

## A Beautiful Northern Renaissance Sculpture of a Beautiful Woman

Metropolitan Museum, NYC. Netherlandish, ca. 1500 AD, polychromed stone (limestone, I believe), ~34 inches tall. Part of the *The Last Knight: The Art, Armor, and Ambition of Maximilian I* exhibition.

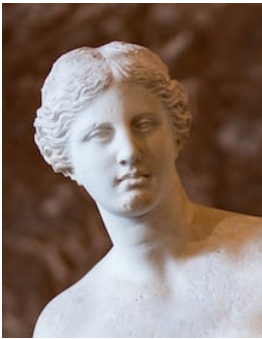


*Crowned Female Figure with an Angel*, stone, Netherlandish, ca. 1500.

There are many fascinating objects in this exhibition, almost all of them dealing with the armor and weaponry used for warfare, real and simulated, of the court of Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I. But as you enter the exhibition, the very first object you see is an exquisitely beautiful sculpture of an exquisitely beautiful young woman. The Met identifies the sculpture vaguely as a “Crowned Female Figure with an Angel” and guesses it may have represented either a court woman or the Virgin Mary. This sculpture is extraordinary in so many ways. The pose, garments, crown and young attendant

holding her robe all say, “This person is very special!” As indeed is the sculpture.

There are many aspects of it that are interesting, but the most arresting and striking feature for me is her face. There is simultaneously a realism and a pronounced stylization. I thought of what the Greeks had done in their Classical period — a combination of wonderfully observant study of the details of the human form, along with a simplification and stylization of those forms. An example is the head of the famous *Venus de Milo*. A similar approach is at work here — wonderfully observed, but stylized and simplified. Stylized, but not prettified as in, for example, Botticelli. The modeling of this “crowned woman”’s



*Venus de Milo*, Greek, c. 100 B.C..



*Birth of Venus*, Sandro Botticelli, c. 1480

face remains very, very natural, but stylized into an ideal beauty. She is presented as a natural beauty, with a soft oval face, narrow chin, the straight line of the nose, the small but curvaceous lips and mouth, the fullness but not too much of the cheeks,.... She is beautiful, which was much of the point. And she is composed. The face, the slight downward tilt of the head, the slightly

lowered eyes — all convey an inner peace and composure. Which adds to her beauty. The eyes are especially unusual. They are very markedly slanted, very Asian. From a certain distance they just look beautiful. But as you get closer, you see the very pronounced slant and slit of the eyes. What was going on there? More about this below.

The label describes her as simply as “crowned woman” and speculates it might be a Virgin Mary, or a high-ranking court woman, or perhaps Mary, sister of Emperor Maximilian. My first reaction was that it was a Madonna because of the cherubic figure holding her cloak. Indeed, the Met identifies that figure as an “angel”. But then there is this: There is a very visually dominant chain — and it is clearly rendered as “chain” — running from her lower abdomen down between her legs in a very straight (i.e., con-





The chain between her legs, ending in a lock.

trolled) line and ending in a lock attached to the last link of the chain. I am told by experts that such a hanging ornament for affluent women was not uncommon in this era. But let us examine this ornament a bit.

The chain and the lock are visually striking and certainly are intended to serve that purely ornamental function, but they are also, quite simply, a chain and a lock. Virginity? The Madonna was a virgin but she is never represented as being forcibly obliged to virginity. So who *is* this woman? With her crown, her expensive garments, her attendant, and her beauty, she is clearly a “queen” in the sense of an idealized figure of

female perfection. The chain and lock

suggest chastity. *Noli me tangere*. Chastity and virginity.

This sculpture was done, according to the Met, ca. 1500, which was also the height of the Italian Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci was working. In fact Leonardo may have done a portrait, *La Bella Principessa*, of Bianca Sforza, who later married Maximilian I. The fluidity and naturalism of this Netherlandish sculpture is extraordinary but it is not as naturalistic as what was being done in the Italian



*Pietà*, Michelangelo, 1499.



*St. Mark*, Donatello, 1413.



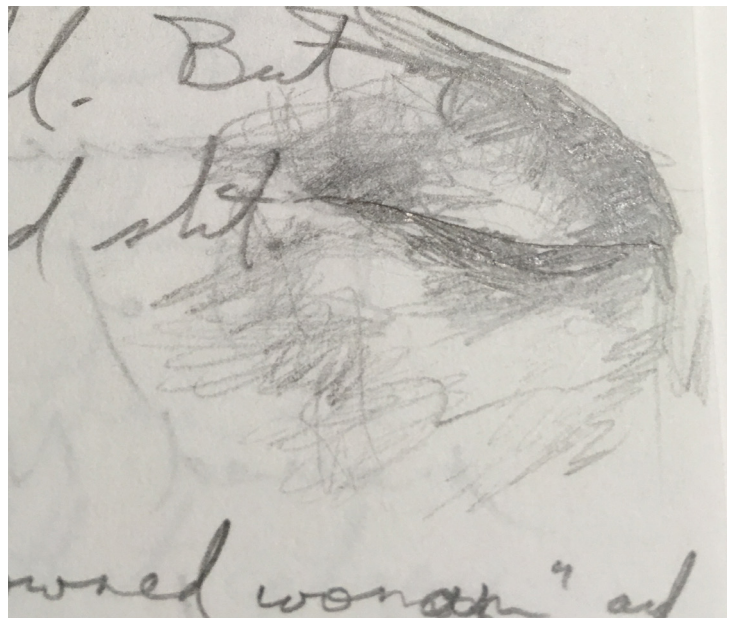
Renaissance several hundred miles south. Compare the naturalism of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, produced about the same time as this northern sculpture. Notice not only his naturalism in the modeling of the human form but also of the cloth. And compare with the *St. Mark* of Donatello, produced about 100 years before the Netherlandish woman, but with a much more fluid treatment of both the face and the cloth. Nonetheless — or perhaps because of? — there is something extremely winning about the “unnatural” stylization of this Netherlandish piece. The very straight lines/curves of her drapery as it falls to her feet would only happen with exceedingly thick fabric and therefore are not very “natural” — but they are wonderful. The straight lines create a stolidity, a solidness, an “*I am here and I know where and who I am*” feeling. As does the symmetry of the chain down her middle and the near symmetry of her hair.



But the eyes. Why did they represent her eyes as so slanted? Was there an awareness of or reference to Asian types, Asian beauties? There was apparently very minimal contact between European and Asian cultures at that time, and to the extent there was any, I would guess that Asians, as outsiders, would have been looked down upon, not admired. But somehow and for some reason, the



Pencil study of the eyes of the statue.



Another drawing, here of her right eye, still attempting to understand its shape and its beauty.

sculptor here, and presumably his patron, admired the beauty of this slant-eyed look.

But part of the beauty and appeal of this woman and this sculpture resides, not only in the beautiful face, but in her beautiful body. The thick flowing skirt and cloak hide much of her body, but her slim shapely torso is not only visible but is shown off. The



garments there are very snug and show off her form – the slim waist, the taut but shapely belly, her small but shapely bosom. And the chain, which is attached to a belt slung low on her hips, has its start just above her pubic area, and drops in a straight line between her legs, calling attention to — Well, to her “between-her-legs”. The whole arrangement calls attention to her sex at the same time that it says, “No. I am inviolate, I am off limits. Noli me tangere.”



Studying the torso.

Whatever the interpretation of the chain, this figure is very sensual. This is the beauty and wonder of a beautiful and confident woman. Whoever she is, she is presented as a beauty and as a woman. She is a real, physical woman, but she is also thoroughly “other”, thoroughly beyond us. In her human-ness she bends slightly forward at the waist, her right knee pushes forward through the cloth, her arms extend to — do something, we don’t know what. She is very human, she is sexually attractive and she is subtly sexually provocative — and she is totally beyond us, out of our reach, “out of our league”, whether sexually, socially, or spiritually, or all of the above. Whether Madonna, Queen consort, unknown royalty, or unknown noble, she is presented as an ideal woman, perhaps *the* ideal woman.





And this interesting coda: After looking at and studying this work in the *Maximillian* exhibit, I went to the Metropolitan roof with its exhibition of sculpture. The work there was mildly interesting. (How is it that so much merely mildly interesting work can garner such stupendous funding!?) Most of the people on the roof were ignoring the sculpture and instead looking at and thinking about the Manhattan skyline (which is indeed flab-

bergasting). Among the viewers on the roof were three Chinese (I think) women taking pictures of each other against the New York City skyline background. One was unusually beautiful and had a face which reminded me of the the Netherlandish woman sculpted 500 years ago — slanted eyes, small chin, soft face. The sort of beauty captured in the 1500 sculpture does not come from nowhere. It comes from life and speaks of life and our reactions to life. Whatever the Netherlandish sculptor's model or intentions, he (we can assume it was a "he") captured something important about human beauty, both physical and emotional.



A young Chinese woman on the roof of the Met, with slanted eyes and narrow chin similar to those of the Netherlandish *Woman with Crown*.

