MINIATURE SCULPTURE FROM THE ATHENIAN AGORA

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EXCAVATIONS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA PICTURE BOOKS

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ATHENIAN AGORA

AMERICAN SCHOOL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
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EXCAVATIONS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA

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Cover: Terracotta rattles from a child's grave. 4th century A.D.
Title page: Lion rending bull. 4th century B.C.
Back cover: Terracotta tortoise. Late 5th century B.C.
MINIATURE SCULPTURE FROM THE ATHENIAN AGORA

Since earliest times men have loved to make small likenesses of themselves and of their animals. The ancient Greeks kept images of the gods in their houses to watch over the inmates; they placed statuettes in graves to please the dead, and they offered others to the nymphs of a spring so that water might flow fresh in the fountain (see above). Such ideas lingered long and sustained a craft that gradually turned from religious to artistic preoccupations and from the production of primitive images to true miniature sculpture.

This booklet offers a selection of such miniatures from the excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies in the ancient Agora of Athens. Several supplementary pieces from the School’s excavation in the assembly place on the Pnyx have also been included; their numbers are 34–36, 38–40. The material in all cases is baked clay (terracotta) unless otherwise noted.

The development of these minor crafts may here be traced from the 14th century B.C. (Mycenaean period) to the 5th century A.D. (Late Roman period). Mycenaean artists were experts in carving ivory, of which one example is shown (2). In contrast their clay figurines are naive, handmade, solid, without features (3–5). These simple types continued until the 7th century B.C. when the makers of terracotta figurines (called coroplasts) began to use moulds, at first for the heads alone, then for complete figures; sometimes the parts of the body were moulded separately and variously combined. The
master craftsman made a free-hand model (42). This was baked hard and from it were taken moulds (see below, 1) from which casts could be made. The finished figure was gaily painted.

Our selection suggests the range in miniature sculpture: religious, frivolous, theatrical, funereal, not to mention vases and lamps. The greatest virtuosity was reached in the Hellenistic period (ca. 325–86 B.C.). Coroplasts created masterpieces like the famous ‘Tanagras’ (made both in Attica and Boeotia), sensitive genre scenes reminiscent of epigrams in the Greek Anthology, and studies of torsion and movement in the manner of bronzes. Under the Romans Athenian craftsmen lost their artistic flair and turned out stereotyped classical subjects, often in bronze and ivory. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. coroplasts grew bored with traditional subjects and began to create new types under the influence of foreign religions. They also ingeniously modelled lamps, rattles and other toys. Lively and like modern creations, these pieces enjoyed an immense popularity till the end of the 4th century A.D. after which time the craft rapidly degenerated. Finally, Christianity put an end to the making of such things; its laws forbade the worship of ‘senseless images’.
2 IVORY JEWEL BOX
14th century B.C.
From a woman's chamber tomb on the North Slope of the Areopagus, the box is carved with scenes of hunting griffins. These mythical creatures are here seen killing deer on a rocky hillside.

‘As when a woman stains ivory with scarlet . . . and it lies in a treasure-chamber as a King’s treasure, a glory to its owner.’
Homer, Iliad
Mycenaean Figurines
From graves of the 14th century B.C.
The figure on the right is shown from behind with her long plait hanging down her back.

Goddess—or mortal:
Like to Artemis, daughter of great Zeus, in form and stature.
Homer, Odyssey

Grave Offerings
9th century B.C.

Two pairs of terracotta boots, models of those actually worn, equipped a dead woman for the long journey to the Underworld.
8 MOURNER
Late 8th century B.C.
On the pyres of the dead, friends threw figures of mourners ‘clasping their heads as all about them wept’.
Homer, *Odyssey*

9 CHARIOT
Late 8th century B.C.
The charioteer ‘lifts the lash above his team and strikes them with the reins and their manes stream on the blast as the chariot speeds over the bounteous earth, each man’s heart athrob for victory’.
Homer, *Iliad*
The head is in high relief; the dress and other details are painted in red, white, green and yellow. The goddess stands between two beneficent snakes, blessing her worshippers who may be imagined bearing offerings and singing, 'Hail Goddess! Protect our city and guide our song.'  

*Homeric Hymn xiii*
A SEVENTH CENTURY SHRINE

11 A CHARIOT (for which the wheels must be imagined)

12 13 14 HORSES 'the glory of the plain'.

15 16 17 SHIELDS 'best thrown away in order to fight another day'.

18 WARRIOR WITH SHIELD AND HELMET

'Until the God of War reverse
Our fortune, letting us forget
Wrath and the tortures that beset
Our hearts from that grim curse
Of Civil War'.
Alkaios.
I9 APHRODITE

Late 6th century B.C.

‘And thou, oh blessed goddess,
Smiling on me with thine immortal face.’
Sappho
When coroplasts learned to make moulds, they produced finer work in the style of contemporary major sculpture. Most figurines were made to be dedicated in temples and house shrines. They usually represented a goddess and her votaries, the girls who served her. Each face is typical of its period.
23 KNEELING BOY

Late 6th century B.C.

Vase in the shape of an athlete: the boy is binding a fillet, symbol of victory, around his head. The hollow body held oil for the rubdown. This unique creation was probably the prize for an athletic contest.

‘For surely shall I win first prize, and bring it to my home.’ Homer, Iliad
26 Wine Jug in the shape of a woman's head (pitcher rim missing above). She wears golden curls and a wool fillet.

Of this period also is the figure of Hermes (1), carrying purse and caduceus (snake-wand), and the tortoise on the back cover.
ANCIENT IMPRESSIONS FROM METAL WORK

27 BATTLE SCENE Relief from a vase.

'It seems bad to me', said Socrates, 'to prefer armor decorated with gilded reliefs to that which fits the body properly.'

Xenophon, Memorabilia

28 WARRIOR. Impression taken from the cheek-piece of a helmet.

Clay impressions taken from metal armor, vases and mirror cases retain the crisp beauty of lost masterpieces. Note also the plaque of similar style on the title page, showing a lion rending a bull. Late 5th and 4th centuries B.C.
29 ODYSSEUS MOURNING  Cast from an ancient impression of a belt buckle.

30 SACRED MARRIAGE  Cast from an ancient impression of the relief on a mirror cover. Dionysos being urged by Eros and Peitho to enjoy his bride.
THE THEATRE

All but 33, 4th century B.C.

31 MASK OF COMIC SLAVE

32 MASK OF OLD MAN

33 TRAGIC ACTOR AS MAD HERAKLES
3rd century B.C.

34 SATYR FROM A SATYR PLAY

35 36 SLAVES FROM COMEDY One sits pondering some mischief, another shades his eyes to peer into the distance, probably after a girl?
LIFE AT HOME

4th and 3rd centuries B.C.

37 CHILD AND NURSE

'Like a tiny child
Who runs by her mother and begs to be lifted,
Clutching her gown and holding her back,
Tearfully looking up, till her mother heeds.'
Homer, *Iliad*

Coroplasts also showed intimate scenes from the home: the paedagogue (or boy’s slave) guiding his charges to school (38); the old nurse kissing a baby (39); the Negro slave boy, asleep in the corner (40).
Age also was a theme that interested the artists. Some saw age as benign and meditative, as in the philosopher type (42); others, as wild and drunken, in the form of Silens (41, 43), followers of Dionysos, god of wine.
AND IN YOUTH

In feminine beauty, all types were appreciated, from the grave face at the top of this page (44), through 45–49 clockwise, to the woman with long curls (50) and the mischievous girl (51) in the center.

‘Put off old age
For many a year;
It is our fear,
O, Aphrodite.’
Ancient Greek Folk Song
HUMOR

52 HEDGEHOG

‘Bristling with sharpest of spikes and with arrogant pride, | This fruit-stealing hedgehog was caught rolling grapes on his spine.’

*Palatine Anthology*

53 GROTESQUE HEAD

4th century B.C.

A toothless grin from a village farce?

54 LAMP IN THE SHAPE OF A NEGRO’S HEAD

3rd century B.C.

The head of a sleepy Negro serves as a lamp; his ears were pierced to receive a metal wick-probe; his mouth, open to hold the wick, is charred with use.
SEATED GIRL

She holds in her lap a 'bronze mirror that tells the truth'.  

*Palatine Anthology*
SEATED YOUTH  (Modern Cast from an Ancient Mould)
2nd century B.C.
'I swear by all the gods that I would not take the kingdom of Persia in exchange for my beauty.'  Kritoboulos in Xenophon, *Symposium*
Herakles, the mighty hero, was regarded during the Hellenistic period as the ideal of manhood in strength and courage. Sculptors studied his muscular vigor in both struggle and repose; their themes were echoed in clay and copied in bronze statuettes, such as this copy of a famous statue by Lysippos, known as the 'Herakles Farnese'.

STRENGTH

57 BRONZE HERAKLES RESTING
1st century B.C.

58 STRUGGLING HERAKLES
3rd century B.C.

59 HEAD OF HERAKLES
2nd century B.C.
60 IVORY STATUETTE, APOLLO LYKEIOS
3rd century A.D.
Mended from over 200 pieces, this ivory statuette (left) is a miniature copy of Praxiteles’ Apollo that stood in Aristotle’s famous school of philosophy, the Lyceum. The god held his silver bow in his left hand as he relaxed after releasing his arrows of plague or punishment.

The terracotta head (above, right) and the tiny ivory Muse also follow the classical tradition that was ardently admired in Roman days.
During the Roman domination of Greece, Athenian coroplasts catered to the collector's taste and copied bronze statuettes. The Greek Aphrodite now resembles the Roman Venus; Eros turns into Cupid, who adopts exotic attributes, carrying the horn of plenty that belonged to the Egyptian child-god, Harpokrates, or leaning on the inverted torch of the spirit of death.
LAMPS
In the later Roman Empire, coroplasts created specialty lamps in the form of figurines. The body of the figure held the olive oil and the nozzle was ingeniously worked into the composition.

67 HOODED SLAVE BOY
(compare 40)

68 HARE NIBBLING LEAVES

69 THE ANCESTOR OF PUNCH,
licking his gums.
(compare 53)
By the 4th century A.D. terracottas had become very crude, coarsely rendered in linear style and decorated with crass colors. Among the favorite subjects was the Mother Goddess, an old type (compare 20) vulgarized and yet the prototype for the Early Christian Madonna. Even classical types like the Muse (compare 62) were debased.
Toys and rattles were immensely popular, especially the horse on wheels. Compare also the group of animals from a child’s grave of the 4th century A.D., shown on the front cover.
That old favorite, the mischievous slave of Greek Comedy (compare 35-36), held its popularity down into the Roman Empire. This example is a life-size clay copy of a genuine stage-mask.
77 Bull’s Head Mask
4th century A.D.
This mask recalls the heads of victims that were suspended after sacrifice on the wall of a sanctuary.

78 Parade Mask
A copy of a gilded metal helmet of the type worn at military exhibitions, made to be hung as decoration on the walls of houses.
This bronze serpent with human head and flowing locks is Glykon, a reincarnation of Asklepios, as created by a magician in Anatolia in the 2nd century A.D. His story is related by Lucian in his *Alexander, The False Magician*.

Glykon also appears on coins issued by Lucius Verus (160–169 A.D.).