A BRONZE EROS

By GISELA M. A. RICHTER
Curator of Greek and Roman Art

The Museum has long needed a major work of the so-called Hellenistic age. As we have several outstanding sculptures of the archaic period, it seemed desirable that they should be matched by a correspondingly important work from the latest phase of Greek art. Visitors could then realize the long road that Greek sculptors traveled from the stylized formulae of the late seventh and the sixth century to the realism of the third to the first century.

We have been fortunate enough to acquire such a masterpiece this year. It is a life-size bronze statue of a little boy stretched out on a piece of drapery, fast asleep. He is winged, and across his chest hangs the baldric of his quiver. So he is intended for Eros, the god of Love. But aside from the attributes there is nothing godlike in the figure except its loveliness. The artist has tried to represent the complete relaxation of a sleeping child, and he has admirably succeeded. The soft little body, the chubby legs, the drooping arm, the face with its closed eyes and parted lips, and above all the easy attitude, convey the abandon of sleep. We almost hear the child breathe, so lifelike is the rendering. It must have been just such creations that Vergil had in mind when he called the Greeks supreme "in imparting the breath and softness of life to bronze."

The figure in fact well illustrates the new ideals which obtained in Greek art after the death of Alexander the Great. The long struggle for an understanding of the human body, which had occupied Greek artists for several centuries, was definitely over. They could now model the human figure correctly in every attitude they wished. Their scope was enlarged, but inevitably their conception changed also. From the idealization of nature they turned more and more to its realistic representation. In the place of the majestic figures of former times they produced themes from the life immediately around them. Nevertheless, even these later creations were not direct copies from life. In our Eros, for instance, the individual shapes of the limbs and body form an organic, well-proportioned composition; the feathers of the wings going in different directions and the locks of hair with the little top-knot make a studied design. The stylizing and simplifying tendencies of early Greek art, so conspicuous in our archaic "Apollo," were still potent, and remained so to the end. Even in the Laokoon, one of the latest of Greek works, we feel the power and balance of the design. And if to the modernists, who have set new standards, the realism of our Eros nevertheless seems excessive, we must remember that Hellenistic art laid the foundation for the development of art in Europe, that it was the ideal of the Italian Renaissance and of classical revivals in general.

The preservation of our statue is exceptionally good. The only missing portions are the left arm from below the shoulder, the right thumb, a small piece of the right wing, parts of the drapery, and presumably the quiver, on which the head rested, for a curious little remnant with sharp projections adjoining the hair (ill. p. 120) may perhaps be explained as the feathered ends of arrows inside the quiver. The right arm was broken off and has been reattached. There are a few modern gouges on body and hair, and there is a crack in the upper right leg. The rock on which the Eros doubtless rested, and which was perhaps also of bronze, is not preserved. We have supplied it in stone. Originally the surface of the figure must have gleamed with the golden color of bronze. The present crusty green patina is of course due to subsequent weathering. Some parts, for instance, the left foot, have been cleaned, and the earthy incrustation which obscured the surface, especially the delicate design of feathers and locks, has also been removed. This cleaning was done previous to
the acquisition of the statue by the Museum.

The importance of the statue rests primarily on its beauty, but its rarity also makes it an outstanding acquisition. Few large bronzes of the Greek or even the Roman period have survived, for the metal was valuable and so was likely to be melted down in times of stress. The sudden destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum and a few shipwrecks account for most of the ancient bronze statues known. Every new example is therefore peculiarly welcome.

Our Eros belongs to a familiar type. Marble statues and statuettes in Italy, Spain, France, England, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Greece, Turkey, which approximate its composition and which have helped us to reconstruct the pose, have been known for a long time (see ill. p. 124). A bronze statuette in this Museum shows the same motif reversed and has the rock and drapery well preserved (ill. p. 125). All these figures are of the Roman period and must be copies and adaptations of a famous Greek original. Is our figure that original? Its superiority in execution over all other known examples makes this likely. The sensitiveness of the modeling, the crispness in the rendering of hair and feathers, above all the feeling of life which pervades the figure, are the very criteria by which we distinguish Greek originals from Roman copies. These standards are in a measure subjective and therefore fallible, but, in the absence of an inscription or other such concrete evidence, they have to serve. And if by chance our figure should be still another Roman copy, it would be such a superlatively and exceptionally fine one, so close to the original Greek work, that it would help us to visualize this original as we never have before. We can now appreciate why this composition became popular throughout the Roman Empire and was repeated again and again, serv-
Bronze figure of Eros

...ing occasionally also as a fountain figure or a tomb memorial. The conception is typical of the time, contrasting with the earlier ones of Eros as a god of Love and the companion of Aphrodite. And the lifelike rendering epitomizes a current ideal, recalling the many praises of realistic works of art by ancient writers of the later period—the grapes by Zeuxis, which were so real that birds pecked at them; the curtain by Parrhasios, which deceived even Zeuxis; the horse by Apelles, at which a live horse neighed; and the partridge by Protogenes, at which domesticated birds chirped. A Greek epigram of the first century B.C. by Statilius Flaccus on a sleeping Eros might almost have been written about our statue:

Thou sleepest, thou who bringest sleepless care on mortals; thou sleepest, O child of the baneful daughter of the foam, not armed with thy fiery torch, nor sending from thy backward-bent, twanging bow the dart that none may escape. Let others pluck up courage, but I fear, thou overweening boy, lest even in thy sleep thou see a dream bitter to me.

The theme was popular also in renaissance times. We hear of a sleeping Cupid of marble, carved by the twenty-year-old Michelangelo, which to his contemporaries had all the appearance of an ancient work. Condivi, Vasari, and others tell the story that Lorenzo de’ Medici, grandson of Il Magnifico, admired it, and at his suggestion it was antiqued and sold by an art dealer to Cardinal San Giorgio in Rome for two hundred ducats, of which Michelangelo received but thirty; when the cardinal found out his mistake he returned the statue and asked his money back. After passing through several hands it was presented by Cesare Borgia to Isabella d’Este. It is mentioned in an inventory as being in Mantua as late as 1627: “Un amorin che dorme sopra un sasso.” In 1631 it was acquired by Charles I of England together with other art treasures of the Gonzagas—and then it disappeared. It is a pity that we cannot compare it with our
bronze. The dimensions were apparently about the same. We know that Michelangelo as a boy studied the antiques of the Medicis in the garden of San Marco, and it seems probable that among them was an ancient version of our sleeping Eros which later served him as a model.

Our statue is said to have been found long ago on the island of Rhodes. Rhodes was of course an important commercial and artistic center in Hellenistic times. By her situation near Egypt, the Syrian and Phoenician coasts, and the Greek Islands she became the chief clearing house of Mediterranean commerce, and she retained this position until the second quarter of the second century B.C. Her most flourishing period, both politically and artistically, was from the time of the battle of Ephesos and the repulse of the Egyptian fleet in that action (about 258 B.C.) to the battle of Pydna (168 B.C.), when she lost some of her Asiatic possessions and soon much of her trade to Delos—which was declared a free port by Rome in 166 B.C.

To judge by the accounts of ancient writers, Rhodes was full of sculptures and paintings. How highly prized some of these were is brought home to us by a story told by Pliny about the Macedonian Demetrios Poliorketes ("Besieger of Cities"), who allegedly gave up the conquest of Rhodes for fear that he might destroy a famous picture by Protogenes.

The many signatures of sculptors found in Rhodes also point to a flourishing artistic activity. These signatures are not only by Rhodians but by men from other places, including Athens, Argos, Crete, Chios, Samos, Cyprus, Halikarnassos, Knidos, and Ephesos. A great trading center would naturally attract artists from all parts. Even, therefore, if we knew definitely that our statue was found in Rhodes, it would not necessarily be an example of Rhodian art. In fact, Professor Ashmole, in his publication of the marble Eros in the Conservatori Palace (ill. p. 124), suggested that the original might be the work of the Athenian sculptor Polykleis. He based this theory on Pliny's statement that Polykleis made the statue of a bronze Hermaphroditus and the fact that the marble statues of a sleeping Hermaphroditus which have survived resemble somewhat those of the sleeping Eros. But we do not know that the type of Hermaphroditus which happens to be preserved goes back to Polykleis's work, for we have no description of it, and the resemblance between the two sleeping figures is not, I think, so great that they are necessarily by the same sculptor. To judge by the new evidence supplied by our bronze, the individual forms of the features and the rendering of the drapery are different. The attribution to Polykleis has become less likely. But, as has been aptly said, the name of an artist is the least important thing about him. Whoever he was, his high ability is shown by the work which has survived him.

The original purpose of the statue is also uncertain. The subject might suggest that it was made for a private patron, and we know that in this period wealthy individuals as well as rulers owned works of art. But genre subjects were not alien to the religious spirit of the Hellenistic age; so our statue might also have been a dedicatory offering in a temple. Hellenistic works are notoriously difficult to date. Whereas in the earlier Greek periods we have been able to establish a fairly reliable chronology based on a definite stylistic development, this criterion fails us in the last three centuries B.C. Instead of a consecutive development we have a naturalistic, eclectic art with a variety of tendencies. And the works dated by outside evidence are comparatively few. The different dates, ranging over several centuries, which have been assigned to Hellenistic sculptures by eminent authorities are sufficient proof of our difficulties. In attempting to date the Eros, therefore, we must bear these difficulties in mind and allow sufficient leeway.

Our best method will be to compare the Eros with Hellenistic works which can be dated, at least approximately, on outside evidence—for instance, the Alexander sarcophagus, the Tyche of Antioch, some of the sculptures dedicated by the kings of Pergamon, the portraits of Hellenistic kings, the sculptures from Lykosoura, et cetera. The datable bronzes which have lately been assembled and discus-
Detail of the sleeping Eros
sed by K. A. Neugebauer are especially useful in this connection. A comparison with these works suggests that the Eros is a product of the middle Hellenistic period of about 250-150 B.C. Its realism is far enough removed from fourth-century traditions to indicate a considerable lapse of time; and there is no trace as yet of the classicist tendencies which made themselves felt from the late second century on. The classicist and manneristic style of the sculptures from the shipwreck off Mahdia—which are dated by Neugebauer, convincingly, I think, early in the first century B.C.—is fundamentally different from the easy naturalism of our sleeping Eros.

In other words, the Eros is a product of the full-blown Hellenistic period and may be placed in the same century as the Pergamene creations, more specifically with the little bronze Satyr in Berlin. The latter, which can be assigned to a period not later than the first half of the second century (from the finding place and the shape of the syrinx), has the same fluidity of contour as our Eros, the same masterly and fresh observation of nature in the rendering of every detail. The same spirit is apparent also in the bronzes found by Professor Oikonomos in a house at Pella which was probably destroyed during the Roman occupation in 168 B.C. Here, too, in the realistically modeled heads of Dionysos and a mule we sense the same picturesque and lively style. And it was also in this period from 250 to 150 B.C. that relaxed, recumbent figures were particularly popular—witness the dying and dead Gauls, giants, and Amazons of the various Pergamene dedications.

All these comparisons, then, suggest a date for the Eros in the century 250 to 150 B.C. But this is a long span. Can we be more precise? As we have pointed out, in the present state of our knowledge precision in dating Hellenistic sculptures is difficult. Some will no doubt see analogies between the Eros and Boethos’s boy strangling a goose, as well as with other important Hellenistic works. They will compare, for instance, Eros’s drapery with that of the Nike of Samothrace or his relaxed attitude with that of the dead Amazon from the smaller Pergamene group. But such comparisons hardly help. The date of Boethos is uncertain, and we are still not sure whether the Nike dates from the third or the second century or whether the Pergamene figures were dedicated in the reign of Attalos I (end of the third century B.C.) or that of Attalos II (middle of the second century). So it seems best to content ourselves, for the present at least, with the wide margin we have suggested.
We can, therefore, welcome the newly acquired Eros as an outstanding example of the middle Hellenistic period by a sculptor who could combine some older traditions with the realistic and picturesque style of his time. He could hardly have foreseen that his creation would find such favor that it would be repeated in countless variations for many centuries after him.

The statue, acc. no. 43.11.4, as placed on rock, is 30 3/4 in. (78.2 cm.) long and 17 1/16 in. (43.4 cm.) high; the greatest width (at the feet) is 12 5/8 in. (32.1 cm.); the greatest length (a caliper measurement) is 33 9/16 in. (85.2 cm.). The thickness of the walls is half a centimeter, more or less.

Technically the figure is of great interest. It is a fine example of hollow casting by the lost-wax process, with extraordinarily thin walls, and was made apparently in several pieces the joins of which are clearly visible on the inside (see ill. p. 124): (1) the head, (2) the right arm, (3) the right wing, (4) most of the drapery as preserved, and (5) the remainder of the figure, including the left wing and the edge of the drapery below it. The missing left arm was probably also cast separately, for the oblong hole on the left shoulder was apparently made for a rivet which fastened arm to shoulder. After the casting, the feathers, hair, eyelids, and finger- and toe-nails were gone over with a chasing tool.

A bronze statuette of the Roman period. In the Metropolitan Museum