A HELLENISTIC BRONZE SATYR

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A Hellenistic bronze satyr now on exhibition in the Eighth Greek Room has long been known to a limited public as a masterpiece. In the nineteenth century it was the property of W. H. Forman, an English collector, and was first published in connection with the sale of his effects at Sotheby’s in 1899. In the sumptuous and learned sale catalogue published on this occasion a noted scholar was able suitably to record the Forman collection before its dispersal “to the four winds and the United States,” as he notes in his preface. The bronze satyr nevertheless remained in England for a generation to enrich another private collection, that of Sir Thomas Gibson Carmichael, who lent it for the exhibition of Greek art held at Burlington House in 1903. Upon his death as Lord Carmichael of Skirling in 1926 the statuette reappeared at Sotheby’s and, of the four winds, the westerly began to blow.

The satyr holds a torch and a wineskin. He is bald and bearded, and crowned with ivy leaves and bunches of berries. It is not clear, from the surface at the small of the back, whether he once had a tail, but he has the pointed ears and snub features of his race. Hellenistic art has a long repertoire of satyr types—in tender youth or bald and mature. In general they are not the gross, unruly beings of earlier art, but rather the disciplined servants of their master Dionysos, busy with the making or pouring of wine, or otherwise doing his will. It is in a particular role that our satyr is cast. In seemly, reverent manner he takes up his torch and shoulders his wineskin; he is about to perform his office as dadouchos, torch-bearer in the mysteries devoted to the wine-god. It will be his duty to walk in the holy procession of the cult and to provide light where it is needed. On an Arretine mold in this Museum (acc. no. 23.108) a bearded satyr, with his wineskin slung on his shoulders like a knapsack, is holding a torch for a priestess who is preparing an altar. In our great Bacchic inscription, where members of a sacred college devoted to the cult are recorded with their titles, the dadouchos was a woman. In the mysteries as they were really practiced these officials were men or women who through initiation partook somewhat of the nature of satyrs. In our new figure the artist shows us the mythological creature himself, wrapped in devotion to his sacred task.

It has been pointed out that at Karlsruhe there is a marble satyr in the same pose, about one-third life size, a Roman copy perhaps derived from the same original as the bronze statuette. It may be, therefore, that there was a famous Greek statue from which the Roman sculptor copied and which established the type for the Hellenistic statuette maker. The original is unknown but the statuette remains as a masterpiece in its own sphere, one of the fine Hellenistic bronzes that are now so rare.

Until shortly before its acquisition by the Museum the statuette was covered with a thick, disfiguring crust. This was removed by its late owner by mechanical means, that is, without the use of chemicals or electrolysis, and the figure now stands forth in something like its due importance. The surface is corroded over part of the torso and left forearm, the feet are missing, and the torch is bent. But over most of the surface, including the face, the modeling is clear. The figure is cast solid. The wineskin, except for the neck, which is held in the satyr’s hand, was cast separately and welded on, as is apparent from the slightly imperfect fit at the shoulder. The torch also may have been so added, though the seam is not visible.

The satyr is published in the catalogues of the Forman and Carmichael sales and in that of the Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition of Ancient Greek Art.
Hellenistic bronze satyr, a torchbearer in the Bacchic mysteries. Height as preserved $9\frac{3}{8}$ inches.