

# Ancient Greeks

By Belinda Hogan and Robyn Collis

## There Is No Denying The Artistic Influence of The Greeks

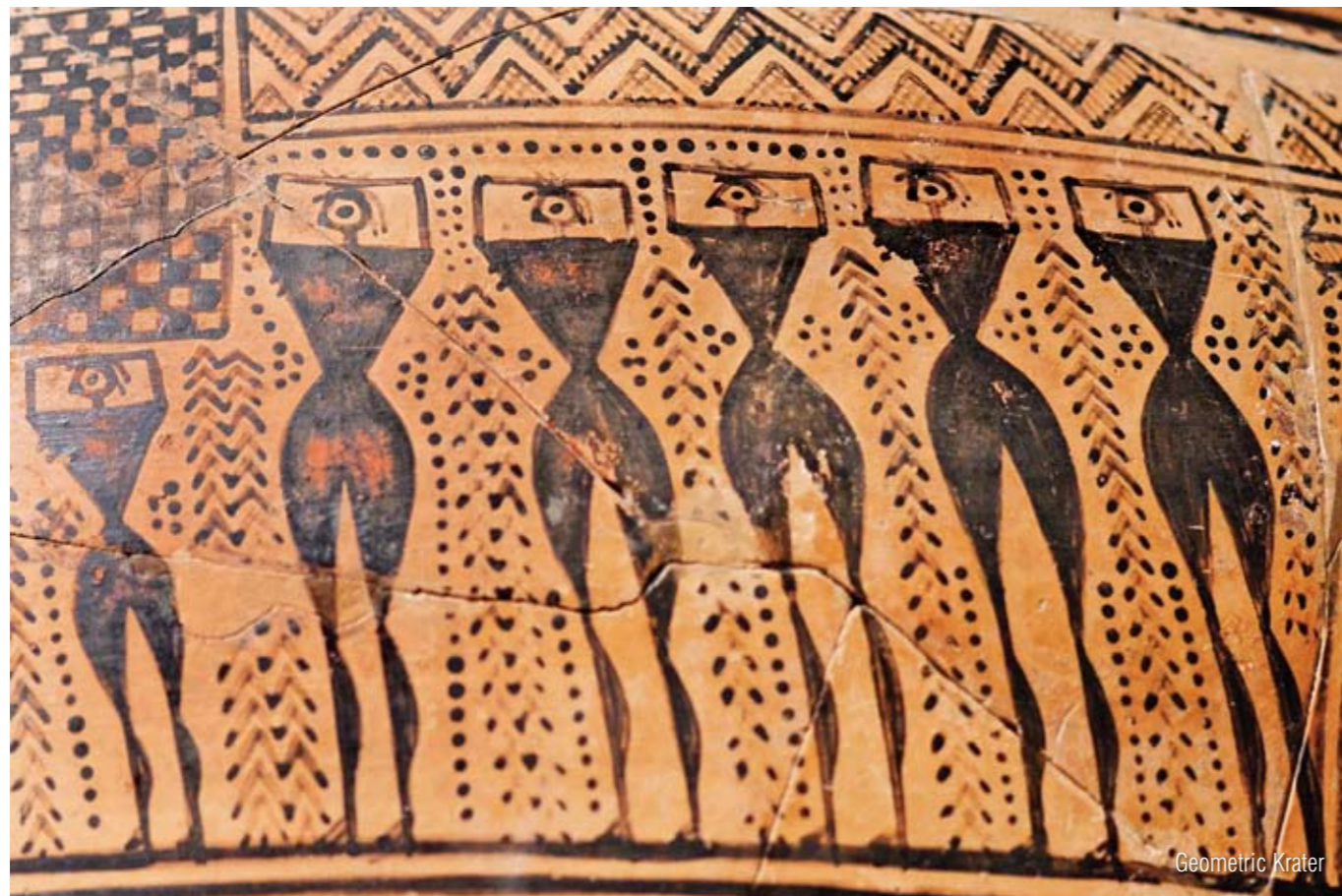
There is no denying the immense influence the Ancient Greeks have had on civilisation. In regards to art, there is no doubting the profound impact the Greeks have had on architecture, sculpture, painting, pottery and jewellery design. Since ancient times to the modern day, Greek styles have been reproduced or copied repeatedly. One just has to look at the architecture in their nearest city, or visit a jeweller or potter's gallery to see the how the Ancient Greeks have inspired us artistically.

In Ancient Greece, everything in

art was linked to politics, religion, worship or the individual, and its art can be divided into seven eras: the Minoan/ Mycenaean, Sub-Mycenaean, Proto-Geometric, Geometric, Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic. Some of these eras develop into one another quite naturally whilst others are very distinct.

The Minoans (circa 2000BC-1500BC) were from Knossos, Crete and were destroyed eventually by a volcano, its aftermath or by invasion. They were a very advanced palace civilization that had a written language and through their art, recorded their

daily lives. Starting off as farmers, the Minoans built up their society around a prosperous maritime trade, making them very affluent. The Minoans were noted for their sculpture, frescos, and ceramics that used smooth lines and vibrant colours. It has been observed from remains that artisans broke away from portraying two-dimensional figures (as seen in the art work of their Egyptians neighbours) creating three-dimensional characters instead. Although there was a high level of luxury, Minoan art work describes an easy going people devoted to leisure



Geometric Krater

who worshipped the snake goddess and the bull, and who understood that the sea and soil were to be thanked for their good fortune. Bull vaulting or leaping was thought to have been a sport resulting in the sacrifice of the animal and many frescos show this activity. Realistic designs of fish, birds, flowers and other marine life were also depicted.

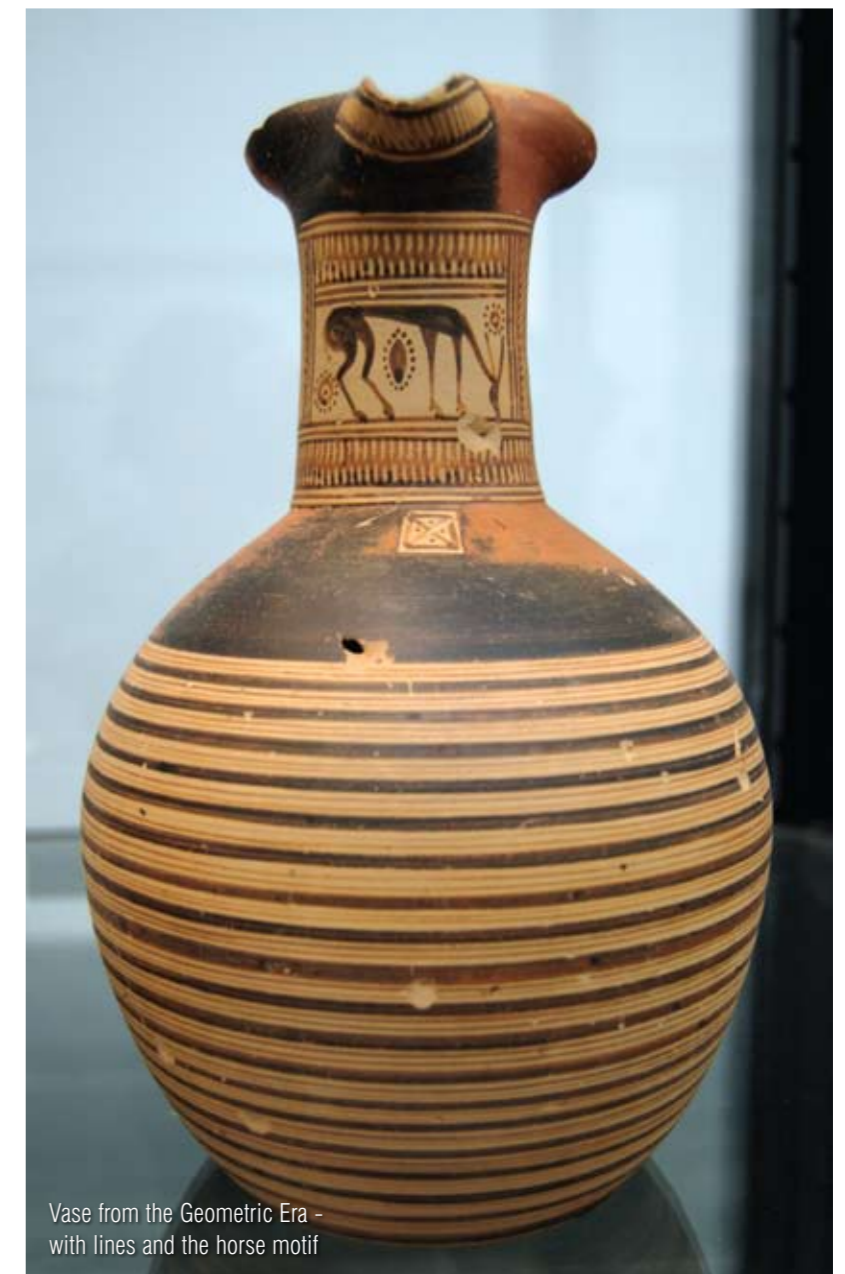
On the other hand, the Mycenaeans (circa 1600BC-1100BC) were mainlanders, and their art came of age during the last stage of the Bronze Age. Prior to this, art on the mainland was restricted to production of everyday usable objects and tools. The Mycenaeans were warriors and very astute traders and although influenced by the art of the Minoans, developed their own style. With their civilization thriving for a time, their architectural approach was bold and elaborate. They had become master stonemasons, building elaborate palaces where the production of fine art was housed. Art was produced on demand for the kings and this is why we see remains of drinking vessels, weapons, jewellery and masks, made out of gold with exquisite carvings. At the same time, the Mycenaeans were avid potters and they also introduced new arts such as ivory carving and internal wall painting. What is interesting is the abundant remains of very small terracotta figurines, representing what many archeologists and art historians believe (though still debate) to be depictions of goddesses.

In 1200BC, around the fall of Troy, the Mycenaean civilization began to collapse. Constant wars and invasions from the north crippled the region with the next epoch known as the Sub-Mycenaean Era or Dark Ages (circa 1100BC to 1025 BC). Very few examples of art have ever been recovered from this period and what has been recovered shows very little innovation or growth. The next phase, the Proto-Geometric (circa 1025BC-900BC), sees the invigoration of the Greeks, culturally, socially and creatively. Pottery was rejuvenated with the invention of a quicker potter's wheel and vases were made with broad bellies, with horizontal lines and simple shapes painted on them.

The Geometric Era (circa 900-700 BC) is so called because of the geometric designs that adorn ceramic vases recovered by archeologists. Lines, triangles, spirals, circles and squares are featured and although artisans in previous civilisations had used geometric shapes, the Greeks started to design them in a controlled, rhythmic way rather than by instinct. Sculpture



Three Female Terracotta Figurines



Vase from the Geometric Era - with lines and the horse motif



Mycenaean Necklace with Golden Spirals



Mycenaean Gold Goblet

started in this era as small geometric votive forms as offerings to gods with the armed warrior, chariot and horse familiar symbols. Artists used a variety of mediums such as solid casting and cold working to create intricate pieces made out of gold and bronze; they also engraved gems. Wood too was used to carve out large-scale sculpture of gods, legends of the past or heroes of the time. Trade routes had been established through to Asia and some artists used oriental influences in their work. For example: Oriental eyes for figurines and hybrid creatures such as the Sphinx, Chimeras (lions with wings), Gorgons (monsters) and Griffins (eagles with ears) started to appear. However, what had not yet been established during this period was stone sculpture.

This all changed with establishment of the Greek city-state (polis), and the continued growth of trade with neighbours like the Egyptians, together with opportunities for colonisation. In the Archaic Era (circa 700BC-450BC) there was a very distinctive shift in the type of art produced and the methods



Mycenaean Krater

Minoan Fresco  
Depicting the flying fishA close up of Geometric  
Krater with Warrior Scenes

used to produce it. The Greeks were fast learners and became acutely aware of the fully formed Egyptian style of post and lintel architecture in temples and large scale standing statues of gods and goddesses and pharaohs.

Artists started to carve out male statues that looked very similar to the Egyptian god or pharaoh with one distinctive exception; the Greek male (the kouros) was always nude. The Greeks were the first humanists, believing gods resembled man and therefore they celebrated ideal masculinity with its strength and athleticism; and femininity (the kore) with its fully clothed beauty. These early statues are typified by an archaic 'smile,' as the Greeks believed this bore life into the figure. Statues during this time were commissioned by the aristocracy and were depictions of the ideal, as opposed to representing specific individuals. At this time also the establishment of 'black figure pottery', in which potters would engrave their designs into the clay with a glossy black paint, and then fire with the finishing

details incised into the black soon developed into the famous classical red figure ware. These works depicted daily Greek life and mythology.

The design and creation of the Doric Temple in the Archaic Era was perfected in the Parthenon under the rule of Pericles in the Classical Era (circa 450BC-323BC), because he wanted Athens to be the most powerful and wealthy of all the city-states. Athens did become the leader, and along with the rise of democracy and philosophy changed the face of art.

Pericles wanted to reflect Athens' status by commissioning public works, public monuments, sculpture and drama festivals. Changing hairstyles that reflected Greek fashions was an innovation in sculpture and more relaxed, twisting poses were also used to make the works more life-like. The Classical Era up until 404BC was called the "Great Fifty Years." However after this, Athens lost its dominance because of inter-state wars, and an artistic decline followed.

The final phase of Greece's greatness is the Hellenistic Era (circa

323-31BC), which began with Philip of Macedon and was brought to magnitude by his son Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire extended from the Greek mainland to what is now known as India and created an era, which extended Greek political and cultural influence. Art became a private commodity and was influenced by the Ancient Near East. The subject matter moved away from the religious depictions to include curiosities such as children, drunkenness and erotica. Public sculpture of rulers became massively oversized and exaggerated to portray the sense of power associated with Hellenistic rule. The famous sculpture the Venus de Milo dates from this period.

The genius of Greek art was to take a simple idea, like the human form and bring it to perfection in short time. The Greeks were able to do this because of their confidence in themselves and their wealth. After the fall of the Hellenistic Empire it was left to the Romans to adapt and develop classical Greek art for the ages. ■