Hellenistic Bronze Statuary

The fall of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E marks the beginning of the Hellenistic age, which concludes in 31 B.C.E.¹ During this time, there was a rise in individual portraiture, especially of royal figures.² There was also an interest in the human experience and expression. This would mean that portraiture would start to shift away from the pure Classical ideal hero and would begin to show imperfections and with that, the human experience and expression.³ The medium of bronze in the Hellenistic age shows a great technical achievement. Bronze also allows for another dimension of expression. The way in which the material reflects and absorbs light gives depth to a sculpture, so it becomes even more lifelike. It can be said that bronze statues epitomizes the achievements of the Hellenistic age.

Bronze has the ability to stand alone, thus allowing for more dramatic poses and expression of the human experience. According to Hemingway, the best sculptors among the Greeks favored the medium of bronze, especially for standing statues.⁴ An example of the abilities of bronze showing the dramatic, human experience is the Horse and Boy Jockey. The horse stands on its back two legs and appears to be mid-jump, floating in space and reaching out, invading the space in front of it. The artist was able to do this because of the capability of the medium.

² Pedley, Greek Art and Archaeology, 368.
³ Pedley, Greek Art and Archaeology, 354.
The Hellenistic age also witnessed a rise in a pursuit of knowledge, which would be reflected in sculpture. The period saw a rise in literacy and therefore, an increase in public libraries. Two of the most well-known libraries were at Pergamon and Alexandria, which “encouraged scholarly study and the pursuit of knowledge.”\(^5\) This pursuit of knowledge is reflected in statuary in regards to the expression of the human experience and individual portraiture. It shows a deeper interest in man, which implies more profound introspection and reflection on the nature of man and his experience as a human, or a mortal.

Along with an increased literacy and public libraries, there was also a rise in art patronage funded by royalty and an increasingly educated and growing upper and middle classes. This would allow for the medium and to develop and for sculptors to innovate with more freedom.\(^6\)

Four main functions of bronze statuary included cultic, votive, commemorative and honorific.\(^7\) “Hellenistic bronze statuary served fundamentally public functions.” However, there was also a rise in the luxury arts “made available to a growing number of citizens and used in the private sphere. Bronze sculpture could also function in private contexts, but… these private statues, and more commonly statuettes served a largely religious function.”\(^8\)

There are a number of challenges with Greek bronze sculpture. Although many of the original Greek bronze sculptures do not survive today, it is evident from literary sources that there were thousands of bronze statues. Because of its ability to melt down and be used for other


\(^7\) Hemingway, *Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period*, 16.

\(^8\) Hemingway, *Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period*, 16.
everyday uses, or to be formed into another work of art, many of the original statues were destroyed and plundered.\textsuperscript{9}

Dating Hellenistic sculpture presents some challenges because it borrowed from earlier styles and period, reusing and modifying them into their own devices. Another aspect that makes dating Hellenistic sculpture difficult is the “ease with which bronze sculptors could replicate works by means of the indirect lost-wax process.”\textsuperscript{10} This borrowing and modifying is very apparent in the bronze statues of this exhibition. For example, the Hellenistic Ruler, and the Seated Boxer, and even the Sleeping Eros mix the Classical ideals and subjects with a Hellenistic twist. The Seated Boxer shows an athlete with bloody patches and a broken nose, but he appears to be strong and muscular, ready to get up and fight again. The Hellenistic Ruler shows an individualized face with a Classical ideal body type. Sleeping Eros displays a paradox of a god in a physical state of being, mixing the idea of the ideal figure of a god with the human experience.\textsuperscript{11}

There are two techniques of bronze casting, including the direct method of hollow lost-wax casting and the indirect method of hollow lost-wax casting. The direct method is usually used for smaller statues or statuettes.\textsuperscript{12} It starts with a clay core, which is then coated with beeswax. When the wax model is finished, the statue is inverted so that the bronze will be able to flow into all the parts of the cast. Wax tubes are attached at specific locations for pouring the molten bronze through. The entire model is then covered in fine clay. After this, the model and


\textsuperscript{10} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 13.


\textsuperscript{12} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 4.
the “channels” are covered in an additional layer of clay. It is then heated up, and the wax melts off, followed by a second heating. Finally, the bronze is poured into the model and cools before finishing touches.\textsuperscript{13}

The indirect method of hollow lost-wax casting is usually for larger statues, in smaller pieces, and put back together.\textsuperscript{14} This sort of casting also allows for reproductions. A “master mold” is formed around a pre-existing model, and the mold is divided into several different sections. After drying, the individual pieces are put back together and covered with beeswax, which cools and becomes the wax model. The model is filled with clay and continues like the direct method.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, once the individual pieces are completed, they are reunited by either metallurgical or mechanical methods, or sometimes both methods.\textsuperscript{16}

Hellenistic bronze sculpture ranges from depicting deep introspection to dramatic outer expression. A perfect example of the expression of human experience and emotion is the Horse and Boy Jockey. The entire sculpture reaches out in space, as opposed to being self-contained like the Sleeping Eros for example. The horse and boy together are in motion, with both the expression of the horse and rider showing realistic expressions. The musculature of the boy is not over-exaggerated, and the musculature of the horse is anatomically correct.\textsuperscript{17} The medium of bronze, now more dulled, enables light to manipulate how the eye perceives the movement of the entire sculpture.

\textsuperscript{13} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{14} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 6.
\textsuperscript{15} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 9.
\textsuperscript{16} Hemingway, \textit{Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period}, 12.
\textsuperscript{17} John Griffiths Pedley, \textit{Greek Art and Archaeology}, 5\textsuperscript{th} ed., (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2012), 362.
Finally, typical of many Hellenistic sculptures, there is a twist or turning in the body. This is sometimes carried through the entire torso, legs or neck. An example of the “Hellenistic twist” is in the Veiled and Masked Dancer. Her drapery describes her twisting body as it falls on her arms and rests on her hip. It is the drapery itself that describes the human experience and makes the dancer appear in action. Her arms twist around her upper body while her head is turned at her shoulder. This twisting and turning allows for more dramaticism and emotional representation.

These two examples epitomize the characteristics of Hellenistic bronze statuary. It is clear that showing human emotion and experience was a key element of this moment in Greek art history.

Bibliography
