

Brill's Companion to Aphrodite

Edited by

Amy C. Smith and Sadie Pickup



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On the cover: An Attic black-figure amphora, featuring Aphrodite and Poseidon, ca. 520 BC. London, British Museum B254. Drawing after Lenormant, de Witte, Élite des monuments céramographiques. Matériaux pour l'histoire des religions et des moeurs de l'antiquité (Paris, 1844–1861), 3, pl. 15.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i>
ABV	Beazley, John D., <i>Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters</i> (Oxford, 1956)
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
AM	<i>Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Athenische Abteilung</i>
ARV ²	Beazley, John D., <i>Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters</i> , 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1963)
BAPD	Beazley Archive Pottery Database, Oxford University (www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/databases/pottery.htm)
BCH	<i>Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique</i>
BSA	<i>Annual of the British School at Athens</i>
CHD	Güterbock, Hans G., Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., and Theo P.J. van den Hout, eds., <i>The Hittite Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> (Chicago, 1980–)
CIG	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> (1825–1860)
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
CVA	<i>Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum</i>
FHG	Müller, C., <i>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</i> (1841–1870)
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> (1873–)
IGRom.	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes</i> (1906–)
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (Zurich, 1981–)
OCD	Hornblower, Simon, and Anthony Spawforth, eds., <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1996)
RDAC	<i>Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus</i>
SEG	<i>Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum</i> (Amsterdam, 1923–)
TAPA	<i>Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association</i>

Abbreviations of primary sources follow those given in *OCD*.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AUGUSTAN APHRODITES: THE ALLURE OF GREEK ART IN ROMAN VISUAL CULTURE

RACHEL KOUSSER

Hellenized images of Aphrodite first began to permeate Roman visual culture in the Augustan era (27 BC–AD 14). From the elaborate state-sponsored monuments of the new regime to wall paintings in private homes, the goddess of love featured prominently in works of art whose idealized naturalism was inspired by the achievements of Classical Greece. These images, widely popular in Augustan Rome, marked a distinct break with earlier practice. They replaced the sober and imposing Venus of the Republic—divine ancestress of Rome, and victory-bringing goddess of Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar—with a more elegant, Greek-style deity. In doing so they offered a particularly vivid example of a broader cultural phenomenon: Augustan classicism.

In recent years, scholars have highlighted the moral and ethical connotations of classicism in the early empire. Drawing especially on elite literary texts, art historians such as Paul Zanker and Tonio Hölscher have characterized classicism as an elevated style appropriate for the gods, and for the new princeps.¹ For them classicism is understood not as an aesthetic choice, but rather as a semiotic one, used to convey meaning within the “visual language” of Early Imperial art. This extremely influential approach has greatly enhanced our understanding of Augustan art. Its emphasis on the semiotic character of Roman artistic styles has proven very effective in opening up new avenues of inquiry in the field. Its exclusive stress on what Zanker has termed “the moral claim of classical forms,” however, seems to me problematic, as it leaves out

¹ Tonio Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art*, trans. Anthony Snodgrass and Annemarie Künzl-Snodgrass (Cambridge, Eng., 2004); originally published in German, as *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* (Heidelberg, 1987); Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor, 1988), pp. 239–263.

a central aspect of what made classicism so powerful in Augustan visual culture: its sensuous pleasure, and its visual allure.²

In contrast, this article focuses precisely on the visual attraction of classicism, as exemplified by the Hellenized images of Aphrodite so prevalent in Early Imperial art. I begin by examining the role of these images in major public monuments of the Augustan regime, concentrating on the forum of the new princeps. In the Forum Augustum, these images—generally adaptations of established Greek sculptural types—served to give an authoritative, impressive appearance to the divine ancestress of the Iulii.³ They also functioned as propaganda, to signal the attractive qualities of the new imperial system through the metaphor of a beautiful woman's body, thus contributing very effectively to the "organization of opinion," to borrow a phrase from Ronald Syme.⁴

Public monuments do not tell the whole story. This article therefore also includes complementary works of art from the private sphere, with a focus on the wall paintings of the Villa Farnesina. In this elite riverside villa in Trastevere, we see very clearly the self-conscious evocation of earlier forms, in rooms whose decorative scheme is patterned on that of a *pinacotheca* ('picture gallery').⁵ Here Aphrodite appears with her companions Peitho and Eros, in a fictive panel painting whose style recalls that of Athenian white-ground pottery of the fifth century BC.⁶ As elsewhere in domestic decoration, the image functions programmatically, but in a manner very different from that seen in public monuments such as the Forum Augustum. Aphrodite at her toilet, in the Villa Farnesina, speaks of the refined pleasures of the senses; in this way, she helps create the pleasurable ambiance central to the Roman conception of *otium* ('pleasurable leisure').

This research is relevant in our understanding of both Aphrodite and Augustan art. Much of our evidence for the visual representation of the Greek goddess comes from the Roman period. The famous fourth-

² Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, p. 245.

³ Tonio Hölscher, *Monumenti Statali e Pubblico*, trans. Lucia Scatozza Höricht and Franz Höricht (Rome, 1994), pp. 141–142; Paul Zanker, *Forum Augustum. Das Bildprogramm* (Tübingen, 1968), pp. 18–19; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 195–196.

⁴ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 459–475.

⁵ Bettina Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995), pp. 102–106; Irene Bragantini and Mariette de Vos, *Le Decorazioni della Villa Romana della Farnesina*, 2, 1, *Museo Nazionale—Romano: Le Pitture* (Rome, 1982), pp. 128–129; Christopher Hallett, "Emulation Versus Replication: Redefining Roman Copying," *JRA* 18, no. 2 (2005), pp. 433–434.

⁶ See below, n. 55.

century BC Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles, for example, is known almost exclusively from Roman coins, statues, and literary descriptions.⁷ Our understanding of the goddess' cult is also fundamentally indebted to Roman authors, such as Strabo and Pausanias, who mention her frequently.⁸ It is important to recognize, however, the existence and character of this Roman "filter," if we are to accurately and critically use these images and authors to reconstruct Greek monuments and cult practices. My examination here of Aphrodites from the Augustan period thus constitutes a contribution to the broader goal of reconstructing the Roman reception of Aphrodite.⁹

In addition to its significance for the study of Aphrodite, this research has implications for our analysis of Augustan art. As scholars have long acknowledged, a major innovation of the period is its adoption and transformation of Greek styles and visual formats to metropolitan public monuments. The prevailing explanation for this phenomenon, promoted by Zanker, stresses the moral claim of Classical forms and the control of the visual sphere by the princeps.¹⁰ Aphrodite images, from both the public and private spheres, are useful in that they suggest different explanations for this use of Classical forms in Augustan art. What they demonstrate above all is the allure, and not simply the authority, of Greek art for the Romans. This understanding may also explain the wide-ranging scope and extraordinary longevity of the Roman embrace of Classical forms, which extended well beyond the state-sponsored monuments of the Augustan metropolis to private and provincial works of art, even in later periods.

The Background: Aphrodite in the Republic

Before examining the deployment of Aphrodite images in the Augustan period, it is useful to consider first some related material from the Republic. Augustus was by no means the first Roman leader to emphasize

⁷ Delivorrias et al., in *LIMC* 2, pp. 50–52, s.v. "Aphrodite," nos. 391–408; Seaman, "Retrieving the Original."

⁸ These authors are central to, for example, authors such as Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque*.

⁹ Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture*, pp. 111–135; *ibid.*, "Mythological Portraiture in Antonine Rome: The Performance of Myth," *AJA* 111 (2007), 673–691.

¹⁰ Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 245–263.

his ties to Venus, or indeed to Aphrodite.¹¹ The Late Republican general Sulla, for example, took as his Latin cognomen *Felix* ('Lucky'); it was translated into Greek, Ἐπαφροδίτιος ('Beloved of Aphrodite'), suggesting he enjoyed the favor of Aphrodite.¹² After his victory at Chaironeia, Sulla dedicated his trophy to Aphrodite, Ares, and Nike, proclaiming them the patron deities of his military success.¹³ He also sent gifts to the Aphrodite of Aphrodisias, claiming to have seen her in a dream, fighting on his side in battle.¹⁴

In his relationship to Aphrodite, as in many other respects, Sulla offered a useful model for other aspiring generals of the Late Republic. His one-time protégé, Pompey the Great, likewise portrayed himself as under the protection of the goddess, and he dedicated a temple within his impressive theatre complex to Venus *Victrix*, that is, Venus 'Victorious'.¹⁵ In response, Pompey's rival Caesar insisted upon his own, albeit closer, relationship to this deity. His forum in Rome, initially vowed to Venus *Victrix*, was eventually dedicated to Venus *Genetrix*—Venus the 'Ancestress'—since he was a member of the Julian gens and therefore claimed descent from her via Aeneas and Iulus.¹⁶ Caesar also commissioned a Greek sculptor, Arkesilaos, to create the statue of Venus to stand in the Julian Forum; he included her extensively on his coins; he also received honors as the son of Aphrodite and Ares from the Greek cities of Asia Minor.¹⁷

Thus in the highly competitive world of the Late Republic, Roman leaders frequently claimed Venus as a patron deity and used artistic and architectural commissions to commemorate this relationship for a broad public audience. Their emphasis was on the goddess' role in war, as an ally bringing them victory and therefore power. They highlighted her connection to Ares/Mars, with whom she shared both a concern for warfare and a role as divine ancestor of the Romans. While this emphatic

¹¹ For an overview, see Robert Schilling, *La Religion Romaine de Vénus depuis les Origines jusqu'au Temps d'Auguste*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1982).

¹² App., *B Civ.* 1.97.

¹³ Plut., *Vit. Sull.* 19.5.

¹⁴ App., *B Civ.* 1.97.

¹⁵ Plin., *HN* 8.20; on the theatre, see Ann Kuttner, "Culture and History at Pompey's Museum," *TAPA* 129 (1999), 343–373, with previous bibliography.

¹⁶ *Victrix*: App., *B Civ.* 2.76.319; *Genetrix*: Plin., *HN* 35.156; on the descent of the Iulii from Venus, see Stefan Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford, 1971), p. 17.

¹⁷ On the Arkesilaos statue, see Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, p. 86; Plin., *HN* 35.156; on the coins, *ibid.*, pp. 99–102; the inscription is in W. Dittenberger, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig, 1915–1924), p. 760.

association with war might seem, at first glance, out of character for the goddess of love, it is clearly attested in the written and visual sources for the Republican period, and it is best understood as a traditional Roman role for Venus, due to her connection with the military god Mars. This goes back at least to the period of the Punic Wars, when the two gods appeared on a couch together at a major religious ceremony in 217 BC.¹⁸—and to her status as ancestress of the (very warlike) war-loving Romans.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that the Venus of the Republic was by no means equivalent to the Greek Aphrodite.¹⁹ While the example of Sulla illustrates how the Romans were aware of Greek Aphrodite cults, and could indeed make use of them for their own purposes, Roman images of Venus, and patterns of worship, were nonetheless distinct from those of her Hellenic predecessor. This may be demonstrated, for example, by Caesar's coins, which show a draped Venus holding a spear, with Victoria alighting on her hand (figure 15.1).²⁰ The effect is very different from that of contemporary Late Hellenistic Aphrodites, with their sensuous representation of the goddess' nude flesh, and attributes such as an apple or mirror.²¹ It was only in the Augustan period that the representation, and to some extent the divine personality, of Venus started to approximate that of her Greek counterpart. This development is well illustrated by the public monuments of the new regime, to which I now turn.

Aphrodite in the Forum Augustum

Although Augustus was not the first Roman leader to emphasize his ties to Venus and Aphrodite, his approach differed from that of his predecessors: in the consistency and number of monuments, in taking inspiration from Classical prototypes rather than the Hellenistic or Republican

¹⁸ Livy 22.10.9.

¹⁹ Schilling, *La Religion Romaine*, pp. 378–379.

²⁰ Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, pp. 487–495, no. 480.3–5, 8–19.

²¹ On Late Hellenistic Aphrodites, see Delivourias et al., in *LIMC* 2, pp. 60–61 and 64–65, s.v. "Aphrodite," nos. 494–496 and 533–545; Havelock, *The Aphrodite of Knidos*; Rachel Kousser, "Creating the Past: The Vénus De Milo and the Hellenistic Reception of Classical Greece," *AJA* 109 (2005), 227–250; Wiltrud Neumer-Pfau, *Studien zur Ikonographie und gesellschaftlichen Function Hellenistischer Aphrodite-Statuen* (Bonn, 1982); Hans-Hoyer von Prittitz und Gaffron, *Der Wandel der Aphrodite. Archäologische Studien zu weiblichen halbbedeckten Statuetten des späten Hellenismus* (Bonn, 1988).



Figure 15.1. Denarius of Julius Caesar showing Venus Genetrix on the reverse, 44 BC. Photo courtesy American Numismatic Society.

ones previously favored, and in his emphasis on her embodiment of the benefits of peace rather than her patronage of war. The Augustan Forum offers the most extensive and complex example of the princeps' programmatic use of Venus and classicism to promote his new regime. Vowed at Philippi in 42 BC, it was completed some forty years later, making it one of the longest, as well as largest, building projects of the period.²² It is also one of the monuments most closely tied to Augustus; the forum was initiated, designed, and paid for by the ruler.²³ It should thus offer us a clearer idea of how Augustus himself wished to present his ties to Venus and the Classical past, than do the other monuments set up in his honor by different patrons.

The complex featured at its centerpiece a large Corinthian temple to Mars *Uitor*, set within an elaborate two-storey portico.²⁴ Its plan thus emulated that of the Forum of Julius Caesar, immediately contiguous to it; at the same time, as a comparison of the two demonstrates, the Forum of Augustus was considerably larger and more complicated than its predecessor.²⁵ Its sculpted decoration was similarly complex and ambitious,

²² Suet., *Aug.* 29.2; Cass. Dio 55.10.1.

²³ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 12.

²⁴ For the architectural ensemble of the forum, see the useful summary in Valentin Kockel, in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* 2, ed. Eva Margarete Steinby (Rome, 1995), pp. 289–295, s.v. “Forum Augustum.”

²⁵ See Chiara Morselli, in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* 2, ed. Eva Margarete Steinby (Rome, 1995), pp. 299–306, s.v. “Forum Iulium.”

including deliberate citations of earlier Greek works—most famously, the caryatids modeled on those of the Erechtheum—as well as portrait statues of illustrious Romans, from Aeneas and Romulus to Pompey and Caesar.²⁶ This historicizing iconography suited its role as a showplace of the new regime: it functioned as a meeting place for the Senate, a tribunal where the emperor sat in judgment, the depository of the Parthian standards, the setting for the manumission of slaves, and, finally, the culminating point of festivals.²⁷

Within this large, high-profile structure, Venus and Venusian imagery were very prominent. Officially, the design centered around Mars, and specifically the temple vowed to him in his capacity as *Ultor* ('Avenger'), in the lead-up to Augustus' battle with the assassins of Caesar at Philippi.²⁸ Venus and her descendents were also extensively honored in the forum. We know the goddess appeared on the pediment of the temple, which is replicated on a relief from the so-called *Ara Pietatis Augustae* of the Claudian period, AD 41–54 (figure 15.2).²⁹ Imposing and heavily draped, Venus has a scepter and diadem to enhance her regal appearance. At the same time, her association with love and beauty is signaled by a tiny figure of Cupid, who perches on her left shoulder. Typological analysis is tenuous with so small a figure, but the rendering of Venus here recalls mid-fifth-century BC Greek prototypes. The triangular mantle, in particular, resembles those on statues such as the *Velletri Athena*.³⁰

Other images of Venus from the Forum can be more securely and closely associated with Classical precedents. Whereas the cult statue group from the temple, for example, featured a novel sculpted image of a bearded, armed Mars, a deity rarely depicted in Classical Greece, the Venus in this group followed prototypes of the late fifth century BC (figure 15.3).³¹ The bare left shoulder, seductive hip-shot pose, and seemingly transparent drapery of the chiton all find parallels in the art of the Peloponnesian War era; useful comparisons might be the so-called

²⁶ For the forum's sculpture, the most useful treatment is that of Eugenio La Rocca, "Il Programma Figurativo del Foro di Augusto," in *I Luoghi del Consenso Imperiale. Il Foro di Augusto, Il Foro di Traiano* 1, ed. Lucrezia Ungaro, Eugenio La Rocca, and Roberto Meneghini (Rome, 1995), pp. 74–87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

²⁸ Suet., *Aug.* 29.2.

²⁹ Joachim Ganzert and Valentin Kockel, "Augustusforum und Mars-Ultor-Tempel," in *Kaiser Augustus und die verlorene Republik* (Mainz, 1988), pp. 171–172.

³⁰ Pierre Demargne, in *LIMC* 2 (1984), p. 980, s.v. "Athena," no. 247.

³¹ Zanker, *Forum Augustum*, pp. 18–19.



Figure 15.2. Julio-Claudian relief showing pedimental statues from the Temple of Mars *Ultror*. Villa Medici, Rome, ca. AD 41–54. Photo courtesy Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, Cologne.

Hera Borghese type, or the Aphrodite in the Gardens from Daphni.³² There is no secure evidence that the Roman cult statue replicates precisely a specific Classical original. It may instead have functioned as an eclectic fusion of several earlier sculptural types, in order to create a new work of art appropriate to its display context, the princeps' forum.

³² On the Hera Borghese, see Angelos Delivorrias, "Der Statuarische Typus der sogenannten Hera Borghese," in *Polykletforschungen*, ed. Herbert Beck and Peter Bol (Berlin, 1993); on the Daphni Aphrodite, "Die Kultstatue der Aphrodite von Daphni," *Antike Plastik* 8 (1968), 19–31.



Figure 15.3. Julio-Claudian relief showing cult statues from the Temple of Mars *Uitor*, ca. AD 41–54. Archaeological Museum, Carthage. Photo courtesy Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, Cologne.

The cult statue of Venus also departed from any Classical precedents (all conceived as independent figures) in that it formed part of a larger group, which included Cupid and Mars as well.³³ Although Mars and Venus are physically isolated from each other and do not touch, they are nonetheless visually connected by the figure of Amor, who holds out to his mother the war god's sword. They also turn and look towards each other in a manner that encourages an allegorical interpretation of the group as a scene of Mars disarmed through his love of Venus.³⁴ Such allegorical scenes were familiar from the late fourth century BC onwards, as for instance with Aetion's famous painting of Alexander the Great

³³ Hans Günter Martin, "Die Tempelkultbilder," in *Kaiser Augustus und die verlorene Republik* (Mainz, 1988), pp. 256–265; Zanker, *Forum Augustum*, pp. 18–19; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 196–197.

³⁴ Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 196–197.

overcome with love of his eastern bride, Roxana.³⁵ In the forum's cult statue group, the sensuous visual appearance of Venus helps to explain—even to motivate—the allegorical narrative. At the same time, her pacific, seductive appeal serves to counterbalance the aggressive force of Mars, for an audience all too familiar with the violence and human cost of war, and appreciative of the benefits of peace.

The manner in which the Venusian images of the Augustan Forum work—both as cultural allusions to the Classical past, and as allegorical representations of the attractive qualities of the new imperial system—is best illustrated by a third sculpture, a group of Mars and Venus set up within the temple (figure 15.4).³⁶ The original statue group is only fragmentarily preserved, but can be reconstructed through comparison with a series of later versions of the type. These sculptures, highly consistent in their scale and iconography, also provide useful evidence for the reception of Augustan state imagery in the private sphere.³⁷ Indeed, the history of the Mars-Venus group type in the Augustan period and thereafter offers a very effective demonstration of how allusion and allegory could be misunderstood, particularly at a time when the visual language of imperial art was still in the process of formation.

One should first consider the visual format of the original Augustan sculpture. Venus, half-nude, with a mantle draped about her hips, turns towards and embraces Mars, her left arm encircling his neck and her right hand on his chest. The war god is here a youthful nude figure, very different from the cuirassed cult statue; he likewise turns to his consort, gazing at her and receiving her embrace. Both figures are based on well-established Classical statue types, the late fifth-century Ares Borghese type for Mars, the mid-fourth-century Aphrodite of Capua type for Venus.³⁸ The group thus constitutes another of those eclectic fusions of earlier precedents, as posited above for the cult statue.³⁹ It imbues the

³⁵ Lucian, *Her. sive Aetion* 4–7; Andrew Stewart, *Faces of Power* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 182–190.

³⁶ Hans Peter L'Orange, "Le Statue di Marte e Venere nel Tempio di Marte Ultore sul Foro di Augusto," *Symbolae Osloenses* 11 (1932), 94–99; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 197–198.

³⁷ Kousser, "Mythological Portraiture."

³⁸ Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. 66; Naples, Museo Nazionale, inv. 6017.

³⁹ On the Classical precedents for the sculptural group, and Augustan eclecticism, see Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture*, pp. 47–50; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 197–198.



Figure 15.4. Sculptural group of Mars and Venus with portrait heads, Ostia, Late Antonine (ca. AD 180). Rome, Museo delle Terme 108522. Photo after G. Moretti, 1920 "Ostia," *Notizie degli Scavi*, 17, pl. 11.

protagonists—Mars, ancestor of the Roman people by connection with Romulus, and Venus, ancestress of the gens Iulii through Aeneas—with the authority and majesty of Greek art.

The sensuous and erotic appearance of the sculpture is undeniable. The Mars-Venus group is a sophisticated classicizing work of art, but it is also an appeal to the senses, a visual essay on the delights of seeing and touching. The gods themselves both gaze and caress, encouraging the viewer to imagine doing likewise. For the mythologically informed viewer, the group's narrative background—the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, celebrated from Homer's *Odyssey* onwards—would heighten the gods' sensuous appeal.⁴⁰

The story of Greek mythology's most famous adulterers was widely popular in contemporary private art, as in Augustan literature—for example, works by Propertius and Ovid.⁴¹ At least some viewers made the connection between the statue group and the myth, to judge from an intriguing passage from Ovid's *Tristia*. In it, the poet imagines a woman visiting the great landmarks of Rome—the Forum Augustum, Circus Maximus, and so on—and interpreting them in a distinctly inappropriate manner:

*venerit in magni templum, tua munera, Martis,
stat Venus Ultori iuncta, vir ante fores.*

Should she come into that temple of great Mars, your own gift,
Venus stands joined to the Avenger, her husband before the doors.⁴²

This is not to suggest that such intimations of adultery would have been perceived by all viewers; nor is it likely that they were intended by the patron or artist. Instead, the seductive visual appearance and Classical form of the sculptures might have been misinterpreted by viewers such as Ovid, who were familiar with the myth of Ares and Aphrodite as represented in Greek literature and in contemporary private art. Instead of reading the statue as an attractive allegorical image of war disarmed by the ancestress of the princeps (as perhaps Augustus intended) they might have read the group in a more literal fashion, as a depiction of erotic love. The afterlife of this image, which appeared very infrequently in later public art, but had an extensive career in the private sphere (on gems, *objets d'art*, and sarcophagi), suggests this interpretation.⁴³

⁴⁰ Hom., *Od.* 8.266–366.

⁴¹ *Prop.* 2.31.33–34; *Ov., Am.* 1.9.39–40; *ibid., Ars am.* 2.561–592.

⁴² *Ov., Tr.* 2.295–296, trans. author.

⁴³ Kousser, "Mythological Portraiture."

In Augustan public spaces like the princeps' Forum, Greek-style Aphrodite images evoked the attractive qualities of the new regime. Thus they were an important component of Augustus' public self-representation. These images were liable to misinterpretation precisely because of their sensuous and attractive appearance, especially at a time when the visual language of the principate was new and unfamiliar to viewers. The seductive Aphrodite images of the private sphere, which had a very different range of functions and meanings, were more familiar to Augustan spectators. These private images thus tended to contaminate, as it were, the interpretation of Augustan public monuments and therefore deserve our scrutiny.

Aphrodite in Augustan Private Art: The Pleasures of the Senses

In the wealthy homes of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, Aphrodite had long been a familiar presence. On Delos and Kos, for example, scores of Aphrodite statuettes were produced for the purposes of domestic decoration; there they might have been seen by Romans as well as Greeks, since both islands had a strong Italian trading presence from the second century BC onwards.⁴⁴ So, too, the Aphrodites found in the Mahdia and Antikythera shipwrecks—reduced in scale, and modeled on famous types such as the Aphrodite of Knidos—likewise testify to the popularity of such images as imports to the Roman market in the first century BC.⁴⁵ While the statuettes of the love goddess from Pompeii and Herculaneum are more difficult to date closely, it seems likely that some, at least, were made during the pre-Augustan period.⁴⁶

Prior to the Imperial period (starting in 27 BC), few painted Aphrodites are preserved in the archaeological record. This is not surprising, given that most Republican wall painting is architectural in character. That they do occur is surprising: we have, for example, Aphrodite and Eros

⁴⁴ Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture*, pp. 34–36; Vassiliki Machaira, *Les Groupes Statuaires d'Aphrodite et d'Eros* (Athens, 1993); Jean Marcadé, *Au Musée de Délos* (Paris, 1969), pp. 225–245.

⁴⁵ For the Antikythera statue, see Delivorrias et al., in *LIMC* 2, p. 51, s.v. "Aphrodite," no. 398; Peter Bol, *Die Skulpturen des Schiffsfundes von Antikythera* (Berlin, 1972), pp. 43–47; for Mahdia, (Musée National du Bardo, Tunis, inv. No. C1183), see Hans-Hoyer von Prittwitz und Gaffron, "Die Marmortondi," in *Das Wrack. Der antike Schiffsfund von Mahdia*, ed. Gisela Hellenkemper Salies (Cologne, 1994), pp. 303–305.

⁴⁶ Angelika Dierichs, "Auf den Spuren der Venus: Bilder der Liebesgötten aus Pompeji (Teil 1)," *Antike Welt* 29 (1998), p. 294, fig. 23; p. 296, fig. 24.

peeking out the door of a wall painting of circa 50 BC from the House of M. Fabius Rufus.⁴⁷ They become much more frequent with the advent of mythological imagery in the Augustan era.⁴⁸

The frescoes of the Villa Farnesina, generally dated in the last decades of the first century BC, offer an early and particularly high-quality example of the use of Greek-style Aphrodite images in Augustan painting.⁴⁹ Their good preservation throughout the decorative ensemble makes them more useful for analysis than the frescoes of many houses at Pompeii, where the mythological panels were cut out and brought to the Naples Museum. The Villa Farnesina paintings thus allow us to see how images of Aphrodite functioned within a larger decorative context, useful for reconstructing more fully their functions and meanings. As comparisons with Pompeian houses show, the Farnesina paintings were not unique, but rather exemplify, in a particularly clear and elegant manner, the significant role played by Aphrodite in the decoration of Roman homes.

An overview of the topographical context and patronage of the Villa Farnesina is warranted. The riverside villa boasted an enviable site, across from the Campus Martius between Trastevere and the Vatican.⁵⁰ It has frequently been associated with Agrippa, who had large holdings in the area; the presence in its decorative scheme of a stucco image of Mercury that seems to resemble Augustus has encouraged this interpretation.⁵¹ Such a hypothesis is difficult to prove. Rather than insisting upon a precise identification of the patron, we should instead see the house as exemplary of the elite culture of early principate. The patron's wealth and cultivated tastes are in any case suggested by the paintings: they are of a high quality and refer to a range of mythological and art-historical references. The scale of the villa and its innovative and complex plan also suggest wealth and taste.

The site and plan of the Villa Farnesina, furthermore, indicates its purpose as a suburban pleasure villa. It stood well outside the pomerium,

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 285, fig. 8.

⁴⁸ Jürgen Hodske, *Mythologische Bildthemen in den Häusern Pompejis* (Ruhpolding, 2007), pp. 143–154.

⁴⁹ The best introduction to the paintings is Bragantini and Vos, *Le Decorazioni della Villa Romana della Farnesina*, with abundant previous bibliography; Maria Rita Sanzi di Mino, ed., *La Villa della Farnesina in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme* (Rome, 1998) is also useful.

⁵⁰ Bragantini and Vos, *Le Decorazioni della Villa Romana della Farnesina*, pp. 17–21.

⁵¹ On the issue, see the judicious summary in Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," p. 102.

the ritual boundary of the city; it has a wealth of rooms, which are oriented towards the Tiber River, with views across to the scenic Campus Martius.⁵² In this respect it is much closer to the new seaside villas around the Bay of Naples than to the old-fashioned townhouses exemplified by, for example, the House of Augustus on the Palatine.⁵³

The fictive *pinacothecae*, seen in two of the *cubicula* ('bedrooms'), have "antique" panels, elaborate frames, and fantastic stands that are all illusionistically rendered in fresco.⁵⁴ Especially noteworthy are the white-ground panels, which in style and technique recall the achievements of fifth-century Greek art.⁵⁵ The ancient literary sources suggest that a similar style was deployed in monumental Greek wall paintings, although we have no major preserved examples dating to the fifth century BC; it is more likely that the Villa Farnesina paintings imitated them rather than vases.⁵⁶ As in the Augustan Forum, here we see the use of earlier styles for expressive purposes. The decoration here also assumes a cultivated viewer, one able to recognize and appreciate these references to earlier styles. In contrast to the Forum, the excellent preservation of this context means that we can observe how carefully these images in classicizing style are presented in the Villa Farnesina as different, set off from their surroundings by framing devices.

In their display context, these classicizing Aphrodites of the Villa Farnesina differ from their public counterparts. This is suggested, at any rate, by the appearance of the images, as well as their juxtaposition with other motifs. In *cubiculum* B, where a white-ground painting of Aphrodite, Eros, and Peitho is the central feature of the south wall, the goddess is shown in a very different milieu from that of the Augustan Forum (figure 15.5). Seated on an impressive throne, with an ornate headdress, Aphrodite gazes downward at a beautifully detailed flower

⁵² For the plan and location, see di Mino, ed., *La Villa della Farnesina in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme*, pp. 9–13.

⁵³ On the House of Augustus, see Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 280–281; for seaside villas, see Stefano De Caro, "The Sculptures of the Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis: A Preliminary Report," in *Ancient Roman Villa Gardens*, ed. Elisabeth MacDougall (Washington, D.C., 1987), pp. 79–133.

⁵⁴ Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," pp. 102–106; Hallett, "Emulation Versus Replication," pp. 433–434.

⁵⁵ On the panels, see especially Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," pp. 103–104. The closest preserved parallels are Athenian white-ground vases, particularly lekythoi, on which see John Oakley, *Picturing Death in Classical Athens: The Evidence of the White Lekythoi* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004).

⁵⁶ Plin., *HN* 35.31–32; Cic., *Brut.* 18.70.



Figure 15.5. Frescoed wall of *cubiculum* B, from the Villa Farnesina, Augustan (ca. 20–10 BC). Detail showing Aphrodite with Peitho and Eros. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme). Photo courtesy Scala / Art Resource, NY ART343367.

in her right hand. Her son, Eros, is a fully formed but petite winged youth, whose intimate connection to his mother is shown as he stands on her footrest, while their legs touch. Peitho, by contrast, is a full-size young woman, whose costume and gesture, as she leans over the back of the throne, assimilate her to the figure of an attendant or maid. The

ambiance of the scene appears more sensuous than erotic. Its mood and iconography resemble scenes of women's life from late fifth-century BC vase paintings, such as red-figure scenes attributed to the Meidias and Eretria Painters.⁵⁷ Just as those scenes appear very frequently on vases made for women, so here one might see the decoration as appropriate for a woman's bedroom.⁵⁸ Aphrodite is an imposing model for the mistress of the house.⁵⁹

Other paintings from the room reinforce the culturally sophisticated atmosphere of the *cubiculum*, as well as its emphasis on women's lives. On the west wall, several small white-ground panels display scenes of women making music (figure 15.6). As with the Aphrodite panel, the absence of men seems to locate the depictions within the women's quarters. Indeed, this was a favorite subject of late fifth-century BC vase painting; musical soirées were evidently the sort of elegant pastime considered appropriate for the wealthy women of Classical Athens.⁶⁰ The central panel of the west wall likewise depicts a characteristically feminine activity; here we see a nymph nursing the baby Dionysos, perhaps a prototype for the motherly activities of the room's inhabitant. The panel constitutes a stylistic departure from those considered above. Not linear but painterly, it finds its best parallels in Late Classical works such as the mourning Demeter figure from the Tomb of Persephone at Vergina.⁶¹ The same style is deployed in the other small narrative panels—which show scenes of erotic play and the theatre—and in the single mythological figures incorporated into the room's decorative scheme, which include Isis as well as Venus.

The ensemble of wall paintings in *cubiculum* B draw on a range of classicizing styles (from the late fifth to fourth centuries BC), juxtaposed so as to highlight, not obscure, stylistic contrast. What unifies the paintings despite these disparate visual choices is, I would argue, their concern with

⁵⁷ Burn, *The Meidias Painter*; Adrienne Lezzi-Hafter, *Der Eretria-Maler. Werke und Weggefährten*. Kerameus 6 (Mainz, 1988).

⁵⁸ Rachel Kousser, "The World of Aphrodite in Late Fifth Century Vase Painting," in *Greek Vases: Images, Contexts, and Controversies*, ed. Clemente Marconi. Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition (Leiden, 2004), pp. 97–112. See also the contribution to this volume by Elizabetta Pala, in chapter 10.

⁵⁹ Bragantini and Vos, *Le Decorazioni della Villa Romana della Farnesina*, pp. 128–129.

⁶⁰ Claude Bérard, "The Order of Women," in *A City of Images: Iconography and Society in Ancient Greece*, ed. Claude Bérard et. al. (Princeton, 1989), p. 91.

⁶¹ J.J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), pp. 185–209; Manolis Andronikos, *Vergina 2: The "Tomb of Persephone"* (Athens, 1994), pls. X–XII.



Figure 15.6. Frescoed wall of *cubiculum* B, from the Villa Farnesina, Augustan (ca. 20–10 BC). Detail showing nymph nursing the young Dionysos. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Palazzo Massimo alle Terme). Photo by Luciano Romano, courtesy Scala/ Art Resource, NY ART343438.

women's lives, as the goddesses and mythological figures depicted offer idealized paradigms of behavior for the *cubiculum*'s inhabitant. Together, they offer a vision of her experience of sensual pleasure: not only of looking, of course, but also of hearing (the musicians), touching (the baby

nursing), and even scent (the flower Aphrodite holds). They move comfortably between what we might call the literal and allegorical levels of interpretation, as Aphrodite, accompanied by love and persuasion, is put next to scenes of amorous couples. Nor is this juxtaposition unique to the Villa Farnesina. It is found frequently in Pompeii, for example at the House of Caecilius Iucundus, where a scene of erotic play featuring mortal protagonists is depicted in close association with a mythological panel of Mars and Venus.⁶² Given these associations in art from the private sphere, it is perhaps not surprising that viewers of Augustan public art were inclined to read images like the Mars-Venus group literally, having been conditioned to do so by the walls of their own homes.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have examined classicizing images of Aphrodite in Augustan public art, particularly the Forum Augustum, and contrasted them with the similarly classicizing, but otherwise quite different, Aphroditēs of the private sphere, exemplified here by the Villa Farnesina. My emphasis has been on analyzing the visual form, styles, and contexts of the monuments in order to appreciate more fully what they meant to their first viewers, and to understand their sudden widespread popularity in the Augustan era. In Augustan public art, they served metaphorically to represent the attractions of the principate. In the private sphere, however, they functioned more literally, as alluring, idealized paradigms of behavior for the villa's inhabitants.

These conclusions offer an implicit challenge to the current general interpretation of Augustan art. Recent scholars have emphasized the control of the visual sphere by the princeps and have tended to assume that his interpretations of images prevailed.⁶³ My sense is that the actual situation was more fluid, and the princeps' control less absolute, than this hypothesis suggests. This is particularly the case because the hypothesis focuses on the creation, rather than the reception, of images; there is little discussion in such work of the horizon of expectations that viewers brought to these new images, or of the ways they were conditioned

⁶² John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 BC–AD 250* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 158–161.

⁶³ Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 245–263.

to understand them.⁶⁴ The possibility of viewers misunderstanding an image is never entertained, but it seems plausible in the case of the Mars-Venus group. Here I have sought to analyze images from the private sphere as autonomous works of art in their own right; this serves as a useful corrective to previous interpretations, where they seem to function too much as reflections of public monuments and symbols of political allegiance.⁶⁵

My focus on the autonomy of images from the domestic realm, and on the specifically private meanings they might have, is also useful for another reason. It helps to explain why classicizing mythological images had such a hold on Roman viewers, so that they filled their homes, their gardens, and eventually their tombs with Aphrodite, Dionysos, and other Greek deities. For such viewers, classicism offered not simply an impressive, politically acceptable visual style, but a seductive and compelling manner with which to represent their hopes and aspirations. Surrounded by these figures from Classical mythology, they could imagine themselves leading a more attractive and exalted existence, beyond the realm of the everyday. A history of Augustan classicizing art that focuses on the role of the princeps ignores too much; we need to incorporate these private patrons and viewers who, with their paintings, their statuettes, and their gems and jewels, testify so emphatically to both the power and the allure of the Classical.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ On this issue, the critique of Paul Zanker's *The Power of Images* by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Rome's Cultural Revolution," *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989), p. 162, is particularly acute.

⁶⁵ E.g., Paul Zanker, "Augustan Political Symbolism in the Private Sphere," in *Image and Mystery in the Roman World*, ed. Janet Huskinson, Mary Beard, and Joyce Reynolds (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 1–13; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 265–295.

⁶⁶ For a more extended argument along these lines, see Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture*, pp. 74–80.

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