

Praxiteles

c. 390 - 355 BC



- A few key facts are known and recorded about him and several commentaries on his works survive
- Personal context is also known, to some extent
- Considered one of the greatest sculptors of all time.
- What does the Antique communicate to us today?

Praxiteles

c. 390 - 355 BC



- Born in Athens, son of sculptor Céphisodotes.
- Worked mostly in Athens, with some time in Asia.
- Reputation was already established by 370 BC and reached peak in the 360s, when he met and fell in love with Phryné of Thespies, the model for the Aphrodite of Knidos.
- Phryné was by all accounts a remarkable woman, such that details of her private and public life, her character, her appearance, and her relationship with Praxiteles have been passed down to us.

Head of Aphrodite of Knidos

(The Kaufmann Head) Copy c.150 BC, Paris, Louvre.



- Created a gilded sculpture of her for the Temple of Thespeis.
- Considered the inventor of the female nude.
- Worked mostly in marble, (especially that of Paros) and occasionally in bronze.
- Famous in Antiquity as the sculptor of youth and female beauty.
- Died at the start of Alexander's reign (c. 335 BC).
- Sculpted idealised portraits of an individual he knew and in this instance, loved.

Head of Aphrodite of Knidos

(The Kaufmann Head) Copy, c.150 BC, Paris, Louvre.



- Praxiteles is known only through copies, and ancient texts, more or less late, anecdotes, judgements, stories, more or less true, and the testimonies of travellers such as Pausanias who recount various anecdotes and descriptions of him and his work.
- One notion of the Aesthetic is that it results from or should produce, ‘disinterested contemplation’.
- In this view the spectator should try to distance him/herself from any emotional investment in the work, and focus on formal or other physical aspects of the work to be able to appraise its ‘beauty’ - (a rating of success or failure of a particular set of rules or expectations).

‘Authomasty’ (Non-admiration)



- Strabo - (64 or 63 BC- c.24 AD)- proposed a state of ‘non-admiration’ to maintain an absence of passion (apathy)
- Vs.
- Winckelmann (1717 –1768) ‘Disinterest’ - may be useful in ethics, but has nothing to do with art, which arouses the passions.

‘Stendhal Syndrome’



- “I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty... I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call 'nerves.' Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling.”
“Voyage en Italie”, Henri-Marie Beyle (‘Stendhal’) (1783–1842).
- Syndrome ‘named’ by Italian psychoanalyst, Graziela Magherini, in 1979.

Praxiteles: Major Works



- Aphrodite of Knidos
- Eros
- Satyr
- Apollo Sauroctone
- Dionysos of Callistrates
- The Diadoumenes
- Hermes
- Works about which we have surviving accounts and documentation.

Polykleitos: The Doryphorus



- **C 430 BC**
- **The Spear Bearer** - known as 'The Canon' because of the treatise on beauty and proportion upon which it is based.
- The *Canon* is a theoretical work that discusses ideal mathematical proportions for the parts of the human body and proposes for sculpture of the human figure a dynamic counterbalance between the relaxed and tensed body parts and between the directions in which the parts move. In Greece this concept was called *symmetria*, and Polyclitus' statues of young athletes, balanced, rhythmical, and finely detailed, were the best demonstration of his principles. His freer use of contrapposto (depiction of the human body with twistings in its vertical axis) helped liberate Greek sculpture from its tradition of rigid frontal poses.

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

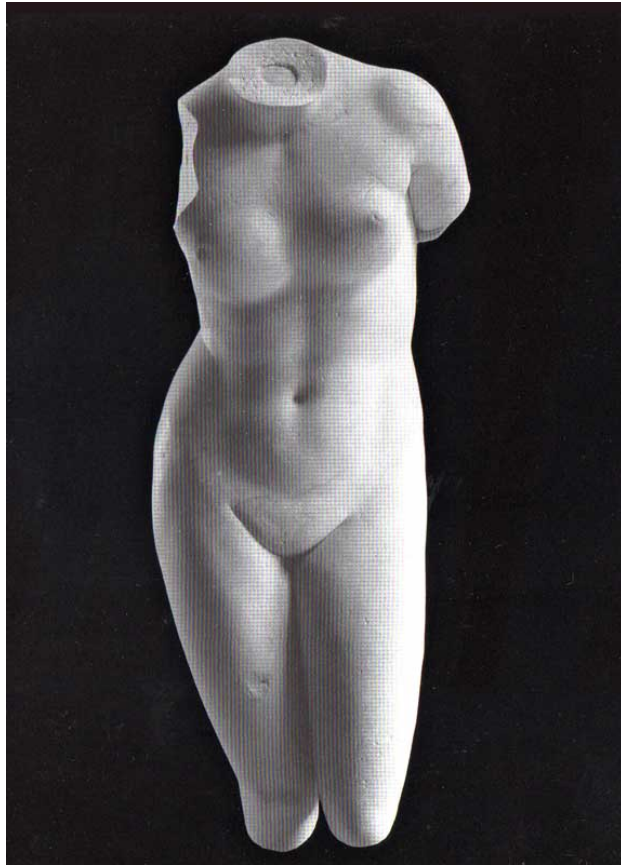
c.350 BC restored Copy, Paris, Louvre.



- The Ludovisi Knidian Aphrodite, or 'Venus Pudica', Roman marble copy (torso and thighs) with restored head, arms, legs and drapery support.
- Aphrodite preparing for her ritual bath to restore her purity, not virginity.
- Shows the statue in something like its original state.

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

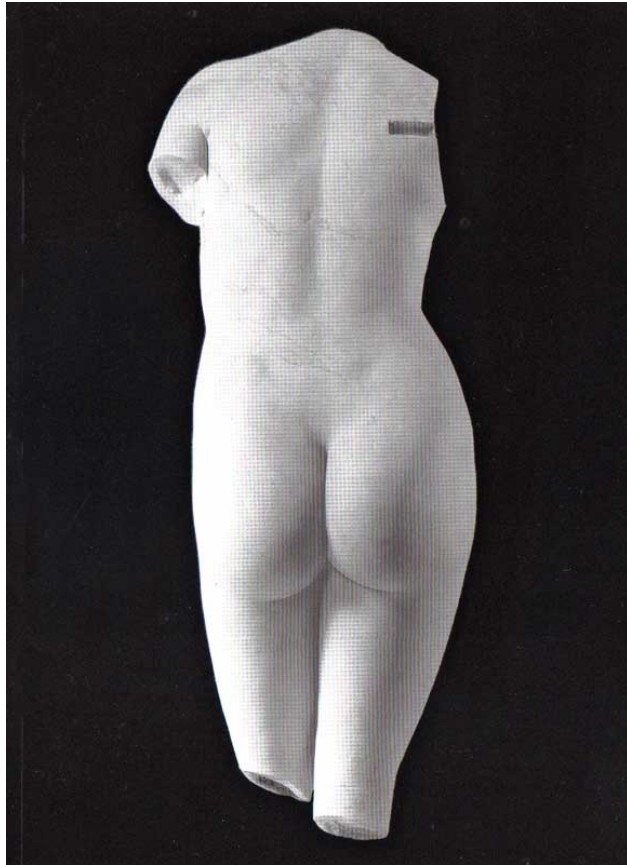
c.350 BC Copy, unrestored, Paris, Louvre.



- Commissioned by the people of Kos, Praxiteles created two versions: nude and clothed.
- The Kosians preferred the ‘Austere and modest’ version (which has not survived)
- The Knideans inherited the nude.
- Pliny described it as not only, “the summit of all his production but also ahead of all the artists in the world. And many are those who make the pilgrimage to Knidos to see her” (Hist Nat. 36, 20).
- “The most beautiful work by Praxiteles” (Pseudo-Lucian, Images, 4)
- She clearly aroused significant passions..

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

c.350 BC Copy, Paris, Louvre.



- Pliny & the Pseudo-Lucian describe the voyage to see her, the expectations, the calm and beauty of the sea, (a reward from the Goddess of peace herself). The narrator's companions, Charicles and Callicrates are eager to see her - they tour the city of love, encounter merchants selling trinkets and erotic souvenirs, they arrive at the temple surrounded by cool rich foliage, suggestive of eternal youth and springtime, and finally enter the temple..

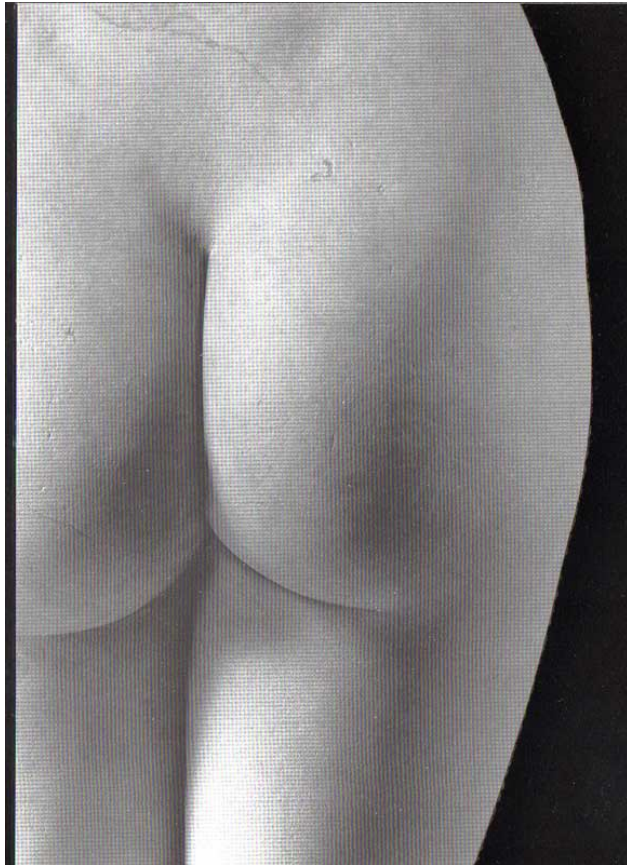
The ‘Seseros’ smile..



- “She is installed in the middle, a master-work in Paros marble, of a perfect beauty, smiling sweetly with a sublime smile, lips just a little open..”
- “She smiles gently with a disdainful and mocking air..” (Pseudo-Lucian, transl Chambry)
- Sappho: “Thus arrived Aphrodite, the smile on your eternal visage’ ..
- Smiling before all things, the world laughs in echo, seduced by her grace
- ‘Seseros’ = haughty, disdainful, melancholic, but firstly: ‘splendid.’
- ‘Seseros’ suggests slightly open lips; Lykinos chose, as the model for the portrait of his beloved, the model of Phidias’ “Athena” (with tightly closed lips - ‘Stomatos Harmogè), not the type of our Aphrodite.

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

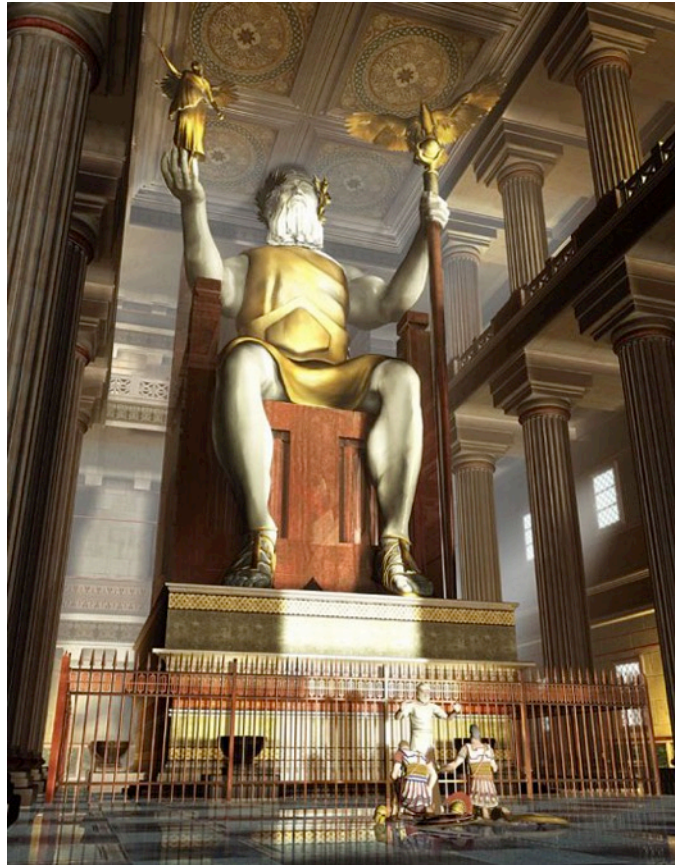
c.350 BC Copy, Paris, Louvre.



- “The Venus of Knidos is expressly intended to be seen from all sides” (Pliny HN 36, 21)
- “The aedicula in which she is placed is totally open, so that the effigy of the goddess can be seen from all sides, an effigy made, so it is believed, with the aid of the goddess herself; and whatever side one looks, one is seized by the same admiration. It is told of one individual (Cleisophos of Selymbria) who was so taken by love for her that he hid in the temple during the night so as to hold her, and left a stain, the mark of his desire.” (Pliny, HN 36, 21)

Zeus of Olympia, by Phidias

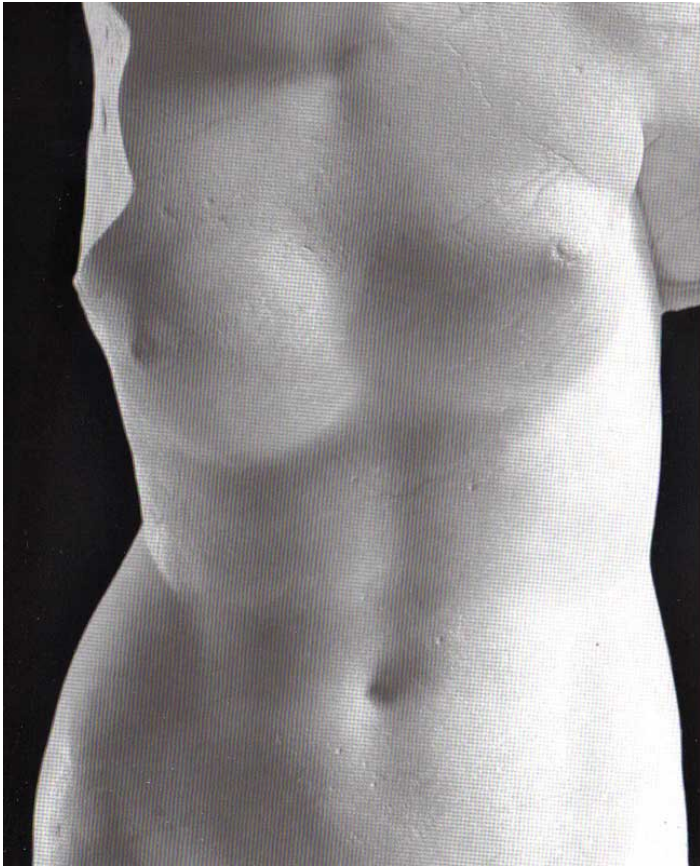
c. 435 BC (reconstruction)



- The fact that the statue of Aphrodite of Knidos was able to be seen in the round is unusual.
- The Zeus of Phidias was criticised by Strabo because it was out of scale (and thus out of proportion) with the temple, such that, if he were imagined to get up from his seated position, he would take the roof of the temple with him...
- (Strabo, VIII, 353)

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

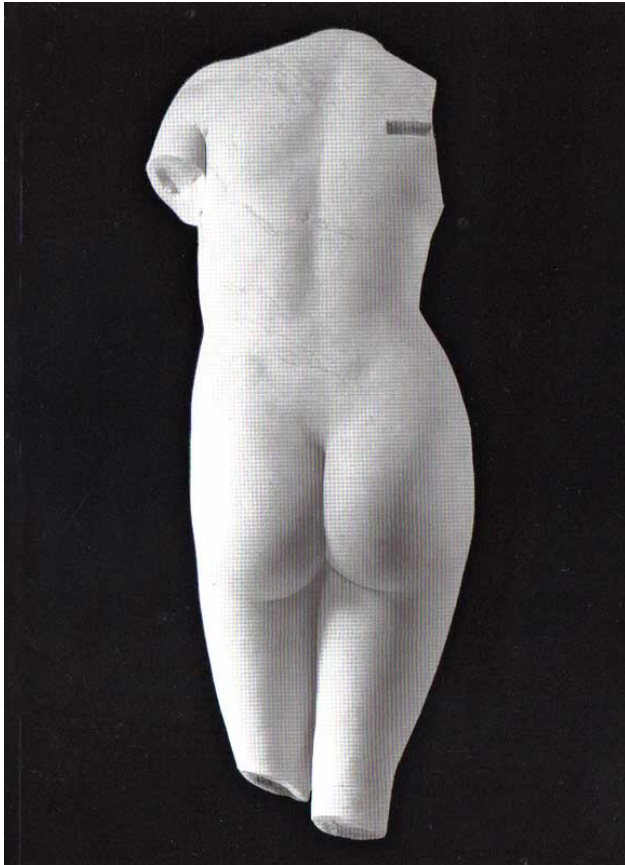
c.350 BC Copy, Paris, Louvre.



- Continuing with the account of the pilgrimage to see her;
- One pilgrim, Charicles, becomes mad with ‘a sort of deliria’ and ‘runs towards her, neck outstretched, to embrace her, unable to take his lips off her’
- (Pseudo-Lucian, ‘Erotes’ ,13)
- The effect that Pliny and the Pseudo-Lucian are here narrating is of an overwhelming erotic desire, ‘as if the statue were alive’. This notion of extreme affective realism, as a function/purpose of art, is one of the dominant narratives about art, present from the earliest times.

Torso, Aphrodite of Knidos

c.350 BC Copy, Paris, Louvre.



- The second traveller, Callicratidas, waxes even more lyrically (rapturously inspired/enthusiastic, from: ‘Entheastikos’ = divine inspiration) about the posterior view:
- ‘O Hercules, how the rhythm of her back is beautiful..Do you see those dimples on either side of her haunches?...
- (Pseudo-Lucian, ‘Erotes’, 13).

‘Circumlitio’ - the problem of colour..



- ‘Circumlitio’ = “Procedure for the colouration of details” (Literally, to seal around the edges, as of a pot)
- Charles Picard (1948, “Manual of Greek Archaeology, Vol III”) raises the question of ‘polychromy’ in Greek art.
- The statue was undoubtedly painted in limewash or encaustic.
- Praxiteles prized the collaboration of the painter Nicias to ‘complete’ his sculptures. Pliny recounts that his favourite works were ‘those that Nicias has painted.’ (HN, 35,122)
- ‘Circumlitio’ probably applied to the edges of lips, eyes, eyebrows, hair and the borders of robes.

Laocoön: Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus of Rhodes, Vatican Museum, Rome.



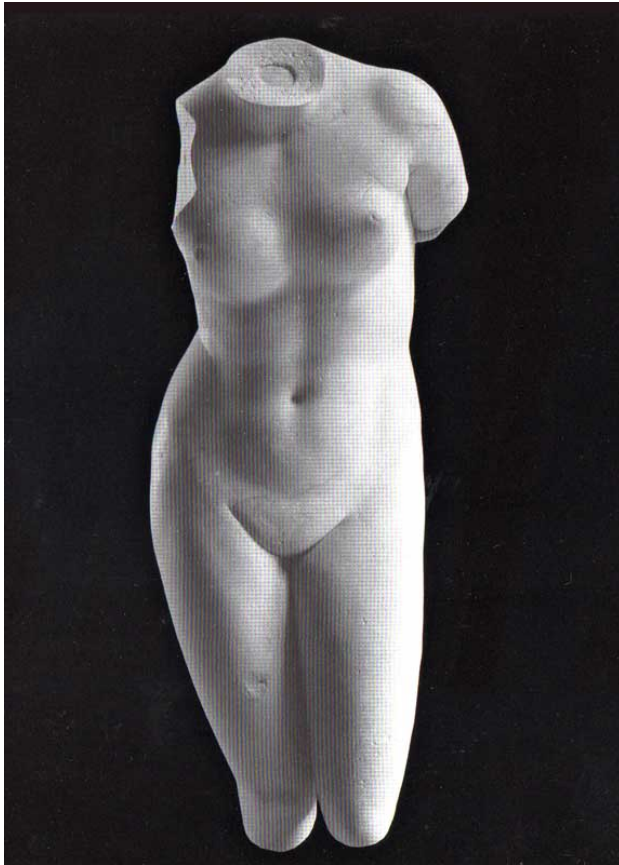
- Marble, Roman Copy (25 BC) of a Hellenistic Greek original (500 BC).
- Even the Laocoön was probably painted.
- One of the standard, iconic works of Classical antiquity, fundamental to the theories of Winckelmann, Lessing and beyond.
- Tests our modern day sensibility / taste / appreciation - We find it almost impossible to appreciate this aspect and mostly consider it with abhorrence/incredulity.

‘Circumlitio’



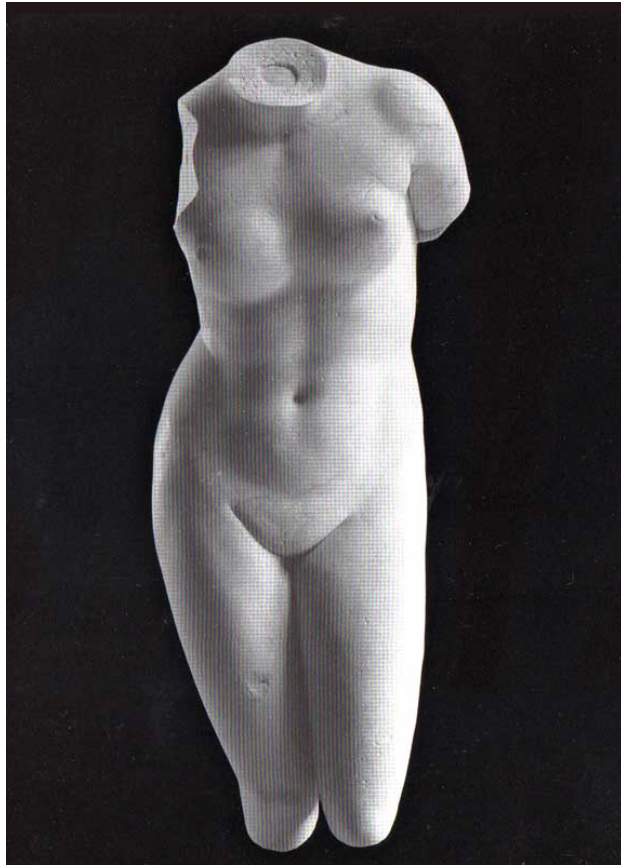
- Yet, Quintilian is clear:
- “Nothing will stand out in a picture if the contours are not delineated” (Quintilian, “nec pictura, in qua nihil circumlitum est, eminet”).
- “Painters depicting several objects in the one painting, should leave blank space around them so that shadows do not fall across their forms.”
 - (‘The Institution of Oratory’).

The effect(s) of the sculpture



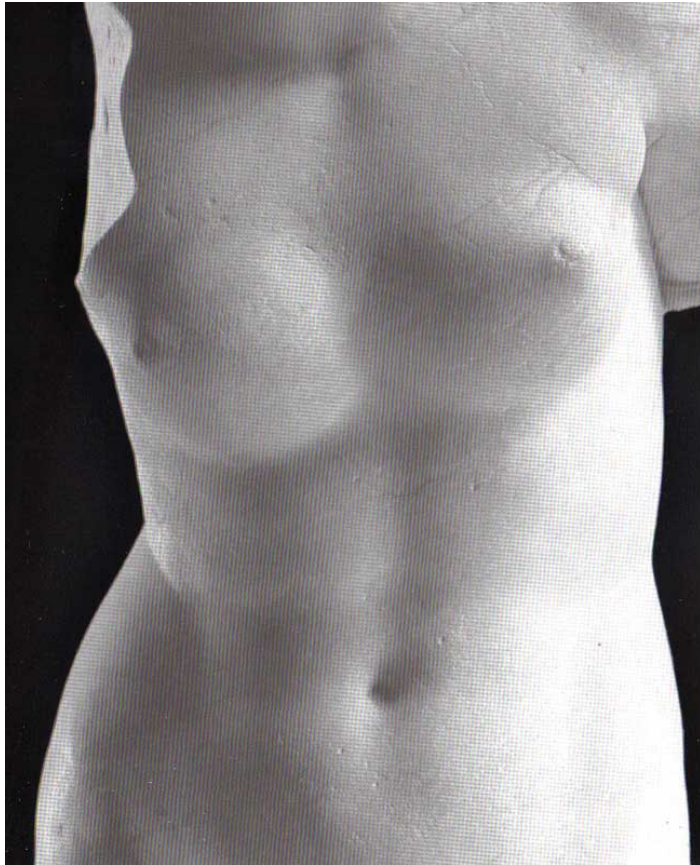
- **Nudity**- “Paris, Adonis, and Anchises saw me naked. Those are all I know of. But how did Praxiteles contrive it? (Antipater of Sidon, Greek Anthology, XVI. 168)
- **‘Thambos’** - stupor (fear or amazement) (Pseudo-Lucian, Erotas, 14 & 21; Homer, II,4,79 - fear at Athena’s arrival; Pseudo-Lucian, “Portraits” of Lykinos - paralysis caused by absolute beauty (Aphrodite) as well as absolute fear, (of the Gorgon)
- Longinus, “On the Sublime”, speaks of **‘ekplexis’** (shock) of the sublime.
- **‘Aphasia’** Callistrates speaks of the viewers of Praxiteles’ statue of a young man, being ‘struck dumb’

The effect(s) of the sculpture



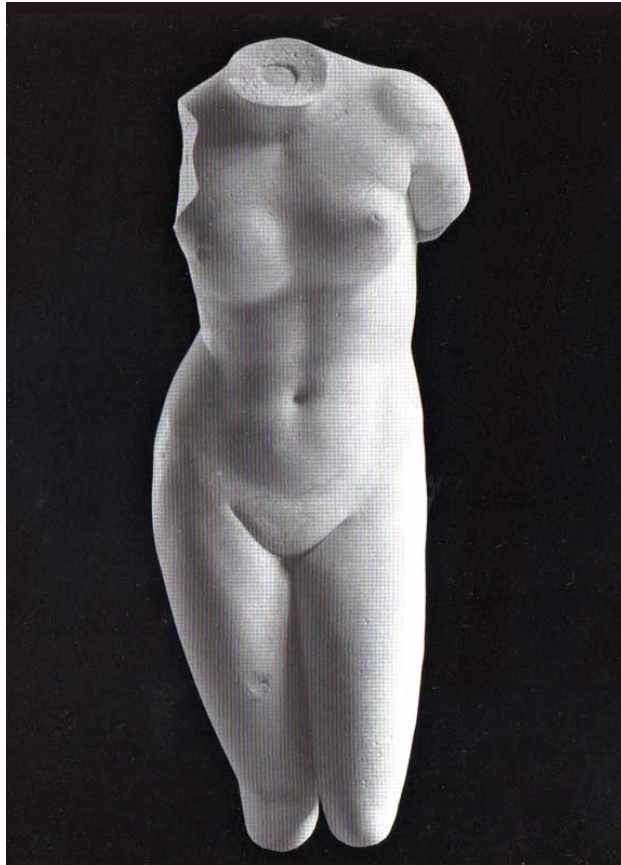
- **Empathy** - the desire to touch (Herder, “Form”, 1778). The stronger the form, the more we want to reach out from our inner imagination to embrace it.
- opposed to Winckelmann’s prioritising of ‘vision’ as abstracted contemplation
- ‘**erotomania**’ - Plutarch, “De virtute moralis” 451e
- ‘**agalmatophilia**’ - love/desire of statues - Aelianus Claudius & Philostratus tells of those who, so in love with a statue that they killed themselves because the Senate forbade them to buy it. (Aelianus Claudius, ‘Historia varia’ ix, 39; Philostratus, “Life of Apollonius of Tyana, VI, 40)

Phryne: lover & model



- “She had no need for makeup because she possessed a natural beauty” (Galen, “Exhortation for the study of the Arts”, II, 10)
- Phyrné risked the death penalty in a trial for impiety brought against her by Euthias, perhaps her former lover. Her lawyer Hyperides, seeing that she was about to be condemned, ‘placed her in view of all, and tearing her underclothes, laid bare her throat. The judges acquitted her. (Deipnosophistes of Athenes, XIII, 590.)
- According to Athenes, Phyrné was more beautiful in that which one did not see - she always dressed in a tunic and did not frequent public baths. She was the model for Apelles when he painted “Aphrodite Anadyomène” (Venus leaving the sea).
- As Praxiteles’ lover, she demanded his most prized work. When he wouldn’t say which work he preferred, she had a servant run to proclaim that a fire was menacing his studio. He ran to save the Eros and the Satyr, proclaiming that nothing would remain of his work if these were destroyed. So she chose the Eros.

Phryne: the first known model



- The first model known in sculpture.
- Phidias sculpted an Athena” but he didn’t use a model:
- “When he sculpted the form of Jupiter or Minerva, he didn’t contemplate anyone from whom he could draw a likeness, but in his spirit (mind) resided a certain extraordinary idea of beauty, which he regarded, upon which he had his eyes fixed, and to whose resemblance his art and his hand were guided.” (Cicero,Orator,§7)
- Praxiteles sculpted from a real person whom he knew and adored - it is a real portrait of a lived encounter.

Phryne: the first known model



- ‘Zeuxis choosing his models for the likeness of Helen’ (Victor Mottez, 1858)
- Conceptual beauty, as the synthesis of five existing, imperfect, models.
- Phryne was famous for uniquely embodying beauty in herself.
- Inspiration of Praxiteles, was in his heart (kardia) and entrails (splanchna).

Eros of Thespies (Eros Farnese)

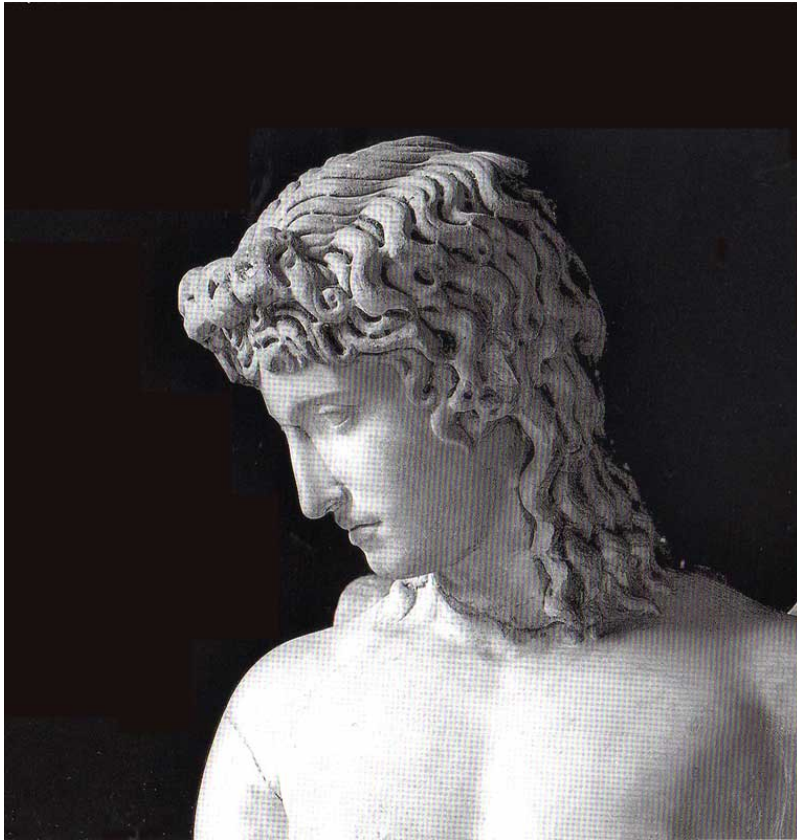
Copy, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples



- Chosen by Phryné and taken to her native Thespies at the foot of Mt Helicon.
- Remained there until 1st century AD, when Caligula took it to Rome; Claudius returned it, Nero took it back and gilded the wings, ‘thereby destroying the precision of art’ (Julian the Apostate, (Orat.36,54a)
- The presence of wings suggests a Platonic influence - wings were a divine element (Plato, Symposium, 195a-196b)
- Subject of a similar amorous encounter to the Aphrodite, (by Alctetas of Rhodes) as narrated by Pliny (HN 36,22). Confirms its effect and the chronology of the two works.

Eros of Thespies (Eros Farnese)

Copy, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.



- Praxiteles himself wrote an epigraph on the pedestal:
- “Praxiteles has achieved perfection in his Eros, which made him suffer, drawing the model from his very heart, and giving me to Phryné as her reward; I cast down charms; no more by casting arrows, but by the looks cast down on me.” (ie not by my looks, but by the effect I have on those who look at me).

Sappho of Lesbos

Pompeian fresco, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples



- Sappho, (c.610- c.570 BC) describes the extreme erotic seizure which beauty can inspire:
- “He seems to me equal to the Gods..my heart bursts in my chest, hearing your suave voice and your charming laugh..even if I look at you so briefly, I am speechless, my tongue shatters... my skin catches fire, ..I am seized by trembling; I am more green than the prairie, and I seem almost dead; yet I must endure.”
- (Sappho, Poem 31)

Eros of Thespies (Eros Farnese)

Copy, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples



- Epigramme from the Greek Anthology (XVI, 203) attributed to Julian of Egypt, “On the Eros of Praxiteles”:
- “Having curved his neck at my feet, Praxiteles with his captive hands, has modelled me; because Eros himself in him is captured, he has poured me in bronze and given me to Phyrné as a measure of her tenderness. She, on her part, has offered me to Love; and in fact, it is good that the lovers bring Love himself as a gift to Love”
- Eros was still considered a deity at the time of Cicero, and offerings were regularly made to his image.

Eros of Thespies (Eros Farnese)

Copy, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples



- Callistrates (end of 3rd c. AD) describes another Eros by Praxiteles, in bronze (‘Ekphrasis’ ‘Descriptions’ of 14 statues)
- Eros of Thespies was in white Pentelic marble
- Both were winged and nude
- ‘The Ekphrasis of Eros’ by Callistrates describes the lyrical softness, suppleness and flowing movement of the bronze Eros: “It was of fire and honey, the look from his eyes; and one could see the bronze obeying passion and welcoming with good humour, the representation (mimesis) of laughter...”

Resting Satyr

Roman copy, Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline, Rome.



- “The nonchalant arabesque, dear to Praxiteles; the fluid line of his legs and haunches” - Callistrates compares Praxiteles to Daedalus (the first artist), capable of forming living statues and filling them with human sensibility.
- Daedalus, according to Aristotle, was able to animate his wooden Aphrodite, simply by pouring silver over it. (De Anima, 406b)
- and Homer talks of the ‘Tripods of Hephaestos’, sculpted by Daedalus, which were able, by themselves, to enter the Hall of the Gods. (Iliad, 18, 376).

Resting Satyr

Roman copy, Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline, Rome.



- “The art of Praxiteles, who knows how to give life to matter, (bronze for example) is of another order. His imitation is closer to life than that of Daedalus. It transforms matter”
- (Callistrates, ‘Ekphrasis of Eros’).
- In Plato’s Symposium, Agathon speaks of, “Eros, as the youngest, and most delicate of the Gods; To that one should add that his constitution, is ‘supple’; In effect, if it was rigid he would not be able to pass unnoticed, on entering and on leaving a soul. His graceful and flowing constitution, his grace, gives him important qualities..” ..His ‘humid’ constitution, (fluid, languorous, flexible) permits love to ‘bend’ to the contours of the object he embraces, and to ‘inflect’ himself onto the form of the soul through which he passes.”

Satyr, Pouring Wine

Copy, Antikensammlung, Berlin.



- Unquestionably one of the earliest works by Praxiteles.
- Originally in Bronze and copied many times. (Previous types of athletes pouring oil by the school of Myron existed)
- First time a Satyr appears in full 3D. Usually depicted as half man, half horse/goat
- Satyrs formed part of the entourage of Dionysos.
- Here, the only sign of being a Satyr are the pointed ears.
- The cult of Dionysos of Eleusis is indicated by the band of initiates which he wears.

Satyr, Pouring Wine

Copy, Antikensammlung, Berlin.



- Satyrs were symbolic representations of happy deaths (Dietrich).
- Dionysos, as God of Health, gave access to Elyseen promise.
- One of the two sculptures dearest to Praxiteles himself (the other being the ‘Eros’, given to Phryné).

Apollo Sauroctone (Apollo killing a

Lizard) Roman Copy, II century AD, Paris, Louvre



- “Praxiteles was happiest in marble, and owes his celebrity most certainly, to it; But he also made some beautiful works in bronze” (Pliny, HN, XXXIV, 69)
- Martial: “He who runs towards you, child (puber) full of ruses, spare him, this lizard; he desires to perish under your fingers.” (14, 172)

Apollo Sauroctone (Apollo killing a

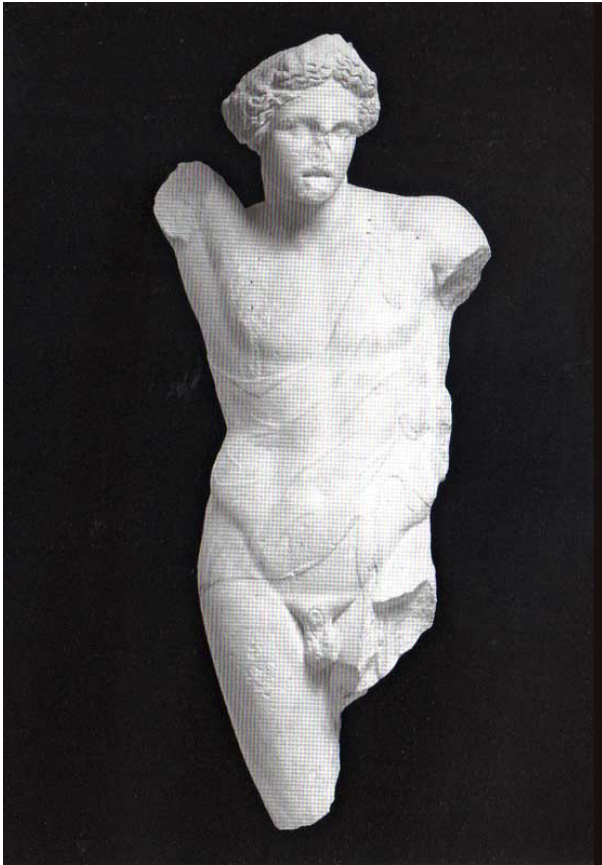
Lizard) Roman Copy, II century AD, Paris, Louvre



- Winckelmann goes into raptures about the, “type of an eternal youth, and the image of a permanent spring” :
- “The most beautiful knees and most beautiful legs of male figures are without doubt, The Apollo Sauroctone of the Villa Borghese, as of the Apollo with a swan at his feet, and of a Bacchus, two statues in the Villa Medici”.
- Beauty seems to be a fusion of male and female characteristics.

Dionysos clothed in a Faun's skin

Copy after Praxiteles and Scopas, Paris, Louvre.



- “Dionysos is represented as a young man, so delicate that the bronze is transformed into flesh (‘metarruqmivzesqai’), with a flesh so supple and relaxed that one would say that it was made of another material than bronze...He was in the flower of youth, he was full of delicacy, flowing with desire..”
- (Callistrates, v. 233)

Hermes, carrying the child Dionysos

Copy, Archeological Museum, Olympia.



- Winckelmann notes the Theban law for art which demanded, “the best possible reproduction of nature, under penalty of a fine”, also demanded artists to ‘represent the most beautiful persons’ - (ie to ‘improve’ on nature by idealisation)
- Praxiteles, in modelling his Aphrodite on Phyrné, risked breaking that law.
- The discovery of this statue in 19th Century by the German School, was thought to be an original by Praxiteles. We know it now to be a copy, but a very good one.
- Described by Pausanias as the second most famous statue of the ancient world (the first being the Aphrodite of Knidos) (Periegesis).

Hermes, carrying the child Dionysos

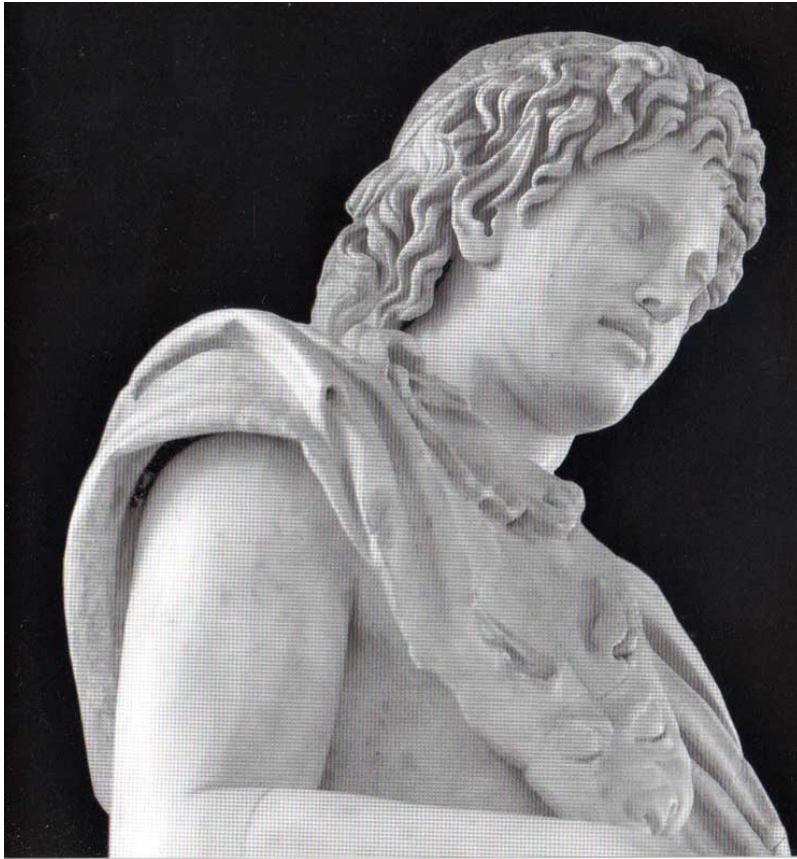
Copy, Archeological Museum, Olympia.



- Hermes receives the baby Dionysos, born of Semele: he carries him to the Nymphs of Nysa, who feed him in the mountains. En route, the messenger stops, and to amuse his companion, holds up to him in the air, with his right arm, a bunch of grapes, towards which the little god, gourmand, stretches out his hand.”
- Pose derives from Cephisodote (father of Praxiteles)
- The ‘Canon’ of beauty, as defined by the ‘Doryphorus’ of Polycleitus, demanded symmetry and proportion of all the parts.
- Callistrates praised the ‘truthfulness’ of the sculpture: “The statue transforms imitation (mimesis) into a truthful (realistic) being. Stone, whilst preserving its own qualities, surpasses them, and brings imitation to a state of veritable being’ (Truth).

Resting Satyr

Roman copy, Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline, Rome.



- “Praxiteles, mixed the stone of his statues with the passions of the soul”
- (Diodorus of Sicily)
- Both the Aphrodite of Knidos and the Eros evoke the passions, not least because Praxiteles wanted them to, but because he felt them; and the passion felt was love.

Bibliography

- Ajootian, Aileen, Praxiteles, *Personal Styles in Greek Sculpture* (ed. Olga Palagia and J. J. Pollitt), Cambridge University Press, 1998 (1st publication 1996) ([ISBN 0-521-65738-5](#)), pp.91-129.
- Corso, Antonio, Prassitele, *Fonti Epigrafiche e Letterarie, Vita e Opere*, three vol., De Lucca, Rome, 1988 and 1991.
- Havelock, Christine Mitchell, The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors: A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Métraux, Guy P. R., Sculptors and Physicians in Fifth-Century Greece: A Preliminary Study, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- Moon, Warren G., Polykleitos, the Doryphoros, and Tradition, Madison, Wisconsin University Press, 1995.
- Muller-Dufeu, Marion, La Sculpture grecque. Sources littéraires et Épigraphiques, Éditions de l'école nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, coll. Beaux-Arts histoire, Paris, 2002 ([ISBN 2-84056-087-9](#)), p. 481-521 (new edition of Overbeck's *Antiquen Schiftquellen*, 1868).
- Pasquier, Alain and Jean-Luc Martinez, Praxitèle, catalogue of the exhibition at the Louvre Museum, March 23-June 18, 2007, Louvre editions & Somogy, Paris, 2007 ([ISBN 978-2-35031-111-1](#)).
- Pigeaud, Jackie, Praxitèle, Dilecta, Paris, 2007.
- Ridgway, Brunilde Sismondo, Fourth-Century Styles in Greek Sculpture, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, ([ISBN 0-299-15470-X](#)), 1997, pp.258-267.
- Rolley, Claude, La Sculpture grecque II: la période classique, Picard, coll. Manuels d'art et d'archéologie antiques, 1999 ([ISBN 2-7084-0506-3](#)), pp.242-267.
- Stewart, Andrew, Greek Sculpture: An Exploration, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1990 ([ISBN 0-300-04072-5](#)) pp.277-281.