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JOURNAL *of* PUBLIC  
ARCHAEOLOGY


**VOLUME 1 / 2017**

*Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty*

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## VOLUME 1

February 2017

## Section

## REVIEWS

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# The Riace celebrities

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 [g.baldassarre@archeostoriejpa.eu](mailto:g.baldassarre@archeostoriejpa.eu)**Keywords** Riace Bronzes, Salvatore Settis, Maurizio Paoletti

Since their discovery in 1972, the Riace Bronzes have been the source of much debate. In addition, they have appeared in comic strips, tourism campaigns and commercials that only increased their success and media exposure. But where do we draw the line between use and abuse? The essays collected in a volume edited by Salvatore Settis and Maurizio Paoletti, recently published by Donzelli, offer reflections and suggestions on an exemplary case study.

First thing first: it didn't take much for the Riace Bronzes, recovered from the seafloor just a few decades ago, to be numbered among the world's most popular ancient artworks – in the same league as, say, the Parthenon's marbles or the Venus de Milo. There are multiple reasons for this incredible success: the extraordinary artistic quality of the statues and their material - which is bronze and not marble, like most of the Greek originals that have survived to this day; the gorgeous blending of classical beauty and strong virility that was achieved in the Bronzes; finally, the halo of mystery surrounding the statues, that has captured from the start popular imagination. Had the archaeologists demonstrated some willingness to communicate their knowledge, instead of just acting as the specialized keepers of ancient art, they could have exploited the huge popularity of the Bronzes to influence audience response and prevent the two statues from drifting into the definitely cheesy realm of marketing that has turned them into pop icons.

The essays collected in the book *On the Use and Abuse of the Riace Bronzes*, edited by Salvatore Settis and Maurizio Paoletti and published by Donzelli, all address this point. Blending irony and bitter reflections, the authors revisit the history of the Bronzes while exploring the lights and shadows of their management and preservation, as well as the often dysfunctional role of national and local institutions. The Bronzes, that is, should have offered an opportunity to educate the public into a greater appreciation of their national cultural heritage, rather than being exploited for crass commercialism; the book deliberately tries to make amends for this abuse. However, individual responsibilities and exculpations aside, one may ask why it took over thirty years to realize and acknowledge the mistakes that have been made.

Had the archaeologists been more considerate of the crowd gathered on the beach in those days of mid-August 1972, they would have perceived right away the people's enthusiasm and strong emotional reaction to those two statues, writes Salvatore Settis. Indeed, the



discovery of the Riace Bronzes caused surprise and commotion also among scholars, but removing the encrustations from the metal surfaces and cleaning them seemed - wrongly, we have realized - more urgent and more important than developing a discourse on the statues that treated them as masterpieces of classical art, "exceptional testimony of an art (the bronze casting technique) almost completely devoured by time and man's greed."

The mistake of not emphasizing the sublime artistic value of the pair was repeated again in 1981, when the restored Bronzes were displayed first at the Archaeological Museum of Florence, and then in the Quirinal Palace in Rome. Long lines of visitors eager to see the two masterpieces crowded the exhibitions, which enjoyed extensive and global media coverage. But the archaeologists again kept their peace, bewildered and leery of a success that they labeled as uncultured and barbaric, a sort of newfound, irrational taste for old things at a time of general disinterest in antiquities. In response to the public's thirst for information and understanding, they only published an illustrated full-color booklet: too little to turn the non-specialists' totally uncritical and spontaneous appreciation into an ingrained awareness of the cultural, historical and artistic significance of the Bronzes.

The major fault, both in those years and in the following decades, was the lack of a serious academic debate that, regardless of the subjects' identification, would speculate about the statues' style and the artistic climate where they originated. This is the core contention of Mario Torelli's perhaps reductive but incisive analysis of the communication mistakes archaeologists have made. No one was really able to explain to the general public that the two massive bronzes recovered from the sea were nothing but heroes, just like the ones celebrated in the verses of the Greek tragedians. They were not, after all, the obscure beings that the public, starved for information and lacking any interpretive tools, was led to believe they were. The Riace Bronzes were thus degraded to serve as material tokens in a high-society understanding of culture. As such, they

were desired and even expected to start event-hopping, bouncing from La Maddalena G8 summit to the Expo. Fortunately, this pathetic tentative to exploit their mass popularity and the surprise effect they could produce to obfuscate the real problems of the Italian cultural heritage and avoid critical reflection around them, was consistently foiled.

What is, then, the Bronzes' proper function? asks Maurizio Paoletti, echoed by Simonetta Bonomi. Their good use begins where the abuse ends, and it involves in the first place the effort of promoting the two statues not in isolation but as part and parcel of the extraordinary collection housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria - an institution that should in turn be managed and promoted in order to make it known and attractive to patrons. The Bronzes should work, that is, as cultural brands, capable of attracting people to the Museum and introducing them to exhibits designed to minimize their propensity for distraction and selfie-obsession, and facilitate enjoyment of art at first hand.

The very room where the Bronzes are now displayed should be better fitted to welcome visitors and introduce them to a unique cultural and emotional experience, states the Reggio Calabria Museum's new Director Carmelo Malacrino. Bathing the pair in a "warmer and more dramatic" lighting, for instance, could soften the impression of the room's cold impersonality and highlight every single detail of the metallic surfaces. Lightning aside, we might add, the planning of the communication inside and outside of the museum should be organically structured to inform visitors of all ages about the incredible art and history behind the Bronzes. The twenty-minute visit should not be perceived as an experience outside of time, but as a total immersion in the culture and beauty of 5th century Greece. An immersion ideally not limited to the museum's rooms, but overflowing to involve the surrounding area, its past and its cultural heritage that are so worthy of attention and interest.

The volume edited by Settis and Paoletti contains perhaps more bitterness than optimism. It draws a dysfunctional portrait of

the Italian cultural heritage system, plagued by a long list of ills: omissions and negligence, time-consuming bureaucracy and sterile debates. A system that has been incapable of preventing the general public from turning their artistic heritage into a heap of idols to worship, when they could have used them as the basis for a common cultural identity.

Has there been any change of direction, as of late? There are encouraging but not yet definite signs. At the moment we can only wish that something may change for the Riace Bronzes and a real resurgence may take place for them, as for many other national artworks and monuments.



