On beauty: Ancient perceptions of beauty from classical Greece to Imperial Rome

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ON BEAUTY: ANCIENT PERCEPTIONS OF BEAUTY
FROM CLASSICAL GREECE TO IMPERIAL ROME

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When trying to describe something that is beautiful to someone, a common first step is to find an image of the beauty one is trying to describe. In the Greco-Roman world, these images were found in the artworks, texts, and other forms of expression from the time, and images of human beauty were found in paintings, frescos, and statuary. Unfortunately, due to the Ravages of Time, statuary is the most common surviving medium and therefore our biggest asset in knowing what the Greeks and Romans saw as beautiful. Much like how society today uses models to represent beauty standards and expectations, the people of the ancient world did this with statues. The way these statues portrayed beauty was through pleasing proportions, how well the artwork aligned with societal expectations or gender roles, and through their accuracy in depicting the natural world around them.

This study seeks to explore what the ancient Greeks and Romans saw as beautiful, in the primarily female but also male human body. This study is important because as humans we are obsessed with the idea of beauty and wanting to be perceived as beautiful, but we do not know where these ideas of beauty come from. A large majority of Western ideas about beauty in terms of architecture comes from the Greeks and Romans. Learning more about what they considered to be beautiful in regard to humans can help us to understand our modern ideas of beauty. The guiding question of this study consists of: How did artistic and philosophical views of beauty correlate and influence each other? How did depictions of beauty differ between moral and immortal figures? and How did depictions of beauty differ across time?

This study will answer these questions by comparing statues from the Classical and Hellenistic periods in Greece and the Principate in Rome. In order to focus the study, sculptures
of deities and humans in public life, such as emperors, empresses, athletes, and priestesses will be used. The reason for this is that when depicting a deity, an artist would not want to portray the deity as being ugly, for fear of divine retaliation. A similar logic can be used in justifying the focus on emperors, empresses and priestesses: artists would not want to portray them as anything other than beautiful, or anything less than their realistic appearance, for fear of a negative reaction from the ruling family or the person they were depicting. In the case of emperors, such as Augustus, the artist would exaggerate their realistic appearance. While athletes may seem like an outlier in this group of statues, athletes held a special place in Classical antiquity, which caused them to be depicted in positive and even idealized ways.

Each of the periods of Classical art had characteristics that highlighted what people believed to be beautiful in that period. While Classical Greek art is heavily idealized, the idealizations, if made consistently, can tell us what features the Greeks preferred, and hence saw as beautiful. Hellenistic art moved towards realism, but did not abandon the models, canons, and techniques from the Classical period. This means that while Hellenistic art was more focused on accurately depicting the world around the artist, it did not completely abandon the idealism of the past. The Roman art of the Principate offers by far the most advanced, albeit idealized, depictions we have from Classical antiquity. The Principate is also where we find evidence of beauty regimens being integrated into sculpture, such as the elaborate hairstyles of Flavian women. The purpose of this study is to find patterns, commonalities, and differences in the sculpture of each of these periods and determine how that relates to their understanding and beliefs about beauty.

The philosophers of the Greco-Roman world also provide us with information on the how the ideas of art and beauty changed overtime. The thinkers of the early Classical period were
focused on the abstract concepts of art and pinpointing what qualified as art and did not. In their discussions of art, a focus on mathematics and proportions can be found in the majority of early philosophers’ works. In the Classical period Plato and Aristotle began to focus on the idea of beauty. While they mostly focused on beauty in the form of textual arts, their ideas can be applied to plastic arts as well. Hellenistic philosophers shifted from a focus on art to a focus on beauty. Their ideas of beauty were largely focused on pleasure and virtue instead of mathematics like the philosophers before them. By analyzing the changes in thought as well as the changes in statuary, we are able to have a deeper understanding of how beauty and the depiction of beauty changed throughout the Classical world.

Many scholars have discussed these topics in previous works and their works have fallen into three categories: scholars who focused on philosophy and aesthetics, scholars who focused on art, and scholars who focused on explaining ancient culture and society. The main scholars who focused on philosophy and aesthetics were Monroe Beardsley, Bernard Bosanquet, and Władysław Tatarkiewicz.¹ Each of them used primary source philosophical texts to reach their conclusions. Their articles mainly focused on abstract ideas of aesthetics and provided information on how the philosophers came to and justified their conclusions. When the scholars, and philosophers, discussed the concrete applications of the abstract theories of aesthetics, they mainly wrote in terms of architecture and music.

Scholars of art from antiquity typically divided into scholars focusing on Greek art and scholars focusing on Roman art. Even though Roman art encompasses Greek art, the Roman art scholars included discussions on the history, and importance, of the person being depicted in the

sculpture. The scholars consulted for this study consisted of John Boardman and Martin Robertson, for studies on Greek art, and Nancy and Andrew Ramage and Fred Kleiner, for studies on Roman art. Each of these scholars used artistic primary source evidence consisting of paintings, mosaics, statues, and numismatic evidence. These studies focused on the trends in art and how different techniques and skills advanced. The sources also contained in-depth information on specific aspects of various artworks, such as the meaning behind clothing, hairstyles, and other subtle aspects that are hidden to the untrained viewer.

In order to understand how philosophy and art intersected with society, it is important to know how society and the daily lives of women functioned. Studies done by Eve D’Ambra, Susan Pomeroy, and Elaine Fantham and her colleagues provide this information. These studies used a wide array of primary sources such as texts, archaeological, and artistic evidence. Texts included letters, legislation, and literary works. The artistic sources consisted of paintings, frescoes, and numismatic evidence. Perfume bottles, cosmetic containers, and grooming tools such as mirrors and hairbrushes made up the archaeological evidence. They used this evidence to explain women’s place in society. The studies explained women’s role in religion, their daily lives and routines, in addition to their role in public life.

These scholars stayed focused on specific and narrow topics they were pursuing. In cases where studies overlapped, such as D’Ambra using art to explain daily life in Rome, the ideas of

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philosophy were not considered. Much of the secondary literature was siloed in this way and did not overlap with topics from other categories. For the purpose of this study, the three categories will be blended together to find how philosophy and art interacted with the views of society.

A factor complicating this study is that many of the original Greek statues have been lost to war, destruction, and time. Many of those statues were stolen from Greek cities and sanctuaries by the Roman aristocracy. After the supply of original statues was exhausted, the Romans began to make copies of the most famous works. The Romans did not care about the artist who made the sculpture as much as they did about the impression the piece made on the viewer. Some of the copied statues were even valued as highly as the Greek original if they were seen as accurate representations of the original sculpture. In order to earn the most profit on their work, Roman copyists and sculptures tried to remain as true to the Greek statue as possible.

Roman copyists and artists maintained the accuracy of their works by using a pointing machine to create new sculptures almost exactly the same as the original. Sean Hemingway describes the process of creating a Roman copy:

Roman marble sculptors were capable of achieving this copying precision by means of a device known as a pointing machine, first introduced during the Hellenistic period. The sculptor, having taken molds from the original… would have made the one-to-one plaster casts in his own workshop. These casts would have served as master models during the carving process… The stone sculptor would take hundreds of measurements from the master model and transfer them to the rough stone block in precisely corresponding positions. Holes were then drilled into the stone block to the depth measured by means of

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5 Hemingway, “Posthumous Copies,” 32.

6 Hemingway, “Posthumous Copies,” 32.
a pointing machine. The superficial stone was then removed with a mallet and chisel to the full depth of the pointing holes.\textsuperscript{7}

Because of the accuracy achieved by Roman copyists, due to the pointing machine, Charles Stocking argued that Roman copies should not be dismissed, rendered as derivative, nor seen as secondary.\textsuperscript{8} He also noted that while the copies should be used as credible representations of Greek art, it is important to remember the Roman copyists had their own aesthetics and were tailoring the statues to Roman buyers.\textsuperscript{9} We are made aware of these aesthetic changes in those rare cases where we have a Greek original as well as Roman copies.

The way the Greeks defined beauty adds another layer of complexity to this study. Much like today, when we use the word “beautiful” to describe people, nature, sounds, and a wide array of other things, the people of the ancient world also had a broad definition of the word. The people of ancient Greece used the word \textit{kalós}, often translated as “beauty”, to describe things that were beautiful, well-wrought, good, of fine quality, and even used it in a moral sense as noble or honorable.\textsuperscript{10} Beauty is also used to translate \textit{kalon}, which has been defined as everything that pleases, attracts, and arouses admiration. \textit{Kalon} could be used to describe sights, sounds, the quality of the human mind and character.\textsuperscript{11} However, \textit{kalon} did not lose the moral side of beauty, as it was sometimes also translated as virtue and honor.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{7} Hemingway, “Posthumous Copies,” 29.

\textsuperscript{8} Charles Heiko Stocking, “Greek Ideal as Hyperreal: Greco-Roman Sculpture and the Athletic Male Body,” \textit{Journal of Humanities and the Classics} 21, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 47.

\textsuperscript{9} Stocking, “Greek Ideal as Hyperreal,” 47.


\textsuperscript{11} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 25.

\textsuperscript{12} Konstan, “Beauty,” 367.
In the Classical period, the words *kalós* and *kalon* were used to describe moral beauty, but over time they tried to restrict the definition to sensual beauty based on visual perception. This was an important precursor to arriving at the definition of beauty that most accurately reflects the purpose of this study. David Konstan argued that the word *kállos*, is the closest the Greeks came to our modern definition of the word beauty. He noted that the primary meaning of *kállos* referred to physical beauty, specifically beauty that was associated with erotic attraction. In a different article, he noted that when the Greeks spoke of human beauty, it was most often associated with sexual attractiveness. This definition also provides interesting insight into how the Greeks saw beauty in their gods. This term was often attributed to Aphrodite but was rarely used to describe virgin goddesses such as Athena or Artemis. In a similar fashion, *kállos* is never applied to small children, and is only applied to girls once they become of marriageable age. While these definitions are complex, they provide evidence that the Greeks were interested in beauty and spoke and wrote about it often.

While the idea of beauty was ambiguous in Greece, due to the multiple definitions of the word, in Rome the ideas of beauty and perfecting one’s physical appearance were much more concrete. Archaeology provides us with physical evidence in the form of cosmetics which were used by women in Rome. We are also provided with evidence from satirists such as Juvenal who wrote,

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There is nothing that a woman balks at, no action that gives her a twinge of conscience. Once she’s put on her emerald choker, weighted down her ear-lobes with vast pearl pendants. What’s more insufferable than your well-heeled female? But earlier in the process he presents a sight as funny as it’s appalling, her features lost under a damp bread face-pack, or greasy with vanishing-cream that clings to her husband’s lips when the poor man kisses her – though it’s all wiped off for her lover. She takes no trouble about the way she looks at home.  

While Juvenal finds these regimens to be particularly unpleasing, his writing gives us a look into what Roman women were doing to appear beautiful such as wearing makeup and jewelry. However, contradictory to Juvenal’s view, Eve D’Ambra wrote in her book, *Roman Women*, that the appearance of a sophisticated and well-turned-out woman in public was cause for praise, both for her and her husband. She also noted that these beauty regimens and finery transformed matrons into elegant creatures worthy of the public renown or achievement of their spouses.  

The reason for women maintaining this beauty regimen was not entirely to please their husbands or the public. For some women, participating in the regimen made them believe that beauty was a state that could be achieved through proper toilette routines. This did not mean that Roman women were stuck in the same routine; for some women, the beauty regimen was seen as an activity that allowed them creative control over their appearances. Roman women also believed that their self-maintenance allowed them to imagine themselves as Venuses who could achieve the same physical perfection as the goddess. The evidence of Roman women’s


20 D’Ambra, *Roman Women*, 112.


carefully created appearance is evident in the sculptures and statues from that time which depict parts of these regimens such as elaborate hairstyles.
Chapter 2

Greek and Roman Thoughts on Beauty and Art

While there were many definitions of beauty throughout the Greco-Roman world which have made it complicated for scholars to study the subject, the differing thoughts and perspectives on beauty further complicate the study. Philosophers and schools of philosophy had their own explanations for what made something beautiful, and in many cases had their own explanations of how beauty related to art. Philosophers were not the only people who pondered these ideas in the ancient world and there is evidence that the idea of beauty also was discussed by ordinary Greeks and Romans. While ordinary people may not have always known who was being depicted, they were able to point out the things that pleased them and the things that did not. When philosophers discussed beauty, it generally came along with discussions of pleasure, mathematics, and metaphysics.

In the early stages of the Classical period, philosophers mainly focused on the underlying ideas of art and what art meant but had not yet considered the idea of beauty. The art of the Classical period was focused on geometry, symmetry, and imitation; the philosophers thought about art in similar terms. The Pythagoreans were very mathematical and focused on the ideas of number, measure and proportion.\(^1\) Democritus, who was active after Pythagoras had died, focused on the theories of art instead of the ideas of beauty. He believed that art imitated nature, and that nature was the model for art, but pleasure was the ultimate aim.\(^2\) Socrates was the first to break away from these ideas by adding utilitarian ideas of art and beginning to think about

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\(^1\) Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 80-81.

beauty, albeit not in the terms we would consider as beauty or beautiful today. Socrates refused to consider the idea that beauty could exist except as relative to a purpose. The Sophists agreed with Socrates’ belief that beauty is related to purpose, but they added that beauty was also related to the degree of pleasure one received from the art. Pleasure may have been included because one characteristic of the Sophists was that they switched philosophical thought from nature to humans and from general to more detailed observations.

While the Sophists and Socrates were not thinking of beauty and how it related to art, they did frame the ideas that would allow Plato and Aristotle to contemplate such things. While Plato’s and Aristotle’s writings mainly focused on criticism of text and not on visual arts, their ideas can be applied to both texts and plastic arts. Plato noticed that the term “beauty” was applied to a large variety of things such as texts, people, and artwork, and believed that if many things were referred to as beautiful, then there must be some quality that was present in all of them. He believed this common quality was the Form of Beauty. Plato wrote that the Idea, or Form, of beauty is the ultimate type of beauty and was superior to the beauty of souls which was superior to the beauty of the body. In typical Platonic fashion, the abstract Idea of beauty was

3 Bernard Bosanquet, A History of Aesthetic, 43.
4 Tatarkiewicz, History of Aesthetics, 118-19.
5 Tatarkiewicz, History of Aesthetics, 96.
7 Beardsley, Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present, 39.
what mattered, but he also believed that art should be judged by correctness.\textsuperscript{9} While the artist should aim for the Idea of Beauty, it is most important for the piece to be correct.

Aristotle did not follow Plato’s notion of Ideas and Forms of Beauty; instead he focused on theories of art and rarely commented on beauty. He also did not explicitly think about the pleasure that comes from sculptures; instead he focused on how things were depicted and what they represented.\textsuperscript{10} While Aristotle focused his discussion of aesthetics on textual arts, he touched on the imitative arts. He considered the imitative arts to be painting, sculpture, poetry, and music. In these arts, he saw that nature and the world were depicted in three ways: (1) As they are, (2) As they are thought to be, and (3) As they ought to be.\textsuperscript{11} He noticed that when a piece was created as it was thought to be or as it was ought to be, it created an idealizing of nature.\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle died at the time the Greek world was moving from the Classical period to the Hellenistic, where the ideas of idealism, naturalism, and realism were changing.\textsuperscript{13}

The Hellenistic period saw the creation of schools of philosophy such as the Epicureans, Stoics, and Eclectics who each had their own ideas on beauty and art. The Epicureans rejected Plato and the Classical philosophers’ ideas of “spiritual” beauty.\textsuperscript{14} They believed that beauty and art were defined by the pleasure they provided.\textsuperscript{15} The Stoics were not as quick to reject the ideas

\textsuperscript{9} Beardsley, \textit{Aesthetics from Classical Greece}, 49.
\textsuperscript{10} Bosanquet, \textit{A History of Aesthetic}, 56.
\textsuperscript{11} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 142.
\textsuperscript{12} Bosanquet, \textit{A History of Aesthetic}, 62.
\textsuperscript{13} Aristotle died in 322 BCE and the Hellenistic period is generally believed to start in 323 BCE, but with all periodization, the dates and characteristics are flexible. It is likely that idealized art would have been being produced before his death.
\textsuperscript{14} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 175.
\textsuperscript{15} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 175.
of the Classical philosophers. They believed beauty had a connection to goodness and virtue.\textsuperscript{16} The Stoics defined beauty as “the orderly arrangement of objects to the rational order of the soul and suggest[ed] that the delight in beauty is connected with the virtue that expresses itself in an ordered life.”\textsuperscript{17} Cicero and the Eclectics embraced Plato’s belief of a non-material type of beauty. They believed that the mind is always capable of a higher beauty than what is produced in an artwork. For instance, they believed that the picture, the sculptor Phidias had in his head was more beautiful than any of the sculptures he produced.\textsuperscript{18} The Eclectics had divided the concept of beauty into two different types. There was beauty that existed in grace (\textit{venustas}) which was typically associated with feminine beauty, and beauty that existed in dignity (\textit{dignitas}) which was typically associated with masculine beauty.\textsuperscript{19}

The Hellenistic philosophers continued to be active even after the Hellenistic period had ended. Roman philosophers were involved in the schools of thought from the Hellenistic period, and kept their ideas alive. In many cases, such as the Epicureans and the Stoics, all we know of them is provided to us through the works of later Roman thinkers. Plotinus who is considered to be the last Roman philosopher before aesthetics and philosophy moved into the Middle Ages provides us with thoughts on aesthetics from the later part of the Roman empire. Plotinus largely embraced Plato’s belief in “spiritual” beauty. He believed that beauty was only in the Form because that is the only thing that can enter into our apprehension.\textsuperscript{20} Plotinus also rejected the

\textsuperscript{16} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 187.

\textsuperscript{17} Beardsley, \textit{Aesthetics from Classical Greece}, 70.

\textsuperscript{18} Bosanquet, \textit{A History of Aesthetic}, 103.


\textsuperscript{20} Bosanquet, \textit{A History of Aesthetic}, 115.
idea of the early Classical philosophers that symmetry is beautiful. He believed that symmetry was a component of beauty, but because symmetry was in everything, it was not beautiful itself. Instead of symmetry, he believed that unity is what made something beautiful.

Art was a topic that interested more than just the philosophers of the ancient world. Greeks and Romans, much like people today, would design their homes with the placement of statues in mind. Many people would intentionally place statues in the parts of the house where they would be viewed most often. Craig Hardiman argued that much of the statuary in Hellenistic homes could best be described as “pretty.” He noted that this was because of the smooth surface transitions and the classical framework which was common in the post-Praxitelean world. According to Hardiman, the classical world had three virtues of aesthetics: (1) realism, (2) miraculous quality, and (3) costliness. The sculptures that were in these homes were meant to encompass these three virtues. The most pleasing sculptures were believed to accurately depict the world around them, showcase the artist’s high technical skill, and be expensive. While these virtues help to explain what the ancient people saw as beautiful, they do not account for the subjective experience each person had while interacting with art.

In the ancient world, much like today, the way a person interpreted and interacted with art depended on their own personal experiences. For many average people in ancient Greece and Rome, their reaction to art was influenced by their own social and cultural knowledge of areas

22 Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece*, 82.
23 Hardiman, “‘Popular’ Aesthetics,” 275.
24 Hardiman, “‘Popular’ Aesthetics,” 278.
such as history, myth, or politics. Terrance Rusnak collected 557 ancient references that provide evidence to sculpture being discussed by average viewers. In this study he found four patterns describing how viewers interacted with art: (1) Viewers share knowledge of myth, history, or societal convention which allows them to recognize the figure depicted. (2) If the viewers did not recognize a figure then they began to question each other. (3) These works served as a catalyst for discussion, on topics such as beauty, on personal as well as societal levels. (4) Viewers empathize and interact with the represented subject.

These same experiences were also shaped by the societal context the person lived in. For Greeks in the Classical period, art and the way people reacted to art was largely influenced by the way the cultures valued athletics and military training. Military training and athletics were a large focus of the Greek world because they were constantly at battle with neighboring peoples and needed their men to always be fit for battle. Since the world around them focused on bodies being fit from athletics and military training, it makes sense that their art would represent that as well.

The art and statuary of the ancient world was viewed through the lenses of athletics and militarism, but they also had deeply religious aspects as well. They saw the statues as a living symbol of which ever deity it depicted and believed that the statue was connected to the spirit of the deity. In his article on the production of art and religion, Richard Gordon noted that Greek

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26 Hardiman, “Popular’ Aesthetics,” 281.
and Roman writers often made no distinction between the image of a deity and the deity itself. Rosemary Barrow however argued that “the distinction between human and divine is illustrated in the disparity between art and reality. Unlike a woman, the statue of a goddess cannot be penetrated, and a god-like man must be bigger, bolder, and better than his mortal equivalent.” Seeing the statue as a deity, or being closely connected to a deity, created an interesting way in which the Greco-Roman world interpreted the beauty of these statues. Konstan argued that the artworks themselves were not seen as “beautiful” because when the Greeks and Romans looked at an artistic representation of a “beautiful figure,” they responded to the beauty of the sculpture as they would to that of a living person. From the close relationship between the figure being depicted, the figure itself, and the concept of beauty, we can interpret what the Greco-Roman world saw as beautiful.


Chapter 3

The How and Why of Greco-Roman Depictions

The art of the Classical period in ancient Greece began with depictions of gods and goddesses and this continued in the art of Imperial Rome. The religion of the Greco-Roman world was anthropomorphic, meaning they believed that their deities had the same attributes and traits of humans, and because of this the human body became the main preoccupation of Greek sculptors.1 This blending of sculpture and religion made the character of ancient art more complex because the artist was representing the world of the gods and not that of men.2 While depicting the world of the gods, Jean-Pierre Vernant argues that the idea of the artist and the artwork was to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine; yet by the same move, it must also emphasize what is inaccessible and mysterious in divinity, its alien quality, its otherness.3 Religion profoundly influenced the art of the Greco-Roman world, and the aesthetics of the times influenced the way the deities were depicted.

The art of the Classical world was also characterized by the use of proportions and a standardized canon. The canon created by Polyclitus, a Greek sculptor of the fifth century BCE, was one of the most important aspects of ancient art and it was believed that a good artist knew the rules and used them instead of using his own creativity and individuality.4 Galen provides us

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1 Barrow, “The Body, Human and Divine,” 94.

2 Tatarkiewicz, History of Aesthetics, 23.


4 Tatarkiewicz, History of Aesthetics, 29.
with a basic summary of the canon, “Beauty…lies in the proportion of its members: of finger, obviously to finger, of all the fingers to palm and wrist, of these to the forearm, of forearm to upper arm and of all to all, as it has been written in the Canon of Polyclitus.”\(^5\) The canon not only covered the proportions of the body as a whole, but also explained the proportions of the face, which was divided into three parts, the forehead, nose, and lips-chin.\(^6\) Władysław Tatarkiewicz quotes Vitruvius urging that, “Nature has so designed the human body that the skull, from the chin to the upper part of the forehead and the roots of the hair, should equal one-tenth of the length of the body.”\(^7\)

Much of the early Classical period art was defined by the rigid proportions that came with the canon. As the Classical period developed, the depictions of humans became increasingly subject to the artist’s personal taste. The sculptors became concerned with the proportions of a well-built man instead of the rigid proportions of the canon that should be present in a statue.\(^8\) They were moving away from the geometry found in Polyclitus towards the idea of representing the nature and world around them.\(^9\) However the Greeks did not entirely abandon the canon of Polyclitus, instead they saw his proportions as something that could be revised to include freedom, individuality, and align with the prevailing tastes of the times.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 55.

\(^8\) Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 55.

\(^9\) Stocking, “Greek Ideal,” 51.

While the original canon of Polyclitus has been lost to history, it is believed that the Doryphoros, which was also sculpted by Polyclitus, displays the same ideal proportions of the canon.\textsuperscript{11} We know of the Doryphorus through a Roman marble copy which was made prior to 79 CE based on Polyclitus’ original bronze from the third quarter of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century BCE.\textsuperscript{12} The fact that Romans continued to reproduce art that was made more than five hundred years before meant that they still found these proportions to be beautiful and pleasing to their interests. The marble statue of Hermes, which was a copy made in the first or second century CE based on a statue by Polyclitus from the late fifth or early fourth century BCE, is an example of this same idea.\textsuperscript{13}

This was not restricted to depictions of men and their ideal proportions; we also see it in depictions of women as well. One of the most famous statues from Classical Greece is the Aphrodite of Cnidus by Praxiteles, which was sculpted ca. 350 BCE.\textsuperscript{14} Then in the first or second century CE, we find a Roman copy called the Torso of Venus which is inspired by the Aphrodite of Cnidus.\textsuperscript{15} The proportions of these two sculptures are similar even though they were made hundreds of years apart. The copying of statues was so popular that in some cases, such as the Roman Matron in the Guise of Venus, the lower orders of society would just put their loved one’s head on the body of a popular statue.\textsuperscript{16} This provides evidence that the Romans

\textsuperscript{11} Robertson, \textit{A Shorter History of Greek Art}, 112.

\textsuperscript{12} Robertson, \textit{A Shorter History of Greek Art}, 113.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Marble Statue of Hermes}, Original Late 5\textsuperscript{th} or Early 4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, Marble, Met Museum, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254925 (Roman Copy).

\textsuperscript{14} Boardman, \textit{Greek Art}, 188.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Torso of Venus}, 1\textsuperscript{st} or 2\textsuperscript{nd} century CE, Marble, Cleveland Museum of Art, https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1926.565.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Roman Matron in the Guise of Venus}, Late 2\textsuperscript{nd} century CE, Marble, in D’Ambra, \textit{Roman Women}, 177; D’Ambra \textit{Roman Women}, 177.
found the Greek proportions in sculpture to be so pleasing that they continued to use them for hundreds of years instead of creating their own.

It is important to note that these proportions were not accurate depictions of the way humans actually looked. Instead they were meant to be representations of the ideal body and depict the way a human should look. The sculptures of ancient Greece were meant to show the superiority the Greeks achieved through physical exercise, but they represented this superiority as a physical impossibility that could only exist in mental or divine capacity.\textsuperscript{17} For instance, the statues of Heracles came to represent the physical ideal of the mythic Greek past, but depictions of him, such as the Farnese Heracles from the baths of Caracalla, are entirely unrealistic.\textsuperscript{18} Scholars have proposed that these idealizations may have given the artist the feeling that their works were permanent and would not pass away.\textsuperscript{19}

Artists of the ancient world did not only create statues to assert physical superiority and show off ideal body proportions; they also gave the statues a wide array of meanings. Many sculptures of athletes were dedicated to gods in sanctuaries as a memorial of victory.\textsuperscript{20} Athletic statues were also meant to express the desired state of their souls, and those created as funerary monuments were meant to reflect the glory of the athlete’s past achievements.\textsuperscript{21} In Rome, funerary monuments were meant to honor the life of the deceased, and in some cases, such as the

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\textsuperscript{17} Stocking, “Greek Ideal,” 47.
\textsuperscript{18} Stocking, “Greek Ideal,” 57; \textit{Heracles (Farnese)}, Original ca. 325 BCE, Marble copy of bronze original, in Boardman, \textit{Greek Art}, 188. (Roman Copy).
\textsuperscript{19} Tatarkiewicz, \textit{History of Aesthetics}, 72.
\textsuperscript{21} Reid, “Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece,” 284.
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Altar of Julia Victorina, offered a depiction of what the deceased could have looked like if they were to have lived.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} Altar of Julia Victorina, ca 60-70 CE, Marble, in D’Ambra, \textit{Roman Women}, 66; D’Ambra, \textit{Roman Women}, 66.
Chapter 4
Female Depictions

The representation of women in sculpture fluctuated throughout the ancient world, but generally reflected a woman’s place in society. In the Classical period of Greece, there were virtually no sculptures depicting women who were not deities. This is likely because during this period, it was the woman’s role to stay home and maintain the house, while also taking care of any children she had.\(^1\) When in public, men and women were usually separated to prevent men, even male relatives, from gazing at them. This separation of men and women was not only found in public; they were also separated in the home.\(^2\) While women’s roles were mostly confined to the home, they were able to participate in civic cults and had a role as religious officials.\(^3\) Because of this separation and women’s narrow role in public life, it is not surprising that the art of the Classical period did not have much representation of women in sculpture outside of religious circumstances.

By the time of Imperial Rome, women’s typical roles had changed significantly from those in Classical Greece. Imperial Rome also had a large number of women depicted in their statues, the most popular being women of the imperial court and Vestal Virgins.\(^4\) Women in the imperial court were often seen as extensions of the emperor or as a personification of his qualities. This is often seen in the coinage from the empire, where the emperor’s portrait would

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be on the obverse of a coin with an imperial woman on the reverse.\textsuperscript{5} This was not the case for wealthy upper-class women because they were not seen as appendages of men.\textsuperscript{6} Instead, wealthy women were seen, independent from men, through their displays of status and wealth. This can often be seen depicted in artworks such a bust of a Flavian woman, also known as the Fonseca Bust, where the woman’s hair is meticulously done and very elaborate.\textsuperscript{7}

Since women had a very small role outside of the home in Classical Greece, artists did not take much interest in depicting the female body accurately. Classical depictions of female deities have noticeably masculine proportions. When looking at statues such as the Athena Lemnia or Hestia Giustiani, these proportions reveal themselves.\textsuperscript{8} The Athena Lemnia has a very similar body type to that of the Doryphoros or the Naukydes.\textsuperscript{9} The statues of the goddesses have square shoulders and hips, which resemble that of a Greek athlete. Because many of these statues have masculine proportions, it often looks like they were modelled off of ephes and then breasts added later.\textsuperscript{10} It is typical for Classical sculptures of goddesses to have small breasts and larger buttocks. This may be in part because of the homosexual context of the Grecian world, which made it that buttocks were more attractive than breasts.\textsuperscript{11} While the small breasts, larger

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\textsuperscript{8} *Athena Lemnia*, Original 450-430 BCE, Marble copy of bronze original, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/166020 (Roman Copy); *Hestia Giustiniiani*, Original 2nd quarter of 5th century BCE, Marble copy of bronze original, in Robertson, *A Shorter History of Greek Art*, 53, (Roman Copy).
\textsuperscript{10} Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World*, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{11} Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 47.
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buttocks, and masculine proportions were seen as beautiful, women in the Classical world found it as difficult to obtain these standards as women today do with modern standards of beauty.\textsuperscript{12}

Depictions of Aphrodite in the Classical world contradict these ideas of masculine proportions. Aphrodite was seen as the epitome of beauty even though her proportions did not match those of other goddesses.\textsuperscript{13} While depictions of Aphrodite still maintain the small breasts and larger buttocks, her depictions also included more feminine curves, which can be seen in sculptures such as Praxiteles’ \textit{Aphrodite of Cnidus}, the \textit{Capitoline Venus}, and the \textit{Torso of Venus}.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to the feminine breasts and buttocks, depictions of Aphrodite also tended to have smaller hips than other deities such as Demeter or Nemesis.\textsuperscript{15} This could be because Aphrodite is meant to be portrayed as beautiful in the definition of the word \textit{kállos}, meaning physical and erotic beauty instead of in the type of beauty defined as \textit{kalon}. This type of beauty must have been pleasing to the Greco-Roman world as Aphrodite was the most prevalent deity in the sculptural record.\textsuperscript{16}

The beauty defined as \textit{kalós} is more likely to be seen in depictions of goddesses such as Athena or Demeter. In the Greco-Roman world, women were expected to dress modestly and conceal their bodies. While Konstan argued that beautiful was not used to describe goddesses

\textsuperscript{12} Fantham et al., \textit{Women in the Classical World}, 177.

\textsuperscript{13} Konstan, “Beauty,” 368.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Aphrodite of Cnidus}, Original ca. 350 BCE, Marble, in Boardman, \textit{Greek Art}, 188 (Roman Copy); \textit{Capitoline Venus}, Original ca. 4\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, Marble, Musei Capitolini, http://www.museicapitolini.org/en/collezioni/percorsi_per_sale/palazzo_nuovo/gabinetto_della_venere/statua_della_venere_capitolina (Roman Copy); \textit{Torso of Venus}, Cleveland Museum of Art (Roman Copy).

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Demeter from Morgantina}, Late 5\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, Marble, in Boardman, \textit{Greek Art}, 183; \textit{Nemesis}, Original 3\textsuperscript{rd} quarter of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, Marble, in Robertson, \textit{A Shorter History of Greek Art}, 105 (Roman Copy).

\textsuperscript{16} Hardiman, “Popular Aesthetics,” 275.
such as Athena, it seems that it was just beauty under the definition of *kállos*, or erotic beauty, that was not used to describe these goddesses.\(^\text{17}\) In a statue of Athena by Myron, Athena represents beauty defined in the sense of *kalós*, meaning good or of fine quality. In this statue, Athena is following the feminine gender roles of being modestly dressed and not revealing her body, while also wearing armor that is symbolic of the warrior/athlete context of ancient Greece.\(^\text{18}\) By aligning with the social contexts of militarism and her assigned gender roles, she is seen as good or *kalós*. To be sure, the same can be said of the depictions of Demeter, Hestia, Eirene, Nemesis, and Hera, all of whom are dressed modestly which fits into the Greek definition of how a woman should dress, hence the label *kalós*.\(^\text{19}\) Even Aphrodite was depicted as being modest in the *Aphrodite of Cnidus* statue because she was depicted covering her genitals and appearing to be self-conscious in her vulnerable nude state.\(^\text{20}\)

Concealing the body was important for more than just portraying modesty. In the Classical period, depictions of goddesses were clothed because it was believed that if a human saw a female god naked they would be struck dead or blinded by the gods.\(^\text{21}\) As Robin Osborne points out, another reason that women were always depicted wearing clothes was because artists of the time had no artistic interest in depicting females as female, which reflects the fact that


\(^{18}\) *Athena*, Original mid 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century BCE, Marble, in Robertson, *A Shorter History of Greek Art*, 117. (Roman Copy).


women had no independent place in society so there was no priority in depicting women.\textsuperscript{22} Because of this, the statues of women that were erected in public areas are always modestly dressed and the clothing itself becomes the vehicle for conveying female grace and beauty.\textsuperscript{23} It is important to note however, that the depiction of women clothed from head to toe was not an accurate reflection of reality, and instead served as part of the ideological culture apparatus which meant to control wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{24}

Another reason women were depicted as being modest was because of the harsh societal judgement that came with being immodest. In Classical Athens, the traditional view was that young women who lacked male supervision or a male relative to conduct transactions that required meeting men were in danger of losing their respectability and that respectable women should remain silent and avoid being discussed by men.\textsuperscript{25} Part of this came from societal attempts to keep women sexually repressed which allowed them to keep their virginal status until after marriage. In Athens, the virginal status of a woman was important due to citizenship and legitimacy concerns. Under Pericles’ citizenship law of 451-450 BCE in order for a child to be an Athenian citizen, both the mother and the father had to be Athenian citizens.\textsuperscript{26} The easiest way to ensure the legitimacy of a child was to restrict women sexually, by keeping them clothed and concealed from the public. This restriction was not limited to the Greek world, under

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Robin Osborne, \textit{Archaic and Classical Greek Art}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.
\item Fantham et al., \textit{Women in the Classical World}, 173.
\item D’Ambra, \textit{Roman Women}, 6.
\item Fantham et al., \textit{Women in the Classical World}, 79.
\item Fantham et al., \textit{Women in the Classical World}, 73.
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Augustan legislations the empire tried to control private behavior and counteract what was seen as sexual irresponsibility that was found in the Roman upper classes.\textsuperscript{27}

The depictions of goddesses did not drastically change in the Hellenistic period of Greek art. This could be because the people of Classical antiquity believed that in order for an artist to depict a deity, he had to have seen the true image of the deity either through ascending to the deity, or by the deity coming down to the artist.\textsuperscript{28} This also meant that people who did not have contact with the god only knew of the deity through the work of the artist. To change the depiction would mean the new artist insists that the past one was wrong, which could invoke divine retaliation, so depictions tended to not vary too drastically.

One difference is that the masculine proportions of the Classical era began to give way to more feminine ones. The feminine proportions expanded from just Aphrodite to include other goddesses such as Artemis, Tyche, and Nike. In sculptures such as the Nike of Samothrace, Tyche of Antioch, or Diana of Versailles the goddesses are depicted with much slimmer shoulders compared to the depictions of Athena in Classical art.\textsuperscript{29} Breasts remained small in the majority of depictions, especially in those of Aphrodite. In many of the Hellenistic sculptures, the faces of the deities became much fuller and rounder than those of the Classical period. This

\\textsuperscript{27} Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 296.

\textsuperscript{28} Tatarkiewicz, History of Aesthetics, 291.

\textsuperscript{29} Nike of Samothrace, Late 3\textsuperscript{rd} or early 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BCE, Marble, in Robertson, A Shorter History of Greek Art, 194; Tyche of Antioch, 3\textsuperscript{rd} century- 290 BCE, Marble, in Boardman, Greek Art, 229 (Roman Copy); Diana of Versailles, Original ca. 100 BCE, Marble, Museum of Classical Archaeology-Cambridge, https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/diana-versailles (Roman Copy).
can be seen in the heads of Demeter and Artemis from Lykosoura in Arcadia, as well as in the Bartlett Head of Aphrodite.\(^{30}\)

The Hellenistic age also saw a change in the depiction of modesty. Whereas the Aphrodite of the Classical period was reserved, the depictions of Aphrodite in the Hellenistic period were much more open and confident in their pose. While the gaze of many of the statues is still down, the stance of the sculptures, such as the *Aphrodite of Arles* or the *Venus de Milo*, is much more open to the viewer’s gaze.\(^{31}\) There are still depictions of modest deities such as the *Tyche of Antioch* or *Demeter of Knidos*.\(^{32}\) This tells us that the ancient world was becoming more accepting of depicting women as *kálido*, but at the same time were not abandoning the beauty found in *kaló*.  

Depictions of deities in Rome were mostly copies of popular Classical and Hellenistic statues. As mentioned before, the Roman aristocracy were avid collectors of Greek art, especially art depicting gods and goddesses.\(^{33}\) Much of this artwork would be displayed in private homes. The Romans also began the practice of commemorating people “in the guise of” different gods and goddesses. In many cases, this meant they would put a head of the person they were depicting onto the body of a Greek statue of a god or goddess, for example *Livia as Fortuna* or a

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\(^{32}\) *Tyche of Antioch*, in Boardman, *Greek Art*, 229 (Roman Copy); *Demeter of Knidos*, Second half of the 4th century, Marble, in Robertson, *A Shorter History of Greek Art*, 161.

\(^{33}\) Hemingway, “Posthumous Copies,” 27.
Flavian Woman in the Guise of Venus. By depicting a woman in the guise of Venus, that meant that the woman being depicted was seen as beautiful as the goddess herself.

While the depictions of deities from the Roman empire tell us that the Romans were pleased with the image the Greeks had created of the gods, the portraiture from Rome is what tells us about Roman ideas of beauty. Rome had an increase in female portraiture because they publicly commemorated women who served as priestesses and woman of the imperial court. Much of the Roman perception of beauty revolved around the woman’s hair instead of her unique facial characteristics. Statues with elaborate hairstyles begin to develop in Imperial Rome as early as 80 CE and lasted until ca. 120 CE. These coiffures were typical of prominent women throughout the empire, but took excessive amounts of time, and so were only worn for ceremonial occasions or important moments of everyday life. These elaborate coiffures can be seen in the portrait of Julia Titi, the bust of the Flavian woman, as well as in a statue of a Roman woman found at Aphrodisias. When the coiffures were at their height, they were seen as a symbol of status and wealth. To have that hairstyle put a woman among a class of other women of the same social or political status. The elaborate coiffures were eventually replaced with fairly simple hairstyles which were parted and then pulled back and sometimes curled.


36 D’Ambra, “Beauty and the Roman Female,” 162.


38 D’Ambra, “Beauty and the Roman Female,” 173.

The depictions of Roman women in portrait art were more slender than the depictions of deities. The women of Imperial Rome were depicted smaller waists than statues in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. For instance, the statue of Eumachia from Pompeii and the statue of Agrippina the Younger from the basilica at Velleia both have smaller waists than deities such as Athena or Demeter had in the past. This could be because artists were learning female proportions and were now interested in accurately depicting them. It would then be fair to say that female proportions were beautiful because artists have made it a goal to display them in their works.

While the female body was being more accurately depicted in Roman portraiture, the representation of modesty was also being revived in sculpture. Sculptures such as the Statue of a Matron from Rome, created ca. 27 BCE-14 CE, or Plancia Magna of Perge, depict women draped in clothing from head to toe. Even portrait busts represented women who were heavily clothed, for example the busts of Faustina the Younger, Julia Domna, and Faustina the Elder all have the women wearing heavy amounts of clothing. Possible explanations for this return to modesty are that the women who were commemorated were often priestesses, the artwork was meant for a private home, such as Hadrian’s Villa, where it would be weird to have naked depictions of ancestors, or because society was once again expecting women to be covered and to divert sexual attraction.

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40 Eumachia, Mid 1st century CE, Marble, in Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 333; Agrippina the Younger, ca. 48-51 CE, Marble, in Kleiner, A History of Roman Art, 110.

41 Statue of a Matron from Rome, ca. 27 BCE- 14 CE, Marble, in Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 233; Plancia Magna of Perge, ca. 120 CE, Marble, in Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 364.

While all of these reasons seem plausible for why women were covered, there is evidence that it was due to societal expectations. The Augustan marital legislation tried to curb the sexual irresponsibility of the upper-class, and one way to do that was to heavily clothe women to prevent any sort of erotic attraction. Ceremonial wedding traditions also show the increased value of modesty in women. Rich and luxurious hair was a sign of vigorous female sexuality, so the bride’s hair would be tightly bound, and covered. A depiction of this tightly bound and covered hairstyle can be found in the statuary from around the empire. A portrait of Faustina the Elder from Sardis is an example. The style of depicting women with covered hair began in the early second century CE and continued into the third. The covered hair served as a way for women to portray their modesty.

While the depictions of modesty in women changed throughout Classical antiquity, one beauty standard that remained the same was that depictions of women represented them as young, even as the model in reality aged. The gods and goddesses were always depicted as youthful because of their immortality. This can also be seen in portraits of Augustus and Livia who are always depicted as young even after their death. Part of this could be because in the Greek world, young men were seen as sexual interests and they and women were the only humans that the word beauty was applied to. When a mature man was described as beautiful, it

43 Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 296.
44 D’Ambra, Roman Women, 74.
46 D’Ambra, Roman Women, 151.
typically had a negative connotation to it. In sculptures where the age of the subject was depicted, it was generally focused on the toll aging took on the human body.


48 Fantham et al., Women in the Classical World, 177.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Beauty is a prevalent topic in our everyday life, and yet we do not know where our beliefs about beauty come from. The main purpose of this study was to explore the idea of beauty and how it relates to our modern views of beauty. The Greeks and Romans are fundamental to our understanding of democracy, architecture, music and so much more which makes it logical to wonder if our modern idea of physical beauty stems from them as well. By understanding their perceptions of beauty, we can understand where our modern ideas come from.

Depictions of beauty varied throughout Greco-Roman history. In the Classical period of Greece, beauty was seen in terms of masculine proportions and portrayals of modesty. The Hellenistic period saw beauty in terms of more feminine proportions while also depicting beauty that was found in erotic attraction. The Roman aristocracy continued to find the depictions of Greek gods and goddesses beautiful, so they made extensive copies of the artworks for public and private displays. Throughout Imperial Rome when someone wanted to depict a woman as beautiful, they would often create an individualized head of their model and then attach it to a copy of a Greek statue, typically in the style of Venus. This required less skill of the artist which made the statue more affordable, but when the wealthy upper classes wanted to depict a beautiful woman, they often commemorated them in a portrait bust or a sculpture. These depictions would often have elaborate hairstyles which were seen as a symbol of status and beauty in Rome. No matter what period the Greco-Roman world was in, one thing that was always seen as beautiful was the idea of eternal youth.
The philosophical texts and the statuary from the Greco-Roman world provide evidence that the way the Greeks and Romans saw beauty does not differ from our modern concept of it. While the idea of women being modestly dressed and covered in clothing from head to toe has largely fallen away in the Western world, the other ideas of beauty are still present. The proportions, such as slim waists and large buttocks, that are found in depictions of women from Rome are still desired proportions today. Our modern ideas of beauty focus on mathematical concepts, such as proportions in weight and height, and proportions were the main focus of early philosophers. We still believe that fitting desired proportions is a large component of beauty. This study also found that the standards of beauty that we hold people to are impossible to achieve and that women of antiquity had as hard of time meeting beauty standards as women do today.

This study is limited by the fact that our largest surviving medium of art is statuary; however, that does not meant that the surviving paintings, frescoes, etc. should be omitted from studies such as this one. Future studies could be done on these art forms as well as on funerary sculpture to see what they reveal about ideas of beauty. Many literary sources also discuss beauty both explicitly in their writings as well as in their descriptions of characters and people. While many of these sources are dissatisfied with the beauty routines and appearances of women, they can still provide helpful insight. This study is a small part of a larger discussion of, and investigation into, Greco-Roman perceptions of beauty.

Much like how our ideas about aesthetics in architecture and music came from the Romans, who borrowed them from the Greeks, our ideas about physical beauty do as well. It seems that we will never be done finding ways the ancient world has influenced our world today.
While thousands of years have passed and the world has changed tenfold, our concept of beauty has not.


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