



the
Academic
Body



“We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Between 1914 and about 1950, a larger-than-life classical statue (fig. 1) stood in the entry courtyard of the new McKim, Mead & White Building at the American Academy in Rome (AAR)—in the circle now occupied by the Bass fountain and a migrating pair of mallards. It was an appropriate sign for an institution dedicated to immersion in the lessons of Rome. All who passed this statue entered the building under portals that still bear a bas-relief of the two-faced god Janus, a reminder that our sense of the future and past is always transformed by the current moment.

The statue was a composite assembled around a heroic torso (c. 1st century CE) without a specific provenance, but identifiable by its musculature and pose as part of a copy of one of the most popular Greek sources, the Doryphoros by Polykleitos (c. 440–430 BCE). The torso is clinically described in the Academy’s archive as an “ancient core: coarse-grain white marble . . . head, both arms, both legs, and genitals missing; only half of lower torso intact. . . . Right breast and left buttock also alien, both secured by dowel sealed with lead plug.” The description goes on to note that “traces of a creamy whitewash remain to provide uniform surface,” evidently intended to mask its fragmentary nature. With the appendages removed, the assembled torso, its surface cleaned of graffiti in 1994, now rests on a pedestal inside the Academy’s ample entry vestibule.¹

All constituent parts of the torso are from antiquity, contrary to the practice of having living artists refashion missing pieces, as both Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) and Antonio Canova (1757–1822; fig. 2) did early in their careers. The fragments were optimistically assembled to approximate a version of Polykleitos’s influential figure, which posited a canon of ideal form and proportion to achieve a set of harmonic relationships—and approach ideal beauty. The pieces themselves are spolia, fragments from earlier buildings or sculptures that are reused and repurposed in the service of contemporary needs. Symbols, as well as materials, get recycled and stand for the continuity of an empire or the greater power of a current regime. Like an excavation, fragments of history

are revealed, assembled, and eventually interpreted as a possible narrative that, like the reconstruction of the statue in the courtyard, creates a coherent whole. There is an attraction to seamless continuity, which can encourage a reading of history that is linear and told from a single perspective.

The group exhibition, *The Academic Body*, mounted as the AAR approaches its 125th anniversary year, explores the role of the institution as a transmission point between evolving ideas about history and values in the arts. Read through the depiction of the human form, the show reflects attitudes toward artistic and cultural canons, and the ways in which those canons are formed, revised, or rejected as culture itself changes. The body in its very familiarity carries the weight of history—from prehistory to Vitruvius to Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and beyond—perhaps more than any other representation. The way the human form is portrayed reveals a self-image and a sense of the world through a particular filter. As Michael Squire, professor of classical art at King’s College, London, suggests, “Ancient and modern images of the body prove at once familiar and strange: there follows a process of mutual illumination.”²

Even the relationship between Greek and Roman statuary, which is often understood as one of direct copying, is more complex. Beyond the intersection of these cultures at various periods or the purposeful archaizing of Roman statuary to create a link to an earlier Greek history, there were differing attitudes about what the presentation of the figure meant. The unidealized realism of Roman portrait heads would have been alien to Greek practices; the nudity of statuary was seemingly natural to Greeks but uncomfortable for the Romans.

The artists of the Renaissance reflected close contact with excavated examples of the classical figure, as in Michelangelo’s (1475–1564) life-size *Risen Christ* (1521). Originally exposed in full nakedness (later covered by a baroque bronze swag), it was radical for its representation of the godhead of Christianity with the athletic muscularity of a pagan god.³ Three hundred years later, the Italian neoclassical sculptor Canova (in the aftermath of the famously bad reception to his colossal 1806 nude sculpture of Napoleon in the guise of *Mars the Peacemaker*) grappled with a translation of the classical vocabulary transplanted to American soil in his seated portrait of George Washington (1818–20; fig. 3). Commissioned by Thomas Jefferson for the young republic, which had already linked its ambitions to empire through its selection of classical architecture as its national style,

Canova's Washington is depicted in ancient military garb, revealing the legs of an idealized body, topped with the classically rendered face and hair of a Roman portrait bust.⁴ The appearance seems uncomfortably imperial compared to the more familiar portraits of Washington by American painters such as Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) and Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) that show Washington in more vernacular terms, in contemporary garb with a powdered wig and an American military uniform.

This type of direct translation of classical models for actual individuals had a mixed reception, yet the national fascination for classicism continued in both sculpture and architecture, taking firm root in academic traditions based on the study of this canon. Time spent in Rome and elsewhere in Europe was part of the Grand Tour with which men (and some women) of breeding and means finished their education from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. However, it was viewed as essential for the training of artists and architects, who developed technical skill through repetition and copying of classical sources. The French Academy in Rome, founded in 1666, was one of many national academies established to give artists and architects this firsthand exposure. The network of foreign academies that eventually included the American Academy in Rome provided structure and space to work within close proximity to the monuments of the past.

In the absence of Greek and Roman originals, teaching casts served students and were standard in university and museum collections throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Such collections presented a remarkable historical *mélange* of art and architectural fragments: a pedagogical bricolage of Assyrian and Egyptian, Greek and Roman, Romanesque and Gothic. Although a few cast collections remain on view (at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, fig. 4, for example), most were discarded or put in storage by the mid-twentieth century. The Academy's own collection was donated after World War II to the Museo di Roma, which then consigned them to the Museum of Classical Art at the University of Rome, La Sapienza (fig. 5).

By that time, attitudes toward the conventions of academic training had changed significantly. Academic art increasingly came to be regarded as proficient, but lacking in invention or contemporary meaning and resonance. Scholars, critics, and artists challenged the ideas of academicism as "formulaic" and the resulting art as "sterile and inert." They

sought to generate "different methods of calibrating aesthetic value as well as other ways of dealing with the status of nature or the nature of representation" and to present "new readings about representation, cultural authority, and visual meaning"⁵ (fig. 6).

Although modeled in large part on the French Academy, the American Academy in Rome was brought into being at a moment, in the 1890s, when academic hegemony was being challenged, in a city no longer seen as the epicenter for the study of art and architecture, and at a time of rapid artistic development reflecting the speed, technology, and social ferment of the day. In a narrative often recounted, the inspiration for AAR emerged from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where a group that included architects Charles Follen McKim and Daniel Burnham, painters John LaFarge and Francis Millet, and sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French discussed the possibility of creating a study center for American artists and architects in Rome. The Academy's founders were less interested in supporting innovation or experimentation than in "providing an education in taste through constant exposure to the great monuments of the past," a premise in accordance with the *beaux arts* approach of their own work.⁶ Their vision for AAR, as McKim described it, was of "a School of Contact and Research (not of original design)."⁷ Yet, although AAR was never properly a school, its founding leadership reinforced the centrality of the classical canon in its evaluation and selection process for the Rome Prize and in the work that Fellows created in Rome. The hope was that American artists and architects would inscribe what they had learned of antiquity and the Renaissance in projects across the United States.

In an 1894 letter to Burnham, McKim explicitly insisted that all candidates for the Academy submit designs that were "classical in character" and Millet continued in that vein in 1905, praising "the revival, after a period of worship of ignorant originality and the perverted spirit of invention in modern art, of a sane and healthful respect and veneration for the masterpieces which have stood the test of time and have remained for centuries superior to caprice and fashion."⁸ The Academy represented a set of embedded artistic and cultural values, validating classicism and disparaging other artistic practices.

In the early 1920s, tensions arose from the conflicting desires of Fellows to experiment and travel outside of Italy and the restrictions maintained by the overseers, men who represented a fixed vision of the institution and repeatedly served on the annual

selection panels. Their perspective was reasserted with the publication of a credo that began by announcing that the Academy "is founded upon a settled belief" in "the unquestionable acceptance of the arts of classical antiquity and the Italian renaissance to the exclusion of all other styles and periods."⁹ As the twentieth century continued, those tenets were increasingly at odds with progressive movements in art and architecture.

Paul Manship (1885–1966), a Fellow in sculpture, came to the Academy in 1909 with only a passing attraction to Rome, being more drawn to Paris and the experimentation of artists like Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), whose plastic modeling of the figure influenced his early work (fig. 7). Manship's interest in archaic sculpture across the ancient world developed during his three-year term and permeated his work throughout his career (fig. 8). His return to AAR as a member of the Board of Trustees, from 1946 to 1962, coincided with the postwar period under the leadership of director Laurance Roberts from 1946 to 1959. A former director of the Brooklyn Museum with a background in Asian studies, Roberts brought a professional curatorial vision to the institution and was responsible for encouraging independent creative work, modernism across disciplines, and a new openness to the city of Rome itself. Roberts jettisoned the last beaux arts ties from the program and enhanced the community of Fellows with invited Residents such as architect Louis Kahn and composer Bohuslav Martinů, bringing modern voices to this sequestered community.

Manship's comments as a Trustee in 1950 reflect his concern regarding these changes. Echoing the 1924 credo, he wrote that "every effort might be given to encourage study of the Classics whether Greek, Roman—or Renaissance, and I wish more insistence might be made to that purpose . . . and so—the Committees who make up the Art juries should be carefully studied. Let us not put too much store in those of the 'fresh new spirit.'" That spirit was, he felt, "not related to Rome and what the Academy stands for." His sentiments exerted a strong influence on the selection of jurors, particularly in sculpture, into the early 1960s.¹⁰

The AAR was late in its embrace of modern art and architecture, and efforts to adapt to contemporary shifts yielded results that were at best stylistic and stylized. In the 1920s and 1930s, these efforts yielded an art deco classicism in sculpture and streamlined versions of the axial symmetry of earlier beaux arts composition in architecture. When the Academy under Roberts subsequently turned toward the free expression and abstraction of modern art, it was

also rejecting the valorization of the heroic body associated with the fascist regimes of the immediate past (fig. 9).

Yet, while modernism may have once appeared to reject figuration—and the centrality of the human figure—in the ascendancy of postwar abstract expressionism, the body never went away. As Squire observes, with the "universalizing dream of 'Vitruvian man' having seemingly turned totalitarian, artists were compelled to look elsewhere."¹¹ Neither the perfect geometric overlay on the body of man (as God incarnate) nor the idealized form the Romans copied from the Greeks could hold together the central humanist core. The use of the body as a sign had changed and eventually those who made the work changed as well, widening perspectives and perceptions of the body in its unidealized complexity. Contemporary artists including Giulio Paolini (b. 1940), Charles Ray (b. 1953; fig. 10), and Patricia Cronin (b. 1963; fig. 11) use the classical body directly as a foil, commenting on the history of its presentation and through shifts in scale, materials, and juxtapositions—suggesting other personal and social narratives. The body resonates as a source of interest or inspiration, whether in constructing a broader, more inclusive artistic canon or in questioning the concept of canonical standards itself.



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Charles Ray
Shoe Tie (pattern), 2012
Fiberglass
73.6 × 74.9 × 61 cm
(29 × 29½ × 24 in.)

11
Patricia Cronin
Aphrodite Reimagined, 2018
Cold cast marble and resin,
monumental sculpture
307.3 × 82.5 × 91.4 cm
(121 × 32½ × 36 in.)
Permanent collection of
The Tampa Museum of Art

Patricia Cronin
Memorial to a Marriage, 2004



Memorial to a Marriage marks the joint burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, located in the Bronx, New York, owned by Patricia Cronin (b. 1963) and her partner, the artist Deborah Kass (b. 1952). The original marble installed in 2002 was replaced by a bronze version in 2011. The supine figures locked in a tender embrace recall the recumbent bodies in nineteenth-century funerary monuments by American sculptors such as Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), and Frank Duveneck (1848–1919) that represent tragic female figures, including Beatrice Cenci. These examples emulated well-known Roman copies of Hellenistic sculpture, including the Borghese Hermaphrodite (see p. 29) and Sleeping Ariadne—touchstones for classical proportions—as well as complex psychological states, sleeping figures, and erotic nudes. During her Fellowship year at the American Academy in 2007, Cronin compiled a catalogue raisonné of work by Hosmer—largely forgotten at the time—whose independent spirit and prominence as an expatriate artist in Rome prompted Nathaniel

Hawthorne to use her as the model for one of the main characters in *The Marble Faun* (1860).

Inspired by Hosmer's example, and that of other "lady sculptors" disparaged by Henry James (in his tribute to American sculptor William Wetmore Storey) as a "white, marmorean flock,"¹ Cronin reworks these historical models, reconfiguring neoclassical figures in a bold public statement about the ties that bind two professional women artists in everlasting matrimony. She reverses, too, the terms of the narrative; even though her sculpture marks a burial plot, it is testament to matrimonial harmony, rather than the discord, guilt, and parricide underlying the nineteenth-century prototypes. Her valorization of what Robert Rosenblum has called a "lesbian Liebestod"² is even more striking when one considers that Cronin's sculpture was conceived and made *before* any state in the union officially sanctioned same-sex marriages—a full decade prior to the landmark United States Supreme Court decision that effectively endorsed the law legalizing such unions.

P.B.M.

¹ Henry James, *William Wetmore Storey and His Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1903), two volumes.

² Robert Rosenblum, "5 Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to a Marriage*," *Artforum* (December 2003), 120.



Patricia Cronin (2007 Fellow)
Memorial to a Marriage, 2004
Bronze
43.2 × 134.6 × 68.6 cm
(17 × 53 × 27 in.)
Fuhrman Family Collection,
New York