



Final Paper

Art 101.01: History of Western Art I: Prehistoric to 14th Century

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Illustrations



Figure 1

Terracotta squat lekythos (oil jar)
of Aphrodite

Artist Unknown

Late 5th Century BCE, Greek,
Classical Period

Terracotta

Height 5 in. (12.7 cm)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New
York City

1972.118.149



Figure 2

Silver Statuette of Venus

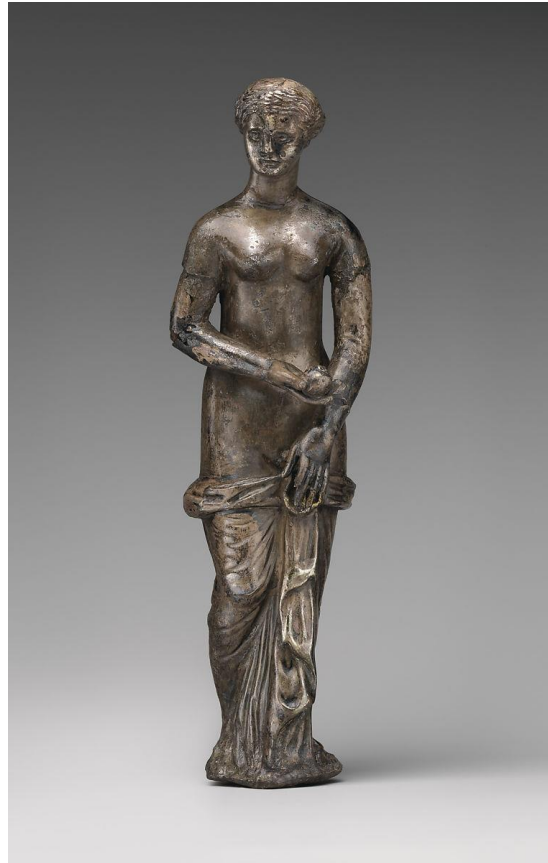
Artist Unknown


1st or 2nd Century CE,
Roman, Early or Mid
Imperial Period

Silver

Height 6 7/8 x 2in. (17.5 x
5.1cm)

Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York City
1995.539.14






This paper will focus on two works from two different stylistic periods, created by two distinct cultures, Greece and Rome, who occupied the areas around the Mediterranean several thousand years ago. The objects chosen for this paper share thematic elements, as their subject matter involves the similar yet divergent interpretations of a single mythological figure recognized by the people of both. Thus, figures one and two are representations of religious imagery from both cultures.

Two different types of art forms have been chosen, made from different materials and created for different purposes. The first, *Terracotta squat lekythos (oil jar) of Aphrodite* (Figure 1), is a functional object created using the minor art form of ceramics, while the second, *Silver Statuette of Venus* (Figure 2), is a decorative sculpture made from casting silver, a precious metal. This showcases a variety of techniques common during that time, from painting to modeling to metalworking, many of which are still used today.

Figure one, titled “Terracotta squat lekythos (oil jar) of Aphrodite,” depicts the Greek goddess Aphrodite with her son Eros. An incense burner is shown between them. While Eros is standing, reaching toward the incense burner, Aphrodite is seated. Aphrodite is much larger than Eros, as they come to roughly the same height despite their different positions, giving the impression that if she were to stand, she would tower over him. While works from ancient Egypt or the ancient Near East used this technique of stylization to show importance through hierarchical scale—where differences in size that establish the order of importance of the subjects in a work, where a leader might be large compared to the servants depicted beside them—here the size difference most likely reflects the nature of the relationship between Aphrodite and Eros. Aphrodite is his mother, therefore she is bigger. He is shown in a three-



quarter profile, making him appear much more slender than Aphrodite, who is shown from a more fully-frontal position and appears much broader.


Eros is nude, depicted in a manner reminiscent of earlier Greek *kouroi* statues of the Archaic period, which represented idealized young men¹. While nakedness signified slavery or low status in earlier stylistic periods, such as Akkadian or Babylonian art, here it contains positive connotations and is meant to show beauty and pride². In contrast, Aphrodite is partially-clothed. Aphrodite does not touch the ground line, while the feet of Eros intersect with the ground line and plunge into the decorative motif just above the foot of the lekythos. There is another decorative border at the top of the pot and further decoration up the neck of the lekythos. These borders were commonly found on Greek pottery. Eros is shown in contrapposto or chiastic pose, with his weight unevenly distributed across both legs. Contrapposto is a feature that distinguishes the Classical Period from the Archaic Period, as this is when it was first seen in free-standing sculptures³.

Aphrodite is the goddess of sexual love and beauty, often representing fertility and romance. Her son Eros is the god of the Greek concept of romantic love. She is often presented as an incredibly beautiful woman, clothed in thin, drapery, revealing fabrics, but she is often depicted nude as well. Eros is her son, typically “depicted as a handsome winged youth or

¹ Valerie Sioufas-Lalli, “Ancient Greek”,
https://nccarthistory.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/4/121443569/6_ancient_greekv2a.pdf. Accessed May 6, 2020.

² Bonfante, Larissa. "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art." *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, no. 4 (1989): 543-70. Accessed May 10, 2020. doi:10.2307/505328. P. 93.

³Valerie Sioufas-Lalli, “Ancient Greek”,
https://nccarthistory.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/4/121443569/6_ancient_greekv2a.pdf. Accessed May 6, 2020.



mischievous toddler”⁴. He bears feathered wings on his back and given a bow and quiver of golden arrows, which he uses to cause people to fall in love when struck.


Ancient Greeks saw their gods as immortal but deeply human figures, flawed and complex as any mortal soul. In many of Aphrodite’s myths, she is shown to be exceedingly vain, jealous, and fickle, as well as a doting mother and a benefactor of the love-lorn. In the myth of Eros and Psyche, we see Aphrodite’s demeanor exemplified perfectly. In this myth, a woman named Psyche is so beautiful that many people around her have begun worshipping her instead of Aphrodite. The goddess is angered by this and hatches a plan to exact revenge on Psyche, sending her son Eros to convince her to fall in love with a hideous beast, and further to have Psyche prove herself through several impossible trials after Psyche accidentally burns Eros with hot oil from her lantern. Aphrodite is often depicted in this vengeful, petty, and vain manner.

Eros himself in this myth is shown to be just as impulsive and dynamic of action as his mother, sending an offer for Psyche to live with him so that they may be together, despite the wishes of his mother. This perfectly exemplifies the nature of those in love to act impulsively and without consideration to consequence, and thus it makes sense that Eros, as the god of romantic love, would act in a similar manner.

The lekythos was created in the late fifth century BCE, placing it roughly around the time of the Peloponnesian war. From its genesis, Greek civilization was a loose collection of city-states, united in spirit by commonality of belief and language but separated chiefly by its mountainous and hilly geography.⁵ Because of this political disunity, conflict was common. This

⁴ Smith, James Pierce. *From Abacus to Zeus. A Handbook of Art History*. 3rd ed. Prentice-Hall, 1987. P. 102.

⁵ Horst Woldemar Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *A Basic History of Western Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 69.



work is categorized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as Attic, referring to the historical region of Attica⁶. This region encompassed Athens, which was the cultural and center of Greece. It was economically devastated by the war and subsequently lost this cultural status⁷. Therefore this lekythos was likely made in a region and during a time period in which there was ongoing and widespread violence. In addition, a plague swept through Athens in 430 BCE, killing one-third to two-thirds of the population⁸. Aphrodite, an important goddess in the Greek pantheon, might have been depicted here to invoke her status as a goddess of fertility, as the area was suffering many casualties when this object was made.

The Classical period, in which this work was made, lasted from roughly 480-400 BCE. It marked many notable changes in Greek art, such as the more naturalistic depictions of the human form over the stylization common to the preceding Archaic period and the illusion of spatial depth or perspective now being developed⁹. This period saw the work of many influential philosophers, such as Aristotle and Socrates, whose ideas remain significant and well-known to this day. These philosophers had an active role in shaping Greek culture during the period, emphasizing humanism, rationalism, and idealism, which refer, respectively, to self-determination through reasoning, experience as a determining factor in problem-solving, and the necessity of imagination over strict reproductions of nature¹⁰. Unlike the visual complexity of the preceding Geometric and Archaic periods, there is an elegant simplicity to the humanistic figures


⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Terracotta squat lekythos (oil jar)*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255460>.

⁷ Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York, NY: Viking, 2003).

⁸ R J Littman, "The Plague of Athens: Epidemiology and Paleopathology.," *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine*, October 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1002/msj.20137>.

⁹ Horst Woldemar Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *A Basic History of Western Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 77.

¹⁰ Valerie Sioufas-Lalli, "Ancient Greek", https://nccarthistory.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/4/121443569/6_ancient_greekv2a.pdf. Accessed May 6, 2020.



represented. There is a lot of negative space which serves to emphasize them. Also common to the time, the subject matter is representative in nature, intended for religious worship, as most vase-paintings during the Classical and Archaic periods display mythological or human activities¹¹.


A squat lekythos is a type of pottery most frequently used to store oil, usually small and “characterized by a long cylindrical body gracefully tapered to the base and a narrow neck with a loop-shaped handle”¹². The elongated neck allowed the oil to be poured slowly. Typically used for funerary rites, to anoint the bodies of the deceased with oil, this style of pottery became very popular in the fifth century BCE¹³. At five inches in height, this small flask was incredibly portable. It is a motivated piece, intended to be used and serve a functional purpose, decorated with representational subject matter for the purpose of religious worship. Because of the incense burner shown, the religious iconography of Aphrodite and Eros, and the nature and typical usage of the lekythos itself, this vessel was likely found in a temple.

The medium used is terracotta, a fired clay. Like the squat lekythos, there were many forms of Greek pottery in varying sizes and shapes, all intended for different functional purposes. Due to the strong association between lekythoi and funeral rites, a commonly-seen painting technique used to decorate them was the white-ground technique, which was developed in

¹¹ Gondek, Renee M. “Greek Vase-Painting, an Introduction.” *Khan Academy*. Accessed May 8, 2020. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/greek-pottery/a/greek-vase-painting-an-introduction>.

¹² “Ancient Awakening: Lenore Tawney’s ‘Lekythos,’” National Museum of Women in the Arts, January 6, 2016, <https://blog.nmwa.org/2016/01/06/ancient-awakening-lenore-tawneys-lekythos/>).

¹³ *Ibid.*



Athens circa 500 BCE¹⁴. This was because the white-ground technique produced comparatively fragile results and so would only be employed for items not intended for everyday use¹⁵.

The technique used on this particular squat lekythos is known as the red-figure technique, developed at the tail-end of the 6th Century, roughly 530 BCE¹⁶, which gradually replaced the black-figure technique of pottery painting. The development of the red-figure technique is attributed to a nameless Athenian artisan known as the Andokides Painter. The ancient Greeks would place their clay in water and swirl it around in a centrifugal motion, allowing the heavier elements in their clay to fall to the bottom of their cistern, and leaving relatively pure clay behind. From there, they would press out any additional impurities and air bubbles that may have formed during its dip, before it was placed onto the potter's wheel and shaped. This method utilized simple lines painted atop the face of the pottery, leveraging the naturally red coloration of Greek soil, so colored due to the higher concentration of iron in the soil and the purification method used for the clay. This iron content made Greek soil poor for growing.


Due to the ease of depicting greater detail, expressing position, depth, and activity, red-figure painting rapidly grew to supplant the previous black style, and by the early fifth century BCE, roughly 510 to 500 BCE, it was the de facto style of pottery art used in classical ancient Greece. A drawback of the black-figure technique was the difficulty in creating foreshortening¹⁷. By inverting the colors, the red-figure technique allowed for easier foreshortening by filling in the background with black and keeping the figures lighter. At the time this squat lekythos was

¹⁴ Art History 101 Glossary. <http://blog.stephens.edu/arh101glossary/?glossary=white-ground-technique>. Accessed May 7, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Horst Woldemar Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *A Basic History of Western Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 76.

¹⁷ Ibid.



created, the red-figure technique was well-established as the dominant decorative technique. It allowed for more variety of position and more depth of expression, so it made possible a more naturalistic style as was characteristic of the Classical period¹⁸.

Figure two, titled “Silver statuette of Venus,” is a Roman work from the first or second century CE during the Early or Mid Imperial period¹⁹. This is a representational work depicting the Roman goddess Venus, the counterpart of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. She was assimilated early into Roman culture, and her cult was very popular throughout Rome²⁰. It was likely created during the Early Empire, as by the time of the High Empire, Classical art was losing prominence and influence²¹. This time was known as Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, and was a time of great prosperity and peace, allowing Rome to grow²².

The statuette is relatively small, standing at only 6 7/8 inches by 2 inches, but is larger than many votive statues of its kind²³. Venus is shown standing, bent forward slightly at the waist with her upper body nude. She is clutching a fabric draped around her legs, below her buttocks. She may be bathing or stepping out of water, referencing her origins, as she is thought to have emerged fully-grown from the sea. In her right hand, she holds an apple, an example of iconography referencing the beauty contest that she is said to have won against Juno and Minerva²⁴. There is a high degree of naturalism in this depiction, as this is modeled on a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Silver statuette of Venus.”
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256241>. Accessed May 5, 2020.


²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Valerie Sioufas-Lalli, “Roman Art.”
https://nccarthistory.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/4/121443569/8_roman_art_v2.pdf. Accessed May 10, 2020.

²² Ibid.

²³ Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Silver statuette of Venus.”
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256241>. Accessed May 5, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.



Hellenistic prototype like many Roman works²⁵. Rome adopted many Greek cultural practices and absorbed a great deal of their religious figures, as Rome greatly admired Greek culture and art.

Roman religious culture centered deeply on a concept that they called “Pax Deorum,” or “Peace of the Gods,” which revolved around making sure that everything that Rome did was in service to the gods so that they would reciprocate with Roman prosperity²⁶. In function, it meant that all places in the Roman empire should consider themselves one Rome, which meant that religious differences were often settled with syncretism, or the practice of finding similar aspects of different gods between Rome and the cultures that it subsumed so that all Romans could worship the same gods in the same way. As a result, when Greece was absorbed into Rome via the conquests of Greece in 146 BCE, the Romans syncretized the Greek Pantheon into the Roman gods²⁷. As one of the first territories outside of the Italian peninsula that Rome conquered after the Punic Wars, Greek culture played a large role in influencing Rome’s own deities for centuries to come. Much of Roman art and culture bears a striking resemblance to the Greek pantheon more often than those of other later-absorbed cultures, including their sculpture and art, as well as the techniques to replicate them.


Venus herself is the Roman counterpart to Aphrodite primarily in that she is a goddess of fertility and beauty, though it is believed that the original Venus was a goddess of cultivated fields, gardens, and springtime²⁸. When Aphrodite was transported over to Roman culture,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “The Peace of the Gods: Elite Religious Practices in the Middle Roman Republic.” Princeton University Press. Accessed May 10, 2020. <http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/i11014.pdf>.

²⁷ Eckstein, Arthur. "What Is an Empire? Rome and the Greeks after 188 B.C." *South Central Review* 26, no. 3 (2009): 20-37. Accessed May 10, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/40645984.

²⁸ “Venus.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, April 4, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Venus-goddess>. Accessed May 10, 2020.




however, she picked up a few other deific responsibilities, such as being a goddess of victory and prosperity and specifically as a mother of Rome itself, and therefore its quasi protector²⁹. In a bid for political power, Julius Caesar claimed lineage with Rome's ancient founder, Romulus.

Romulus was the grandson of King Aeneas of Troy, the mortal son of Venus who sailed to the western coast of the Italian peninsula and settled the region of Latium, where Rome would one day be founded. Venus was worshipped in a similar capacity to Aphrodite for her domain over love and beauty, as well as the symbols that Greek culture used to represent Aphrodite, such as roses and myrtle. Additionally, Rome held a festival for Venus on April 1st, known as the Veneralia, in which Romans draped her statues in flowers and carefully cleaned and washed them, promising to fulfill the moral obligations of good Roman wives and husbands.

Myths of Aphrodite were also attributed to Venus as a result, including, most relevantly, her role in the old Greek story of the Illiad, in which Discordia (Eris), taking offense to not being invited to the wedding of two other gods, crafted a fine golden apple and said that it was for the fairest of the Goddesses. With her statement so vague, Venus (Aphrodite), Minerva (Athena), and Juno (Hera) all claimed that honor and argued with each other. Eventually, Venus was gifted the golden apple and inadvertently began the Trojan War by kidnapping the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, Helen.

Roman worship of their gods primarily took place in the home and outside of the various temples made for the gods, considered the dwellings of the gods. The belief in Rome was that the spirits of their ancestors watched over them, and that individual expression of worship was unimportant, but rather worship was to be conducted in strict adherence to religious rituals. This

²⁹ "Venus." Greek Gods and Goddesses. Accessed May 10, 2020.




was to keep the dangers of religious zeal to a minimum, by implementing strict standards and practices and emphasizing the importance of praising the gods in the right way, lest they be in violation of the Pax Deorum³⁰.

Near the first century CE, the Roman general Pompey (of the first triumvirate alongside Julius Caesar) dedicated a temple to Venus Victris (Venus of Victory) in 55 BCE, and Emperor Hadrian dedicated a temple to Venus and Rome Aeterna (The Eternal Rome), thereby pronouncing Venus as the protective mother of the Roman State. Venus was seen as a deity of equal importance to Mars in many ways. She was the spirit of Rome, at once its protector and mother, while Mars encapsulated the burning spirit of Roman conquest and strength.

For much of Rome's history, it was a republic, a citizen assembly of elected officials and headed by the senate for governance. This system lasted for four hundred years. During the early periods of Rome's history, its government was headed by the patrician class, wealthy land-owning elites who held the majority of the power. However, over the course of roughly two hundred years, the poorer classes, known as plebeians, continually held strikes and refused essential services when their rights were unequal to the patricians. Around 400 BCE, after many of these civil disruptions, the plebeian class was equal to the patricians in all but name, boasting the right to marry patricians and the right to run for office. Through many reforms and adjustments to the formula, Roman society eventually evolved into a relatively egalitarian one for ethnic Romans, with the possibility for upward mobility through the social strata.³¹

³⁰ Wasson, Donald L. "Roman Religion." Ancient History Encyclopedia, November 13, 2013. https://www.ancient.eu/Roman_Religion/. Accessed May 11, 2020.

³¹ MacMullen, Ramsay, and Nancy Thomson de Grummond. "Ancient Rome - The Transformation of Rome and Italy during the Middle Republic." Britannica.com. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 4, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-transformation-of-Rome-and-Italy-during-the-Middle-Republic>.




However, beginning in 133 BCE, political corruption overthrew this balance. During Tiberius Gracchus's attempts to redistribute land to the poor of Rome, he was beaten to death in the senate, and three hundred of his followers were killed. This arguably started Roman politics down the path of bribery and political murder³². It is in this fractured state that Julius Caesar came to power in the first century BCE, taking advantage of the laws created during the preceding century of bribes to leverage his deeds and political savvy into successfully declaring himself dictator for life. He effectively became Rome's king without the crown. However, starting in 31 BCE, due to the machinations of Octavian, soon Emperor Augustus, the republic was abolished and Rome's leadership consisted of emperors until the end of its contiguous history in 410 CE³³.

The Roman empire in the first century CE grew under chaotic leadership. After Emperor Augustus exited the throne came the fraught but brief reign of emperor Caligula, who was succeeded by Emperor Claudius. This signaled the start of a revolving door of Roman emperors over the first century CE, with Nero succeeding Claudius fourteen years later. In 69 CE came the year of imperial succession, with Emperors Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian all taking the throne in the span of the year, through political expulsion or, more often, murder, usually via the praetorian guard, bodyguards of the emperor.

Roman expansion brought them into contact with many different cultures, with many being partially absorbed into Roman culture, though none more so than the Greeks. Though Rome saw the defeated Greek people with a general ambivalence, they greatly admired their written works and culture, particularly its defined literature and learning structure. It was this

³² Little, Becky. "How Rome Destroyed Its Own Republic." History, November 5, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/rome-republic-augustus-dictator>. Accessed May 10, 2020.

³³ Horst Woldemar Janson and Anthony F. Janson, A Basic History of Western Art (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 111.




which Rome adopted most readily and incorporated into its sense of self, of what it meant to be Roman, alongside the Greek gods. The end result of this was a general Greco-Roman culture which Rome passed on to its subsequent empires³⁴.

Roman civilization also adopted the sculpture techniques used by the Greeks. The statuette was made using the lost-wax casting method. Lost wax casting is a labor-intensive, time-consuming method of sculpture-making which produces incredibly detailed works. Because they are made from metal and not more frangible materials, more complex action poses can be achieved without risk of damage. First a clay, mock version of whatever it is that the artist wishes to make is made. Once fired, the clay will hold its shape when the wax is pressed into it.

The wax is applied in a thin layer over the clay mold, just enough to ensure that the final product is sturdy without making it too heavy. The mold is touched up to add any important details before recasting. More clay is then pressed over the initial wax layer to create a thin negative in the desired shape for the final statue, with holes included in the design to allow the wax to run out and gases to escape. When fired, the wax will melt out, and metal can then be poured into the resulting empty space between layers of fired clay. Using this method, very fine detail can be preserved in the final product and it lets the artist save costs by keeping the necessary amount of metal used to a minimum. This allows for final works that are lighter, stronger, and far more detailed than any prior technique, in addition to being more durable than traditional marble pieces³⁵.

³⁴ Saller, Richard P, and E. Badian. "Ancient Rome." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., February 4, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Culture-and-religion>. Accessed May 11, 2020.

³⁵ "Lost-wax process." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, May 25, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/lost-wax-process>. Accessed May 10, 2020.



Many votive bronze statuettes of this nature have survived, despite the propensity for melting down metal statues to reuse the materials³⁶. However, silver was less commonly used, as silver was more likely to be used in coinage³⁷. Casting this statuette from silver shows the prosperity of the age in which it was created. This statuette was likely found in the home of a wealthy patrician, serving an apotropaic purpose.

These works show the cultural osmosis that occurred between Greece and Rome. From their religion and cultural practices to their artistic techniques and subject matter, Greek culture lived on in Rome in many ways. The lekythos, used for practical purposes, and the votive statuette, created for religious worship, are both different objects representing the religious practices of these two dynamic cultures.

³⁶ Department of Greek and Roman Art. "Roman Copies of Greek Statues." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rogr/hd_rogr.htm (October 2002)

³⁷ Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Silver statuette of Venus."
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