

Introduction

Aphrodite (Roman **Venus**) was the goddess of beauty and erotic love in Classical Mythology. According to tradition, she was born from the sea foam (*aphros*) and came to land on Cyprus. Her over-lifesized statue in the Wilcox faces you as you enter the front door, and is a plaster cast of a Greek original of ca. 150 B.C., now in the Louvre Museum (Paris, France), along with fragments of the upper and lower left arm and hand with an apple. Inventory no. 399/400. Parian marble. H. 2.04 m. (6 ft. 2 in.).

Findspot

She was found on the volcanic Greek island of Melos in the Aegean Sea in 1822. Originally she stood in a niche in a gymnasium, or exercise yard, where men exercised in the nude or talked with friends (women were excluded). Therefore, she was probably not a cult statue, but rather a type of decoration (not unlike modern "garden art"). During the Hellenistic period (323-30 B.C.) such sculpture became popular, and eventually the Romans acquired similar tastes. An inscribed base (now lost) names [Alex-] or [Ages-] and of Antioch-on-the-Meander in Turkey as sculptor (see line drawing).

Iconography and Style

Viewers often do not realize that this statue was made from two blocks of stone: the torso and head, and the draped lower body. The sections join

horizontally at hip level, and the costume masks the break. (A related statue, the Poseidon of Melos now in Athens, was made in the same way). The use of two smaller blocks of marble may have been cheaper than employing a single, huge block of stone. Aphrodite stands nearly frontal in a relaxed, sinuous pose. Notice too that her head is fairly small relative to the rest of the body, and her features quite bland. The hair is parted in the center with locks pulled to the back of the head and loosely knotted; a few tresses hang down the neck. Attachment holes once held metal earrings and a hairband.

Her body proportions—somewhat small breasts and rather full hips—made this figure very popular in the 19th c., but contemporary taste has changed. Though both arms are incomplete, careful inspection of the angle of the lowered right shoulder and raised left shoulder indicate that both limbs were held to the front and slightly away from the body, with the right arm crossing the torso diagonally.

Originally, our figure held an apple as a love-token awarded by prince Paris of Troy. Perhaps a pun was intended, for the Greek word for apple (*mêlon*) recalls the name of the island and city of Melos. Thus she may be a personification rather than Aphrodite alone.

A drawing of the lost base (see illustration) depicts a cutting for a vertical strut near the left foot to help her support the missing attribute.

The drapery of the figure is suggestive as well: this is neither the blatantly naked goddess of Near Eastern myth, nor the fully clad figure of earlier generations of Greek art. Instead, only the torso is nude, and the clothing covers just the lower half of the body. The garment appears ready to slip off at any moment, however, and the contrast between smooth, bare flesh and concealing drapery invites the spectator to imagine the body underneath. Since no one point of view is emphasized, one wants to look at the figure from all angles. All these stylistic characteristics have helped scholars assign the figure to the mid-2nd c. B.C.

Cultural Context

During the Hellenistic period, less traditional views of the gods of Mt. Olympus became increasingly popular, especially Aphrodite who is shown in a number of new ways: nude, about to bathe, emerging from the bath, or in the company of her son **Eros (Cupid)**. Nevertheless, the Melos statue belongs historically to an unsettled political period, when many of the Greek city-states were losing ground to the Romans, who were increasingly interfering in the world of the Eastern Mediterranean. Little more than a century after our Aphrodite was carved, a pan-Mediterranean Roman empire emerged (30 B.C.). Whether you admire the Aphrodite of Melos as a "masterpiece" or not, she challenges us to look at her from different historical perspectives and artistic points of view.



The now missing base with mortise for a support (herm?) and inscription:

"Hagesandros son of Menides from Antioch on the Maeander [River] made this"

Select Modern Bibliography

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For more information...

You can learn more about Greek sculpture in **CLSX/HA 526: GREEK ARCHAEOLOGY & ART** (Note: this course can be taken for Classics or Art History credit).

For more about Aphrodite (Venus) and her stories, take **CLSX 148: CLASSICAL MYTH**.

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cast:

APHRODITE OF MELOS (VENUS DE MILO)

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January 2004
rev. 10.2016