

Introduction

The original of this statue was found in 1877 by a team of German archaeologists excavating in the sanctuary of Zeus at **Olympia** in the Peloponnese (not to be confused with Mt. Olympus in northern Greece). The nearly complete statue (lower legs and left foot restored) stood in the temple of Hera (Juno) at the site. Greek and Roman temples were often used as 'museums' for displaying works of art. We see the adult god **Hermes** (Roman **Mercury**) holding his baby brother, **Dionysos (Bacchus)**. The statue was long thought to be the actual Greek master-piece by the sculptor **Praxiteles** (4th c. B.C.) mentioned by the traveler Pausanias (ca. A.D. 160) as being in the temple (*Guide to Greece* 5.17.7). Most scholars now, however, consider it a late Hellenistic or Roman work of the 1st c. B.C. in Praxitelean style. Rasp and chisel marks reveal a partial reworking of the back. Traces of red paint may indicate that Hermes' hair, lips, and sandals were gilded originally. Olympia Archaeological Museum (Greece). Marble. H. 2.10 m. (7 ft. 1 in.); 2.28 if the right arm is restored.

Mythological Background

According to myth, Hermes and Dionysos were sons of Zeus, but by different mothers (the princess Semele and the minor goddess Maia,

respectively). To protect the infant Dionysos, Zeus entrusted him to Hermes, who together with a band of nymphs, hid the child near Mt. Nysa in Anatolia (modern Turkey). As an adult, Dionysos returned to Greece, where he proclaimed his divinity and offered the gifts of wine, revelry, and the experience of altered states. Those who accepted him were rewarded; those who refused were punished in various horrible ways. In the Olympia statue, however, we see a lighter moment: Hermes dangles something, now lost, and baby Dionysos reaches toward it. (Our cast restores a bunch of grapes along with the baby's arm, on the evidence of a Roman wall-painting from Pompeii).

Iconography and Style

The group consists of the two gods, with a vertical support covered with the folds of a cloak. Hermes stands with his weight resting on his right leg, with the left trailing and bent at the knee, causing a dramatic shift in pose at hip level. (Note a second, horizontal, strut here). The torso, however, curves in the opposite direction as Hermes extends his right arm up and out (the forearm and hand are missing). The body thus describes a reverse S-curve considered typical of Praxitelean works (e.g., the Apollo Sauroktonos or Lizard-slayer). The left arm bends acutely at the elbow and rests atop

the supporting pier, perhaps suggesting a gymnasium setting. The infant Dionysos sits confidently on the crook of Hermes' arm and reaches out toward his older brother. Neither figure establishes eye contact with the viewer: the brothers exist entirely within their own space. The two heads, however, create a strong diagonal line echoed at the level of Hermes' shoulder, hips, and knees. The combination of an adult plus child, relatively small heads, tousled hair, and soft *sfumato* ("smoky") carving are all traits of 4th c. sculpture. But the sandals of Hermes are of no earlier than the 2nd c. B.C. - one of the reasons our figure is *unlikely* to be a 4th c. original masterpiece.

Context and Interpretation

This group is important, because it seemed to be one of the few surviving masterpieces by a known artist, as described by Pausanias. The author lived, however, nearly 500 years after the artist. Nevertheless, scholars have used the statue to define the style of Praxiteles (as outlined above) and to attribute other works to his artistic output (*oeuvre*) - a dangerous kind of guesswork! If the statue is of 1st c. B.C. date, it means we have to rethink what we *really* know for sure about Praxiteles. The history of this statue encourages students and scholars alike to look at things

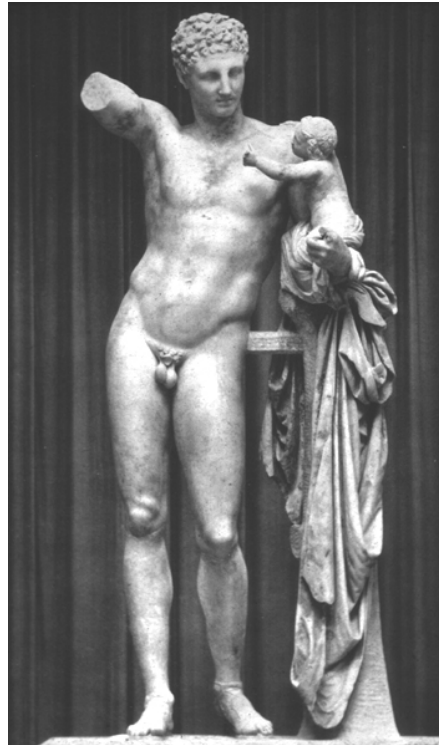
through fresh eyes, and to question the validity of standard assumptions - whether in the museum, or in the classroom!

Select Modern Bibliography

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For more about Greek and Roman sculpture, these courses are available: **CLSX/HA 526 or 537.**

For more about Hermes and other gods, take **CLSX 148.**



The original statue in the Olympia Museum; note how the Wilcox cast restores Hermes's right arm.

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cast:

HERMES "BY PRAXITELES" FROM OLYMPIA

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