

Reaching Peak Greek at the Met Museum

By **HOLLAND COTTER** APRIL 14, 2016 The New York Times

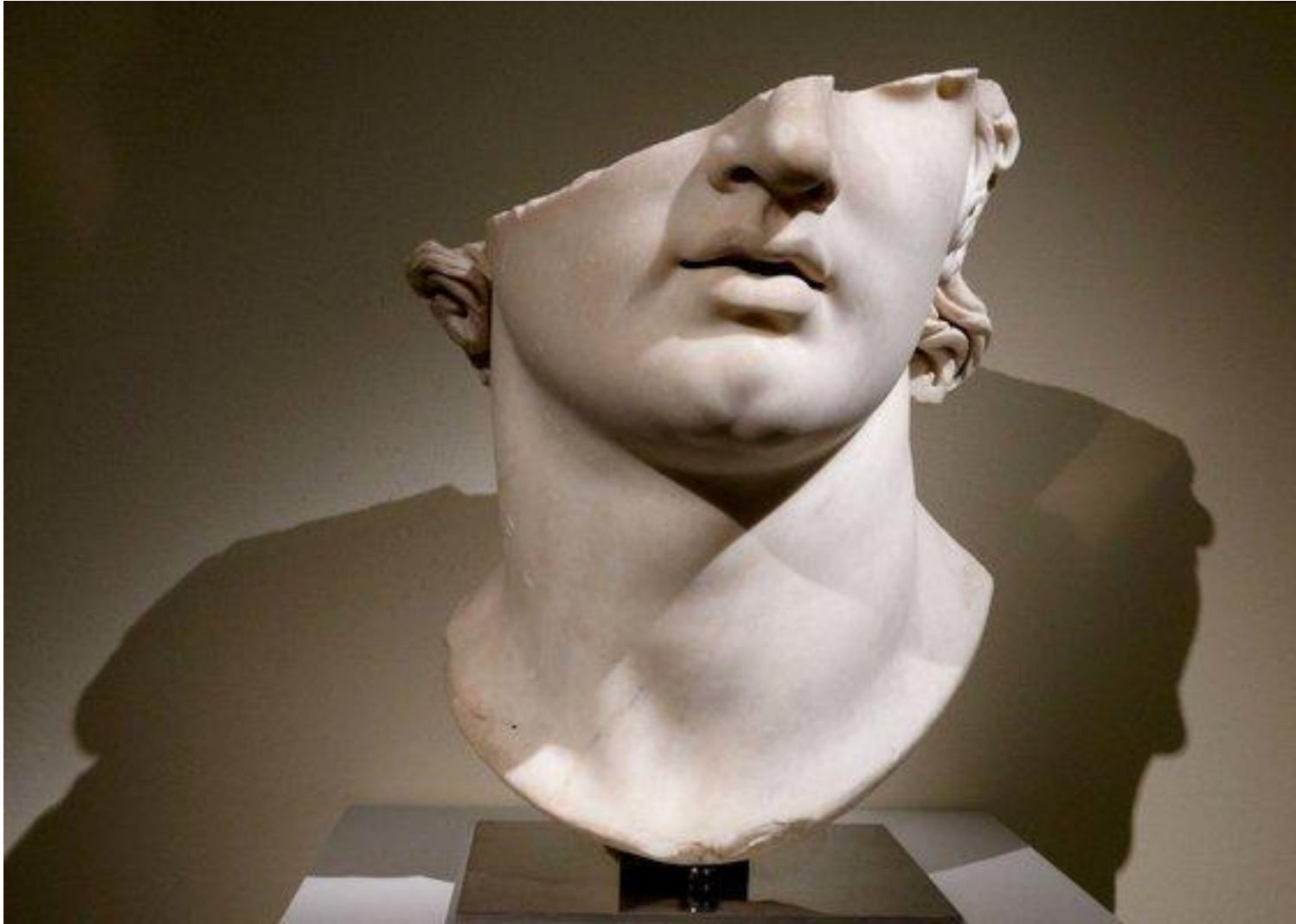


“Il Spinario” is included in “Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World,” a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition examining how Greek Classical art and works of other cultures influenced each other. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Seen from on high, history is a grand sorting machine, loading on events, parsing populations, dividing time into nameable, datable piles. No one captures this process more grandly than the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And in [“Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World,”](#) which opens on Monday, April 18, it is operating in truly epical form.

But the show also offers something less often encountered: history viewed at ground level, from inside. From that perspective, it’s about binding, not sorting, about single lives threaded

together day by day. And it's not about statistics, but about impressions, personal sensations, evoked by the sight of sculpted cloth falling over vulnerable flesh and the worry lines etched into the brow of a portrait head.



Above, a fragmentary colossal marble head, probably part of a depiction of Alexander the Great. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Grand exhibitions and historical epochs alike often revolve around a magnetic personality. The Met show does too: King Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great. Although he was born far from Athens, he deeply identified with Greek Classical culture (having Aristotle as a personal tutor helped). At the same time, he moved beyond it with the creative confidence of a superstar.

Gorgeous and beauty-loving, culturally inquisitive and ravenous with ambition, Alexander embarked on what amounts to a world tour based on military conquest. Within a few years, he exerted political control over Greece, staked claims to sovereignty in Egypt and Persia, and reached the edges of India. He spread the Hellenic spirit as he went, but he also absorbed influences from the cultures around him, and shipped those influences home in the form of gold, jewels and precious objects.

The Greek Classical tradition was based on an aesthetic, which was also an ethic, of idealization, austerity and emotional restraint. It represented, at least to some degree, the effort of a peninsular culture to distance itself from, and elevate itself above, what it perceived as a barbaric outside world. Alexander plunged into that outside world and the cargo of exotic fabulousness he sent back from it altered the character of Classical art. By the time of his death in 323 B.C., at 32, a new, hybrid, internationalist art, now known as Hellenistic, had begun to coalesce, and would flourish for nearly three centuries.

Its history is the subject of the Met show and is, to say the least, a complex one. Alexander himself is everywhere in the opening gallery. A marble portrait head — possibly a Roman copy of an original bronze by his court artist, Lysippos — likely reflects what the ruler looked like: generically dishy with a designer haircut, Justin Bieber with gravitas. Two small bronzes suggest distinctive personas that Alexander, a born performer, wanted to market: in one he's a buff hunk inviting worshipful admiration, in the other an armored equestrian, eyes wide, hair flying, sword-arm raised.



A bronze statuette of an emaciated youth. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Objects around him give a sense of globalist environment he relished and promoted. Asian elephants lumber over silver coins and glazed plates. Persian courtiers circle a monumental vase. A shimmering myrtle wreath of hammered gold, each light-catching leaf, twig and

flower exquisitely formed, seems to await the wealthy wearer who, wherever he lived and whatever he did, was a cosmopolitan member of Hellenistic society.

A flair for the theatrical in this new art often expressed itself through exaggerated scale. In a gallery further along in the show, a marble statue of Athena, carved around 170 B.C., towers more than 13 feet tall. A two-foot-high head of Herakles is a fragment of an image that, when intact, must have projected muscle-bound immensity. Both sculptures were found at Pergamon in modern Turkey. The site was the capital of the Attalid dynasty, one of several post-Alexander kingdoms that fought among themselves and eventually faced off with Rome. It's most famous, though for its frieze-covered Great Altar, one of the most dramatic of surviving Hellenistic monuments.

Uncovered by German archaeologists at the end of the 19th century, the altar reliefs are now in Berlin at the [Pergamon Museum](#), which, currently closed for restoration, is the source for nearly a third of the 265 objects in the Met show. The sequence of high-relief panels that once lined the altar staircase depicts a mortal clash between the major Greek gods and a race of marauding giants. With its near-hysterical tone, the frieze is one of the great coups de théâtre of sculptural history and a lastingly influential one. It is also physically unmovable and couldn't travel to New York. Two marvelous panels from a second, smaller frieze at the site did make the trip, though it is in a group of sculptures with no direct relationship to the altar that the life-and-death emotionalism of the Pergamon's style comes through most sharply.

The group makes a startling first impression: of fallen bodies strewn across the ground, as if in the wake of an execution squad that has just moved on. A marble figure of an Amazon lies dead on a patch of earth, her face slack, her limp body thrown open. Nearby is the famous sculpture, on loan from the Capitoline Museums in Rome, of "Dying Gaul," an image of a nude man, felled by wounds, making one final, futile effort to rise.

These sculptures are not meant to inspire pure pity. Their subjects — a mythically fierce female warrior, a real Celtic tribesman of a kind known to pillage Greek settlements — embodied cosmic forces seen as ever-threatening to the Hellenic civilization. They are outsiders, the enemy. But pathos is pathos: The dying man, head hanging down as if he were staring into the earth, is a pitiable sight. One of the grand beauties of Hellenistic art is its insistence on confusing our feelings, on replacing the Classical certainty with emotional complication.

The exhibition's organizers — Carlos A. Picón and Seán Hemingway of the museum's department of Greek and Roman art, leading a curatorial team of Ariel Herrmann, Kyriaki Karoglou, Christopher S. Lightfoot, Joan R. Mertens, Lillian Bartlett Stoner and Paul Zanker — have done well to emphasize this complex dynamic, one that gives Hellenistic art an exceptionally modern savor. But after the high Pergamon moment, there's still a lot of ground to cover, and the show broadens out in a series of mini-surveys devoted to specific features of Hellenistic art: jewelry, glass production coins and intimate sculpture.

Each yields astonishments: onyx cameos with 10 layers of carving, glass bowls with inserted gold sheets and sculptures like the famed "Il Spinario," which turns the image of a child pulling a thorn from his foot into a tight Baroque tangle of coiled lines.

In some eras, art loses steam, repeats itself, sputters out. Hellenistic art seemed increasingly fueled by audacity. Decorative glassware goes psychedelic. Portraits turn slightly psychotic. The margin for oddity, always wide, grows wider, and is rife with jokes and surprises. Look at the back of a life-size carving of a sleeping hermaphrodite and you see the smooth planes of an Ingres odalisque, Classical Venus; look from the front and you see an erection.



The “Borghese Krater” from about 40-40 B.C. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

This marble sculpture is a Roman copy of a Greek original, done sometime in the second century B.C. By then, global political balances had long since shifted. Rome, that power mower of an empire, had picked off the Hellenistic kingdoms one by one. The last Attalid monarch handed over the keys to Pergamon without being asked. With Cleopatra’s suicide in 30 B.C., Alexander’s one remaining direct successor left the scene. The new Roman emperor, Augustus, was a Classicist. He liked pure, was comfortable with composed. Unruly emotion in art was out.

Or was it? After centuries, the Hellenistic spirit had permanently changed art’s DNA. There could be no more Classicism, only Neo-Classicism and Post-Classicism. At the end of the show we find a bronze caldron, made somewhere in the Greek world during the Augustan

years: its basic form is old-style but from its surface a little satyr pops out like a jack-in-the-box, snaps his fingers and smiles a gleaming silver inlaid smile. And at a late date we find one of the exhibition's most moving portraits, the bronze head of a young African king named Juba II, on loan from the Archaeological Museum of Rabat in Morocco.



A towering marble statue of Athena, from around 170 B.C. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Juba's father, the king of Numidia, had killed himself after losing a battle against Julius Caesar in Africa. The boy was brought to Rome as part of the victory spoils, paraded through the streets, then raised in the imperial household. Augustus eventually made him ruler of the African lands to which he was already the natural heir. Records tell us that Juba remained close to Augustus and lived a long life as a loyal Roman citizen. In the portrait, though, as intimate and unguarded as a snapshot, he's still young, somewhere in his teens. He stares off as if lost in thought. His lip curls in something like anger. His face swells as if he were about to cry.

"Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World" opens Monday and runs through July 17 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org. The exhibition is now open to members.



A bronze bust of Juba II, from around 25 B.C. Credit Musée Archéologique de Rabat, Morocco



Background, a bronze statue of Eros sleeping; foreground, a marble statue of a sleeping hermaphrodite. Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times