Venus de Milos

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Introduction

Aphrodite de Melos or *Venus de Milos*, is an ancient Greek Paritan marble statue that was originally believed to be from the Classical period but now attributed to the Hellenistic period. Its exact date of creation is uncertain, but experts place it between 160-110 BC while others argue 150-50 BC. Its discovery is also shrouded in conflicting reports, the only constant being that it was found in 1820 on the Aegean island of Milos in Greece, where she receives her name. *Venus de Milos* was then bought by King Louis XVIII and displayed in the Louvre in 1821, where it has remained ever since.

She is most likely believed to be a representation of the goddess Aphrodite, due to her resemblance to other Aphrodities of the Hellenistic period, but even her identity as Venus is uncertain. The shrouds of mystery surround the famous statues' true origins, and contradicting historical reports only add to her allure and fame. As some accounts claim something to be a proven fact while others dispute the claim entirely.

Though historic accounts are partially to blame, other accounts blame the selfish actions made by the Louvre directors at the time of her unveiling in 1821. As their actions may have caused irreparable damage and prevented the true history of *Venus de Milos* from ever being discovered.

Discovery

Most historic accounts can agree that *Venus de Milos* was discovered on the Island of Milos, on April 8th of 1820, by a Greek farmer by the name of Yorgos, or his father Theodore Kondros Botoni, or his son Antonio Bottonis. The statue was believed to have been found near the farmer's plot of land in a small cavity in the rocky hillside among the ruins of an ancient amphitheater or gymnasium. A french naval officer, Oliver Voutier, is credited as the man who recognised the potential significance of framers' broken statue and aided in its excavation. The 6ft 7in statue was found separated into two fragments, an upper and lower torso. Beside the statue were fragments of an arm, a hand holding an apple, and her herms; of Hercules and Hermes. As well as an inscribed partially legible fragment believed to be from the statue's plinth or stand. Voucher acquired the work and presented it to Louis the XVIII who in turn donated it to the Louvre museum. It was titled *Venus de Milos,* despite being a Greek sculpture. As the French preferred the Roman "Venus" over the Greek "Aphrodite" and appealed to the Louvres' desire to showcase work associated with the powerful Roman empire. Displayed in 1821, *Venus de Milos* was hailed as a masterpiece of Classical Greek art and was attributed—by the museum's director, Auguste de Forbin— to the 4th century BCE sculptor Parxiteles, who is accredited to portraying the first nude Aphrodite, garnering the new Venus fame for her supposed famous sculptor.

Restoration

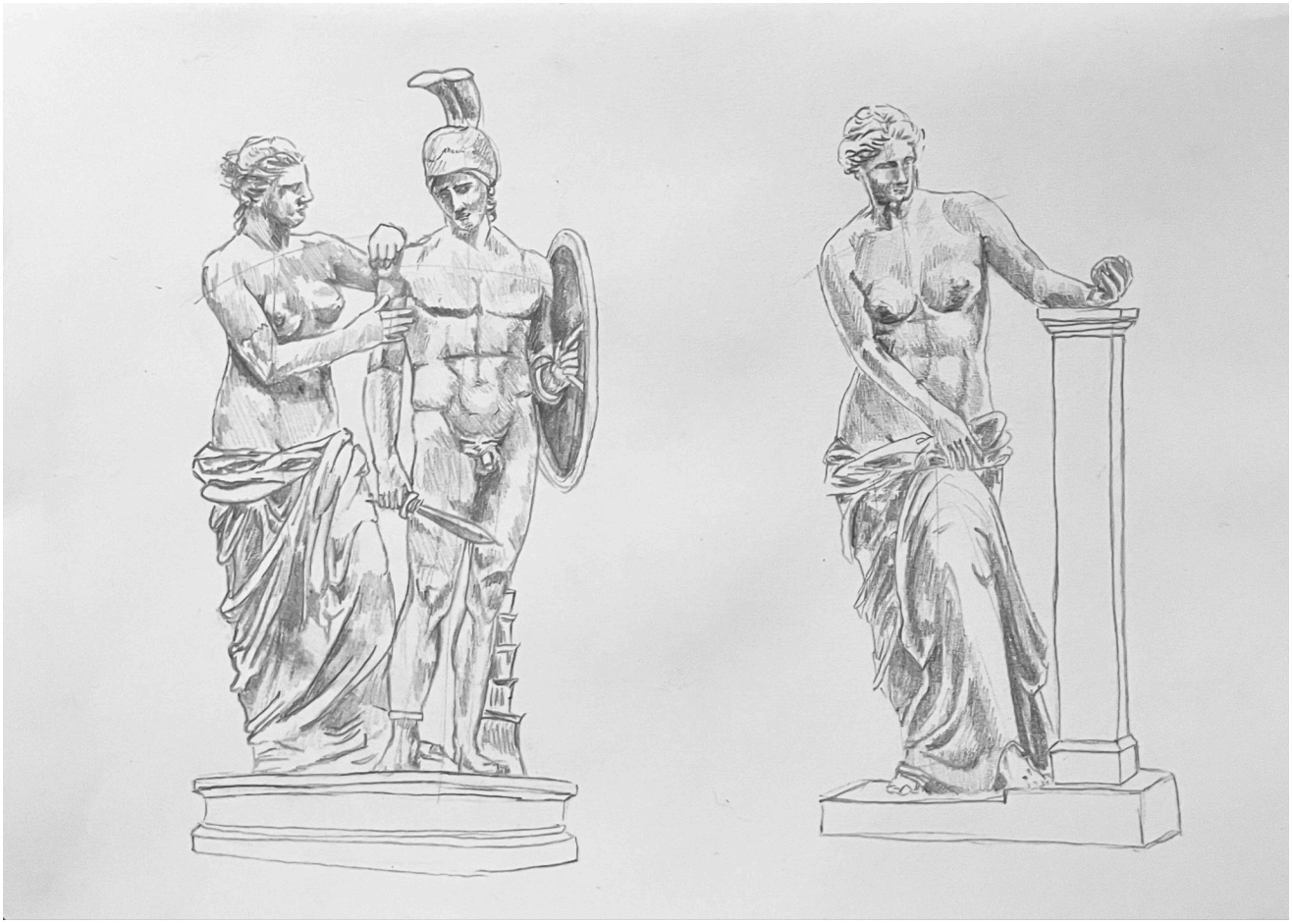
While some accounts blame a dispute between a French and Turkish sailor off the shore of Milos for the statues' broken arms, it is widely accepted that she was found without them—as it is common for statues left unpreserved. Other damages included large chips in the marble of her back and shoulder, missing earlobes, missing right foot, and a section of the base known as the plinth. The upper and lower torsos were found separated but seemed to be formed from two separate blocks of marble, Joined in the center with iron tetons, the resulting crease blending into the drapery. *Venus de Milos*, like many hellenistic sculptures was likely painted vibrantly but due to its environment and deterioration no pigment remains. After its arrival in Paris minimal imperfections were restored—the tip of the nose, lower lip, big toe, and parts of the drapery— a left foot was added to the statue as well as a new pedestal, without the inscribed plinth found in the excavation. Quatremere de Quincy, a French "armchair archeologist" recommended the statue not be significantly restored but exhibited in the state she was discovered in. Contrary to the usual practice of buffing out all imperfections.

Interpretations

The statue is believed to depict the Greek goddess Aphrodite, though its fragmented state makes definitive identification difficult. Even the earliest written accounts—though their credibility is disputed— from a French captain on Milos, identify the statue as *Aphrodite holding the apple of discord*. His opinion based on the hand found beside the statue. Alternet and less accepted interpretations are of the sea goddess worshiped in Milos: Ampheriate, the goddess Nemesis, a Muse, or the poet Sappho. The *Venus de Milos* depicts the goddess with a bare torso and draped lower half, she stands contrapposto with her left leg raised and her head to the left. As she is missing both of her arms it is so difficult to identify exactly what the statue looked like when completed. One of the most popular interpretations of *Venus de Milos* came from the curator of antiquities at the Louvre from 1870 to 1900, Félix Ravaisson, who theorized that the statue was meant to represent both the goddess of love and the god of war, Aries. Going as far as to have full-scale casts of the sculpture combined with the "Mars Borghese" to represent the missing Mars. However, Ravaisson's interpretation ignored the fragments of the statue excavated with *Venus de Milos* and did not account for the entirely missing Mars statue.

The second and more widely accepted interpretation came from Adolf Furtwängler, who in 1895 proposed that the excavated plinth was the base of a rectangular column which she leaned on with her left hand extended holding the apple of discord. While her right arm crossed her lower torso grasping the drapery slipping from her waist. Furtwängler interpretation of the right-hand placement is supported by damage found on the right rib which suggests an arm support was once attached there. As well as her anatomy, as the flexed muscles of the left shoulder indicated that her arm was raised to shoulder height.

Furtwängler's interpretation gave credence to the theory introduced by historians, that the statue was a variation of Aphrodite holding the apple of discord—a frequent subject of Aphrodite statues, depicting the origins of the famous Trojan War. Where Paris of Troy chose the golden apple of the most beautiful goddess—between Aphrodite, Athena, and Artemis—and was gifted the most beautiful woman in the world. A choice that led to the destruction of Troy.



Classical or Hellenistic, and the interpretations of the Louvre Museum

Venus de Milos was originally displayed as a masterpiece of classical Greek art and was only later revealed to belong to the Hellenistic period. At the time of her unveiling, during the Renaissance, scholars held a fierce disdain for the Hellenistic period. Contrary to the Classical period, the Hellenistic period's experimental, expressive, and sensual forms deified all aspects of the era's values.

The Louver leaned into *Venus de Milos* more conventionally classical aspects; the small rectangular eyes, mouth, string nose, and brow. It ignored the definitive Hellenistic influence found in the hyper-realism of her upper body and the provocatively low and elaborate drapery almost slipping off of her hips, which were far too for classical ideals.

The excavation on the island of Milos uncovered Venus' upper and lower torso, as well fragments of an arm, a hand, two helms, and most notably a possible fragment of her stand or plinth. This plinth is only recorded in drawings and depicts the plinth reattached at the base beside the right foot. These drawings also revealed an inscription, which not only definitively dated the sculpture to the Hellenistic period (320 BC-31 BC). Still, they revealed a partially legible name "[Alex]ander, son of [M]enides, from [Ant]iochia on the Menander, made this [statue]." and offers evidence to the artist being the Greek sculptor Alexandros of Antioch.

This plinth was reportedly “lost” before her unveiling to the public and the Louvre has offered no explanation as to why. They rather claimed that the piece references an “Alexandros, son of Menides, from Antiochia” a victor of the Thespian Festival in 80 BCE. as well as arguing that it could have been a modern forgery, though it is impossible as no one could have invented a name that would later be proven historical.

It is important to note that after the fall of the Napoleonic empire, the Louvre was forced to return all stolen art, including most of its famous pieces from the classical Greek collection. At that time the museum was desperate for Classical Greek work, not only to fill their galleries but to regain the nation's association with Classical Greece and the Roman Empire. This context offered an explanation as to why Louvre’s director would have made the intentional decision to remove the plinth. As it not only dated the piece to the anti-classical Hellenistic period but a possible name of the sculptor, meaning that they could not claim it was another work by the—at the time—most famous sculptor of Classical Greece, Auguste de Forbint.

It was only in 1951 when the Louvre corrected their original interpretation, admitting that *Venus de Milos* is in fact Hellenistic. Even now the Museum's official website is more fascinated with the debate of whether or not *Venus de Milos* is a depiction of Aphrodite or Amphitrite, than offering an explanation as to why they kept their original interpretations for so long.

Conclusion

Now *Venus de Milos* stands as a centerpiece in the hall of Classical and Hellenistic Greek sculptures. Though the actions made by the directors of the Louvre were successful in propelling her to the public's fascination and in turn made her into one of the most iconic depictions of the goddess Aphrodiety, their actions may be responsible for the permanent and irreversible inability to define her true history.

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