



Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (2 ed.)

Edited by Michael Kelly

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Print ISBN-13: 9780199747108

Current Online Version: 2014

Print Publication Date: 2014

Published online: 2014

eISBN: 9780199747115

Sculpture.

To analyze the lengthy and complex history of sculpture, this entry comprises four essays:

OVERVIEW

CLASSICAL SCULPTURE

MODERN SCULPTURE

SCULPTURE SINCE 1960

The first essay provides a conceptual as well as historical overview of sculpture and its roles in art. The other three essays analyze particular periods and types of sculpture, which in turn embody and generate different senses of aesthetics. For further discussion, see [CONTEMPORARY ART](#); [INSTALLATION ART](#); [MONUMENTS](#); [PERFORMANCE ART](#); and [PUBLIC ART](#).

Classical Sculpture

Classical sculpture might be defined in at least three overlapping ways. In common parlance, any work of sculpture from Classical (Greco-Roman) Antiquity might fall under the category. In professional art history and archaeology, however, the Classical period of Greece runs from the Persian invasion of 480 BCE to the Macedonian conquest of 338 BCE. It thereby encompasses famous monuments such as the Delphi Charioteer, the pediments and metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, the Elgin Marbles, the Riace Bronzes, and most Athenian gravestones, as well as great masters such as Pheidias, Polykleitos, and Praxiteles. Finally, “Classical” can name a merely taxonomic category of style. Characteristic features of this style include the naturalistic depiction of drapery, anatomy, and movement; the dramatic presentation of *êthos* or character; and a relatively three-dimensional or “plastic” conception of space, especially in relief. Not all Classical sculpture, according to this last definition, need come from the Classical period, or even from Classical Antiquity at all.

For present purposes, however, it is convenient to restrict discussion to sculpture in the Classical style that comes from the Classical period of Greece (ca. 480–336 BCE). Such restriction should not be taken to imply absolute ruptures or breaks in the historical record, so much as a concession to scholarly norms.

Modern Historiography.

Modern histories of Classical sculpture, so defined, tend to cast its development in terms of *mimêsis*, or imitation. The essential point of discussion is the relationship between the statue and its representamen; the latter can, adventitiously, be either a physical body or an immaterial idea. Historical development shows the relationship becoming, in each case, progressively closer. Thus it has been possible for scholars to say that Classical sculpture represents a new empirical, or even “scientific,” encounter with the physical world—and, in the same breath, that it represents a perfect adequation of material form and conceptual content. Classical sculpture manages to be both empiricist and idealist at the same time.

Much scholarship of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries consisted of efforts to historicize this chimerical theory, that is, to reconcile it with the exigencies of curatorial practice and archaeological fieldwork. In the roughly fifty years separating Winckelmann and Hegel, the principle of stylistic periodization established itself as the essential resource of an idealist historiography of the Classical. Greek art in general, and sculpture in particular, was understood to tend inexorably toward the manifestation of ideal content in material form, even as the new ethical characterization of the later Classical looked beyond sculpture to tragedy and philosophy. Stylistic periodization provided Classical sculpture with a history.

Over the next 150 years, this idealist historicism encountered the positivism of the emerging university system. Excavations proliferated in Greece and elsewhere, producing vast archives of new data in need of systematization. The essential task of scholarship was to date monuments and assign them to regional schools and even authorial hands—a task in which periodization, based upon the presupposition of progressive perfection of *mimêsis*, was a crucial tool. Research proceeded through the aggregation of epigraphical, literary, stratigraphic, and stylistic evidence, with varying degrees of systematicity. Inevitably, this system tended to magnify breaks or ruptures between the Classical period and the antecedent Archaic. An early “aniconic” phase was even posited as a requisite starting-point for the progressive development, doing duty for what Hegel called the “Symbolic.”

The result was a history of the Classical style that was at once *teleological*, *nationalist*, *liberal*, and *non-falsifiable*. *Teleological*, in that the model of progressive, uniform historical development provided the basic framework for dating new finds. So powerful was this model that the evidence of style came to trump all others. The Athenian Treasury at Delphi is a case in point: despite strong epigraphical and literary evidence providing a *terminus post quem* of 490 BCE for its construction, the building was routinely dated a generation earlier on the basis of its “archaic” sculptural decor. *Nationalist*, in that the idea of regional schools proceeded on the assumption of thick cultural coherence on the model of the nation-state; when comparing finds, perceived similarity of style was *ex hypothesi* evidence for similarity of date and national origin, while dissimilarity was evidence for cultural, ethnic, or even racial difference. Local variations in style could be aggregated to produce larger regional or ethnic ones—one premise of the enterprise being a sharp distinction between the European (or Aryan) Greeks, and their Asiatic (or Semitic) neighbors to the East. The histories were also *liberal*, in that they made space for individual free agents: until recently, for instance, the analysis of the personal styles of Greek sculptors through comparative study of putative Roman “copies” (*Meisterforschung*) was a major research agenda. A notable setback for this approach was the discovery of the Riace Bronzes in 1972: universally extolled as masterpieces of Classical sculpture, the method failed to produce consensus on basic questions of date, regional style, or personal style. Lastly, the histories were *non-falsifiable*, in that they could accommodate contrary evidence without perturbation. Classical sculpture was empirical and realist, except when it was idealizing; homogeneous across regions and uniform in its chronological development, except when it was individualist and idiosyncratic. Deviations from naturalism could be ascribed variously to the personal whims of individual artists, foreign influence, or the idealizing tendencies of Greek culture writ large. Such expedients preserved the basic criteria of dating and attribution in the face of debacles such as the controversy over the Riace Bronzes—and, with them, the basic framework of idealist historiography.



[Click to view larger](#)

It is an open question whether this attempt to marry nineteenth-century *Geistesgeschichte* with positivist research protocols attained to coherence. Tellingly, however, it proved difficult to identify works in which the developmental history of the Classical style reached fruition: naturalistic in action, anatomy and drapery, three-dimensional in conception, and dramatically (“ethically”) characterized. The Golden Age of Periclean Athens was, in this respect, unsatisfactory: so spectacularly did the Parthenon sculptures fail to meet these criteria that, when the Elgin Marbles first arrived in Britain, many refused to believe that they could be Greek at all (a position that John Keats dismissed as “browless idiotism”). Even today, however, new discoveries are dated and assigned to regional schools on the basis of traditional schemes; the history of Classical sculpture remains a teleology without a *telos*.

As such it lies open to the charge of anachronism. Absent a prior investment in the perfection and inevitability of the Classical style—a legacy of the early modern historicism—the chronological sequence

Poseidon (or Zeus) from the Artemisium at Cape Sounion, 460 BCE (bronze), National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece.

NIMATALLAH / ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

can appear unmotivated. Hence it has become urgent to understand the terms in which the Classical Greeks, historically, encountered their own sculpture.

Pre-Platonic Accounts.

There is little, if any, systematic theorization of the visual arts in Greek prior to Plato. Yet it is possible, nonetheless, to discern a pre- or non-Platonic discourse on sculpture in earlier literary, historical, and epigraphical texts.

One route to this end is the study of ritual practice. It is sometimes suggested that Greek sculpture is an essentially religious phenomenon, or one specially tuned to situational “visualities” in which, under the impetus of ritual mandate or pious fervor, special epiphanic experiences were induced. This approach might be said to be the modern iteration of Hegel’s account of a Greek *Kunstreligion*. Yet neither Greek sculpture in general, nor Classical sculpture in particular, was exclusively religious. It was, instead, either commemorative or votive or both. Commemorative sculpture (*mnemata*, “memorials”) includes grave monuments and statues honoring athletic victors or important political figures. Votives (*agalmata*, “pleasing things”) comprise gifts to deities erected in sanctuaries. Formally there was considerable overlap between the two categories; honorific statues, for instance, could be equally at home in temple precincts or public squares. Well into the fifth century BCE, one and the same statue type could represent a god (in a sanctuary), a dead person (in a graveyard), or an athlete (in a town square). Evidence for idolatrous belief—the conflation of a statue and a deity—is thin; there is little reason to suppose that even the most hallowed images required a special “visuality.” Over time, profane contexts became increasingly important venues for sculpture; by the end of our period, sculpture had entered private homes as high-end décor. It is, in short, rash to explain broad stylistic developments in narrowly religious terms.

A better approach is to see Greek sculpture as part of a larger class of crafted artifacts that exemplify skill or *techné*. When early Greek writers talk about such items, they tend to emphasize final causes: is it pleasing, is it effective? Their concern is less the relation of work to prototype than the relation of work to beholder. Questions of accuracy and truthfulness—of *mimêsis* in either its Platonic or its Aristotelian variants—are secondary or absent entirely. Instead, two terms are especially important: wonder (*thauma*) and grace (*charis*). Each names both a type of artifact and an experience: wonders induce wonder, graces induce grace, “a sense of favor received.”

From Homer onward, a praiseworthy work of craft, be it a figural representation or anything else, should be a *thauma idesthai*, “a wonder to behold for itself and oneself.” A good example comes from the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey*, in which the poet describes a brooch belonging to Odysseus: “the front part of it was artful: a hound held a dappled fawn in his forepaws, preying on it as it struggled; and all were wonderstruck at how, although they were golden, the hound preyed on the fawn and strangled it, and the fawn struggled with his feet as he tried to escape” (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.225–231). What induces wonder is neither illusion nor fidelity to appearances but the *combination* of vivid, lifelike effect with an awareness of the material support of the image (in this case gold). Odysseus’s brooch is, in this regard, exemplary. Its exploitation of what has been called the “twofoldness” of depiction is essential to the Greek experience of wonder before works of art.

Closely linked to wonder is grace, *charis*. This term characterizes relations of felicitous gift exchange. In religion, for instance, animal sacrifice established “graceful” reciprocity between mortals and gods, blessings in exchange for blood and smoke. *Charis* could also be a visible property of the units of such exchange: it could radiate from a gifted object like a bright light, rendering it “charismatic.” For instance, when the gods give Pandora as a gift to men, they adorn her with a crown decorated with figurines: “on it were many cunning works of craft, a wonder to see for itself and oneself [*thauma idesthai*]; for of the many creatures which the land and sea rear up, [Hephaestus] put most upon it, wonderful things [*thaumasia*], like living beings with voices: and great grace [*charis*] shone all around from it” (Hesiod, *Theogony* 578–584). Like wonder, grace is essentially duplex: it radiates from an entity that is “neither here

nor there,” a gift proffered but not yet accepted or reciprocated, suspended in the indefinite term of an ongoing cycle of transactions.

Generally speaking, the brief of early Greek sculptors was to make wonders and graces. To that end, they did not try to suppress the “twofold” aspect of depictions, as one might expect if their goal had been to produce illusion or *trompe l’oeil*. Instead, they exploited or exaggerated it: the Classical style amounts to an array of techniques for the amplification of “twofoldness” in depiction. Certain qualities were deemed particularly effective in this regard: dazzling brightness, which made materials conspicuous even as it collapsed distance by striking the eye from afar; semi-transparency or diaphanousness, which revealed one thing as if through another; exceptional speed or sudden appearance, which made far-off things close and absent ones present; vast scale, which imposed even as it displayed technical bravura; above all, uncanny vividness in works of conspicuous craft, which dramatized the play between depictive content and material support. The Classical style in Greek sculpture was a toolkit for producing these qualities—and for amplifying them, in order to produce ever more wonderful and graceful works of craft.

Works.

Radiance was a desideratum in Greek sculpture in all periods. White marble was favored for just this reason; its very name, *marmaros*, means “shining stone.” Polished bronze was brighter still, and by ca. 500 BCE Greek sculptors had mastered the production of large-scale bronze sculpture using the indirect lost wax method. Early examples, such as the Piraeus Apollo, closely resembled marble statues of the so-called *kouros* type: static, foursquare, and aloof. But the high tensile strength of bronze encouraged experimentation with open, active poses. The resulting statues could do more than flash from afar: they could appear actually to charge at beholders. One of the first of these new bronzes was the Tyrant-Slayers Group in Athens, produced by Critius and Nesiotes in the early 470s BCE: two naked men seem to race forward menacingly with swords drawn (copy in Naples). An inscription identified the men as “a beam of light flashing at the Athenians,” thereby assimilating their novel, active poses to the brilliance of polished bronze.

The Tyrant-Slayers has been called the inaugural work of Classical sculpture. Artists quickly identified more ways to thematize the forceful impact of a sculpture. Classical statues often appear to hurl things at beholders or to move toward them: the Artemision Zeus (Athens) wields lightning, the Discobolus of Myron (copies in Rome and London) tosses a discus, the Delphi Charioteer (Delphi) seems to process slowly forward. Sculptors felt free to distort anatomy or contort poses in order to maximize visual impact (e.g., the Artemision god spreads arms of nearly simian length, unrealistic but imposing). What mattered, again, was the effect.

As with pose, so with drapery and even skin. Revealing garments made it possible to see one thing through another, an effect the Greeks deemed as wonderful as brilliance. In the Homeric poems, Aphrodite wears a dress so sheer as to shimmer over her body like moonlight, Odysseus a tunic as fine as a dried-out onionskin; each garment is at once dazzlingly bright, magically transparent, and “a wonder to behold” (Homer, *Hymn to Aphrodite* 5.81–90; *Odyssey* 19.232–235). When Herodotus (3.24) imagines a Land of Cockaigne, he replaces ordinary statues with crystal pillars that contain painted cartonnages that, in turn, contain bodies, each layer diaphanous to the one it envelops. Classical sculptors were obsessed with such effects, carving drapery that bore scant relation to any real-world fabric but that did contrive to cover the body while revealing everything. Exemplary in this regard are the Motya Charioteer (Mozia), the Parthenon pediments (London), the Nike of Paeonius (Olympia), and the ex-Getty Aphrodite (Aidone). Drapery became a medium that could simultaneously cover and reveal, shimmering and duplex.

Just so, nude bodies acquired rich, undulating surfaces that seemed to reveal bones, sinews, and veins; sculptors would twist limbs unnaturally, or stylize certain details, the better to provide fields for the display of such “hypodermal” features. To say that the resulting figures were more anatomically accurate than their predecessors is, therefore, a half-truth. For the Classical style also engendered new infelicities or stylizations, features that could read

as “inaccurate” only within the context of a new anatomical realism. Realistic anatomy was not an end in itself, but a means to produce an eloquent surface, a membrane that revealed even as it concealed.

Toward the end of the fifth century, sculptors began to exploit such effects as resources for narrative. Statues such as the Mourning Penelope (Tehran), the Niobids (Rome), and the Procne and Itys of Alcamenes (Athens) depicted figures whose pose, drapery, and even anatomy were richly expressive of dramatic character or *êthos*. In each case, the narrative itself concerned the potential eloquence of cloth or stone, and the tragic fallibility of the senses: Penelope “weaves her wiles,” Procne loses her humanity after reading a tapestry, Niobe turns to stone yet continues to weep. Such works constitute *êthos* as hidden, veiled, interior precisely in order to reveal it.

But the supreme achievements of Classical sculpture were, by the unanimous verdict of ancient sources, the great gold-and-ivory colossi of the later fifth century: Pheidias’s Zeus at Olympia and Athena Parthenos at Athens, and Polyclitus’s Hera at Argos. None survives save in Roman echoes and literary accounts. Vast, hulking deities, glittering with gold and opalescent glass in the half-light of a temple interior, expanses of snow-white skin alternating with richly expressive golden drapery, crawling with subsidiary figures and—not least—hugely expensive, these chryselephantine giants fit uneasily into the standard teleology of the Classical style. But they make sense as quintessential “wonders” and “graces.” Technically eclectic, the Classical style was single minded in its pursuit of these effects.

Not everyone was convinced, as a fragment of Aeschylus can attest. The poet laments the old Archaic style: “those ancient statues, though simply made, are to be considered divine, while the new kind, though elaborately worked and inducing wonder, have a less divine aspect to them” (T114 Radt). Aeschylus was unsympathetic to Classical sculpture (“the new kind”), but there is no mistaking the terms in which he understood it. The Classical was the style of wonder and that, for him, was the problem.

From Wonder to Beauty.

Notably absent from early Greek discourse is any emphasis on beauty, *kallos*. For Plato, by contrast, the Beautiful is of cardinal importance exactly because it is the only one of the Forms susceptible of apprehension by the senses: we can see the Beautiful in the flesh, as it were, or in an image or *eidôlon*. Plato calls the Beautiful the “most brilliant and most beloved” of the Forms (*Phaedrus* 250d-e), appropriating the traditional language of sculpture to his purely intellectual, philosophical “beholding,” that is, *theôria* or “theory.” Philosophical beholding of Forms (*ideai*) spiritualizes the embodied beholding of images (*eidôla*); that the Beautiful connects the two opens the way to Neoplatonic aesthetics. Strictly speaking, however, Classical Greek sculpture was not beautiful; it became so only *ex post facto*, at the moment of its philosophical disenfranchisement. Such is its legacy.

[See also ARISTOTLE; BEAUTY: CLASSICAL CONCEPTS; CLASSICISM; CRITICISM: ANCIENT CRITICISM; GIFT; HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH: HEGEL ON THE HISTORICITY OF ART; HELLENISTIC AESTHETICS; IDEAS, AESTHETIC; MIMESIS; ORIGINS OF AESTHETICS; PLATO; and WINCKELMANN, JOHANN JOACHIM.]

Bibliography

Adam, Sheila. *The Technique of Greek Sculpture in the Archaic and Classical Periods*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1966.

Find This Resource

Bol, Peter C., ed. *Die Geschichte der antiken Bildhauerkunst 2. Klassische Plastik*. Mainz, Germany: P. von Zabern, 2004.

Find This Resource