

ANCIENT GREEK SCULPTURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY WESTERN ART

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Abstract

Ancient Greek art and culture had served as a significant guide for Western civilisation for centuries. Greek philosophy, literature and mythology as well as art and architecture had a major impact on artists especially in the periods of Renaissance and Neoclassicism. It is interesting to see that Ancient Greek sculpture has still been inspiring for the 20th century western painters, sculptors and performance artists. This article will focus on the visual representations of four statues -*Apollo Belvedere*, *Venus of Milo*, *Nike of Samothrace* and *Sleeping Ariadne*- in the imagination of artists working in various styles. Depictions of aforementioned statues and their novel and distinctive interpretations had been the subject of this descriptive research. 20th century creations have been scanned for traces of Ancient Greek sculpture. These timeless paragons of Classical and Hellenistic periods acquired a fresh life thanks to the 20th century art world's admiration and respect for the Ancient Greek sculpture. It can be concluded that by juxtaposing classical and contemporary imagery, artists created memorable and engrossing works.

Keywords: Ancient Greek Sculpture, 20th century, Western Art

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Introduction

Ancient Greek art has been a prominent source of inspiration for Western artists since the Renaissance. Ancient sculptures taught a great deal to the Renaissance artists about proportions and ideal beauty of male and female bodies. Neoclassical art of the 17th and 18th centuries, regarded ancient masters as their teachers while creating their art works. It can be seen that ancient art has still been inspiring in the 20th century although it is so many ages back in history. This article aims to explore visual representations of ancient Greek sculptures in the paintings, sculptures and performances composed by European artists of the 1900's. Four great sculptures of the ancient Greek art, *Apollo Belvedere* from the Classical period and three Hellenistic masterpieces -*Venus of Milo*, *Nike of Samothrace* and *Sleeping Ariadne*- had been brought to life once again by artists working in various styles and movements of the 20th century. Visual presentations of these statues and their newly attached myriad of meanings had been the subject of this descriptive research. After giving brief information about these sculptures, artistic interpretations of the 20th century will be presented.

Many of the most celebrated art works of Classical Greek style that fascinated viewers in later times as exemplifying the great types of human beings are copies of statues created in the middle of the 4th century BC. The *Apollo Belvedere* (**Figure 1**), presents the ideal model of a man's body. His majestic pose is worth considering: he is holding up the bow in the extended arm and with his head turned sideways, he seems to be following the arrow with his eyes. The idea underlying the ancient arrangement in which each part of the body was given its most representative view can be recalled (Gombrich, 1998: 105). Marble statue of Apollo, Greek god of music, healing and prophecy, was discovered towards the end of the 15th century and named after the Belvedere Court in the Vatican, where it was exhibited since 1511. It is a Roman copy of a Classical Greek sculpture and Leochares (an Athenian sculptor who lived in 4th century BC) has been thought as the creator of the lost original. For centuries it was regarded as one of the sublime masterpieces of world art and pure standard for male beauty (Chilvers, 2009: 21). The right arm, originally extending from the right leg hip, may have held a laurel wreath. Traces of laurel leaves are noticeable on the tree trunk that supports the right leg. Thus *Apollo Belvedere* may then have been designed to convey Apollo as both pacifier and healer (Gagarin, 2010: 138). German art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) thought very highly of *Apollo Belvedere*. The statue owes some of its fame to his glorifying compliments. He considered it the exalted expression of Greek art and said: "*of all the works of antiquity that have escaped destruction, the statue of Apollo represents the highest ideal of art*" (www.museivaticani.va). This work was very popular during the 18th and 19th centuries. Museums and academies have the plaster copies of it for edifying purposes. Generations of students have been taught that it embodied the Greek spirit (Janson and Janson, 2001: 142).



Figure 1: *Apollo Belvedere*, c. 350 BC, Roman marble copy after a Greek original, height 224 cm, Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican.

The death of Alexander the Great of Macedon in 323 BC marks the end of the Classical period of Greek history and the dawn of a new Hellenistic age. This lasted for roughly three centuries until the battle of Actium in

31 BC, where Octavian defeated the last independent Hellenistic monarch (Burn, 2004: 13).

Hellenistic sculpture is quite different from Classical sculpture. It has a more pronounced realism and expressiveness, as well as greater variety of drapery and pose. (Janson and Janson, 2001: 142). The Hellenistic statues are in close contact with their surroundings and they seem to be alive human or godlike presences (Kleiner, 2010: 136).

The *Venus of Milo* (**Figure 2**) is a marble statue of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love and beauty, found on the small Greek island of Melos in 1820. A plinth (now lost) was found with the statue was said to be signed "...andros (Alexandros or Agasandros) of Antioch on the Maeander", but nothing is known of this sculptor. Many 19th century commentators were very excited about the figure, they thought it represented the apogee of female beauty, perfectly combining glory with grace (Chilvers, 2009: 653).

In the Hellenistic period, sculptors regularly followed Athenian 4th century BC sculptor Praxiteles' lead in undressing Aphrodite, but they also openly explored the eroticism of the nude female form. Showing the eroticism of many Hellenistic sculptures, *Venus de Milo* has a slipping garment to tease the spectator (Kleiner, 2010: 136).



Figure 2: *Venus of Milo*, c. 200 BC, marble, height 202 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Nike of Samothrace (**Figure 3**) is a marble statue showing winged goddess of victory alighting on the bow of a galley. The figure, discovered on the Greek island of Samothrace in 1863, is lithely outstretched and draped with magnificent swirls. It was erected around 200 BC above a rocky pool showing its best view obliquely and from below (Chilvers, 2009: 658).

Victory was created soon after the naval battle with Ptolemy and that the commemorative coins borrowed their design directly from the statue. Thus a date for the statue and clear evidence as to how it should be restored can be understood thanks to these coins. The goddess held a trumpet to her lips with her right hand and in her left carried a support such as was used for the erection of a trophy (Tarbell, 2010, p. 249). The invisible force of onrushing air here becomes a tangible reality. There is an active relationship between the statue and the space around it (Janson and Janson, 200: 147).



Figure 3: *Nike of Samothrace*, c. 200-190 BC, marble, height 2.4 m, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The statue of *Sleeping Ariadne* (**Figure 4**) shows a beautiful reclining woman. Ariadne, the daughter of Creten King Minos, after having helped Theseus overcome the Minotaur and escape the Labyrinth, was left behind by the thankless man as she lay sleeping on the island of Naxos. She was awakened by the arrival of Dionysus, the god of wine, theatre and fertility, and then they fell in love and got married. The sculpture was acquired by Pope Julius II (1503-1513) in 1512 for the *Cortile delle Statue* (Courtyard of Statues) where it decorated a fountain (www.museivaticani.va).



Figure 4: *Sleeping Ariadne*, 2nd century BC, Roman marble copy after a Greek original, Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican.

Twentieth Century Artworks

Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), founder of the painting style Pittura Metafisica (Metaphysical Painting), painted nine townscapes centered on *Sleeping Ariadne* in the years 1912 and 1913 (www.getty.edu). *The Soothsayer's Recompense* dated 1913 (**Figure 5**) is one of a series of melancholic cityscapes that de Chirico painted featuring a lonely statue in a solitary Italian square. The antique statue represents the sleeping Ariadne. The confrontation of the classical world with a modern steam engine in the back ground creates an uneasy ambiguity of time and space (www.philamuseum.org).



Figure 5: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Soothsayer's Recompense*, 1913, oil on canvas, 135 x 180 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

De Chirico depicted unusual elements together in his painting entitled *The Song of Love* (1915) (**Figure 6**). A surgical garment, *Apollo Belvedere's* plaster head and a green ball are presented together in a mysterious way. This strange ensemble is shown on a building with a passing train in the background. Unlikely meetings among unlike objects were to become a potent theme in modern art. Cloaked in an atmosphere of anxiety and melancholy, de Chirico's blank architecture, shadowy passages and elongated streets recall the fear and destruction of the First World War (www.moma.org).



Figure 6: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Song of Love*, 1915, oil on canvas, 73 x 59 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

French painter Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940), a member of the Nabis group, added the image of *Venus of Milo* several times to his paintings. The secret brotherhood of the Nabis (Hebrew: Prophets) was founded in 1888 by French artists Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and Paul Serusier (1864-1927) as a revolt against academicism. A spiritual element subsisted in the ideas and practices of the Nabis. *Venus de Milo* dated 1920 (**Figure 7**) presents the statue on a fireplace of a cosy interior with an elegant lady. Vuillard excelled at psychologically delicate interior scenes (Dempsey, 2002, p. 50-53). Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) and Vuillard, the two most gifted of the group, were fascinated by what happened in the world of everyday experience (Lucie-Smith, 1996: 37).



Figure 7: Edouard Vuillard, *Venus de Milo*, 1920, Jill Newhouse Gallery, New York.

By taking a miniature plaster souvenir of the *Venus of Milo*, in *The Copper Handcuffs* (1936), Belgian Surrealist artist Rene Magritte connected the ancient figure to the present through his varied use of colored paint (**Figure 8**). In a letter to French poet Andre Breton (1896-1966), Magritte commented, "Here, the head is white, the body is flesh-colored, the drapery is blue... In my opinion this gives the Venus a new and unexpected life." Breton's response to Magritte, in proposing a title for the piece, noted that the advantage of naming it, *The Copper Handcuffs* was that "it gives an additional color to the object, but not arbitrarily, since copper is the metal corresponding to Venus." In essence, it epitomizes the playful subversion of classicism in which the Surrealists reveled (Syson, Wagstaff, Bowyer and Kumar, 2018: 9).



Figure 8: Rene Magritte, *Copper Handcuffs*, 1931, painted plaster, Musee Magritte, Brussels.

Spanish Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) was inspired by ancient Greek art in various paintings. *Venus of Milo with Drawers* dated 1936 (**Figure 9**) is an interesting example presenting the pleasure Surrealists had playing with reality in different ways. Influenced by Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) writings on the unconscious, the Surrealists explored the world of dreams and fantasy. Specific elements in their paintings are often depicted realistically, but the strange juxtaposition of elements yields a apprehensive irrationality reminiscent of dreams (Weiten, 2007: 165).

Dalí borrowed these drawers from Freud. He used them to represent his psychoanalytical theories in pictorial

images. He met Freud only once, in London in 1938. He said: “*The only difference between immortal Greece and the present time is Freud who discovered the human body -purely Neoplatonic in the Greek age- is today full of secret drawers which only psychoanalysis is capable of opening.*” (Neret, 1994: 44).

Venus of Milo with Drawers, is a half-size plaster reproduction of the famous marble statue altered with pompon-decorated drawers in the figure’s forehead, breasts, stomach, abdomen, and left knee. By combining cool painted plaster and silky mink tufts, Dalí demonstrated the Surrealist interest in uniting different elements in a strange way. Dalí envisioned the idea of a cabinet converted into a female figure, which he called an “anthropomorphic cabinet” under the influence of Freud’s writings. *Venus of Milo with Drawers* is a good example of his interest in exploring the psychological mysteries of sexual desire. Ancient goddess of love became the symbol of sensuality (www.artic.edu).



Figure 9: Salvador Dalí, *Venus de Milo with Drawers*, 1936, painted plaster with metal pulls and mink ponpons, 98 x 32.5 x 34 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

Trilogy of the Desert: Mirage dated 1946 (**Figure 10**) is a product of the artist’s time in the United States. Dalí lived in America for eight years. This experience in the new world, made it possible for him to create a novel approach to his artistic personality and production. He embraced American consumerism, spicing his art with the American advertising industry.. *Trilogy of the Desert: Mirage* encapsulates all these changes in Dalí’s art, proving it as an important work from his middle period. It formed one part of a triptych commissioned by Shulton Cosmetics, to promote a new perfume and make-up brand designed for women, namely Desert Flower. Dalí was chosen by the brand because of his famous pictures depicting lands reminiscent of his homeland in Catalonia. The image depicts a dry landscape where a atomically fragmented Renaissance architectural fantasy appears. A desert flower seems to be sprouting from the forehead of *Apollo Belvedere* (www.ngv.vic.gov.au).



Figure 10: Salvador Dalí, *Triology of the Desert: Mirage*, 1946, oil on canvas, 36 x 59 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

French sculptor and painter Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002) treated *Venus of Milo* as a heroine of performative art in 1962 (**Figure 11**) Many works by Nouveau Realistes embrace 'creative destruction' and are results of actions or performances. Saint Phalle's *tirs* (shooting paintings) are among these examples. Saint Phalle has described her shooting assemblages as symbolic acts of protest against the stereotypical image of women imposed by contemporary society. This focus on the female figure and its representation in art presages both the imagery and the topics of feminist discussion which would become prevalent in the 1970's. In the performance event in New York in 1962, a *Venus* containing bags of paint was wheeled on stage and shot at by Saint Phalle with a rifle, turning an idealised representation of femininity into a murdered, paint-spattered corpse (Dempsey, 2002: 212-213).



Figure 11: Niki de Saint Phalle, *Venus of Milo*, 1962.

At about the same date, French artist Yves Klein (1928-1962), one of the most influential figures of European avant-garde art in the post war period, created *The Victory of Samothrace* (1962) in his famous blue (**Figure 12**). In the mid 1950's he began exhibiting monochromes, pictures in which a canvas was uniformly painted a single color, a distinctive blue that he called International Klein Blue. He used this specific color also for other works including sculptured figures and reliefs of sponges (Chilvers, 2009: 329).



Figure 12: Yves Klein, *The Victory of Samothrace*, 1962, synthetic resin, stone, metal and pigment, 25 x 25.5 x 51.5 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Italian Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933-...), poses the question whether the idealized and perfect past is preferable to the colorful and chaotic present in his work entitled *Venus of the Rags* in 1967 (**Figure 13**). By creating surprising juxtapositions of images and materials Arte Povera, fuses the past with the present, connects the nature with the culture and unites art with life (Dempsey, 2002: 266-268).

The statue of Venus is positioned with its back to the viewer and a large pile of abandoned colourful clothes are accumulated on the floor in the art work entitled *Venus of the Rags*. The figure's face and body press lightly against the pile of fabrics that rises up before it, so that the front of the statue is hidden. Pistoletto's use of Venus sculpture, recalls Italy's cultural past in an ironic way (www.tate.org.uk).



Figure 13: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags*, 1967, marble and textiles, 110 x 212 x 340 cm, Tate Gallery, London.

American Pop artist Jim Dine's (1935-...), *Venus at Sunset* dated 1983 (**Figure 14**) is among the recent art works that relate to the image of ancient sculpture *Venus of Milo*. Pop Art refers to work by artists who utilize mass consumer culture. Roared onto the art scene shortly after 1960, Pop Art was often interpreted as a celebration of modern life (Morgan, 2017: 318-319). Dine has been interested and captivated by the Venus figure started since the seventies after buying a *Venus of Milo* statuette in Paris. He was fascinated by the object because of its linkage to ancient Greek and Roman histories. Venus has been a repeated theme in the artist's work. (www.fineart.ha.com).



Figure 14: Jim Dine, *Venus at Sunset*, 1983, carved and painted composite acrylic sculpture in five parts, 45.7 x 50.8 x 157.5 cm, Private Collection.

Conclusion

Ancient Greece has been significantly influential on the development of European art and culture. Its impact can be seen both as a source of subject matter and as a guidance for structural and formational style. Mythological characters and their narratives, ancient Greek philosophy, history and life style have been as valuable as the ancient masters' exemplary works and their teachings on artistic issues. This article aimed to focus on four ancient Greek sculptures -one Classical and three Hellenistic- that came back to life in the 20th century art world.

It is exciting to see that various 20th century art movements concentrated on the past in their own way and preferred to have an impressive dialogue with history. Metaphysical Painting, the Nabis, Surrealism, Nouveau Realisme, Arte Povera and Pop Art are diverse movements but they met on one common ground that is the admiration for ancient sculpture. Aforementioned works had been created by painters, sculptors and performance

artists. Therefore, it can be said that although the starting point was the art of sculpture, the creative outcomes of the previous century have been as wide as could possibly be dreamed of. De Chirico and Vuillard utilized the ancient images in their pictures while Magritte, Dalí, Klein, Pistoletto and Dine played with and commented on the statues by using a three dimensional language. Saint Phalle put forth her feminist reaction in a performative act where an ancient statue acted both as a symbol and heroine. National identities of these artists had been diverse. Italian, Spanish, French, Belgian and even American artists felt the need to look back to Ancient Greece. Only de Chirico is personally related to Greece. So the universality of ancient inspiration can be securely confirmed. The meeting and fusion of classical and contemporary imagery served to be fruitful. Among the four statues from the past, *Venus of Milo* seems to be the most popular image preferred to be used by the artists. It is enjoyable to see her in different colors, with drawers, placed facing a pile of clothes or even shot at by a rifle. Winckelmann would be surprised to see the image of *Apollo Belvedere*, the sublime expression of Greek art, hung next to rubber glove or as a figure in the mirage of a desert. Nike became very blue while Ariadne slept in a melancholic town within shadows. Art history shows that there is a continual and multifaceted relationship between the periods and styles. Past can be a good teacher as well as a reminder of the important artistic values and notions. Thanks to the artistic imagination, these timeless ancient statues had unexpected journeys in the 20th century. Apollo, Venus, Nike and Ariadne, both as personalities and art works, are still alive in our midst. Artists created impressive and unique combinations by bringing together important images from the sculpture history and contemporary ways of expression.

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Ulakbilge
Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi

20. YÜZYIL BATI SANATINDA ANTİK YUNAN HEYKELİNİN İZLERİ

Sibel ALMELEK İŐMAN

Öz

Antik Yunan sanatı ve kültürü, asırlar boyunca Batı uygarlığı için önemli bir rehber olagelmiştir. Yunan felsefesi, edebiyatı ve mitolojisinin yanı sıra sanatı ve mimarisi, özellikle Rönesans ve Yeni Klasikçilik dönemlerindeki sanatçıların üzerinde büyük bir etki bırakmıştır. Antik Yunan heykelinin 20. yüzyılın batılı ressam, heykeltıraş ve performans sanatçılarına ilham kaynağı olduğunu görmek ilginçtir. Bu araştırma, dört heykelin -*Apollo Belvedere*, *Milo Venüsü*, *Semadirekli Nike* ve *Uyuyan Ariadne*- değişik üsluplarda çalışan sanatçıların imgelemindeki görsel temsillerine odaklanacaktır. Adı geçen heykellerin tasvirleri ve onlara katılan yeni ve farklı yorumlar, bu betimsel araştırmanın konusu olmuştur. 20. yüzyıl sanatındaki yaratımlar, antik Yunan heykelinin izlerini bulmak amacıyla taranmıştır. Klasik ve Hellenistik dönemlerin bu ebedî örnekleri, 20. yüzyıl sanat dünyasının antik Yunan heykeline duyduğu hayranlık ve saygı sayesinde, yeni anlamlar ve taze yaşamlar kazanmıştır. Klasik ve çağdaş imgeleri yan yana getirerek, sanatçıların akılda kalıcı ve düşündürücü eserler yarattığı sonucuna varılabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Antik Yunan heykeli, 20. yüzyıl, Batı sanatı