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Museum Paper - Sleeping Hermaphroditus

The Sleeping Hermaphroditus is a Roman marble sculpture from the 2nd century BCE, based on an earlier Hellenistic original. Although the artist is unknown, the piece reflects the Hellenistic fascination with realism within the human form and emotional expression. This sculpture highlights the technical expertise of Hellenistic artists in depicting both the body's naturalism and subtle emotional states. This sculpture sits just below an average person's waist and is currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris. On our audio tour I also learned that the statue depicts Hermaphroditus, the son of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Hermes, the messenger god. When Hermaphroditus was a young man, a nymph Salmakis fell in love with him, and he rejected her advances. Desperate Salmakis prayed to the gods their bodies be joined together. Soon granted but in a way that was not how Salmakis had entirely intended, fused into one being, a hermaphrodite, embodying both male and female characteristics.

The sculpture depicts Hermaphroditus in a relaxed, almost vulnerable position, suggesting sleep or rest, with the body gently leaning on its right side. Hermaphroditus' left arm is extended out to the side, while the right arm is tucked beneath the head, suggesting a natural sleeping position. This contrapposto-like posing, where the weight of the body rests on one leg while the other is bent, is an important element of this classical sculpture, creating a sense of

relaxation and balance between the figure. The body itself is laid on a cushion that is delicately carved and folds under the figure's body naturally. The use of drapery on a sheet to cover the body is not only to enhance the softness of the figure but also provide a sense of contrast to the smoothness of the nude torso. The head is slightly tilted backward, with the face turned to the viewer's left, further emphasizing the figure's vulnerability.

Commonly seen in many other Hellenistic sculptures, the artist focused on the proportions of the human form, meant to create a high degree of realism. The figure of Hermaphroditus has a finely sculpted torso, with the muscles carefully defined but not exaggerated, and a smooth, well-proportioned face. The curves of the hips and the slightly swollen abdomen suggest a feminine form, but the more angular and narrower upper body suggests a male physique. The figure's androgyny is shown through the sculptural portrayal of both male and female genitalia. It is widely believed that the sculptor intended this statue of Hermaphroditus to be perceived as a female figure at first, saving the surprise of this figure's dual nature for when the viewer walks around to see the figure in full. The artist's depiction of these elements is done subtly and with care, ensuring that the figure avoids being overtly sexual while still communicating the underlying theme of duality. This figure serves as a powerful embodiment of gender fluidity and androgyny. The careful balance of masculine and feminine features in this sculpture evokes thoughts of the idea of duality, the combination of opposites, and the complexity of identity.

Visiting the Louvre Museum in Paris was an incredible experience, exploring the Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities or the Salle des Caryatides where the

Sleeping Hermaphroditus was located, was a journey into the artistic and cultural timeline of these ancient times. The audio tour informed us that the room was originally designed as a royal ballroom, this specific section of the Louvre representing the arrival of Renaissance architecture in Paris. During the tour we had also learned that this room had received its name after the four caryatids. These sculpted figures in the start of the room, with their elegant drapery and poised expressions, immediately stood out to me and set the tone for the room's magnificent atmosphere. The architecture of this section of the Louvre with its high ceilings and classical columns reinforced to me its original purpose as a prominent space, and portrayed the room as vast and airy. The various other marble statues on display, with their lifelike expressions and anatomical realistic precision, showed me these ancient artists' extensive understanding of the human form. Near the caryatids and with a large window near to cast sunlight onto the sculpture is the Sleeping Hermaphroditus, challenging perceptions of beauty and gender, inviting a space to have thoughtful contemplation. What made the Salle des Caryatides particularly memorable to myself was the way the exhibition is able to blend art, history, and architecture into an immersive experience. The room's combination of Renaissance elegance and ancient artistry is able to create a unique atmosphere that invited me to observe and reflect.



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