

VÉNUS DE MILO: MUSEUM SHOWCASE, CULTURAL SYMBOL AND SCIENTIFIC MYSTERY

Silviu ANGHEL

Few cases exist in the annals of scholarship in which the immortal gods have thrown such a bitter yet tempting apple of discord into the midst of the world of scholars. The statue of Vénus de Milo was discovered in April 1820 by a Greek peasant clearing his land of stones useful for reuse. Ph. Voutier, a young French officer in his majesty navy, bonapartiste and enthusiastic minor participant in the Greek war of independence, digging on the island, witnessed the discovery. However, he was soon pushed aside by ever increasing interests, and became thoroughly disillusioned. He did not publish his recollections, and instead left the navy and joined Byron to fulfill his destiny by the sword. The statue was embarked for Paris and arrived at the Louvre where it was put on display immediately. The Vénus de Milo has become, partly through a scientific turmoil we will discuss below and partly because of its esthetic value on of the most famous statues in the world. Indeed, after the return of the Venus Capitolini to Rome, the Vénus de Milo was one of the few female nudes in the Louvre. It was thought to represent the classical ideal of the female body, the equivalent of the Polykleitos's male nudes.

Soon after its arrival, however, controversies started to abound about the statue. Above all (fig. 1), the broken plinth and arms of the statue were reconstructed in a variety of ways. Did the statue hold an apple? If so, to whom was it offered? Was there a male divine figure (a Mars) next to her? Over the years many forests were cut, and many models presented as to the reconstruction

of the statue. The angle of the plinth and of the hands was studied in the minutest details. However, the most important data about the statue, the testimonia of its founder, and other accounts, were ignored. Among other things, these witnesses suggest that the statue was found hidden in a niche, and not alone: its arms were lying by her side, and with her three other herms occupied the space. The thought of ugly archaic looking herms put together with a masterpiece of the female idealized body horrified the scientific world. Only recently did this enraged debate come to an end. This paper analyzes the sources about its discovery, corroborated with newly cataloguing work in the Louvre to present the true account of the discovery, placement and composition of the statue. The second part analyzes how this scientific progress was received by the Louvre and its managers, and the decisions taken on how to display and present the statue.

The finding of the statue

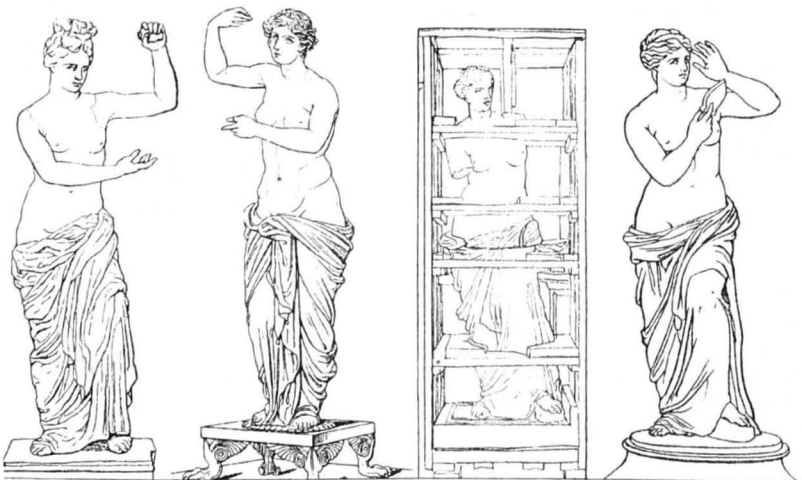
As we've said before, the most important evidence we have about the statue were the accounts of its discovery. Only fifty four years later did Voutier decide to publish his memoirs, in response to existing contradictive testimonia. In particular, the count Brest, who acted to purchase the statue, published later accounts which abounded in inexactitudes. Two more accounts exist (now collected in de Lorris 1994), that of the famous explorer Dumont d'Urville, whose ship arrived at Milos three weeks after the

discovery and by count Marcellus. These three (Voutier, d'Urville and Marcellus) sources are the only ones who saw the place of discovery (either in the moment of discovery or a few days afterwards), and are our most reliable sources¹. They do leave omissions, and this, coupled with numerous other erroneous reports served only to fuel a long and bitter dispute about the statue. This confusion was greatly enhanced by systematic chaos at the Louvre. The statues or inscriptions sent with the *Vénus de Milo* were lost, and only some found after persistent searches through its vast collections. The reliability of Voutier's 1874 account was in fact proved by his drawing of the herms and their inscriptions. These had been lost upon their arrival at the Louvre but were found after – and with the help of – Voutier's testimony. It is better to follow Voutier's account in extenso:

Dans le loisir d'une relâche à Milo, je voulus faire des fouilles... Après avoir examiné les lieux, il fut hors de doute que je devais commencer mes recherches au pied du rocher escarpé sur lequel avait été située la ville antique dont les débris à sa destruction devaient y avoir été précipités... Pendant que je surveillais mes travailleurs, deux braves marins de L'Estafette, à vingt pas de nous, un paysan tirait des pierres des ruines d'une petite chapelle enfouie par l'exhaussement du sol et qui montrait encore des traces de peintures intérieures. Le voyant s'arrêter et regarder avec attention au fond de son trou, je m'approchai: il venait de mettre au jour la partie supérieure d'une statue en fort mauvais état, et comme elle ne pouvait pas servir dans sa construction, il allait la recouvrir de décombres. (d'Urville, Marcellus, Voutier 1994: 100-1)

1. Interestingly d'Urville is the first to have written about the arms, stating that the right hand is holding an apple and the left the garment. He also drew a sketch, presented to the count Marcellus, which does not show arms. It seems therefore that d'Urville is simply describing the statue as he imagines it. This explorer did not know of the future debate on the statue, and putting this statement on paper without realizing its importance points to its sincerity. D'Urville's drawing of inscriptions at the site have also proved correct and all the more invaluable as today the inscriptions are lost.

fig. 5.
Reconstituiri
ale lui *Vénus*



Encouraged by the find, the Frenchman and the Greek kept on searching for further fragments. Voutier states that the effort for further fragments (i.e. arms) was stopped because nothing could be found within "quatre metres carrée circonscrit de murs" (d'Urville, Marcellus, Voutier 1994: 102).

(see also see PhMil02, Voutier's own drawing)

This story is corroborated by the other two main sources:

D'Urville (d'Urville, Marcellus, Voutier 1994: 20)

Trois semaines avant notre arrivée à Milo, un paysan grec, bêchant son champ renfermé dans cette enceinte (i.e. un coteau rocailleux n.a.), rencontra quelques pierres de taille; comme ces pierres employées par les habitants dans la construction de leurs maisons, ont une certaine valeur, cette considération l'engagea à creuser plus avant, et il parvint ainsi à déblayer une espèce de niche dans laquelle il trouva une statue en marbre, deux Hermès, et quelques autres morceaux également en marbre.

Marcellus (d'Urville, Marcellus, Voutier 1994: 30)

un pauvre Grec, nommé Yorgos occupé à bêcher vers la fin du mois de février 1820, heurta de son fer et découvrit peu à peu une sorte de niche oblongue, bâtie dans le roc qui dominait et bornait sa propriété. Il parvint à déblayer cette petite construction, ainsi qu'une cave étroite enfoncée de cinq ou six pieds au-dessous du niveau du sol actuel.

Voutier was digging at the foot of an escarpment, near the village Castro. The ancient city (or rather its acropolis) was located just above that, and the French sailor was hoping to find objects fallen from the ancient city above. The place where the statue was found seemed to him to be a chappelle submerged by the extensive derailment of the escarpment. The other two accounts of d'Urville and Marcellus, who saw the place where the statue was found, corroborate this accounts and both speak of clearing a type of niche (d'Urville déblayer une espèce de niche/ Marcellus découvrit, peu à peu,

fig. 6.
Reconstituir
a lui Vénus



VÉNUS A SA TOILETTE. — (Restitution de Hasse.)

une sorte de niche oblongue). Marcellus adds that the niche was bâtie dans le roc qui dominait et bornait sa propriété. The place where the statue was seems therefore to have been dug in the rocky escarpment. This means accordingly that the stone wall the peasant was clearing was not the niche itself. As the peasant was probably digging vertically – since Voutier could see the peasant but the discovery was not visible, the chapelle must have been in the course of time covered (enfouie) with soil and rocks from above. Giorgios stopped and looked “au fond de son trou”, which drew Voutier’s attention. This seems to indicate a cavity, an empty space. In it some soil had infiltrated either before or during the digging.

The niche was ‘surmonté’ by a large block bearing an inscription. Whether this was fixed in the back wall of the niche or simply reused to block the niche is unclear in the accounts, and not surprisingly so since it was one of the first to be displaced by Giorgios. The inscription reads:

Βάκχιος Σάττου ὑπογυμνασιάρχῃσας]
τάν τε ἐξέδραν καί τὸ [ἄγαλμα]?
Ἑρμῶι Ἡρακλεῖ

Bakchios son of Sattos being a gymnasiarch (dedicated)
the exedra and the [statue]
to Hermes and Herakles
[ἄγαλμα]: Furtwangler, followed
by Hiller von Gaertringen.

Fate seems to have erased the most important line in the inscription. The second line is reported either to start either indented, or at the same

alignment with line 1 as presented above. The first option alone would fit the length of agalma. At the time of writing these lines it is not clear which version is that of d’Urville, and he himself seems to not have paid any attention to this detail.

The niche was large, though several contradicting sets of dimensions are given: square with a width of 4 feet (de Clarac), semicircle with a diameter of 4 meters (Doussault²). Voutier’s statement of the floor is the most reliable one, and the drawing presented by Doussault is purely conjectural – and contradictory to his own stated dimensions. What was the niche dug for? Morey, who visited the site in 1838 and saw it states that it was a great tomb, and that the statue was placed there to escape destruction from Christians. He was led there by Giorgios’ son, but whether he saw the exact same spot is very unclear. Others have argued that it was a kiln’s deposit, where the statues were awaiting destruction. This is the weakest of the hypotheses, being built solely on the idea that the ‘ugly’ herms must be separated from the gorgeous statue³! Nor is the contents of the discovery a shapeless pile of statuary and statue pieces piled to await destruction. Furtwangler argued that the niche was in part of the exedra and that the statue was therefore discovered in situ⁴. This is mostly conjectural, but it is possible that the niche was designed to hold this or another statue. But since it was lost, we will never know for sure. If the statue was found in situ, the difficulty is to explain what are the three hermes doing in there. One of them, it is now

2. He did not see or measure the place, but reconstructed them according to the dimensions of the consul Brest.

3. The originator of this explanation is S. Reinach (Reinach 1890 : 382): « cette explication romanesque [i.e. of burial as protection from Christians] ne rend pas compte d’un fait capitale: c’est qu’on a trouvé auprès de la statue, dans la même grotte, deux hermès et plusieurs fragments de marbre, tels que le pied chaussé d’un cothurne...J’ai la presque certitude qu’il n’y avait pas là une cachette, mais un magasin de chaufournier » He does use the term *cachette* several times, which made people quote him in support of the cachette hypothesis.

4. This idea is based not on any archaeological basis but his reconstruction of the statue and of the inscription above the niche (Furtwängler 1895: 304).⁵ Contra Chery and Sparkes 1982 52-57, who presume, without proof that because of the plinth inscription and the existence of a gymnasium in the locality that the statue was found there (followed by Kousser 1992). This would imply that the statue was found in situ. It is improbable that this is the case, because of the other herms found with the statue.

clear, fitted on the lost part of the plinth which extended to Vénus de Milo's left. The second one could not have been part of the same complex.

In conclusion, the niche was most probably dug in the living rock⁵. The stone wall and the existence of two more herms make me believe that we are indeed dealing with a cachette⁶.

The recent work of Marriane Hamiaux has clarified many of the aspects of the contents of the cache (Hamiaux 1998): the two hand fragments were found (MA 400 and 401), as well as the three herms (Ma 405 + Ma 1441; Ma 403; Ma 404), exactly as Voutier had said. A fragment of a foot was also found (MA 4794). One of them fits, according to him, the plinth. This problem remains dependent on his testimony, as the plinth was not found. Yet we have no real reason to doubt Voutier's description. The plinth fitted the broken part of statue, and he drew them accordingly. It also showed a square hole in it, which fit one of the imberbe herms⁷. The text of the is fortunately known, it is in effect an artist's signature:

[---]ανδρος [Μ]ηνίδου
[Ἄντι]ιοχευὸς ἀπὸ Μαιάδρου
ἐποίησεν
...andros of Menidos
from Antioch on the Meander
made (this)

One of the herms, the bearded one dedicated to Herakles, has its own base. The herm and the base had disappeared upon their entrance into the Louvre, the drawing of the base and of the herm by Voutier allowed Michon to

rediscover them. The base had been wrongly assorted with a funerary monument. The base bears an inscription (IG XII 1092):

[Θ]εοδωρίδας Λαιστράτου
Ἑρμῶι
Theodoridas, son of Laisstratos,
to Hermes

Even before the base was discovered in the depth of its second cachette at the Louvre, Hiller von Gaertringen, working only from imprecise drawings which gave the name as Alisistratos or Agisistratos⁸ saw the mistake, proposed the emendation and connected the base with IG XII 1096, yet another statue base found in 1877 on Milos by Tissot and currently in Athens: [Θ]εοδωρίδας Λαιστράτου Ποσειδᾶνι (Λαιστράτου is a dialectal form of Λαιστράτου). The paleography of both inscriptions is similar and dated to the 4th century BCE.

The life of Vénus de Milo in the Museum

As it becomes clear from the preceding pages, evidence for at least part of the elements in this puzzle had been available for some time. Though people of good faith such as Voutier and careful researchers such as Michon found documents in the Louvre archives that attest to the statue and its surroundings, these were not followed through and little was done by the Louvre over the years, both in finding of the objects, and in displaying the statue.

A number of series of directors or eminent researchers of the Museum believed this statue as the epitome of ancient art. Quatremère de Quincy in 1821 believed it was an original of the school of Praxiteles and that the signature of the plinth does not correspond to the statue; Clarac the director of the Louvre in 1821 believed it to be classical as well, and that the signature is sign of a repair. He restored the statue as an isolated figure as Aphrodita of Capua, holding a head band; Saint-Victor, again in 1821 believed the statue to be an original of the classical art, and that the signature is a restoration; he reconstructed the statue as an isolated figure holding an apple⁹. All these men were writing when the statue was brought to the Louvre, on the same ship as the herms, and with a receipt proving that they originated together. Why did they refuse to associate the statue? Of course fake associations did exist at the time, a period when un-professional digging resulted often in statues sold to museums by art dealers of more or less

honest reputations. This statue in particular was also courted by the Mavrocordats, then based in Walachia. The French acted faster, and the statue is now in Paris and not Bucharest. These men however, chose to ignore the data which suggested the association with the herms, because they adored the classical ideal of the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE. For them even an association with the Hellenistic period, a period of decadence when absolute rulers extinguished the flame of freedom, democracy or arts of the Greeks, was a major problem. Fifty years passed until the brilliance of Furtwängler showed that the plinth was authentic, and that the statue came with a herm.

Today the association with the herm is not in doubt. Even more, the statue is in effect not classical, as the plinth shows. The city of Antioch was a Seleucid foundation¹⁰, of the Hellenistic period. Most authors today will agree on a date between 150 and 50 BCE (Kousser 2005: 127-8). Yet the saga of the Vénus de Milo is not over. Though scientific publications have finally began to agree on it's date, position and association (see for instance Kousser 2005), this has not reached the general public and has not changed the way the statue is displayed. Though the statue is presented alone in a room, with ample space around it, able to accommodate a large number of visitors at any one time, no explanation is given regarding its origins, nor are the herms displayed with the statue. We do not wish to pass judgment on the museum policy, and fact it is not clear that the Louvre should be blamed for this.

6. For the story of the discovery, transportation and saga within the Louvre, several sources are necessary. The best three witnesses have been recently collected in a volume (Lorris 1994). Reinach gives several accounts (Reinach 1890, 1896, 1897). Reinach 1896 is particularly interesting for the inscriptions. For the Louvre, Etienne Michon (Michon 1900, 1902) discusses all internal documents, receipts, inventory numbers and letters found in the Louvre archive. Recently, a journalist put much of the evidence into a book (Curtis 1994). Finally, several newspapers contain a large number of letters and responses,



fig. 7. Reconstituire a lui Vénus

with interesting details of all parties involved.

In English, *The Nation* collection, online, is particularly interesting.

7. In fact Voutier mentions two Herms, and draws a bearded one with a separate base and the imberb one with our plinth.

8. Drawing by Voutier, who perhaps was thinking of the other plinth?

9. A. C.

Quatremère de Quincy, *Sur la statue antique de Vénus découverte dans l'île de Milo en 1820* ;

transportée à Paris par M. le Marquis de Rivière,

ambassadeur de France à la cour ottomane, Paris 1821 ; F. de

Clarac, *Sur la statue antique de la Vénus Victrix découverte dans l'île de Milo en 1820*, Paris

1821 ; J. B. de Saint-Victor, "Vénus de Milos", in P.

Pouillon, *Musée des Antiques dessiné et gravé*, I. *Les divinités*, Paris 1821 ;

10. For a list of Seleucid foundations and their dates see

Gatzel M. Cohen

Though belated, the scientific work of the museum has presented in a scientific form largely available the truth about the statue. Having been on display for over one hundred eighty five years, the statue has become part of the iconic message of the museum. Few of the millions of visitors through the museum do not stop to admire her. They mostly see in her an peak of classical art, widely publicized and presented in different media sets. The statue was used and imitated by many modern artists, such as Dalli's famous Venus with drawers. It's cultural value, as an ambassador of the ancient world, is higher and more important to the modern day public than it's scientific miscellanea.

As it is seen by the visitors of the museum, the statue is not only an iconic image of the Louvre or of classical sculpture. It has always had an educational value, leading, hopefully, to the better understanding of the Greek sculpture and sense of beauty in classical times. Any exhibit in a museum, no matter how famous it may be, transmits a message, generates specific experiences and thoughts. This is true above all for the Vénus de Milo. Displaying it in a certain context, the information released related to her are just some of the hints the museum transmits, that shape the educational messages related to the statue.

Due to its own history, to its physical characteristics, as well as to the scientific research behind it, the statue of Vénus de Milo has a high educational potential. This could be

creatively used during various educational programs for children and families, which would highlight specific aspects. This high potential could also be valorized in a different display, more intriguing.

Displaying it in a context related to its ancient history would challenge the visitors more. The statue would come alive and would provoke debates, beyond its artistic value. Visitors could find answers to many questions such as: who was Vénus? how did the concept of beauty evolved? what are the Herms? what is the practice of sculpture in classical Greece? how does the contemporary society relate to the ancient art?

All these questions could be addressed in the museum exhibit. The statue is now showed alone in a room, as a symbol of Classical Antiquity, of the collections of the Louvre and as an object of art. She attracts a very large number of visitors. Any major change that will drastically alter this environment will undoubtedly alter the way the statue is seen by the general public, and lead to a decreased number of visitors. However, a discrete presentation of many of these elements, not directly connected with the display, but only alluding to it, would enhance the experience for many people. It would allow those who are desiring to know more about what this statue is, where it comes from, and why it is so famous to answer their questions. This will enhance the value of the statue, rather than decrease it.

BIBLIOGRAFIE

- Cherry J. and Sparkes B. 1982: "A note on the topography of the ancient settlement of Melos" in Renfrew C., Wagstaff M. (edd.), *An island Polity. The archaeology of Exploitation in Melos*, London, 52-57;
- Curtis, Gregory 1994: *Disarmed. The story of the Venus de Milo*, New York.
- de Lorris, A, 1994: *Enlevement de Vénus : Dumont d'Urville, de Marcellus et Voutier*, Paris

- Furtwängler, Adolf 1895: *Masterpieces of Greek sculpture; a series of essays on the history of art*; ed. by Eugénie Sellers;
- Hamiaux, Marianne 1998: *Musée du Louvre. Les sculptures Grecques. II. La période hellénistique*, Paris;
- Kousser, Rachel 2005: "Creating the past: the Venus de Milo and the Hellenistic reception of Classical Greece" *AJA* 109 (2), 127-134;