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## Gods, Goddesses & Mortals for the 21st Century: the Reinstallation of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts Collection of Ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art

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# Gods, Goddesses, and Mortals for the 21st Century: The Reinstallation of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts Collection of Ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art

BARBARA KELLUM

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On 18 December 2021, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) unveiled five newly revitalized galleries for nearly 550 objects from their renowned collection of Greek and Roman art.<sup>1</sup> The new installations include one featuring Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses (“Living with the Gods”) and others devoted to the Byzantine Empire, Early Greek art (“The Making of Ancient Greece”), Roman portraiture, and a gallery for rotating exhibits exploring how 20th- and 21st-century artists have interacted with the art of the ancient Mediterranean. These galleries join those that have already been refurbished: the interactive ancient coin room (2012); the three-themed room featuring collections relating to the Homeric epics, to Dionysus and the symposium, and to the ancient theater (2014); and the “Daily Life in Ancient Greece” gallery (2017).<sup>2</sup> Still to be realized are a gallery for the Etruscan works and one for Roman villa culture, which await additional fundraising. This is an expensive process, as the MFA is taking the environmental high road in renovating existing spaces rather than constructing yet another new wing. The now temperature-controlled main rooms with their high ceilings and skylights make for an optimal viewing ambience, although the overall footprint, with its two long halls, must have presented some curatorial challenges.

The curatorial team—Christine Kondoleon, George D. and Margo Behrakis Chair of the Art of Ancient Greece and Rome; Phoebe Segal, Mary Bryce Comstock Curator; and Laure Marest, Cornelius and Emily Vermeule Assistant Curator—are to be congratulated for their success in reorganizing and reconceptualizing the way in which the collection is displayed. They maintained, throughout, the thought-provoking juxtaposition of objects in a variety of media and from different chronological periods and geographies,

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the objects mentioned in this museum review were acquired after 30 December 1973, and there is no documentation of the object before that date or evidence that the object was legally exported from the country of origin. In light of the reviewer’s discussion of how the museum did or did not engage with issues of provenance or the previous scholarly publication of these objects, editorial discretion was exercised to let these mentions stand.

<sup>2</sup> Stansbury-O’Donnell 2019.



FIG. 1. “Living with the Gods” gallery, the George D. and Margo Behrakis Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The colossal “Juno” stands at the center of the room.

as well as augmenting these with state-of-the-art digital installations that enhance viewer experience.

#### LIVING WITH THE GODS

The two vitrines in the rotunda that flank the entry to the gallery of gods and goddesses make it clear that ancient art can speak to concerns of contemporary viewers. One features a statuette of the Hanging Marsyas<sup>3</sup> and an Athena and Marsyas bell krater<sup>4</sup> with a label emphasizing the theme of resistance to authority, while the other contains a statuette of a betrousered captive barbarian<sup>5</sup> with a label quoting Toni Morrison on visualizing others. The gallery itself revolves around the 13-foot-high Muse with the Head of Juno<sup>6</sup>—the largest Roman statue in the United States—brought in through the skylight in the roof in 2012 when the MFA transported it from the garden of an estate near Brookline, Massachusetts (fig. 1). When the “Juno”

first arrived, the gallery was filled with ancient Egyptian sculpture, which was then moved to the first floor. This made both collections more coherent, as the ancient Egyptian collection is now together on the first floor and the Greek and Roman on the second. In the new gallery, the “Juno” is joined by some of the MFA’s most celebrated Graeco-Roman objects, including a colossal seated statue of a woman, perhaps a muse from Amiternum;<sup>7</sup> a head of Aphrodite (the Bartlett Head);<sup>8</sup> a bronze statue of Hercules whose extended hand once held a drinking cup;<sup>9</sup> the three-sided relief known as the Boston Throne;<sup>10</sup> and the Triumph of Dionysus sarcophagus.<sup>11</sup> These are nestled among a variety of *kleinkunst*, ritual objects, and a select range of Greek vases. The vases especially help bring the narratives of the gods to life: from the famed bell krater with Artemis slaying Aktaion by the

<sup>3</sup>MFA 01.8195.

<sup>4</sup>MFA 00.348.

<sup>5</sup>MFA 2000.1053.

<sup>6</sup>MFA 2011.75.

<sup>7</sup>MFA 99.340.

<sup>8</sup>MFA 03.743.

<sup>9</sup>MFA 95.76.

<sup>10</sup>MFA 08.205.

<sup>11</sup>MFA 1972.650.

Pan Painter<sup>12</sup> to the lesser-known but equally illuminating lekythos with the birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus by the Alkimachos Painter.<sup>13</sup> The sheer quantity of now-white marble in this room makes it a perfect venue for the digital exploration of “The Myth of Classical Whiteness,” restoring color to the Roman era Athena Parthenos<sup>14</sup> from the traces of paint that can still be detected on its surface (fig. 2). The video is quite explicit in stating that “white” as a racial concept did not exist in antiquity, so again this is framed in relation to contemporary issues, in this case issues around attempting to reclaim the classical world from the clutches of white supremacists.

The area behind the statue of “Juno” has one corner devoted to mystery cults and a wall of cabinetry meant to evoke outdoor shrines like that of Zeus Hypsistos on the Pnyx at Athens pictured opposite it. The compartments in the cabinet allow for intimate encounters with the individual votives, from one shaped like female genitalia<sup>15</sup> to one in the form of a dove.<sup>16</sup> These are accompanied by a soundscape featuring birdsong and incantations and a poem read in Greek and in English (although perhaps because of the high ceiling it is often almost inaudible). In contrast to the grandeur of the main gallery, this space seems somewhat marginalized.

#### THE GLORY OF BYZANTIUM

Exiting from this far end of the gods and goddesses gallery, one discovers what is, in my view, the crown jewel of the new installations: the gallery of the Byzantine Empire (fig. 3). Stepping into this space is like entering into another world: it is a small room where, beneath a facsimile of a golden dome, reminiscent of the central floorplan of Eastern churches, the visitor encounters the breathtaking 10-foot-wide 15th-century Monopoli altarpiece of the Virgin and Child with Saints in the tradition of Byzantine icons.<sup>17</sup> The ambient light is low, but the objects in the spot-lit cases around the room glisten with gold, silver, and other precious materials. There is African red slip ware, with Orpheus and the animals on one plate<sup>18</sup> and the



FIG. 2. Close-up of Athena Parthenos (acq. 1980; see supra n. 1) juxtaposed with the “Myth of Classical Whiteness” video restoring the color to the Roman-era statue, in the “Living with the Gods” gallery.

Sacrifice of Isaac on the next,<sup>19</sup> funerary stelae from Christian Egypt, lamps of all materials, liturgical vessels, gemstones, coins, textiles, mosaics, and a wide selection of luxury goods, as well as everything from portraits to steelyard weights. In this space, the soundscape of a selection of Greek Orthodox hymns adds yet one more sensory level to the experience.

One simple but dramatic device for encouraging visitors to venture into the Byzantine gallery should also be noted: the striking decision to position near the entry a male portrait head from the 4th–5th century CE<sup>20</sup> so that the first thing the viewer sees is the back of his head. Like the visitor, the head appears to be viewing the altarpiece across the room, but so accustomed are we to the frontal presentation of sculpture that the

<sup>12</sup>MFA 10.185.

<sup>13</sup>MFA 95.39.

<sup>14</sup>MFA 1980.196.

<sup>15</sup>MFA RES.08.34b.

<sup>16</sup>MFA 88.363.

<sup>17</sup>MFA 37.410.1–7.

<sup>18</sup>MFA 1981.658.

<sup>19</sup>MFA 1989.690.

<sup>20</sup>MFA 1997.223.



FIG. 3. Byzantine Empire gallery.

urge to walk around the case to see him face to face is irresistible. Much the same visual strategy is employed in the long hallway gallery of Greek and Roman sculpture which leads from the Byzantine gallery toward first the “Daily Life in Ancient Greece” gallery and then to “The Making of Ancient Greece.” Here, on one side of the hall, in cases containing bronze statue fragments, it is the backside of the lower torso of a youth<sup>21</sup> that beckons the viewer, while farther down the hall an over-life-sized woman from a Greek funerary monument<sup>22</sup> turns her back on the viewer as she looks toward the entry to “Daily Life in Ancient Greece.” Not to be missed along the way are the sculptures that line the opposite wall where more of the museum’s renowned works are on display, including the head of a goddess (the Chios Head)<sup>23</sup> beloved by the sculptor Rodin (1840–1917) and a sinuous torso of a youth.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> MFA 2003.47.

<sup>22</sup> MFA 98.642.

<sup>23</sup> MFA 10.70.

<sup>24</sup> MFA 22.593.

#### THE MAKING OF ANCIENT GREECE

The Early Greek art gallery is beautifully realized, with the Herakles and Centaurs relief sculpture for the architrave of the temple of Athena at Assos<sup>25</sup> raised high to suggest its placement on the building (fig. 4), and with a wonderful large-screen projection of the site (including a resident feline) setting the scene. The diminutive but powerful Mantiklos “Apollo”<sup>26</sup> is also given pride of place at the front of the gallery and near the stunning bilingual amphora with Herakles Driving a Bull to Sacrifice, black-figure Side A by the Lysippides Painter, and red-figure Side B by the Andokides Painter.<sup>27</sup> The amphora is the subject of an animated short displayed next to it entitled “Figures in Red,” which does a superb job of exploring the techniques of Athenian vase painting in an informative and entertaining fashion. Other highlights include a magnificent seated-lion funerary marker<sup>28</sup> and a sarcophagus rim

<sup>25</sup> MFA 84.67.

<sup>26</sup> MFA 03.997.

<sup>27</sup> MFA 99.538.

<sup>28</sup> MFA 97.289.



FIG. 4. “The Making of Ancient Greece” gallery.

from Klazomenai with a poignant scene of a couple and their three children saying farewell to a young warrior mounting a chariot.<sup>29</sup>

Opening off the Early Greek gallery is the space reserved for rotating exhibits of modern artists whose work reflects on the art of the ancient Mediterranean. The first of these—five sculptures and a painting by Cy Twombly (1928–2011)—provides a perfect example of the rich interplay between past and present that such a space allows. Twombly, an art student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from 1947 to 1948, would have known some of the ancient artworks currently on display. He spent most of his adult life in Italy, where Greek and Roman art and sites continued to be an important source of inspiration in his work. The wall text and a double-sided gallery handout make the connections clear for viewers.

#### ROMAN PORTRAITURE

The last of the new galleries to open (the lighting was still a work in progress when I first visited in

March 2022) is the Roman portrait gallery (fig. 5). Like the gods and goddesses gallery, it opens off the rotunda and consists of a long hallway with a red tile floor, presumably a remnant from some earlier phase of the museum’s history. Taking their cue from the tile floor, the designers installed scrims that, though they are a different shade of red, set off the marble sculpture well. The center of the gallery is anchored by two of the collection’s mainstays: on one side of the scrim a cuirassed torso whose breastplate sports a Minerva flanked by Victories, likely once a part of a portrait statue of the emperor Domitian,<sup>30</sup> and on the other the portrait statue of a priestess burning incense.<sup>31</sup> Clustered around these are portraits tracing women’s hairstyles, and imperial and private portraits across a wide chronological spectrum arranged in familial and conversational groupings. The myth section attempts to pair the fragmentary statue of Commodus as the infant Hercules killing snakes<sup>32</sup> with an under-life-sized head wearing a crown of poplar leaves that is identified

<sup>29</sup> MFA 04.285.

<sup>30</sup> MFA 99.346.

<sup>31</sup> MFA 34.113.

<sup>32</sup> MFA 1971.394.



FIG. 5. Roman portraiture gallery.

as a portrait of Domitian based on two rows of curls.<sup>33</sup> The facial features, however, bear no resemblance to those of Domitian, and the lightly incised pupils suggest this idealized head is of a later date. Arguably the strongest section is that devoted to funerary commemoration, as here the MFA possesses some significant examples, including the relief of Petronia Hedone and her son<sup>34</sup> and the solemn Gessii relief.<sup>35</sup>

At the far end of the portrait gallery there is a video installation of several college students commenting on their experience of ancient cultures and their relevance today. Like the other digital displays, this is very professionally produced, and having those contemporary talking heads present in the portrait hall makes the gallery experience all the more lively. Less successful, however, is the installation as the very last work in the portrait gallery: the minimalist *Senza titolo* by Greek-Italian artist Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017) consisting of a steel beam and two worn leather shoes. The label does explain that this is a self-portrait, and it is clearly

intended as a parallel to the new gallery for modern art that adjoins that for ancient Greek art. Nonetheless, without more signage explaining why this is included, it remains a somewhat bewildering addition for visitors.

Since the Roman portrait gallery features primarily works in marble, it is here that it becomes most apparent that the MFA has tested all the marble objects on display and names the type of marble in each of the labels. This can be useful information for an understanding of materials sourcing and the stages of artistic production, although it does not provide any insight into when the sculpture was made, by whom, and for what function. The labels are brief; usually well under the 150-word-or-less museum standard. Additional information is available on the museum's website for most objects, through the inventory number, including the circumstances of purchase. Given the importance of provenance in contemporary discussions of ancient objects,<sup>36</sup> though, it would have been better if those sculptures that do have a secure archaeological

<sup>33</sup> MFA 1978.227.

<sup>34</sup> MFA 99.348.

<sup>35</sup> MFA 37.100.

<sup>36</sup> Marlowe 2013.

context—like the statue of the priestess<sup>37</sup> or the portraits of a man and a girl from the same tomb on the Via Flaminia<sup>38</sup>—could be highlighted as such in their labels. Of course, that would risk revealing all those that do not come from a secure archaeological context—a problem the museum deftly alludes to by including in the gods and goddesses room a large-scale historical photograph of the excavations at Kalapodi as a backdrop for a vitrine of votives. The label there notes that while the objects in the case are not from controlled excavations like those at Kalapodi, they are nevertheless similar to the votives in the photograph. This is a classic example of a strategy Roland Barthes describes in his *Mythologies* as an inoculation—admitting a little “evil” (a case of unprovenanced votives) to deflect attention from a more systemic problem.<sup>39</sup> For it is a fact that the MFA’s collection—like that of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and most of the rest of the world’s great collections of Graeco-Roman antiquities—has only a handful of objects from identifiable archaeological contexts. Especially for the MFA and the Met, that is in part because vast numbers of their antiquities were acquired at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, when the collections were first established and when a “said to be from . . .” provenance was more than sufficient.

A HISTORY OF COLLECTING AT THE MFA:  
THE ELUSIVE BUT EVER-PRESENT EDWARD  
PERRY WARREN

It seems to me that the MFA has missed an opportunity here to take the lead in revealing to the public how their amazing collection came to be. Their splendid 2011–12 exhibition *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, which celebrated the depth and breadth of the erotic art in the collection and touted the role of the legendary collector Edward Perry Warren (1860–1928) for his generosity to his hometown museum, suggested that they were ready to tell this tale in full. Curiously, however, in the new galleries the erotic art has all but disappeared (more on that below) and Warren is mentioned only on the MFA website, in the acquisition notes on the web pages for the individual objects. Nevertheless, Edward Perry Warren was far more than

a wealthy collector of erotica and a generous benefactor of the museum. From 1895 through the 1920s, he was the chief purchasing agent of classical art for the MFA, as his soulmate and sometime romantic partner John Marshall (1860–1928) was for the Met. Warren and Marshall, both avid collectors themselves, formed a circle of like-minded men who gathered at their home, Lewes House in Sussex, England. This group included the young John D. Beazley (1885–1970), who pioneered the classification of Attic vases by artistic style. Both Warren and Marshall became early advocates of the importance of collecting Greek vases, overcoming the initial objections of American museum boards, who doubted their value. Warren sold or gave more than 500 Greek vases and fragments to the MFA,<sup>40</sup> and together Warren and Marshall sold or donated more than 4,000 classical pieces to the MFA.<sup>41</sup> To establish some notion of Warren’s overall impact on the collection to this day, I note that out of the 39 works of ancient art mentioned in this review, Warren acquired 23 of them, including the Bartlett Head, the Chios Head, the Mantiklos “Apollo,” and the Boston Throne, as well as other renowned pieces. For him, building the MFA’s classical collection was personal as well as political: he claimed it was “hate of Boston which made me work for Boston. . . . The collection was my plea against that in Boston which contradicted my (pagan) love.”<sup>42</sup> Warren was one of the first to identify Greek vases on which an older male reaches down to caress a youth’s genitals,<sup>43</sup> so it is perhaps no surprise that the MFA has some exceptionally fine examples: a fragment by Makron<sup>44</sup> and a two-handled cup with pederastic courtship scenes.<sup>45</sup> The latter was on view in the 2011 Aphrodite exhibition but is no longer on display. Such scenes may be difficult to reconcile with the “founding concepts of democracy, civic leadership, and religious community” for which the MFA’s director Michael Teitelbaum praised the new galleries in a press release,<sup>46</sup> but they were undeniably a part of ancient

<sup>40</sup> Murley 2012, 202 n. 744.

<sup>41</sup> Grove 2015, 218.

<sup>42</sup> Burdett and Goddard 1941, 146.

<sup>43</sup> Grove 2015, 229.

<sup>44</sup> MFA RES 08.31e.

<sup>45</sup> MFA 08.292.

<sup>46</sup> MFA Boston, *MFA Boston Unveils Five Newly Transformed Galleries for Art of Ancient Greece, Rome and the Byzantine Empire*, 1 December 2021; [www.mfa.org/press-release/art-of-ancient-greece-rome-and-the-byzantine-empire](http://www.mfa.org/press-release/art-of-ancient-greece-rome-and-the-byzantine-empire).

<sup>37</sup> MFA 34.133; Farinelli and Gabrici 1902.

<sup>38</sup> MFA 96.699 and 96.697; Lanciani 1902, 28; Venier 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Barthes 1957.



Greek life. Their absence has already been noted by queer commentator Erin L. Thompson, who reports that the only sex scene now on view is a kylix which features a coupling between a man and a woman<sup>47</sup> in the Dionysus and symposium section.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond Warren and Marshall's proclivities as collectors, another aspect of their impact on the antiquities trade that is seldom discussed is just how much of the market they commanded as the buyers for the MFA and the Met. Both men were highly skilled connoisseurs, but of course it was inevitable that a few forgeries were likely to be a part of the mix. For John Marshall, it was over-life-sized black terracotta Etruscan warriors that he acquired for the Met between 1915 and 1921 and which remained on display until a 1960 chemical analysis revealed the truth. In the 1990s, Warren's name became forever attached to a Roman silver cup featuring two men having anal sex on one side and a coupling between a man and a *puer delicatus* (beautiful slave boy) on the other. The cup was offered to the MFA in 1921, but they ultimately declined it.<sup>49</sup> Warren dubbed it his "Holy Grail" and some scholars—including this reviewer<sup>50</sup>—posit that it was a supposed antiquity custom-made to please Warren himself, as it featured the two kinds of homoerotic lovemaking to which he devoted his three-volume life work, *A Defence of Uranian Love*. Doubts notwithstanding, however, the British Museum purchased the Warren Cup in 1999 for £1.8 million.

In the MFA collection, Romanists have often questioned the neoclassical perfection of the unique portrait of Augustus,<sup>51</sup> with its nondefacing pseudo-repairs, which Warren purchased from the heirs of Cardinal Antonio Despuig y Demeto.<sup>52</sup> The cardinal's 18th-century collection contained both restored antiquities and works *all'antica*, including other famous portraits whose authenticity has been questioned.<sup>53</sup> But the pristine beauty of the Augustus has made it a curator favorite. This head graced both the front and back covers of Mary Comstock and Cornelius Vermeule's 1978 *Sculpture in Stone* catalogue, and it is the

first face you see when you enter the new Roman portrait gallery. The MFA's Forbes Augustus<sup>54</sup> would be a more trustworthy centerpiece but, root-marked as it is, it is now relegated to the Roman coin room. Were they to make the switch, featuring the beautifully carved but stained Forbes Augustus would be one more step in undermining the aesthetics of "pure" whiteness and the broader culturally fraught notion of "perfection" that continues to haunt the study of classical sculpture.

Certainly the most controversial of Warren's MFA acquisitions, however, is the three-sided relief known as the Boston Throne.<sup>55</sup> As early as 1911 scholars expressed reservations about the authenticity of this sculpture, and the debate continues to this day with Norwegian scholar Siri Sande arguing that the Boston Throne, the Ludovisi Throne, and the Warren Cup were all created in the late 19th century.<sup>56</sup> And yet there is no mention whatsoever of more than a century of debate in the label or on the website. This is part of a disconcerting trend at both the MFA and the Met already identified by H. Alan Shapiro in his 2012 review of the Aphrodite exhibition and its catalogue: no references to scholarly literature other than MFA publications are to be found on the website.<sup>57</sup> This certainly allows the museum to maintain the illusion of the unassailable purity of their collection, but it also denies many of these objects their rich and sometimes controversial histories.

Like most major museums, the MFA has maintained a strict code of silence about the origins of their Greek and Roman collection and the lack of archaeological context for most of its pieces. Nonetheless, the museum has taken the bold step of recording the acquisition information for individual objects on the website, including sometimes even the price Warren paid. They also document the museum's later interactions with dealers like the Royal Athena Galleries, with its checkered reputation for trading in forged or looted material.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, for one of its newest acquisitions—the colossal statue of "Juno" (see fig. 1)—Christine Kondoleon has written a small book delving

<sup>47</sup> MFA 1970.233.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Grove 2015, 225.

<sup>50</sup> Kellum 1999.

<sup>51</sup> MFA 99.344.

<sup>52</sup> Tronchin 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Johansen 1978; 2003.

<sup>54</sup> MFA 06.1873.

<sup>55</sup> MFA 08.205. For a good overview: Murley 2012, 330–34. Even for scholars who consider the Boston Throne ancient, the date is still debated; see Moltesen, 2012, 112.

<sup>56</sup> Sande 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Shapiro 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Tsirogiannis 2020.

into the collection history of the piece, relating it to a group of other colossal statues and plausibly arguing that they together constituted a group of Apollo and the Muses that may have once graced the Theater of Pompey in Augustan Rome.<sup>59</sup> The book includes a report on the conservation of the statue and the modern restoration of the nose and lips of the Juno head, as well as a brief bibliography. The label and the website entry are culled from this work and are more engaging for it. In future, if similar small volumes—or some digital equivalent—could be provided for even a handful of the museum’s early acquisitions, this could enrich the viewer experience of diverse audiences, intriguing them with tales of collecting and the art market, of the debates these pieces have inspired, and the puzzle pieces about them that have yet to fall into place. The more visitors come to realize these objects are not static but are ever-shifting in meaning, the more they will want to return to this new and spectacular reenvisioning of the Greek and Roman collection, which, to paraphrase the Augustan poet Horace (*Ars P.* 365), will then in years to come please not just once, but “ten times called for, will always please.”

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<sup>59</sup>Kondoleon 2021.