

Art 110: Prehistoric to the Middle Ages
Description and Formal Analysis of a Work of Art at the Getty Villa: *Muse*

In Roman and Greek mythology, the muses were nine goddesses of art and sciences who inspired writers, artists and philosophers. *Muse* is the name given to a Roman sculpture from around 200 A.D by an unknown artist, depicting one of these nine, Polyhymnia, the muse of mime. This piece is of carved white marble with traces of pigment and gold leaf. It stands a little over 3 feet and is about a foot wide. In this piece Polyhymnia is presented in such a way that she communicates to the viewer the relationship of a muse to an artist and her purpose to inspire.

At the Getty, *Muse* is initially seen by the viewer in profile. The goddess is leaning forward, her right elbow and left forearm resting on a rough-hewn pedestal. Her right forearm is positioned vertically with her chin resting on her closed fist. She is dressed in a long robe and mantel, almost completely covering her body except for her face and the toes of her right foot which are peeking out from under her garment just to the right of the pedestal. The form of her left calf and foot can be seen under her garment. The foot is positioned so that her heel is raised and the toes are resting gently on the ground. Her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail, exposing her ears and entire face. The goddess' face is round and youthful with delicate features. Her expression is pensive and echoed in her body language. Her posture and expression indicate she is relaxed but deep in thought. She stands on a simple beveled edge, semi-circular base showing that this sculpture was meant to be displayed from the goddess's right side and was set against a wall or placed in a niche.

The placement allows the viewer to clearly see the different textures of the sculpture that the artist has used. The smoothness of the garment is in contrast to the rough surface of the pedestal, but still not as smooth as the skin of the goddess' face which is highly polished. Her hair has deep, thick waves which set off her smooth skin. The hair has the most evidence that the piece was once alive with color. The viewer can clearly see traces of gold leaf in the furrows of the hair's waves. Small traces of pigment can be seen in the iris of the right eye. The presence of this paint makes it easy to imagine that when this piece was fully colored attention was drawn to the goddess' face and gilded hair.

The draping of Polyhymnia's clothing is beautifully executed. Even with the goddess fully covered the draping of the garment give shape to her body. Her robe is deeply gathered and falls straight to the ground. Her slightly raised left leg can be distinguished under the robe by the taut fabric being pulled across her calf and slight gathering about the heel. The mantel is wrapped tightly around her resting arms so that the viewer can see their position and shape, and lies wrapped across her back gathering just below her buttocks giving curves to the covered goddess. The mantel is draped over her left shoulder and falls down her back.

When the viewer walks around *Muse* to the right for a frontal view of the goddess, a strong vertical axis is perceived. This vertical axis is created by the straight pedestal and continues with the forearm and fist below her chin. This line draws the viewer's eyes up to the face of the sculpture. The curve of the draping mantel across her chest leads the eye up and around her head. All of this

emphasizes Polyhymnias' head and expression. The gold leaf on her hair would have further drawn attention to her face.

In this sculpture, Polyhymnia is completely engaged in something or someone outside of herself since she is gazing forward. Her disinterest in herself is evident in several ways: her body is completely covered, she is not striking an intentional pose, and her hair is not carefully styled. Perhaps she is intently listening to a young artist as he composes a hymn inspired by her. This sculpture can make the viewer think further about the relationship between a muse and an artist. The artist is not being inspired by the muse's outward appearance, but by their relationship and interaction. She is not just listening but possibly analyzing the artist's work and challenging the young man's artistic expressions. This relationship of muse and artist is interactive. The muse's role of thoughtful listening is portrayed in this piece.

