

GREEK ART

PREHISTORIC AND EARLY GREEK ART (ca. 4500–ca. 700 B.C.)

The Cycladic Islands

Situated in the southwestern Aegean Sea, the Cycladic islands were settled in the late sixth millennium B.C. The sculptures made during the Neolithic period are the precursors of the far more numerous—and better known—pieces datable to between about 3200 and 2000 B.C. that are commonly called Cycladic (fig. 1 and slide 1). The Cycladic works are the product of an imperfectly understood culture. Few settlements have been found, much of the evidence—including the marble figures—comes from graves, and scholars have not established the precise origin of the inhabitants. In the predominance of human form, the use of marble heightened with color, the conscious preservation of proportions, and the harmony of the parts, these works initiate the glorious tradition of Greek marble sculpture.

Minoan Crete (ca. 3200–ca. 1050 B.C.)

The prehistoric culture of the island of Crete is known as Minoan, after the legendary King Minos. Minoan culture reached its apogee about 1900 B.C. with the establishment of centers, called palaces, that concentrated political and economic power as well as artistic activity (fig. 2). Major palaces were built at Knossos and Mallia in the north, Phaistos in the south, and Zalno in the east. With the palaces came the development of writing. Minoan Crete employed two scripts: a pictographic script, whose source of inspiration was probably Egypt, and a linear script, called Linear A, perhaps derived from the cuneiform characters of the eastern Mediterranean. From 1500 B.C. onward, Crete shows an increasing influence from the Greek mainland; in fact, the Mycenaeans may have occupied Crete after an island-wide destruction about 1450 B.C. By the beginning



Figure 1. *Marble seated harp player*. Cycladic, late Early Cycladic–Early Cycladic II, ca. 2800–2700 B.C. Rogers Fund, 1947 (47.100.1)



Figure 2. *Terracotta vase in the form of a bull's head*. Minoan, Late Minoan II, ca. 1450–1400 B.C. Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 1973 (1973.35)



Figure 3. *Agate lentoid seal with griffin.*
Minoan, Late Minoan II, ca. 1450–1400 B.C.
Funds from various donors, 1914 (14.104.1)



Figure 4. *Terracotta stirrup jar with octopus.*
Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIC, ca. 1200–1100 B.C.
Purchase, Louisa Eldridge McBurney Gift, 1953 (53.11.6)

of the eleventh century B.C., the entire culture of Crete was in decline. The Minoan art most fully represented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is seal engraving (fig. 3). The seals reveal an extraordinary sensitivity to materials and dynamic form—characteristics that are equally apparent in other media, including clay, gold, bronze, stone, and wall paintings.

Mycenaean Greece (ca. 1600–ca. 1200 B.C.)

The prehistoric culture of mainland Greece is called Helladic, after Hellas, the ancient Greek name for mainland Greece. The extraordinary material wealth that an emerging elite deposited in a series of shaft graves within the citadel at Mycenae in the sixteenth century B.C. represents the expression of a powerful society that continued to flourish for the next four centuries, a period commonly called Mycenaean. The Mycenaean contact with Minoan Crete played a decisive role in how they shaped and developed their culture, especially the arts, but the Mycenaean were also great engineers who designed and built remarkable bridges, fortifications, beehive-shaped tombs, and elaborate drainage and irrigation systems. Their palatial centers —“Mycenae rich in gold” and “sandy Pylos,” to name two— are immortalized in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Palace scribes employed a new script, Linear B, to record an early form of the Greek language. Mycenaean goods (fig. 4) and trade outposts were widespread around the Mediterranean Sea, from Spain to the Levant, but a wave of destruction in the late thirteenth century B.C. swept away the palatial civilization, leading to a “dark age” of relative cultural dormancy in Greece in the eleventh century B.C.

Geometric Greece (ca. 1050–ca. 700 B.C.)

The roots of Classical Greece lie in the Geometric period of about 1050 to 700 B.C., when the primary Greek institutions took shape: city-states, major sanctuaries, and the Panhellenic Festivals for all Greek-speaking people. The Greeks adapted the alphabet of the Phoenicians, with whom they traded. Greeks of this time continued to be active seafarers, seeking opportunities for trade and founding new, independent cities from the western coast of Asia Minor to southern Italy and Sicily. The eighth century B.C. was the time of Homer, a traditional—though not necessarily historical—figure, whose account of the Greek campaign against Troy (the *Iliad*) and the subsequent adventures of Odysseus on his return to Ithaka (the *Odyssey*) are generally regarded as the first literary masterpieces of Western culture. The two epic poems were an inexhaustible source of inspiration to the Classical Greeks and have remained so for artists and writers down to the present day.

The Geometric period derives its name from the prevailing artistic idiom, which was based upon rectilinear and curvilinear forms. Although the style seems simple, the works are highly refined. Powerful bronze figures (fig. 5) and monumental clay vases (fig. 6 and slide 2) from Attica—the region of which Athens was the capital—manifest not only a masterful technical command of the media but also the clarity and order that are, perhaps, the most salient characteristics of Greek art.

GREEK ART OF THE SEVENTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES B.C.

A striking change occurs in Greek art of the seventh century B.C., the beginning of the Archaic period. The abstract geometric patterning that was dominant between about 1050 and 700 B.C. is supplanted in the seventh century by a more naturalistic style reflecting significant influence from the Near East and Egypt. Trading stations in the Levant and the Nile Delta, continuing colonization to the east and west, as well as contact with eastern craftsmen, notably on



Figure 5. *Bronze man and centaur*. Greek, Geometric, ca. 750 B.C. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.2072)



Figure 6. *Terracotta funerary krater*. Attic, Geometric, ca. 750–700 B.C. Attributed to the Hirschfeld Workshop. Rogers Fund, 1914 (14.130.14)



Figure 7. *Ivory relief of two women*. Greek, ca. 650–600 B.C. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.73)



Figure 8. *Terracotta cosmetic vase*. Eastern Greek or Lydian, 7th century B.C. Classical Purchase Fund, 1977 (1977.11.3)



Figure 9. *Bronze mitra (belly guard) with sphinxes*. Cretan, ca. 625–600 B.C. Gift of Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989 (1989.281.53)

Crete and Cyprus, exposed Greek artists to techniques as diverse as gem cutting, ivory carving (fig. 7), jewelry making, and metalworking. They adopted eastern pictorial motifs—palmette and lotos (lotus) compositions, animal hunts, and such composite beasts as griffins (part bird, part lion), sphinxes (part woman, part winged lion), and sirens (part woman, part bird). Greek artists rapidly assimilated foreign styles and motifs into new portrayals of their own myths and customs, thereby forging the foundations of Archaic and Classical Greek art.

The Greek world of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. consisted of numerous autonomous city-states, or poleis, separated one from the other by mountains and the sea. Greek settlements stretched all the way from the shores of the Black Sea, along the coast of Asia Minor, and the Aegean islands, to mainland Greece, Sicily, southern Italy, North Africa, and even Spain. Regional schools exhibited a rich variety of artistic styles. As they grew in wealth and power, the poleis on the coast of Asia Minor and the neighboring islands competed with one another in the construction of sanctuaries with huge stone temples. Lyric poetry, the primary literary medium of the day, attained new heights in the work of such notable poets as Archilochos of Paros and Sappho of Lesbos, whom Plato called “the tenth muse.” Exchanges with prosperous centers such as Sardis in Lydia, which was ruled in the sixth century B.C. by the legendary wealthy King Croesus, influenced Greek art of the eastern Mediterranean (fig. 8). Sculptors in the Aegean islands, notably on Naxos and Samos, were carving large-scale statues in marble, goldsmiths on Rhodes were specializing in fine jewelry, and bronze workers on Crete were fashioning superb relief-decorated armor (fig. 9) and plaques.

The prominent artistic centers of mainland Greece—notably Sparta, Corinth, and Athens—also exhibited their own regional styles. Sparta and its neighbors in Lakonia produced remarkable ivory carvings and distinctive bronzes. Corinthian potters and painters invented a technique of silhouetted forms that would evolve into the black figures of Athenian vase painting; they also developed tapestry-like patterns of small animals and plant motifs (fig. 10). By contrast, the vase painters of Athens were more interested in mythological scenes illustrated in large outline drawings. Despite differences in dialect—even the way the alphabet was written varied from region to region at this time—the Greek language was a major unifying factor. Dedications at major Panhellenic sanctuaries of mainland Greece, such as Olympia and Delphi, included many works from the east, together with the Greek works that they inspired (fig. 11), as well as dedications from the west.

Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy were politically independent, but each maintained religious ties and trade links with its mother city. Until the mid-sixth century B.C., Corinth dominated the western trade, exporting such products as vases, often filled with precious oil, and importing grain. Sicilian city-states, such as Syracuse and Selinus, erected major temples that rivaled those in the east. As opposed to the Aegean islands and mainland Greece, where marble was plentiful, Sicily and southern Italy had few local sources of high-quality marble. Consequently, like the Etruscans of central Italy, who also lacked much marble, the Greeks in the west established a strong tradition of terracotta sculpture and developed distinctive regional styles. In future centuries these western Greeks would become the primary transmitters of Greek culture to Italy and the Romans.



Figure 10. *Terracotta dinos* (bowl for mixing water with wine). Corinthian, black-figure, ca. 630–615 B.C. Classical Purchase Fund and Louis V. Bell Fund, 1997 (1997.36)



Figure 11. *Bronze griffin protome* (forepart). Greek, ca. 650–625 B.C. Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971 (1972.118.54)



Figure 12. *Detail of a marble grave stele.*
Attic, ca. 530 B.C.
Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, 1911, Rogers Fund, 1921, Anonymous Gift, 1951 (II.185a–c,f,g)



Figure 13. *Marble relief of lion attacking bull.*
Attic, ca. 525–500 B.C.
Rogers Fund, 1942 (42.II.35)

GREEK ART OF THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

Throughout the sixth century B.C., Greek artists made increasingly naturalistic representations of the human figure in a style now known as Archaic. This distinctly Greek endeavor is a watershed in the history of European art. Two types of free-standing, large-scale sculptures predominate: the male kouros, or standing nude youth, and the female kore, or standing draped maiden (slide 4). Among the earliest examples of the type, the New York kouros (slide 3) reveals Egyptian influence in both its pose and its proportions. Erected in sanctuaries and cemeteries outside the city walls, these large stone statues served as dedications to the gods or as grave markers. Athenian aristocrats frequently erected expensive funerary monuments in the city and its environs, especially for members of their family who had died in the flower of youth. Such monuments could also take the form of a tall shaft (stele), often decorated in relief (fig. 12 and slide 6) and crowned by a capital and a finial (slide 7 and poster). Like all ancient marble sculpture, funerary statues and grave stelai were brightly painted, and extensive traces of red, black, blue, and green pigment often still remain.

Sanctuaries were a focus of artistic achievement and served as major repositories of works of art. The two main orders of Greek architecture—the Doric order of mainland Greece and the western colonies, and the Ionic order of the Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor and the Ionian islands—were well established by the beginning of the sixth century B.C. Temple architecture continued to be refined throughout the century by a process of vibrant experimentation, often through building projects initiated by such tyrants as Peisistratos of Athens and Polykrates of Samos. Temples and other public buildings were frequently embellished with sculptural figures of stone or terracotta, paintings (now mostly lost), elaborate moldings, and plant motifs. Powerful images perhaps intended to avert evil, such as

lions attacking bulls (fig. 13), were especially popular. True narrative scenes in relief sculpture appeared in the latter part of the sixth century B.C., as artists became increasingly successful at showing figures in motion. Statues of victors at these games were erected as dedications to the gods. About 566 B.C., Athens established the Panathenaic games. Among the honors accorded the victors at the Panathenaic games were free meals at public expense and the award of a large quantity of olive oil in amphorai. Trophy amphorai (fig. 14 and slide 8) were decorated with the event in which the athlete had triumphed. Other sanctuary dedications included bronze statuettes (fig. 15), vessels, and armor of exquisite quality, as well as more common handmade and molded terracotta votives.

Creativity and innovation took many forms during the sixth century B.C. The earliest known Greek scientist, Thales of Miletos, demonstrated the cycles of nature and successfully predicted a solar eclipse and the solstices. Pythagoras of Samos, famous today for the theorem in geometry that bears his name, was an influential and forward-thinking mathematician. In Athens, the lawgiver and poet Solon instituted groundbreaking reforms and established a written code of laws. Meanwhile, potters (both native and foreign-born) mastered Corinthian techniques in Athens and by 550 B.C., Athenian—also called “Attic” for the region around Athens—black-figure pottery dominated the export market throughout the Mediterranean region. Athenian vases of the second half of the sixth century B.C. provide a wealth of iconography illuminating numerous aspects of Greek culture, including funerary rites, daily life, the symposium (drinking party), athletics (fig. 14 and slide 8), warfare, deities, heroes, and episodes from mythology.



Figure 14. *Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora (storage vessel)*. Attic, black-figure, ca. 530 B.C. Attributed to the Euphiletos Painter. Rogers Fund, 1914 (14.130.12)



Figure 15. *Bronze statuette of Herakles*. Greek, ca. 525–500 B.C. Fletcher Fund, 1928 (28.77)



Figure 16. *Terracotta neck-amphora (storage vessel) with lid*. Attic, black-figure, ca. 540 B.C. Attributed to Exekias. Rogers Fund, 1917 (17.230.14a,b), and Gift of John Davidson Beazley, 1927 (27.16)



Figure 17. *Detail of a kithara player from a terracotta amphora (storage vessel)*. Attic, red-figure, ca. 490 B.C. Attributed to the Berlin Painter. Fletcher Fund, 1956 (56.171.38)

Some vase painters and potters are known from their signatures; others remain anonymous, so that modern scholars have given them names of convenience. Among the great painters of Attic black-figure vases are Sophilos, Kleitias, Nearchos, Lydos, Exekias (fig. 16 and slide 5), and the Amasis Painter. Vase painters experimented with a variety of techniques to overcome the limitations of black-figure painting with its emphasis on silhouette and incised detail. The consequent invention of the red-figure technique, which offered greater opportunities for drawing and eventually superseded black-figure, is conventionally dated about 530 B.C. and attributed to the workshop of the potter Andokides. The next generation of red-figure painters included many accomplished artists. Among the best were Euthymides, Phintias, and Euphronios (slide 9), each with his own distinctive style.

GREEK ART OF THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C.

Political developments directly and significantly influenced Greek art of the fifth century B.C. Constitutional reforms in Athens, proposed by the legislator Kleisthenes at the end of the sixth century B.C., led to a more democratic system of government. In the first decades of the fifth century B.C., the Persian kings Darius I and Xerxes invaded mainland Greece, twice plundering and destroying Greek centers, even the Athenian akropolis itself. In response, many of the fiercely independent Greek city-states banded together for the first time since the Trojan War, some eight hundred years before.

The art of the fifth century B.C. reflects the magnitude of the Greek—indeed, Athenian—victory over the Persians. The red-figure technique superseded black-figure in vase painting thanks to a small group of artists, designated the Pioneers, among whom Euphronios and Euthymides were leaders. Potters and painters of the first decades of the fifth century B.C. specialized in the fabrication and decoration of certain shapes; painted drinking cups were especially popular. Works by Onesimos, Douris, Makron, the Kleophrades Painter, and the Berlin Painter (fig. 17 and slide 10) exhibit superlative draftsmanship and masterful decoration, as do the white-ground vase paintings

of this same period (slide 11). The greatest innovations lay in the rendering of the human body, clothed or naked, at rest and in motion; equally accomplished was the miniature art of engraving gemstones and coin dies (fig. 18). Monumental sculpture was slower to break from the Archaic conventions of symmetry and bold frontality, but a new sculptural style, known today as Classical, emerged after the Persian Wars. It informed figures with a noble awareness and restrained emotion that evoked the virtues of moderation and self-control to which the Greeks attributed their victory over the Persians. The Classical style retained the geometric principles of earlier periods, but for the first time represented human beings naturalistically as self-conscious individuals. This achievement was coupled with a remarkable tendency toward balanced compositions and formal harmony, which can be seen in sculpture large and small (fig. 19).

Architectural and funerary sculpture in stone (fig. 20 and slide 14) provides the best evidence for the sculptural style of this period. Perikles, the great Athenian statesman, sponsored an ambitious building program on and around the akropolis as a highly visible manifestation of the city's greatness. The architectural and sculptural grandeur of this enterprise is epitomized by the Parthenon, constructed between 447 and 432 B.C., the temple on the akropolis dedicated to Athena Parthenos, patron goddess of the city. An open-air theater dedicated to Dionysos was built on the south slope of the akropolis where many of the most famous plays of classical antiquity were first performed.

At the same time, valued for its tensile strength and lustrous beauty, bronze, an alloy principally of copper and tin, became the preferred medium for freestanding statuary. All the best sculptors, such as Myron and Polykleitos, worked in bronze; molds were made from their models, and then the statues were piece-cast by means of the lost-wax process. Unfortunately, very few bronze originals of the fifth century B.C. survive (slide 12), just as the finest cult statues of this time—colossal works of gold and ivory over a wooden core



Figure 18. *Silver dekadrachm*. Attic, ca. 475–465 B.C. Lent (L.1999.19.7) by The American Numismatic Society, Gift of Burton Y. Berry (1968.34.16)



Figure 19. *Bronze mirror*. Greek, perhaps Peloponnesian, ca. 460–450 B.C. Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971 (1972.118.78)



Figure 20. *Marble grave stele of a girl with doves*. Greek, ca. 450–440 B.C. Fletcher Fund, 1927 (27.45)



Figure 21. *Marble statue of a wounded warrior*. Roman, Antonine period, ca. A.D. 138–181. Copy of a Greek bronze statue of ca. 460–450 B.C. Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, 1925 (25.116)



Figure 22. *Terracotta lekythos (oil flask)*. Attic, white-ground, ca. 440 B.C. Attributed to the Achilles Painter. Gift of Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989 (1989.281.72)

housed in temples in Athens, Olympia, and elsewhere—by such important artists as Pheidias are lost to us. Instead, what we know of these famous sculptures comes primarily from ancient literature and later Roman copies in marble (fig. 21 and slides 13, 15, and 16).

The visual arts were a major part of a cultural revolution whose legacy endures to the present day. The lyric poet Pindar of Thebes; the young philosopher Plato and his teacher Sokrates, both from Athens; Herodotos of Halikarnassos, the first Greek-speaking historian; Thoukydides of Athens, who pioneered the scientific recording and analysis of historical events; Hippokrates of Kos, the father of modern medicine; the famous Athenian dramatists Aeschylos, Euripides, and Sophokles; and the comic writer Aristophanes of Athens all lived during this golden age of Greek culture.

GREEK ART OF THE LATER FIFTH AND FOURTH CENTURIES B.C.

Athens remained the leading artistic center in the latter part of the fifth century B.C. Its political power, however, was alarming to the other Greek city-states and in 431 B.C., open warfare broke out between Athens and the Peloponnesian League, an alliance of city-states led by Sparta. Shortly thereafter, Athens suffered grave losses through the outbreak of a plague and the death of Perikles. The somber side of art at this time can be seen in sculptural tomb markers and grave goods such as elegant vases (fig. 22) with painted decoration on a white background of applied slip (thinned clay). Major monuments of the Periklean building program became important sources of inspiration for artisans; vase painters in particular borrowed the style and iconography of the Parthenon sculptures. A new impressionistic style developed toward the end of the century, with sculptural works often exhibiting an elegant, calligraphic effect in the drapery, which may appear as if flying, windblown, or wet (slides 17 and 18).

In 404 B.C., with the end of the Peloponnesian War, Athens lost its place as the foremost Greek city and preeminent cultural center. Nonetheless, the Classical styles of the fifth century B.C. continued to influence the art of the fourth century B.C., as can be seen in the powerful Attic grave reliefs (fig. 23) that continued to be produced. There were many new developments as well. The third major order of Greek architecture—the Corinthian—characterized by ornate, vegetal capitals, came into vogue. For the first time, artists' schools, as institutions of learning, were established. Among the most famous was the school at Sikyon in the Peloponnesos, which emphasized cumulative knowledge and laid the foundations of art history. Patrons also had an increased intellectual awareness of art, which led to the growing importance of connoisseurship. The Athenians were especially given to employing personifications for instruction, including such ritual concepts as *pompe* (procession) (fig. 24). Perhaps most notably, the arts manifested a new interest in personal human experience, expressed as pathos.

Artists of the fourth century B.C. worked on a more international scale than their predecessors. Skopas of Paros traveled throughout the eastern Mediterranean to produce commissions, including those utilizing a team of artists, like the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Praxiteles of Athens created one of the most celebrated statues of antiquity—the first fully nude sculpture of the goddess Aphrodite—for a sanctuary at Knidos, a city on the end of the southwest coast of Asia Minor. His use of slender proportions and distinctive contrapposto became hallmarks of the sculptural style of the period, and was replicated in both large-scale sculptures (slide 20) and small-scale works, such as terracotta statuettes (fig. 25) that were especially popular at the time.



Figure 23. *Marble grave relief*. Attic, mid-4th century B.C. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1948 (48.11.4)



Figure 24. *Terracotta oinochoe (wine pitcher)*. Attic, red-figure, mid-4th century B.C. Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.190)



Figure 25. *Terracotta female figurine*. Greek, probably Boeotian, late 4th–early 3rd century B.C. Rogers Fund, 1909 (09.221.28)



Figure 26. *Gold pediment-shaped brooch.*
Greek, ca. 340–320 B.C.
Rogers Fund,
1906 (06.1159)



Figure 27. *Bronze box mirror with head of Pan.*
Greek, late 4th century
B.C. Fletcher Fund,
1925 (25.78.44)

During the middle of the fourth century B.C., Macedonia (in northern Greece) became a formidable power under a remarkable king, Philip II, whose success set the stage for his son Alexander the Great's unparalleled conquest of much of the ancient world. His victory over the Greeks at the Battle of Chaeroneia in Boeotia in 338 B.C. made Philip II the undisputed ruler of Greece, and the Macedonian royal court became the leading center of Greek culture. Fine tomb paintings, notably at Vergina, precious metal vessels, and elaborate gold jewelry (fig. 26) give an indication of the splendor of the arts produced for the Macedonian royal family. Alexander the Great (ruled 336–323 B.C.), who had been educated by Aristotle, the greatest of Plato's pupils, cultivated the arts on an unprecedented scale. He maintained a retinue of Greek artists, including Lysippos of Sikyon as court sculptor, Apelles of Kolophon as court painter, and Pyrgoteles as court gem engraver. Lysippos was arguably the most important artist of his century. His works, notably portraits of Alexander (and the works they influenced, fig. 27), mark the culmination of Classical sculpture. They inaugurated features, such as heroic-ruler portraiture, that would become major aspects of Hellenistic sculpture (323–31 B.C.). Furthermore, Alexander's conquests opened exchanges with cultures as far east as the Indus River valley in modern Pakistan. This expanded Greek world would have a profound impact on the arts of the succeeding centuries.