

REMEMBERING HISTORY

Greek Athletic Sculpture and the Emergence of Realism in Greek Art

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The popularity of athletic competition is a well-known phenomenon from antiquity and the enthusiasm for sport seems to have been extraordinarily keen during the classical period. It is at this time that interest in athletics appears to have spawned an important genre in Greek art—that of athletic sculpture. Correspondingly, Greek athletic sculpture, that is, athletic monuments dedicated by victorious athletes or depictions of athletes, quite fittingly becomes the primary vehicle for the representation of the male body in Greek art. Within the corpus of Greek sculpture, it is commonly acknowledged that the realistic treatment of the human body becomes evident during the Hellenistic age, whereas terms such as naturalism and idealism attend the artistic output of the earlier classical period. However, a closer examination of athletic sculpture produced during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. indicates that Greek sculptors admitted much anatomical specificity into their work.

Anatomical specificity in Greek athletic sculpture which dates to the classical period is evident in three distinct areas. First, athletic sculptural representations are specific according to the age of the competitor. Sculptors are keen to record those physical characteristics which are appropriate for different age classes of athletes. Anatomically, youthful athletes are represented in ways different from adolescent competitors, and, again, different from older, more mature athletes. We know from ancient sources that different age classes of athletes participated in panhellenic competition, and this was reflected in contemporary sculpture whereby anatomical features specific to the competitor's age were recorded. Specificity is also evident in a second way; athletes were represented in ways which were distinctive to their contest or event. By the time of the early 4th century B.C., adult male athletes were competing in twelve different events, whereas their youthful counterparts were engaged in three different contests in panhellenic competition. Analysis of existing sculpture, examination of the footing marks on preserved statue bases, and a careful reading of ancient descriptions of athletic statues informs us that Greek sculptors had developed an extensive visual vocabulary which included a range of separate gestures, poses, and attributes whereby they could distinguish an athlete's event. Distinctive poses and gestures were also accompanied by correct



The hat symbolizes the inauguration of new NASSH President, Robert K. Barney.

anatomical representations of different muscle groups and body parts. Specificity was also conveyed in a third way; various athletic physiques were correctly rendered in sculpture. Ancient sources record that during the classical period, different training regimens and the introduction of new diets resulted in a diversification of athletic body builds. Also at this time, athletes began to specialize in single events and to train their bodies for specific competition. Contemporary sculpture very accurately reflected physiques which were characteristic for particular athletic contests.

The emergence of anatomical specificity in athletic sculpture indicates that during the classical period, sculptors had to have been aware of current practices and developments in Greek athletics. Moreover, the correct and accurate representation of anatomical features also suggests that sculptors were acquainted with contemporary philosophical and medical issues regarding the workings of the human body.