

Leah Clark - A plaquette of the Apollo and Marsyas

Hi, I'm Leah Clark. I'm an art historian in the department of art history at The Open University. And I specialise in the Italian Renaissance, with a particular focus on collecting practices in Italy. Today, I'm going to be speaking about a plaquette - that is a small metal object that would have been found in studies, in collector's studies in the Renaissance.

It depicts an ancient gem, an image on an ancient gem of Apollo and Marsyas. The gem dates from 30 BC, but this plaquette dates from the 15th century. So in some ways, it's a reproduction of an ancient classical piece, but it is also a work of art in itself.

This plaquette that is made out of bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin. Now this medium was highly prized in the Renaissance and was quite expensive. So it was usually reserved for big public sculptures, but it could also be made into smaller objects like this plaquette or small sculpture. So as you can see, it's very small. I've printed out an image of it in its exact size.

So I've got a two-penny coin here. And you can see really how small it is. It's just under 3 and 1/2 centimetres wide and just over four centimetres long. So who were Apollo and Marsyas? Well, Marsyas thought he was a great musician. And he challenged the god Apollo to a musical competition. Unfortunately, Marsyas did not win, and the end was rather gruesome. Apollo decided to flay him alive attached to a tree.

So in the image, you can see Marsyas is attached to the tree sitting down while Apollo is standing up straight on the right. So you'll notice that both figures are mostly naked. And this gives the artist the opportunity to show off the anatomy. And the anatomy follows classical proportions - that is their very idealised, but they're also fairly realistic.

So Apollo is standing up, but he's in what's called a contrapposto pose where one leg is slightly bent and the other leg holds more weight. And this gives a kind of natural flow to the body, what is called an S curve. And that is actually echoed in some ways in Marsyas sitting down. So you get a kind of dynamism in the image.

Now because it is in bronze, if you hold it up to the light, you will see the low relief. That is, you'll see the reflection of light on the various figures. What's also interesting about this plaquette is because it's an impression, you'll notice that Apollo's face is slightly worn out, that is, the impression did not portray that face properly. So you can't actually see the features of the face. But actually, it picks up quite well the anatomy.

So what was its purpose? Well, as I mentioned, collectors would often have these in their studies. And this was a way for them to familiarise themselves with images from antiquity. This is a time before they could just google an image and find one on the internet. So this would be a way for them to acquaint themselves with those images. Some plaquettes were found in studies, but we also know that they were used to adorn the body. Some were used as hat badges or even belt buckles.

This particular plaquette had a hole at the top that has now been plugged. This suggests that it may have been strung as a necklace. But we also know that plaquettes were hung around the study. As I mentioned, this plaquette copies in original antique gem that was highly sought by collectors. So many people would own a plaquette like this as a way to get a piece of that original gem that they couldn't afford.

Today, the plaquette it is housed in the British Museum in London, but is one of many impressions in collections around the world. So what is its relevance for today? Well it gives us insight into collecting practices and habits in the Renaissance. It also gives us insight into how collectors knew antiquity through material and visual means. But it also gives us insight into how images circulated in the Renaissance before the invention of the internet or photography.