
“Ask Iris Love”: Cnidus, Aphrodite and Unorthodox Archeology

Art and Design

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Abstract

The existence of Praxiteles' sculpture of the Aphrodite of Cnidus has long been regarded within the academic community as an unsolved mystery with many layers left to uncover. For many centuries, only the Roman copies of the sculpture could be referred to in order to comprehend the original stance and figure of Praxiteles' Aphrodite, which was believed to have been completed in the fourth century B.C. Unfortunately, the remaining copies are believed to be from the late second century A.D. and therefore cannot be counted as reliable evidence to verify the authenticity of the rendition of Praxiteles' original statue. The span of time between these periods may be too long to be sure of a correlation between the original Greek version and the Roman copies.

According to J.J. Pollitt, Aphrodite of Cnidus inspired worship and reverence mostly due to her sensual physical features of her nude appearance, which was newly embraced by the cultural society of fourth century Greece (*Art and Experience in Classical Greece* 159). In the fifth century, Greek society had shunned the romantic and sexually idealized type of woman who could be objectified in art (Pollitt 159). Only one century later, the psychological changes in the collective conscious of Greece following the Peloponnesian War may have been main contributing factors resulting in a new Hellenistic age that ushered in the introduction of the female nude in Greek art (Pollitt 136-37). This period of Greek art was generally characterized by the emotional states of the facial expressions of the sculpted figures, as well as the exaggerated contrapposto poses of their bodies (Pollitt 159). If the Aphrodite of Cnidus was truly the first female nude sculpture, as many art historians claim, it would be likely that controversy

would have surrounded the creation and interpretation of the sculpture in the culture in which Praxiteles worked.

This paper discusses the consequences of the Aphrodite of Cnidus controversy from the perspective of the twentieth century, long after the creation of the original statue by Praxiteles. Iris Love, an archeologist who claimed that she had found the original head of the goddess sculpted by Praxiteles, was rejected by the academic community because she used dynamite in her excavations on Cnidus and refused to wait for the approval of other art historians before she thrust her personal belief that *Head 1314* was the actual head of Aphrodite of Cnidus sculpted by Praxiteles upon the world.

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From the earliest years of her life, Iris Love was captivated by the Classical tradition and seemed to feel the weight of her name and her destiny. Since Love’s name is linked with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, her “affinity with Aphrodite and her city...goes beyond academic interest” (Bouton 34). Love’s association with the Aphrodite of Cnidus is fraught with accusation, misunderstanding and her own hybris (Bouton 34). J.J. Pollitt describes the Cnidian Aphrodite’s origins according to the historian Athenaios,

“And Praxiteles the sculptor, being in love with her [Phryne], modeled his Knidian Aphrodite after her, and on the base of the Eros beneath the stage building of the theater he had inscribed:

Praxiteles rendered precisely the love he suffered,

Drawing the archetype from his own heart.

Phryne received me as a gift; love philters no longer

Do I shoot with any bow, but love is stirred by looking at me.” (13.59 IA, 88)

According to the historian Pliny, Aphrodite of Cnidus was not only a Greek goddess but also a universal icon:

“I have mentioned the date of Praxiteles in my discussion of the sculptors who worked in bronze; yet it was in fame as a worker in marble that he surpassed even himself. There are works by him in Athens in the Kerameikos. But superior to all the works, not only of

Praxiteles, but indeed the whole world, is the Aphrodite which many people have sailed to Knidos in order to see” (Pliny, N.H. 36.20, 84).

By the time Pliny wrote this account, the fame of Praxiteles’ Aphrodite of Cnidus had reached not only Greece but Rome as well. Later the emperor Hadrian himself commissioned a copy of the Cnidian Aphrodite to be installed in his Villa at Tivoli along with a replica of Aphrodite’s temple in Cnidus (Beard, Henderson 125).

According to the experts, Iris Love was unqualified for the work which she undertook in the field of archeology. First, she was a single woman lacking the necessary credentials; and second, she used dynamite in her excavations on Cnidus (Bouton 45, 63). The fact that she was a woman working in a field where only men succeeded. In Katherine Bouton’s article, “A Reporter At Large: The Dig At Cnidus,” published in *The New Yorker* in 1978, she visited Iris Love at Cnidus as well as some of the other surrounding archeological sites, and she remarks, “I heard an American archeologist in Athens refer to her predominately female group as ‘Amazons,’ and I heard a German at Ephesus laugh it off as ‘beautiful girls in bikinis’ (62-63). It is no wonder that Love presented herself as a tenacious individual who reveled in her solitary status, since she was in working in a field that was traditionally male.

Aside from her female identity, she was accused of being ill-prepared and unexperienced in the archaeological field. Her resume, however, belies this accusation. Katherine Bouton specifically interviewed Love with this accusation in mind. Love graduated from Smith College in 1955 and almost received a Ph.D. in art history at N.Y.U’s Institute of Fine Arts (63). While excavating in Greece and Italy, Love taught at Smith and Cooper Union (63). In 1965, she passed her doctoral exams but failed to submit her thesis (63). Bouton acknowledges Love’s regret about not having her Ph.D. (63). “It’s my Achilles’ heel,’ she says. ‘For the sake of Cnidus, I should probably take six months off and write the - - - thing” (63).

Despite the fact that Love did not have a Ph.D. in art history, she had worked extensively in the field of archaeology. While working on her Ph.D. at N.Y.U., she studied under Professor Karl Lehmann. Lehmann and his wife, Professor Phyllis Lehmann, served as co-directors of an archaeological dig on the island of Samothrace (Bouton 63). Love was invited to join the Lehmanns at Samothrace, where she worked for the next nine summers during her time at N.Y.U. (Bouton 63). In particular, Professor Phyllis Lehmann seems to have a profound impact upon Love's decision to become an archaeologist. When Professor Karl Lehmann died in 1960, his wife remained at the site as acting director (Bouton 63). Almost twenty years later, Bouton wrote that Love still had a photograph of Lehmann taped on her fridge while she worked at Cnidus as a daily reminder of her beloved mentor (63).

Between 1966 and 1967, Love began her work at Cnidus when she was thirty-four years old and was the sole acting director of the expedition (Bouton 33). Love still believed her name was wrapped up in destiny. On one warm summer day in Cnidus, her fate was fulfilled. Bouton describes how Love's destiny coincided with a historic event in world history;

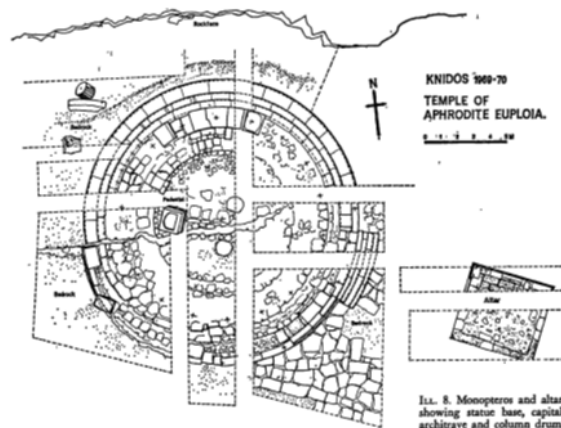
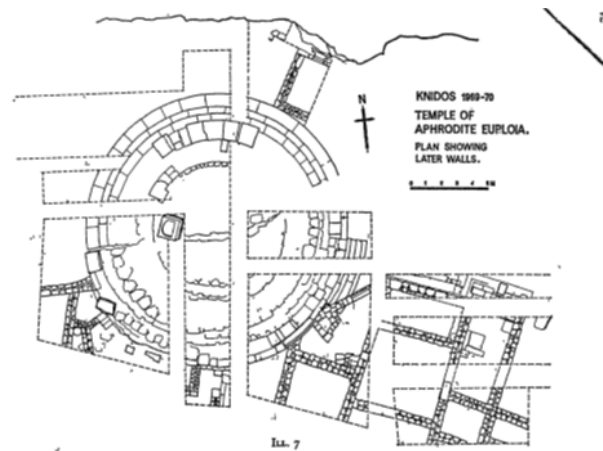
“Miss Love discovered the round temple on July 20, 1969 - the day that Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon. The rest of her group were all in camp listening to a portable radio, and she was wandering over the hills and thinking about the elusive temple... Suddenly, at the highest westernmost point of Cnidus, she noticed something odd about the way the earth fell, as if it had spilled over a curved structure, and she *knew*, she says, that that had to be the spot. She was right.” (Bouton 54)

For the next year, Love attempted to uncover the site where she believed the Temple of Aphrodite was located. Unfortunately, Love's hybris led to her own undoing. The first sign of weakness was her willingness to listen to her commissioner, Hakki Nalbantoglu, who suggested that they use dynamite to blow away rocks out of the way of the Temple (74). Love openly acknowledged her actions in the “Preliminary Report of the Excavations at Knidos, 1970” in the *American Journal of Archaeology*. Instead of relying upon her own experience in the archaeological field, Love followed the advice of the so-called “experts”:

“The necessary permits for using dynamite were obtained...A dynamite expert was employed. Holes were hand-drilled in the boulders (a lengthy process) and the powder

was inserted. To ascertain how much powder was needed we had the expert test an isolated boulder and then divided the recommended amount in half” (74).

Her transparency regarding her unorthodox methods conflicted with her own “apprehension” as she watched the dynamite split boulders apart “like cracked eggs” (74). Love claimed that without removing the stones she would have been unable to continue her excavations. In her “1970 Preliminary Report,” Love said that there was no damage to the podium of the temple. She admitted to Bouton, however, that “earthquake damage” had certainly left a “large crack through the temple where the statue stood” (67, See Fig. 1). Whether the use of dynamite or the earthquake was responsible for the crack in the temple, it is clear that her actions offended the academic community.



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Figure 1. Love, Iris. *Temple of Aphrodite Euploia*. "A Preliminary Report of the Excavations at Knidos, 1970." *American Journal of Archeology*. 76.1 (1972): 61-72. JSTOR. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

If Love harbored any regrets for using dynamite, she may have turned to a new venue for fulfilling her aspirations for fame and notoriety. Bouton described how in May of 1970, Love and Margot Mitchell, her cousin and assistant, along with her architect for the Cnidus expedition, Sheila Gibson, stumbled upon Head 1314 in the basement of the British Museum (64). Love recalled her memory of the event to Bouton and said, "As soon as I saw it, '... 'I thought, Was it, could it be ... *the* head? Her eyes had that limpid gaze that has been described so often. They were so *Praxitelean*! So I screamed at Margot, 'I think this might be the 'Aphrodite'" (Bouton 64, Fig. 2). This head was exactly what Love had searched for at Cnidus, only to find it in the basement of the British Museum. Professor Bernard Ashmole admitted that it was from the fourth century, a date which was consistent with the account of Praxiteles' Aphrodite (Bouton 64). However, this head was hardly a head anymore, with the back of it badly damaged and the remains of a mouth resting in its chin, but Love was unwaveringly sure of its authenticity (See Fig. 2). The Byzantine historian Georgius Cedrenus had written that the Aphrodite of Cnidus had been burned in Constantinople in 476 A.D., but Love discredited this account because it was written five hundred years after the event (Bouton 67). She suggested that one of the Roman copies of the Aphrodite may have been burned instead (Bouton 67). Love used the hairstyle of Head 1314 as her evidence of its authenticity:

"In almost all known instances, classical female statues are topped off by hair drawn back above the ears and ending in a bun on the back of the head. But the "Aphrodite" was different. She wore her hair half covering her ears and ending in a bun low on the nape. We know this because numerous terra-cotta and marble copies of the statue — of all sizes, found at Cnidus and elsewhere — show this hairstyle. It can also be seen on Cnidian coins from the third and second centuries B.C." (See Fig. 3, Bouton 67)

According to Bouton, if the hairstyle on *Head 1314* had matched the Roman rendition, such as in *The Kaufmann Head* or 'Colonna Venus' (See Figures 4,5), from the back view of the head and the profile images on the Cnidian coins, Love could have proved her hypothesis, but unfortunately, the back of the head was missing (See Figures 2, 3, 4, 5; Bouton 67).

Another criticism of Love's discovery was her surprise announcement which she made to the public instead of first sharing it with the academic community (Bouton 64). In September, 1970, Love did speak to Denys Haynes, who was the keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, asking his permission to share her discovery of Head 1314, which he granted (Bouton 64). Love waited for two months for the museum to finish cleaning the head for exhibition but when she began to suspect that the museum was going to take the credit for her discovery she took matters into her own hands (Bouton 64).



Figure 2. Praxiteles (?). *Head 1314*. Parian Marble. ca. 350 B.C. *The British Museum*, London.



Figure 3. *Reverse Side of Bronze Coin, Cnidus. ca. 211-217 A.D. American Numismatic Society.*



Figure 4. *The Kauffman Head, Parian Marble. ca. 150 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris.*

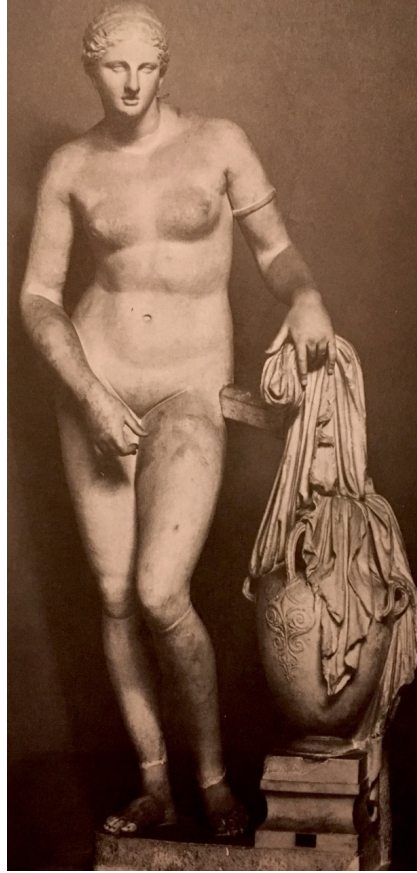


Figure 5. *Aphrodite of Knidos (Roman Copy After Praxiteles)*, ‘Colonna Venus’, Parian Marble. ca.350 B.C. (Original Version). *Vatican Museums*, Rome.

On Saturday, November 7, 1970, she announced her discovery to the *Times*, breaking the rules of formal etiquette in the archaeological community (Bouton 64). On Sunday, November 8, 1970, the headline in the *Times* read, “HEAD OF APHRODITE BY PRAXITELES FOUND” (Bouton 64). The following Monday, November 9, The British Museum placed Head 1314 on prominent display (Bouton 64). When asked if the museum’s experts agreed with Love’s conclusions, Denys Haynes replied, “We thought that since this whole business burst upon an astonished world, we had better get the object out” (Bouton 64). However, Head 1314’s exhibition was short-lived and soon the experts began to doubt the credibility of Love’s discovery (Bouton 67). Based on the statue’s find-spot, Professor Bernard Ashmole concluded that Head 1314 was “Persephone” based on the fact that the museum already had acquired Sir Charles Morton’s “Demeter” from Cnidus (Bouton 67). Haynes doubted the possibility of its being Praxiteles’

Aphrodite since Morton had found the head of “Demeter” at the site of the Temple of Demeter on Cnidus (Bouton 67). Haynes’ was quoted in the *Times*, saying, “If it is the head of Aphrodite, it must have walked [from] the Temple of Aphrodite. How else did it get there? Ask Iris Love” (Bouton 67).

In response to this attack, Bouton wrote Love’s response in the *Times*; “From Newton’s description, Demeter’s sanctuary appears to have been used as a repository for broken gods and goddesses, perhaps for sacred burial after calamity” (67). According to Bouton, Love also proposed that the emperor Theodosius’ orders to destroy pagan sanctuaries and pagan statues would have inspired a loyal follower of Aphrodite to bury the head at the site of Demeter’s Temple out of respect for the goddess (67). When Bouton interviewed Love in 1978, she met a woman who was proud of her contributions to archeology and who had continued to make discoveries, less well known at the site of Cnidus, which she loved so well. More recently, according to a 2010 article in *Departures*, the sixty-nine year old Iris Love was busy working on a book about the *Odyssey* and enjoying training and breeding her dachshunds in Manhattan (Filler).

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