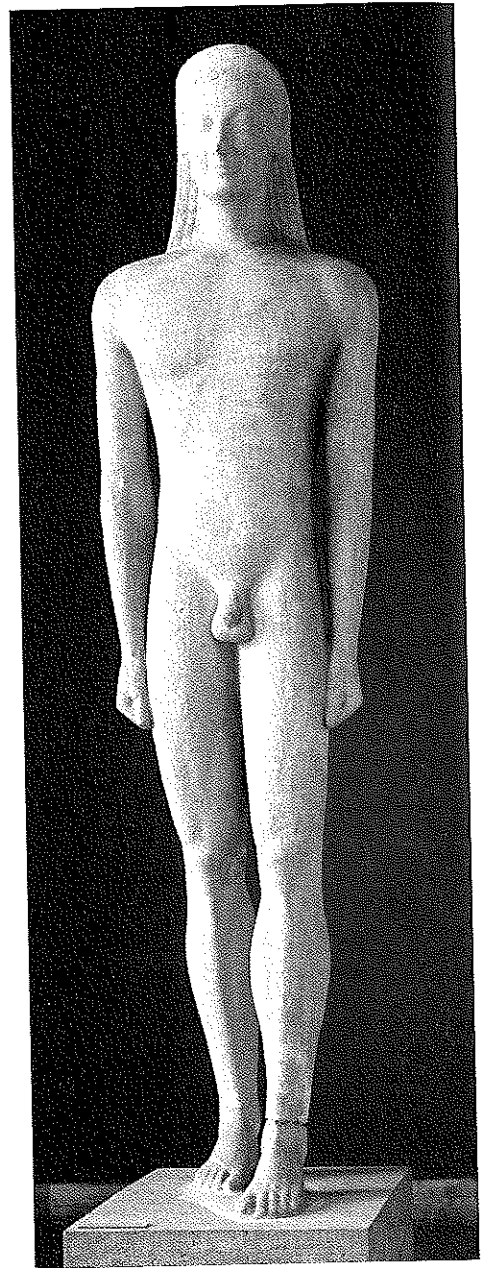


28 A colossal statue of Rameses II, at Luxor Temple, c.1400 BC.



29 A kouros figure from Melos, c.600 BC, clearly similar in stance to earlier Egyptian statues.

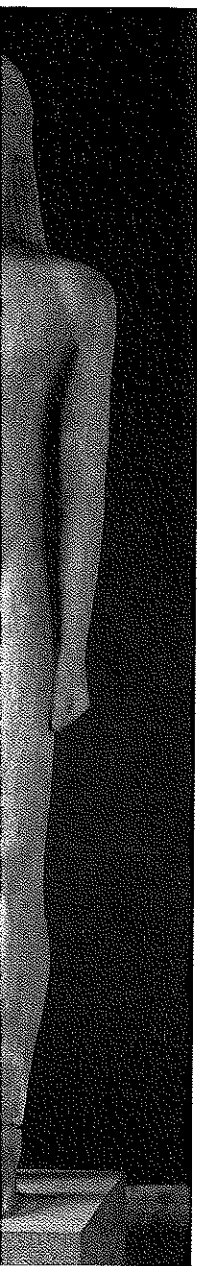
THE GREEK REVOLUTION

The Greeks may have borrowed heavily from Egypt in order to arrive at their first full-sized, free-standing figures. But the schematic principles of Egyptian practice were not transplanted. On the contrary: instead of working from grids and fixed mental images, Greek artists turned directly to the actual or intended subjects of their representation. Of course, not all these objects were visible. The poets could weave tales about many-headed monsters, but illustrating them remained a task for the imagination. But the gods on high, the heroes of the past, and contemporary patrons all shared the same essential form – that of the human body. To *represent* such subjects, to create a virtual reality with art, required Greek artists to depart from convention and use their eyes. So they did.

The Greek *kouros*, the upright young men shown as if stepping forward, and smiling in their eagerness to advance, may truly be said – stylistically – never to stand still. At first, their bodies are mapped into basic patterns, with little regard for anatomical accuracy. But almost immediately there is development towards realism. Ears begin to look like ears, not curious curved objects attached to the side of the head. Instead of showing the upper body as a triangle containing certain ridges and grooves, sculptors began to locate clavicles and shoulder blades, abdomens and backbones. Each decade of this generic statue type – once thought to represent the god Apollo, but now understood to stand for any aristocratic would-be hero commemorated in his youthful prime – showed a further stage of similarity to actual human appearance. Within little more than a century, the artistic end was achieved: a sculpture of a man that looked like a man.

His eyes, made of glass paste for realistic effect, have dropped out. His head and body were found separately, and some parts of the body have never been found. Also, his surface paintwork that once gave him a healthy outdoor tan has disappeared, so he is not as natural as he once was. All the same, here is the ultimate *kouros*: a marble statue dedicated on the Acropolis, a great sanctuary overlooking the city of Athens. The young man is anonymous; the statue known only as ‘Kritian Boy’ (*Fig. 30*).

Kritian Boy gives us the effect of what has been hailed as the ‘Greek Revolution’. The youth projects himself with a demure yet confident air: he wants to be admired, as well he might, because not only is the viewer inclined to think, ‘What a wonderful body’, but also because the artistry here gives us such direct visual access. It all seems so natural: flesh stretched taut over muscle and bone; one leg relaxed, the other assuming



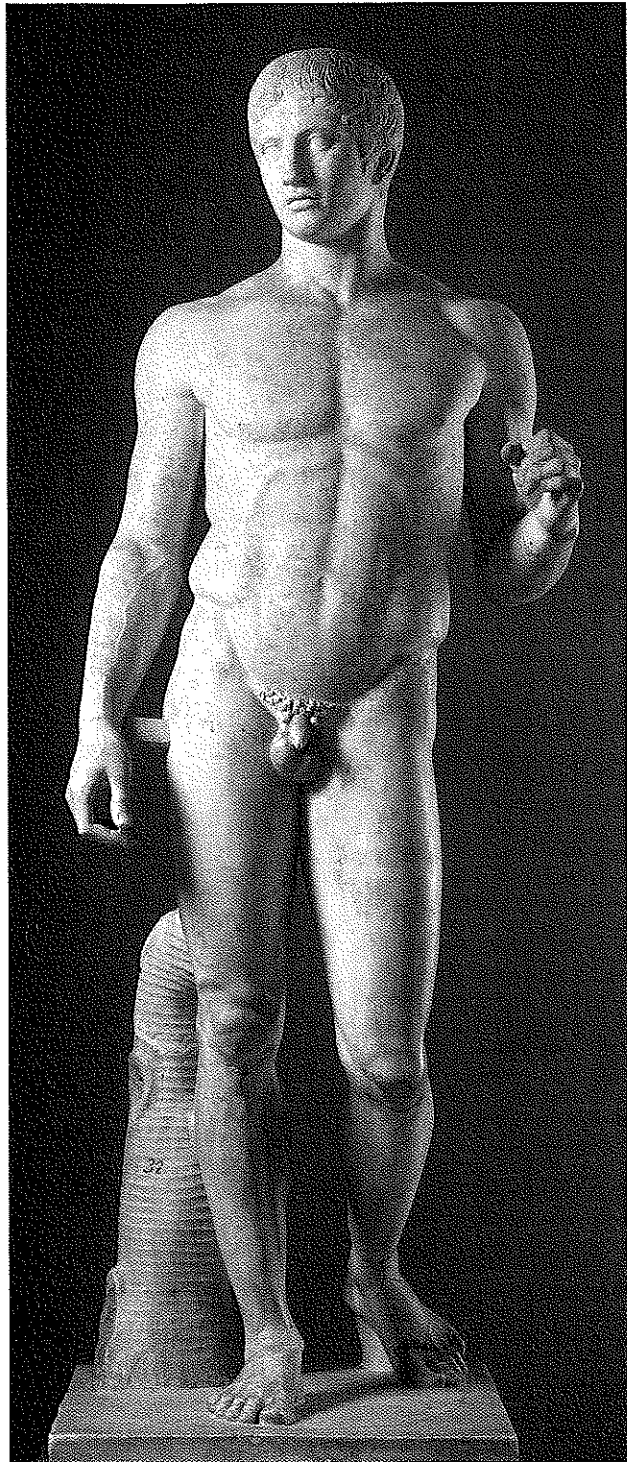
the balance of weight; vertebrae forming a gentle curve; kneecaps and ribcage causing contours we can recognize. There is nothing schematic or conceptual about Kritian Boy. This is how we are: the human body at last 'discovered' in a work of art.

POLYKLEITOS AND THE PERFECT PHYSIQUE

The Greek word *gymnos* means 'unclothed', and no Greek city was complete if it lacked a gymnasium, literally 'a place to be without clothes'. The institutional centrality of exercising unclothed was one of the defining aspects of Greek culture. The Greeks were highly conscious, too, that their custom of competing unclothed at athletic festivals was peculiar to them – a custom that 'barbarians' or non-Greeks might regard as shocking. This nudity habit was, however, all the more visible for being culturally distinctive. At the Olympic Games – which, before the Macedonian and Roman conquest of Greece, were strictly confined to competitors of Greek ('Hellenic') ethnic origin – athletes who had triumphed without their clothes on were ostentatiously commemorated in that way, so victory statues proliferated. Some showed the athlete crowning himself with the garland of triumph; others, such as the well-known image of an all-rounder especially remembered for his discus-throwing, attempted to catch the dynamic effort that brought glory.

There was no shortage of victory occasions, so an artist could make a very good living from the production of commemorative pieces. One fifth-century BC Greek sculptor who supplied the demand for athletic statues at Olympia and elsewhere was Polykleitos, who took his work seriously – so seriously, it seems, that he came to regard the artist's role in defining a prize-winning body as equally important, if not more so, to that of the trainer in the gymnasium or wrestling-school.

Polykleitos aspired to make art a branch of geometry. He wrote a treatise about how to represent the ideal physique in bronze or stone, using a system of mathematical calculations. All we know about the details of this lost text by Polykleitos amounts to a few frustratingly enigmatic phrases cited in ancient literature, such as 'Beauty comes about from many numbers'. No statue has yet been found that can be confidently called an original work by this artist. However, a fair notion of the Polykleitan project can be gained from the many copies or adaptations taken from his original bronze-cast pieces. Men, boys, women – it seems the measuring-system devised by Polykleitos was flexible



31 *Doryphoros* or 'Spear Carrier', after Polykleitos, c. 440 BC.

insofar as it could accommodate variations of both age and gender in human form. However, there was little range in the shape or *schema* of an aesthetically successful body as prescribed in the so-called *Kanon* of Polykleitos. The Greek word *kanon* gives us our 'canonical', which implies a standard to be respected, a central point of authority. If copies from the output of Polykleitos illustrate his rules (one work, the *Doryphoros* or 'Spear Carrier', is usually reckoned as constructed according to the sculptor's *Kanon*), then it is clear enough that 'aesthetically successful' in Polykleitan terms means a body dominated by qualities of tautness, symmetry and balance. A harmony of parts was what Polykleitos appears to have sought and articulated in solid form (*Fig. 31*). It was as if he created a series of theoretical rods passing through key points of the body. For example, if one knee was low and relaxed, then a rise and tautness must be caused across the axis of the opposing hips and legs. The effect of this system was to establish what must technically be known as a 'chiasitic balance' – from the Greek *chiasmōs*, implying diagonal tension – or, in Italian, as *contrapposto*: a matching of physical forces in human gait and posture.

For young men, the pressure to aspire towards a more or less predictable Polykleitan formula – broad shoulders, contoured thorax, firm waist, powerful thighs – was onerous. It was literally cast as a norm by one Classical sculptor after another. But was it an attainable ideal?

THE RIACE BRONZES: 'MORE HUMAN THAN HUMAN'

In August 1972 a scuba-diver exploring the coastal waters off Riace, near Reggio in Calabria, the southernmost province of Italy, made what he at first thought to be a horrifying discovery. A human hand was reaching out from the seabed about 9 metres (30 feet) below. Could it belong to some half-buried corpse? The diver, Stefano Mariottini, plunged down to investigate. To his immediate relief, the hand was made of bronze, and to his amazement, he realized that the hand was part of a statue – and this statue was not alone. Another figure, no less lifelike, lay encrusted in the sand nearby.

Brought to the surface, cleaned and now permanently displayed in Reggio's archaeological museum, these are the 'Riace Bronzes' – a pair of Greek statues probably made *c.* 450 BC. The most likely explanation as to how they came to be submerged in the straits between Calabria and the island of Sicily is that some ancient Roman connoisseur

of Greek art – perhaps an emperor such as Nero – once intended them to grace the walkways of his villa or palace. The vessel transporting the statues had foundered, and they were not salvaged until espied by Stefano Mariottini on his summer vacation.

Modern connoisseurs cannot agree which great name of Classical Greek sculpture may have produced the Riace Bronzes. One suggestion is Pheidias, mastermind behind the decoration of the Parthenon temple on the Athenian Acropolis. Another is Myron, whose ‘Discus Thrower’ was admired and copied by the Romans. A further candidate is Polykleitos, also highly popular with Roman collectors. The problem is that while Greek sculptors of the fifth (and fourth) century BC preferred hollow-cast bronze as a medium for free-standing statues, very few such statues have survived. (Ancient descriptions of the site of Olympia, for example, indicate that the sanctuary was once congested with gleaming brazen images, but later predators broke them up and melted them down.) For the Riace pair, therefore, the name of the artist remains as elusive as the identity of the statues – rather disappointingly known only as ‘Statue A’ and ‘Statue B’. Statue B once wore a tipped-up helmet on his head; both figures evidently carried large round shields, and weapons too.

Relaxed in stance, and with their lips slightly apart – as if conversing or taking breath – the Riace Bronzes appear at first glance to be perfectly realistic. They have been planted very firmly on their bases in the Reggio museum (for fear of earthquakes), yet they seem light on their feet, tall but not ponderous. The veins on their arms and hands are unnervingly subtle and ‘alive’, a delicate feature of ancient bronzeworking technique, the accomplishment of which is judged by some modern practitioners to be unattainable today (*Fig. 34*). But on closer scrutiny, the impression of absolute naturalism begins to fade. It was Protagoras, a Greek philosopher of the mid-fifth century BC, who insisted that ‘man is the measure of all things’. But is *man* the measure of the Riace Bronzes, or have these statues gained their form as a result of many calculations: measurements taken to extremes?

In fact, neither of the Riace Bronzes is anatomically correct. One of them – Statue A – has been deemed almost hermaphrodite: his pronounced backside, according to expert analysis, is more like a woman’s. But both statues exhibit departures from normal human

34 Detail of one of the Riace Bronzes (Statue A), the delicate veins clearly visible on the arm and hand.

resemblance. No one, however athletic, will ever look this way. The division between upper and lower body has been emphasized by raising the edge of the so-called iliac crest, a band of muscle and ligament that most men fail to find on themselves. At the front of the body this contour may not be anatomically impossible, but its continuation around the back is so powerful as to strain belief. The suspicion dawns that what matters here is not faithfulness to reality, but geometric symmetry. An implausibly deep groove runs up the centre of the chest. The length of the legs has been extended to match the length of the upper body. The muscles of the back are tense and over-defined. And as for the channel of the vertebrae – not only is it deeper than would ever be seen on an ordinary mortal, but it descends into the cleft of the buttocks with no interruption from a coccyx, the bone at the base of the spine that helps us to sit down (*Fig. 1, page 2*).

In other words, the Riace Bronzes display exaggerated specifications of the human body; a further case, then, of peak shift.

EXAGGERATION RULES

'Human kind,' in the words of the poet T.S. Eliot, 'cannot bear very much reality.' That observation may be enough to account for the peak-shift principle, or make a case for people liking to 'accentuate the positive'. Either way, the human trait of distorting images of the body seems to be pervasive in many cultures, and recurrent across many centuries. In most contexts it is simply the image that is distorted, such as the *yakshi* figure curvaceously symbolizing wealth and fertility in the bracket of a Buddhist shrine (*Fig. 35*). Where bodily beauty has become a commodity, direct means of exaggerating personal appearance may be marketed, to the extent of cosmetic surgery offering a virtual sculpture of the flesh. The tendency for exaggeration, to create bodies 'more human than human', is very much alive. What began with the Venus of Willendorf is not just a thing of the past.