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The Late Antique Silver Dancer in Boston

*Marice Rose
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A late third/ fourth-century AD gilded silver statuette (h. 12 cm) in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts depicts a dancer, a woman from the margins of Roman society (Fig. 1). She wears a tight, short, high-girt tunic that leaves her legs and arms bare. Beads adorn her hair, and gold bands encircle her arms and wrists. Seated, she puts on or removes her right shoe with both hands, and gazes forward with a contemplative expression. Although performers appear frequently in Roman art, this is a rare representation of a female entertainer sitting and in a thoughtful mood.



Fig. 1. Silver seated dancer, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The figurine is material evidence of a more sympathetic attitude toward dancers than most contemporary textual sources provide. While the figurine's uncertain provenance means that many aspects of its production and reception cannot be known,¹ this paper will examine it within the artistic traditions of theatrical subjects and in terms of a theorized audience reception within a home. The statuette, highly original in its dress, pose, and implied occupation, would have elicited different responses from different viewers. It exemplifies the oppositions possible in Roman domestic art, with its low-status subject, potentially erotic costume and pose, yet pensive facial expression.

The MFA statuette has been included in museum catalogues and two important loan exhibitions since the museum acquired it in 1969 but it has not received a detailed scholarly treatment.² In 1971, MFA curator of antiquities Cornelius Vermeule identified the subject as a dancer.³ The hairstyle and costume are consistent with a late antique dancer's dress, although the lack of surviving comparanda makes the statuette a challenge to characterize. Vermeule dated it to ca. 350–400 by comparing its face shape and hair to numismatic and marble empress portraits. The coiffure is a *scheitelzopf*, a style in which hair is pulled back in waves, braided into a wide plait and pinned up on top of the head.⁴ The hairstyle was most popular in the third and fourth centuries, but continued into the sixth century. A beaded wreath crowns her head over her bun, a type of hair ornamentation that also was not unusual in late antiquity. She wears a short-sleeved chiton, with fastenings that reveal the shoulders and upper arms.⁵ Although similar sleeve-fastenings appear on portraits of the Empresses Faustina, Plautilla, and Julia Domna, and in depictions of other Roman women, in those instances a mantle usually covers the arms. This

¹ The statuette was purchased from New York dealer Mathias Komor on May 14, 1969. It is said to have come from "East Greece." http://www.mfa.org/collections/search_art.asp?coll_accession=69.72&coll_name=&coll_artist=&coll_medium=&coll_culture=&coll_classification=&coll_credit=&coll_provenance=&coll_keywords=&coll_sort=2&coll_sort_order=0&submit= Search accessed June 15, 2010.

² Cornelius Vermeule, "Recent Museum Acquisitions: Greek, Etruscan, Roman Gold and Silver-II: Hellenistic to Late Antique Gold and Silver," *Burlington Magazine* vol. 113, 1971, p. 404; Vermeule, *Greek and Roman Sculpture in Gold and Silver*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1974, pp. 33-34, as well as in the catalogues for the exhibition at the Yale Art Gallery, see Diana Kleiner and Susan Matheson, ed., *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 228 and the exhibition at the Sackler Museum. See Ioli Kalavrezou, ed., *Byzantine Women and their World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 149.

³ Vermeule 1971 (above note 2), p. 404.

⁴ Susan Wood, "Subject and Artist: Studies in Roman Portraiture of the Third Century," *AJA* vol. 85, 1981, p. 60; Marie Emmanuel, "Hairstyles and Headdresses of Empresses, Princesses, and Ladies of the Aristocracy in Byzantium," *Deltion tes Christianikes Archaialogikes Hetaireias* vol. 17, 1993/1994, p. 113.

⁵ Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, Charleston: Tempus Books, 2002, p. 78 calls this style a "gap-sleeved tunic."

figure's bare arms are accentuated by the gold bracelets, which, on real performers, would attract attention to the performer's movements. On the figurine, the gilded accents also add visual interest to the silver and evoke a sense of higher cost.

The figurine's short skirt reaches only to mid-thigh, which is uncommon in late antique depictions of women, although it would be appropriate for a dancer's costume. A short costume without a mantle would allow a real dancer to move freely and, on the figurine, it exposes her legs. The garment appears to be made from a tight, clinging fabric, like silk, that reveals the body. A light silk garment would have been more comfortable for a dancer and it is consistent with textual evidence: a sumptuary law concerning mime actresses, contemporary with the statuette, decrees that they were permitted to wear silk if it were not brocade or gold in color (Theodosian Code 15.7.11).⁶ The figurine's left foot is bare; a gold slipper is depicted on the ground next to it. Most fourth-century women wore sandals or ankle-boots—slippers like these were traditionally worn by performers.⁷ The choices made by the artist leave no doubt therefore that the subject represents a performer, with emphasis placed on her body and her adornments.

The figurine was probably made for a domestic space. It belongs to a long Greco-Roman tradition of theatrical images, in a wide range of media, used in household settings. Scenes with performers are found on Greek vases as early as the fifth century BC and continue in later monumental domestic decoration such as wall painting and mosaic. The majority of surviving theatrical subjects, however, are in the form of small figurines like the Boston dancer. From the fourth century BC to the first century AD, figurines of male actors were common throughout the Mediterranean, like the first-century BC Greek examples in the Louvre (Fig. 2).⁸ Unlike the silver Boston figurine, most of the examples extant are terracotta, presumably because their affordability made them more common and/or because precious metals were later melted down and reused.⁹ While some figurines have been found in graves, many probably would have been placed originally on shelves, tables, or in wall niches in homes.¹⁰ Theatrical

⁶ Silk was characteristically worn by both elite women and prostitutes; Kelly Olson, "Matrona and Whore: The Clothing of Women in Roman Antiquity," *Fashion Theory* vol. 6, 2002, p. 398.

⁷ Croom (above note 5), p. 97.

⁸ For the development of actor figurines, see Dorothy Thompson, "Three Centuries of Hellenistic Terracottas," *Hesperia* vol. 21, 1952, pp. 141-144 and Margaret Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

⁹ A rare ivory example is the masked tragic actor figurine in Paris (1st c-3rd c CE). Petit Palais, Dutuit Bequest 1902, Inv. ADUT00192.

¹⁰ Susan Auth, "A Romano-Egyptian Statuette of a Comic Actor," in K. Hartswicke and M. Sturgeon, ed., *Stephanos: Studies in Honor of Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998, p. 106.

figurines usually depict the actors wearing or holding dramatic masks, standing as if performing or seated on an altar.



Fig. 2. Terracotta actor figurines, Louvre Museum, Paris.

Although not as common as images of actors, representations of dancing or standing female performers are known as well. In the Hellenistic period, mantle dancer figurines in terracotta and bronze (such as the well-known Baker Dancer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) were popular.¹¹ Examples of dancing females from late antique homes include the mosaic dancers celebrating the rose harvest as identified by Christine Kondoleon, and twisting maenads on textiles and furniture fittings.¹² Images of performing grotesques were also popular in figurines, on pavement

¹¹ Dorothy Thompson, "A Bronze Dancer from Alexandria," *AJA* vol. 54, 1950, pp. 371-385; some may once have been attached to furniture or vessels, see Beryl Barr-Sharrar, "Coroplast, Potter, and Metalsmith," in Jaimee Uhlenbrock, ed., *The Coroplast's Art: Greek Terracottas of the Hellenistic World*, New Rochelle: Aristide Caratzas, 1990, p. 35.

¹² For the rose harvest, Christine Kondoleon, "Timing Spectacles: Roman Domestic Art and Performance" in Bettina Bergmann and Kondoleon, ed., *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1999, pp. 334-5; for maenads, Kalavrezou (above note 2), pp. 168-169.

mosaics, and small objects such as lamps, continuing a Hellenistic tradition (Figs. 3 and 4).¹³



Fig. 3. Roman mosaic, from the villa at Sidi Ghrib, Bardo Museum, Tunis.



Fig. 4. Roman mosaic, Vatican Museums, Rome.

¹³ Figurines of grotesques are often found as sanctuary gifts and in tombs, but most scholars agree that they also would have served as domestic decoration; Lucinda Burn, *Hellenistic Art*, Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2004, pp. 74-77.

The maenads, grotesques, and mosaic dancers dance with arms wide and legs crossing to suggest a twirl. On the textiles, the dancers wear long, flowing tunics that swirl around their legs.¹⁴ The ecstasy shown by these dancers' twirling bodies and drapery is strikingly different from the seated pose and contemplative tone of the Boston statuette.¹⁵ These active dancers appear to dance for an audience while the silver figurine is alone in her private moment.

The only surviving image of a pensive actress similar in tone to the Boston figurine is a fragment from a sixth-century ivory casket that depicts a serious standing female performer, usually identified as a pantomime, wearing a high-girt garment and holding a sword, a lyre and three masks (Fig. 5).¹⁶



Fig. 5. Ivory relief, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

¹⁴ Examples are found in Eunice Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt: The Rich Life and the Dance*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 79, 100, 108, 126, 147, 176.

¹⁵ For example, the so-called *Titieux Dancer* in the Louvre; see Elisabeth Frieslander, "The Mantle Dancer in the Hellenistic Period," *Assaph* vol. 6, 2001, p. 16.

¹⁶ The subject has been identified as a pantomime actress because of the masks. Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977, p. 262.

For a comparable seated pose in domestic images of performers, one has to look to other decoration such as the mosaics and wall paintings that depict male actors next to or gazing at masks, such as in the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii.¹⁷ Scenes like these give the viewer a sense of privilege—of being allowed to see the actors out of character, unlike a normal audience—a point to be discussed further below.

The monumental and ivory mask-gazing images differ from the Boston figurine in that they depict practitioners of “higher” forms of theatrical performance, such as tragedy or pantomime, than the Boston dancer appears to represent. Women did not perform in classical tragedy. The Boston figurine does not represent a pantomime actress either, because her costume is not consistent with that identification. The spectacle of pantomime varied widely, but it is defined by the portrayal of mythological subjects through movement, with voices and music provided by accompanying choruses.¹⁸ Pantomimes performed in public and in private; Pliny reports in *Epistles* 7.24.4-5 that a woman named Ummidia Quadrillata kept pantomimes (and cared for them more than was appropriate).¹⁹ Evidence for their costume is found in a variety of textual and visual sources, with male and female pantomimes wearing long robes (fringed or embroidered on the edges), scarves, and keeping long, loose hair.²⁰ Scenes of pantomimes performing appear on fourth and fifth-century contorniate medallions, the sixth-century consular diptych of Anastasius, and a fifth—sixth-century ivory comb (Fig. 6).²¹



Fig. 6. Ivory comb, Louvre Museum, Paris.

¹⁷ Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2008, p. 254.

¹⁸ For recent scholarship, see Edith Hall and Rosie Wyles, edd., *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁹ Thanks to Eve D’Ambra for this reference.

²⁰ Wyles, “The Symbolism of Costume in Ancient Pantomime,” in Hall and Wyles (above note 18), pp. 61-86.

²¹ Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, Figs. 1-5.

The Boston dancer with her short dress and hair up, therefore, is a practitioner instead of one of the popular, but “lower” performing art forms such as mime or dances for private audiences. The term “mime” is most often used to cover a broad range of public or private performance, usually including bawdy scenes enacted with words, music, and dance.²² Private dinner parties featuring dancers were common in late antiquity and would have been familiar to an elite patron or viewer of the silver statuette. Neither female mimes nor private dancers had a standard costume that can be identified on the basis of extant depictions and texts, although Church Father John Chrysostom criticizes mime actresses for revealing their bodies as the Boston figurine does.²³

In order to understand the figurine as a performer of a “low” art, it is important to consider its social context. Dancers enjoyed patronage from the highest echelons of society. In the fourth and fifth centuries, pantomime dancers appeared at imperial festivals and competed for factions.²⁴ There were dancers at religious festivals and private feasts. Private and public mime performances were popular. Legally, however, such dancers as well as practitioners of the more prestigious performing arts would have been *infames*, a degraded status assigned to all Roman performers.²⁵ They and their children were not allowed to marry men of the senatorial order, although this statute was repealed under Emperor Justinian in 520/534. Performers lacked legal rights because they voluntarily shared their bodies with the public; like prostitutes’ bodies, theirs were considered to be not their own. If someone physically assaulted a performer, he would not be punished. This degraded status remained even after a dancer left the profession.²⁶ Although many performers in Rome had the additional stigma of being slaves, slave performers were less common in the East, where the Boston figurine is said to have been acquired.²⁷

Not only the law, but most late antique written discourse also denigrates dancers. As social outsiders, all performers were mistrusted, but many writers considered female dancers to be particularly corruptive of audiences’ morals, especially in the Early Christian era when suspicion of women and their sexuality intensified. Female dancers, provocative in

²² Webb (above note 21), pp. 95-138 has shown mime to be a discrete genre with its own logic and rules that explored elements of society and humanity in meaningful ways.

²³ The frequent interpretation of his comments that mime actresses performed stripteases is probably not true; Webb (above note 21), p. 101.

²⁴ See the relief sculpture of faction dancers on the Theodosius obelisk base in Constantinople. Alan Cameron, *Porphyrus the Charioteer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37-38.

²⁵ Dorothea R. French, “Maintaining Boundaries: The Status of Actresses in Early Christian Society,” *Vigiliae Christianae* vol. 52 (1998), pp. 293-318.

²⁶ Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 91-94.

²⁷ Webb (above note 21), p. 47.

costume like the Boston statuette, and provocative in movement and often itinerant, were unable to embody the key Roman female virtues of modesty, piety, and dedication to family and home. As a result, the assumption that female performers were prostitutes was widespread. Church Fathers warned that viewing dancers led to a decline in spectators' morals. John Chrysostom wrote that if one meets a woman in a public place it is troubling enough, but not nearly so much as if one sees her in the theater singing lewd songs.²⁸

A dancer's potential to corrupt, however, does not exist without an audience capable of being corrupted. For these ancient writers, the audience's gaze was passive, receiving the female performer's dangerous sexuality and being corrupted by it, an idea that has persisted into modern times.²⁹ The nineteenth-century Viennese ballerina Fanny Elssler was described during her American tour as an "enchantress," captivating all who viewed her, with both men and women "sit[ting] in open-mouthed ecstasy of delight."³⁰ By blaming the dancer, the seduced viewer remains without shame. Despite the reputations attached to entertainers, people were attracted to the performing arts in order to act, dance, or sing, and probably also to obtain wealth. The Early Christian dancer-turned-saint Pelagia's *vita* describes her adornment with jewels before her conversion, and John Chrysostom mentions fans showering actresses with gifts.³¹ A law allows senators' daughters who have been actresses to marry freedmen; some girls of the senatorial class must have freely chosen acting as a profession, although further evidence is lacking.³² Ca. 197–202 AD, Tertullian pointed out the contradictory outlooks of spectators toward performance and performer: "the perversity of it . . . [audiences] love whom they lower, they despise whom they approve, the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace" (*De spect.* 22). The appearance of a female dancer in the visual record is therefore not as contradictory as the written sources may make it seem.

The complicated attitudes spectators held toward the performing arts and artists are echoed in the variety of ways images of performers operated within the home. The images' functions depended on their subject, scale, and audience. I believe that the patrons' own enjoyment of dance,

²⁸ Chrysostom, *Contra ludos et theatra*, in Webb "Salome's Sisters: The Rhetoric and Realities of Dance in Late Antiquity and Byzantium," in Liz James, ed., *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 133.

²⁹ Lim, in Bergmann and Kondoleon (above note 12), p. 359.

³⁰ Maureen Costonis, "The Personification of Desire: Fanny Elssler and American Audiences," *Dance Chronicle* vol. 13, 1990, pp. 47-67.

³¹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in Lynda Coon, Katherine Haldane, and Elisabeth Sommer, ed., *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1990, pp. 47-50; French (above note 25), 303.

³² Digest 23.247 Paul, *Lex Julia et Papia*, book 2; French (above note 25), note 9 p. 297.

and desire to see and discuss related representations in his or her home, played the biggest roles in the choice of a dancer for a subject. If the Boston figurine represents a performer like those who may have entertained in the home where it was placed, she is one of many representations that reflected real private entertainments, such as the nude and semi-nude dancers—*cinaedi*, or “rump-shakers”—who performed at private parties (fig. 4).³³ Roman representations of such dancers may have illustrated their patrons’ ownership and enjoyment of their own troupes, as depictions of dancing dwarves may have reflected ownership of real dwarves used to entertain. Similarly, the masked terracotta actor figurines were mass-produced as souvenirs and may have served as pleasant reminders of the theater.³⁴ Some mantle dancer figurines may have been “objects of delight” in the home—similar in this respect to the many statuettes inspired by the Venus de Milo.³⁵ Henry Maguire has shown how images of dancing maenads were used in the late Roman home to magically encourage fertility and household abundance.³⁶ In the home, figurines of dwarves and other grotesques may also have had an apotropaic function, in addition to reminding one of real dancers and providing comic relief with their ridiculous poses.³⁷ The late antique images of dancing maenads, and the *cinaedi* and the dwarves’ active poses, however, are completely different from that of the silver dancer. Although the subject is similar, with the quietness of her pose it is unlikely that she would have been apotropaic or have inspired laughter.

For large-scale decorative programs, one reason for patrons’ interest in theatrical depictions may have been their desire to evoke their own

³³ Katherine Dunbabin, “Problems in the Iconography of the Roman Mime,” In Christophe Hugoniot, Frederic Hurlet, and Silvia Milanezi, edd., *Le Statut de l’Acteur dans l’Antiquité Grecque et Romaine: Actes du Colloque Qui s’est tenu à Tours les 3 et 4 Mai 2002*, Tours: Université François-Rabelais 2004, pp. 170-172; Eunice Maguire and Henry Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007), pp. 109-110.

³⁴ J. R. Green, “Drunk Again: A Study in the Iconography of the Comic Theater,” *AJA* vol. 89, 1985, p. 469.

³⁵ Several have been found in tombs; Frieslander (above note 16) pp. 1-30; Bell, “Hellenistic Terracottas of Southern Italy and Sicily,” in Uhlenbrock (above note 12) p. 66; for Venus de Milo statuettes, Rachel Kousser, *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture: The Allure of the Classical*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 36.

³⁶ Other subjects used in this way were animals, plants, and personifications. Henry Maguire, “The Good Life,” In Glenn Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Andre Grabar, edd., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard, 1999, p. 780.

³⁷ Andrew Stewart, *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997, pp. 224-5; John Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250*, Berkeley: University of California, 2007, p. 8.

status as patrons of spectacles.³⁸ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and others argue that the Roman house (wall painting, in particular) reflects and constructs its patrons' power relationships, according to a hierarchy of motifs and viewings.³⁹ The patron's power in terms of the dancer lies in the representation of her in a private moment—that is, not performing—and therefore it privileges the patrons' view by giving him or her access to a scene the rest of the audience does not see. Statuary could be part of a visual discourse constructing control over those of lower status. The small scale of the Boston figurine, however, requiring close viewing unlike large scale painting and mosaic programs, opposes this reading and suggests instead that the figurine exemplifies the simple concept of images meant for the pleasure of the house's inhabitants who saw them every day.⁴⁰ Its ability to be turned and manipulated in one's hands would have offered tactile pleasure in addition to viewing pleasure.⁴¹

In order to understand receptions of the figurine, one must acknowledge its varying viewerships. There would have been other viewers in addition to the patron; the Roman house was not an exclusively private realm. It also served as place of business, political meetings, and entertainment. Individual rooms had more than one function and audience.⁴² The figurine would have been seen by inhabitants and visitors, men and women, citizens and the slaves charged with its polishing and dusting.⁴³ It is important to bear in mind that depictions of actors were conversation pieces rather than documents of performance history.⁴⁴ The Boston figurine clearly would have communicated to any viewer, by virtue of her revealing dress, that she is a performer of one of the lowest types of entertainment, as discussed above. One's response to the statuette would

³⁸ Kondoleon, "Signs of Privilege and Pleasure: Roman Domestic Mosaics," in Elaine Gazda, ed., *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991, pp. 105-116.

³⁹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; David Frederick added gender to Wallace-Hadrill's "axes of decoration" and the images' messages in "Beyond the Atrium to Ariadne: Erotic Painting and Visual Pleasure in the Roman House," *Classical Antiquity* vol. 14, 1995, pp. 266-303. For late antiquity, see Simon Ellis, "Power, Architecture, and Decor: How the Late Roman Aristocrat Appeared to His Guests," in Gazda, ed. (above note 38), pp. 117-134.

⁴⁰ Kousser (above note 35), p. 79 and Kondoleon (above note 38), p. 111.

⁴¹ While some dancer figurines had cultic functions, it is doubtful the Boston dancer was made for a Dionysian shrine, because a pensive dancer makes no sense in a ritual environment and there is no iconographic connection (she does not look like a maenad).

⁴² Simon Ellis, "The End of the Roman House," *American Journal of Archaeology* vol. 92, 1988, pp. 565-577.

⁴³ For reception theory in Roman art, see Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2007.

⁴⁴ Clarke (above note 37), p. 8

have been informed by this understanding. In the Roman empire, women's clothes were part of a rigid system of communication that conveyed both their wearer's status and morality.⁴⁵ Roman moralists and church fathers, as noted above, discuss individual elements of women's dress in terms of their revelation of the wearer's intent to seduce. They caution that arms should always be covered and hair should not be decorated, two strictures violated by the Boston dancer. The Boston statuette's costume clearly excludes her from the realm of virtuous Roman womanhood, especially in late antiquity, when increasing modesty led to more of the body being covered. Tertullian's pronouncement that dress announces character (*De Cult. Fem.* 2.12.3) anticipates modern theories of dress as a system of social communication, especially for messages regarding sexual availability that might be inappropriate if expressed verbally.⁴⁶ Through its display of the dancer's body, and the implied sexual availability of women of her profession, the costume could have elicited an erotically pleasurable response.

The figurine's foot-holding pose also adds to a potential erotic reading. Feet and shoes have been considered seductive in many eras and cultures, including the ancient Mediterranean. In Greece, where the statuette may have been made, *eros* was associated with feet into the late antique period.⁴⁷ Bare feet were considered to be sexually tempting—Clement of Alexandria warns that women should never show them (*Paed.* 2.11.116-117). In late antiquity, love letters attributed to Alciphron and Philostratus praise women's and men's feet in erotic terms, often comparing their naked feet to those of Aphrodite.⁴⁸ Prostitutes wrote messages on soles of their shoes, and shoe prints with suggestive graffiti have been found. The depiction of women taking off or putting on of shoes is not uncommon in ancient art, and often relates to erotic pleasure. On archaic Greek vases, women holding shoes help create a sensual mood.⁴⁹ The gesture is often found in Hellenistic art; the Spratt Aphrodite binds her sandal from a standing pose that allows her to reveal her body. In the so-called Slipper-Slapper erotic group, Aphrodite is poised to hit Pan with her slipper. The nymph in the Invitation

⁴⁵ Olson (above note 6), p. 390; Mary Harlow, "Female Dress, 3rd-6th Century: The Messages in the Media," *Antiquité Tardive* vol. 12, 2004, pp. 203-15.

⁴⁶ For dress theory, Mireille Lee, "Deciphering Gender in Minoan Dress," in A. Rautman, *Reading the Body: Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000, pp. 114-115; Greg McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1988, pp. 63-68.

⁴⁷ For erotics of feet, see Daniel B. Levine "EPATON BAMA ('Her Lovely Footstep'): The Erotics of Feet in Ancient Greece," in Douglas Cairns, ed., *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005; for shoes, Sue Blundell, "Clutching at Clothes," in Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, ed., *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World*, London: Duckworth, 2002, pp. 150-152.

⁴⁸ Levine (above note 47), pp. 63-64.

⁴⁹ Blundell (above note 47), p.152.

to the Dance group, many copies of which were produced, is shown putting on or taking off her sandal; the sexual proclivities of nymphs are well known.⁵⁰ Both the nymph and the Boston figurine sit cross-legged, with legs apart and the ankle across the knee, which may mean sexual availability. In most societies, women are taught to be modest and to keep their body in a closed position when seated, and ancient Rome was no exception.⁵¹ It is particularly atypical for a woman wearing a short skirt, like the Boston statuette, to cross her legs in this fashion, because someone standing in front of her would be able to look up her skirt.⁵² While such intimations are apt for Aphrodites and nymphs that are seductive or playful in mood, the figurine's small scale and contemplative look counteract these potentially erotic elements, offering its viewers a very different, more empathetic intimacy.

Although distant in time and place from the Boston figurine, Edgar Degas' representations of backstage dancers share a similar social context and potential variety of receptions (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Edgar Degas, *Seated Dancer*, print transfer with charcoal and pastel, 1896.

⁵⁰ Dericksen Brinkerhoff, "New Examples of the Hellenistic Statue Group, 'The Invitation to the Dance,' and their Significance," *AJA* vol. 69, 1965, pp. 25-37.

⁵¹ Glenys Davies, "On Being Seated: Gender and Body Language in Hellenistic and Roman Art," in Cairns (above note 47), pp. 215-238.

⁵² For Roman underwear, see Kelly Olson, "Roman Underwear Revisited," *Classical World* vol. 96, pp. 201-210.

Nineteenth-century Parisian ballerinas participated in a “higher” art form than that of the Boston dancer and enjoyed greater legal rights, but like late antique entertainers they were also usually from the lowest stratum of society and had the reputation of selling their bodies (which many of them were forced to do). Yet, like their Roman counterparts, they also could achieve great financial success; in nineteenth-century Paris, a teenage ballerina could earn more than her working-class father.⁵³ As in late antiquity, dance was an extremely popular form of entertainment, despite (or perhaps because of) the public’s attitudes toward dancers. Degas’ 1896 print of a ballerina holding her foot is strikingly similar in subject and composition to the Boston figurine. Elite viewers could have responded similarly in terms of feeling superior to the profession depicted, enjoying power by virtue of the voyeuristic nature of seeing a moment that the audience did not, or having an erotically pleasurable response by her pose and the revealing costume. They also could simply have enjoyed the reference to a favorite pastime, going to the ballet. But like the figurine, Degas’ depicts his dancer as seated and thoughtful rather than performing. Degas has been accused of misogyny because of his depiction of scantily-dressed or nude women in awkward poses, yet he is also praised for treating women with sensitivity and for challenging the stereotype of dancers as sexual commodities.⁵⁴ Both the Boston figurine and the Degas print represent a dancer in a vulnerable moment, inspiring empathy in the viewer. The viewer’s pleasure therefore also may lie in the dancers being represented in a private moment, a privileged scene that a spectacle’s audience did not have.

In conclusion, the dancer is shown “off stage”—not engaged in the activity that defines her. The fact that she is a small figurine, an object of domestic decoration, may help explain why. As an object, she displays a susceptible femininity viewed at a moment that the audience was not meant to see. By nature of the figurine’s pose, the viewer is instantly privileged. The subject’s distance from conventional Roman womanhood, or even “high” art, is made clear by her costume, yet her pose and facial expression humanize her. By virtue of the scale of the object, the viewer can desire to possess and protect it. The figurine presents multiple contradictions: a public person in a private moment; a performer who is not performing; despite low status, a representation in shining silver with gold accents. It exemplifies the paradoxes surviving in literature about female performers,

⁵³ Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 115.

⁵⁴ Herbert (above note 53), 128.

women whose own discourses do not survive. The specific circumstances of the figurine's production and viewing may never be known, but it remains an unusual object, offering a rich combination of associations and pleasures in the complexity of its visual language and evocations.⁵⁵



⁵⁵ I owe thanks to Eve D'Ambra, Christine Kondoleon, and Natalie Boymel Kampen for reading drafts of this article and offering valuable suggestions, and Marti LoMonaco for insights on perceptions of performers in antiquity. I am indebted to *NECF's* anonymous referee, whose generous advice improved this article considerably.

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