GEOMETRIC ANCIENT GREEK ART

BALANCE, PROPORTION, HARMONY

Between the 12th and 11th centuries B.C., following Doric, Eolian and Ionic invasions, the Mycenaean civilization began to decline. The invaders soon managed to integrate and trigger the start of the Greek civilization around the 8th century B.C. In a few centuries, Ancient Greek civilization would reach such levels of cultural development as to become a necessary reference point for all other western civilizations, particularly for Ancient Rome.

To the Ancient Greeks we owe the start of Science (looking for rational explanations of natural phenomena), Philosophy (looking for rational explanations of spiritual and existential problems), Politics (the art of governing the city democratically), Drama (the art of staging comic and tragic stories).

Following the decline of religion and magic, also art acquires new scope and significance, thus becoming free expression of Man’s intellect and search for beauty, balance and perfection as ideals.

In the “Aphrodite of Milos” (around 300 B.C.), Alexandros of Antioch sought beauty and perfection. In the “School of Athens” (1510), Raphael represented all the major expositors of Ancient Greek thinking.

Ancient Greek Art can conventionally be divided into:

- the Geometric Period (11th-8th centuries B.C.), a.k.a. Greek Dark Ages or Homeric Age, was a period of formation marked by the start of the poleis (city states);
- the Archaic Period (8th - mid-5th centuries B.C.), marked by the initial definition of the distinctive features of Ancient Greek Art and the development of temples and of the sculpture of the human figure;
- the Classic Period (mid-5th (Battle of Salamina, in which the Greeks defeated the Persians) - late 4th (death of Alexander the Great) centuries B.C.); it is the economic, social and artistic heyday of the poleis;
- the Hellenistic Period (late 4th (death of Alexander the Great) - late 1st (Battle of Actium) centuries B.C.), which entailed the annexation of Ancient Greece to a militarily-overwhelming but culturally-dependent Roman Empire.

THE GEOMETRIC PERIOD

The Geometric Period took its name from the numerous geometric themes on ceramic works, most of which were found in Attica, namely by the Dipylon in Athens.

Very high funerary vases, the Dipylon amphorae feature the typical black enamel abstract decoration on a light background. Among the most common patterns we can find checks, meanders, swastikas, Greek frets, triangles, separating horizontal lines and concentric circles. Human figures were extremely stylized.

Ceramics is fundamental to the investigation of Classic Art, owing to the decorations and patterns painted on the surfaces of the vessels. Pottery would soon acquire great significance as clay was an easy-to-work low-cost raw material. Ancient Greeks would make any vessel out of terracotta, both for liquids such as water, wine, oil and perfumes, and for solid stuff (legumes, flour, olives and wheat). Tall clay vessels were used as signs attesting the position of the tombstones they were on. The patterns on on this type of amphorae characterized the style as geometric. Painting was the main form of art in Ancient Greece.

From the top down, we can distinguish the following parts of an amphora: mouth, rim, handle, neck, shoulder, belly and foot.

Geometric art is a phase of Greek art, characterized largely by geometric motifs in vase painting. From this period, we can see examples of ceramics painted with geometric motifs. This period is mostly characterised by vascular art.
The vases had different uses such as containing food, drinks, oils and perfumes. The creation of the vase followed different phases: first the clay was worked with a specific tool, then the vases were baked in the oven and finally painted. The most common motifs were chess, meanders, concentric circles and the swastika (hooked cross), which before the nazi regime was a symbol of good wishes. For trivia’s sake, we can point out that Hitler was said to have taken the original swastika and turned its hooks toward the other side to make it a symbol of the nazis.