Beyond Love and Beauty: Aphrodite's Mythology

Grades: 5-7
Subject Areas: Language Arts and Social Studies
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Featured Artworks:

Oil bottle (lekythos) in the form of Aphrodite at her birth
Greek, made in Athens
Late Classical period, 4th century B.C.
Ceramic

Statuette of a Dove
Italic, Etruscan
Hellenistic Period, late 3rd-2nd century B.C.
Terracotta

The goddess Aphrodite is one of the twelve gods and goddesses in the Greek Pantheon who resided at Mount Olympus. According to Greek mythology, Aphrodite was born when one of the twelve Titans, Kronos, cut off the genitals of his father, Ouranos (Uranus), the primordial sky god, and threw them into the sea. Aphrodite rose from the white sea foam, known in Greek as aphros. The cult of Aphrodite dates back to the 8th century B.C. when she was Kypris, the goddess of the island of Cyprus. The Greek poet Hesiod wrote of Aphrodite's birth in the late 8th century B.C.: "...she first to Kythera did come, to sacred Kythera, and them to sea-girt Kypris came, and stepped upon the shore a lovely goddess with a claim to reverence, and grass sprang up beneath her feet; her name is Aphrodite...".

Aphrodite's association with fertility can be traced back to the 4th millennium B.C., when female fertility figures made of clay and stone began to appear in Cyprus. Some historians link Aphrodite's roots to the Sumerian goddess, Inana, and the Akkadian goddess, Ishtar. Each of these goddesses was associated with love, fertility, authority, war and power. Although Aphrodite has come to be primarily associated with love and beauty, she was originally more aligned with Inana and Ishtar. Aphrodite was also the goddess of battle and defense. This coincided with her frequent mate, Ares, who was the Greek god of war. The wives of warriors would call upon Aphrodite to awaken their husbands' military passion, the "eros of the battle". In addition to her other roles, Aphrodite was the patron goddess of copper, and her official husband was Hephaestus, the god of craftsmen. Aphrodite is also tied to her lover Adonis, the paragon of male beauty.

For the ancient Greeks, Aphrodite's blessing was sought after for young women as they entered the milestones of marriage and childbirth. She was also called Aphrodite Pontia, the goddess of the sea, fair sailing and the harbor. Her ability to unite people in government and community affairs is also evident through her extended name: Aphrodite Pandemos (who brings people together). Other civic cults revered her as Aphrodite Nomophylakis (the guardian of laws), and Aphroditis Stratigis (from the generals or stratagoi). Aphrodite's symbols are the dove, rose, scallop shell, myrtle, dolphin, sparrow, mirror, swan and the magic girdle with which Hephaestus forged for her. The magic girdle made her irresistible to men. In addition to Hephaestus, Ares, and Adonis, her consorts included Hermes, Poseidon, Dionysus, and the Greek
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mortal Anchises (she bore him the son Aeneas). Her other children include Eros and the Graces. The beauty of Aphrodite has been an inspiration for countless artists over the millennia. Some of the most enduring Greek myths involving Aphrodite are Adonis, Pygmalion, The Judgment of Paris, and the myth of Eros and Psyche.

Aphrodite and Adonis
Aphrodite rescued the mortal Adonis when he was an infant. She found him abandoned by a myrrh tree. Aphrodite had Adonis raised by Persephone in the underworld. When Adonis grows up to be an exceedingly handsome man, Aphrodite falls in love with him and wants to bring him back to the world of the living. Persephone, however, is unwilling to give him up. The two strike a bargain, with each of them keeping Adonis for one-third of the year. Adonis must choose who he will spend the remaining third of the year with. He selects Aphrodite, and takes up the sport of hunting. When Aphrodite has to leave his side to tend to her duties, Adonis is speared by a boar during a hunt. Aphrodite was too late to save Adonis and creates anemone flowers from the drops of his blood that have spattered on the earth. Adonis returns to the underworld, and when Persephone and Aphrodite begin to argue over him again, Zeus intervenes and decrees that Adonis shall divide his time evenly between the two goddesses, spending six months of the year with each.

Pygmalion
The Greek sculptor Pygmalion could not find a perfect woman to fall in love with, but Aphrodite appeared to him in a dream and told him to sculpt a woman from ivory in her likeness. Pygmalion fell deeply in love with his beautiful sculpture but despaired on ever finding a love that could compare with the sculpture he had created. He was so enamored with his statue that he called her Galatea. Aphrodite took pity on him and brought the statue of Galatea to life so Pygmalion could marry her and find happiness.

TEKS
§117.32. Art, Grade 6.(c) Knowledge and skills.(1) Perception. The student develops and organizes ideas from the environment. The student is expected to:(A) illustrate themes from direct observation, personal experience, and traditional events; and (6.2) Creative expression/performance. The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using a variety of media with appropriate skill. The student is expected to:(A) express a variety of ideas based on personal experience and direct observations; (B) describe in detail a variety of practical applications for design ideas; and(C) demonstrate technical skills effectively, using a variety of art media and materials to produce designs, drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, ceramics, (6.3) Historical/cultural heritage. The student demonstrates an understanding of art history and culture as records of human achievement. The student is expected to:(A) identify in artworks the influence of historical and political events,(B) compare specific artworks from a variety of cultures §113.18. Social Studies, Grade 6, Beginning with School Year 2011-2012. (15) Culture. The student understands the similarities and differences within and among cultures in various world societies. The student is expected to: (A) define culture and the common traits that unify a culture region;(18) Culture. The student understands the relationship that exists between the arts and the societies in which they are produced. The student is expected to: (A) explain the relationships that exist between societies and their architecture, art, music, and literature.

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Subject: ___________________________ Grade level: _________ E-mail: ___________________________
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