Aphrodite and the Rebirth of Beauty

by Gail Leggio

The influence of the classical pantheon extended well beyond the religious cults of antiquity. For millennia, the ancient deities—with their compelling stories and rich iconography—have fired imaginations and generated what W.B. Yeats called "metaphors for poetry." Aphrodite, ruler of desire and embodiment of beauty, and her son Eros became important figures in Western art and literature. In the fifteenth century, when Botticelli sought to express the Neoplatonic worldview of the Florentine humanists, he painted *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, two multi-figure compositions with the goddess taking center stage. When the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley struggled to find meaning in the death of John Keats, he wrote "Adonais," drawing on the legend of Venus' doomed mortal lover. Sigmund Freud constructed the edifice of psychoanalysis, in part, on the power of Eros (as well as on some inventive re-readings of the Oedipus cycle). Myths survive because they give succeeding generations ways to think about the complex patterns of life.

With the current revival of interest in the traditional techniques and canonical masterpieces of the past, we might expect another return to the ancient subjects. The classical figure has indeed become a touchstone in the atelier once again, with Jacob Collins, Juliette Aristides and instructors at the Art Students League in New York City, among others, reclaiming the practice of drawing from casts, ubiquitous in the Beaux-Arts academies of the nineteenth century. According to Aristides, "Greek sculptors formulated a system that combined graceful naturalism with extremely sophisticated design systems," and their works "embody a perfect combination of observed nature and archetypal form."[1] Contemporary traditionalists emphasize the formal virtues of classical art, and the resulting improvement in skill levels among the present generation of artists has been impressive. But, with some exceptions discussed later in this article, they seem wary of tackling the cultural content. An ancient image of Aphrodite (in most cases, a cast) in the atelier presents an aesthetic challenge. Yet the artworks that have come down to us from the past also bristle with complex meanings. Our society as a whole has lost that easy familiarity with the gods that made myth a lingua franca for artists and audiences across the centuries. One way to enrich the expressive language of art is to reconnect to that legacy.

Looking at classical art in the context of its original belief systems and social dimensions is a good place to start. An exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, explores the image and character of an important goddess. "Aphrodite and the Gods of Love" presents 160 works, most from the MFA's own Greek and Roman collection, supplemented by thirteen key loans from

museums in Italy. Some are superb expressions of ideal beauty and/or sexual power; others could be classified as decorative ornaments or magical fetishes. Exquisitely refined, playful or even crude, they all tap into the deep reservoir of myth that pervaded daily life in the ancient world. Eight scholars contributed to the informative and thought-provoking catalogue.[2]

There are intriguing implications for contemporary practice. Nakedness, for example, was one of Aphrodite's defining attributes, which makes her a principal source for the traditional genre of the classical female nude. Classical figure drawing has returned as a crucial component of pedagogy in the new ateliers, yet too few of today's artists are aware of the fusion of art, sexuality and religion in the ancient persona of Aphrodite. Rachel Kousser writes in her catalogue essay: "The alluring form of Aphrodite…emerges as the concrete, effective expression of her divine power—making these ancient images…very different from the female nudes of later periods, when the realms of the sensual and the religious and political spheres were considered wholly separate, even antithetical."[3]

The classical deities are not only powerful symbols but also lively personalities, who stubbornly refuse to be reduced to schematic abstractions. Their complicated alliances and antagonisms, which play out on Olympus and spill over into human history, engender multiple storylines. As immortals, the gods have no end, but they do have beginnings, as reported in works such as Hesiod's *Theogony* (late eighth century BC). Aphrodite was born before any of the other Olympians, the daughter of Ouranos, the Sky, and Gaia, the Earth.[4] It's a violent and bizarre tale, but Aphrodite's emergence from the seminal foam of the sea inspired a host of marvelous images, from the Ludovisi Throne (fifth century BC), in Rome's Palazzo Altemps, to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1482). The Renaissance Venus holds on to the full range of her ancient powers, in part, because the artists drew on the tradition of the Homeric and Orphic Hymns, poems to her embodiment of both erotic and celestial love, physical desire and the web of attractions that holds the universe together. As William Congreve puts it, in his 1710 translation of an ancient Hymn: "Her charms, th' Immortal Minds of Gods can move/And tame the stubborn race of men to love….Whole nature on her sole support depends, /As far as life exists, her care extends."[5]

The story of Aphrodite/Venus begins with her birth out of the sea, a subject well represented in the Boston exhibition. One of the most seductive works is a Hellenistic marble statuette of Aphrodite emerging from the sea (first century BC or first century AD). Like much ancient sculpture, the figure has lost its head and arms, but the elegant curves of the voluptuous body are superbly balanced, and the sinuous lines of the swirling drapery create dynamic movement patterns. In formal terms, this is recognizably the work of an accomplished artist, whatever its original cultural—or cultic—context. But Aphrodite appears in the decorative motifs of everyday life as well. She ruled over every aspect of love and beauty, including *kosmesis*, cosmetics and adorn-

Statuette of Aphrodite emerging from the sea, Greek or Roman
Eastern Mediterranean, 1st century BC or 1st century AD
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

ment, and was invoked both in brothels and bridal celebrations. A ceramic oil
bottle (lekythos) in the form of Aphrodite at her birth (mid-fourth century BC)
has the lively charm of good folk art. The rose-tinted shell that surrounds the
figure of the goddess bursts out of the belly of the flask with the energy of a
Georgia O'Keeffe flower, while two winged erotes stretch out the billowing sail

Oil flask (lekythos) in the
form of Aphrodite
Greek, mid-4th century BC
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
BOSTON

of her drapery. The continuum of Aphrodite's influence encompasses high and low, sacred and secular.

Aphrodite's iconographic associations with nudity and water made her an appropriate figure for the ancient baths. The long line of bathers in art history may, at times, reflect the distant, numinous origins of this trope. The monumental female nude as a genre can be traced back to a specific work, the Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles (fourth century BC), now lost but known through copies. (Before that, male nudes were common, but female figures were clothed.) Praxiteles' goddess is regal but not hieratic; her pose is natural and relaxed, and her gestures subtly allude to her mythic narrative. This combination of mythic resonance and naturalism appears in the trope of Aphrodite Anadyomene (wringing out her hair), which depicts a common activity given deeper meaning by the story of the goddess's birth. A marble statuette of Aphrodite Anadyomene (100 BC–70 AD) dispenses with iconographic trappings; the association did not need to be spelled out. In the exhibition catalogue, the curators juxtapose the statuette with another work from the MFA, a crayon lithograph, *Venus Rising from the Sea* (1839), by Théodore Chassériau. He places her on a mysterious seashore. When she lifts her arms to wring out her hair, the gesture emphasizes the opulent curves of her body, yet her demeanor is cool, and the overall mood is classical.

The Roman Venus was based on the Greek Aphrodite, although she acquired some fresh qualities in moving to a new pantheon. As the mother of

the Trojan hero Aeneas, founder of Rome, she became a protector of the city. Venus was associated with all kinds of propitious events, from victory in war to favorable throws of dice. The classical deities, in addition to their specialization in areas such as love, war or craft, maintained strategic alliances with cities and states. A marble statue of Aphrodite (117–38 BC) is a superb copy of a late-fourth-century BC original, probably erected in Corinth as a guardian of the polis. The figure is half nude, with graceful drapery at the hip. Her hair is pulled back in a chignon, she wears a diadem and once carried a shield. The gods and goddesses had important civic functions in the ancient world. We see vestiges of this tradition in the rhetorical and iconographic figures of Justice, Victory and Liberty.[6] American Renaissance sculptors such as Daniel Chester French and Augustus Saint-Gaudens were latter-day masters of the genre, combining allegorical meaning and heightened physical beauty in a thoroughly classical way.

Some deities seem more suitable than others for public iconography in the post-classical world. A figure descended from Athena/Minerva translates easily in schemes for civic virtue. Venus' afterlife has been largely in the private sphere. Of course, the Romans celebrated her in public spaces like the forum and, very appropriately, the baths. But she seemed particularly at home in private settings, in gardens and villas, luxurious surroundings where art and beauty were appreciated for their own sake. The aesthetic response is understandable when we look at a magnificent marble in the Boston exhibition. Statue of a woman in the guise of Venus (mid-first century–early second century AD) is a tour de force of wet drapery. The diaphanous garment clings to and molds the body underneath, while the rippling fabric suggests the vitality of moving water. The Roman appreciation for figures such as this, while still rooted in ancient piety, begins to suggest modern connoisseurship.

Aphrodite/Venus had a substantial entourage, and the curators acknowledge the importance of Hermaphrodite, the Three Graces—represented by an elegant Pompeiian fresco painting (first century BC–first century AD), on loan from the Museo Archeologico in Naples—and Eros, whose post-classical career rivaled his mother's. Yet, the primary focus remains the complex goddess. A host of issues—among them, nudity, sexuality and myth—swirl around her. Examining those issues may shed light on contemporary painters who champion a return to beauty and, in some cases, consider themselves classicists.

Why did the classical pantheon inspire artists for nearly two millennia, and why do artists today, for the most part, shy away from this iconography? In *On the Philosophy of Art* (1802–03), Friedrich Schelling summed up the case for archetypes, writing that "the gods are the absolute itself seen through the particular and considered as real" and that mythology "is the necessary condition and material of all art," the "forms through which eternal ideas may be expressed."[7] The gods were associated with heightened reality and ideal form.

At its best, as Anne Hollander writes, classical art is "a corrective to life…standing firm in behalf of our limitless hopes, feeding our longing." The danger, she adds, is that "perfect rightness, although enormously compelling, may show a certain aridity and limitation, especially in less than inspired works"[8] In the later nineteenth century, the avant-garde became disenchanted with the quest for ideal beauty. Confronted with Alexandre Cabanel's saccharine, soft-core *Birth of Venus* (1863), it's not difficult to see why they also became disenchanted with classical myth, as least as narrowly defined by the less imaginative academicians. The Venus that thrived in the nineteenth century was more likely to be a descendent of the goddess of medieval legend, in Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhauser*, Sir Edward Burne-Jones's painting *Laus Veneris* (based on an Algernon Charles Swinburne poem) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's image *Venus Verticordia*, a neo-Venetian bombshell of extraordinary power.

Some of the finest painters working today are reviving the pedagogic methods of the Beaux-Arts academies, with classical figure drawing at the heart of the enterprise, but, in general, they do not rely on traditional subject matter. Whether they rejected or accepted—uncritically or with transformative imagination—the ancient pantheon, nineteenth-century artists were fully versed in the stories and iconography of the gods. In our society, we can no longer take that cultural literacy for granted. Stylistically, too, the neo-traditionalist project is complicated by the competing legacy of nineteenth-century Realism, which especially conditions contemporary approaches to the figure. Jacob Collins's superb nudes have a vulnerable, flesh-and-blood physicality that is reminiscent of Courbet's. Steven Assael's paintings demonstrate an ability to think realistically and mythically at the same time, but his dramatis personae is a sui generis collection of comic book characters, fetishistic club kids and figures of modern alienation.

There are, however, some contemporary painters who find inspiration in classical subjects. One of the most articulate is David Ligare, who began making paintings based on Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy in 1978. Historical recreations were "against the laws of contemporary art," he remarks, but he was eager to explore this "unworked vein."[9] Ligare's narrative paintings do not traffic in raw emotion since, he believes, "a true classical work avoids histrionics." Philosophical principles of clarity and balance govern works such as *Hercules Protecting the Balance between Pleasure and Virtue* (1993). The nude blond figure of Pleasure has a cool generalized beauty that fits one definition of "classical," although it lacks the erotic charge of many ancient images of Aphrodite/Venus. Ligare has given the question of nudity considerable thought. Nudity has the advantage of being "very time neutral but it can also be distracting." In the ancient world, an image of a nude woman still had an aura of the sacred or the taboo. Nudity "is different now because of the total availability of photographs of naked people, pornography or otherwise."

Patricia Watwood, *Pandora*, 2011

The current disenchantment of nudity certainly factors into the diffi-culties contemporary artists face when presenting the unclothed figure. But Ligare's most original and most truly classical paintings are, for me, his still lifes—luminous, cerebral explorations of the philosophical underpinnings of representation. The still lifes Ligare calls "aparchai," after the Greek for ritual offerings, are particularly rich. He sets up a kind of stage platform with a side wall. The still life objects, illusionistically three-dimensional, cast a two-dimensional shadow on that wall: this clever visual conceit alludes to Plato's story of the cave while confronting the paradox of realism in painting. The still-life objects themselves look idealized yet physically, palpably real. In *Olives and Wheat* (2006), a Greek vessel decorated with Athena's owl is filled with olives and topped by an elegant branch. A few stalks of wheat, lit from within and saturated with mystery, like something out of the Eleusinian ritual, lie at the base. The six red-gold fruits in *Apples and Wheat* (2006) would not

be out of place on the Olympian banquet table. Ligare's work expresses one important aspect of classicism, the search for perfect poise.

A number of other contemporary artists are exploring the shadows of classical mythology, acknowledging the untidiness of the original stories and the disruptive power of the gods. Patricia Watwood, who calls herself a contemporary classicist, favors the demi-deities of the Greco-Roman tradition. Her *Pandora* (2011) places the first woman, with her fateful box, amid the debris of a contemporary industrial waterfront, an appropriate illustration of the havoc caused by unfettered human ambition. Hope is represented by the endangered Eastern bluebird, a nice ecological touch. Watwood's *Semele* (2005) is dark-haired and voluptuous, with a bowl of fruit balanced on her head and a tattooed arm. The gold leaf background suggests a superlunary world. The slightly exotic look of the mother of Dionysos/Bacchus is appropriate, given the god's Eastern origin. In Euripides' the *Bacchae*, Dionysos is the archetypal embodiment of dangerous divinity. Watwood's handling of the figure is solid, but her most distinctive contribution to the continuing saga of the classical myths may be her imaginative coupling of ancient tropes and contemporary themes. This is a promising avenue of exploration. An exhibition of twenty-nine paintings, "Patricia Watwood: Myths and Individuals," first on view at the Saint Louis University Museum of Art, travels to the Forbes Galleries in New York City (February 17–April 28, 2012).[10]

Adam Miller, a young Brooklyn-based painter who trained at the Florence Academy of Art under Daniel Graves, seems comfortable working in the visual language of mythology. In his *Oil Slick* (2009), the dark-haired young woman rising, elegantly half-draped, from the sea explicitly evokes Aphrodite/Venus. Her air of melancholy reflects contemporary complexities—the most difficult aspect of the ancient goddess to recapture may be her blitheness.[11] Miller's figure is realistic, with the kind of beauty observable in the everyday world: she is not an ideal concocted from imagination. The sea and the sky are lyrically painted yet obviously polluted by the oil-rig fire on the horizon. Miller relishes "the opposites of a beautiful Turneresque fire and the damage and violence created by it." He identifies, at least in part, with his Venus, "living only in the Romantic moment of erotic Venusian satisfaction."[12]

How do we define classicism in painting? Miller taps into the perennial themes and iconography of Greco-Roman mythology and handles the material with originality and sophistication. Stylistically, he is a neo-Romantic rather than a neoclassicist. His *Artemis Triptych* (2009) expresses, he writes, "the desire for perfection and the impossibility of experiencing it." The goddess occupies the central oval panel, sitting cross-legged on the ground, her head covered by a dark red drape. Two attendant nymphs, each in her own tondo, flank the goddess. Their faces are obscured as they raise their arms in gestures of mourning. In all three panels, the backdrop is a twilight, soft-focus landscape of woods and streams. It's a haunting ensemble, a different vision of the goddess of wild

Adam Miller, *Oil Slick*, 2009

places. Miller alludes to another tradition in *Exile* (2010), a striking composition in which an Eve figure, holding an apple, looks back over her shoulder. More than half of the horizontal painting is taken up by the baroque drapery that swirls behind her, adding to the forward momentum of the figure. This Eve is not skulking out of paradise but moving toward the future.

Over the course of the last two millennia, Western culture has focused on another set of stories, taken from the Judeo-Christian narrative. The archetypal scene of Eden and the Fall proved a rich source, theologically and psychologically. It also changed attitudes toward nudity and the feminine, becoming a powerful touchstone for a legacy of misogyny and asceticism.[13] The rehabilitation of Eve has been a long process. For some contemporary artists, the figure of Eve offers a way back to the prelapsarian world of myth. Brad Kunkle, for example, does not use direct references to classical deities, although he acknowledges they address perennial "belief patterns and desires of the human spirit."[14] Contemporary artists often feel that they lack sufficient knowledge of Greco-Roman myth to work in that idiom—or fear that their audience will not understand it. Eve remains a familiar figure, and freeing her from the tradition of demonization is a viable way to re-enchant the world. The vertical composition of Kunkle's *The Proposition* (2008) is fairly conventional, with two naked figures flanking the Tree of Knowledge and the serpent between them. Both figures are female, however, alluding to the underground tradition of Adam's independent first wife, Lilith, as a participant in the drama.

Kunkle's style is neither neoclassical nor neo-Romantic, but a contemporary riff on the aesthetic of the English Pre-Raphaelites and continental fin-de-siècle artists such as Gustav Klimt and Fernand Khnopff. He works from photographs for the figures, which are nearly monochromatic. The flesh tones are a warm grisaille, reminiscent of nineteenth-century photography. The three-dimensionality of the figures plays against the flat, decorative quality of the background, underscored by the use of gold leaf—for the Art Nouveau curves of Eve's serpent—and silver leaf, for the luminous space visible through the trees. There is a similarly effective deployment of gold and silver in *Summoning a Sleeper* (2010), a horizontal image of a contemporary girl sleeping in a field, protected by the magic circle of a gold serpent.

Kunkle's *The Daughters of Mandelbrot* (2011) approaches some classical themes from an unexpected direction. A trio of cutting-edge beauties, with spiky hair and slinky black slip dresses, stands at the edge of a marsh, holding gleaming salvers amid a shower of gold leaf and engaging in some kind of ritual. The title alludes to the famous Mandelbrot Set, a set of points that generates a distinctive two-dimensional fractal shape. The emphasis on the mathematics of beauty is a clue that we are in the presence of a new version of the Three Graces, Aphrodite's handmaidens. Kunkle's women don't look like the classical Graces, seen in the Boston exhibition in a Pompeiian fresco, or like the group to the left of Venus in Botticelli's *Primavera*. But they are clearly part of the mythic sisterhood. The classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant writes: "Myth…is only alive when it goes on being recounted….The myth-story…is both polysemous like a poetic text, in its multiple layers of meaning, and, unlike a poem, not fixed in definite form….The story remains somewhat open to innovation."[15] The artists working today to recover the aesthetic legacy of the past would do

well to respect Aphrodite, whose special province is beauty, in all its contradictory and inexhaustible power. By reconnecting to the ancient myths, we open up a treasure house of poetic possibilities.

"Aphrodite and the Gods of Love" was on view through February 20, 2012, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115. On the web at www.mfa.org. It travels to the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California (March 28–July 9, 2012), the San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas (September 15, 2012–February 17, 2013) and the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma (March 3–May 26, 2013).

NOTES

1. Juliette Aristides, *Classical Drawing Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2006), pp. 85–86.
2. *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, edited, Christine Kondoleon with Phoebe C. Segal (Boston: MFA Publications, 2011).
3. Rachel Kousser, "The Female Nude in Classical Art: Between Voyeurism and Power," *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, p. 166.
4. For an engaging retelling by an eminent classicist, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Universe, the Gods and Men: Ancient Greek Myths*, translated, Linda Asher (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), pp. 12–13.
5. *The Oxford Book of Classical Verse*, edited, Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 75.
6. For a well-researched and lively study of this topic, from a feminist perspective, see Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1985).
7. Cited, Jean Richer, "Romanticism and Mythology: The Use of Myths in Literary Works," *Roman and European Mythologies*, compiled by Yves Bonnefay, translated under the direction of Wendy Doniger (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). p. 265.
8. Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1989), p. 60.
9. All Ligare quotes from email exchanges with the author, October 8–11, 2011.
10. See Peter Trippi, "Patricia Watwood: Making the Timeless Timely," *Fine Art Connoisseur* (December 2011), pp. 36–40.
11. A notable exception comes from pop culture, an interlude in Terry Gilliam's film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988), in which a radiant, flirtatious Uma Thurman plays Venus, with Oliver Reed as her jealous husband, Vulcan.
12. All Miller quotes from email to author, November 4, 2011.
13. For a rich analysis of the orthodox doctrine of the Fall, along with the Gnostic countertradition, see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).
14. Email to author, October 3, 2011.
15. Vernant, pp. x–xi.