

ONF

The Study and Presentation of Greek Art

Studying Greek Art and Historical Narratives

When one opens a textbook on Greek art, or even the history of art generally, one almost always find an illustration and discussion of the sculpture from the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi (Figure 1). We will discuss this building and its sculpture extensively throughout this book, along with a bronze mirror (Figure 2) and a ceramic drinking cup (Figure 3), but let us begin by describing the treasury. The original structure was a small building with a porch at one end and an enclosed room behind it (Figure 4). Made of marble, the elaborate architectural decoration, particularly its sculpted pediments and friezes that are now on display in the Archaeological Museum at Delphi, would belong on virtually any top-fifty list for Greek art, and probably on many top-ten lists.

The consensus of art historians is that this is an important monument of the Archaic period (c. 600–480 BCE). In part, this is because of the condition of the reliefs and pediments that crowned the building, as other examples of relatively well-preserved, sculpted architectural relief before the fifth century BCE are rare. Further, the building was one of the most luxurious treasuries at Delphi, made of imported marble with lavish ornamental moldings in addition to the reliefs. The scholarly discussion of the sculptural reliefs focuses on either their style or their subject matter, or both. Regarding style, it is significant that two clearly distinguishable sculptors worked on different sides of the building, one of whom inscribed a partially effaced signature on

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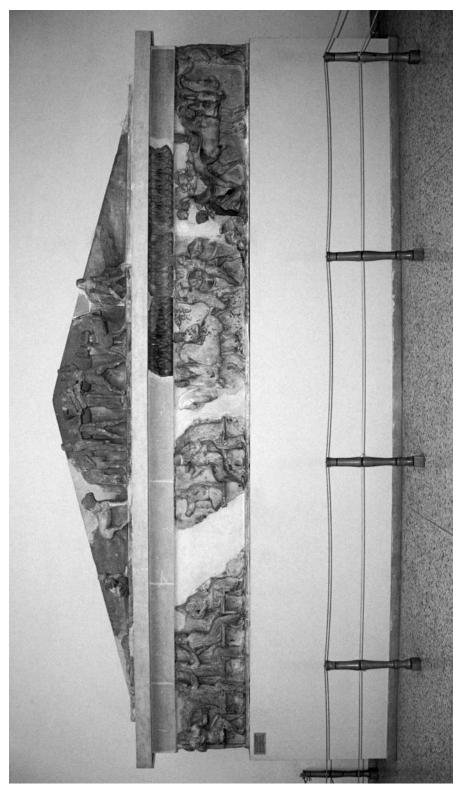


Figure 1. East frieze and pediment, Siphnian Treasury, Delphi, c. 525 BCE. Delphi Museum. Photo: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.



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Figure 2. Bronze Argive caryatid mirror, mid-fifth century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.118.78. Image Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.





Figure 3. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to Douris, c. 490–480 BCE. Theseus and Skiron, Theseus and Kerkyon. London, British Museum, E48. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.



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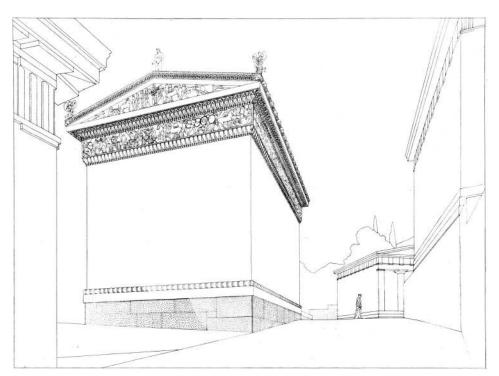


Figure 4. Reconstruction of the Siphnian Treasury and Sacred Way at Delphi. Photo: École française d'Athènes/E. Hansen.

the north side. The composition of that frieze, showing a Gigantomachy, or battle between the gods and the giants, is noted for its greater use of overlapping and the relatively complex movement of the figures compared with contemporary monuments (Figure 5). The other subjects are also noted and described, as is their broader significance and relationship to other representations of the same scenes. Finally, the work is important for the history of Greek art in that there is secondary documentation that links its construction to around the year 525 BCE, making it a key marker for the chronology of Greek art. The Siphnian Treasury is important for art historians and archaeologists, then, for a variety of reasons.

The second-century ce doctor and traveler Pausanias, who wrote a guide-book to Greece and gave a detailed description of the sights at Delphi that equals or exceeds the length of most modern guidebooks, mentions the Siphnian Treasury in his account. In contrast with modern histories, he tells us simply that "the Siphnians too made a treasury, the reason being as follows." He then recounts the story of the wealth and troubles of the Siphnians, but says nothing about the building's appearance or its artistic program. It is just one of several "treasuries" that do not contain treasure and do not seem



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sufficiently striking on their own to merit any further description, unlike several other monuments at Delphi that he describes in detail. The historian Herodotos, writing earlier in the fifth century BCE, also mentions the story behind the construction of the Siphnian Treasury, but of the building itself he adds only that it is "equal to the richest ones there."²

Why are there such differences in interest and conclusions between these two ancient observers of this building in its original condition and setting, and recent scholars, who can view only its incomplete fragments in a modern museum? First, one has to recognize that neither Pausanias nor Herodotos is trying to explain the history of Greek art, their agendas are quite different from that of a modern archaeologist or art historian. For Pausanias, the Siphnian Treasury pales in comparison with other monuments at Delphi that he describes in more detail. Herodotos is writing a history of Greece, and the action of the Samians, who attacked Siphnos, is his primary focus; the Treasury is evidence of the wealth of the Siphnians.

More important, it is necessary to understand that any history, ancient or modern, is a story. In practical terms, historians must be selective in what they describe or recount if they are to achieve their main goal: understanding the causes of events and relationships among events, people, and things. Unnecessary or extraneous details would bog down the narrative and its point. In that sense, modern archaeologists and art historians share the same approach as Herodotos. However, the specific objective of a history of Greek art will make the fabric of the Siphnian Treasury itself more significant for the archaeologist and art historian than it was for Herodotos. Finally, any historian must work with the available evidence, and consider its completeness and reliability, in selecting which details to include and exclude from the account. For Pausanias, there were other sights more engaging at the time he was at Delphi, but many of these are now lost or are in much worse condition than the sculpture of the Siphnian Treasury.

For modern art historians, the importance of the Siphnian Treasury derives not only from the accidents of preservation and documentation, but also from its inherent artistic qualities. The chronology and development of artistic style have been fundamental goals of art history since its beginning; for this story line, the Siphnian Treasury is indeed a key piece of evidence. When the site at Delphi was excavated by French archaeologists beginning in 1892, there were no labels or manuals to guide them. The conclusions that current texts draw about the Treasury's style and composition are the result not just of looking at the remains, but also of the methods and theoretical approaches that have helped scholars to analyze them. Just as the



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Figure 5. North frieze of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, c. 525 BCE. Gigantomachy. Delphi Museum. Photo: École française d'Athènes/Ph. Collet.

agenda of the modern art historian gives importance to the Siphnian Treasury, the particular theory or approach that art historians take affects their understanding and conclusions.

There are many more dimensions than style and date to consider when looking at a work of art such as this, however. What it means, why it was built, how it was used, and how it represents the identity of the people and culture who made it are all important questions for the art historian. Which of these receives attention depends, at least in part, on the issue that the art historian is exploring and on his or her need for constructing a plausible story/history of Greek art. If one were only interested in funerary art and architecture or mural painting, then one might well leave the Siphnian Treasury aside, in spite of its canonical status.

Rather than the history of Greek art, what is of interest for this book is the variety of questions that we want to ask about monuments such as the Siphnian Treasury, or any other work of Greek art, and how we can start to answer them. We could construct many different types of histories; considering some of the processes and theories that are available for such a task can help us articulate what we might want to know about an object and whether or how we can learn enough to begin to engage with its place in history.

I envision two types of readers for this book, both of whom are confronted with works of Greek art and seek to make sense of them. One is the student in a class on Greek art history or archaeology who may have to study actual



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objects as part of a research project or essay. The other is a visitor or traveler interested not only in the well-known works housed in places such as Athens, Paris, London, Rome, Munich, and New York, but also in any collection of Greek art in cities such as Minneapolis, Chiusi, or Nemea. When either type of reader goes to look at Greek art, each becomes an art historian in a way, looking to make sense of the artifacts and objects on display.³

No ancient artwork in a museum was ever meant to be in such a place, and almost everything in a museum was found without any documentation or guide to its interpretation. Although labels help, you as a viewer must define what interests you about what you see. What questions can you ask about the work of art? What more do you need to find out to understand things more deeply? How do you connect the work to others, whether in the same room or elsewhere? Understanding how methodology and theories work on a practical level can help us to consider these and other questions.

Encountering Objects and Narratives of Display

As noted earlier, both Herodotos and Pausanias could see the Siphnian Treasury intact and complete, but we can see only its base on the grounds of Delphi and some of its remains in the nearby museum. Looking at these artifacts, however, is not as simple as it might first seem. The preservation and means of display of an ancient work of art are important factors in the way we encounter an object today, and our viewing experiences are quite different from those of its original makers and users. Furthermore, no museum has enough space to display everything in its collection, so curators must select what to put into display cases. How a single object is set up and placed into groups with other objects affects how we think about it. Displaying and looking at artifacts thus involve choices and decisions, thinking about how we encounter objects today can serve as a prelude to studying them more intensively. Before laying out the specific plan of this book, then, we should consider briefly the circumstances in which we look at Greek art today, as it is the work of art itself that engages us.

For example, we might consider a small object such as that found in many museums with collections of Greek art. In looking at the object in Figure 2, without any prior knowledge, one might be surprised on reading the label that it is a mirror, as it does not seem as if it would give a clear reflection of its user. Looking at the picture printed here, it seems as if the mirror is in a good state of preservation, as indeed it is, but looking at the actual object rather than a photograph, one can see that the surface is a bit rough, somewhat like fine sandpaper in areas. A new bronze object would



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have had a smooth, polished, and highly reflective surface quite different from what we see today. The present mottled discoloration is the result of a chemical reaction; the original color would likely have been lighter, more metallic, and uniform. When cleaned and polished in a new state, one could imagine seeing one's reflection and the glint of light off the surface, making the original experience quite different from the one we have today. Two centuries ago, such a work might have been "restored" to its "original" appearance. Today we try to conserve rather than restore works, but this does have the effect of making the work less as it was for its original owner.

Not only is the appearance of the mirror different than it was originally, but the viewing experience is different as well. One would have held an object such as this as one holds a modern mirror, or one could have looked at one's reflection from a close distance while the mirror stood on a flat surface. Today, when the object is protected in a display case by glass or Plexiglas, one certainly can not hold it and move it around, and in most displays, it would be unlikely that you could get directly in front of it at the proper distance for usage, even if it were still shiny and reflective. Thus, one cannot experience the work as a user but only as a detached viewer, losing the intimate, personal dimension of the original work. This is unavoidable, because letting viewers touch objects such as this would quickly damage these objects.

This detached viewing of a work increases substantially when we see the work reproduced in publications. Most Greek art is three-dimensional, but the limits of publication typically result in only one view, such as that in Figure 2, being printed for the discussion of an object. The back side, though, is revealing: the joins and rivets of the mirror are apparent, as is the rougher and greener quality of the surface of the disk (Figure 6). Because the back would not have been polished over and over again, as was the reflecting front, its surface was probably less protected from the elements when it went from being a household object to a buried artifact. Even adding a back view, however, does not fully convey the three-dimensional quality of the mirror. From an oblique rather than a perpendicular angle, one can see that the figure stands in a slightly twisted and asymmetrical stance, as a real person would stand, and that the arm holding the bird projects toward the front. You realize in actually looking at the object that reaching out to grasp it would not have been a casual act; you would have to reach under that arm to wrap your hand around the bottom part of the figure.

Seeing the object, then, is important. Although the limitations that we have considered might seem to be huge disadvantages for the modern viewer, there are aspects of the museum that in fact make it easier to see an object.



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Figure 6. Bronze Argive caryatid mirror, back, mid-fifth century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.118.78. Image Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

The modern museum usually provides better viewing conditions in terms of climate and lighting, and objects are often displayed so one can see them distinctly and from multiple angles. The care given to their presentation and handling means that they will likely be the same when you see them