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The Study of Ancient Sculpture

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The Study of Ancient Sculpture

BRUNILDE SISMONDO RIDGWAY

The wave of enormous public interest created last summer by the exhibition of the two bronze warriors recovered from the sea off Riace (Calabria) has not yet abated, and is not likely to do so for a long time. Had there been any doubt, this occurrence would have forcefully underscored the enduring importance of classical sculpture, especially when, as in this case, the beauty of the finds can give rise to a flurry of attributions to the major Greek masters of the fifth century B.C.

Ancient, and more specifically, Classical sculpture has always played a major role in the study of the past. Renaissance scholars combined a lively interest in the literary sources with equal admiration for sculptural finds, and this attitude prevailed unchanged for several centuries, virtually down to our own days. Arduous travel to Italy and Greece was complemented, since at least the 16th century, by the creation of cast collections in the major European museums or at the courts of the leading monarchs. In time, the casts themselves were supplemented first by S. Reinach's drawings, then by large photographic repertoires, such as the *Denkmäler griechischer und römischer Skulptur* (Brunn-Bruckmann, 1888–1947) or the *Photographische Einzelaufnahmen antiker Skulpturen* (Arndt-Amelung, 1893–1940)—a trend which continues in renewed format with the series *Antike Plastik* (1962–). The turn of the 20th century saw the launching of vast corpora, such as E. Conze, *Die attischen Grabreliefs* (1890–1922), and sporadic attempts in this direction are still being made, witness for instance, the volumes of Pfuhl-Möbius, *Die ostgriechischen Grabreliefs* (1977–1979) and the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (1963–).

Classical archaeology was for a long time virtually equated with the study of sculpture, which formed the core of college curricula in that discipline, as well as in History of Art. But also today sculpture tends to receive the lion's share in general handbooks on Classical culture, as can be shown by Martin Robertson's monumental *History of Greek Art* (1975) or, perhaps less obviously, even by W.R. Biers' *The Archaeology of Greece* (1980). As for Art History, the 1981 book by F. Haskell and N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, not only explores the phenomenon of public response to

classical sculpture since the Renaissance, but also provides an invaluable catalogue of antiquarian information on the major statues in Italian collections, according to their popularity in the past. Other major catalogues of public and private museums are being published apace, either for the first time (e.g., R. Calza et al., *Antichità di Villa Doria-Pamphilj*, 1977) or in revised and updated editions (e.g., B. Vierneisel-Schlörb, *Klassische Skulpturen des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, for the Munich Glyptothek; A. Giuliano et al., *Museo Nazionale Romano, Le Sculture*, both 1979). Leading archaeological periodicals—the *JdI* and *AA* of the German Archaeological Institute, the *BCH* of the French School in Athens, the *Deltion* and *ArchEph* for Greece, and *ASAtene* for the Italians (to name just a few)—devote a large portion of their issues to articles on sculpture, and monographs on various sculptural topics continue to appear with remarkable frequency.

Yet for all this continuity, major changes have taken place in our approach to ancient sculpture. Aesthetic appreciation and stylistic analysis are still basic components of our studies, but by no means—and no longer—the main ones. While chronological assessment and artistic attribution set the main thrust of earlier publications, these aims are now concomitant with a variety of others which tend to see sculpture as an expression of political, socio-economic and geographic conditions. Apart from R. Bianchi-Bandinelli's approach to Roman portraiture and Roman art, studies such as L. Schneider's *Zur sozialen Bedeutung der archaischen Korenstatuen* (1975), or N. Himmelmann's investigation into marble-carving practices and artisans in ancient Greece (*JdI* 94 [1979] 127–42) are worth noting as harbingers of new directions in sculptural analysis.

Attributions to individual masters or to regional schools continue to be made on stylistic grounds, but these "subjective" criteria that, in the past, had led to a proliferation of theories—virtually as many as there were scholars who wrote on the same subject—and therefore to a basic distrust of the method itself, are now being supplemented, if not entirely replaced, by more "objective" criteria made possible by modern technological achievements. Among these can be

numbered, for instance, the invention of the computer and of photogrammetry, as well as the special laboratory techniques developed for the space program, such as thermoluminescence, which was used to vindicate the antiquity of the bronze horse in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. As this *AJA* issue appears, a Congress on the Parthenon sculptures is taking place in the Basel Museum: it was sparked by the complete collection there of casts of all blocks and fragments connected with the Athenian building—but casts in light-weight styrofoam which allows easy shifting of the bulky pieces and therefore a trial-and-error method in the reconstruction of the lost compositions.

Anthropological models devised for other artifacts or cultures are now being applied to the study of classical sculpture, and new questions are being asked of the material. Emotionalism in defending original from copy, creation from adaptation or imitation, is considerably diminishing if not disappearing entirely. The methodology employed by J.B. Ward-Perkins to determine the routes of marble trade has been applied by him now to sarcophagi, despite resistance from “the traditionalists” to whom the notion of considering a sarcophagus as an object of trade whose artistic evaluation may be affected by the type of marble from which it was made is “positively repugnant” (*MAAR* 36 [1980] 325–38). This same methodology, with the help of a computer, could usefully be applied to plot out distribution of Roman copies and their trade routes, thus helping to identify centers of production and sources of inspiration.

Finally, the discovery of the spectacular epic groups in the grotto of Sperlonga (Terracina, Italy) in 1957 has alerted us to the possibility that statuary in Hellenistic style could be created, or at least supplemented, in Roman Imperial times. Great strides are therefore being made in separating Greek from Roman creations, classical style from classicizing: a research movement spearheaded by scholars like P. Zanker, R. Wünsche and W. Trillmich, to name only a few.

The contributions collected in this issue of *AJA* were not editorially selected to represent old and modern trends, but they nevertheless provide a fair sampling of present approaches to the field. For instance, the article by Watrous, trying to define the political message of the Siphnian Treasury frieze at Delphi, follows in the footsteps of John Boardman’s pioneering attempts to connect Peisistratos with Herakles and the archaic poros pediments from the Athenian Akropolis. Guralnick and Goldberg use statistical

techniques, aided by photogrammetry and computer analysis in the case of the former, to deal with their diverse material: the application of a canon of proportions to archaic Greek sculpture, and the distribution of archaic akroterial types respectively. Goldberg’s research, in this respect, is akin to recent studies that have postulated geographical preferences for certain styles or forms of architectural sculpture. This type of investigation aims at isolating not simply local trends but especially cross-currents and contacts among Greek and non-Greek states. A similar geographical clustering based on typology is outlined by Pedley in his gathering of korai exhibiting specific sartorial and cosmetic features, which the author assumes originated in the island of Paros.

Sturgeon’s publication of a female statuette in Corinth uses the traditional methodology of stylistic analysis, but the conclusion differs, in that she sees the figure as a product of a classicizing master who recreated earlier fashions according to the taste of his own, much later, time. Style is again employed by Wood, in her attempt to defend the authenticity of a portrait of Philip the Arab that has recently been challenged. Style enables C.C. Vermeule to attribute to a Julio-Claudian altar the head of a boy in a private collection, but the peregrinations of the piece in reaching this country allow for an excursus into antiquarianism and collecting practices. Antiquarian interest is also present in Waywell’s account of an altar that was considered lost, after a period of fame and popularity during the Renaissance, but has now been rediscovered by the author in an English collection.

Two contributors, Voutiras and Tiverios, are concerned with iconography, the former in the case of votive reliefs which lead to the study of a religious society connected with the Attic deme of Ikaria and the cult of Apollo; the latter in dealing with the East metopes of the Parthenon. Finally, Warden’s analysis of a group of bronze wrestlers from Poggio Civitate (Italy) defines Etruscan schools and touches upon Etruscan athletics; Greek input still plays a considerable role in Etruscan studies, but modern trends stress Etruscan creativity and independence rather than subordination to Greek art. That Etruscan forms may have in turn exercised considerable influence on Greek art is being increasingly considered.

In recent years several of my students had expressed to me doubts about embarking on a specialization in sculpture since, in their opinion, everything had already been said or tried with reference to the

known monuments. My view of the situation is diametrically opposite: I believe that many new answers can be obtained, if we ask new questions, and some of these novel queries are just being formulated at present, while others may occur in the future. Scientific aids, a greater understanding of and interest in techniques, and especially increased openmindedness in

evaluating each culture per se and in appreciating its specific brand of art, will definitely help us to put new and stimulating wine in old sculptural bottles.

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