

[Ashley Lazevnick](#)

ART 305

3 Mar 2022

The Birth of Venus (Cabanel)

The Birth of Venus is a painting by Alexandre Cabanel. The most noteworthy aspect of the painting is that it is a combination of a seascape and a nude figure portrait. The central figure is a reclining Venus who rests on a foamy wave. Surrounding her are cherubs, two of which are trumpeting conch shells. While compositionally simple, the subject matter, forms, and colors create a fantastical setting.

Venus, the reclining subject, has a wistful gaze as she drapes herself on the sea. Her body is unnaturally slender and unblemished. Her hips jut out widely and yet her ribcage is poking through translucent skin. She is hairless and perfect, an ideal body, even godlike — even if her proportions are exaggerated. Her hair is long, wavy, and golden. It reaches down mid-calf or even longer, since it is partially folded behind her forearm. The curls in her hair mimic the softness of the waves below her. The illusion of light is shown by the lightening of certain parts of her hair, particularly those mid-torso, which sport small specks of white to indicate reflection. Cabanel used extreme care in painting the hair to appear as if every strand is visible. Her overall appearance gives off a feeling of perplexity. Her weary eyes and dramatic pose of hiding into herself give a sense of shame. However, her torso is angled out to the viewer, almost as if showing off. Somehow, the mood of this painting is shameful yet glamorous.

The cherubs create an interesting line of action on the top of the painting. The eye is led from the leftmost cherub and follows an s-curve down to Venus' face. Their dynamic movements reflect that line of action. Their poses are playful, almost clumsy. They appear to be tumbling over themselves to get a closer look at Venus. Oddly, two of the cherubs sport bright

blue wings in opposition to the stark white ones of the others. Perhaps this was used to make them stand out from the already bright sky. The two cherubs on the left blow on conch shells into the air as if sounding a trumpet. Sounding a trumpet gives the illusion that someone important has arrived. The birth of Venus is an occasion worthy of announcing.

In comparison to Venus, the murky waves of the ocean seem more hastily painted. From a distance, they seem perfectly, almost too naturally, realistic. Yet as the viewer gets a closer look of the painting, one can tell that the waves and dips in the water are distinguishable by mere white strokes. The white marks are textured as if done with a dry brush very quickly. They are somewhat blended in areas, but others remain quick sketch lines. As the image recedes further back in space, atmospheric perspective is employed. Even the clouds above are simplified. Cabanel seems to prioritize the human form over landscape. The human form is distinct from its background without using heavy contour line. Rather, the sky creates visual negative space for our eyes to carve out the body.

The colors used are mostly natural earth tones. There is a great amount of blue and green tones, even in the skin of Venus and the cherubs. The reflection of the water leaves a slight tint on their skin. The application of the light ivory color is pleasing to the eye. It gives the painting a soft, angelic effect. The gold of the hair of Venus and the cherubs adds a feeling of royalty or richness. The deep blues of the ocean and the wings continue the mystical feeling.

In conclusion, Cabanel created a painting that was an idealized representation of a goddess. His use of color that is associated with light and royalty add to the feeling of importance. Not only that, but the form of Venus is beautiful and statuesque; she is effortlessly beautiful which makes her the highlight of the painting. The dynamic array of cherubs and

Venus' pose take the eye from one side of the painting to the other. Described in one word, this painting is soft.