



Three Goddesses, Joseph Nollekens

Three Goddesses

Joseph Nollekens
English, 1773–1776
Marble
N971114.4

These three marble statues representing Juno, Venus, and Minerva, formed part of a *Judgment of Paris* group that originally included a figure of Paris. With Paris, the marble goddesses would have formed a group representing the classical myth in which



the mortal shepherd was called upon to decide which goddess would receive the title of “the fairest.” Although Minerva promised him fame and glory in war and Juno promised to give him any kingdom he wanted, Paris chose Venus, who promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Originally these sculptures were placed in a way that presented a powerful narrative engagement between them.

Charles Watson-Wentworth, second Marquess of Rockingham, commissioned the three statues from English sculptor Joseph Nollekens to join his statue of Paris. As a testament to his classical education and the taste he developed during his Grand Tour of Italy at age 18, the marquess assembled this group and other works in his Neoclassical sculpture gallery. The group was designed for the marquess's London house and, after 1782, taken to his heir's estate at Woodhouse, near Rotherham in Yorkshire.

About the Artist

Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823)

Born in London, Joseph Nollekens was the son of a Flemish genre painter. He trained with a Flemish sculptor in London before going to Rome in 1762. Gaining employment in Bartolomeo Cavaceppi's workshop, he collected terracottas by such artists as Michelangelo and Giambologna. In this venerable city, Nollekens learned from the antique, perfecting a Neoclassical style that soon earned him a reputation and a small fortune. He was particularly popular among the English tourists who visited Rome on the Grand Tour.

Returning to England in 1770, Nollekens soon became a member of the **Royal Academy**. While he was a prolific tomb-maker, he is best known for his portrait busts in plaster or marble. His own favorites were the rare mythological statues he carved, particularly the goddesses, whose

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elegance recalls late-16th-century Italian sculpture. Despite his wealth and reputation, Nollekens was known for his eccentric ways. A former student who claimed to have been deceived into believing that he would inherit Nollekens's fortune with several other of Nollekens's associates wrote a spiteful biography about him.

Questions for Teaching

Describe the three figures. What attributes does each figure have that might give clues about who they are? (The woman to the left has a crown on her head, the woman in the middle is nude, and the woman on the right wears a helmet and holds a shield. They are, from left to right, the goddess Juno, queen of the gods; Venus, goddess of beauty and love; and Minerva, goddess of wisdom, the arts, and war.)

While these sculptures are inspired by works from ancient Greece and Rome, they were actually made in the 1770s. What is the difference between these sculptures and ancient statues you see in museums today? (They are in excellent condition. None of their limbs have broken off. Almost all ancient sculptures have not survived without some damage over time.)

By examining their gestures and poses, what do you think the women in the sculptures are doing? (The goddesses are in various stages of undress. Minerva reaches for her helmet, Juno begins to disrobe, and Venus will be completely undressed once she has removed her sandal.)

These three goddesses were once part of a sculpture group that represented the story of the Judgment of Paris. Based on the symbolism of the attributes of each goddess, what bribes do you think they offered to Paris in order to influence his decision? Based on these bribes, which goddess would you choose, and why? (Juno offered him power, Minerva offered wisdom, and Venus offered him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world.)

Read the excerpt from the *Judgment of Paris*, available in the lesson plan (http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/curricula/mythology/downloads/worksheet05_02.rtf) and then examine the sculptures to see what moment in the story they represent.

