Fashioning the Goddesses: Idealizing and Celebrating the Female Form

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ABSTRACT

FASHIONING THE GODDESSES: IDEALIZING AND CELEBRATING THE FEMALE FORM

By Lauren Johnson

Inspired by nine Greco-Roman goddesses, I designed, patterned, and produced eveningwear. I then directed two photo shoots and informal fashion show to showcase these designs as well as showed one dress in one additional fashion show. This paper describes the thought processes behind those designs and illustrates them using the photographs taken during the photo shoots, my mood boards, and my fashion renderings.
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Introduction

I have always had an interest in clothing and mythology because they both tell stories in their own separate ways. Our choices regarding what we wear and how we wear it give almost endless information about ourselves. They tell where we have been, what we like, and how we think about ourselves.

I wanted to take these concepts and apply them to the goddesses of Greco-Roman religion so that I could tell their stories and show their personalities through their dress. Each of these goddesses has an immense number of stories to tell and concepts to explore from her thousands of years of history up until today, when she is still relevant. In addition to their classical mythology, Greco-Roman goddesses have been adopted by the modern Feminist movement as archetypes for women’s psychology such as in the works of Jean Shinoda Bolen. The goddesses were reclaimed by women as representations of their own power. I used this concept as a springboard for my work. I wanted each goddess to be a representation of female strength and beauty while encompassing all of her complexities.

At the same time, I wanted each goddess to have an appearance that fit with the aesthetics of her cultural heritage. I researched dress in Greek and Roman history beginning with the Mycenaean Greeks. Her dress and entire appearance should look as it would if the Greeks and Romans had access to our modern materials and technology. One particular article was especially inspirational, “A Woman’s View? Dress, Eroticism, and the Ideal Female Body in Athenian Art,” by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. This article explains that the way garments were made in the Greco-Roman world could not produce the kind of images shown in Athenian art. The garments in the images are too tight and
revealing to have them be realistic representations of ancient clothing. Instead, the article posits that these artistic representations were idealizations that ancient women would have seen in much the same way as modern women view movie stars today (Llewellyn-Jones 2002, 190-191).

One way to achieve the look of the clothing in the works referenced by Llewellyn-Jones is to use the bias cut. Popular in 1930’s evening gowns, the bias cut allows the fabric to cling to the body and yet fall in elegant folds to the floor. I chose to utilize the bias cut in at least one portion of all of the dresses to achieve this effect that would have appealed the classical aesthetic. Except for the two Mycenaean inspired gowns, I gave all of the dresses silhouettes that were reminiscent of classical gowns such as the peplos, chiton, and stola. Each is a long and straight in shape with side seams. I only used center seams when they were required for fit or to make sure I had enough fabric. I also used a variety of sheer fabrics and edging details because these fascinated Greek and Roman women (Goldman 2001, 217).

However, the Greeks and Romans did not have a single unified view of female beauty. While the Athenian Greeks seemed to prefer plump breasts that were rather large in proportion to the hips (Llewellyn-Jones 2002, 181), the Romans especially seemed to prefer bodies with small, pert breasts and proportionately larger hips as shown in Roman wall frescoes and mosaics (Atsma, 2007). Because of these variations in aesthetics and the variations within the physical types of my models, I decided not to embrace one single ideal shape but instead to celebrate each unique body. I did not try to reshape my model’s bodies except when absolutely required to achieve a Mycenaean line. Instead, I aimed to flatter their figures so that they would feel confident and beautiful. Most of them
naturally had bodies that would fit in well with those in Roman art, but one had a body that seemed to match those in Athenian art. None of my models, however, had typical fashion model bodies as the tallest girl was between 5’6” and 5’7”. 
Aphrodite

Photo: Diana Brake
Model: Amanda Chio
For Aphrodite¹ I wanted to channel Old Hollywood with its sultry, glamorous sex appeal. I definitely did not want her to seem over-the-top. She needed to represent both the Divine and Vulgar Aphrodites (Plato, *Symposium*) at the same time, to be both a believably sexually voracious woman and a maternal creator goddess. The bias cut gave her dress just the shape that it needed so it could drape seductively but elegantly at the same time.

For the fabric of her gown, I chose a cotton-backed satin for its shine and sleek feel to attract the eye and the hand to add to the sensuality of the design. The light teal color of her gown represents the sea foam from which she was born after Ouranos’s severed genitals landed there (Hesiod, *Theogony* 176). I used this same theme by placing tulle in a similar shade around her during the photo shoot. The color also functions as a way to soften the plunging back and neckline of the gown as does the sheer drape around her neck. The large shell at the bottom of the neckline refers to a similar variation of her birth story in which she rides to shore on a shell as is often depicted in art (Atsma, 2007). Because of this, the shellfish is sacred to her as are pearls (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 32.10),

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¹ For the sake of consistency, all goddesses will be referred to by their Greek names except for Magna Mater.
which also adorn her dress along with “sea opal” glass chip beads above the large shell.

The dark teal belt defines her waist to emphasize the curves of her figure. I chose the model Amanda for Aphrodite because she naturally has a very well defined, high waist like that of classical representations of Aphrodite. As a goddess of sexual attraction and beauty, Aphrodite’s body is more important to her character than that of the other goddesses.

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Amanda Chio
Artemis

Photo: Diana Brake
Model: Tamika Nunley
Like Aphrodite but even more so, Artemis is a goddess of contrasts. She is the both a hunter of animals and their guardian. She is a goddess of childbirth and yet a virgin herself. She is also responsible for bringing illness to women and girls but also for healing them (Atsma 2007). At the same time, she is a goddess of song and dance (Atsma 2007). I wanted to show all of these contrasts in her dress but to have her image be considerably more masculine than the other goddesses with the exception of Athena.

Her contrasts became intensified when she began to be blended with the Thracian goddess Bendis, who represented the moon, animals, and magic (Atsma 2007). At about the same time she began be seen as part of the goddess triad Selene-Artemis-Hekate, and eventually she took on aspects of the other two (Atsma 2007). Nonnus uses the names of the three goddesses interchangeably in the Dionysiaca (Nonnus, 44.198). With this unification she attained what is probably her most well known aspect, that she is goddess of the moon.

I wanted the fabric of her dress to look like moonlight to reflect this. I left her right shoulder bare and her left armhole oversized so that she could have a full range of motion when using her bow. Like in her traditional representations (Atsma 2007), I gave
her dress a short skirt so that she can run with ease as described by Callimachus, ""Give me [Artemis] arrows and a bow ... and give me to gird me in a tunic with embroidered border reaching to the knee, that I may slay wild beasts." (Hymn 3 to Artemis). The beads on the left shoulder are meant to add interest to her back and to balance out the openness of her right shoulder.

Artemis, like most of the other goddesses is prone to fits of wrath, but she has a large number of them, usually triggered by men pursuing her sexually, by women going back on vows of perpetual virginity, by mortal men boasting of their hunting skills, otherwise failing to give her proper respect. The most famous of the incidents is perhaps when she demands the sacrifice of Iphigenaia to atone for the death of one of her rabbits but replaces the girl with a hind at the last possible second (Ovid, Metamorphoses 12.8). She shows her contrasting natures in this story in that she is wrathful but able to discern those deserving of her wrath from the innocent.

Thus, she has an element of softness to her haughty arrogance. I wanted to show this in the curved lines of her dress such as the smooth scoop of the neckline. However, I did not want
this curve to become too dominant and make the overall look too soft. So I added a thin, black border to maintain her sharpness and echo the hard edges of her personality.

I chose Tamika to portray Artemis because of her poise and confidence. Also, because of her heritage: she is half African-American and half Korean, she has the perfect skin tone to portray Artemis, someone who spends much of her time out of doors. Tamika also has a slim but toned body that could easily be imagined darting through the forest and hiding among the trees.
Hera

Both photos: Victor Lin
Model: Author
Originally, Tamika was also slated to portray Hera, but due to scheduling conflicts, I had to fill in. I wanted to use her because of that same poise and confidence.
that allowed her to let Artemis easily sleep into her skin but make it softer, more refined, and more regal. I also wanted her anger, jealousy, and pain to appear just beneath the surface of her photographs to add complexity to her image.

I drew inspiration from one of Hera’s attributes, the peacock feather (Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 2.17.6). I used the same sheer dark teal fabric as the accent fabric in Aphrodite’s dress because the color of it reminded me of a peacock. The drape around her hips is reminiscent of that of the *palla* on the sculpture “Married Couple,” in the Capitoline Museum in Rome (Goldman 2001, 225). The cut of the dress is similar to that of Artemis’s gown but longer and more revealing on the back and sides. This is because I wanted to reference the similarities between the personalities of the two goddesses, namely their propensity towards wrath, but I also wanted to emphasize Hera’s comparative femininity and vulnerability. I left the curve of her neckline unadorned, left the back of the dress open, and cut away at the armholes because I wanted to emphasize her bare skin. It stands out even more because of the bright, berry color of her dress’s fabric.

Through this I wanted to show her vulnerability, her dependency on her husband for her status, and thus, her insecurity. As queen of the gods, she can have anything she wants, anything that is, except her husband/brother Zeus. He seduced her as a bird, and the two of them were married happily for three-hundred years (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 41.263), but as first seduced her, he began to pursue and seduce others. Every time he does this it stirs her wrath because it endangers her status. She knows that Zeus is fully capable of replacing her because he replaced their daughter Hebe with Ganymede as cupbearer to the gods (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 8.93). Even so, Zeus still loves her and is
committed to maintaining the relationship even if he is not faithful. When Hera was angry with him, Zeus arranged for a sham marriage with a wooden girl to win Hera back (Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 9.3.1). Thus she knows deep down that she is secure, but she still becomes angry at her rivals and their children from their relationships with her husband. While modeling as Hera I tried to put these complex emotions and thoughts in her eyes.
Hestia

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Nicole Rachel
And that was what now she often felt the need of— to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated, and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity to being oneself... When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, FROM TO THE LIGHTHOUSE
Hestia is paradoxically both the oldest and the youngest of the Olympian deities as she was the first born but also the first eaten by her father Ouranos and thus the last disgorged (*Homeric Hymn V to Aphrodite* 18). The goddess of hearth and home, she is most often associated with the flame. Some myths say that her flame burns at the center of the earth or even the universe (Atsma 2007). Both the Greeks and Romans believed that her flame must not be allowed to go out, and that if it did it must be relit by either friction or using fire from the sun through burning glasses (Atsma 2007). The Romans even had special, virginal priestesses in charge of guarding her flame. She is also the goddess of houses and house building, a craft which she invented (Atsma 2007).

Ironically, although she is the goddess of hearth and home, she is a virgin. Both Appollon and Poseidon asked for her hand in marriage, but she refused them and asked Zeus’s permission to remain a virgin (*Homeric Hymn V to Aphrodite* 18). The works of Bolen, Woolger, and Barker provide a useful way to mitigate this irony by positioning her as the archetype of women’s spirituality (Bolen 1984 and Woolger 1989). This interpretation of her elegantly combines her mastery over the house with that over the flame and all sacrifices. It echoes the writings of Cicero, “The goddess whom they call
Hestia. Her power extends over altars and hearths, and therefore all prayers and all sacrifices end with this goddess, because she is the guardian of the innermost things," (Atsma 2007 quoting De Natura Deorum 2.27).

I used this concept heavily in my work and decided to portray her as the goddess of all that is internal both spatially and spiritually. I chose the fabric of her dress because its colors reminded me of her flame but were within my color palette enough to still look nice with the fabrics of some of the other dresses. The fabric’s little gold beads and metallic flecks represent inner, spiritual light. Her dress also has the most demure cut of all the dresses because of her perpetual virginity. It shows little skin and glides over her body. Her dress has emphasized curves around the neckline and back but few hard lines to give her a very feminine appearance. This is because her perpetual virginity is different from those of the other virgin goddesses. Artemis’s comes from her refusal of men, and Athena’s comes from her identifying more with men then women, but Hestia’s comes from her purity.
Athena

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Kat Swift
Athena, yet another virgin goddess, was born ready for battle. When Zeus, her father learned, that his wife’s unborn child would be equal to he and a future son would be greater, he ate the pregnant woman. Athena then birthed herself by bursting out of Zeus’s head (Hesiod, *Theogony* 929a). Because she birthed herself, she continued to think of herself as not having and mother and thus sides with men in all matters except for marriage (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 734). This is probably also the reason why she is a virgin goddess; because she sees herself primarily as a masculine entity. However, she inherits her famous mind from her mother Metis, the goddess of wisdom, and the union between her wisdom and Zeus’s power created the potential for such a threat that Zeus consumed his own wife and daughter (Shearer 1996, 24).

She is the goddess of warfare, wisdom, and crafts, especially the fabric arts. The various areas which she governs seem unrelated at first glance. Her variety of warfare, however, is that of cunning battle preparation, and she does not value war for its own sake but for the gains it can bring (Atsma 2007). She rules over rational warfare as on of
her, “great civilizing gifts is precisely that ability to think before we act,” (Shearer 1996, 19). Her power is harnessed by foresight and understanding (Shearer 1996, 21). Her crafts include not only weaving and other arts that were thought to belong to woman but also the building of chariots (Homeric Hymn 5 to Aphrodite 7). She governs invention, transition, ideas, and rationality (Shearer 1996, 25).

I tried to reconcile her domains through the design of her dress. Rather, it is a tunic since she wears it over pants. I decided to use modern dress pants under my design because I thought that Athena would like them because they are traditionally a masculine garment, and because they would give her a freer range of motion than the long tunic she typically wears when represented in ancient art (Atsma 2007). The long tunic seems to give her a more dignified and civilized appearance than Artemis in her short tunic, and my Athena’s pants maintain these positive aspects of her appearance. They create strong vertical lines that emphasize her physical prowess. The skirt of her tunic has gathered up to free her legs even more, to give her classical folds, and to soften her image to because of her aspects besides that of warrior goddess. I gave her a complex beaded trim and a corded to trim to represent her patronage of fabric crafts. The diagonal lines of her neckline and the skirt of her tunic
emphasize the length of her body while the complex design of the straps on her back emphasize the musculature of her shoulders and upper back.

Athena was probably the easiest model for me to cast because I had already seen Kat act in the manner I imagined Athena acting.

Athena’s areas of expertise: warfare, wisdom, and learned skills for me are all heavily associated with the martial arts.

Kat was my first martial arts instructor and my only female one, so I think of her, at least in that context as having the same personality traits as Athena such as wise, quiet confidence and a strong presence. Her martial arts knowledge also gave me confidence that she would be able to perform combat-inspired poses with relative ease. Furthermore, she has a naturally lean and muscular body.
Demeter is the goddess of fertility and agriculture, but to me she is much more interesting while she is angry and withholding her bounty. She behaved this way after her daughter Persephone was kidnapped. A great famine fell upon the earth while she searched for her daughter because she was too sad and angry to bring life to the plants (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 462-486). After Persephone returned to her she learned that her daughter had become the queen of the dead by eating seven pomegranate seeds and must leave her for half of the year (autumn and winter or one third of the year according to earlier writers) to return to the Underworld (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 564-571).

While Persephone is gone, Demeter returns to her state of mourning and nothing grows. To illustrate this state, I wanted Demeter to look cold and icy. She is traditionally portrayed in a light blue gown and holding a bundle of wheat (Atsma 2007). To play off of these conventions I had the model hold a bundle of branches that had been spray-painted silver. I selected a lavender-blue lined, crushed organza to make her gown because of its icy sheen and crisp hand. I kept the cut of her dress relatively simple with a cowl neck and a plunging back because I did not want to distract from the beauty of the fabric. The dress is similar in cut to that of Hestia, but it is
slightly sexier and has more hard edges. The openness of the back of the dress reflects how Demeter is a sexual goddess of fertility. The hard edges such as the straps and bottom point of the back of the dress reflect her strength of will and power. I made a strand of quart crystal points to represent icicles and attached the strand to the dress using magnet so the crystal would lie against her back.
Persephone

Photo: Diana Brake
Model: Karen Johnson
In Ovid’s Metamorphoses the nymph Alpheian says, “While beneath the earth I glided in my Stygian stream, I saw, myself with my own eyes, your Proserpina (Persephone). Her looks were sad, and fear still in her eyes; and yet a queen, and yet of that dark land Empress, and yet with power and majesty the consort of the Tyrannus Infernus (Sovereign lord of Hell) [Haides].” (5.487-508).

This is the image of Persephone I wanted to portray. I wanted this mix of conflicting concepts, her innocence and sorrow combined with her newly found power, her innocence with her sexuality, and her youth with her maturity.

I tried to show this contrast in Persephone’s dress. The top layer is made from a sheer lavender fabric that had been embroidered with flowers. Its cut is very similar to that of Demeter’s dress, but the straps of the back tie together to hold the dress to the body instead of being sewn together. This top layer represents her life before her ordeal and the part of her that is still a little girl. That the top layer is long and sheer while the bottom layer is short allows her legs to show. This gives her an element of sensuality and mystery.
The beads along the bottom edge of the back of the dress and on top of the cowl neck serve a similar purpose. They draw attention to the places where the top layer, the bottom layer, and the skin meet. This emphasizes her innocence (top), maturity (bottom), vulnerability (skin), and new wealth and power (beads).

The bottom layer of the dress is made from satin-backed taffeta. I turned the black satin side out on the bodice and the gray taffeta side out on the skirt. I made this under-dress short because her dark role as the queen of the dead is intimately connected to her gaining maturity. She could only receive this role by becoming dead herself. To illustrate this I had the model pose with a veil I had made from black organza for a previous project.
Eris
The goddess of war and strife, Eris is typically seen as personified hatred. Her most famous misdeed is starting the Trojan War by throwing a golden apple into the wedding party of Peleus and Thetis because she had not been invited. She is conflict in battle, marriage, and friendly competition. Hesiod claims the deity of this last category to be a completely separate Eris (*Works and Days* 11), but I chose to interpret Eris as only one goddess complicated goddess. Focusing on the idea that she delights in war (Atsma 2007), I decided to try and show Eris from her own perspective. She certainly would not see herself as evil and ugly like she is often described in literature. She’s a mischievous girl, who only wants to have fun even if and especially if that fun is at the expense of others.

I chose a Mycenaean shape for her gown because it had more hard lines than the shape I used for the other goddesses. It has strong vertical lines from the seams on the bodice and the long but relatively narrow skirt and horizontal lines from the skirt’s various layers. The only curved lines are at the bottom of the bodice and the top of the neckline, but this
The curve is not nearly as extreme as that on necklines of Artemis and Hera. I joined the front and back portions of the bodice with a safety pin instead of a shoulder seam to both reference the fibulae used by Roman women and to give her a slight punk feel. I created the layers of her skirt out of irregularly cut and shredded tulle to reference a storm cloud, but I did not gather the tulle into place because I wanted to keep the lines sharp.

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Nicole Rachel
Magna Mater

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Kat Swift
Magna Mater (Cybele) was originally a goddess from Phrygia (Anatolia). The first record of her in Greece dates from about 525 BCE (Turcan 1996, 29). She was brought to Rome in 205 BCE because the Sibylline Oracle prophesied that the Punic Wars would only be over completely after the Romans brought “The Idaean Mother of Pessinus,” who was identified with the Cretan Mother (Turcan 1996, 35). Her temple was finally dedicated in 191 BCE (Turcan 1996, 37).

The most famous aspect of her cult is the theme of castration. One version of her birth myth holds that she was born as a hermaphrodite, but her male organs were cut off because the other gods feared her (Pausanias, Guide to Greece 7.17.8). She placed the severed male organs in her bosom and later gave birth to Attis, a primary figure in her cult (Pausanias, Guide to Greece 7.17.8). The Romans believed that she forced her Asian priests to castrate themselves. Catullus describes in great detail how she drives Attis to castrate himself out of insanity (63), but usually her priests did this for the reward of happiness in the afterlife (Turcan 1996, 74).

I envisioned Magna Mater as having the best aspects of all other goddesses combined. I designed her dress drawing inspiration from the Minoan Snake Goddess
because of her being the Cretan Mother and because I wanted to show a return to the Mycenaean past of Greece. I made the layers of her skirt from scraps of various fabrics including at least once fabric from the dress of each of the other goddesses because I wanted to show that she is all of them combined. They show her wide variety of aspects from nurturing to destroying. Her dress, more than any of the others, has a balance of curved and straight lines. Most notably, the edges of the pieces of her skirt have been cut on the bias and treated with a lettuce edge so that they move independently of one another and keep the horizontal lines created by the tiers of her skirt from becoming too harsh. The seams of the bodice and the long but narrow skirt give an impression of power. I left the back open to show off Kat’s back and gave the dress a rolled, off-the-shoulder neckline to soften the entire image.

Photo: Victor Lin
Model: Kat Swift
Conclusion

Each of the above goddess has multiple contrasting aspects that I needed to combine and balance in order to create a cohesive image for her. While this was at times a difficult task, these complexities originally drew me to the goddesses. They have the emotional and experimental complexities of real women, sometimes even more complexities. I tried to bring these complexities to each goddess’s gown through my design choices such as silhouette, line, color, and detailing so that each could tell her stories and hint at her personality. However, multiple versions exist of every story, some with more disagreements than others. Thus, the goddesses become women that we’ve heard about, women of the rumor mill because we don’t know which versions are true—maybe some, none, or all.

Photo: Victor Lin
Models: Author and Kat Swift
Bibliography


