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***Venus Restored: The 'Venus de Milo' in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France***

*Normally slides would accompany this talk*

If they hang around long enough, works of art all become objects of restoration. I thus begin my talk with a discussion of the term *restoration* and its multiple meanings during the decades surrounding the French Revolution of 1789. The talk is divided into three sections: after the first, I present in "Discovery of Venus" a brief history of the *Venus de Milo*, a work of art brought to France in 1821 and that illustrated the several meanings of "restoration" at the time. In the third section, "Reception and Deception," I examine the reassessment of the statue in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, one that turned a "classical" work of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE into a "Hellenistic" one of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE. In this last section I also analyze the reception of the statue by the public and, briefly, its appearance in literature.

I. Restoration

At least three discourses privileged the term *restoration* during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: that of the nascent discipline of art history; that of the equally nascent national and public art museum; and that of the political regime of 1815-30 called the Restoration. The second use of the term links the first and third: the museum is the site on which art history and politics collide and collaborate.

A. *Art history.* As Frances Haskell and Nicholas Penny note in their study *Taste and the Antique*, the European restoration of found works of statuary was first systematic in Italy in the 1520s and 30s. The rationale for restoration was that an ideal work—and these were mostly Roman copies of Greek originals, thought at the time to be Roman originals—was acceptable only in completed form, even if this completion obviously altered the artist's original intent. Mutilation was not considered pretty, nor was it deemed interesting. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century several famous statues were restored; the most well-known, the *Medici Venus*, received new arms and its head was reset. A 1<sup>st</sup>-century BCE statue, the *Medici Venus* was the ideal sculpted female for the French before the discovery of the *Venus de Milo*. Other examples were the *Callipygian Venus* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, which was so poorly restored that its restorations were later re-restored, and the *Crouching Venus* of which there are several versions (here, the one at the Uffizi). The reputation of the *Capitoline Venus*, by contrast, a statue that was in the Louvre from 1798-1815, grew immensely in large part due to the fact that it *did not need* restoration.

This view of restoration as being necessary (although there were certainly statues that weren't restored) began to change during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a plethora of studies concerning sculpture, and especially the discovery of ancient sculptures, was published: the Count de Caylus's *Receuil d'antiquités* (1752-67), Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), Herder's *Sculpture* (1778), and Etienne-Maurice Falconet's *Réflexions sur la Sculpture* (1760). The German J.J. Winckelmann (d. 1768), especially, changed forever the course of art history by privileging Greece over Rome and by demonstrating that Roman works considered as ideal were in fact copies of original Greek works. The practice of restoration was thus put into question since it was the study of unadulterated Roman copies that Greek originals could be known.

The 18<sup>th</sup>-century thus gave rise to art history as a discipline--not until Winckelmann that the terms “history” and “art” appeared together, in the title of his 1764 tome, *The History of Ancient Art*. Thus, art history as a discipline emerged from a new understanding of ancient art. Winckelmann’s argument about the derivative nature of Roman works was taken up in France in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Quatremère de Quincy, *secrétaire perpétuel* of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* from 1816-39, who along with Winckelmann privileged Greek art of the Classical period (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE). Unlike Winckelmann, however, Quatremère believed that Greek originals could be found and he would thus mistakenly attribute the *Venus de Milo* to the 4<sup>th</sup>-century school or atelier of Praxiteles. Since no one could truly know how the Greeks intended their works to be, and since no one could in any case rival the Greeks, it was best according to Quatremère to keep works in their found condition.

*B. The Museum.* This new attitude meshed well with the rise of the national art museum, which in Paris was marked by the opening of the Louvre as a public museum in 1793. The Louvre housed the ancien régime royal collection of art and the acquisitions or trophies of conquest had during Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaigns. Museum officials had at least two goals in mind. One was the acquisition of as many valuable works as possible in a competition with other European collections—the loss of the Parthenon marbles to the British in 1816 was a major moment of shame in this competition; another example of defeat was the restitution of the *Medici Venus* to Italy upon Napoleon’s forced departure in 1815. Second, the Louvre was meant to be a “universal survey museum,” to borrow Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach’s term, that is, it had the pedagogic function of illustrating the history of art for the public. As Carol Duncan states: “The ritual task of the Louvre visitor was to reenact that history of genius, re-live its progress step by step and, thus enlightened, know himself as a citizen of history’s most civilized

and advanced nation-state” (Duncan 27). The survey was meant to demonstrate that there was a direct lineage between ancient Greek art and French art—that France was, in effect, the inheritor of the ideal. As arguments over how schools of art and genres should be displayed heated up, all agreed on one thing: Greek Classical works (5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) needed to be acquired if this lineage was to convince the public.

When sculptures and paintings arrived at the Louvre they were taken to the restoration ateliers located in the lower levels of the museum—restoration was thus legitimized as a technique within the walls of the Louvre. Finally, the birth of art history as a discipline and of the museum as the physical site on which this discipline constructed itself was joined by a literary and artistic movement, Romanticism, which also privileged the fragment, ruins, and remains. This movement would also become increasingly interested in restoration: witness the restoration of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, encouraged by Victor Hugo’s novel of 1831, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which held forth the crumbling cathedral as a sort of icon (or museum) of the French Middle Ages.

*C. Politics.* Indeed, there are strong connections between Revolution and Romanticism, restoration and legitimacy. In her essay *Bodies in Pieces*, art historian Linda Nochlin has called the privileging of the fragment a topos of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary period: “It is the French Revolution, the transformative event that ushered in the modern period, which constituted the fragment as a positive rather than negative trope” (8). But, as she notes, fragments were privileged in a contradictory manner (and you will note this contradiction throughout my paper). On the one hand, they resulted from the purposeful and violent destruction of art works—vandalism—carried out during the revolutionary period. On the other hand, they were to be gathered together and conserved in museum collections as signs of the

wholeness of the post-Revolutionary government. As Germain Bazin has stated: “At no other time in history was the instinct of preservation so closely allied with the act of destruction; like a defective compass, the Convention continually contradicted itself; at one time it upheld laws prescribing the destruction of seditious emblems; at another, alarmed by the wave of vandalism it had helped to promote, it voted for severe penalties against all those who defaced monuments belonging to the nation” (170). This contradiction was created by the Revolution, which displayed both a desire to obliterate the past, in order to reform society, and a desire to conserve the past as “evidence of Republican enlightenment” in the words of Andrew McClellan (155). France was an enlightened nation that knew how to conserve properly works that were deteriorating elsewhere, and this emphasis on enlightened conservation was intimately related to the idea of the modern museum, in sync with the state in its will to define, conserve, and set out for public view a nationalistic and hegemonic history of art.

With the fall of Napoleon I, the restoration of the monarch’s body was accomplished as Louis XVIII’s attached head stood in for his brother Louis XVI’s decapitated one. The restoration of the monarchy (1815-30) led, in fact, to a temporary lull in the debate concerning restoration, although the terms fragment and restoration continued to preoccupy the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some sense, political restoration was accompanied by a relinquishing of the constant restoration of art and art history; this is reflected in the anecdote that purports that Louis XVIII himself put an end to discussion of the restoration of the *Venus de Milo*’s arms.

## II. Discovery of Venus

A. *All the King’s Men*. The story of the discovery of the *Venus de Milo* is intriguing but difficult to follow, this because of the proliferation of names of those involved, and the various versions of who actually was involved and to what extent. Rather than make the story more

easily intelligible by glossing over names and events, I give an abundance of them to you purposefully, as a means of emphasizing that this discovery and acquisition was the work of the combined forces of marines and diplomats—of Louis XVIII's men. All the King's Men—the phrase is a reference to the Mother Goose rhyme about Humpty Dumpty, in which all the king's horses and all the king's men could not, we are told, restore the fragmented egg. (In the following story of the *Venus*, horses are replaced with ships.)

In February of 1820, a peasant named Yorgos discovered a statue in two large pieces—separated at the torso—in the ground on the Greek island of Melos, one of the Cyclades islands in the Aegean Sea, at the time ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Yorgos offered the statue to the French consulate agent in the area, a M. Brest. In April of the same year, a French ship, *L'Estafette*, arrived at Melos and a midshipman named Olivier Voutier drew the statue (Voutier's role in the story was subsequently “forgotten” for several decades). Meanwhile, an ensign on another boat, *La Chevrette*, named Dumont d'Urville, saw the statue, apparently from on board the boat (he later claimed that he was the first to see it). He then sailed the *Chevrette* to Constantinople (Istanbul) to consult with the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, the Marquis de Rivière, whom he told of the find. The Count Marcellus, the secretary of the French embassy in Constantinople, was subsequently sent by the Marquis to the island of Melos to acquire the statue for the royal collection.

In May 1820, Marcellus arrived in the harbor of Melos. By this time, however, Brest had lost the statue—it had been sold by village bishops to a Greek monk who hoped to bribe an Ottoman prince with it. Marcellus entered into negotiations with the village elders as the statue sat on a boat, variously called Greek, Ottoman, and Albanian. Finally, Marcellus was successful; he paid Yorgos a small fee, and the statue was transferred to the *Estafette*. In September, 1820,

after four months' travel in the Aegean, the boat arrived at Athens where the French Vice-Consul claimed that it was a Venus and that it was a classical work (of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE). The Dutch and the British, who had territories and thus ships in the area, had heard of this statue and tried to seize it, but it was too late: the *Venus* was on its way to Smyrna (Izma), where it was transferred to the ship *La Lionne*, which arrived in Constantinople in late October. The voyage of the statue in the Aegean was not yet complete, however; the Marquis de Rivière boarded the *Lionne* and set sail for Melos, in order to retrieve a carved inscription that had been found with the statue. In February, 1821, a full year after its discovery, the well-traveled *Venus* finally arrived in Paris, having been transferred from the *Lionne* to ground transportation in Marseille.

*B. Installation.* On March 1, 1821, Rivière presented the *Venus de Milo* to Louis XVIII. Following museum policy, the statue was immediately sent to the restoration ateliers, where the tip of its nose was rather quickly repaired, along with its upper left arm. After this, a M. Debay fils did a drawing of the statue which shows the plinth inscription. This plinth fragment, which read "Alex-andros, son of Henidos, from the city of Antioch on the Meander," and thus identified an author unknown to art historians, subsequently disappeared from the ateliers, leading to much speculation: had it been purposely absconded with or destroyed because it revealed an origin of the statue that did not jive with the classical version? Did it ever even exist at all? With the inscription attached, it was said, the left foot could not be repaired, and the idea promulgated by Quatremère de Quincy, that the *Venus* originally formed part of a group with Mars --and therefore did not have its own inscription-- won the day. The foot was attached, the inscription gone—but not completely forgotten.

As for the *Venus*'s various installations in the Louvre, I have recently published an article on this topic so I will not rehearse that history here. Suffice to say that the statue was moved

several times during the 19<sup>th</sup> century—including for a stay in the basement of the Préfecture de Police during the Franco-Prussian war and Commune uprising. It found its permanent home, at the end of a series of small galleries, in 1939.

C. *Venus' Arms*. But what of Venus's arms? Why were efforts not made in the ateliers to replace the missing arms with those of another statue or statues? In fact, efforts were made, but restorers were unable to decide on the final stance of the statue. As we have seen, this inability was the result in part of a relatively recent hesitation before the complete restoration of ancient statues. According to Marcellus, it was Louis XVIII who determined that the arms should not be restored; he noted in his memoirs: “Louis XVIII, appréciateur si éclairé de l'art antique, jugea toute restauration indigne de cette magnifique statue et voulut qu'elle parût aux yeux du public dans l'état de mutilation où je l'avais trouvé” (48). Is this Louis XVIII who speaks of restoration or Marcellus who wants to identify the statue as he found it with the King's ideal? We can not know for sure. The truth is surely that a range of events influenced the decision: the change in the status of restoration since the 17<sup>th</sup> century; the King's belief, shared by many but doubted already by others, that this was a masterpiece of the Classical era; and, the inability to agree on an appropriate stance for the statue.

Today, of course, the *Venus de Milo* with arms is unimaginable, except in parody. This is responsible, I believe, for the reaction of one of my undergraduates who was part of a study abroad group I took to Paris. After having learned the history of the statue, this while we stood as a group before it, she said in reference to the missing arms “But I thought it was made that way.” Indeed, most spectators would probably agree with art historian and former Louvre administrator Jean Charbonneaux, who wrote this rather perverse line in 1958: “La Vénus a beaucoup gagné à perdre ses bras” (15).

### III. Reception and Deception

#### *A. Hellenistic Venus.*

In an essay published in 1890s, the German art historian Adolphe Furtwangler stated what others were thinking but what no one else yet had proclaimed so brutally—that the *Venus de Milo* was a Hellenistic (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE), not Classical, statue. This meant that the statue was not of Praxiteles's 4<sup>th</sup>-century, was nowhere near on a par with the Parthenon marbles of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and might even be labeled “decadent,” as the Hellenistic period was thought to be, given the multiplicity of styles of art that proliferated following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. Furtwangler believed that the plinth fragment was purposely hidden or destroyed (he calls this “the sin of an earlier generation”), this to protect the Classical myth. In fact, Debay's drawing of the inscription clearly revealed that the script was Hellenistic. Of course, Quatremère and others had already dealt with this problem by surmising that the plinth fragment either did not belong to the statue or was added to it later, during the Hellenistic period. But Furtwangler accused Q. and others of willful negligence of evidence.

Precisely because Hellenistic art favored eclecticism and in particular the imitation of Classical art, it was easy for the early spectators to be fooled, and this combined with their political motives explains the error. With no monarchs around in 1893 to contest Furtwangler's theory, it became generally accepted, and today art history books cite Alexandros of Antioch on the Meander as the probable sculptor of the work.

#### *B. The Public.*

Did this knowledge of the true dating of the *Venus* deter spectators from visiting it in droves? Hardly, although the popularity of the *Venus* has certainly waxed and waned. But by 1900 the *Venus de Milo* had become such a popular icon that its celebrity was ensured.

The popularity of the *Venus* was aided and abetted by new reproduction techniques introduced in the nineteenth century, in particular the Collas method of mass-producing small sculptures invented in the late 1830s. This is not to say that sculptures had not been reproduced—in full size and in miniature—before the 19<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, reproduction of these has been a business since the ancient Romans, who first thought to copy the Greek. But it was during the era of mechanical reproduction that mass-produced and affordable small casts were finally available to the public. Reproductions are still, of course, on sale in the Louvre museum—these are authorized copies; unauthorized (and more Barbie-esque figures) are available for purchase throughout the shops on the rue de Rivoli across from the museum and, of course, in the hors-taxi area of Paris' airports.

The *Venus* was ubiquitous in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it appeared in the background of painted portraits, as a signifier of the subject's education; it appeared in the background of images of artists' ateliers, as a "reality effect" or sign that this truly was an atelier [**Gérome in his atelier, 1887; still life, Adolphe Bilordeaux, 1855**]; it appeared again and again in caricatures [**Daumier, 1860s, Un Amateur; Bertall, La Question de la Vénus de Milo, 1874; Le Mari de la Vénus de Milo, 1886**]

Innovators of the photographic nude such as Hippolyte Bayard and Bruno Braquehais also posed the statuette along with their figures. As debates raged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century about photography's status as an art (vs. a technical process), the presence of the *Venus* was meant to reassure viewers of the photograph's place in a long line of artistic genres that idealized the body of woman. [**stereoscopic view, 1864, Hippolyte Jouvin**] The presence of the miniature *Venus* also suggested a more general association between photography—the new art—and sculpture—the ancient art.

The art historian Martin Robertson wrote in 1974: “[the statue’s] mild merits hardly justify the figure’s extraordinary reputation, which, started by propaganda, has become perpetuated by habit” (I: 554). Certainly, there was propaganda in the early essays on the statue, some of which insisted so adamantly that the statue belonged to a pre-Hellenistic period. And, certainly, there is habit associated with our acquaintance with the statue: the *Venus de Milo* is so much a part of Western culture, and in particular our image of France, that we do not consider it a “found” object with a history of its own. Propaganda combined with habit has produced a “popular” icon.

### C. Literature.

The special relationship between literature and sculpture has been overshadowed in critical work by the more readily “visible” relationship between literature and painting (this is the subject of my forthcoming article on teaching 19<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture and literature in tandem). Authors in France from Honoré de Balzac to Prosper Mérimée, and Théophile Gautier to Emile Zola, were invested in the literary representation of sculptors and sculptures. In part, sculpture provided fuel for fantastic resurrections of dead bodies and works of art—for sculpture displays the fundamental oppositions between movement and stasis, and life and death. Authors of the time were also, of course, friends to sculptors as well as painters and were familiar with the tricks of the trade and with the life of the atelier. Finally, as Alexandra Wettlaufer has recently shown in her study *Pen vs. Paintbrush*, authors, especially Balzac, were struggling to define the novel and especially Realism in contradistinction to painting—but also, I would add, sculpture.

A humorous short story by Jules Champfleury, “Les Bras de la *Vénus de Milo*” (1873) runs thus: A German archaeologist, M. Protococus, who lives in Paris and calls the statue the “Fénus,” is clearly in love with it and acts out his ardor in public in rather lewd ways. He has a

sculptor create a version of the *Venus* and Mars in which he himself poses as Mars, of course, but his eccentricities finally cause him to be chased from Paris. His revenge is swift: before leaving he adds definitive arms and a Mars figure to the statue in the Louvre. Certainly the most significant fictionalization of this particular statue is, however, in the symbolist novelist, playwright and short story author Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve future* (1886).

Lord Ewald's journey to Abyssinia has left him empty handed, but upon his crossing of the Atlantic to meet with his friend Edison, Ewald is presented with a sort of archeological find—the masterpiece uncovered in Edison's laboratory. The treasure named Hadaly closes up history by representing both the past—she looks like the *Venus de Milo* and she is made by a sculptor—and the future—she is an android. In this tale, the android becomes the modern sculpture, the scientist the modern sculptor.

The most significant “sculpted scene” of the novel occurs, not surprisingly, at the Louvre Museum. Lord Ewald takes his beautiful but inadequate lover Alicia to the museum, hoping that she will develop a depth of character to accompany her faultless body after recognizing herself in the *Venus de Milo*. She fails miserably, however, by remarking that *she* possesses arms and has a more distinguished look. Upon leaving the museum, Alicia displays to Ewald her bourgeois and utilitarian understanding of the statue's significance: “Mais, si l'on fait tant de frais pour cette statue, alors—j'aurai du succès?” (816). For Alicia, the aspiring virtuosa, statuary serves the practical purpose of helping to increase one's renown, and this is why she is easily duped into posing for Edison, who claims to make a statue of her for display in London. Thus *L'Eve future* presents the fin-de-siècle's contradictory view of the value of sculpture as timeless, eternal, and spiritual, but also as a product for sale.

I want to end with a non-French literary text that has preoccupied me lately, a very short story called “The Background” by the British author H.H. Munro (1870-1916)—better known as Saki. “The Background” tells the tale of Henri Deplis, a commercial traveller. While on a business trip to Northern Italy, our hero has himself tattooed by the famous but impoverished Signor Andreas Pincini, a master of the art who covers Henri’s back with “a glowing representation of the Fall of Icarus” (122). Before Henri has time to pay him, Pincini dies, leaving the Fall of Icarus as his last masterpiece. The spendthrift Henri is subsequently unable to pay Pincini’s widow, leading her to cancel the sale of the artwork; instead, she donates it (and thus Henri’s back) to the city of Bergamo. When Henri’s home office reassigns him to Bordeaux, he realizes the extent to which his body has become the work of art: at the Franco-Italian border he is stopped and forced to return to Italy. To make matters worse, a German art expert claims that the tattoo is a “spurious Pincini” (123). As the dispute widens, all of Europe is drawn in. As for Henri, the “unhappy human background” he becomes an anarchist, one who is repeatedly taken to the border as a political dissident, only to be brought back into Italy as a work of art. Finally, during an anarchist meeting, a vial of corrosive liquid is broken over Henri’s back and the work of art is ruined. The attacker receives a prison term for defacing a national treasure and Henri is promptly expelled from Italy. He ends up in Paris, where he suffers from the delusion that he has become the lost fragment of a famous damaged work of art, the *Venus de Milo*: “In the quieter streets of Paris, especially in the neighbourhood of the Ministry of Fine Arts, you may sometimes meet a depressed, anxious-looking man, who, if you pass him the time of day, will answer you with a slight Luxemburgian accent. He nurses the illusion that he is one of the lost arms of the *Venus de Milo*, and hopes that the French

Government may be persuaded to buy him. On all other subjects I believe he is tolerably sane” (124).

Saki’s tale is, I would argue, a version of the “Jerusalem syndrome” as applied to statues (Agulhon--statuomania). The Jerusalem syndrome is an actual illness that afflicts certain, especially German and American (that is, Protestant), visitors to the Holy Land: those suffering from this affliction suddenly don white flowing clothes, wash their feet compulsively, and walk through the streets of Jerusalem believing that they are living in Biblical times. Henri is afflicted with the *Venus de Milo* syndrome. There are indeed those who are obsessed with statues such as the *Venus de Milo* and the *Victory of Samothrace* and who even believe that they possess the knowledge and power to restore these fragmented works of art. An example: for the past two years, the curator of Antiquities at the Louvre has received letters from Germany, on average once a month, in which the author exhorts, sometimes commands, him to reattach the *Venus*’s arms (reminding us of Champfleury’s *M. Protococus*). Not only does the writer provide the special glue that will enable the museum to do so—this in small tubes enclosed in the letters—he threatens the curator with harm should the arms not be properly restored; after 9/11, mentions of the Taliban in his (or her) letters point to a belief on the writer’s part that the Louvre’s refusal to accommodate him is related to world events and a terrorist discourse. What the writer seems to fail to realize, among other things, is that the Louvre does not possess the *Venus de Milo*’s arms, and that restoration of antique statues is no longer valued in the art world as it once was. This is his tragedy.

We have seen that the *Venus de Milo* appeared on the scene at a propitious moment in history. By 1820, the Louvre Museum had been open for 27 years but was still, and is still, in the process of acquiring “masterpieces” that would solidify the state’s status as a conservator of

culture; by 1820, arguments concerning restoration, vandalism, and conservation had been played out for several decades; by 1820, a Restoration monarchy was in place, a regime that, like all French regimes, sought to legitimize itself through cultural acquisitions; by 1820, Romanticism was on the verge of blossoming as a full-fledged aesthetic movement, one that, although it rejected classicism and thus the *Venus de Milo*, valued fragments and ruins, and recuperated the statue in poems by Théodore de Banville and Leconte de Lisle. The *Venus* survived the changing regimes and aesthetic movements of the century and continues to be fodder for parody and pastiche.

**Dali, La Venus de Milo aux tiroirs**

**Jim Dine, 1994, Little Lady**

**Adrian Tranquilli, 1998, Artist: The Alien, Paris, France, 1960**

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