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Changing Approaches to Classical Bronze Statuary

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Changing Approaches to Classical Bronze Statuary

Carol C. Mattusch

- 1 Claude Rolley's regular reports about new publications of ancient bronzes were unparalleled. We read them avidly and, of course, with trepidation when it came to his critiques of what we had written. His familiarity with current bibliography was staggeringly thorough. Many years ago, Rolley referred in print to one of my ideas. I was thrilled that the preeminent scholar in the field of classical bronzes had mentioned my work! In my mind that fact outweighed his characterization of what I had proposed as "bizarre."¹ His question, however, prompted me to look very carefully at each problem before suggesting its resolution.
- 2 In the spirit of careful examination, I shall consider here the modern beginnings of the study of large classical bronzes from the Mediterranean region, and follow the process that led to the privileged status accorded them in the minds of scholars today. Greek bronzes became familiar to us through Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, which was widely read and either admired or criticized from late antiquity onwards in the monasteries and schools of the Middle Ages. An early seventeenth-century translation into English further broadened the sphere of influence of Pliny's encyclopedic work.²
- 3 Book 34 of the *Natural History* provides a glimpse of ancient bronze artists and of their works of public statuary, which have been entirely lost to the modern world. We know well from Book 34 that Lysippos made 1,500 statues during his career in the fourth century BC (*NH* 34.37); that in Athens there were 360 statues of Demetrios of Phaleron (c. 350–282 BC) (*NH* 34.27); and that even as late as Pliny's own lifetime there were still 3,000 bronze statues in Athens, and in Olympia, Delphi, and Rhodes (*NH* 34.36). Or was it 73,000?³ The number in the manuscripts is unclear. Not surprisingly, many scholars have been tempted to attach the names of the famous artists mentioned by Pliny to surviving bronze statues that seem to fit Pliny's brief descriptions.
- 4 Early travelers to Italy, like Richard Lassels in 1653, were more likely to comment upon what ancient statues represented than upon whom the artist might have been or even upon the medium.⁴ Fewer than twenty bronzes that were considered to be ancient

could be seen in Italy. In Rome, there were the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Campidoglio and the colossal Hercules in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, both gilded, as well as the Spinario, the Camillus, Brutus, and the Capitoline Wolf. In Florence there were the Chimaera from Arezzo, the Boar, and the Idolino. And in Venice one could see the four huge gilded horses above the entrance to the Basilica of San Marco, the Praying Boy from Rhodes (with modern arms), and the Lion of Venice. When the Jonathan Richardsons, father and son, visited Italy in 1722, they too were more interested in subject than in medium: only occasionally did they mention that a statue was made of “brass,” and they did so simply to distinguish that particular work from all the marble sculptures that they saw.⁵

- 5 In 1738, when the Spanish Bourbons began their excavations in Portici at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, so many bronze statues were dug up that the medium of bronze took on new significance. Over the next twenty years, more than sixty ancient bronzes were removed from the Villa dei Papiri alone, almost all of them in excellent condition. After 1748, bronzes were being found in Pompeii as well. Charles VII, the Bourbon King of Naples and Sicily, capitalized upon his rapidly growing collection of antiquities, hiring scholars to publish them and artists to illustrate them.
- 6 By the 1760s, the Bourbon collection of ancient bronze statuary had become a focal point of the antiquities displayed in their Museum Herculense, which was housed in their summer palace at Portici. Many of the bronzes were published by the Spanish Bourbons’ Royal Academy of scholars in two volumes of the *Antichità di Ercolano*: 1767 (volume 5: busts); and 1771 (volume 6: statues). Pliny’s Book 34 was, of course, often cited in the scholars’ lengthy footnotes.

1. "Winckelmann illuminated, in the middle of Rome, the torch of the rational study of works of antiquity"



After a painting by A.-R. Mengs, engraving by M. Blot, 1815. Winckelmann holds a copy in Greek of Homer's *Iliad*. The book at the lower right is his own work and it is open to the title page: "History of the Art of the Ancients."

© Photo author.

- 7 Between 1758 and 1767, Johann Joachim Winckelmann made four trips from Rome to Naples, and it was against the background of the archaeological discoveries and of his own direct experience of the new finds from Herculaneum and Pompeii that he wrote the first full-fledged *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1763/64), which was of course filled with references to Pliny and many other ancient authors (fig. 1). That publication has ever since affected the study of the history of ancient art, particularly of sculpture.
- 8 The works that Winckelmann knew so well from Herculaneum and Pompeii were featured in all his future work. More than one hundred antiquities from Herculaneum and Pompeii are included in his *History of the Art of Antiquity*—thirty-nine sculptures and forty-two paintings, as well as three buildings, two statue bases, and a few examples of inscriptions, mosaics, gold and silver, glass, and other types of objects. This publication preceded that of the team of Bourbon scholars and was thus the first scholarly publication of the material. The sculptures in particular became part of a canon that survived largely intact for nearly two hundred years. Through the strength of Winckelmann's scholarly reputation, his writings were pivotal both for providing a format for their analysis and interpretation and for introducing these antiquities to northern European audiences.

2. Archaizing bust



Naples, Archaeological Museum inv. 5608.

© Photo Henry Lie.

- 9 Winckelmann observed, and rightly so, that bronzes were, in his day, the rarest of ancient monuments. In considering them, one of the issues that Winckelmann addressed was how to distinguish what is Greek from what is Roman. He reveals his own bias in Chapter 4, “Art of the Greeks,” beginning with “Reasons and Causes for the Development of Greek Art and for Its Superiority over the Art of Other Peoples.”⁶ When he described a bronze bust from Herculaneum simply as “one of the oldest heads in all antiquity,” it was understood that it was a Greek work (fig. 2).⁷ This is actually a Roman archaizing bust of an Apollo or kouros type.⁸

3. Piombino Apollo



Discovered in 1812 or 1832. Paris, Louvre Br. 2.
© Photo RMN.

4. Apollo from the house of C. Julius Polybius at Pompeii



Excavated 1977. Pompeii inv. 22924.

© Photo "L'Erma" di Bretschneider.

- 10 The first ancient bronze statue to be discovered after the spectacular finds at Herculaneum was the Piombino Apollo, found off the coast of Italy in the early 1800s. It is not surprising that comparisons were made (fig. 3). Was the newly discovered statue also the oldest one? It looked Greek, but how early was it? Who was the artist? Today we know that the Piombino Apollo looks like an Archaic Greek kouros but that it was actually made in Roman times.⁹ In 1977, a bronze very much like it was discovered in a triclinium of the House of Gaius Julius Polybius at Pompeii, and that statue held a wooden tray, which was perhaps used to hold food or wine (fig. 4). This raised new questions about editions of bronzes being produced like editions of prints.¹⁰

5. Acropolis Youth



Discovered in 1866. Athens, National Archaeological Museum no. 6590.

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6. Marathon Boy



Discovered in 1925. Athens, National Archaeological Museum Br. 15118.

- 11 The first ancient Greek bronze statue (or part of one) that was reported to have been found in Greece itself was the head of a boy from a small statue, discovered on the Athenian Acropolis in 1866 (fig. 5). The few bronzes in the archaic or classical styles that have been found since then in Greece are described as “Greek originals” and “unique works,” no questions asked. But is this only by chance, the result of there being so few surviving bronzes? And, in the wake of the realization that the Pompeii Apollo and perhaps also the Piombino Apollo were silent butlers, a new look at the Marathon Boy, found in 1925, will surely suggest to some scholars that he once held a tray in somebody’s home (fig. 6). His date of production remains elusive.
- 12 The large numbers of Greek bronze statues in public places enumerated by Pliny the Elder should not surprise us, because bronze was the medium of choice for public statuary in Greece, and it is, of course, reproducible. Today an artist delivers only a model to the founder, decides how many bronzes to order, requests sizes at which the model should be reproduced, and chooses patinas. The more copies the artist orders, the less she pays—once the foundry has produced the molds from his or her model.
- 13 Although scholars noticed long ago that marble types tend to be repeated, they overlooked the evidence yielded by casting techniques. In fact, a single model can be used to produce two or more bronzes that are just alike or that are variants of the model. This should not be a surprise: after all, only a very small percentage of ancient classical bronzes survive, and most of them come from Herculaneum and Pompeii.
- 14 By the 1880s, a few scholars had mentioned that ancient bronzes were cast by the lost-wax process. Subsequently, they were distracted from this line of thinking by Kurt Kluge, a practicing sculptor who applied his knowledge of modern styles and

techniques to ancient foundry practices. In *Die Antike Erzgestaltung*, written in 1927, he argued that whereas early Greek bronze statuettes were made by the lost-wax process, early large bronze statues were sand-cast from carved wooden models. The thick uneven walls of Archaic bronzes suggested sand-casting to Kluge, rather than a more cumbersome direct form of the lost-wax process. But he had no actual evidence to support his theory of sand-casting in ancient Greece, only his own experience in the foundry. Scholars were convinced by Kluge's technical expertise, and the angular style of some Archaic sculpture confirmed in their minds that the models for bronzes had been carved, even though many of those works were not cast in bronze but were carved out of stone. Yet Kluge's words resonated for the simple reason that many scholars were unfamiliar with bronze technology, modern or ancient.

- 15 The art historian Rhys Carpenter linked Kluge's theories to style and to the literary testimonia, arguing that carved wooden models were used to produce statues that looked "glyptic" during the Archaic and Classical periods, but that a more "plastic" style was introduced when Lysippos started to use wax models in the fourth century BC. Because the literary testimonia associate Aegina with bronzeworking, Carpenter argued that the glyptic or angular style of the stone pedimental sculptures from the Temple of Aphaia reflected contemporary work in bronze, when, in fact, bronzes were adhering to styles initiated by works in stone. Whatever their material, the marketable types of freestanding sculptures in the sixth century BC included kouroi and korai, standing, striding, and seated figures, and equestrians. Early bronzes did not take advantage of the flexibility and strength of the medium.
- 16 Not until the 1960s did archaeologists begin to argue that sand-casting as Kluge described it is a modern process, and that ancient bronzes, large and small, were all made by lost-wax casting after all. Denys Haynes led the way by looking directly at ancient bronzes, inside and out.¹¹
- 17 Because ancient bronze statues are normally found one at a time, new finds have been greeted as unique, which most often they were probably not. When the two Riace Bronzes were found, scholars did not discuss the implications of how much alike they are, but instead treated them as if they were unique and had only by chance been recovered in the same place. They looked for differences between the two bronzes, and a number of individuals proposed that the two statues had been made by different artists at different times, even in different places. The recent theory that the Riace Bronzes are direct lost-wax castings, rather than indirect castings as most think, is another way of attempting to show that each of them is unique, even though the indirect lost-wax process, of course, allows for that and is amply attested on the interiors of the bronzes.¹² The question of whether these rare bronzes are Greek or South Italian has also been raised, in efforts to claim them for the cultural patrimony of either Greece or Italy. Given the nature of the bronze industry, they could even have been made at different times and in different places, as the differences between their core materials might indicate.¹³ Nonetheless, they are both surely based upon a single basic model, upon which individualized features were introduced in the wax working models for the two castings, as they were intended to represent different men.
- 18 The bronzes from Herculaneum and Pompeii were repaired before they were put on exhibit in the Royal Bourbon Museum. Ancient bronzes considered to be irreparable were used for scrap metal in the modern repairs, giving the eighteenth-century repairs alloys like those of the ancient bronzes. Draped busts were made for the ancient heads

that had broken off their herm posts when they were pulled from the excavators' tunnels in Herculaneum. The drape might be in the style of the eighteenth century, or it might be designed to look like an ancient drape on another bust, even if the bust they used for a man was that of a woman.¹⁴ The repairs were pinned (with round pins) and cast on, the modern joins using much more bronze than the ancient joins did, so that large areas inside a bronze may be coated with excess metal. The Bourbon restorers also remounted heads so that they were inclined forwards on busts, even though those heads would have been erect on their original herm posts. And, if the eyes were missing, they were filled with plaster colored to look like bronze. As a result, more than one modern scholar was misled into thinking that Roman bronzes all had bronze eyes, when they did not.

7. Seated Hermes



Discovered in 1758. Naples, Archaeological Museum inv. 5625.

© Photo author.

- 19 Winckelmann was told that when the statue of a youthful seated Hermes was found at Herculaneum it was broken into one hundred pieces (fig. 7). It was the first bronze statue catalogued in the *Antichità di Ercolano*, with no reference to its condition. Its condition was of little interest to eighteenth-century scholars or to the public. Winckelmann thought it was the most beautiful of ancient bronzes, as did many others.¹⁵ Thereafter, scholars compared the young Hermes with famous marbles like the Farnese Herakles, the Belvedere Apollo, and the Medici Venus. And the fact that it is made of bronze made people ask if it was the “Greek bronze original” of this type? In a 1907 guidebook to the Museo Nazionale in Naples, the statue was called “the most celebrated bronze of antiquity,” and it was widely touted as a work by Lysippos.¹⁶

- 20 The Hermes was demoted in the twentieth century, perhaps in part because the statue had not been found on Greek soil and thus did not have all the qualifications required to prove that it was a Greek “original.” The statue is now usually ascribed to a follower of Lysippos. It is difficult to judge what impact the restorations may have had upon modern appraisals of the statue. The latest repairs were made in 1948. The body of the statue has not been stripped of its corrosion products nor painted over, but the rock is modern, the lips are painted red, the eyes are filled with plaster and painted red, and the head is repaired from many pieces, and painted black.¹⁷
- 21 A sculptor admiring the marble Aphrodite from Rione Terra said it could take a year and a half for skilled carvers to make it from the artist’s model.¹⁸ Today a bronze foundry requires from one to three months to produce a bronze, which includes making the molds from the artist’s model. Making the “original” molds and casting the first bronze usually costs approximately twice as much as additional castings. And if the artist orders additional examples of the work, bronzes can be produced in two to four weeks.
- 22 Considering the technology and the market, perhaps there was more than one example of the bronze Doryphoros by Polykleitos. Could the wide renown of the bronze statue suggest that examples of that statue could be seen in different cities? Many marble versions of the Doryphoros have survived, of course, but so far the only large bronze is a Roman herm head, signed by its Greek producer, Apollonios, the son of Archias, an Athenian (fig. 8).¹⁹ Does that suggest a tradition beginning in the fifth century BC, when the statue was first produced?

8. Herm-head of the Doryphoros



Found in 1753. Naples, Archaeological Museum inv. 4885.

© Photo Henry Lie.

- 23 The owners of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum owned this head of the Doryphoros and a marble Sciarra Amazon. The many bronzes from that villa came from foundries that specialized in everything from reproductions of famous statues to small-scale portrait-busts of famous Greeks to statues of satyrs and animals. A buyer might go to one shop for a small bust of Epicurus for the table in the library, and to another shop for a full-size drunken satyr for the garden.
- 24 Ease of production helps to explain the vast numbers of bronze statues in Greek cities and sanctuaries and, later on, in Roman villas and gardens. As early as 158 BC, Rome's Forum was so crowded with bronze statuary that all privately erected dedications were removed, and one hundred years later, 3,000 statues were put up on the stage of a temporary theater in Rome. But Pliny says that Roman production was of poor quality: "Today it is unclear which is worse—the workmanship or the bronze itself; and it is surprising that, though the prices paid for these works of art have increased *ad infinitum*, the importance of the art itself has been destroyed" (Pliny, *NH* 34.30, *NH* 34.5). In fact, today it costs significantly less to have a work produced in bronze than to have one produced in marble, and considering the production time alone, the same was certainly true during antiquity.
- 25 The utter disappearance of most of these bronzes can be blamed upon the ever-strong market for scrap metal, a major component of ancient and modern alloys. For example, in 2005, a two-ton sculpture by Henry Moore worth £ 3 million (\$ 4.6 million) was stolen from a park in Leeds. It was melted down and sold for 1,500 pounds (\$ 2,300), or half of 1 percent of its value as a sculpture. That is, the value of the sculpture was \$ 1,150 per pound, and the value of the sculpture as scrap metal was \$ 0.58 per pound. Today, as in antiquity, there are many more uses for scrap metal than for bronze statuary, and many more pounds of metal are sold as scrap than as statuary. It is no wonder that we prize the classical bronzes that have survived.

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ANNEXES

Diaporama des illustrations

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/73632227@N02/sets/72157630221051888/show/>

NOTES

1. ROLLEY 1994, 349.
2. 1601 translation by Philemon Holland. For the history of the reception of Pliny's *Natural History*, see HEALY 1991, xxxvi–xl.
3. K. Jex-Blake uses 73,000: *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, ed. E. Sellers (1896; Chicago rpt. 1967), NH 34.36, 28–29.
4. LASSELS 1670.
5. RICHARDSON 1722.
6. WINCKELMANN 2006, 186.
7. *Ibid.*, 249. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 5608, found in the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum in 1756.
8. See MATTUSCH 2005, 236–42.
9. RIDGWAY 1967.
10. MATTUSCH 1996, 139–40; MATTUSCH 2008, 141–43.
11. HAYNES 1962, 1968.
12. See FORMIGLI 1984.
13. CIPRIANI *et al* 1984.
14. See MATTUSCH AND LIE 2005, 335–37, 268–70, 222–23; Naples Archaeological Museum inv. no. 5588; Naples no number.
15. WINCKELMANN 1762, 35.
16. MONACO 1907, 55.

17. MATTUSCH and LIE 2005, 216–22.

18. Aphrodite from Rione Terra at Pozzuoli: Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia 292862; VALERI 2005, 85–98. I thank Harold C. Vogel for his observations on this statue, and Betsey Hurd for her comments on modern bronze production.

19. Naples Archaeological Museum inv. 4885: MATTUSCH and LIE 2005, 276–82.