

faces

GIFTS FROM THE GODS

BY MAGGIE DUFFY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MONICA HERNDON

For the past ten years, Seth Pevnick has used his expertise in antiquities to serve as the Tampa Museum of Art's Richard E. Perry curator of Greek and Roman art. He holds a Ph.D. in archaeology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He came to the museum in 2009 from the prestigious J. Paul Getty Museum in L.A., where he was the curatorial assistant in the department of antiquities. Pevnick eventually went on to become the museum's chief curator, a job in which he strove to connect the museum's collection of antiquities with its modern and contemporary art.

Pevnick recently accepted a position as the curator of Greek and Roman art at the renowned Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio, so he'll be leaving Tampa in March. During his time at the Tampa museum, he's overseen the acquisition of countless works of art and curated numerous exhibitions, including 2018's "Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite and the Lure of Antiquity: Conversations with the Collection." For that exhibit, Cronin created a monumental sculpture of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, inspired by a torso of Aphrodite from the museum's collection. The museum has acquired *Aphrodite Reimagined*, so Pevnick's legacy will live on.

That exhibition was part of a trio in the museum's "Season of Love," which includes one of Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Rooms, "Love is Calling" and a retrospective of work by LOVE sculptor Robert Indiana.

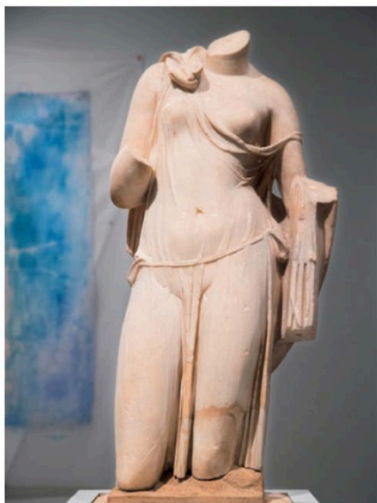
Before Pevnick says goodbye to Tampa, we picked his scholarly brain about the exhibition, Aphrodite and expressions of love.



Seth Pevnick, the Richard E. Perry curator of Greek and Roman Art at the Tampa Museum of Art. He leaves Tampa in March.

When did you first discover your love for art?

I've loved art since I was a little kid. I remember making a lot of art throughout preschool and elementary school, and then taking many different studio-art classes in high school. I did pretty well in those classes, and I thought about going to art school, but I wasn't ready to commit to pursuing a career related to art. In college, I took a wide range of courses, and ended up teaching elementary school after I graduated, but found myself returning as much as I could to museums and to learning about ancient art and ancient civilizations. I've been really fortunate to be able to follow my passions and find myself in this position.



The Torso of Aphrodite/Venus in the Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite and the Lure of Antiquity: Conversations with the Collection exhibit.



The Head of Aphrodite in the Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite and the Lure of Antiquity: Conversations with the Collection exhibit.

What is it about Greek and Roman antiquities that made you want to spend your life studying and discovering them?

I've always seen the Greeks and Romans as our cultural forebears, and even though their language and religion may seem foreign to many people today, I find it fascinating — and in certain ways comforting — that there are so many similarities between them and us. When I spend time looking closely at an ancient artwork, I feel myself becoming closer in a certain way to the people who made it, used it, and cared for it centuries or millennia ago.

All of the exhibitions in the museum right now have to do with love. Was that a coincidence or planned?

That was a happy coincidence. It wasn't totally unplanned, but (the curatorial staff) had been talking for some time about doing this Conversations with the Collection, in which we would invite a living artist to reflect on a work in our collection. With Patricia Cronin, it was her choice to focus on Aphrodite, the goddess of love.



Seth Pevnick on the museum's recent exhibits: "The opportunity to tie it all together through love was really phenomenal."

When that decision was made, we were already talking about the Robert Indiana show, and he's most famous for *Love*, so there was a clear connection there, and then when we had the opportunity to present "Yayoi Kusama, Love is Calling," we said this makes perfect sense, it all works together. We're always trying to find ways to connect, especially the antiquities to modern and contemporary because sometimes it doesn't seem like a clear connection. The opportunity to tie it all together through love was really phenomenal.

How did you find Patricia Cronin?

To be honest, I did not know of Patricia Cronin. Joanna Robotham, our curator of modern and contemporary art, suggested that she might be a good fit for us. And right away I learned about (Cronin's sculpture) *Memorial to a Marriage* and I thought, that makes sense. In a way, it's more neo-classical than classical, but as someone who has studied ancient art, I saw a lot of clear classical references. And when we reached out to her and started talking, I said how much it reminds me of Etruscan funerary art. There's a famous life-sized sarcophagus in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston that shows a couple in bed. It's not two women, like in *Memorial to a Marriage*, but it's a couple in bed. She knew exactly what I was talking about.

Memorial to a Marriage depicts Cronin and her now wife embracing, and it will be their actual grave marker. At the time it was created in 2002, was it controversial?

Memorial to a Marriage was revolutionary in its day. It represents love in the form of two women. And at the time that it was made, marriage between two women or two men wasn't legal in this country. Which is kind of hard to believe, because the sculpture is not that old, but 15 years ago it was illegal. So to call a sculpture *Memorial to a Marriage* was really a political message ... because it was a memorial to a marriage that our legal system wouldn't recognize. But in Patricia Cronin's mind, and in many other people's minds, it is a marriage, because it's two people in love.

When she came to select the piece from the collection, did she instantly gravitate toward the Aphrodite torso?

She did. The Aphrodite torso was close to the front of the gallery and she was struck by it, which didn't surprise me.



LOVE by Robert Indiana. Below, *Love is Calling* by Yayoi Kusama.

Photographs courtesy of the Tampa Museum of Art

How has Aphrodite been used to symbolize love?

Over the course of ancient art, there are a lot of monumental sculptures, like the one that we have. The *Aphrodite of Knidos* is the very famous sculpture by Praxiteles, which no longer survives. In antiquity, it was emulated by many other artists. She also appears on coins, small terracottas and Greek vases, all sorts of different media. She is a goddess who is connected particularly with love and beauty, but also with the sea. She was famously born from the sea, there's the famous Botticelli painting (*The Birth of Venus*) of her rising from the sea. There were lots of temples and sanctuaries dedicated to Aphrodite in antiquity.

Would they be things about with love, specifically?

Sometimes. She is connected to love and marriage, but also to procreation. So she's holding a pomegranate in the sculpture that Patricia Cronin created. The pomegranate is often thought to be connected to fertility, which goes back goes to ancient times.

Is there a particular story in mythology that connects Aphrodite to the act of love?

The most famous one is the story of the judgment of Paris. ... Peleus and Thetis were getting married and all of the gods and goddesses were invited except for Eros, the goddess of discord. She showed up anyway and tossed into the wedding party the golden apple, which was inscribed for the most beautiful. She knew this was going to cause a problem,

and Aphrodite said, 'It's mine,' and Athena said, 'It's mine,' and Hera said, 'It's mine,' And Zeus and Hermes said, 'We need someone to decide this.' So Hermes takes the apple to Paris, the trojan prince, to make the decision. Talk about a no-win situation. Each of the goddesses offered a bribe and Aphrodite says, 'If you choose me, I'll make the most beautiful woman in the world your wife.' So he chooses her and then Paris takes Helen, the most beautiful in the world, as his wife. But this is a major problem ... because Helen was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. He takes Helen from Sparta to Troy, and this is what launches the Trojan war. And all of that comes, in a sense, from Aphrodite.

The exhibition will end, but since the museum acquired *Aphrodite Reimagined*, she will stay. Can we call *Aphrodite Reimagined* the Tampa Aphrodite?

Well, I do call our torso the *Tampa Aphrodite*, which is probably a little presumptuous. But (*Aphrodite Reimagined*) is the most important Aphrodite in Tampa! And there is the painting that (Cronin) made of our sculpture and that is called *Aphrodite, Tampa Museum*.

You'll be leaving the museum in March for the Cleveland Museum of Art. In living here these past ten years, what do you love about Tampa?

I love the Tampa Museum of Art, in particular the Greek and Roman art collection. I love the community, I've gotten to know so many wonderful people here. I love the Riverwalk, I love the park. I love how friendly people are. It's not a gigantic city, but it's a major metropolitan area, and it feels like a small town. I run into people wherever I go and they're usually happy to see me. I have a wife and two kids, ages 6 and 10, and they've been really happy here. We'll miss Tampa.

