Cultural Daily

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Lecturing, Instead of Making Love to Aphrodite

Edward Goldman · Friday, April 6th, 2012

The Greeks knew her as Aphrodite and the Romans called her Venus. For us, today, her name evokes the idea of love, romance and erotic adventures. The new exhibition at the Getty Villa, *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, tells a fascinating story about this goddess whose cult originated in the ancient Near East, before sweeping Greece in the 4th Century BC.

Sleeping Hermaphrodite, Roman, 2nd century AD; Marble. © The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Aphrodite's jobs were manifold: she cared for sailors and merchants, protected cities and soldiers on the battlefield. But first, and most of all, she beguiled, inspired and often wrecked havoc in all matters of love. After all, she was to blame for the Trojan War, when Paris of Troy, chose her as the most beautiful of three goddesses. As award, Aphrodite gave him beautiful Helen, who happened to be married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. Sure enough, the Greeks got enraged, raised an army, sailed to Troy, and the rest is history.

(L) Ring with Aphrodite taking up arms, late 3rd Century BC, Greek, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; (R) Head of Aphrodite (The Bartlett Head), about 330-300 BC, unknown artist; Parian marble, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The exhibition, which was done in collaboration with the Boston Museum of Fine Art, generously illustrates the mythology of Aphrodite through numerous bronze and marble sculptures, as well as scenes painted on ceramic vases and etched on polished metal mirrors. Considering the racy, very racy, nature of many scenes, the curators placed a sign at the entrance, warning visitors of what lay ahead.

(L) Statuette of Aphrodite emerging from the sea, 1st century BC or 1st century AD, Greek or Roman (Eastern Mediterranean), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; (C) Mirror with women bathing before a statue of Aphrodite on a pillar, 110–117 AD, Roman Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; (R) Cupid, Roman, 1-50 AD, Bronze with silver and copper, J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection.

Of course, I took one of the magnifying glasses provided by the museum and carefully studied the numerous scenes of naughty adventures inspired by Aphrodite, while trying to suppress guilty giggles. If I have one bone to pick with this traveling exhibition, it would be the fact that so many excellent ancient artworks from Boston, where it originated, didn't make it to Los Angeles.
Going through the exhibition catalogue I realized that in the Boston Museum of Fine Art, the ancient representations of Aphrodite were accompanied by paintings and drawings by Luca Giordano, Picasso, Jim Dine and Botero, to name just a few. Alas, none of these are shown at the Getty Villa. As a result, the exhibition comes across as a well-researched scholarly lecture, rather than a passionate affair with the Goddess of Love. There is no doubt in my mind, that Aphrodite herself would prefer that the curators make love to her, so to speak, instead of giving a lecture.

Rain-god Vessel, Mexico, Colima, El Chanal, 1200-1500 AD, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; Photo by Edward Goldman.

Another exhibition telling us a story of the ancient world, just opened across the city at LACMA. *Children of the Plumed Serpent: the Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico* is comprised of over 200 art objects on loan from American, European and Mexican institutions.
According to the press release, "this is the first large-scale exploration of the ancient kingdoms of southern Mexico and their patron deity, Quetzalcoatl, the human incarnation of the Plumed Serpent."

Codex Selden, 1556-1560 AD, Mexico, Western Oaxaca, Deerskin, gesso and pigments, © The Bodeian Library, University of Oxford.

Unlike the serene beauty of so many Greek and Roman artworks at the Getty Villa, here at LACMA, the works of ancient Mexican artists exude a sense of aggression and explosive danger.

Two Atlantid sculptures (A) 900-1200 AD, Tufa; (B) 850-1150, Limestone, Museo Nacional de Antropologia; Photo by Edward Goldman.

Through their tense body language and facial expressions, these numerous images convey the dark mood and edginess of Hollywood horror movies. As a result, this imaginative and elegantly installed exhibition comes across, not as a scholarly lecture, but as a dramatic and thoroughly engaging exploration of the art of ancient Mexico.

(L) Censer, Mexico, Yucatan, Mayapan, Maya, 1200–1500 AD, Polychrome ceramic, Tecoh, Archaeological Center, INAH, Photo by Edward Goldman; (C) Xantil, Mexico, Eastern Nahua, AD 1200–1400, Ceramic with pigment, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo by Edward Goldman; (R) Skull with Turquoise Mosaic, 1400-1521 AD, Mexico, Western Oaxaca or Puebla; Photo © LACMA.

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