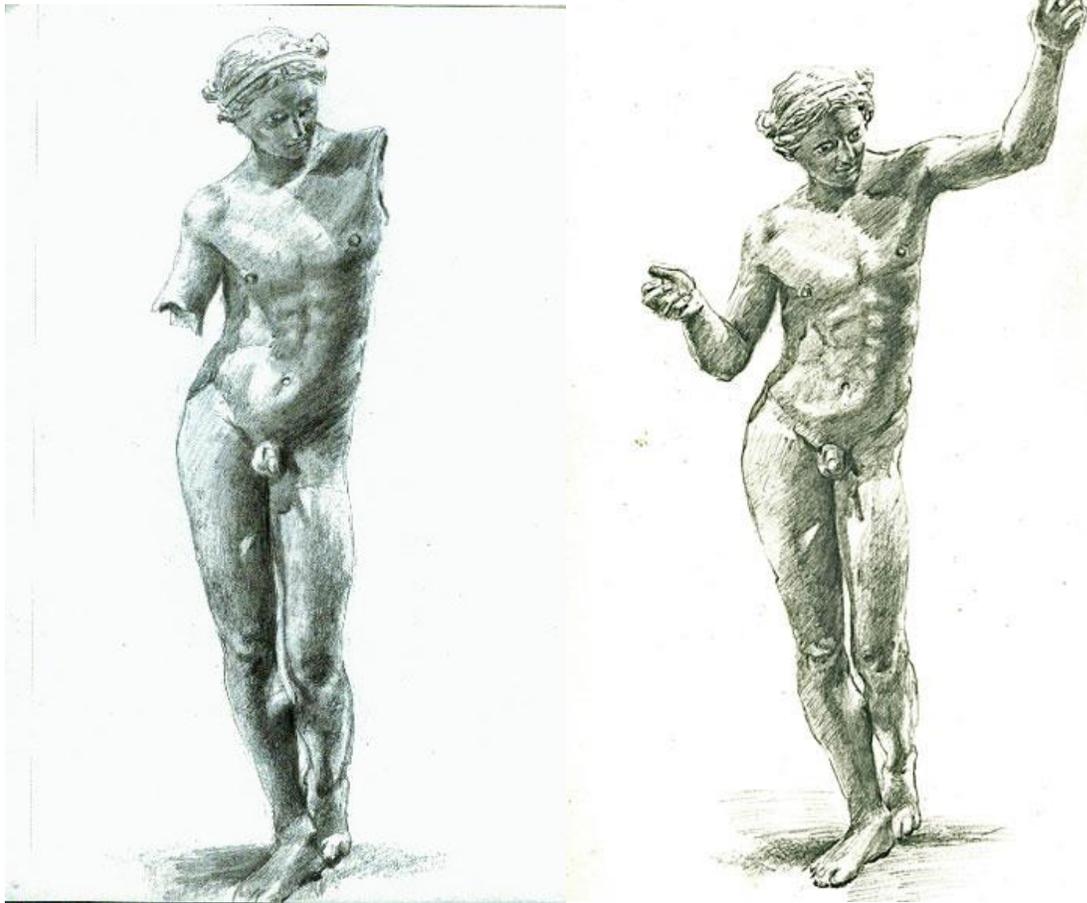


**Misuses of Scholarship in the Making of the Myth of
Praxiteles**

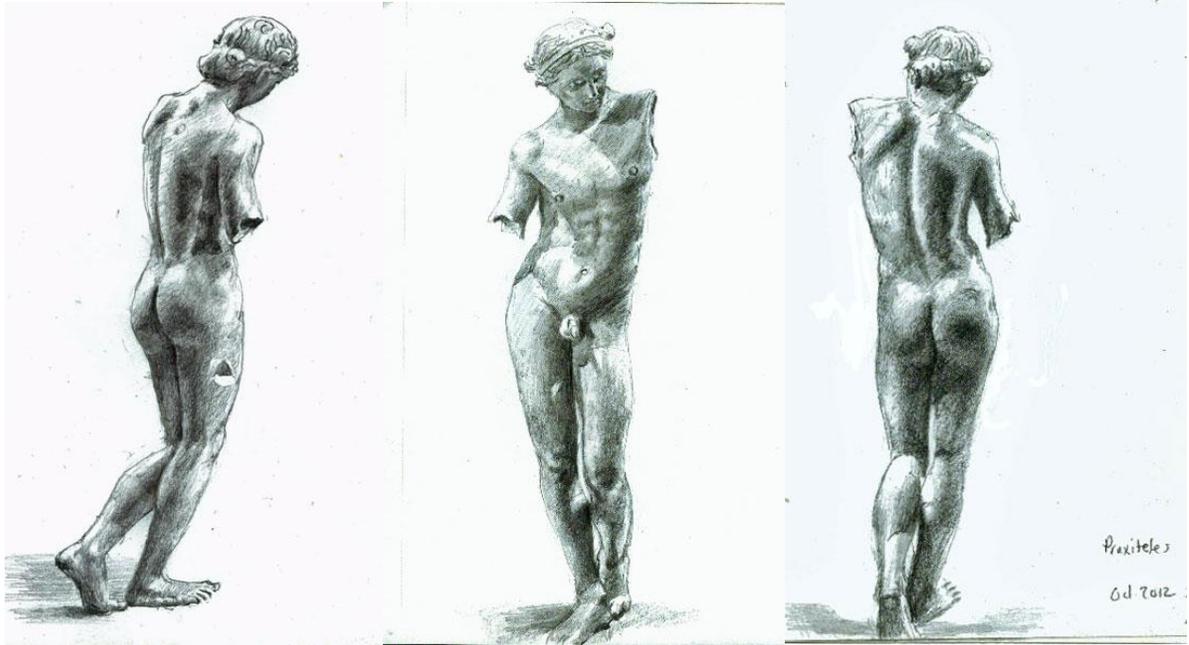


Reconstruction the Apollo as it might have looked
, actual sculpture on left, reconstruction on right.
Sculpture likely to be falsely attributed to Praxiteles

“some statues do in our day....obtain a much greater price..... if they inscribe the name of Praxiteles on their marbles...”

Phaedrus 15-50 BCE

For fun I did some studies of the 3 Apollo sculptures on show at Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) on show in 2013-14.. One of the Apollo sculptures belongs to CMA, one to the Louvre and one to the Liverpool Museum in Britain. The design of these sculptures is claimed to be by Praxiteles. The Cleveland Sculpture is claimed to be the actual one by him and the other two copies. This is certainly not true as the evidence suggests that “Praxiteles” may be the invention historians and scholars. Above you see my more recent attempt to turn the existing sculpture into what it might have looked like when it was made, minus the tree. Here are the three drawing I did in late 2012 and early 2013..



My drawings of the CMA Apollo Sauroktonos,
(claimed to be by Praxiteles, but probably Roman)

Doing these drawings was a joy. I came to see why artists from Leonardo to the 19th century idealized Greek and Roman art so much. It is beautiful with a beauty that fascinates and invites you into it.

When I did the first three of these drawings I was blissfully oblivious to all that I will write about here. Indeed, the joy, precision, perfection, craft and humor in this sculpture is so palpable that I was really drawing that above all. Not only is the great god Apollo here pictured as a slight teen, lovely in strength and form, but the reverence here is for his physicality, not his godlikeness. Indeed, this image is decidedly not a god but a real human. The image is supposed to be about the Greek god Apollo conquering Chaos represented humorously as a tiny serpent. But this is unlikely and the allegory does not hold up except as a joke. If the small lizard is “Python”, or Chaos, then the sculpture is a parody or satire on the idea of Apollo conquering Chaos.

My idealization of Greek sculpture could only last a month or two. This

is not to say that the sculpture lost anything of their appeal. The sculpture was billed as a "Praxiteles", but I did not care about that. Once I started learning about the facts behind some of these sculptures I had to adjust my views. When I did these drawings I did not realize that this sculpture had cruelty embodied in it. Originally I did not see this aspect of the sculpture as the Cleveland Apollo is without arms. I was merely drawing a very lovely young man whose body celebrate youth, existence and human kind. In the Cleveland Apollo he is not pictured as a boy being cruel to animals. But in the Louvre and Liverpool Apollo he is holding a string in one hand to tease up the lizard. In the other he holds an arrow, presumably to kill the lizard once it crawls up the tree.

But as I studied the various versions of the Apollo that visited the Cleveland museum I realized the metaphor of the cruel boy appears to be more of an excuse than a reality. If there is a myth at the heart of this is not obvious, even in the Louvre, Liverpool or Vatican versions. It certainly is not about conquering Chaos. On face value the sculpture appears to be a spoof on heroic or mythic sculptures and perhaps a spoof on Greek Gods. This too would indicate a Hellenistic rather than a classical origin. This is not a sculpture of deep religious faith but one of consummate skill and playful satire of religion.

Though I love the form of this sculpture and have studied it intensely, I dislike the aspect of cruelty in more intact versions of this sculpture think it part of the history of cruelty to animals that develops in Greece and Rome and later joins with Christianity to create Speciesism. This speciesism is certainly present in Ancient Greece. This is already present in Aristotle who wrote in his book on Government:

It is evident then that we may conclude of those things that are, that plants are created for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of men; the tame for our use and provision; the wild, at least the greater part, for our provision also, or for some other advantageous purpose, as furnishing us with clothes, and the like

As we know now, animals were not “created” but evolved and the notion that they exist simply for humans is self-serving anthropocentrism. The ideology of the Great Chain of Being is repulsive. But my desire to draw this sculpture, an Aristotelian form if ever there was one--- also had primarily to do with its fine proportions and to draw some male figures. I am quite able to separate the ways in which Aristotle was wrong from the ways in which he was right. Like the historian of the time, he is a mixed bag, and does some things well and other things very badly. He is certainly better than Plato in any case. Moreover, I had been painting studies of females for a year or so needed to study the male body more.¹

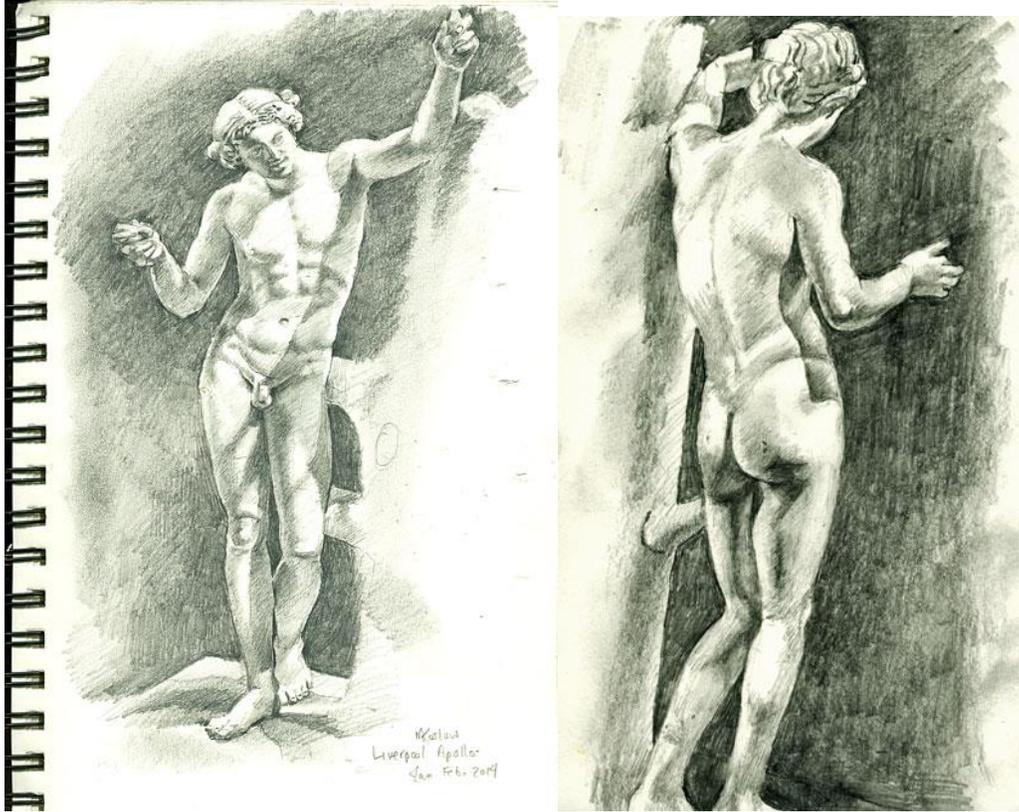
In any case, the sculpture appears to have a lot of mixed motives in it. On the one hand, this image recalls the Yakshi image outside Hindu temples where a female goddess touches a tree with her heel and the tree bursts into flower. The Yakshi goddess is obviously a fertility image and probably is based on older pre-Vedanta imagery. There is no historical connection as far as I am aware with this Apollo. But Platonism and Vedanta appear to have cross-pollinated to some degree, both of them being caste obsessed, authoritarian, patriarchal and elitist systems of unjust privilege.. The figure of Apollo is also a fertility image, once the lizard motif is ignored. The beauty of the young man is quite extraordinary and suggests the loveliness and fertility of youth. Vedanta and Plato are both anti-nature as is the motif of the Lizard killing. But this is so superficially presented that it is hard to take seriously, indeed, it reads as a joke or a satire on the image of Apollo as the sun god, vanquishing Chaos.

It seems to me that this Apollo might have some of the old fertility image of

¹ Cleveland was very forbidding and precious about drawing sculptures in their ‘special exhibition’ rooms. They would not let me draw the Louvre sculpture so I contacted the Louvre and got permission from them to do so. CMA only gave me three hours to draw it, which is not enough. I can only do one of these drawings in 5 or 6 hours or more. This was rather petty I thought, as the Louvre and many other museums have much more enlightened policy where they let anyone draw anywhere in the museum, any time, provided there is not a busy show going on such that artists get in the way of the crowds. There is no copyright restriction in doing drawings as drawing is not copying. CMA’s policy on this is wrongheaded. There is no good reason for it other than the exercise of arbitrary and irrational power.

the youth as image of "Life" or Kouros in it, in a latent sort of way. The meaning of this opposes the image of the killer. The killing of the lizard is sometimes connected to the rebellion of Greek religion against the snake/nature worship of indigenous culture in Greece and thus might connect to Orphic myths, in which Orpheus is seen as a sort of enemy of wild nature. What is really being killed in an ancient respect for the natural world. This would be the opposite of the Yakshi image, which celebrates woman and nature, at least on the surface. But then this sculpture is probably Roman and there is a confusion of motives in it, and the image of the fertile and virile youth need not be reconciled with the Lizard killer image. Pastiche is common in these works in the Hellenistic period, and these images are very fluid and change meaning easily. In any case it was the fertility or virility of this young man that I was drawing, the lizard killing aspect does not interest me at all.

The Cleveland sculpture has some features that are absent in the others. It is wonderfully drawn and has much greater detail in the forms than the Liverpool or the Louvre versions. The fingernails the hairband are very exact and true to life for instance. It is the most balanced and best proportioned and drawn of the group of three. I did these drawings of the Liverpool, on the left and the Louvre versions too. The latter, on the right, is not finished, as I explain in a footnote.



Liverpool Apollo and Louvre Apollo

(both alleged copies of an unknown original also allegedly by Praxiteles)

. In any case, in the process of doing these drawings, I was drawn into the historical and political arguments of scholars about Praxiteles, the presumed designer of the form of all these sculptures. A lot of what was said about this man did not make sense, so I began to look deeper. It soon became clear this could not be a Praxiteles and that this figure in history is not just problematic, but very likely a fabrication. Since it became clear fairly quickly that this sculpture is an example of scholarship gone awry, it seemed a fitting topic for my third book which is about mistaken assumptions. This book is about the nearly religious/political assumptions that deform truth seeking and turn it into fictitious avenues. Eventually I got tangentially involved in Art History and archeology of the Classical period. First, I want to discuss myth making in modern art history and how and why it is created and sustained by the self-interest of scholars.

So, the main question of this essay is: Is Praxiteles a being of mythic fiction or an actual person? After a good deal of research it dawned on me at last that he is probably a fiction, partially or entirely. I conclude though my studies in this area, over the last several years, that a great deal of what passes as history of this period is fiction or dressed up stories of uncertain provenance. Most of the stories about Praxiteles are by Roman historians around the time of Pliny (23 -79 C.E.) who was writing over 300 years after Praxiteles (395-340?²), is supposed to have existed. I am used to history as search for reality and truth. This is not at all what history was during the time of Pliny. Unfortunately some modern Classical scholars also make up fictional histories, ignore contrary evidence and create a version of the truth that is to their liking, even if it never happened. William James puts forward the idea in his theory of religion and claims that if a story feels true it must be true, even if it is entirely made up. This what has happened with Praxiteles, and this fabrication goes back very far. In Pliny and other ancient historians one is as much in the realm of myth and religion as fact. Praxiteles is thus the creation of the fictional tendencies of historians.

Little of the information about Praxiteles can be trusted and most of it appears to be anecdotal or mythic, made up by these Roman historians. It is impossible in many cases to verify what Pliny says, but he appears to be mistaken about so many things and made up history when it suited him. In Pliny, imaginative novelist, the poet, and the historian mix in really inappropriate ways. Part of the problem with classical scholarship is that these stories tend to form a sort of dogma and modern scholars reinforce each other's illusions about the supposed authenticity of reports made based questionable sources. One of the delights of my position is that I am not a classical scholar, however ongoing my interest is-- and so do not have to obey

² his dates are unknown, but these are an average of those often used.

the hidden canons of the subject and can speculate freely on what the facts, -- or in this case, the absence of them, might mean.

So to begin rather randomly: besides Pliny, who I will discuss in more depth shortly, another writer trotted out to confirm modern scholarly prejudices, that the CMA Apollo was done by Praxiteles, is Marcus Valerius Martialis. He died around 104 C.E. He died nearly 400 years after Praxiteles made this sculpture Martialis writes of in his Epigram 172

Sauroctonos Corinth.

To you creeping, insidious child, lizards scratch, scratch that wants to destroy you.

This is rather trivial and ambiguous and seems a comment on the myth of Apollo rather than to a real sculpture on Corinth. One can read all sorts of things into an epigrammic poem like this. There was allegedly a bronze Apollo sculpture on Corinth but that it was by Praxiteles is merely a literary imagining and not a fact. While the poem is full of mythological suggestions, It is more or less useless as history. Yet it is used as a fact in the historiography of this work. It is not a fact but a piece of rhetorical fiction. Yet historians use this useless little bit of information to add to the scaffold of the Praxiteles myth.

The same is true of the questionable epigrams of "Plato", who is claimed to have said "When Cypris saw Cypris at Cnidus, 'Alas!' said she; 'where did Praxiteles see me naked?'" --- while this is clever, it is probably spurious. Plato did not write them. Cypris means Lady of Cypris or Aphrodite, of course. So the implication is that both Plato and Aphrodite are blessing the sculpture as having been done by Praxiteles. Actually this appears to be another fiction. This time put into Plato's mouth. Modern historians dutifully quote this as evidence of a sculpture that Praxiteles supposedly made, but actually there is little reason to suppose this is true.

Writing history in Greece and Rome was not really about truth but about

a good story, an epic, or literature. According to J.L Moles, historiography after Herodotus and Thucydides is about “epic narrative” on the one hand, and the “attempt to establish factual truth” on the other.³ The Greek and Roman historians write a strange combination of fables and fact while trying to imitating the likes of Homer’s Illiad, which is not history any more that the Bible is. This confusion of fact and fiction is present in Pliny, Atheneus and Pausanias, the main “history” writers about Praxiteles.

It was clear to me 20 years ago that from the age of Homer to the age of Plato, perhaps 400 years, involved an increasingly differentiation in culture. Inchoate and irrational gods became Ideas. This process was not whole cloth or entire. Even by Roman times there were few that had escaped the thrall of myth, including ideological myths like Plato created. So if Praxiteles was a real person, that person is now lost to history. The mythic imagination of Greece and Rome made him into a catch all for many sculptures, probably none of which were done by ‘him’, whoever he was, or if he was. This theory is of course speculative, but it has the advantage of actually fitting the facts now available to us, unlike the many books on Praxiteles, which are artful fictions .

Moles notes that Plutarch(46 – 120 C.E.) was quite willing to sacrifice historical fact to relate a good story with a moral. Pliny lived near the time of Plutarch and the same may be said of him. Seneca accuses historians of being liars. He writes “Some historians win approval by telling incredible tales”. At best it can be said that Pliny and Pausanias and others invented a literary story about Praxiteles and each one embellished it to the point where one cannot know if there was such a man, who or if he might have been. If there was such a person no one knows what he actually did. It is likely he did not exist at all. This is not quite the same thing as lying, but it is bad history and mythic fabrication, certainly. Rather than having art historians indulge this need of mythic magnification, I would much prefer to eliminate the attribution “Praxiteles” from art history all together and treat all the sculptures ascribed to

³ Gill, Christopher. Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World, University of Texas, Austin 1993 pg. 91

him as not yet known and very possibly works done by many artists, all now invisible and neglected. They are all great sculptures, but even on face value they appear to be done by different hands.

At least with the sculptors Phidias and Polykleitos there is a better record than with Praxiteles. Polykleitos wrote a book on sculpture called the Kanon somewhere around 450-440 B.CE. one of the first datable books on aesthetics. Polykelitos is as close as we come to a Platonic sculptor, that is, one who created his works based on a mathematical formulae of sorts, rather like Leonardo's Vitruvian man.. The workshop of Phidias for the Zeus sculpture was seemingly found in 1958 and there are some contemporary accounts about him, specifically in Plato, who mentioned him in Meno (91d). Also he appears to have been at work on the Parthenon. Plutarch's biography of Phidias 500 years after the fact cannot be taken very seriously, however. So there is some admittedly shaky evidence about what he did, though his existence is not in doubt.

But the record about Praxiteles is so very thin, so thin, in fact, I have come to believe he did not exist. He is largely and perhaps entirely, a fictive invention. The classical scholar Aileen Ajootian notes in her essay on Praxiteles that

Particularly in the case of Praxiteles the literary tradition creates a persona that consists of an accretion of literary tropes rather than a strict account of facts.⁴

This is good but way understates the case. At least Ajootian admits there is a problem here, but then proceeds in much of the rest of her essay to treat literary fictions as if they were facts. Actually there is no contemporaneous evidence of Praxiteles ever existing. All the works ascribed to him could not be

⁴ Palagia and Pollitt, Personal Styles in Greek Sculpture .Cambridge University Press 1996 pg. 97

his and who actually did them is unknown. Classical art scholars have a hard time dealing with this unknown and so make up this or that simply to fill the void. While Da Vinci is incontestably real with thousands of manuscript pages and paintings ascribable only to him, and Van Gogh incontestably existed as over 900 letters prove, Praxiteles is a ghost, and appears to be a carefully nurtured fiction, not any less fiction despite all the true believers that worship at his many shrines. Maybe there was such a man, but it is doubtful and all the facts about him should be carefully studied and subjected to rigorous examination. I have not looked into them all, but from what I have seen so far, it is a story that is far more fiction than fact. I think rigorous dismissal of facts not supported by actual evidence suggests the man did not exist, as I show in this essay. I think this would still be the case even if more searching were done. He is the creation of bad art historians and gives that discipline a bad name. He is a persistent illusion.

Biographies of Praxiteles, like the two volume set by Antonio Corso, are largely fiction stringing together a lot of questionable facts or fictions as if they were certainties, when they are anything but. The scholarship involved in Corso's book is extensive but is based on many unexamined assumptions, unquestionable dogmas and facts accepted that actually are later fictions. He obsessively builds his case out of thin air. He is willing to use the words "perhaps" or "Praxiteles must have", when in fact he does not know. Moreover he does not consider contrary evidence nor give much credence to the many critics of virtually every piece attributed to Praxiteles. He quotes Pliny like a Bible.

Art History here gets written without any fact checking or peer review and claims can be asserted that have no real basis in fact. True, there is more evidence that Praxiteles did exist than that Jesus of Nazareth⁵ existed, but that

⁵ The creation of the myth of Jesus overlaps the creation of the myth of Praxiteles, both having been created about 2000 years ago. It may be the same mythic and historical interplay and hyperbole is at work in both. Earl Doherty and others claim that the Christ myth precedes the attempt to create a gospel narrative, which are fictional stories which justify the already existing myth. The evidence suggests that this is a fact. This happens around 100-200 C.E. Roman writers are important in the creation and

is saying little as Christ very likely did not exist.⁶ But we are largely in the realm of myth and legend with Praxiteles, as with Christ and Muhammad: indeed, in all these cases we find the same pattern of historical fudging, lies, myth creation and lots of time between the time when the subject supposedly existed and any actual records that claim what they did. All these men appear to be later literary creations, when in fact there is little or no mention of them at the time, and nothing of a factual nature..

It may be that there was another Praxiteles who lived later or that maybe a 'Praxiteles' did exist, or at least a sculpture by a man of a similar name existed, as some attributions have been made because a name was misread.⁷ No one knows the origin of any of these sculptures. The Hermes and Dionysius sculpture is probably Roman for instance, but is usually placed squarely in the Praxitelian canon. Since the originals are gone, or rather, they may not even have existed, no one can now tell if copies of it look like exactly it or not, or even indeed if the presumed copies are actually copies or original works. Many of the works false attributed to Praxiteles are probably original Roman creations.

There are a number of inscribed bases with Praxiteles signature on them, but no sculpture above it.⁸ But this tells us little and anyone who is handy with a chisel can write on marble. Some of these are very dubious at best. The one comment of Pliny that might be somewhat convincing is his claim that many

eventual state imposition of the Christian myth. In both cases we are dealing with a fiction that treated as historical fact. Of course the function of the Praxiteles myth is to serve the Roman Empire in a minor way, whereas the Christ myth becomes a huge organizing force that helps create the Dark Age Feudalism that would supplant Rome, though mostly Christianity is a Roman creation. But these are complex matters I only allude to here

⁶ For more on the Christ Myth see Earl Doherty [the Jesus Puzzle](http://www.jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/jhcjp.htm)
<http://www.jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/jhcjp.htm>

or here <http://www.jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/home.htm>

⁷ One group sculpture of the Sauroktonos type, the Ildefonso, uses the Sauroktonos image for instance, but might be by a Praxiteles, whose name is quite similar, says Aileen Ajootian in [Personal Styles in Greek Sculpture](#). Pg121

⁸ Corso discusses one such inscription and spends a whole day trying to read it, and concludes it does say Praxiteles. His career depends on seeing it that way. But barely readable words written on stone are not proof of anything. One cannot infer a whole history of an individual from blurred writing on an old stone, since no one knows when it was written or by whom, or even if it really says what is claimed.

people went to visit the Aphrodite of Cnidus after Praxiteles made it. He writes that “There are works by him [Praxiteles] at Athens in the Ceramics, but first and foremost not only of this, but indeed in the whole world, is the Venus that many have sailed to Cnidus to see.” But all this really implies is that people went there during the time of Pliny, which is nearly 400 years after the sculpture was supposedly created. So Pliny has not really given us anything except knowledge that it was admired in the 1st or 2nd century C.E.

I would like to imagine a Praxiteles may have existed. But there are simply no facts to prove that he did. The one sculpture that is supposed to have been definitely by him is the Aphrodite of Cnidus or Knidos. The basis of the attribution of the Knidian Aphrodite sculpture to Praxiteles is again Pliny. But even here in this most ‘certain’ of Praxiteles sculptures, there are many doubts about the literary heritage of it. Pliny, Atheneus, Pausanias and others cannot be trusted. Christine Havelock notes that “there is not a trace of the Knidia in the art and literature of the fourth or third centuries” B.C.E. ⁹ This fact should have suggested to this author that this is evidence that perhaps the man did not exist and the Knidia is a later creation by someone else, Hellenistic and not Classical. Maybe it was done by a Greek sculptor working for the early Romans. There does not seem to be any record of anyone seeing the Knidian Aphrodite till around 220 230 BCE, when a few ambiguous coins turn up with the image on it, though how those coins were dated is not very clear to me, nor is it clear that this is the sculpture called Knidia on the coin. Havelock also notes that

“the figure [of Knida] is not mentioned in any contemporary source. She was ignored or unknown to the philosophers, dramatists, and poets of the fourth century and the early Hellenistic period” ¹⁰

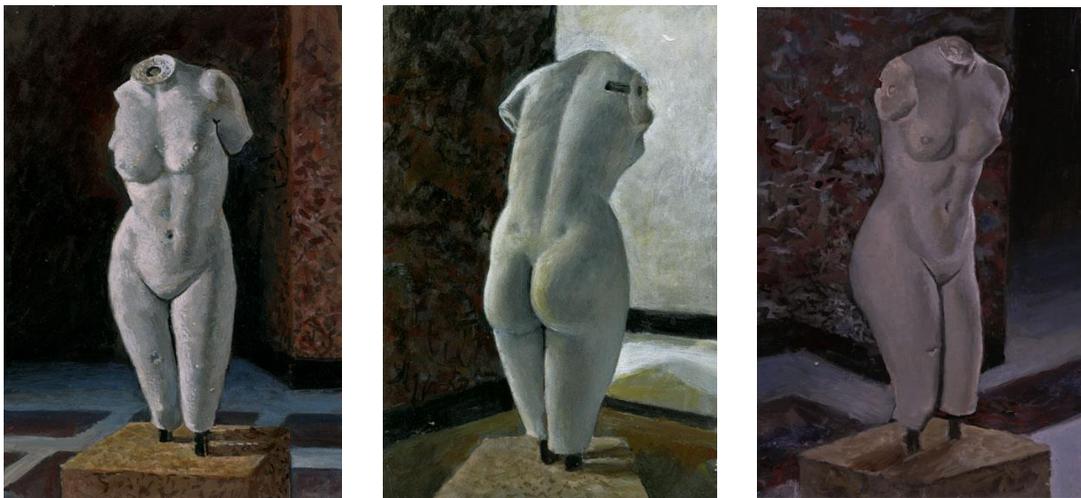
⁹ Havelock, Christine Mitchell [The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors: A Historical Review...](#)

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 55

It is a presumption to say “she was ignored” when it is not certain that she even existed then. This surmise and assumption is how myths maintain themselves. The Knidian Aphrodite is mentioned by Poseidippis, who mentions it the early 200’s BCE, and it is noted that this historian does not mention Phyrne at all. This is 150 years or so since it was supposedly made by Praxiteles. It is reasonable to suppose that this, his most famous sculpture, was probably not made by him at all and is later, Hellenistic.

But if Poseidippis is the first to mention the sculpture, and there is not mention of such an important work before that, it is clear the fiction begins there. The notion that it was made 150 years earlier and no one mentions this important work is absurd, he did not make it.

Pliny made up his imaginary stories about the Knida and other sculptures 200 years later. The notion that one can believe Pliny, given this record, is utterly absurd. It is likely he merely embellished the exaggerated fictions of others. Yet art history scholars go on saying it is certain Praxiteles did make this one sculpture, the model for thousands of other Venuses.



Three Views of the Louvre’s Aphrodite of Knidos, allegedly by Praxiteles Torso
small oil paintings by author

There is no basis for this supposition at all, and if the rules of evidence matter, the only real likelihood is that Praxiteles is a myth pushed by Poseidippis, Pliny, Pausanias, Atheneus, as well as by recent art historians such as Palagia, Corso, Havelock and many others. They all made it up, unknowingly perhaps, but nevertheless. It was exceedingly common for Greek and Roman historians to do this--- just as Herodotus made up the hairy mane and tail he imagined to be on the Hippopotamus of the Nile as well as his exaggerations about the huge size of the Persian Army.¹¹

In fact the absence of evidence for Praxiteles is indeed, in this case, evidence of his absence. It is pretty sure that this artist is a myth. Perhaps some evidence would turn up eventually showing he was real. But until that happens it is most reasonable to assume he is the literary creation of art historians and anthropologists who should have been novel writers. The fact of so much uncertainty in the records about him gives one pause. The lack of evidence is more in favor of his being a myth than a reality. Havelock mentions that there is a “surprising” flowering of interest in the Knidian Aphrodite about 100 BCE, and this suggests that it does not exist much before that. This not “surprising” at all if the sculpture was made around 200 BCE or later. So it is not Greek at all but Roman and the coins merely represent a prototype of sorts or a growing trend in form. This has the ring of truth in it, and of honest assessment based on the facts. So perhaps Roman sculptors made the form of the Knidan Aphrodite, as well as most of the other Aphrodites, since nearly all of them are indeed Roman and after 200 BCE. The form was probably not the creation of one sculptor but of many over a few hundred years.

But all the other sculptures ascribed to Praxiteles are very doubtful. It is humorous to look at the list of works that is attributed to Praxiteles. There are about 70 works, 10 of them "disputed" when actually all of them are disputable and there are no originals that are uncontested, including the Aphrodite. No one

¹¹ Herodotus also thought that sheep in Egypt had huge tails and that there were flying snakes in the Middle East. History in those days was largely make believe and this is long before Pliny, who might be a little better, but not by much.

could have made 70 advanced sculptures of this quality in less than five lifetimes. Since this is impossible, there clearly there has been allot of fiction written about this guy. He is a dumping ground for lovely sculptures that scholars have trouble attributing to anyone. Experts I have questioned have no real evidence about Praxiteles, they merely have “faith” in Pliny, Pausanias, Lucian and others that mention him, and so claim he existed and made the works that are disputed to be his.¹² This is religion or politics and not art history. . So is Praxiteles entirely the invention of Roman historians and modern museum curators, anxious to attribute "their" pet sculpture to a great name that has no reality at its base? It would seem so, or at least, this seems one likely conclusion, all too often denied by classical scholars. The refusal to admit this very reasonable assumption is itself worrying.

The idea that the existence of Praxiteles should not be questioned—as one eminent classical art scholar said to me—is dogma and not rational. There is a dogmatic myth that the main sculptures in the Praxitelian canon were not created by anyone but him, even if the originals were lost, and in the absence of convincing evidence. This is not art history but fancy, dogmatism and mistaken. Classical art scholarship appears to be largely based on literary fiction and dogma and to be little supported by any facts or contemporary witnesses. It is really just a tissue of literary associations loosely attached to existing works. The works themselves are amazing, there is no doubt about that, but the history that surrounds them is probably bogus. What is amazing in the Knidia, the Apollo, Dionysius and other sculptures is the men who made them all of them unknown and invisible.

But there is one fact that can be demonstrated. There is an historical record of one man saying, in effect, that Praxiteles is a dumping ground. Phaedrus (15 BCE, 50 CE) said it was all bogus at the time. He writes

¹² for instance Corso argues that Cephisodotus or Kephisodotos was Praxiteles’ father, son or son in law or father and that Pliny as a source of this. But the idea that Pliny knew anything about it very farfetched to begin with.

something very interesting that no scholar has bothered to quote as far as I can tell. In his Prologue to the Fables he says:

‘
“If I shall anywhere insert the name of Æsop, to whom I have already rendered every honor that was his due, know that it is for the sake of his authority, just as some statues do in our day, who obtain a much greater price for their productions, if they inscribe the name of Praxiteles on their marbles, and Myron on their polished silver. Therefore let these Fables obtain a hearing.”¹³

Phaedrus, who at least was a real person, wanted to be Aesop, (who probably did not exist either). But at least he is honest about it. Phaedrus was aware that many sculptures attributed to Praxiteles were fake, yet many put the name of Praxiteles on their sculptures and claimed it was really by him, because it promoted their work into the myth. That is how 70 sculptures got the name Praxiteles on them. He is saying that if you want to be listened to, make it up, it takes “fables to obtain a hearing”. This is evidence of a common understanding at the time of the need to lie and to lie specifically about Praxiteles. Pliny and Herodotus, Pausanias and others told fables, but were not honest about it. Perhaps the Knidian Aphrodite was indeed by a man whose name is lost who lived around 200 BCE. Maybe his name was Prasiteles or Positelis or even Praxiteles and all the other sculptures are free-loaders on his name. This is more plausible than the imaginary existence of a Praxiteles living at the time of Aristotle, for whom there is no evidence at all. But what there really was a Praxiteles in Greece who made the famous sculptures. Nope.

Yet if Phaedrus knew the name Praxiteles was being forged and promoted as myth, it seems likely this was not an uncommon occurrence. This would explain all the sculptures around with that name attached to them. It is

¹³ Phaedrus. The Fables of Phaedrus Book V Prologue

entirely reasonable to doubt the existence of Praxiteles and see it all as myth. This ought to be a valid point of view in classical studies. It might even be the right one.

Phaedrus is already saying around 25 CE, that many of the sculptures then called Praxiteles were not actually by him, and this is not long before Pliny writes fables in praise of Praxiteles. It is much more likely that Phaedrus is telling the truth than Pliny. Phaedrus was writing fiction with a moral lesson and thus telling white lies in order to tell the truth. Sometimes, not often perhaps, but sometimes, fiction is truer than non-fiction, as in Dickens or Shakespeare. Pliny is doing the opposite from Phaedrus, he is writing "truth" that is actually a mythical concoction or a lie. It was already known that the name Praxiteles was a way to pawn off things that were not real. Phaedrus implies it was common knowledge. Just as Homer is probably a made up composite of many poets and generally seen as the culmination of many generations of oral story-telling that resulted in the Iliad and Odyssey, so Praxiteles is not one sculptor but many sculptors. Like Homer, Aesop is also a "literary" trope or cultural tradition. The man probably did not exist, but the character is a catch all for a type of story. The Greeks and Romans were still living in a twilight area where truth and fiction are blurred. Praxiteles maybe a fictional character of this kind, an attribution dump.

What is clear is that the name "Praxiteles" bolsters or hypes up the image of the Roman authors and modern scholars that write about it, as well as archeologists that promote his sculptures. Like the 'god' fiction Praxiteles creates jobs and careers. So who cares if it might be all fiction? Isn't a good story better than reality anyway?

My own preference is for the truth, as the world is full enough of actual marvels without dressed up fictions added to them. As Gregory Curtis shows in his excellent book Disarmed, those who worked at the Louvre in the early 1800's actually cut off the signature of the artist who did it and claimed it was a Praxiteles, to bolster its fame. This guy has been used for millennia as a

dump for masterpieces. Actually, as we now know the Venus de Milo was Carved by Alexandros, a little known sculptor of Antioch around 150 BCE. Maybe he did the Aphrodite or the Sauroctonos too? Phaedrus would laugh out loud about this. As it is exactly what he said people were doing nearly 2 thousand years earlier. Unfortunately the Louvre has not learned from its own mistake and is still trying to push the myth of Praxiteles. Though there is proof that times have changed. At an exhibition of works allegedly “by” Praxiteles in 2007 at the Louvre, one of their promotional documents admits that

"The numismatic and literary sources presented in the display cases are the only surviving and reliable historical records that we may use to supplement our understanding of the sculptor, since virtually all of his works fell victim to the ravages of time or the vicissitudes of history".

Actually the literary sources are really useless, since the writings of Pliny, Atheneus, Martialis and Pausanias,--- all of whom are used to claim that Praxiteles is real,--- are all questionable. They are all heavily involved in myth making, and though they occasionally pepper their works with facts it is largely unknown which are facts and which are make believe stories meant to entertain. There is yet to be a really thorough evidentiary vetting of these ancient texts, as there ought to be. They are so full of mistakes, fabrications and myth. So the Louvre show of 2007 is questionable at best and probably misleading and involved in the same myth creation.

A brief glance at Pliny's Natural History would convince anyone with reason that this man is not to be trusted. He writes all sorts of nonsense. He says, for instance, that dragons leap out of trees and eat elephants. He says that a “Phoenix” exists in Arabia and he imagines that

“it lives five hundred and forty years, that when it becomes old it builds a nest of cassia and sprigs of incense, which it fills with perfumes, and

then lays its body down upon them to die; that from its bones and marrow there springs at first a sort of small worm, which in time changes into a little bird: that the first thing that it does is to perform the obsequies of its predecessor, and to carry the nest entire to the city of the Sun near Panchaia,⁵ and there deposit it upon the altar of that divinity” (Natural History 10,2)

. His book is full of nonsense like this on many subjects. The idea that he can be trusted on something 300 years before him is absurd.¹⁴ Are Atheneus, Pausanias and Pliny to be trusted? The simple answer is no. Looking at Pliny’s Natural History made me think few scholars of Greek sculpture have actually read him, or if they did they are very gullible. Phaedrus was certainly right.

However, there are exceptions. At least Olga Palagia points out in her essay, "Pheidias Epoiesein",¹⁵ that Pliny is prone to give a sculpture a mistaken attribution when it is not factually indicated at all, simply because it conforms to his "value judgment" . For instance a sculpture of a man named Alcibiades is supposed by Pliny to have been done by either Praxiteles or Scopas, but this work could not be by either Praxiteles or Scopas since “Alcibiades lived in the wrong century”, she says. Pliny makes great names like Praxiteles or Scopas a "magnet of attribution" she says. Pliny thought that if a given sculpture was beautiful it must be a Phidias or Praxiteles. Palagia goes to great lengths to show that sculptures were misidentified or wrongly attributed by both Pliny and Pausanias, writing nearly 400 years after Phidias and Praxiteles. How could it be otherwise?

¹⁴ About salamanders for instance: “ the salamander, an animal like a lizard in shape, and with a body starred all over, never comes out except during heavy showers, and disappears the moment it becomes fine. This animal is so intensely cold as to extinguish fire by its contact, in the same way as ice does. It spits forth a milky matter from its mouth; and whatever part of the human body is touched with this, all the hair falls off, and the part assumes the appearance of leprosy> N.H. 10, 86

¹⁵ Palagia, Olga, "Pheidias Epoiesein",
http://www.arch.uoa.gr/fileadmin/arch.uoa.gr/uploads/images/melh_dep/papers/palagia_pheidias_epoiese_n.pdf

Pliny and Pausanias were not the only ones to mis-attribute sculptures. So did the Classical scholar, Furtwangler, whom Palagia accuses of having an "ad hoc" method of deciding who did what sculpture. She notes that classical experts on sculpture have made irresponsible attributions on the basis that "this [sculpture] is so beautiful it must be classical and was probably made by someone we have heard of". Cleveland basically claims that their Apollo sculpture is a Praxiteles because it is too beautiful to be anything else. That at least is known and Phaedrus admits that all sorts of people claimed that a given sculpture was by Praxiteles when it was not..

I do not mean here to imply that Palagia herself is beyond these illusory attributions. She mentions the imaginary love between Praxiteles and Phyrne as if it were a fact. Actually the historical record suggests this story is clearly the result of the imagination of Athenaeus (200 BCE), probably promoted by less embellished comments from earlier writers.¹⁶ The story is traced in Christine Mitchell Havelock's book The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors. She shows the Phyrne myth grew up slowly as a sensationalist literary fiction over several centuries, and implies that if there was any basis for it, it might have been someone else entirely, as there was more than one Phyrne. The Athenaeus story in the *Deipnosophistae* (d. after 200 C.E.) about Praxiteles love for Phyrne is well told, but there is not a grain of truth in it. Havelock quotes an earlier version of this myth, very likely the first version, which comes from around 200 BCE. The Athenaeus version is a few hundred years later and he added salacious details about Phyrne taking her clothes off at her trial. Havelock notes that this "perhaps did not even happen". There is no perhaps about it, as indeed, the whole story is probably a concoction. Corso seems to take every word of Pliny as 'gospel' and never questions if the gospel might be a fiction.

I don't think Havelock draws the logical conclusion that the Phyrne of

¹⁶ See also Phyrne in *Modern Art, Cinema and Cartoon* by Eleanora Cavallini.

myth is a fabrication, but she should have. She comes close, in any case, and it is obvious to me that the myth should be questioned. A more skeptical attitude towards the historicity of Phryne anecdotes is certainly warranted. These authors, Palagia and Havelock, both notably women, begin to question these myths but do not draw the logical conclusion, though they comes closer to it than many other classical scholars. Just about everything, actually— everything--- about Praxiteles is fiction and the historians who write about Greek sculpture created and are still creating a mythic or legendary series of stories about the sculptor..

The Phryne story was later painted by Gerome, Turner and many others, and is obviously a male voyeuristic fantasy which persists by virtue of its erotic content. and cannot be taken seriously as a historical account of anything. It is used to claim that this or that statue is actually by Praxiteles of Phryne the Hetaerae or courtesan. The name Phryne was a common one for prostitute or courtesan during the classical period. It would be safe to observe that Gerome's fantasy accurately reflects the fabricated story of Athenaeus and thus reflects male sexual fantasy in the begging of the 3rd century CE..

Both the Gerome and Atheneus stories are rather sensationalist and transparent stories and hard to take seriously as history. Though one must add that the need to make such a fantasy float as a real event is itself part of history. The convenient thing about Praxiteles is that because there are no real facts about him that anyone one can point to, the scholar who writes about him are much freer than usual to express their creative instincts and claim him as their own. Yet at the same time they can write about him as if he were a real person, not a fiction. This makes Praxiteles almost a religious figure, like Jesus or Muhammad, and one in which sexual allusions are both allowed and even built upon as part of "history". One could rightly say then that the myth of Phryne is really a cloak for the hypocrisy of mostly male scholars and painters.



Phryne before the Areopagus by Gerome, 1861f

As to the coins, my preliminary finding is that they all appear to be Roman creations, at least as far as the Sauroktonos coins are concerned.¹⁷ They are mostly from one period in the 2nd century C.E. and since Praxiteles himself seems to be a Roman creation to a large degree, this is not surprising. Havelock mentions coin images of Knida but none of them are much older than 200 BCE. But are they of the Knidia?

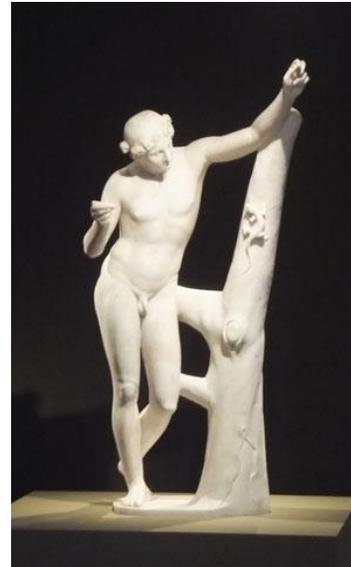
Since there are no Praxiteles that exist with any concrete reference or reality other than in 1st or second century BCE, and all others are hearsay or invented fiction, and some coins from the same period, it is virtually impossible to identify a style or a man's work and significance. The evidence suggests that

¹⁷ Patrician Laurence writes of these coins that "I would repeat: this is a unique phenomenon. A famous statuary type used in one region and, as a series [of coins]: nowhere else. Never before Antoninus Pius, never after Diadumenian.(208 – 218 C.E.). Martial writes it up at Rome, but it never appears on a Rome-mint coin. Marble copies are found in Greece, but it does not appear on Greek Imperials from the Greek peninsula or islands" Antoninus Pius lived 86 C.E. – died 7 March, 161 C.E...This is rather late and is close to the time of Pliny who died in 79 in the explosion of Vesuvius.

Praxiteles did not exist and all the sculptures attributed to him are 2nd or 1st century BCE, the oldest being 220 BCE or so. In fact the Praxitelian oeuvre is heterogeneous and looks like it was done by many invisible sculptors.

This is a particularly clear example of historians abuse of history. This makes all scholarly writings about Praxiteles more about their authors than about the fictional character they write about. They are writing imaginative fiction not art history. Tangentially such writings might also be about various more or less random sculptures, some of them of exceptional quality and beauty, which could have been done hundreds of years after the man Praxiteles might have lived. Thus, virtually all Praxiteles studies are largely fiction of a rather cultish kind, and fiction created and sustained by scholars as an attempt to sustain careers and serve ambitions.

This looks to be the case with the Cleveland Apollo, which follows the by now usual pattern. The three sculptures below were all in a show in Cleveland in 2013-14. The one on the left is said by curator Michael Bennett to be an authentic Praxiteles. The only one on earth, he passionately imagines. But this is probably just hype and in fact it is a later Roman work, as I will explain shortly. The one in the middle, from the Louvre, in some ways the most beautiful, since it is almost complete, although heavily restored. The one on the right is the Liverpool Apollo.



From Left to right : the Cleveland Apollo, the Louvre Apollo and the Liverpool Apollo, all likely mis-attributed to a Praxiteles original

Cleveland bought theirs in 2004 from a questionable antiquities dealer, who claims to have gotten it from East Germany. There are those who doubt this story, and the museum has not been forthcoming about aspects of its origins according to some. This sculpture is really beautiful, though very damaged. It is claimed by Bennett that it was done by Praxiteles (370-330) but he has not demonstrated anything other than it was probably made sometime between 350 B.C.E. and 100 B.C.E.. This could mean many things. It could have been done by many people between 350 and 100 BCE. It is unlikely the earlier date is at all accurate as I will explain shortly. It could be Roman, it could be by virtually anyone else. The evidence does not suggest it is the one that Pliny records in the 1st century BCE, which is certainly a fake in any case. It is claimed by the Cleveland Museum to be the one that is said to have been at Delphi. But this is also fiction with little or no basis to it. Since there is not one sculpture by Praxiteles whose authenticity is uncontested, is it likely to be really by him?. For one to suddenly turn up at this late date is certainly doubtful. It has been thrust into view without much real debate as to its character and origins. It is claimed it was probably taken out of Greece by Nero

along with shiploads of 500 other sculptures. But no one knows that this is case either. This maybe more art history of the sort that does not go before its critics for their fair assessment, but one that is thrust on the public as part of a PR campaign. This has some of the marks of a flim flam.

So I looked closer. Michael Bennett and Antonio Corso both heavily depend on Pliny's Natural History and the book of Atheneus to defend their claims about Praxiteles' creations. The basis of the attribution of Apollo Sauroktonos is again Pliny. This sculpture is mentioned by Pliny,(NH. 34. 19, or in some editions 34, 70?) but in brief and rather trivial terms. Pliny says

"Praxiteles also made a youthful Apollo called in Greek the Lizard-Slayer because he is waiting with an arrow for a lizard creeping towards him."

This is not enough to base an identification on, as it could well be as Phaedrus says, merely a trumped up pretence or a promotional fiction.

Bennett has a nearly religious view of the sculpture and says that in Ohio he has recreated the "Temple of Art", like Delphi, where the sculpture was supposed to have been originally housed. Bennett tries to relate the sculpture to an imaginary American "Temple of Art" and compares it to the Greenough sculpture of George Washington and thus folds it into a Nationalist ideology, evoking transcendentalist ideas of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism of the 19th century.¹⁸ This is not history, but Republican myth, politics and religion. It is also poor scholarship and unwarranted, despite the

¹⁸ Bennett does not like "collective ownership" of art and calls it "ideology" but exempts private ownership from the same charge, when obviously both of these are ideology. (pg. 48 of his book). He claims "ancient art transcends archeological context", which is nonsense as all art has a place of origin and this always matters. But since the provenance of the Cleveland Apollo is rather suspicious, it is not a surprise he would say that. Actually a great sculpture like this really does belong to everyone. The Elgin Marbles belong in Greece, since they were stolen off the Parthenon and Britain should return them. So likewise this sculpture probably should make regular visits to Italy and Greece, where it is from. Art done for the ultra-rich has always been a corrupting influence on culture,--- and often results in poor art-- as the French Revolution understood very well.

extraordinary beauty of the sculpture. Since Pliny is often mistaken and his attributions are often 'value judgments' rather than real scholarship based on facts, as Palagia has shown, Bennett has made a "value judgment" that because the sculpture is beautiful it must be by Praxiteles. . In other words claiming the Cleveland Apollo is a Praxiteles follows a well-established trend of questionable attributions made by museum curators. Palagia notes that though Pliny's tendency to literary and mythic attributions is a practice is on the wane it is still alive and well in some places. The Cleveland museum appears to be one of these places.

Pliny mentions the Apollo Sauroktonos was a bronze. But though the Cleveland Apollo is a bronze, there have been so many false attributions in history for pieces claiming to be a Praxiteles, one should be very cautious. His signature appears in many places, indeed, there are far more signatures than facts about his life, suggesting again that Phaedrus is right and the name Praxiteles and the word fable are nearly synonymous.. The Cleveland Apollo has no valid provenance to speak of, so the most one can say is that it is beautiful.

Palagia notes herself that it is not Greek but Roman and she says in a letter to the author this is so because "the face is Roman" and the bronze "has too much lead in it". Bennett says the lead content is 15%, and 10 % tin and the rest copper. This is a high lead content. Carol Mattusch says in her Greek Bronze Statuary. (pg. 15) that the Greek used little or no lead until later and suggests that a large amount of lead probably indicates a later date, or as Palagia says, it may mean it was Roman. This is the science of archeology at its best. So the physical evidence suggests that this statue is Roman and not Greek. If these facts are correct, and I think they are, one can definitely say this sculpture is not Classical. It is not by an imaginary Praxiteles. It is probably Roman and Hellenistic. I am not sure why the idea of the Apollo Sauroktonos is thought to be a Greek idea at all as nothing ties it specifically with Praxiteles, other than legend or fable.. It is probably not even Greek.

A study put out by the Getty Museum online called Small Bronze Sculpture from the Ancient World suggest somewhat different conclusions and says that by the time of Classical sculpture lead content was on the rise. But David Scott, the author of one of the essays here says that lead content is very low in the 4th century, which would include Praxiteles. So again, this sculpture is probably either late Greek, well after Praxiteles or more likely Roman. Of course, there are variations of lead content even in early sculptures so this is not a certainty. It is remotely possible that there may have been an anomalous Greek sculpture that had high lead content. But the evidence is much stronger that it is a Roman sculpture. No one has been very honest about these concerns, which again suggests that Phaedrus had it right, the name Praxiteles is an 'attribution magnet' or dump, that people use to try to hitch their wagon to the Praxiteles star, even if there is no such thing.

2300 years is a long time for anyone to know who made a given sculpture. Given the unknown provenance of the Cleveland Apollo it is sure that no one should be claiming certainty about authorship. No one knows who did it. The only known facts about it are that it is probably Roman, probably Hellenistic but not from the Classical period. It is not a Praxiteles, of course. No one knows where it was or where it came from. How it ended up in East Germany is also mysterious and some think, suspect. That makes it highly dubious. But like the Venus de Milo which was also claimed to be by Praxiteles and turned out not to be, this one is really lovely. In the end it is the beauty of these sculptures that matters, and one can wonder about their origin, but be aware that in the absence of facts the human mind is prone to create delusions, and they are prevalent in all the alleged sculpture of "Praxiteles". So there is the beauty of the sculpture on the one hand, that I tried to show in my drawings, with variable results, and there is the human comedy of attribution, which shows all the usual foibles of human vanity, ambition, lying, envy and in fighting, pretense and posturing. The whole Praxiteles enterprise is invention, surmise, fabrication or based on little or no actual fact. This is in interesting

story that probably belongs more in a book critical of religion than anywhere else. The creation of the myth of Praxiteles is an example of how gods and avatars get made, born of human delusions and nurtured by the will to power, poor scholarship, nationalism and unjust wealth.

Having watched myself how a nearly religious tendency has developed around the Cleveland Apollo, it is interesting to speculate how Greek sculpture has attracted a nearly religious following since the Renaissance and done so in relation to political ideology. This is no doubt connected to the erosion of Christianity and subsequent rise of nationalism as a civic religion. The French claimed the Venus De Milo ¹⁹as their own, even though they basically stole it, and the English did steal the misnamed Elgin Marbles, which really are the Parthenon marbles, and which should have been returned to Greece long ago.²⁰

¹ Byron wrote of the theft of the Parthenon marbles that:

“Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had best behoved
To guard those relics ne'er to be restored.
Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,
And snatch'd thy shrinking gods to northern climes abhorred!”

¹⁹ The French curators and experts lied about it being a Praxiteles in the early 19th century. They knew it was not by him and even cut off the actual sculpture's name off the original to try to sell it as a Praxiteles, and later on the name on the base was found. It was not a Praxiteles and it was not and there were even jokes about this as you can see on page 87 of Disarmed by Gregory Curtis.

The French Revolution artists saw the Greeks and Romans as forward looking embodiments of liberty, which of course many of them were. But the kings of the reactionary Restoration period tried to restyle the Greeks as 'divine right' reactionaries, and some of them, like Plato, were that exactly. The rebellion against the mythologizing tendency moved toward abstraction and this just made matters worse, not better by helping the corporate ideology of personhood solidify in demonstrations of emptiness and neo-religious delusions. Thus, Greek and Roman sculpture, which grew out of the archeological context, has had a troubled and political history.

The Cleveland Museum of Art, motivated by a reactionary American politics claims to have created a "temple of art" around their Apollo and tried to tie it to 21 century globalist and neo-colonial economic ideology. This is another form of nationalism and manifest destiny, updating 19th century civic religion. In order to justify the capitalist speculation on art objects Bennett writes panegyrics against archeological "context" and public ownership and despises the fact that art always arises in a specific place. This is the ideology of global corporate ownership, a delusion, which itself is a fiction. The Greek Culture Ministry in contrast attacks the Cleveland Apollo,--also inspired by nationalistic civil religion. The Greeks and Italians, at least have the advantage of being the place where these things arose. The Greeks prevented The Cleveland Apollo from appearing in the 2007 Louvre show on Praxiteles. The Greeks claim it was stolen, which it may have been, as its origins are suspect. This is not without relation to the fact that the Germans, Americans and others have been trying to punish Greece for not adhering well to corrupt economic "austerity" programs created by banking institutions and countries bent of a neo-colonial and corporate agenda of punishing those who do not go along with an IMF economic agenda, rather like the mythic Sheriff of Nottingham who steals for the poor to give to the rich.. In any case, my purpose here is not to enter into the fray of these political and quasi-religious battles, but simply to point out that the political battles produce very poor scholarship. I side with

the sculpture itself and deny it is a Praxiteles and decry its bad use by scholars, historians and political propagandists.

In the end, it does not matter who made these lovely sculptures, nor the poor scholarship that surrounds it. The Cleveland Apollo and other great Greek and Roman works in stone and bronze are great sculptures that reflect the science and observations that started with Aristotle and become the astronomy of Hipparchus and the wonder of Hypatia and after the suppression of empirical culture with the mythicizing Dark Ages, returned in the work of Da Vinci. The Apollo and the Aphrodite are wonderfully drawn and formed. The sculptors who made them were no doubt devoted to clear-eyed observation and not political propaganda. It is not a religious object but an example of Greek and Roman art that embodies an Aristotelian proto-science and a love of the human form that is objective and new, populist and democratic. The rather political and religious scholarship that wants to make the sculpture mythic or national, or an example of late capitalistic corporate Manifest Destiny is really out of place. The fact these sculptures have led so many scholars astray is interesting. Even Phaedrus, more honest than others, had sense enough to be honest about all the falsification that was going on over these great works of art. It is a backhanded complement to these works that they have inspired centuries of fiction and fabrication and very likely the mythic invention of the character of Praxiteles, who never existed. But it is about time we cleared the field a bit and started looking at the reality in which these great works were lied about and authorship fabricated. Their beauty shines all the better in the midst of all the vain fables and lies, propaganda and politics that surround them. They really belong to all of us, and those who claim to own them are just pretenders. Phaedrus might have written a good fable expressing just this. He could have called it: the Great Invisible Sculptors were Written out of History.

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