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The Iconography of Hellenistic Bronzes

Jan BAŽANT

In describing artistic development, far greater emphasis is usually given to iconography in chapters on Hellenism than in previous artistic epochs, where a stylistic analysis unequivocally prevails. However, not a single comprehensive study has been devoted to genre scenes—and yet for bronze statuettes of this period this subject is most characteristic apart from portrait statuettes¹. The origin and purpose of these statuettes depicting older or ill people, children, foreigners, actors and the city poor has not been satisfactorily explained as yet.

At first it was attributed to the specific atmosphere of Alexandria where these statuettes were said to have been exclusively produced². But by the thirties, this method of interpretation was generally abandoned—because far too many such depictions were found in other Hellenistic towns as well³. Anthropological approach, in 1903 the outstanding exception, was proposed by Wace: the majority of Hellenistic grotesques were according to him used as charms against Evil Eye⁴. More recent views of the Hellenistic genre can be basically divided into following main trends. This new, typical Hellenistic theme is explained as the result of art historical development: having exhausted all themes of previous epochs, the artist was compelled to seek new sources of inspiration⁵. Other researchers emphasize the results of intellectual development: in Hellenistic thinking there was a sharp rise in interest in the surrounding world and the individuality of its separate aspects first began to be appreciated for what they were⁶. Another manner of interpretation is based on the influence of economic development of society on artistic creation: according to Hauser, new art patrons, Hellenistic "bourgeoisie", brought with them the naturalistic genre⁷; others are more cautious in their statements, speaking only of a rise in luxury in housing architecture⁸, or about the laicization of arts under Hellenism⁹.

Of course, it can be assumed that during the emergence of the Hellenistic genre all the above-mentioned factors were involved. However, I should like to call attention also to the close mutual relationship, on the one hand, between the genre and portrait statuettes and, on the other, to the relationship of both these groups to the statuettes of young men and women—to an iconographical theme which in the production of bronze statuettes was pre-eminent in previous centuries.

In Archaic times bronze statuettes of a young man or woman might be placed in temple as sacrificial gift and the giver might have considered it an idealized depiction of himself, just as was its monumental counterpart¹⁰. Kouros or kore embodied the civilian ideal of the Archaic Greek polis and thus, in fact, depicted each of its members. After the mid-5th century B.C. the production of bronze statuettes sharply declined and no other new theme ever had such striking success. A revival came only in the 3rd century B.C., but the structure of the iconography had radically changed—the bronze statuettes of a young man or woman, for whom a mythological, genre or portrait explanation would not come into consideration, now became rare. The iconographical type of young man or woman receded into the shadow of portrait and, mainly, genre statuettes. The older type, as was mentioned above, embodied not only the picture of a Greek civilian ideal but represented also the customer, or if you like the patron. He or she could say about it—this admiration worthy of a statuette which I dedicated to the temple/or which adorns my precious tableware or mirror/is me.

And what was the case with Hellenistic portrait or genre statuettes? What was the

relationship of these new themes to the one they replaced? Let us take a look first at the genre scenes¹¹. The one who bought the bronze statuette of a foreigner—whether of a black man¹² or of a Gaul¹³—might have rightly considered their models as his opposite number. In Greek thinking in the 4th century B.C. the difference between these Barbarians and Greeks was still so great that it might have stood comparison with the difference between people and animals¹⁴. The identification with patron could certainly not have come into consideration also with statuettes representing sick people, or the mentally ill and cripples¹⁵. Certain cripples might have perhaps represented typical figures of popular farce and in the iconography of Hellenistic bronzes masked actors, mimes, male and female dancers played an outstanding role¹⁶. All these figures, however, represented the professional artist who belonged to the *banausoi*, the inferior citizens living from physical labour. Various statuettes of sellers and different street types belong to this group too. The last group of genre statuettes is made up of children and old people. In Ancient Greece, just as today, people generally believe that the child has no reason at birth. In Greek thought this put the child on the level of animals; in old age man again approached this stage with the gradual weakening and decline of his mental faculties¹⁷.

In all these genre figures in Hellenistic bronze statuettes something was missing, their living models lacked something and this prevented the patron from Greek or Graecized milieu from identification with them. The one who could buy these statuettes no doubt was able to regard their living examples with arrogance; they were creatures of a lower order—they did not, it is true, belong to the kingdom of dumb animals, but they also did not belong among their equal fellow-citizens.

The situation was just the opposite with the second main group of Hellenistic bronzes—the portrait statuettes. This was depiction of beings who not only lacked nothing, but quite contrary—the Hellenistic rulers¹⁸, the famous politicians¹⁹ and philosophers²⁰ stood far above those who bought their statuettes. True, they were mortals, but only the kind who by their political power or intellectual ability were head and shoulders above their fellow-citizens. If we were to put genre figures somewhere between the patron and animals, then portrait statuettes could be placed somewhere between the patron and the gods. From the stylistic aspect these portrait statuettes can be regarded as the successor to the bronze statuettes of young men and women of the Archaic and Classical eras—in both instances we are speaking of a more or less static figure. This shows that the retreat of older iconography was not caused by a stylistic development, which is to say by efforts to achieve more dramatic poses or the like.

GODS	—			Portrait statuettes of rulers and thinkers
PATRON	Youth or girl	—		Man or woman sacrificing
	—			Genre figures of popular and grotesque types
ANIMALS	Archaic and Classical	Hellenistic	Roman	

bronze statuettes

Lysistratos, the brother of Lysippos, was allegedly the first to depict people in their real appearance²¹. In the bronze statuettes of the Hellenistic epoch, however, this applies only to portraits of personalities who stood high above the level of those who actually bought the statuettes. We also find the depiction of creatures who were far below their level, not as portraits, but in the form of settled types. However, the actual buyer—the patron—in contrast to preceding epochs—cannot be found. The old Archaic type—kouros and kore—still were seen here and there in some statuettes of athletes²², warriors²³ or women²⁴, but its validity for the society as a whole was definitively lost. No new type to replace it appeared in Greek art.

We come across bronze statuettes showing the patron in the following epoch, in Roman art; here it can probably be seen in numerous statuettes depicting the sacrificing Roman man or woman, whose series begins in the 1st century A.D.²⁵. If these figures really represent the free Romans, then in the iconography of ancient bronze statuettes, after a gap of three centuries, there reappeared a theme with which the owner of these statuettes could fully identify.

But let us go back to the Hellenistic genre. Its development was partially the result of the change of function of bronze statuettes, for now they were no longer sacrifices to the gods but served foremost as an artistic item for the pleasure of their owner and for him to display²⁶. Even more important—in my opinion—was the loss of a valid ideal for the whole of society. The new iconography could be regarded as a logical result of these changes. The old ideal—the type of the youth and young maiden—had lost its attraction for artists; their patrons as a whole could no longer identify with it. The return in small bronze statuettes to the negative form of this ideal—to the genre scenes and portrait statuettes, could be the artist's reaction to this new situation.

Notes

¹ E.g. J. Charbonneaux, *Greek Bronzes* (1962) 120.

² E.g. G. Dickins, *Hellenistic Sculpture* (1920) 27; K.A. Neugebauer, *Antike Bronzestatuetten* (1921) 88; C. Picard, *Sculpture antique* 2 (1926) 294-295. For the first time: T. Schreiber, *MDAI(A)* 10, 1885, 390-394, and certainly not for the last time: Charbonneaux *op. c.* 127, or D.G. Mitten, in: D.G. Mitten - S.F. Doeringer, *Master Bronzes from Classical World* (1967) 23.

³ Cf. A.J.B. Wace, *ABSA* 9, 1902-1903, 225-229, 241; G.M.A. Richter, *Three Critical Periods in Greek Sculpture* (1951) 31f.

⁴ A.J.B. Wace, *Grotesques and the Evil Eye*, *ABSA* 10, 1903-1904, 109-114.

⁵ E.g. J.D. Beazley - B. Ashmole, *Greek Sculpture and Painting* (1932) 68-69; J. Charbonneaux, in: J. Charbonneaux - R. Martin - F. Villard, *Hellenistic Art* (1973) 248.

⁶ E.g. M. Bieber, *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age* (1955) 5; Richter *op. c.* (*supra* n. 3) 25-26, 32.

⁷ A. Hauser, *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur* (1973) 109.

⁸ A.W. Lawrence, *Later Greek Sculpture and its Influence on East and West* (1927) 9.

⁹ R. Bianchi Bandinelli, in: *EAA* 3 (1960) 810.

¹⁰ Cf. G.M.A. Richter, *Kouros*³ (1970) and *Korai* (1968); L.A. Schneider, *Zur sozialen Bedeutung der archaischen Korestatuen* (1975); V. Zinserling, *Zum Bedeutungsgehalt des archaischen Kuros*, *Eirene* 13, 1975, 19-33; J. Ducat, *Fonction de la statue dans la Grèce archaïque: kouros et kolossos*, *BCH* 100, 1976, 239-251.

¹¹ Cf. E. Pottier, in: E. Pottier - S. Reinach, *La nécropole de Myrina* (1887) 483-488; W. Lamb, *Greek and Roman Bronzes* (1929) 198-204.

¹² G.H. Beardsley, *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization* (1929) 92-100; cf. F.M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970).

¹³ P. Bieńkowski, *Les Celtes dans les arts mineurs gréco-romains* (1928) 1-79.

¹⁴ Isokr. 15, 293; cf. H.C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (1965) 69.

¹⁵ Wace *op. c.* (*supra* n. 4) 105-107; H. Hoffman, *AA* 1960, 122, n. 35, fig. 54-56.

¹⁶ T.B.L. Webster, *Monuments Illustrating New Comedy*² (1969); for a mime see: H. Goldman, *AJA* 47, 1943, 22-34.

¹⁷ Cf. M. Pohlenz, *Die Stoa* (1948) 147; K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (1974) 102.

¹⁸ E.g. G.M.A. Richter, *The Portraits of the Greeks* (1965) 272, fig. 1890-1891; 278, fig. 1972; 256, fig. 1743; 275, fig. 1931.

¹⁹ E.g. *ibid.* 104, fig. 446-447; 104, fig. 445.

²⁰ E.g. *ibid.* 176; 185 c; 222 a, fig. 1511-1512; 199, fig. 1220.

²¹ Plin., *nat.* 35, 153.

²² E.g. Mitten - Doeringer *op. c.* (*supra* n. 2) nr. 133; K.A. Neugebauer, *Die griechischen Bronzen der klassischen Zeit und des Hellenismus* (1951) nr. 78; kouros: D.K. Hill, *Catalogue of Classical Bronze Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery* (1949) nr. 176.

²³ E.g. Bieber *op. c.* (*supra* n. 6) fig. 687.

²⁴ E.g. J. Babelon, *Choix de bronzes de la collection Caylus* (1928) nr. 20.

²⁵ Cf. M. Bieber, *Die antiken Skulpturen und Bronzen in Cassel* (1915) nr. 225; Lamb *op. c.* (*supra* n. 11) 218-219; I. Ryberg, *MAAR* 22, 1955, 53f.; for the Etruscan prototypes of these statuettes see E.H. Richardson, *MAAR* 21, 1953, 110.

²⁶ Cf. Charbonneaux *op. c.* (*supra* n. 1) 117.