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Roman Sculpture in Context: Selected Papers in Ancient Art and Architecture, Volume 6

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Recommended Citation

De Staebler, Peter D.; Hrychuk Kontokosta, Anne; and Rose, Marice, "Roman Sculpture in Context: Selected Papers in Ancient Art and Architecture, Volume 6" (2021). *Visual & Performing Arts Faculty Book and Media Gallery*. 23.
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Chapter Ten

Body/Culture: Display and Reception of the *Farnese Hercules*

Marice Rose

Abstract

The Farnese Hercules*, discovered in 1546 in the Baths of Caracalla's central hall, has a rich history of reception. After its display in the Farnese Palace became an essential stop on the Grand Tour, versions were created in various sizes and media, and it continues to be replicated by artists and for domestic interior design. While art historians tend to reference the statue as a replica of a possibly Lysippan original, post-antique imitations of the statue are unconcerned with its artistic pedigree. Contemporary artists alter its appearance to engage with notions of high culture, good taste, and the Western canon that relate to its early modern display within an antiquities collection, while bodybuilders' and physical educators' emulation of Hercules's physique corresponds closely to the statue's original context in an ancient Roman bath complex.*

In *The Lives of the Artists* (1550), Giorgio Vasari credited Renaissance artists' achievements depicting the human figure naturalistically to the influence of recently unearthed Roman antiquities, including the *Farnese Hercules*, discovered four years earlier in the Baths of Caracalla (fig. 1). For Vasari, the "Laocoon, the Hercules, the Great Torso of Belvedere…" exhibited "expressions of real flesh copied from the most beautiful details of living models," and artists' seeing them caused the previous "dry, crude" style to "disappear."[1] The statue continues to be a touchstone for notions about artistic style and about sculpture's relationship to real human bodies. After its excavation, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese acquired and exhibited the statue in his palace courtyard, where it became a popular object of artists' and tourists' attention for the next two centuries. By 1787 it was moved to

Fig. 1. Farnese Hercules, *Naples, Museo Archaeologico Nazionale (© Vanni Archive/ Art Resource, NY).*

Naples, where it was displayed in the park of King Ferdinand IV's palace, and in 1816 to the museum that became the Royal Bourbon Museum (now the National Archaeological Museum of Naples).[2] This article will consider the *Farnese Hercules*'s replication in the 20th and 21st centuries, and distinguish two forms of its visual receptions—as a physically ideal body, and as an ideal of classical style and aspirational culture. Neither of these receptions draws from the bulk of art historical scholarship about the statue, which focuses on its connection to the Weary Herakles iconographic type attributed to Lysippos, but they relate to the statue's original and subsequent physical contexts.[3] By focusing on the sculpture's receptions, I demonstrate that artists and decorators often correspond to its postantique function as a display object within an art collection, while bodybuilders' receptions relate to the original viewing of the statue in the ancient baths.

Fig. 2. Farnese Hercules, *Naples, Museo Archaeologico Nazionale (© Vanni Archive/ Art Resource, NY).*

The *Farnese Hercules*'s Ancient Body

Sculpted from Pentelic marble in the third century C.E., the *Farnese Hercules* was found in fragments and has undergone several restoration campaigns.[4] After assembly, it was—and remains—the largest surviving Weary Hercules, at 3.17 m. tall. It is inscribed with the name Glykon of Athens, an artist with no other surviving signed artworks or historical references. Representations of this type depict the hero-god as older, with a full, curly beard and mature face, and a heavily muscled body.[5] The *Farnese Hercules*'s muscles are articulated more than any other version, qualities that likely would have been noted by its original viewers in the baths.[6] The type's name comes from Hercules's exhaustion, shown by the figure's leaning heavily on its lion skin-draped club, yet the left leg's forward placement lends an active component to the

pose. A viewer must move around the statue to see evidence of the Labor that caused fatigue; Hercules holds in his right hand, behind his back, the apples of the Hesperides (fig. 2).

In addition to the figure's superhuman scale and massive muscular form, its original polychromy would have made it a striking image in the public baths, a colossal god present among mortals.[7] Hercules's eyes would have been made of materials such as glass, stone, and bone or ivory (the sockets were filled with plaster in a modern restoration).[8] Any original pigment on the marble is no longer visible to the naked eye, and there has been no technical analysis of the *Farnese Hercules*'s surface, but based on evidence from other sculptures, the statue's hair and lips, and club, lion skin, and apples would have been colorful—perhaps the apples were gold.[9] His skin was likely colored; the "flesh" of many Roman statues was painted or tinted, although it is difficult to determine what the original colors were.[10] There is no standard skin tone used for Hercules in paintings or mosaics, it ranges from brown to pinkish beige.[11] The paint that survives on Hellenistic and Roman marble statues is usually underpainting and not surface layers, although there is evidence that some sculptures' skin was gilded.[12] Arguing that the statue would have been polychromed, Miranda Marvin notes that there are no statue niches in the hot-water rooms of Roman baths, including Caracalla's, possibly because the heat would have melted wax-based paint.[13]

The *Farnese Hercules* Expressing Culture

The loss of the statue's original colors makes it a compelling case study for reception, as the unpigmented statue became a symbol of classical art and culture. Contemporary artists or designers who imitate or replicate the statue often use a white medium that is brighter than its marble surface.[14] Vinzenz Brinkmann suggests that white became the presumed color of ancient Greek and Roman art more recently because color-print reproductions of classical art and architecture were prohibitively expensive; the World Wars hindered onsite research; and a modern, minimalist aesthetic that favored clean, white spaces and forms developed.[15] Yet, ancient polychromy's existence was well known in the 18th and 19th centuries as archaeologists unearthed colored marbles, and painted ancient statuary and architecture were popular topics of scholarly and public discussion.[16] The privileging of whiteness did not only

Fig. 3. Anonymous, Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*: Farnese Palace Interior, 1560 The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Rogers Fund, transferred from the Library, 1941 41.72[3.50]).*

apply to statuary; racial prejudice was part of the increasing aversion to the idea of colorful statues.[17] Nineteenth-century ethnologists presented marble classical statues' whiteness, proportions, and musculature as accurate representations of the physical superiority of light-skinned people of European descent, and this information was publicly communicated at venues such as the Crystal Palace that displayed white-plaster casts of statues including the *Farnese Hercules*.[18]

The relationship of ancient statues to broader ideas of European culture was exemplified by Cardinal Farnese acquiring and displaying the *Farnese Hercules* as part of his antiquities collection after it was excavated (fig. 3). Placing it and other statues from the Baths of Caracalla in his palace belonged to a trend of elite Italians showing their elevated education, wealth, and familial and political power by collecting and exhibiting classical art.[19] As early as the 16th century, guidebooks encouraged travelers to Italy to pay attention to antiquities on view, including at the Farnese Palace.[20] Unlike some collections, the courtyard where the Hercules was displayed was easily accessible to tourists. Here and at other established tourist sites, tour guides provided information re-

Fig. 4. Anonymous, The Hall at the Royal Academy, *Somerset House, 1810 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).*

inforcing the antiquities' educational role at a time when European elite education was rooted in the classics.[21] Traveling to Rome specifically to see classical art in situ or in private collections was considered an important part of a (usually male, usually European) aristocrat's leisure and learning, as well as a foundation for developing good taste.[22]

Colorless reproductions of the statue had similar functions of educating and conveying culture to viewers, and the statue's origin as decoration in a bath was not emphasized in early modern or later replications and displays. In the 18th century, the increased popularity of the Grand Tour with its conventional visit to the Farnese Palace sparked copies and imitations of the *Farnese Hercules* in various media. Renaissance and Romantic paintings depicted the *Farnese Hercules* standing in imaginary ruins, and prints of the isolated statue and small-scale statuettes were sold as souvenirs.[23] Art academies in Europe, such as the Royal Academy in London, and the United States obtained plaster casts of the statue as educational tools to teach drawing (fig. 4).[24] Full-scale plaster casts of the *Farnese Hercules* also became linked to European cultural capital and were made for domestic decoration in royal palaces and aristocratic homes.[25] Thomas Jefferson originally planned to decorate Monticello with a *Farnese Hercules* cast

and casts of other ancient statues, although he considered classical statuary to be too rarefied for exhibition in public buildings, owing to the lack of wealth of most Americans.[26] This type of attitude changed as plaster casts of ancient statues began to be exhibited in public spaces such as museums, World Fairs, and the Crystal Palace, where they were intended to bring education and culture to the masses who could not afford to go on a Grand Tour.[27] Johannes Siapkas and Lena Sjögren demonstrate that famous classical statues, especially life-size or monumental versions including the *Farnese Hercules*, consistently were and continue to be grouped in museum settings to represent the epitome of high art and exemplify European cultural and aesthetic ideals, while their original contexts are rarely given emphasis in didactic materials.[28]

In the 21st century, decorators and artists still replicate the *Farnese Hercules* to evoke notions and questions of good taste and the art historical canon. Small-scale, bright-white resin versions made by contemporary manufacturers for the home-decorating market aim to convey aspects of perceived high culture at a low cost. A 0.76 m tall *Farnese Hercules* is available for purchase from online retailers for under $200. One listing depicts it next to a swimming pool, stating that it will add "sophisticated style to your home or garden gallery."[29] Artist Jeff Koons uses the *Farnese Hercules* to comment on popular, decorative use of classical sculpture by modifying it and juxtaposing it with other subjects. His *Gazing Ball* series of statues (2013), first displayed together as a Farnese-like collection, comprises large white plaster casts of well-known classical statues, including the *Farnese Hercules*, the *Belvedere Torso*, and *Medici Venus*, along with familiar objects seen outside American suburban homes such as a mailbox, a birdbath, and an inflatable snowman lawn decoration (fig. 5).[30] On each cast balances a reflective blue glass sphere. Koons says the globes were inspired by those seen in his childhood neighborhood in Pennsylvania.[31] The globes can be considered kitsch, like mass-produced white statues that aspire to sophistication. Koons's combination of popular and classical is consistent with his stated intention of creating art that is accessible to viewers.[32] The everyday objects in Koons's series belong to his usual pop-culture subject matter, while the classical subjects were new to his repertoire. The series stakes a new claim for his often-reviled art within the art historical canon of classical nudes, as he chose famous statues to repli-

Fig. 5. Jeff Koons, (Gazing Ball) Farnese Hercules*, 2013 (photograph by Katherine A. Schwab).*

cate, at full scale.[33] His use of the plaster medium, the brightness of which is heightened by the contrast of the deep blue spheres, directly links his statues to 19th-century casts and contemporary yard decor, but any original meanings that the *Farnese Hercules* held for viewers in the baths is not part of his expression.

Sir Yinka Shonibare's *Farnese Hercules* (2017) replicates the statue as part of a series that challenges the Western art historical canon while raising issues of globalization, cultural hybridity, and viewers' assumptions (fig. 6). This version of the statue is made of fiberglass, with a glass world globe for a head. Its human scale (1.4 m) and less-bulky, more-typical bodily proportions contrast with the brightly colored, unnaturalistic pattern covering its surface. Shonibare paints ab-

Fig. 6. Yinka Shonibare, Farnese Hercules*, 2017 (© Yinka Shonibare MBE. All rights reserved, DACS/ ARS, NY 2019).*

stract Batik-inspired designs on this and his versions of other famous statues, such as the *Diskobolus* and Michelangelo's *David*. The patterns look stereotypically African, but are inspired by fabrics made in England by Dutch companies that were sold in West African colonies. Shonibare has said that his Hercules is ironically closer to the actual ancient sculp-

Fig. 7. Athletes, detail of floor mosaic from the baths of Caracalla, Museo Gregoriano Profano (Scala/ Art Resource, NY).

ture than the more familiar white copies, because the original would have been polychrome.[34] By posing the figure as Weary Hercules, and naming it after the type's most famous example, Shonibare problematizes the notion of cultural symbols and their expected whiteness. In their responses to the *Farnese Hercules* as a symbol of European visual culture and canon, these artistic receptions respond to the statue's context as it was displayed in the Farnese Palace or copied in plaster in schools, museums, and homes for educational and/ or cultural purposes.

The *Farnese Hercules* and the Modern Body

A different branch of modern reception is consistent with its location in the baths, where it was displayed with other depictions of Hercules and representations of athletes. Maryl Gensheimer demonstrates that the *Farnese Hercules* was created for a specific location in the Baths of Caracalla that corresponds to documentary evidence of its find spot and its composition.[35] The statue originally stood in the baths' main building's central hall, between columns that separated the frigidarium from a bathing block antechamber. Another Weary Hercules of a slightly different composition, the so-called Latin Hercules, was found in fragments near the *Farnese Hercules*, and would have stood on the other side of

the passage between the frigidarium and the adjoining chamber. In addition to the *Farnese Hercules*, *Latin Hercules*, and additional Weary- and non-Weary Hercules imagery, the Baths of Caracalla included other depictions of physically ideal male bodies. Near the two Hercules statues were found fragments of *Doryphoros* and *Diskobolus* statues. In the palaestra were color mosaics depicting individualized and ideal athletes (fig. 7).

Depictions of the god-hero were found in baths across the Roman Empire, where, in addition to imperial connotations, they correspond to his roles as god of hot springs and gymnasia and reflect the buildings' athletic functions.[36] Scholars have pointed out that athletes, having finished exercising and about to enter the bath waters, likely compared themselves to the fit, but tired, Hercules as they walked past.[37] The *Farnese Hercules*'s extreme muscularity depicts a body that, if achieved by a human, would have required significant time and effort, but was possible. Roman imperial athletic training literature prescribes that one consider the body as an imitation of sculpture, and exercise in order to achieve a similar body.[38] Exercise was an important part of the everyday bathing experience for all social classes, and included running, wrestling, boxing, weight lifting, and ball games.[39] Large bath complexes had space for professional athletic competitions—the Baths of Trajan housed a professional athletic club, perhaps others were headquartered at different baths.[40] A skeleton found at Herculaneum of a 46-year-old man shows evidence of well-developed leg, arm, and deltoid muscles attained through exercise that was not performed for labor, as shown by the lack of overwork or stress of individual muscles.[41] The naturalism of the mosaics' colors, and probably the statues', would have heightened viewers' reactions to the two- and three-dimensional decoration as motivating for physical fitness. Such a reception is one of many potential responses.[42] Gensheimer demonstrates that the overarching message of the baths' enormous scale and colossal decoration, including the *Farnese Hercules*, was to honor and communicate Caracalla's, and Rome's, power.[43]

Some modern receptions, not situated within artistic or domestic display contexts, also have a close relationship to the baths' association with fitness. Like the original statue, they were and are created within contexts associated with actual human bodies and notions of physical fitness, even if

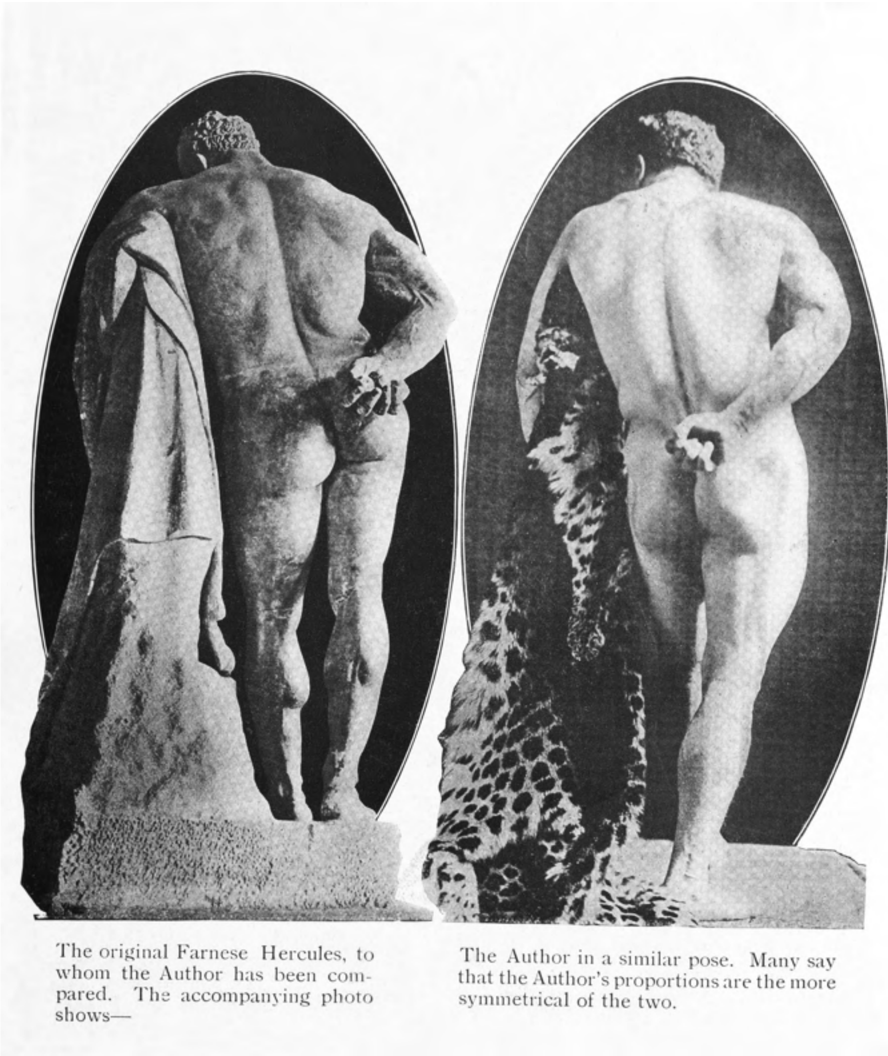

Fig. 8. Eugen Sandow and the Farnese Hercules*, from* Eugen Sandow: Life of the Author as Told in Photographs *(image after Wellcome Collection, CC BY).*

they do not intentionally evoke the statue's initial location. Early 20th-century practitioners of the new sport of bodybuilding saw the *Farnese Hercules* as a goal for an ideally muscled form.[44] The *Farnese Hercules* (with the *Discobolus*) was frequently included in physique publications, and its musculature was the basis of an early-20th century free-weight training program, with a plaster cast in the "measuring studio" of the trainer.[45] Eugen Sandow (1867–1925), founder of modern bodybuilding, wrote physical-education treatises inspired by Greek statues' muscular idealism, as well as the

perceived athleticism, intellectualism, and morality of ancient Greeks.[46] Sandow recognized that similar muscular articulation could be achieved through weightlifting, which he advocated and practiced. Promoted by Florenz Ziegfeld, he posed as the *Farnese Hercules* and other ancient statues in public performances and for his treatises and "cabinet cards," which were commercially produced and distributed photographs.[47] Sandow himself said that the *Farnese Hercules* inspired his self-improvement.[48] In 1899 he placed a plaster cast of the statue outside his Institute of Physical Culture at the Crystal Palace, where Kate Nichols suggests it and the Palace's other replicas of classical statues could have served as inspiration to the Institute's students.[49] Photographs by Napoleon Sarony of Sandow posing as the *Farnese Hercules* (with his own hair and moustache, and a modesty leaf covering his groin area) elicited comparison between actual athletic bodies and the sculpted image, while giving cultural and moral legitimacy to bodybuilding (fig. 8).[50] Sandow applied a reddish powder that was reported to make him look like terracotta before his performances, rubbing into his skin so it collected between his muscles and made them appear more articulated.[51] In other performances he mimicked classical statuary by covering himself in bronze body paint or white powder.[52] These simulations in publications, plaster, and flesh may have evoked similar reactions to the original in the baths.

The blurred lines of sculpted and human body are still present in the bodybuilding community. After Sandow, the *Farnese Hercules* continued to be a model for body builders. Joe Weider (1919–2013), known as the father of bodybuilding for popularizing it as a sport, said that the statue was "the ideal I held in my head of what a bodybuilder should look like…."[53] A bodybuilding blog treats the statue (identified as an 18th-century drawing) as if it were an actual person (fig. 9).[54] Medal-winning powerlifter and artist Frédéric Delavier has created anatomical écorché drawings of the statue, as if it were made of real flesh and bone (fig. 10). His work is intended for the user's physiological education and improvement.[55] These bodybuilders' imitations and reproductions of the statue are unconcerned with where it was located in antiquity. They focus on the statue's physique and the means to attain it, probably hewing closely to some ancient viewers' reactions to the statue.

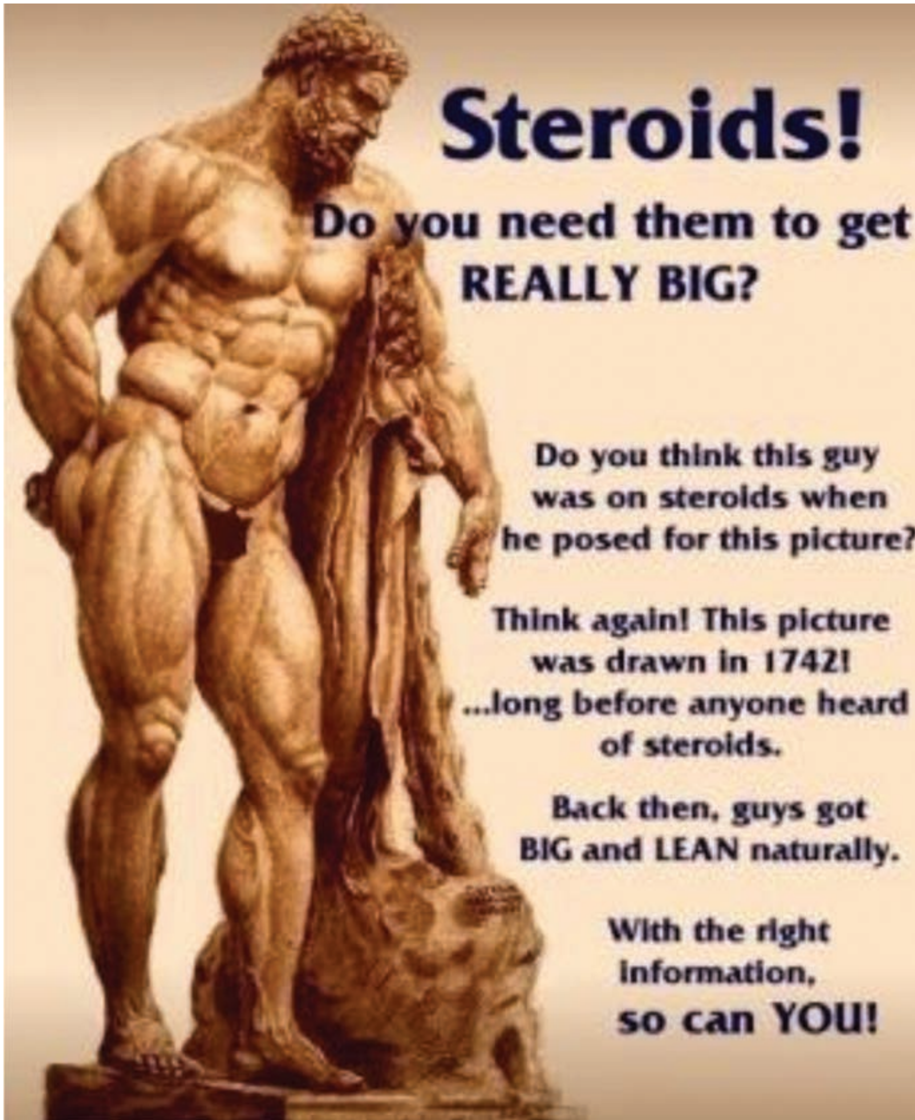

Fig. 9. From Vegetarian Bodybuilding blog. {AQ: website url?}

The diverse receptions of the *Farnese Hercules*, as an epitome of physical fitness and as a representative of culture and taste, intersect in the desire of replicators of the statue—with their own bodies or in other media—to use it to improve their conditions and those of their viewers, whether physical, social, intellectual, or emotional. With such a burden of significance, perhaps it is no surprise that Hercules is weary.

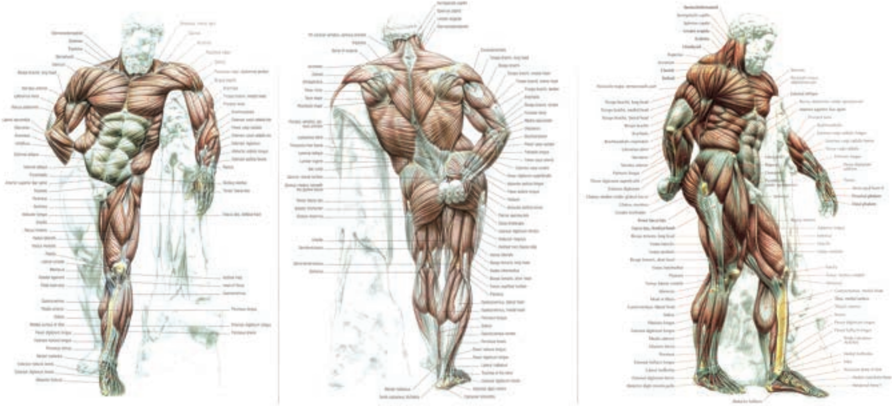

Fig. 10. Frédéric Delavier, Ecorché Hercules *(© Frédéric Delavier, 1998).*

Notes

A version of this article was first presented at the College Art Association's Annual Meeting of 2019 in New York City. I would like to thank Peter De Staebler and Anne Hrychuk Kontokosta for organizing the session and editing this volume. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, and to the College of Arts & Sciences Publication Fund at Fairfield University for its help in publication.

[1] Vasari 2008, 279.

[2] Gensheimer (2018, 280) and Fittipaldi (2007, 199–200). See Haskell and Penny (1981, 229–30) for a detailed account of reception of the statue from its excavation through the 19th century.

[3] Gensheimer (2018, 282–84) comprehensively reviews the scholarship; see also Gensheimer in this volume.

[4] The baths were dedicated in 216 C.E., but a precise date of the statue cannot be determined. For its condition upon excavation and restoration history, see Gensheimer (2018, 280–81).

[5] Vermeule 1975; Krull 1985.

[6] Marvin 1983, 352.

[7] Gensheimer (2018, 165–90) establishes how the ancient viewer would have moved through the space and interacted with the sculptural program.

[8] Gensheimer 2018, 280.

[9] A statue of Hercules currently at The J. Paul Getty Museum preserves blue and purple pigment on the lion skin's head (J. Paul Getty). Brinkmann (2017, 49–50) argues that all ancient Greek statues would have been painted, even those of the most valuable marble, and it was likely a continuous practice through the Roman and medieval periods.

[10] Abbe 2015, 178–79.

[11] *LIMC* IV and V catalogue images of Hercules. There are few textual references as to the color of the god-hero's hair or flesh. Her-

akles' epithet was Μελάμπυγος dark or black-bottomed or backed, as he is teased by the Kerkopes in an episode that was well-known in antiquity, for example in a lost poem attributed to Homer and in Herodotus (7.216), and frequently depicted on Greek vases; Kirkpatrick and Dunn 2002, 36.

[12] Abbe 2010, 280–85. The Asklepios from the Baths of Caracalla was gilded; Marvin 1983, 352, n. 27. *LIMC* IV and V catalogue painted and mosaic images of Hercules.

[13] Marvin 1983, 352. See also Gensheimer in this volume on the original display of the Hercules.

[14] In 2015, The Fitzwilliam Museum curated the exhibition "Following Hercules" around a historic cast of the *Farnese Hercules*, with the goal of showing how classical sculpture "came to define western art" (Fitzwilliam Museum 2015). It featured *Hercules* (2014) by Matthew Darbyshire in the shape of the Farnese, but made of white polystyrene (Michael Grubb Studio).

[15] Brinkmann 2017, 19.

[16] Brinkmann 2017, 13–20.

[17] Nelson 2000, 2007; Purdy 2004. Bond's (2017) discussion of ancient polychromy in popular media resulted in white supremacist backlash; Quintana, 2017.

[18] Nichols 2015, 219–24.

[19] Cardinals and popes made their collections available also to show their piety, by emphasizing public benefit. The display was carefully controlled with regard to access, Stenhouse 2005, 401; Bentz (2015) discusses the negative reception of antiquities in 16th-century collections.

[20] Stenhouse 2005, 397.

[21] Black 2003, 143.

[22] Black 2003, 14.

[23] Haskell and Penny 1981, 229–32.

[24] McNutt 1990, 163–64. The Royal Academy received its cast from Rome in 1790 or 1791 (Royal Academy).

[25] Coutu (2015, 64){AQ: add ref to bib} notes that 18th-century English patrons preferred to decorate their grand houses with more graceful and elegant statues than the brawny Farnese Herakles.

[26] McNutt 1990, 160.

[27] Kurtz 2000; Nichols 2015.

[28] The didactic material in Naples focuses on the statue's role in art history and stylistic qualities, rather than its original context in the baths. Siapkas and Sjogren 2013, 124.

[29] Design Toscano 2019.

[30] Bonami 2014.{AQ: 2013 in bib}

[31] Sischy 2014.

[32] Sischy (2014) writes: "[Koons] told me, 'One of the things that I'm most proud of is making work that lets viewers not feel intimidated by art, but feel that they can emotionally participate in it through their senses and their intellect and be fully engaged …'

As we drove through small industrial communities that had definitely seen better days, Koons pointed out the ubiquitous garden ornaments in so many front yards—the gazing balls, the inflatable bunnies."

[33] His art is known for being unpopular among the professional art world and critics. *New York Magazine* asked in a cover story, "So What's the Art World Got against Him?" (Swanson 2013).

[34] Shonibare 2018.

[35] Gensheimer 2018, 44–45. Her work on the Bath's sculptural program (2018, 166–69) shows that it and its pendant were made for the space, because of their composition in relation to their original placement between columns, as well as for stylistic and technical reasons; see also Gensheimer in this volume.

[36] Marvin 1983, 379.

[37] Newby 2005, 69–73; Stocking 2014, 58.

[38] Stocking 2014, 49.

[39] Newby 2005, 46.

[40] Yegül 2010, 122–23.

[41] Bisel and Bisel 2002, 460–61.

[42] Paul Zanker (2010, 65–66) argues that copies of Greek statues and architectural motifs helped Roman imperial baths create a visual environment in the tradition of a Greek gymnasium, therefore elevating everyday activities through an associated intellectual aspect.

[43] Gensheimer 2018, 78–146.

[44] Squire 2011; Todd (2005) discusses art historical and athletic reactions to the *Farnese Hercules*'s muscularity over time.

[45] Burns 2008, 445.

[46] Wyke 1997, 54; Nichols 2015, 224.

[47] Chapman 1994, 72.

[48] Todd 2005, 34.

[49] Nichols 2015, 224. A plaster cast of his own body was exhibited as the embodiment of the perfect European man; Burns 2008, 444. For racist connotations of bodybuilding, see Dyer 1997.

[50] Wyke 1997, 54–55; Squire 2011, 17–18.

[51] Chapman 1994, 79.

[52] Wyke 1997, 54; Black 2013, 13.

[53] Todd 2005, 29.

[54] Willitts, 2017.

[55] Online bodybuilding discussion boards show that the statue is still used as a model. For example, from a RossTraining (2012) discussion thread: "The model who posed for the Farnese Hercules … given the fact that they didn't have it easy like us with gyms … you have to admire the physiques they were able to obtain." "Proportions like the Farnese are what I envision in my head … it would require me lifting heavy weights for repetition."

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