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

by Richard Neer

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

The ostensible subject is large-scale Hellenistic bronzes, that is, pieces produced in the Greek kingdoms of the Mediterranean and Middle East in the last three centuries B.C. In fact there is quite a bit more than that—Etruscan works, Roman ones, a few marbles, some astonishing pieces in hard black basanite, the odd statuette—but nobody’s complaining. Bronze was the ancient world’s preferred medium for high-end sculpture thanks to its glimmering finish, high tensile strength, capacity for detail, and openness to serial production (you can make any number of casts), so this show literally brings together the best and the brightest.

There are plenty of well-known masterpieces on display, like a great, bloodied boxer from the Palazzo Massimo in Rome, a Greco-Libyan prince from the British Museum, or the Getty’s own Victorious Athlete, a proud young man crowning himself. There are also spectacular new discoveries, like the head of a barbarian king and the body of a discus thrower, both found in 2004; rarities from museums in less-touristed places like Tunis, the southern Italian city of Brindisi and the little Greek island of Kalymnos; and, at the heart of the show, the first reunion of no fewer than five similar versions of a magnificent nude athlete that may well go back to one of the great lost works of Lysippos, court sculptor to Alexander the Great. This last group alone would comprise a worthy exhibition: the pieces are both immensely appealing and historically important, and the chance to see them side by side may never arise again.

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

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

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

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with “Hellenistic,” on the other hand, is that it is something of a grab-bag term: it designates a vast range—from Naples to Kandahar, Libya to the Caucasus—over a long span of time. Hellenistic artists were sophisticated and eclectic, mixing and matching styles and iconographies in a way that seems calculated to frustrate historians (or, alas, to fool unwary buyers, for there were forgers in antiquity, too). The upshot is that style alone can rarely date a piece to within 100 years or so. Scientific analyses are helpful, but not precise. In the end, we can only guess at when most of those statues were made, or where, or by whom, or for whom, as it is as though we could not be sure whether the works of Maenot were from the 180s or the time of Vespasian.

Fortunately, Dahnert and Lapatin are among the best in the business, and they do a superb job with questions of connoisseurship, iconography (identifying portrait sitters, etc.), casting technology and so on. The catalogue is no mere coffee-table book but a trove of essays and individual entries by more top scholars than there is space here to name. If you are interested in casting techniques and alloys, in the cultural history of bronze, in eclectic styles or forgeries, in the Greeks in the Middle East, in the relation of art to poetry, in underwater archaeology, in patinas and colors, you need look no further. There is even a breakdown of the metalurgical content of no fewer than 22 pieces, a boon to specialists. In short, the book is the real deal; if only other museums were as rigorous.

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way that moderns tend to do (or say they do). Tidily, their language made no distinction between read and live; the distinction between outward facade and inner truth did not register. Of course the Greeks told lies and kept secrets and tried to fit in like everybody else. On their view, however, the self was essentially social, a function of class and circumstance; ascius was not a matter of getting in touch with one’s feelings or interpreting one’s unconscious desires but of testing and reaffirming one’s place in a larger system “out there.” As the poet Simonides put it, using terms borrowed from sculpture, “It is difficult for a man to become truly good, ‘square’ in hands, feet and mind, crafted without flaws.”

To become good is not to undergo an inner transformation but to be given one’s place in a confection of the Roman era. The Spinario shows ascus in action. Is he performing, performing like a show pony, or is he demonstrating obbligato长城 and self-absorption? He’s doing both, of course, but that is merely to say that the distinction does not pertain. The crafting of the self is essentially public, not private, superficial, not deep.

If this sounds more modern than ancient, that may be because our view of the Greeks is a caricature, filtered through modernist myth making. Rodin, we are told, liberated the sculpted skin. Because our view of the Greeks is a caricature, we might be tempted to say that the distinction does not pertain. The crafting of the self was not a matter of getting in touch with one’s feelings or interpreting one’s unconscious desires but of testing and reaffirming one’s place in a larger system “out there.” However, as the poet Simonides put it, using terms borrowed from sculpture, “It is difficult for a man to become truly good, ‘square’ in hands, feet and mind, crafted without flaws.”

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WHAT’S BENEATH these surfaces, what’s inside a statue? The key work here is the famous Spinario from Rome (probably 1st century B.C.), exhibited alongside a superb marble version from the British Museum—another curatorial coup. The bronze may be unique among the objects in the show in that it has never been lost to view: the Spinario has been on display continuously, in one venue or another, for some two thousand years, and has inspired everyone from Brunelleschi to Seurat. A boy, a fetching shepherd of the sort that populates the pastoral poetry of the Hellenistic age, sits on a rock, one only pricked into the opposite knee, extracting a thorn from his heel. Once again the pose is all absorption, limbs folded one upon the other, head bowed in concentration; once again the subject attends to its own surface, its own literal skin. The marble version from London is rapt, legs parted, the better-known bronze from Rome is impassive. His coiffure is fussy and old-fashioned, quite out of keeping with the rustic theme and overall realism; it is the sort of hairdyle you would see on a much earlier work, or on a “retro” piece like the so-called Piacentino Apollo, an archaicizing confection of the Roman era. The effect of the Spinario, surely deliberate, is of a statue come to life and caught as if it were backstage, unguarded. The result is charming and witty, if a touch voyeuristic. One cannot be squeamish about Antiquity: the spectacle of a pretty boy, lost to the world and absorbed in his own surface, what’s inside him, is more than a little suggestive, to the point that medieval viewers went overboard and identified the figure as Priapus, the Roman god of virile fertility and erections, while Renaissance ones deemed it unfit for ladies.

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

For the Romantics of the 19th century, the Spinario epitomized what they took to be the perfect, unselfconscious life of Greek Antiquity: He’s lost to the world, like one of the intensely absorbed...
or bronze, be it called piety. Bronze is hard and cold and it cuts through flesh without feeling. Homer also called it: bright bronze flashes from afar to dazzle the eye, conspicuous in a rough bough, periodical world. Both qualities are very much in evidence in this exhibition. Shepherds, athletes and deities aside, most of the works are portraits of no doubt extremely unpleasant men who lived at a time of hideous inequality, brutality and exploitation. The sad truth is that your average ISIS commander is probably more humane than the expansion, bloodily-minded, face-of-menace of the Greek kingdoms. Of course, this age also produced Stoicism and skepticism, which taught people how to dissociate themselves from the world of desire and suffering to attain a state of impermeability, even joy. It saw the invention of everything from mathematical proofs to sitcoms. But the portrayals at the Getty are not a cross section of the ancient population, just of those with the wealth and inclination to commemorate themselves in public; at staggering expense: the Trumps, Kardashians and Putins of the day. The rest is mostly heroic; its essential function is to give pleasure, not always of the nicest sort. Even that beard, for all his grandeur, appeals to a certain sadism, as one learns closer to savour the skill with which the artist has used copper inlay to represent trickling blood, or a darker alloy on the cheek to suggest a vicious bruise. Thisessential liberalism is part of what makes antiquity so interesting. It is inhumane, exactly because it precedes the modern concept of the human; it is shallow, exactly because it has no thought of being ‘deep’. If these bronzes are compelling all the same—and they are—then that may be because the difference in question is by no means absolute: alien and pitiless as they may be, we can look into their eyes. What we see there is another way of being a person, another concept of the ethical life, another kind of embodiment. Those ways are not so alien as to defy all comprehension—just enough to shock, the way that, once upon a time, Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’ put a wrinkle in wool. Hellenistic artists could push these eloquent surfaces to the point of allegory. A circular medallion, unearthed in a palace in downtown Thessaloniki in 1990, contains a bust of Athena, goddess of wisdom; it once graced the front of a chariot. The relief is very high, as is the quality: a study in contrasting textures. Simple sheer cloth plays against a riotous feathered cape, agitated locks of hair over a smooth background, everything turbo-charged with deep undulating and heavy shadows. Exceptionally, the goddess wears a metal mask (or mask-faced helmet) over her head, in juxtaposition with her own face. This mask, a metal representation of a metal representation, is the monstrous Medusa, whose gaze turned men to stone; as often in Hellenistic art she is beautiful, not ugly, and her eyes close in sleep or death. Against this impressive mask is Athena herself, staring wildly, lips parted, baraballess. No less than the Oil-Scraper or the Spinario, this relief prominently features surfaces and layers, inside and outside. Yet there is no simple antithesis: the impasse of sleep is a mask, the face of wisdom is all agitation.

There is something very cold in all this. Homer had a word for bronze: he called it piety. Bronze is hard and cold and it cuts through flesh without feeling. Homer also called it: bright bronze flashes from afar to dazzle the eye, conspicuous in a rough bough, periodical world. Both qualities are very much in evidence in this exhibition. Shepherds, athletes and deities aside, most of the works are portraits of no doubt extremely unpleasant men who lived at a time of hideous inequality, brutality and exploitation. The sad truth is that your average ISIS commander is probably more humane than the expansion, bloodily-minded, face-of-menace of the Greek kingdoms. Of course, this age also produced Stoicism and skepticism, which taught people how to dissociate themselves from the world of desire and suffering to attain a state of impermeability, even joy. It saw the invention of everything from mathematical proofs to sitcoms. But the portrayals at the Getty are not a cross section of the ancient population, just of those with the wealth and inclination to commemorate themselves in public; at staggering expense: the Trumps, Kardashians and Putins of the day. The rest is mostly heroic; its essential function is to give pleasure, not always of the nicest sort. Even that beard, for all his grandeur, appeals to a certain sadism, as one learns closer to savour the skill with which the artist has used copper inlay to represent trickling blood, or a darker alloy on the cheek to suggest a vicious bruise. This essential liberalism is part of what makes antiquity so interesting. It is inhumane, exactly because it precedes the modern concept of the human; it is shallow, exactly because it has no thought of being ‘deep’. If these bronzes are compelling all the same—and they are—then that may be because the difference in question is by no means absolute: alien and pitiless as they may be, we can look into their eyes. What we see there is another way of being a person, another concept of the ethical life, another kind of embodiment. Those ways are not so alien as to defy all comprehension—just enough to shock, the way that, once upon a time, Rodin could shock, or Titian. As we ourselves become ‘post-human,’ the ‘pre-human’ can be terrible and exhilarating in equal measure.

1. For an expanded discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke in relation to ancient conceptions of ‘human’ see Richard Neer, Die Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 179.


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