The RA Shows Real Metal

My, Aren't You Looking Bronzed!

Heavy Metal

The Bronze Rage

Charles Saumarez Smith casts his eye over the 150-plus spectacular bronzes that are to appear at the Royal Academy this autumn

Years ago, I had a friend called Philip Core, who was an American painter with eclectic interests, who became the ideal broadcaster on art as he knew something about everything and what he didn't know, he was able to invent. I remember the moment he produced a book, which he had been sent by a publisher, which showed the astonishing Hellenistic bronze sculptures that were being excavated or discovered through marine archaeology in the Mediterranean. Or have I imagined this book? Anyway, it was the sort of subject that Philip would have known about: that our view of antiquity was being transformed from the rather frigid view that we had inherited from Winckelmann of rows and rows of marble statues assembled in the Vatican Museum to the realisation that classical statues can be much more lively and realistic, as is evident in the extraordinary Dancing Satyr of Mazara del Vallo, which was hauled up from the bottom of the sea by fishermen on 4 March 1998.

I have thought of Philip and his enthusiasm for Hellenistic bronzes often during the preparations for the Royal Academy's great exhibition on Bronze, which opens to the public on 15 September. It derives from the rather similar enthusiasms of David Ekserdjian, an art historian based at the University of Leicester, who, at the age of six, first became interested in bronzes through his admiration for a picture of the Chimera of Arezzo on the spine of a copy of C W Ceram's Gods Graves and Scholars, a work of popular archaeology on the shelves of his father's library. Later on, as a teenager, David developed an interest in Cambodian bronzes, based on illustrations in National Geographic. When he became Christie's expert on sculpture, he discovered that the people who know about Cambodian bronzes very often don't know anything about Renaissance bronzes, and neither of them is necessarily familiar with the great bronzes of the medieval or Hellenistic world. He realised that in nearly every culture and civilisation, bronze has been regarded as having semi-magical or alchemical properties in its ability to express movement in sculpture. So, like André Malraux's "museum without walls", he began to hatch in his mind the idea of an exhibition that would assemble all the great bronzes in the world in rooms together, so that they could (so to speak) talk to one another.

David proposed this idea to the Royal Academy a couple of years ago. He happened to show as his first slide a photograph of the Dancing Satyr from Mazaro del Vallo. It was a photograph that showed the full beauty of the twisting torso, the quality of the patination on the bronze, the sense of Dionysiac intensity in the pose and, without anything being said, the recognition that here was a view of

Hellenistic art that was deeply unfamiliar, slightly disturbing and definitely exciting. I don't know how many people were familiar with the work, but I knew at that moment that we were going to put on the exhibition. We have made incredibly strenuous efforts to borrow the Dancing Satyr, including a flying visit to Palermo to negotiate with the local museum authorities and entertaining them on a visit to London, but to no avail. The work is required in an exhibition due to be held in Palermo to coincide with local elections in order to buff up the cultural credentials of one of the candidates.

But I should not lament. There are plenty of great and remarkable treasures that are going to travel to London just after the Olympics , bronze after bronze, to cheer us all up as autumn approaches.

The National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen has generously lent one of its greatest treasures, the Trundholm sun chariot, which was found in a peat bog in 1902, dates from the 14th or 15th century BC, and consists of a small horse on wheels, pulling a gilded disc that represents the sun. I like to think that Christopher Le Brun, the President of the Royal Academy, will like this, owing to his fascination with the deep mythological significance of the horse and to the way he sometimes both paints and sculpts the horse in conjunction with a bronze disc.

Nearly as remarkable an object to have been able to borrow is the so-called Strettweg Chariot, which was discovered in a Hallstatt grave in 1851 and which has been lent by the Archaeological Museum in Schloss Eggenberg in Graz by special permission of the Austrian government.

The exhibition will include the Chimera of Arezzo, a mythological beast, half-lion but with the tail of a serpent. It was found outside Arezzo in 1553 and immediately claimed by Cosimo de Medici, who placed it on prominent display in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. It is now normally on display in the Archaeological Museum in Florence, which few of the many millions of foreign tourists to Florence necessarily visit, so it will be a treat to see it in London.

We are also showing the so-called Crosby Garrett helmet, which consists of the head of a young Roman centurion with curly hair and wearing a Phrygian cap. It was found on a farm near the eponymous village of Crosby Garrett in Cumberland by someone with a metal detector in May 2010 and was sold not long after by Christie's for £2.3m.

Maybe most spectacular of all the objects we are going to show is the grim-faced head of King Seuthes III, who battled against Alexander the Great and whose head was found buried at Seuthopolis by Bulgarian archaeologists. Powerful and rather gloomy, he is much more realistic than the often idealised heads of antiquity.

There will be modern objects as well, including: Picasso's great Baboon and Young, borrowed from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, in which two small toy cars are turned into the head of the baboon; a Spider by Louise Bourgeois; and two tin cans that have been turned into bronze sculptures by Jasper Johns. But the point of the exhibition will be to demonstrate the use of bronze as a rare material, requiring the highest form of artistic skill in its facture, making the ordinary exotic.

As a whole, the exhibition – designed by Paul Williams of Stanton Williams, who has long experience of exhibition design, ever since he was first employed by Sir Roy Strong as the in-house designer at the Victoria and Albert Museum – will be a most spectacular display of beautiful and rare objects, many of which will never have been seen in Britain and which no one can possibly have seen, nor indeed necessarily thought about, together before. Of course, some art historians will no doubt be sniffy that the objects have been selected only for their beauty, rarity and the quality of visual intelligence that led to their creation. It is not an exhibition that has been constructed to tell a straightforward narrative, but is instead being organised thematically in order to show relationships between objects of a particular type across different cultures.

I hope the public will respond with enthusiasm to an exhibition that is about great and extraordinary objects to be seen and appreciated and admired for their beauty alone.

Bronze opens at the Royal Academy on 15 September.

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