

BLUMKA



Jacques Dubroeucq, circle of
Venus and Eros

Southern Netherlandish, c. 1560
Alabaster; pedestal: ebonised wood
Old restoration in places, old cracks, right arm original, broken off and
reattached in an early repair, surface worn
Height: 57 cm, with pedestal: 71 cm

Provenance:

Germany, private collection

Comparable Objects:

- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, personification of Charity, Jacques Dubroeuq, circle of, alabaster, Inv. No. 65.110
- Saint Louis Art Museum, personification of Charity, Jacques Dubroeuq, circle of, ca 1550, alabaster, Inv. No. 64:1928
- Mons, Collegiate Church St. Waltrudis, personifications of the Virtues, Jacques Dubroeuq, 1545, alabaster
- Mons, Stiftskirche St. Waltrudis, St Bartholomew, Jacques Dubroeuq, 1572, alabaster
- Saint-Omer, Cathédrale Notre-Dame, Madonna with Cat, ca 1560, alabaster
- Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, Conrad Meit, ca 1525–1528, alabaster, Inv. No. R 204

Related Literature:

- R. Didier, R.: Jacques Dubroeuq de Mons : sculpteur et maître-artiste de l'Empereur, Mons 2020
- S. Koja / C. Kryza-Gersch (eds.): Schatten der Zeit. Giambologna, Michelangelo und die Medici-Kapelle, exhib. cat. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden 2018, pp. 180–185, Cat. Nos. 23–24
- A. Lipinska: Moving Sculptures. Southern Netherlandish Alabasters from the 16th to 17th Centuries in Central and Northern Europe, Leiden / Boston 2015 (= Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History, Vol. 11), pp. 71–75, pp. 81–91
- I. Wardropper: European Sculpture, 1400–1900, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2011, pp. 77–79, Cat. No. 24
- K. Kriegseisen / A. Lipinska, A. (eds.): Matter of Light and Flesh. Alabaster in the Netherlandish Sculpture of the 16th and 17th centuries, ex. cat. National Museum, Gdańsk 2011
- D. Diemer / P. Diemer / L. Seelig, et al: Die Münchner Kunstammer, 3 vols, Munich 2008 (=Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Abhandlungen, Neue Folge, Heft 129), Vol. 1, pp. 430–431, No. 1307
- R. Eikermann (ed.): Conrat Meit. Bildhauer der Renaissance. 'desgleichen ich kein gesehen...', exhib. cat. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich 2007, pp. 76–79, Cat. No. 3, pp. 218–219, Cat. No. 53, pp. 224–225, Cat. No. 56
- T. de Haseth Möller / F. Scholten: Paludanus, a humanist sculptor working for Spain, in: C. Weissert / S. Poeschel / N. Büttner (eds.): Zwischen Lust und Frust: die Kunst in den Niederlanden und am Hof Philipps II. von Spanien (1527–1598), Cologne 2013, pp. 149–172

- E. M. Kavalier: Jacques Dubroeucq and northern perspectives on the antique mode, in: J. Chapuis (ed.): *Invention. Northern Renaissance Studies in Honor of Molly Faries*, Turnhout 2008, pp. 191–207
- M. Capouillez (ed.): *Jacques Du Broeucq de Mons (1505–1584) : maître de l'empereur Charles Quint*, Mons 2005
- E. M. Kavalier: *La Sculpture de Jacques Du Broeucq de l'Italie à la France*, in: M. Capouillez : *Jacques Du Broeucq de Mons (1505–1584) : maître de l'empereur Charles Quint*, Mons 2005
- E. M. Kavalier: *The Jubé of Mons and the Renaissance in the Netherlands*, in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 45 (1994)*, pp. 348–381
- M. De Reymaecker (ed.): *Jacques Du Broeucq, sculpture et architecte de la Renaissance*, Mons 1985
- C. Avery: *Giambologna's 'Bathsheba': An Early Marble Statue Rediscovered*, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 125 (1983), pp. 340–349
- J. Duverger: *Beeldhouwer Willem van den Broecke alias Guilielmus Paludanus (1530 tot 1579 of 1580)*, in: *Gentse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiednis 5 (1938)*, pp. 75–140
- R. Hedicke: *Jacques Dubroeucq von Mons: ein niederländischer Meister aus der Frühzeit des italienischen Einflusses*, Strasbourg 1904 (=Zur Kunstgeschichte des Auslandes, Vol. 26)
- R. Hedicke: *Jacques Dubroeucq. Der Meister des Lettners von Ste Waudru in Mons*, Inaugural-Dissertation [doctoral dissertation], Strasbourg 1904







This exquisitely modelled alabaster sculpture is so powerfully expressive because of the way Venus has been depicted. Although the figure is unabashedly sensuous, it is presented as a Flemish beauty from the sixteenth century rather than the goddess of love known from Greco-Roman antiquity. Clad in a cloth cap and a long, open garment that only covers her back and arms, this Northern Renaissance Aphrodite stands in elegant contrapposto next to Eros, the child god of desire, and looks fondly down on him. Cupping one breast in her right hand, in her left she holds up the Golden Apple which, as mythology has it, Paris awarded to her. Eros is depicted as a naked toddler who has climbed up on his quiver to grasp her left thigh. Reaching up with his right hand, he begs for the apple, which the goddess tantalisingly withholds. The material of which this sculpture is made, its stylistic features and the mode of representation indicate that this unusual work came from the southern Low Countries, where alabaster sculpture flourished in the mid-sixteenth century, thanks to Habsburg patronage and the growth of an aspiring patrician class. During the sixteenth century, sculpture workshops were established not only in Mechelen but also in Mons and Antwerp that contributed substantially to the formulation of Renaissance art north of the Alps by translating the Italian Rinascimento language of forms into the context of Netherlandish art production and reinterpreting it in the process.

The creator of the Aphrodite and Eros group was obviously a sculptor in the circle of Jacques Dubroeucq (ca 1500–1584), a Flemish sculptor and architect, who ensured his place in the annals of art history by being Giambologna's (1529–1608) first teacher and is still viewed as one of the most important Renaissance artists in the southern Low Countries. Jacques Dubroeucq is highly likely to have spent some years in Italy before returning to his native Mons in 1539 to stay. There he built monuments replete with sculpture as well as entire castles commissioned by influential figures from public life, notably Maria of Hungary (1505–1558), sister of the Emperor Karl V (reign 1520–1556) and Habsburg governor of the Low Countries. Dubroeucq's opus magnum is generally believed to have been the rood screen that he built in 1541–1545 for the collegiate church of St. Waltrudis in Mons. Although the architectural framework of the rood screen was destroyed in the eighteenth century, sculptures now stand in St. Waltrudis that once adorned the massive partition between the chancel and the nave. They include personifications of the four Cardinal Virtues and the three Theological Virtues: *Justitia* (Justice), *Temperantia* (Temperance, Moderation), *Fortitudo* (Fortitude, Courage), *Prudentia* (Prudence, Wisdom) as well as *Fides* (Faith), *Caritas* (Charity, Love) and *Spes* (Hope), all appearing with their traditional attributes and clad like ancient deities in flowing garments (Figs. 1–6). With respect to overall composition, the exquisitely rendered folds of garments made of thin cloth and the configuration of hands and feet, the St. Waltrudis Virtues, especially the *Caritas* (Figs. 3–4), lend themselves to comparison with the Aphrodite discussed here, although their facial features are typologically dissimilar. More suited to comparison with the Aphrodite's face is the Madonna with the Cat in Notre-Dame

in Saint-Omer, which is attributed to Jacques Dubroeuq and dates to ca 1560 (Fig. 8): the Madonna not only has the same facial features as the Aphrodite, but is depicted as performing a similar gesture, cupping with her hand the breast from which the Christ Child suckles. Two alabaster Caritas statues in the Saint Louis Museum of Art (Fig. 10) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 9) are noteworthy in this connection: they are also believed to be the work of a sculptor in the circle of Jacques Dubroeuq. The latter in particular reveals striking parallels with the Aphrodite in idiom and composition. Unlike the New York Caritas and the St. Waltrudis personifications of the Virtues, the alabaster sculpture studied here is not a work of sacred art intended for a church interior, but is decidedly profane in character and was made in a small format, obviously as a collector's item.

As an alabaster statue in a small format and with more than a tinge of eroticism, made expressly for display in a *Kunstkammer*, this Aphrodite belongs to a new subgenre of sculpture that emerged in the southern Low Countries in the sixteenth century. Conrad Meit (1470/1485–1550/1551) is regarded as the originator of this genre. While Meit was working in the Royal Monastery of Brou at Bourg-en-Bresse between 1525 and 1528 on the tombs of Margarete of Austria (1480–1530), her spouse, who died young, and her mother-in-law, he carved an alabaster sculpture of Judith, at the time a one-off (Fig. 11), which he probably gave to his patroness. Meit was evidently well aware that Margarete of Austria, as governor of the Low Countries, held one of the most important collections of her day at her palace in Mechelen and would have been delighted to receive this fine alabaster sculpture. With Judith, Meit had succeeded in launching a sculpture genre in a small format executed in a precious material with consummate artistry. A celebration of the female body under the guise of a biblical story, it also satisfied the discerning taste and met the exacting standards of a princess who took pride in being both politically powerful and a patroness of the arts.

A sculptor in Antwerp would follow in Meit's footsteps who must be named in connection with the Aphrodite discussed here: Willem van den Broecke (1530–1579), called Paludanus. Van den Broecke came from a family of artists in Mechelen, which was the Flemish centre of alabaster sculpture in the sixteenth century. Qualities that set him apart from contemporaries were his lofty intellectual standards informed by Humanism and his antiquizing style, which resulted from travels for study purposes in Italy. Recorded as active in Antwerp from 1557 on, Van den Broecke specialized in alabaster sculpture all'antica in small formats. Most of his statuettes stood on classical pedestals and were thematically devoted to allegory or myth (Figs. 12–15). A prime example is the signed Cypris (an epithet applied to Aphrodite) and Eros group, which is dated 1559 and is privately owned in Belgium (Fig. 12). It addresses the same subject matter as the sculpture discussed here: reclining in a lascivious curve on the edge of a throne and

holding an apple in her hand, Aphrodite casually tilts her head to kiss the naked infant Eros. She is seated on a long garment she has taken off, presenting her nude body in an explicitly erotic pose with one leg raised and bent. The same erotic allure characterises the Sleeping Nymph in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Fig. 13) and the Venus at her Toilet owned by the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (Fig. 14). The old game of veiling and flaunting is evoked by the garment that the sculptor always places strategically – as is the case with the Aphrodite discussed here, who is literally about to disrobe.

Like Van den Broecke, the sculptor responsible for the Aphrodite discussed here evidently specialised in *Kunstkamer* sculpture in rather small formats that reinterpreted classical motifs from antiquity with the emphasis on the erotic allure of the female body. He undoubtedly drew inspiration from Greco-Roman antiquity. He may well have been familiar with a Roman copy of the Aphrodite of Praxiteles (Fig. 16). Yet, even if he was, he made substantial changes to the ancient model: whereas the Praxitelean goddess of love is modestly covering her breasts, the Flemish sculptor changed the gesture into a suggestively erotic hand movement – his Aphrodite holds her breast in her hand as if it were a ripe fruit – a second Golden Apple.

The circumstance that the present Aphrodite is not carved of marble like her ancient prototypes but is worked in alabaster is due not only to the availability of this tractable material in Flanders but especially to the aesthetic properties of the stone, which is translucent and yellowish white. In fact, alabaster is so highly suited **for** rendering flesh tones that the metaphorical alabaster body as a sign of feminine beauty would soon become a trope in sixteenth-century literature. As a material for sculpture, alabaster heightens the sensuous aspect of Aphrodite, who is represented both as an object of erotic fantasizing and as a warning against the consequences of lust. The Golden Apple that Aphrodite is holding in her hand is, according to mythology, not only a symbol of her beauty but also the cause of the Trojan War. After Aphrodite, Athene and Hera began fighting over the Golden Apple, Paris, the beautiful youth, was supposed to judge which of the three goddesses was the most beautiful and to hand the Golden Apple to the one he chose. Since Aphrodite promised to reward him with the love of the most beautiful woman in the world if he chose her, Paris decided in her favor. However, Helen, a beauty already married to the king of Sparta, was the one to catch his eye. And the abduction of Helen sparked off the Trojan War. If, therefore, Aphrodite is withholding the Golden Apple from Eros, the god of lust, this gesture is meant to warn the viewer: although he may at first glance be enthralled by the physical beauty of the lovely and all too worldly goddess, the childish behaviour of the toddler at her side should immediately remind him of the dangers of Eros.

That erotic alabaster sculptures of Flemish provenance were highly prized by distinguished collectors beyond the borders of the Low Countries is clearly shown by works of Willem van den Broeke's, such as his personification of Geometry and Astrology (Fig. 15) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which verifiably was once owned by Archduke Ferdinand II of the Tyrol, the founder of the celebrated Kunstkammer at Ambras Castle. Inventories of princely collections dating from about 1600 have entries for more sculpture of this kind, for instance 'A naked wench with a naked child, like unto Veneri and Cupidini' ['Ain nackent Weibsbildt mit einem nackenden Kindl, Veneri und Cupidini gleich'], which, according to the inventory of the Munich Kunstkammer drawn up by Johann Baptist Fickler in 1598, was displayed there. Although the context that gave rise to the Aphrodite discussed here is unknown, there can be no doubt at all that this choice Kunstkammer sculpture of an erotic nature would have whetted the appetite of any princely collector.











Fig. 1
Personification of Fortitudo, Jacque Dubroëucq, Mons, 1540-1548
Alabaster
Collegiate church Sainte Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists



Fig. 2
Personification of Temperantia
Jacque Dubrocœucq, Mons, 1540-1548
Alabaster
Collegiate church Sainte Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists

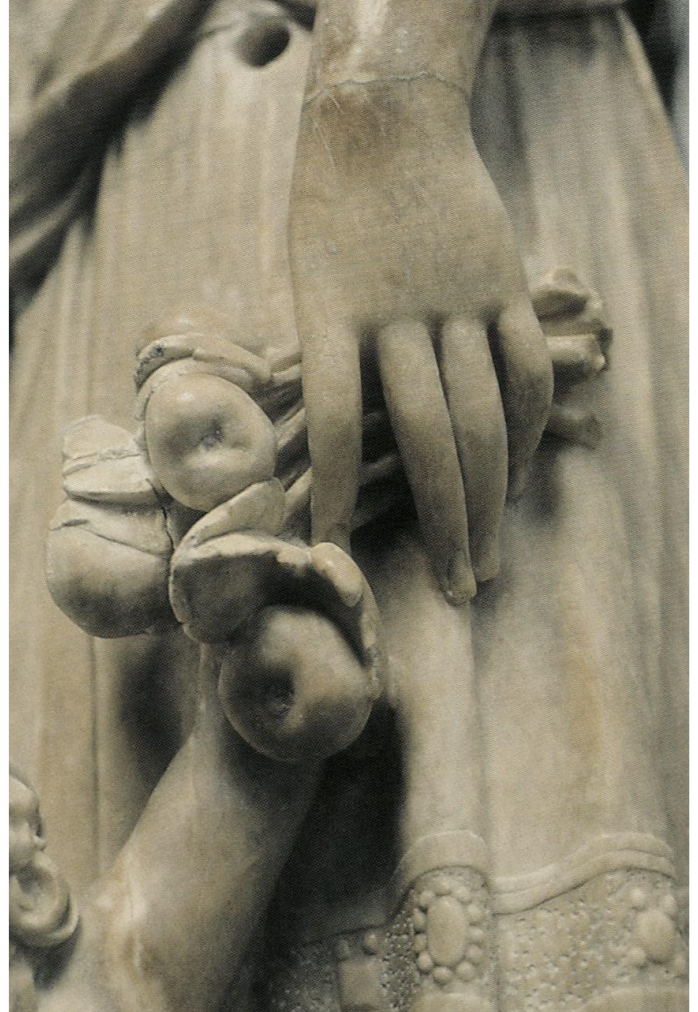


Fig. 3
Personification of *Caritas*
Jacques Dubroeuq
Mons, 1540–1548
Alabaster

Mons, collegiate church Sainte-Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists



Fig. 4
Personification of Caritas
Jacques Dubroeuq
Mons, 1540–1548
Alabaster

Mons, collegiate church Sainte-Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists

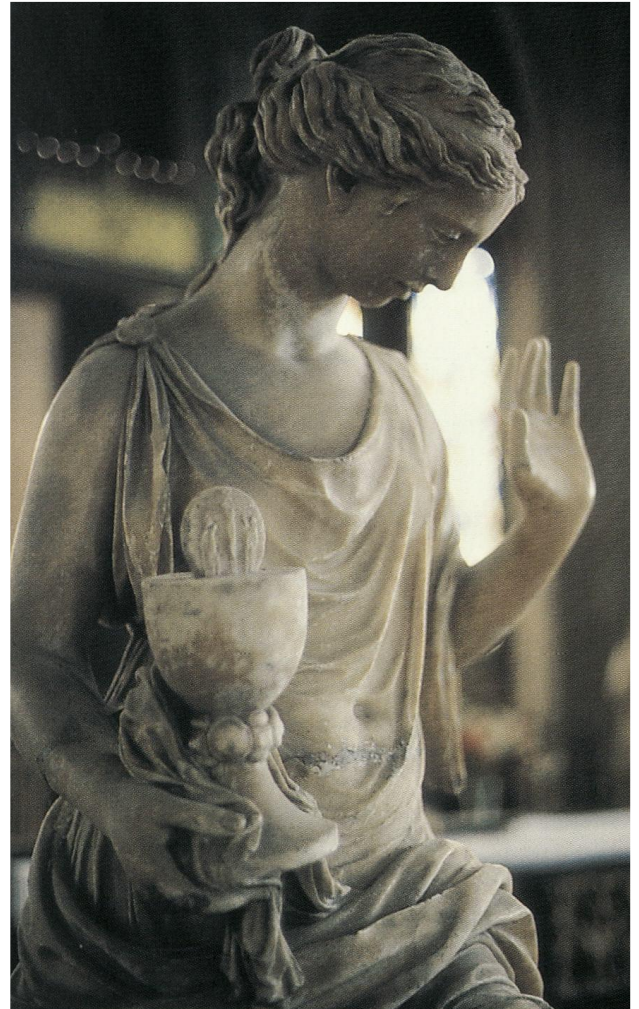


Fig. 5
Personification of *Fides*
Jacques Dubroeuq
Mons, 1540–1548
Alabaster

Mons, collegiate church Sainte-Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists



Fig. 6
Personification of *Justitia*
Jacques Dubroeuq
Mons, 1540–1548
Alabaster

Mons, collegiate church Sainte-Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists

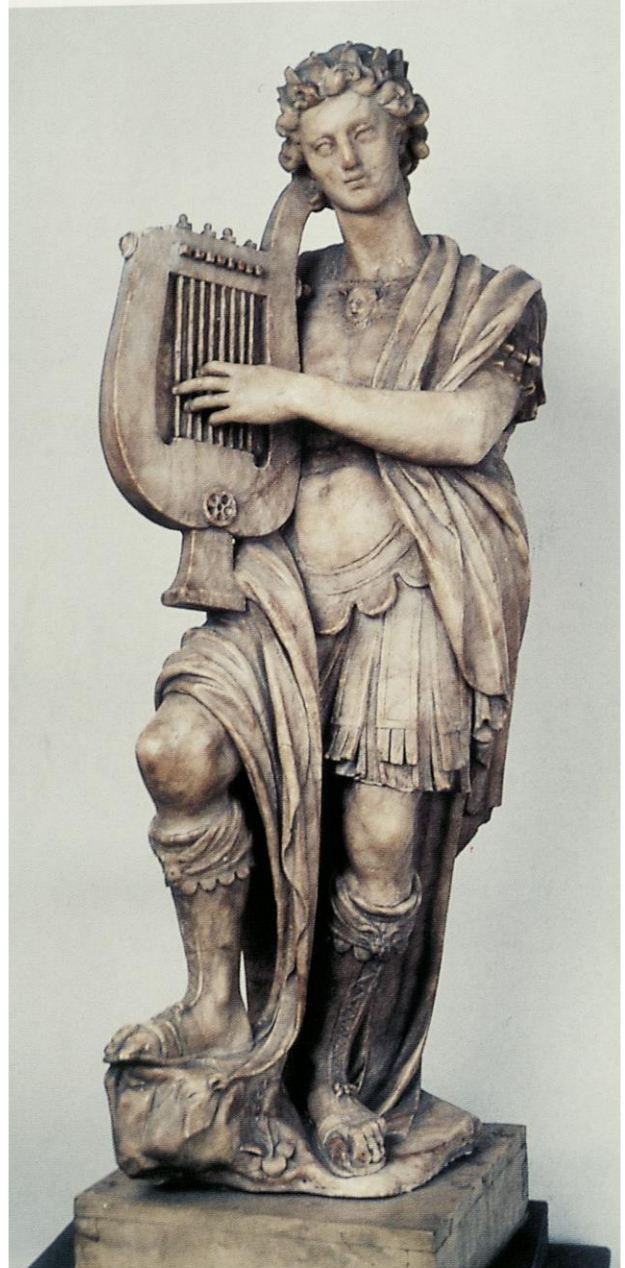


Fig. 7
King David
Jacques Dubroecq, Mons, 1540–1548
Alabaster
Mons, collegiate church Sainte-Waudru, from the rood screen, which no longer exists



Fig. 8
Madonna with a Cat
Jacques Dubroecq, attributed
Saint-Omer, ca 1560
Alabaster
Saint-Omer, Cathédrale Notre-Dame



Fig. 9
Personification of *Caritas*
Jacques Dubroeucq, circle of
Southern Netherlandish, ca 1550
Alabaster
Height 139.1 cm, width 44.5 cm, depth
31.4 cm
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Inv. No. 65.110



Fig. 10
Personification of *Caritas*
Jacques Dubroecq, circle of
Southern Netherlandish, ca 1550
Alabaster, height 61 cm, width 30 cm, depth 18 cm
Saint Louis Art Museum, Inv. No. 64:1928



Fig .11
Judith with the Head of
Holofernes
Conrad Meit, signed
Mechelen or Bourg-en-Bresse,
ca 1525–1528
Alabaster, partly polychromed
Inscription 'CONRAT . MEIT .
VON . WORMS'
Height 29.5 cm
Munich, Bayerisches
Nationalmuseum, Inv. No. R 204



Fig. 12
Eros and Aphrodite
Willem van den Broecke, signed
Antwerp, dated 1559
Alabaster
Height 25 cm
Belgium, private collection



Fig, 13
Sleeping Nymph
Willem van den Broecke, attr.
Antwerp, ca 1550–60
Alabaster, wooden pedestal
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Inv. No. BK-1979-7

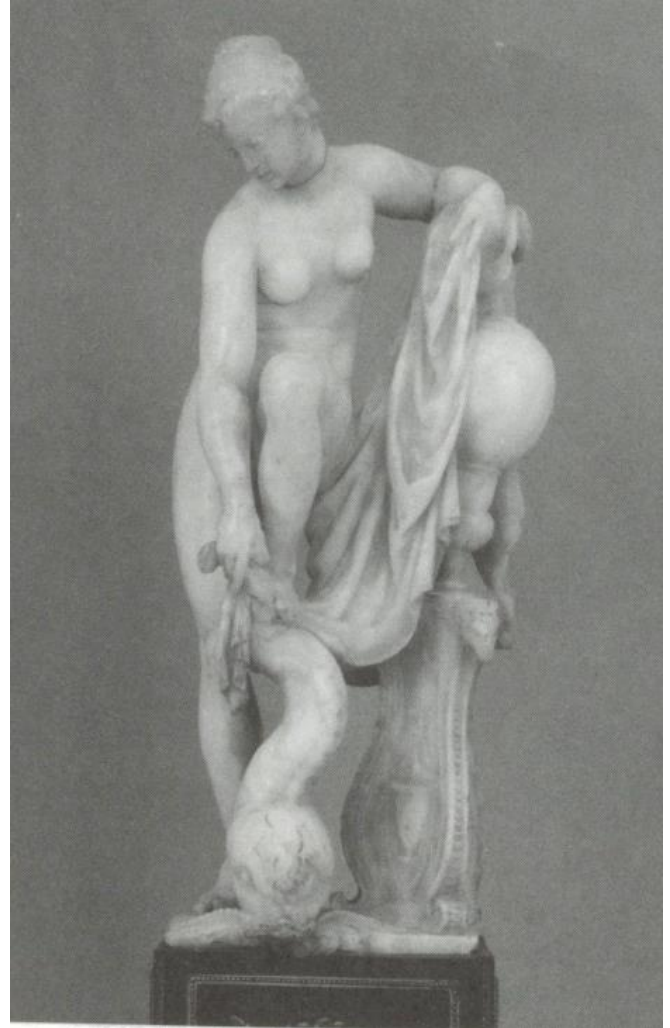


Fig. 14
The Toilet of Venus
Willem van den Broecke, attr.
Antwerp, ca 1560
Alabaster, wooden pedestal
Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli



Fig. 15
Female personification of *Geometry and Astrology*
Willem van den Broecke, attr.
Southern Netherlandish, ca 1560
Alabaster
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer, Inv. No. KK4430

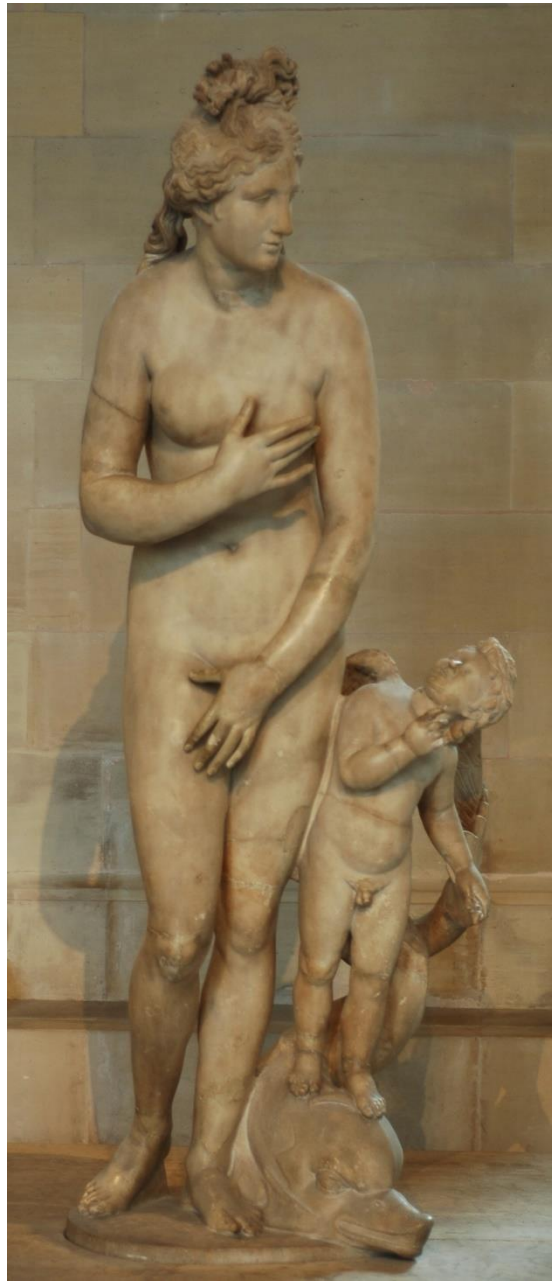


Fig. 16
Aphrodite and Eros
from the Borghese Collection
Roman copy after Praxiteles, 2nd century AD
Height 180 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre,
Inv. No. Ma 335