

# FRAGMENT OF APHRODITE

ROMAN, 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BC – 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AD  
MARBLE

HEIGHT : 29 CM.

WIDTH : 18 CM.

DEPTH : 13 CM.

*PROVENANCE:  
FORMER FRENCH COLLECTION SINCE  
THE 1940S BASED ON THE MOUNTING  
TECHNIQUES.  
THEN FORMER PRIVATE COLLECTION,  
STRASBOURG, BY SUCCESSION.*



All that remains of this female statue over time are her hips, her legs and part of her drapery. Yet a single glance is enough to recognise the woman depicted, who seems to have preserved from oblivion only the very essence of her charms, her entire intimacy. What other goddess, if not Aphrodite, could thus span the centuries and offer of herself only a fragment that is sublime in what it

reveals and what it conceals? The Aphrodite of the Greeks became Venus among the Romans, but nowadays she may be referred to by both names.



Although severed just above the navel, this marble Venus constitutes a fragment of the intimate, in that it undoubtedly preserves the most erotic parts of the divine body. The goddess stands, leaning on her right leg, thus creating a twist in her posture – a contrapposto inherited from the Greeks. This twist is evident at her hips and particularly at her buttocks. Entirely exposed, the latter are clearly firm, shapely



and full. The emphasis placed on this part of the goddess's body is a way of expressing her sensuality. A sensuality which, as indicated by the gracefulness of the goddess's form, is associated with the freshness of her evident youth. With feigned modesty, Aphrodite casually holds back a corner of her heavy himation, which seems to glide over her soft skin. This thick drapery, animated by numerous deep folds, reveals almost all of the goddess's private parts; certainly her buttocks, most certainly her partially visible breasts, and part of her pubis, outlined by the folds of her groin.



The marble has developed a stunning patina, lending it a lifelike quality. The skin on the goddess's lower abdomen is dark and lightens towards the groin, giving this intimate area a very pale appearance. As for the drapery, the patina has settled on the

relief of the folds, thus highlighting their hollows in the marble's almost original colour. This fragment is relatively little altered. Apart from the severed hand, only a few areas of erosion resembling calluses are noticeable on the sculpture's buttocks.



Scholars agree that the nude or semi-nude statues of Aphrodite from the Hellenistic and Roman periods all trace their origins back to Praxiteles' works from the late Classical period, notably the Aphrodite of Cnidus (Ill. 1). This statue, created in the 340s BC, is often regarded as the first major female nude in Western sculptural art. It is said that this Aphrodite was inspired by models of nude Phoenician deities and that the goddess's complete nudity was so unusual that the sculptor justified it by depicting her bathing. Once painted by Praxiteles's favourite collaborator, Nicias, it

stood within a temple with two entrances in Cnidus. This distinctive feature was likely a clever device to allow the beauty of the goddess's body to be appreciated from every angle, a sight that sent more than a few mystical shivers down the spines of the pilgrims who beheld it. Pliny even recounted how a young man is said to have allowed himself to be locked inside the temple for an entire night to consummate his love for the goddess. Pseudo-Lucian, for his part, offered, in his "Dialogue on Love", a description—imbued with sensual paganism—of the emotion evoked by the sight of this statue.



Following this creation, numerous variations emerged, depicting the goddess naked or half-clothed, concealing herself in various ways. The variations of these statues of the goddess branch out into many categories, the

main ones being the 'Venus Anadyomene' type – emerging from the sea – and the 'modest Venus'. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, statues of Venus were widely worshipped and produced in large numbers; the different types became intermingled and influenced one another, breaking free from the original Cnidian model whilst endowing the Venus figures with a light-hearted femininity.



Our goddess belongs to a type derived from the 'modest Venuses', depicting the goddess standing with a billowing himation, tied in a knot at the hips, which covers part of the lower body whilst leaving the buttocks and legs exposed. This type, to which our fragment belongs, essentially comprises the Aphrodite of Syracuse (Ill. 2), the Venus Landolina (Ill. 3) and the Venus of Bullas (Ill. 4). Although its weight is not borne on the

same leg as the Sicilian Aphrodite, our statue is very similar to the latter, particularly in the rendering of the buttocks, the arrangement of the drapery and the charming detail of the particularly full and deep navel. As they retain a greater portion of their anatomy, the Aphrodite of Syracuse and the Venus Landolina allow us to imagine what our Venus must have looked like. No doubt she would have lightly touched the tip of her left breast with her right hand in a modest yet sensual gesture. Our fragment clearly shows the cupped palm of her left hand, which held a fold of her himation—a garment that would have flared out like a corolla around her legs, in the style of the Venus Landolina.

Aphrodite's body was what made the goddess famous. She is sensuality personified. To the Greeks, she was a very serious deity; her eroticism was praised as essential to all forms of reproduction. Mistress of desire, she reigned over the cycle of generations and the regeneration of life. Adored, respected and revered, she nevertheless carried a scandalous reputation linked to tales depicting her in amorous scenes. The Romans, having not forgotten that Aphrodite was also a goddess of sex and blood (she was born from the semen of the castrated Ouranos, which gushed forth from the sea foam), produced numerous light-hearted depictions of her. They loved the frivolous, sensual, desiring and desirable aspects of her character. They loved her wiles. Even if they loved her solely for her beauty, it is hard to hold it against them, for she is beautiful as no one else could ever be. Radiant, vibrant, uninhibited and mysterious, her body harbours immortal charms. Our sculpture captures the essence of what made Aphrodite's fame and legend:

the eroticism of her flesh tinged with an endearing modesty.



At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Guy de Maupassant undertook a grand journey through the Maghreb and along the Italian coast. Weary of Paris and awestruck by the sights and landscapes of his stops along the way, he wrote a series of chronicles that were eventually compiled into the collection "La vie errante", published in 1890. Published shortly before his death, this book takes on the character of a personal account. In it, the author has retained only the most tender images from his final, dreamlike journey. Among these images is that of the Venus known as the Landolina, which has been housed in Syracuse since its discovery in 1804 (Ill. 3). Our fragment belongs to the same type as this statue, which so deeply moved Maupassant, thus demonstrating that the



charms of the ancient marble Venuses have lost none of their power to enchant.

*Des gens traversent des continents pour aller en pèlerinage à quelque statue miraculeuse — moi, j'ai porté mes dévotions à la Vénus de Syracuse !*

*Ce n'est point la femme poétisée, la femme idéalisée, la femme divine ou majestueuse comme la Vénus de Milo, c'est la femme telle qu'elle est, telle qu'on l'aime, telle qu'on la désire, telle qu'on la veut étreindre. Elle est grasse, avec la poitrine forte, la hanche puissante et la jambe un peu lourde, c'est une Vénus charnelle, qu'on rêve couchée en la voyant debout. Son bras tombé cachait ses seins ; de la main qui lui reste elle soulève une draperie dont elle couvre, avec un geste adorable, les charmes les plus mystérieux. Tout le corps est fait, conçu, penché pour ce mouvement, toutes les lignes s'y concentrent, toute la pensée y va. Ce geste simple et naturel, plein de pudeur et d'impudicité, qui cache et montre, voile et révèle, attire et dérobe, semble définir toute l'attitude de la femme sur la terre.*

*Et le marbre est vivant. On le voudrait palper avec la certitude qu'il cédera sous la main, comme de la chair.*

*Les reins, surtout, sont inexprimablement animés et beaux. Elle se déroule avec tout son charme, cette ligne onduleuse et grasse des dos féminins qui va de la nuque aux talons, et qui montre dans le contour des épaules, dans la rondeur décroissante des cuisses et dans la légère courbe du mollet aminci jusqu'aux chevilles, toutes les modulations de la grâce humaine.*

*Une œuvre d'art n'est supérieure que si elle est, en même temps, un symbole et l'expression exacte d'une réalité.*

*La Vénus de Syracuse est une femme, et c'est aussi le symbole de la chair.*

*Devant la tête de la Joconde, on se sent obsédé par on ne sait quelle tentation d'amour énervant et mystique. Il existe aussi des femmes vivantes dont les yeux nous donnent ce rêve d'irréalisable et mystérieuse tendresse. On cherche en elles autre chose derrière ce qui est, parce qu'elles paraissent contenir et exprimer un peu de l'insaisissable idéal. Nous*

*le poursuivons sans jamais l'atteindre, derrière toutes les surprises de la beauté qui semble contenir de la pensée, dans l'infini du regard qui n'est qu'une nuance de l'iris, dans le charme du sourire venu du pli de la lèvre et d'un éclair d'émail, dans la grâce du mouvement né du hasard et de l'harmonie des formes.*

*La Vénus de Syracuse est la parfaite expression de cette beauté puissante, saine et simple. Ce torse admirable, en marbre de Paros, est, dit-on la Vénus Callipyge décrite par Athénée et*

*Lampride, qui fut donnée par Héliogabale aux Syracusains.*

*Elle n'a pas de tête ! Qu'importe ! Le symbole en est devenu plus complet. C'est un corps de femme qui exprime toute la poésie réelle de la caresse.*

*Schopenhauer a dit que la nature, voulant perpétuer l'espèce, a fait de la reproduction un piège.*

*Cette forme de marbre, vue à Syracuse, c'est bien le piège humain deviné par l'artiste antique, la femme qui cache et montre l'affolant mystère de la vie.*

*Est-ce un piège ? Tant pis ! Elle appelle la bouche, elle attire la main, elle offre aux baisers la palpable réalité de la chair admirable, de la chair élastique et blanche, ronde et ferme et délicieuse sous l'étreinte.*

*Elle est divine, non pas parce qu'elle exprime une pensée, mais seulement parce qu'elle est belle.*

Guy de Maupassant, *La vie errante*, Paul Ollendorff, Paris, 1890.

## Comparative works:



Ill. 1. Aphrodite said « Colonna Venus », marble, roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD after the Greek original Aphrodite of Cnidus of Praxiteles, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican (inv. 812).

Ill. 2. Aphrodite of Syracuse, marble, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Athens National Archaeological museum (inv. 3524).



Ill. 3. Landolina Venus, marble, Roman, 1st century AD, Regional archaeological museum Paolo Orsi of Syracuse (inv. 694).



Ill. 4. Bullas Venus, marble, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Madrid National archaeological museum (inv. 2696).