
Greek Ideal as Hyperreal: Greco-Roman Sculpture and the Athletic Male Body

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TWO ROOMS over from the highly frequented Parthenon Frieze in the British Museum stands a Greco-Roman sculpture of an athletic male youth (fig. 1).¹ This sculpture has a museum plaque that gives visitors little information beyond what they might be able to observe for themselves. The plaque simply reads “God or Athlete.” In contrast to the vast amounts of historical information and political debate that surround the famous Parthenon frieze, one might be disappointed not to learn any specific historical or contextual information for this particular sculpture.² Yet, the indecisive title of this piece may be taken as a case in point for the complexities involved with the Greek visual legacy of the male body.

On the one hand, the title “God or Athlete”

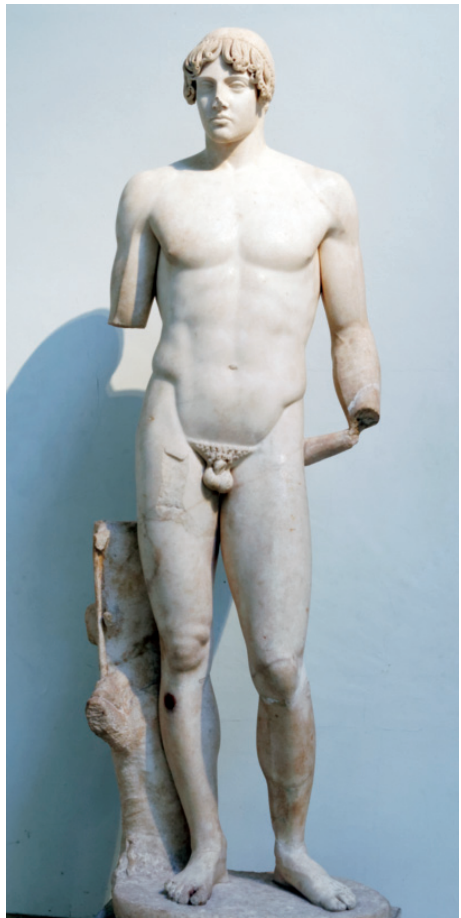


Fig. 1

ARION 21.3 WINTER 2014

perfectly captures a modern concept generally known as the “Greek ideal”—an ambiguous and paradoxical relationship between the physical body and the divine, first popularized by Johann Joachim Winckelmann.³ In the introduction to his first major work, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture* (1756), Winckelmann asserted that the Greeks were far superior to modern man in physical strength and beauty, a fact he attributed to their overall physical culture and superior forms of exercise. According to Winckelmann, such superiority was readily observed in sculpture. Thus he explains, “Their bodies received great and manly shape through exercise, which the Greek masters gave to their sculptures.”⁴ Indeed, there may be some truth to Winckelmann’s reliance on sculpture as a signifier of actual Greek bodies, since early inscriptions on athletic monuments emphasize that statues reproduced the likeness and size of the victor, especially at the moment of victory.⁵ Scholars today have also echoed Winckelmann’s sentiment that Greek athletic sculpture reflects the strictest of ancient training regimens designed to build the body beautiful.⁶

Nevertheless, Winckelmann also recognized how ancient sculpture went beyond any traditional mode of imitation:

These frequent occasions of observing nature caused the Greek artists to go farther. They began to form certain general ideas of beauty, with regard to individual parts as an entire understanding of the body, which ought to uplift itself above nature itself. Their model was in a sense some ideal nature.⁷

Winckelmann asserted that it was from this “ideal nature” that “the Greeks formed their gods and men.”⁸ Thus Greek sculpture captured an artistic principle based on dual modes of imitation: “The sensual beauty gave to the artist a beautiful nature; ideal beauty gave sublime processions; from the former he took the human, from the latter the godlike.”⁹ For Winckelmann, it is this paradox of Greek sculpture as an imitation that both reflects and exceeds the reality of the phys-

ical body, which made the Greeks themselves inimitable, and therefore, worthy of imitation.¹⁰ Ancient sculpture indicated the superiority of the Greeks, achieved through physical exercise, and it also represented a physical impossibility that could only exist in a mental or divine capacity. This paradox is one that was recognized even in the ancient world and continues to the present. Isocrates, for instance, acknowledged that, “no one can make the nature of his body resemble statues or paintings.”¹¹ Similar sentiments have also been expressed by current art historians on the physical impossibility of ancient Greek figural representation.¹²

Thus, the title of this fairly unknown sculpture at the British museum, “God or Athlete,” inadvertently gives expression to a long intellectual history on the problematic nature of the imitation of the body in ancient art. However, there is a second, equally problematic level of imitation at work in this sculpture. Beyond the enigmatic title, the plaque for the sculpture states that it is a Roman copy dated to the first century CE of a Greek bronze.¹³ For museum visitors, the status of this sculpture as a “copy” makes it far less attractive than “original” works of Greek artists. Unlike the Parthenon Frieze, the well-documented Greek provenance of which has made it the child of a heated cultural custody battle, no one is fighting over this “God or Athlete,” an ambiguous imitation of an unknown Greek bronze. Like the notion of the Greek ideal, the notion that Roman sculpture was somehow inferior may also be attributed to Winckelmann.¹⁴ But despite popular dismissal of Roman “copies,” scholars have more recently demonstrated that the notion of copying in the Roman era does not render Roman sculpture derivative or secondary. Such sculptures have their own “aesthetics of emulation,” inspired by Greek predecessors, but also adapted to specifically Roman contexts.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this sculpture of the “God or Athlete,” like so many others, lacks even a Roman provenance, rendering the sculpture a floating signifier with multiple stratigraphic layers. Is this sculpture a god or an athlete? Roman or Greek? When we

trace the historical levels of representation in this statue, we never reach a bedrock of reference.

In many respects, this “irreference” of the Greek ideal in Greco-Roman sculpture such as the “God or Athlete” presents us with an ancient corollary to the post-modern experience of the image, which Jean Baudrillard defined as the *hyperreal*, a “generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”¹⁶ Of course, Baudrillard had situated his theory of hyperreality within a very specific historical framework that excluded the ancient world. In his work, *Simulations*, Baudrillard presents three “orders of appearance”: the *Counterfeit* order, which began with the Renaissance, the order of *Production*, that coincided with the industrial revolution, and finally, the order of *Simulation*, which defines our own postmodern world. In the present era of simulation, the “real” ceases to become an object in and of itself. As Baudrillard states, “The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced.”¹⁷ One might wonder how a postmodern theory of the image could be relevant for viewing ancient sculpture. Looking at Greco-Roman sculpture with “postmodern eyes,” however, can allow one to appreciate a different aesthetic in Roman copies, not an aesthetic of “originality,” but one based on reproduction and seriality. Baudrillard explains seriality as follows: “The relation between them [images in a series] is no longer that of an original to its counterfeit—neither analogy nor reflection—but equivalence, indifference. In a series, objects become undefined simulacra, one of the other.”¹⁸ The very same principle of seriality can be observed in Greco-Roman sculptural arrangements, from the twin bodies of Vespasian and Titus in the Shrine of the Augustales to the Large Herculaneum Woman statues.¹⁹

Still, this postmodern aesthetic would only render Greco-Roman sculpture equivalent to Baudrillard’s second order of appearance, the order of Production. To these two levels,

ture such as the “God or Athlete” have remained on constant display in the British Museum, the cast of Eugen Sandow, who was so inspired by such statuary, has been locked away in a storeroom, far from the public gaze. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, it seems, the general population was far more at home with the hyperreal than any actual representation of the real itself.

And yet Sandow’s failure to realize the Greek ideal has not stopped others from continuing this pursuit into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Farnese Heracles, which had such a profound effect on athletes in Imperial Rome and modern Europe, seems to have exerted a similar influence on Joe Weider, the fitness industry tycoon and official coach of the most recognized bodybuilder in history, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Weider explains the effect of the Farnese as follows:

Seeing the Farnese Hercules was a revelation—a turning point in my life. It became the ideal I held in my head of what a bodybuilder should look like, and I don’t know of any other piece of art that personifies power so effectively. There’s just something magical in the Farnese that speaks to the sort of man—like me—who’s always wanted to be bigger and stronger. It’s kind of simple, really—what he has is what we want.⁵⁴

Joe Weider presents a perfect account for how the Farnese statue inspires a feeling of desire and lack in the one who admires it: “what he has is what we want.” It is perhaps this same desire that Philostratus articulates in the *Gymnasticus*, when he complains of athletes in his own era. And this same feeling was inspired no doubt in those who viewed the image of Eugen Sandow as the Farnese. That the product of such hyperreal statuary is desire itself, however, tells us that “becoming Greek” in body, as Nietzsche himself desired, really is an impossibility.

Even today we can observe this impossible desire at work in hyperreal simulation of the male body. On March 7, 2012, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the modern patriarch of bodybuilding, a former actor/ governor/ family man, that is

to say, a man at home with the logic of simulation, unveiled a bronze statue of himself in front of Franklin County Veterans Memorial in Columbus Ohio, where he holds the annual Arnold Fitness Expo (fig. 9).⁵⁵ It has been reported that Arnold owns a personal copy of Eugen Sandow's body cast.⁵⁶ And Arnold's statue is very much in keeping with Sandow's efforts to immortalize his own physique. But unlike the Sandow sculpture, which seeks to reproduce Sandow in exact measurements and build while he was still at his height in physical form, Arnold's statue stands at eight foot four inches tall and portrays him in a bodybuilding pose that



Fig. 9

is meant to recreate his former glory days rather than his exact likeness in the present. Thus, Schwarzenegger's statue seems to adhere more to the visual logic of the Farnese Hercules, hypermuscular and larger than life.

Of course, Schwarzenegger is well aware of how influential the Greek visual legacy has been on bodybuilding. As he states in his *New Encyclopedia of Bodybuilding*, "At the end of the nineteenth century a new interest in muscle building arose, not muscle as a means of survival or of defending oneself, but a return to the Greek ideal—muscular development as a celebration of the human body."⁵⁷ In light of Schwarzenegger's knowledge of the reception of the Classical tradition, his choice to portray himself in *bronze* may be a conscious effort at self-fashioning according to ancient modes of representation. Perhaps he is attempting to reach back to those lost original Greek bronzes for which we only have Roman replications. Indeed, Arnold's classicizing roots go back to his debut film, *Hercules in New York* (1969), which attempted, in its own campy way, to bring the Greek mythic past into the present. Still, if the marble copy of a Greek bronze of the "God or Athlete" at the British Museum presents a simulation of a simulation, Arnold standing before a bronze statue of himself demonstrates the impossibility of ever peeling away these layers of simulation to find a real referent. In a photo from the unveiling of the Columbus statue's twin, which stands in front of Arnold's childhood home in Thal, we see Arnold reach out and touch the statue (fig. 10). It is as if the person in the flesh seeks to touch a representation of himself that is beyond his own likeness—the referent for both the person and image exist in a nostalgic memory of the projected past.

Baudrillard had stated that, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality, of secondhand truth, objectivity, and authenticity."⁵⁸ Historically, the Greeks have always been the object of nostalgic desire for

ancients and moderns alike. Nowhere is such nostalgia more apparent than in the Greek visual legacy of the body. That the “real is no longer what it used to be” is something Philostratus laments at the beginning of the *Gymnasticus* in the third century CE. We find the same complaint in the introduction to Winckelmann’s *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works*, when he states, “The most beautiful body among us would perhaps be inferior to the most beautiful Greek body, just as Iphicles was to his brother Hercules.”⁵⁹ Likewise, in the late nineteenth century, we are told that Greco-Roman statuary caused Sandow’s father to lament that the race of man had fallen “from its once mighty estate” and that “later ages, with their ignoble ideal, sordid habits and fashionable indulgences of the race, had wrought their due havoc.”⁶⁰ In the Roman era and in modern Europe, Greco-Roman sculpture of the athletic male body had caused a feeling of inadequacy, which simultaneously inspired a deep desire to return to an idealized, hyper-real past. Nietzsche captured this sentiment best when he exclaimed, “*Man will zurück.*”⁶¹ Similarly, Arnold Schwarzenegger concluded the unveiling ceremony of his own bronze sculpture with his famous movie tagline, “I’ll be back.” In light of this brief history of the body and ancient sculpture, Arnold’s one liner has much more in common with Nietzsche’s proclamation than one would first expect. It is symptomatic of a post-modern, or rather post-*Hellenic* nostalgia. Such nostalgia has a long tradition that cannot be confined to a



Fig. 10

single historical time period, as we have observed in the words of Philostratus, Winckelmann, Sandow, Nietzsche, Weider, and Schwarzenegger. In viewing Greco-Roman sculpture, each of these figures from very different time periods presents the same response. Each is inspired with a desire to return to a corporeal past located in the Greek visual legacy. Such a return, however, is always deferred because the past is never actually represented in the body itself, only in its simulations.

NOTES

This piece was completed during a fellowship with the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, and I am extremely grateful for the generous support and resources provided by the Center and the invaluable conversations with everyone there. An initial version was given at the Classical Association of the Canadian West 2012 conference, and I am also very grateful to the organizers and audience of that conference for their feedback and helpful suggestions. Also, special thanks to David Smith for his photographs of the “Arnold” statue.

1. British Museum, Sculpture 209.

2. Historically, this statue, formerly known as the Choiseul-Gouffier Apollo was compared with the Omphalos Apollo, which was found in Athens near the Theater of Dionysos with a base featuring an omphalos nearby—hence the attribution of the latter statue to Apollo. However, it has been shown that the Omphalos Apollo’s base does not match the statue. Thus, it is not clear whether either statue actually represents Apollo. Both versions have been used as examples of a generic type, whose Greek “original” (which no longer exists) has been taken to occupy a key position in the history of Greek sculpture, between the Archaic and Classical periods. For the relationship between the Choiseul-Gouffier and the Omphalos Apollo, its many copies, and the notional Greek original, see, among others, Walther Amelung, “Der Meister des Apollon auf dem Omphalos und seiner Schule” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, 41 (1926): 247–87; Vagn Poulsen, *Der Strenge Stil* (Copenhagen 1937), 136; Gisela Richter, *Kouroi* (Oxford 1942), 151; Gisela Richter, *A Handbook of Greek Art* (London 1959), 87; Werner Fuchs, *Die Skulptur der Griechen* (München 1969), 67–69; Brunilde Ridgway, *The Severe Style* (Princeton 1970), 60–63; Friedrich Hiller, *Formgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur griechischen Statue des späten 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (Mainz 1971), 15, 42; W. Trillmich, “Bemerkungen zur Erforschung der römischen Idealplastik,” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 88 (1973): 247–82; Paul Zanker, *Klassizistische Statuen* (Mainz 1974), 91; Martin Robertson, *History of Greek Art* (Cambridge 1975), 194–96; Barbara Vierendeel-Schlörb,