American Venus must know her worth—that her own experiences and vision are what brought her to where she is today, and no conglomerate or algorithm is ever going to change that. The entertainment industry will always be in search of the new American Venus, but what they will never find is another her.