

Deborah Tomkies
Student number: 508112

History of Western Art
Part Two – The Classical and Medieval Worlds

Assignment Two – Exercise 1

Notes – Chapter 4 – The Greeks and their neighbours

Political and social context

'Greece' describes not one country but broad collection of smaller city states 'the polis' (derivation of our 'politics'). Some operated as democracies, others aristocracy/oligarchy, some tyrannies (p126). Frequently at war with one another. Commonality per Herodotus (p116) was in language, Hellenic culture, religion and customs. Similarities also in arts and architecture. Influences from elsewhere eg. kneeling youth from Samos (p119). Particular influences on borders with, eg. Egypt, Africa – Thracians, Scythians, Etruscans). However, overall a distinctive 'Hellenic' style exists, highly regarded but rarely matched in Europe (p116). 1300-800bc 'Dark Age'. Language all but lost, culture decimated, very little art survives. 1st Millenium, new language evolves, iron-working develops, some art found – mostly practical/funerary vessels.

Status and training of artists

Potters and craftsmen highly valued alongside sculptors and artists. No distinction between 'arts' and 'crafts' (p119). Metalworkers arguably most highly regarded (Homer) (p119).

Materials and processes

No surviving paintings though writings (Xenophon, Aristotle) tell of great skills (p117, p142). No textiles remain. Much metalwork and later marbles only survive as copies. Late classical, exquisite gold pieces survived but made for Scythians. Coins, jewellery and other fine pieces found far beyond Greece (p149). Valuable metals often melted down, marble crushed. Worked in stone and marble, taking process influence from Egypt (p121). Sculptures usually coloured, also decorated with precious metals, exotic gems, ivory. Skilled in pottery (see below). Building construction evolved, new skills producing new styles (eg. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian columns; move from columnar to open buildings). Buildings initially only built with intention of viewing only from front. Later (eg. Parthenon) attractively proportioned from all sides (p129-30). Similarly sculpture (p139). Late classical; houses often luxurious with mosaic floors (p147).

Styles and movements

Few early pieces with named artists. Some later Athenian pieces signed. Subject matter; everyday life, myths and gods, sports, homo-erotica (p125). Surviving pottery shows fine craftsmanship, attention to symmetry and form, eg. Dipylon vase (p117). Decoration initially black figures on red ground ('black figure' work) later red figures on black ground ('red figure work'). Required skilful knowledge of slip, firing temperatures and times. Later combination black and red figure particularly skilful (p143). Evidence of foreshortening in pottery and stonecarving (already used in Egypt) (p124). By 4th c BC careful balance of idealisation vs naturalism to suit subject, later lost in Roman copies (Boy from bay of Marathon) (p140). Sculpture; focus on symmetry, but based on human no mathematical (Egyptian) proportions (p121). Idealisation of human form resulted in (according to writings), sculptors using several models to produce one sculpture (no one person being perfect) (p139). Stylistic features, eg. hair and pose, thought to assist in dating (p123). Clothing and features more delicate as skills develop (p120). Koroi athletic, fit, young, both man/god, confident. Female nudity rare until 4thc BC (p120).

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Inside and outside influences

Outside Greece; nomadic Scythians preferred wild animal imagery, possibly influences from China; little understanding of them, their culture or artifacts, mostly found in graves. Significance and meaning of art obscure (totems, hunting rites, magic? cf medieval heraldic beasts) (p153). Bodies were tattooed (p153). Their art was alternative to Mediterranean, determining much of history of European painting and sculpture (p152). Structure was monarchy, early textiles, silk and felt found in elaborate, 5th c BC tomb (p153). Samartians; China/Persia influences; metalwork, cloisonné, absorbed into Huns who also adopted Animal style. Iron age Hallstatt later (Illyrians/Celts/Germans) settled in SE, C and N Europe and later La Tene; Halstatt originally cremating dead, 6th c bc burying rich with goods and burned 'companions' (p154). La Tene imported high quality Greek art but limited influence on own art (p156). Influence of Greece on Sardinia and Iberia less clear. Possible links via lost wax casting in parallel with Greek timeline. Small bronze pieces and sculptures quite different, not idealised. Possible similarities with Cretan/Mycenaean buildings but above not below ground. Etruscans; highly organised, merchants with successful trading fleets. Independent from Greeks with similar poleis structure. Ruled Rome until 510BC (p158). No remaining literature so only third-party accounts of culture and practices. Art valued by Greeks (eg. She-Wolf c500 BC) (p158). Plethora of artifacts makes cultural conclusions contentious and conflicting (p158). Etruscan art deploys realism over idealisation (animal and human) (pp159-160). From tombs can be inferred that houses luxurious although timber and mud-brick/terracotta. Also terracotta for some sculpture. Preferred Archaic Greek style, schematic not naturalistic (p162). Mars of Todi only large-scale surviving bronze closest to Classical style but differs from Greek 'natural'. Burly, awkward in pose, less well-rendered flesh. Cremated dead but buried with material goods. Unusual sarcophagi adorned with lifelike sculptures.

Critics, thinkers and historians

Differences between critics over likeness vs appearance (Socrates vs Plato) (p138). Historical and ongoing debate over identity of artists, functions of pieces/significance, dates and whether originals or copies.

Where

language lost and confluence of styles, passionate debates over origins of work, eg. Etrurian tombs (p158).