



Vasso Kindi

Why is laughter almost non-existent in ancient Greek sculpture?

"Laughter distorts the body and is testimony to lack of control" is one explanation for why there is almost no laughter in ancient Greek sculpture. The question was posed by Yannis Tsvividis to archaeologists, art historians, classical philologists, and curators. Their replies raise as many questions as they answer.

We have all heard at school about the archaic smile and we have seen it in museums on *Kouroi* and *Korai*. Yet, we very rarely see laughter depicted in ancient Greek sculpture, while in other cultures we come across laughing representations of gods (for instance, the laughing Buddha). This is an observation made by Yannis Tsvividis, Professor of Electrical Engineering at Columbia University in New York, who addressed it as a question to distinguished archaeologists, art historians, classical philologists, curators, and historians of ideas. Their answers, which were immediately and very kindly given, are published here. (Unfortunately we did not have an equally forthcoming response from Greek scholars).

Yannis Tsvividis observes that while the answers printed here do explain and clarify several aspects of the issue, they raise new questions:

The replies are really very useful and considerably helped me in answering the question. But the interesting points made give rise to other questions, more concrete compared to the original. It's not clear to me, for example, why the statues in temples depict other human expressions, some of which are not at all related to high ideals (e.g., physical pain), while laughter, itself a human expression, is not depicted at all. It is also not clear to me why physical pain is shown through gestures and not facial expressions. Finally, I think the distinction made between private art and vase painting on the one hand and public art and sculpture on the other is really important and needs to be taken into consideration. In general, I wonder how much this contributed to what is today taken to be serious and dignified, or whether there has been some distortion which has contributed to the pomposity we are sometimes witnessing now.

We still do not really know the role that laughter had in everyday life in ancient times, nor do we fully understand its relation to the gods, to mortals, or to the arts. We also do not completely comprehend the role that art in general had, or even sculpture, and how it was then perceived.

We know that laughter is abundantly present in Attic comedy, yet even there comic masks are at least ambiguous and only occasionally clearly express laughter (see Stephen Halliwell's *Greek Laughter: a Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, forthcoming October 2008, Cambridge University Press and in particular Appendix 2 entitled "Gelastic Faces in Visual Art"). We have exaggerated and distorted features, but it is not clear that we have depiction of laughter. (Aristotle in his *Poetics* characterizes the comic mask as "ugly and distorted" (5.1449a35)). What is more, when actors move on stage, they were probably displaying different aspects of the masks which may have been then expressing conflicting emotions.

We also find laughter in Homer, in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, among mortals and among the gods who appear in a scene where "unquenchable laughter arose" (*Iliad*, I 599). Plato, however, in the *Republic*, referring explicitly to Homer, says that "if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods" (388e9–389a1).

In sculpture, though, unlike epic and theatre, laughter seems completely absent. According to Halliwell, this absence can be attributed to the potential association of laughter with "bodily excess, indecency and shamefulness".

Halliwell also maintains that we cannot know what the ancient observers actually saw. We do not know if what we take to be an archaic smile was a smile for them too, given that, as he says, there is no ancient reference to it. He also makes the conjecture that they may have been perceiving something beyond what we today see in a figure. We cannot discern a smile where ancient saw one. We have ancient descriptions of statues which were supposed to be smiling while we do not perceive such smiles on copies that have survived and which we take to be accurate.

It seems that we had to reach the early Renaissance to find representations of emotions, and particularly of laughter. Even that was limited, though, because of the role of religious art. But even secular art, which dealt with mythical figures and public figures, aimed at representing virtues and not specific sentiments, let alone individual sentiments of ordinary people. An interesting piece is the bust of a small child by the Renaissance artist Desiderio da Settignano (1429–1464) which openly displays joy — the mouth is half-open and the teeth and tongue are visible (see Andrew Butterfield, "The 'Laughing Boy' and the Invention of Sculpture" *The New Republic*, 24. 09.07).

Many thinkers have written on laughter: Hobbes, Bergson, Baudelaire, Skinner. Yet, as Georges Bataille — who also wrote on the subject — notes, the history of the philosophical study of laughter seems to show that it is the history of an insoluble problem. We hope that the views we host in the following pages illuminate aspects of the problem. We thank both Yannis Tsvividis who raised the original question and the scholars who have trusted us and kindly agreed to have their opinions published in our journal.

**Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, Professor Emerita
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Archaic statues seem to smile, at least from ca. 550 to ca. 500 C.E. Yet the apparent smile may not have been intentional (although some scholars think otherwise) but simply an effort to make the faces look more natural and pleasant. Ancient sources mention that the Aphrodite Sosandra by Kalamis had

"a hidden smile" — but, if our identification of its possible copies are correct, it was so well hidden that we cannot see it. On the other hand, even grief or physical pain is usually expressed through gestures rather than proper grimaces or tears. Only some semi-human creatures, such as centaurs (e.g. on the Parthenon South metopes) convey pain through an open mouth. I suspect that the Greeks did not want to alter the beauty of human features with unusual expressions. Even the Hellenistic period, for all its alleged realism, may show deformity (or deformation, such as swollen cheeks from blowing on the pipes) but not true emotion. Perhaps the control of one's facial expressions was considered important for something as permanent as stone sculpture, which mostly had a religious purpose. On the other hand, even the Romans, who seem to have had much less restraint than the Greeks, did not convey laughter in their monuments. Perhaps we "modern" are not in a position to give a competent answer to your question.

Andrew Stewart

Professor of Greek Studies, Nicholas C. Petris, Professor of Art History and Classics, University of Berkeley

The prime reason is one of genre. Greek sculpture is broadly religious, and subdivides into a number of genres (votive, funerary, honorific, etc.), none of which could readily accommodate laughter. As you know, many archaic *kouroi* smile, but after the archaic period, such levity was apparently considered *de trop* before the gods or in a sanctuary setting.

Nevertheless, the possibility of laughter in sculpture is suggested by Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10, and Praxiteles is even said to have created a *Matron Weeping and Merry Courtesan* in bronze, the later allegedly a portrait of his mistress Phryne (Pliny, *Nat.Hist.* 34. 70). If so, this is the exception that proves the rule: laughter was not impossible in Greek sculpture, merely inappropriate in 99.9% of the situations and functions served by it.

Simon D. Goldhill

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Because laughter distorts the body and is testimony to laughter's lack of control and the audience's humiliation.

Ada Cohen

Department of Art History, Dartmouth College

The rarity of laughter in Greek sculpture and, more broadly, art has to do, I believe, with the issue of decorum. Self-control was one of ancient Greece's core ideals. Although it is unlikely that this control was maintained in daily life or in the context of a premier genre of cultural expression such as Comedy, Greek artists seem to have prized it. They assigned the open-mouth laugh (as sign of loss of control) to figures in compromised circumstances or low in the hierarchy of humanity and somehow foreign. As an ennobling medium, Greek sculpture preferred self-reflective seriousness: one of the many restrictions of ancient art. Indeed, if one approaches this restriction from the perspective of humour, one asks why; but if one approaches it from the perspective of art history, one finds that there is a whole range of subjects that were left out of the repertoire. It is interesting, however, that this particular restriction in revealing one's teeth in laughter is manifested more broadly in European visual culture prior to the twentieth century.

Sheri R. Klein, Ph.D.

Professor of Art Education, UW-Stout

Although Thalia, is the Athenian goddess of comedy, there are few examples of laughing images in Greek visual art. Historically, Greek visual art has been preoccupied with themes of love, the ideal, myth, beauty, grace and perfection — a marriage of idea and material. These themes have been expressed throughout the centuries in time honoured materials, such as marble, and in styles of Mannerism and Classicism. There are examples of quiet and subdued smiling in Greek art that can be found in the *Kouros* and *Kharites* figures. These figures, however, denote a quiet pleasure and merriment, rather than the recognition of incongruities that result in boisterous laughter. While Greek culture has honoured Dionysus, and while there is much humour to be associated with Greek drama and literature, historical Greek visual art appears to be preoccupied with the serious messages of epics, myths, and eternal truths.

R. Drew Griffith

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This is an interesting question, to which I have no conclusive answer (I am an expert on Greek literature, not art). My tentative guess would be that the answer is to be found in a limitation of the sculptors' technique. Archaic sculpture often uses the "archaic smile", which is thought to be an attempt not to show emotion, but rather to convey the roundness of the features, particularly as seen from below (bear in mind that much ancient sculpture was from pediments and friezes of temples, and therefore meant to be seen by viewers standing many feet away — and below —; this is not readily apparent in today's museum-displays, where one sees the work face-on). I would further think that technical considerations might be at work, since vase-paintings seem often to depict laughter, and to display a considerable sense of humour in general. One might argue against this that sculpture is public-art, whereas vase-painting is private and personal, and that a certain dignity may have been felt to be required of public art. Also the sculptors may have felt (though Homer certainly did not!) that it was unseemly to portray gods expressing strong emotions, including mirth. These are pretty off-the-cuff remarks. I hope they're of some use.

Quentin Skinner

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I'm afraid that my response is hardly a very satisfactory one, for I really do not know why it's so rare for laughter to be depicted in classical antiquity. I suspect, however, that it's connected with the thoroughly Greek view (strongly present in Aristotle) that laughter generally expresses a loss of control, and especially the presence of unpleasant passions, notably those of scorn and contempt. Not a suitable subject, perhaps, for sculptural display? It's odd that the phenomenon we would call good-natured laughter seems to have been a notion completely foreign to the ancient Greeks. It's a terrible shame that Aristotle's treatise on comedy is lost, for he would surely have explained.

Angus Trumble

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Unlike various types of smile, by its very nature laughter defies static representation, so while it may seem absent from ancient Greek sculpture I think that this is not especially remarkable or unique. Visual artists in many cultures and eras have not often seemed especially keen to try and capture or represent it — other than in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, where it goes hand-in-hand with raucous music-making, dancing, and drinking. Rare exceptions occasionally tend to strike us as innately unconvincing, or forced, though Dionysian material is suggestive. How well did Greek sculptors manage to scrunch up the facial muscles, draw back the lips, and have a

plausibly competent stab at representing full-throated laughter, or is it more a case of extending as far as possible the established convention of the "archaic smile" so as to suggest that in these Bacchic instances it is a case of simply turning up the volume, and not attempting to represent an entirely different phenomenon?

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