

## ANCIENT GREECE – Sculpture

**Sculpture and temples** Ancient Greek sculpture belongs to the same creative impulse as the ancient Greek temple. However Greek sculpture was only in part a coproduct of Greek temple architecture. The period during which Greek sculpture was created on actual works of Greek architecture would be the 5th century classical period, and would involve sculptural works on metopes and pediments as well as on the extensive friezes we find on temples dating from the mid sixth to the mid fifth century. Of those ornamental sculptural works, whose *raison d'être* is to complement the temple, we find a blindingly skillful fusion with the temple, so radiant that in instances like the sculptures of the Parthenon, or of the Nike Temple on the Acropolis, the sculptural work is a seamless whole with the temple itself. (The Parthenon frieze, subsequently called The Elgin Marbles, for Lord Elgin dismantled the frieze from its pediment in the 18th century and transferred it to the British Museum, would be a central example of the brilliance of the welding of sculpture and architecture.)

**Non-temple sculpture** A great deal of ancient Greek sculpture was created independent of temple architecture, and for those examples—early bronzes, archaic kouros (youthful male) and korai (maidens), free standing life sized sculptures often found in temple precincts, fourth and third century 'genre' sculptures like the Hermes of Praxiteles (320 B.C.) or The Dying Trumpeter (230 B.C.)—for those examples any aesthetic alliance with Greek temple architecture would be hard to formulate. What are the landmarks of this sculpture? To attempt such a formulation, to reach toward an aesthetic which would be in common both to Greek temple creations and to further domains of Greek art—like ceramics or painting—would be to start this Greek culture discussion on the right course, looking for the characteristic traits of ancient Greek culture; we will look for that unity as we advance and when we conclude.

**Changes in sculptures** If we look at the developmental curve of free standing Greek sculpture, that is sculpture not part of temples, we see that it changes dramatically in character from the earliest remaining examples to the work of Hellenistic sculptures. Look, for starters, at the Man and Centaur sculpture in bronze from 750 B.C. This example, of work in the geometric style, is a starkly abstract reminder of the kind of Near Eastern stylized art which was to generate many visual themes in subsequent Greek sculpture. This style, however, marks off sharply from the life-sized sculptures in stone which begin to spring from Hellenic workshops after 650 B.C. The creations we call kouros (youthful nude standing males) and korai (clothed standing maidens) pick up the stiff frontality of contemporary Egyptian culture, and speak for the aesthetic values of an age truly called Archaic, and soon, by the early decades of the fifth century, to transition off into free standing sculptural works of an entirely more 'naturalistic' cast, like the dying warrior (480 B.C.) or the Poseidon (460 B.C.) found in the sea off the Temple of Poseidon at Sunium.

**Trends in sculpture history** Among these rapidly transitioning phases of Greek sculpture one struggles to see a pattern; and yet the 'sense of the cultural movement,' which is passing through social as well as art life, is that of increasing 'naturalism' in literature, the visual arts, even in philosophy, where concrete efforts are being made to identify the 'material composition' of reality. (To put 'naturalism' at the apex of this movement is doubtless a byproduct of our own cultural comfort with realism in the arts, a byproduct challenged in our own times by such art movements as Modernism in painting—Braques, Picasso—which make the abstract and often starkly non-representational—remember the bronze Man and Centaur from 750 B.C.—seem to be the center of mankind's visual universe.) If we go beyond the consummate works of the mid-fifth century sculptors we may jump sharply ahead into such work as the coy statue of Aphrodite of Cnidus (360 B.C.) which is created in the era of Plato, Xenophon, and Menander. In that statue we have gone into a world profoundly different from that of the korai of the Archaic Age, some of which were still under creative production not much more than a century earlier,

and examples of which abound at Greek sanctuaries throughout the Mediterranean world in the fifth century B.C.

**Sculptural naturalism** 'Finally,' if we want to skim examples of this trend toward 'naturalism' in sculpture, and then beyond it, into the attitudinal coyness of our Aphrodite, we will find ourselves looking at sculptural work like *The Dying Trumpeter* (230 B.C.) which fully represents the Hellenistic comfort with the depiction of heartfelt emotions, often enough tinged, as here, with the hue of sentimentality. Is a single Hellenic aesthetic emerging, as we peruse works of ancient Greek temple construction and sculpture? Are we finding a Greek signature on the creations we address? This question is rendered difficult by the obvious fact that the Hellenic artistic sensibility is in constant change, from era to era. In temple architecture we careen from the massive Doric columns of Paestum in sixth century Italy, to the perfect Doric harmonies of the Parthenon, to the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, in the 4th century B.C. The correlative history of Greek sculpture, from an Archaic kouros to the *Dying Trumpeter*, will track a sequence of style and worldview changes which are easily as dramatic as any in the realm of architectural history.

**The importance of light** Would we like to say that a celebration of light, harmony, the deeply human, pervades the high point works of the fifth century, both in temple architecture and in sculpture? Such an assertion would correspond to the overall evaluation, in Western culture, of the progress, peak, and decline of the visual arts in the Hellenic world. Anything like such an assertion would rely on tried and true belief that Humanism surges to the fore with the mid-fifth century genius, and that this is the moment to which our attentions turn as to the absolute center of the Hellenic achievement. Clearly this would be a culturally loaded way of seeing Greek visual art.

Discussion questions

*From what you gather about Greek sculpture, do you feel its development moves in tandem with the development of Greek history in the broad sense? Or is this just metaphorical talk? Is historical development too broad a theme to be correlated with something as specific as the development of an art tradition?*

*Why are the classical Greek temples structures so profusely ornamented with sculpture? Do architectural structure and sculptural decoration fit together well? Do they—as, say, on the Parthenon frieze or the Nike Temple on the Acropolis—reinforce one another? How does this relationship work itself out in contemporary world religious edifices?*

*Are you comfortable with our viewing sculpture as expressions of 'culture' rather than only as expressions of 'art history'?*

*Does art seem to you to spring from the same foundations as daily life, religious worship, and military action?*

Reading List

Boardman, J., *Greek Sculpture: the archaic period*, London 1978.

Carpenter, R., *Greek Sculpture*, Chicago, 1971.

Lawrence, A. W., *Classical Sculpture*, London, 1972.,

Lullies, R., and Hirmer, M., *Greek Sculpture*, 1960.

Stewart, A. *Greek Sculpture*, New Haven and London, 1990.