
Broken: The Venus de Milo

AMELIA ARENAS

For Trish

THE MOST CELEBRATED STATUE in the world was bought in 1820 by a French official stationed in the island of Melos for about fifty dollars—and a lucky transaction it was, in more than the obvious sense. The peasant who sold it had found it among the ruins of an ancient theater which the locals were scavenging for old marble to feed to their lime furnaces. Were it not for this bargain, the lovely goddess might have met her fate as septic-tank neutralizer or whitewash.

Soon after its arrival in France, the work was presented to Louis XVIII, who in turn gave it to the Louvre—an excellent chance to get even with the English, one imagines, who four years earlier had snatched the greatest art treasure in the Western world, the sculptures of the Parthenon. And the French got their way. Since then, the Venus de Milo (fig. 1) has been the absolute emblem of classical beauty, ranking far higher in the public's imagination than the carvings of the Parthenon, which are perhaps superior, and certainly no less beautiful. Think of the three magnificent goddesses who once adorned the temple's east pediment—faceless, ravaged figures, who still lounge on their pedestal at the British Museum with the ease of teenagers watching tv.

Apparently, the world has to thank Lord Elgin for having stolen the sculptures of the Parthenon, or rather, whatever was left of them. In the late seventeenth century, the Ottoman army turned the temple into a gun-powder magazine and was eventually blown to pieces. Later, Turkish soldiers had used the figures in the friezes and metopes as shooting targets, while the locals mutilated what remained of the carvings to sell as souvenirs to discriminating tourists, who returned home from “the Grand Tour” with dainty fingers, drapery folds, and hair locks.

The Venus de Milo was a lot luckier. She had lain under the rubble for two millennia, virtually untouched by the cruelties

of man and time. True, her arms were missing. She had a nip in her chin, some scrapes on her nose and brow, and the carving of her garment had lost some of its original crispness. But in spite of all that, her superb presence was intact. This alone would explain her preeminence among all Venuses, the majority of which are headless, armless torsos, chunks of stone unexpectedly graced by a bellybutton or a buttock's dimple. And yet, the few that have survived complete are not nearly as popular as the Louvre goddess. If most Venuses are too damaged to compete with the Venus de Milo, those that remain unharmed are, in a sense, not damaged enough.

Sassy, silly, or coy, the typical Venus is always irresistibly human. She smiles, folding her arms or pulling her garments to cover her nakedness with calculated inefficiency. Sometimes she wrings her long hair as she emerges from the sea; other times she plays with her child, Cupid, less like a solicitous mother than like an underage babysitter. A delightfully silly Venus in the National Museum of Naples is about to slap a horny satyr with her sandal (fig. 2).

By contrast, the Venus de Milo doesn't exist in our world. In fact, our fascination with her might well betray a perverse impulse—a neurotic attraction to ambivalent love-objects, for she's in the same measure physically tangible and psychologically aloof. She's serene, grand, remote. Her head turns slightly away. Her gaze never meets our eyes. Neatly parted at the center, her hair is gathered in a style one would almost call austere, were it not for the few locks that fall free from her chignon, softening the robust neck. But our response to this distant being is complicated by the arresting specificity of her flesh. Here, the sculptor works with the knowledge of a lover, engaging the hand even more than the eye. One can feel the fatty tissue tenderly swelling underneath her skin—around her hips, in her belly, in the fold between arm and breast. Her nipples are barely visible. It is hard to believe they were ever touched by a chisel.

Besides, what is she doing? She seems to be bending over slightly and lifting her thigh, as if trying to stop her clothes from slipping down any further—an impending development,

one imagines, arrested at the point of exquisite suspense.

It is most artworks' fortune to outlive the artists who made them and the patrons who paid for them, and, in some cases, to be recreated by the public's imagination and the workings of chance. For, originally, the Venus de Milo told a very different story. Research suggests that her left arm rested on a pillar, while her right hand held her garment. According to two independent witnesses to the purchase, some of the missing pieces had been shipped to France from Melos with the statue, but they were somehow lost soon after their arrival at the Louvre. (Rumor has it that a noted curator made the fragments' disappear, because they contradicted his reading of the work's iconography.) Among them, was a piece of the plinth where the artist had carved his name, Agesand[ron?], son of Henidos, from the City of Antioch," and a left hand holding an apple.

Clearly, then, the Venus de Milo was a representation of Aphrodite Triumphant, showing off her golden apple—the trophy she won in the beauty contest held by Prince Paris. We will never know whether the goddess got her prize on merit alone or because she bribed the judge: she promised him that the most enchanting woman in the world would love him madly. And a mixed blessing it was, as it's well known, since Helen, the woman in question, happened to be married to a Greek king, and the affair sparked the most memorable conflict in Western art, the Trojan War.

The tale of the "The Judgement of Paris" is only one illustration of the pointed contradictions associated with Venus and her gifts. In antiquity, she ruled over love, and from the late Middle Ages on, over beauty, that most mysterious and arresting aspect of art. She was therefore the patroness of lovers and artists, an association which does not flatter either camp, for Venus was notoriously vain and promiscuous. Moreover, the goddess of beauty and love was married to Vulcan, the only ugly member of the Olympian clan, while her true passion was Mars, the god of war.

Of course, all this is literature: ingenious tales spun by poets and artists over the ages. For all our Venuses, from Homer to

Boucher, are faint, elegant shadows of a primitive fertility deity, Aphrodite of Cyprus. It is perhaps more than an ironic coincidence that, among all her images, only the Venus of Milo—the most civilized of them—brings up strong memories of those archaic roots. She's matronly. Her large hips and pliant flesh betray the body of someone who has borne children, and yet, she has the breasts of a maiden: she has never suckled a child—a well-known convention in Greek and Roman art, which her mutilation renders somehow meaningful. In fact, she seems a lot closer to a formidable, ambivalent mother than to a receptive lover.

Needless to say, some would find no contradiction here—Freud, for instance, but also many an archeologist. Those who discovered the first stone-age fertility figurines must have had the popular Louvre statue in mind when they nicknamed them “Venuses.” The most famous among them, the “Venus” of Willendorf (fig. 4), is not unlike her. Though virtually intact, she too looks incomplete. (Folded over her bosom, her minute arms are barely visible.) Besides, although she's tiny she seems monumental—all belly, breasts, and hips, all womanhood. On the other hand, our Venus, though larger than life, registers as a thing because she's broken, albeit a ponderous thing: a fetish.

The Surrealists were alert to this. Think of Hans Bellmer's “dolls”(fig. 4)—bizarre columns of breasts, buttocks, and vulvas, where the chilly glamour of the Venus de Milo merges with the grotesque, primal carnality of the “Venus” of Willendorf. Again and again, our goddess is cast as a mysterious cult object in the works of such artists as Dalí (fig. 6), Ernst, Delvaux. Man Ray, who also worked extensively as an advertising photographer, might have contributed to the goddess' mass-culture role as the ideal icon to sell the most fetishistic commodities: makeup, jewelry, underwear, perfume (fig. 5).

Venus' mutilation seems to strike a primal chord in our sexual unconscious. It also conjures up an aspect of her mythological persona that has been conspicuously absent from the twenty-five hundred years of art she has inspired. According to Hesiod, the first Greek mythographer, Venus was born from



Fig. 1 The Venus of Milo, c. 130–120 BCE. Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Fig. 2 Aphrodite, Pan, and Eros. National Archeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY)



Fig. 3 Venus of Willendorf. Limestone figure (front view), 25th millenium BCE. Naturhistorisches Meseum, Vienna, Austria. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Fig. 4 Hans Bellmer, *Doll* 1936. Painted aluminum cast 1965. $19\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{5}{8} \times 14\frac{7}{8}$ in.; bronze base, $7\frac{1}{2} \times 8 \times 8$ in. Museum of Modern Art, NY. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. (Photo © 2001 MOMA / NY)



Fig. 5 Man Ray, *En pleine occultation de Venus*. Paris, France.
(© Man Ray Trust / ARS / telimage—2002)



Fig. 6 Salvador Dalí, *Venus de Milo with Drawers* 1964. Dalí Theater-Museum, Figueres, Spain. Replica of original work from 1936, bronze with plaster, 98 x 32.5 x 34 cm. (© 2002 Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation / Artist Rights Society [ARS], NY)

the severed genitals of the Titan Saturn, which his son Cronos threw into the sea after castrating him. So, Venus, the darling of Western art and the ultimate symbol of feminine charm, was not born of woman. She's not the product of a sexual union, but rather, of a hideous sexual crime. She's a severed phallus come to life—at once, a symbol of carnal anxiety and carnal longing, of erotic potency and impotence.

Curiously, only the Venus de Milo, the most memorable of her images, brings back a memory of that repressed myth. She emerges superb from the membranous wrap of her garments, at once aloof and alluring, distant and yielding, impenetrable and penetrating.

It's remarkable how consistently Western artists have repressed this aspect of the goddess's mythology. Think of all the Venuses in the history of art—ethereal, otherworldly beings blown ashore on sea shells among fluttering putti and twirling rose petals; beautifully bored courtesans accompanied by obsequious lute players; pubescent coquettes preoccupied by the minutiae of their toilette. Only one work puts me in mind of the gruesome myth, though the connection might have been either unconscious or fortuitous. I'm thinking of Louise Bourgeois's assemblage, *The Destruction of the Father* (1967)—a dark, ominous form overhung with pendulous forms which look at once like testicles, penises, vulvas, and breasts.

Perhaps we could see the goddess today as the citizens of Melos saw her during her festivals, painted, covered in garlands and jewelry, and complete, she might seem less awesome. But looking at her again in the Louvre last summer, surrounded by a mob of dumbfounded pilgrims from all over the world, her white flesh thundering in the flash of the cameras, I felt I was getting a glimpse of that cult she inspired long before Greece was Greece and the world had museums. I wondered then whether all the Venuses that populate the Louvre—the coy goddesses of Roman art, the baby-face deities in the ceiling's frescoes, the demimondaines immortalized by academic art—might not be atavistic efforts to appease a monster: Aphrodite, the phallus that smiles.