A STATUE OF APHRODITE

By CHRISTINE ALEXANDER
Curator of Greek and Roman Art

Since the Renaissance brought classical sculpture back to the minds and eyes of men, certain ancient statues have from time to time made their appearance, like stars in a firmament. The mutations of taste work their changes in the current valuations of these fixed stars, whose magnitudes nevertheless retain a stability of their own. The Laocoön, the Apollo Belvedere, the Aphrodites called the Medici Venus, the Venus de Milo, the Capitoline, the one from Cyrene, and the dozen or so other works that come to the mind of every literate person in the Western world, have received a widely varying measure of admiration from generation to generation, and the classical tradition has in one sense held them as navigational points, as the ancients peopled their skies with lucid divinities and by them steered their ships.

The Medici Venus is a life-size marble statue of Aphrodite surprised while bathing. Aphrodite was born from the sea, and the dolphin at her feet is an allusion to it. The statue, now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, before that in the Villa Medici in Rome, was known in the sixteenth century, and the evaluations of it, with the criteria on which they were based, from that day to this, are in themselves a long annotation to classical scholarship. It is the name-piece, because it is nearly complete and has been long known, of the fragments of numerous ancient replicas of the same type, presupposing a Greek Aphrodite as a prototype, from which they stem and which though unrecorded in extant literature must have had in antiquity a great and lasting renown.

There now appears, and is shown to the public for the first time, a statue that reveals the type in a new light, and with it the lost original moves more nearly into focus. It interprets with a new and surprising force the theme and composition that burst on the renaissance imagination, the goddess of love and beauty, startled by a beholder. The surface of the marble is almost untouched by weathering or cleaning. The pose of the head is not in doubt, for it did not break off when the other breaks occurred. On the rectangular plinth is the left foot, which took the weight of the body, and a trace on the marble that fixes the position of the right foot, as well as part of the dolphin-tree-trunk support. Both arms, the intervening lengths of the legs, and the upper part of the support, are missing, and the nose, lips, and chin are damaged. To recover the main composition, casts were made of the two parts of the statue, and what is missing of the legs was restored with casts from the Medici replica. The dolphin support is necessary, and the eye must supply the top of it, which curved upward and lay against the back of the thigh, where the trace of the post and fluke of the tail remain on the marble. The strong vertical, running through the left, or weight leg, and the balanced horizontals that the massive stone requires for its security are established. To these, the fluid lines of the main structure, and of the muscles as they merge and transmit their pull one to another, are intricately and surely related, and from this relation there breaks the fugitive grace of a girl’s motion as she turns and directs her sudden, level gaze. The goddess’s hair is drawn into a knot at the back and tied with a band that passes under one tress in front. The foot, with its separate, sandal-wearer’s great toe, is bare. The ears are not pierced for earrings, as in the Medici statue. The divinity is bathing, not practicing the arts of which she is the patron.

Praxiteles was dead, his followers caught up his tools and for a brief time ruled their material, bronze or marble, in ultimate mastery and restraint. Around the middle of the fourth century B.C. he had made his marble statue of Aphrodite, which was bought by the
Head and torso of Aphrodite. Ancient replica of a Greek work of about 300 B.C.
View of the Aphrodite shown on the preceding page and on the cover
The Aphrodite with its plinth, on which the foot and dolphin support are preserved.
citizens of Knidos. He made it “under the direct inspiration of the goddess,” Pliny says, and Nikias the famous painter colored it. Before that, public taste had not readily accepted statues of a goddess undraped, though male nudity in sculpture had a long history, but it now surrendered wholly to the enchantment of the theme. The Cnidian Aphrodite is lost, but Roman copies of it exist, identified with the literary record by the statue on the Roman coinage of Knidos. Later, at the turn of the century, a sculptor working in the immediate tradition of Praxiteles made a statue of his own on the already famous theme, the goddess bathing and startled by an intruder. This may have been a bronze statue, which, being light, would have stood without the dolphin support. Both his name and his work are lost, but the Roman replicas—the Medici, the New York, and others of lesser importance—pointed off in their main dimensions by mechanical means, go back with certainty to a Greek original in the post-Praxitelean style of about 300 B.C. Hellenistic sculptors then went their several ways, and their Aphrodites became eclectic or sentimentalized. In time, as the creative impulse waned, they found it more profitable to copy the famous types than to invent new ones, and in doing so they unwittingly preserved them from utter vanishment, in so far as they were able to reproduce them. The term “Roman copy,” applied everywhere to statues such as the Aphrodite, should be expanded. In art Greece conquered Rome, not vice versa, and “Roman” in such parlance is a political term, shorthand for “produced anywhere in the known world during the time, say, between the dictatorship of Sulla and the removal of the Capital to Byzantium, 81 B.C. to A.D. 330.” All the art of this period stems in one degree or another from Greece, and some works, as we have seen, are direct copies of Greek originals. The several copies of a single original differ in quality, like the performance of a sonata by a genius or by a hack. The copyist, at his best, was a Greek sculptor, something of a genius himself, working for a rich client, individual or corporate. He was the apprentice of those who, master and pupil, had stood in the short, direct line from Skopas and Praxiteles and the rest, and he worked in the full blaze of their spiritual tradition and held his great virtuosity from them alone. He had moreover seen the multitude of their works, now almost completely lost. It is this sculptor, a “Roman” copyist, very likely himself a Greek, standing close up to the face of Greek sculpture, across on the other side of Christendom’s mighty chasm, whose work we see in our copy of a statue of Aphrodite. He could
Detail, head of the Aphrodite shown on the preceding pages
Another detail
Another detail
Reconstructed cast of the Aphrodite shown on the preceding pages
Reconstructed cast of the Aphrodite shown on the preceding pages with a cast of the Medici Venus.
lift our eyes to godhead, making the stubborn marble flow after his chisel in living planes of muscle. The divinity that emerges from his quarried block is not the Roman Venus but the Greek Aphrodite. In 1518 there were riots at Oxford over the introduction of Greek into the Latin curriculum; the dwellers on Mount Olympus went by their Latin names for centuries and the Medici Venus is still often so recorded in the guidebooks. A modern public will see in its new statue an Aphrodite, so truly has Roman taste served us and so slowly have we followed the Roman copies back to the Greek.

When the casts of the New York and the Medici statues are compared, the differences in the two copies are apparent. The set of the Medici head is perhaps not entirely certain, for it was broken off, and the right arm is a restoration. In their main dimensions and in many details the two measure out the same within small fractions of an inch. The forms of the New York figure are slightly fuller, the shift of weight at the hips less pronounced, the left foot is larger and toes out less; the set of the head weights the composition more heavily to the spectator’s left of the main vertical. There is considerable variation in the dolphin support, very likely a copyist’s invention not needed if the original was bronze. In the New York statue it is more compact, dolphin engaged with post where in the Medici it is cut free of it; there was no Eros rider where the lower of the two Medici Erotes is placed, and the dolphin apparently made less of a spiral turn. The whole support stood farther back of the legs, was less visible in front view. A recent study of copyists’ supports places the Medici Venus as a copy made in the Augustan period, by comparison with the dolphin of the Primaporta statue of the young Augustus. By these criteria, the New York replica is somewhat earlier than the Medici. An early date for it is borne out by the sparing use of the drill, the marks of which are seen here and there in the hair, on the tear ducts, and in the groove formed by the thighs at the back.

The Aphrodite now on view is not a recent find but has remained unnoticed in private hands for many years. Until shortly before the second World War it was at an estate in Silesia, in the possession of the late Count Chamáré, whose ancestor, Count Schlaböndorf, made the Tour de Chevalier sponsored by Winckelmann in the eighteenth century. Some of the Winckelmann letters published by Justi (Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen, 1898) are addressed to this nobleman, and it may well be that as a by-product of their friendship the statue was acquired in Italy and removed to Silesia. At all events, it there fell into neglect, and was eventually sold at the breaking up of the estate. And so ended its long eclipse.

Accession no. 52.11.5. Fletcher Fund. Height of head and torso, as preserved, 47 1/2 in. (120.7 cm.); height of plinth and support, as preserved, 14 in. (35.6 cm.); height of plinth 2 1/4 in. (6.4 cm.); height as reconstructed, with plinth, 63 1/2 in. (161.5 cm.). Soft, finegrained white marble, probably Pentelic, with brownish, not bluish, seams. For a list of the replicas of this type, cf. B.M. Felleti-Maj, in Archeologica Classica, 11 (1951), pp. 61f.; on the dating of the Medici Venus as a Roman copy, see F. Muthmann, Statuenstützen und dekoratives Beiwerk, 1951, pp. 28, 91 ff.