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## What the Sleeping Hermaphrodite Tells Us About Art, Sex and Good Taste

By [DANIEL MCDERMON](#) JUNE 24, 2016

Blurring the borders of identity feels modern, but ambiguity has ancient roots.



Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Gender and sexual identity are on many minds right now. There are continuing legal battles over bathroom access; piles of gossip items about Caitlyn Jenner; the third season of “Transparent” is likely to be a highlight of fall television.

For those used to dividing the world neatly into male and female, the new way of thinking feels, well, new.

But, of course, these complexities are as old as humanity. A glance through the exhibition “[Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World](#),” now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shows how long they’ve fascinated us.

This show of works from the far reaches of the Roman Empire drives home another point, too. In 2016, embracing the ambiguities of gender and sexual identity can be a way to signal open-mindedness. And even in this, ancient civilizations were ahead of us.



Credit Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome

As you approach this sculpture from the rear, near the end of the Met’s sprawling “[Pergamon](#)” exhibition, you might guess that it depicts Venus. But the front side reveals something unexpected, a surprise originally intended as a joke at the viewer’s expense.

In imperial Rome, sculptures like this filled the homes and gardens of wealthy people, said Carlos Picón, curator of Greek and Roman art at the Met. They were seen as light amusements, signifiers of good taste. And it is believed that there were hundreds of them because at least nine copies of the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite” have survived.

This one, on loan from the National Museum of Rome, dates from the second century A.D. Like the others, it is believed to be a copy of an earlier Greek bronze, now lost. For Romans, evoking Greek culture was another way of showing off.

But it would be a mistake to interpret the popularity of these works as a sign of ancient tolerance, Mr. Picón said. The birth of intersex people was seen as a bad omen; those born with ambiguous genitals were usually killed.



Credit Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia

A second “surprise” work in this Met show relies on the same gimmick: a lusting satyr grabs at a feminine figure, unaware that it is [Hermaphroditus](#), the offspring of Hermes and Aphrodite who embodied male and female.

There are about 30 surviving examples of this type, also copied from a Greek original.

“This kind of playful, titillating decorative sculpture was carved by the bushel,” Mr. Picón said.



Credit Thierry Ollivier/Musée du Louvre

The best-known sleeping hermaphrodite, [now at the Louvre](#), was unearthed in Rome in 1608. The billowy mattress was an addition, added by the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini at the request of the work's then owner, Cardinal Scipione Borghese.



Credit Museo del Prado

The Borghese work was so widely admired in the 17th century that it inspired its own copies. The bronze above, [now at the Prado](#) in Madrid, was made in 1652 to decorate that city's Alcázar Palace. And the Florentine sculptor Giovanni Francesco Susini made copies, too, which he sold widely. The designer Yves Saint Laurent owned one of those, which was auctioned in 2009 for [more than \\$900,000](#). (Another Susini, not on view, is in the collection [at the Met](#).)



Credit Barry X Ball; Private collection

Bringing us back to the present is this contemporary version, completed in 2010 by the Brooklyn-based sculptor Barry X Ball. He made a detailed 3-D scan of the Borghese hermaphrodite in the Louvre; but the work isn't exactly a copy.

The scan was digitally edited to address some flaws, Mr. Ball said in an interview. And after it was carved by machine from a block of Belgian marble, he and a team of assistants spent thousands of hours refining it.

"I never want to say that the end result is better," Mr. Ball said. Rather, he sees his work as a continuation of his artistic forebears'. "I was trying to make something that would be even more permanent."



Credit Barry X Ball; Private collection

The broken-off hands were not replaced, but the finished work does resolve some aesthetic problems in the original that Mr. Ball identified, like the flow of the sheets and the connection to Bernini's mattress. The most noticeable change is that Mr. Ball's hermaphrodite has a larger penis.

More than two millennia after the original version, this remake was shown at the Louvre and in Venice during [the 2011 Biennale](#); and it has found fans among some collectors. This work sold in the evening contemporary sale at Christie's last month [for \\$545,000](#) to an unidentified buyer. And Mr. Ball is working on another one, in white Iranian onyx, for a collector in Paris.

"Can you imagine, 2,000 years from now, what people are going to think about my thing?" he said.

But in many ways, the ancient image seems little changed. In its latest form, it still embodies a notion of beauty and transgression that signals a kind of cosmopolitanism, just as it did in the 2nd century.

As Mr. Picón, the Met curator, said, "They had it formulated pretty clear all the way back then."