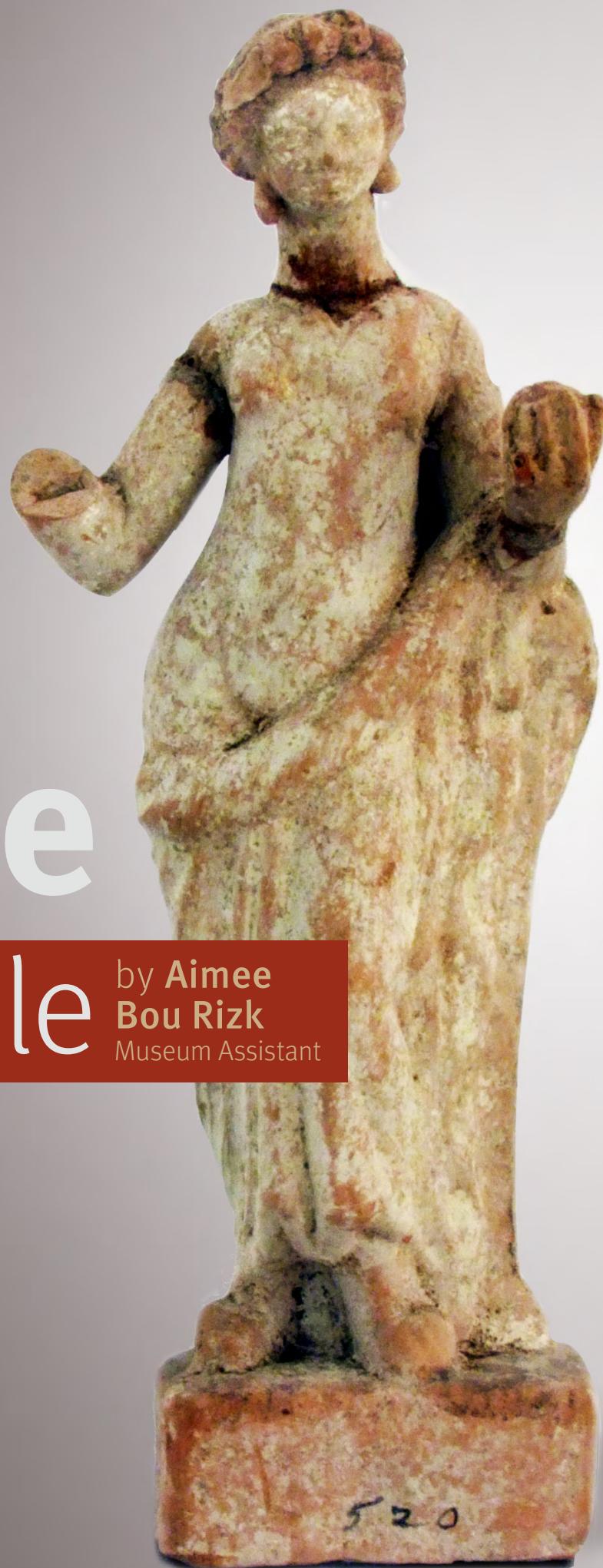


The hidden stories
of the **ARCHAEOLOGICAL**
Museum

Aphrodite

holding an apple

by Aimee
Bou Rizk
Museum Assistant



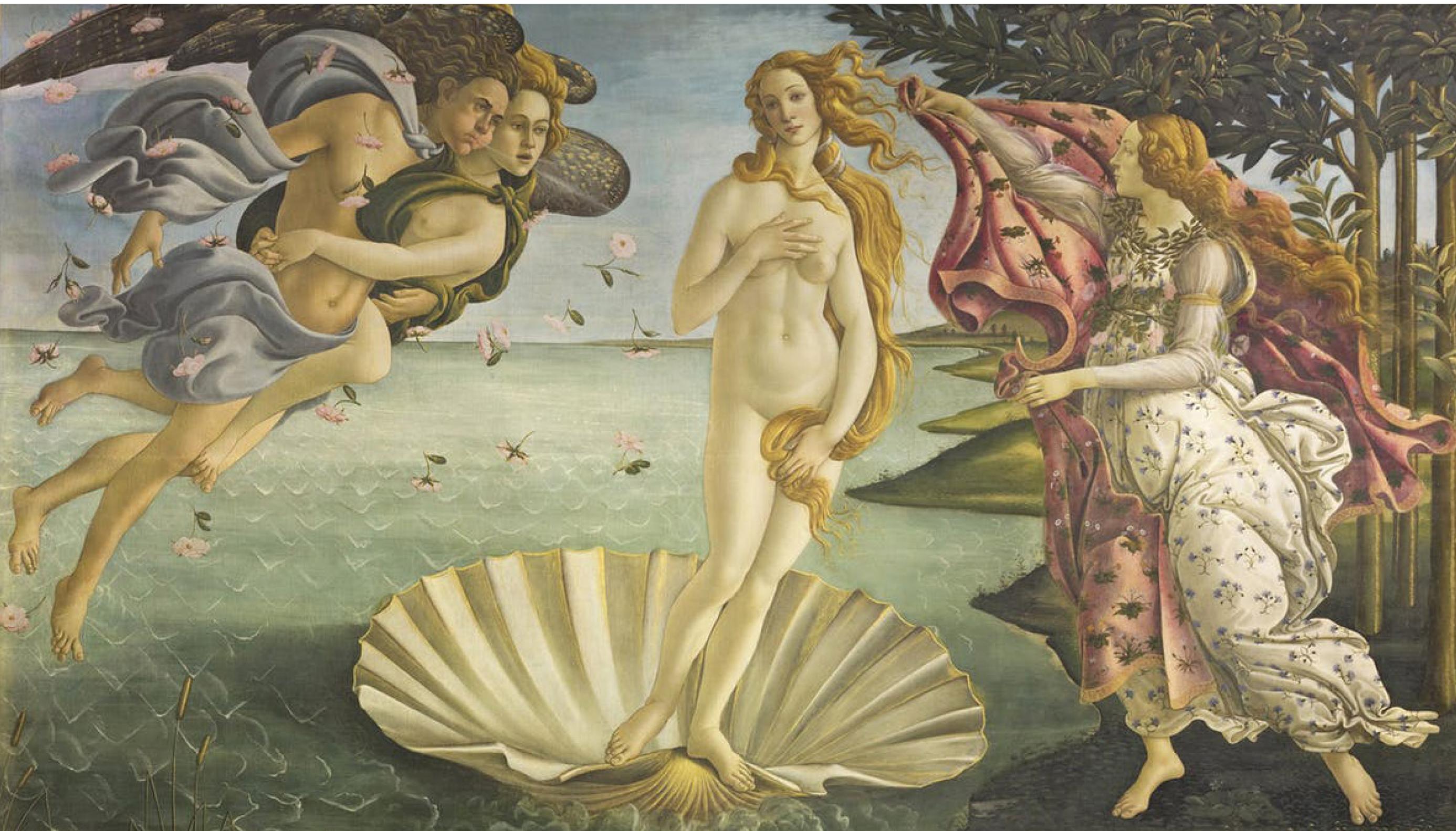


Pr. Jules Rouvier

In 1905, Jules Rouvier, an obstetrician and a professor at the French Faculty of Medicine of Beirut, who was also an avid antique collector and numismatic enthusiast, donated his large collection of Greco-Roman antiquities to the Syrian Protestant College (as AUB then was). The Rouvier collection includes a small terracotta figurine (inv #520), thought to have been found in Anatolia, representing the goddess Aphrodite leaning on a pillar holding an apple.



Aphrodite holding an apple from the AUB Museum, Inv # 520 (Hellenistic Period)



Aphrodite, or Venus to use her Latin name, was the goddess of love and beauty, as well as being a source of inspiration for poetry, painting, and sculpture, and all manner of other contexts from antiquity until today. Her representation could be found in tombs, gardens, baths, and domestic dwellings and she was one of the most regular figures to appear in household shrines from the Greek to the Roman period. The reason Aphrodite/Venus was—literally—idolized, especially in private houses, is not just because of her glamorous appearance. As well as being goddess of love, with her son Eros, or Cupid in Latin, to do her bidding, she also had the ability to intervene in the matters of the heart with one little prick from Cupid’s arrows. And there was also a terrifying aspect to Aphrodite that was not to be taken lightly. Behind all her beauty and grace, she concealed great powers and you would not want to get on the wrong side of her. Just ask the brave and beautiful—but all-too human—Psyche, with whom Eros unwittingly fell in love. But that is a different story.

The birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli from the Uffizi Gallery, Inv # 1890 no. 878 (ca. 1485)

The most famous Greek myth showing just how dangerous Aphrodite's powers could be is the Judgment of Paris, son of King Priam of Troy.



The Judgement of Paris by Peter Paul Rubens from the Museo del Prado (ca. 1638)

The story begins with a banquet organized to celebrate the wedding of the sea nymph Thetis with the Thessalian king Peleus. All the gods were invited except Eris, the goddess of strife, for fear that she might trigger her usual discord. Hurt at not being invited, Eris interrupted the festivities by throwing a golden apple onto the dining table, inscribed with the Greek word “kallistēi,” meaning “to the fairest.” This simple act caused just the discord Eris was looking for, as it kicked off a fight between the goddesses over who the apple should be awarded to. In the end, three goddesses were selected for this mythical Miss World pageant: Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite. Zeus did not want to decide so as not to hurt anyone’s feelings—a wise move as it turned out. Instead he entrusted this judgment to the mortal Paris, who at the time was living as a shepherd after being abandoned as a baby by his parents following a prophecy. Escorted by the god Hermes, the three shortlisted deities went to see Paris and asked him to choose the winner. All three tried to influence the young shepherd. Hera promised him power over Europe and Asia, Athena victories in war and wisdom, and Aphrodite the hand of the most beautiful woman in the world. After much reflection, Paris chose Aphrodite and offered her the golden apple.

The most beautiful woman in the world was Helen of Sparta, but there was only one problem: she was already married to Sparta’s king, Menelaus. With the help of Aphrodite, Paris managed to elope with Helen to Troy, provoking the wrath of the Greeks whose efforts to recover their queen started the Trojan War lasting 10 whole years. To add to this disaster, by choosing Aphrodite, Paris offended Hera and more importantly Athena, the goddess of war, who ended up siding with the Greeks against the Trojans in this epic war that led to the sack of Troy.

*Woman leaning on a pillar from the
Walters Art Museum, Inv # 23.281
(Hellenistic Period)*



The figurine from the Rouvier collection represents the victorious Aphrodite proudly holding the golden apple symbol of her triumph. She is leaning nonchalantly on a pillar, a loose garment providing little cover for Aphrodite herself, but obscuring the pillar. Her head is elegantly worked with her hair knotted on top and round earrings adorning each ear.



The statuette was made with the technique used in figurines known as “Tanagras.” These are small terracotta figurines of specific style and technique which started appearing at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. They are named after the city of Tanagra in Boeotia, in Central Greece, where they were first discovered in a cemetery. But figurines and molds in this style have been found all over the Hellenistic world as far away as Italy, Egypt, Anatolia, and Kuwait. They mostly represent women or girls, elegantly draped, sometimes wearing hats or holding fans. Less common are the representations of half-draped women leaning against pillars we see at the AUB Museum. Two molds were used, one for the front and one for the back. A large, round vent was cut out of the back to allow moisture to evaporate during firing. The left arm and the head were molded separately and attached to the body and the base was made by adding a rectangular plaque. A white covering of liquid slip was applied to the entire statuette before it was fired. After firing, bright colors were applied to the figurine and we can still see some red paint residue on Aphrodite’s hair and hand.

When looking at this statuette, the victorious Aphrodite in her moment of glory, the first thing we admire is likely to be the charm and glamour that radiate across the centuries. But when we are reminded of the story behind this depiction, and its blood-soaked consequences, perhaps we learn to be a little more careful as to what beauty can hide

Tanagra – ‘Lady in blue’ from the Louvre Museum, MNB 907 (Hellenistic Period)



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