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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
1 February 2022

Before Covid-19, there was mass tourism. Before mass tourism, there were “grand tourists”—most of them English. And before the *milordi*, there were the pilgrims. Coming to Rome, they were looking for redemption and could be granted forgiveness for their sins once they had visited all of the city’s major churches. One of these pilgrims was the young Martin Luther. Yet not long after his trip to Rome in 1510–11, he would denounce the papal practice of selling indulgences that promised many thousand years of relief from purgatorial punishments, thereby marking the beginning of the transition from religious to aesthetic pilgrimage.



The pope, seated at the table to the right, is busy selling indulgences while holding up a sign that reads “While the coin is ringing in the box, the soul is going to heaven”

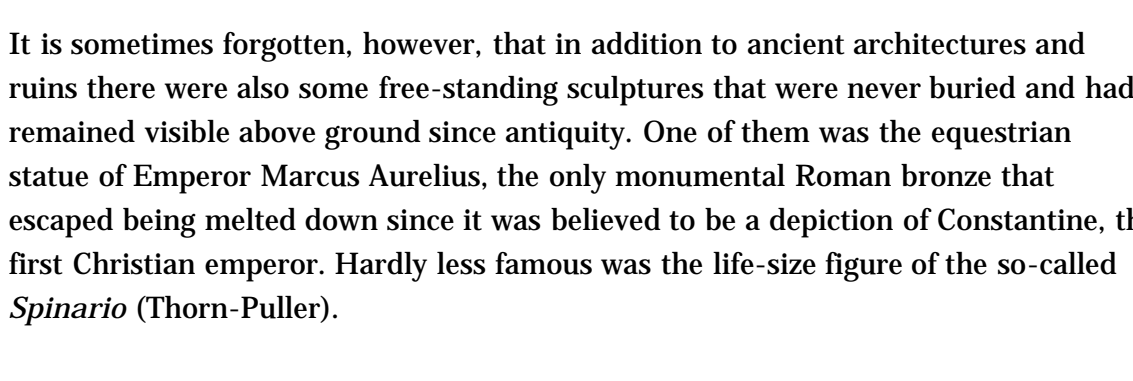
(detail from a hand-colored woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Younger, ca. 1550)

Then and now, remnants of Rome’s time as the center of a world empire can be seen everywhere in the “eternal city.” The advent of printmaking allowed visitors to take visual memories back home without bringing their own sketchbooks along. During the second half of the sixteenth century, publishers capitalized on this demand for souvenirs. One of them was Antoine du Pérac Lafréry, a Burgundian engraver who compiled engravings by a variety of printmakers into an ever-increasing compendium that he marketed in collaboration with the Spanish-born publisher Antonio Salamanca as *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae* (“The Mirror of Roman Magnificence”).



Laocöon and his Sons, marble, ca. 40–30 BCE (Belvedere Courtyard, Vatican)

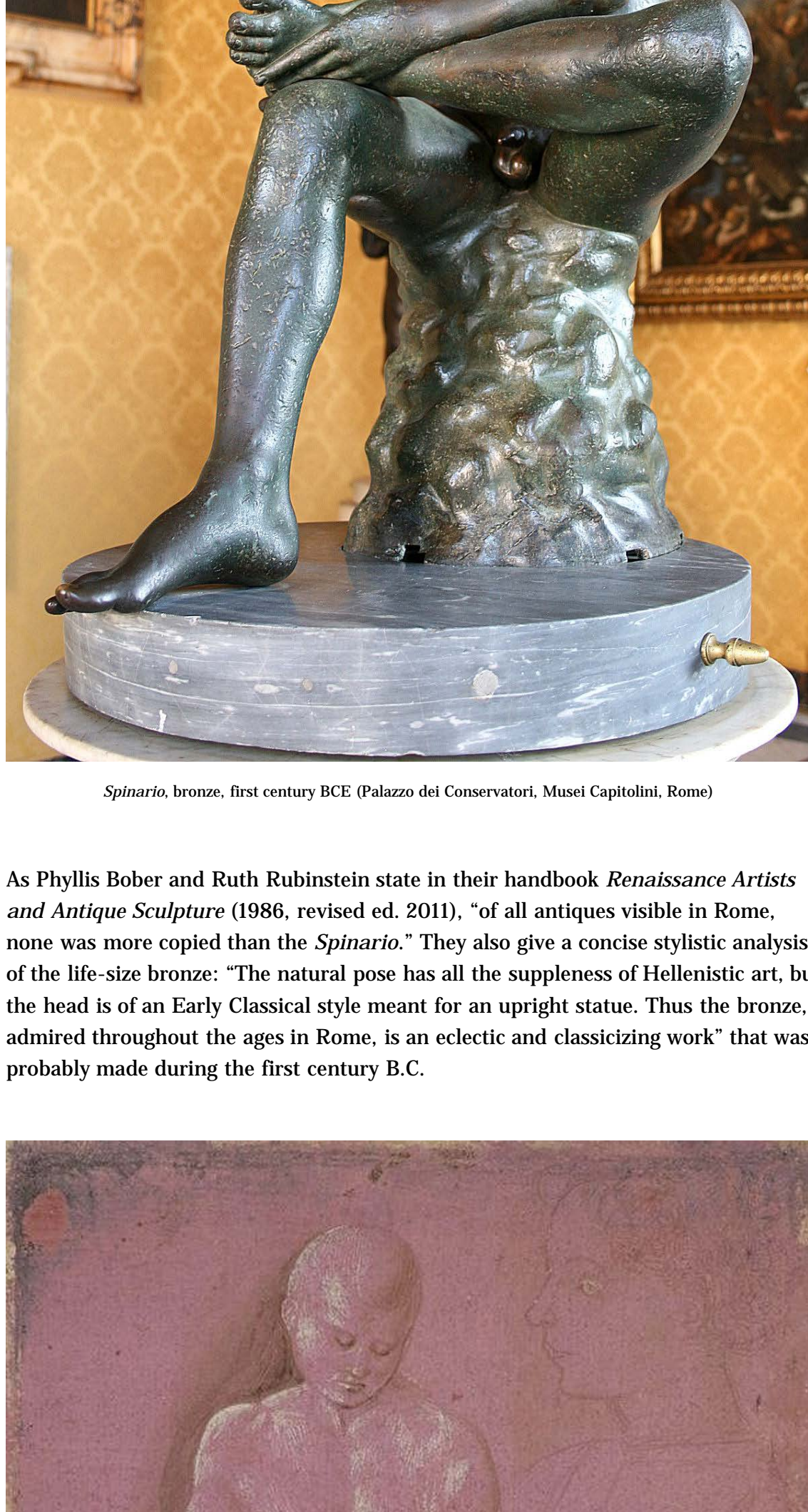
The growing antiquarian interest (as well as the ambitious building projects under Pope Julius II) lead to the discovery of many new antiquities, arguably the most spectacular among them the figure of *Laocöon* that was found 1506.



Marcus Aurelius, bronze, ca. 165–180 CE

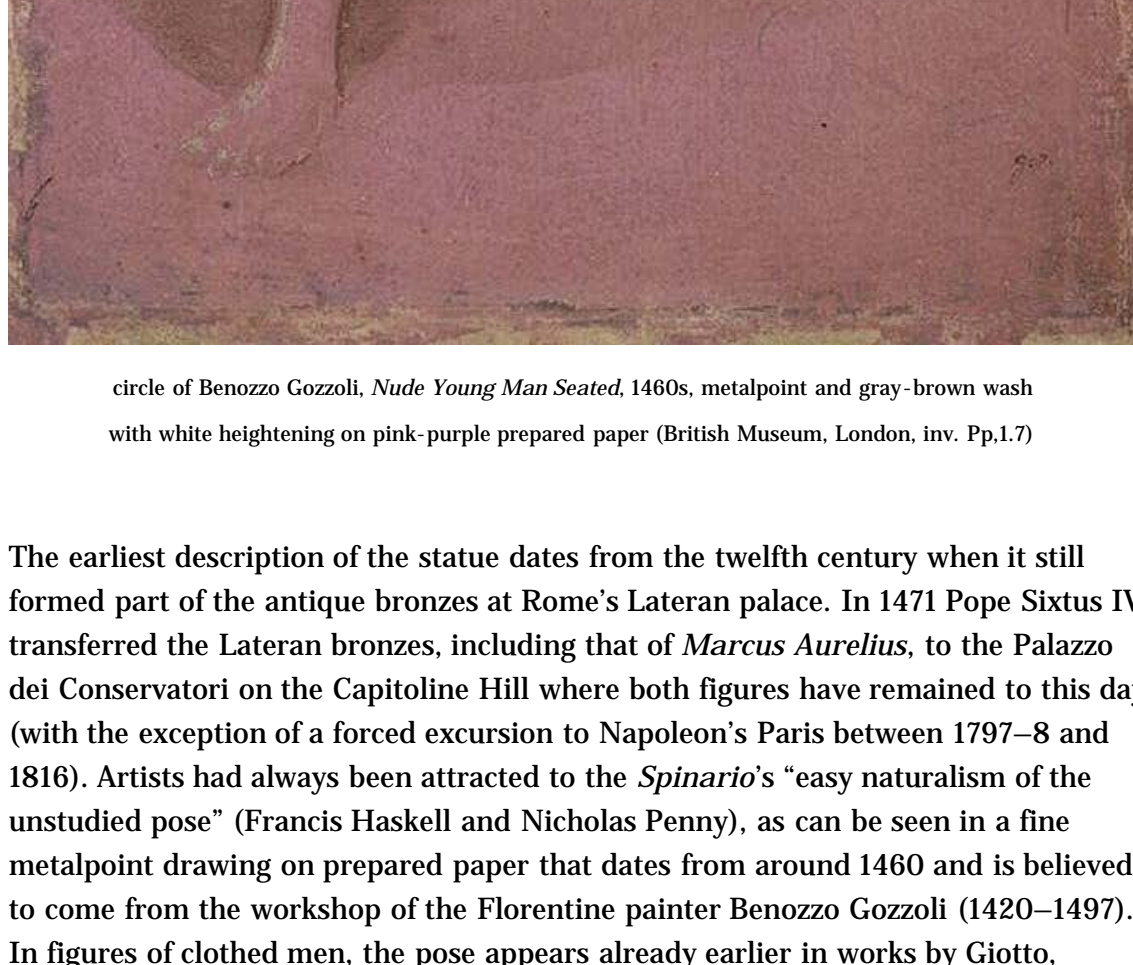
(modern replica on the Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome; the original is now in the Capitoline Museums)

It is sometimes forgotten, however, that in addition to ancient architectures and ruins there were also some free-standing sculptures that were never buried and had remained visible above ground since antiquity. One of them was the equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the only monumental Roman bronze that escaped being melted down since it was believed to be a depiction of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Hardly less famous was the life-size figure of the so-called *Spinario* (Thorn-Puller).



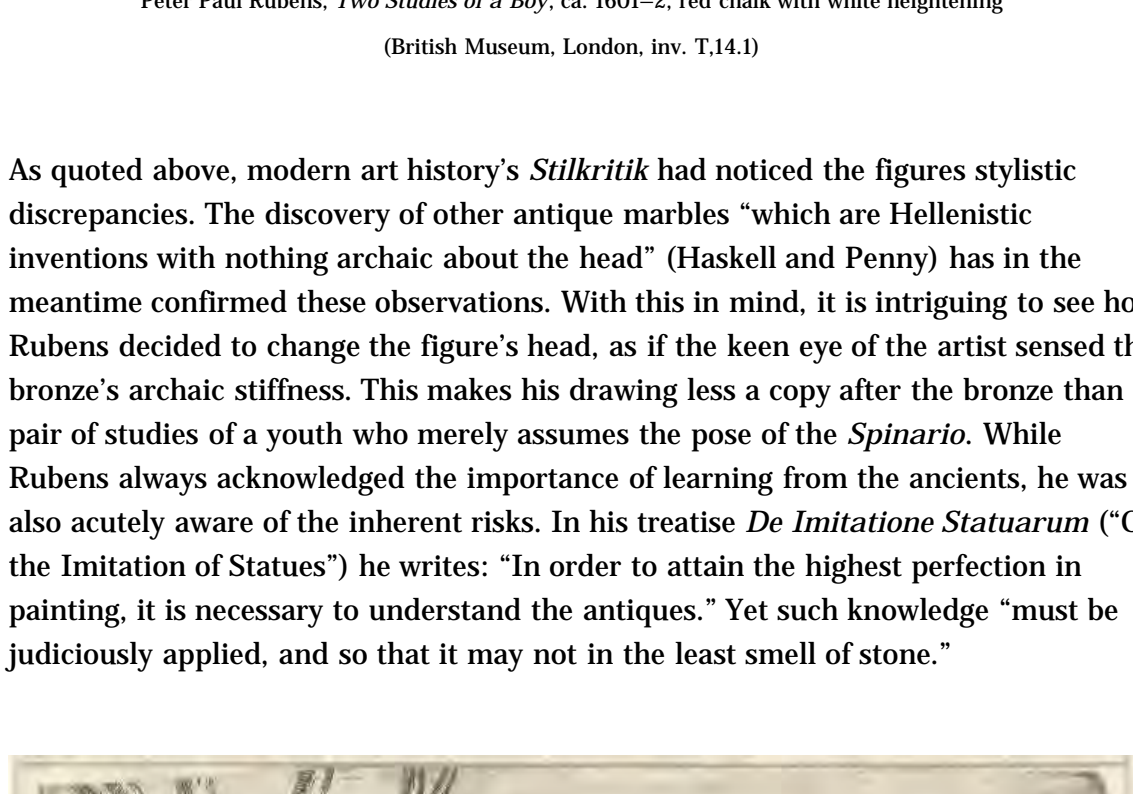
Spinario, bronze, first century BCE (Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome)

As Phyllis Bober and Ruth Rubinstein state in their handbook *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture* (1986, revised ed. 2011), “of all antiquies visible in Rome, none was more copied than the *Spinario*.” They also give a concise stylistic analysis of the life-size bronze: “The natural pose has all the suppleness of Hellenistic art, but the head is of an Early Classical style meant for an upright statue. Thus the bronze, admired throughout the ages in Rome, is an eclectic and classicizing work” that was probably made during the first century B.C.



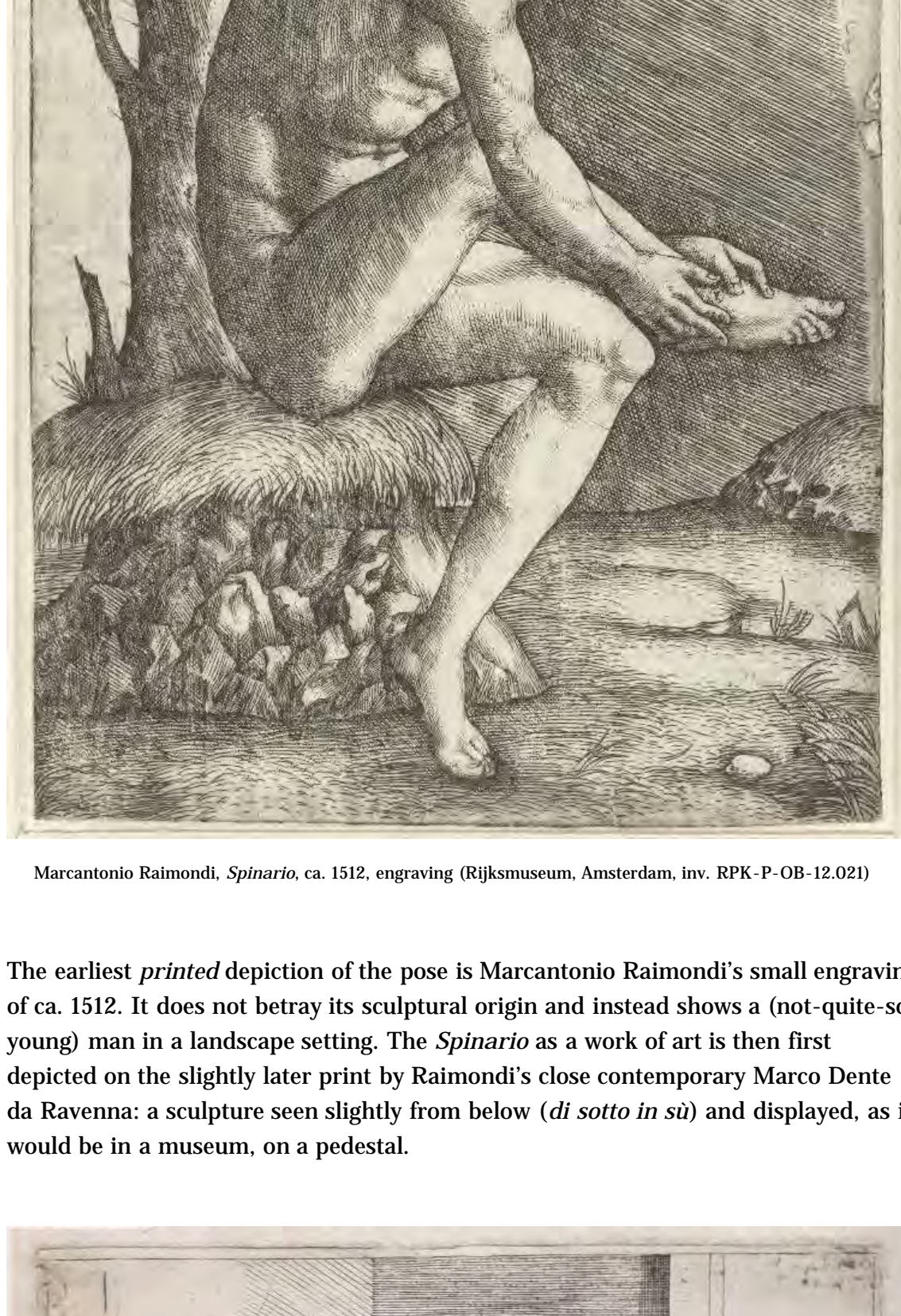
circle of Benozzo Gozzoli, *Nude Young Man Seated*, 1460s, metalpoint and gray-brown wash with white heightening on pink-purple prepared paper (British Museum, London, inv. Pp.1.7)

The earliest description of the statue dates from the twelfth century when it still formed part of the antique bronzes at Rome’s Lateran palace. In 1471 Pope Sixtus IV transferred the Lateran bronzes, including that of *Marcus Aurelius*, to the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill where both figures have remained to this day (with the exception of a forced excursion to Napoleon’s Paris between 1797–8 and 1816). Artists had always been attracted to the *Spinario*’s “easy naturalism of the unstudied pose” (Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny), as can be seen in a fine metalpoint drawing on prepared paper that dates from around 1460 and is believed to come from the workshop of the Florentine painter Benozzo Gozzoli (1420–1497). In figures of clothed men, the pose appears earlier in works by Giotto, Brunelleschi, Massaccio, Piero della Francesca and others.



Peter Paul Rubens, *Two Studies of a Boy*, ca. 1601–2, red chalk with white heightening (British Museum, London, inv. T.14.1)

As quoted above, modern art history’s *Stilkritik* had noticed the figures stylistic discrepancies. The discovery of other antique marbles “which are Hellenistic inventions with nothing archaic about the head” (Haskell and Penny) has in the meantime confirmed these observations. With this in mind, it is intriguing to see how Rubens decided to change the figure’s head, as if the keen eye of the artist sensed the bronze’s archaic stiffness. This makes his drawing less a copy after the bronze than a pair of studies of a youth who merely assumes the pose of the *Spinario*. While Rubens always acknowledged the importance of learning from the ancients, he was also acutely aware of the inherent risks. In his treatise *De Imitatione Statuarum* (“On the Imitation of Statues”) he writes: “In order to attain the highest perfection in painting, it is necessary to understand the antiques.” Yet such knowledge “must be judiciously applied, and so that it may not in the least smelt of stone.”



Marcantonio Raimondi, *Spinario*, ca. 1512, engraving (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. RPK-P-OB-12.021)

The earliest *printed* depiction of the pose is Marcantonio Raimondi’s small engraving of ca. 1512. It does not betray its sculptural origin and instead shows a (not-quite-so-young) man in a landscape setting. The *Spinario* as a work of art is then first depicted on the slightly later print by Raimondi’s close contemporary Marco Dente da Ravenna: a sculpture seen slightly from below (*di sotto in sù*) and displayed, as it would be in a museum, on a pedestal.



Marco Dente da Ravenna, *Spinario*, ca. 1515–20, engraving

Accordingly does the perspectival inscription on Dente’s print—“IN CAPITOLIO”—make explicit mention of the statue’s new location. Interesting for us modern viewers is also Dente’s nearly “cubistic” attempt to translate the three-dimensionality of the sculpture into adjoining sections of parallel lines—as if the engraver was trying, quite literally, to press the spatial volume of the *Spinario* into a “flatbed picture plane.”

Marco Dente, “Spinario”

