

Imagining Aphrodite in Syria: The Evidence of Two Statuettes in San Antonio

In this paper I explore the many roles of Aphrodite as a recipient of domestic worship in the Roman Near East. Although recent years have seen a surge of interest in Aphrodite/Venus, her place in household cult practices under the Roman Empire has received relatively little attention. I examine the varied representations of the goddess in marble and bronze statuettes that most likely served as domestic cult objects. The statuettes under study are clearly related to traditional, classicizing Greek and Roman depictions of the goddess, but they also have idiosyncratic features only attested in figures from sites in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, they present distinctly different images of the goddess from the larger statues found in the region's temples and public buildings.

As case studies, I will focus on two statuettes of Aphrodite from sites in Roman Syria that are now in the collection of the San Antonio Museum of Art. Each presents an image of Aphrodite that is known only from a small number of statuettes found in the Near East. The first, in marble, depicts the goddess fully clothed, with Eros sitting on her shoulder and an apple in her hand. This previously unpublished figure was purchased in Jerusalem by the Stark family of Orange, Texas, in 1927; it was said to have been found near Aleppo. My paper will serve as the first scholarly presentation of this statuette, which is the only example of its type in a North American museum. The second statuette is a bronze that represents Aphrodite in the nude wearing a radiate crown, but again with an apple and a figure of Eros, now lost. Reportedly found in Tartus, this statuette was acquired by the French collector Louis de Clercq in 1862 (De Ridder 1905, no. 126). Despite their similar attributes, the varying poses and attire (or lack thereof) of the two statuettes convey strikingly different impressions of the goddess, ranging from seductive and teasing to modest and maternal. I assess the ways these divergent

representations of Aphrodite may have appealed to their owners and the implications of such imagery for the breadth of the goddess's sphere in this region.

Work Cited

De Ridder, A. 1905. *Collection de Clercq. Catalogue*, vol. 3, *Les Bronzes*. Paris: Ernest Leroux.