

# *The Cambridge History of* PAINTING IN THE CLASSICAL WORLD



Painting was one of the major achievements of the Classical world. This book examines the development of mural and panel painting in the Classical world from the earliest Minoan and Cycladic frescoes of the Aegean Bronze Age to late Roman painting, from approximately 1800 B.C. to A.D. 400. It provides a comprehensive study of major monuments, including exciting new material that has been discovered in recent years and has transformed the field. It also offers a critical overview of scholarly debates and controversies on aspects of style, iconography, technique, and cultural context. This volume provides an up-to-date and much-needed overview of the monuments that are now known and of the ideas that have been generated about them.

J. J. Pollitt is Sterling Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology and History of Art at Yale University. He served as Dean of the Graduate School from 1986 to 1991, Editor-in-Chief of *American Journal of Archaeology* from 1973 to 1977, and Chairman of the Publications Committee of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens from 1982 to 1985. He is the author of numerous books, including *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*, *The Ancient View of Greek Art*, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, and *The Art of Greece: Sources and Documents*.

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J. J. POLLITT  
Yale University



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PREFACE

J. J. Pollitt

IT HAS BEEN MORE than eighty years since the appearance of the last comprehensive study of ancient Greek and Roman mural and panel painting, Mary Swindler’s *Ancient Painting*.<sup>1</sup> In the year of its publication, 1929, many of the monuments that are now fundamental to this subject had not yet been discovered. Still unknown were, to name just a few now-famous examples, the Cycladic-Minoan house paintings from Thera, the Mycenaean palace paintings at Pylos, the Tomb of the Diver and later Italic paintings at Paestum, the Macedonian tomb paintings from Vergina and other sites, and even many important Romano-Campanian paintings, like those from the villa at Oplontis. These and other finds have made it possible for scholars in the early twenty-first century to form a more complete understanding of the interconnections between the various periods, regions, and cultural traditions that form the setting and framework within which ancient painting evolved. For example, until the discovery of several well-preserved painted tombs dating to the later part of the fourth century B.C. in Macedonia, there was virtually no trace of polychrome wall painting in Greece. It was known to have existed, of course, because ancient literary sources describe it in some detail. Until very recently, however, we have been forced to rely on tantalizing hints in Athenian vase painting and problematical echoes in Etruscan painting, augmented by a considerable amount of imagination, to form an idea of what these achievements looked like. But now we have a growing corpus of real Greek polychrome mural paintings to study, and these monuments, it turns out, reveal a diversity of style, technique, and composition that the evidence of vase painting and contemporary Etruscan painting would not have led one to expect.

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In view of the amount of new material that is now available and the volume of specialized scholarship that has been devoted to analyzing recent discoveries and reassessing older ones, a new overview of ancient painting is not only warranted but, in fact, overdue. This book is intended to fill that need by providing a comprehensive survey of the major monuments of ancient painting and also a critique of the conclusions, conjectures, and controversies that scholarly research has generated about their style, technique, iconography, and cultural context. In view of the breadth and complexity of the subject, a multi-authored volume, with contributions from scholars who have a particular interest and expertise in the various fields covered in this book, seemed most appropriate.

Since the book's focus is on polychrome mural and panel painting, the authors have not attempted to, or felt obliged to, incorporate into it a complete history of Greek painted pottery. Many excellent detailed histories of Greek vase painting already exist, and some of them are quite recent.<sup>2</sup> The authors have, however, felt free to examine techniques of drawing, composition, uses of color, and the representation of space in vase painting whenever it seemed that these may have mirrored similar developments in monumental painting. Since the evidence for Greek panel and mural painting from the end of the Bronze Age to the second half of the fourth century B.C. is very limited, Jeffrey M. Hurwit in Chapter 2 and Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell in Chapter 4 have, of necessity, made extensive use of painted pottery, but even in these chapters the emphasis is on what the methods and conceptions of pictorial representation in vase painting can tell us about the development of large-scale polychrome mural and panel painting.

A similar approach has been followed in the case of mosaics. Good comprehensive accounts of the development of ancient mosaics in the Graeco-Roman world have been published in recent years,<sup>3</sup> and it seemed neither practical nor necessary to duplicate these in summary form here. But since,

in their use of colors, shading, and composition, Hellenistic and Roman polychrome mosaics clearly often mirrored monumental painting, the authors of this volume have made use of mosaics as parallel evidence for developments in mural painting whenever such a comparison seemed instructive.

The title of this volume, "Painting in the Classical World", is, of necessity, a shorthand version of a longer title that would unquestionably be more accurate but obviously less practical: "Mural and Panel Painting in Ancient Greece and Italy and in Other Areas Where Greek and/or Roman Cultural Influence Was, at One Time or Another, Dominant". This is, needless to say, not a narrow subject. Its chronological range, stretching from the earliest Minoan and Cycladic frescoes of the Aegean Bronze Age to late Roman painting, covers approximately two millennia. Equally vast is the geographical area in which relevant monuments can be found. For Greek painting it includes not only Greece but also Sicily, southern Italy, portions of Asia Minor, the coast of the Black Sea, Bulgaria, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and a number of sites on the Mediterranean coast of Africa; and for Roman painting, it includes an area stretching from Britain in the west to Mesopotamia in the east, and from Africa in the south to Germany in the north. The subject also takes for granted a remarkable cultural diversity among those who produced painting in the Classical world, since works done by and for peoples whose ethnic origins and language were neither Greek nor Roman (e.g., Etruscans, the Italic peoples of central Italy, Thracians, and native Egyptians) were an important part of it.

Beyond defining the chronological and geographical range of what "painting in the Classical world" means, can it also be asserted that we are talking about a single, continuous artistic tradition in painting, a tradition analogous to, for example, that of western Europe from circa A.D. 800 to the late nineteenth century or to the development of Chinese painting from the T'ang to the Ch'ing

Dynasties? That is to say, are we dealing here with an artistic tradition in which, no matter what revolutionary innovations took place and how radically the manner of painting seemed to change, painters measured their achievements, sometimes in a spirit of respectful emulation and sometimes in a spirit of rebellion, against an artistic past of which they were acutely conscious and that in certain ways determined their agenda? For the final 1,100 years of the period covered by this book the answer to this question would seem clearly to be yes.

The Archaic style, which emerged around 700 B.C. from a fusion of motifs derived from the Near East with a Greek proclivity for Geometric order that had evolved in the early centuries of the first millennium B.C., became an artistic koine in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. It served as a common artistic language, with regional “dialects”, not only for Greek painters in Greece, Greek Asia Minor, Cyprus, and the Greek colonial settlements in southern Italy and Sicily, but also for non-Greek painters in Etruria and Anatolia. When later painters, beginning in the fifth century B.C., initiated a series of innovations that revolutionized the art of painting – foreshortening in drawing, spatial perspective, modeling forms with gradations of light and dark tones, and the use of reflections and shadows to create a sense of ambient light – their point of departure was the Archaic style, and while they broke away from many of its formal and expressive limitations, they also perpetuated many of the genres, motifs, and standard subjects that had been developed in the Archaic period. There remained, in other words, an obvious thread of continuity along with dramatic changes.

Once the naturalistic style in painting that the innovative techniques of the Classical period brought into being was established, it continued to be the dominant style of Graeco-Roman painting for about nine hundred years. As the recently discovered polychrome mural paintings from Macedonia (see Chapter 5) confirm, the style had already reached a mature state by the later fourth

century B.C., and its diffusion from that point can be traced in such diverse sites as Etruscan and Italic tombs in Hellenistic Italy (Chapter 6); in the tombs of Hellenistic Thrace and Egypt (Chapter 5); in the long-familiar domestic paintings from Rome, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, as well as other sites dating from the late Roman Republic and the early Empire (Chapter 8); and at many sites in the middle and late Roman Empire (Chapter 9). Only when the appeal of hieratic religious symbolism gradually began to take precedence over naturalism in the fourth century A.C. did the style’s hold on ancient painters begin to wane.

Whether or not this line of continuity in the development of mural and panel painting in the Classical world can be traced farther back than c. 700 B.C. is a far more problematical question. The so-called Dark Ages that intervened between the end of the Minoan-Mycenaean tradition of painting in the twelfth century B.C. and the emergence of the Archaic style around 700 B.C. are nowadays not as dark as they once were, but even so, the social and political changes that took place in Greece during those centuries were profound, and the culture that emerged in the Archaic period was markedly different from that of the Bronze Age. Powerful memories of the earlier age survived, however, as the Homeric epics attest, and the physical remains of Mycenaean culture, as a variety of literary sources confirm, were treated with reverence.<sup>4</sup> Legends and myths clung to the massive fortifications of Mycenaean citadels, semi-divine “heroes” were worshipped at Mycenaean tombs, and smaller objects that were discovered from time to time – pottery, armor, and gems, for example – were apparently treated as precious heirlooms and were sometimes used as votive offerings in Greek sanctuaries.

While there is no explicit evidence to confirm that remains of Mycenaean wall paintings also survived intact into the eighth and seventh centuries, it is not impossible, of course, that they did. Assuming that later artists did occasionally encounter such paintings, however, the question of whether they

ever felt disposed to use the work of their Bronze Age predecessors as models is one about which we can only speculate. On the one hand, in the light of such evidence as now exists, there is no compelling reason to believe that Bronze Age painting had any significant influence on the formal development of later painting in the Classical world. On the other hand, as Anne P. Chapin observes in Chapter 1, “there are certain elements [in Bronze Age painting] that seem, uncannily, to prefigure the great achievements of Classical art”, most notably a continuing preoccupation with certain iconographical themes. It is, then, at least possible to conjecture that a thread of artistic continuity in the art of painting existed – in spirit, if not necessarily in formal development – from the Bronze Age to the end of Classical antiquity.

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EDITORIAL NOTES

*Illustrations*

References to illustrations are cited by the chapter number followed by the figure or

color plate number. The citation “Fig. 7.5,” for example, refers to Chapter 7, Figure 5. References preceded by “CD/W” refer to illustrations on the compact disc that accompanies this book; access to the images on the CD is also available on the following Web site: [www.cambridge.org/9780521865913](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521865913).

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

References to sources in the endnotes that follow each chapter are confined to the author’s name, the date of publication, and illustration and/or page numbers where relevant – for example, “Napoli (1970)” or “Boardman (1980) 176, fig. 214”. Full references for all sources are given in the consolidated bibliography at the end of the book.

SPELLING AND DATES

This book contains the work of scholars from four European countries as well as from the United States, and their conventions with regard to the spelling of English words differ. The principal difference involves the conventional spelling of certain nouns and verbs in Great Britain as compared with that used in the United States (e.g., “colour” vs. “color” and “analyse” vs. “analyze”). The editor’s policy has been to allow each author to use whatever spelling seems most natural to him or her and not to impose one system on all. A similar policy has been applied to the transliteration of Greek names and words into the Roman alphabet. Since the geographical focus, cultural emphasis, and chronological range of the chapters differ widely, the individual authors have been given the choice of using either the Greek style or the Latin style of transliteration (e.g., Philostratos vs. Philostratus; Ikaros vs. Icarus).

To employ the same flexibility in connection with the diverse systems used for indicating historical dates would, however, invite confusion, if not chaos, and therefore the following system has been adopted for all chapters: Dates prior to the Christian era are indicated by “B.C.” Dates subsequent to the beginning of the Christian era are normally indicated by “A.C.”, but specific calendar years within the Christian era may instead, at the discretion of the individual authors, be preceded by “A.D.” This system has been adopted for practical reasons and has no ideological implications.

In accordance with conventional usage in Classical archaeology, flexibility has also been allowed in the capitalization of the terms “early”, “middle”, and “late”. These words are often used informally and are thus lowercase. They may be capitalized, however, (1) when the long-standing conventions of a particular sub-field make capitalization virtually mandatory, as in the case of “Early Minoan”, “Middle Helladic”, and “Late Cycladic”; and (2) when they refer to a chronological phase that is defined with reasonable precision and is associated with a distinctive and dominant style

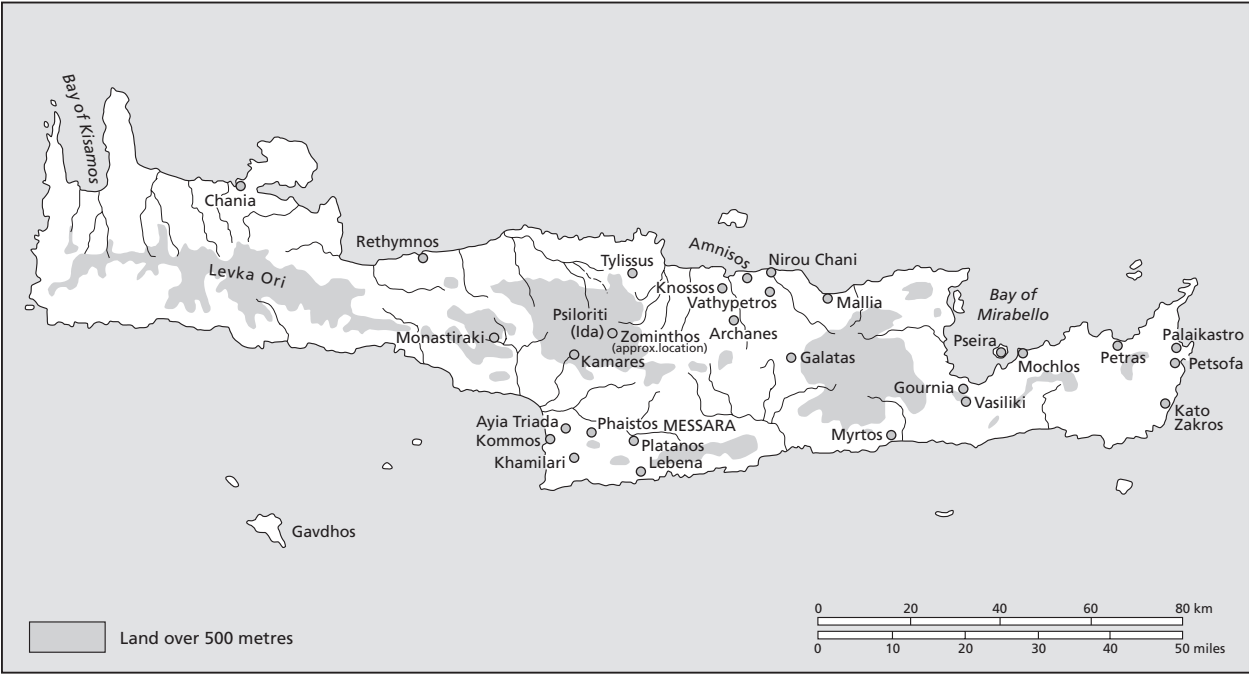
in painting and sculpture, as in the case of “Late Archaic” and “Early Classical”.

NOTES

- 1 Although a few long-range reviews of the development of ancient painting (as defined here) have appeared since Swindler’s pioneering study, all of them have been less comprehensive than hers. Andreas Rumpf’s, *Malerei und Zeichnung* (Munich, 1951), for example, which is essentially a handbook, does not include the Bronze Age; and Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli’s *La pittura antica* (Rome, 1980), a thoughtful collection of essays (previously published elsewhere) on a variety of monuments and technical problems, begins with late Archaic Greek painting. Both of these, needless to say, are now out of date in many respects.
- 2 For example, the third edition of R. M. Cook’s *Greek Painted Pottery* (London, 1997) and John Boardman’s *The History of Greek Vases* (London, 2001).
- 3 Katherine M. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge, 1999) and Roger Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (Princeton, 1998).
- 4 For a collection of the literary testimonia, a survey of Mycenaean “survivals”, and an informative commentary on how the later Greeks conceived of their remote past, see John Boardman’s *The Archaeology of Nostalgia* (London, 2002).

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MAPS







Map 2 (above and facing page) Greece and Asia Minor: Bronze Age and Archaic period





Map 2 (cont.)



Map 3 Central Italy: Etruria, Latium, and Campania



Map 4 Greece and Macedonia in the Classical and Hellenistic periods

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Map 5 (above and facing page) The Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire





Map 5 (cont.)



Map 6 Southern Italy