

A Masterpiece from the Capitoline Museum, Rome

# THE CAPITOLINE VENUS



National Gallery of Art | June 8 – September 5, 2011

A project of  ROMA CAPITALE

## THE CAPITOLINE VENUS AND ITS ORIGINS

This sculpture is an exceptional loan from the Capitoline Museum in Rome, founded in 1734 and the oldest public art museum in the world. One of the best-preserved sculptures to survive from Roman antiquity, the *Capitoline Venus* derives from the celebrated *Aphrodite of Cnidos*, created by the renowned classical Greek sculptor Praxiteles around 360 BC.

For centuries, Praxiteles' statue adorned a shrine dedicated to the goddess of love, Aphrodite (the Greek name for Venus), at Cnidos on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. Its fame spread throughout the Mediterranean world. In the first century AD Pliny the Elder called it "superior to all the works, not only of Praxiteles, but indeed in the whole world." The sculpture was later taken to the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople (now Istanbul), where it perished in a fire that swept through the city in 475 AD.

With the *Aphrodite of Cnidos*, Praxiteles introduced a new subject to the history of art: the large-scale, free-standing, fully nude female. This type of image is called the "Modest Venus" (*Venus pudica*) because the goddess attempts to cover her nakedness. The *Capitoline Venus* is largely a faithful copy, although her pose is reversed, the hairstyle is more elaborate and, unlike the original, she covers her nakedness with both arms rather than just one. The hydria next to her is a vessel for water, perhaps alluding to bathing or Venus' birth from the sea. The expert carving of the figure endows hard marble with the appearance of soft flesh and has made the *Capitoline Venus* one of the most admired and frequently copied of all Roman antiquities.

## THE DISCOVERY OF THE CAPITOLINE VENUS

The *Capitoline Venus* was discovered in Rome in the 1670s, buried beneath a large garden where it was found in the remains of an ancient building, according to a seventeenth-century account. Remarkably, the statue was intact except for the nose, some fingers, and one hand that had broken off and has been reattached. In 1752 the *Venus* was given to the Capitoline Museum by

Pope Benedict XIV. There the sculpture remained until 1797 when it was taken to France by Napoleon, who had invaded northern Italy a few years earlier. He ordered the *Capitoline Venus* to be carried in a triumphal procession into Paris. In 1816, the year after Napoleon fell from power, the sculpture was returned to the Capitoline Museum; since then the sculpture has never been lent until this occasion.

Americans traveling in Europe in the nineteenth century included writers and artists who drew inspiration from works of art they saw in museums there. Mark Twain's visit to the Capitoline Museum in 1867 prompted him to write a short story, "The Capitoline Venus," in which he described the statue as the "most illustrious work of ancient art the world can boast of" (FIG. 1). Even before going to Rome, Twain probably knew of the sculpture from its photograph in Nathaniel Hawthorne's very popular novel, *The Marble Faun*, published in 1860. Both Twain and Hawthorne would also have been familiar with the *Greek Slave* (1844) by the eminent American sculptor Hiram Powers (FIG. 2). Inspired by the ancient Roman sculpture known as the *Medici Venus*—another variant of the "Modest Venus" type—the *Greek Slave* toured the United States to enthusiastic crowds from 1847 to 1848. A version is now in the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

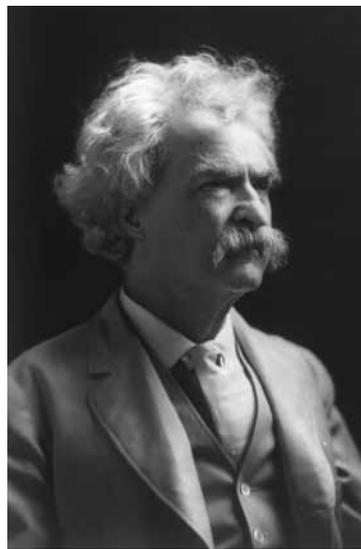
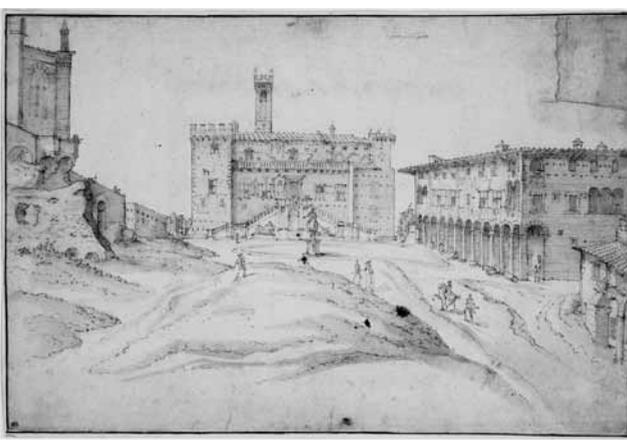


FIG. 1 Mark Twain. Photograph by A. F. Bradley, 1907, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



FIG. 2 Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* on display at the Dusseldorf Gallery, New York. Engraving by R. Thew, nineteenth century. Photo: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



### THE CAPITOLINE MUSEUM

The Capitoline Museum is a complex of buildings located on the Capitoline Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome. In antiquity the hill was the religious and political heart of the city, the site of many temples, including the massive Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, which overlooked the Forum. During the Middle Ages, the ancient buildings fell into disrepair. Rising from their ruins were new municipal structures: the Palace of the Senators, which was built largely in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and turned its back on the Forum to face Papal Rome and the Church of Saint Peter's, and the Palace of the Conservators (magistrates), constructed in the fifteenth century to the right of the Palace of the Senators (FIG. 3).

A donation made in 1471 marked the beginning of a new function for the buildings on the Capitoline Hill, reflecting the rising interest in the artistic legacy of Roman antiquity. In that year Pope Sixtus IV transferred to the Capitoline four ancient bronze sculptures from the Lateran Palace, then the principal papal residence. In 1537 Pope Paul III commissioned Michelangelo to relocate another sculpture from the Lateran to the plaza in front of the Palace of the Senators: the monumental bronze equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which had escaped destruction during the Middle Ages as it was then believed to represent Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

Michelangelo was also charged with reorganizing the area, known as the Piazza del Campidoglio. He



FIG. 3 The Capitoline Hill showing the Palace of the Senators in the center and the Palace of the Conservators at right. Anonymous drawing, mid-sixteenth century, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

FIG. 4 Piazza del Campidoglio, designed by Michelangelo and now the site of the Capitoline Museum. Engraving by Étienne Dupérac, 1568. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

designed new facades for the Palaces of the Senators and Conservators, completed after his death in 1564. To balance the Palace of the Conservators, he conceived a matching building, the New Palace, which was finished in 1667. Together, these buildings constitute the Capitoline Museum. The last element of Michelangelo's masterpiece of urban planning, the Piazza, was completed only in 1940 under Mussolini, but keeps largely to the original design, which appears in a sixteenth-century engraving by Étienne Dupérac (FIG. 4). Despite the centuries of construction, most of Michelangelo's plans for the site were implemented.

In the sixteenth century the Capitoline collections increased dramatically through the acquisition of newly excavated works and donations such as the ancient works of art given by Pope Pius V with the intention of "purging the Vatican of pagan idols." The Palace of the Conservators became so crowded with sculpture that the magistrates found it difficult to carry out their official duties. In the later seventeenth century, many of the works were transferred to the recently completed New Palace, which also houses major eighteenth-century acquisitions such as the *Capitoline Venus*. Since then, the Capitoline Museum has continued to expand its holdings, making it one of the world's great collections of Roman antiquities (FIG. 5).



This exhibition is part of **THE DREAM OF ROME**, a project initiated by the mayor of Rome to exhibit timeless masterpieces in the United States from 2011 to 2013.

The exhibition is organized by Roma Capitale, Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali–Musei Capitolini, and the National Gallery of Art, with the partnership of the Knights of Columbus and the Embassy of the Republic of Italy, Washington.

**FIG. 5** The Piazza del Campidoglio, aerial view toward the Palace of the Senators, with the New Palace at left facing the Palace of the Conservators at right. Photo: Guido Alberto Rossi / age fotostock

**COVER** *The Capitoline Venus*, marble (probably Parian), 2nd century AD, as installed in the Capitoline Museum. Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali di Roma Capitale–Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy (photo: Araldo de Luca)