



Lauren Wiacek
FNAR 200

Gods Walk Among Men

Naturalistic representations of gods strengthen the
connection between mortals and the divine



How come gods in art are often portrayed naturalistically? I continue to come to conclusions with the idea that it is because people have always valued connection and showing the divine in that way allows us to have that connection. From growing a sense of familiarity and relatability through depicting gods with human-like features, the gap between something supernatural and the human experience shrinks. All the pieces I selected tell stories of different gods, however, they are all similar in the way they were worshiped and valued. Having something become more realistic to ourselves also creates the opportunity for viewers to see themselves in the figure. So, when these gods are attributed with certain virtues and strengths, we work to achieve those as well, whether that be resilience or self-control. Another key part of naturalistic representations is the space for emotions and the appearance of the human experience, once again, within the stories told about the gods. We see these artworks and can recall tales of the god Ra crying tears of joy when his lost children returned or when Pandora's curiosity overpowered her rationality. These are figures untouchable to mankind, yet in those moments they feel reachable. Artworks that display gods in a human-like fashion cultivate a stronger connection between the divine and mortals, almost creating the illusion that gods did once walk among men.





“Osiris”

- ca. 1070–664 B.C.
- Copper alloy, stone
 - direct lost-wax casting process
- Statue
- Egyptian
- 33.2 × 0.1 × 5.6 cm.
- Egypt (specific location unknown)
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Osiris, 1070–664 B.C., Copper alloy, stone, 33.2 × 0.1 × 5.6 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546112>

“Osiris”

Displayed here is a statuette of the Egyptian god Osiris. He is standing in an upright position with his arms crossed holding a crook and flail. Those items are attributes of Osiris and are seen in several artworks. *Osiris* showcases preserved inlays in the eyes, brows, beard straps, and scepters, although the beard is absent. Another key part of the statuette is the facial features. Osiris is shown with a curved nose and a smiling mouth. These would have been stylistic choices modeled after artworks from the New Kingdom period. Based upon what we know of several statuettes produced in Egypt at this time, it is most likely that this was used in a funerary setting. Osiris became one of the symbols of the dead and resurrection, making it more likely that the statue was placed with the deceased. Having Osiris represented naturalistically made him more accessible to worshippers. In a funerary context, this would have been helpful, creating that possible bridge to the afterlife. The human form also makes it easier to convey authority, especially with Osiris holding the crook and flail. A connection can form that Osiris will be the power that will judge one at their time of death. The artifact's aging is the most engaging detail, with the vibrant green patina covering most of the statuette.



“ Tablet of Shamash”

- 860 BC-850 BC
- Limestone
- Low relief
- Mesopotamian
- 29.21 × 17.78 cm.
- Sippar, Iraq
- The British Museum, London

*The Sun God Tablet, 860BC-850BC, Limestone, 29.21 x 17.78 cm., The British Museum, London,
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1881-0428-34-a*

“Tablet of Shamash”

The Tablet of Shamash, also known as *The Sun God Tablet*, depicts a solar disc resting upon an altar that is held by deities. On one side of the disc is Shamash and on the other side are three figures. These are Nabu-nadin-shum (a priest), the goddess Aa, and Nabu-apla-iddina (a king of Babylon). The priest and goddess are leading the king to the shrine where Shamash sits. We can tell this is Shamash due to his attributes of a horned headdress and a ringed rod in his hand. Above Shamash are the symbols of Sin, Shamash, and Ishtar (the lunar disc, solar disc, and eight-pointed star). The tablet was found at the Temple of Shamash in Sippar, southern Iraq. While the usage of the tablet is unknown, the end purpose was for it to be buried. There was a fired clay cover that went over the relief before it was buried. This was done during the rule of Nabu-apla-iddina and the cover was later broken by Babylonian king Nabopolassar who wanted to open the tablet. In the *Tablet of Shamash*, Shamash is shown as a human, even though the hierarchical scale gives him an unrealistic scale to the other figures. For a god who represents justice and the rein of light over darkness, he gave people the motive to live a virtuous life. In a realm, the majority would turn to their monarch for advice on navigating life. When the king is portrayed as someone who reveres Shamash, the people strive to establish a similar connection with the deity. The hierarchical scale and the presence of the solar disc make the work engaging, viewers work through understanding where the power is placed and how it moves through all the figures present.

“Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy (Battle Between Gods and Giants)”

- 300 BCE–101 BCE
- Terracotta, pigment
- High relief
- Etruscan
- 45.8 × 46 × 21.9 cm.
- Etruria, Italy
- The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago



Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy (Battle Between Gods and Giants), 300 BCE–101 BCE, terracotta, pigment, 45.8 × 46 × 21.9 cm., The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/111030/architectural-relief-depicting-the-gigantomachy-battle-between-gods-and-giants>

“Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy (Battle Between Gods and Giants)”

The Etruscans were known to believe in Greek mythology more than the Romans, which would have strengthened their connection to the gods featured in their artwork. In *Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy, or Battle Between Gods and Giants*, Gods and Goddess are about to defeat a giant that they captured. The viewer is met with the implied motion from the straining position of the giant and the flowing drapery of the goddess's clothing. Etruscan buildings were often decorated with compositions based on Greek mythology. The *Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy* is inferred to have belonged to a series of ornamental covers placed along roof tiles on a small building or temple. The lack of the rest of the story makes this artwork interesting to look at. For the Etruscans who would have seen the work on the buildings, they would have been able to understand the story. But in our modern context, we need to have learned the story of Zeus leading Olympian gods into battle. The story continues with the Olympians learning that they could only have a victory over the giant if a mortal helped them. This artwork shows a direct need for the divine connection, even going as far as to imply that the Olympian gods were once battling alongside mortals. Having these kinds of works incorporated into places that were seen every day constantly promotes those ideas of that necessary connection and striving to reach those strengths the gods wielded.



“ Statue of Dionysos leaning on a female figure ("Hope Dionysos")”

- 27 BCE–68 CE
- Marble
- Stone Sculpture
- Roman (copy of Greek high classical)
- H 210.2 cm
- Inferred to be found in Rome, Italy
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Statue of Dionysos leaning on a female figure ("Hope Dionysos"), 27 BCE–68 CE, Marble, 210.2 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255973>

“ Statue of Dionysos leaning on a female figure ("Hope Dionysos")”

Hope Dionysos displays the god Dionysos leaning upon Spes, the personification of hope. The Greek figure would have been a religious cult figure in a temple, however, in Rome, that holiness is lost, and it now becomes a decorative piece to emulate the Greek past. Several Greek works were recreated due to the Romans's fondness for their artistic style and culture. It is unknown where it stood in Rome, contextually it could have been in a bath, garden, or villa as those were typical locations for statues such as *Hope Dionysos*. The androgyny of Dionysos makes this work compelling to look at alongside the position of Spes. There is greater intended motion in Dionysos' stance, also conveyed in the draping of his clothes, while Spes is more stagnant. This is an interesting aspect and offers a contrast within the work. Additionally, Dionysos' interpretation of human emotion, such as the calmness conveyed in his expression, made him palpable to viewers. Historically, some theorize that they represent the onset of peace following war. There is now relatability and motivation that reaches the people who would have believed in Greek and Roman gods. The high classical style of the figures is also important to note. It lessens the gap for interpretation of the work and enforces not only their human-like qualities but also the story and values.

“Fragment of a Marble Tomb Relief with Christ Giving the Law”



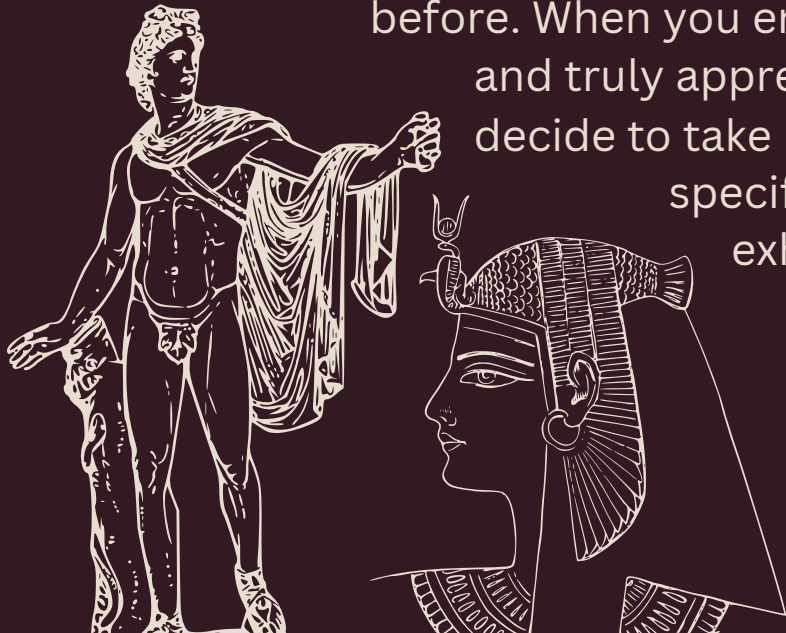
- Late 300s CE
- Marble
- Relief
- Byzantine
- 49.5 x 134 x 15.2 cm.
- Found in Rome, Italy
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

Fragment of a Marble Tomb Relief with Christ Giving the Law, late 300s CE, Marble, 49.5 x 134 x 15.2 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468269>

“Fragment of a Marble Tomb Relief with Christ Giving the Law”

The Fragment of a Marble Tomb Relief with Christ Giving the Law is a carved marble relief that displays Christ bestowing the law in scroll form to Saint Peter as recognition of his role as the leader of the church. These types of religious images were common on sarcophagi that belonged to wealthier Christians. Christ is centrally positioned, spreading his authority and divineness. The relief was also likely intended to show the power and resilience of the Roman Empire in times of change, which would have strengthened their connection with their divinely sanctioned rulers. The intricate details of this artifact, including the folds in Christ's tunic, the curls in his hair, and the facial expressions of the other figures, are features that make the work engaging. Christ, depicted in a classical contrapposto stance, exudes a sense of harmony and balance, emphasizing the divine order inherent in the delivery of the law. Having an important scene from Christianity on one's final resting place strengthens the connection between the divine and a mortal, ensuring a level of trust that Christ will guide and protect one as they move into the afterlife. The amount of detail and lively scene make the work more captivating, the more time spent focusing on the relief, the more the story becomes apparent.

I thought that with the Arts of the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine World being placed right next to the Modern Wing entrance, the *Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy* would have had more attention on it. However, it was placed at the end of the hallway by the doors to the *Chagall Windows* and located on a wall that faced away from all the people walking into the gallery. That display choice made it seem like it had less value than some of the other works present even though I feel that this one held more of a story compared to some of the other works. However, people were closely inspecting the other artifacts in the gallery. The pieces on display held a lot of intricate details, I can only assume that type of attention would have also been given to the *Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy*. I enjoy going to the art museum a lot, I like how you can continue wandering through the galleries and find new things you might not have seen before. When you enter the museum, it feels like a new atmosphere. People behave differently and truly appreciate art. I enjoy seeing what works people gravitate towards and what they decide to take pictures of. It was slightly odd going to the museum to seek out a specific artwork, I typically spend time meandering through the galleries and exhibits.





Works Cited

Architectural Relief Depicting the Gigantomachy (Battle Between Gods and Giants), 300 BCE–101 BCE, terracotta, pigment, 45.8 × 46 × 21.9 cm., The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/111030/architectural-relief-depicting-the-gigantomachy-battle-between-gods-and-giants>

Fragment of a Marble Tomb Relief with Christ Giving the Law, late 300s CE, Marble, 49.5 x 134 x 15.2 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468269>

Osiris, 1070–664 B.C., Copper alloy, stone, 33.2 × 0.1 × 5.6 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546112>

Statue of Dionysos leaning on a female figure ("Hope Dionysos"), 27 BCE–68 CE, Marble, 210.2 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255973>

The Sun God Tablet, 860BC-850BC, Limestone, 29.21 x 17.78 cm., The British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1881-0428-34-a