

OPEN MUSEUM · ESSAY

How civilisations depict the human

Three sculptures, three civilisations, nearly two thousand years apart, and three incompatible ideas of what a person is.

8 WORKS · THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART · CC0



Marble statue of a kouros (youth). Greek, Archaic, ca. 590–580 BCE. Naxian marble. The Metropolitan Museum of Art • CC0 • [met:253370](#).

A sculpture of a person is never only that. It is an argument, made in stone or bronze, about what a person fundamentally is: singular or shared, fixed or released, complete alone or completed only in another. Three works, drawn from three civilisations across nearly two thousand years, make three such arguments, and they do not agree.

The individual

Look at how he stands: feet planted, one foot forward, arms locked to the sides, shoulders level, the faint Archaic smile holding the face. Cut from Naxian marble around 590 BCE, this kouros is one body and nothing else: no companion, no setting, no god. You can read the Egyptian statues he descends from in the rigid symmetry, and watch, in the same stone, Greek sculpture beginning its long obsession: the human as an individual, to be studied, refined, idealised. The pose would loosen over two thousand years into the shifted weight of contrapposto, and on to Michelangelo's David. The whole idea is already standing here.

The afterlife of the ideal body



Marble portrait of the emperor Augustus. Roman, ca. 14–37 CE. Marble. The Met • CC0 • [met:247993](#).



Marble portrait head of the Emperor Constantine I. Roman, ca. 325–370 CE. Marble. The Met • CC0 • [met:252884](#).

How long can a civilisation imagine the self as singular?

The released self



Buddhist monk Budai. China, Qing dynasty, 17th–18th century. Dehua porcelain. The Metropolitan Museum of Art · CCO · [met:42545](#).

Where the kouros holds itself rigid and frontal, Budai pours out of his own outline. The belly falls forward, the robe slides off a shoulder, the head tips back into laughter. This is not the body idealised but the body let go: a figure who has set down the work of being a singular, finished self. He is loved across the Chan and Zen traditions, where the joke can be the teaching. Modelled in Dehua porcelain, white and glassy, he is as carefully made as any Greek marble, and argues the reverse of everything it stands for. Selfhood here is something to be released, not refined.

Stillness, two ways



Buddha Seated in Meditation. Sri Lanka, western regions, 16th century. Copper alloy with gilding. The Met • CCO • [met:72301](#).



Seated Transcendent Buddha Vairochana. Java, ca. late 9th century. Bronze. The Met • CCO • [met:39020](#).

Is a self that lets go of itself diminished, or free?

The sacred pair



Loving Couple (Mithuna). India, Eastern Ganga dynasty, 13th century. Ferruginous stone. The Metropolitan Museum of Art • CC0 • [met:38141](#).

Here the single body is not the unit of meaning at all. Two figures lean into one another, and neither is complete alone. The mithuna, the auspicious couple, stands at temple thresholds across India as a sign of wholeness and good fortune: hips turned toward each other, an arm crossing a back, the weight shared between them. Where the Greek statue insists the human is one and complete, and Budai lets that singular self dissolve, this stone makes a third claim entirely. A person becomes fully real in union with another. The body is not a monument to the individual but a half that seeks its pair.

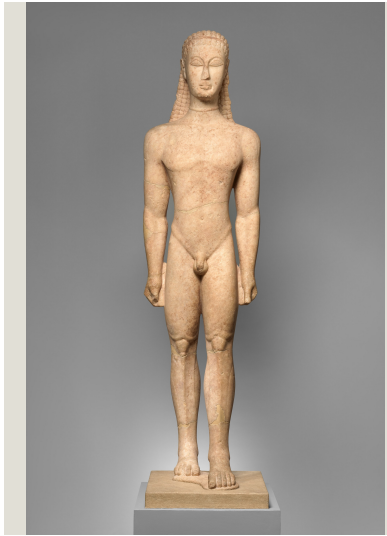


Krishna and the Gopis on the Bank of the Yamuna River. India, ca. 1775–80. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art • CC0 • [met:765654](https://www.metmuseum.org/objects/765654).

If a person is completed by another, where does the self end?

Three theories of a body

Seen together, these works do not trace a single history of the human figure. They offer three incompatible answers to one question. In one, the body stands alone, a complete self; in another, it loosens its claim to selfhood; in the third, it becomes fully meaningful only in relation. The comparison does not resolve the differences. It makes them visible.



COMPLETE IN ITSELF



SET FREE OF ITSELF



COMPLETED IN ANOTHER

The writing can only point. The looking is yours.

THE WORKS IN THIS ESSAY

1. Marble statue of a kouros (youth) · Greek, Archaic, ca. 590–580 BCE · [met:253370](#) · CC0
2. Marble portrait of the emperor Augustus · Roman, ca. 14–37 CE · [met:247993](#) · CC0
3. Marble portrait head of the Emperor Constantine I · Roman, ca. 325–370 CE · [met:252884](#) · CC0
4. Buddhist monk Budai · China, Qing dynasty, 17th–18th century · [met:42545](#) · CC0
5. Buddha Seated in Meditation · Sri Lanka, western regions, 16th century · [met:72301](#) · CC0
6. Seated Transcendent Buddha Vairochana · Java, ca. late 9th century · [met:39020](#) · CC0
7. Loving Couple (Mithuna) · India, Eastern Ganga dynasty, 13th century · [met:38141](#) · CC0
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