

Greek Pottery

Based on “**Greek Art**,” a Handbook by G. M. A. Richter

If you desire a parable of the hidden knowledge, tell the story of the Greeks and the Chinese.

“We are the better artists,” the Chinese declared.

“We have the edge on you,” the Greeks countered.

“I will put you to the test,” said the Sultan. “Then we shall see which of you makes good your claim.”

“Assign to us one particular room, and you Greeks another,” said the Chinese.

The two rooms faced each other, door to door, the Chinese taking one and the Greeks the other. The Chinese demanded of the king a hundred colors, so that worthy monarch opened up his treasury and every morning the Chinese received of his bounty their ration of colors from the treasury.

“No hues or colours are suitable for our work,” said the Greeks. “All we require is to get rid of the rust.”

So saying, they shut the door and set to work polishing; smooth and unsullied as the sky they became.

There is a way from multi-coloricity to colorlessness: color is like the clouds, colorlessness is a moon. Whatever radiance and splendor you see in the clouds, be sure that it comes from the stars, the moon and the sun.

When the Chinese had completed their work they began drumming for joy. The king came in and saw the pictures there; the moment he encountered that sight, it stole away his wits. Then he advanced toward the Greeks, who thereupon removed the intervening curtain so that the reflection of the Chinese masterpieces struck upon the walls they had scoured clean of rust. All that the king had seen in the Chinese room showed lovelier here, so that his very eyes were snatched out of their sockets.

—“Tales from the Masnavi” translated by A.J. Arberry

The word “ceramics” is derived from the Greek **kerames** meaning “baked clay.” With this definition it may be difficult to draw any hard and fast line between Terra Cotta, Tile and Pottery, but the term “Pottery” is used mostly for objects of baked clay, utilitarian or ceremonial, and often etched or painted.

Joseph Needham has been writing volumes on “Chinese Technology” and only now his sections on Ceramics are appearing. There is nothing like that in the studies on Greek civilizations, yet.

Too often we have made an “extensional” use of the term “Chinese” and an “intentional” one of the Greek. Any culture that has arisen in territorial China, which is vast, is known as “Chinese.”

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The term "Greek" has too often been confined not only to a comparatively small area, but to a narrow interpretation in time, space and race. If we interpreted the term "Greek" to include not only **Hellenic, Hellenic** and **Hellenistic** but derivations thereof in time, space and race as we interpret "Chinese Culture" we might determine that writers have been working in a rather small "mental space." Even if much of Greek culture came from Egypt or the Orient, we have not yet given it proper consideration. And this would become evident if we researched what we call "Greek Music."

A number of years ago I met the late Dr. Aga-Oglu when he was working at the Detroit Museum of Arts under Dr. Heil, later transferred to San Francisco. (Dr. Aga-Oglu also visited the De Young Museum with the Ford collection of Rugs but did not stay.) His pride was a work in "Turkish Mechanics." It had a number of tools and devices which, at the time of publication (Fifteenth century) were not known in Western Europe. It is quite evident that Leonardo had access to this, or a **similar work** because some of his records show the inclusion of and advance on the material in "Turkish Mechanics."

Our "bourgeois" attitude has at times overemphasized the esthetic elements in the Arts and diminished the importance of tools. This attitude has not been changed in all our social and psychological revolutions. The artist seems always to be placed among the artisan who is placed above the tool-maker. One does not challenge the hierarchy but this has left the history of all the Arts, Fine, Applied, etc. without consideration of the tools. Even Domestic Arts do not always give due consideration to tools and techniques.

In a complete essay on "Pottery" one should take into consideration such companionate Arts as Mosaics, Glass-Making and Ornament, and the whole field of Furniture and Furnishings in the larger content. One must indicate rather, that there will be the same opportunities.

There is a picture of the "Potters Kiln" on page 309. This is very similar to the Chinese kiln of an early area. It is evident that the Greeks knew far more of oxidation processes than of Reduction. In this respect they were far behind the Etruscans. The Etruscans, and their descendents, have been specialists in the world of Charcoal. The Greeks evidently stuck to Wood.

There have not been studies of the Near East Art prior to the introduction of the wheel, as there are now in Japan. In this respect the work of Schleimann has followed the geographical efforts of this great man, rather than being entirely circumferential to Troy itself.

The result is that we have a "Pallas Athene" Art, full blown during what we still persist in calling the "Dark Ages" of Greece. Our specimens of the Eighth Century B.C. show aesthetically and technically a very high art.

If one looks at contemporary Bulgarian or Turkish Ceramics, one fails to see anything better, or even as good as these ancient pieces. A culture that tends to downgrade "geometric forms" and then creates "Cubism" lacks in perspective and judgment. Not only that, there are many Modigliani types in these early periods.

Psychologically the "Dark Ages" arts look as if they were approaching a climax or zenith while Modigliani looks as if we had passed such points. This conclusion has no merits and shows the imperfection of analytical points of view.

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In general, and this is a very poor statement, the Pottery technique did not change much during the centuries. Or rather, in restricting our consideration of Greek civilization and Greek art to a period prior to the Roman conquest and severing it from Byzantine cultures, we are unable to make a true parallel with the Chinese.

Actually Greek Pottery has served in place of other historical records, such as Painting because of the ever increasing efficiency in the painting on the vases. It keeps on improving and improving. It also shows us pictures and themes which were undoubtedly used in the Fine Arts, but which have been lost.

When oxidation is carried to its limits, there is no danger of further chemical deterioration. And when there are paintings or slips there is also physical protection. One characteristic of Greek Ceramics is that the pieces are mechanically fragile, can be easily broken; they are functionally excellent. They seem to be water-proof, wind-proof, time-proof.

In this respect the painting is far more durable than that in many other lands and cultures. True, we seem to be restricted to the "iron palette." Ores of Copper, Manganese and even Sodium do not seem to be used. Lead, yes. But this field has still to be investigated.

The Proto-Attic period, in the early part of the Seventh Century B.C. further discountenances some of our "Dark Age" traditions. Stories appear from traditions and while we look for written records of these stories in the early Greek dramas, we find the themes already used on vases. For example, there is an Attic amphora with sphinx, from the Agora, late seventh century B.C. Some of the tales from both Thebes and Athens must have been well known before that time.

What is called the "Proto-Corinthian Period" already shows the union between sculpture and Ceramics. We see forms which need much more than the mere wheel and handicraft. Richter thinks there was an influence of handicrafts and this can open up volumes.

One is not going to write here on the various forms of Vases, their purposes and values as this has already been well done. Where the Chinese improved techniques in firing, kilns, slips and finishes, the Greeks seem to have improved the Painting, Design and traditional Glaze.

Personally I do not find any drawings finer than those which appeared in the still "dark" Seventh century B.C. The Terra Cotta designing was still more "primitive" but in the sense that the term is used in Art, not in Anthropology.

According to Miss Richter, civilization, or a climax, appeared about the year 550 B.C. There was a much better knowledge of physiology and dynamics. The themes remain mythological. Even historical themes seem to have been "mythized," or symbolized.

We seem to be in a period something like that of the Han in China where gradually folk elements enter, showing the ways of humanity rather than of the gods and heroes. There is more attention to detail without any recourse to enlargement of Figures. Today we might call this "realism," a much abused term.

There are elements of perspective, as we know it. But we are apt to confuse our particular form of perspective, based on an alteration of Euclidean space as "the perspective." The rise of the Drama

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brought in more elements from plays and the progress in Textiles and Clothing gave artists principles which they followed.

The dark backgrounds on the Vases from South Italy suggest the learning of techniques from the Etruscans.

I think the Hellenistic period has not been given enough consideration. More attention too must be paid to the Cyclades. Our contemporary techniques enable us to reconstruct much from single artifacts.

While "Greek Art" is an excellent book—no criticism has been made of it—it should be used as an introduction to a vast field which needs further research.

In the cases of Glass and Mosaics, we have continued as a culture to a stream of evolution going on into the whole Byzantine period. No doubt artistic development is not always in a straight line or volute, but may rise and fall. Painting and Drawing actually fell, Glass and Glazing improved and so did Mosaics. The answers as to Pottery still await further investigation.