

***Rethinking the Romans: New Views of Ancient Sculpture***, April 6, 2001-January 2, 2009

## **Introduction**

The variety and number of Roman sculptures that survive today attest to the important role that statuary played in the lives of the Romans. Throughout the empire, sculpture enlivened the public spaces of their cities and decorated their homes and gardens. In order to understand and appreciate such works, their original contexts and functions must be considered. Only then can they be viewed for what they are – purposeful creations that embody the intentions, values, and attitudes of Roman artists and patrons.

## **Objects of Luxury**

To Romans of early imperial times, an object fashioned of marble indicated that its owner was a person of taste and relative wealth. Any item made of marble was expensive, often relying on imported stone from the Greek mainland and other more distant sources. Recent recoveries of ancient shipwrecks have shown that several types of luxury goods that had seemed typically Roman were actually first produced in Greece, to be eventually copied and developed on Italian soil. Objects so recovered include marble column shafts, vases, candelabra, roundels or disks with mythological creatures in relief, statues, lamps, and furniture. The Romans loved such works with a passion and displayed them with pride in their homes, gardens, baths, and grottoes.

## **Sculptural Fragments**

Through the years, fragments of ancient statues have evoked a variety of responses, each reflective of then-current cultural attitudes. During the Renaissance, for example, sculptors began to restore missing limbs, heads, and attributes to ancient statues for aesthetic reasons. Early in the 19th century, however, attitudes began to change with the British government's acquisition of marble sculpture from the Athenian Acropolis, gathered under Lord Elgin's authority. Asked by the British for advice on treating this group, the eminent Italian sculptor Antonio Canova declared that since no living artist was capable of matching their style, the marbles should not be restored. The effects of his opinion were far-reaching, contributing to a decreased interest in restoring ancient sculpture. Over time, fragmentary sculptures have come to be valued as romantic objects evocative of a long-distant past, while also being viewed as physical evidence of life in ancient times.

## **The Trade in Marble**

Roman networks of marble trade and artistic exchange were surprisingly international. Although cities across the Roman empire (particularly Rome, Cyrene, and Leptis Magna) displayed quantities of marble sculpture, there were only a select few quarry sites. These included Mt. Pendeli near Athens, the islands of Thasos and Paros in the Aegean Sea, Dokimeion and Aphrodisias in Asia Minor (now Turkey), Proconnesos in the Sea of Marmara, and Luna (modern Carrara) in Italy.

# RISD MUSEUM

Correlating information from sites where marble was quarried with evidence from sites where marble was used indicates patterns of marble trade around the Mediterranean. Such information has suggested date ranges for quarry sites and objects, as well as political links between cities during certain periods. As a result, marble testing and quarry research have become important tools in evaluating sculpture, at times revealing not only where the stone of a statue originated, but when and how it was carved.

## **Copies, Variants, and Adaptations**

Over the last two centuries, Western culture has placed high value on the originality and singularity of artwork, celebrating both the differences from that which came before and the unique properties of an individual work. Such modern attitudes have fostered a devaluation of Roman ideal sculptures – images of gods and goddesses, personifications of nature, heroes, and athletes – that survive today in multiple versions. These works often depict familiar subjects rendered in poses and styles evocative of earlier Greek works, which were part of the Romans' cultural inheritance.

The context of the creation of these works by artists during the first few centuries of our era was a complex world dominated by Rome without benefit of modern mass media. In this world, visual art objects were primary agents of communication. Images became recognizable through consistency of form. As a result, originality and singularity carried less importance than they do today.

Many traditional Greek images took on new meaning when employed in a Roman context, while others were adapted slightly for their display in Roman settings. These reflective sculptures should be thought of as thoroughly Roman works of art: intentional creations that embody the values and attitudes of Roman artists and patrons, rather than as illustrations of ancient texts, clues to absent masterpieces, or slavish copies.

## **Patronage**

Roman patrons commissioned pieces of sculpture to convey particular, often self-promoting, messages. Portrait statues of the emperors, for example, often served to announce significant events of their reigns. In funerary portraits, Romans often had themselves depicted in the guise of particular deities or with features resembling those of imperial family members, in order to evoke certain associations.

There were also clear ideas behind the commissioning of idealized sculptures of gods and goddesses, personifications of nature, heroes, and athletes, which the Romans displayed in their public squares, baths, markets, libraries, and theaters, as well as in houses, villas and gardens. Always mindful of the appropriateness of sculpture to its setting and context, the Romans mixed and matched traditional elements of pose, attribute, and style to create new artworks and sculptural groupings with specific meaning for their world.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Roman

*Fragment from a Sarcophagus, ca. CE 200*

Marble

Gift of Charlotte F. Dailey 02.004

This fragment was part of the upper edge of the long side of a sarcophagus, as indicated by a preserved portion of the upper molding. It depicts Omphale, a queen of ancient Lydia (in west Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey), and another woman to her left. According to legend, Herakles was enslaved to Omphale to atone for his crimes. He performed various exploits for her and became her lover. During his enslavement, Herakles was ordered by Omphale to exchange roles and clothes with her. She is shown here wearing Herakles's lion skin. This is an extremely rare depiction of Omphale on a sarcophagus; only one other such representation is known.



Roman

*Head of a Satyr Grasped by the Hair, ca. CE 150*

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund 26.165

The pointed ears and facial features of this figure indicate that he is a satyr, a semihuman follower of the god of wine, Dionysos/Bacchus. The small hand that grasps his hair allows the identification of the type of sculptural group to which this fragment belonged. The original composition, as seen in the drawing, was of a nymph rejecting the advances of a satyr. Such Roman groupings were based on Hellenistic amorous or erotic subjects, most of which involved satyrs being warded off by uninterested parties. Their function in Roman settings is difficult to determine. They may have been votive sculptures set in Dionysiac sanctuaries or privately commissioned works to serve decorative functions.



Greek

*Headless Statue - Adaption of Aphrodite Frejus Type, ca. CE 100*

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund 23.351

The pose and garments of this figure are reminiscent of Venus Genetrix as the goddess appeared on Roman imperial coinage of the second century AD, celebrating her role as “universal mother.” Venus represented virtues beyond simple beauty, those that were highly valued in (and desired for) the proper Roman matron: chastity, piety, modesty, and loyalty. In fact, the type represented by the Providence piece, the Louvre-Naples type, was particularly preferred to represent these virtues.

Both types of Venus were favored for funerary portrait statues, especially in the second and third centuries AD. The Providence piece may be an example of such an honorary portrait, as indicated by the preparation of the neck to receive a fitted head. This use is also suggested by a slight adaptation in the figure’s garment (*chiton*), which covers the left breast. In the Louvre-Naples prototype, the *chiton* slips off the shoulder, leaving the breast bared. Especially during the first two centuries AD, non-aristocratic women most often rejected in their private funerary statuary the heroic nudity employed in imperial circles.



Roman

*Youthful Figure Wearing a Torque, 138-192 CE*

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund 26.158



## Restoration of Legs, Support, and Base for Male Figure in the Guise of Hermes:

In the 18th century, it was common practice for sculptors to fill out broken sculptures, to recombine unrelated fragments as restored statues, and as a result to create “new antiquities.” Seemingly intact, such statues were valued as aesthetic objects whose ancient pedigrees and pleasing poses reinforced their owners’ social status. This tradition is reflected in the mounting of RISD’s *Male Figure in the Guise of Hermes* (acc. no. 03.008) at its time of purchase by the Museum. This restoration, which completed the legs, support, vessel, and base of the ancient fragment, was removed in 1953. The current philosophy of conservation of ancient sculpture is to let fragments stand on their own as much as possible. Ambitious restorations tend to blur the boundaries between what is original and what is not. In addition, restorations inevitably reflect some flavor of the era during which they were made and consequently tend to look out of place to subsequent generations of viewers.

Roman

*Male figure in the guise of Hermes*, early 100s CE

Marble

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 03.008

This piece is likely an example of an honorary portrait statue. During Roman imperial times, artists and patrons began to insert portrait heads into statues based on well-known body types identified with certain deities. This practice was not restricted to members of the imperial family, as certain body types were used by patrons of different status and wealth. The intent in all cases, however, was to be represented as embodying the quintessential Roman ideals or virtues as symbolized by the particular deities. The distinctive front twist in the mantle (*chlamys*) draped over the Providence figure’s left shoulder has been found only on representations of the god Hermes (the Roman Mercury) and suggests such an identification for the Providence torso. Hermes was the Patron god of businessmen, especially those involved in trade. Known as the Hermes Richelieu type (after a statue in the Louvre Museum, Paris), the particular body type of the RISD figure was often used for portrait statues of businessmen.



# RISD MUSEUM

Roman

*Torso of a fighting giant*, 117-138 CE

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund 25.064

The engraved hair rosette on the chest of this torso reveals its semihuman status, for similar features have been found on sculptural examples of centaurs, giants, and satyrs. An architectural example from a frieze in Corinth matches the RISD figure in size, pose, and rosette ornament, suggesting a similar identification: that of a giant in battle. The most common battle legend about the mythical giants regarded their attempt to overturn the rule of the gods in an early and mighty struggle. From the fifth century BC, battles involving giants (*gigantomachies*) appeared often in the arts, especially in sculpture. The Providence piece was probably not part of a frieze, however, nor of any other type of architectural sculpture: the figure's back side is almost as well defined as its front. Meant to be seen from all directions, the RISD torso may have been part of a battle scene in the round. The stump that juts out curiously from the figure's lower left buttock was perhaps the strut that served to support and anchor the piece to its base.



Greek

*Portrait of a Boy as Eros*, late 1st/2nd century CE

Marble

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 03.009

For many years, this piece was thought to represent Eros. Its distinctive curly hairstyle, with braid and topknot, is common to depictions of youthful mythological figures; yet the work's extremely distinctive facial features, including the supple cheeks, dimple, protruding upper lip and receding chin, suggest instead that it was a portrait. The RISD head may be a blend of the two: a portrait with personalized features styled into an overall type of mythical figure. Such a practice is known for both adults and children, often in a funerary context, especially in the second and third centuries AD. In these, the deceased are represented with a portrait head and the attributes of a deity in order to suggest that he possessed qualities particular to the deity, or, especially in the case of children, that the deceased would continue to be under the protection of that deity in the afterlife.



# RISD MUSEUM

Roman

*Head of an Amazon*, 70-90 CE

Marble

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 01.005

According to epic tradition, the Amazons were a race of female warriors who lived just beyond the borders of the known Greek world. Signifying the danger and romantic wonder of the foreign and unknown, they appeared often in legend as enemies of the Greeks. RISD's head originally belonged to a full-length statue, a replica from a well-known series of wounded Amazons (see drawing at right). This is not only apparent from the break at its neck, but also from the top of the head: a large area on the left half is without rendering of hair. This was the resting point for the right hand of the figure, as seen in the drawing.

This piece is one of over 15 existing example of the Sciarra type, named after a statue from the Palazzo Sciarra, Rome (now in Copenhagen). Traditional scholarship has tied this Amazon type to a set of four others that together may represent the subject of a contest in antiquity. According to the ancient author Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), five famous Greek sculptors created figures of Amazons for the Artemision at the Ephesos (constructed on the coast of Asia Minor in the 6th century BC), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



Roman

*Cinerary Urn*, 1st century CE

Marble

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.083

At the time this piece was made, cremation was the favored form of burial for all Roman social classes. Marble cinerary urns with carved decoration were quite popular in the first century AD as containers for the ashes of the deceased. This urn takes the form of a miniature temple decorated with vegetal motifs and implements used for the burial ritual, such as a bowl for a liquid offering (*patera*) and a funerary wreath. The Latin inscription reads: "To the Shades of the Dead. Anotonia Saturnina made [commissioned] this for her husband Delicatus, imperial slave, and Marcus Anotninus his son made it for his well-deserving father."



# RISD MUSEUM

Roman

*Table or Throne Support*, 1-100 CE

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund and Special Gift 23.352

This sculpture slab was probably fashioned as the proper right support of a marble bench (see drawing at right). Ornamented with volutes and lotus buds on its long sides, the object is singular in its representation of a male head on its short side; one that likely terminated in a single, large animal hoof or paw at the bottom (now missing). The bearded figure may represent a satyr (a mythical creature of the wild), or, alternately, Acheloos (a river god with underworld associations).

Its artificial combination of human with animal and vegetal features, including horns, pointed ears, and spiral beard flowing into inverted flowers beneath, are common in depictions of “grotesques,” or mythological creatures composed typically of a lion or eagle body with horns, animal paws, beard, and large ornate wings. The Providence relief may belong to a small class of supports with uncommon and wingless grotesques. While supports are known as early as the sixth century BC, this example is probably a creation of the first century AD.



Roman

*Male figure*, 1-100 CE

Marble

Museum Appropriation Fund 26.159



Roman

*Portrait of Agrippina the Younger, ca. 40 CE*

Marble (from Paros) head, and 18th-century colored marble bust  
Anonymous gift 56.097

Agrippina the Younger (AD 15 - 59) was a powerful woman: the sister, wife, and mother to three different emperors. According to ancient authors, Agrippina's brother Caligula sent her into exile for involvement in a conspiracy in AD 39. Her uncle Claudius recalled her from banishment and married her in AD 49. Agrippina is said to have poisoned Claudius so that her son Nero might become emperor. The empress ruled in Nero's name while he was young, but he eventually turned against her, ordering assassins to murder her. While Agrippina is said to have written an autobiography, it has not survived. Her portraits provide the only remaining clues as to how she wished to be represented during her lifetime. These depict her with a slightly protruding upper lip and chin that are reminiscent of Caligula's portraits. Of the RISD version, only the head is ancient.



Roman

*Portrait of a Julio-Claudian Prince (probably Drusus Minor), 0-39 CE*

Marble

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 22.211

In order to reinforce their leading position in Roman society, members of the imperial family often had themselves portrayed as looking very much like Augustus (reigned 27 BC – AD 14). In fact, most of Julio-Claudian men were portrayed as looking so much alike that scholars have had difficulty identifying them with certainty. While the profile of the RISD portrait recalls Drusus the Younger (died AD 23, son of the emperor Tiberius), the hairstyle suggests the young Germanicus (15 BC – AD 19, nephew of Tiberius).



The treatment of the base of the neck indicates that the head was meant for insertion into a stock bust or body, a common practice for portraits in Roman times. The ridge above the bottom row of locks on the back of the head perhaps was an indentation to support a wreath. The top of the head is summarily carved, and drill marks around the ears appear rough, lending credence to the proposed presence of a wreath, which would have hidden these unfinished effects.

# RISD MUSEUM

Roman

*Fragment from a Neo-Attic Vase, 39-1 CE*

Marble

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry D. Sharpe 26.270

The curve of the fragment's profile suggest that it came from a marble vase larger at the top than at the bottom, perhaps a container used during banquets for mixing wine with water (*krater*). *Kraters* were often appropriately decorated with nymphs and satyrs, followers of Dionysos/Bacchus, the god of wine. The RISD vase shows a satyr moving to the right and holding a staff (*thyrsus*). In earlier times portrayed as more animal than man, the satyr began to be humanized over the centuries in artistic representations. By Roman times, when Dionysiac imagery and symbolism enjoyed great popularity, only the smallest details, such as pointed ears, distinguished satyrs from humans.



Roman

*Portrait of Augustus, 0-39 CE*

Marble (from Paros)

Museum Appropriation Fund 26.160

This is a portrait of Augustus, who ruled in Rome from 27 BC until his death in AD 14. With over 200 surviving examples, more sculptural portraits of Augustus remain than of any other Roman emperor. Prominently displayed in public squares, baths, markets, theaters, and law courts throughout the empire, his portraits made him recognizable and present to his subjects, and at times even substituted for his actual presence. Depending on the message that Augustus wished to convey, he was represented as military commander, emperor, priest, or divinity.



This sculpture belongs to his principal early portrait type, which first appeared in 38/37 BC to balance his youthful inexperience with his imperial authority. The top and back of the RISD head are unfinished, suggesting that it was originally covered by a fold of his toga drawn up over his head. With head covered, the depiction of Augustus would refer to his role as Rome's chief priest (*pontifex maximus*).