Pseudo-Lukian, in his *Affairs of the Heart*, describes the first encounter of a young Athenian with the statue of Aphrodite in her temple at Knidos. The youth entered the temple and upon encountering the statue's unearthly perfection he

suddenly raised a shout far more frenzied than that of Charikles. ‘Heraclies!’ he exclaimed, ‘what a well-proportioned back! What generous flanks she has! How satisfying an armful to embrace! How delicately moulded the flesh on the buttocks, neither too thin and close to the bone, nor yet revealing too great an expanse of fat! And as for those precious parts sealed in on either side by the hips, how inexpressibly sweetly they smile! How perfect the proportions of the thighs and the shins as they stretch down in a straight line to the feet!’

But then he noticed a mark on one thigh, like a stain on a dress, and took it for a natural defect in the marble. The attendant had, however, a different story to tell. A young man of a good family fell in love with the goddess. All day long he would sit facing the statue with his eyes uninterruptedly fixed upon her. One night the unfortunate inamorato slipped unnoticed into the temple, and in Pseudo-Lukian’s words:

*Why do I chatter on and tell you in every detail the reckless deed of that unmentionable night? These marks of his amorous embraces were seen after day came and the goddess had that blemish to prove what she had suffered.*

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* The present paper profited enormously from the suggestions of David Frankfurter and Henk Versnel.

1 Ps.-Luk. amor. 13–16: ἄθροῶς πολύ τοῦ Ἀφροδίτης ἐμμανέστερον ἀνεβόησεν, Ἡράκλεις, ὅση μὲν τῶν μεταρρέοντον εὐρυθμία, πῶς δ’ ἀμφίλαξες ἀλαγόνες, ἀγκάλια χειροπλημμένες· ὡς δ’ εὐπερίγραφαι τῶν γλυκῶν αἱ σάρκες ἐπεκροτοῦνται μὴ ἀγαν ἐλληπτείς αὐτοῖς ὅστεις προσεσταλμέναι μήτε εἰς ὑπεροχούν ἐκχειμεῖνα πίστη. τῶν δὲ τοῖς ἰσχίοις ἐνεσφραγισμένων εἰς ἐκατέρων τύπων ὡς ἕνεποι τις ὃς ἢδυς
This is, of course, fiction. Divine images and especially those in the round were washed and dressed, carried in processions or carried away as booty. They may have been touched and kissed, but they were not physically raped. Nevertheless, Pseudo-Lukian’s story raises a series of important issues: the function of statues in temples, their transformation from objects of cult to objects of aesthetic delight—even of sexual desire, the relationship between the image and the god or mortal it represents, the boundaries that separate mortals and gods, and the behaviour of visitors to temples. But above all, Pseudo-Lukian’s narration confronts us with questions concerning the parameters that constitute a significant part of the visual construction of the divine in Graeco-Roman antiquity: the style, the material, the habitus, and the ingenious mise en scène.

In the case of the Knidian Aphrodite one may identify several parameters that visually provided an instant understanding of her essence: a) the sensual style of Praxiteles, who was considered to have even achieved rendering the humid, erotic look in the goddess’ eyes, b) the Pentelic marble,3 famous for its exquisite qualities, which could create a fleshy impression without the use of colour thanks to the golden tinge of its iron particles,4 c) the complete nudity of a divine image in a temple (a highly revolutionary detail), and d) the concept of a sacred building purposefully functioning to stage, as it were theatrically, the unveiled sensuality of the statue.5

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2 For an understanding of Pseudo-Lukian’s narration in the context of other ekphrastic texts, see Platt 2002.
3 Pseudo-Lukian identifies the material with Parian marble (amor. 13: Παρίας δὲ λίθου δαιδαλίμα κάλλιστον). On the contrary, Lukian refers to Pentelic marble (Iupp. trag.: λίθου τοῦ λευκοῦ Πεντέληθεν). Regarding the material, all other sources on Aphrodite’s statue in Knidos either remain silent or generally refer to stone or marble.
5 Ps.-Luk. amor. 13: ἐστι δ’ ἀμφιθύρος ὁ νεός καὶ τοῖς θέλοντα κατὰ νότον τὴν θεόν ιδεῖν ἀφριβίας, ἕνα μηδὲν αὐτῆς ἀδαμαστον ἦν. δὴ εὐμαρείας σὺν ἐστὶ τῇ ἐτέρᾳ πύλῃ παρελθόντων τὴν ὁποὺ περισσότων εὐμαρισμάτων διαθήσει (the temple had a door on both sides for the benefit of those also who wish to have a good view of the goddess from behind, so that no part of her be left unadmired). In addition, Corso 2007, 16 considers the conception of the image that emphasises its front and back side part of Praxiteles’ theatrical approach to Aphrodite’s Knidian statue.