*Greece Background*

The civilization we know as Ancient Greece developed over thousands of years, on the southern Balkan mainland, peninsula and islands that extend into the Aegean Sea. Its first flowerings of splendor occurred during the Minoan Period (c. 2000-1450 BCE) on the island of Crete, followed by the Mycenaean Period (c. 1450-900 BCE) on the Peloponnesian Peninsula—the culture that saw the Trojan War and the incidents on which Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey were based. With the collapse of Mycenaean power under pressure from invasions of northern people called the Dorians, Greece entered a long period of unrest, which became known as their Dark Ages. Trading outside of Greece sharply declined and many people fled to form new colonies on the eastern mainland and islands, an area which became known as Ionia. Hundreds of years would pass before the Greeks would regain their power.

The nation we now call Greece was not a united country in ancient times. Although the people shared common ancestors and languages, the terrain of Rocky Mountains and jagged coastlines effectively kept cities separate from each other and fostered a fortified, medieval style of rule. Most cities consisted of a small fertile valley or plain for crops, one or several towns controlled by an aristocratic family, and an “acropolis” (literally “high city”), or fortified stronghold, for defense in times of attack.

By 750 BCE, the power of the nobles on mainland Greece was being undermined, and the rise of democracy had begun. The introduction of armor led to increased importance for the infantry, and the development of writing brought wider interest in the government and laws. The city-state arose (“polis” in Greek), by the banding together of neighboring towns and farmland for government, protection, and economic growth. Because of the arid nature of the terrain, the city-states fought mainly over control of fertile farmland and trade routes. As the soils became depleted and crop yields slowly fell, the Greeks turned with greater zeal to establishing further trade routes and colonies in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

Perhaps their most vital import was Russian wheat, and their most valuable resource was silver.

Slowly, two city-states gained dominance in two very different ways. Sparta, whose ruling citizens had invaded and conquered the local populations of the Peloponnesian Peninsula during the Dark Ages, had enslaved the locals and maintained their power through harsh military strength. They developed a government headed by two kings and controlled by the military, where the individual was subordinated to the whole, and rigorous military training began at age nine. The arts were of minor importance to the Spartans, and were produced mainly to glorify their shrines.

The city of Athens became the dominant power on mainland Greece through a much different route. During the end of the Dark Ages and the early part of the Archaic Period (c. 750-475 BCE), they stripped their aristocracy of political power, and elected an oligarchy (rule by the few). Laws were reformed to reflect greater interest in individual rights and voting power, and although they lived through several subsequent tyrannies, the rights of the individual continued to advance. Finally, they developed a government elected by the people (democracy) that even included electing the heads of the military.

The invasion of the Persians, under Darius I, at the beginning of the 5th century BCE, brought many changes. Athens formed a league of sorts with Sparta to fight the Persians in 490, 480, and 479 BCE, after which the Persians finally admitted defeat. With peace and a strong navy came stronger trade routes and prosperity, as well as a true league between 265 city-states, (called the Delian League), who shared financial contributions to maintain ready defenses in case the Persians should decide to attack again. The Athenians elected Pericles to head their government, and he became a benevolent tyrant, ruling for fifteen years. Athens continued to exact dues from the Delian League, but began to use the funds to rebuild the war-ravaged acropolis and the city, instead of for defense.

This was the golden age of Classical Greece (c. 480-323 BCE), and the sciences, art, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, and many other studies made rapid advances. Athens became powerful and admired throughout the Mediterranean world, but also envied and mistrusted. By 431 BCE, Sparta was joined by several of Athens’ disgruntled allies in declaring war on the golden city. Three decades of sporadic fighting followed, which weakened both powers financially and militarily, and eventually cut off Athens’ trade routes to their wheat suppliers. The golden age of Athens was over. During the next century, Sparta ruled for a little over 30 years, then gave way to the power of Thebes, which then controlled Greece for the next 30 years. This power fell in 323 BCE to the Macedonian invaders from the north, led by Philip, and later his son, Alexander. This new era we now call the Hellenistic Period (c. 323-146 BCE), and Alexander’s widespread campaigns brought knowledge of Greek culture to many new areas of the world. Two hundred years later, when the remains of Alexander’s empire fell to Rome in 146 BCE, the Romans embraced many aspects of Greek life and art, and made them their own. In this way, Greece was unusual among conquered nations…although their days of power and glory were over, their ideas and principles lived on to influence many other cultures throughout the centuries.

PERIODS OF GREEK ART

Geometric Period

(10th-8th Century BCE)

Beginning with the Iron Age, this period has sparse material remains. There is little surviving architecture and sculpture. Pottery, however, is plentiful. The period is named for the pottery with its geometric decoration. Patterns of geometric designs and abstract animal decoration are characteristic of this period. By the 8th century human figures appear in stylized silhouette.

Archaic Period

(7th-6th Century BCE)

The beginning of the archaic period is sometimes called the “Orientalizing” phase because of the great influence of the Near East on the figurative arts. The full development of the “polis,” or city-state, occurred during the Archaic Period. The cities, through colonization and trade, became acquainted with Egyptian stone carving and the decorative arts of Assyria and

Mesopotamia.

In painting, human figures appeared in compositions that told a story or legend. Corinth and Athens became two important centers in the pottery industry. The export of vases was one of the principal means by which Greece, a poor country, could pay for imports of badly needed raw materials. Athenian potters experimented with different decorating techniques, such as silhouette, outline drawing and the use of white in their vase painting. Vases were decorated with scenes from mythology as well as Greeks’ daily life.

Monumental sculpture in limestone and marble appeared in Greece during this period. The first statues were influenced by Egyptian sculpture in both pose and execution. Over time they became more naturalistic, culminating in images of the ideal masculine and feminine form. Relief sculpture also came into popularity during this time. Clear contours with human and animal compositions dominate these architectural decorations.

Monumental Greek architecture was a development that coincided with the beginning of monumental sculpture. During this period the Doric style of mainland Greece and the Ionic style of the Aegean islands came into being.

Classical Period

(5th-4th Century BCE)

The culmination of the preceding centuries in all fields of art occurred during the Classical Period.

The standardization of the temple form permitted only minor innovations—chiefly in the ornamentation of buildings, including the creation of the Corinthian order—and Greek architects turned their efforts toward creating the subtleties of proportion that were to make Greek architecture one of the greatest in the world.

Two buildings exemplify classical Greek architecture and sculpture. The first is the Temple of Zeus at Olympia; the other is the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens. The Temple of Zeus is a Doric building, while the Parthenon’s Doric architecture was tempered by Ionic friezes. (Most of the friezes are now in the British Museum in London).

Classical sculpture was characterized by a more natural, relaxed rendering of the human body with asymmetrically balanced composition, idealized treatment of the head, and increasingly slender proportions. Many of the original works have not survived, therefore scholars rely on Roman copies and ancient descriptions in literature. The surviving painting is mainly in the form of vase painting. Here the painters perfected the rendering of anatomy and introduced and developed perspective and shading.

Hellinistic Period

(323-31 BCE)

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, his extensive empire was dissolved into many different kingdoms. This fragmentation was symbolic of the diversity and multiplicity of artistic tendencies in the Hellenistic period. The great art centers were no longer in mainland Greece, but in the islands, such as

Rhodes, and the cities in the eastern Mediterranean—Alexandria, Antioch, and Pergamum.

The Hellenistic period was, above all, a period of eclecticism. Art still served a religious function or glorified athletes and warriors, but sculpture and painting were also used to decorate the homes of the rich. A more dramatic style of sculpture was characteristic of the time, with an exaggeration of movement and emotion set against a background of swirling draperies.

More Contributions of the Ancient Greeks:

Government: Democracy, republic, oligarchy

Mathematics: Geometry

Language:

• Words that begin with: “geo-” (earth),

“phon-” (voice/sound), “pan-” (every)

• Words that end with: “-ology” (study of),

“-phobia” (fear)

Literature/Philosophy:

• Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey*

• The plays of Aeschylus

• The teachings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

• Mythology

Life:

• The Olympics

• Fraternity/Sorority system,

• Gyros!

Greek Architectural Orders

The three classical Greek architectural orders are the Doric, the Ionic and Corinthian. The Doric and Ionic orders were well developed by about 600 BCE. The Doric order is the oldest and plainest of the three orders. The Ionic order is named after Ionia, a region occupied by Greeks on the west coast of Anatolia and the islands off the coast. The Corinthian order, a variation of the Ionic, began to appear around 450 BCE.

The basic components of the Greek orders are the column and the entablature. All types of columns have a shaft and a capital, some also have a base. Columns are formed of round sections, or drums, which are joined by internal metal pegs.

The Doric order shaft rises directly from the stylobate, without a base. The shaft is fluted but not as deeply as the other orders. As in the other orders, the entablature includes the architrave, the frieze, and the cornice, the topmost, projecting horizontal element.

The Ionic order has more elegant proportions than the Doric, its height being about nine times the diameter of the column at its base, as opposed to the Doric column’s five-and-a-half-to-one ratio.



The flutes on the columns are deeper and closer together and are separated by flat surfaces, fillets. The hallmark of the Ionic capital is the distinctive scrolled volute.

The Corinthian order was originally developed by the Greeks for use in interiors but came to be used on temple exteriors as well. Its elaborate capitals are sheathed with stylized acanthus leaves, and sometimes rosettes, and they often have scrolled elements at the corners.

*Rome Background*

The ancient Romans influenced western art and architecture in almost every area. Early Roman structures were copies of Greek architectural forms; however, the Romans soon established their own identity by developing new building materials and structural innovations. This distinctive Roman art began to emerge in the third and second centuries BCE.

Sculpture

As Rome established herself as the center of civilization, realistic sculpture became a very important means of communicating ideas to the people. Sculptures were commissioned to honor and glorify the individuals and events that were making the empire great and powerful. Throughout the Roman world, statues and reliefs were regularly displayed in, on and around public and private buildings. Honorary statues of civic leaders and private citizens were done in bronze, while other statues were made of marble or stone. Unfortunately, due to the material value of bronze, most of those statues were melted down in the Middle Ages and few remain today.

One of the great Roman contributions to art is portrait sculpture. Bronze, terra cotta and marble were commonly used materials. During the first century BCE, a period of great creativity, Romans produced very detailed, realistic marble busts and images of patricians by the thousands. From 200 to 250 CE, portrait sculpture began to display emotions and expressions. Statues became very natural, in contrast to the stiff, formal statues of the past.

Another popular form of Roman art was figural relief sculpture. The majority of these reliefs were originally on tombs in the form of a frieze, a sculpted or ornamental band. They often showed scenes of the deceased at work or as a benefactor of the community. Battle scenes and Greek mythological themes were also popular subjects. Romans used figural relief sculpture as an effective method of communicating imperial propaganda. Reliefs adorned large monuments such as arches, altars, columns and statue bases with messages of the achievements of rulers and ideology of the time.

Architecture

The Roman Empire’s most impressive contribution is in the field of architecture. Romans created numerous structures, blending utility with beauty. They also developed two totally new types of materials, which they called “caementum” (cement) and “oncretus” (concrete, a mixture of cement, sand and broken stones). The existence of Roman buildings, roads and bridges today is a testament to the durability of the building materials.

Building on the innovations of the Etruscans, the Romans perfected the arch and invented the vault. Concrete vaulting made possible the construction of the great amphitheaters and public baths of the Roman world. The Romans were the first to enclose space with a dome; the best example of this is the Pantheon. Many of their most impressive buildings were constructed during the imperial period, from 27 BCE to 476 CE. Roman theaters first appeared in the late Republic (509 BCE to 27 BCE). They were semi-circular in plan and consisted of a tall stage building abutting a semicircular orchestra and tiered seating area. Later Romans expanded the theater into an amphitheater, which is essentially two theaters that face each other. The earliest known amphitheater (75 BCE) is at Pompeii, and the grandest, Rome’s Colosseum (70-80 CE), held approximately 50,000 spectators—roughly the capacity of today’s large sports stadiums.

Another great achievement attributed to the Romans was the layout of cities. The city plan also included apartment buildings, libraries, lecture halls, and vast vaulted public spaces elaborately decorated with statues, mosaics, paintings, and stucco.

Painting

Although popular, portrait painting was not very well preserved and is best represented by the panels recovered from sites throughout Roman Egypt. These works, traditionally called “Fayyum portraits,” after the agricultural district in Egypt where they were first discovered, are the only portraits that have survived. Mural painting is, by contrast, well documented, especially in Pompeii and the other cities buried in 79 CE by the eruption of the volcano Mount Vesuvius.

Wall painting to decorate the interior walls of homes and public spaces became a popular art form as an alternative to marble paneling. There were few windows in Roman houses, so scenes from a city, the countryside, the sea or even mythological scenes were painted on walls in Roman homes and buildings.

There were four major styles of wall painting. The first was incrustation, in which the walls were divided into bright polychrome panels of solid colors with occasional textural contrasts. The second was the architectural style in which the decoration was not limited to a single visual plane. Space was made to look as if it extended beyond the room itself. Architectural forms were convincingly painted onto the wall. The ornate style was the third version of wall painting. Architectural elements were no longer intended as illusions of actual architecture, but served as dividers or frames for individual paintings. The net effect resembled pictures hung on a wall. Finally the last style was the intricate style. Areas of open vistas and architectural frames were the hallmarks of this style. Aerial perspective was used instead of linear perspective. Light and atmosphere prevailed in these scenes.

Mosaics

Wherever wall paintings existed, colored marble or tiled floors were likely to be present. The art form of creating designs with colored tiles, known as mosaics, had its beginnings in the ancient Near East. Romans even applied these mosaics to wall surfaces. A striking aspect of Roman mosaics is the attempt to capture both the subject matter and the modeling or shading of painting techniques. This was achieved through the use of an enormous number of “tesserae” (bits of glass or stone composing the mosaic) being used in a small area.

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