Mercury (Hermes)
Ca. 1st–3rd c. C.E.
Bronze (59.20)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Laurence Witten

Bronze figurines (Mercury (Hermes), Winged Victory (Nike), *Venus (Aphrodite), and Jupiter or Neptune (Zeus or Poseidon)) depict various mythological figures popular in the Roman period. Some of the deities of the Roman pantheon had Greek origins (the Roman name is given, followed by the Greek equivalent in parentheses). Roman mythology and religion were a combination of native Italian, Greek, and eastern traditions.

Mercury (Hermes) is the god of traders, travelers, and mercantile activity. He is depicted in art as a young, unbearded man wearing a traveler’s broad-brimmed hat (a petasos) and sandals (sometimes winged), and he carries the herald’s staff (a caduceus). Often, he carries a purse, a traveling necessity as well as one appropriate for trade. His name “mercury” is related to the Latin word for merchant and trading (merx, mercari). His cult, likely introduced to Italy in the 5th century B.C.E., is an early example of Greek commercial influence.

His swiftness was an appropriate characteristic for his other role as messenger of the gods. He also had a reputation for being a cunning trickster who moved with lightning speed. Related to his role as messenger, he also served in Greek mythology as a Guide of Souls, guiding deceased souls to the Underworld. (Note comparisons: Praxiteles’ Hermes in Cast Gallery doesn’t emphasize him as a god of commerce as do Roman depictions.)
Winged Victory (Nike)
Ca. 1st–3rd c. C.E.
Bronze (62.66.2)
Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein

Victory (Nike) is the Greek goddess, daughter of the Titans Pallas and Styx. In the Gigantomachy (battle of gods and giants), she sided with the Olympians, who were victorious against the Giants. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, she became an abstract symbol of victory. She is associated with victory in athletics, beauty, poetry, drama competitions, battles, and even victory over death. In art, she is depicted as a winged female figure who often holds a wreath to crown winners. In the Roman imperial period, this goddess was primarily associated with peace that followed military victory. (Note comparisons: Nike of Samothrace, Paionios’ Nike in Cast Gallery)
*Venus (Aphrodite)
2nd c. C.E.
Bronze (61.25)
Chorn Memorial Fund

Venus (Aphrodite): Originally an Italian goddess associated with fertility of crops. Later, she became associated with the Greek goddess of erotic love and beauty, Aphrodite. In the Roman Imperial period, her role as Venus Genetrix (the mother of the Julian family) was prominent and later became linked with the cult of the emperors. Arguably the most popular goddess in Italy, she became associated with fertility of all kinds and was a symbol of Roman prosperity.

In art, Aphrodite is depicted as the ideal female beauty. In the 4th century B.C.E., Praxiteles carved a nude statue of the goddess in a modest pose while bathing; this image became the model for many Hellenistic and Roman depictions of the goddess. In the Roman period, Venus was sometimes depicted as a nude female (as the figurine on display), but at other times her role as mother of the Julian family was emphasized, and she was depicted as a draped matron. (Note comparisons: Medici Venus in Cast Gallery is in same pose, showing the “modest Venus” covering herself, while Venus Genetrix depicts her in the role of mother of the Romans.)

*The Venus was previously on display; further information is provided here.
Jupiter or Neptune (Zeus or Poseidon)
Ca. 1st–2nd c. C.E.
Bronze (2003.7)
Weinberg Fund

Jupiter/Neptune (Zeus/Poseidon): the god of the sky, king of the gods. Jupiter represented justice, power, and dignity. In art, he is depicted as a mature, bearded man, often holding a scepter (a symbol of power) or a lightning bolt (his weapon). Neptune (Poseidon) was the brother of Jupiter (Zeus), and was the god of the sea, earthquakes, and ships. In art, Neptune is also depicted as a mature, bearded man, sometimes holding a trident (a three-pronged fishing spear). Without their characteristic attributes, as in the figurine here, it is often difficult to distinguish between these two gods.

In Roman culture, Jupiter was specifically the god of weather, treaties and oaths, war, and justice; he was also the protector of the state. Neptune was the god of water in general, but not just the sea as in the Greek tradition. He was thus associated with bodies of water, earthquakes, and horses; he also protected against drought. The bearded, fatherly appearance of these gods influenced Medieval and Renaissance images of the God the Father.