Greek Sculpture

Ancient Greek sculpture seems to have a timeless quality – provoking reactions that may range from awe to alienation. Yet it was a particular product of its age, and to know how and why it was once created is to embark upon an understanding of its ‘Classic’ status. In this richly illustrated and carefully written survey, encompassing works from c. 700 BC to the end of antiquity, Nigel Spivey expounds not only the social function of Greek sculpture, but also its aesthetic and technical achievement. Fresh approaches are reconciled with traditional modes of study as the connoisseurship of this art is sympathetically unravelled, while source material and historical narratives are woven into detailed explanations, putting the art into its proper context. Greek Sculpture is the ideal textbook for students of Classics, Classical civilization, art history and archaeology – and an accessible account for all interested readers.

NIGEL SPIVEY teaches Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, where he is also a Fellow of Emmanuel College. He has held scholarships at the British School at Rome and the University of Pisa, and has also worked at the Australian National University and the Getty Research Institute. He has written widely about Greek, Etruscan and Roman art, and presented several historical television documentaries, including the major BBC/PBS series How Art Made the World (2005).
GREEK SCULPTURE

Nigel Spivey
Je voudrais que le lecteur ne crût rien sur parole et sans l’avoir vérifié, et qu’il se méfiât de tout, même de cet itinéraire. Croire sur parole est souvent commode en politique ou en morale, mais dans les arts c’est le grand chemin de l’ennui.

STENDHAL, Promenades dans Rome, 25 Janvier 1828
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**Frontispiece**: Laocoon – a sketch attributed to Michelangelo, in the underground room of the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo, Florence.

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This book is the offspring of another. Entitled Understanding Greek Sculpture, it was published in 1996 and went out of print several years ago. As any author would, I wished for a reissue – or rather, a second edition, correcting and updating where necessary. This wish developed into the more ambitious project of entire renovation. Motives were mixed: since I could not trace the ‘floppy disk’ where the words of the original text were stored, the book would have to be rewritten – but in any case I was glad of the opportunity to implement numerous pentimenti of style and substance, while adding several further chapters and extra material throughout.

The basic structure remains – along with the intention to provide an ‘understanding’ of Greek sculpture. In a fresh introductory section I have outlined the historic and aesthetic justification for studying this body of ancient art; here it may be worth adding a reminder that the ‘power of art’ is rarely self-sufficient. If artists of today require (as they seem to) critics and commentators to ‘explain’ their work, how much greater the need for glossaries on work produced 2,000 or more years ago? And naturally we create our own academic priorities for this as for any other field of study. Since 1996, there have been two distinct trends in research and writing about Classical art in general, and Greek sculpture in particular. The first has been to investigate ‘the viewer’s share’ – to focus not so much on how images were produced as on how they were received. It remains rare to have any insight about the contemporary response to sculptures of the fifth century BC and earlier. Yet the exploration of later texts related to images and attention to the literary genre of ekphrasis – the descriptive ‘speaking-out’ of writers alluding to works of art, from Homer onwards – has become more sensitive and sophisticated; and there is even some fresh evidence (notably from papyrus remains of the third-century BC poet Posidippus). An evolutionary and collective account of ancient response is still difficult to compose. This study, nonetheless, tries to maintain alertness to the religious power of images in their original function: a ‘theology of viewing’ wherever sculpture was once situated.

The second major shift of scholarly opinion in recent years concerns the activity of Greek sculptors working within what may broadly be termed ‘the Roman world’ – that is, not only Rome and Italy, but all those areas (specially in the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor) that came under Roman administration. It has long been accepted that Greek sculptors flourished beyond the surrender of
independence by Greek city-states to Rome. But there has also been a long tradition of scorning the work done by Greek sculptors throughout this period. From my own student days I well remember the overt distaste expressed towards ‘Roman copies’ by our teachers – with one of them (Martin Robertson) maintaining that the rot had set in during Hellenistic times.

A gallery of yellowing ‘restored’ marbles from the Antonine epoch can still cause the willing spirit to falter. But it is no longer conventional to pronounce Greek sculpture from the second century onwards as the tired replication of masterpieces from an earlier age. A modern ‘preference for the primitive’ may linger on; objectively, however, one could make the case that Athenodoros, Polydorus and Hagesander – the three sculptors from Rhodes accredited with the Laocoon Group, who left their names on equally powerful work installed in a cave at Sperlonga – were absolutely matchless exponents of the art of transforming blocks of marble into epic drama; and they probably worked in the early decades of the century beginning Anno Domini. Readers must not be surprised, then, to find many works with Roman provenance included here as ‘Greek sculpture’ – and the category of ‘Roman copy’ virtually taboo throughout the book.

Certain masterpieces of Greek sculpture may be characterized as ‘time lords’; albeit eroded, fractured or otherwise incomplete, they have not only survived for around two and a half thousand years, but have also been visible over several or more centuries. So, while this book is essentially a quest for original meanings, I have tried to give some sense of that enduring presence and resilience throughout the text. Beyond a dedicated last chapter on the post-Roman reception of Greek sculpture, I have also chosen some illustrations ‘of a certain age’ – and indicated, especially in captions, circumstances of discovery for individual pieces.

We suppose Classical relics to form a fixed body of knowledge: yet this is a considerably weightier tome than its predecessor – not only for the sake of verbiage or corrigenda. Added substance reflects further information; though there are certain monuments for which a deeper knowledge seems only to bring less comprehension, one could point to many sites and monuments where excavation and research over the last two decades have made a marked difference to ‘understanding Greek sculpture’. Nonetheless, this remains an essentially speculative, dare I say ‘Socratic’, study, permeated throughout with uncertainty or lack of proof. Nobody knows, for example, what the images of the Parthenon frieze were intended to signify. A tally of the words ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’ and ‘possibly’ within my text would amount (I fear) to a forbidding total.
A number of anonymous readers have made helpful suggestions towards strengthening the structure and scope of the book, and I have taxed learned colleagues with the onus of reading parts of the text. Here is the place to thank them: John Boardman, John Henderson, Ian Jenkins, Robin Osborne, Rolf Schneider, Bert Smith, Michael Squire, Jeremy Tanner and Carrie Vout. They are of course exculpated from any remaining errors or sins of omission.

Readers who already know why Greek sculpture is worth studying, and who consider themselves au fait with the jargon and historiography of the subject, may skip the introductory first chapter.

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NOTE

Abbreviations for Classical authors, texts and learned journals etc. are mostly as prescribed in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edn), with the addition of *A–B* for the works of Posidippus as edited by Austin and Bastianini (Milan 2002). However, the spelling of Greek and Latin names in the text follows preference for familiar usage and is therefore inconsistent – so ‘Akropolis’ not ‘Acropolis’, but ‘Erechtheum’ rather than ‘Erechtheion’.

References to Pausanias follow the numbering of the Penguin translation by Peter Levi S.J. (Harmondsworth 1971).

Dates in the text are all BC unless otherwise specified.

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