Early, High, and Late Classical Greece, pp. 65-77

The recipe of beauty: classical sculpture
Architectural sculpture
Counterbalance and idealization
Greek bronzes and marble copies
The canon of Polykleitos
Myron and the representation of movement
Building the perfect national monument: the Acropolis
   Iktinos
   Phidias

Late Classical sculpture:
   Praxiteles
   Lysippos
In the Archaic period, architectural sculpture played a pivotal role in challenging Greek sculptors:

to find new solutions of body representation

The main part of the temple devoted to sculptural decoration was the **pediment**

The triangular shape of the pediment created a great challenge to sculptors who needed to fill it with figures

The decoration of the pediment of the Temple of Aphaia at **Aegina**, is a turning point between Archaic and Classical sculpture:

Figures are almost freestanding sculptures attached to the architecture

We have noticed the persistence of “Archaic smile” in their faces

This and other signs of archaism (geometric rendering of curly hair) are shared by these works with more archaic representations such as the Calf Bearer
West pediment of the Temple of Aphaia, Aegina, Greece, ca. 500-490, Munich

However, the author now feels the need to fit his figures in the pediment area in the most natural way, having them acting and posing differently according to their position in the triangle:

In stead of representing the human body according to traditional rules, repeated generation after generation, the artist now studied the actual human anatomy and represented it as it appears to the eye rather than as it is understood as a concept.

This shift to the observation and representation of the real world is a major passage in what Gombrich has called the Greek revolution.
Not only are figures portrayed now in more natural and complex poses but also details of their anatomies are now noticed and represented for the first time.
Dying warrior, Aegina, 490 BCE

Dying warrior, Aegina, 480 BCE
The conquest of space, achieved in Archaic freestanding statuary + More natural poses of reality of late-Archaic architectural sculpture = Created a new problem to be solved: How to represent the human figure in the most natural way without any specific act?
By studying the human body as a structure, Greek artists understood that the balance of the whole figure is determined by a shift of weight and distribution of body parts around the flexible axis of the spine.

This new way of representation has been defined as contrapposto (counterbalance) and separates Classical from Archaic Greek statuary:

The frontal character of earlier statues has been broken;

the weight of the body is laying on the warrior’s right leg (leaving the left one at ease),

This is counter-balanced by the arms: the left arm is holding a shield (the right is at ease)
Another major characteristic of Greek art is the complex relationship between “realism” and idealization:

**Ideal:** existing only in the imagination; desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality

**Idealization:** the representation of things in ideal form. Often contrasted with REALISM.

**Apparent inconsistency:**

On the one hand, direct **observation of reality** and the representation of things as they are perceived

On the other hand, Greek artists did not depict the actual features of real persons, but rather they were looking for the perfect beauty of bodies and faces, in a process of idealization.
The legend of Zeuxis:

Greek painter Zeuxis was asked to depict the legendary Helen of Troy, he chose five beautiful virgins as models. From the group he selected the most perfect features of each, and amalgamated them into one ideal figure.

Classical *idealization* of the human figure

Kauffman, *Zeuxis Selecting Models for his Painting of Helen of Troy*, 1778
Greek classical statue was usually done in bronze, which is a precious metallic alloy (copper and tin).

Most of Greek bronzes were destroyed (melted) during the Middle Ages.
The Riace Warrior (with its companion) is a rare exception: it was rescued in 1972 by a scuba diver about 25 feet beneath the sea near Riace.

This piece was probably being brought from Athens to Rome and it was maybe thrown out of board during a shipwreck.

Greek bronzes
Most often we don’t have the original bronze

Therefore, we study **marble copies** after Greek bronze originals that Romans did

There is a number of **problems related** to the study of these marble copies:

- **Color**: they are bright **white** and don’t have **colored details**

- **Composition**: Stone is **heavier** and more fragile: Roman sculptors added trunks and other **reinforcements to avoid ruptures**

- **Lost in translation**: Roman sculptors could be extremely skillful, but we are not able to determine **how faithful they were** to the original

Let’s now study one of the most famous roman copies of a Greek bronze:

The Doriphoros (Spear bearer) by **Polykleitos**
Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear Bearer), Roman copy from Pompeii, Italy, after a bronze original of ca. 450-440

The original bronze is lost

We study today a marble copy that stood in a palestra at Pompeii
Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear Bearer), Roman copy after a bronze original of ca. 450-440

the contrapposto the idealization of the human figure, had its culmination with Polykleitos

Polykleitos wrote a treatise titled the Canon (Greek for “measure,” “rule,” or “law”), lost, where he theorized the recipe of beauty:

the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras believed that underlying mathematical proportions could be found in nature and that beauty resided in harmonious numerical ratios
Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear Bearer), Roman copy after a bronze original of ca. 450-440

Similarly, in his treatise, Polykleitos defined the mathematical proportions for the perfect human body:

- a **basic unit** determined the length of various body parts;

- the **relationship/harmony** of body parts to one another;

- he also established the exact rules for the perfect **contrapposto**
Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear Bearer), Roman copy after a bronze original of ca. 450-440

To illustrate his theory, Polykleitos created a larger-than-lifesize bronze statue of a standing man carrying a spear (perhaps the hero Achilles)

3 points:

1) P. imposed **order** on human body;

2) by means of an **harmony of opposites**, he managed to obtain a sense of **motion while at rest**

3) more general statement about the **notion of art-making**: the artist is not simply a skillful artisan; his work is also **intellectual**
Myron, Diskobolos (Discus Thrower), Roman copy after a bronze original of ca. 450 BC

Once the body was freed and acted “naturally” in space, the new problem for Greek sculptors was how to represent movement.

The great revolution of Greek art came from the direct observation of reality.
Movement is an **essential quality of the real**

The inevitable **stillness** of paintings and statues was therefore perceived as a **limitation**

From now on, this will be a recurrent problem in the whole history of art

Which, in different periods, has been solved mostly in 3 ways:
Distortion

By modifying the shape of images many artists have tried to give the illusion of the movement of things through space.
Repetition

Other artists represented, in a single image,
Different positions of things through time

Balla, Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash, 1912
Sequence

Others have represented movement as a *series of several moments*

Muybridge, Horse Galloping, 1878
Myron was interested in keeping the integrity and perfection of the human body and in representing movement without deforming nor fragmenting its image.
Myron, chose represent the **decisive moment**: Which implies what has happened and what is about to occur **moment of highest tension**: When the body of the athlete has completed its torsion And is about to **spring into action** in the opposite direction.
The statue itself invites the spectator to walk around and discover different perspectives: Freestanding Greek statuary has now reached a total relationship with space.
As Polykleitos, **Iktinos** defined in a treatise (lost) the recipe for the perfect building, and the Parthenon was its practical application:

- a **single unit** determined the length of various building parts (column diameter);

- a mathematical **relationship obtained harmony** of architectural parts to one another (the ratio 4:9 expresses the relationship of breadth to length and also the relationship of column diameter to space between columns).
Iktinos and Kallikrates, Parthenon (the temple of Athena Parthenos), Athens, 447-438 BC

- **Idealization**: his search of perfection went so far to “correct” the eye:

  There are adjustments to **compensate for optical illusions**

  (the **base** and **entablature** are slightly arched in order to appear perfectly straight)

  **corner columns** are thicker because they are surrounded by light: doing so, the viewer has the illusion that corner columns have the same diameter of other columns)

  Which order?

  It is the ultimate **Doric** temple
With some Ionic parts

The Parthenon is the most important building of the Acropolis complex, however, the second important temple, the Erechteion, is Ionic

Why this stylistic inconsistency?

The reason is political: After the Persian Wars (480BCE), Athens became the most powerful city of Greece

Through the Acropolis, Athens proclaimed itself the capital of all Greece and as the symbol of the triumph of democratic and enlightened Greek civilization over imperial despotism of Persia
Three Goddesses, from the East Pediment of the Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, ca. 438-432 BC, marble

Phidias

The sculptural decoration of the Parthenon was supervised by Phidias, the most famous sculptor of his time.

Like the pediments of most temples, those of the Parthenon were filled with sculptures secured to the wall with metal pins.

Unfortunately, much has been damaged or lost over the centuries.

The statues of the east pediment are the best preserved.

Three female figures: probably 3 goddesses [Hestia (goddess of hearth), Dione (one of Zeus many wives), and her daughter, Aphrodite (goddess of beauty)].
Three Goddesses, from the East Pediment of the Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, ca. 438-432 BC, marble

- The **interrelationship between figures** is dramatically new if compared to previous pediment decorations (Aegina)

- Their **poses**, filling the **triangular shape** of the pediment, are **natural**

- **Female form beneath** the fall of **draperies**

The clinging **fabric** (it seems to be **wet**) both **covers and reveals**, creating circular patterns rippling with a **life of their own** over torsos, breasts, and knees, and uniting the three figures into a single mass

**Female figures** were always **dressed** in classical Greece:

with Phidias’s device of “wet” drapery, artists **begun to hint boldly at the naked female body**
One of the most successful examples is the Nike adjusting her sandal. It represents a girl, one of the goddesses of victory (Nike), stooping to fasten a loosened sandal as she walks: she bends forward gracefully, causing her chiton to slip off one shoulder.

The figure has been mutilated; however, even without head or hands her body, under the delicate and light fabric, is one of the most discreetly erotic images in ancient art.

Moreover, the everyday gesture of this goddess, as opposed to the heroic acts of previous representations, introduces us to the more intimate worldview of the Late Classical period: normal feelings and non-heroic humanity are now preferred qualities than detached poses and dramatic gestures.
Praxiteles

The principles established by Phidias and Polykleitos in the mid-fifth century, were challenged and modified by artists such as Praxiteles and Lysippos in the fourth century. The crisis of those principles corresponded to a radical shift in the historical and political situation: in ca. 400 BC Athens lost its empire, in 338 was conquered by the Philip II, king of Macedonia, and then ruled by his son, Alexander the Great. Praxiteles’s Hermes and the infant Dionysos exemplifies this new sensibility: It represents the god Hermes holding the young Dionysos on his arm and playing with him.
On the one hand, if we compare it with the *Kouros*, we see the enormous distance Greek art have traveled in two hundred years:

In the work of Praxiteles, all traces of rigidity have gone. The god stands before us in a relaxed pose which does not impair his dignity.

On the other hand if we compare it with the *Doryphoros* of Polykleitos, we can see how Praxiteles systematically destroyed his predecessor’s canon of representation.
Hermes has a **smaller head** and a more youthful body than Polykleitos’s *Doryphoros*

His pose is **off-balanced** and **S-curved**, requiring the figure to lean on a post,

(while Polykleitos’s efforts aimed to the perfect balance)

The artist also created a **sensuous play of light** over the figure’s **surface**:

The gleam of the **smoothly finished flesh** contrasts with the **textured quality of the draperies and the hair**

Praxiteles is also responsible for the new **humanized treatment of the subject**:
He was above all famed for the **sweet and insinuating character** of his creations.

Dionysos is the first true representation of a **child** as a real child (rather than a small man) in the history of art.

Two gods, one a loving adult and the other a playful child, are caught in a moment of absorbed companionship: the focus is for the first time on the **tenderness of feeling** of an adult for a child.

The **interaction of the two across real space** (Hermes is showing Dionysos a grape) through gestures and glances creates an overall effect far different from that of the austere deities of the fifth century.
Praxiteles’s most celebrated work, whose praise was sung in many poems, represented goddess of Love, the youthful Aphrodite.

This is the first statue by a well-known Greek sculptor to depict a fully nude woman, and it set a new standard.

Although nudity among athletic young men was admired in Greek society, among women it had been considered a sign of low character.

The wide acceptance of female nudes in large statuary may be related to the gradual merging of the Greek concept of their goddess Aphrodite with some of the characteristics of the Phoenician goddess Astarte, who was nearly always shown nude in Near Eastern art.

Praxiteles represents Aphrodite in an everyday activity: she is preparing to take a bath, with a water jug and discarded clothing on her side.

The elongated and S-curved body are even more accentuated and sensual than in the Hermes.
With the **Apoxiomenos, Lysippos** further **destroyed** the tradition of Polykleitos:

He chose a **typically classical subject**: a nude male athlete

But instead of a figure actively engaged in a sport, in the heroic moment of action, when the crowd admires him

Lysippos depicted the athlete **alone**, **after** the performance, when he removes oil and dirt from his body with a scraping tool

Tall, slender, and with a small head, the figure has **proportions** (like Praxiteles) **that break Polykleitos canon**

But Lysippos’s figure is **more radical** than Praxiteles: its **weight** is even more **evenly distributed** between the engaged leg and the free one

---

Lysippos, Apoxiomenos (Scraper), Roman copy after a bronze original of ca. 330 BC, marble
The Doriphoros is contained within fairly simple, compact contours and oriented toward a center front viewer.

In contrast, the arms of the Apoxiomenos enter the viewer’s space involving the viewer in a more direct and human communication.

Moreover, the precariousness of the Apoxiomenos’s balance, is further underscored by his gesture:
Once he will be done with his right arm, he will “clean” his left arm:

Then, the whole balance will need to switch position!
(he’s almost making fun of Polykleitos stability)

If we compare this to the classical images of balanced figures, heroic gestures, and powerful athletes,

It becomes evident how in the late classical and Hellenistic Greece, the focus is on the instability of humans and their anti-heroic condition
Lysippos, Weary Herakles (Farnese Herakles), Roman copy from Rome, after a bronze original of ca. 320 BC.