

From the Museum World

# “The Plaster Age” – On the Historical Significance of the Basel Skulpturhalle

By Tomas Lochman



Fig. 1: The Parthenon Exhibition in the Skulpturhalle after the renovation of the building in 2006.

With over 2,000 plaster casts of ancient sculptures, the Skulpturhalle numbers amongst those Basel museums with an international standing. Few people, however, are truly aware of the importance of this collection. This is probably related to the fact that during most of the 20th century plaster casts were held in low esteem; they were thought to be useful from a didactic point of view but worthless with regard to their material. In the 19th century, however, such copies were viewed in a completely different manner. At that time, almost every European university town could boast a large collection of plaster casts. These “gipsoteche” were, so to speak, the culmination of the enthusiasm for casts after ancient artworks that had been sparked off by the Renaissance. As of the 15th century, plaster casts played an increasingly important role in the imitation, research and dissemination of ancient sculptures. At first, various Italian artists assembled small collections of plaster casts that served as models and were used for practice purposes in their studios. From the 17th century onwards, the leading art academies began to use plaster casts as models for their students. And from the late 18th century, casts were also used in the nascent science of archaeology and as a means of furthering the education of the bourgeoisie.

On the basis of this historical development, collections of plaster casts fulfilled a three-

fold role in the 19th century. Artists used them for practice purposes, they served to further scholarly research, and they were a source of aesthetic pleasure for the educated middle classes. It was exactly these three



Fig. 2: The predecessor of the Skulpturhalle: Basel's first collection of plaster casts in the “Sculpture Room” of the Museum on the Augustiner-gasse, between 1849 and 1886.

core tasks that were to be addressed in Basel, when, on the occasion of its opening in the year 1849, the Museum on the Augustiner-gasse was provided with a room dedicated to plaster casts (fig. 2; this seminal collection was later to become the Skulpturhalle). Indeed, a not inconsiderable number of persons at the time preferred plaster casts to the marble originals, as the snow-white casts showed the plastic qualities of the sculptures to greater advantage than the weathered originals

did. The practical advantages of a collection of casts are today more convincing than such aesthetic arguments: The best and most important sculptures from around the globe can be assembled in a well-stocked collection of casts. Gaps can be filled or, conversely, exhaustive series of comparable pieces built up. Even better, fragments of an artwork that are scattered in different locations can be reassembled, making it possible to reconstruct what the original must have looked like.

Thus, it was only logical that the leading 19th century scholars specialised in the study of sculpture, such as Adolf Michaelis in Strasbourg, Gerhard Treu in Dresden or Wilhelm Klein in Prague, supported their research findings with three-dimensional plaster reconstructions displayed in the university cast collections that they supervised. In Dresden, for instance, Treu first tried out his reconstructions of the two pediment groups of the Zeus Temple in Olympia with the aid of casts, and only then implemented them using the original fragments in the Museum of Olympia. Furthermore, Treu used casts to test his research into the polychromy of ancient sculptures by letting selected casts be painted.

It is as telling as it is deplorable that, for much of the 20th century, these fruitful projects were not continued. The aesthetic dogma of the fragmentary white marble and the devaluation of copies were all too powerful, almost totally ousting reconstructions and research into ancient polychromy from the academic agenda. This makes it all the more remarkable that Ernst Berger, the first director of the Basel Antikenmuseum, which was founded in 1961, used the Skulpturhalle for scientific reconstructions and had it integrated in the Antikenmuseum. In this manner he succeeded, in 1964, in reconstructing the composition of the Hellenistic statue group of Achilles and Penthesilea (fig. 3). Only a few isolated fragments from rare Roman copies have survived as testimony to this bronze sculpture which once graced Pergamon. By making casts of the most informative fragments on site in the museums preserving them, Berger succeeded in collecting sufficient material to reassemble the group in plaster with the aid of a sculptor. Berger later topped this achievement with the reconstruction of numerous Polykleitian

statue types and, even more importantly, by uniting almost all the sculptures from the Parthenon of Athens, the originals of which are dispersed amongst various museum collections.

All these projects make the Skulpturhalle a museum of plaster casts that is unique worldwide. It is important to remind ourselves of this fact, especially in this year which has seen the introduction of massive cost-cutting measures, forcing the Skulpturhalle to significantly reduce its opening hours and activities.

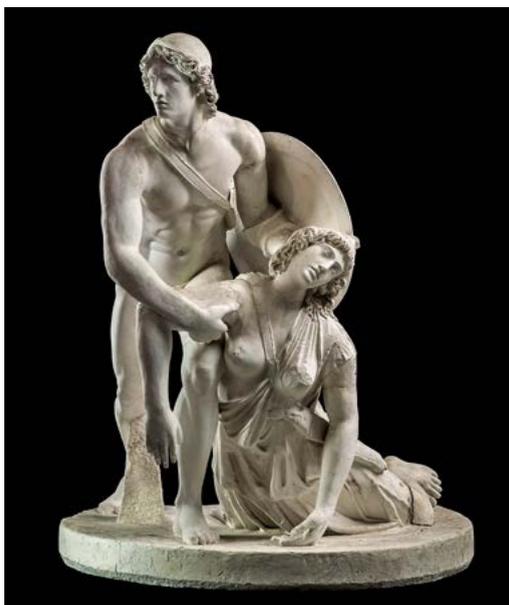


Fig. 3: Achilles and Pentesilea. Ernst Berger's reconstruction, made in 1964, unites plaster casts of fragments from Roman marble copies of the Hellenistic bronze sculpture: Head of Achilles in the Prado, Head of Pentesilea in the Antikenmuseum Basel, Torso of Achilles in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Torso of Pentesilea in the Museo Nazionale Romano. Skulpturhalle Basel, Inv. SH 1135A.



**Thomas Lochman** studied Classical Archaeology in Basel and earned his doctorate with a thesis on Roman art in Phrygia. He has been director of the Skulpturhalle since 1993 and curator in the Antikenmuseum since 2013. From 2000-2016 he was president of the International Association for the Conservation and the Promotion of Plaster Cast Collections. Lochman's research focuses on ancient sculpture (Greece, Rome and the Eastern Provinces), the reception of Antiquity in modern times and the history of plaster cast collections.

## My Choice

# A Head of a Paniska

By Jean-David Cahn

Paniskas are very rarely represented. The type probably emerged shortly after 400 B.C., possibly around the time when the artist Zeuxis created the Taurines. Our charming Paniska was probably sculpted during the reign of Emperor Augustus. She turns her head back slightly and smiles at the beholder with parted lips. Her features are girlish, but the face is still imbued with an idealized femininity. Small bumps on her forehead indicate the horns and her pursed lips reveal pointed teeth; thus, all elements that characterize a Paniska are present. Her thick, curly hair is drawn to the back of her head, where it was held together in a now lost chignon.

The fine crystalline marble is of high quality and has some slight discolourations. Probably the head belonged to a full-length sculpture of a Paniska which once adorned a garden in the City of Rome, evoking a rural idyll within the orderly framework of the atrium. City gardens were often decorated with motifs from nature such as swans, rabbits, nymphs, satyrs and the companions of Pan, whose purpose was to create the impression of a different, happy state of being.

I acquired the sculpture in France. It comes from the estate of the well-known sculptor Paul Dubois (1829-1905). He did well to keep this sculpture either in his house or his workshop, for on longer contemplation the exceptionally sensitive and elegant modelling of the surface becomes manifest. The tip of the nose, which was restored in plaster, and the somewhat cool, classicist pedestal date from the 19th century. We did not remove them, since, together with the head, they form a convincing whole. Furthermore, these additions are representative of the period in which the piece was collected.

Paniskas are the companions of Pan and difficult to define. Their behaviour is erotically charged – albeit of a purely heterosexual nature – and they help the gods at their symposia. They are probably best understood as female counterparts of Pan's robust sexuality.



A Head of a Paniska H. 16.5 cm. Marble. Roman, late 1st cent. B.C.-early 1st cent. A.D. CHF 34,000

In any case, something very attractive is suggested here in a subtle manner. I can well imagine that the sculptor Dubois was afforded much pleasure by this piece.

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## From the Museum World

## An Earring from Troy

By Cornelia Holzach

One of the most admired and treasured objects at *Pforzheim Jewellery Museum* is an intricate gold earring that has belonged to the museum's collection of ancient jewellery since 1977 (fig. 1). It has been dated to the period around 2200 B.C., although it



Fig. 1: An earring. L. 7.4 cm. Gold. Anatolia, Troy, ca. 2400-2200 B.C. © Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim. Inv. no. 1977/9. Photo: Günther Meyer.

could be older, and comes from Asia Minor; that it comes from the environs of ancient Troy is not improbable. Exceptionally fine and artfully worked, it appears to have been made in a workshop well-versed in the art of goldsmithing. It takes the form of a little basket with several tiny chains suspended from it and a hoop that passed through the ear. Loosely attached to the chains are numerous very thin, overlapping leaves. The basket was made of wires laid in a five-loop spiral and then pressed together to form an oval. Six wires at the projecting ends were then fused together to form a solid hoop. Probably only then were the wires soldered together, the four hoops of the two ovals severed with shears, and the whole object bent into a semi-circular, cradle-shaped basket. The rows of seven rosettes, each consisting of one central bead and of a strip of gold sheet, wreathed by petals, were soldered onto the side where the wires begin so that they come to rest on the front of the earlobe.

At the bottom of the basket are two plates with seven and five suspension rings made of wire with a rectangular cross section soldered onto them. The tiny chains suspended from these rings are foxtail chains. Such chains are made of round links which are first bent into a figure of eight and then moulded into a U-shape. These are then linked together, loop for loop, in order to create a densely packed little chain, with almost no visible space between the links. Yet the goldsmith still managed to attach the tiny rings by which the leaves made of thin gold sheet are suspended. The plain, lancet-shaped leaves hanging from the short chains are staggered so that the broader row at the front does not obscure the one behind it. Similar care was taken with the spacing of the double leaves, so that each new one appears to grow out of the fork formed by the two above it, thus keeping the chain underneath concealed. This scale-like arrangement gives rise to a structured gold surface that is at the same time both supple and smooth.

The sophistication of both composition and technique is all the more astounding bearing in mind the early dating of the piece. There are parallels to Early Bronze Age Anatolian-Cycladic goldsmithing, which also had links to the great civilizations of Mesopota-

mia. Another parallel belongs to the treasures discovered by Heinrich Schliemann, which Blegen attributes to Troy II g, Korfmann to Troy II middle – in other words to that “razed city” whose destruction Schliemann initially blamed on the Greeks, although its demise in fact predates the campaign of the Mycenaen warriors by around a thousand years. The structural elements of our earring are to be found there too.

A comparative analysis of the gold, however, allows for an even closer identification with the “Schliemann Treasures” (fig. 2). In 2009 the *Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin* approached us with the request that we make our earring available for use as a reference object for the analysis of a manufacturing method. The items of gold jewellery that were to be



Fig. 2: Sophia Schliemann wearing the treasures unearthed in Troy by her husband, Heinrich Schliemann. Photo ca. 1874.

analysed counted among Schliemann's finds from Troy, but for unknown reasons had been left behind in Berlin when the Soviets removed the bulk of the treasures in late June 1945. The analysis was conducted at the *Curt-Engelhorn-Zentrum für Archäometrie* in Mannheim in the presence of Prof. Ernst Pernicka, at the time still head of the German

## My Choice

# A Sabaean Head

By Jean-David Cahn

The velvety surface of the alabaster derives a subtle vitality from being slightly translucent, rather like human skin. The Sabaean head thus becomes a haunting, but strangely elusive, presence – an impression enhanced by the stylized facial features aligned along the horizontal and vertical axes. The schematic reduction evident in the slightly bulging eyes, which would have been painted originally, in the elongated nose with gently rounded bridge, the remarkably small mouth and the somewhat oversized ears, as also in the block-like shape of the head and neck are powerful visual signals that seem to bespeak a mysterious, inscrutable inner life.

This modern response to a work of ancient art that is over 2000 years old has naturally been shaped in part by our visual experience of the sculptures of Brancusi and Modigliani. Yet that is precisely where the fascination of ancient art lies: in its continued capacity to touch us in ever new ways.

Our head almost certainly stems from a sepulchral context, as do most of the alabaster and limestone statues, busts and heads that are among the leitmotifs of ancient Southern Arabian art. The closeness and the remoteness radiated by this piece are entirely fitting for a representation of a human on the threshold of the afterlife. The coarse, but clearly visible smoothing of the underside of the neck indicates that both head and neck were conceived as part of a statue right from the start. Similar examples are known from the necropolis of Ma'rib (cemetery of Awam), where the busts were inserted into the top half of a funerary stele made of limestone, fixed in place with plaster, and the stele then inscribed along the top with the name of the deceased.

This impressive work from a private collection in Bonn was included in the 1987 show "Jemen: 3000 Jahre Kunst und Kultur des glücklichen Arabien" at the Staatliche Museum für Völkerkunde Munich.



HEAD OF A MAN. H. 35 cm. Alabaster. Southern Arabia, Sabaean, 3rd cent. B.C. CHF 28,000

excavation of Troy, and Hermann Born, head of the Berlin museums' restoration workshops. The surface of the earring was studied first with a scanning electron microscope. It was then subjected to electron probe microanalysis (EPMA) and further imaging using an energy-dispersive X-ray spectrometer, the most accurate method of material analysis then available.

The analysis yielded an almost perfect match in both material and technique between those few gold items that were known to come from the Schliemann finds and the earring



Fig. 3: Anatolian jewellery of the late 3rd-2nd mill. B.C. is only rarely available on the art market; one exception is this pair of gold earrings, L. 5.6 cm, sold by Gallery Cahn.

from Pforzheim. It follows that both the gold mines and the goldsmithing workshops in both cases must have been very closely related, if not identical. This chance to take a closer look at one of our most cherished treasures was most fortuitous, such analytical methods being prohibitively expensive as a rule and hence reserved for pieces of exceptional importance or to allay grave doubts.

Independent of its stylistic and material attribution and the findings of the technical analysis, this earring is as intricate as it is exquisite and a magnificent example of the early art of goldsmithing. Our only regret is that the *Pforzheim Jewellery Museum* is in possession of only one of these earrings. The original pair was separated and the matching piece now belongs to a private collection. Only once, for the great Troy exhibition of 2001, "Troy: Dream and Reality," were they briefly reunited.

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Cornelia Holzach was born in Reutlingen. After an apprenticeship as a goldsmith she studied jewellery design at the University of Applied Arts in Pforzheim and art history in Karlsruhe. She was an academic staff member at the University of Applied Arts in Pforzheim as well as at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna. She has been on the staff of the Pforzheim Jewellery Museum since 1997 and its director since 2005.

From the Museum World

# The Self and the Other

By Frank Hildebrandt



*Eurymedon Vase; Oinochoe form VII, Circle of the Triptolemos Painter, Attic, ca. 465/0 B.C. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.*

Europe is faced with major challenges in the coming years! The transition to a post-industrial knowledge and service economy, rapid globalisation, virtually unimpeded means of communication, financial crises and speculative bubbles, ecological depletion and new dimensions of terror have marked the past decades. Terror, conflicts and wars remind and warn us how fragile the world we live in is. The current migration flows which bring people from Africa and the Middle East to Europe are both an expression and a consequence of these uncertainties.

It remains to be seen in which ways we can learn from history. However, a knowledge of history and the study of the material evidence of the past can serve as a manifold mirror for our everyday lives, if we are able to learn how to recognise and name common features and differences. The visual language and the literary legacy of the Greeks and Romans are a

virtually inexhaustible source which pays particular attention to the relationship between the Self and the Other. This is even more interesting when one considers that our present day ethical canon is to a large degree based on the philosophical concepts of the ancient Greeks.

How did the Greeks define themselves? Put simply, it was above all their common language – in contrast to the *bárbaroi* – as well as their religion and myths that created a sense of identity. Examples for this include, for instance, the Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*, which is not just a list of troop contingents, but also describes the mechanisms of social cohesion and the power structures in place at the time of the poem's composition, and the Panhellenic hero Herakles. The closer his adventures take him to the limits of the world known to the Greeks, the stranger his opponents become. In the outermost West, for example, he meets the three-bodied Geryoneus.

Until ca. 700 B.C. the Greek world lay at the periphery of the great civilisations of the Ancient Near East and of Egypt, and at first took up their ideas, techniques, products, motifs and iconographical elements and adapted them to suit their own needs and notions. At the end of the 6th century B.C. the situation changed radically. In the wake of the military confrontation and the victory over the Persians, the Greeks of the Classical Period became increasingly conscious of their common cultural identity and began to distance themselves from other cultural groups. Vices such as excessive luxury, effeminacy, lack of self-control and despotic behaviour were ascribed to the Non-Greeks.

An important testimony to this development is the Eurymedon Vase that has been on display to the public for the past 35 years in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg. The scene represented on it is probably

related to a theatre play and refers to a historical event. Side A depicts a nude Greek man with a pointed beard and a cloak knotted in front of his chest. He strides forwards hastily, his left arm outstretched, his right hand holding his phallos. On side B an Oriental archer wearing a body-suit and a soft hat bends forwards with a gorytos dangling from his arm. He turns his head to face the beholder and raises his hands level with his head.

Whilst on side A the vase painter plays with a motif well known from representations of amorous chases and running warriors, the conduct of the Oriental figure comes as a surprise. The inscription beginning close to the Greek man's mouth reads: "I am Eurymedon. I stand bent forward."

In the year 465 B.C. the Greek fleet and army under the command of the Athenian strategist Cimon defeated the Persians by the Eurymedon River in Asia Minor – a final victory in a protracted conflict. This victory is represented in a brutal and humiliating manner: The Greek man is seeking to abuse the Persian sexually. But is this how a victory should be depicted? Hardly! Cimon's mother's family was Thracian, so he was not a pure Greek. The Other serves to justify his deed and at the same time reveals him to be ruthless. When does a caricature turn into a prejudice? Cimon was later ostracised from Athens and forced to leave the city.



**Dr. Frank Hildebrandt** studied Classical Archaeology, Ancient History, Pre- and Protohistory and Medieval Archaeology at the Universities of Tübingen and Freiburg im Breisgau. He received his PhD, which was supervised by Professor Dr. Volker Michael Strocka, in 2005. He participated in excavations in South Germany and Spain, and his research interests took him to Pompeii and Athens, amongst other places. Since 2006 he has been Curator of the Ancient Art and Antiquities Department of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, and since 2013 he has also been responsible for Exhibition Project Management.

## Recent Research Findings

# Reading the Invisible

## X-Ray Phase-Contrast Imaging Reveals Letters in Carbonized Papyri

By Gerburg Ludwig



D. Delattre, C. Ferrero, V. Mocella (from left) preparing the X-ray phase-contrast tomography. © J. Delattre

Black letters on a black background – how can that be legible? Physicists, chemists, computer analysts and papyrologists from Italy, France and Belgium have made the seemingly impossible a reality. In recent years they have examined completely carbonized, still rolled-up papyrus scrolls by means of high-energy X-rays with the aim of deciphering the collection of texts – a unique cultural treasure – unearthed in 1752-1754 in the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum.

How had these papyri been reduced to such a state? The cause was the eruption of Vesuvius around noon on 24 August in the year 79 A.D. Pliny the Younger, who witnessed the cataclysm from the safety of Misenum, in the north-west of the Gulf of Naples later described it in two letters addressed to Tacitus (Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, VI.16; VI.20). Even today such explosive eruptions are termed Plinian eruptions. Some hours after the volcano had ejected ash, lapilli and pumice, the first pyroclastic flow – a fast-moving current of hot gas and rock – streamed down

the mountain's slopes, devastating the town of Herculaneum. With temperatures of ca. 320 °C, this searing wave cost the lives of countless people. The enormous heat completely carbonized the approximately 1800 papyrus scrolls resting on the bookshelves of a small side room adjacent to the villa's courtyard. Like other organic substances, they were subsequently conserved by a several metre-thick layer of rubble, ash and solidified pyroclastic rock, which is also called tuff because of the numerous gas cavities it contains.

These extremely fragile objects (most of them are today preserved in the National Library of Naples) have time and again fascinated specialists. On unrolling them, however, they disintegrated into thin layers. The Oslo Method which was developed in the 1980s intentionally used this characteristic of the scrolls in order to examine individual specimens. With the aid of microscopes and digital photography using multispectral filters, the open scrolls could be deciphered. But those which