

Fifth Century B.C. Greek Athletic Ideals as Represented in the Sculpture of Polykleitos

by
DAVID G. ROMANO
University of Oregon

Polykleitos of Argos was a fifth century B.C. Greek sculptor whose main interest was in the depiction of athletes. Polykleitos received commissions to create idealistic victor monuments in honor of victorious athletes at the Panhellenic festival sites, such as Olympia. An example of such a victor monument is the Diadoumenos, or the fillet binder.

After years of study, of athletes and the human form, Polykleitos became convinced that certain ideal proportions of the human body were intimately related to the ideal nature of man. In this connection, Polykleitos wrote a treatise which has come to be called the *Canon* of Polykleitos in which he enumerated the human proportions which he believed to be ideal. The Canon was based on the total commensurability of parts of the human body. We know, for example, that Polykleitos considered the ideal proportion of head to total body to be approximately one to seven.

The Doryphoros, a standing male athlete figure, was created by Polykleitos as the perfect example of his Canon of proportions. Understood in the Doryphoros were certain ethical and social values which were of great immediacy and importance to the fifth century Greeks: justice, order and loyalty to mention only a few. The human proportions, as described in Polykleitos' Canon, and as portrayed in the Doryphoros, became an ideal, a figure for the men and boys of the city-state to model after in the palaestrae and gymnasia. The Doryphoros represented the citizen-soldier-athlete, a product of harmonious and balanced physical and intellectual training who was prepared to defend his city-state and who was capable of contributing to the society of which he was a member.

The Doryphoros, therefore, was not only the Greek physical and aesthetic ideal but was also the embodiment of several important Greek cultural ideals including *arete*, *agòn*, *sophrosýne* and *kalòs kai agathos*.

Both the Diadoumenos and the Doryphoros were idealized representations of the citizen-soldier-athlete of the mid fifth century B.C. whose civic and cultural qualities were inherent in their physical proportions.
