Overview of Art & Architecture in Ancient Greece

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**Summary:** The civilization of ancient Greece loosely refers to a period that began during the Greek Dark Ages (c. 1200-800 BCE) and lasted until the Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BCE. The ancient Greeks were known for their art and architecture, which first developed during Mycenaean Greece in the sixteenth century BCE, and which flourished during the Hellenistic period in the first century BCE. The art and architecture created by the ancient Greeks represents the highest standards of artistic accomplishment in human history, and are widely considered the foundation for much of Western culture. Despite our modern-day perspective and appreciation, the aesthetic value of ancient Greek art and architecture was second to its functionality at the time.

**Background & History**

**Architecture**

Many people consider the architecture of the ancient Greeks, which includes stadiums, temples and theatres, to be the greatest artistic accomplishment of ancient Greek culture. The
influence of classical Greek architecture is manifest throughout the modern world, and some believe that many surviving structures, such as the Parthenon (a temple built for the goddess Athena), represents the pinnacle of architectural perfection for that time. The impact of Greek architecture is, perhaps, immeasurable.

Ancient Greek stadiums were rectangular (later, oval-shaped) grassy areas, with a 200-meter running track and seats built on a hillside on one or more sides. The most well-known stadiums were located near the cities of Olympia, Delphi, Corinth and Nemea. These stadiums hosted the Panhellenic Games, a series of four festivals (including the Ancient Olympic Games) which featured track and field events, wrestling and boxing, chariot racing, and discus and javelin competitions.

Theaters in ancient Greece were characteristically open-air, semi-circular structures, with terraced seats. They are very similar to the later Roman amphitheatre, where even the farthest spectators, those seated in the very back, could hear every word uttered on the orchestra, or stage. These ancient Greek theaters were built to accommodate large groups--citizen gatherings were a crucial part of Greek politics--and hosted the first dramas and comedies as well as the first musical competitions.

Ancient Greek temples were built with marble or limestone. They were designed to be open, with a cela, a rectangular room supported by columns, in the center. Inside would be placed an image of the deity the temple was built to honor, as well as votive offerings in the form of sculptures, pottery, paintings, gold and other items. Outside would be an altar where sacrifices would be held. The temple was built with open sides, as the Greeks believed the deity could watch the sacrifice from inside.

Greek temples were dedicated to a particular deity. The Erechtheion, on the Acropolis in Athens, for example, was built to honor Athena Polias. Similarly, the Greek temple of Poseidon was located at Sounion, the Greek temple for Zeus at Olympia, and Apollo was honored with a temple at Delphi. The most important deities were honored with many temples throughout the ancient Greek world. Other important Greek structures included treasuries, where the ancient Greeks stored their spoils of war and other valuables.

Greek architecture is also famous for the stoa, a covered walkway that served many different purposes. Early stoae, which are lined with columns at each side, were found at the entrances to buildings, offering shade and protection in inclement weather. Later, they were built two-stories high and served as a marketplace for merchants to sell their wares. Some stoae had rooms, such as the Stoa of Attalos at the Agora in Athens, which is considered the first shopping mall. It was built in the second century BCE.

Among the most well-known architects are those who designed temples, including Ictinus and Callicrates (or Iktinos and Kallikrates), who are believed to have been the co-designers of the Parthenon. Ictinus is also credited as the architect of the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, a surviving temple which remains one of the most studied Greek temple ruins. Other famous
ancient Greek architects include Libon of Elis, who designed the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, and Pythius, to whom the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the Temple of Athena Polias at Priene is usually attributed.

**Sculpture**

The Greeks sculpted small figurines, statues and architectural work, including friezes (decorative horizontal bands), metopes (decorated panels), and reliefs. Most sculpture was sacred, and some served as offerings to the gods or were used to mark graves.

Some of the earliest marble and ivory figurines date back to the Neolithic period (which began about 9500 BCE), and are believed to have served as icons of fertility. Other excavated pieces were likely made as children's toys. Large-scale, marble sculptures of nude men (kouroi) and clothed women (korai) appeared in the Archaic period (c. 776-479 BCE). The sculptures represented both deities and mortals, and were made for sacred use. Bronze continued to be a popular material for sculpture as well. It would be three more centuries before Praxiteles would create the first nude female statue, the famed *Aphrodite of Knidos*, during the Classical period in the fourth century BCE.

During the sixth century, artists began to receive the first commissions from athletes who wanted to commemorate themselves. Soon sculptures of athletes and war heroes became as commonplace as deities. The most famous sculpture of a mortal, Myron's *Diskobolos* (discus-thrower), was created during the early fifth century.

The Classical period (480-323 BCE) was particularly important to the development of sculpture, specifically that of statues, in ancient Greece. This was the era of Polyclitus, who captured the action and angst of athletes, and Phidias, known for his enormous chryselephantine (gold and ivory) sculptures of the goddess Athena at the Acropolis and Zeus at the temple at Olympia. Phidias also was responsible for the 525-foot long frieze and ninety-two metopes created for the Parthenon (447-438 BCE).

By the second century BCE, Greek sculptures had become a commodity and were collected widely by wealthy patrons for their homes and gardens. The Romans, who revered Greek art, also collected sculptures (often as spoils of war), including their own reproductions.

**Decorative Pottery**

Since as early as the Roman Empire, the decorated pottery of ancient Greece has been studied for scholarly purposes and collected worldwide for its aesthetic value. During the time period of ancient Greece, however, pottery was functional and served as an important industry for trade. Two noted forms of Greek pottery included the amphora and the hydria. The amphora was designed to hold olive oil or grain and the hydria for carrying water. Other pieces were designed for sacred uses, often as a gift to a deity or to be used in a specific ritual. The most significant pieces of painted pottery were created during four subsequent periods in
Greek history: the Geometric (c. 900 to 750 or 700 BCE), Orientalizing (c. 700-600 BCE), Archaic (c. 600-480) and Classical (480-323 BCE) Periods.

The Geometric Period was named for the abstract, linear designs and motifs popular at that time. The Orientalizing Period takes into account influences from Eastern cultures, particularly those of Syria and Phoenicia. The Archaic Period represented the beginning of a shift to narrative art using silhouetted figures. These figures first appeared on black-figure pottery, a style developed in Corinth where the designs are painted with black slip. Later, in the fifth century BCE, Attic potters (from Attica) developed the red-figure technique that involved leaving the designs clay-colored and painting the background black. During the Classical Period, red-figure pottery became more refined and other styles appeared, including white-ground pottery.

Painted pottery--along with whimsically shaped cosmetic boxes, cups and other artful pieces--was generally a luxury only enjoyed by the wealthy class. The lower-classes were left to use plain pottery. In other cases, the painted pots were produced so quickly and with such little talent that they would not have been considered artful at all. Most of the artists remained anonymous, though certain artisans, such as the fifth-century painter, Euphronius and the sixth-century painter Exekias, were well-known during their lifetimes.

Narrative pottery illustrates everything that was important to the ancient Greeks: myths and legends such as the battle of Troy and the voyage of Odysseus, sacred rituals and festivals, and the gods and goddesses to whom they paid tribute. The illustrations also tell stories about the daily lives of the Greeks, such as the activities that brought them joy and pain, as well as the warriors, athletes, thespians and politicians whom the populace largely admired.

**Painting**

In addition to pottery, the Greeks painted statues, walls, wooden panels and theatrical sets, although most of these surfaces have not survived. Most of what is known about Greek painting comes from historical accounts, such as the writing of Pausanias (c. 150-180 CE), a Greek geographer, and the books of Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), who is famous for his early encyclopedic work, *Naturalis Historia*. Much was also learned from studying painted pottery and mosaics. Based on these resources, scholars have reason to believe that the large-scale paintings of the ancient Greeks were equally as impressive as their other artistic endeavors.

While few paintings from the height of Greek civilization survived, early wall paintings from the Minoan civilization (c. 3500-1100 BCE) attest to the beginning of an appreciation for decorated surfaces in the Mediterranean region. These include colorful illustrations of fish discovered on the walls of the Knossos palace on the isle of Crete, and *Spring Fresco*, a painting of plants and swallows found in a house on Thera, which is the modern-day island of Santorini.

Greeks began painting the walls of temples during the seventh century. Later on, illustrations began to appear regularly on tombs, the walls of public and private buildings, and on wooden
The first known painter of panels was Polygnotus (c. 500-440 BCE), who is revered for his narrative paintings that once decorated the Stoa Poecile (Painted Stoa), located in the Agora in Athens. Scholars believe the first public display of paintings took place in the Painted Stoa, where military victories were illustrated along with a collection of Spartan shields that had been won during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). The fourth-century painters of Nicias and Parrhasius are two other Greek artists who managed to escape anonymity.

**Jewelry**

With the exception of utilitarian pieces such as the fibula (pin), hairpin and belt, jewelry was worn for aesthetic reasons and to flaunt one's wealth. Although most jewelry was made of bone, bronze, iron, silver and other such materials, nothing could match the dazzling brilliance of gold. Gold rings, bracelets, pendants, earrings, diadems (headbands) and other pieces were often buried with their owners, and thus well preserved.

Jewelry was also given to the deities as an offering. Often these pieces had the image of the god or goddesses stamped or engraved in the gold or silver as a display of the donor's devotion. Although jewelry is often considered secondary to architecture and pottery, the Greeks made some of the most dazzling pieces ever, and developed new techniques and styles that continue to be reproduced by modern artists.

**Music**

Music was an integral part of the lives of ancient Greeks. It provided cohesion in a culture that was otherwise divided by socioeconomic and political boundaries. Most everyone sang and/or learned an instrument, including slaves. For example, women sang work songs while spinning or weaving, while men were summoned to civic duty by the trumpet or entertained by flute girls (hetairai) at their symposia. Music also accompanied war, athletic training, theatrical performances, funerals, sacrifices and processions. Competitions were held among men in the aulos and the kithara, and in the choral lyric, a blend of poetry, dance and singing.

Music was considered a gift from the gods and goddesses. Each cult had their own musical instruments and songs associated with the deities they worshiped. Apollo, Artemis and Aphrodite were especially known for their musical ability. The ancient Greeks also believed that music was inspired by the Muses, goddesses and spirits that the ancient Greeks believed were responsible for the creation of the arts. Three of the nine Muses associated with music were Polyhymnia, Euterpe and Terpischore.

Common Greek instruments included the harp, lyre and the kithara (concert lyre); wind instruments (or pipes), including the aulos (flute), pan-pipes, and salpinx (a long, narrow trumpet without valves); and percussion, mostly hand-held, including clappers, cymbals and small drums.

**The Impact of Ancient Greek Art & Architecture on World Culture**

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Often regarded as the cradle of Western civilization, ancient Greece boasts a rich tradition of art and architecture which influenced the artistic traditions of modern Europe. Elements and examples of classical Greek architecture are extant throughout the modern world, and the replication of many of its features is a testament to its inherent qualities: majestic and dignified, yet graceful--evoking the ideals of democracy, free inquiry and spirituality.

Many people believe the Greek temple is unmatched in architectural beauty and finesse, and that the Parthenon (438 BCE), the ancient temple of the Greek goddess Athena, represents a perfection never before attained. It is considered the finest example of the Doric order, perhaps the greatest advancement in temple architecture in ancient Greece. The Doric order included a columnar porch which led into a great hall. The columns and the superstructure were initially made of wood and limestone, but after the sixth century BCE, all buildings were made of marble. With some elements of the Ionic order, the Parthenon demonstrates two of the three orders attributed to the Greeks, the other being Corinthian.

Along with Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns, the Greeks gave the world the caryatide, a column sculpted to resemble a clothed woman, named for the maidens from Caryae. The most well-known caryatides are at the Erechtheum on the Acropolis. The Greeks also perfected the post-and-lintel system on which the temple was built, and were the first to design the portico (porch) and the related stoa, as well as sculpted metopes, triangular pediments, and friezes.

**The Impact of Ancient Greek Sculpture on World Culture**

The Greeks developed the art of realistic-looking, anatomically correct sculptures of humans. They were also the first artists to use mathematics to determine size and proportion. The Greeks perfected the use of molds and taught the Romans how to make reproductions. Without Roman reproductions, many of the original Greek sculptures would have been lost forever, as bronze was often melted down for other uses, while sculptures made from clay or stone were often destroyed in war or earthquakes.

Greeks were also masters of architectural decoration. Their metopes, friezes and impediments help tell the story of Greek civilization and are among the most recognizable features of classical architecture.

**The Impact of Ancient Greek Pottery on World Culture**

With their contribution of valuable new styles, designs and techniques, the ancient Greeks laid the foundation for the development of pottery in Western civilization. The Greeks also developed symmetry, proportion, texture, and other design elements in their pottery. They perfected the shape of a pot. With the aid of a compass or ruler, they figured out how to paint designs that were perfectly linear. Perhaps the greatest contribution, however, are the paintings themselves: the sacking of Troy, Theseus slaying the Minotaur, a woman playing the aulos (reed instrument)–these depictions offer a window into this flourishing ancient culture.
The Impact of Ancient Greek Painting on World Culture

The Greeks provided the foundation for perspective, shading, and other artistic techniques that enabled the first realistic illustrations. Their early trompe-l'œil paintings were legendary. (Trompe-l'œil is a technique in which realistic imagery is painted to create a three-dimensional effect.) The ancient Greeks were also the first to display artwork in public, and to choose subject matter that would appeal to the masses and instill a sense of civic pride. With so few paintings to survive antiquity, however, the illustrations on pottery represent the ancient Greeks' most lasting achievement in painting.

The Impact of Ancient Greek Music on World Culture

The Greeks built on the knowledge gained from ancient Egypt and other cultures, and developed new concert halls, instruments, and songs and modes (Phrygian, Ionian, and Lydian, to name a few). It was Pythagoras (c. 570-490 BCE), the mathematician, who gave the world the rudiments of music theory. The philosophy of music also took root in ancient Greece. Plato (c. 429-347 BCE) was the first to emphasize the role of music on moral development and set the foundation for music criticism and censorship.

Interesting Facts

- Ancient Greeks believed that music had such a great effect on human beings that it could affect the humours (phlegm, bile, blood) and also summon death.
- The ancient Greek dramatist, Sophocles, was one of the most well-known kithara (seven-stringed lyre) players. In addition to playing the instrument for his plays, he often sang and served as the director of the chorus.
- The chelys (common lyre) was made from a tortoise shell with a piece of leather skin stretched over the opening. The Greeks attributed the instrument to Hermes, a god who served as a messenger to the mortals and an escort to the dead as they entered the Underworld.
- The first trompe-l'œil paintings appeared in Greece during the fifth century BCE, when it is said that the artist Zeuxis painted grapes that looked so real that birds were tricked into attempting to eat them. However, a fellow artist, Parrhasios, surpassed Zeuxis when he painted a curtain that looked so real that Zeuxis demanded he open it to reveal his painting. When Zeuxis realized the curtain was the painting, he declared Parrhasios the winner, for he had only tricked the birds while Parrhasios had tricked him.
- Until the nineteenth century, when archaeologists uncovered evidence of sculptures that had been painted, it was believed that the ancient Greeks never painted their marble statues. Even today, most people are unaware that the figures of athletes and deities, as well as the Parthenon frieze, were often painted in bright colors.
- During the sixteenth century CE, the Ottomans used the Parthenon for an ammunitions storage facility. When the Venetians hit the temple with cannon fire, the gunpowder inside blew up and damaged twenty-eight of the columns, while killing a few hundred people who may have been hiding inside.
• Mycenae, the palace where Agamemnon lived during the thirteenth century BCE, was believed by the ancient Greeks to have been built by the Cyclops, giants with a large eye in the foreheads. Visitors can follow the footsteps of the Mycenaean as they pass through the Lion Gate, just outside the ruins.

• In 2006, archaeologists discovered a residence on the island on Salamis where Ajax was presumed to have lived. Ajax, a warrior in Agamemnon's army, was a hero in the Trojan War.

Bibliography


• This recent catalogue of sculpture, pottery, and jewelry from the collections of the Walters Art Museum brings to life the history and significance of each piece.


• The black-and white illustrations of vases, coins, sculptures, and friezes can be used for art study, while a chapter on history provides excellent background information.


• Boardman has been considered an authority on Greek art for over fifty years. This classic textbook can be read cover to cover or enjoyed for its many illustrations.


• This exhaustive study of music in ancient Greece presents the most recent research in text that is accessible to a general audience.


• An up-do-date, easy-to-read source with a glossary, timeline, list of major Greek collections and plenty of color illustrations.


• This classic textbook will find favor with both students and the general public, as it includes many color illustrations along with an insightful introduction.


• This solid textbook has been in print for forty years, and is as suitable for the general public
as it is for undergraduates.


• Readers will be astounded when they see the dazzling gold filigree, sophisticated wire-work, and elegant designs presented in this book.


• Just eighty pages long, this compact catalogue provides a good introduction to Greek pottery.

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