

INTRODUCTION

“True originality is never something sought after or, as it were, signed; rather it is a quality belonging to something touched in the dark and brought back as a tentative question.”

– John Berger

Geometric art is the first coherent style of ancient Greece. It is original, confident. Based on its Greek worldwide appearance and three-century run from 1050 to 700 B.C.E., it must be judged a resounding success. Down to the last half century its aesthetic is immersed in abstraction. Surrounded by virtually nothing but the natural world, painters of pots turn to what is anything but natural: to lines as straight and forms as precise as preindustrial methods can achieve (Fig. 0.1). In the practice there are waverings, miscalculations, sloppiness, omissions, thinnings and thickenings of the slip, even drips. Yet if the potter-painters' aims are measured by the most ambitious productions, the effect is astounding: regularity that approaches the mechanical without releasing its hold on the organic. Unlike their Bronze Age ancestors, these artists created a unified field of figure, object, and ornament. The late appearance of animal and human forms perfectly integrated with their geometric habitat confirms the convictions of the style. There is a willing separation from the direct experience of reality, an inserted barrier composed of the merest millimeter of potter's slip, a slip that holds vast cultural potential. It is a medium for rejecting the world of direct sense and experience in favor of the constructed, the imagined, the interpreted.

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Susan Langdon

Excerpt

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0.1. Attic Early Geometric amphora (P 27629) from grave 16:6, the “Rich Athenian Lady” on the Areopagus. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

That Geometric art welcomed the arrival of figures like long-awaited company demonstrates the style’s flexibility, but it does not account for the timing or the nature of the innovation. If anything, it tends to mask what a departure it was. A decorative, if highly principled, technique was transformed seemingly overnight into a storytelling art. Its images speak a language – sometimes mythopoeic, sometimes ritual, and sometimes symbolic or metaphorical – no less than does later Greek art, and in this respect is its true progenitor.

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0.2. Middle Geometric II krater. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1934 (34.11.2). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This is not the way that Geometric art is usually presented. To be sure, traditional readings locate its imagery within a world of epic and mythic reference, and it is not difficult to see why. Epitomized by the great Dipylon grave markers, eighth-century art specializes in the battlefield, the chariot file, the heroic death and its funerary celebration, all assuring the memory of mortal warriors, like their poetic counterparts (Fig. 0.2). Geometric art, one suspects, has always been enjoyed most by those who revel in satisfying links with Homeric aesthetic: its rhythms, frames, meters, epithets, similes, and motifs. Indeed, the early study of Geometric pictorial arts was shaped by scholars who privileged text over art and Homeric poetry above all, and projected a similar hierarchy into the past.¹

However, seeing Geometric art as the visual counterpart of epic poetry is no longer supportable. Conventional approaches that match pictorial narratives with remnants of literary cycles are prone to clear methodological difficulties. The most obvious fallacy is to use images for dating the appearance of uncertainly dated epics. When Homer is compared with early images, it can be shown that the narrative scenes of Geometric art do not derive from preserved versions of Homeric epic, are unlikely



to have depended on any epics, and can just as plausibly be assumed to have a basis in folktales.² None of this, however, explains why some stories were popular and widely disseminated while others were completely ignored by artists, nor why, once begun, multi-figure narratives were not more common. The answers to at least some of these puzzles lie in the intended purpose of the images.

Released from the shadow of Homer, recent studies of Geometric art have gone far to address its neglected social dimensions. Especially effective are those explorations of how decorative and pictorial motifs served to establish and maintain claims of status in early Greek communities.³ The visual tradition is grounded in momentous changes separating the collapse of Bronze Age palace cultures and the emergence of Archaic city-states. The last half-century of this process witnessed sweeping cultural and social developments, including the rapid growth and consolidation of communities, revival of literacy, and foundation of religious sanctuaries. Against this backdrop recent research into the pottery of the Early Iron Age has approached issues of class, ethnicity, and gender with new theoretical ordnance.⁴ These positive developments offer a way to understand Geometric art as a viable representational system in its own right, crucial to the political and social movements of its time. Yet Geometric art's promotion from a lackluster career in epic illustration to the heady ranks of state formation has come at the expense of its visual content. Political implications of pottery styles have been probed without reference to subject matter. Some commentators have gone so far as to pronounce its motifs purely decorative and rich readings of Geometric iconography misguided.⁵ For many it is enough to accept Geometric imagery as "heroizing" – that is, it starts and ends by assimilating its exclusive clientele to a glorious imagined past.

The problem is that characterizing the art in this way reduces it to a kind of heroic wallpaper against which the hardscrabble life of eighth-century Greece acquired glamour and authority. It means, in effect, that one need never look very closely at it again, and Geometric imagery – for all the painstaking labor that was poured into it – becomes neither significant nor interesting. Traditional art historical accounts imply that the Greeks would have agreed: as soon as artists heard the siren call from the East and picked up some new narrative tricks, they never looked back from their detour into myth and naturalism. What has gone

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missing in this view is a sense of substantive content in the imagery that accompanied six decades of unparalleled social and political ferment from which emerged the major city-states of Greece. There persists in our understanding of Geometric art an estrangement between the most significant objects of these times and the lives of the people that used them.

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The common view that Geometric pictorial art expresses the “aristocratic worldview, that is, heroic myth and heroized themes of daily life,” may explain the choice of themes on pottery and metalwork but begs the larger question of what Geometric imagery was *for*.⁶ The tendency to see narrative scenes as increasingly the goal of Late Geometric artists has been hard to shake. This holdover of early Homeric scholarship persists even in these historiographically self-conscious times because it corroborates the surge of iconographic innovation that marked the last decades of the eighth century. The energetic silhouettes of Late Geometric exert themselves to draw the viewer into their predicaments, whether shipwreck, duel, chariot race, or dance contest. Alongside these forms are a larger number that on the sliding scale of narrativity approach the iconic. A small detail can push an image from one category to another. Derived perhaps from the static motifs of North Syrian art, a pair of dueling men becomes a symmetrical emblem – unless they meet in shipboard battle or athletic competition (Fig. 0.3; compare Figs. 0.2 and 4.1).⁷ Recent work in narratology distinguishes among such variations, but takes us only so far in understanding what Geometric art is about.⁸ After all, the bread and butter of the Geometric artist was not narrative but genre. For every shipwreck or Hydra-hacking, there are 100 files of chariots, 50 chains of dancers. Even such generic scenes can hold unusual details or pairings that hint there is more going on than first meets the eye. A Late Geometric two-handled flask, looted from a tomb near east Cretan Andromyloi in 1902, juxtaposes a line of male and female dancers on one panel with four big-skirted figures with lines rising from their shoulders on the other (Fig. 0.4).⁹ These have confused some observers; J. P. Droop pronounced the figures incomprehensible and Bernhard Schweitzer’s *Greek Geometric Art* published the image upside

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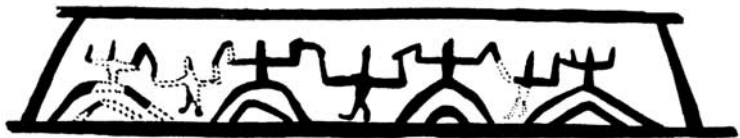
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0.3. Figural stand fragment with duel. With permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM.



0.4. Figural neck panels on flask from Andromyloi, Crete. Drawing: *BSA* 12 (1905–06) 47 fig. 22.

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0.5. Protoattic amphora from grave in Eleusis. Photograph: Czakó, DAI-ATH-Eleusis 544. All rights reserved.

down. The similarity of these figures to the cauldron heads and shoulder snakes of the Protoattic Eleusis amphora nevertheless confirms their identity as gorgons (Fig. 0.5). Is there a reason to associate dancers with gorgons? Is it relevant that this vase was deposited in a tomb? Apart from their appearance together on a small vase, nothing connects the two panels. Yet surveying the broad spectrum of Geometric art with special attention to the social, ritual, and artistic settings of dance scenes opens up interpretive possibilities. Understanding the social function of Geometric art must encompass generic as well as narrative images.

The assumption that the Late Geometric artist was driven to illustrate myths is a perspective from which the persistently reductive style



can only seem an impediment to content, something to be abandoned before mythic reference could develop freely. A brief look at the communicative powers of the Geometric artist shows why this view needs to be challenged, and how the style's apparent shortcomings made it the ideal medium for its messages. The formal rules of Geometric art are not difficult to discern.¹⁰ The figural style is best characterized as conceptual, analytic, and expressive. Based on a fundamental principle of logic, the analytic approach operates at all levels within the image by breaking down the whole of an object or composition into its constituent parts and spreading them across the picture plane according to syntactic relationships. Chariot wheels, bed legs, and horse necks are set side by side to be counted rather than overlapped, while horse bodies are less confusing when fused into a single silhouette (Figs. 1.6, 2.3). Because this approach constructs an expressive and selective reality rather than visual mimesis, there are few unnecessary details. The narrow repertoire of basic forms and motifs means that alterations tend to be significant. The complex compositions where the communicative possibilities are most fully realized remain generalized, typical situations described by vivid action and expressive gesture, unbounded by specific identity and place.¹¹ Indications of space and time, long understood as fundamental to narrative linearity, are created as dynamics of the action itself.¹²

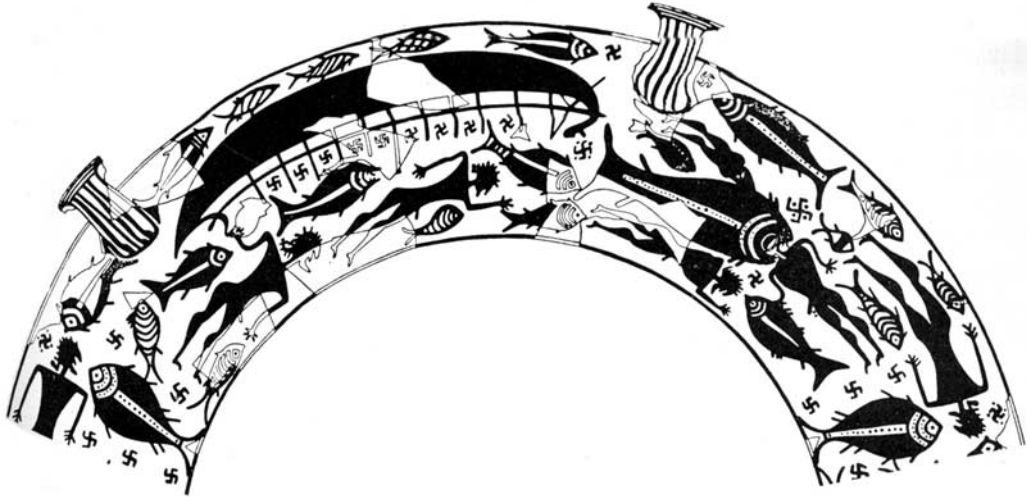
Approaching this art as inventive and expressive brings us nearer to the experience of its original audience. Of course, any picture requires collaboration for its success: the viewer must supply the meaning of gestures, the relationships between actors and elements, the space and time that explain the whole. With Geometric art, which deals in "suggestive rather than explicit" forms, the intended viewer's role would have been even greater, and to eyes unjaded by long familiarity with figural representation, all the more successful.¹³ As Sture Brunnsåker admonished, "We are more apt to underrate than to overrate the expressiveness of the Geometric style."¹⁴ For the willing viewer, the artist had a surprising range of techniques to project not just a situation but also its emotional content. One of the virtues of a strict, rule-bound style is that it is easy, when occasion demands, to exploit the rules to stage high drama, making stark bids for viewer involvement with the characters' emotions. To this end, the artist of the Pithekoussai shipwreck used open hands,

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0.6. Shipwreck scene on Late Geometric krater from Pithekoussai. Drawing: *OpRom* 4 (1962) 171 fig. 7. Courtesy Swedish Institute at Rome.

splayed limbs, formidable fish, and – most unusually – a partly obscured body to sketch the plight of a lost crew with grim immediacy (Fig. 0.6). Rather than emphasizing the style’s constraints, we can more profitably approach Geometric art like the “art of the silent film . . . as a universal language.”¹⁵

It may seem self-evident that Geometric was a figural style well suited to its content. Yet such successful pictorial scenes as the Pithekoussai shipwreck are often taken as evidence of a discontent with Geometric convention that heralds its breakup. Unfortunately, the style lends itself to a teleological reconstruction of Greek art. John Boardman once famously likened the Geometric phase to childhood, in which the Greeks learned the discipline that would carry them through the impressionable adolescence of Orientalizing before attaining the maturity of Classical art. This was an effective metaphor 40 years ago, but one that has led others to an impoverished view of Geometric art as offering little more than formal heritage.¹⁶ Moreover, it arose within the now untenable view that Geometric art flourished in cultural isolation, before Eastern naturalism began to seduce Greek tastes and artistic ambitions.

Today we know that Oriental art was widely available and discreetly imitated throughout much of the Geometric period. Even the icon of the age, the so-called Dipylon Amphora (Athens NM 804), can legitimately be called “Phoenicianizing” for its recumbent fauna.¹⁷ The fact that the



availability of naturalistic models and ready-made iconographies as early as the ninth and eighth centuries did not incite an earlier “Orientalizing revolution” strongly attests the success of and commitment to the prevailing Geometric tradition. Indeed, the range of figural motifs greatly expanded in the last two or three decades of the eighth century as hunters, dancers, acrobats, and monsters joined the repertoire. In other words, the formulaic Geometric style was not a routine in which artists were stuck but a choice they held to throughout one of the biggest cultural upheavals in Greek history, the social and political consolidations that gave rise to the polis. Fully understanding this art depends on recovering the circumstances for which it was created and the people who used it.

Geometric Art and the Early Greek Community

A book about art, it has been said, is a book about power. Created by individuals to be seen by other individuals, figural art implies a message and a social intent, representing not objective facts but the subjective projections of artist and patron. The prevailing view of Geometric imagery offers one answer to the question of whose reality we see: it presents a distilled worldview in which an elite past and present are telescoped. The process of *synoikismos* that led to polities like Athens, Argos, Sparta, Knossos, Corinth, Eretria, and Thebes depended on new kinds of political and religious authority, which emerged from the households of local leaders into the public sphere. The process set different groups to compete for social rank. Unstable village groups of Big Men with their followers and more stable chiefdoms alike yielded to the emergence of larger aristocratic groups with their claims to power and authority.¹⁸ The profusion of horses, chariots, and prestigious weaponry that equip the warrior ranks of Geometric pottery provided an archaizing model by which aristocratic families or groups could mark their exclusivity and authority. In some cases the imagery’s close resemblance to Bronze Age finds suggests direct appeal to the local past (compare Figs. 1.11 and 1.12).¹⁹ In addition to elite self-projection through fine ceramic and metal objects, these emerging hierarchies are materially expressed by differential treatment of the dead; and in the highly gendered spheres of activity they are marked by wealthy warrior graves, feasting ceremonies, hunting, and fighting. So a further possible answer to the question is posed: