

THE ART OF
GREECE AND ROME

Second Edition

Susan Woodford

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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.