ARTS

Cleveland Museum of Art's Apollo sculpture is a star with intriguing past

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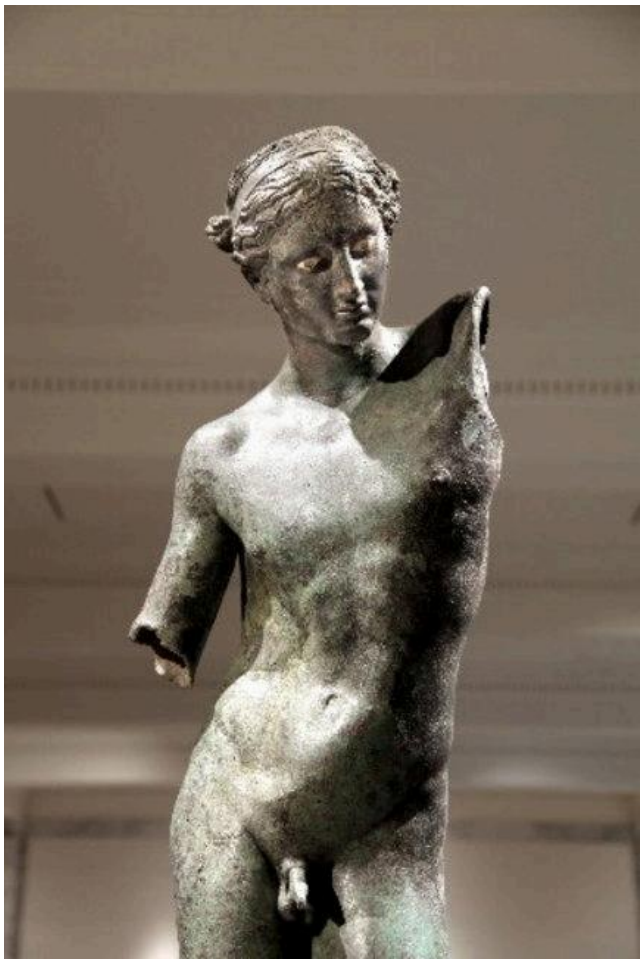
By Steven Litt, cleveland.com

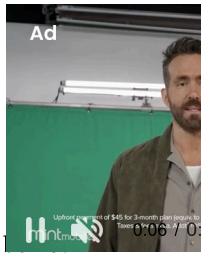


Lisa DeJong, The Plain Dealer

The Cleveland Museum of Art believes its ancient bronze sculpture âApollo Sauroktonos, "Apollo the Lizard-Slayer," may be the only original bronze in the world by Praxiteles, one of the most famous sculptors of ancient Greece.

Michael Bennett is a confident man these days. The Cleveland Museum of Art's curator of ancient Near Eastern, Greek and Roman art believes that he made the purchase of a lifetime in 2004, when he persuaded the museum to buy a beautiful and controversial ancient bronze statue of Apollo Sauroktonos, or Apollo the Lizard Slayer.

Bennett is now more certain than ever that the Apollo may be the world's only original work by the great ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles, or a product of his workshop soon after his death in approximately 330 B.C. Only one other sculpture has been attributed to Praxiteles, a marble statue of Hermes with the infant Dionysus, found at Olympia in Greece in 1877, but some scholars say the work was completed after the sculptor's death. Today, Praxiteles is known chiefly through later Roman copies. "We may have here a work by his hand," Bennett said, raising his voice in excitement while examining the sculpture at the museum recently. "We're talking about Praxiteles!"



The sculpture, which stands 5 feet tall with a richly mottled green and dark-red surface acquired from having been buried for centuries, depicts a nude, adolescent boy preparing to spear a lizard with an arrow.

The sculpture's right arm is missing from above the elbow and the left arm is gone from the shoulder down, although the museum has the left hand and forearm -- and the tiny, squiggly lizard Apollo was getting ready to kill.

After several years in storage, the sculpture and its detached pieces are ready to play a starring role in the museum's newly renovated galleries of ancient and medieval art, scheduled to open Saturday.

The firmer attribution to Praxiteles signals that Bennett is moving on from the controversy that has dogged the sculpture since the museum acquired it from Phoenix Ancient Art, a dealership with offices in New York and Geneva, Switzerland.

Chief among the questions about the Apollo is the absence of evidence to eliminate concerns that it might have been looted in recent decades in violation of international agreements.

The museum said that a retired German lawyer, Ernst-Ulrich Walter, had reported that he found the sculpture lying in pieces in a building on a family estate he reclaimed after the fall of East Germany. Walter also reportedly remembered seeing the piece on the family estate in the 1930s, although no photographs of it exist from that time.

According to the museum, Walter said he sold the piece to a Dutch art dealer in 1994 but couldn't remember the dealer's name. The Dutch dealer then reportedly sold the work to at least one other anonymous collector, who then sold it to Phoenix.

Archaeologists have said that the story, which isn't backed up by anything other than the lawyer's word, sends a message to the antiquities market that museums are willing to acquire works with gaps in their ownership histories. This, in turn, encourages looting.

Yet another report, that the sculpture was fished out of the sea between Greece and Italy, was circulated by Agence France-Presse in 2007, though the unnamed Greek officials who made the claim have never presented any evidence or contacted the museum.

Bennett points to scientific tests that indicate the sculpture has been out of the ground for approximately a century, placing it well out of the reach of contemporary laws aimed against looting.

"This is a settled issue," Bennett said. "We've known for a long time that the statue has been outside its archaeological context for at least 100 years."

Labeling makes a telling reference

The museum always has asserted that the Apollo was probably Greek and probably by Praxiteles, but it allowed the possibility that it might have been produced as recently as A.D. 300, which would make it a less valuable Roman copy.

A new label installed with the work removes any suggestion of Roman origins and pushes the sculpture's creation back to a window from 350 to 275 B.C., giving it approximately a 20-year overlap with the lifetime of Praxiteles.

Bennett's attribution stemmed originally from the writings of Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian and philosopher, who described having seen a bronze sculpture matching the description of the Cleveland Apollo in the first century.

Tests performed on samples of metal removed from the sculpture in 2004 proved that the work was made in ancient Greek or Roman times. A half-dozen scholars who examined it before the museum purchased it were also sure it was ancient and not a forgery. But they weren't certain it was a Praxiteles.

Bennett's higher degree of certainty comes from having lived with the work for six years, and from having compared it with other ancient versions of the same motif at the Vatican in Rome, the Louvre in Paris and the Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

Slight changes in details such as the wavy pattern in Apollo's hair, the position of his fingers or the crease on the outer edge of his right foot have convinced Bennett that the Cleveland version is the one on which the others were based.

Apart from the details, Bennett said that the overall impression conveyed by the piece, in comparison with the stiffness and heaviness of the other versions, which are carved in marble, is that it's the real deal.

"There's a buoyancy, there's a lightness to it," he said of Cleveland's bronze. "It's not heavy. It looks like it can almost elevate."

In addition to the comparisons, Bennett and other staff members at the museum used medical devices to peer inside the sculpture's cavities and take photographs. The images show, they say, that the sculpture was never exposed to the sea. There are no signs of marine life or corrosion.

Bennett hasn't published his findings yet. Nevertheless, at least one prominent expert in ancient Greek sculpture is prepared to accept his conclusions.

"From photographs I've seen, it does seem quite possible it's Greek," said Malcolm Bell III, an art history professor at the University of Virginia and an expert in ancient classical art, who has led an excavation at Morgantina in Sicily.

Part of the sensation over the work is that only about 30 large ancient Greek bronzes have survived antiquity. The rest were melted down to make everything from other sculptures or weapons to nails.

If Bennett is correct, the Apollo would fall into a truly rarefied category. It would be the world's only original Praxiteles, and the only large ancient Greek bronze attributed to a specific artist by an ancient writer.

Questions persist on provenance

Much as the museum would like to focus the conversation on Praxiteles, however, questions persist about the sculpture's provenance, or ownership history. That is in part, scholars say, because of the dealers involved and in part because the museum hasn't shared all the information it has collected about the work.

The museum doesn't reveal prices in private sales, but a source close to the museum said in 2004 it paid $5 million. The principals of Phoenix Ancient Art, brothers Ali and Hicham Aboutaam, have both had brushes with authorities.

Ali Aboutaam was convicted in Egypt in absentia in 2003 on charges of smuggling and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Hicham Aboutaam pleaded guilty in New York in 2004 to a misdemeanor federal charge that he had falsified a customs document.

Before the museum bought the Apollo, museum officials obtained a written statement from the German lawyer, in addition to the reports and written statements from the scholars it consulted. . But the museum has declined to release those items as well as the data from metallurgical tests performed at Oxford University.

Those tests showed that while the sculpture is indeed ancient in origin, the base to which it was attached is about 100 to 500 years old, the museum said.

However, in 2007, the museum did release a critical piece of information -- an analysis of the lead solder used to join the Apollo sculpture to its base.

That exploration, performed at the University of Tubingen in Germany, showed that production of the solder "must have occurred less than about [a] hundred years ago."

Bennett said the report means that the sculpture was joined to its base around 100 years ago, thus proving it was excavated well before modern laws aimed at the prevention of looting.

Still, the fallout over the Apollo continues. In 2007, under political pressure from Greece, the Louvre declined to exhibit the sculpture in a large exhibition on the influence of Praxiteles, preventing scholars from making side-by-side comparisons with other versions of the Apollo Sauroktonos.

Last year, the museum agreed to return 13 antiquities and a Renaissance-era artwork to Italy after the country showed they had been looted, stolen or handled by traffickers.

The museum also agreed to form a joint committee with Italy to examine scientific and technical evidence about the Apollo and a bronze, Roman-era chariot ornament depicting Nike, the goddess of victory. Italy has made no claim and presented no evidence about either piece, Bennett said.

While the committee pursues its work, the museum won't release any more information about the Apollo, said Bennett and Griffith Mann, the museum's chief curator.

An international symposium on the work, which the museum originally planned in 2006, has been postponed indefinitely.

Deborah Gribbon, the museum's interim director, said she is convinced the museum has revealed all pertinent information.

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"The issue is not that there are things to hide, it's that some of this is ongoing research and other elements are proprietary information," she said.

But Patricia Gerstenblith, a law professor at DePaul University in Chicago and a leading expert on looting of antiquities, doesn't support the museum's position.

"It's a public institution supported by the taxpayers and the government," she said. "I think they should come forward with the evidence they have. I don't know who they're protecting by secrecy."

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