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BEAUTY
HISTORY OF ART

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Ancient Greek artists were obsessed with the human form. Particularly compelling is the contrast between the female and male form in their Classical sculpture, which demonstrates a balance between naturalism and idealism as well as a focus on beauty. Aesthetically there appears to be a consistent image of the consummate woman and consummate man. Yet from the physicality of the sculptures around 500-300 BC emerges a broader, more cultural sense of what it means to be 'beautiful' in Ancient Greece, one that comprises a social, sexual and extremely gendered dynamic.

The features intrinsic to the depictions of women in the Classical period present stark contrasts with their male counterparts, one that hints at differing standards of beauty for both sexes. The rigid, more Egyptian style of korai (statues of young women), such as the Peplos Kore (c. 530 BC), features forward facing figures that had both feet firmly on the ground, one arm or both stiffly by their side, and flat drapery. She is perhaps a votive offering to the gods. A disparity of conventions exists between the female and male sculptures of this decade: the Kroisos Kouros of c. 530 BC, coeval to the Peplos Kore and found nearby, is consistent in rigidity of form, yet is completely naked. Arguably this difference lies in their purposes: the kouros is a grave marker for a warrior called Kroisos, whom, the inscription reads, "raging Ares destroyed when he was in the front ranks." The sculpture's aim is to emphasise this man's youth and strength in order to immortalise and glorify his part in battle. The muscles are meticulously defined, and one foot precedes the other in a stance of energetic, martial potential. The desire to show off these characteristics perhaps explains his nakedness, whereas the Peplos Kore's purpose is only a symbolic offering and therefore has no need to exhibit achievements of the individual body. However, the Kroisos Kouros is unlikely to be a realistic, or even remembered, portrait of the dead Kroisos, but rather the sculpture's vision of the ideal man. The face is generic, the form perfectly symmetrical, and the head fits into the length of the body roughly seven times in an attempt at perfect proportion. Moreover, the artist has gone beyond naturalism to glorify Kroisos: the statue is six feet and four inches tall, a height that accentuates the man's strength and causes him to tower over viewers. A projection of the sculptor's artistic license, the kouros offers us a view into a Greek conception of male beauty, one that focuses on anatomy, prides physical strength, and centres on the subject's virility. Indeed, if we return to the Peplos Kore, as a depiction of a maiden she can also be seen as an attempt at replicating an ideal. Her motionless stance, her demure smile, and her proffered left arm (whatever it was holding) are antitheses to the aggressive masculinity of the kouros. Her drapery, which gives hardly any hint to the shape of the body underneath, attests to a modest, un-sexualised woman. In contrast to the height of the kouros, the statue is three feet and eight inches high, making her inferior in size to her viewers. She appears submissive and docile. Even from the early Classical period, then, there appears a highly polarised concept of the ideal man and woman, one that opens up questions as to the political and social nature of these dichotomies.

Peplos Kore c. 530 BC. Artist unknown.

Kroisos Kouros c. 530 BC. Artist unknown. Found in Anavyssos, 34km from Athens.

These differing standards find their roots in the entirely disparate social roles of men and women in Ancient Greece. Only men could be Athenian citizens, vote, make laws and own property. As such their main duty was to their polis, and by extension the military, as Greece was comprised of many city-states that often warred with one another. Since democracy, restored in Athens in 403 BC, gave rise to the elevation of the state over the individual, being commemorated for dying for one's nation was surely idealised. In a totally different social sphere, a Greek woman's duty was to her husband. She organised the household, the servants and her children. We know from references in Homer and from statues that Greek women often wore veils as coverings, possibly as a symbol of their wealth or their submission to their husband. Indeed, the speaker of Lysias' speech *On the Murder of Eratosthenes* calls his wife "the best of all wives, for she was clever and

frugal in her running of the house, and carefully supervised every aspect of its management."[1] Paramount are her functional qualities as an overseer of the domestic space. Just as men such as Kroisos wished to be remembered for military service, so women such as Hegeso boasted of domestic service on her grave marker. The Grave Stele of Hegeso (c. 400 BC) is contained within a *naiskos* (square frame) to enclose her within her home. She is with a maidservant who offers her a box from which she takes some jewellery; Hegeso clearly wished to be remembered as a free, wealthy woman who ran her house well and took care of her appearance. Thus the female body was not at the visual forefront of depictions of women. Instead, feminine beauty is expressed in terms of adornments, class and surroundings. Superseding any allusions to her aesthetic beauty is observance of Greek cultural norms. Arguably depictions of kouroi, though naked, were no more concerned with the male body as an aesthetic piece, and only detailed anatomy insofar as the form reflected the man beneath. Beauty, in this sense, mostly related to the Greek sense of excellence of one's character, with the sexual or erotic elements secondary.

However, within these sculptures of the ideal, supposedly modest and docile women, paradoxically a sexual dimension can be found. Later in the Classical period, the sculptor Praxiteles created *The Aphrodite of Knidos,* possibly the first sculpture of a naked woman. It seems perplexing that such a spectacle of anatomy could be consistent with the repression of female sexuality in the public sphere. Yet Praxiteles manages to release the female body while still conforming to Greek values. The water jar locates the goddess of love in her bath; thus she remains in a domestic, private space. Styled neatly, her hair supplies a dignified, composed look. She modestly covers her nudity with her right hand, as if she has been surprised. Thus she isn't guilty of promiscuity; the viewers, as the voyeurs, are to blame for erotically charging the scene. Consequently her beauty remains contained in the context of her conformity to Greek custom. Even through her anatomy itself these values are being expressed. Her breasts are prominent and her hips are wide; whether consciously doing so or not, the artist could be placing emphasis on her maternal and childbearing features, highlighting the key function a woman has as a wife. Her nakedness itself celebrates fertility, just as the phallus might on a male sculpture.

Grave Stele of Hegeso c. 400 BC. Most likely sculpted by Callimachus. Found in Athens.

Another way to embed the paradoxical 'modest nude' within Greek standards of beauty is to always depict women as adults. Male deities, such as Hermes and Dionysus, can be depicted as babies, children or adults in narrative artworks, yet goddesses, such as Aphrodite in this pinax relief in which servants rush to cover the modesty of the new-born, are always fully-grown. Girls' movement and interaction with non-family members were highly restricted, and they could be married as young as fourteen to men over thirty. Their childhood was short, hidden, and un-sexualised. It makes sense, then, that representations of domestic conformity and sexual maturity must go hand in hand, if a woman's duties of raising children and running a household were interdependent. Women are illustrated between pre-pubescent and post-menopausal states, showing that a significant part of female beauty descended from a woman's sexual maturity and fertility, the qualities they needed to contribute to their polis.

The Ludovisi *Cnidian Aphrodite*, Roman marble copy (torso and thighs) of *The Aphrodite of Knidos,* c. 365 BC, by Praxiteles.

Though achieving extraordinary standards of realism in their sculpture, Ancient Greek art was more concerned with idealism, a far more provocative art form for scholars to interpret, since in their manifestations of human perfection we can discern certain cultural values. The apparent differences in the treatment of the male and female form provide us deeper insights than simple aesthetic rules for beauty; beauty to the Greeks resided on a more personal, behavioural level, in which those who excelled in their prescribed roles were glorified. Their sculpture was not only a thought experiment in perfect proportion and composition, but also a symbol of the assets that allowed a man to serve his state, and the virtues that allowed a wife to serve her husband.

1 Lysias 1: On the Murder of Eratosthenes, Section 7. Date uncertain (c. 380 BC?)

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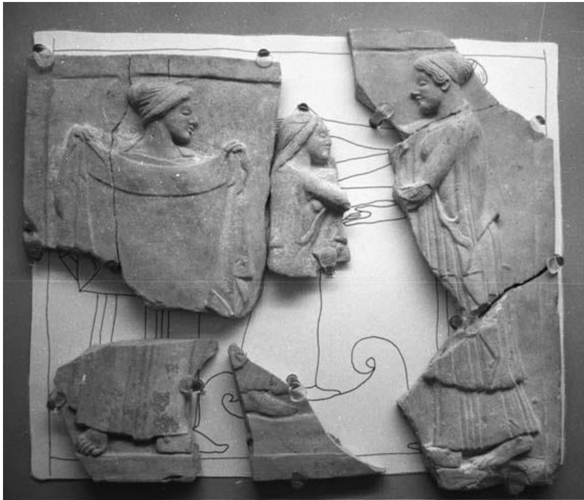

The Birth of Aphrodite, c. 470 BC. Lokrian pinax type. Artist unknown.

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