The Diskobolus of Myron

The sculpture of the Diskobolus by Myron is one of the most famous and recognizable works coming from the ancient world. Although the original BRONZE work has been lost, there are many copies of the work done in marble and created during the Roman period. While there are many copies of the work, the most famous one – and the one I will use – is the Diskobolus from the British Museum. This statue was found in a fountain in Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli, a small town not far from the city of Rome.

The athletic sports of Ancient Greece are depicted in many Classical statues, including the Diskobolus by Myron of Eleutherai. The sculpture in marble is almost 6 feet in height and shows a nude male figure in the act of tossing a discus. What strikes the viewer when he first sees the sculpture is that there is this perfect combination of action and balance; it is almost as if Myron created the statue from a photograph or stop-action camera, it is that life-like!

Historical records about the athletic games practiced in Greece say that throwing the discus was one of the five components of the Pentathlon. Athletic events were obviously popular topics used in Greek art because we see so many Greek vases of the 6th and 5th centuries BC painted with sports activities such as sprinting, javelin-throwing, jumping with hand-held weights, wrestling, and boxing.

Myron was a leading Early Classical bronze sculptor of the Attic school whose exact biographical dates are not known. However, some evidence indicates that Myron began his career around 470 BC at the latest, and there is no evidence that he worked after c. 440 BC. His statues of athletes were greatly admired throughout the Hellenistic world, and in the Diskobolus we see a daring pose and sense of physical exertion which were celebrated in epigrams from a number of ancient sources.
Myron’s popularity makes it quite plausible that his skills were needed for architectural sculptures during the mid-5th-century BC building program begun by Pericles at Athens. This may explain why there are not more examples of his individual works of sculpture which have survived down to our own times.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the Diskobolus is that he is an athlete, as mentioned above, and that the figure is nude. When one looks at the statue, there is this wonderful sense of balance; for example, one arm is extended backwards while the other arm is gently hanging, relaxed, in a forward position. Almost all of the entire weight of the athlete is balancing on the right leg where his toes are pointing straight ahead. However, the left leg is posed with the toes bent clearly backwards. Again and again, the statue just SCREAMS balance, harmony, masculine strength, and beauty.

Greek sculpture was concerned with producing a work that was both highly ‘natural’ in its appearance and yet was also the ‘ideal form or shape’ of the particular figure. Ideal proportions of the human body based upon fixed numbers resulted in both symmetry and a kind of spiritual beauty which the Greek mind greatly appreciated. What is particularly noteworthy about Diskobolus is that this is a nude statue which depicts vigorous movement; artistically, this was a great achievement of Myron.

One of the odd things about the British Museum’s copy of Diskobolus is that the head is in the wrong position! Clearly, this part of the statue was a later restoration by someone who didn’t know a lot about how a discus was actually thrown! This brings me to the topic of Provenance – where the statue comes from. As previously mentioned, the Diskobolus ('discus-thrower'), is a marble copy of a lost bronze original by the Greek sculptor, Myron. It was found in 1791 in the Villa of the Emperor Hadrian at Tivoli, outside Rome. Charles Townley purchased
this sculpture from Thomas Jenkins, a dealer in antiquities. It was restored in Italy but with an alien head set at the wrong angle. Townley knew of another copy of the work which showed the original composition having the athlete looking back with his eyes firmly fixed on the discus. However, he remained convinced that his version was not only correctly restored, but that it was the best example.

What I liked most about this amazing sculpture was that it combined the moment in which a tremendous athlete is about to toss the discus while at the same time showing the human body as an object of perfect balance and agility.
Works Cited


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