Antonio Corso

THE ART OF PRAXITELES II
THE MATURE YEARS

«L’ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER
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FIFTH CHAPTER

PRAXITELES AT HIS PEAK (AROUND 364-360)

Before the late 360's, Praxiteles' fame was established mainly in Athens, but afterwards he built up an international reputation. This process harks back to the creation by this sculptor of a statue of Aphrodite which would have been bought by the Cnidians and which was going to become one of the most famous statues of the Greek world. It was the Cnidian Aphrodite which established Praxiteles world-wide fame.

22. THE CNIDIAN APHRODITE

After the works of the middle 360's (especially after the Triad of Thespiae), the time was ripe, for Praxiteles, to represent Aphrodite in all her beauty: the result was the Cnidian Aphrodite.

The statue dates to the years 364-1, the high point of Praxiteles’ career, for according to Pliny 34. 50:

"In the 104th Olympiad (= 364-1) flourished Praxiteles” (transl. Loeb).

From Pliny we also learn that the statue was made at the same time as the Coan Aphrodite, which dates after the foundation of Cos in 366/5.

It is usual for the peak of an artist’s career to be identified with his most famous work.

See Pliny 36. 20-1:

"Praxiteles is an artist whose date I have mentioned among those of the makers of bronze statues, but in the fame of his work in marble he surpassed even himself (...) and yet superior to anything not merely by Praxiteles, but in the whole world, is the Venus, which many people have sailed to Cnidus to see. He had made two figures, which he put up for sale together. One of them was draped and for this reason was preferred by the people of Cos, who had an option on the sale, although he offered it at the same price as the other. This they considered to be the
only decent and dignified course of action. The statue which they refused was purchased by the people of Cnidus and achieved an immeasurably greater reputation" (transl. Loeb).

Lucian, *Juppiter tragoedus* 10 remembers that the Cnidian Aphrodite was the outcome of Praxiteles' vision: "You (*scil.*: Aphrodite) have been turned by Praxiteles' fancy (*doxa*) into Aphrodite in this manner".

Moreover, Himerius, *Orationes* 64. 4, refers to the carving of the Cnidia in the workshop of Praxiteles: "The workshop of Praxiteles was small, but everybody travelled to Cnidus in order to see the statue".

Praxiteles' ambitious claim that the goddess' divine beauty could be translated into terms of human beauty was based on the notion that other men before him, as Paris, Anchises, Adonis, had seen Aphrodite nude. Of particular significance to Praxiteles was the example of the Judgement of Paris.

See the following epigrams:

*Anthologia Graeca* 16. 160 (by Plato):
"Paphian Cytherea came through the waves to Cnidus, wishing to see her own image, and having viewed it from all sides in its far-seen shrine she cried: 'Where did Praxiteles see me naked?'
Praxiteles did not look on forbidden things, but the steel carved the Paphian as Ares would have her" (transl. Loeb).

161 (by the same Plato):
"Neither did Praxiteles nor the chisel work thee, but so thou standest as of old when thou camest to judgement" (transl. Loeb).

168 (anonymous):
"Paris, Anchises and Adonis saw me naked. Those are all I know, but how did Praxiteles contrive it?" (transl. Loeb).

162 (anonymous):

159 (anonymous):
"Who gave a soul to marble? Who saw Cypris on earth? Who wrought such love-longing in a stone? This must be the work of Praxiteles' hands, or else perchance Olympus is bereaved since the Paphian has descended to Cnidus" (transl. Loeb).

170 (by Hermodorus):
"When you see, stranger, the Cnidian Cytherea, you would say this, 'Rule alone over mortals and immortals', but when you look
at Pallas in the city of Cecrops boldly brandishing her spear, you will exclaim, ‘Paris was really a bumpkin’” (transl. Loeb).

169 (anonymous):
“Gaze from every side at the divine beauty of the foam-born Paphian and you will say, ‘I applaud the Phrygian’s judgement’. Again when you look at the Attic Pallas you will cry out, ‘It was just like a neatherd for Paris to pass her by’ “ (transl. Loeb).

165 (by Evenus):
“Pallas and the consort of Zeus said, when they saw the Cnidian, ‘We are wrong in finding fault with Paris’ “ (transl. Loeb).

166 (by the same Evenus):
“The neatherd alone saw of old on the mountain of Ida her who gained the prize of beauty, but Praxiteles has set her in full view of the Cnidians, having the vote of Paris to attest his skill” (transl. Loeb).

163 (by Lucian):
“None ever saw the Paphian naked, but if anyone did, it is this man who here erected the naked Paphian”.

(transl. Loeb, with few amendments).
In my first volume on the art of Praxiteles, I stressed that, in the Platonic environment of our sculptor, the beauty which is closest to divine perfection was thought to be known through the least imperfect examples of earthly beauty. Moreover, because a personal knowledge of beauty is possible through one’s inner feelings, it was regarded best to employ examples which provoke this feeling.

For this reason, Praxiteles used as models two courtesans who were also his lovers: Phryne for the goddess’ body and Cratina for the head. Posidippus, *Peri Knidou*, frg. 147 Austin and Bastianini, handed down by Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 4. 47, informs us of Cratina: “Praxiteles, as Posidippus shows clearly in his book on Cnidus, when fashioning the statue of Cnidian Aphrodite, made the goddess resembles the form of his mistress Cratina, that the miserable people might have the sculptor’s mistress to worship” (transl. Loeb).

Arnobius 6. 13 remarks on the same information: “Who ignores, if he reads again Posidippus, that Praxiteles, competing with his own skill, copied the appearance of the Cnidian Venus from the features of the courtesan Cratina, whom the poor man was desperately loving? But is she the sole Venus, who had her fame increased because her face (*vultus*) has been taken from the one of a courtesan?” (transl. Loeb).

Concerning Phryne, see Athenaeus 13. 591 a: “The sculptor Praxiteles, being in love with her (*scil.*: Phryne), modelled
his Cnidian Aphrodite from her" (transl. Loeb).

Arethas, scholium to Clement, _ad locum_ echoes:

“The girl-friend of Praxiteles (scil.: Phryne): (...) this statue of Aphrodite (scil.: the Cnidia) had been carved similar to the courtesan Phryne, who was the girl-friend of the sculptor”.

These examples, and especially the _itinerarium in divinum_ described by Plato in his dialogue _Symposium_, offered Praxiteles direct inspiration for his goddess. See especially Pliny 36. 21: the statue “is believed to have been made in this way with the blessing of the goddess herself” (transl. Loeb).

It is well known that a statue could be infused with a divine or heroic subject through magical practices, which assured the epiphany of the subject in the portrayal (see especially the passages of Meleager and Callistatus reported in the first volume on the art of Praxiteles and concerning the Archer Eros, the Eros of Thespiae, the Euripidean Dionysus and the Eros _diadumenus_ respectively).

In the case of Aphrodite, as we are told in the epigram attributed to Plato, _Anthologia Graeca_ 16. 160, mentioned above, this was supplied through the iron chisel used for making this statue and for representing the beauty of the goddess. Iron, was the symbol of Ares, Aphrodite’s lover. This notice, after Plato, is handed down by Ausonius, _Epigrammata_ 62 Green:

“On a statue of Venus sculptured by Praxiteles.
The real Venus, when she saw the Cnidian Cypris, said:
‘Methinks, Praxiteles, thou hast seen me unclad’.
‘I have not seen thee, ’twould be sin: but ’tis with steel I finish every work.
Steel is at the disposal of Mars Gradivus.
Therefore my steel chisel has fashioned a goddess such as the Cytherea whom it knew to have pleased its lord’ “ (transl. Loeb).

The marble was Parian, as we know from the _Amores_ 13, attributed to Lucian:5

“she (scil.: the Cnidian Aphrodite)’ s a most beautiful statue of Parian marble” (transl. Loeb).

Parian marble was Praxiteles’ favourite marble, especially for sculpting figures of beauty, including the Thespian Eros. In classical antiquity, Parian marble was considered of the best quality (see especially Pliny 36. 14 and Quintilian 2. 19. 3).

Praxiteles’ choice of marble perhaps also depended on the belief that, particularly in Parian marble, stone statues of deities were immanent, awaiting the sculptor’s removal of superfluous material and the release of natural works of art (see Pliny 36. 14).
The statement of Cicero, *de divinatione* 2. 21. 48
"in omni marmore sit inesse (...) Praxitelia capita"
confirms that such an endeavour was already labelled Praxitelean in the middle Hellenistic period (Cicero attributes a reflection about it to the Academic philosopher Carneades).

Ezechiel Spanheim recognized the image of the Cnidian Aphrodite on a Cnidian coin (fig. 1) as early as 1671⁶, enabling Beger in 1701 and Richardson in 1728 to identify copies in the Bellori Aphrodite and in the Belvedere Aphrodite (fig. 2)⁷ respectively.

At least 335 copies and variations of this creation are known. It was the most copied masterpiece of all classical antiquity⁸.

The goddess’ appearance had been given in the *Amores* attributed to Lucian, 13:

“In the midst (scil.: of the temple of Aphrodite at Cnidus) thereof sits the goddess (...) arrogantly smiling a little as a grin parts her lips. Draped by no garment, all her beauty is uncovered and revealed, except in so far as she unobtrusively uses one hand to hide her private parts. So great was the power of the craftsman’s art that the hard unyielding marble did justice to every limb. Charicles at any rate raised a mad distracted cry and exclaimed: ‘Happiest indeed of the gods was Ares who suffered chains because of her’. And, as he spoke, he ran up and, stretching out his neck as far as he could, started to kiss the goddess with importunate lips. Callicratidas stood by in silence with amazement in his heart” (transl. Loeb).

This description is echoed later by Cedrenus 1. 564:
“the Cnidian Aphrodite of white stone, naked, shielding with her hand only her pudenda” (transl. Mango, with amendments).
as well as by Tzetzes, Chiliades 8, historiae 195. 370:
“The statue at Cnidus, the naked Aphrodite”.

The copies are divided into two categories, named after well-known examples: the Belvedere (nt. 8, no. 260) and the Colonna (nt. 8, no. 259) (fig. 3). The Belvedere is closer to the figure on the Cnidian coins than the Colonna sub-type, and may be truer to Praxiteles’ creation. The second appears to be a later re-interpretation, following the same iconography.

Aphrodite is represented bending forwards to pick up her garment after having washed herself in a bathing-place. The site was probably in a forest, the topos where Praxiteles’ deities are often placed.

In Greek mythology, Aphrodite bathed before showing herself to Paris. Moreover, a tradition, harking back to the 4th c. BC, links the Cnidian Aphrodite to the judgement of Paris. It is, therefore, probable that this statue of Aphrodite represents the goddess at her bath before the judgement of Paris. As I have pointed out above, Praxiteles believed that the Judgement of Paris was the guarantee that a mortal could admire goddess’ beauty, translated into female terms. That is probably why Praxiteles fleshe out the goddess, by imagining her while bathing and before facing the competition with Hera and Athena.

Bathing had also the function of purifying and regenerating the goddess, and her nakedness was also intended to express a state of primordial purity thus regained. Having completed her bath, the goddess was returned to her primordial purity, and a paradeigma to mortal men.

Men, as we know from several sources, especially the Amores attributed to Lucian, being re-generated by a vision of absolute beauty, transcend vulgar love and turn to the heavenly one.

The small kalpis on the left side of the goddess probably contained perfumes with which she has anointed herself - a very apparent symbol of purification.

The act of covering her pubes with a hand may relate to her bathing in open air, signifying her fear of the gaze of strangers, such as mythical inhabitants of the forests, or heroic personages such as Tiresias or Actaeon, who have seen other goddesses bathing. The shielding of her pubes, the source of life, with her right hand could mean a very favourable fecundatio mundi. The age-old tradition of representations of the goddess shielding her pubes with her right hand must have encouraged Praxiteles to adopt this feature. In Greece, during the 5th and the early 4th c. BC, the most important representations of Aphrodite had draped images. In ‘Kleinkunst’, however, the goddess was sometimes represented naked, particularly when she was depicted either bathing or in a shell.

The carving of a monumental statue of naked Aphrodite was an innovation of Praxiteles. His half-draped Thespian Aphrodite (fig. 4) set
Fig. 2. Cnidia Belvedere, Rome, Vatican Museums, storerooms, no. 4260, front view (see nt. 8, no. 260) (photo courtesy of the Vatican Museums).
the stage which resulted in the Cnidian Aphrodite and the concept of the goddess, from draped to naked.

The sculptor had probably been inspired by the famous picture of Helen made by Zeuxis in the age of Socrates. In fact, Zeuxis had already aimed at representing Helen as the absolute paradigm of female beauty. This aim peaked as a consequence of the closeness of Zeuxis to Socrates, who may have anticipated the aim at knowing absolute ideas and translating them into worldly terms, which will characterize the cultural environment of Plato. Moreover, this painter had already represented Helen naked. He used five life models, taking from each their most perfect form and therefore fleshing out the body of the beautiful heroine. However, while the models, who inspired Zeuxis, were virgin girls, Praxiteles took inspiration from courtesans (Cratina and Phryne) who were also his lovers. This circumstance shows a shift toward the emotional involvement of the artist in his artistic creations, in which he pours his own internal feelings and his subjective experience. The fact that the models were now no longer virgin girls, but courtesans makes more clear the hedonistic aspect of the artistic creation, which testifies of the love of men with courtesans and perhaps, as we shall see, even advertises it. Both in the cases of the Helen of Zeuxis and of the Cnidia, the myth of Paris seems to have offered mythic ideals of female beauty which the two artists wanted to recapture, i.e. Helen, the most beautiful woman, and Aphrodite, admired as a naked woman exactly in the circumstance of the Paris' judgement. Finally, it is likely that Helen had been painted by Zeuxis while bathing. The circumstances that already Zeuxis, as Praxiteles, wrote epigrams bearing comments on his artistic activity and that he too was wealthy and confident to have brought his own art to its peak may have encouraged Praxiteles to take inspiration from this renowned painter and from his most famous creation, i.e. his Helen. Although the most famous picture of Helen by Zeuxis had been dedicated at Croton, in southern Italy, a lesser known picture with the same subject and by the same painter, probably a duplicate, stood at Athens. Therefore, Praxiteles could well have been aware of the appearance of this creation.

From a formal point of view, the Cnidian Aphrodite is conceived for viewing from the front and back, but not from the sides. Consequently, the statue lacks a sense of space and three-dimensional quality. The absence of space is typical of other sculptures by Praxiteles (see volume 1).

In the case of the Cnidian Aphrodite, the absence of space emphasizes her complete nakedness, and particularly her back, suggesting seduction. This conception of the figure reflects a theatrical approach, reducing the statue to two view-points, clearly a pictorial and not a sculptural idea. It
Fig. 3. Cnidia Colonna, Rome, Vatican Museums, Gabinetto delle Maschere, no. 812, front view (see nt. 8, no. 259) (photo courtesy of the German Archaeological Institute of Rome).
is possible that Praxiteles was influenced by his numerous commissions relating to the theatrical life of Athens and especially for choregic monuments.

The stance of the goddess shows a sinuosity more pronounced than in the early works of Praxiteles - compare especially the Eros with a bow, the wine-pouring Satyr and the Thespian statues - but less pronounced than works of his full maturity, such as the Apollo Sauroctonus (fig. 5) and the Resting Satyr: Nor are the jar and drapery merely static supports for the figure - as in the cases of the leaning Sauroctonus and of the Resting Satyr. This feature dates the Cnidian Aphrodite to the late 360s, later than the Eros with a bow and Praxiteles’ other works of the early 360s, but before the two most important works of his full maturity, the Sauroctonus and the Resting Satyr.

Concerning the anatomy, A. Della Seta in particular, in his book *Il nudo nell’arte*, has shown its direct derivation from the actual young female body, confirming the ancient tradition of Praxiteles’ inspiration from young female models.

However, a part of her anatomy, especially the back, is derived from the male body, the focus of the *Amores* attributed to Lucian, 14:

“The Athenian who had been so impassive an observer a minute before, upon inspecting those parts of the goddess (scil.: Praxiteles’ Cnidia) which recommend a boy, suddenly raised a shout far more frenzied than that of Charicles: ‘Heracles’ he exclaimed, ‘what a well-proportioned back! What generous flanks she has! How satisfying an armful to embrace! How delicately moulded the flesh on the buttocks, neither too thin and close to the bone, nor yet revealing too great an expanse of fat! And as for those precious parts sealed in on either side by the hips, how inexpressibly sweetly they smile! How perfect the proportions of the thighs and the shins as they stretch down in a straight line to the feet! So that’s what Ganymedes looks like as he pours out the nectar in heaven for Zeus and makes it taste sweeter. For I’d never have taken the cup from Hebe if she served me.’ While Callicratidas was shouting this under the spell of the goddess, Charicles in the excess of his admiration stood almost petrified, though his emotions showed in the melting tears trickling from his eyes. (....) 17: Callicratidas smiled and said: ‘(...) Even now in this (scil.: in the love of a man with the Cnidia) we have a clear proof of the truth about the Aphrodite whom you hold in such esteem’. When Charicles asked how this was, I thought Callicratidas made a very convincing reply. For he said that, although the love-struck youth had seized the chance to enjoy a whole uninterrupted night and had complete liberty to glut his passion, he nevertheless made love to the marble as though to a boy, because, I’m sure, he didn’t want to be confronted by the female parts. (...)
Fig. 4. Arles Aphrodite, cast without the restorations by Girardon, Arles, Ancient Arles Museum.
54: Perhaps someone will assert this is a shameful thing to say (scil.: the anal sex), but, by Aphrodite of Cnidus, it's the truth” (transl. Loeb).

This mix of the principal female features with minor male ones perhaps functions to achieve ideal beauty, transcending both sexes. From Lucian's *Amores*, in the passages just quoted, it is known that the lovers of boys also satisfied their erotic taste in the Cnidian Aphrodite.

The style treatment is quite different in the Belvedere and Colonna types. The Belvedere shows a softness of surface, while the Colonna shows a more advanced treatment of the surfaces as one continuous transition. Consequently, the Belvedere type fits in with Praxiteles’ work of the late 360s, between the wine-pouring Satyr and the Centocelle Eros on the one hand, and, on the other, the Resting Satyr and other later creations.

The Colonna type rendering cannot be dated so early, because the mutation of the body's structure is here too pronounced.

On the basis of the numismatic evidence, I believe that the Belvedere type gives the true features of Praxiteles’ creation and that its treatment confirms my proposed dating of the Cnidian Aphrodite.

The body of the Cnidian Aphrodite - and in particular that of the Belvedere type - is similar to that of the Arles type of the goddess, which derives from Praxiteles’ Aphrodite at Thespiae. This similarity can be explained with the the circumstance that both Praxitelean Aphrodites were inspired by Phryne.

On the contrary, the face of the Cnidian / Belvedere goddess differs from that of the Arles type. This is likely due to the fact that the Arles type’s head was based on Phryne, but the Cnidian head, as the reported testimony of Posidippus argues, is derived from Cratina.

The Cnidian head also agrees with the typical Praxitelean heads of young female subjects of the 360s: the elliptical shaped face, the triangular forehead, with its curved upper border, the almond-shaped eyes, the strong nose, the small mouth and the protruding chin. The hair is divided in the middle; wavy locks are brought back and collected at the nape in a chignon. Two fillets encircled the head, adding to its decorative beauty. Since Aphrodite wore enchanting fillets when she faced the judgement of Paris (see Lucian, *Dearum judicium* 10), they may be endowed with magic charms. An armlet on the left limb of the goddess (fig. 6), which was worn by the Belvedere copy (see nt. 8, no. 260) and therefore also characterized the original, probably had the same magic function.

The young Athenian painter Nicias may have waxed the surfaces, to produce a blending of light and shade, to convey the impression of flesh, and may have painted other parts: hair, fillets, eyes, lips, drapery and vase.
Fig. 5. Bronze copy of Praxiteles’ Apollo Sauroctonus, in Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art (photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art).
Praxiteles was thought, in the Xenocratean art criticism tradition handed down by Pliny, to have perfected painting in wax. See Pliny 35. 122:

"Some people think it (scil.: painting in wax and designs in encaustic) was a discovery of Aristides, subsequently brought to perfection by Praxiteles" (transl. Loeb).

Pliny 35. 133 relates that the painter Nicias collaborated on Praxiteles’ statues:

"It is Nicias of whom Praxiteles used to say, when asked which of his own works in marble he placed highest, ‘the ones to which Nicias has set his hand’ - so much value did he assign to his colouring of surfaces" (transl. Loeb).

Since the acme of Nicias dates to the years 332-29 (Pliny 35. 133) and he was still active during the first generation of Alexander’s Diadochi, around 300 BC (see Plutarch, Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum 11. 2), he was younger than Praxiteles. It is reasonable that the painter was employed in Praxiteles’ workshop when he was very young, i.e. in the period of the peak of Praxiteles’ activity (probably in the late 360s), before becoming well-established and embarking on an independent activity.

From his tutelage under Praxiteles, Nicias learned to paint white marbles (see Pausanias 7. 22. 6), a preference for female subjects, as well as a definition of surfaces through a play of light and shade (see Pliny 35. 130-1).

Through this interpretation of the surfaces as a continuous blending of light and shade, the Cnidian Aphrodite suggested a dreamy, magic sense of physical presence.

Having completed the statue, Praxiteles put the work up for sale in his workshop, together with a draped statue of the goddess, which was also made in the same period, according to Pliny 36. 20-1 (cited above). Pliny also informs us that the Cnidian purchased the naked Aphrodite.