Venus de Milo: Sublime Goddess or Object of Sport?

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The Venus de Milo was uncovered by a local farmer and Oliver Voutier, a French naval officer who was either interested in the then new science of archaeology, or simply bored. Anchored in the Greek harbor of Melos and waiting for his next orders, Voutier decided to take two of his sailors and explore the “dull, remote, harsh” island.1 With the help of the young farmer, Voutier began to dig around what were clearly ancient ruins. In only a few hours’ time, Voutier uncovered a piece of art that would become renowned throughout the world (figure 1). Covered in dirt, scratches and nicks, broken into two pieces and missing an appendage or two, the Venus de Milo still had the ability to entrance those who became the first to see her in over a millennium. His discovery of the Venus de Milo would propel the French back into the cultural race; it would be thrown into a center of controversy, and would fascinate the world for generations to come, whether positively or negatively.

Before 1815, France had obtained an extensive collection of art. During his military campaign, Napoleon, although not a great lover of art himself, understood the prestige and the representation of his power that came with a respectable collection of art. While on his rampage across Europe, Napoleon confiscated many great works of art and shipped them to the Louvre. But Napoleon’s reign as emperor ended after his defeat at Waterloo and the restoration of the monarchy. When nations returned to reclaim their art, the Louvre lost some of its most precious works. The Louvre it still had no great aesthetic work to claim from Classical Greece. The British Museum had recently obtained significant fragments from the pediments of the Parthenon. Italy had its masterpieces overflowing the country, and France had nothing until the discovery of the Venus on the island of Melos. As Mary Beard writes, “It so happened that this damaged beauty appeared on the scene at the very moment when the full flood of Romantic sentiment was cultivation the nostalgia of the fragment and the ideal of the ruin.”2 Curators at the Louvre, though, would from the moment of arrival, hide significant matters about the sculpture and stretch the truth about their very own Classical work.

Three sacks arrived at the Louvre in February, 1821. Two sacks held the upper and lower parts of the Venus, and the third sack carried two herms
found nearby and a slab of marble containing an important inscription. The slab of marble was the base of the *Venus*, its inscription identifying the artist of the work: “Aexandros, son of Menides, citizen of Antioch of Meander made the statue.” This inscription presented a huge problem for Louvre curators claiming the work as Classical. According to Gregory Curtis, “Antioch . . . had not been founded until the late third century B.C., a full half century after Greece’s Classical age.”3 Because the statue was Hellenistic, an artistic style that was considered substandard to the superior Classical Greek art, the director of the Louvre, Count de Forbin, came close to losing France’s prized sculpture. The French nevertheless, unaware of her Hellenistic origins, fell in love with the statue, oblivious to its inferior type. Needless to say, the coveted base was tucked away so tightly, it still has not been found. This would not be the only occurrence of deceit surrounding the *Venus de Milo*.

In 1870, with the threat of invading Prussian armies, the *Venus* was packed away in an oak crate and secretly moved out of the Louvre for safety. Although there was no irrevocable damage, the four pieces that had been reattached to the hip in 1821 again broke off the statue. Coincidentally, the pieces covered two cavities on each side of the hip, enabling the conservator, Felix Ravaission, to view the interior. Ravaission discovered that for fifty years, the statue had stood incorrectly. Curtis describes the first reattachment of the hip pieces:

> The restorers at the Louvre were unable to reattach the lower section from the left hip where it should have been. The faulty readjustment made the top edge of the broken piece extend higher than the top surface of the lower block of the statue. The restorers tried to chisel the protuberance down but they couldn’t chisel off too much without causing visible damage. The edge of the broken piece still exceeded the surface of the bottom block by several millimeters.4

The “chiseling” down of the hip pieces created an imbalance in the statue, forcing the restorers to place wooden wedges on the interior close to the hips. It is no known why these incompetent steps were taken in the restoration of the statue. The rough restoration of 1821 will not conclude the number of false pretenses that followed the sculpture.

Much of the intrigue of the *Venus* develops from her missing arms. For years scholars have speculated on the placement of her absent arms, each creating his own version, his own interpretation. What did her arms hold and where does her gaze fall? Curtis finds is no need to speculate, the truth lies almost assuredly with the left arm. When the *Venus* was discovered, according to Jules-Sebastien-Cesar Dumont d’Urville, an admiral who has helped to obtain the statue for France, her left arm was attached, raised, and holding an apple in its palm.
The arm had broken off as the bound statue was dragged along the beach of Melos. This was another disgraceful act, shamefully covered up by the French. In fact no mystery exists. As she was originally, the Venus with her left hand held the apple given to her by Paris and with her right half-heartedly held up the drapery just about to fall. Her gaze falls upon the apple, and she ponders her beauty and triumph. Fred Kleiner suggests that, “the sculptor intentionally designed the work to tease the spectator. By doing so, he imbued his partially draped [Venus] with a sexuality not present in [Classical Greek portrayals of] entirely nude image[s] of the goddess.”

As has been seen, society of the times will define art. Today, Hellenistic art is as revered as Classical. The statue has her own room in the Louvre (figure 2), just large enough to accommodate her many visitors. The Louvre is not the only place one can view the Venus; its image has been slapped on everything from watches, car commercials, to squeaky toys (figure 3). The statue has become a product of the contemporary world; her original placement in a gym for men on the island of Melos seems to bear little significance (figure 4). Today she has been so duplicated that the original intent has been forgotten; today she is looked upon critically by contemporary artists. Dali carved drawers into her figure (figure 5) turning her into a surrealist piece. Even some feminists have taken to the bantering; they argue that her original purpose was for men to objectify, and that her fame is only a celebration of this objectification. The statue’s fame has made a mockery of her, ironically. Actually, she was simply meant to please the eye. If one follows the S curve of her body (figure 6), the emotionless look upon her face, the sensuality of her carelessly held drapery and the feminine quality of her back one can still see that beauty, even if it is Hellenistic. While the grace of her body is beautiful, Curtis writes that “the face is the most criticized part of the statue.” The unevenness, slight hint of masculinity, and the expression that no one can really interpret leave people intrigued for the better or for worse. One definite positive aspect of the statue that can still be held is that true beauty is controversial and that is what has and will continue to seize peoples’ imaginations, not the propaganda of her past or the negative connotations. Society and times change a work of art to associate it with the ethos of the period. Most especially true today, but always an issue throughout art history, it is never easy to understand or imagine a work of art in its original cultural context.
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Notes
3 Curtis, Gregory. “Base Deception.” Smithsonian: 34.7 (October 2003). 3.
4 Curtis, Disarmed. 104.
6 Curtis, Disarmed. 203.

Works Cited
Kleiner, Fred S., and Mamiya, Christin J. Gardner’s Art Through the Ages. 12th ed. Thomson Wadsworth
Figure 1. *Venus de Milo*. As seen from the front

Figure 2. *Venus de Milo*. As seen from the back
For ages, because Troy was considered a mythological city, not many people believed in its existence. Troy is associated in Homer’s *Iliad* with the word “Hellespont,” the ancient name for the Dardanelles and Mount Ida, currently called Kaz Dağ (Goose Mountain).¹ Troy also gets its fame from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which contains one of the best known accounts of the sack of Troy. In May, 1873, actual evidence of a real Troy was found by Heinrich Schliemann, a German businessman who had studied Homer’s *Iliad* assiduously.

In ancient times, the lands between the Dardanelles, Sea of Marmara, and Edremit Bay were called Troas or Troad. The current site is known as Hisarlık (Castle Kingdom in Turkish).² During the time mentioned in Homer’s *Iliad*, the most powerful king was Agamemnon, who resided in Mycenae. Agamemnon married Clytemnestra, sister of Helen.³ The young shepherd Paris, the son of Priam, King of Troy, was chosen by Zeus to determine if Athena, Aphrodite, or Hera was the fairest goddess. The contest asked him to give the golden apple (thrown by Eris) to the fairest goddess. Each goddess bribed him with temptations, but he chose Aphrodite’s bribe, the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. He abducted Helen, starting the Trojan War. The war raged on for a decade before the Greeks built the famous wooden horse.⁴ Finally, pretending the horse was a gift, the Greeks gained entrance into Troy. Hiding inside the horse, they killed the Trojans as they slept.

The tale of the Trojan War and the great Greek victory intrigued the German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann, who first started excavations of Troy in 1870.⁵ For many people Troy was just an imagined city. Schliemann, however, believed every line of the *Iliad*. He had made several fortunes by providing the Russian army with black-market goods and by banking with California during the Gold Rush.⁶ Before he began his search for Troy, he moved to China to pursue another dream, to see the Great Wall of China. He stayed until he was forty-three years old. Becoming very unhappy with his life, he moved to America and to Paris. During his time in Paris, he decided to begin his search for Troy.

Schliemann’s first success was a dig at Mount Aetios, on mountains of Ithaca.⁷ There he discovered twenty vessels containing ashes. This easy find encouraged him to believe in his ability as an archeologist. Equipped with a guide

### Citations

1. Homer, *Iliad*.
2. *Iliad*.
3. *Aeneid*.
4. *Iliad*.
5. *Iliad*.
6. *Iliad*.
7. *Iliad*.
and two horses, Schliemann began working with Frank Calvert, an Englishman who acted as the American vice-consul for the Dardanelles. Calvert had done some preliminary digging at Hisarlik, which he thought was Troy. He invited the British Museum to begin the excavation because he wanted the British to have the honor of discovering Troy, but nothing came from his proposals.\(^8\) When Schliemann came, he decided to help Calvert as best as he could. Schliemann was convinced that Hisarlik was the site of Troy because everything seemed to fit well with the description in the *Iliad*. Unfortunately, they could not begin excavations because it was late in the season for digging. He also needed permission from the Turkish government.\(^9\) In his preoccupation with getting started, he divorced his Russian wife for a more appropriate Greek wife, Sophia.

Although Schliemann was denied permission from the Turkish government, he began digging, anyway. The eastern half of the hill was owned by Calvert, and the western part belonged to two Turks. He believed the great buildings and treasures were on the western part of the hill overlooking the sea. He began to dig on the western half without permission from the two Turks. He figured that once the Turks saw the great treasures he uncovered, he would be forgiven. In two days he uncovered an entire house, where he found a coin bearing the image of Hector with the inscription “Hector of Troy.”\(^10\) On the third day, fearing that the Turkish landowners might pay a visit, he quickly made two long trenches, one from east to west and the other from south to north.\(^11\) By slicing the mound, he hoped he could get a general impression of the city.

When the Turks arrived shortly afterwards, Schliemann used an interpreter to explain the scientific nature of his dig. The Turks seemed more interested in the large stones because they needed to build a bridge.\(^12\) Schliemann paid them forty francs and was allowed to continue digging. After the Turks had enough stone to build their bridge, they called for a halt to the excavations. Schliemann decided the only way to dig on the hill was to buy it. He attempted to buy the land through the Turkish government, saying he wanted only to find the ruins, not the treasure. He did not request any money; instead he asked that any of the precious objects he found would be divided; half for the museum and half for him to cover expenses.\(^13\) He made sure to mention he did not think any treasure would be found there.

Once he got permission, Schliemann went in with great fervor to find the city. The number of workmen increased each day until it reached 120. During his digs he found several objects, including a relief known as *Apollo Riding the Four Horses of the Sun*.\(^14\) With the help of Calvert, he secretly smuggled it out of the country. Schliemann finally found what he was after in May of 1873.\(^15\) He
noticed a metal object protruding out of the side of the trench. Not wanting the workmen to see the object, he ordered his wife to tell the workers to have the day off. He claimed it was his birthday. His wife returned while he was attempting to remove the treasures with a pocket knife. He asked for her shawl and carried the treasures back to their house. The treasure consisted of a copper shield, a copper cauldron, a silver vase, a gold bottle, two gold cups, and a small electrum cup, in addition a silver goblet, three silver vases, seven double-edged copper daggers, six silver knife blades, thirteen copper lance-heads, two gold earrings, 8,750 gold rings and buttons. Finally, two diadems were found, one consisting of ninety chains, entirely covering the forehead.

When some of the workers became suspicious, he was asked to have his house searched. Schliemann refused and in the next few days smuggled the treasures out of the country, again with Calvert’s help. He was ordered by the Turks to give up their half of the finds to the museum. He refused; a trial was held and found in favor of the Turks. He was ordered to pay 50,000 francs and half the treasure. He complied, but sent only a few of the less important objects to the museum.

Since its discovery by Schliemann, the excavations of Troy continue in a massive and painstaking process. After Schliemann’s death, real systematic excavations were begun by Wilhelm Dörpfeld. Everything was photographed, labeled, and minutely examined before it was set aside. The first plan of Troy was drawn by him. Americans took over the excavation of Troy from 1932 until 1939, assisted by Karl Blegen. Blegen is responsible for separating the different levels and examining the remains of the nine cities. He dated them partly according to fire traces, ceramics, and buildings, but mostly according to historical events.

The excavations indicated that Troy was founded in the year 3000 B.C., then demolished and reconstructed nine times until 500 A.D. Troy I lasted five hundred years before being demolished in 2500 B.C. The Early Bronze Age inhabitants of Troy I made their tools of copper, stone, and bone. The city was fortified by a wall made of rough stones. Only a short segment of this wall remains as well as the main gate and two towers. Other remnants of the first Troy are the foundations of houses found in Schliemann’s north-south trench. The site seems to have been a mercantile city, since its location allowed for complete control of the Dardanelles, which every merchant ship from the Aegean Sea heading for the Black Sea had to pass.

Troy II was built on top of the ruins of Troy I. The inhabitants completely reconstructed the citadel after the disaster. Further evidence indicates that the culture of Troy I continued into this period. The sloped walls of Troy II were not

Citations
only a powerful defensive fortification, but were earthquake resistant and easy to build. The city also had two main gates, one on the southeast and the other on the southwest. The treasures of Schliemann belonged to this period of Troy. The people of this time lived in high luxury. Troy II was eventually burned down by a warring nation.

After the destruction of Troy II, the survivors rebuilt the whole town around 2300 B.C. Because of no influence by the invaders, no break in cultural continuity occurred. It is thought the invaders either left this place to emigrate elsewhere or mixed with the natives and lived with them. Another theory for no break is the appearance of a lack of significant activity. However, during the stages of Troy III, IV, and V, the city expanded greatly because of the increase in population. Because Schliemann removed all the walls of these periods, few remain today. Recent excavations of Schliemann’s north-south trench show signs of some sturdy walls that might have been used as city walls. Troy V fell in 1800 B.C.

Troy VI was founded in 1800 B.C. and was probably destroyed by an earthquake around 1300 B.C. Just a few houses along the acropolis and a small section of a fortified wall remain. The hilltop has almost no vestiges since it was shaved off during Hellenistic and Roman times in order to provide an open courtyard around the Temple of Athena. The city walls were built of large blocks of limestone and had five gateways to the city. An American expedition decided walls of Troy VI were used in the first phase of Troy VII. Although the wooden-horse theory cannot be proved, one of the gates was enlarged by tearing down a wall in order to let in a large object. Troy VI was destroyed by a violent earthquake.

Troy VII is divided into two sections, Troy VIIa and Troy VIIb, dated through analysis of pottery styles to 1300 B.C. The Trojan War took place in Troy VIIa in approximately 1200 B.C. Partial human remains were found in houses and in the streets, and in the northwestern section, a human skeleton with skull injuries and a broken jaw. Three bronze arrowheads were discovered, two in the fort and one in the city. However, only small portions of the city have been excavated, and the finds do not clarify whether the city was destroyed by war or by a natural disaster.

Troy VIII, built in 1000 B.C., lasted until 85 B.C. It was the first Greek settlement in Troy. At this time, Greek culture dominated the region so that this stratum was a typical Greek colony. A religious area with a place for worshipping and sacrificing was located just outside the city walls of the Troy VI city. The Temple of Athena was built by one of Alexander the Great’s commanders.
The last city on this site, Hellenistic Ilium (Troy IX), was founded by Romans during the reign of the Emperor Augustus.\textsuperscript{41} The city expanded and flourished, spreading all over the ridge. To supply water to the city, water pipes and aqueducts were built. A piece of the original aqueduct can be seen in Kemerdere Village. Much of the city remains unexcavated. The excavated parts include a Roman Odeon (music theater), a bouleuterion (council chamber-senate), a Roman bath, and a few marble pieces of the Temple of Athena.\textsuperscript{42} This era of the city was constantly rebuilt and restored by Roman Emperors including Augustus, Constantine, and Caracalla.\textsuperscript{xliii} In Byzantine times the city declined gradually and eventually disappeared.

The fascination with the fabled city of Troy probably emerged from Homer’s \textit{Iliad} and Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid}. For many reasons Hisarlık was chosen as the official site of Troy. Hisarlık is on a hill dominating a fertile plain suitable for farming and animal breeding.\textsuperscript{43} It was determined during ancient times that the sea came up to Troy I and eventually silted up the plain. The Troy we know today still holds the same appeal and mysteries. The more Troy is excavated, the more we learn about the ancient civilization. Through the history, discovery, and excavations, the legend of Troy is constantly being reinvented.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textbf{Notes}

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\textsuperscript{1} Susan Swan, \textit{Turkey} (DK Publishing, March 2003), 174.

\textsuperscript{2} Swan, 43.