

Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World.* National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, December 13, 2015–March 20, 2016.

Reviewed by Tyler Jo Smith

In creating large-scale sculptures, ancient Greek artisans worked in a variety of available media. Although famous Classical sculptors, such as Pheidias and Polykletos are known to have produced objects in bronze, marble, and chryselephantine (gold and ivory), by the fifth century BCE, bronze became the material of choice for public sculpture. This was perhaps for visual or technical reasons, or both. Consulting ancient textual sources, such as Pliny and Pausanias; discoveries of bronze statues on land and in the sea; other arts (i.e. painted vases, gems); Roman copies in marble; and archaeological science helps scholars to recreate a picture of the production and consumption of these once highly valued objects that rarely survive.

Bringing together some fifty bronze sculptures from collections in Greece, Italy, and other European countries, Great Britain, Georgia, Tunisia, and the United States, the recent *Power and Pathos* exhibition travelled from Florence to Los Angeles before concluding its tour in Washington, DC, at the National Gallery of Art. Interestingly, the focus of the exhibition was not Classical Greece, whose artists—regardless of medium—revered the ideal human form, but rather the Hellenistic period following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 (cf. cat. no. 2: *Alexander the Great on Horseback*) when “Greek artists turned their attention in a concerted way to portraying the explicitly ‘un-ideal’—the innumerable contingencies of real-life physiognomy, such as the wrinkled skin, pot belly, and balding head of Silenos, or the unlovely face of the poet” (Daehner and Lapatin 2015:9).

The exhibition was thoughtfully laid out in several rooms of the National Gallery’s west wing, and presented themes designed to both guide and educate: “Bronze Sculpture in the Hellenistic World,” “The Rarity of Bronze,” “Likeness and Expression,” “Bodies: Real and Ideal,” “Images of the Divine,” “Greek Art and Roman Collectors,” and “Augustan Era.” The curators made excellent use of maps and wall text to situate the sculptures in ancient geographical space and historical time. Despite the profound beauty of the sculptures on display, collectively they represent an assortment of styles, subjects, sizes, and conditions. Where known, the provenance, modern collection history, restoration, and conservation details were also provided. Visitors learned for example that the *Portrait of a Poet* (“Arundel Head,” cat. no. 27) was discovered in a well at Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) during the 1620s, and passed through various private hands before being donated to the British Museum (its current home) in 1760; while the *Statue of a Man* (cat. no. 10)—the head, body, and arm of a portrait surviving in two parts—was found in 1992 as part of a ship’s cargo in the Adriatic Sea. The great range of materials used to embellish bronze sculptures may have surprised many public viewers, such as the inlaid eyes of alabaster (or faience) and copper on the *Head of a Man with Kausia* (cat. no. 5), or the mixture of copper, bone, dark stone, and glass employed for facial details on the *Statue of Apollo* from Pompeii (cat. no. 48).

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As pointed out in both the exhibition and the catalogue, “one important characteristic that distinguishes bronze sculpture from other media is its reproducibility” (Daehner and Lapatin 2015:271). This is aptly demonstrated using the example of the Apoxyomenos, an athlete literally “scraping himself” with a strigil, the curved instrument used to remove dirt and sweat from the body. Here we encounter multiple versions of the *Ephesos Apoxyomenos* type in bronze (cat. nos. 40, 41, 42), all dated to late Hellenistic or Roman Imperial times, and based on an original statue dated to the 300s BCE, as well as a marble version (cat. no. 43) from the second century CE now in the Uffizi, said to have been made from a complete model cast of the original.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition is handsomely illustrated and includes far more information, in the form of essays, additional examples, and comparative evidence, than could be made available at the National Gallery. For those with an interest in bronze as a sculpting material in ancient Greece, Rome, or elsewhere, the publication runs the gamut from advantages to disadvantages characterizing the medium. The volume’s chapters address diverse topics from the chemical composition of featured works to contextual readings of them, from aesthetic consequences to symbolic significance.

Reference Cited

Daehner, Jens M. and Kenneth Lapatin, eds. 2015. *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.

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