

## DESCRIPTION OF THE TORSO IN THE BELVEDERE IN ROME

I offer here a description of the famous torso in the Belvedere, which was commonly called 'the torso' by Michelangelo, because this artist valued this work especially highly and learned much from it. It is the mutilated statue of a seated Heracles, as is known, and its creator was Apollonius of Athens, the son of Nestor.<sup>1</sup> This description concerns only the ideal aspect of the statue, particularly since the statue is an idealized one, and is a part of a similar portrayal of several statues.

The first task that I took on in Rome was to describe the statues in the Belvedere – namely, the Apollo, the Laocoön, the so-called Antinous, and this torso – as those which are the most perfect in ancient sculpture. The presentation of each statue was supposed to have two parts – the first from the viewpoint of the ideal, the second in accordance with the artistry – and my intention was to have the works themselves drawn and engraved by the best artist. This project, however, surpassed my abilities and would have depended on the help of generous connoisseurs; therefore, this plan, about which I thought long and hard, has remained unfinished, and the present description itself might still need some finishing touches.

One may regard this description as a test of what there is to think and say about such a perfect work of art, and as an example of the inquiry into art. For it is not enough to say that something is beautiful: one should also know to what degree and

<sup>1</sup> Apollonius, Greek sculptor of the second or first century BC. The statue itself is typically dated 150–50 BC. Modern scholarship is less certain than Winckelmann about identifying the statue as one of Heracles. The torso is seated on an animal skin of some sort – one which has often been interpreted as that of a lion, and thus as a reference to Heracles's first labour, in which he defeated and skinned the Nemean Lion, ever after using the lion's invulnerable pelt for protection. But the exact nature of the skin in the statue is unclear, thereby casting doubt on the claim that the statue is one of Heracles.

why it is beautiful. This the antiquarians in Rome do not know, as those who are led by them prove to me, and very few artists have attained insight into the grandeur and sublimity of the works of the ancients. It would be desirable to find someone, for whom circumstances are favourable, who could undertake a description of the best statues and execute it in terms of merit, as it would be indispensable for the instruction of young artists and travelling connoisseurs.

I direct you now to the much praised, but never sufficiently glorified, mutilated statue of Heracles – to a work which is the most beautiful of its kind and is to be counted among the highest creations of art which have come into our time. How will I describe it to you, since it has been robbed of the most graceful and most significant parts of nature? Just as only the trunk is left over from a magnificent oak tree which has been cut down and stripped of branches and boughs, so sits the image of the hero, abused and mutilated, lacking a head, chest, arms, and legs.

A first glance will perhaps allow you to see nothing but an unformed stone; but if you are able to penetrate the secrets of art, then you will see a miracle in it – if you consider this work with a calm eye. Then Heracles will appear to you as if he were in the middle of all of his labours, and the hero and the god will simultaneously become visible in this work.

So where the poets have left off, the artist has begun: the former become silent as soon as the hero has been received among the gods and married to the goddess of eternal youth; however, the latter shows us this same hero in a deified form and with, as it were, an immortal body – but a body which has retained the strength and facility for the great labours that it performed.

I see in the powerful contours of this body the invincible force of the conqueror of the mighty giants who rebelled against the gods and were laid low by him in the fields of Phlegra;<sup>2</sup> and at the same the soft features of this outline, which make the edifice of the body light and pliable, place before me its swift turns in

<sup>2</sup> The Battle of the Gods and Giants took place at Phlegra, located in the westernmost peninsula of Chalcidice. Heracles assisted the Olympian gods, who required the help of a mortal in order to win.

the fight with Achelous, who, with all his various forms, could not escape the hero's hands.<sup>3</sup>

Every part of this body reveals, as in a painting, the entire hero in a particular deed; and here one sees the use for which deed every part has served, just as one sees the suitable purposes in the rational construction of a palace.

I cannot consider what little there is still to be seen of the shoulder without reminding myself that the entire weight of the heavenly spheres rests on its outstretched strength, as if on two mountain ranges.<sup>4</sup> With what greatness does the chest swell, and how magnificent is the swelling curve of its vault! Such a chest must this one have been, against which the giant Antaeus and the three-headed Geryon were crushed.<sup>5</sup> No chest of a three- or four-timed crowned Olympian victor, no chest of a Spartan warrior born of heroes could have shown itself to be so magnificent and sublime.

Ask those who are familiar with what is most beautiful in the nature of mortals whether or not they have seen a flank which may be compared with the left one. The action and reaction of its muscles has been wonderfully weighed out with a wise measure of alternating motion and quick force, and the body must have been made capable by the same means for all that it was intended to accomplish. As in a rising motion of the sea the previously still surface swells into a lovely tumult with playful waves, where one is swallowed by the other and is again rolled out from the very same wave, here, just as softly swollen and drawn in suspension, one muscle flows into the other, and a third, which raises itself between them and seems to strengthen their motion, loses itself in the latter, and our glance is, as it were, likewise swallowed.

I would like to stand here quietly in order to give space to our

<sup>3</sup> Heracles wrestled and defeated the river-god Achelous over Deianeira, a Greek princess who later became his wife.

<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to Heracles's eleventh labour, during which he held the sky in place while Atlas retrieved the Golden Apples of the Hesperides.

<sup>5</sup> Antaeus was a giant who was invincible as long as he touched the ground, since his mother was Gaia, the earth. Heracles defeated him by lifting him from the ground and strangling him. In his tenth labour Heracles killed Geryon, another giant, and stole his cattle.

considerations, to impress on the imagination an everlasting image of this flank; but the high beauties exist here without limits, and are in inseparable communication. What a conception develops here at the same time out of the hips, whose firmness can show that the hero must never have wavered, and must never have bowed down!

At this moment my mind travels through the most remote regions of the world through which Heracles passed, and I am led to the limits of his labours, and to the monuments and columns where his foot rested, by the sight of thighs of inexhaustible force (and of a length appropriate for one of the gods) which have carried the hero through hundreds of lands and peoples into immortality. I was beginning to think over these distant journeys, when my mind was recalled by means of a glimpse at his back. I was delighted when I looked at this body from behind, just like a person who, after admiring the mighty entrance to a temple, is led to the top, where its vault, which he cannot avoid seeing, astounds him once again.

Here I see the most refined construction of the frame of this body, the origin of the muscles and the basis of their position and motion, and all of this manifests itself like a landscape discovered from the summit of the mountains, a landscape over which nature has poured out the manifold richness of its beauties. Just as its merry heights disappear with a soft slope into sunken valleys, narrowing over here and widening over there, swelling hills of muscles, just as manifold, mighty and beautiful, rise up, around which, like the current of the Meander, there twist and turn often unseen depths which are revealed less to sight than to feeling.

If it seems incomprehensible to locate a thinking power in some part of the body besides the head, then one learns here how the hand of a creative master is capable of animating matter. It seems to me that the back, which appears bent by lofty considerations, forms for me a head occupied with a cheerful memory of its astonishing deeds; and by raising such a head full of majesty and wisdom before my eyes, the remaining missing limbs begin to form in my thoughts, flowing forth and together from what is present and effecting, as it were, a sudden restoration.

The power of the shoulders indicates to me how strong the arms were which strangled the lion on Mount Cithaeron, and my eye seeks to form for itself those arms which bound and carried

off Cerberus.<sup>6</sup> Its thighs and the surviving knee give me a conception of legs which never tire and which, with feet of iron, pursued and caught the hind.<sup>7</sup>

By means of a secret art, however, the mind is led through all of the deeds of his strength up to the perfection of his soul, and in this work there is a monument to this very soul which no poet erects who sings only of the strength of his arms: the artist has surpassed it. His image of the hero gives no place to thoughts of violence and unruly love. In the peace and quiet of the body is revealed a calm, great spirit: the man who has become an example of virtue to the poets, who exposed himself to the greatest dangers from love of justice, who brought security to the nations and peace to the inhabitants.

This excellent and noble form of such a perfect nature is, as it were, enveloped in immortality, and the figure is merely like its vessel: a loftier spirit seems to have taken the place of the mortal parts and to have spread itself in their stead. It is no longer the body which has hitherto had to contend with monsters and disturbers of the peace; it is that body which has been purged on Mount Oeta of the dross of humanity which separated it from the source of its similarity to the father of the gods.<sup>8</sup>

Neither the beloved Hyllus nor the tender Iole saw Heracles in such perfection; he lay thus in the arms of Hebe – the arms of eternal youth – and drew into himself her unceasing influence.<sup>9</sup> His body is not nourished by mortal dishes and coarse portions:

<sup>6</sup> Mount Cithaeron is located in southeastern Greece. When he was eighteen, Heracles killed a lion there. In his final labour Heracles captured Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog at the entrance to Hades, and brought him to the land of the living.

<sup>7</sup> Winckelmann speaks here of a *Hirsch*, that is, a male deer. Yet the context indicates that he is referring to Heracles's fourth labour, in which he captured the Ceryneian Hind – that is, a *Hindin* or female deer – after pursuing it for a year.

<sup>8</sup> Heracles's funeral pyre was built on Mount Oeta.

<sup>9</sup> Hyllus was the son of Heracles and Deianeira. Iole was the daughter of Erytus, king of Oechalia. Heracles carried her off after an attack on Oechalia. Deianeira feared that she was being replaced by Iole in Heracles's affection, and so she sent him a robe smeared in the centaur Nessus's blood, thinking that it would restore Heracles's love for her. Instead, it poisoned him, causing him great agony until he was burned on his funeral pyre on Mount Oeta. After he was taken to Olympus, he reconciled with Hera and married her daughter Hebe, goddess of youth.

the food of the gods preserves him, and he seems only to enjoy, not to partake, and completely, without being satiated.

O, I would like to see this image in the greatness and beauty in which it revealed itself to the understanding of the artist, only in order to be able to say of the remains what he thought and how I should think to be worthy of describing it. But, full of sadness, I stop, and just like Psyche as she began to lament love once she had learned about it! My great fortune, following upon the artist's great fortune, was to learn of this work; therefore, I deplore the irreparable harm to this Heracles once I have attained insight into its beauty.

At the same time art weeps with me: for the work, which art could oppose to the greatest inventions of wit and contemplation, and by means of which art could still yet raise its head, as in its golden era, to the greatest height of human admiration; this work, which is perhaps the last one to which art applied its utmost powers, it must see half annihilated and cruelly mishandled. Who here does not take to heart the loss of so many hundreds of other masterpieces! But art, which wishes to instruct us further, recalls us from these sad reflections and shows us how much is still to be learned from that which remains, and with what kind of eye the artist must look at it.

After this ideal description would follow the description in accordance with the artistry.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The translator would like to thank Paul Guyer and David Kenosian for their many helpful suggestions on various drafts of the translation. He would also like to thank Sarah Norman for her proofreading and editing of the penultimate draft.

## ESSAY ON THE CAPACITY FOR THE SENTIMENT FOR THE BEAUTIFUL IN ART, AND ON INSTRUCTION IN IT

To the Nobly-born Baron,  
Friedrich Rudolph von Berg,  
From Livonia.<sup>1</sup>

...a beautiful form mixed with youthful bloom...  
Pindar, *Olympic Odes*, 10, lines 103-104

<sup>1</sup> Winckelmann's essay is addressed to his friend Friedrich Reinhold (not Rudolph), Freiherr of Berg (1736-1809).