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The Knidian Aphrodite: Praxiteles as Voyeur and Feminist

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Aphrodite of Knidos: Female Agency and Goddess Culture

One of the most famous sculptures from the fourth century BCE is the *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles. (Figure 1) The *Aphrodite* was the first large marble nude, depicting a goddess, in Greek culture. Prior to Praxiteles, frequent depictions of women were in seminude form and the male was shown almost exclusively nude. Scholars such as Robin Osbourne have explored the male reaction to *Aphrodite of Knidos* through the lens of male viewers and its implications. The male gaze describes the gendered limitations of male viewership on female nudes such as *Aphrodite*. Other scholars such as Mereille M. Lee argue that Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* was enjoyed by a female viewership as well. In this paper I will argue that Praxiteles' *Aphrodite* was made for both a male and female audience, and that the *Aphrodite* was a product of the complex social world in which women existed. Moreover, that women were not only viewers, but also artisans and patrons of the arts, of the divine nude, and the meanings behind these concepts. Moreover, this paper will explore the ways in which women helped to create not only the social and aesthetic forms of female nudity, but also the ways female agency played a role in Greek society.

In the fourth century BCE, Praxiteles sculpted the *Aphrodite of Knidos* (figure 1) which was nude, alongside another *Aphrodite* that was seminude. The sculpture was likely commissioned by and made for the city of Knidos around 361B.C.¹ The Knidian *Aphrodite* was the first sculpture of a fully nude Goddess, as previous sculptures depicted nude men or only

¹ Morislov Marcovich, "From Ishtar to Aphrodite," Source: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30 no 2. (1996) 43-59.

seminude women. In the *Knidian Aphrodite*, Praxiteles set the precedent for not only the sculptural image of a goddess, but also further engaged his viewers in the conversation of goddess worship and the role of women in fourth century Greek culture. The Aphrodite stands in a pose similar to *Venus Pudica* yet does not completely cover herself as she does in other versions, The Aphrodite of Knidos has one hand resting near her lower abdomen, the other clutching a cloth.² The imagery seen with the cloth and the vessel near her feet suggest the motif of a bathing goddess.³ This subject matter would have been recognized by both men and women as a traditional portrayal of the goddess and would have aided in worship at temples and sanctuaries.

Aphrodite had come to be worshiped as one of the main goddesses of Ancient Greece. The cult of Aphrodite originated in Cyprus in three locations, and the Aphrodite cult then spread to larger Greece.⁴ As the goddess of love and fertility, Aphrodite was also associated with marriage, virtue, and chastity.⁵ The cult of Aphrodite in fourth century Greece, during the time of Praxiteles would have been complex. Aphrodite was not only associated with social and religious beliefs, morals, and values, but Aphrodite was also an emblem in the Knidian socio-political world.⁶ The political rule of Timotheos likely influenced Praxiteles, as Timotheos was an associated patron of Praxiteles' workshop.⁷ Praxiteles was likely involved along with his Timotheos to create a new version of the freestanding nude Goddess.

² Mireille M. Lee, "Other Ways of Seeing: Female Viewers of the Knidian Aphrodite," *Helios* 42 no 42 (2015).

³ Mireille M. Lee, "Other Ways of Seeing," *Helios* (2015)

⁴ Marcovich, "From Ishtar to Aphrodite," Source: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30 no 2. (1996) 46.

⁵ Antonio Corso, "The Cult and Political Background of The Knidian Aphrodite," *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens* V (2007) 176.

⁶ Corso, "The Cult and Political Background of the Knidian Aphrodite," 177.

⁷ Corso, "The Cult and Political Background of the Knidian Aphrodite," 175.

A.A Donohue and Julia Kindt have explored the traditional study of *Aphrodite of Knidos* through the lens and implications of the male gaze, and the obvious erotic element to The Aphrodite of Knidos.⁸ Although the male gaze in a modern sense was not understood by ancient Greeks, they likely were aware of the reactions nudity elicited among men and women in their society, and the erotic or voyeuristic purposes they may have served to a male spectator. Although the nude *Aphrodite* was created by a man in the context of a masculine centered social culture, this does not downplay the female element of the sculpture's creation and social involvement among women also, as will be discussed further.

The location of the *Knidian Aphrodite* is of importance as the city of Knidos specifically chose it over the draped Aphrodite by Praxiteles. Nudity was more prevalent in Knidos as a result of a strong goddess culture as opposed to the island of Cos who adopted Praxiteles' draped seminude version.⁹ The preference of the divine nude in fourth century Knidos gave Aphrodite of Knidos a place and a context to be understood. Knidos also accepted nudity in a unique way in the fourth century. The presence of a strong near eastern influence existed there which was inspired largely by female nudity.¹⁰ Although many women were excluded from politics and public office in Ancient Greece, women likely played important roles as artists, patrons, and models for sculptures. Some women are even seen in the act of painting of ancient Greek vases and pottery, as well as being seen in religious or civic activities.¹¹

⁸ Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 155-56.

⁹ Steven Lattimore, *Art and Architecture: The Greek World in the Fourth Century*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 256.

¹⁰ Lattimore, *The Greek World in the Fourth Century*, 266.

¹¹ Donohue, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, 166.

Going further, the depiction of women in ancient Greek art can offer insights into female agency, and our interpretations give us clues to their positions in society. A. A. Donohue in her article “Interpreting Women in Archaic and Classical Greek Sculpture” describes the women seen on stelai, Greek vases, and that the iconography can potentially explain the role and occupations of women during the fourth and fifth centuries, in relation to religious and social positions and locations.¹² However, Donohue also describes how these images of women could also be seen as ways of reinforcing specific and expected roles and behaviors of women, and that caution should be taken when interpreting them as expressions of female power.

Scholar Brunilde Ridgway offers insights into this theme as well and reiterates that the roles of women in antiquity have primarily been dealt with through literary texts, such as Pliny and others, and that these interpretations are somewhat limited into our understanding of female agency in ancient cultures.¹³ Ridgway’s solution to this problem is to study the art itself as a way to draw more solid conclusions onto the roles women played in Greek society throughout the centuries. One fascinating reference made by Ridgway in her article “Ancient Greek Women and Art” is the female patron known as Nikandre of Naxos, who is cited on an inscription at the base of the sculpture which cites Nikandre as its sponsor and potential patron, alongside Nikandre’s father and brother.¹⁴ This sculpture depicting the goddess Artemis gives us a look into how female deities were used by women to represent not only themselves and their society, but the ways women used goddesses to fashion their cultural identity in society. (fig 3). Although the sculpture of Artemis is from a few centuries later than Aphrodite of Knidos it provides evidence

¹² Donohue, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, 166.

¹³ Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, “Ancient Greek Women and Art: The Material Evidence, Source: *American Journal of Archaeology* 91, vol. 2 (1987), 400.

¹⁴ Ridgway, “Ancient Greek Women and Art,” 400.

of female patrons in ancient society, and the deities that resonated with female patrons at this time. Moreover, the Athenian acropolis has unearthed many funerary sculptures, monuments, and amphoras inscribed and dedicated to women during the archaic period.¹⁵ A large percent of these also came from woman donors and artisans which supports the idea of female agency to a degree in ancient Greece.¹⁶ A woman is mentioned in a dedication inscription at the Athenian Acropolis whose name was Mikythe, the structure known as a tithe, or dedication to her and her children.¹⁷ Ridgeway's article demonstrates for us the strong presence of female agency at both funerary and worship sites, showing that women both deceased and alive help positions of some wealth and influence.

Returning to the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, the sculpture was said to have a famous woman as its model, the seductive courtesan named Phryne, whom Praxiteles shared a relationship.¹⁸ This story is potentially apocryphal but was documented by Pliny the Elder and later historians, hundreds of years after the life and death of Praxiteles. Pliny the Elder seems to have set the stage for interpreting *Aphrodite of Knidos* through an erotic lens, which perhaps influenced scholars of more recent times to explore *Aphrodite of Knidos*' erotic implications. Praxiteles potentially using a courtesan as a model for his *Aphrodite* offers implications to study it through the male gaze, as prostitution was prevalent in fourth century Greece, as well being one of the potentially few occupations of women. Although given as a gift or tribute to his love of Phryne, Praxiteles was perhaps defaulting into a limited representation of female nudity for the

¹⁵ Ridgway, "Ancient Greek Women and Art," 405.

¹⁶ Ridgway, "Ancient Greek Women and Art," 405.

¹⁷ Ridgway, "Ancient Greek Women and Art," 405

¹⁸ Lattimore, *The Greek World in the Fourth Century*, 266.

admiration and arousal of its male viewers.¹⁹ As scholar Mireielle M. Lee suggests, the male gaze studied by scholars such as M. Solomon have not considered the “Divine sexual powers of the goddess Aphrodite,” and the ways in which nudity could be associated with Goddess worship and iconography.²⁰

In doing so, fourth century Greek women would have been empowered by nude Goddesses, as opposed to them being a vehicle of shame within the male gaze. Praxiteles also created Phryne’s likeness in the motif and dialogue of ancient Greece known as *eros*, which meant to show love, emotion, and the vulnerability of affection.²¹ An emphasis in *eros* was also placed on the love of a soul and not just a body. Praxiteles in the act of depicting his love was creating a vulnerable and more considerate depiction of a nude woman, as opposed to creating an anonymous nude in a objectifying way.²² Although *eros* had erotic connotations it also would have allowed artists in the fourth century to illicit elements of heroic love in female nude, and the more platonic or emotional love between men and women. The potential implications of Phryne having posed for the *Aphrodite* for Praxiteles one way that included female agency, recreating her in a virtuous image of beauty and would have elevated her status as a woman. Furthermore, in the world of *eros*, love as a form of suffering was also of interest and offers insight into a romantic emphasis in sculpture and not just an erotic one.²³

¹⁹ Mireielle M. Lee, *Dress and Adornment in Archaic and Classical Greece*, (Chichester:Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012) 186.

²⁰ Mireielle M. Lee, “Dress and Adornment,” 189.

²¹ Antonio Corso, “Love as Suffering: The Eros of Thespieae of Praxiteles,” Source: *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 42 (1997), 63-91.

²² Corso, “Love as Suffering,” 65.

²³ Corso, “Love as Suffering,” 65.

A. A. Donohue and Brunilde Ridgway have also suggested a more empowered reading of Aphrodite, specifically the garment held by the figure in the Knidos nude.²⁴ Praxiteles broke new ground by showing his nude goddess holding her own garment, as in previous sculptures goddesses had their clothing taken from their bodies, as seen in the Lapith women in the Temple of Zeus.²⁵ (Fig 3) Praxiteles depicted his Aphrodite, and his Phryne as a more powerful and proud nude woman as had not previously been seen in ancient Greece. This would have had an influential impact on the gendered philosophy of ancient Greeks and would have raised the status and importance of Goddesses in the nude. In addition to the status of goddess in ancient Greece there is also a development into the status of Greek women during the fifth century, not long after Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos*. Mentioned by Robin Osbourne in her article "Law, the Democratic Citizen and the Representation of Women in Classical Athens," this law was passed in Greek society to administer status of citizenship to people of both an Athenian father as well as mother.²⁶

Although the sculpture still elicits a voyeuristic gaze, the sculpture should not be read only as such. Praxiteles was working within the social and artistic confines of his time, while also pushing the boundaries of showing a proud yet seductive Goddess. Portraying a nude woman in the act of bathing, or in the context of water would have been recognized as a depiction of an all-powerful Goddess, and one of importance in Knidos during the sculptures time. Praxiteles created a virtuous yet vulnerable Aphrodite that was not restricted by voyeuristic intentions and served to elevate Phryne's status as well as Aphrodite.

²⁴ Mereielle M. Lee, *Dress and Adornment*, 189.

²⁵ Mereielle M. Lee, *Dress and Adornment*.

²⁶ Robin Osbourne, *Law, the Democratic Citizen and the Representation of Women in Classical Athens*, Source: *Past and Present* 155, (1997): 3.

Another aspect of the involvement of women in fourth century Greek art has been mentioned by Kathryn Gutzwiller.²⁷ Gutzwiller documents Hellenistic female poets who wrote epigrams underneath sculptures or near them in locations of Goddess worship, frequented by women. The influence of a large female population at these religious sites offered a range of analysis and poetic manifestations of love and eroticism in the Greek notion of *eros* through and for a female perception. The Knidian Aphrodite specifically is associated with poems by Hellenistic women such as Erinna, Moero, and Anyte.²⁸

Scholars have likely formed their analysis of Aphrodite and the male gaze in the descriptions from Pliny the Elder and Lucian regarding the sculpture. Men who viewed the sculpture were stricken with arousal, as one tale describes a man hiding in the sculpture's location, and becoming so enamored with the Aphrodite, he begins to touch it, and eventually releases his masculine urges onto its thigh.²⁹ This account is unlikely, but the purpose of it may have been to further the narrative of the sculptures power to create a visceral response of arousal and response in men. However, women also likely engaged and responded to the sculpture in aesthetic and spiritual ways, such as being inspired by the proud nudity of Aphrodite, as well as a call to worship the deity through the sculpture's beauty and aesthetic.

As previously mentioned, women's roles in society were limited in fourth century Greece, however it is evident that women were involved in positions of power in a religious context, perhaps at these worship sites such as Knidos and others. Praxiteles Aphrodite was clearly a sculpture for women just as much as it was for men.

²⁷ Kathryn Gutzwiller, "Gender and Inscribed Epigram: Herennia Procula and The Thespian Eros," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 134 no. 2 (2004) 383-418.

²⁸ Gutzwiller, "Gender and Inscribed Epigram," 383.

²⁹ Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 164.

In fourth century and ancient Greece, the role of women in religious functions must be explored. Being one of the only positions women may have held at this time, women can be studied in this context as major players of religious and worship sites where nude depictions were likely seen. As suggested by Eva Stehle in *Women and Religion in Greece*, we come to understand that worship centers were places directed by women, and sometimes were exclusively inhabited by them.³⁰ The sculpture having resided in Knidos, after Praxiteles sold it to the Knidians, makes an important point that it would have been seen by many women in a religious environment, and would have inspired Goddess worship among women. With this idea we can expound further to interpret the Aphrodite as much more than just an object of male voyeurism.

In fourth century, religious worship, women would have held positions as priestesses and spiritual mentors to young girls or women, guiding them, along the path of Greek faith and Goddess worship. As suggested by Stehle, this atmosphere of spiritual worship would have allowed women to bond and relate to one another on their own terms and engage with nude sculptures in the context of temples. This may have encouraged an open and stimulating dialogue for ancient women to align themselves with the gods outside of the confines of their patriarchal surroundings and allowed women to create their own values and aesthetic interpretations toward Aphrodite and others.

The *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles was a sculpture of complex social and religious notions. With a variety of responses and functions of the Aphrodite covered in this paper, we can better understand its meaning in ancient Greek society. Not only an image of sensuous

³⁰ Eva Stehle, *Women and Religion in Ancient Greece, from A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing 2012): 191.

admiration, but the work also held religious and civic purposes, and was appreciated by men and women alike, for various reasons.

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Figures



Fig 1. Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, marble. 4th Century BCE. (Roman Copy). Le Gallerie de Delgi Uffizzi.



Fig 2. Anonymous. *Women in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia*. 456 BCE, marble. Olympia Musuem.

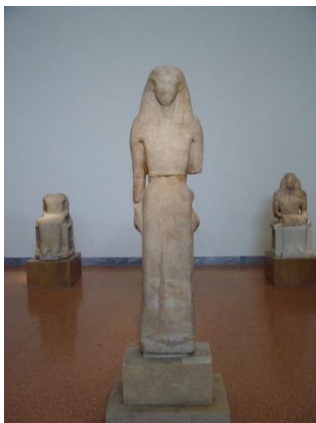


Fig 3. *Nikandre*, 650 BCE, marble, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.