INTRODUCTION

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome.

Ode to Helen
Edgar Allan Poe

Poe's ode is addressed to the legendary beauty who, though married to King Menelaos of Sparta, was carried off by the Trojan prince, Paris. Menelaos thereupon summoned his allies and, having assembled a mighty army under the command of his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, sailed to Troy and fought there for ten years until the city was sacked and Helen was recovered. This is a famous story and one that has often inspired poets, but its connection with the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome may not be immediately obvious.

The myth of Helen and the Trojan War seems to have had historical roots in the period around 1250 BC. People speaking an early form of Greek were then already living in Greece and had produced a flourishing civilisation that we call *Mycenaean*, naming it after the richest and most powerful of its centres. By the end of the 12th century BC, for reasons that are still obscure, this civilisation lay in ruins. Populous sites had become deserted, trade had ceased, skills were lost and crafts declined. A once wealthy civilisation had

become poor, a literate one illiterate. Meanwhile, new tribes of Greek-speaking people, the Dorians, began to move into Greece, and some of the earlier ones migrated eastward to the islands of the Aegean and the west coast of Asia Minor (Map 1). Hardly more than a memory survived of the desolation that followed the collapse of Mycenaean civilisation, but out of that memory legends were shaped, tales told and new poems created.

By the 8th century BC, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been composed. These two Homeric epics developed the story of the Trojan War and made it something essential for all later cultural developments. These poems were among the earliest manifestations of a new civilisation, the *Hellenic*, which had arisen out of the ashes of the old; the people who produced this civilisation, the successors of the Mycenaeans, were the ones who created 'the glory that was Greece'. Throughout their history they greatly valued the poetry of Homer; children learned his works by heart, and adults used them as models of behaviour.

In the four centuries from the time of Homer to that of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), the Greeks evolved a culture that was to be immensely influential throughout the Western World. The conquests of Alexander carried Greek ideas to people far beyond the traditional centres in which Greeks had lived (Map 2). Such geographical extension drastically modified the character of Greek civilisation, and so this later phase is called *Hellenistic* rather than Hellenic. From the 3rd to the 1st century BC, Hellenistic culture was admired and imitated from the western borders of India to the southern slopes of the Alps.

The 'grandeur that was Rome' came into being rather differently. Rome was founded in the 8th century BC, a small settlement on the banks of the Tiber with no memories of a glorious past. As the city grew in power, the Romans encountered more civilised peoples and began to take an interest in art and literature, which hitherto had been of little importance to them. At first the Romans learned from the neighbouring Etruscans (who were masters of Rome for a time and left a lasting imprint on Roman religion and attitudes), but from the 3rd century BC they turned increasingly to the Hellenistic Greeks for instruction and inspiration. By adapting elements of Hellenistic culture and combining them with their

own well-developed organisational and military skills, the Romans were able to produce a magnificent culture of their own.

By the time Rome had reached its zenith, Greece had become a mere Roman province. But even then the myth of Helen and the Trojan War continued to play a vital part in Greek culture. The Romans, when they began to appreciate Greek values, sought to attach Greek legends to their own traditions by tracing their descent from those very Trojans whom the Greeks, in their art and literature, had depicted as noble and worthy adversaries.

The Roman empire gradually expanded, embracing virtually all the territory that had once been part of the Hellenistic world and also many lands to the north and the west (Map 3). Roman values, Roman building practices and Roman styles followed the Roman armies, and though some native traditions persisted, most people were attracted to the comfort and elegance that came with Roman civilisation.

Eventually the Roman empire fell into decline. The cities and sanctuaries of Greece, too, became little more than neglected ruins. Nevertheless, the art of Greece and Rome, though much of what has survived is only fragmentary, bears vivid testimony to the erstwhile greatness of these two cultures. The object of this book is to recapture the feeling of the time when the art was created and to explain its lasting power to enthral men's minds and captivate their imaginations.

PART I. THE ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL PERIODS: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

1: FREE-STANDING STATUES

THE GREEKS

The beginnings of Greek civilisation after the decline of the Mycenaeans were not very glorious. By about 1000 BC, people speaking various Greek dialects were living around the Aegean Sea. Principal among them were the Dorians, who lived mostly on mainland Greece, and the Ionians, who populated many of the islands and the west coast of Asia Minor (Map 1). They gathered together in small, widely separated communities, many of which eventually developed into *poleis* ('city-states', as they are often, somewhat imprecisely, called; singular *polis*).

The earliest communities were poor, illiterate, and isolated from one another as well as from the rest of the world. Slowly they began to prosper and develop. By the middle of the 8th century BC, when the Homeric poems were being composed, craftsmen could already produce huge funerary monuments of pottery covered with precise and elegant decoration (Fig. 59). Soon an increase in population encouraged the now overcrowded Greeks to send out colonies, east to the area around the Black Sea and west to Sicily and southern Italy. The poleis eventually also began to trade more widely and so came into contact with the peoples and the cultures of Egypt and the Near East. These ancient, literate and brilliant civilisations, with their rich and accomplished art forms, awed and astonished the Greeks. Thoroughly impressed and eager to learn, many had by the middle of the 7th century BC acquired the two skills which enabled them to produce the literature and sculpture that later made them famous: they learned how to write and how to carve stone.

Each polis was fiercely independent and each developed a character of its own. Corinth, on the isthmus, was rich and luxurious, a great trading centre; Sparta became renowned for its military prowess; Argos produced a succession of outstanding bronze-casters; Athens, an Ionian polis on the predominantly Dorian mainland, encouraged individual achievements and attracted gifted foreigners,

so that eventually the finest poetry, drama and art were created there.

These independent poleis were linked by a shared language and a common religion. At the famous panhellenic (all-Greek) sanctuaries like Delphi and Olympia, the Greeks from different poleis would congregate to hold competitions in athletics, poetry and music in honour of the gods. Most of their other encounters were acrimonious. The poleis were constantly at war with one another.

It took a great threat to unite them, even temporarily. That threat came in the early 5th century BC with the Persian Wars. The Persian empire had gradually absorbed the Greek poleis on the coast of Asia Minor during the course of the 6th century BC. In 499 BC, these poleis unsuccessfully rebelled against their Persian overlords and drew Greek poleis from the mainland into their rebellion. The Persians quelled the revolt and sent out a punitive mission. When, in 490 BC, this came to grief on the plains of Marathon, defeated primarily by the Athenian army, the Persian king resolved on a war of total conquest.

The Greeks united to face the common enemy. The Athenians, though their city was sacked, took to their ships and fought bravely in the naval battle at Salamis in 480 BC, and the Spartans distinguished themselves in the final battle on Greek soil at Plataea in 479 BC. The great Persian invasion had been defeated.

Athens had been an important and cultured polis before the Persian Wars, but it was after their conclusion that it reached its height. The fifty or so years between the end of the Persian Wars (479 BC) and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (431 BC) were for Athens a golden age of art, literature and political power. It continued to produce great works right up to the end of the century, but the Peloponnesian War, in which it and its empire fought against the Spartans and their allies, eventually sapped most of its strength and almost all of its creativity. Athens was defeated by the Spartans in 404 BC, but the works it created during the 5th century BC were so extraordinary in their beauty that they have been considered classics ever since.

from left to right
1. Kouros, late 7th century BC, height 184 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1032.

2. Bakenref (Egyptian), mid-7th century BC, height 50 cm, courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William E. Nickerson Fund.

3. King Meryankhre Mentuhotep VI (Egyptian), mid 17th century BC, height 23 cm, British Museum, London.

Archaic is the name given to the period from about the middle of the 7th century BC (around 650), when the Greeks were developing techniques and ideas stimulated by contact with the older civilisations of Egypt and the Near East, until the time of the Persian Wars in the early part of the 5th century BC (490–479). *Classical* is the name given to the period from the Persian Wars till the end of the Peloponnesian War (404 BC).

The term *classical* is commonly used in two further senses. It often simply denotes excellence, so that something is called 'a classic' if it is an outstanding example of its type; or the term is used historically, so that the Greek and Roman civilisations together are known collectively as 'classical antiquity' in order to distinguish them from the remoter antiquity of the civilisations of Egypt and the Near East. In this book 'classical' is used restrictively to describe the artistic style developed in the 5th century BC.

The archaic and classical periods were for the Greeks immensely exciting times to live in; thinkers and practical men were constantly

discovering and inventing new things. It was also a critical time for the development of art, as we shall see.

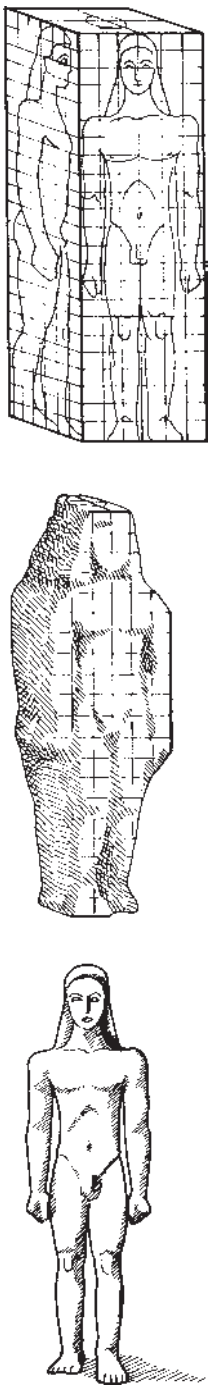
GREEKS AND EGYPTIANS: STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

Sometime after the middle of the 7th century BC, the Greeks began to carve large-scale figures of men out of marble (Fig. 1). They must have been impressed by statues made in other hard stones that they saw in Egypt, since the inspiration for the type of standing figure they made clearly comes from Egypt (compare Fig. 1 with Figs. 2 and 3). There was also something else, more important than inspiration, which came from Egypt: technique.

Carving a life-size figure out of stone is not a simple matter, and any unsystematic attempt quickly leads to disaster. The Greeks must have been aware of this, but they also knew that the Egyptians, many centuries earlier, had devised a method for carving stone figures. The Egyptians would draw the outlines of the figures they wanted on three (or four) faces of a stone block – front view on the front, profile on the sides. Then they would chip away inwards gradually from the front and the sides, removing more and more stone until they reached the depth that corresponded to the figure that had been drawn (Fig. 4). The drawings had to be made according to a fixed scheme of proportions (for instance, one unit up to the ankle, six units up to the knee and so on) so that when the work was finished the front and side views would agree with one another.

The Greeks adopted the Egyptian method of working and, to a large extent, also the Egyptian system of proportions. That is why early Greek statues look so much like Egyptian ones (Figs. 1–3).

The similarities in pose and technique are obvious; the differences in style and function are more subtle, but extremely important. The Egyptian sculptor made a rather convincingly naturalistic figure of a man; the Greek statue is more abstract. Evidently, the Greeks believed that a statue of this kind should not only look like a man but should also be a beautiful object in itself. They made it into a thing of beauty by imposing three elements of design on



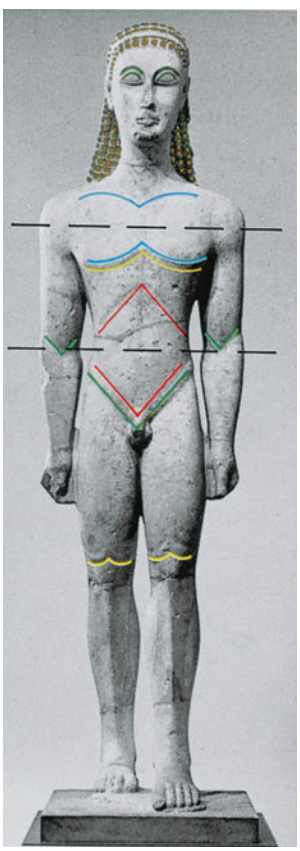
4. Diagram showing the archaic Greek method of stone carving.

the representation of the human form: symmetry, exact repetition of shapes, and use of some shapes on different scales.

The Greek sculptor, like his Egyptian counterpart, appreciated the natural symmetry of the human body with its pairs of eyes, ears, arms and legs, and stressed the symmetry by keeping the figure upright, facing straight forward, standing with its weight equally distributed on its two legs. He avoided any pose containing twists, turns or bends since these would have spoiled the symmetry.

Symmetry about a vertical axis was thus easily achieved. But symmetry about a horizontal axis was quite another matter. The human form, with a single head at one end and a pair of legs at the other, must have seemed unpromising material to organise in this way. Nevertheless, the Greek artist dealt with the problem by inventing his own, rather limited, horizontal axes. He imagined a horizontal axis running across the body at the level of the navel and then produced a symmetrical design on either side of it (Fig. 5, red) – the upright V of the heavily accented muscle separating the torso from the legs and the balancing inverted V of the lower boundary of the thorax. He imagined another horizontal line midway between the collar-bones and the pectoral muscles. He then balanced the shallow W of the pectorals below it with the inverted shallow W of the collar-bones above (Fig. 5, blue). (The symmetry is easier to perceive if you turn the book sideways.)

5. Kouros (same as Fig. 1). Analysis of the sculptor's efforts at pattern making.



The sculptor repeated certain shapes exactly, in order to produce a decorative pattern. He made the line of the eyebrows follow the line of the upper lids (Fig. 5, brown) and composed the hair of bead-like knobs, each of which is the same as its neighbours (Fig. 5, brown). This is particularly effective from the back, where the play of light and shadow on the richly carved hair contrasts with the smooth surface of the body (Fig. 8).

Use of the same shape on different scales is a third aesthetic device employed by the sculptor. Notice how the shallow W of the pectorals is echoed on a smaller scale in the shallow Ws over the knee-caps (Fig. 5, yellow) and how the protruding V of the torso–leg division is echoed in the smaller, recessed Vs of the elbows (Fig. 5, green).

A great deal of thought about design has obviously gone into the making of a figure that at first glance might appear rather more

primitive than a contemporary Egyptian statue (Fig. 2). The Greek sculptor has sacrificed the smooth naturalism of his Egyptian model for the sake of creating a more aesthetically satisfying work. Greek artists were always concerned with striking a balance between beautiful designs and natural appearances, though sometimes the balance was tipped toward the abstract and formal, as here, and at other times toward the convincingly real.

The Greek statue we have been looking at (Fig. 1) was made near the end of the 7th century BC. It is one of the earliest examples of a type made throughout the archaic period (from about 650 to 490 BC). This type of statue – a nude male figure standing facing front with the weight evenly distributed on both legs – is called a *kouros* (plural: *kouroi*), meaning 'young man'.

THE PERILS OF PROGRESS: ARCHAIC KOUROI 650–490 BC

The Greeks made kouroi to serve one of three functions. A kouros could be the representation of a god; it could serve as a beautiful object offered as a dedication to a god; or it could be a memorial of a man, sometimes placed upon his tomb. There was nothing in any of these three functions that dictated the form of the statue and nothing to prevent artists from changing that form as they saw fit. This was very different from the practice in Egypt, where statues were often carved to serve a quasi-magical function, for instance, to be available as alternative homes for the *ka* (the spirit of a man) should his mummified body be accidentally destroyed. Magic is by its nature conservative and resistant to change. That is one of the reasons why a statue made around the middle of the 7th century BC in Egypt (Fig. 2) looks so much like a statue made more than a thousand years earlier (Fig. 3) around 1650 BC.

Change for its own sake, or 'progress', seems to us the natural order of things, but in antiquity it seemed daring, usually undesirable and often downright dangerous. Exact repetition of a model assured the sculptor of the successful outcome of his work. Changing even one element could lead to unlooked-for and often unfortunate consequences.

6. Kouros from Anavyssos, *c.* 530 BC, height 194 cm, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

The Greeks, who were adventurous and willing to take risks, found all this out for themselves.

There were, of course, technical limitations on how much they could change at any one time, since the marble still had to be cut from the block in the same way, and any statue had to be designed so that it would not fall over or break. Within these limits, however, Greek sculptors started to make changes and to produce, little by little, increasingly naturalistic kouroi.

Within a hundred years, the kouros found at Anavyssos (near Athens) had been created (Fig. 6). This grave marker is a splendid figure, full of vibrant life, and shows a tremendous advance in the direction of naturalism. It is even more natural in appearance than the Egyptian statues (Figs. 2 and 3).

But the new realism of the Anavyssos kouros proved a mixed blessing. It was achieved by modifying the proportions of the figure and giving a more rounded treatment to the lines that had simply been engraved into the surface before. However, the hair – always difficult to render convincingly in stone – is carved not very differently from the hair of the early kouros. Here is a good example of the sort of problem that emerges once artists start making changes. The stylised, decorative, bead-like hair looked appropriate on the early kouros (Fig. 8) because it fitted in with the whole stylised decorative character of the statue. Not so on the later kouros (Fig. 7). There the swelling, natural forms of the body clash with the artificial, stiff, bead-like hair.

This clash of styles was not one that could be foreseen by the sculptor. It simply emerged when he altered some of the traditional elements. How such unanticipated problems could take a sculptor by surprise can be seen from a third kouros (Fig. 9) made around 500 BC, that is, about a generation later than the statue in Figure 6.

The statue representing Aristodikos – it also served as a grave marker – is still more naturalistic. It is so natural that it almost makes the Anavyssos kouros (Fig. 6) look like an inflated balloon by contrast. The problem with the hair has been solved by a new fashion; the hair is tied up in plaits (or braids) wound round the head rather than flowing loose down the back. And yet, despite the convincing anatomical forms – or perhaps just because of them – there seems something wrong with the statue of Aristodikos.