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Aphrodite (Venus) through the Ages

*Origin*

A prominent figure in mythology comes in the form of a goddess of beauty, desire, and love: Aphrodite. Her story in Greek mythology, according to Robert Graves’ telling of the Greek stories, Aphrodite came out of the sea foam upon a shell naked. Wherever she stepped on land, grass and flowers grew. The myth suggests the foam bubbled from Uranus’ genitals that Cronus threw into the sea, or that Zeus impregnated Dione. Aphrodite was given Hephaestus as husband by Zeus, and she had three children—Phobus, Deimus, and Harmonia—which she presented to Hephaestus as his but were really Ares’, god of war. The two, Aphrodite and Ares, were caught together and her husband Hephaestus created a hunting net, which was to hold Aphrodite and Ares to the bed. Caught again, this time by Hephaestus, the net was dropped on the two in bed, and they were stuck. Many of the other gods and goddesses came to the scene, which embarrassed Aphrodite (Graves, 24-25).

Aphrodite, later in her mythical Greek story, changes a pregnant Smyrna into a myrrh tree, which a sword breaks her in two, releasing an infant Adonis, who Aphrodite put in a chest and gave to Persephone, the Queen of the Dead, to keep hidden away. Though, Persephone’s curiosity was peeked, and she let Adonis out. Upon seeing him, Persephone wanted him for herself, but Aphrodite wouldn’t allow it. So, Calliope, one of the nine Greek muses, decided Adonis would be with Aphrodite for one-third of the year, Persephone for the second-third, and by himself the last third. Aphrodite didn’t play fair and by using her magic girdle attracted Adonis to stay with her. Persephone was not happy and had Adonis killed by one of Apollo’s boars (Graves, 43-47).

Though her mythological Greek story may seem scandalous, Aphrodite remains to be a symbol of love, beauty, and sex. Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love and sexuality, or Venus in Roman mythology, continues to be a muse and influence of popular culture today.

*Music*

When observing music, Aphrodite seems to be a figure for romantic songs and ballads, from symphonies and operas to modern pop. Some of the earliest music comes in the form of Renaissance composer, Philippe de Monte’s 1588, “La Déesse Venus,” which translates to “The Goddess Venus” According to Donald M. Poduska, this appears to be one of the first songs related to or influenced by the goddess Aphrodite. (202).

From there, there’s a large jump from 1588 to 1700 when John Blow composed “Sappho to the Goddess of Love,” a song written for Soprano and strings that portrays Sappho asking Venus (Aphrodite) to aid her with the art of love (202). Later in the same century, in 1792, Antonín Vranicky composed a symphony, “Aphrodite Symphony,” which suggests the story of Aphrodite through a nearly half an hour musical composition (202)

In the mid-1800s, Richard Wagner developed a three-hour opera called Tannhäuser. This 1845 opera is about a minstrel-knight in medieval Germany seeking release from Venus, who represents carnal love (202). At 183 minutes, this has a major influence of Aphrodite and creates a new interpretation of Aphrodite in a modern tale through the medium of music and opera.

Coming into the 20th century, two hymns to Aphrodite/Venus open the new era in 1904 and 1906. In 1904, Albéric Magnard wrote a symphonic poem highlightinh Venus’ power rather than adoration qualities. At thirteen and a half minutes, his musical poem, Hymne à Venus has a direct ode towards Venus (202). According to the American Symphony Orchestra, “The composer had the deepest respect for women. He was madly in love with his wife Julia and apotheosized his mother, who had committed suicide when Magnard was only four,” making Aphrodite a prime subject for focus and interpretation (Kirshnit). Likewise, Giranville Bantock does the same in 1906 with his song “Hymn to Aphrodite,” which is from the “song cycle of Sappho on text by Sappho about the Goddess of love” (202).

More contemporary influence of Aphrodite or Venus seen in modern music has been seen though pop love songs. A popular example comes from the 1959 teen ballad, “Venus,” performed by Frankie Avalon, which a “modern-day lover asks Venus to send him a the perfect mate” (203). Another song within the same era with “Venus in Blue Jeans” performed Jimmy Clanton in the United States and Mark Wynter in the United Kingdom, both in 1962. Using the same lyrics in both versions, the song comes from the perspective of someone who “likens his love to a teenage Venus” (203). A couple decades later, “Venus” by Bananarama came out that directly discusses about the goddess of beauty (203).

Even within the past thirty years, the influence Aphrodite or Venus has had on music continues. Being the goddess of love and beauty, the genre of love songs, ballads, and symphonies easily gravitate towards Aphrodite and Venus. It seems, though, that as music and writing became a stronger artform and more accessible form for others, the songs and music grew.

*Art*

Being a goddess of beauty, Aphrodite inherently became a prime figure for art. Subject of many nude sculptures and paintings for hundreds of years, Venus in particular, has been a strong female motivation in the world of art. Starting as early as the Hellenic era, statues and sculptures of Aphrodite have been recovered and constructed. A major sculptor, especially of Aphrodite, is Praxiteles, who focused on nude artistry (Seattle Art Museum). Currently in the Seattle Art Museum is a sculpture of Aphrodite’s torso from the second century, which they believe to be Egyptian. They say that this sculpture was made after Praxiteles, whose work was later frequently copied and interpreted by many (Seattle Art Museum).

In the Renaissance period, Sandro Botticelli crafted multiple paintings in admiration of Aphrodite and Venus. One piece he created with tempera on canvas was *The Birth of Venus*, which he painted between 1482 and 1485 (Uffizi Gallery Museum). This is the representation Botticelli created of Aphrodite’s birth, taking the stance of her appearance from the sea that she arrived upon a shell. After this piece, he created *Venus and Mars* with tempera and oil on poplar. Using the story of Mars and Venus being lovers, Botticelli depicts “Mars as unarmed and asleept while Venus is awake and alert,” and the meaning behind the piece being “love conquers war, or love conquers all” (The National Gallery, London).

Roughly a little over a hundred years later, Peter Paul Rubens used oil on panel to paint *Venus Before a Mirror* in 1614-1615. This painting, a symbol of beauty, depicts a naked Aphrodite viewing her portrait in a mirror held up by Cupid (Liechtenstein: The Princely Collections). The artist uses prime aspects of Aphrodite to depict the female form as well as implementing symbolism of Aphrodite’s story and nature as the goddess of beauty.

A trio of three different pieces show a continuation of Aphrodite’s influence within the world of art throughout the centuries. *Olympia*, painted by Edouard Manet in 1856, Manet based his idea from another painting. *Venus of Urbino* by Titian in 1538, created in the likeness and love for Aphrodite, Manet took Titian’s artwork and made his own “of a reclining nude woman, attended by a [black] maid and a black cat” (Manet.org). In 1974, an artist, Mel Ramos, refashioned Manet’s *Olympia*, which “blurs the line between the highly aestheticized nudes of fine arts and contemporary pornography” (Hood Museum of Art). All three of these, all different eras, have foundations in the Greek goddess Aphrodite and pays some homage to her in one aspect or another.

Because of Aphrodite’s open nature of love and sexuality and desire, she, within the art world, has been subject to censorship. This has been a continues topic even today. Most recently, in October 2011, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts opened an exhibit dedicated to Aphrodite. Part of the mission with this exhibit for them was to put away the past banning of erotic sculpture and art. This collection also paired her with Eros with the entire collection being 151 pieces (Sharpio).

A deep influence, due to her beauty, female form, and source of love, Aphrodite and Venus are attributed a lot of different artworks throughout the centuries. A prime subject for nude art and sculpture, Aphrodite’s traits as a beautiful goddess allow her to be a sexually open figure, which opens a vast amount of interpretation for artists.

*Literature*

Although not being as significantly influenced, literature does present some inspiration by Aphrodite and Venus. Again, being a love symbol and the epitome of the female form, she does become an encouragement of developing suitable female characters.

A largely reprinted and adored piece of literature directly corresponding with Aphrodite is Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. One of Shakespeare’s first poems, *Venus and Adonis*, gained immediate likeness in 1593. The nearly 1200-lined narrative poem describes the story of Venus (Aphrodite) and her love and seduction of Adonis, as laid out in her mythological story (Folger Shakespeare Library). This poetic retelling was so popular when it was first published, ten editions were printed before Shakespeare died in 1616 (Shakespeare Documented).

In the early 1800s, six hymns by Albert Pike appeared in the American Monthly Magazine in 1830: “To Neptune,” “To Apollo,” “To Venus,” “To Diane,” “To Mercury,” “To Bacchus.” These were written in two differently inspired sources, Pike wrote these odes in the influenced by Keats and the goddess Aphrodite, among other gods and goddesses, admiring their traits and god-like wonder (Riley, 365-357; Pike).

Even characters are influenced by Aphrodite in the realm of character traits. Being a figure of female beauty and love, many women characters are likened to Aphrodite. A symbolic take of this is Willa Cather’s 1920 erotic short story “Coming, Aphrodite!” The way the author characterizes the main female character closely to Aphrodite’s aspects: “In this story, Cather presented her readers with a fully-realized depiction of a young, single woman happy in her physicality, aware of her body and its desires, and who makes free decisions about her own sexuality, unencumbered by social taboos or conventions” (Hamilton, 857).

*Conclusion*

Throughout the centuries, even directly after the development and immediate popularity of the Greek and Roman myths of the gods and goddesses, the continuation of influence and popularity of the mythic figures are still relevant today. Due to the extreme love and adoration to other-worldly gods with supernatural powers on a humanistic level, the ongoing popularity of these myths have not been lost, even though some of the darkest parts of history for the fine arts. From music to art and literature, the influences of gods, especially the goddess Aphrodite and Venus, continues to be a source of inspiration of composers, writers, poets, artists, and sculptors today. Even being centuries old, the prevalence and respect for the mythology of the Greeks and Romans will continue to have ties in current popular culture for centuries to come.

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