

Classical Modern Irreverence: Michael Jackson and Bubbles Recontextualized

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The mission of this paper is to be as irreverant as the art it discusses. The research moves between high and low culture, creating a vertigo that blurs all artistic distinctions. I examine Jeff Koons’s Michael Jackson and Bubbles (1998) through the lens of Classical Greek art. The comparison shows the circularity of time, which humanizes antiquity and aggrandizes modernity. The research is particularly valuable to Stanford students because Koons’s sculpture resides in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. When I am in the gallery there, I notice that most people walk by laughing at its gaudy absurdity. While this is certainly a valid response, it ignores the deeper implications of the piece. A plaque at the museum has some useful information about the sculpture, but it does not mention the obvious iconographic link to Dionysus. The paper’s broad historical scope appeals to classicists and modernists alike, as well as the befuddled museum-goer. Koons crosses the traditions of ancient cult statues, the Parthenon, and Praxiteles with the banality of pop culture to question the materialist values of American society and blur established gender distinctions.

For ancient Greeks, the Parthenon was the central melody on which subsequent variations were based. Every change in the artistic style was in some way a reaction to or against the Parthenonic ideal. Pericles wanted the Parthenon to flex the political muscles of Athens, so he enlisted the best sculptors to depict the conquest of the Persians in a way that made the battle appear gracefully easy. Physical imperfections, like Hephaestus’s clubbed foot, were all “airbrushed” away. However, after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE and the plague in Athens in 430 BCE, the perfection of the Parthenon must have struck a dissonant chord. At the Temple of Apollo Epikourios in Bassae, the relief artists revolted bitterly against the unattainable and naive Parthenonic ideal. Although there are still visual references to the choreographed war of the metopes, Bassae shows war as the bloody chaos it really is (Fig. 1). Several years later, after the defeat of the Spartans at Sphacteria, the Athenians once again felt compelled to brag about their military prowess. They elaborately carved the Nike Temple on the Acropolis in a fashion even more luxurious and idealized than the Parthenon, while still applying Parthenonic motifs (Fig. 2 & 3). Bassae and the Nike Parapet are two examples of the opposite reactions that existed in regard to the Parthenon and its political propaganda.

What happens, however, when an artist sourly satirizes modernity in a mode that more resembles the Nike Parapet’s buttery elegance than Bassae’s caustic brutality? Jeff Koons created the answer in his 1988 sculpture, Michael Jackson and Bubbles (Fig. 4). Just like the Nike Parapet, Michael Jackson and Bubbles candy-coats the visual language of the Parthenon, but does so with a Bassae-like sarcasm that bluntly criticizes America’s values of fame and wealth. The blaringly bright statue almost screams the importance of its surface over all intellectual content, recalling the tradition of porcelain Meissen figurines—decorative knick-knacks for wealthy
bourgeois tastes. However, Koons coyly positions Jackson in the pose of Dionysus from the East Pediment of the Parthenon (Fig. 5), thereby employing the time-honored and academically sanctioned tradition of borrowing from antiquity. Whereas neoclassical artists borrowed reverently, Koons borrows irreverently, linking the King of Pop across time and space with the King of Theater. Another convergence of time and theme is between Koons and Praxiteles, whose deity statues were as smooth in appearance and brazen in message as Koons’s statue of a modern god. The publicity photo that inspired Koons shows Jackson lovingly holding his pet chimpanzee with the same S-curve hips that are the trademark of Praxiteles’s statues such as Hermes with Baby Dionysus (Fig. 6). With satiric humor, Koons combines the “high” traditions of ancient cult statues, the Parthenon, and Praxiteles, with the “low” traditions of Meissen figurines and publicity photos—the result being a menacingly proportioned pop icon, who questions the materialistic values of American society, blurs the distinction of gender, and challenges modern religion.

Part of the purpose of an ancient Greek temple was to house a colossal cult statue made of gold and ivory, like the Parthenon’s Athena. Michael Jackson and Bubbles is painted with this exact color scheme, a choice equating modern celebrities and religious icons. Like Elvis before him, Jackson was literally worshiped by crazed fans—one headline in Christianity Today went so far as to proclaim “A Fringe Cult Calls Michael Jackson the Returned Christ.” Even mainstream media such as Newsweek described Jackson as “a pop idol, a demigod; a lonely prophet of salvation through the miracle of his own childlike, playful, life-giving music.” His music may be immortal, but his fame and public reputation are as fragile as a porcelain cult statue.

In 1992, The San Francisco Examiner perceptively commented, “It may not be stretching it to say that at heart Koons is a utopian, even a religious artist.” By calling Koons “utopian” one is inevitably reminded of Pericles, the mastermind of the Parthenon’s construction. Both these men were the overseers of artistic creation, the visionaries, not the actual artist involved in production. At one point Koons directed fifty sculptors and twenty painters, who worked on twenty sculptures and sixteen paintings.” The comparison between classical, carveable marbles and the radioactive Michael Jackson is easier to accept when realizing the marbles were themselves once brightly painted. The effect was indeed so outrageous that Plutarch scathingly criticized Pericles’s project saying,

> Greece is clearly the victim of a monstrous Tyranny; she sees us using what she is forced to contribute for the war, in order to gild and bedizen our city like a wanton woman hung round with costly stones and statues and thousand-talent temples.

In Koons’s sculpture, Michael looks exactly like the bedecked, wanton woman Plutarch so abhors. The sculpture is all about the exterior with seemingly nothing on the inside, which is appropriate since the general public will never know Jackson’s inner workings distinct from his celebrity personality. The fact that Michael has been literally chiseled to “perfection” by a plastic surgeon is all the more ironic in the context of the immaculately carved Parthenon figures.

Besides referring to the Parthenon as a general ideology of perfection, Michael Jackson and Bubbles also appropriates the languidly reclined pose of Dionysus on the East Pediment. Whereas Dionysus likely held a kantharos (two-handled drinking cup), Michael holds his pet chimpanzee. Koons’s selection of Dionysus as Michael Jackson’s prototype is appropriate not only because they are both icons of hedonistic entertainment, but also because they both blur the distinctions of gender. We usually consider the Parthenon to be a celebration of masculinity, but the statue of Dionysus was actually a revolutionary departure, which began the process of feminizing Dionysus. In the long history of vase painting before the Parthenon, Dionysus was always shown with a beard, a clear symbol of masculinity. The Parthenon was the first time Dionysus was shown sans beard. The vase painters quickly followed the Parthenon’s lead and began portraying Dionysus in a more feminized beardless fashion. This feminization was probably far from the intention of Pericles, who likely wanted Dionysus beardless to celebrate his youthfulness, and by extension the youthfulness of the soldiers who fought in the Persian War. However, artistic intention only goes so far, and the Parthenon’s Dionysus perhaps unwittingly began the process that led to a character in Aeschylus’s play Edoni calling Dionysus gumnis or “woman-man.” Michael Jackson has likewise transformed himself into a more and more feminized form. His publicity photo with Bubbles shows Michael in a nurturing and maternal pose, and his baby smooth skin looks utterly incapable of growing even a bit of stubble. A caption in Life magazine perceptively said, “With a touch of pancake, plenty of eyeliner—yet hardly enough beard to shave—[Jackson] has set a new
standard in androgynous allure.”\textsuperscript{10} His statue’s face is delicately painted to resemble a veneer of makeup and red lipstick. The golden locks cascading over his eyes and shoulders make him look more like Petrarch’s Laura than a male African American.

Koons’s gender bending and hip swishing recalls Praxiteles, who also used pre-existing iconographic elements but with an iconoclastic twist. Both Praxiteles and Koons used the Parthenon’s visual vocabulary to expose the futility of mindless admiration, be it of gods or celebrities. In \textit{Hermes with Baby Dionysus}, Praxiteles used the same swish of the hips as appears on the Parthenon’s frieze (Fig. 7), but instead of flexing the muscles of an idealized masculine form, it makes Apollo and Hermes androgynous and soft, hence robbing them of agency and virility. Hermes is not the forward rushing figure he was on the West Pediment of the Parthenon, but rather a static figure, content with child’s play. As Xenophon warns, “Softening of the body leads to softening of the mind.”\textsuperscript{11} After the plague and brutal civil war, Praxiteles must have felt the gods no longer deserved absolute veneration, so he mockingly feminized them thereby robbing them of their agency and power. Like Praxiteles, Koons used motifs from the Parthenon, but with a similar edge that robs this mega-celebrity of his power to genuinely “heal the world,” which coincidently Jackson is attempting to do with his own charitable foundation, established in 1992.

Both admirers and critics alike call Koons’s work “kitsch,” merely altering the tone of their voice to distinguish their positions. Although there are numerous definitions of the word, the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} defines kitsch as “characterized by worthless pretentiousness,” and it quotes \textit{The Observer} from February 23, 1958 as an example saying, “What is so extraordinary about some of these kitsch masterpieces is the way they can be enjoyed on two planes, both as themselves and as their own parodies.”\textsuperscript{12} The gold color, large scale, classical motifs, and its very placement in an art museum lend this Brodbergtag-scale Meissen figurine an air of pretentiousness. However, instead of being worthless, it satirizes the very concept of worth, both monetary and moral. Koons himself defines \textit{kitsch} as “direct vulgarity and an object without function.”\textsuperscript{13} The tasteless sheen of \textit{Michael Jackson and Bubbles} and its utter uselessness place it squarely within this definition. Considering the word \textit{vulgar} derives from the Latin meaning “of the common people”\textsuperscript{14} it is well applied to the “King of Pop,” whose title implies Jackson’s popular and hence vulgar appeal.

In the postmodern era, classical art is often viewed as a sort of “worthless pretension” in and of itself. Classical references seemed to go out of fashion with grand political history paintings. In a conflation almost akin to art-historical blasphemy, Koons’s major precedents were the Parthenon and Meissen figurines. Although these two sources of inspiration are very much opposites of each other, Koons cleverly bends the art historical hierarchy to make them touch. Power and frivolity coexist, but not without satire. In \textit{The Book of Meissen}, Robert Rontgen rightly observes, “Porcelain does not lend itself easily to the depiction of serious motifs, especially when they are conceived intellectually.”\textsuperscript{15} The Meissen figurine of a young boy reclining (in a suspiciously familiar pose) illustrate the banality of these famous collectables (Fig. 8). One of the most famous Meissen series was called \textit{Monkey Band}, which showed monkeys playing various musical instruments, such as the contrabass.\textsuperscript{16} The band uniforms worn by Jackson and Bubbles strongly recall these hilarious (yet expensive!) figurines. Koons aligns his cult statue of Michael Jackson with decorative art, thereby challenging the very limits of art (which recalls Marcel Duchamp’s infamous \textit{Fountain}, a porcelain urinal currently residing just down the corridor from Koons’s own porcelain, in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art).

In addition to challenging the definition of art, Koons also challenges religious faith in the modern era. The Greek statues were considered active agents of divine intervention. The word for statue in Greek, \textit{agalma}, means literally “thing which delights” especially in reference to delighting the gods. It was a sacred word, not a just a mere noun. Koons’s modern god, in contrast, is passive and impotent, more profane than sacred. Like the Bassae temple once did, Koons criticizes the status quo, but he uses the smoothness of the Nike Temple to do so. Greek art historian J.J. Pollitt says of the Nike Temple, “In these sculptures, ornamental beauty has become an end in itself and to a great degree has usurped the role of meaning or ‘content’ in the specific narrative sense.”\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Michael Jackson and Bubbles} is devoid of content just like the Nike Temple, but in the more literal sense of being hollow inside. The statue implies that modern religion is more hollow than hallowed. Instead of founding faith on a rock, the vulgar populous finds its faith on fragile porcelain.

What appears to be all surface frequently has hidden layers—Jackson’s lack of literal layers allows for metaphorical ones. The Parthenon was similarly accused of being all surface by Sir Mortimer Wheeler\textsuperscript{18}, but it had a profound impact on the whole history of art because it was so perfectly conceived and executed. With only a thin crust of porcelain and glaze
Koons addresses modern materialism, gender roles, and religious futility. With the tone of Bassae and the smoothness of the Nike Temple, Koons turns the language of the establishment against itself. Koons is at once a modern incarnation of Pericles as well as Praxiteles. The method of production, the pose, and the color scheme all reference Periclean ideals, while the iconographic twist and feminization of the figure recalls Praxiteles. The equation of Jackson with Dionysus sets up Koons’s satire because Dionysus was the god associated with satyrs, from whence satire is derived. The disconcerting blend of limbs, in which one of Bubbles’s legs could easily be mistaken for Jackson’s third arm, gives the sculpture a half-man half-animal motif found in the satyrs of antiquity. This statue is brilliant, both with its golden glow and in its artistic conception. It is beautiful in its own kitschy way and yet also acutely disturbing. In a statue so rich in paradoxes, the conflation of the classical and kitschy is both fresh and provocative.

Works Cited