Why is our world so dominated by images of the body that are unrealistic?

Pictures of the human body fill our TV screens, magazines, and billboards, every waking moment. Through the ages artists have been obsessed with the human form. The range of bodies they have created is breathtaking, but yet they share one thing in common—most of these images are not totally realistic representations. So why is our modern world dominated by images of the body that are unrealistic?

Neuroscientists theorize this has something to do with the workings of the human brain, and point to a neurological principle known as the “peak shift.” In essence our brain is hard-wired to focus upon parts of objects with pleasing associations. So if you were an artist, the tendency would be to reproduce human figures with parts that mattered the most to you.

Prehistoric artists were clearly caught up in peak shift tendencies, creating exaggerated statues like the famed Venus of Willendorf. For their part, the Egyptians perfected a more stylized, order-obsessed human figure, only to have the Greeks break out and create fantastically heroic—but unrealistic—images.

So why then are we modern people constantly inundated by unrealistic images of the body? In reality, we humans don't really like reality - we prefer exaggerated, “more human than human,” images of the body. This is a shared biological instinct that appears to link us with our ancient ancestors.

THE VENUS [WOMAN] OF WILLENDORF

The Venus/Woman of Willendorf is one of the earliest images of the body unearthed to date. It stands just over 4 ½ inches high and was carved some 25,000 years ago. It was discovered on the banks of the Danube River, in Austria, and it was most likely made by hunter-gatherers who lived in the area. The people who made this statue lived in a harsh ice-age environment where features of fatness and fertility would have been highly desirable.

The question is, why were prehistoric humans stimulated by an exaggerated image such as this? The answer, according to neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran and others, lies in the workings of the human brain, in a neurological principle known as the "peak shift."

In Paleolithic people terms, the parts that mattered most had to do with successful reproduction - the breasts and pelvic girdle. Therefore, these parts were isolated and amplified by the artist's brain.

EGYPT: OBSESSIVE ORDER
By 5000 BC, the Egyptians had established a stable agricultural existence. They were the first settled humans to use images of the body extensively in their art. But the exaggerated, nomadic way of showing the body as a response to a harsh environment was long dead and gone.

Egyptian artisans lived and worked in groups, where originality was not highly prized. Images of the human body were regular and repeated, and nothing about them was exaggerated. Everything was formulaic and made to look the same. The artist was more concerned with cataloging the parts of the body - one head, two arms, two legs, etc - then the actual appearance of the body. The Egyptians chose to represent the human body from its clearest angle, and within a grid system that was applied to a plastered wall by dipping a length of string in red paint, stretching it tight, and then twanging it against the surface to be painted. To the ancient Egyptians, their image of the body mapped within a grid system prevented any deviation from the norm.

**ANCIENT GREECE: NAKED PERFECTION**

Ancient Greeks were preoccupied with philosophy and mathematics, but there was something in their culture that was the equivalent of Egypt's obsession with order and precision. The Greeks were fixated with the human body, and to them the perfect body was an athletic body. They believed their gods took human form, and in order to worship their gods properly, they filled their temples with life-size, life-like images of them. Greek sculptors first learned sculpting and quarrying techniques from the Egyptians. They initially created truly realistic depictions of the human body, like Kritian (or Kritios) Boy, (left), but within a generation they stopped this realism - for some reason they were dissatisfied with it. Though they didn't know it, just like the hunter-gatherers thousands of years ago, they were looking for something more human than human. The Greeks discovered they had to do interesting things with the human form, such as distorting it in order to exaggerate the brain's aesthetic response to that body. A 450 BC Greek sculptor called Polyclitus (or Polykleitos) developed a break-through technique that allowed sculptures to be created showing the physical potential of an athlete, something both relaxed and yet ready to move. With this radical new system, the artist could at last represent physical perfection - as personified by a famous pair of Greek statues called the Riace Bronzes, circa 450 BC. At first glance they resemble human beings, but in fact it's not anatomically possible for a person, however athletic, to look like them. They are something more human than human. They are unrealistic bodies where reality has been exaggerated - perhaps a further case of peak shift?
How did the Greek civilization influence Roman Achievements?

The Greeks and Romans were neighbors, therefore, inevitably had an affect on each other. They shared many different points of view and discoveries with each other. A point where many ideas and beliefs were exchanged was at Alexandria, Egypt. The Greeks affected the Romans in many aspects: religion, science and math, architecture, and more.

The Greeks obviously influenced the Romans in their religion. If you look at almost any Roman god, they have a Greek counterpart. For example, Jupiter was Zeus, Neptune was Poseidon, and Pluto was Hades. The gods that weren't from the Greeks were from Egypt and other surrounding nations.

The Romans believed that science and math had its limits. They used it only for practical uses, like using math for buildings and science for inventions used in daily life; therefore, many of the advances in mathematics and science were made by the Greeks. Pythagoras was Greek. So were many other scientists such as Archimedes, Galen, etc.

The Romans admired Greek art, and because so much Greek art was destroyed through invasions and natural disasters, we know what it looked like because of the Roman copies.

Although the Romans did adapt many of the Greeks’ styles, the Romans did add to them. The Romans were people who readily accepted other's beliefs. When they conquered other peoples, they allowed them to become citizens and keep their own beliefs, hence diversifying their own culture. —Edward Lee (adapted)