

*Jill Burke*  
*Venus and Adonis*

When I look at this image, I find my eyes irresistibly drawn to those white, beautiful, dimpled buttocks. And it seems that I'm not the only one. At least one art critic in the Renaissance particularly praised Venus's 'hindmost parts' as he called them, and said that 'no one' – I'm quoting 'so cooled by age or so tough of temperament, that on seeing Venus wouldn't feel his body heating up and his blood stirring in his veins.'

Not everyone liked their blood stirred, though. The Spanish ambassador to Venice described the painting as 'excessively lascivious.' And it's not surprising that he was shocked. Unlike in Italy where there were lots and lots of nudes by this time, in Spain, and in England, nudes were very rare and still had the power to disturb people. We can only imagine, then, how the wife of Titian's patron, Queen Mary I, must have reacted to these impressive buttocks when the painting arrived in London in 1554. And Mary, her own looks were constantly scrutinized, with Spanish and Italian letters of the time berating her lack of beauty: disparaging her red hair, criticizing her thinness, and her aging face.

Paintings like Titian's fed into a conversation about the way that real women should look. In a book of beauty tips from the 1560s, women are urged to look 'naturally beautiful': hair should be blonde, eyes should be dark, skin should be white and smooth, with hints of pink – just like Titian's Venus. Amongst recipes for anti-wrinkle creams, caustic body hair removal ointments and hair bleach, are tips on how to get fatter, or how to make your thighs – and I quote – 'soft, trembling, and white like alabaster.' So Queen Mary, with her unfashionable English body, was never going to make the grade in the gossip of Italian courtiers. But Phillip II, her husband, seemed to appreciate her anyway. An Italian source exclaims with surprise: "They always sleep together! The King bears so much love and good will for her, that it couldn't be more."

Then, as now, it seems, some men could look beyond the buttocks.