CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

'Body language' has become a familiar everyday phrase, widely used in the popular media, its analysis especially applied to politicians and media stars of all kinds. Numerous books have been written which claim to reveal the secrets of 'reading' the body language of others, and modifying one's own for greater success at work or in one's love life. These popularised versions are, on the whole, based on genuine scientific research which involves scholars from various disciplines: psychologists, sociologists, social anthropologists to name but a few. They reveal (sometimes inadvertently) a lot about the society we live in, especially about the expression of status and the relationship between status and gender.[1]

The idea behind this book began over twenty years ago with the question 'What happens if you use the ideas in modern body language studies to inform our understanding of Classical art?'[2] At the time 'body language' (the more popular term for what is often called in more academic works 'non-verbal communication' or 'non-verbal behaviour') was only just becoming a subject of popular interest, although my attention had been caught earlier by books and television programmes by Desmond Morris.[3] There were fewer books on body language to be found on bookstore shelves than there are now (though the subject was well enough established for there to be a book on body language in the Teach Yourself series).[4]

WHAT IS MEANT BY BODY LANGUAGE?

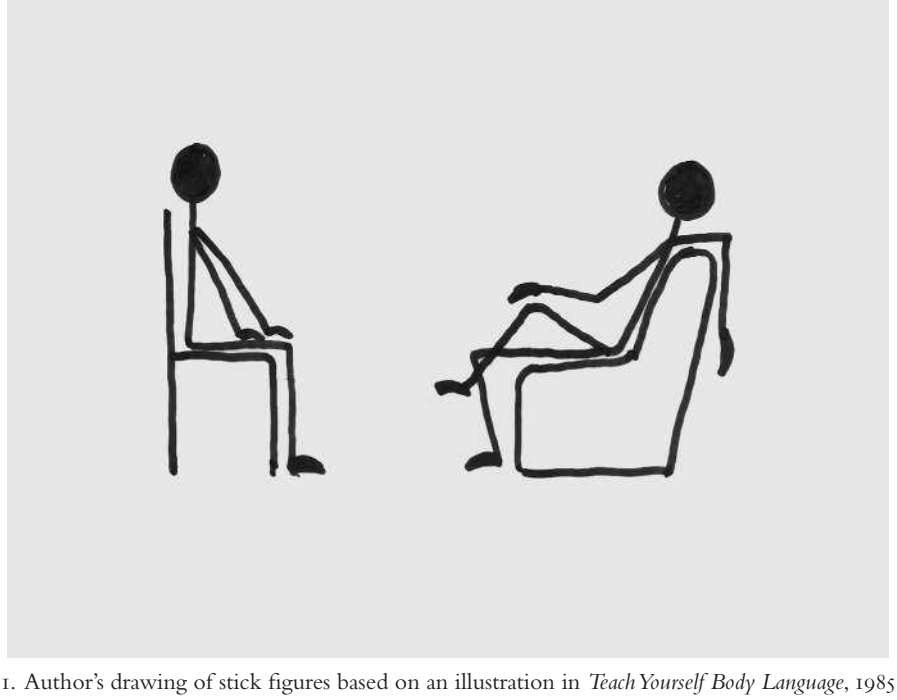
Body language consists of the various ways of holding the body (posture and pose, such as sitting with the legs crossed or with the knees spread wide apart), movements (especially of the head and limbs), and facial expression and gestures (such as nodding or shaking the head to indicate yes and no). These often occur in clusters and sequences, which need to be read together and in context. Body language is used in everyday social interaction to communicate far more than words, and is said to be crucial on first meeting someone for our assessment of them.[5] We all use body language and read that of other people, whether we are aware of it or not. Body language is understood intuitively rather than consciously – although various modern manuals and self-help books claim to teach us to use it in a more knowledgeable and conscious way. The human brain, however, seems to be able to decode body language extremely fast, usually without conscious effort, and, although gestures may be used to convey ideas, most body language concerns feelings and emotions rather than intellectual concepts.

Body language has existed as long as the human race (and is an important means of communication for many non-human animals too),[6] even if its scientific analysis and the self-help books are a recent phenomenon.[7] Although the terms 'body language' and 'non-verbal communication' are recent, the concept of body language and its importance for social interaction have long been recognised in the guise of good (and courtly) manners, conduct, etiquette, deportment and so on.[8] I shall be arguing later that the basic idea of body language and the importance of the use of 'correct' body language (i.e. that which conforms to the norms for one's sex and class) were well-known to Roman writers such as Cicero, Quintilian and Clement of Alexandria. The body language adopted by a society or group within it can also reveal a lot about the working and attitudes of that society: a comment made about body language and medieval society could equally be applied to the Romans:

> The study of gestures, from the most solemn to the most ordinary and even unconscious, allows the historian to enter deeply into the functioning of medieval society, its symbolic values, its way of life, and its modes of thought.[9]

BODY LANGUAGE AND CLASSICAL ARTISTS

Actors and visual artists reproduce and use body language to put across characters and narratives: they need to show behaviour that is generally understandable to their audience in order to communicate their message.[10] Although some aspects of body language consist of sequences of movements, much can



1. Author's drawing of stick figures based on an illustration in *Teach Yourself Body Language*, 1985

be revealed by static postures and simple gestures which are easily recorded in a single image: researchers investigating various aspects of non-verbal behaviour and its perception by those who witness it in our contemporary society often make use of still photographs or other static images.[11] Quite how much can be conveyed by even the simplest drawing can be seen from the matchstick figures based on an illustration in *Teach Yourself Body Language* (Figure 1).[12] A few simple lines convey the impression of the nervous, up-tight figure on the left – seated upright on a hard chair, with stiff arms resting on the knees – and the relaxed, laid-back figure lounging in the armchair on the right. It is not difficult, even with this amount of information, to construct a relationship between the two figures, or to infer their relative social statuses, and we can do this at a glance.

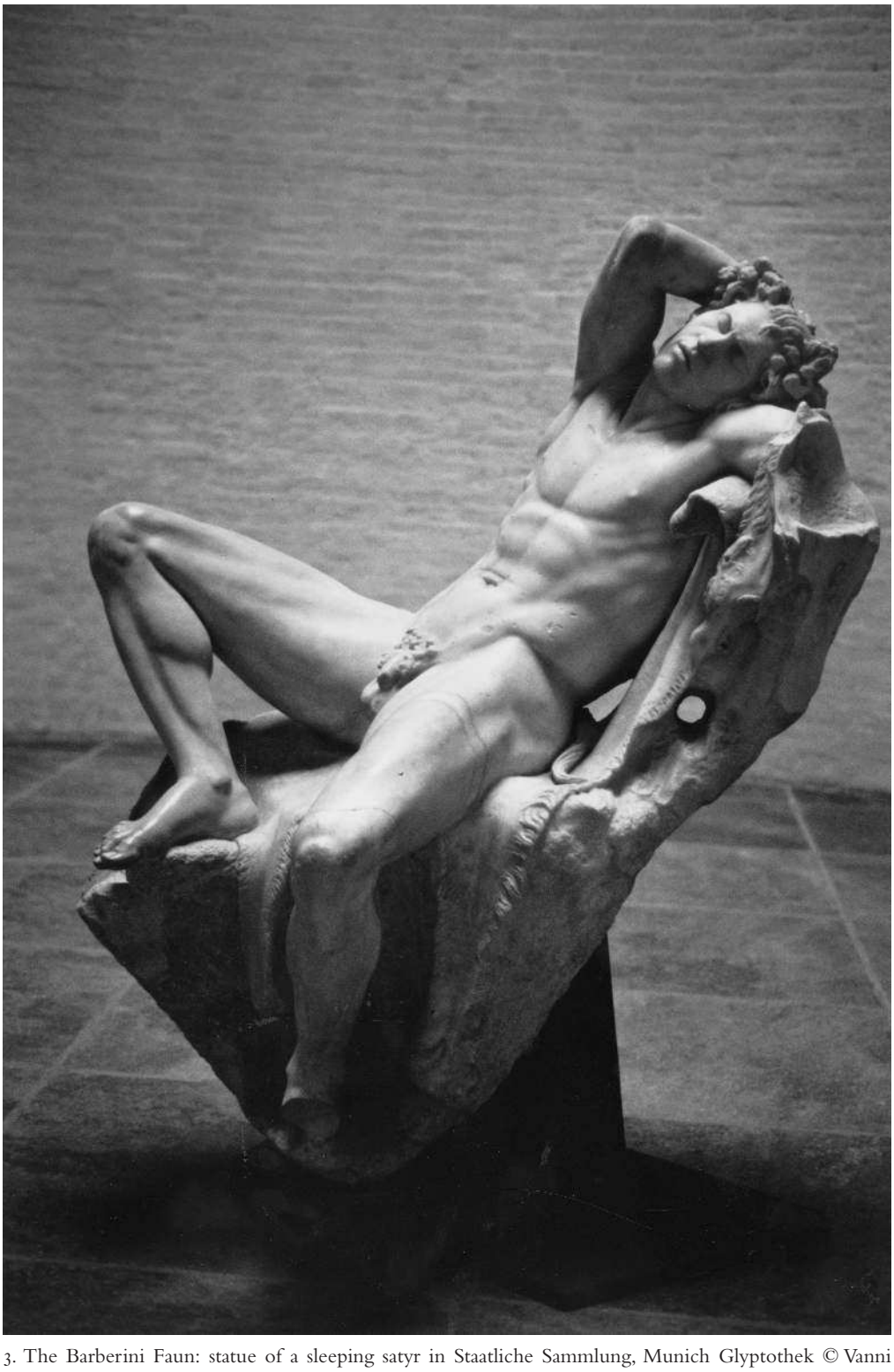
Body language was exploited by Classical artists from the first appearance of the human figure in Greek art: the mourning figures on late Geometric Attic vases, represented with their hands raised to their heads to tear their hair or scratch their cheeks, already show this in a schematic form.[13] Such schematic representations are not always clear to us, however, as the two figures represented in the round on the lid of a Villanovan urn show: they stand opposite one another, their feet some distance apart, with their upper bodies leaning in towards one another and their arms entwined, but are they embracing or wrestling?[14] By the Classical period artists were using a wider range of body language

to convey more complex messages, to communicate status, relationships between figures and narrative. The use of body language to create a narrative is well illustrated by a red-figure vase painting now in New York (Figure 2):[15] this is easily read as a man beating on a closed door with a nervous woman on the other side debating whether it is safe to open it. The only setting we are shown is the door itself, separating the two figures, with a little piece of roof to indicate that he is on the outside, while she is inside. What is going on and the relationship between the two is suggested by their postures and gestures: his superior size, made larger by his active, striding pose and raised arm, is contrasted with her daintiness and crouching posture, her fingers to her mouth expressing her uncertainty about what to do. That this incident is happening late at night is shown by the lamp she holds in her hand, and that he has been drinking at a symposium is suggested by his dress, his stick, the musical instrument he carries and the exuberant movements he is using. The figures are exaggerated in an almost cartoon-like way: their body language can be interpreted without conscious effort by the modern viewer. The precise circumstances of this scene have been debated: is he a husband, home late, who demands entrance noisily from his wife or servant, or is he an out-of-hours and importunate visitor to a brothel?[16] The artist may have intended one reading rather than the other, or he may have been deliberately vague, leaving the viewers to construct their own narratives. Complete understanding of the scene requires knowledge of contemporary artistic conventions and of the actions of everyday life in Classical Athens, both of which we comprehend only imperfectly, but the emotional content of the scene (powerful bully of a man demanding entrance from a nervous subordinate woman) is easily understood across cultures. Nevertheless, we should not simply assume that what seems to us to be the obvious interpretation of the body language represented is exactly the same as the way in which it would have been understood by a contemporary Athenian.

Although artists used body language to indicate what the figures they represented were doing, how they related to each other and what they were feeling from earliest times, it was artists of the fourth century BC and Hellenistic period who really explored how to express the extremes of emotion through body posture and facial expression.[17] The most famous masterpieces of Hellenistic sculpture tend to show this: the violent writhing of the figures in the Laocoon group contrasts with the drunken stupor of the Barberini faun (Figure 3), while the Ludovisi Gaul (shown in the act of killing himself after killing his wife) provides a similar contrast of violent movement and the stillness of the slumped, this time dead, body within the same composition; the coquettish, twisted pose of the statue of a seated teenage girl (Figure 4) contrasts with that of a blissfully drunk old woman, seated on the ground hugging a large wine jar, and again with the representation of a seated boxer, presented as an exhausted old bruiser after the end of a fight.[18] In all of these examples the body posture is

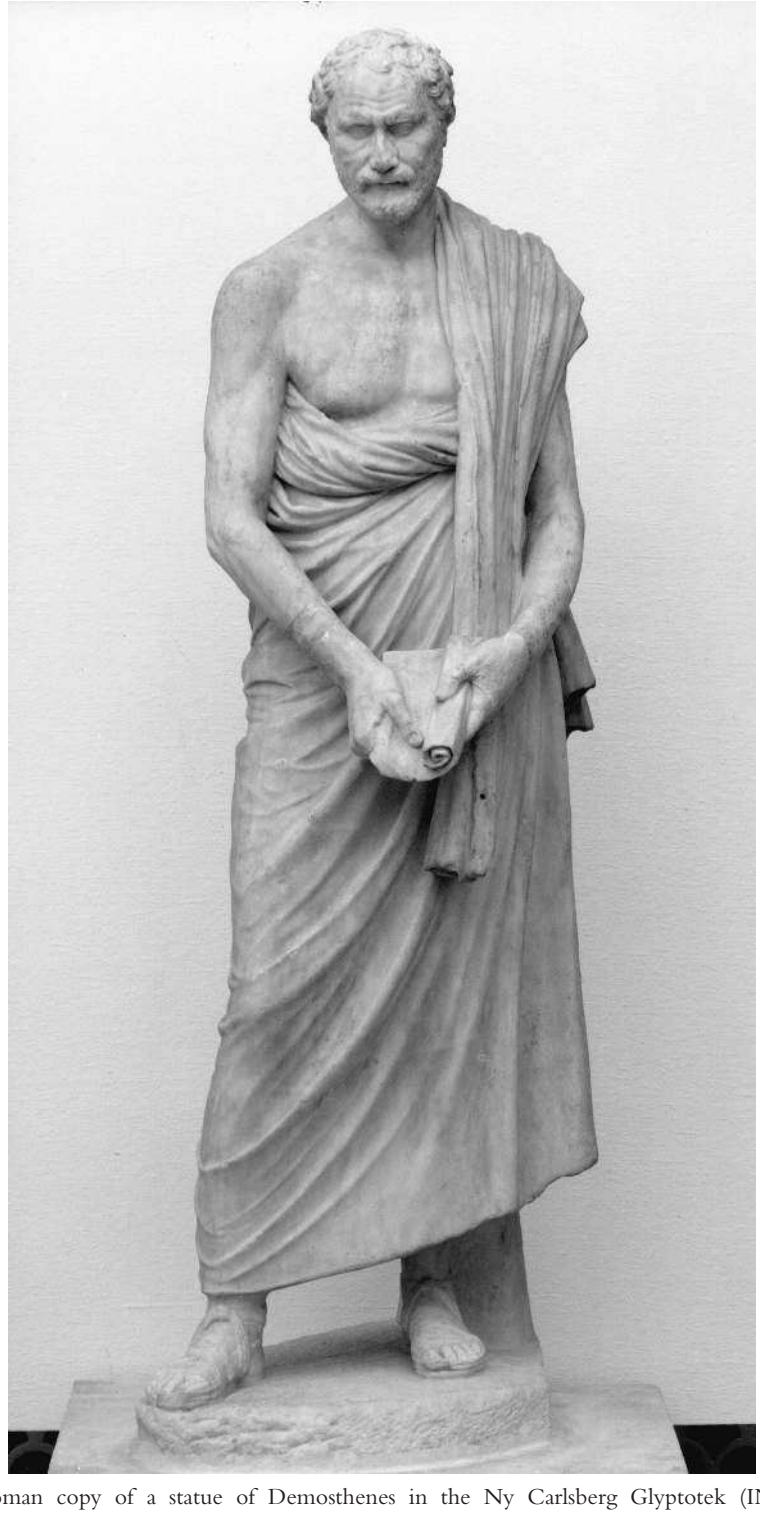
2. Red-figure vase (oenochoe/chous) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 37.11.19), c. 430–420 BC © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource Scala, Florence.

crucial for communicating complex information about the character and mood of the figure portrayed. Even less obviously dramatic subjects (such as the statue of Demosthenes by Polyeuktos – Figures 5a and 5b) create their impact by using subtle and understated body language.

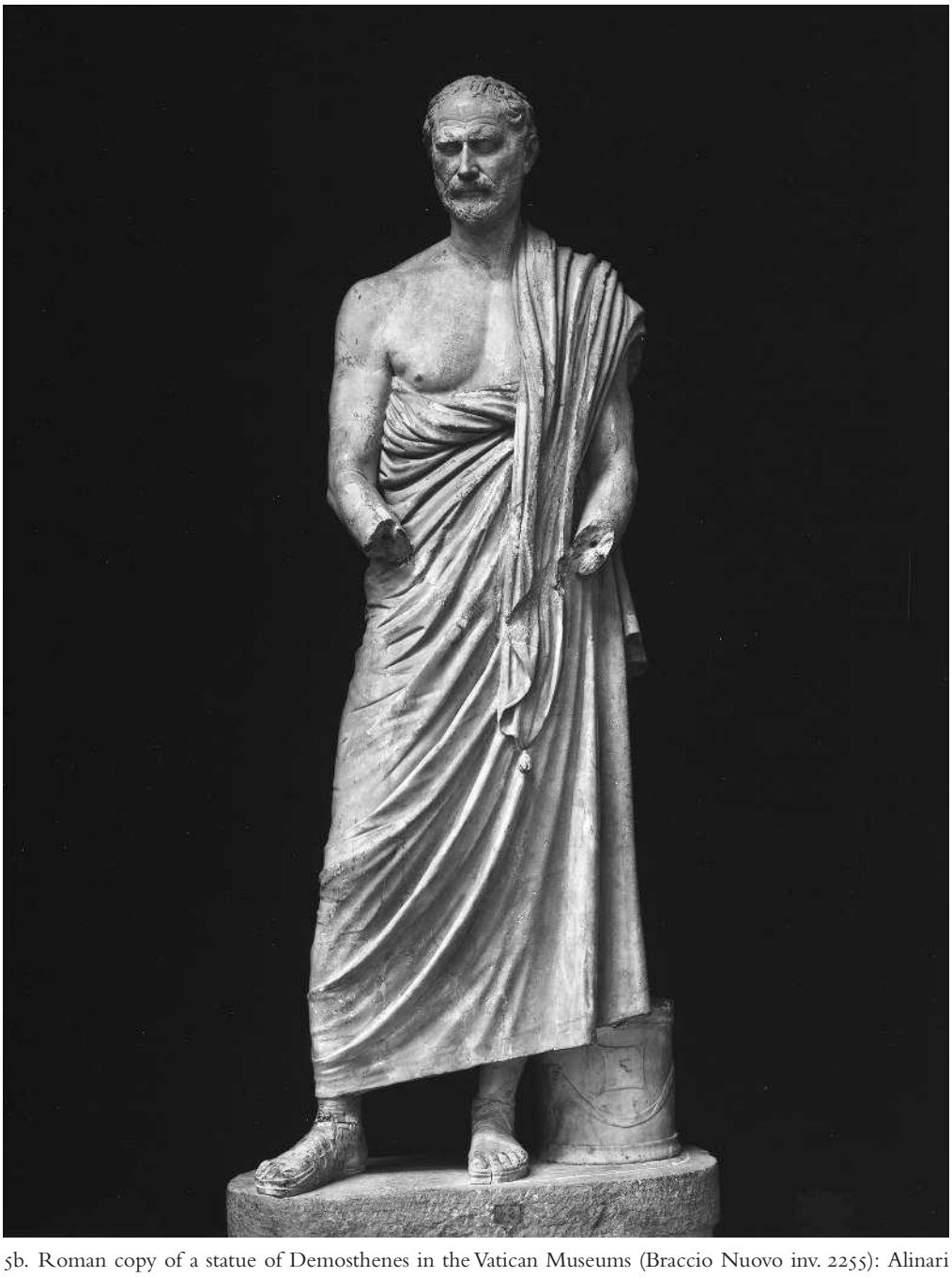


3. The Barberini Faun: statue of a sleeping satyr in Staatliche Sammlung, Munich Glyptothek © Vanni Archive/ Art Resource NY.

4. Statue of a seated teenage girl: Capitoline Museums collection, in Centrale Montemartini, Rome (inv. 1107) photo: Singer DAIR 67.1.



5a. Roman copy of a statue of Demosthenes in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (IN2782). Photo: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Ole Haupt. The hands are restored.



5b. Roman copy of a statue of Demosthenes in the Vatican Museums (Braccio Nuovo inv. 2255): Alinari Archives, Florence.

Demosthenes was represented not in the middle of a fiery speech as might be expected of a great orator, but in thoughtful, introspective contemplation, an image which contrasts with the standard representation of Athenian citizens at the time, and in particular with the statue of his main rival, Aischines (Figure 6).[19] Demosthenes' character and his role in Athenian society are expressed through a combination of physiognomy and pose. His body is that of an old man, with wasted musculature visible on his arms and breast and a careworn wrinkled face. He stands in a slumped pose, with his shoulders sagging and his hands linked loosely in front,[20] his head inclined slightly to one side with a downward-directed gaze. The vigorous folds of the drapery of the good-quality *himation* only serve to emphasise the decrepitude of the body it covers. Demosthenes is here shown to be a rather unusual kind of elder statesman: Smith points to the way this statue borrows elements from philosopher iconography 'to suggest an ascetic, visionary Demosthenes, a political thinker ahead of his time'.[21] A crucial aspect of the statue in conveying the artist's interpretation of Demosthenes' character and political role is its pose: this contrasts with the upright carriage, direct gaze and expansive gestures associated with portrait statues of alpha males such as the 'Terme Ruler' (Figure 7),[22] and used in a less exaggerated form for statues of other statesmen and prominent citizens. Aischines, like the Terme Ruler, has one hand behind his back, giving him a somewhat swaggering air, but the other arm is more modestly wrapped in his cloak, whereas the Ruler raises his arm high to lean on a spear or sceptre. The growing habit of erecting honorific and funerary statuary from the fourth century onwards in the Greek world and later at Rome encouraged the development of standard 'types' which used conventionalised body language to indicate the subject's status and role in society: analysis of this body language in the light of modern research into non-verbal behaviour can deepen our understanding of the dynamics of Classical societies. Both the standard and the atypical (such as Demosthenes) are revealing in their different ways.

This book concentrates on Roman art, but Roman art relies heavily on its predecessors, and especially the art of the Hellenistic world: indeed, most of the late Classical and Hellenistic statues discussed above are only known to us through Roman copies and adaptations, as the Greek originals have not survived, and their popularity with the Romans may have been partly because their use of body language to express both individual character and the human condition appealed particularly to the Romans.[23] I will not be considering Attic vase painting or works of sculpture made before the late Classical period, and the Greek art I do consider is in the context of its inspiration for later Roman production. Within Roman art I shall focus on sculpture, especially