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How the Present Day Began in Greece

My Love of Archaeology

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Sample translation by Jamie Bulloch

What is the point of archaeology today?

February 2026: The Humboldt University in Berlin announces that, due to cost-cutting measures, the Winckelmann Institute of Archaeology will no longer continue in its current form. The website speaks of a realignment but there is no indication as to what this precisely means. There are protests and I get involved myself. Not just because it's the institute where I was a student. It's about whether such an important university can dispense with archaeology as a discipline.

The students wrap the plaster casts of the ancient statues that decorate the main building of the university in clingfilm. The message behind this is that archaeology cannot be reduced to mere ornamentation.

But somehow it's clear that this has already happened. In an article for the *Tagesspiegel* the author asks, 'Has this venerable institute missed the boat?' She continues: 'Most people

probably associate archaeology with adventure films like *Indiana Jones* and with Museum Island and its world-famous exhibits.’ But: ‘Its history also includes the fact that it was able to flourish between the mid-18th century and the beginning of the 20th century because researchers and expeditions benefited from the colonial rule of European powers.’

It’s a scathing article that in parts is simply divorced from reality. But it’s also representative of a problem of which archaeology isn’t entirely innocent. People no longer understand what’s supposed to be important about the discipline. The discussion in Berlin is not an isolated case. In many places in Europe and North America, archaeological institutes find themselves facing cuts or are even fighting for survival.

Sometimes it sounds as if people are talking about an incurable disease: ‘Archaeology is perhaps one of the best examples of a subject whose origins and foundations are based almost exclusively on the use of knowledge as a weapon for subjugation,’ a colleague writes on a website for postcolonial studies. We could discuss the question of whether archaeology really is so sick. But I’ve set out to do something different. Focusing on one example I intend to show why we cannot understand our world without archaeology. To do this I’ve chosen what is supposedly the sickest example imaginable: the art of Classical Greece. I know it sounds very traditional and as if I’ve missed the boat too. But I intend to show that this is precisely where our present day began, even though we’re not always aware of this – and that, if we keep cancelling archaeology, we’ll realise it even less.

Despite what it may seem, this book isn’t a polemic. It’s actually a love letter to archaeology. Arguing means going on the defensive. But I’m not setting out to dispute anything: the Greeks weren’t saints – in the same way that the Assyrians, Egyptians, Phoenicians or Romans weren’t. Love means doing it anyway.

[...]

The discovery of nature

The subject of my love letter is fairly narrow. Out of the long history of classical antiquity (with a small c), which lasted from roughly 700 B.C. to 500 A.D., we will be focusing on just two centuries and only one culture, the Greek, and for the most part just one aspect of this: the art.

It's not that the rest isn't interesting. I've selected one example of many that deserve our attention. At the same time it is special. For the Greek art of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., that is to say the art of the Classical era (with a capital C) has a special significance in ancient history – and for everything that comes after it.

Paradoxically it's Classicism's incredibly large impact throughout history that prevents us from appreciating its importance. Classical art is ubiquitous today, not only in Europe but on all continents. From the Capitol in Washington to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, from the Renaissance to Neo-Classicism and Futurism, the legacy of Greek Classicism has an influence everywhere, whether as inspiration and 'rebirth' (i.e. renaissance), or negation. For even in negation, in the anti-Classical, the Classical remains present as an antithesis. This is why, whether we realise it or not, we're so strongly influenced by Classicism today that it no longer occurs to us just how exceptional it is as a historical phenomenon. We merely think of it as natural. But it's not.

What Greek Classicism brought to the world and what signifies art today – hence the Greek temple as the symbol for museums in Google Maps – was, back then in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the absolute exception. And it's up to archaeology to explain this exception.

To avoid misunderstanding, this isn't about value judgments. Roman archaeology, for example, is just as indispensable for our understanding of the ancient world and of everything

that came afterwards, including the present. But this shouldn't prevent us from seeing what was particularly special about Greek culture. On the contrary, it's precisely in places like Rome and Pompeii that we can see how extraordinarily influential its legacy already was in 79 A.D., when Pompeii was buried by Vesuvius.

So what is 'exceptional' about the Classical art of Greece? In a nutshell, the discovery of nature.

Nature – *physis* in Greek, as opposed to *nomos*, human-made 'law' – is the external world that is totally independent from us. It is so immeasurably large and diverse that we can never comprehend it in full.

Before Classicism, art was *nomos*, i.e. something that brought order and clarity to the wilderness of life. With the advent of Classicism this is turned upside down: art allows what is natural, disorganised and organic to break into the order of human society. Since then there has always been something subversive about art, something wild, which challenges order – a feature it had lacked in older cultures like the Egyptian. On the contrary, in ancient Egypt, art stood for the stability of the existing divine order.

The ancient Greeks themselves were aware of this difference. In *The Laws* the philosopher Plato says that in Egypt there were certain forms that were simply 'good': 'Once they had established which these were and how to create them they made them publicly known in the temples. And neither painters nor any of the other artists who depicted body postures or anything else of this sort were permitted to introduce novel elements into these forms. The prohibition still exists today, both in this field and in art as a whole. And on closer inspection you will find that the artworks painted and fashioned ten thousand years ago are neither more beautiful nor uglier than those today, but created in the same artistic style.'

Although Plato exaggerates slightly, he is not completely wrong. Egyptian statues are indeed far more difficult to date stylistically than Greek ones. In the Museum of Egyptian Art

in Munich you can see two heads that are like twins, whereas in fact there are almost three thousand years between them.

Plato thinks this is a good thing, for he is opposed to Greek art that is constantly changing, and he uses Egyptian art as a positive counterpoint. This is another feature of Classical art from the beginning: it is forever inventing something new, forever provoking criticism and resistance. Plato is the forefather of those critics who ridicule, condemn or even destroy modern art – they would rather have work that is beautifully Classical, without understanding that an action by Joseph Beuys, for example *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, is actually far more Classical than a Classical statue on a triumphal arch. For in his work Beuys seeks new ways of representing nature: the animal, death and our relationship to these.

At the moment when the artist liberates themselves from the prescribed social and religious laws of human life, they can go in search of deeper, hidden laws: the laws of nature. At the beginning of his career the famous sculptor Lysipp asked a painter friend of his which artist of the past he should use as a model. None, came the answer. Use nature instead. This is why techniques of randomness in modern art, for example where colours seemed to have been daubed haphazardly on the canvas, in fact have a profoundly Classical origin.

Art in the modern sense develops when the unforeseen, natural and surprising are elevated to an artistic principle. Colleagues from prehistory are cautious, therefore, with the term art. Not because the cave paintings from the Stone Age cannot compete with art from later periods. Maybe the opposite is true, in that what is being expressed there has such a deep cosmic and spiritual dimension that our notion of art appears far too small for it. Painting was a part of rituals that determined the relationship to the divine, and survival depended on this. It was fundamentally different from going into a museum in order to contemplate God and the world in a space free of religious and social constraints (at least this is what a museum ought to be!).

From this perspective, art only appears in the Greek Classical period. And it will remain thus from then on, even though pre-classical art keeps reappearing – especially in times when the relationship between humanity and nature is redefined. Examples of this are the art of late antiquity, but also the present day in which artificial intelligence makes us doubt where precisely the dividing line between the human and the artificial is.

It is surely no coincidence that the search for nature in art begins in roughly the same era when natural philosophy emerges in Greece. Natural philosophy appears in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. in the Greek cities on the western coast of what today is Turkey. It heralds the start of scientific thinking about the world. Why are things as they are? All the same it would be wrong to explain the new art simply as a by-product of natural science. For it is only much later that the latter will progress beyond highly theoretical speculation. Maybe it's the other way around; maybe natural science owes its rise to Classical art. The modest beginnings of natural science may well have come to nothing if this hadn't already had a place in human consciousness where there was a note, saying, 'Keep clear, something else is coming.' This place was discovered and occupied by Classical art until the point when natural science was in a position to occupy it itself. In other words, art embodied the hope that eventually it would be possible to decipher the natural laws they were looking for in an artistic-creative way. How did art do this? By celebrating the beauty of nature. This has been its contribution to scientific progress, a contribution that shouldn't be underestimated, for better or worse, from the sequencing of DNA to the atomic bomb. The art historian Horst Bredekamp has shown how, at the advent of the Modern age, it was the imagination of artists that showed natural science the way. And this still happens.

Omar Yaghi was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan in 1965. He had nine siblings and it wasn't an easy childhood. At the age of ten he discovered a chemistry book in the school library; fifty years later he was awarded the Nobel Prize. He was asked in an

interview what captivated him so much about molecules. ‘Their beauty,’ was the answer. ‘They seemed to be a way out,’ he said, ‘a distraction from the hardship of life. Even before I understood what molecules were, I was attracted by the allure and uniqueness of the drawings.’

Geometric art

Two hundred years prior to the advent of Classicism nobody could have dreamed that Greece would ever change the course of art history. Or anything else. The Greeks lived on the periphery of the advanced civilisations of western Asia, on the bridge to the European continent, which at the time seemed to have missed the boat completely. Greek-speaking groups also lived on the Black Sea coast as well as in southern Italy and Sicily, where they had founded colonial cities. For there is, in fact, something ‘colonial’ about Greek Classicism and not only since Winckelmann. In the world which, with Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundations of modern political theory, colonial and ethnically motivated force was the order of the day, and moreover, if we look closely, we can see that this has left clear traces in the texts of Classical philosophy. But the same is true of practically every other culture in antiquity, at least to the same degree. The Assyrians and Persians were merciless imperialists, the Phoenicians colonised the Mediterranean before the Greeks, while the Egyptians saw other peoples as very inferior. Not to mention the Roman Empire. Caesar’s conquest of Gaul was tantamount to a genocide.

Unlike modern European colonies, the Greek ones were not part of an imperial policy. Classical Greece wasn’t an empire. There were merely cities possessing hinterlands that varied in size, sometimes only a few square kilometres. Hundreds of such cities existed, each of them autonomous, connected to the others only by a common culture and language. Greece was the exact opposite of a trading union; it was merely a union of values. Trade was conducted more profitably with other seafaring peoples, especially the Phoenicians and Etruscans. And no

consideration was shown militarily; Greek cities were at war with each other all the time, robbing, murdering, raping and enslaving their Greek neighbours.

Greece hadn't always been so chaotic, however. Between the sixteenth and twelfth centuries BC, in the late Bronze Age, monumental, fortress-like palaces had been built. The best known of these is Mycenae, which is why this period is called the 'Mycenaean'. Relatively large areas were administered from these palaces. For this purpose records were kept, written in a syllabary known as 'Linear B', which wasn't deciphered until 1957.

Many traces of the Mycenaean era were preserved in the culture of the later Classical period, which is astonishing given that the language was lost after the twelfth century, meaning that these must have been passed down orally. The Homeric epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which tell of the Trojan War and the return of the Greek warriors, show how this worked. They are some of the first texts written in the Classical Greek alphabet, which is datable back to the eighth century BC. But their structure goes back to a pre-literate culture. Wandering singers who moved from village to village performed the old myths as improvised songs. They told of heroes and heroines such as Medea, Odysseus, Achilles, Elektra and Agammemnon, King of Mycenae. But Mycenae had long been a ruin.

[...]

It is a remarkable phenomenon: after the collapse of the Mycenaean order, when people are faced with an excess of wilderness, contingency and nature, art reaches a maximum level of regularity, predictability and unnaturalness. Geometric art, if we can call it that, is anti-natural and anti-random, setting an artificial, inorganic and strictly repetitive order against the chaos of the time.

This makes it the polar opposite of the Classical art of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, which strives to integrate the natural and coincidental. Here that is excluded. And if it does appear it is denaturalised: the serpentine bends of a river become regular rectangular meanders and waves are depicted as zig-zag lines.

When – late in the second half of the eighth century – human figures find their way into the imagery of geometric vases, they are silhouettes deliberately reducing the human body to a pattern, also geometric. The head is a circle, the torso a triangle.

The archaic smile and how it disappeared

In the seventh century BC the strict geometric patterns suddenly vanish. There is closer contact with other regions in the eastern Mediterranean again. In the time prior to this individual colonies were founded in the west: Cumae near Naples around the mid-eighth century, Naxos on Sicily, Tarent and Sybaris in southern Italy shortly afterwards. In the seventh and sixth centuries, the so-called ‘Archaic Period’, many more emerge. Trade flourishes; at international marketplaces – which are often under the protection of a god or goddess, such as the Hera sanctuary on the island of Samos – silver, gold, bronze and ceramic objects can be found that come from what is now Turkey, Phoenicia and Egypt.

Greek literature is born. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are written down, a farmer by the name of Hesiod writes of the genesis of the cosmos and the poet Sappho composes love poems for other woman on the island of Lesbos (from which we get our word ‘lesbian’). This is possible thanks to the Greek alphabet that was developed from the Phoenician. But unlike the Phoenician alphabet, which was consonantal (as the Hebrew and Arabic ones still are today), the Greek alphabet has letters for the vowels too. It is thus the first alphabet that tries to represent the sound of a language in its totality. The Greeks even come up with different letters

for long and short vowels, for example omicron (O) for a short 'O' and omega (Ω) for a long one. They don't write merely to record tributes and inventories but to immortalise poems. Sometimes they even write them on the clay bowls and jugs they drink wine from.

In the sixth century B.C. villages become cities. A new military tactic gains ground. Until then the Greeks had fought each other like disorganised gangs with warlords at their head – this is more or less how Homer describes the Trojan War. Now the formation, described as a phalanx, is precise rows of hoplites, warriors with large round shields and long lances. The phalanx comes rolling towards the enemy like a cylinder. To avoid being overrun the enemy needs to oppose it with their own phalanx. This required larger armies, standardised weaponry and better training. The consequences are far-reaching. The citizens of the cities need to be able to be trained and be equipped as hoplites. In return they demand resources and a say in decision-making.

Art becomes monumental again. Lifesize stone statues like the Egyptian ones stand on graves and in temples, representing deities as well as people. What's most striking about these is the high degree of standardisation – in this respect too the statues are similar to Egyptian art. Essentially there are only two standard types with little variation, if at all. The males, usually naked, are called *kouros* (boy); the females, always clothed, *kore* (girl).

At the same time the first Doric and Ionic architectural orders appear. Here too we are struck by the extent to which Greek architecture of the time sought the regularity and consistency of Egyptian models. This is particularly true of the Doric temples (the Ionic ones are a sort of eastern Greek regional style). Basically one Doric temple is like another. This is not due to a lack of creativity but to the deliberate repetition of a canon, an 'order' or a 'standard'.

In architecture a unity was therefore created that stood in stark contrast to the fragmented, chaotic reality. This is precisely why it was successful. The Greeks in the colonies,

in particular, who lived with other ethnic groups and intermingled with them, were worried about losing their affiliation with Greek culture.

Sometimes this is exactly what happened, such as in a city called Gelonus, to the north of the Black Sea. Its inhabitants, the Greek historian Herodotus says, were Greeks who'd left the trading colonies on the coast and moved inland. Now they spoke a language that was a mixture of Greek and Scythian, and lived in a city built entirely of wood. The standardised statues and temples were a sort of self-insurance. We're Greek and will remain so, they signified, for exactly the same statues and stone temples stood in other Greek cities.

[...]

Around the end of the sixth century the temple in the Aphaia sanctuary at Aegina is replaced by a large Doric peripteros. A peripteros is a temple surrounded by columns on all sides. A large sculptor's workshop makes the stone figures in the two gables out of marble from the island of Paros. But the eastern gable soon has to be replaced; we don't know why exactly. Maybe it was damaged in an earthquake.

The era of Classical art has dawned. Here, therefore, we can follow the beginning of Classicism as if in slow motion. The western gable is still Archaic, the eastern one Classical.

In the centre of both gables stands Athena. Aphaia is not amongst the figures depicted. Maybe the daughter of Zeus, who had no mother but had sprung directly from the head of the highest god, and who was revered everywhere in Greece, was a better fit for the men of Aegina than the unruly hunter from Crete.

Battle scenes are depicted on both sides of Athena: Greeks against Trojans. On the western gable Athena stands front-on in the centre, her robe flowing down in almost geometric forms. There is something stiff about the warriors too. One dying soldier looks a little like a

recumbent statue. On the eastern gable there is much more movement; everything looks more organic and natural.

The biggest difference, however, only becomes apparent when you take a closer look at the faces of the sculptures, which have been on display in Munich's Glyptothek since the nineteenth century. Those on the older western gable are smiling, all of them. No matter whether they're shooting an arrow or falling to the ground having been hit, each of them has a smile on their lips. It's called the Archaic smile. It evidently bears no relation to the situation in which the figure depicted finds themselves. After all, it makes no sense for someone to be smiling when they're in battle, especially not when wounded. The smile has nothing to do with what is happening, but with what is timeless. Whether Greek or Trojan, hero or goddess, they're all part of a world which is essentially good, well-ordered and noble, or at least ought to be. This is why they're smiling. It's not the moment that finds expression here but their overall, timeless existence, the order of the cosmos. For the same reason the statues of the dead smile on graves.

We are captivated by the Archaic smile because it comes from an alien world. We who only live in the moment and tend to listen to every feeling – we are gazing at the face of a past where only existence mattered, existence as a whole rather than the individual present moment. Those who are noble and heroic are happy, even in death. This is the meaning of the heroes' smile.

It is a lovely image, but also unnatural. Of course the Greeks didn't really smile when they bit the dust. If at all, it was a metaphysical smile. In Sparta Tyrtaeus wrote, 'How beautiful to fall in the front line...' And he meant it just like that. Not in the sense of 'It's a beautiful thing' but 'What a beautiful moment!'

The sculptors of the eastern gable dispensed with the Archaic smile. This is the great novelty: not the subject itself – the Greeks in battle against the Trojans – but the fact that the

depiction is now truer to nature, more realistic. Rather than timeless existence, the art focuses on what is there now, what is happening at the moment. This also means articulating the fact that dying in battle isn't that beautiful after all. Art now has the courage to show this. The western and eastern gables are divided by more than a few decades. Between them is a rupture, a declaration: We're no longer looking for what the poets call beautiful. We're looking for the wild nature of humanity... and in nature a different, rawer beauty. The adventure of Classical art has thus begun.

Myron and the physics of the discus throw

If the investigation of nature begins with Classical art, then Myron is the inventor of physics. His most famous work is the *Discobolus*. This statue of a discus thrower was made around thirty or forty years after the western gable of the Aphaia temple. No other sculpture of the Classical era has a comparable power and dynamic. Isn't that odd?

Sometimes a work appears at the beginning of an epoch which exhausts the entire potential of the period. Giotto's *Crucifix* in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence appears at the very beginning of the Renaissance, but the portrayal of the suffering son of man, which marks the breach with the mediaeval, triumphant interpretation of the subject, will not be surpassed in its psychological intensity for a long time. The same is true of the *Discobolus*, only that, unlike Giotto, Myron does not focus his gaze on the inner world, the psychological (Jesus suffered like every person). Instead he creates something that is all about the external surface, and from every perspective too.

Archaic sculptures were designed to be viewed from a particular angle. This could occasionally mean that they looked totally inorganic from the side. On display in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens is a sculpture showing two *kouroi*, young men, standing

side by side, each with an arm over the other's shoulder. But if you look at it from the side it's clear how unnaturally the arm lies on the shoulder, as if it were dangling from the top, completely detached from its body. To be physically accurate the sculptor would have only had to show part of the hand on the shoulder.

The *Discobolus* has no obvious front side. No matter which angle you view it from, you can see how all the body parts comply perfectly with the laws of physics at the very moment a discus is about to be thrown. Or do they? Is this really physics or is it only pretending to be?

Before we come to this it must be noted that the discus thrower, like practically all other famous works of Classic art, are not known in their original form. The discus thrower by Myron, which was made in bronze, has not survived.

At some point in late antiquity, when the ancient Greek religion, along with their sporting contests including the discus, became illegal, the bronze statue was melted down to make something else. Many marble statues suffered a similar fate, as lime to produce mortar was extracted from the marble. This involved cutting the statues into pieces and burning them in lime kilns. Others were used in houses or in hastily built fortress walls, designed to stop the 'barbarian' incursions. It is thanks to the Romans that we are still able to write a history of Classical art. Without them we would have to rely only on what was spared destruction later on, be it intentionally or by chance. Fortunately these artworks amount to more than just a few; quite a lot of original Greek marble sculptures and some bronze ones from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have survived, but. But these are not the 'masterpieces' that served as models for later generations.

The importance of the Romans for art history is that they knew they didn't really have any art they could call their own. This is not meant ironically or disparagingly.

It's not that Rome was lacking in talented artists. But their names have rarely survived; clearly they weren't of interest to anyone. In truth the Romans were only keen on Greek art,

and even what was special about their own art was viewed in relation to the Greek tradition. Anyone visiting the Roman city of Pompeii sees 'Roman' art only up to a point. The themes and subjects of the frescoes and statues in the houses are almost all of Greek origin. The Romans are not the first 'disciples' of the glad tidings of Classicism, but definitely the most influential. Engaging with European art history without beginning with the Greeks, would have seemed to them utterly absurd, unlike some people today.

[...]

Rather than reading about Greek art the Romans looked at it. This is why those who could, put copies of Greek statues in their houses and gardens. They were often marble even if the original was bronze.

We often call them 'Roman copies', which is true insofar as those who commissioned these works were for the most part the owners of houses and villas of the Roman upper class. But the production centres weren't just in Italy, they were in Greece too, especially Athens. In fact this is where the market for copies appears to have had its origins, something which is easy to understand. Greece had been part of the Roman Empire since the second century B.C. In concrete terms this meant an endless series of military interventions, plunder and raids, which only came to an end during the time of Emperor Augustus. But thousands of artworks from Greek temples, palaces and squares had already found their way into private Roman ownership. Some were exhibited in public buildings in the capital, such as Myron's *Heracles*, which Pliny mentions. The Greeks felt this ruthless cultural exploitation to be a humiliation. On the other hand they were creative businesspeople. If the Romans were so crazy for Classical works, why not ensure new supplies of these?

There must have been an enormous number of copies. Dozens of copies of famous statues like Myron's discus thrower or Polykleitos's *Canon* have survived, if only often as fragments. And this is just the tip of the iceberg as most were lost. It would be wrong, nonetheless, to think in terms of cheap mass reproduction. For unlike today, 'the age of mechanical reproduction', as Walter Benjamin called it, making copies in antiquity was complicated and expensive. Much more expensive than making a new statue. To faithfully replicate a Greek original, sculptors in the Roman era used measuring instruments, but also plaster casts like those found in excavations at Baia, to the west of Naples. It has been calculated that a sculptor needed around 2,200 hours to make a life-size marble copy of a Greek original. Only 1,400 hours were needed, by comparison, for a sculpture the artist thought up themselves.

The history of Classical Greek art can be reconstructed by comparing the copies with texts such as Pliny's. The technical term for this is 'kopienkritik' (copy criticism). Just as textual criticism in philology seeks to reconstruct the originals of texts by Homer or Plato from mediaeval transcripts, kopienkritik looks at and analyses the copies in conjunction with the texts to reconstruct the original statues.

[...]

What about the discus thrower? The problem is that other sculptors made discus throwers too. Commissions for statues often came from competition winners in Olympia and in other sporting venues, as victory gave them the right to have a statue of themselves erected in the sacred precinct. The discus thrower was a regular feature of the competitions and so Myron's *Discobolus* was not the only one of its type.

A particular stroke of luck made it possible to identify it with certainty. Lucian, a Greek writer in the second century B.C., mentions it in passing in a story which is actually about something else. He provides a short description that leaves no room for doubt: the type of statue, its best copy in the Palazzo Massimo in Rome, can be traced back to Myron's work.

The statue appears to capture a precise moment of discus-throwing as if it were a still image. But a 2016 essay Maria Luisa Catoni and Luca Giuliani showed that this is absolutely not true. To throw the discus the athlete rotates around their own axis. The *Discobolus* doesn't correspond to a single moment in that movement. Instead the statue brings together a number of different points in time. The raised arm with the discus is depicted at the moment of highest tension before the throw, but the left foot has already swivelled into the position it would be when the discus is launched. Meanwhile, the penis – the Greeks played sport naked – still points in the direction which, according to the principle of inertia, ought to correspond with the previous movement.

Did Myron get everything wrong? Or did he, as Maria Luisa Catoni and Luca Giuliani suggest, make an artistic contribution to the theory of movement and time that philosophers such as Zenon and Aristotle were working on too? In that case his sculpture would be groundbreaking rather than flawed, because physics isn't based on a one-to-one reproduction of nature, but using abstraction to arrive at the laws behind it. According to Nils Bohr, therefore, it is 'wrong to think that it is the job of physics to find out how nature is constituted. Physics relates to what we can say about nature.'

Myron didn't simply want to know what nature is, but what we can say about it. For him this meant how we can represent it in a statue.

A statue which, it ought to be noted, appealed greatly to Adolf Hitler. Indeed the Führer was so taken by it that he pressurised his ally, Benito Mussolini, until the latter finally agreed to sell the ancient copy from the Palazzo Massimo in Rome for the then exorbitant price of one

million reichsmarks to the Glyptothek in Munich. After the war it was swiftly returned, wisely without asking for the money back.

Since then Classicism has had a particularly hard time in Germany, harder than in Italy, for example, where the study of classics at school and Classical archaeology are less at risk of cuts even though the financial situation isn't any better. The National Socialists consciously oriented themselves to Greek Classicism, especially that of the fifth century B.C. (we will see why). In Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia*, which was made to document the 1936 Olympic Games in Germany, there is a sequence in which Myron's statue of the discus thrower is transformed into a living athlete. The message was clear: Greek Classicism lives on in the National Socialist racist image of humanity.

When this lay in ruins the beautiful image of Classicism was shattered too. The Classical poem to the fallen soldiers of the Battle of Thermopylae – 'Wanderer, if you come to Sparta, tell them...' – becomes a fragment in Heinrich Böll's 1950 short story: 'Wanderer, if you come to Spa...' The story tells of a wounded soldier in the last days of the war who recognises the Classical quotation on the board that he'd written himself. He's in the school he was attending only a few months earlier and which has been repurposed into a field hospital. Lying on a desk in the art room, he looks down at his body and sees that both his arms and one leg have been blown off by a shell.