

Aphrodite rising from the sea

Heavenly, golden and laughter-loving. These words describe Aphrodite, the goddess of love. She is often pictured emerging from the sea, a reference to her mythical birth in the sea off the island of Cyprus.

The statue of Aphrodite in the Ure Museum is from the Roman period (1st century BC or later), when it was dedicated to the goddess, probably by a worshipper. It was found near the remains of Aphrodite's temple at Cyrene (Africa). Surprising as it may seem, for a statue that's almost 2000 years old, she still has a youthful appearance and appeal.



Roman statue of Aphrodite, Eros and a dolphin, on loan to the Ure Museum from the British Museum.

How do we know that the statue in the Ure Museum is Aphrodite? Look closely at the statue and you will see several clues which help us identify her. The appearance of the dolphin near her legs alludes to her mythical birth from the sea. The dolphin also alludes to her role as the goddess of animal fertility (as told in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*). The winged boy who sits on the dolphin is Eros, the god of love. The ancient writer Pausanias tells us that Eros was the first to welcome the goddess to earth after her rising from the sea. Aphrodite's knot of drapery at the middle of her legs derives from the clothing of Isis (the Egyptian goddess of love). This element reminds us that the Cyrenaicans were close to Egypt, with whom they exchanged artistic ideas and much else. The statue combines Aphrodite's sea birth and her naked power over sexuality, love and fertility, which she shared with Isis and gave to her Roman counterpart, Venus.

The first sculptures of the goddess Aphrodite show her clothed, like the rest of the Greek goddesses. However, ancient writers tell us that in the 4th century BC, the painter Apelles and the sculptor Praxiteles both depicted the goddess naked. The sources tell us that their inspiration came from watching a prostitute who bathed herself in front of them! Apelles' famous painting showed the goddess rising from the sea, just as she is in the Ure Museum.

Charis Papadopoulou