

Aphrodite and Pan – On the Last Bearer of Beauty



Aphrodite with Pan/Satyr, Hellenistic sculpture from Gaza, 4th century BCE – 4th century CE

The Descending Knowledge and the Last Bearer: From Eleusis to Gaza (Introductory text)

In the gloom of Western thought slumbers an ancient truth: is human knowledge, far from a steady advance, essentially a cosmic descent?

Where our gaze now probes the earth with the precision of reason, it once reached — in the age of the primal mysteries — clairvoyantly into the spiritual cosmos.

The Mysteries of Eleusis, to which Plato could still refer in his recollection of immortal Ideas, formed the last sanctuary in which humankind experienced the living bond between earth and the starry heavens.

With the birth of Western philosophy in Plato, this direct experience was captured within thought.

The Ideas remained the spiritual reality, yet were now reconstructed by the intellect.

When Aristotle then turned his gaze away from the Ideas and towards form within earthly matter, he completed a necessary but downward step.

The ancient, celestial science of nature transformed into an empirical one, directed at the explainable and the material.

Thus, the human soul descended into matter — not as a loss, but as a preparation for remembrance.

This shift — from *Kosmos* to *Cosmopolis* — found expression in the campaigns of Alexander the Great.

His Hellenistic empire spread Greek rationality and sensuality to the edges of the known world. Yet at the heart of this expansion, in the cosmopolitan centre of Gaza, a countercurrent arose. The culture of *logos* merged with Semitic spirituality and a profound awareness of cycle and return.

The Aphrodite of Gaza is not merely a Greek goddess, but a symbol of synthesis — in which the beauty of the earthly, individualised work of art carries the memory of spiritual continuity.

In her posture and her silence — surrounded by the fleeting murmur of the modern world — she preserves what Western reason has lost: the cosmic awareness.

Aphrodite embodies the truth that when philosophy and science descend into the merely material, beauty — as the final echo of celestial harmony, the reflection of a spiritual order — becomes the last bearer of history.

She is the tangible promise of recurrence, of life enduring through destruction, forming a bridge to a world in which spirit once again reveals itself — in sound and in marble.

Beauty, the Final Bearer: Gaza, Paris and the Cosmic Awareness

Did this Aphrodite embody the longing for ancient spiritual connections in a time of decline — and how does that relate to our contemporary search for continuity and solace?

Birds pass through the glass — not that they intend to — the observer draws them in with her thoughts, inviting them into her inner universe.

The place, the glass dome of the *Bourse de Commerce*, possesses something sacred — pure as pearl-white marble.

Thought itself seems to take on a colour, almost sky blue; it rises from the poetic tones of the man with the saxophone.

Thoughts and notes merge — the birds circle above the dome, catching each sound, carrying it away on their wings.

The transcendence of sound and motion stands in sharp contrast to the earthly silence of the graves.

Earlier that day, crows danced upon the tombs in *La Cité des Morts* (Père Lachaise).

The rustling of leaves formed the ground tone to their cries.

The round windows of the chapel-tombs were blue, red and green — stained glass pierced by sunlight through threads of ancient webs, casting coloured fragments upon the soil.

These historical resonances took tangible form elsewhere that same day.

On the banks of the Seine, within the *Institut du Monde Arabe* (IMA), stood the figure of Aphrodite.

The contrast between the fragility of glass and the eternity of marble was palpable there.

A tall, draped female figure, her left hand resting upon a small, bearded Pan or Satyr — a childlike figure serving as her support.

This sculpture, an essential remnant of Gaza's past, represents the rich Hellenistic and Roman cosmopolitan era (4th century BCE – 4th century CE), when Gaza, through its crucial position on the incense route, was a significant Greek cultural and commercial centre.

The style, with its draped body, is distinctly Greco-Roman, yet the function and cult reflect the religious synthesis of the Levant.

In her downward gaze lies a strength born of cultural continuity — a quiet determination that has outlasted the centuries.

Is it the memory of countless cycles of creation and destruction that explains this serenity? Aphrodite, once goddess of love and creation, became in this eastern world a figure of return: of life that endures through devastation.

This association with the cycle of life and death makes the sculpture a fitting funerary symbol.

The small, bearded figure beside her is no mere child, but an independent cultic being. It is most likely Pan, god of the wild, or a Satyr — not Eros, as the beard and moustache, despite his diminutive form, reveal.

This god of nature symbolises the spark of perpetual renewal and creation, a notion supported by Hellenistic religious practice.

Yet the relationship between the goddess and her companion remains subtly tense.

The firm, resting hand of Aphrodite, which rests upon the figure of Pan—who assumes the function of support pillar or Caryatide—suggests not passive resignation, but active control. This gesture can be read as the mastery of the universal, spiritual love (Aphrodite Urania) over the unbridled, instinctive, or Chthonic aspects of Creation that Pan embodies. The goddess of Form and Harmonic Beauty keeps the wild, uncultivated Creative force in check, a synthesis of Cosmos and Nature.

Her posture seems to know what cities forget: that beauty is the last bearer of history. Did this Aphrodite embody the longing for ancient spiritual connections in a time of decline — and how does that relate to our contemporary search for continuity and solace?

Her silence preserves what the city has lost.

In her stance rests the memory of a cosmopolitan world.

The woman with the tambourine — another sculpture from the same period — stands beside her.

Both figures are not only linked to the Greek goddess of love, but also associated with local fertility cults or the afterlife, reflecting a fusion of the Greek Aphrodite with Semitic goddesses such as Astarte, and revealing the religious and cultural polyphony of ancient Gaza.

In those days, the light of the sun carried the living, while the moon guided souls into the night. The cross — as circle and intersection — symbolised the unity of heaven and earth, of day and night.

In this sign, the cycle was preserved: life, death and return — the rhythm upon which the ancient world breathed.

The sculptures of Gaza are deeply imbued with this awareness.

The history of Gaza has been rendered invisible, yet here, temporarily displayed within this modern building, the images live on.

They have been rescued, like the remnants once laden with meaning along the incense route.

The building itself is a synthesis — a radical modernity in which the southern façade, a high-tech diaphragm of steel *mashrabiya*, regulates light and vision.

The IMA thus functions as a hypermodern mausoleum, where rescued objects preserve their silence.

That day ended with the birds above the glass dome of the *Bourse de Commerce*.

Saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins entered into dialogue with the sculptures of Meg Webster.

I listen.

This moment — an auditory synthesis of earlier visual experiences — unites the circle of the dome, the tambourine of the IMA, and the metal diaphragms that filter the light: all walls that capture sound and radiance, holding the chaos outside.

Yet the sound of the saxophone carries the chaos of Gaza, carries the carrion crows of Père Lachaise, and lets them drift within the pearl-white light of Paris.

Music is the bearer.

The dome is the ear.

*The history of the East breathes on — in marble,
in sound, in the light of Paris.*

Thus beauty becomes memory, and silence its witness.

See the short video: : [The Dome is the Ear](#) Running time: 3:31 min



Ingrid van de Linde, Autumn 2025

