

VIEWPOINTS

Depicting the Human Form

Hellenic art celebrated the possibility of physical perfection. It offered an idealized version of the human form, one without blemishes, imperfections, or complex emotions. In contrast, Hellenistic artists produced works that were more genuinely naturalistic, displaying the human form in all of its diversity and adding an emotional element. While the subjects of Hellenic art often appear serene, even detached, in Hellenistic art we see the physical reflection of the subject's life experiences and emotional state. Indeed, the subject's inner life and outer appearance are portrayed as inseparable. The two sculptures included here are good examples of the essential differences between Hellenic and Hellenistic art. As you examine them, try to make connections between each sculpture and the society that created it. How would you explain the artistic shift that the two pieces represent?

5-4 | A Hellenic Depiction of Physical Perfection

Zeus from Artemisium (ca. 460 B.C.E.)

This bronze statue was discovered in a shipwreck off the coast of the Greek island Euboea. Bronze statues from antiquity are rare because they were normally melted down for their precious metal. This statue stands almost seven feet tall and is thought to represent Zeus. The statue probably originally held a thunderbolt in its right hand and is in position to strike. Ancient Greek statues are often figures in complete nudity, reflecting the Greeks' comfort with the nude human form. For example, participants in athletic competitions never wore clothes.

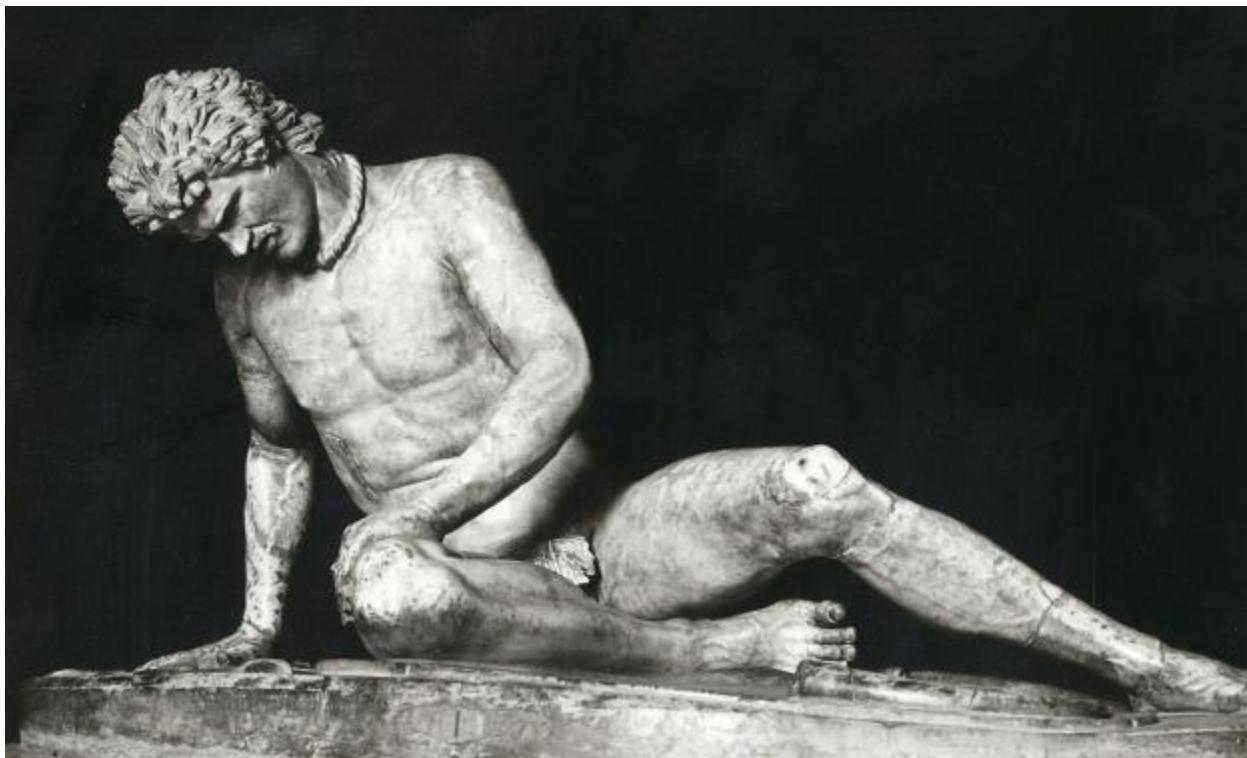


DEA/G. Nimatallah/De Agostini/Getty Images.

5-5 | A Hellenistic Depiction of Human Suffering

The Dying Gaul (ca. 230–220 B.C.E.)

In 278 B.C.E, tribes from Gaul (modern France) invaded Greece and later attacked the Greek cities in Asia Minor. One of the Hellenistic kingdoms, Pergamum, defeated the Gauls and later set up a massive monument to commemorate their victory. The original bronze sculpture of this figure has been lost; this Roman copy was discovered during excavations in the seventeenth century. The warrior's only adornment, a torque, and his hairstyle identify him as a Gallic warrior.



Dying Gaul, copy of a Greek original of ca. 230–220 B.C.E. by Epigonos (marble) (b/w photo), Roman/Pinacoteca Capitolina, Palazzo Conservatori, Rome, Italy.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the position of the Zeus's arms, legs, and head. How would you explain the artist's choices in this regard?
2. What should we make of the fact that Zeus is depicted as a perfect human? What does this statue tell us about how the Greeks saw their gods?
3. What clues does the sculpture offer that its subject is dying and not merely wounded or resting? How can we tell this from his body and from his facial expression?
4. What emotions does this statue evoke? How might the viewer have been meant to respond to it?
5. What aspect of each statue do you find most striking? Why?
6. How did each artist approach the depiction of the human body? What similarities, if any, do you see between the two works in this regard?
7. How do these two pieces relate to larger social and cultural trends in the Greek world?