The history of the female nude in Western art begins with Aphrodite. The goddess appeared in oversize cult statues in Greek temples and in gleaming marble sculptures decorating Roman baths. She also adorned more modest settings, with mass-produced marble and terracotta statuettes placed in homes and tombs, creating a sensuous domestic ambience or accompanying the deceased to the afterlife. From the fourth century BCE, nude images of the goddess proliferated; they are found in every medium and every period and across the vast expanse of the Greco-Roman world. Thus, the history of the female nude and that of Aphrodite are closely intertwined; indeed, almost all nudes in ancient art are of Aphrodite, and almost all Aphrodites, from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, are wholly or partially nude.

The implications of this connection have not always been fully appreciated by scholars. Their tendency has been to interpret the genre "female nude" in light of later works—from voluptuous Renaissance paintings to Playboy pinups—that are thoroughly secular in nature and divorced from religious belief and cult practice. But foregrounding later works of art is problematic, because such works necessarily differed in function and meaning from the nude Aphrodites of the Classical era. By focusing instead on these nudes of Classical antiquity, in relation to the goddess’s cult and religious persona, we may understand better not only the representation of Aphrodite but also the early history of a major theme in Western art.

In early Greek art, it is the male nude that predominates. Athletes, heroes, and gods are shown unclothed, allowing their kalokagathia (beauty and goodness, conceived of as an inseparable pair) to be visibly displayed through their taut, muscular bodies and graceful poses. Women’s bodies by contrast are concealed, their beauty suggested through ornate costume, complex hairstyles, jewelry, and elegant, modest gestures. A few exceptions to the rule exist: for instance, some rare early works were inspired by models from ancient Near Eastern art, where female nudity was more common
(cat. nos. 1–3, pp. 18–20). And there are occasional narrative scenes in which a woman’s nakedness appears as a signal of her sexual availability or vulnerability, such as images of prostitutes at drinking parties or the rape of the Trojan princess Cassandra by the Greek warrior Ajax.

Created in the mid-fourth century B.C. by one of the era’s premier sculptors, Praxiteles, the Aphrodite of Knidos was the first monumental female nude in Greek art and a radical departure from previous practice (Fig. 9). While the original is no longer preserved, its appearance can be reconstructed from the many extant copies. The sculpture shows Aphrodite bathing, with an urn for bathwater beside her. Praxiteles thus provided a narrative context for the goddess’s nudity and also humanized her, by depicting her taking part in an everyday activity. But Aphrodite’s action is not simply mundane. Rather, it alludes to the central myth of the goddess’s origins in the sea; bathing returns her to that moment of birth and the watery realm. Praxiteles’s sculpture, therefore, while novel in its presentation, nonetheless connects the goddess to ancient tradition and to what was most distinctive about her, mythologically speaking. This connection is particularly appropriate for a statue erected on the Greek island of Knidos, where Aphrodite was worshipped as a kind of water goddess and where her cult title was Euploia, the goddess of fair sailing.

It is with these cultic and artistic concerns in mind that we should interpret the first female nude in Greek art. In artistic terms, the Knidian Aphrodite typified the most important developments seen in fourth-century B.C. sculpture: formal innovation and an emphatic assertion of ties to the past. Like other statues of its era, the Knidian offered a new physical ideal—that of the nude and sexually mature woman—which went beyond the rather narrow range of the preceding High Classical period. And it highlighted the human, everyday aspects of the goddess rather than her isolated grandeur. In this way, the statue responded to, and indeed encouraged, the shift
in the fourth century B.C. toward a more emotionally fulfilling religious experience for the individual worshipper; this may be seen also in the growth of healing and salvific cults, so marked a feature of the period. But while the statue appeared up-to-date, even avant-garde, in its visual form and especially its nudity, the Knidian Aphrodite at the same time represented the goddess in a manner that was anchored in Hellenic tradition. This was done above all through myth, as Aphrodite's bath functioned allusively to recall the story of her birth—her foundation myth, as it were.

Aphrodite's pose in the statue might equally relate to ancient tradition. Her right hand is held before her pubic area, in what is frequently misinterpreted as a gesture of shame or embarrassment—as though the goddess, caught unexpectedly by the viewer, were trying to hide. Such an interpretation seems implausible for a cult statue, which should offer a wholly positive representation of omnipotent divinity. The gesture should be seen instead as one intended to draw attention to the part of the body most intimately connected with sexuality. For Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love, this was, after all, the source of her extraordinary power, which her nudity highlighted. As a consequence, interpretations of the statue in terms of shame or vulnerability are problematic because they do not take into sufficient account the Greek religious context. Only with the proliferation of nude Aphrodites during the Hellenistic era was there a shift toward more secular, and perhaps more voyeuristic, images.

Hellenistic artists depicted Aphrodite frequently, as demonstrated by an extensive series of original works and an even vaster array of copies. As the copies show, the Aphrodites of this period attained the greatest popularity with later viewers, in sculptures such as the Aphrodite Anadyomene (wringing out her hair) (cat. no. 130, p. 178), the crouching Aphrodite (cat. no. 132, p. 152), and Aphrodite taking off her sandal. (cat. no. 139, p. 153). These images drew inspiration from the Knidian cult statue; they too depict Aphrodite engaged in everyday activities, with narratives connecting her to water and bathing. But they also move beyond the Kinidia, for instance, by depicting Aphrodite in more active and complex poses and with a more distinctively feminine body type.

Although Aphrodite might appear fully clothed in these images, as she did in the conservative artistic center of Athens (cat. no. 134, p. 176), she was most often nude, the typical choice of patrons and artists throughout the Hellenistic world. Nudity functioned almost as an attribute of the goddess, allowing her identification even when other signs (such as Eros, her son, or the dove, her bird) were absent. This nearly constant nudity for Hellenistic Aphrodites effectively demonstrates the significance of the Knidia.
as the model for later works. At about this time, nude Aphrodites began to appear in a range of objects and contexts, including in small bronze and terracotta statuettes for homes or tombs (cat. no. 129; cat. no. 159, p. 186) and on gems, mirrors, and jewelry (cat. no. 72, p. 86; cat. no. 75, p. 85). Images of the female nude served a broader range of functions than was previously the case and reached a much wider audience.

Still, while Hellenistic artists were influenced by the Knidia, they also became innovators in their own right, as their facility with rendering the distinctive qualities of the nude female form increased. Praxiteles' statue was an ambitious attempt at a new subject rather than a perfect, finished achievement. It had, therefore, a somewhat awkward effect, which can be seen in the sculpture's oddly placed breasts, thick waist, and rubbery hips. Later statues such as the Capitoline Aphrodite display more clearly their creators' familiarity with sculptural techniques for rendering women's naked bodies: their proportions are more accurate and they include appropriately feminine details, such as the soft, slightly sagging flesh of the underarms and the demarcation between the swelling belly and pubic area (cat. no. 127, p. 155). The result is a more credible female nude body, which highlights and exalts its differences from the previously dominant male prototype.

A variation of the Knidia is illustrated by the statue type known as the Aphrodite of Caupia (cat. no. 23, p. 156). The original sculpture was created in the late fourth century B.C. Although it is no longer preserved, we have numerous later versions of the type, where Aphrodite is depicted half-nude and with a mantle draped about her hips for a more modest appearance than the Knidia's. Trim and erect, she also appears more youthful and dynamic as she twists sharply to the left, originally holding a shield in both hands. Her focused gaze, down and to the left, seems to emphasize the significance of her action—even though this significance, in both the Aphrodite of Knidos and the Capuan statue type, has long been subject to debate.

Scholars have frequently claimed that Aphrodite is using the shield of Ares, her lover, as a mirror to admire her own beauty. This interpretation is problematic, however, because it relies upon an extremely limited characterization of Aphrodite. It is unlikely that the goddess would be so exclusively concerned with love and beauty that she would turn the war god's shield, an important emblem of battle, into a mirror. As recent studies have shown, in Greece Aphrodite had a much more wide-ranging sphere of activity—her dominion extended not only to sexual love but also
to political harmony, agricultural fertility, seafaring, and, perhaps surprisingly, war. In Corinth, where the original Capuan statue was likely erected, Aphrodite had long been venerated as a goddess of military victory; literary and archaeological sources show that she was believed to protect the city in times of danger, such as during the Persian Wars.

The image of Aphrodite with a shield is best interpreted as an appropriately martial cult statue for the goddess’s Corinthian temple. It represents Aphrodite as a sensuous half-nude in the most current fashion of the late fourth century B.C., but holding a shield to indicate her longstanding role as defender of the polis. Like the Knidia, the Capuan statue combines innovative representational strategies with traditional religious symbolism; while it retains the erotic appeal characteristic of the goddess of love, its sensuality has a particular meaning here: the desirability of military victory in the age of Alexander the Great, a time when such victory was ever more critical to the community’s survival. The statue’s combination of erotic beauty and martial symbolism also ensured its popularity in later periods, especially in the heavily militarized society of imperial Rome.

The Roman goddess Venus had much in common with Aphrodite, but the two were by no means identical. Like her Greek counterpart, Venus was a powerful deity associated with beauty, love, and sexuality. Venus also inherited much of Aphrodite’s mythological background, such as her involvement in the Trojan War and her love affairs with Adonis and Anchises—albeit with a particular emphasis on her role as mother of Aeneas, a founding hero of Rome. But in other ways the two goddesses were quite distinct. The most significant difference was Venus’s greater involvement with war and victory, as well as her connection to the imperial family. Taken together, these variations resulted in strikingly divergent patterns of worship for the Roman goddess, even when her visual form was very close to that of her Hellenic predecessor.

From the outset, the public cult of Venus in Rome was closely associated with military success and imperial expansion. Q. Fabius Gorges built the first temple to Venus in 295 B.C. at the conclusion of a war with the Samnites. Rome’s formidable neighbors on the Italian peninsula. The goddess’s cult title here was
Venus Obsequens (propitious Venus), because she had proved advantageous in the war to the temple's dedicator and to the Romans more broadly. Q. Fabius Maximus, the grandson of the previous dedicator, vowed a second temple in 217 B.C. during the Second Punic War. The dedication came in response to Rome's crushing defeat by the great Carthaginian general Hannibal at the battle of Cannae and was part of a broader attempt to garner divine support for continuing the struggle. In this case, the temple was dedicated to Venus Erycina, from the former Punic stronghold of Mount Eryx, in Sicily; its importance is signaled by its placement on the Capitoline hill, the heart of ancient Rome. L. Porcius Licinius constructed an additional temple to Venus Erycina in 184 B.C. during the Ligurian War. While these temples took on other functions as well—for example, a festival for prostitutes was held near the site of Licinius's dedication—their martial purposes were clear and highly valued by the Romans. The temples' history shows how the worship of Venus was incorporated into the public rituals of Rome, above all at times of great military peril during the wars that secured Rome's dominance over the Mediterranean.

While later cults of Venus continued to connect her with war and victory, they also associated the goddess more closely with particular individuals in the contest for power that marked the Late Republic. In the early first century B.C., following his victory in the so-called Social War with Rome's Italian allies, the dictator L. Cornelius Sulla set up a colony named after Venus—the Vesuvian city of Pompeii, formally the Colonia Veneria Cornelia Pompeianorum—and constructed her temple there in a prominent location. After his military successes in the Mithridatic wars in Greece, he set up a victory monument to Aphrodite and sent gifts to the Aphrodite of Aphrodisias (in present-day western Turkey), claiming that he saw her in a dream, fighting on his side. He also took as his Latin cognomen Felix (lucky), which in Greek was translated as E aphroditos, suggesting that he enjoyed the favor of Aphrodite. All this closely tied Sulla to Venus, whom he also promoted on his coins as a kind of patron deity of his military successes. Later aspiring generals followed his lead, including Pompey the Great, Sulla's one-time protégé and the dominant military figure of the mid-first century B.C. Throughout his career, Pompey portrayed himself as under the goddess's protection; he even dedicated the temple crowning his famous theater in Rome to her as Venus Victrix (victorious).

The association of Venus with powerful military figures did not change when the Republic ended in 27 B.C. and the Principate was established. Instead, the connection intensified, although Venus also took on
other nonmilitary functions. Hellenistic rulers had already promoted Aphrodite as a divine role model for their queens; however, the Roman emperors surpassed their Greek counterparts in the many ways they aligned themselves with the deity—by sponsoring several Venusian cults and monuments, used in high-profile imperial settings and integrated within a coherent visual language of political propaganda. Much of the credit for this development must go to Julius Caesar and his heir Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Caesar’s family, the Julii, claimed descent from Venus via her son Aeneas, and already in the second century BCE they were representing the goddess on their coins. Under Caesar and Augustus, this practice was vastly accelerated. The dictator and his grand-nephew the emperor not only put Venus on their coins but also honored her in their temples and used her imagery on their gems, historical reliefs, and portraits, thereby emphasizing their divine ancestry, crucial for the kind of charismatic leadership role to which they aspired. At the same time, using the image of the goddess of love offered a sensuous and pacific way to represent their power, one particularly attractive to the Romans after a generation of civil war.

Caesar’s and Augustus’s descendants, the Julio-Claudians, emphasized their ancestral ties especially to Venus Genetrix (the ancestress). But after the assassination of Nero and the accession of a new dynasty, the Flavians, Venus became instead a model for the Roman empresses, as she had for Hellenistic queens. Her image was coupled with that of the empress, particularly on coins and gems, where it metaphorically suggested the beauty of her mortal counterpart or the marital concord of the dynasty (cat. no. 145, p. 172; cat. no. 151). She was also honored in a temple constructed by the emperor Hadrian to Venus Felix and Roma Aeterna (Venus of Good Fortune and Eternal Rome). This immense religious structure, atop the Velian hill at the eastern end of the Roman Forum, was the last major public temple to the goddess in Rome; but even into the Late Empire, Venus continued to adorn the great public buildings, such as baths, theaters, and amphitheaters, that the emperors patronized so lavishly. In such locations, her statues offered an attractive representation of imperial power for those who were subject to it. Her public, nude images perhaps also alluded to her role as guarantor of fertility and as embodiment of felicitas temporum (the good fortune of the era)—both critical to the flourishing of the empire.
Venus was popular in private worship as well. Her connection to sexuality made her an important deity for women, including brides, matrons, and prostitutes, and gave her a particular place of honor in the home. Venus also appeared in gardens—perhaps in acknowledgment of her power over agricultural fecundity, further underscored by the appearance of her son, the fertility god Priapos—and her presence there emphasized the garden’s status as a zone of pleasure within the multifunctional Roman home. As all these public and private cults of Venus suggest, the goddess was thoroughly integrated into Roman life. Her worship was emphatically different from that of Aphrodite; her images, by contrast, were closely linked.

Roman nudes tend to look Greek. That is, the Romans used Greek styles, and often established Hellenic types, to represent the female nude in their art; they also appropriated earlier works of Greek art for their own uses. This emulation of Greek art also extended to heroic male nudes (frequently deployed for portraits), images of the gods, narratives of courage and romance derived from Greek myth, and the decoration of Roman houses and tombs. As this list suggests, the Romans used Greek styles selectively for particular artistic genres, while others, such as realist portraiture, remained emphatically Roman in form. Overall, one might say that the Romans dreamed in Greek, deploying Greek visual formats and styles to represent their pleasures, fantasies, and ideals.

These Greek-style works have often been described as derivative copies, yet such a description does not do justice to what is distinctive about them: their contexts. Monumental images derived from Greek cult statues were erected in eminently Roman settings such as baths, theaters, and gladiatorial arenas. Miniaturized versions were also created to adorn the Romans’ beloved villa gardens, while models with portrait heads were used as a characteristic form of Roman funerary commemoration (cat. no 146). In such settings, Greek-style nudes were seen by broad new audiences and thus understood in new ways. So while the Roman period saw few changes to the female nude in visual terms, its meanings were dramatically altered.

Among the most significant of these alterations was the deployment of Greek-style Aphrodites throughout the great civic spaces of the Roman world. Public architectural complexes boasted an immense population of sculptures in marble and bronze. Gods and mythological heroes rubbed shoulders with local benefactors and the reigning emperor, result-
Fig. 13
Statue of Aphrodite
Roman, from the bath of Caracalla, Imperial period, about AD 212-217
Marble
86.9 cm (34.3 in.)
Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano

[Image of the statue]
ing in a dazzling showcase of Roman wealth and imperial power. While the goddess of love appeared in all these civic spaces, she was particularly popular within Roman baths. The myth of her birth and her cultic connection to water may partly account for her popularity there; more important, however, was her association with beauty, love, and pleasure. These were the baths’ promise, so it is not surprising that Aphrodite (together with the wine god Dionysos and perhaps the healing deities Asklepios and Hygeia) predominates there.

A statue from Cyrene, a Greco-Roman city on the coast of North Africa, demonstrates very effectively what made Aphrodite so appropriate for the baths (fig. 12). The statue depicts the goddess as a full-bodied and graceful nude, with her discarded costume and a small dolphin to her right as a support. Her arms are not preserved below the shoulders, but copies of the type suggest that they were raised, perhaps wringing out wet hair or binding it with a ribbon. In this statue, the treatment of the nude body is adept and sensuous. It puts to good use some five centuries of sculptors’ experience with the rendering of the undorned female form, and—with the softly modulated planes of the body and strong light-shadow contrasts on the support—shows the high level of artistic achievement attained in civic sculpture during the Roman Empire.

The North African bath complex in which the Aphrodite stood testifies to the scale and ambition of such buildings in the provinces. At the same time, the site’s inscriptions show that the bath was initiated during the emperor Trajan’s reign and with his assistance, making clear its connection to Rome. The complex was restored by his successor, Hadrian, after the Jewish revolt of A.D. 72–75, known as the Bar Kochba War; he was also likely responsible for the sculptures here. These elegantly carved and high-profile works of art testified to the artistic taste and cultivation of Hadrian and to the benefits for the local population of the empire he ruled.

A second important development of the Roman era was the predominance of Venus, and Venustian imagery, in the private sphere of house and tomb. In Pompeii, for example, Venus was the divinity most frequently depicted in domestic statuettes and wall paintings, often shown wholly or partly nude, as were her companions, Cupid, Psyche, and the Three Graces. Compared with the nudes used in public monuments, these private works of art were more diverse in appearance and meaning, while retaining a consistent connection to beauty and sexual love. The private nudes also began earlier and continued longer, becoming popular in the early first century B.C. and keeping their hold on Roman viewers well into the Late Antique peri-
od, as the Roman Empire became Christian. Unlike large-scale public commissions, private works of art were more economical. They were also less ostentatiously at odds with the new religious dispensation and consequently tended to escape the destruction meted out to, for example, statues and temples of Venus.\textsuperscript{24}

Funerary contexts also provided a rich and varied private production of Venusian imagery. In tombs, women were often shown in the manner of the Capirolla Aphrodite as a means to commemorate and idealize the deceased. The dead woman's assimilation to Venus was surely meant to praise her beauty; this central aspect of the goddess's character was enhanced by her depiction as a nude (cat. no. 45, p. 163). The nudity was metaphorical, functioning as a kind of costume that indicated the virtues being commemorated in the funerary monument. It removed the deceased from the sphere of everyday life and connected her to the gods and to high art, especially through its allusion to a familiar statue type. Thus, here as elsewhere, nudity had a religious meaning and also an aesthetic one, exalting the deceased through the medium of Greek art.

The Aphrodite of Knidos was influential not simply as the first but indeed as the definitive female nude throughout antiquity. Reproduced in hundreds of copies from the Hellenistic through Late Roman periods, the Knidia set the standard for later images. Given the striking differences between the Hellenic worship of Aphrodite and the Roman cult of Venus—with her close connection to war, imperial expansion, and the ruling dynasty—the Knidia's influence, and that of Greek art more generally, becomes especially noteworthy. We might expect the goddess to look more explicitly martial, or at any rate more sober and restrained, than is generally the case. Instead, she was represented as sensuous and alluring, and the revered traditions of Greek art were deployed to enhance her attractiveness rather than her formidable divinity. At the same time, when viewed in the correct light, it is precisely the alluring physical form of Aphrodite that emerges as the concrete, effective expression of her divine power—making these ancient images of her very different indeed from the female nudes of later periods, when the realms of the sensual and the religious and political spheres were considered wholly separate, even antithetical.


21. Because of its uniqueness, many scholars have written on this object, most recently Andrew Stewart, "Reflections," in Sexuality in Ancient Art, ed. Natalie Boymel Kammen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 136–54, esp. 145–50, and John R. Clarke, Looking at Lovemaking (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23–37. Both are open to the possibility that the female represented is the famous Corinthian Isthmia Leina, nicknamed the "Lioness" because she was adept at the sexual position depicted on the mirror's interior engraving.


23. Sambucus puts it best: "What shall men's strength avail when love has stormed heaven and...despoiled the immortals of their arms?"

24. Quoted in Jean Sobella, "Eros and the Lizard: Children, Animals and Roman Funerary Sculpture," in Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and India (Heidelberg: Schnell Supplement 41), ed. Ada Cohen and Jeremy B. Rutter (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2007), 555. Sobella provides a recent discussion (553–70) of the type represented by some 180 marble examples dating from the first through fourth centuries C.E.


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5. The classic example is Adolf Funwängler, Masterpiece of Greek Sculpture, trans. Eugene Sellars (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 387–88, followed by many later scholars.


9. Temple of Venus Obscures: Livy 16.21.9; Temple of Venus Erycina: Livy 22.10.10; 54.34.4; Strabo 6.1.6; Ovid Fasti 4.871–76.


15. Most influential here has been Funwängler, Masterpiece of Greek Sculpture, with many later followers, for an extensive discussion of the historiography of Greek-style Roman sculptures, see Miranda Marvin, The Language of the Muse: The Dialogue Between Roman and Greek Sculpture (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008).


