

The Aphrodite of Knidos and Doryphoros in the study of the roles of women in Classical Greece

Lara Powell

In this essay, I will be discussing how we can use the statue of the Aphrodite of Knidos (sometimes Cnidus) and Polykleitos' Doryphoros, in conjunction with other sculptures to gain an insight into the expected social roles of Classical Greek women. I will be examining why the Knidian statue can reveal how the Classical Greek world expected their women to present themselves and behave in society. In particular, I will be focusing on the posture and pose of the statue and what it reveals about expected female gender conformities, including modesty in response to the male gaze. By examining the roles of Classical Greek women, we can hope to expand our understanding of Classical Greek society, one that moves away from a predominantly male-driven narrative to highlight the roles that women had within society. Bringing women's roles to the forefront of this paper is especially important in the context of our modern feminist climate and the push of fourth-wave feminism to examine women's marginalisation in society.

In 330-360 BCE, the sculptor Praxiteles was commissioned to create a statue for the Island of Kos. Praxiteles sculpted two statues of the goddess Aphrodite, one clothed and the other naked. The people of Kos were shocked at the naked statue and bought the traditionally clothed one instead. Incidentally, the people of the Island of Knidos bought the naked one and installed it in their sanctuary to Aphrodite. We should be aware that the specific statue is of a goddess and therefore exhibits more of the ideal body over the realistic, but I believe that it can still be useful in examining the Classical Greek view of women and their roles within their society. Unfortunately, the original Knidian statue has not survived to the modern-day and was lost in a fire in Constantinople in 475 CE; now, only copies remain. However, thanks to Pliny the Elder in his *Natural Histories* and to pseudo-Lucian in his *Amores* (who likely saw the statue firsthand), we have enough contemporary description to corroborate these copies so that we can convincingly use them instead of the original Knidian statue.¹

Despite the statue's Athenian creator and origins, the scope of this essay dictates that the Aphrodite of Knidos must be plausibly representative of the wider Greek world and its feminine expectations. Naturally, one statue cannot represent all Greek cultures, but due to Athenian cultural

¹ Plin. *NH.* 26. 20-1, Luc (attributed). *Amor.* 13-16.

and artistic influence during this period, we can at least posit that the statue represents what was popular. Furthermore, this theory supports the idea that the people of Kos specifically sought out the Athenian sculptor Praxiteles rather than a local Kos artist. Praxiteles's sculpture was considered some of the finest Attica had to produce, reflecting Athens's artistic prominence during this period.

If we were to look up Classical male statues from the Classical period, nudity was not shied away from, so what can the first life-size nude female statue reveal to us about how women were expected to behave in Classical Greek society? First, we should examine the sculpture itself. There are numerous copies of the original Knidian statue, but the one thought to be the most faithful to the original is the Colonna Venus, as evidenced from its numerous images on Hellenistic and Roman coin issues compared to other replicas.²

² Nigel Spivey, *Greek Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 205.

The Aphrodite of Knidos



Figure 1: Colonna Venus (Anonymous Roman copy of the original 4th century BCE Knidian statue) Now on display in Museo Pio Clementino, Rome (Inv. 812). Photo © Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY (ART359096).

https://www.cambridge-org.bris.idm.oclc.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3351A9EC98C7269D847A6C0524AD2FBA/9781107039544c2_35-48.pdf/female_body_aphrodite_of_cnidos.pdf

Praxiteles's statue was the first to employ the pudica pose, or the modest pose, with the right hand attempting to cover her pubis. One interpretation of the pose is often associated with the women being unwilling participants of the viewing, and any sensuality the viewer derives from the statue was meant to be unintentional on the depicted woman's part.³ On the other hand, scholars such as Christine Havelock have argued that rather than defending her modesty, the hand is placed perfectly to draw attention to her nudity.⁴ Whilst it is subjective to the viewer how they perceive the pudica pose, either way, the statue draws attention to her nudity, be it attention-seeking or

³ Nanette Saloman, 'Making a World of Difference: Gender, Asymmetry, and the Greek Nude', in *Naked Truths*, ed. by Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire. L. Lyons (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 197-219 (pp. 208-209).

⁴ Christine Havelock, *The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors: A Historical Review of the Female Nude* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 35.

vulnerability. Aphrodite's left hand clutches her discarded chiton, draped over a hydria, indicating she is in the act of bathing. She stands with her weight on her right leg, and her right hip cocked to the side. The original statue was said by Lucian to have an arrogant smile.⁵ The Colonna Venus stands at just over six feet tall and exhibits the ideal depiction of the female body with a rounded stomach and hips, small and high breasts.⁶

A Male Creation and the Male Gaze

Apart from a few exceptions, most working artists in Classical Greece that created important public artwork were men. This gender prejudice leaves us in the dilemma that their work often portrayed the male view of gender. However, because men were also the dominant members of society, they set out the roles for women within Classical Greece. So, a man's depiction of women is arguably a view that more authentically reflects the role of women; through this reflection, we can now recognise that the Aphrodite of Knidos embodies women's roles through the 'male gaze'.

Coined in 1975 by Laura Mulvey, the term 'male gaze' refers to the depiction of women in visual art and literature from the perspective of men, usually culminating in a presentation of passive women, sexually objectified for the male viewer.⁷ Reevaluating the Aphrodite through this lens allows us to highlight the statues almost shy posture, and evidently, there are questions to be raised here as to whether the Aphrodite is consenting to the gaze upon her, naked as she is. The modern push to reevaluate art with the awareness of the 'male gaze' allows us to engage with images of women and see past the objectification and through the male silencing. However, whilst the 'male gaze' of the Aphrodite will help us understand women's roles in Greek society, it does not help us understand how women directly thought of their roles. Unfortunately, due to the restricted nature of our sources, this is something we might never come to see from a female perspective but instead will mostly have to be inferred from the subtext of the 'male gaze'. The best way I hope to demonstrate this inference is by allowing the Aphrodite to speak for herself by highlighting the division of gender roles as seen by the 'male gaze'.

This division of gender roles is best seen in our sculptures when we compare the Doryphoros, Figure 2, to the Aphrodite, Figure 1. The Doryphoros stands tall, unhunched and strong, and originally would have carried a spear. In contrast, the Aphrodite female bathes and is

⁵ Luc (attributed). *Amor*. 13-14.

⁶ Rosemary Barrow, *Gender, Identity and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 37.

⁷ Naomi Frisby, "'I am a woman, not an exhibit.'" The effects of the male gaze in art, literature and today's society' (2020) <<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/the-doll-factory-the-effects-of-the-male-gaze>> [accessed 01.07.2021].

hunched over. The male Doryphoros aggressively imposes itself into the viewers' space, whilst the female Aphrodite appears to turn her head away from her watcher's gaze. Furthermore, the Doryphoros exhibits an outwardly strong face and expression, compared to the composed face of the female statue. What is evident in these statues is the disparity in the expectations for the presentation of gender and roles in Classical Greek society. The male body is treated as a coherent unit; the female body is treated as an external surface subject to her viewer, clearly exhibiting her subjugation under the 'male gaze'.⁸ These contrasting depictions suggest that men are expected to appear strong and active in their societal roles, while women should exhibit submission to their viewers and be unimposing in their day-to-day manoeuvrings.

Furthermore, to be able to use the statue of Aphrodite within the scope of this essay, we have to address its divinity as an ideal woman. For the statue to be useful as a source on the roles of non-divine women in Greek society, we have to be at least reasonably confident she can represent a human, realistic woman. In this regard, Praxiteles, as the statue's creator, becomes ideal for our discussion. Praxiteles was well known in the Greek world for using his sculpture to depict the gods in banal everyday activities to humanise them and make them accessible to their worshippers.⁹ Through their portrayal of accessibility, the gods' statues allowed for more meaningful communication and self-identification with their worshippers. Therefore, Aphrodite's bathing scene indicates that the goddess has been humanised and made with the image of 'real' women in mind, despite her divine identity. To further this idea of realness, the statue is said to have been sculpted based on a real woman named Phryne, proposed to be one of Praxiteles mistresses, further overlaying the impression of real Greek women onto the statue.¹⁰

Aphrodite's Nudity

The idea that Aphrodite was 'caught' in a state of undress whilst bathing suggests a need to justify the statue's nakedness, indicating an inherent Greek dislike of public female nudity. We can speculate that Aphrodite was caught bathing due to the presence of the hydria vessel and the draped robe, as well as the hunched posture and attempt to cover the most intimate parts of her body. The hydria vessel and the robe indicate that Aphrodite had just unrobed and was about to begin bathing, whilst the attempt to cover herself shows how she has been discovered in a state of undress against her will.

⁸ Nanette Saloman, 'The Venus Pudica: uncovering art history's 'hidden agendas' and pernicious pedigrees', in *Generations and geographies in the visual arts: feminist readings*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 69-87 (p. 90).

⁹ Spivey, p. 206.

¹⁰ Spivey, p. 204.



Figure 2: A hetaira engaging in sexual intercourse with a symposium goer, c.a 480 BCE.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1836-0224-173

From events such as the Olympics, we know that men appearing naked reflected their strong bodies and, therefore, their strong minds (see Figure 3). The ability to strip away the 'costume' of every day and participate in the gymnasium allowed men to communicate and assert their citizenship, social status, and attention to bodily virtue.¹¹ Furthermore, having a visibly strong body demonstrated a man's self-discipline to onlookers, and for a society that valued military prowess as well as mental, the Greeks appreciated the sight of a disciplined citizen.¹²

However, for women to appear unclothed was considered indecent as it invokes the imagery of the female companion, the 'hetairai', and the symposium, essentially a male drinking party, which is not a connection with which most traditionally respectable women in Classical Greek society would have wanted to be associated.¹³ These 'hetairai' were usually hired by hosts of symposiums to entertain the male guests, which included drinking and conversing with the men; and, as evidenced by art such as Figure 2, to engage in sexual acts.¹⁴ Indeed, the sexual promiscuity of the 'hetairai' is something that modest women wished to avoid association with as not to tarnish their chaste reputations; therefore, public nudity was to be avoided.

¹¹ Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 82-83.

¹² Kyle, p. 83.

¹³ Spivey, p. 201.

¹⁴ Spivey, p. 201.



Figure 3: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)* or *Canon*, Roman marble copy of a Greek bronze, c. 450-440 BCE (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples).

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/ancient-mediterranean-ap/Greece-etruria-rome/a/polykleitos-doryphoros-spear-bearer>

So, whilst the visible nakedness of the strong male body was to be admired, a woman's visible nakedness was to break a societal taboo and risk uncouth associations, as only a woman's husband should see her undressed.¹⁵ From this need of justification for nudity, we can infer that a woman's role within society was to present a clothed, modest appearance to reinforce her chaste ways.

Interestingly, despite the Knidian statue's overall nakedness, there is no indication of a vulva or of any pubic hair with which we would expect to see in a depiction of a nude. Whilst the lack of pubic hair can be explained by the Greek tradition of depilation, in a culture that carefully sculpts male genitalia, the lack of female genitalia is telling.¹⁶ Scholars such as Ronald Smith have suggested that the lack of female genitalia on statuary was not due to a dislike of aesthetics, but perhaps because it was deemed too immodest or too sexually aggressive.¹⁷ This argument fits

¹⁵ Spivey, p. 201.

¹⁶ Andrew F. Stewart, *Art, desire, and the body in ancient Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 99.

¹⁷ R. R. R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), p. 83.

within the idea that women, even divine, were not meant to be sexually aggressive or aggressive in any way.¹⁸ For a woman viewer, the Aphrodite would have reinforced societal ideas surrounding female chastity. The pudica pose further emphasises this idea of sexual chasteness by covering her pubis; it is a protective stance. Aphrodite is slightly hunched over, and with her head tilting forward, she radiates shyness from the viewer's gaze.

Furthermore, Rosemary Barrow suggests, citing Rachel Kousser, that we must consider the statue's divinity. As the goddess of sexuality and love, the covering of her pubis could instead represent the goddess protecting her power, and therefore a female viewer can recognise her duty to protect her own sexual power in the image of the goddess.¹⁹ So despite the statue depicting an unreal goddess, Classical Greek women who had the opportunity to view the Aphrodite could identify themselves with it and how the statue reflected a real woman's role within society; notably, as the divine were personified aspects of the Greek world and therefore emulated the expected behaviour of that aspect. In Aphrodite's case, she personifies love and sexuality; hence she was responsible for representing how love and sexuality should look, and as women were some of her main supplicants, her influence on women would have been more keenly felt and emulated.



Figure 4: Marble funerary statues of a maiden and a little girl made ca. 320 BCE. Found in Attica. Now on display at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 158.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254508>

¹⁸ Stewart, p. 99.

¹⁹ Barrow, p. 43; R. Kousser, 'The Female Nude in Classical Art: Between Voyeurism and Power', in *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, ed. by C. Kondoleon and P. C. Segal (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2011), pp.149–66 (p. 151).

In direct contrast to the Knidian statue, we can see the more realistic portrayal of Greek women's roles in Figure 4. Instead of nakedness, we see more typical representations of young women. In particular, the older girl's statue provides a contrast to Aphrodite's naked sensuality; instead, she portrays the upstanding maiden with her mantle pinned at the shoulders and her peplos draping down her back (a symbol reserved for young virgins.)²⁰ This type of clothed female was not just the normative, but also the expected way of depicting women in Classical Greek statues before the Knidian statue (see Figure 5); and whilst artists might have employed the 'wet look' of drapery in their statuary to infer a more sexualised piece (see Figure 6) outright nudity was taboo. This taboo extended to all types of female depiction, including pottery (see Figure 11) and grave *stelai* (see Figure 7). Depicting a woman as anything other than clothed, and therefore modest was not acceptable to the majority of Classical Greek society. Thus, the girls depicted in Figure 4 more readily represent the ideal figures that follow the traditional gender roles. In comparison, the Aphrodite subverts these societal gender roles by appearing naked in public. Naturally, this fact does not mean she cannot reinforce Classical Greek women's need for chastity and modesty, but she does break tradition by appearing unclothed in a public space with many onlookers.



Figure 5: A terracotta statue of a woman, fully clothed in a belted chiton, c.a 300-250 BCE.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-528

²⁰ Gisela M. A. Richter, 'Two Statues', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 3: 48-53 (1944), pp. 50-51.

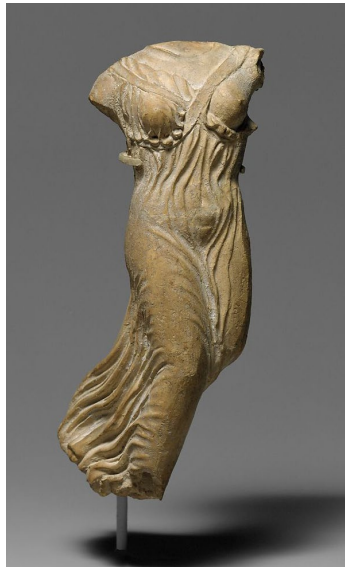


Figure 6: An example of the wet drapery technique used in the Classical period. A terracotta statuette of Nike, c.a late 5th century BCE. Here we can clearly see how the artist has used the wet technique to make the clothing hug the goddess's body, almost making the clothing appear translucent. Now on display at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 156.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247903>



Figure 7: A grave stele of a young woman, on the right, and her servant, on the left, c. 400-390 BCE.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253505>

The Hydria and Gender Enforcement



Figure 8: An example of a bronze hydria vessel, ca. 375-350 BCE. Now on display at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 171.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254776>

Another example of how the Knidian statue illuminates women's roles in Classical Greek society is by examining the hydria vessel (Figure 8). Ellen Reeder draws interesting comparisons between the hydria vessel and women's roles in Classical Greek society as human vessels. Reeder posits that the hydria serves as an iconographical image that alludes to the Classical Greek concept of a jar representing the womb.²¹ From the numerous artistic depictions on other material evidence, such as pottery, we know that the arenas of marriage and childbearing were some of the main spheres that Classical Greek women were expected to interact with; Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure 11 are a select few examples of the typical types of depictions of Classical Greek women. The idea of childbearing in relation to Aphrodite makes sense when we consider that the goddess was worshipped as a deity for sexual love and procreation.²² So with the imagery of the hydria being so interconnected to women's primary roles in society, we can reason that when women encountered the imagery, they would have understood the gender reinforcement. Their role was to emulate the goddess' model of procreation and ensure they continued society.

²¹ Ellen D. Reeder, *Pandora: Women in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore, MD: The Trustees of The Walters Art Gallery; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 195-199.

²² Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Anne Ley, 'Aphrodite', in *Brill's New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes ed. by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, English edition by Christine F. Salazar, Classical Tradition volumes ed. by Manfred Landfester, English edn by Francis G. Gentry (2006) http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e127370 [accessed 02.01.2021].

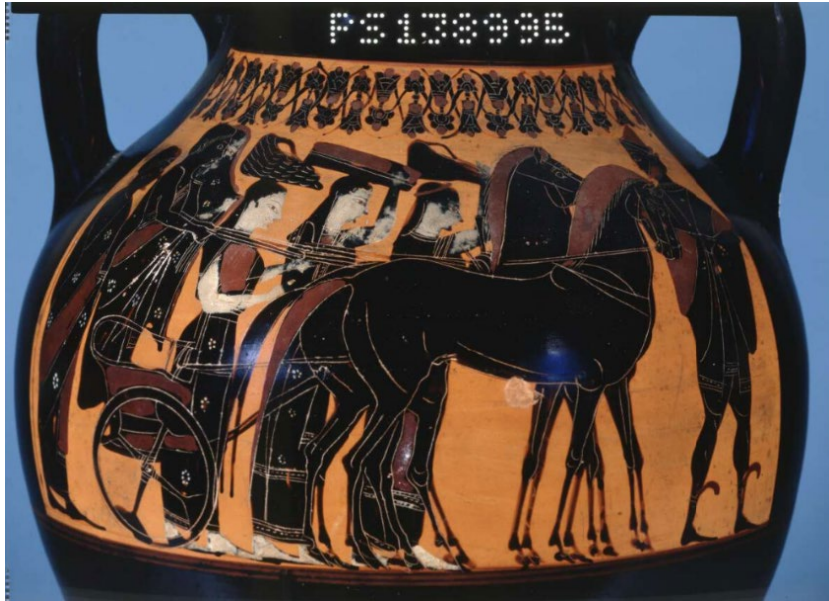


Figure 9: An amphora depicting a marriage procession, ca 550-540 BCE. Three women are depicted walking in front of the bridal couple, bearing various objects.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1868-0610-2



Figure 10: A red figure lebes gamikos depicting women and a toilet for a wedding, ca 450-400 BCE.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1842-0728-1136

Similarities for this type of gender enforcement can be seen in modern media and literature, which encourages the traditional role of the ideal citizen; one must only browse the cover pages of modern women's magazines such as *Vogue*, *Women's Health* and *Elle* to see the prescribed female gender beauty ideals. So, although much is being done by modern body-positive activists such as Ashley Graham and Tess Holiday to expand on these ideals, images of air-brushed, tanned, and slim women still prevail as the primary female depiction worthy of modern high-status media. Many modern women perceive and conform to these supposed idealised female beauty standards through this perpetual imagistic enforcement. Furthermore, because the Greeks rarely made art for art's sake, artwork usually had a purpose.²³ Therefore, it is reasonable to posit that the Aphrodite's purpose was to exhibit and reinforce the ideal roles of Classical Greek women, just as modern media reinforces them for modern women.



Figure 11: A red figure hydria depicting two women and an infant at home, ca 440-430 BCE.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-350

Overall, the Aphrodite of Knidos provides a profound example of how women's roles as chaste, modest beauties were portrayed through the male gaze. In direct contrast to the typically clothed statues before the creation of the Knidian statue, Aphrodite gives us another aspect of

²³ Tyler Jo Smith and Dimitris Plantzos, 'Introduction: The Greeks and their Art', in *A Companion to Greek Art*, ed. by Tyler Jo Smith and Dimitris Plantzos. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pp. 3-14 (p. 5).

female portrayal. Whilst scholars still debate the finer details of its interpretation, the arguments are generally consensual. The statue depicts a humanised divine woman reacting according to how real women were expected to react when confronted with the male intrusion by protecting her modesty. Admittedly, the statue alone cannot tell us much about the role of Classical Greek women without comparison to other literary and epigraphical material. However, it does support our existing narrative from this period that Greek women were expected to hold roles as modest objects. So, whilst the Aphrodite of Knidos is a statue of idealised beauty, it can help us shed light on the realistic bodily conformity that women in most of Classical Greece were expected to abide.

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