

# FRAGMENT OF A VENUS

ROMAN, *CIRCA 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AD*  
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 58,5 CM.

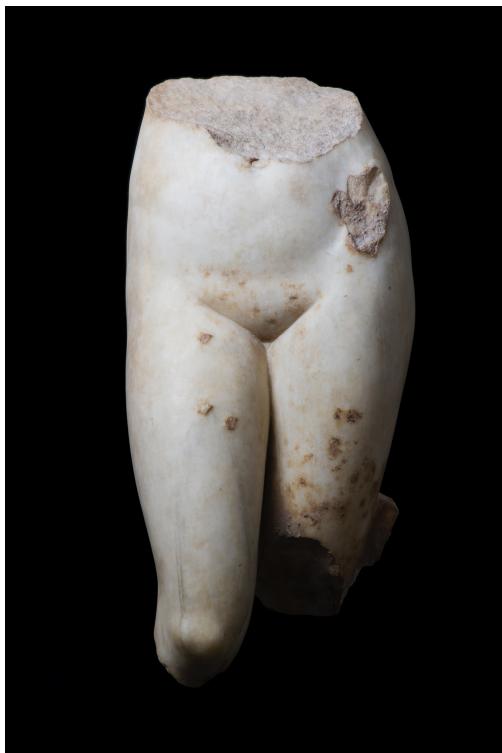
WIDTH: 30 CM.

DEPTH: 23 CM.

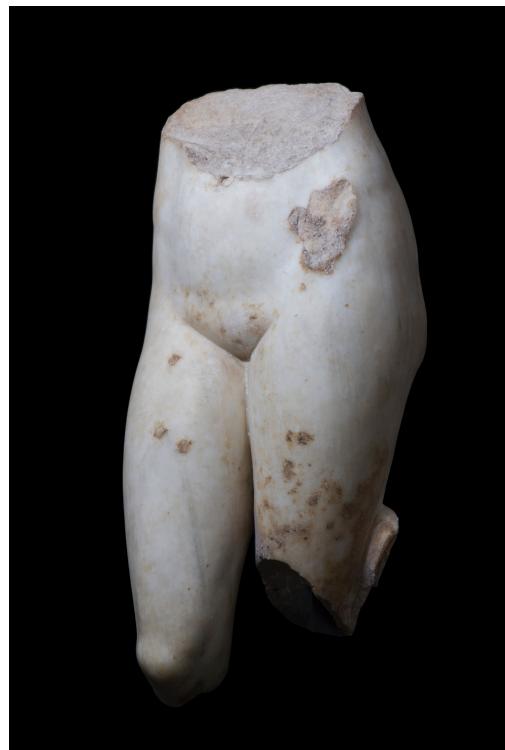
*PROVENANCE:*

*FORMER COLLECTION OF DON MARCELLO MASSARENTI (1817-1905), PALAZZO RUSTICUCCI-ACCORAMBONI, ROME, ACQUIRED BEFORE 1897. THEN FORMER COLLECTION OF HENRY WALTERS (1848-1931), NEW YORK AND BALTIMORE, ACQUIRED FROM HIM IN 1902; TRANSFERRED TO THE WALTERS ART GALLERY, BALTIMORE (ACC. NO. 23.47).*

*PROPERTY OF THE WALTERS ART GALLERY, SOLD FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE ACQUISITION FUND; ANTIQUITIES SALE, SOTHEBY'S, NEW YORK, 12-13 DECEMBER 1991, LOT 65. WITH AXEL VERVOORDT N.V., GRAVENWEZEL, BELGIUM, 2002. THEN FORMER ONZEA-GOVAERTS COLLECTION, BELGIUM.*



This statue fragment, preserved from the waist to the knees, reveals a highly skillful execution, both in the softness of the modeling and the subtle handling of volumes. It represents the lower part of a nude female body, with particular attention paid to the curvature of the hips, accurately emphasizing the flexibility and sensuality of the female form. The abdominal area is treated with delicacy: the slightly rounded belly displays smooth and natural transitions in volume. A marked shadow on the right flank discreetly accentuates the roundness, while the half-visible navel blends harmoniously into the whole.



The hips, though slender, retain a full curve, reflecting the youth and femininity of the model. The two lines that connect the hips to the thighs are rendered with great softness,



while the slight twist of the pelvis to the right—indicating the famous *contrapposto* of Polykleitos—gives the figure a dynamic balance. *Contrapposto* is an artistic convention in which the body's weight rests on a single leg, while the other leg is bent, creating a subtle shift in posture.



A brownish mark on the left side of the hip bears witness to a former contact area—likely from the forearm that once covered the genital area. The pubic zone is rendered with great modesty: the forms are full and smooth, without unnecessary anatomical detail, in keeping with the aesthetics of idealized nudity in the classical tradition. The right leg, positioned forward, shows a slightly bent knee initiating a forward movement, while the extended left leg provides stability. The curvature of the thighs is precisely emphasized, reinforcing the impression of supple, fleshy forms. Below the left knee, an irregularly shaped fragment remains; it may be a remnant of drapery or a structural element that has since disappeared. On the back, the treatment subtly indicates the spinal line, extending to the lower back and

enhancing the elegance of the silhouette. The back of the statue tilts slightly forward. At the level of the buttocks, a rectangular cut has been made, indicating a later intervention: it could correspond to a wall-mounting system or to material extraction, a practice known during decorative reuse, particularly in the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the lower part of the buttocks remains intact, carefully sculpted: the volumes are full, rounded, and convey a certain sensuality.



Several traces of erosion on the thigh and left flank tell the history of our sculpture. Its brown patina, the quality of the marble's original polish, as well as the finesse of execution and the representation of sensuality, are all elements that testify to the sculptor's mastery and the work's antiquity.

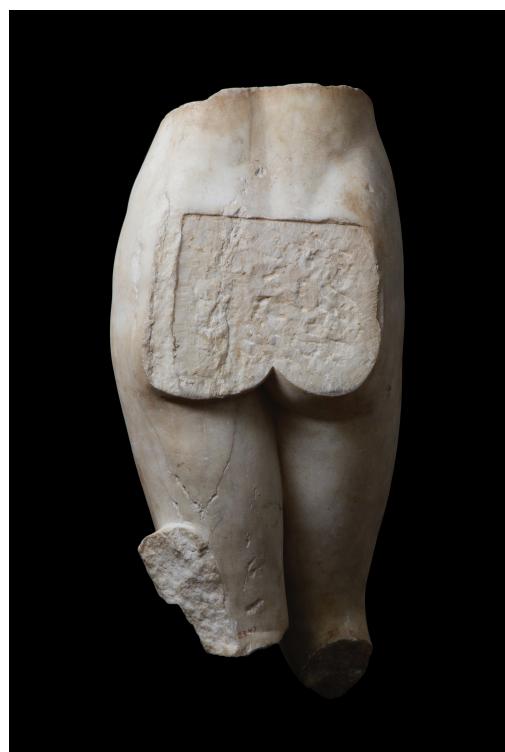
This sculpture, dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, belongs to the tradition of Roman reproductions of Hellenistic Greek originals, in the style of Praxiteles. It follows the aesthetic canons developed by him in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The sculptural features of this work — full volumes, supple flesh,

*contrapposto*, and sensuality — directly recall models such as the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, the prototype of the ancient female nude, or the *Capitoline Venus*, which reprises the same formula in a more ample and solemn version. The slightly swayed posture and forward-leaning torso introduce a gentle dynamism into the figure's silhouette, enhancing its natural grace. The remnant of drapery visible on the side of the thigh suggests the presence of a fabric that likely served to emphasize the lower body without concealing the subject's nudity. The pubic area, revealed and fully visible, aligns with the iconography of Aphrodite, where nudity is not merely erotic but conveys a divine symbolism of beauty. This "controlled" unveiling corresponds to a pose of presentation, echoing the formula created by Praxiteles for the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, and perpetuated in Roman imperial variants such as the *Capitoline Venus*.



In the Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, representations of Venus proliferated in both public and private spheres. This widespread presence went beyond a simple taste for

eroticism: it responded to a political and religious logic. Venus was, in fact, the tutelary goddess of the *gens Julia*, the imperial dynasty of Augustus, which claimed mythical descent through Aeneas, son of the goddess. These sculptures thus formed part of a visual strategy to glorify the Greek heritage while asserting the refinement of Roman power.



Our sculpture is part of a vast corpus of representations of Aphrodite/Venus, widely disseminated throughout the Roman imperial world. Among the most significant examples are several works housed in major museum collections, such as the Museum of Antiquities in Cyrene, Libya (ill. 1), the British Museum (ill. 2), and the Louvre (ill. 3 and 4), where two life-size sculptures of the Capitoline Venus based on the original Greek bronze are displayed. Another fragment, quite similar to our sculpture, is also found at the MFA in Boston (ill. 5).

This work comes from the former collection of Don Marcello Massarenti (1817-1905), a

prominent figure in Roman collecting in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An officer of the Vatican and a close associate of Pope Pius IX, Massarenti assembled an impressive collection of antiquities and Old Masters at the Accoramboni Palace. The sculpture in question is already listed there before 1897, as evidenced by two catalogues published in 1894 (ill. 6) and 1897 (ill. 7). Representing the antiquarian passion that animated papal Rome, Massarenti's collection offered a broad panorama of ancient art. In 1902, it was acquired in its entirety by the American businessman and patron Henry Walters (ill. 8). As noted by Eve D'Ambra Bartman in *The New Galleries of Ancient Art at the Walters Art Museum* (AJA, 2004), this collection constitutes a true "time capsule of collecting in Rome at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century." According to Bartman, this acquisition was Henry Walters' "most consequential decision" as a collector, laying the foundations for what would become one of the most important collections of ancient art in the United States. Upon his death, Walters bequeathed not only his collection but also the building to house it, along with an endowment for its maintenance "for the benefit of the public." On November 3, 1934, the Walters Art Gallery (ill. 9) opened its doors as a public institution, with this sculpture in its collection. The museum would later take the name *Walters Art Museum*. The sculpture was then removed from the public collections and sold at a Sotheby's auction in 1991. In 2002, it was acquired by the Belgian gallerist and designer Axel Vervoordt (ill. 10), before entering the private Onzea-Govaerts collection in Belgium. From the 1970s onward, Joris Onzea and Suzanne Govaerts — heir to the Fort family business, the origin of the CASA chain of stores — built an eclectic collection deeply influenced by Axel Vervoordt's aesthetic. Together, they shaped a contemporary *Kunstkammer*, blending ancient art, contemporary creations, Asian

and African objects, as well as European furniture.

### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Statue of Aphrodite, Roman, beginning of the imperial period, 1<sup>st</sup> century

AD, marble, H.: 152 cm. Museum of Antiquities, Cyrene, Libya, no. inv. 14.292

Ill. 2. Statue of the Capitoline Aphrodite, Roman, 100-150 AD, marble, H.: 223 cm. British Museum, London. no. inv.

1834.0301.1.



Ill. 3. Statue of the Capitoline Aphrodite, based on a Greek original by Cephisodotus the Younger, first quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 190 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris. no. inv. MR



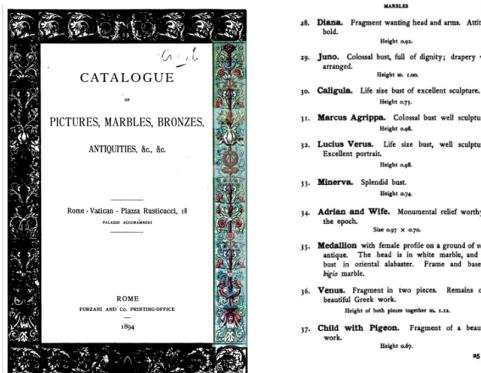
Ill. 4. Statue of the Capitoline Aphrodite, based on a Greek original by Cephisodotus the Younger, first quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 195 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, no. inv. MR

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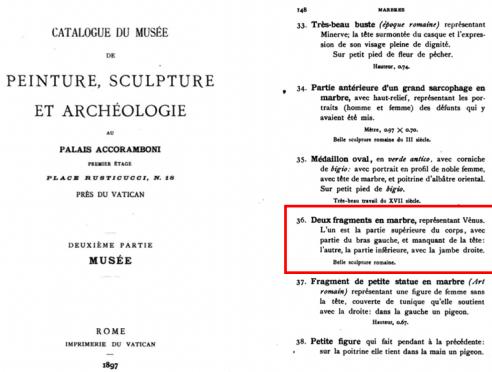


Ill. 5. Torso of Aphrodite, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 137 cm. MFA Boston, no. inv. 99.350

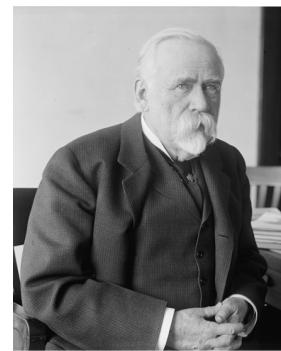
#### Provenance:



Ill. 6. Catalogue of Pictures, Marbles, Bronzes, Antiquities, &c., &c., Palazzo Accoramboni, Rome, 1894, p. 181, no. 36.



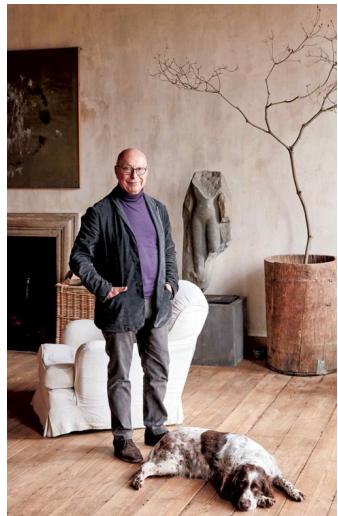
Ill. 7. E. van Esbroeck, *Catalogue du musée de peinture, sculpture et archéologie au Palais Accoramboni*, vol. II, Rome, 1897, p. 148, no. 36.



Ill. 8. Portrait of Henry Walters



Ill. 9. The Walters Art Museum



Ill. 10. Portrait of Axel Vervoordt



Ill. 11. Portait of Joris Onzea et Suzanne Govaerts

**Publications:**

- *Catalogue of Pictures, Marbles, Bronzes, Antiquities, &C., &C., Palazzo Accoramboni*, Rome, 1894, p. 181, no. 36.

- E. van Esbroeck, Catalogue of the Museum of Painting, Sculpture and Archaeology in Palazzo Accoramboni, vol. II, Rome, 1897, p. 148, no. 36.