

Out of the Past: Hellenistic Bronzes

by Gail Leggio

On the day when a statue is finished, its life, in a certain sense, begins.

—Marguerite Yourcenar

In the title essay from her collection *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, Marguerite Yourcenar traces the life of an art work—after an artist has brought it “into human shape”—through centuries of neglect, deliberate defacement, weathering and more or less prudent attempts at restoration. This process is most pronounced with ancient sculpture: “everything leaves its mark on their bodies of metal and stone.”¹

Sometimes, a statue is reborn, after a long period of hibernation, re-emerging under dramatic circumstances. The marble group *Laocoön and His Sons* (200 BCE) was rediscovered in Rome in 1506. Pope Julius II summoned Michelangelo and a few lesser artists to the site to sketch the masterpiece as it was being excavated. In 1885, the archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani uncovered, on Rome’s Quirinal hill, the magnificent bronze figure known as the *Terme Boxer* (c. 300–200 BCE). We have photographic evidence of the event: the *Boxer*, muscular but weary, sitting, slightly slumped, in the dirt, a poignant figure out of the past.

The *Terme Boxer*, usually resident in Rome’s Palazzo Massimo, was one of the star attractions of “Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World,” first seen at the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy (March 14–June 21, 2015), then at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (July 28–November 1, 2015). Now at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (December 13, 2015–March 20, 2016), the exhibition brings together fifty works, a remarkable achievement. Because bronze is recyclable, these works are rarer than marble sculptures.

The *Terme Boxer* challenges preconceptions about ancient Greek art, especially the figure of the youthful athlete. Bruised, with visible cuts and a cauliflower ear, the *Boxer* is an older, albeit muscular man, resting after a tough bout. Other figures in the exhibition stand, in graceful contrapposto, victorious: *The Ephesian Apoxyomenos* (1–90 CE, a Roman copy of a fourth century BCE Greek work) and *Victorious Athlete*, known as the “Getty Bronze” (300–100 BCE). While the term *classical* is often used, loosely, to describe ancient Greek art in general, there are important stylistic distinctions—Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic and a host of bewildering variations—outlined in the scholarly essays of the excellent catalogue.²

The *Terme Boxer* embodies—very physically—what Gianfranco Adornato, in the catalogue, calls the Hellenistic principle of truth, *altheia* in Greek, *veritas*



Alexander the Great on Horseback, 100–1 BCE
MUSEO ARCHAEOLOGICO NAZIONALE, NAPLES

in Latin. Hellenistic artists tended toward realism, acknowledging the battered physique of a mature athlete, for example, and showing his emotional weariness. These artists also employed highly sophisticated techniques to simulate natural effects. The creator of the *Terme Boxer* inserted copper inlays to mimic cuts and blood splatters, and added another alloy to suggest bruising under the right eye. Across the centuries, we recognize another human being, not an ideal or a paragon but a man who is both valiant and vulnerable. He is about our size—just slightly larger, since life-size statues look puny. (Similarly, ancient architects employed subtle curves—*entasis*—to make columns look straight, compensating for optical distortion.) Sitting, hunched over, he seems to be taking a break, like a fatigued museum-goer, albeit one with a remarkably impressive physique.

The *Boxer* complicates the art historical plot, making us examine what we mean when we use the terms *classicism* and *realism*. We recognize antique realism in vividly idiosyncratic Roman portrait busts, but the *Boxer* exemplifies a different kind of naturalism. The sculptor aims to capture the essence of a type, using remarkable mimetic skills to bring the character to a convincing semblance of life. We find a strikingly similar approach, leaping forward two millennia, in the writings of an artist in the relatively young artform of



Terme Boxer, 300–200 BCE. MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO, PALAZZO MASSIMO, ROME

photography. In his book *Naturalistic Photography* (1880), P.H. Emerson wrote: “never forget...the *type*, you must choose your models carefully, and they must without fail be picturesque and typical. The student must feel that there never was such a fisherman, or such a plowman, or such a poacher, or such an old man, or such a beautiful girl, as he is picturing.”³ Or such a boxer, in the case of the Hellenistic bronze, which expresses both the power and the pathos of a way of life.

One reason works like the *Boxer* seem so convincingly real: the medium itself. “The thin wall of the hollow bronze...is by its very nature, more mimetic of actual skin than solid stone...a stone body required more make believe to be accepted as organic.”⁴ We now know that ancient marbles, far from the later notion of snowy purity, were often painted to simulate the human complexion, hair and eyes. But bronze seems to blush or bruise from within, and workers in bronze were often compared to alchemists. The effects must have been even more striking when the bronzes were new; many ancient bronzes were much lighter, a flesh-like rosy gold, before they darkened with time.⁵ Hellenistic realism extended to eyelashes of trimmed copper surrounding intense eyes, with whites of limestone, alabaster or ivory and pupils of amber, obsidian or colored glass. Eyes were the work of a specialty craftsman the Romans called a *faber ocularius*.

Considered more broadly, Hellenistic realism flourished across a continuum that included ethnic and character types, along with elements of portraiture and idealization. Two remarkable heads in the exhibition illustrate this complexity and demonstrate how the Hellenistic style spread beyond the borders of Magna Graecia. *Head of a North African Man* (300–150 BCE) was discovered in 1861 at Cyrene, the site of an important Greek and Roman city, in Libya. The subject is clearly of North African ethnicity, with full lips (inset with copper) and curly hair, but these qualities are not exaggerated. Handsome enough to suggest a heroic type—he may be the son of a Numidian king, a young man known as a fine athlete—he has a slightly receding chin that suggests a particular individual was the model.

Portrait of Seuthes III (c. 310–300 BCE) is even more striking and better preserved. It was excavated in 2004 in Bulgaria, close to Seuthes’ tomb (coins of the period make identifying the head easier). The long hair and beard—strands were individually modelled and then welded on—testify to his non-Greek ethnicity. His copper-fringed eyes—made of alabaster and glass paste—flash with authority. (The eyes, held in place with prongs, were often the most vulnerable part of these compound works.) Crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes, a furrowed brow and a prominent vein at the temple give him a certain irascible energy, and he seems to be turning his head: this is not the hieratic, straight-on gaze of a serene ruler.

A subtle realism inflects even images of the gods. The Classical-era Eros is depicted as a comely adolescent, a type that persisted into the Middle Ages, as exemplified by the figure of Amor in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (1295). The Hellenistic sculpture *Sleeping Eros* (300–100 BCE), in contrast, represents the god as toddler, the obvious forerunner of a legion of Renaissance cherubs and putti, by way of the Roman Cupid. The *Sleeping Eros* has one wing folded beneath him; the other rests against his back. There are traces of his quiver, and he would have held a bow (now lost) loosely in his hand. These iconographic clues identify him as the deity. But the way his childlike yet elegant body is draped across the

support, a marble rock (a modern addition believed to replicate the original) is naturalistic. It is easy to imagine this beautiful recumbent boy influencing not only generations of pagan Cupids but also intimate scenes of the Christ Child.

Art historians rightly emphasize naturalism as an important characteristic of Hellenistic work, but it was not the only stylistic option. We think of the act of selecting from a menu of styles as a fairly modern development, the nineteenth-century artist adopting a form of neo-this or that-revival, depending on the job at hand. But the phenomenon was already well-established in the ancient world.

Many works from the Hellenistic era mimic earlier styles, catering to the eclectic taste of patrons; artists did a brisk business in copies, pastiches and even forgeries, although scholars use the last term less pejoratively than we are accustomed to, at least in this context. In her catalogue essay, Carol C. Mattusch writes: “The Archaic style did not end with the Archaic period proper, but continued to be popular throughout the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods.” She adds that “private needs supplanted public dedications, both religious and honorific.”⁶ A kouros figure, for example, could be pressed into service as an upscale piece of home décor, such as the *Statue of Apollo* (100–79 BCE) found in the triclinium (dining room) of a house in Pompeii. Fitted out as a tray-bearer or lampstand, the kouros testified to the owner’s antiquarian interests and over-the-top luxury life style. This Apollo exerts a magnetic power, in part because he retains his stone-and-glass eyes.

The scholarly backstory of such works is complicated. Because bronzes are made in molds, there can be multiple, albeit usually limited editions of one design, which artists could customize in the finishing. The Pompeian figure has a near-twin, the celebrated *Piombino Apollo* (c. 120–100 BCE). Excavated in 1832, the statue replicates the slight stiffness and left-foot-forward stance of the Archaic kouros, although experts point out the naturalistic treatment of hands and feet as evidence of a pastiche. The copper-inlay lips and eyebrows are also striking. This Apollo, probably made in Rhodes and lost at sea while being shipped to Rome, likely was destined for a place in a sanctuary, a more sacred setting than the Pompeian figure’s secular party space.

The fashion for retrospective styles goes back as far as the fifth century BCE. People in the ancient world—Hellenistic artists and connoisseurs, the Emperor Augustus—were already making a fetish of “antiquity,” a past believed to be more pious and aesthetically pure than the current age. At the same time, this nostalgia was in no way incompatible with pride in contemporary sophistication and technical prowess, nor did sentiment about the past deter ambitious projects like Augustus’ rebuilding of Rome as a city of marble. Janus-faced, the artist—a category broadly defined to include writers, builders and historians—looked to the past with a view to shaping the future. There is, as Christopher Hallett points out in his catalogue essay, an element of creative dissembling in all this, and an awareness of the limitations of facts. Virgil’s

Aeneid, he claims, is “a kind of forgery,” an invented “prehistory” of the Roman people.⁷

The brisk trade in sculpture included originals, copies, forgeries and pastiches—terms that become more complex as the reader proceeds through the exhibition’s catalogue. Some famous works circulated in various versions, a proliferation that contributed mightily to their celebrity. The *Farnese Hercules* (Museo Archaeologico Nazionale, Naples), a massive marble figure of the hero, leans on his club (draped with the skin of the Nemean lion) and holds behind his muscular back the apples of the Hesperides, commemorating the first and last of his Labors. The work, dated c. 216 CE, is a copy made for the Baths of Caracalla in Rome of a fourth century BCE original by Lysippos. Since the *Farnese Hercules* was excavated in 1546, it has spawned a host of tributes. Hendrick Goltzius’s magnificent engraving of 1591 depicts two puny viewers peering up at the enormous figure in awe.

Lysippos’ original was already being reproduced, however, even before the copy designated for the Baths of Caracalla. The exhibition features a beau-



Portrait of Seutbes III

c. 310–300 BCE

BULGARIAN ACADEMY
OF SCIENCES, NATIONAL
INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY
WITH MUSEUM, SOFIA

tifully worked bronze statuette, about fourteen inches high, known as *Weary Herakles* (1–100 CE). It carries an inscription identifying the man who dedicated it, Marcus Attius Peticius Marsus, a wealthy merchant. The work was found in a sanctuary to Hercules in the Abruzzo region of Italy. During the Renaissance, tabletop bronzes—by artists such as Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, known as Antico (c. 1455–1528)—were prized by connoisseurs as signifiers of luxury and erudition. The Hellenistic statuette has some of that panache, but it also retained a sacred function.

Domestic-scale bronzes served many functions—religious, decorative and commemorative, often simultaneously. *Alexander the Great on Horseback* (100–1 BCE) captures the energy of an equestrian monument of unusual vitality, although the work is just twenty inches high. The youthful ruler, with flowing hair, turns in the saddle, raising his arm (he originally brandished a sword, now lost). The beautifully muscled horse—Alexander's famous steed, Boucephalos—rears up (a pose known in heraldry as rampant). The statuette is thought to be a miniature replica of the centerpiece of a monumental group by Lysippos, from the Sanctuary of Zeus at Dion in Macedonia. The use of silver on the horse's trappings adds an exquisite touch. It is a fitting tribute to the man whose conquests gave birth to the Hellenistic world.

We get some sense of how imposing a full-scale equestrian bronze would be from another work in the exhibition, a *Horse Head*, known as *The Medici Riccardi Horse* (c. 350 BCE). With flaring nostrils, pulsing veins and a muscular form, the horse is a magnificent animal. Traces of the original gilding remain. The work exemplifies the textural refinement and expressive range achieved by master bronze workers, and studying it will increase our appreciation of surviving monuments such as the *Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* (161–80 CE) at the Musei Capitolini in Rome.

One of the most famous Hellenistic bronzes, however, does not honor a ruler or deity. *Boy Removing a Thorn from His Foot*, known as *The Spinario* (c. 50 BCE), is a genre piece. It was wildly popular in antiquity. The exhibition also includes a marble version (25–50 CE), and many more—based on a still-older prototype—survive. The figure was often placed in a garden setting, with associations to Endymion, Adonis or other shepherds in love with mortal or divine women. But such allusions were more whimsical flourishes than straight-up identifications. The principal appeal of the lithe boy with his naturalistic pose was most probably then—as it is now—its charm. Unlike most of the works in the exhibition, *The Spinario* has been on view at least since medieval times, inspiring artists and connoisseurs, who delighted in the easy grace with which the boy performs an everyday task. Scholars note that the hairstyle and grave, thoughtful face refer back to the Severe Style of the early fifth century BCE, but the combination of that quality with the Hellenistic naturalism of the body is completely harmonious, and details like the inlay copper lips testify to the sculptor's exquisite sensibility.

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Marguerite Yourcenar on the long—often interrupted, just as often dramatically eventful—life of ancient sculpture. The catalogue authors emphasize that the story of bronze is full of dynamic change, change that had already begun in antiquity. At first, a gold-toned bronze was the norm, and copper inlays—the wounds on the *Terme Boxer*, for example, or the lips—would have appeared darker. But bronze darkens quickly, and some methods used to retard change and corrosion—such as rubbing with oil—actually darkened the surface. Here the story takes an interesting turn, as tastes changed to accommodate the difference. A vogue emerged for “intentionally dark artificial patinas before the end of the Hellenistic period.”⁸ “Black bronzes” and “Corinthian bronzes,” with an enamel-like patina, also inspired Roman dark-stone sculpture, like the *Torso of an Athlete* (1–500 CE), in basanite, a stone common in Egyptian art, found in the 1930s on the site of Emperor Domitian’s villa.

Some of the works in this magnificent exhibition were rediscovered—unearthed or pulled from the sea—only recently. The story of ancient bronze, like the story of antiquity itself, is a work-in-progress. The more we learn about the past, especially what we loosely call classical antiquity, the more complex it becomes.

NOTES

1. Marguerite Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, trans., Walter Kaiser (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 57–58.
2. *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*, ed., Jens M. Daehner and Kenneth Lapatin (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015).
3. Jennifer M. Green, “‘The Right Thing in the Right Place’: P.H. Emerson and the Picturesque Photograph,” *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed., Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 98.
4. *Power and Pathos*, 223.
5. *Ibid.*, 150–66.
6. *Ibid.*, 123.
7. *Ibid.*, 145.
8. *Ibid.*, 160.

Update: The *Terme Boxer* has been recalled to Rome and does not appear in the Washington, D.C. venue. Several other bronzes have been added, including the remarkably fluid *Dancing Faun* (c. 100 BCE) and *Boy Runner* (100 BCE–79 CE).