

Decolonizing the Museum: A Bronze Bust and its Reception

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss an object currently on display at the RISD Museum in Providence, Rhode Island. As I will demonstrate, this object has an interesting provenance and history of representation. I argue that the current curation of the object misrepresents and neglects important parts of its history and should be changed to better come to terms with the museum's complicity in racism and colonialism. I begin with a description of the object, including a discussion of its provenance, acquisition, and history of curation and description. I then turn to historical context for the object itself and, more importantly, the history of its representation. Finally, I discuss the specific details of this object alongside much broader context and consider what alternative curatorial practices for this object could look like in the future. I specifically recommend changing the name of the object and I suggest an alternative description for use on the RISD Museum website.

The object



Figure 1. Photo credit: RISD Museum.

The object I discuss in this paper is shown in Figure 1. At least some descriptive characteristics are unambiguous: the object is approximately 13 cm tall and made out of bronze. The precise composition and relative percentages of copper and tin in the alloy have not been determined.¹ It is clear that the object has suffered corrosion and oxidation, perhaps because of burial, exposure to the elements, and storage conditions. It is hollow and made of two pieces: the lid, which forms the top part of the head, and the bust itself. These pieces were made through the process of lost-

¹ I am grateful to Gina Borrromeo (curator of ancient art at the RISD Museum) for her help on this point and throughout the project.

wax casting.

The provenance of the object is particularly difficult to determine. It is “said to be from Samandhond, Egypt” on the RISD Museum catalog card.² I have been unable to find references to this place name in any other contexts; it appears that no place with this exact name exists. I suggest, however, that this name refers to the ancient Egyptian Sebennytos (Σεβέννυτος). This town was the capital of the twelfth nome and the seat of the Thirtieth Dynasty (380–343 BCE). Sebennytos was also home to Manetho, an Egyptian historian of the Ptolemaic period. Sebennytos lay on the Damietta distributary of the Nile. There is a modern town on this site called Samannūd (Arabic: سمنود).³ I believe this Arabic name was corrupted and recorded by the museum as “Samandhond.” This suspicion is confirmed by the one source that suggests a different provenance: “from Samannūd (Egypt).”⁴ This provenance is also consistent with other characteristics of the object. Based on comparisons with other surviving artefacts, David Mitten concludes that the object “belongs to the Hellenistic art of Alexandria and was probably executed sometime from the late third through the end of the second century” BCE.⁵ Hence the location of Samannud – in the Nile Delta about 125 km from Alexandria – is probably accurate.

One of the reasons the object’s provenance is difficult to trace is because of its acquisition history. In 1911, Eliza Greene Radeke (*née* Metcalf) donated this object to the Museum. “Mrs. Gustav Radeke,” as she is referred to in the catalogue, was one of the principal benefactors of the RISD Museum and served as president of the Rhode Island School of Design from 1913 to 1931. Radeke took a particular interest in classical art, and especially classical bronzes. Unfortunately, she left

² Mitten, *Classical Bronzes*, 62.

³ Alternative transliterations include Samanoud, Samnoud, and Samannoud.

⁴ Snowden, “Iconographical Evidence,” 190.

⁵ Mitten, *Classical Bronzes*, 64.

no information about the acquisition of this object.⁶ It is quite likely that the object passed through a number of murky networks before eventually reaching the RISD Museum. Partly because of this provenance, information on the object and its history is scarce.

What we *can* study, however, happens to also be the most interesting aspect of this object: its curation and representation. As I indicated earlier, the object is clearly from Hellenistic Egypt. The RISD Museum displays the object as part of its Greek and Roman collection, not as part of the Egyptian gallery.⁷ Indeed, this object is the only artifact from Egypt in the Greek gallery. The case in which this object is displayed has exclusively Greek art that is meant to relate to “everyday life.” These artifacts include a number of ceramics from Attica and from southern Italy. The Egyptian gallery does include pieces from Hellenistic and Ptolemaic Egypt created at approximately the same time. By placing this object in the Greek gallery rather than the Egyptian section, the curators explicitly reinforce the links of this object to the Greek world, in preference to connections with the Egyptian past. I will further explore this decision in context later.

Within this display, the object is currently given minimal context. The label states the date, material, accession number, and provenance (“Greek, probably from Egypt”). Perhaps most interesting is the title given by the label for the object: “Vase and Lid in the Form of the Head of a Nubian Boy.” This is one of the many names under which this object has been known. These are, in chronological order: “a bust of a boy, negroid type”;⁸ “Negro Head”;⁹ “Plastic Vase and Lid:

⁶ In the words of Gina Borrromeo, curator of ancient art, “we don’t have any idea how Mrs Radeke acquired this piece” (personal communication, 13 December 2017).

⁷ Note, though, that in some contexts the object is placed in different sections: for example, it is in the “Egypt and Africa” chapter of Woolsey, *Selected Works*.

⁸ From the original 1911 acquisition. I thank Gina Borrromeo, curator of ancient art, for sharing this information in a personal communication on 8 December 2017.

⁹ Brinkerhoff, “Greek and Etruscan Art in the Museum of Rhode Island School of Design,” 155.

Bust of a Negro Boy”;¹⁰ “Perfume vase: bust of a Negro youth”;¹¹ “*Balsamarium* (perfume vase) ... [that] portrays the bust of a Nubian youth”;¹² and “Vessel in the form of a bust of a Nubian youth.”¹³ It is interesting to note the commonalities among the descriptions. They almost all refer to three characteristics of the object. First, all discuss the form and function: some kind of “bust” or “head” serving as a “vessel” or “vase.” Second, all refer to the subject as a “boy” or “youth.” In my view – and I am not a specialist – the subject could just as easily be depicting a young girl (though it seems fairly clear that it is not an adult). Third, all the names use explicitly racial language to describe the object: “Negro” or, since 1985, “Nubian.” It is important to note that the descriptions do not focus on the physical characteristics of the figure per se (say, the hairstyle or the flat nose). Instead, they subsume such considerations under a single racial label.

The various descriptions across time draw heavily from each other. For example, David Mitten discussed the provenance of the object with Frank M. Snowden, Jr., who included it in his section of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*.¹⁴ The language used often contains echoes of previous descriptions. For example, the 1985 *Handbook of the Museum of Art* describes the object as depicting a “Negro captive” and presenting “the black ... with sensitivity and restraint.”¹⁵ By 2008, such explicitly racial language was rejected: the RISD Museum’s *Selected Works* uses only the words “Nubian” and “African.” Yet the 2008 description is redolent of previous language: the vessel depicts a “bound captive” and the “artistic representations of Africans” demonstrate that “artists were exploring realism and frequently depicted marginalized members of society, such as

¹⁰ Mitten, *Classical Bronzes*, 62.

¹¹ Snowden, “Iconographical Evidence,” 190.

¹² Woodward and Robinson, *Handbook of the Museum of Art*, III.

¹³ Woolsey, *Selected Works*, 33.

¹⁴ Mitten, *Classical Bronzes*, 64, n. 1. I further discuss this connection later on.

¹⁵ Woodward and Robinson, *Handbook of the Museum of Art*, III.

... different ethnic groups.”¹⁶ In some ways, the modern language is “code” for the earlier, explicitly racialized terminology.

Historical context

Why has there been such a shift in the description of the object? The answer requires contextualization. First, it is important to note that not all racial language was used in negative ways. An excellent case in point is the famous work *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. This series of volumes was conceived by the de Menil family “at the height of the civil rights movement in the United States as a subtle bulwark and living testimony against antiblack racism ... by unveiling the fact that for centuries – indeed, millennia – canonical Western artists had included black figures in positive, sometimes realistic, and often celebratory ways.”¹⁷ Among the writers involved in this project was the aforementioned Frank M. Snowden, Jr., a (African-American) professor of classics at Howard University. By documenting the “black populations in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” Snowden’s contribution aligned with the overall goal of the publication. Yet in his writing, Snowden frequently used language rooted in scientific racism. For example, he discusses the “two Negroid types” archaeologists study: the “pure African Negro” and the “Nilotic.”¹⁸ Snowden recognizes that ancient authors used the terms “Nubian” and “Ethiopian,” yet he largely refrains from adopting these terms himself.¹⁹ Instead, Snowden sees his aim as being “to relate the Negroes of the artists to the ‘Ethiopians’ of the texts.”²⁰ Snowden sees the “Negro” as the immutable, corporeal type instantiated by ancient descriptions of Africans. It is in this

¹⁶ Woolsey, *Selected Works*, 33.

¹⁷ Bindman and Gates, “Race and Representation in Ancient Art,” vii.

¹⁸ Snowden, “Iconographical Evidence,” 133.

¹⁹ There are a number of exceptions. See, for example, the “Nubian archer” in figure 144 (p. 136) and the “Ethiopian warriors” in figures 155–8 (p. 144).

²⁰ Snowden, “Iconographical Evidence,” 135.

context that he names the object “Perfume vase: bust of a Negro youth.”

This language was then by no means consistently employed to denigrate. Instead, it reflected the hegemonic vocabulary of racism that dominated through until the end of the twentieth century. The shift in vocabulary is well reflected in the history of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. In 2010, a new edition was published under the editorship of David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a (black) professor at Harvard University. Their preface to the new edition grapples with issues of terminology. The authors note that “the peculiar discourse of nineteenth-century racism, which lasted well into the twentieth century, based as it was on supposedly unimpeachable scientific data, only reinforced the stereotypes of the behavior and appearance of blacks.”²¹ I agree with this argument; applying it to Snowden’s description of the object I am examining, I would say that no matter how well-intentioned, using the language of racism perpetuates systematic oppression.

In his introduction to the new edition of the first volume of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Jeremy Tanner takes up these themes with specific reference to the historiography of classical antiquity. For example, he describes a shift in “interpretative models in art history ... away from looking at images as straightforward *indexes* of black social presence in antiquity,” as Snowden seems to have approached them. Instead, Tanner says, art historians today “explore the cultural construction of highly varied racialized *representations*, and how and why such constructions were mobilized in different times, places, and contexts.”²² Later on, Tanner specifically addresses the work of Snowden, arguing that his analysis is “vitiating” by how suffused it is by “modern racial politics and the more long-standing traditions of racial categorization in which such politics are embedded.”²³ What does Tanner prescribe for modern scholars? One avenue is to collapse

²¹ Bindman and Gates, “Race and Representation in Ancient Art,” xix. See also *ibid.*, xiii–xiv.

²² Tanner, “Race and Representation in Ancient Art,” 1. Italics preserved from the original.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

ethnicity and race, arguing that racism per se did not exist in classical antiquity. I am tempted to agree with this argument, despite the excellent counterpoint offered by Benjamin Isaac in his 2004 work *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*.²⁴ Tanner does not entirely agree with Isaac either. He offers a third way out that arguably removes the blinders of Euro-American racism without entirely obviating the study of race and racism in classical antiquity. Tanner elaborates on his “‘racialization’ perspective” as follows:

A focus on the cultural construction of racial images encourages us to explore to what extent racialized modes of artistic representation draw upon similar visual strategies and metaphorical tropes across different cultures; and to analyze how far variations in social structure and cultural tradition inflect the character, scope, and intensity of the racialization of visual representation.²⁵

Tanner goes on to explore the implications of this perspective in a variety of classical contexts. Most important for us is his discussion of Hellenistic art in Alexandria, the context of the object under examination. Tanner notes that Alexander’s conquests greatly increased contact between black Africans and Greeks. A major part of this contact occurred through the Nubian and Libyan slave trade in Alexandria. Snowden emphasizes the positive evaluations of blacks, but Tanner again argues that Snowden’s research distorts ancient attitudes because of his own political motives.

This argument could also be extended to David Mitten’s entry on this object, particularly because Snowden and Mitten often collaborated. Despite Tanner’s criticisms, though, Mitten provides some valuable information. For example, Mitten notes that “few late-classical bronze head vases

²⁴ Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*.

²⁵ Tanner, “Race and Representation in Ancient Art,” 16.

are known.”²⁶ He argues that the growth of Hellenistic metropolitan centers like Alexandria fostered the creation of more such bronzes. Mitten cites a similar artifact in the Kestner Museum in Hanover, which he believes “may well come from the same workshop.”²⁷ This *Kopfgefäß* (literally “head-shaped vessel”) is described as being “in the shape of a Nubian ... [with] thick and fleshy lips, flat nose, and hair in the shape of corkscrews [i.e. in cornrows].”²⁸ Further comparative study is needed to examine the role played by this object in its classical context.

What is the upshot of all of this for the object in question? Certainly, all discussion of “race” in classical antiquity is inevitably inflected by our own ideology and politics. This is exemplified by the object under discussion. The first descriptions of the object reflected a world in which all levels of scholarship were dominated by the ideology of white supremacy. After the Civil Rights movement, the dominance of Euro-American racism in the academy was slowly eroded.²⁹ At first, new scholars (like Snowden) working against the ideology of white supremacy still used the vocabulary of racism. This is why the object continued to be referred to with explicitly racial language up until 1985. Since then, terms like “Negro” and “Nilotic” have been replaced by descriptors such as “black” and “Nubian.” Yet this shift has its own issues; in many cases, it reifies the modern American racial paradigm based on a black/white binary. For objects like the one in question, there is scant evidence of who its subject was or how other people in ancient antiquity viewed it. In sum, the path forward is unclear.

²⁶ Mitten, *Classical Bronzes*, 64.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Kopfgefäß in Gestalt eines Nubiens. Der Mund ist leicht geöffnet, die Lippen dick und fleischig, die Nase ist flach und die Haare sind korkzieherartig geordnet.” Menzel, *Römische Bronzen*, 41. I am grateful to Brian Bielenberg for his help with the translation.

²⁹ I do not suggest that racism no longer has any hold in the academy, but rather that it is no longer hegemonic in the Gramscian sense.

Towards a different future

What are the implications of the above for the future of the object in the RISD museum? First, I do not believe that this artifact should be repatriated or hidden. Indeed, I strongly believe that its display can contribute to a more representative and diverse depiction of the classical world. I do not recommend that the object be moved from the Greek gallery to the Egyptian section. Instead, I would welcome the addition of more objects from across the Hellenistic world in the Greek gallery (perhaps including an object from the Levant, Mesopotamia, or even Central Asia). The classical world was diverse, and this is best demonstrated by exhibiting objects from a wide variety of locations and contexts.³⁰

I argue that the name used for this object should be changed from “Vase and Lid in the Form of the Head of a Nubian Boy” to remove racial (and gendered) language. An example of an alternative title is “Vase and Lid in the Form of the Head of a Child.” I suggest that the word “boy” be replaced with “child,” since there is no clear evidence that the subject is male. Making this change acknowledges the legacy of patriarchy in naming museum objects; the “unmarked” term should not be masculine. Most importantly, I strongly believe that racial terms like “Nubian” should be avoided when naming objects. As I contended earlier, using such terms – even with the best of intentions – reinforces the structural racism that still pervades our world today. Removing racial language from the label of the object is not a panacea, but it does signify the commitment of the RISD Museum to a just future. Leaving out racial language also does not mean ignoring the continuing legacy of racism, especially in the United States. Ideally, a name like “Vase and Lid in the Form of the Head of a Child” would force the viewer to reflect on their ideas of race. Whiteness

³⁰ This diversity of locations would complement the variety of time periods from which objects are currently drawn; diachronic links already made in the gallery could be enriched by synchronic connections from across the world.

is currently the norm; no object is (or should be) described as a “Vase and Lid in the Form of the Head of a White Child.” Using unmarked language (with no racial descriptor) for the object under question normalizes blackness. Rather than ignoring race, changing the label to remove racial terminology provokes reflection on race and racism while also avoiding ahistorical vocabulary that is inappropriate when referring to classical antiquity.

Similar considerations should be kept in mind when examining other aspects of the object’s representation. I acknowledge that the current object does not have a physical description, probably due to limitations of space. Nonetheless, there is a description for this object on the website, which I would suggest changing to better reflect the history of the object and its representation. As it currently stands, the website says:

The Hellenistic world featured a wide range of communities and trading partners. Many Greeks, or Hellenized members of colonies like Egypt, came into contact with representatives from nations as far away as Sudan and India. Egyptians held a keen interest in their southern neighbors on the African continent, coupled with a desire to accurately depict Africans in art. This perfume vessel is just one of many examples of this trend, showing the head of an African boy in carefully modeled bronze. The exoticism of the external representation echoed the exotic contents within, as many perfume ingredients were imported from afar.

My suggestion for an alternative description (of exactly the same length) is:

Hellenistic Egypt was part of a diverse, interconnected world in which many communities interacted, especially in major cities like Alexandria. These communities included Greeks, Hellenized members of territories like Egypt, and slaves from places like Libya and

Nubia.³¹ This intense cultural contact was reflected in the art of Hellenistic Egypt. For example, this perfume vessel portrays the head of a child in carefully modeled bronze. Artifacts like these may be excerpts of full-scale sculptures made in the same workshop. When acquired in 1911, this object was called “a bust of a boy, Negroid type.” Today’s description intentionally avoids such terminology.

I avoid using loaded terms such as “colonies” and “nations” for similar reasons as there were for avoiding racial language. I particularly remove references to “exoticism,” which are problematic for many reasons. First, they imply a certain positionality of the viewer; to someone who looked like the subject, I doubt the artifact would seem “exotic.” Furthermore, using the word “exotic” echoes Orientalism – the essentializing representation of the “East” in “Western” art and discourse.³² I also emphasize the history of representation of the object to acknowledge its role within the hegemonic racism of the twentieth century and to provoke further reflection on the role of race in the museum and society today.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a different name and description of the object examined. I have traced the history of the object itself (including its provenance) as well as the history of its representation, curation, and description. Putting these particular examples in context reveals underlying motives and ideologies. Reflecting on this context alongside this object pushes us to imagine a different future for the object. The changes I have suggested are practical and can immediately be put into effect, yet do substantial work in decolonizing the museum. This work

³¹ I refer to these regions in a strictly geographic sense: Libya being North Africa west of the Nile and Nubia being the area around the Nile between the first cataract and the confluence of the Blue and White Niles.

³² See Said, *Orientalism*.

requires ambitious thinking and a sustained commitment from all actors, but it begins with actions as incremental as changing the name and description of a single object.

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