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Fragmentary Figure of Venus at the Bath

Roman, Imperial period, 1st – 2nd Century A.D.

ROMAN
Imperial Period, 1st – 2nd century A.D.

FRAGMENTARY FIGURE OF VENUS AT THE BATH

Bronze

15 × 8 cm;
6 × 3 1/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Canada;
Private collection, London, UK;
Private collection, Belgium.

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This bronze fragment preserves the upper body of a crouching female figure, her head bowed and inclined to one side, her arms drawn low across the body, and her form enveloped in gathered drapery that falls in deep, fluent folds to a fringed edge at the centre. The lost-wax casting retains much of its modelling despite long burial: the turn of the shoulders, the pressure of the hands within the cloth and the rhythm of the folds remain legible beneath a rich patina of malachite green shot through with passages of red-brown cuprite, the surface at once corroded and softly luminous. The lower body, and whatever base, vessel or attributes once accompanied it, are now lost; but the compact, inward-turning posture and the drapery clutched against the body still convey a woman gathered in upon herself at her washing.

The subject belongs to the enduring imagery of Venus at her bath, among the most beloved and most reproduced inventions of ancient art, within which two great compositions predominate. In the first, the "Crouching Venus," a Hellenistic model of the goddess surprised while bathing, she sinks toward the ground and draws an arm across her body, entirely nude (fig. 1). In the second, descended from the celebrated Aphrodite of Knidos of Praxiteles, she stands and grasps her discarded garment, letting it fall over a water-jar as she undresses for, or dresses after, the ritual bath, a conceit repeated across the Roman world, from the Belvedere Venus, who is shown clutching her robe, to the small bronze statuettes of the disrobing goddess that furnished Roman houses (fig. 2). It is to this second, Knidian line, in which the goddess handles her bath-linen, rather than to the wholly naked Crouching Venus, that the prominent gathered drapery of the present figure most naturally relates. Its hunched, inward-turning posture, however, belongs rather to the first; and the surviving portion is too worn and too fragmentary to be fastened to any single prototype. In all likelihood, the present statute is an eclectic creation, marrying the crouch of the one type to the clutched drapery of the other, a bathing Venus conceived with a certain freedom rather than copied faithfully from a famous model.

Small bronzes of Venus were among the most familiar objects of the Roman world, cast in quantity for domestic shrines, for votive dedication and for the ornament of the home, where the goddess presided as the deity of love and beauty and, in her guise as Venus Genetrix, as mythical ancestress of the Julian house and a figure of the Roman state itself. At this intimate scale the bathing Venus became a private possession, a work to be handled and set upon a table or within a household niche, its appeal at once devotional and frankly sensuous. The fluency of the drapery and the assurance of the pose place the present figure within this accomplished tradition of Roman bronze-working.

Fig. 1: The “Lely Venus,” 2nd Century A.D., Marble, H: 1.12m (44 1/8 in.), The British Museum, London, inv. GR 1963.10-29.1

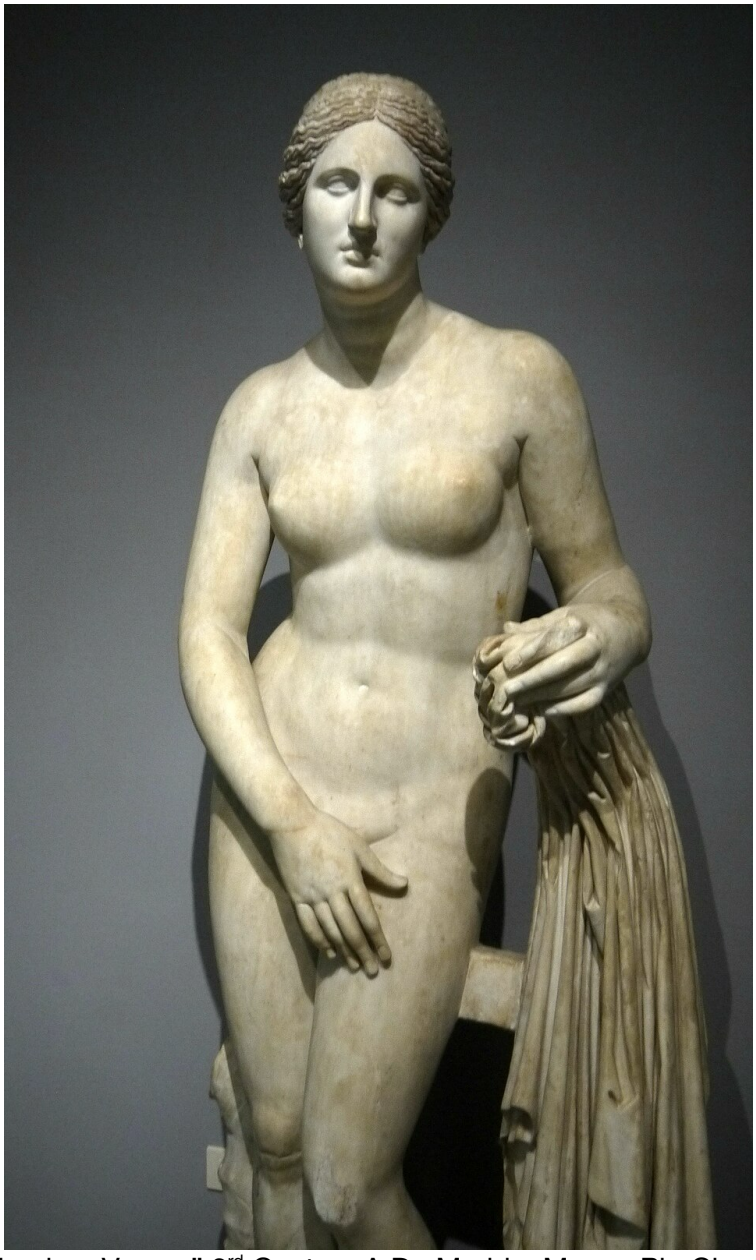

Fig. 2: The “Belvedere Venus,” 3rd Century A.D., Marble, Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museums, The Vatican, inv. 1914

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