

Pygmalion in Greek Mythology

Pygmalion saw so much to blame in women that he came at last to abhor the sex, and resolved to live unmarried. He was a sculptor, and had made with wonderful skill a statue of ivory, so beautiful that no living woman came anywhere near it. It was indeed the perfect semblance of a maiden that seemed to be alive, and only prevented from moving by modesty. His art was so perfect that it concealed itself and its product looked like the workmanship of nature. Pygmalion admired his own work, and at last fell in love with the counterfeit creation. Oftentimes he laid his hand upon it as if to assure himself whether it were living or not, and could not even then believe that it was only ivory. He caressed it, and gave it presents such as young girls love, – bright shells and polished stones, little birds and flowers



Edward Burne-Jones. Pygmalion and the Image Series: The Soul Attains, 1878. Oil on canvas, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

of various hues, beads and amber. He put raiment on its limbs, and jewels on its fingers, and a necklace about its neck. To the ears he hung earrings and strings of pearls upon the breast. Her dress became her, and she looked not less charming than when unattired. He laid her on a couch spread with cloths of Tyrian dye, and called her his wife, and put her head upon a pillow of the softest feathers, as if she could enjoy their softness.

The festival of Aphrodite was at hand – a festival celebrated with great pomp at Cyprus. Victims were offered, the altars smoked, and the odour of incense filled the air. When Pygmalion had performed his part in the solemnities, he stood before the altar and timidly said, “Ye gods, who can do all things, give me, I pray you, for my wife” – he dared not say “my ivory

virgin,” but said instead – “one like my ivory virgin.”

Aphrodite, who was present at the festival, heard him and knew the thought he would have uttered; and as an omen of her favour, caused the flame on the altar to shoot up thrice in a fiery point into the air. When he returned home, he went to see his statue, and leaning over the couch, gave a kiss to the mouth. It seemed to be warm. He pressed its lips again, he laid his hand upon the limbs; the ivory felt soft to his touch and yielded to his fingers like the wax of Hymettus. While he stands astonished and glad, though doubting, and fears he may be mistaken, again and again with a lover’s ardour he touches the object of his hopes. It was indeed alive! The veins when pressed yielded to the finger and again resumed their roundness. Then at last the votary of Aphrodite found words to thank the goddess, and pressed his lips upon lips as real as his own. The virgin felt the kisses and blushed, and opening her timid eyes to the light, fixed them at the same moment on her lover. Aphrodite blessed the nuptials she had formed, and from this union Paphos was born, from whom the city, sacred to Aphrodite, received its name.



Étienne Maurice Falconet: Pygmalion & Galatée (1763).