

PITILESS BRONZE

An exhibition of rare Hellenistic bronzes reveals the challenges to scholarship in the field while inviting new questions about the nature of life and art in Greek Antiquity.

by Richard Neer

“POWER AND PATHOS: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World” may be the most important exhibition of Classical art in a generation. If the first test for any big show is whether the benefits of display outweigh the risks of transport, then this one passes with ease: the organizers, Jens Daehner and Kenneth Lapatin of Los Angeles’s Getty Museum, have put together an ideal combination of visual impact and scholarly heft.

The ostensible subject is large-scale Hellenistic bronzes, that is, pieces produced in the Greek kingdoms of the Mediterranean and Middle East in the last three centuries B.C. In fact there is quite a bit more than that—Etruscan works, Roman ones, a few marbles, some astonishing pieces in hard black basanite, the odd statuette—but nobody’s complaining. Bronze was the ancient world’s preferred medium for high-end sculpture thanks to its gleaming finish, high tensile strength, capacity for detail, and openness to serial production (you can make any number of casts), so this show literally brings together the best and the brightest. There are plenty of well-known masterpieces on display, like a great, bloodied boxer from the Palazzo Massimo in Rome, a Greco-Libyan prince from the British Museum, or the Getty’s own Victorious Athlete, a proud young man crowning himself. There are also spectacular new discoveries, like the head of a barbarian king and the body of a discus thrower, both found in 2004; rarities from museums in less-touristed places like Tunis, the southern Italian city of Brindisi and the little Greek island of

Kalymnos; and, at the heart of the show, the first reunion of no fewer than five similar versions of a magnificent nude athlete that may well go back to one of the great lost works of Lysippos, court sculptor to Alexander the Great. This last group alone would comprise a worthy exhibition: the pieces are both immensely appealing and historically important, and the chance to see them side by side may never arise again.

The only drawback is that the show—which opened in Florence’s Palazzo Strozzi last spring, traveled to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and goes on view this month at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.—has been shedding statues at every step. Authorities from a dozen countries have been supremely generous, but more than a few pieces have failed to make all three stops; the problem is not unique to this exhibition but an unfortunate trend. Even the somewhat diminished display slated for Washington, however, is still a blockbuster.

Hellenistic bronzes pose special challenges for scholars, partly because they are bronze, partly because they are Hellenistic. The trouble with ancient bronzes is that they usually come with little or no information about their original contexts. Most works were melted down for scrap after the fall of Rome (if not before), and the ones that do survive usually come from shipwrecks, which tell us next to nothing about where the statues originally stood. A work’s style is usually the best evidence for its date and origin—and style is notoriously slippery. The trouble



Portrait of a Man, ca. 1st century B.C., bronze, 11½ by 8½ by 8½ inches. Courtesy J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
“Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World” at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Dec. 13, 2015–Mar. 20, 2016.

RICHARD NEER is a professor of art history at the University of Chicago. See Contributors page.

with “Hellenistic,” on the other hand, is that it is something of a grab-bag term: it designates a vast region—from Naples to Kandahar, Libya to the Crimea—over a long span of time. Hellenistic artists were sophisticated and eclectic, mixing and matching styles and iconographies in a way that seems calculated to frustrate historians (or, alas, to fool unwary buyers, for there were forgers in antiquity, too!). The upshot is that style alone can rarely date a piece to within 100 years or so. Scientific analyses are helpful, but no more precise. In the end, we can only guess at when most of these statues were made, or where, or by whom, or for whom; it is as though we could not be sure whether the works of Manet were from the 1860s or the time of Velázquez.

Fortunately, Daehner and Lapatin are among the best in the business, and they do a superb job with questions of connoisseurship, iconography (identifying portrait sitters, etc.), casting technology and so on. The catalogue is no mere coffee-table book but a trove of essays and individual entries by more top scholars than there is space here to name. If you are interested in casting techniques and alloys, in the cultural history of bronze, in eclectic styles or forgeries, in the Greeks in the Middle East, in the relation of art to poetry, in underwater archaeology, in patinas and colors, you need look no further. There is even a breakdown of the metallurgical content of no fewer than 22 pieces, a boon to specialists. In short, the book is the real deal; if only other museums were as rigorous as the Getty has become. Yet precision in technical matters only brings out the relative haziness of our knowledge on nearly every other front. This point is not a criticism. Everyone involved with this show is perfectly aware of the predicament; in fact, that is one justification for the endeavor.

YET THE SHEER intractability of Hellenistic sculpture, its resistance to precise dating and the finer points of connoisseurship, may open as many doors as it closes. Current art history, tying statues to patrons or social history or religion, requires a kind of information that is simply not forthcoming in this case. Perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise. Freed from the demand for historical depth, we can be perfectly, shamelessly superficial: we can forget about names and dates for a moment, and attend to the look of these artworks. We can attend, in short, to *surfaces*.

Take the statue of an athlete represented here in four or five versions (depending on the venue), notably a complete bronze found at Ephesus in Turkey in 1896, and another discovered off Losinj in Croatia a century later. The Ephesus version was in 234 pieces when found, and painstakingly restored by the Viennese sculptor Wilhelm Sturm; his labors may have seemed like overreach to some, but the Losinj statue, which was found almost completely intact, showed that Sturm got everything pretty much right, and vindicated his intervention. Although the Croatian piece does not travel to Washington, the other versions do, including a splendid head now in Fort Worth that was considered suspect until the recent find proved its antiquity. All have a fair if unproven claim to reproduce a famous lost work by the sculptor Lysippos of Sikyon, perhaps even by means of molds taken off the original. Lysippos, active in the late 300s B.C., was recognized in antiquity as one of the very greatest of all Greek sculptors: Alexander the Great, a megalomaniac with

very good taste, gave him a monopoly of sorts on his own image. The statue in question, known as the Oil-Scraper (*Apoxymenos*), was a showpiece of his talent. With time the original wound up in Rome, where, we are told, it stood in a public bath until the Emperor Tiberius (r. 14-37 C.E.) took a fancy to it and put it in his own bedroom; the outraged citizenry rioted and eventually got it back. It’s a good story, and may even be true, but the connection between the works on display and Lysippos is no more than plausible. Although the statues on display surely go back to *some* famous prototype, we cannot really be sure which one.

What if we set such questions aside? We are left with a well-built, naked man in his early 20s, standing with eyes downcast, limbs relaxed. He’s fiddling with something down by his hip, but what? Greek athletes would anoint their bodies with oil before exercise; afterward, they would scrape it off with a long, crescent-shaped tool (the scum of oil, sweat and grime, valued for its medicinal properties, was carefully collected for resale). The youth is cleaning his oil-scraper between finger and thumb: one of the everyday rituals of the gymnasium. The tool itself is lost but, in its original position, would have been directly in front of the genitalia, creating a peekaboo effect. Elsewhere in the show you will see plenty of extroverts—brash victors crowning themselves, rulers glaring at their minions, supercilious deities—but this young man seems unaware of his surroundings even as he is manifestly, conspicuously on display. He’s taking care of himself, attending to himself.

The statue is about surface in the most literal sense: the athlete is cleaning his own skin or, more exactly, cleaning the tool that cleans the skin. Focusing attention on the scraper evokes the tool’s passage over the body, the way it hugs every contour. Of course a bronze statue is, itself, shiny: the conceit is that the gleam of bronze, maintained in antiquity with pumice, is like the gleam of oil, and the statue is, as it were, polishing itself, making itself brilliant. In fact, an Athenian vase-painting of the Classical era shows artisans using just such a tool to rasp the surface of a cast bronze. Yet the pose also evokes immersion in a task to the point of being oblivious to surroundings. In short, both self-perfection and self-absorption take the form of an exquisite *attention to surface*: the statue is a meditation on membranes. That the bronze itself is, on inspection, full of miscasts, patches and air bubbles only brings out the amount of skill required in what the Greeks called “the art of living,” and the interminable nature of any attempt at perfection, be it artistic, bodily or a matter of everyday existence.

The Greek word for exercise is *ascesis*, which survives in our words “ascetic” and “asceticism.” In English an ascetic is one who undergoes extreme rigors of self-denial, usually for some religious purpose, but the original, Greek sense is different: *ascesis* is the forming, modeling activity of the craftsman, and an ascetic is anyone who goes to work on him- or herself, who crafts him- or herself. For Plato, who set some of his dialogues in gymnasia, the fashioning of the body was all well and good, but what really mattered was the fashioning of one’s way of life: to master the self, he said, was to win the *real* Olympic Games.¹ Physical exercise and spiritual exercise go together, the trick being to get from one to the other.

The philosopher Michel Foucault called this “an aesthetics of existence.” The key point is that the Greeks did not experience the contrast between inner life and outer appearance in quite the



Statue of an Athlete (The Croatian Apoxyomenos), ca. 1st century B.C.E., bronze and copper, 78¾ by 23¾ by 19¾ inches. Courtesy Ministry of Culture. Photo Ljubo Gamulin of Republic of Croatia, Zagreb.



way that moderns tend to do (or say they do). Tellingly, their language made no distinction between *mask* and *face*: the distinction between outward facade and inner truth did not register. Of course the Greeks told lies and kept secrets and tried to fit in like everybody else. On their view, however, the self was essentially social, a function of class and circumstance; *ascesis* was not a matter of getting in touch with one's feelings or interpreting one's unconscious desires but of testing and reaffirming one's place in a larger system "out there." As the poet Simonides put it, using terms borrowed from sculpture, "It is difficult for a man to become truly good, 'foursquare' in hands, feet and mind, crafted without flaw."² To become good is not to undergo an inner transformation but to become like a work of art. We are artists of ourselves.

The Oil-Scraper shows *ascesis* in action. Is he performing, preening like a show pony, or is he demonstrating obliviousness and self-absorption? He's doing both, of course, but that is merely to say that the distinction does not pertain. The crafting of the self is essentially public, not private, superficial, not deep.

If this sounds more modern than ancient, that may be because our view of the Greeks is a caricature, filtered through modernist myth making. Rodin, we are told, liberated the sculpted surface from the demand that it signify something underneath or inside. Skin could swirl and undulate of its own accord; modeling no longer corresponded to muscles, bones or sinews, but evoked the artist's touch and the process of making. This was modern: with Rodin, as Leo Steinberg once put it, "That whole antique armature of clarified articulations which, since ancient Greece, had made male anatomy thinkable as an art object dissolves in the skinflow of continuity."³ Well, yes and no. It should not detract from Rodin's achievement (or Steinberg's) to suggest that this contrast might be a bit too pat. The surfaces in "Power and Pathos" do not flow like Rodin's, but there is more to the matter than clarity of articulation: surface is a source of visual and thematic interest in its own right. Modernism, advertised as a wholesale break with the antique, tends to obscure this point.

WHAT'S BENEATH these surfaces, what's inside a statue? The key work here is the famous Spinario from Rome (probably 1st century B.C.), exhibited alongside a superb marble version from the British Museum—another curatorial coup. The bronze may be unique among the objects in the show in that it has never been lost to view: the Spinario has been on display continuously, in one venue or another, for some two thousand years, and has inspired everyone from Brunelleschi to Seurat. A boy, a fetching shepherd of the sort that populates the pastoral poetry of the Hellenistic age, sits on a rock, one ankle propped on the opposite knee, extracting a thorn from his heel. Once again the pose is all absorption, limbs folded one upon the other, head bowed in concentration; once again the subject attends to its own surface, its own literal skin. The marble version from London is rapt, lips parted; the better-known bronze from Rome is impassive. His coiffure is fussy and old-fashioned, quite out of keeping with the rustic theme and overall realism; it is the sort of hairstyle you would see on a much earlier work, or on a "retro" piece like the so-called Piombino Apollo, an archaizing confection of the Roman era. The effect of the Spinario,



Portrait of a Boy, ca. 100-50 B.C., bronze, 55½ by 22 by 18 inches. Courtesy Archaeological Museum of Herakleion, Ministry of Culture & Sports, Archaeological Receipts Fund.

surely deliberate, is of a statue come to life and caught as if it were backstage, unguarded. The result is charming and witty, if a touch voyeuristic. One cannot be squeamish about Antiquity: the spectacle of a pretty boy, lost to the world and absorbed in a nasty pinprick, is more than a little suggestive, to the point that medieval viewers went overboard and identified the figure as Priapus, the Roman god of virile fertility and erections, while Renaissance ones deemed it unfit for ladies.

Like the Oil-Scraper, the Spinario puts the skin, the surface, overtly at issue. To see the extraction of the thorn, the piercing of the membrane, is also to see a state of mingled absorption and pain: the pathos, "emotion" or "suffering," of the show's title, here embodied in the boy who, the picture of self-restraint, literally repairs himself. Penetration, pathos and visual pleasure go together, each reinforcing the others, each on the surface.

For the Romantics of the 19th century, the Spinario epitomized what they took to be the perfect, unselfconscious life of Greek Antiquity. He's lost to the world, like one of the intensely absorbed

Opposite, Boy Removing a thorn from his Foot (Spinario), ca. 50 B.C.E., bronze and copper, 31½ by 17½ by 24 inches. Courtesy Musei Capitolini, Rome. © Foto Scala, Firenze.

Medallion with the Bust of Athena, ca. 150 B.C., bronze and white glass paste, 10¼ by 10¼ by 7½ inches. Courtesy Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki. Photo Orestis Kourakis. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund.



boys of Chardin, building houses of cards or blowing bubbles. In 1810, the great German author Heinrich von Kleist wrote of a youth who glimpsed his own reflection in a mirror as he towed off after a bath, and fancied that he resembled the Spinario—but, when he tried to repeat the moment for a friend, found that he could not. For Kleist, modern self-awareness makes true, spontaneous grace impossible: the Greeks had it and we've lost it, because we overthink everything. He concludes, perhaps ironically, that the only alternative is to attain the automatic, unthinking state of a puppet on a string: to become marionettes. If there is a grain of truth here, it is that the Greeks really would not have recognized the contrast between unselfconscious absorption and knowing self-display, instead understanding these states of being as part of a continuum.

At the opposite extreme from the Spinario is a muffled boy from southeastern Crete, one of the show's true gems. The adolescent stands enveloped in a long cape, fists balled under the cloth, head cocked; he seems a tough customer. The fabric is heavy, presumably wool, so the folds are simple and severe. A great arc of cloth depends from the neck like a yoke and, in so doing, knits the flat, square face into a larger system of zigzags and masses: a knitted brow, pursed lips and greasy hair are of a piece with the nearly abstract structure of the garment, so many perturbations of surface, as though "what we call mind and soul and love" were but a wrinkle in wool.⁴ This statue may well have marked a grave, and it takes little imagination to see how its play of visible and implicit, present and unseen, could be a fitting way to commemorate a dead child: the statue holds him in the here-and-now while marking his irrevocable departure, so we see him, if not through a glass darkly, then through the medium of fabric and metal.

Hellenistic artists could push these eloquent surfaces to the point of allegory. A circular medallion, unearthed in a palace in downtown Thessaloniki in 1990, contains a bust of Athena, goddess of wisdom; it once graced the front of a chariot. The

relief is very high, as is the quality: a study in contrasting textures. Simple sheer cloth plays against a riotous feathered cape, agitated locks of hair snake over a smooth background, everything turbo-charged with deep undercutting and heavy shadows. Exceptionally, the goddess wears a metal mask (or mask-faced helmet) over her head, in juxtaposition with her own face. This mask, a metal representation of a metal representation, is the monstrous Medusa, whose gaze turned men to stone; as often in Hellenistic art she is beautiful, not ugly, and her eyes close in sleep or death. Against this impassive mask is Athena herself, staring wildly, lips parted, breathless. No less than the Oil-Scraper or the Spinario, this relief prominently features surfaces and layers, insides and outsides. Yet there is no simple antithesis: the impassivity of sleep is a mask, the face of wisdom is all agitation.

There is something very cold in all this. Homer had a word for bronze: he called it *pitiless*. Bronze is hard and cold and it cuts through flesh without feeling. Homer also called it *bright*: bronze flashes from afar to dazzle the eye, conspicuous in a rough-hewn, preindustrial world. Both qualities are very much in evidence in this exhibition. Shepherds, athletes and deities aside, most of the works are portraits of no doubt extremely unpleasant men who lived at a time of hideous inequality, brutality and exploitation. The sad truth is that your average ISIS commander is probably more humane than the rapacious, bloody-minded, slave-owning aristocrats of the Greek kingdoms. Of course, this age also produced Stoicism and skepticism, which taught people how to dissociate themselves from the world of desire and suffering to attain a state of imperturbability, even joy. It saw the invention of everything from mathematical proofs to sitcoms. But the portraits at the Getty are not a cross section of the ancient population, just of those with the wealth and inclination to commemorate themselves in public at staggering expense: the Trumps, Kardashians and Putins of the day. The rest is mostly home decor; its essential function is to give pleasure, not always of the nicest sort. Even that boxer, for all his grandeur, appeals to a certain sadism, as one leans closer to savor the skill with which the artist has used copper inlay to represent trickling blood, or a darker alloy on the cheek to suggest a vicious bruise.

This essential illiberalism is part of what makes antiquity so interesting. It is inhumane, exactly because it precedes the modern concept of the human; it is shallow, exactly because it has no thought of being "deep." If these bronzes are compelling all the same—and they are—then that may be because the difference in question is by no means absolute: alien and pitiless as they may be, we can look into their eyes. What we see there is another way of being a person, another concept of the ethical life, another kind of embodiment. Those ways are not so alien as to defy all comprehension—just enough to shock, the way that, once upon a time, Rodin could shock, or Tatlin. As we ourselves become "post-human," the "pre-human" can be terrible and exhilarating in equal measure. ○

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, p. 47.

2. Simonides, fr. 542, *PMG*.

3. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 379.

4. For an expanded discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke in relation to ancient conceptions of surface see Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 107-08.

