JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

21/2026





www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universitätsverlag Potsdam 2026
http://verlag.ub.uni-potsdam.de | https://ror.org/01femje42
Email: verlag@uni-potsdam.de
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

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ISSN 2364-7612

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Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
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Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21

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21/2026 | pp. 34 – 55

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Greek Bodies Shaping the Modern Cosmetics Industry

Abstract This article examines the use of ancient Greek imagery in contemporary beauty marketing, focusing on the 2023 collaboration between Lancôme and the Louvre which drew inspiration from classical sculptures – primarily Greek but also Roman, whose role in transmitting, adapting, and sometimes reshaping Greek aesthetics is crucial for understanding the modern classical ideal. By analyzing historical and modern marketing strategies, this study traces how Lancôme has consistently referenced classical art since its inception in 1935. The discussion explores how white marble statues became synonymous with beauty, despite evidence of their original polychrome. While the inclusion of diverse brand ambassadors suggests an attempt to modernize classical aesthetics, the campaign arguably reinscribes a Eurocentric beauty paradigm that remains indebted to 19th-century receptions of white marble sculptures as the aesthetic ideal. Finally, the study examines how statues like the Venus de Milo and The Winged Victory of Samothrace have been reinterpreted as symbols of empowerment, feminism, and inclusivity. Through a critical lens, it interrogates whether classical art in advertising serves as an inclusive tool or reinforces a selective, Western-centric aesthetic.

Keywords Ancient Greek Art, Beauty Marketing, Polychrome, Luxury Branding, Inclusivity

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URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21.307

Advertising campaigns often draw inspiration from historical figures and events, including those from Antiquity:[1] from global companies using famous people to play the role of a Roman emperor[2] to little images on a potato chips package representing the Apollo Belvedere statue,[3] probably to suggest a Greek flavour profile. Similarly, a Lithuanian contemporary art museum used a statue of Hercules in 2024 to promote an exhibition on sexuality, creating a juxtaposition between ancient ideals and modern concerns.[4] These varied examples illustrate how ancient Greek – and to some extent Roman – imagery continues to be mobilized across marketing contexts. Roman culture, which actively appropriated, adapted, and disseminated Greek ideals, played a crucial role in shaping what is now recognized as the classical canon.[5] Roman copies of Greek sculptures, Latin inscriptions, and imperial iconography all contributed to establishing a visual and symbolic repertoire that contemporary advertising still draws upon.

While Antiquity can be invoked across a range of industries,[6] it is particularly prevalent in the beauty sector, where classical imagery often functions as an aesthetic standard to emulate.[7] This is especially evident in the case of the French luxury brand Lancôme.

In autumn 2023, the Louvre Museum and Lancôme collaborated on a new makeup and skincare collection inspired by Antiquity, titled the *Lancôme x Louvre Collection.* The launch campaign was shot at the Louvre Museum, drawing inspiration from eight iconic sculptures housed there. This collaboration reinterpreted classical art through the lens of contemporary beauty standards, potentially bridging the gap between historical and modern ideals of beauty. The accompanying press release highlighted the influence of these works conserved in the Louvre, emphasizing the universality of beauty across time.[8] This

1 Morcillo (2017).

2 Bièvre-Perrin & Pampanay (2017), p. 205.

3 To view the image, see https://chazzchips.com/en-us/products/graikisko-kebabo-skonio-hand-cooked-bulviu-traskuciai-chazz (accessed 18 March 2026).

4 To view the image, see MO muziejus (n.d.) https://mo.lt/kaipkalbeti/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

5 Loar, MacDonald, Padilla Peralta (2017).

6 Bièvre-Perrin, Pampanay (2017).

7 Carlotto (2024).

8 Musée du Louvre (2023).

was by no means the first collaboration of its kind for the Louvre – past collaborations have included brands like Uniqlo[9] and high-profile artists like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, whose 2018 *Apeshit* music video was shot at the museum[10], or, more recently, Lady Gaga[11]. However, what is most fascinating about this campaign is the direct reference to Antiquity which seem to legitimize the brand's claim to be an heir to classical Greek culture as a canon of beauty.

Four current brand ambassadors – actresses Zendaya and Amanda Seyfried, singer Aya Nakamura and model He Cong – embody today's beauty codes. They are featured alongside eight antique sculptures from the Louvre: the Venus de Milo, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, Corinna, Diana of Gabies, the Nymph with the Scorpion, Echo, Hygieia and Hermaphrodite. According to Laurence des Cars, President-Director of the Louvre Museum, the collaboration with Lancôme "highlights with incredible talent the diversity of forms of beauty found in the Louvre collections"[12]. As stated in the Lancôme press release, ancient art "resonates radically with today's society."[13]

This article examines the role of Greek and, to a lesser degree, Roman Antiquity in cosmetics advertising, whereby the contribution of ancient Roman culture to the transmission, adaptation, and reinterpretation of Greek aesthetics[14] is considered crucial to understanding the modern classical ideal and thus modern images of beauty. Addressing an interdisciplinary audience at the intersection of classical reception, visual culture, and critical theory – particularly scholars interested in gender, race, and identity in advertising –, the article sets out to answer how Lancôme utilizes representations of ancient bodies in its marketing, and what messages this conveys about Antiquity and contemporary beauty ideals.

Following Edward Said's foundational work on postcolonial theory, the article considers how elements of his critique of cultural representation emerge in the 2023 collaboration between Lancôme and the Louvre. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argued that Western representations of the East – constructed through lit-

9 Carlotto (2024).

10 Plate (2019).

11 Bindé (2024).

12 Musée du Louvre (2023).

13 *Idem.*

14 Rutledge (2012).

erature, art, and scholarship – served to define the 'Orient' as exotic, backward, and inferior, thereby legitimizing Western authority and dominance. While his critique focused on the Middle East and Asia, the broader mechanism he described – wherein the West constructs and aestheticizes the 'Other' for its own hegemonial purposes – applies more widely. This framework proves helpful in examining how contemporary luxury branding reappropriates classical art, often framing it as universal while masking its Eurocentric and colonial inheritances. In the Lancôme campaign, the use of Greco-Roman imagery – and the selective inclusion of non-Western identities – raises questions about how cultural heritage is mobilized to project an ideal that remains anchored in a Western canon of beauty.

Analyzing how classical art references have been used in beauty marketing furthermore reveals that Lancôme's choice is by no means new. The association between ancient Greek representations and beauty intensified in the 19th century, when white Greek marble was solidified as a beauty ideal – despite evidence that ancient statues were originally painted in colour. Since the brand's inception in the 1930s, Antiquity has played a key role in shaping its visual identity. While the Lancôme campaign predominantly draws on Greek and Hellenistic art, it also incorporates Roman elements – both visually, through Roman copies of Greek sculptures, and linguistically, through Latin product names – highlighting the classical references shaping Western beauty standards.

Based on the research objective outlined above, I will first examine how Antiquity has been reappropriated in beauty marketing, tracing this evolution from the early 20th century to contemporary advertising strategies. Next, I will explore this historical transformation and the persistence of the denial of polychromy in modern visual culture, particularly in the *Louvre x Lancôme* campaign. Finally, I will analyze how classical art is now used to convey messages of inclusivity, a paradoxical yet significant shift in the perception of ancient aesthetics. Through this discussion, I will critically assess whether these classical references challenge or reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards.

MARKETING BEAUTY WITH CLASSICAL ART

The Western world's fascination with ancient Greece and Rome, initiated during the Renaissance, has had an important influence on our day's society.[15] This enduring attraction is particularly evident in the realm of beauty, where references to Antiquity have long been employed for many reasons.[16] As exemplified by the luxury brand Lancôme, the use of classical imagery in beauty advertising remains a prevalent and enduring strategy. The collaboration with the Louvre is a continuation of Lancôme's appropriation[17] of Antiquity from the beginning of the brand's history.[18] Lancôme's strategy is not exceptional, given the widespread use of antique imagery, which has accelerated since the 19th century.[19] The ancient sculptures chosen to inspire the makeup collection tend to evoke values such as femininity, strength, and beauty, which are at the heart of the brand's identity.

The French cosmetics company, founded in 1935 to celebrate femininity and French luxury, quickly incorporated references to Antiquity into its advertising imagery. To promote a lipstick in 1939, the brand featured a bust of a Greek statue wearing the product.[20] In 1948, the launch of a cream called *Nutrix et Galatéis* again drew on the imagery of the ancient world.[21] The invocation of Galatea – a Nereid whose myth is layered with artistic and gendered implications, demon-

15 For example, Squire (2011), Jenkins (2015), Bièvre-Perrin & Pampanay (2018), Moyer et al. (2020).

16 Renault (2021).

17 In this article, I adopt the concept of cultural appropriation to examine the commercial reuse of Greco-Roman art in beauty marketing. While the term is most used to describe the exploitation of living, often marginalized cultures, I extend its application to highlight how classical heritage – repackaged through colonial and Eurocentric visual regimes – is commodified in ways that uphold Western ideals. Rather than suggesting that Antiquity itself is 'owned,' this framing draws attention to how particular versions of the classical past are selectively mobilized to serve contemporary cultural and commercial hierarchies.

18 Guibourgé (2009).

19 Couëlle (2010), Carlà-Uhink, García Morcillo, Walde (2017), Wieber (2020).

20 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/item/38621/Lancome-Cosmetics-1939-Make-up-Lipstick (accessed 18 March 2026).

21 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/fr/item/65125/Lancome-Cosmetics-1948-Nutrix-et-Galateis (accessed 18 March 2026).

strates how classical mythology is mobilized in beauty branding as a metaphor for transformation, purity, and aesthetic legitimacy. Galatea is also the name of the statue which was brought to life in the myth of Pygmalion – another powerful metaphor for transformation and beauty. As M. Squire emphasizes, "Pygmalion uses art to realize his fantasy of the feminine"[22]. The company did not hesitate to place the Latin word *Nutrix* alongside the Greek *Galatea* to enhance the product's symbolic appeal. *Nutrix* is evoked as a nurturing goddess figure, associated with rejuvenation and the restoration of power. Together, the two names suggest a personification of nourishment and repair – qualities that align with the desired effects of the cream, and that draw on the authority and allure of Antiquity. Moreover, the myth is reinterpreted through a shift in agency: it is now the modern female consumer – rather than the ancient male artist – who is responsible for shaping her own beauty. In this updated narrative, the contemporary woman appears to hold the power over her own transformation. The advertising implies that the cream itself enables a woman to embody an ideal. While France often aligns itself with the heritage of ancient Greece, the use of Latin names like *Nutrix* in branding reveals the dominant linguistic influence of Rome. In this case, the Roman legacy manifests in the linguistic sphere, but as the article will show, this influence extends far beyond language – shaping not only visual culture and aesthetic preferences but also underlying ideas concerning gender, race, and cultural authority in beauty marketing.

The following year, in 1949, Lancôme, in a face cream advertisement illustrated by Edmond-Maurice Pérot, clearly adopted an aesthetic resonating with Antiquity: a Greek amphora depicting a naked woman adorned with jewels, crouching down while holding a cosmetic box in her left hand.[23] In 1956, Lancôme used the image of a bust from an ancient statue for advertisements targeted at English-speaking audiences,[24] as if a reference to Antiquity were universally understood as a mark of quality. The words 'imported from France' further emphasized the brand's French identity, as though a bust representing an ancient sculpture had become a symbol of France.[25] In other words, Lancôme reappropriated antique

22 Squire (2011), p. 88.

23 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/item/48847/Lancome-Cosmetics-1949-Nutrix-Galateis-Classical-Antiquity-E-M-Perot (accessed 18 March 2026).

24 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/search?q=Lanc%C3%B4me+antiquity&p=1&met=syn (accessed 18 March 2026).

25 Leoussi (2016), p. 58–66.

imagery, not only to evoke timeless beauty, but also to position it as an integral part of French cultural identity.

Given the pervasive use of antique imagery, other brands – beyond those solely associated with beauty, such as Lancôme – also incorporated this visual language into their advertising. For example, an early 20th-century French advertising poster compared the Venus de Milo to a Ford automobile, presenting both as masterpieces.[26] This reflects the influence of classical ideas and imagery spread throughout the 19th century in France and other countries, which helped these nations legitimize their claims to ancient Greek heritage and integrate the Greek body into the public sphere. This integration of ancient imagery into public and commercial life was not merely aesthetic – it was also ideological. In France and across Europe, the Greek body became a symbol of national identity as well as racial and totalitarian ideology.[27] To understand the use of this imagery in the marketing context, we must examine the ideological and political climate in which the Greek body emerged as a model to emulate and identify with.

THE PERFECT GREEK BODY

The appropriation of Antiquity as a part of the Western' identity is observed all through the 19th century. France is one of these countries which tried to legitimize its claim to Ancient Greek heritage and identifying itself as having roots in Ancient Athens. The consequences of this idea can be observed in various contexts where the Ancient Greek body is depicted in public space. For example, the *Palais Bourbon,* a parliamentary building from the late 18th century, features numerous references that highlight the influence of Antiquity in its decor, such as the image of the goddess Athena, the figure most favoured by artists in these representations. The goddess Athena became an allegory of wisdom, science, education, war and even France.[28] The belief that France required physical regeneration through the adoption of Greek principles of bodily cultivation became increasingly prevalent. According to Athena Leoussi, "in order to regain

26 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/fr/item/70503/Lincoln-1929-Roger-Soubie-Venus-de-Milo (accessed 18 March 2026).

27 Chapoutot (2012).

28 Champier (2016).

their lost Greek body, the French had to change their way of life: they had to care for their body as their Greek ancestors had done. They should do gymnastics, and make trips to the Mediterranean south of France, and especially Provence, where the roots of France were supposed to lie"[29]. Within this context, the representation of the idealized Greek body in public space came to be seen as both natural and inevitable, and, more importantly, as an exemplar taken as a model.

The adoption of ancient Greek imagery in public space also served as a means to prove the Western world's supremacy over the rest of the world.[30] German historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717 –1788), who played a pioneering role in the emergence of the neoclassical movement, saw classical sculptures made of white marble as the embodiment of ideal beauty.[31] As emerita Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter details, Winckelmann was himself an Eurocentrist who regularly denigrated non-European nationalities such as the Chinese for example.[32] As she puts it, in sculpture, the use of colour came to be associated with barbarism, as it was believed that the refined ancient Greeks were too cultured to paint their artworks.[33] An unconditional defender of Greek art, Winckelmann saw in it the absolute characteristics of beauty. However, he did not travel through Greece to see the traces of polychrome with his own eyes but studied Roman copies that had been passed from one collection to another, so that their colours were completely faded by time and light. Ironically, the 19th-century ideal of 'pure' Greek beauty was constructed through the lens of Roman reproductions, which were often seen as more accessible.[34] Thus, the Roman reinterpretation of Greek art directly shaped what later generations perceived as authentically Greek. Many of the so-called "Greek" sculptures – such as the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* featured in the Lancôme campaign – are, in fact, Roman copies of earlier Greek originals.[35] This example highlights the role of Romans not only in preserving Greek aesthetics but also in shaping the classical canon that modern visual culture continues to draw upon.

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29 Leoussi (2016), p. 65.

30 McCoskey (2012).

31 Colonna, Gallo (2021).

32 Painter (2010), p. 59.

33 *Idem*, p. 60.

34 Jockey (2015).

35 Pensabene (2018).

Winckelmann's idea was widely accepted in 19th-century Europe: the perfect body was imagined as one carved from white marble. Even the discovery of traces of polychromy on ancient Greek art and architecture was met with resistance, and to some extent, it still is.[36] A fierce debate emerged among 19th-century scholars who struggled to accept the existence of polychromy. For example, the German-born French architect Jacques Ignace Hittorff (1792–1867) launched a study on the polychromy of Greek temples.[37] In 1824, he presented the results of archaeological investigations carried out in Sicily, in the former ancient Greek colonies of Agrigento and Selinunte, referring to a practice common throughout Antiquity: the painting of statues and buildings. One of his fiercest opponents was Désiré Raoul-Rochette (1790–1854), an archaeologist and permanent secretary of the French Academy of Fine Arts, who attributed the traces of polychromy in Ancient works to medieval barbarism.[38] Given the unequivocal evidence presented by Hittorff, different theories were proposed to explain away the presence of polychromy on ancient Greek statues and buildings because the notion of a "white Greece"[39] was already widely accepted and to imagine it coloured was apparently too difficult. This persistent ideal of whiteness – rooted in 19th-century Eurocentric interpretations of classical sculpture – continues to influence how ancient bodies are presented and perceived today. Even when modern marketing campaigns aim for inclusivity, they often remain bound to this inherited aesthetic standard.

DENIAL OF POLYCHROMY?

The reception of classical Antiquity has long intersected with ideologies of whiteness and Western superiority – a dynamic visible in both 19th-century nationalism and contemporary visual branding.[40] The 2023 *Lancôme x Louvre* launch campaign aimed to demonstrate that white Greek marble can reflect the diver-

36 Béguin, Renaud, Triquet (2019).

37 Kiene (2015, 2023).

38 Grand-Clément (2007), p. 144.

39 Jockey (2015).

40 McCoskey (2012), Chapoutot (2012), Leoussi (2016), McCoskey (2022).

sity of ethnicities that also share in this common heritage. For example, the campaign featured the Malian-born singer Aya Nakamura juxtaposed with a statue of the poetess Corinne, and the Chinese model He Cong posed next to the Venus de Milo.[41] As the press release communicates, this collaboration highlights the diversity of beauty because it "allows us to send iconic and inspiring images of antiquity on a journey, confronting them with contemporary representations and canons,"[42] comments President-Director of the Louvre Museum. However, by limiting its focus to representations rooted in the Western classical art canon, the museum's collaboration with the luxury brand risks reinforcing the idea that today's beauty must still be validated through Greco-Roman aesthetics. While the campaign aims to promote diversity through its choice of models – particularly by appealing to an audience attuned to issues of inclusivity, such as Black or Asian women – it ultimately frames this diversity within a singular, Eurocentric artistic tradition. Rather than embracing the multiplicity of beauty represented in Ancient art, the campaign foregrounds a narrowly defined aesthetic canon, one largely shaped in the 19th century.[43] This is also reflected in Lancôme's packaging, where the lipstick and eyeshadow palette feature white marble sculpture imagery. This choice is particularly striking given that, as is now widely recognized, Greek statues in Antiquity were originally polychrome. In seeking to persuade diverse groups of cosmetic consumers not only to purchase the product but also to visit the museum, both the Louvre and Lancôme aim to foster a sense of identification between the consumer and the product – an identification mediated through a selective art-historical lens that appears to emphasize whiteness as an ideal to emulate. As Sara Ahmed argues, the language of diversity often functions as a non-performative – a declaration that does not necessarily lead to institutional change but instead works to protect existing structures of privilege.[44] In this context, the campaign's visual gestures toward inclusion may do little to unsettle the deeply embedded Eurocentric aesthetic that continues to define the boundaries of cultural legitimacy and beauty.

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41 To view the image of He Cong standing next to the Venus de Milo, see Abdessamad (2023) https://artreview.com/the-eye-of-the-beholder-louvre-lacome-zendaya-collaboration/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

42 Musée du Louvre (2023).

43 Couëlle (2013).

44 Ahmed (2012).

One of the consumer groups targeted by the Louvre and Lancôme clearly includes Aya Nakamura's audience – a highly diverse public, particularly within the Black community, which might be seen paradoxical given the way the whiteness is emphasized as an example to follow. Interestingly, classical Antiquity has become part of the visual language used by several contemporary Black artists; singers such as Rihanna and Beyoncé regularly incorporate classical imagery into their performances as a way to engage with and reinterpret cultural heritage.[45] For example, in their music video filmed at the Louvre, Beyoncé and her husband stand in front of iconic works like The Winged Victory of Samothrace[46] to assert their connection and to identify with this statue.[47] As Élise Pampanay observes, "the opposition between Black and white skin tones and fabric seems central to the video's visual power".[48] Similarly, the Louvre x Lancôme marketing campaign shares a common goal: to highlight the beauty of classical art as a universal heritage in which individuals can see themselves, regardless of skin colour or ethnicity. Yet, drawing on Said's critique of Western knowledge systems, it is important to question whether such campaigns truly achieve this universalism. As bell hooks argues, racial and cultural difference is often consumed as a sign of progressiveness or rebellion, but such gestures can serve white desire more than they disrupt it.[49] Within this logic, the inclusion of Black or Asian models may appear to challenge Eurocentric ideals while, in fact, reinforcing whiteness as the unspoken standard through a framework that remains anchored in classical, Western aesthetics. This dynamic complicates claims to inclusivity and raises questions about what kind of difference is being represented – and for whom. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, could this collaboration also be seen as a tacit denial of polychromy in Ancient art – the vibrant colours that once adorned classical sculptures, now erased in favour of an idealized whiteness?

45 Bièvre-Perrin (2017b).

46 To view the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA (accessed 18 March 2026).

47 Plate (2019), p. 6.

48 Pampanay (2021), p. 83.

49 hooks (1992), p. 371–372.

A group of scholars has discussed the denial of polychromy in Ancient art within French museums.[50] When exhibitions dedicated to polychromy do take place, they are only temporary, while permanent collections largely ignore the presence of colour, as if it had never existed. This rejection of ancient polychromy is exemplified by the treatment of The Winged Victory of Samothrace. During the restoration campaign, infrared luminescence revealed traces of Egyptian blue on the wings and the lower part of the mantle. However, the digital reconstruction of the headless and armless sculpture, presented in its original position, remains entirely white. This denial is reflected not only in museums but also in visitors' attitudes, as many seem to struggle with the idea of ancient sculptures being polychrome. It underscores how heritage is shaped by an aesthetic approach to form and colour, which in turn influences our perception of these objects as both archaeological artifacts and works of art.[51]

The campaign *Lancôme x Louvre Collection* encapsulates the tensions inherent in the modern reception of classical polychromy: the continued privileging of whiteness, despite archaeological evidence of vibrant coloration, reflects not only aesthetic preferences but deep-settled ideological investments in notions of purity and universality. As Said has shown, cultural canons often present themselves as objective or universal, while in fact functioning ideologically to affirm Western superiority.[52] The enduring preference for white marble – despite archaeological evidence of polychromy – reveals such an aesthetic construction: what is perceived as neutral or classical is often the product of Western historiographical and artistic choices. This prompts a crucial question: to what extent can classical art be mobilized as a tool for articulating inclusivity, and when does such appropriation risk reproducing the very aesthetic and ideological boundaries it aims to dismantle?

50 Béguin, Renaud, Triquet (2019).

51 *Idem.*

52 Said (1978).

EMPOWERED ANTIQUITY? CLASSICAL STATUES IN THE RHETORIC OF INCLUSIVITY

A closer examination of the classical statues chosen for the marketing campaign reveals a reliance on familiar and conventional imagery, rather than innovative or unexpected selections. Some sculptures, such as the Venus de Milo, have already become iconic in the modern world[53] and are widely used not only in beauty marketing but also in other fields.[54] In fact, the Venus de Milo has come to symbolize inclusivity. For example, the sculpture appeared in a 2018 US advertising campaign titled *Venus on the Go,* in which the statue, still without hands, comes to life as a woman navigating daily life with a disability.[55] Using humour, the video employs the ancient sculpture to address social issues while simultaneously promoting pistachios. A couple of years later, two entrepreneurs in Valencia, Spain, came up with the idea of creating ice cream shaped like the famous statue to raise awareness about breast cancer. Named *La Venuseta,* this unique ice cream features a distinctive detail: instead of a breast, a scar is engraved.[56] This imagery serves as a powerful reminder of the reality of cancer and encourages women to undergo regular screenings. More than just a dessert, *La Venuseta* has become a symbol in the fight against cancer. By purchasing it, consumers directly support medical research. Through this initiative, the Venus de Milo reclaims her status as a symbol of femininity, embodying the strength and resilience of women in the face of illness.

53 Jockey (2011).

54 Besnard (2021).

55 Venus de Milo On the Go (2018), https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/venus-de-milo-on-the-go (accessed 18 March 2026). That same year, Handicap International fitted a replica of the Venus de Milo statue with prosthetic arms to raise public awareness of 3D prostheses. To view the image, see A Pair of Prosthetics for the Venus de Milo (2018) https://www.finestresullarte.info/en/news/a-pair-of-prosthetics-for-the-venus-de-milo (accessed 18 March 2026).

56 To view the image see Rosebud (2021) https://vimeo.com/578535020?fl=pl&fe=sh (accessed 18 March 2026).

The same Venus de Milo was later chosen as a symbol for the 2024 Paris Olympics.[57] In front of the National Assembly building in Paris, six sculptures of the ancient goddess were installed on April 2, 2024. These multi-coloured replicas of the Venus de Milo represent different Olympic sports. While they retain the statue's recognizable exposed torso and missing arms, five of the six versions were modified to include both arms, each engaging in a different sport: one playing tennis, another playing basketball, one holding a surfboard and preparing to dive into the waves, another about to throw a spear, one preparing to box, and the last – still missing one arm – holding a bow. French artist Laurent Perbos was responsible for these depictions, and it was not the first time he had incorporated replicas of ancient artworks into his work. Painted in various Olympic colours, these sculptures highlight the Games' core values of equality and respect, emphasizing inclusivity. According to a statement by the French National Assembly, the choice of Venus de Milo aims to challenge the widespread association of sports with masculinity.[58] In this context, the statue has evolved beyond its role as a symbol of beauty, now embodying inclusivity and representation of female strength in modern times.[59]

The Venus de Milo is not the only classical artwork that has become a significant symbol in contemporary society. The Winged Victory of Samothrace has also gained iconic status in pop culture. Lancôme's use of this statue to market a beauty product is part of an ongoing process of appropriating and reinterpreting its image.[60] Reimagined by various artists, The Winged Victory of Samothrace was notably appropriated by the sportswear brand Nike, whose name and wing-shaped logo both evoke the statue's iconic form.[61] In Lancôme's case, The Winged Victory of Samothrace appears to symbolize the strength and independence of the modern 21st-century woman. This interpretation is reinforced by a promotional video featuring French actress Philippine Leroy-Beaulieu, known for

57 For the image see La Beauté et le Geste (2024) https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/16/evenements2/2024/la-beaute-et-le-geste-installation-de-laurent-perbos (accessed 18 March 2026).

58 Lesage-Münch & Epoque, 2024.

59 Franks (2025) explores how Graeco-Roman sculptures of Venus were received and how they influenced the ideal of the 'fit' American woman's body aesthetics during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

60 Pampanay (2021).

61 *Idem*, p. 79.

her role in *Emily in Paris*. When asked which ancient sculpture she would choose for Lancôme, Leroy-Beaulieu selected The Winged Victory of Samothrace, arguing it could inspire modern women and encourage young girls to embrace freedom and independence.[62]

The symbolic reinterpretation of Ancient heroines within contemporary advertising reveals the elasticity of classical reception, where figures like The Winged Victory of Samothrace are reactivated to communicate evolving discourses on femininity and agency. The selection of other statues, such as those of Corinna, Hygieia, Hermaphrodite, and Diana, is intended to resonate with today's women, offering them examples to look up to. For instance, Corinna, a poet from Tanagra in Boeotia (6th–5th century BCE), is one of the rare female poets from ancient Greece. Although her works were critically received during the modern period, Corinna's poetry has also piqued the interest of feminist literary historians as one of the few surviving examples of ancient Greek women's literature. Scholars have shown that Corinna competed with the renowned poet Pindar, and she was even considered to have won.[63] Her example challenges our understanding of Antiquity, illustrating that women poets once held authority, much as they can today. In the Louvre and Lancôme collaboration, the statue of Corinne – created in the 19th century by Edme-François-Étienne Gois – served as inspiration for the eyeshadow palette, with her face featured prominently on the packaging. However, as Rosalind Gill has argued in her work on "post-feminist" advertising, such invocations of female empowerment often function within a framework of "empowerment sexism" – where women's apparent agency is celebrated yet remains shaped by longstanding aesthetic and ideological norms.[64] In this context, the campaign's use of statues like Corinna may offer empowering narratives on the surface, while still circulating within a Western canon that historically excluded these very identities.

The *Lancôme x Louvre Collection* not only draws on classical artworks from Antiquity but also underscores their continued relevance in shaping contemporary ideals of identity and beauty. While the campaign gestures toward women's agency and empowerment, it also delivers a message of inclusivity aimed at the LGBTQ+ community. One of the key figures featured is the Sleeping Hermaphrodite – a Roman marble copy (2nd century AD) of a lost Greek original, discov-

62 Louis (2023).

63 Snyder (1989), Thorsen (2020).

64 Gill (2008), p. 41–43.

ered in 1608 near the Baths of Diocletian. In 1619, Gian Lorenzo Bernini was commissioned to sculpt the cushion beneath the figure, adding an erotic softness that further emphasized its ambivalence. As a mythological child of Aphrodite and Hermes, Hermaphrodite[65] symbolizes the merging of male and female characteristics – an ambiguity long constrained by classical ideals of symmetry and beauty. Lancôme's decision to recontextualize this figure within a modern beauty campaign reflects a broader attempt to engage with gender diversity and fluidity. However, this gesture is best understood through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. As Butler argues, gender is not a stable identity, but a series of performed actions shaped by cultural expectations, especially those enforced by heteronormative norms.[66] From this perspective, the Hermaphrodite does not merely represent a fixed third category between male and female, but rather embodies the performative, fluid, and unstable nature of gender itself. Lancôme's appropriation of this classical figure thus operates on two levels: it visually signals inclusivity, but it also repackages non-conforming gender expression into a familiar aesthetic form – beautified, stylized, and palatable to luxury consumers. While the campaign introduces non-binary potential into its visual narrative, it does so within the confines of a classical canon historically rooted in binary and hierarchical ideals. The ambiguity of the Hermaphrodite is preserved yet simultaneously domesticated – rendered legible within a luxury framework that privileges aesthetic harmony. This tension encapsulates the broader challenge faced by such campaigns: they seek to evoke inclusivity and gender fluidity yet remain bound by the very visual and ideological systems they might otherwise hope to question. This layered engagement with gender performativity invites the question of whether such imagery can challenge classical norms – or merely recast them in contemporary packaging.

In autumn 2024, the Louvre and L'Oréal Group launched a new initiative titled "De toutes beautés!" (*In All Beauties!*),[67] presenting 108 artworks from a range of civilizations – including Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Etruscan cultures – alongside European pieces. Among them is *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) by Marie-

65 Cantarella (2004).

66 Butler (1990).

67 https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/visitor-trails/de-toutes-beautes.

Guillemine Benoist,[68] which portrays a formerly enslaved woman within a bourgeois setting. While the inclusion of such works suggests an effort to expand representational diversity, non-white figures continue to be framed through a Eurocentric lens. Much like the 2023 Louvre x Lancôme campaign, which paired racially diverse models with Greco-Roman statues, these gestures toward inclusivity remain embedded in aesthetic codes shaped by the Western canon.

This ongoing alignment of beauty branding with classical art reveals how ancient ideals – particularly those inherited from Greece and Rome – continue to shape contemporary visual culture. The Louvre x Lancôme collaboration exemplifies the dual role of classical Antiquity in luxury marketing: as both a legitimizing reference and a malleable aesthetic tool. Figures such as the Venus de Milo, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and the Sleeping Hermaphrodite are not only recontextualized to embody contemporary values like empowerment and inclusivity but also flattened within a visual language that privileges whiteness. As Judith Butler and Rosalind Gill remind us, representations of gender and empowerment in visual culture often reproduce the very norms they claim to subvert.

Though Greek art supplies the ideological template for beauty and ideal form, it is through Roman material legacy – its copies, inscriptions, and imperial motifs – that these ideals were preserved and disseminated. The campaign's use of Latin terms and Roman sculptures reinforces how both Greek and Roman traditions continue to authorize aesthetic legitimacy. Yet, despite the campaign's claims to inclusivity, its representations remain tethered to Western artistic hierarchies and consumer logics.

Ultimately, the Louvre x Lancôme collaboration performs a careful balancing act: homage and reinvention. But while it gestures toward diversity, it does so within the safe boundaries of classical imagery – suggesting that true inclusivity in beauty marketing may still be limited by the very canons it seeks to challenge.

68 Bishop (2019). For the painting, see https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010065532 (accessed 18 March 2026).

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Suggested citation
Losytė, Vilma: Greek Bodies Shaping the Modern Cosmetics Industry. In: thersites 21 (2026), pp. 34–55.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21.307