5 | The Ephebe from the Via dell’Abbondanza
History of a Restoration

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Discovery

The Ephebe from the Via dell’Abbondanza (fig. 5.1) was found in Pompeii by Amedeo Maiuri in 1925. It was discovered in the domus now known as the House of the Ephebe (named for this bronze) or the House of Publius Cornelius Tages (regio I.7.11) (fig. 5.2).

The statue, dated to between 20 and 10 B.C., is a version of a mid-fifth-century B.C. Greek figure type. It was brought to light at the left doorpost of the corridor connecting atrium A and room 15 (a tablinum), and was still standing on its circular base, on which two supports for a bronze branch-shaped candelabrum were placed. On the floor by the base were a small altar and four bronze furniture or bed feet.

At the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the Ephebe, the altar, and the bronze feet had been covered with cloth, as indicated by the remains of mineralized fabric that are still visible at several points on the statue (fig. 5.3), as well as by the “copious charred scraps of flax or hemp” that Maiuri collected during the excavation. That the Ephebe and other items were found this way indicates that the House of the Ephebe was undergoing renovation in A.D. 79. The objects, moved from their usual locations, had been collected and covered with cloth to protect them from dust and damage caused by the work.

The House of the Ephebe was a typical middle-class home of a family enriched by trade. It is an aggregate of three adjoining houses, marked by opulence and sophistication. The indoor triclinium, which has a beautiful floor in opus sectile, is decorated with elegant designs in marble and colored glass paste; the walls are painted in the Fourth Style; and the ceiling is adorned with winged figures in golden stucco. In the famous outdoor triclinium are couches decorated with Nilotic scenes. These were protected from the sun by a pergola supported by four columns, next to which is the cylindrical base on which the bronze Ephebe was originally placed.

As mentioned above, the figure was unearthed still standing on its support. This consists of a hollow bronze Pompeian-style base into which an additional, lower marble base supported by three feet was inserted. The photograph taken at the time of discovery in 1925 shows the statue still partly submerged by lapilli, but perfectly recognizable (fig. 5.4). The fracture in the upper
The right arm is clearly distinguishable. What cannot be seen are the calves and feet, which later proved to be heavily damaged by the weight of volcanic material.

**Restoration History**

Maiuri accurately described the condition of the Ephebe as it was found: the left leg was broken at the knee and the calf of the right leg was in several fragments due to compression caused by the weight of volcanic debris; “the ancient break of the original cast where the right forearm was connected to the upper arm” had been reopened; the patina was the “well-known characteristic patina of the bronzes from Pompeii, almost perfectly homogenous in the pure oval of the face and in the hair, less so on the rest of the body, where, here and there, especially on the left arm, there is some blooming and bubbling of the metal”; the bronze base was slightly deformed and crushed; and the pupils had been lost.

Maiuri explained the lack of homogeneity in the color of the patina by observing that the statue not only had been adapted for use as a lamp bearer—as evidenced by the flattening of the palms to fit the branches (fig. 5.5)—but also had been gilded. He defined the gilding as “soft,” “achieved not by applying a layer [of gilding] but by immersing the bronze, the precise technique of which eludes us.” As we shall see below, however, the investigations carried out at the Centro di Restauro in Florence have confirmed observations from the Laboratorio di Conservazione e Restauro in Naples, which indicate that this appearance is the result not of gilding but of scrubbing of the metal during aggressive surface cleaning.

The first restoration of the Ephebe was undertaken in 1925, in the Gabinetto dei Restauri of the Naples Museo Archeologico, by the draftsman Michelangelo Puccetti, under Maiuri’s direction. It aimed at “the uniting of the separated parts of the lower limbs, the consolidation of the right forearm, and the addition of a solid internal framework to secure the original ponderation of the figure.”

The photographs from 1925, preserved in the photographic archive of the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, confirm Maiuri’s report. In the photographs the fracture in the upper right arm, visible in the image made at the time of discovery (see fig. 5.4), has been reassembled and camouflaged, as have the fragmented parts of the legs and feet (figs. 5.6a–b). In addition, the surface of the statue and the base is still to be cleaned. Unfortunately, we do not have any documentation following the completion of the restoration that might show the aggressive cleaning that led to the widespread scrubbing that Maiuri had interpreted as gilding. Traces of this work remain visible, as Maiuri said, “here and there on the body and especially under the left arm and, in very shiny patches, on the back” (fig. 5.7). Maiuri’s claim that the Ephebe was gilded is perplexing, given his experience and knowledge of the materials, and leads us to assume that he did not carefully oversee critical operations such as the cleaning of surfaces.
In any case, the cleaning must have been done immediately after the photography was completed, since Maiuri makes reference to the “gilding” in his publication of the statue (1925–26).

**Restoration Techniques**

Although the images taken in 1925 are valuable, they provide a limited amount of information. The conservation work carried out in 1996 at the Laboratorio di Conservazione e Restauro at the Museo Archeologico allows us to document the 1925 restoration in more detail. The results, presented here for the first time, add to our understanding of the particular and unusual techniques that were used to restore bronzes at the Naples museum in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Because it was in a precarious condition and at risk of further damage, the statue was dismantled, and this allowed for new research. It was possible to confirm that the statue was supported by an armature consisting of two brass bars of rectangular section, which are made up of at least two segments. These were shaped and welded with tin solder at the knees (fig. 5.8). One bar was inserted through the left heel and, passing through the leg and thigh, comes up to the left shoulder; the other was inserted through the right foot and continued up to the pelvis, to then bend to the left shoulder, where it joined with the bar from the left (fig. 5.9). The upper ends of both were wrapped with fabric that was attached to the bronze with cement (fig. 5.10). The lower ends were fitted into slots cut into the bronze base, under which were placed wooden strips, filled with pigmented plaster, to distribute the weight of the statue.

To provide stability to the internal support of the Ephebe and to furnish a surface on which to secure the fragments, part of the thighs and the legs were filled with cement (fig. 5.11). To avoid direct contact of the latter with the ancient bronze, an unusual method was used, which, as far as I know, is documented here for the first and only time. Between the inner wall of the statue and the cement was a yellow sateen fabric that protected the ancient metal. Remains of the sateen were also found inside the right foot (fig. 5.12).

The use of cement in bronze statues is attested at around the same time in the restoration of another famous sculpture, the Ephebe of Selinunte (Castelvetrano, Museo Civico). This statue was discovered in 1882 in Sicily—in Ponte Galera, in the territory of Selinunte—and dates from between 480 and 460 B.C. The statue was restored in the laboratory of the Real Museo Archeologico of Syracuse in 1928 by the restorer Giuseppe D’Amico, who, as reported by Pirro Marconi, was the inventor of a quick-setting concrete. Following the investigations conducted by the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro in 1983, this has been revealed to be cement. The use of cement (or mortar made with gypsum mixed with volcanic sand) not simply as a fill but also as a supporting surface on which to attach fragments during reconstruction has also been well documented in
the recent restoration of a small bronze sculpture in the Museo Archeologico in Naples. It is a
Roman copy of a Hellenistic original of the mid-second century B.C., and represents, perhaps,
Alexander I Balas dressed as Hermes (fig. 5.13). This little statue, found on June 17, 1901, by
Antonio Sogliano in the atrium of a house in Pompeii (regio V. 3), was restored for the first time
in the Naples museum between 1902 and 1908, the year it appeared in Arnold Ruesch's guide
to the Museo Archeologico. The left leg, which was detached from the thigh, was reassembled
using a technique that is similar, as we shall see below, to that adopted for the right arm of the
Ephebe from the Via dell’Abbondanza. The two component parts were joined with cement, and
this served as the support for an integration that was made using colored plaster and colophony
mixed with metal powder (fig. 5.14).

The weight of the legs of the Pompeian Ephebe, filled with cement during the restoration,
was undoubtedly the main cause of the statue's precarious state in 1996. The removal of this
harmful filling required careful work, especially given the fragmentary nature of the legs and
feet. Particularly delicate was the treatment of the right leg (fig. 5.15), where the calf had broken
into several fragments on account of the weight of volcanic material that had buried the statue.

In the leg were found pieces of wood that had been used to secure the brass armature in
its correct position prior to the pouring in of the cement. There were also fragments of tightly
woven fabric placed between the cement and ancient bronze. These served the same purpose as the sateen fabric described above. The conservation of the leg has also allowed us to record the traces left by the molds used to cast the statue in antiquity. Similar evidence was also found in the left leg, which was broken at the bend of the limb and at the top of the ankle (fig. 5.16).

The right foot was fractured in several places. It had been filled with concrete and protected with sateen in contact with the ancient wall (see fig. 5.12). A few areas of ancient repair (cold patches) were also documented.

The cleaning of the left foot was of particular interest for the understanding of the treatment of the statue in antiquity. As Maiuri had already observed in 1925, the circular bronze base was not original but had been adapted to the youth. This was confirmed by a significant widening of the space for the pin inside the left heel. It was originally intended to be smaller and rectangular (fig. 5.17).

The system used to secure the right arm at the time of the discovery was complex, and already appeared partially detached at the time of our investigation. Three plates of brass were welded inside the upper arm. In each, two holes were made that corresponded with those that had been made in the shoulder. The assembly was then effected using threaded brass screws (fig. 5.18). A layer of mortar (malta) was spread on this armature to make a compact and homogenous surface, on which were placed the ancient patches that masked the join between the shoulder and the arm (fig. 5.19).
Finally, the system used by Puccetti to anchor the head of the Ephebe to the body was peculiar. He inserted a support of shaped wood that was fixed into the neck with cement (fig. 5.20). The join between the neck and head was then masked with a pigmented grout.

**Recent Conservation and Definition of Ancient Manufacture**

In 1998 the Ephebe was transferred from the Museo Archeologico in Naples to the Centro di Restauro at the Museo Archeologico in Florence, in order to conduct surveys that had not been made in Naples and to finish the conservation work for the exhibition “—qual era tutto rotto”: *L’enigma dell’Idolino di Pesaro, indagini per un restauro* (Florence, 1998–99). The work that was carried out in Florence consisted mainly of a thorough cleaning of the exterior surface, the removal of excess cement that had remained within the sculpture since 1925, and the replacement of the internal brass armature. The new support consisted of a steel disk crossed by two bars that run up the legs, secured with resin and plates bolted at the knees and near the ankles. A layer of silicone was placed between the ancient base and the steel disk to ensure a better fit between the parts. The support thus minimizes the weight put on the Ephebe’s fragile legs and on the bronze base. The cleaning also brought to light the original copperplates used in the lips and nipples. Fragments of copper wire used for the lashes were also found inside one of the eyes.

The radiographic examinations undertaken in Florence have finally allowed us to evaluate the well-preserved metal, and have also provided useful information regarding the manufacture of the Ephebe. It was an indirect lost-wax cast, as demonstrated by, among other things, the chaplet holes and the traces left by the sections of the molds in the arms and legs (which were already documented during the restoration in Naples in 1996). Radiographs also allowed us to identify the different parts in which the statue was cast: the head, the arms, the chest with the right leg, the left leg, the genitals, and the extremities of the feet.


3 All quotations of Mauri in this essay are from his “Efebo di Via dell’Abbondanza” (note 1), pp. 338–40.

4 Conservation work, disassembly, and temporary reassembly of the Efebe were directed by the author and executed by the conservator Giovanni Cirella, whom I thank for the valuable collaboration. The photographic documentation carried out in 1996 was carried out by Gennaro Morgese.


7 The conservation at the Centro di Restauro in Florence was directed by Mario Iozzo, then deputy director of the center, and executed by the conservator Giuseppe Venturini. Contributors were Roberto Pecchioli (X-rays), Marcello Miccio (analysis of patina), and Antonino Sentineri (photographic evidence). The internal support was designed and built by Giuseppe Venturini and Piergiovanni Nagrini. I thank Dr. Iozzo and Giuseppe Venturini for generously providing me with information about the work carried out in Florence.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS
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