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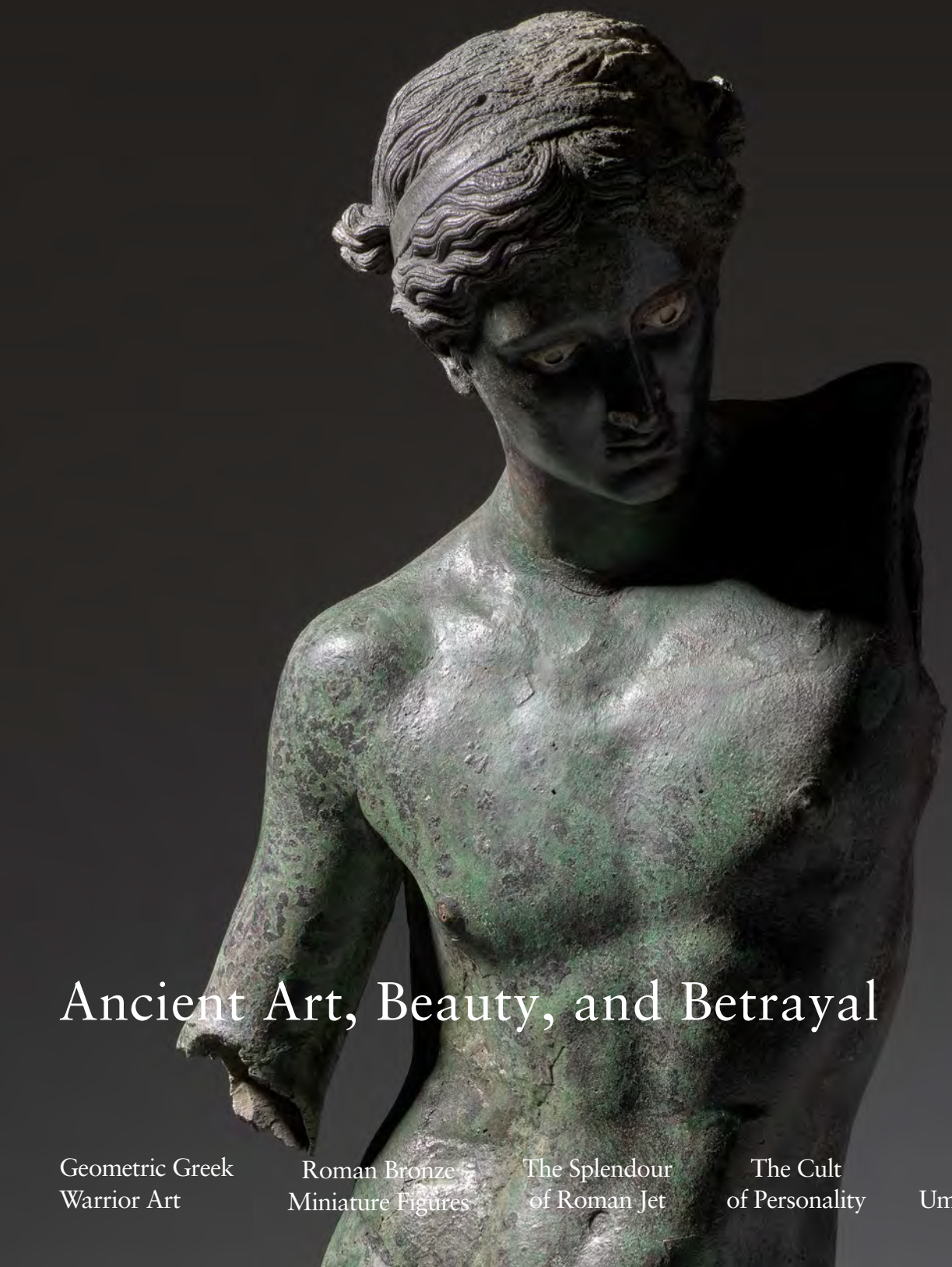

Ancient Art, Beauty, and Betrayal

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Geometric Greek Warrior Art

Roman Bronze Miniature Figures

The Splendour of Roman Jet

The Cult of Personality

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Cover: The Cleveland Apollo: Apollo Sauroktonos (Lizard-Slayer) or Apollo the Python-Slayer, attributed to Praxiteles. Classical period, c. 400–330 BC. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2004.30.
This page: Head of a marine Medusa, which probably decorated a box, perhaps from Campania, southern Italy. Roman, c. AD 50–75. The British Museum, inv. 1867,0510.2. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Roman Bronzes: Perfection in Miniature

Michael Svetbird

When one examines bronze sculpture from classical antiquity it is interesting to consider which examples of this art form first come to mind. Based on my experience, and considering the representation and preservation of such works in museums, I believe that a list of foremost works include: the Boxer at Rest (Hellenistic period, third century BC) in the Palazzo Massimo, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome); Poseidon (Classical period, fifth century BC) in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens); the Riace Warriors (Classical period, fifth century BC) in the Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Calabria); the Orator/Aulus Metellus (second–first century BC) in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence); and Mars of Todi (Classical period, fifth–fourth century BC) in the Musei Vaticani, Vatican. One might include several other iconic sculptures, such as the equestrian statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180) and the Capitoline Wolf (c. 173–176 BC and c. 500 BC respectively) in the Musei Capitolini, Rome. It is evident that these works have common features: most are veristic and life-size and were probably informed by live models, and most likely intended for display in public spaces, where they functioned as free-standing monumental works. The pleasure of viewing these masterpieces is undeniable, particularly when considering the distinctive characteristics of bronze material itself which, with its iridescent shades and intricate multi-coloured patterns, offers a visual richness. Its patina, or oxidation, that forms over time adds further layers of texture and colour, enhancing the material's aesthetic appeal. However, while these large-scale sculptures certainly have justified detailed study, documentation, and description, the focus of this article is on the equally captivating small bronze figures and appliqués (applied forms) in the Roman period.

My intention is to highlight the fascination I have always felt for this material during countless visits to museums. I have often found myself drawn, if not captivated, by the sight of these delicate, small objects displayed in glass cabinets with varying degrees of illumination (sometimes unfavourable), revealing the intricate craftsmanship and detailing of these artistic works. The only drawback, however, is that most shelves and cabinets that display these figurines do not allow the viewer to admire them from every direction, as one would with life-size free-standing sculptures and, therefore, the full appreciation of their craftsmanship may be somewhat limited (below).

Perhaps my interest in these figures, beyond their historical and artistic aspects, might also reflect an echo of childhood associated with collecting toy soldiers and warriors from various eras, a trend that was particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s. While I was not particularly enthusiastic about collecting these modern, mass-produced plastic representations of Roman legionaries, Vikings, Crusaders, Cowboys and Indians, I certainly enjoyed examining them, fascinated by their small, meticulous details. In some cases, ancient bronze figures were collected but had a mainly religious function as mythological figures.

What makes bronze so attractive, and why has it remained in demand as an artistic material? From the perspective of its production, its primary appeal lies in

Bronzes in the cabinets of the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

its malleability during the melting and casting process. An alloy of copper, which was and is more plentiful than tin, its other component along with trace elements. Its constitution in the ancient world was approximately 90 to 10 per cent with variations on this figure depending on the period and region.

These varying proportions result in a finished product of material with variable durability, strength, and colour. The latter is particularly striking and can range from black or dark brown to grey-green or beige, depending on the specific alloy used and its exposure to the environment over time. Patina, the thin layer of oxidation that forms on bronze as it ages, also plays a significant role in its visual appeal and, often, the perception of these works.

Interestingly, some museums choose to clean bronze artefacts, removing the patina to display them in their original state. However, I find it difficult to form a definitive opinion on the question of restoration, particular with bronze miniatures. On the one hand, I enjoy observing and documenting the 'imprints of time' – those marks that characterise the perception of artefacts that have endured through millennia, lending them a unique charm in the eyes of the modern viewer. On the other hand, there is something equally intriguing about examining cleaned, restored, and polished objects, which regain their original copper hue. An example that comes to mind is the Medusa in the British Museum (below).

Bronze is a modern term that, according to generally accepted linguistic definitions, derives through French from the Italian *bronzo*. In certain contexts, this also refers to brass which is thought to be a fusion of the Latin words *aes* and *brassus*, while the Greek *chalkos*, means 'copper' or 'brass'. This term, said to have begun to be adopted in Europe during the Middle Ages, appearing in various forms, such as bronze, *bronzo*, *bronza*, and *bronzium*, likely at a time when the understanding of alloys and the definition of different metallic chemical elements became more refined and terminologically significant, possibly requiring a separate special definition or term, especially with regard to mass production.

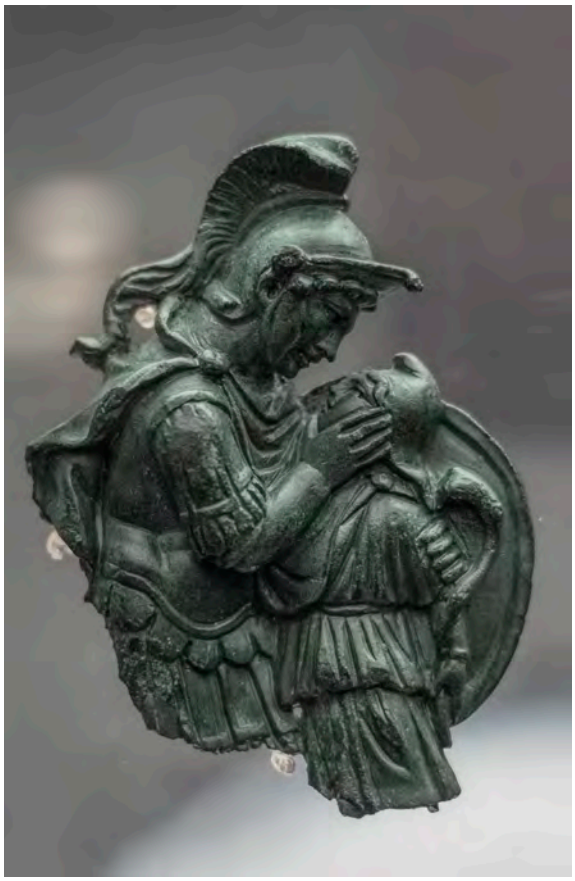
In archaeology and history, bronze has come to denote the Bronze Age, a period spanning roughly from 3300 BC to 1100 BC. This era is characterised by the widespread production of various bronze products – tools, decorative and construction elements, household items, weapons, and armour. By the first millennium BC, artisans had developed considerable expertise, having mastered the intricacies of this material. Bronze miniatures were produced already in Mesopotamia by around the late fourth millennium BC. Roman bronze miniatures therefore represent a relatively recent creative past.

From the first millennium BC, during the Iron Age, bronze was widely used alongside iron by various cultures in Eurasia and Africa. Rome, as a distinct political entity, was according to tradition, founded in the eighth century BC. The Italian Peninsula during this period was a multi-ethnic region, inhabited by various tribes and peoples, including the Etruscans, Latins, Samnites, Umbrians, and Greek colonists, especially southern Italy in Magna Graecia (Great Greece).

The region and its peoples were heavily influenced by Greek civilisation in terms of architecture, the arts, literature, religion, and craft technology. Known key centres of bronze and copper production in the Peninsula included Etruria (Cerveteri, Vulci, Tarquinia), Magna Graecia (Taranto, Cumae), the Po Valley in northern Italy (Mantua, Brescia, Verona), and Sicily. From the study of metallurgy and associated archaeological finds, it is known that copper was primarily sourced locally, while tin is believed to have been imported from other regions, such as

Head of a marine Medusa, which probably decorated a box, perhaps from Campania, southern Italy.
Roman, c. AD 50–75. Bronze.
Diameter: 10.16cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1867,0510.2.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Appliqué representing Achilles and Penthesilea, from Casaloldo, Lombardy. Roman, first–second century AD. Bronze. Height: 9.2cm. Muzeo Archeologico Nazionale di Mantova, Mantua, inv. 54523. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com



the Iberian Peninsula, the Balkans, and Britain, according to various archaeological finds.

In the third century BC, the Italian Peninsula was effectively incorporated into the Roman Republic. The evolution of bronze production occurred as part of the broader technological development in response to the social and economic progress of the emerging Roman Empire from the Augustan period (27 BC–AD 14) onwards.

Logically, bronze products were initially relatively practical, such as tools, clothing accessories, jewellery, archaic-style miniatures, weapons, and armour. Over time production expanded in diversity and complexity, developing to a more versatile range of goods, including coinage, decorative furniture elements, fine tableware, more intricate jewellery and clothing accessories, mirror covers, architectonic elements, and, not least, sculpture.

The production of arms and armour too became more elaborate both functionally and decoratively, with complex detailed bronze relief decoration, often realistic in style, on breastplates, helmets, greaves, shields, sword hilts, daggers, horse harness and chariot adornment. This naturally applied to all principal cultures of the Mediterranean and was integral to the Roman world.

From a cultural perspective, it is clear that neighbouring peoples – primarily the Greeks, Greek colonists, and Etruscans – played a significant role in shaping the transformation and development of bronze production in Rome, both for military and civilian purposes. This influence naturally extended to the artistic, spiritual, and religious nature of bronze items.

Bronzes from the Etruscan and southern Italian Greek world merit special attention and detailed study, as some of these works are exceptional artistic masterpieces, as in the case of the San Mariano Etruscan bronzes from the sixth century BC, now dispersed across museums in Europe (the British Museum, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich, and elsewhere).

An interesting example of the cultural and trade exchanges between Graeco-Italic peoples is the appliqué depicting the Greek mythological scene of Achilles and Penthesilea (left). This was discovered at a late-Etruscan burial site in Casaloldo (near Mantua, northern Italy), and its depiction is inspired by Greek mythology. It is currently in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Mantova, Mantua (first–second century AD).

Bronze miniatures typically refer to figures of 10–30cm in height. One of the smallest bronzes featured in this article is a figure of the goddess Fortuna in the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano in Verona, Italy (first–third century AD). It is typical for the scale of bronzes intended for private decorative or religious use.

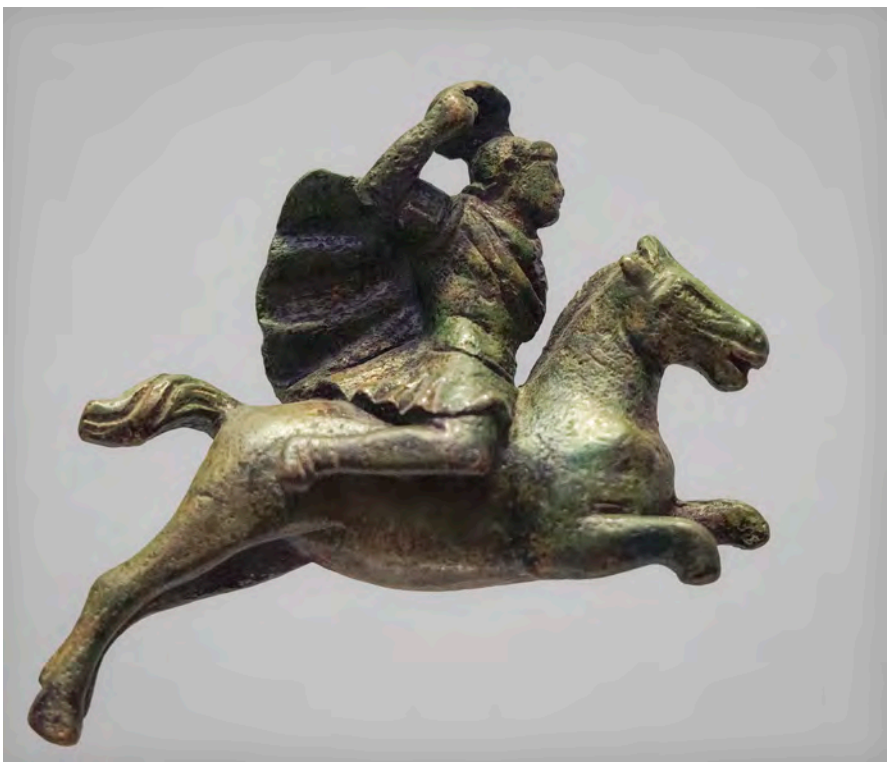
Figure of the goddess Fortuna. Roman, first–third century AD. Bronze. Height: 9cm. Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

In addition to free-standing figures, I also consider appliqués in this article, but only those depicting distinctive figures (rather than groups of three or more) in high- to medium-relief. These figures must be viewable from nearly all sides and not be connected to backgrounds, even if such a form, as we observe it today, is a result of conservation. This is demonstrated by the Medusa and Penthesilea-Achilles appliqués, mentioned above (page 9, left), and by a bronze depicting a Roman commander on horseback (first–third century AD), in the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona (below). Also, miniature portrait sculptures, often simply heads, are an important category too. Two interesting examples are that of a woman inlaid with silver (first or second century AD); and a bronze finial fashioned as a gladiator's helmet (first–third century AD); both in the British Museum (above and below right).

In any case, all bronze miniatures share several key characteristics. Aside, of course from their modest scale, they are crafted in detail, with masterful attention to attributes and features, and the completeness of mythological scenes, leaving little ambiguity about what is represented. These characteristics are directly linked to their function, whether for practical or religious use. Within these broad categories, the figurines can be further divided into several subcategories (and I do exclude other bronze items, such as tools, tableware, or coinage in this context).

First, religious, as in the case of figures of demigods, gods, mythological heroes, and animals, intended for

Top: head of a woman.
Roman, first or second century AD.
Bronze with silver inlay. Height: 4.4cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1873,820.8.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com



Above: Bronze finial for a pole in the form of a gladiator's helmet. Roman, first–third century AD. Bronze. Height: 9.5cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.169.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Left: figure of a military commander on horseback. Roman, first–third century AD.
Bronze. Height: 14cm.
Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

offerings in temples and for use in religious rituals. These could be integral to both private and public religious practices (page 8, 9; 11, page 13, right; page 14–16).

Second, decorative. This category includes divine images mentioned above and portraits and representations of mortals or humans, including individuals from various social classes, such as athletes, gladiators, officials, and other personalities. These figurines often served to decorate the interior spaces of private houses, though they may have had symbolic personal meaning too, such as commemorating loved ones or acting as talismans or amulets. This is the case with the gladiator in the British Museum (page 12, right), and also with a splendid bronze of a woman in Greek dress (first century BC–first century AD) (below); and a sacrificial boar with its attendant (first–second century AD) (right); both in the British Museum; and a pair of wrestlers in the (first–third century AD) in the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona (page 12, left).

Third, commemorative. These bronzes mostly depict human personalities, sometimes as portraits, and

Figure representing a woman in Greek dress,
said to be from Verona, north-eastern Italy.
Roman, first century BC–first century AD. Bronze and silver.
Height: 15.2cm. The British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.4.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Harness fitting of a boar being led to sacrifice by an attendant.
Roman, first–second century AD.
Bronze. Height: 10.1cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.31.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

represent memorable images of loved ones, relatives, or famous individuals, often with the intention of commemorating or honouring them. Examples include a lictor in a toga who carries an axe bound to a bundle of rods (fasces) from which the term 'fascism' derives (c. 20 BC–AD 20) (page 13, left); a priest or possibly the healing god Asclepius with a scroll (second century BC) (page 13, right); and the head of a female mentioned above (page 10, above right); both in the British Museum.

Fourth, functional. This category includes certain appliqué types, in accordance with my earlier definition of 'three-dimensional' reliefs. These might be used to decorate or protect furniture, armour, or other objects, blending artistic and practical purposes. Such examples include the Medusa and representation of Penthesilea and Achilles mentioned above (page 8 and page 9, left).

All of the above categories are distinguished by their artistic and aesthetic qualities to a greater extent than other domestic utilitarian small bronzes. Their freedom of expression transforms them into a unique form of art, especially evident in the movement, development, and plasticity of the figures. The dynamic nature of these works expresses a refined artistic vision, one that sets them apart as significant creative expressions within ancient Roman culture. This is typified by the figures of Hercules, one holding a wine cup (the Bibax type), both hold the skin of the Nemean Lion (first–second century AD), in the Musei Reali, Torino (page 14, below); the possible figure of

Figures of two wrestlers.
Roman, first–third century AD.
Bronze. Height: 12cm.
Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

a priest or Asclepius (page 13, right); and the wrestlers (page 12, left); the last two examples mentioned above.

It is clear that some artefacts could be classified both as sacred or votive and as decorative or utilitarian objects, naturally combining a practical and symbolical significance. However, when examining these miniatures in detail it is fair to say that my classifications are subjective, yet they are, I think, a reasonable conclusion for comprehending the essence of these objects.

It is interesting to consider that bronze figures were collected in the same way as modern collectors acquire such objects. From the end of the second century BC, wealthy Roman citizens began to collect bronze sculpture, large and small from Greece, for private use, mainly to decorate their villas, including the notorious Gaius Verres (c. 115–43 BC), the corrupt governor of Sicily, who looted countless works in 74–70 BC. In contrast, Gaius Pollio (76 BC–AD 5), a friend of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Augustus was respected for his connoisseurship and fine collection of bronze Greek sculpture. Cicero (106–43 BC), who in fact prosecuted Verres, also collected bronzes to decorate his villa at Tusculum in Latium (central-western Italy), acquiring them from his friend Titus Atticus (110–32 BC) in 68–65 BC. However, their high cost was such that he ceased collecting them and joked to another friend in a letter that he should have a figure of Mercury, the god of commerce, so that his business dealings would be more successful.

Interestingly, it is thought that bronze miniatures were created both as unique custom-order works and as mass-produced items, made by a consistent production process (modelling the design, creating the mould, and casting the bronze figure). In the case of mass production, it seems obvious that there would have been a significant number of identical models. Archaeological finds are relatively frequent due to the preservation qualities of bronze per se and the modest scale of this material. Bronze figures are, therefore, widely represented in the collections of archaeological and historical museums globally.

However, based on my personal experience of tracking and observing these artefacts, I can confidently

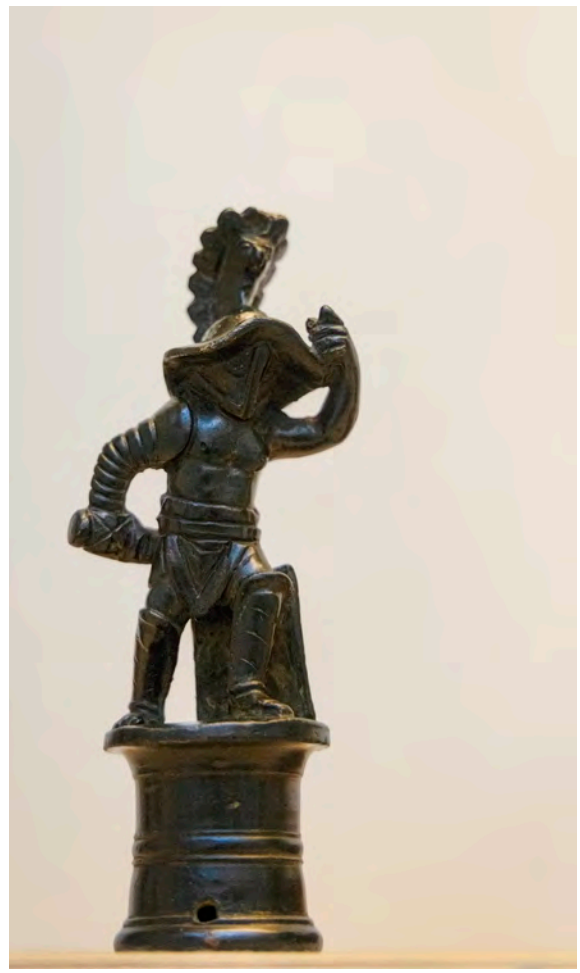


Figure of a gladiator, probably a fitting from a wagon.
Roman, first–second century AD. Bronze. Height: 13.5cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1919,0620.4.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

state that no two figures are identical, but rather they often have close similarities, in terms of the finer details, pose, and mythological theme. For instance, in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, Florence, many Etrusco-Roman heads in my subjective view are rather similar. Gladiators of particular types, and their helmets when produced in isolation – Retiarii, the Murmillo, the Thracian, and the Samnite – are obviously going to be represented in a similar but not identical manner (page 10, below right; page 12, right). Gorgoneions and Medusas (page 8), of course, tend to resemble each other, but even in these instances, one can discern differences in facial features, proportions, and other fine details. One example of near-identical and yet subtly different figures are the two Hercules bronzes mentioned above (page 14, below).

Naturally, I do not claim to have seen every bronze miniature, particularly since a large portion of museum collections remain hidden from public view. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find identical specimens that one could confidently say have been cast from the same mould. This observation raises an interesting point, which somewhat echoes a question from my article in the last issue: to what extent did the desire to diversify mass-produced items, the size of product batches, and the varying skill of artisans influence their variability?

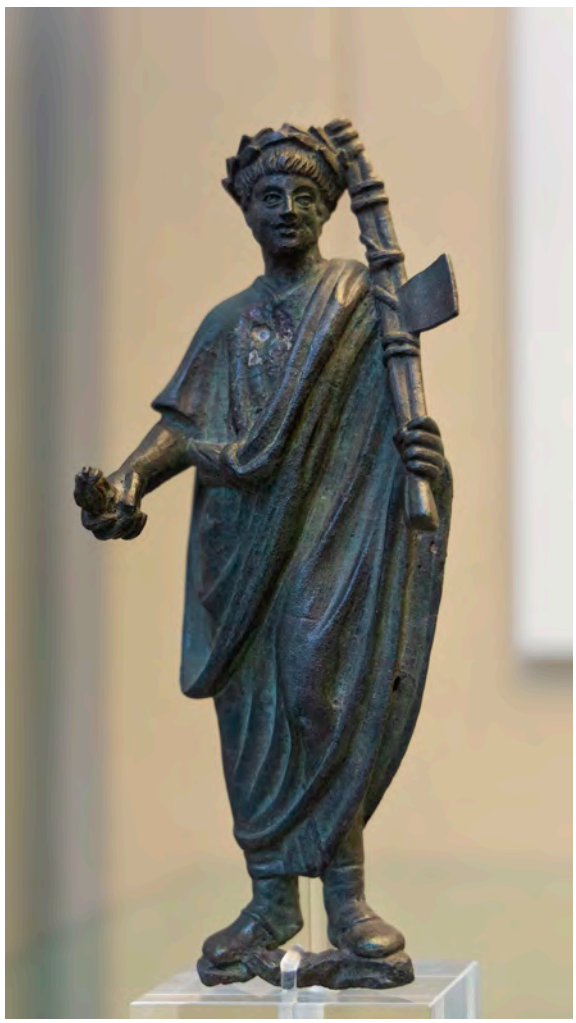


Figure of a lictor (magistrate's attendant) wearing a toga and a wreath on his head. He holds laurel leaves in his right hand and carries the fasces in his right hand. Roman, c. 20 BC– AD 20. Bronze. Height: 18.4cm. The British Museum, inv. GR 1983,1229.1. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Figure perhaps representing a priest or the healing god Asclepius in Greek dress holding a scroll. Roman, second century BC. Bronze. Height: 11.5cm. The British Museum, inv. 1974,1201.3. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Clearly some works – large and small – remained popular and give an impression of taste and the world view in both the public and private sphere of the Roman world. For example, we find repetitive depictions of deities Artemis/Diana (third century AD) in the Musei Reali, Torino (page 14, above), Nike/Fortuna, and Athena/Minerva (among the gods); and in the mortal sphere, gladiators, mentioned above (page 10, below right; page 12, right), and amazons.

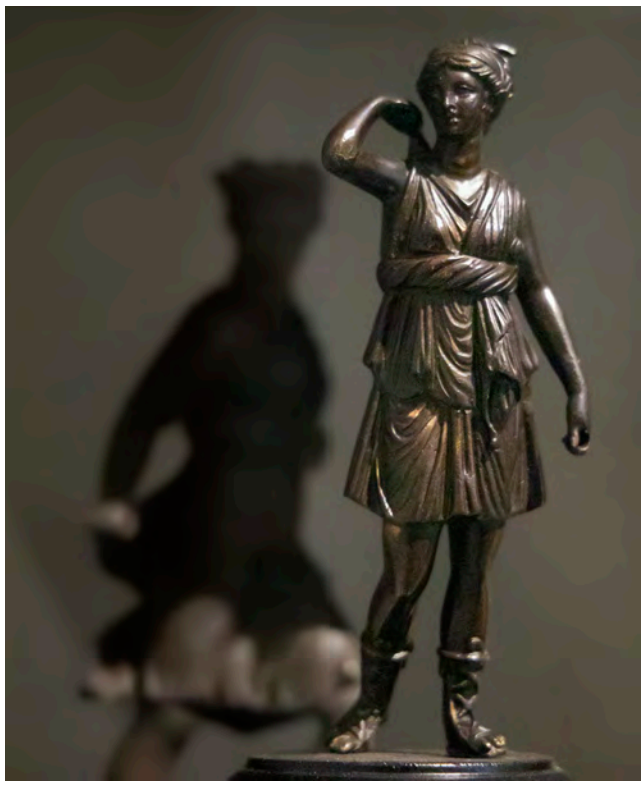
Even among similar examples, mentioned above, there are always subtle differences and variations, such as size, colour, and the details of pose or facial features. The individualisation of certain bronze miniatures is observable, as in the case of the head in the British

Museum mentioned above with eyes of inlaid silver (page 10, above right), and may be the portrait of an individual, perhaps a characteristic of countless examples that are not featured in this article. Another instance of a bronze with interesting artistic inclusions in silver is the figure of a woman in Greek dress mentioned above (page 11, left). Therefore, the definition of 'mass production', although generally accepted for many bronze miniatures, should be tempered with the diversity and individuality of many figures.

It is certainly the case that the root of specific types may be clearly traced, as in deities and mythic figures, which overlap, simultaneously mythological and religious, and are inherited from the Greek world, albeit expressing the imprint of Roman life in the public and private sphere. This can result in a certain 'loss in translation'. For example, it may not always be clear which personality is depicted, whether an athlete, a philosopher, a mythological hero, a public figure, or a priest, as in the case of the figure mentioned above, who may be a priest or the healing god Asclepius (page 13, right).

It is probably true to say that Roman bronze miniatures convey martial and political intent and achievement, as expressed by representations of military figures like the war god Mars, and various administrative figures, which were important ideals in Roman society, both during the Republican and Imperial period.

Figure of the goddess Artemis.
Roman, third century AD.
Bronze. Height: 12.5cm. Musei Reali, Torino, inv. 759.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com



Left: figure of Hercules Bibax with a club and Hercules, both with lion skins, alluding to Hercules' First Labour – catching and killing the terrible Nemean Lion.
Roman, c. first–second century AD.
Bronze. Height: 12.1, 13.3cm (excluding the bases).
Musei Reali, Torino, inv. 789, 762.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Page 15, left: figure of the god Silvanus, wearing a pine-wreath and a goatskin, and holding a branch and a pine-cone. Roman, first–second century AD. Bronze. Height: 16.5cm. The British Museum, inv. 1865,0712.18.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

The realism of bronze miniatures is a prominent feature of this artistic medium, as expressed in most of the examples discussed above, enhanced by the addition of detailed drapery, with the inclusion of attributes, such as armour, and objects held. This is also the case with the representation of the rustic god Silvanus (first–second century AD); and the goddess Athena (late first century AD); both in the British Museum (below and right); the possible depiction of Juno (first–third century AD) (below right); and the figure of the goddess Minerva (first–third century AD) (page 16, above left); both in the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona. This realism, conditioned by the development

of the craftsmanship of the artisans and the technical capabilities, complements the pragmatic nature of the Roman world. However, from a stylistic perspective, it should be mentioned that there was a shift to greater abstraction through the Imperial era, especially in the Late Roman period. It is also reasonable to note a movement towards the militarised aspect of everyday life, which was of course a principal characteristic of the Roman world with its colossal military apparatus.

Of the illustrations presented in this article, I am most enchanted by those representations that capture the impulsive gesture, the spirit of antiquity, and ornate

Figure of Athena Promachos in archaistic style, from Athens?
Roman, late first century AD. Bronze. Height: 11.4cm.
The British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.6.
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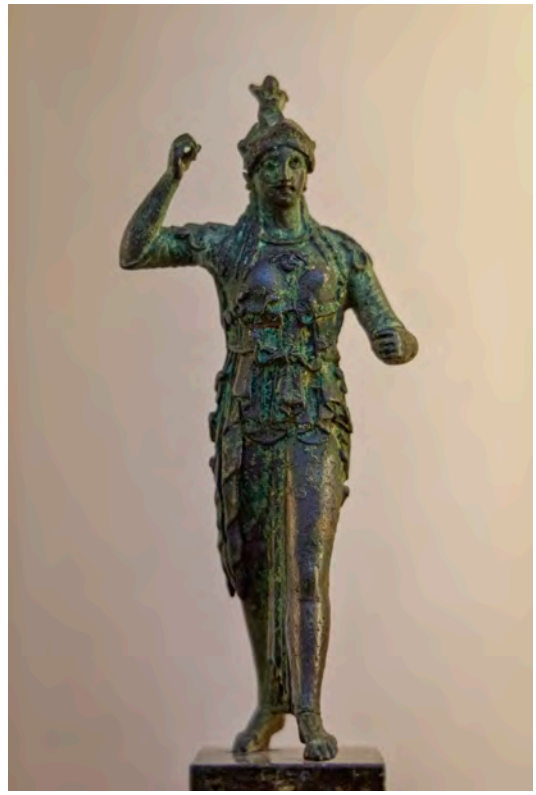


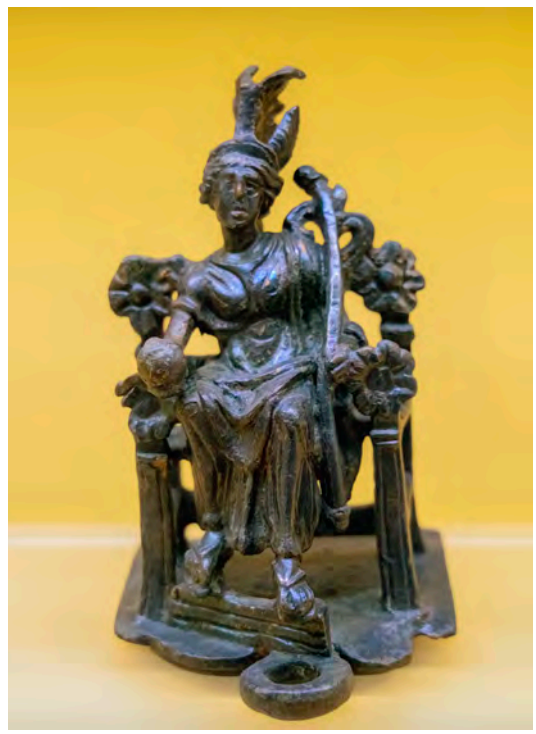


Figure perhaps of the goddess Juno.
Roman, first–third century AD. Bronze. Height: 10cm.
Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano Verona.
https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Figure of Minerva. Roman, first–third century AD. Bronze. Height: 11cm. Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

Right: figure of the goddess Juno. Roman, c. first century AD. Bronze. Height: 16cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna inv. VI 338. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

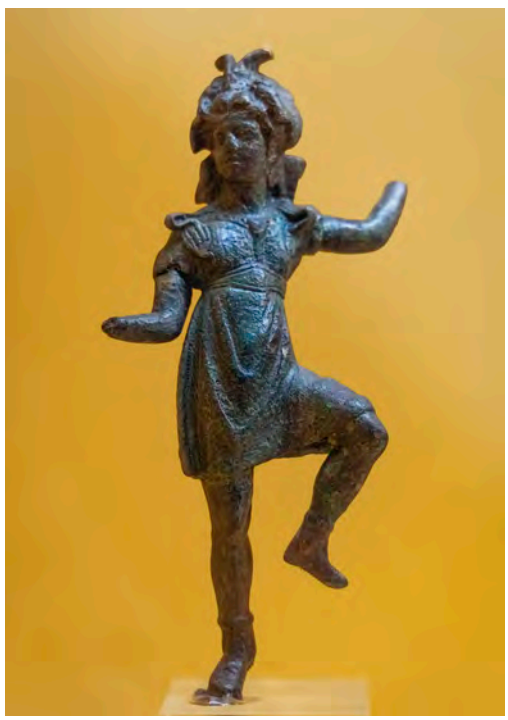
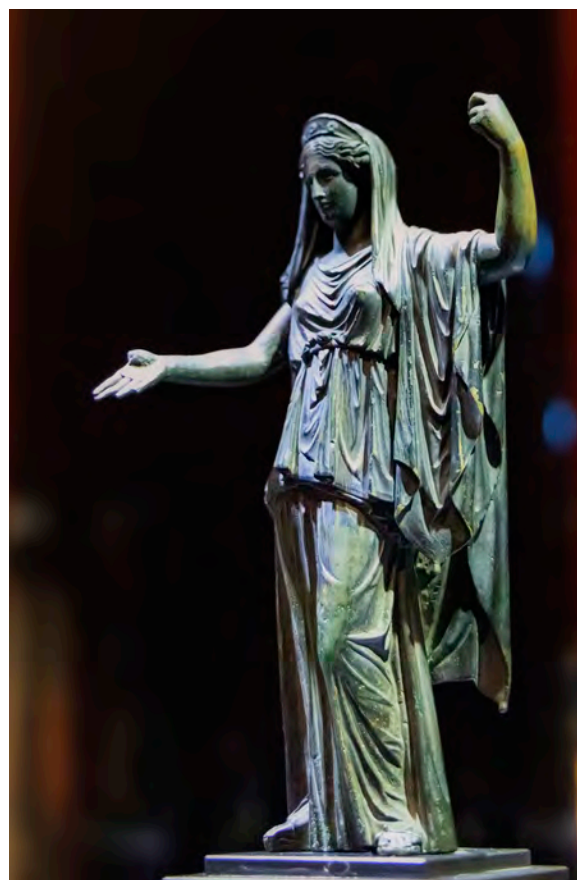


Figure of a dancer. Roman, first–third century AD. Bronze. Height: 12cm. Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona. https://www.michaelsvetbird.com

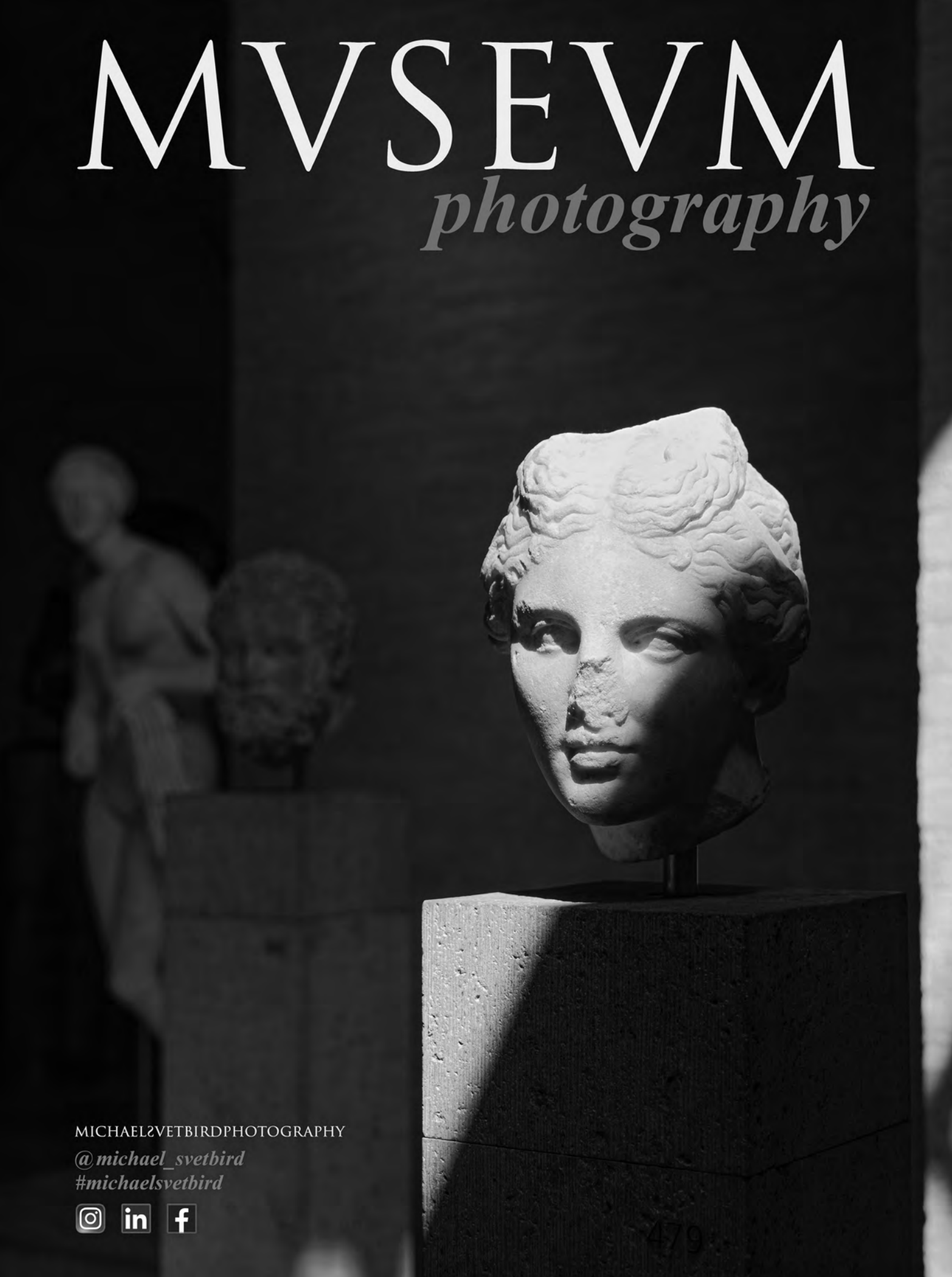
aesthetic detail. This is particularly so with the inlaid female silver head, the female in Greek dress with silver inlay, the wrestlers, and the goddess Athena, all mentioned above (page 10, above right; page 11, left; page 12, left; page 15, above right). To these I should add the dancer with snakes, who appears to be Medusa, in the Museo Archeologico al Teatro Romano, Verona (first–third century AD) (below left) and the splendid goddess Juno (c. first century AD) in Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (below). Let us consider their amazing garments details, gestures and facial expressions!

Overall, the topic of miniature bronzes is truly inexhaustible and delightfully fascinating, at least for myself. Moreover, observing them in detail is educational, interesting, and highly engaging. Viewing the museum cabinets which display these intriguing artefacts in those museums mentioned above and elsewhere is only to be recommended.



Further Reading

Jeffrey Spier, 'Roman Bronzes', in Mark Merrony (ed.), *Mougins Museum of Classical Art*. Mougins: Mougins Museum of Classical Art, 2011, 125–144.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