

## The Ancient World



Fig. 554 Wall painting with three horses facing one another, Chauvet, Ardèche Gorge, France, c. 30,000 BCE.  
Corbis / Sygma

The following chapters are designed to help place the works of art so far discussed in *A World of Art* into a broader historical context. The brief chronological survey and illustrations trace the major developments and movements in art from the earliest to the most recent times.

**THE EARLIEST ART**

Preserved in the depths of approximately fifty caves in France and Spain are thousands of wall paintings, most depicting animals—including large and powerful creatures that were rarely, if ever, hunted. The oldest known of these works, discovered in the deep recesses of the Chauvet cave in southern France, are also the most

120,000 BCE

Modern humans begin  
world migration  
100,000 BCE

Cave paintings in  
France and Spain  
30,000 BCE

120,000 BCE  
Modern humans  
emerge in Africa

8000 BCE  
Beginnings of agriculture  
in Middle East



**Fig. 555** *Venus of Willendorf*, Lower Austria, c. 25,000–20,000 BCE. Limestone, height 4½ in. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.



**Fig. 556** Basin, Majiayao culture, Majiayao phase, Gansu Province, China, c. 3000–2700 BCE

Earthenware with painted decoration, diameter 11 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Anonymous Loan (L. 1996.55.6).

Dorling Kindersley Media Library © Judith Miller / Doris Kindersley / Wallis and Wallis

advanced in their realism, suggesting the artists' desire to imitate the actual appearance of the animals represented. The artists have given the animals a sense of volume by using gradations of color—a technique not found in other cave paintings (Fig. 554). The artists further defined the animals' contours by scraping the wall so that the beasts seem to stand out against a deeper white background. Art, the Chauvet drawings suggest, does not evolve in a linear progression from awkward beginnings to more sophisticated representations. Apparently, from earliest times, human beings could choose to represent the world naturalistically or not, and the choice not to closely imitate reality should not necessarily be attributed to lack of skill or sophistication but to other, more culturally driven factors.

Early artists also created sculptural objects—small carved figures of people (mostly women) and animals. These reflect a more abstract and less naturalistic approach to representation, as illustrated in the

so-called *Venus of Willendorf* (Fig. 555). This limestone statuette was found at Willendorf, in modern Austria, and named by archaeologists after a later goddess. Here the breasts, belly, and genitals are exaggerated and the face lacks defining features, suggesting a connection to fertility and child-bearing. We know, too, that the figurine was originally painted in red ochre, symbolic of menses. And, her navel is not carved; rather, it is a natural indentation in the stone. Whoever carved her seems to have recognized, in the raw stone, a connection to the origins of life. But such figures may have served other purposes as well. Perhaps they were dolls, guardian figures, or images of beauty in a cold, hostile world, where having body fat might have made the difference between survival and death.

As the Ice Age waned, around 8000 BCE, humans began to domesticate animals and cultivate food grains, practices that started in the Middle East and spread slowly across Greece and Europe for the next 6,000 years, reaching Britain last. Agriculture also developed in the southern part of China and spread to Japan and Southeast Asia; it arose independently in the Americas; and in Africa, herding, fishing, and farming communities dotted the continent. Gradually, Neolithic—or New Stone Age—peoples abandoned temporary shelters for permanent structures built of wood, brick, and stone. Religious rituals were regularized in shrines dedicated to that purpose. Crafts—pottery and weaving, in particular—began to flourish.

6500 BCE

Megalith construction begins  
in western Europe  
4000 BCE

6500 BCE  
Millet cultivation in Yellow River  
Valley of China



**Fig. 557** Beaker with ibex, dogs, and long-necked birds, from southwest Iran, c. 5000–4000 BCE.

Art Resource, NY / Musée de Louvre

The Neolithic cultures that flourished along the banks of the Yellow River in China beginning in about 5000 BCE also produced large quantities of pottery (Fig. 556). These cultures were based on growing rice and millet (grains from the Near East would not be introduced for another 3,000 years), and this agricultural emphasis spawned towns and villages. In Gansu province, Neolithic pots began to add painted decoration to their work. The flowing, curvilinear forms painted on the shallow basin illustrated here include “hand” motifs on the outside and round, almost eyelike forms that flow into each other on the inside.

Some of the most remarkable Neolithic painted pottery comes from Susa, on the Iranian plateau. The patterns on one particular beaker (Fig. 557) from around 5000 to 4000 BCE are highly stylized animals, the largest of which is an ibex, a popular decorative feature of prehistoric ceramics from Iran. Associated with the hunt, the ibex may have been a symbol of



**Fig. 558** Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain (Wiltshire), England, c. 2000 BCE.

Spencer Grant / Photo Edit

plenty. The front and hind legs of the ibex are rendered by two triangles, the tail hangs behind it like a feather, the head is oddly disconnected from the body, and the horns rise in a large, exaggerated arc to encircle a decorative circular form. Hounds race around the band above the ibex, and wading birds form a decorative band across the beaker's top.

In Northern Europe, especially in Britain and France, a distinctive kind of monumental stone architecture made its appearance late in the Neolithic period. Known as **megaliths**, or “big stones,” these works were constructed without the use of mortar and represent the most basic form of architectural construction. Without doubt, the most famous megalithic structure in the world is the cromlech known as Stonehenge (Fig. 558), on the Salisbury Plain about 100 miles west of present-day London. A henge is a circle surrounded by a ditch with built-up embankments, presumably for fortification. The site at Stonehenge reflects four major building periods, extending from about 2750 to 1500 BCE. By about 2100 BCE, most of the elements visible today were in place.

The original purpose of Stonehenge remains unknown, although its orientation toward the rising sun at the summer solstice indicates a connection to planting and harvest. Nonetheless, the effort required for its construction suggests that the late Neolithic peoples who built it were extremely social beings, capable of great cooperation. They worked together

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**Fig. 559** Worshippers and deities from the Abu Temple, Tell Asmar, Iraq, c. 2900–2600 BCE. Limestone, alabaster, and gypsum, height of tallest figure 30 in. Excavated by the Iraq Expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, February 13, 1934. Courtesy Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

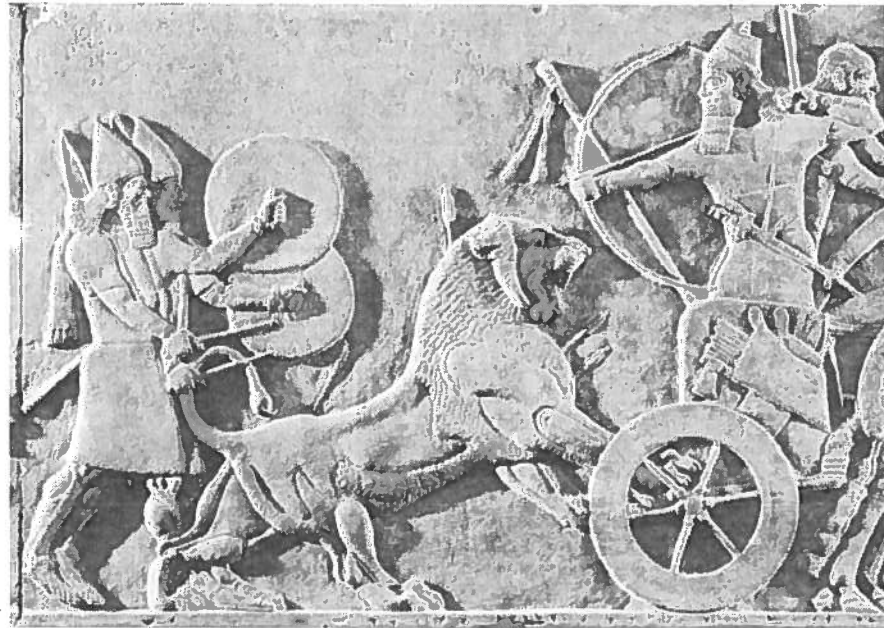
not only to find the giant stones that rise at the site, but also to quarry, transport, and raise them. Theirs was, in other words, a culture of some magnitude and no small skill. It was a culture capable of both solving great problems and organizing itself in the name of creating a great social center.

### MESOPOTAMIAN CULTURES

Between 4000 and 3000 BCE, irrigation techniques were developed on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, allowing for more intensive agriculture and population growth. In the southern plains of Mesopotamia, a people known as the Sumerians developed writing, schools, libraries, and written laws. Ancient Sumer consisted of a dozen or more city-states, each with a population of between 10,000 and 50,000, and each with its own reigning deity. Each of

the local gods had the task of pleading the case of their particular communities with the other gods, who controlled the wind, the rain, and so on.

Communication with the god occurred in a ziggurat, a pyramidal temple structure consisting of successive platforms with outside staircases and a shrine at the top (see Fig. 454). An early Mesopotamian text calls the ziggurat “the bond between heaven and earth.” Visitors—almost certainly limited to members of the priesthood—might bring an offering of food or an animal to be sacrificed to the resident god. Visitors often placed in the temple a statue that represented themselves in a state of perpetual prayer. A group of such statues, found in the shrine room of the ziggurat at Tell Asmar, near modern Baghdad, includes ten men and two women (Fig. 559). They have huge eyes, inlaid with lapis lazuli (a blue semiprecious stone) or



**Fig. 561** *Assurnasirpal II Killing Lions*, from the palace complex of Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq), c. 850 BCE. Alabaster, height approximately 39 in. The British Museum, London.

Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

**Fig. 560** *Stele of Hammurabi*, c. 1760 BCE. Basalt, height of stele approximately 7 ft.; height of relief 28 in. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

JN / Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

shell. The figures clasp their hands in front of them, suggestive of prayer when empty and of making an offering when holding a cup. Some scholars believe that the two tallest figures represent Abu, god of vegetation, and his consort, due to their especially large eyes, but all of the figures are probably worshippers.

One of the most influential Mesopotamian cultures was that of Babylon, which rose to power under the leadership of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century BCE. The so-called Law Code of Hammurabi is inscribed on a giant *stèle*—an upright stone slab, carved with a commemorative design or inscription. It is a record of decisions and decrees made by Hammurabi (Fig. 560) over the course of some 40 years of his reign. In 282 separate “articles” which cover both sides of the basalt monument, the stele

celebrates Hammurabi’s sense of justice and the wisdom of his rule. Atop the stele, Hammurabi receives the blessing of Shamash, the sun god, notable for the rays of light that emerge from his shoulders. The god is much larger than Hammurabi; in fact, he is to Hammurabi as Hammurabi is to his people. Hammurabi’s Code was repeatedly copied for over a thousand years, establishing the rule of law in Mesopotamia for a millennium.

After the fall of Babylon in 1595 BCE, victim of a sudden invasion of Hittites from Turkey, only the Assyrians, who lived around the city of Assur in the north, managed to maintain a continuing cultural identity. By the time Assurnasirpal II came to power, in 883 BCE, the Assyrians dominated the entire region. Assurnasirpal II built a magnificent capital at Kalhu, on the Tigris River, surrounded by nearly 5 miles of walls, 120 feet thick and 42 feet high. A surviving inscription tells us that 69,574 people were invited by Assurnasirpal to celebrate the city’s dedication. Many of its walls were decorated with alabaster reliefs, including a series of depictions of *Assurnasirpal Killing Lions* (Fig. 561). The scene depicts several consecutive actions at once: As soldiers drive the lion toward the king from the left, he shoots it.

Sumerians brew beer from barley  
3000–2500 BCE



**EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION**

At about the same time that Sumerian culture developed in Mesopotamia, Egyptian society began to flourish along the Nile River. The Nile flooded almost every year, leaving behind rich deposits of fertile soil that could be easily planted once the floodwater receded. The cycle of flood and sun made Egypt one of the most productive cultures in the ancient world and one of the most stable. For 3,000 years, from 3100 BCE until the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra by the

Roman general Octavian in 31 BCE, Egypt's institutions and culture remained remarkably unchanged. Its stability contrasted sharply with the conflicts and shifts in power that occurred in Mesopotamia.

Egyptian culture was dedicated to providing a home for the *ka*, that part of the human being that defines personality and that survives life on earth after death. The enduring nature of the *ka* required that artisans decorate tombs with paintings that the spirit could enjoy after death. Small servant figures

3000 BCE

2500 BCE  
Great Sphinx and  
Pyramids of Giza



Fig. 562 *Palette of King Narmer* (front and back), Hierakonpolis, Upper Egypt, c. 3000 BCE  
Slate, height 25 in.  
Art Resource, NY.

might be carved from wood to serve the departed in the afterlife. The *ka* could find a home in a statue of the deceased. Mummification—the preservation of the body by treating it with chemical solutions and then wrapping it in linen—provided a similar home, as did the elaborate coffins in which the mummy was placed. The pyramids (see Fig. 453) were, of course, the largest of the resting places designed to house the *ka*.

The enduring quality of the *ka* accounts for the unchanging way in which, over the centuries, Egyptian figures, especially the pharaohs, were represented. A canon of ideal proportions was developed that was almost universally applied. The figure is, in effect, fitted into a grid. The feet rest on the bottom line of the grid, the ankles are placed on the first horizontal line,

the knee on the sixth, the navel on the thirteenth (higher on the female), elbows on the fourteenth, and the shoulders on the nineteenth. These proportions are used in the *Palette of King Narmer* (Fig. 562), an object designed for grinding pigments and making body or eye paint. This palette was not meant for actual use but rather was a gift to a deity placed in a temple. The tablet celebrates the victory of Upper Egypt, led by King Narmer, over Lower Egypt, in a battle that united the country. Narmer is depicted holding an enemy by the hair, ready to finish him off. On the other side, he is seen reviewing the beheaded bodies of his foes. Narmer's pose is typical of Egyptian art. The lower body is in profile, his torso and shoulders full front, his head in profile again, though a single eye is portrayed frontally.

1900 BCE  
Egypt begins trading with  
Aegean civilizations



**Fig. 563** *King Khafre*, Giza, Egypt, c. 2530 BCE.  
Diorite, height 66 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.  
Araldo de Luca / Index Boreca Iconografica

The rigorous geometry governing Egyptian representation is apparent in the statue of Khafre (Fig. 563). Khafre's frontal pose is almost as rigid as the throne upon which he sits. It is as if he had been composed as a block of right angles. If it was the king's face that made his statue recognizable, it is also true that his official likeness might change several times during his reign, suggesting that the purpose of the royal sculpture was not just portraiture but also the creation of the ideal image of kingship.

For a brief period, in the fourteenth century BCE, under the rule of the Emperor Akhenaten, the conventions of Egyptian art and culture were transformed. Akhenaten declared an end to traditional Egyptian religious practices, relaxing especially the longstanding preoccupation with the *ka*, and introducing a form

of monotheism (the worship of a single god) into polytheistic Egypt. The sun god, manifested as a radiant sun disc—the Aten—embodied all the characteristics of the other Egyptian deities, and thus made them superfluous. Though the traditional standardized proportions of the human body were only slightly modified, artists seemed more intent on depicting special features of the human body—hands and fingers, the details of a face. Nowhere is this attention to detail more evident than in the famous bust of Akhenaten's queen, Nefertiti (Fig. 564). Both the graceful curve of her neck and her almost completely relaxed look make for what seems to be a stunningly naturalistic piece of work, though it remains impossible to say if this is a true likeness or an idealized portrait.



**Fig. 564** *Queen Nefertiti*, Tell el Amarna, c. 1365 BCE.  
Painted limestone, height 19 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin.  
Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

2500 BCE  
Cities of Harappa and  
Mohenjo-daro flourish in India

## RIVER VALLEY SOCIETIES OF INDIA AND CHINA

Indian civilization was born along the Indus River around 2700 BCE in an area known as Sind—from which the words *India* and *Hindu* originate. The earliest Indian peoples lived in at least two great cities in the Indus valley, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. By the early years of the second millennium they were adept at bronze casting, and, as the stone sculpture torso of a “priest-king” (Fig. 565) from Mohenjo-daro demonstrates, they were accomplished artists. This figure, with his neatly trimmed head, is a forceful representation of a powerful personality.

Harappan civilization began to collapse around 1800 BCE, perhaps as the result of a prolonged



**Fig. 565** Torso of a “priest-king,” from Mohenjo-daro, Indus valley civilization, c. 200–190 BCE.

Steatite, height 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan.  
Scala / Art Resource, NY



**Fig. 566** Five-eared *ding* with dragon pattern, c. 1200 BCE.

Bronze, height 48 in., diameter at mouth 32 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
Chunhua County Cultural Museum.

Art Resource, NY

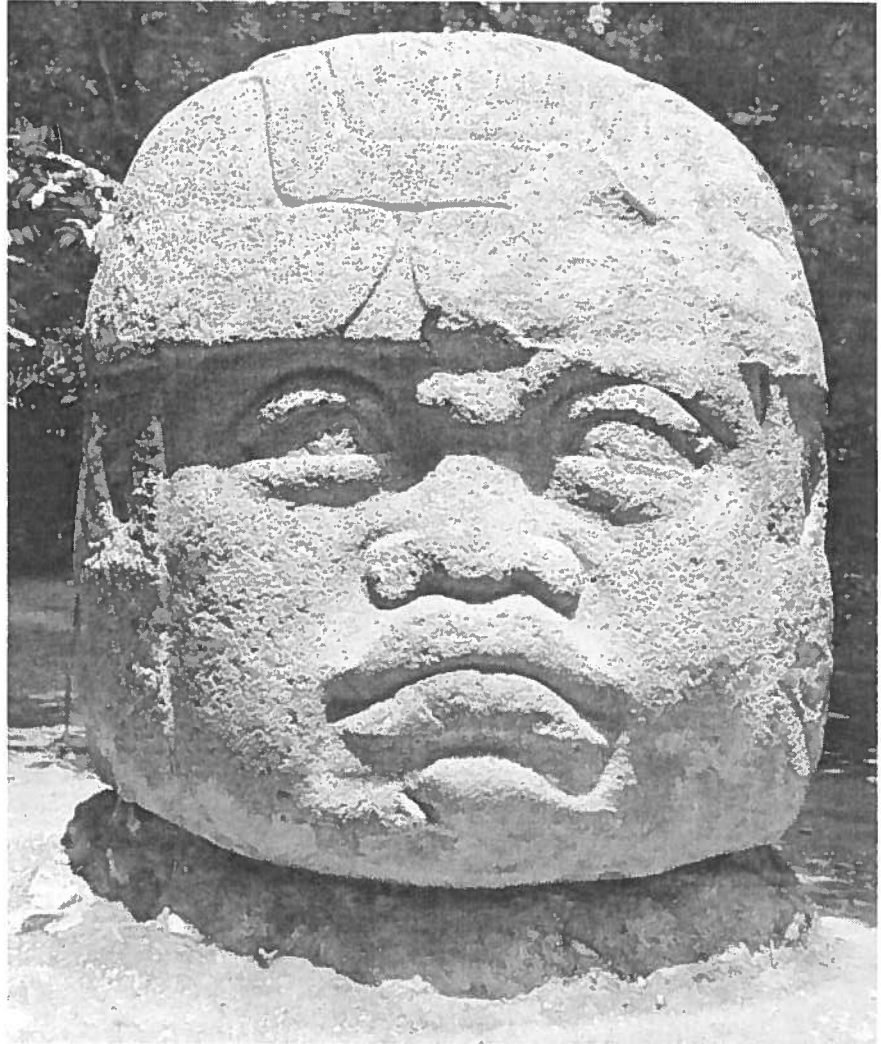
drought, and by 1000 BCE its cities had been abandoned. During its decline, the Vedic people, who called themselves Aryans, moved into the Indus Valley. Over time, their numbers increased and they spread east to the Ganges River Valley as well as north and south. Their cultural heritage would provide the basis for the development of Hinduism and Hindu art, as we will see in Chapter 18.

In China, the Shang dynasty ruled the Yellow River Valley for most of the second millennium BCE, and Shang kings displayed their power with treasures made of jade, shells, bone, and lacquer. The great art form of the Shang dynasty was the richly decorated bronze vessel (Fig. 566), made by a casting technique as advanced as any ever used. This vessel was created to hold food during ceremonies dedicated to the worship and memory of ancestors. Many Shang vessels are decorated with dragons, which for the Shang symbolized royal authority, strength, and fertility. Their symmetry in turn symbolized the balance the Shang leadership brought to the state.

## COMPLEX SOCIETIES IN THE AMERICAS

As early as 1500 BCE, a group known as the Olmec came to inhabit most of the area that we now refer to as Mesoamerica, from the southern tip of Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador. They built huge ceremonial precincts in the middle of their communities and developed many of the characteristic features of later Mesoamerican culture, such as pyramids, ball courts, mirror-making, and a calendar system.

The Olmec built their cities on great earthen platforms, probably designed to protect their ceremonial centers from rain and flood. On these platforms, they erected giant pyramidal mounds, where an elite group of ruler-priests lived, supported by the general population that farmed the rich, sometimes swampy land that surrounded them. These pyramids may have been an architectural reference to the volcanoes that dominate Mexico, or they may have been tombs. Excavations may eventually tell us. At La Venta, very near the present-day city of Villahermosa, three colossal stone heads stood guard over the ceremonial center on the south end of the platform (Fig. 567), and a fourth guarded the north end by itself. Each head weighs between 11 and 24 tons, and each bears a unique emblem on its headgear, which is similar to old-style American leather football helmets. At other Olmec sites—San Lorenzo, for instance—as many as eight of these heads have been found, some up to 12 feet tall. They are carved of basalt, although the nearest basalt quarry is 50 miles to the south in the Tuxtla



**Fig. 567** Colossal head, from La Venta, Mexico, Olmec culture, c. 900–500 BCE. Basalt, height 7 ft. 5 in. La Venta Park, Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico. Susan Murphy, Getty Images, Inc. / Stone-Allstock.

Mountains. They were evidently at least partially carved at the quarry, then loaded onto rafts and floated downriver to the Gulf of Mexico before going back upriver to their final positions. The stone heads are generally believed to be portraits of Olmec rulers, and they all share the same facial features, including wide, flat noses and thick lips. They suggest that the ruler was the culture's principal mediator with the gods, literally larger than life.

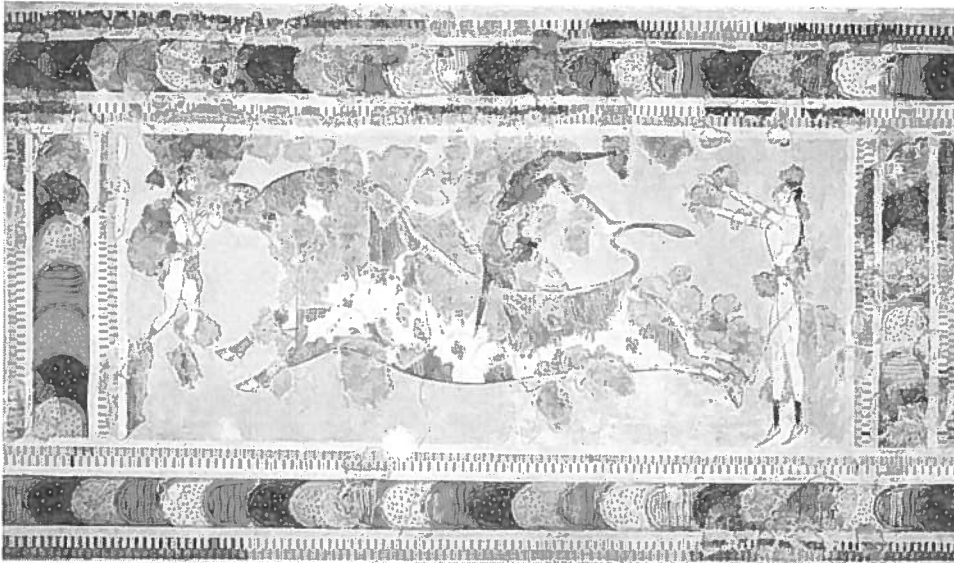


Fig. 568 The "Toreador" fresco, Knossos, Crete, c. 1500 BCE. Height, including upper border, approximately 24½ in. Archaeological Museum, Iraklion, Crete. Studio Kontos Photostock

## AGEAN CIVILIZATIONS

Impressive centers of power and wealth also appeared in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly those of the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete and the Mycenae on the Greek Peloponnese, the southern peninsula of Greece. The origin of the Minoans is unclear—they may have arrived on the island as early as 6000 BCE—but their culture reached its peak between 1600 and 1400 BCE. The so-called "Toreador" fresco (Fig. 568) does not actually depict a bullfight, as its modern title suggests. Instead, a youthful acrobat can be seen vaulting over the bull's back as one maiden holds the animal's horns and another waits to catch him (traditionally, as in Egyptian art, women are depicted with light skin, men with a darker complexion). The three almost nude figures appear to be toying with a charging bull in what may be a ritual activity, connected perhaps to a rite of passage, or in what may simply be a sporting event, designed to entertain the royal court.

In Minoan culture, the bull was an animal of sacred significance. Legend has it that the wife of King Minos, after whom the culture takes its name, gave

birth to a creature half-human and half-bull—the Minotaur. Minos had a giant labyrinth, or maze, constructed to house the creature, to whom Athenian youths and maidens were sacrificed until it was killed by the hero Theseus. The legend of the labyrinth probably arose in response to the intricate design of the palaces built for the Minoan kings.

It is unclear why Minoan culture abruptly ended in approximately 1450 BCE. Great earthquakes and volcanic eruptions may have destroyed the civilization, or perhaps it fell victim to the warlike Mycenaeans from



Fig. 569 *The Warrior Vase*, Mycenae, c. 1200 BCE. Height approximately 14 in. National Museum, Athens. Scala / Art Resource, NY



The City-States of Ancient Greece

the mainland, whose culture flourished between 1400 and 1200 BCE. There was a culture dominated by military values. In *The Warrior Vase* (Fig. 569), we see Mycenaean soldiers marching to war, perhaps to meet the Dorian invaders who destroyed their civilization soon after 1200 BCE. The Dorian weapons were made of iron and therefore were superior to the softer bronze Mycenaean spears. It is this culture, immortalized by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that sacked the great Trojan city of Troy. The Mycenaeans built stone fortresses on the hilltops of the Peloponnese. They buried their dead in so-called beehive tombs, which, dome-shaped, were full of gold and silver, including masks of the royal dead, a burial practice similar to that of the Egyptians.

## GREEK ART

The rise of the Greek city-state, or *polis*, marks the moment when Western culture begins to celebrate its own human strengths and powers—the creative genius of the mind itself—over the power of nature. The Western world's gods now became personified, taking human form and assuming human weaknesses. Though immortal, they were otherwise versions of ourselves, no longer angry beasts or natural phenomena such as the earth, the sun, or the rain.

In about 1200 BCE, just after the fall of Mycenae, the Greek world consisted of various tribes separated by the geographical features of the peninsula, with its deep bays, narrow valleys, and jagged mountains (see the map of Greece above). These tribes soon

700 BCE

Confucius in China  
551–479 BCE

623–543 BCE  
Buddha in India

539 BCE  
Cyrus the Great establishes the  
Persian Empire



Fig. 570 The Acropolis today, viewed from the southwest, Athens, Greece. Greek National Tourism Organization.

developed into independent and often warring city-states, with their own constitutions, coinage, and armies. We know that in 776 BCE these feuding states declared a truce in order to hold the first Olympic games, a moment so significant that the Greeks later took it as the starting point of their history.

The human figure celebrated in athletic contests is one of the most important subjects of Greek art as well, and the Greeks showed a keen interest in depicting the human form in highly naturalistic detail. By the fifth century BCE, this interest in all aspects of the human condition was reflected throughout Greek culture. The physician Hippocrates systematically studied human disease, and the historian Herodotus, in his account of the Persian Wars, began to chronicle human history. Around 500 BCE in Athens, all free male citizens were included in the political system, and democracy—from *demos*, meaning “people,” and *kratia*, meaning “power”—was born. It was not quite democracy as we think of it today: Slavery was considered natural, and women were excluded from political life. Nevertheless, the concept of individual freedom was cherished. And by the fourth century BCE, the philosopher Plato had developed theories not only about social and political relations but also about education and aesthetic pleasure.

The values of the Greek city-state were embodied in its temples. The temple was usually situated on an elevated site above the city, and the acropolis, from

*akros*, meaning “top,” and *polis*, “city,” was conceived as the center of civic life. The crowning achievement of Greek architecture is the complex of buildings on the Acropolis in Athens (Fig. 570), which was built to replace those destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE. Construction began in about 450 BCE under the leadership of the great Athenian statesman, Pericles. The central building of the new complex, designed by Iktinos and Kallikrates, was the Parthenon, dedicated to the city’s namesake, Athena Parthenos, the goddess of wisdom. A Doric temple of the grandest scale, it is composed entirely of marble. At its center was an enormous ivory and gold statue of Athena, sculpted by Phidias, who was in charge of all the ornamentation and sculpture for the project. The Athena is long since lost, and we can imagine his achievement only by considering the sculpture on the building’s pediment (see Fig. 373) and its friezes, all of which reflect Phidias’s style and maybe his design.

The Phidian style is marked by its naturalness. The human figure often assumes a relaxed, seemingly effortless pose, or it may be caught in the act of movement, athletic or casual. In either case, the precision with which the anatomy has been rendered is remarkable. The relief of *Nike* (Fig. 571), goddess of victory, from the balustrade of the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis in Athens, is a perfect example of the Phidian style. As Nike bends to take off her sandal, the drapery both reveals and conceals the body

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509 BCE  
Foundation of  
Roman Republic

500–300 BCE  
Golden Age of Greece

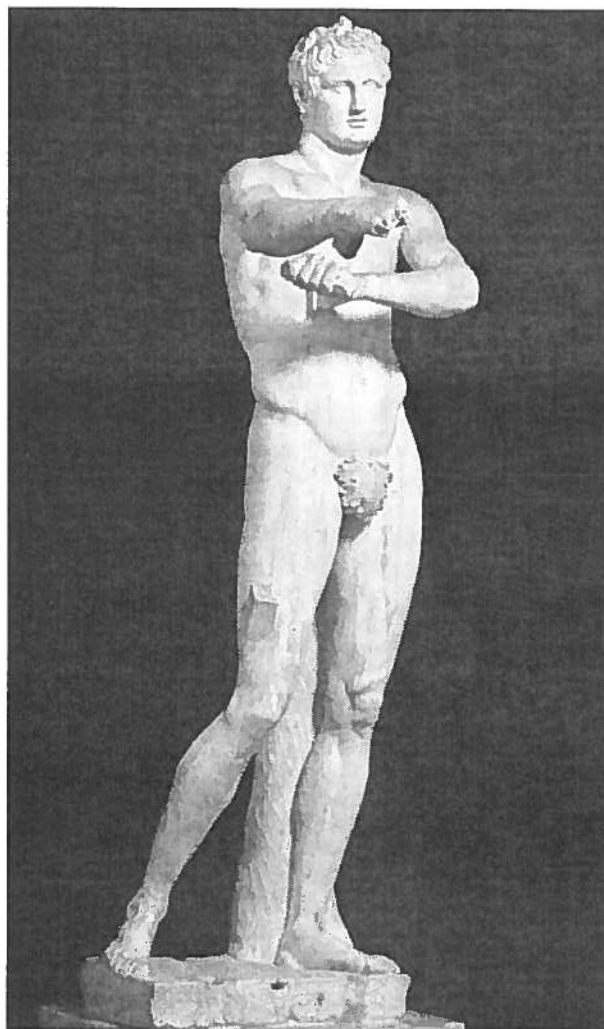


**Fig. 571** *Nike*, from the balustrade of the Temple of Athena Nike, c. 410–407 BCE. Marble, height 42 in. Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece.

Nimatallah / Art Resource, NY.

beneath. Sometimes appearing to be transparent, sometimes dropping in deep folds and hollows, it contributes importantly to the sense of reality conveyed by the sculpture. It is as if we can see the body literally push forward out of the stone and press against the drapery.

The Greek passion for individualism, reason, and accurate observation of the world continued even after the disastrous defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE, which led to a great loss of Athenian power. In 338 BCE, the army of Philip, King of Macedon, conquered Greece, and after Philip's death two years later, his son, Alexander the Great, came to power. Because Philip greatly admired Athenian culture, Alexander was educated by the philosopher Aristotle, who persuaded the young king to impose Greek culture throughout his



**Fig. 572** *Apoxyomenos (The Scraper)*, Roman copy of an original Greek bronze by Lysippos, c. 350–325 BCE. Marble, height 6 ft. 8½ in.

Vatican Museums & Galleries, Rome.

Scala / Art Resource, NY.

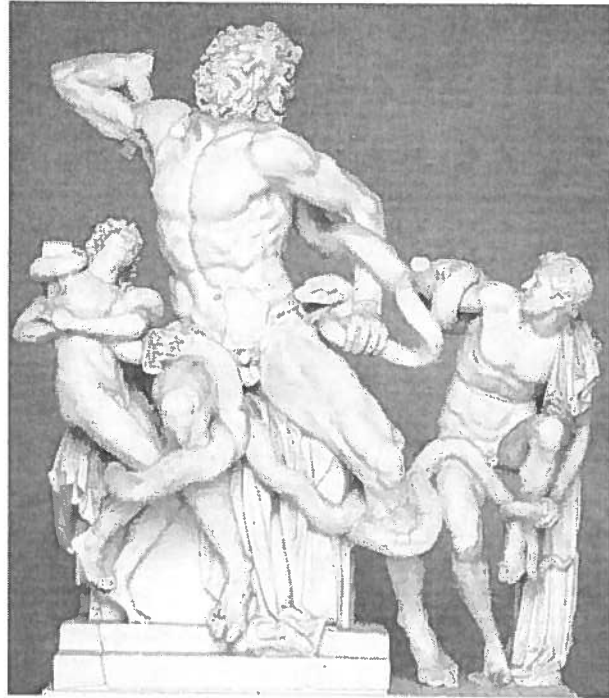
empire. **Hellenism**, or the culture of Greece, thus came to dominate the Western world. The court sculptor to Alexander the Great was Lysippos, known to us only through later Roman copies of his work. Lysippos challenged the Classical canon of proportion created by Polykleitos (see Fig. 203), creating sculptures with smaller heads and slenderer bodies that lent his figures a sense of greater height. In a Roman copy of a lost original by Lysippos known as the *Apoxyomenos* (Fig. 572), or *The Scraper*, an athlete removes oil and dirt from his body with an instrument



**Fig. 573** *Nike of Samothrace*, c. 190 B.C.E.  
Marble, height approximately 8 ft. Musée du Louvre, Paris.  
Musée du Louvre / Art Resource, NY.

called a *stirgil*. He seems detached from his circumstances, as if recalling his victory, both physically and mentally uncontained by the space in which he stands.

In the sculpture of the fourth century BCE, we discover a graceful, even sensuous, beauty marked by *contrapposto* and three-dimensional realism (see Fig. 372). The depiction of physical beauty becomes an end in itself, and sculpture increasingly seems to be more about the pleasures of seeing than anything else. At the same time, artists strove for an ever-greater degree of realism, and in the sculpture of the Hellenistic Age, we find an increasingly animated and dramatic treatment of the figure. The *Nike of Samothrace* (Fig. 573) is a masterpiece of Hellenistic realism. The goddess has been depicted as she



**Fig. 574** *The Laocoön Group*, Roman copy, perhaps after Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes, first century C.E. Marble, height 7 ft.  
The Vatican Museum, Rome.

Scala / Art Resource, NY

alights on the prow of a victorious war galley, and one can almost feel the wind as it buffets her, and the surf spray that has soaked her garment so that it clings revealingly to her torso.

The swirl of line that was once restricted to drapery overwhelms the entire composition of *The Laocoön Group* (Fig. 574), in which Laocoön, a Trojan priest, and his two sons are overwhelmed by serpents sent by the sea-god Poseidon. We are caught in the midst of the Trojan War. The Greeks have sent the Trojans a giant wooden horse as a “gift.” Inside it are Greek soldiers, and Laocoön suspects as much. And so Poseidon, who favors the Greeks, has chosen to silence Laocoön forever. So theatrical is the group that to many eyes it verges on melodrama, but its expressive aims are undeniable. The sculptor is no longer content simply to represent the figure realistically; sculpture must convey emotion as well.



**Fig. 575** *Portrait of a Boy*, early third century BCE. Bronze, height 9 in. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence.  
Nicola Orsi Battaglini / Ikon.

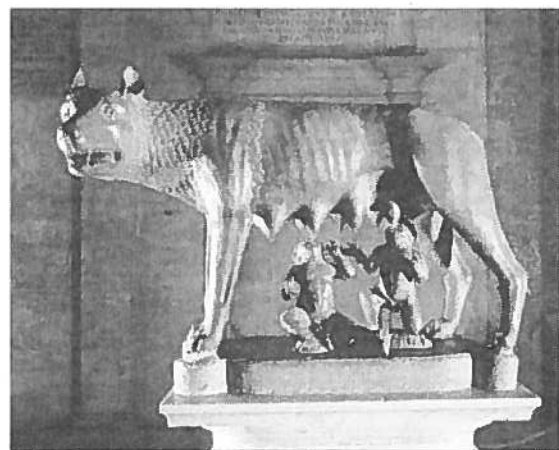
## ROMAN ART

Although the Romans conquered Greece (in 146 BCE), like Philip of Macedon and Alexander, they regarded Greek culture and art as superior to any other. Thus, like the Hellenistic Empire before it, the Roman Empire possessed a distinctly Greek character. The Romans imported thousands of original Greek artworks and had them copied in even greater numbers. In fact, much of what we know today about Greek art we know only through Roman copies. The Greek gods were adapted to the Roman religion, Jupiter bearing a strong resemblance to Zeus, Venus to Aphrodite, and so on. The Romans used the Greek architectural orders in their own buildings and temples, preferring especially the highly decorative Corinthian order. Many, if not most, of Rome's artists were of Greek extraction, though they were "Romanized" to the point of being indistinguishable from the Romans themselves.

Roman art derives, nevertheless, from at least one other source. Around 750 BCE, at about the same time the Greeks first colonized the southern end of the Italian peninsula, the Etruscans, whose language has no relation to any known tongue, and whose origin is somewhat mysterious, established a vital set of

city-states in the area between present-day Florence and Rome. Little remains of the Etruscan cities, which were destroyed and rebuilt by Roman armies in the second and third centuries BCE, and we know the Etruscans' culture largely through their sometimes richly decorated tombs. At Veii, just north of Rome, the Etruscans established a sculptural center that gave them a reputation as the finest metalworkers of the age. They traded widely, and from the sixth century on, a vast array of bronze objects, from statues to hand mirrors, were made for export. Etruscan art was influenced by the Greeks, as the life-size head of the bronze statue (Fig. 575), with its almost melancholy air, makes clear.

The Romans traced their ancestry to the Trojan prince Aeneas, who escaped after the sack of Troy and who appears in Homer's *Iliad*. The city of Rome itself was founded early in Etruscan times—in 753 BCE, the Romans believed—by Romulus and Remus, twins nurtured by a She-Wolf (Fig. 576). Though Romulus and Remus are Renaissance additions to the original Etruscan bronze, the image served as the totem of the city of Rome from the day on which a statue of a she-wolf, possibly this very one, was dedicated on the Capitoline Hill in Rome in 296 BCE. The she-wolf reminded the Romans of the fiercely protective loyalty and power of their motherland.



**Fig. 576** *She-Wolf*, c. 500 BCE.  
Bronze, height 33 1/2 in. Museo Capitolino, Rome.  
Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

265 BCE

Kushite Empire of Africa reaches its pinnacle  
c. 250 BCE

Rome rules entire Mediterranean, after defeat of Carthage  
146 BCE

265 BCE  
Roman Republic rules all Italy

44–14 BCE  
End of Roman Republic, rule of Augustus



The Roman Empire at Its Greatest Extent, c. 180 CE

Beginning in the fifth century BCE, Rome dedicated itself to conquest and created an empire that included all areas surrounding the Mediterranean and that stretched as far north as present-day England (see the map of the Roman Empire above). By the time the Romans conquered Greece, their interest in the accurate portrayal of human features was long established,

and Hellenistic art only supported this tendency. A great ruler was fully capable of idealizing himself as a near-deity, as is evident in the *Augustus of Prima Porta* (Fig. 577), so known because it was discovered at the home of his wife, Livia, at Prima Porta, on the outskirts of Rome. The pose is directly indebted to the *Doryphoros* (Spear Bearer) of Polykleitos (see Fig. 203).



Fig. 577 *Augustus of Prima Porta*, c. 20 BC.

Marble, height 6 ft. 8 in.

Vatican Museums & Galleries, Rome.

SuperStork, Inc.



Fig. 578 *The Arch of Titus*, Rome, c. 81 CE.

Concrete with marble facade, height 50 ft., width 44 ft. 4 in.

Michael Levey, Canal Photobank.

The extended arm points toward an unknown, but presumably greater, future. The military garb announces his role as commander-in-chief. The small Cupid riding a dolphin at his feet makes claim to Augustus's divine descent from Venus.

The perfection of the arch and dome and the development of structural concrete were, as we have seen in Part 3, the Romans' major architectural contributions. But they were also extraordinary monument builders. Upon the death of the emperor Titus, who defeated rebellious Jews in Palestine and sacked the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE, his brother, Domitian, constructed a memorial arch at the highest point on the Sacred Way in Rome to honor his victory (Fig. 578). Originally, this Arch of Titus was topped by a statue of a four-horse chariot and driver. Such **triumphal arches**, as they were called since triumphant armies marched through them, composed of a simple barrel vault enclosed within a rectangle, and enlivened with sculpture and decorative engaged columns, would deeply influence later architecture of the Renaissance, especially the facades of Renaissance cathedrals.



**Fig. 579** Attributed to Apollodorus, *Column of Trajan*, Rome, 113 CE.  
Marble, height originally 128 ft., length of frieze approximately 625 ft.  
Robert Friend / Woodfin Camp and Associates



**Fig. 580** Attributed to Apollodorus, *Lower portion of the Column of Trajan*, Rome, 113 CE.  
Scala / Art Resource, NY

Another remarkable symbol of Roman power is the Column of Trajan (Figs. 579 and 580). Encircled by a spiraling band of relief sculpture 50 inches high and, if it were unwound and stretched out, 625 feet long, the column details the Emperor Trajan's two successful campaigns in present-day Hungary and Romania in the first century BCE. The 150 separate episodes celebrate not only military victories, but Rome's civilizing mission as well.

As the empire solidified its strength under the Pax Romana—150 years of peace initiated by the Emperor Augustus in 27 BCE—a succession of emperors celebrated the glory of the empire in a variety of elaborate public works and monuments, including the

Colosseum and the Pantheon (see Figs. 465 and 467). By the first century CE, Rome's population approached 1 million, with most of its inhabitants living in apartment buildings (an archival record indicates that, at this time, there were only 1,797 private homes in the city). They congregated daily at the Forum, a site originally developed by the Etruscans as a marketplace, but in a plan developed by Julius Caesar and implemented by Augustus, a civic center symbolic of Roman power and grandeur, paved in marble and dominated by colonnaded public spaces, temples, basilicas, and state buildings such as the courts, the archives, and the Curia, or senate house.

Though Rome became extraordinarily wealthy, the empire began to falter after the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE. Invasions of Germanic tribes from the north, Berbers from the south, and Persians from the east wreaked havoc upon

300 BCE  
Cast iron is produced  
in China



**Fig. 581** *Flying Horse Poised on One Leg on a Swallow*, from a tomb at Wuwei, Kansu, Late Han dynasty, second century CE. Bronze, height 13½ in., length 17¾ in. The Exhibition of the Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China. Ench Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

the Empire's economic, administrative, and military structure. By the time the Emperor Constantine decided to move the capital to Byzantium in 323 CE—renaming it Constantinople, today's Istanbul—the empire was hopelessly divided, and the establishment of the new capital only underscored the division.

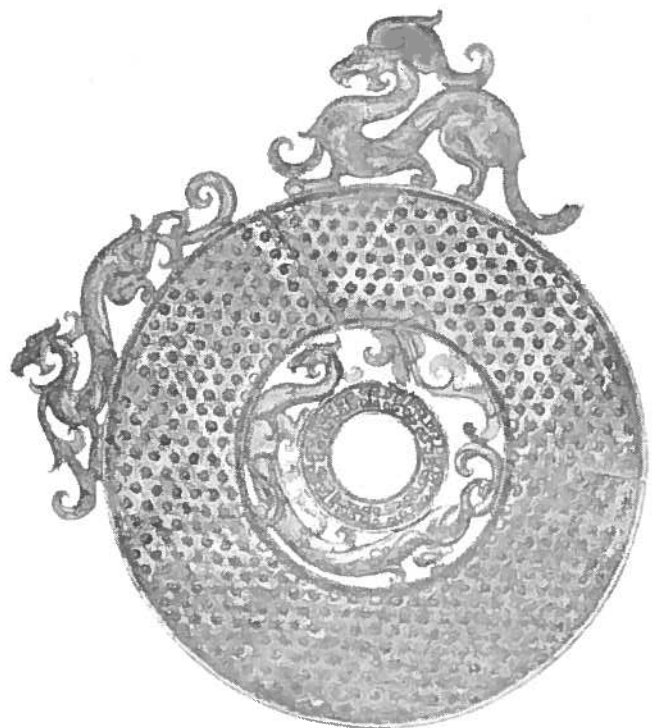
## DEVELOPMENTS IN ASIA

Meanwhile, in Asia, the early artistic traditions developed during the Shang dynasty in China, particularly the casting of bronze (see Fig. 566), were continued. Even as the Roman Empire began to disintegrate, bronze casting in China reached new heights of subtlety and elegance. An example is *Flying Horse Poised on One Leg on a Swallow* (Fig. 581). It is perfectly balanced—almost impossibly so, defying gravity itself—so that it seems to have stolen the ability to fly from the bird beneath its hoof.

Though the traditions of bronze casting remained strong, that part of the world developed no less turbulently than the West. By the sixth century BCE, the Chinese empire had begun to dissolve into a number of warring feudal factions. The resulting political and social chaos brought with it a powerful upsurge of

philosophical and intellectual thought that focused on how to remedy the declining social order. In the context of this debate, Confucius, who died in 479 BCE, 10 years before the birth of Socrates, introduced the idea that high office should be obtained by merit, not birth, and that all social institutions, from the state to the family, should base their authority on loyalty and respect, not sheer might. At the same time, the Taoists developed a philosophy based on the universal principle, or Tao—the achievement by the individual of a pure harmony with nature (for an image embodying the Tao in a later Chinese painting, see Fig. 6).

The jade *Pi*, or disc (Fig. 582), illustrated here symbolizes the desire of the Chinese to unify their country. Made sometime between the sixth and third centuries BCE, the disc is decorated with a dragon and a phoenix, which are today commonly found in the context of the Chinese wedding ceremony, hanging together as a pair over the table at the wedding feast.



**Fig. 582** *Ritual Disc with Dragon Motif (Pi)*. Eastern Zhou dynasty, Warring States period, fourth–third century BCE. Jade, diameter 6½ in. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 33–81.



**Fig. 583** *Lady of Dai with Attendants*, Han dynasty, after 168 BCE. Painted silk banner from the tomb of Dai Hou Fu-ren, Mawangdui Tomb I, Changsha, Hunan, China.

Silk, height 6 ft. 8 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Hunan Museum, Changsha, China

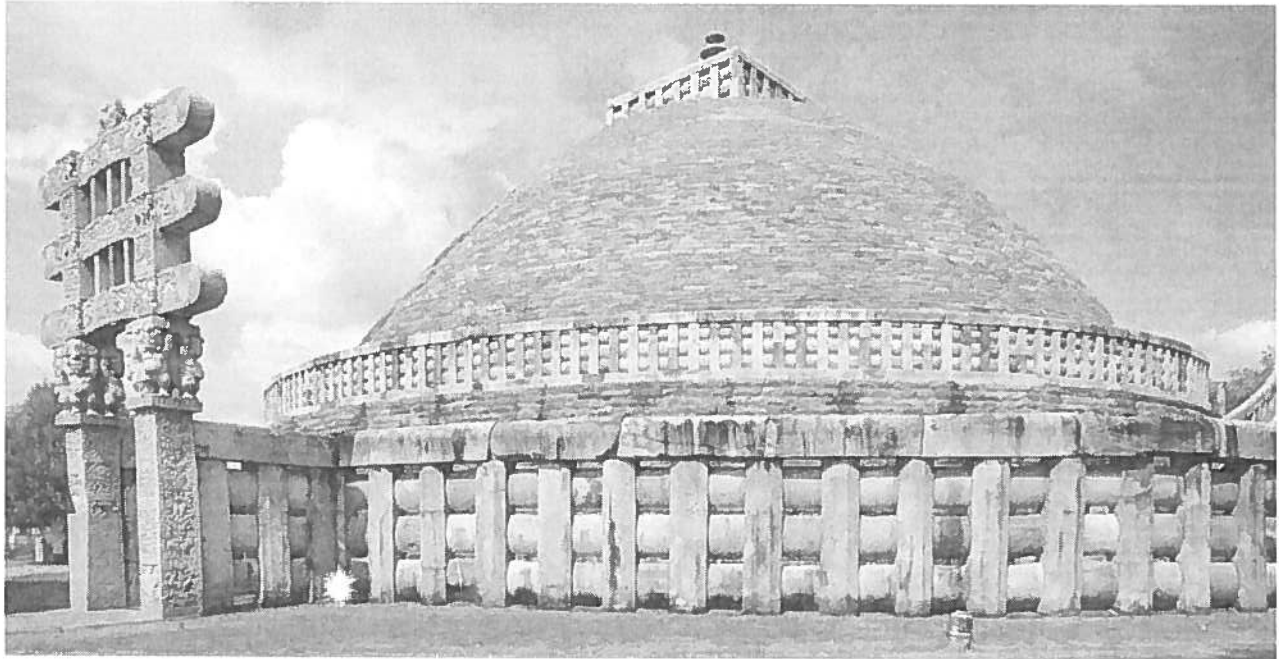
Wang Lu / ChinaStock Photo Library

The tradition goes back to a time when the ancient peoples of China were united in an historic alliance between those from western China, who worshipped the dragon, and those from eastern China, who worshipped the phoenix. This particular disc was found in a tomb, probably placed there because the Chinese believed that jade preserved the body from decay.

Peace lasted in China from 221 BCE, when Shih Huang Ti, the first emperor of Ch'in, whose tomb was discussed in Chapter 13 (see Fig. 377), united the country under one rule. This lasted until the end of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, when China once again endured a 400-year period of disorder and instability. The Han restored Confucianism to prominence. We know through surviving literary descriptions that the Han emperors built lavish palaces, richly decorated with wall paintings. In one of the few imperial Han tombs to have been discovered, that of the Emperor Wu Ti's brother and his wife, both bodies were dressed in suits made of more than 2,000 jade tablets sewn together with gold wire. The prosperity of the Han dynasty was due largely to the expansion of trade, particularly the export of silk. The silk-trading routes reached all the way to Imperial Rome.

The quality of Han silk is evident in a silk banner from the tomb of the wife of the Marquis of Dai discovered on the outskirts of present-day Changsha in Hunan (Fig. 583). Painted with scenes representing on each of three levels the underworld, the earthly realm, and the heavens, it represents the Han conception of the cosmos. Long, sinuous, tendril-like lines describing dragons' tails, coiling serpents, long-tailed birds, and flowing draperies unify the three realms. In the right corner of the heavenly realm, above the crossbar of the T, is an image of the sun containing a crow, and in the other corner is a crescent moon supporting a toad. The deceased noblewoman herself stands on the white platform in the middle region of the banner. Three attendants stand behind her and two figures kneel before her bearing gifts. On the white platform of the bottom realm, bronze vessels contain food and wine for the deceased.

CE



**Fig. 584** The Great Stupa, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India, view of the West Gateway, founded third century bce., enlarged c. 150–50 bce. Shrine height 50 ft., diameter 105 ft.

Massimo Bazzoli / Atlantic PhotoTravel, Corbis, NY

Elsewhere in Asia, the philosophy of Buddha, “The Enlightened One,” was taking hold. Born as Siddhartha Gautama around 537 BCE, Buddha achieved *nirvana*—the release from worldly desires that ends the cycle of death and reincarnation and begins a state of permanent bliss. He preached a message of self-denial and meditation across northern India, attracting converts from all levels of Indian society. The religion gained strength for centuries after Buddha’s death and finally became institutionalized in India under the rule of Asoka (273–232 BCE). Deeply saddened by the horrors of war, and believing that his power rested ultimately in religious virtue and not military force, Asoka became a great patron of the Buddhist monks, erecting some 84,000 shrines, called *stupas*, throughout India, all elaborately decorated with sculpture and painting. The *stupa* is literally a burial mound, dating from prehistoric times, but by the time the Great Stupa at Sanchi was made (Fig. 584)—it is the earliest surviving example of the form—it had come to house

important relics of Buddha himself or the remains of later Buddhist holy persons. This stupa is made of rubble, piled on top of the original shrine, which has been faced with brick to form a hemispherical dome that symbolizes the earth itself. A railing—in this case, made of white stone and clearly visible in this photograph—encircles the sphere. Ceremonial processions moved along the narrow path behind this railing. Pilgrims would circle the stupa in a clockwise direction on another wider path, at ground level, retracing the path of the sun, thus putting themselves in harmony with the cosmos and symbolically walking the Buddhist Path of Life around the World Mountain.

All the ancient centers of civilization underwent wars, conquests, and dramatic cultural changes. And all produced great philosophers, great art, and great writing, much of which we still find current and useful today. All were organized around religion, and with the dawn of the Christian era, religion continued to play a central role in defining culture.

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## The Ancient World

The following chapters are designed to help place the works of art so far discussed in *A World of Art* into a broader historical context. The brief chronological survey and illustrations trace the major developments and movements in art from the earliest to the most recent times.

### The Earliest Art

Preserved in the depths of approximately fifty caves in France and Spain are thousands of wall paintings, most depicting animals—including large and powerful creatures that were rarely, if ever, hunted. The oldest known of these works, discovered in the deep recesses of the Chauvet cave in southern France, are also the most advanced in their realism, suggesting the artists' desire to imitate the actual appearance of the animals represented. The artists have given the animals a sense of volume by using gradations of color—a technique not found in other cave paintings (Fig. 554). The artists further defined the animals' contours by scraping the wall so that the beasts seem to stand out against a deeper white background. Art, the Chauvet drawings suggest, does not evolve in a linear progression from awkward beginnings to more sophisticated representations. Apparently, from earliest times, human beings could choose to represent the world naturalistically or not, and the choice not to closely imitate reality should not necessarily be attributed to lack of skill or sophistication but to other, more culturally driven factors.

**Fig. 554** Wall painting with three horses facing one another, Chauvet, Ardèche Gorge, France, c. 30,000 BCE.



Corbis / Sygma.

Early artists also created sculptural objects—small carved figures of people (mostly women) and animals. These reflect a more abstract and less naturalistic approach to representation, as illustrated in the so-called *Venus of Willendorf* (Fig. 555). This limestone statuette was found at Willendorf, in modern Austria, and named by archaeologists after a later goddess. Here the breasts, belly, and genitals are exaggerated and the face lacks defining features, suggesting a connection to fertility and child-bearing. We know, too, that the figurine was originally painted in red ochre, symbolic of menses. And, her navel is not carved; rather, it is a natural indentation in the stone. Whoever carved her seems to have recognized, in the raw stone, a connection to the origins of life. But such figures may have served other purposes as well. Perhaps they were dolls, guardian figures, or images of beauty in a cold, hostile world, where having body fat might have made the difference between survival and death.

**Fig. 555** *Venus of Willendorf*, Lower Austria, c. 25,000–20,000 BCE. Limestone, height 4½ in.



Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

As the Ice Age waned, around 8000 BCE, humans began to domesticate animals and cultivate food grains, practices that started in the Middle East and spread slowly across Greece and Europe for the next 6,000 years, reaching Britain last. Agriculture also developed in the southern part of China and spread to Japan and Southeast Asia; it arose independently in the Americas; and in Africa, herding, fishing, and farming communities dotted the continent. Gradually, Neolithic—or New Stone Age—peoples abandoned temporary shelters for permanent structures built of wood, brick, and stone. Religious rituals were regularized in shrines dedicated to that purpose. Crafts—pottery and weaving, in particular—began to flourish.

The Neolithic cultures that flourished along the banks of the Yellow River in China beginning in about 5000 BCE also produced large quantities of pottery (Fig. 556). These cultures were based on growing rice and millet (grains from the Near East would not be introduced for another 3,000 years), and this agricultural emphasis spawned towns and villages. In Gansu province, Neolithic potters began to add painted decoration to their work. The flowing, curvilinear forms painted on the shallow basin illustrated here include “hand” motifs on the outside and round, almost eyelike forms that flow into each other on the inside.

**Fig. 556 Basin, Majiayao culture, Majiayao phase, Gansu Province, China, c. 3000–2700 BCE.**



Earthenware with painted decoration, diameter 11 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Anonymous Loan (L. 1996.55.6).

Dorling Kindersly Media Library. © Judith Miller / Doris Kindersly / Wallis and Wallis.

Some of the most remarkable Neolithic painted pottery comes from Susa, on the Iranian plateau. The patterns on one particular beaker (Fig. 557) from around 5000 to 4000 BCE are highly stylized animals, the largest of which is an ibex, a popular decorative feature of prehistoric ceramics from Iran. Associated with the hunt, the ibex may have been a symbol of plenty. The front and hind legs of the ibex are rendered by two triangles, the tail hangs behind it like a feather, the head is oddly disconnected from the body, and the horns rise in a large, exaggerated arc to encircle a decorative circular form. Hounds race around the band above the ibex, and wading birds form a decorative band across the beaker's top.

**Fig. 557 Beaker with ibex, dogs, and long-necked birds, from southwest Iran, c. 5000–4000 BCE.**



Art Resource, NY / Musée du Louvre.

In Northern Europe, especially in Britain and France, a distinctive kind of monumental stone architecture made its appearance late in the Neolithic period. Known as megaliths, or "big stones," these works were constructed without the use of mortar and represent the most basic form of architectural construction. Without doubt, the most famous megalithic structure in the world is the cromlech known as Stonehenge (**Fig. 558**), on the Salisbury Plain about 100 miles west of present-day London. A henge is a circle surrounded by a ditch with built-up embankments, presumably for fortification. The site at Stonehenge reflects four major building periods, extending from about 2750 to 1500 BCE. By about 2100 BCE, most of the elements visible today were in place.

**Fig. 558 Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain (Wiltshire), England, c. 2000 BCE.**



Spencer Grant / Photo Edit

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The original purpose of Stonehenge remains unknown, although its orientation toward the rising sun at the summer solstice indicates a connection to planting and harvest. Nonetheless, the effort required for its construction suggests that the late Neolithic peoples who built it were extremely social beings, capable of great cooperation. They worked together not only to find the giant stones that rise at the site, but also to quarry, transport, and raise them. There was, in other words, a culture of some magnitude and no small skill. It was a culture capable of both solving great problems and organizing itself in the name of creating a great social center.

## Mesopotamian Cultures

Between 4000 and 3000 BCE, irrigation techniques were developed on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, allowing for more intensive agriculture and population growth. In the southern plains of Mesopotamia, a people known as the Sumerians developed writing, schools, libraries, and written laws. Ancient Sumer consisted of a dozen or more city-states, each with a population of between 10,000 and 50,000, and each with its own reigning deity. Each of the local gods had the task of pleading the case of their particular communities with the other gods, who controlled the wind, the rain, and so on.

Communication with the god occurred in a ziggurat, a pyramidal temple structure consisting of successive platforms with outside staircases and a shrine at the top (see Fig. 454). An early Mesopotamian text calls the ziggurat "the bond between heaven and earth." Visitors—almost certainly limited to members of the priesthood—might bring an offering of food or an animal to be sacrificed to the resident god. Visitors often placed in the temple a statue that represented themselves in a state of perpetual prayer. A group of such statues, found in the shrine room of the ziggurat at Tell Asmar, near modern Baghdad, includes ten men and two women (**Fig. 559**). They have huge eyes, inlaid with lapis lazuli (a blue semiprecious stone) or shell. The figures clasp their hands in front of them, suggestive of prayer when empty and of making an offering when holding a cup. Some scholars believe that the two tallest figures represent Abu, god of vegetation, and his consort, due to their especially large eyes, but all of the figures are probably worshippers.

**Fig. 559** Worshippers and deities from the Abu Temple, Tell Asmar, Iraq, c. 2900–2600 BCE.



Limestone, alabaster, and gypsum, height of tallest figure 30 in. Excavated by the Iraq Expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, February 13, 1934.

Courtesy Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

One of the most influential Mesopotamian cultures was that of Babylon, which rose to power under the leadership of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century **BCE**. The so-called Law Code of Hammurabi is inscribed on a giant *stèle*—an upright stone slab, carved with a commemorative design or inscription. It is a record of decisions and decrees made by Hammurabi (**Fig. 560**) over the course of some 40 years of his reign. In 282 separate “articles” which cover both sides of the basalt monument, the stele celebrates Hammurabi’s sense of justice and the wisdom of his rule. Atop the stele, Hammurabi receives the blessing of Shamash, the sun god, notable for the rays of light that emerge from his shoulders. The god is much larger than Hammurabi; in fact, he is to Hammurabi as Hammurabi is to his people. Hammurabi’s Code was repeatedly copied for over a thousand years, establishing the rule of law in Mesopotamia for a millennium.

**Fig. 560** *Stele of Hammurabi*, c. 1760 BCE.



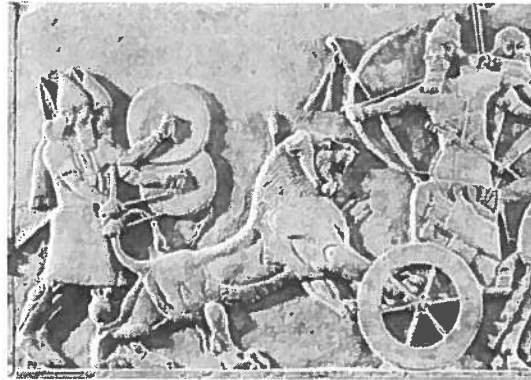
Basalt, height of stele approximately 7 ft., height of relief 28 in. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

RMN / Reunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

After the fall of Babylon in 1595 **BCE**, victim of a sudden invasion of Hittites from Turkey, only the Assyrians, who lived around the city of Assur in the north, managed to maintain a continuing cultural identity. By the time Assurnasirpal II came to power, in 883 **BCE**, the Assyrians dominated the entire region. Assurnasirpal II built a magnificent capital at Kalhu, on the Tigris River, surrounded by nearly 5 miles of walls, 120 feet thick and

42 feet high. A surviving inscription tells us that 69,574 people were invited by Assurnasirpal to celebrate the city's dedication. Many of its walls were decorated with alabaster reliefs, including a series of depictions of *Assurnasirpal Killing Lions* (Fig. 561). The scene depicts several consecutive actions at once: As soldiers drive the lion toward the king from the left, he shoots it.

**Fig. 561 *Assurnasirpal II Killing Lions*, from the palace complex of Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq), c. 850 BCE. Alabaster, height approximately 39 in. The British Museum, London.**



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



## Egyptian Civilization

At about the same time that Sumerian culture developed in Mesopotamia, Egyptian society began to flourish along the Nile River. The Nile flooded almost every year, leaving behind rich deposits of fertile soil that could be easily planted once the floodwater receded. The cycle of flood and sun made Egypt one of the most productive cultures in the ancient world and one of the most stable. For 3,000 years, from 3100 BCE until the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra by the Roman general Octavian in 31 BCE, Egypt's institutions and culture remained remarkably unchanged. Its stability contrasted sharply with the conflicts and shifts in power that occurred in Mesopotamia.

Egyptian culture was dedicated to providing a home for the *ka*, that part of the human being that defines personality and that survives life on earth after death. The enduring nature of the *ka* required that artisans decorate tombs with paintings that the spirit could enjoy after death. Small servant figures might be carved from wood to serve the departed in the afterlife. The *ka* could find a home in a statue of the deceased. Mummification—the preservation of the body by treating it with chemical solutions and then wrapping it in linen—provided a similar home, as did the elaborate coffins in which the mummy was placed. The pyramids (see Fig. 453) were, of course, the largest of the resting places designed to house the *ka*.

The enduring quality of the *ka* accounts for the unchanging way in which, over the centuries, Egyptian figures, especially the pharaohs, were

represented. A canon of ideal proportions was developed that was almost universally applied. The figure is, in effect, fitted into a grid. The feet rest on the bottom line of the grid, the ankles are placed on the first horizontal line, the knee on the sixth, the navel on the thirteenth (higher on the female), elbows on the fourteenth, and the shoulders on the nineteenth. These proportions are used in the *Palette of King Narmer* (Fig. 562), an object designed for grinding pigments and making body or eye paint. This palette was not meant for actual use but rather was a gift to a deity placed in a temple. The tablet celebrates the victory of Upper Egypt, led by King Narmer, over Lower Egypt, in a battle that united the country. Narmer is depicted holding an enemy by the hair, ready to finish him off. On the other side, he is seen reviewing the beheaded bodies of his foes. Narmer's pose is typical of Egyptian art. The lower body is in profile, his torso and shoulders full front, his head in profile again, though a single eye is portrayed frontally.

**Fig. 562 *Palette of King Narmer* (front and back), Hierakonpolis, Upper Egypt, c. 3000 BCE.**



Slate, height 25 in.

Art Resource, NY.

The rigorous geometry governing Egyptian representation is apparent in the statue of Khafre (Fig. 563). Khafre's frontal pose is almost as rigid as the throne upon which he sits. It is as if he had been composed as a block of right angles. If it was the king's face that made his statue recognizable, it is also true that his official likeness might change several times during his reign, suggesting that the purpose of the royal sculpture was not just portraiture but also the creation of the ideal image of kingship.

**Fig. 563 *King Khafre*, Giza, Egypt, c. 2530 BCE.**



Diorite, height 66 1/8 in. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

For a brief period, in the fourteenth century **BCE**, under the rule of the Emperor Akhenaten, the conventions of Egyptian art and culture were transformed. Akhenaten declared an end to traditional Egyptian religious practices, relaxing especially the longstanding preoccupation with the *ka*, and introducing a form of monotheism (the worship of a single god) into polytheistic Egypt. The sun god, manifested as a radiant sun disc—the Aten—embodied all the characteristics of the other Egyptian deities, and thus made them superfluous. Though the traditional standardized proportions of the human body were only slightly modified, artists seemed more intent on depicting special features of the human body—hands and fingers, the details of a face. Nowhere is this attention to detail more evident than in the famous bust of Akhenaten's queen, Nefertiti (**Fig. 564**). Both the graceful curve of her neck and her almost completely relaxed look make for what seems to be a stunningly naturalistic piece of work, though it remains impossible to say if this is a true likeness or an idealized portrait.

**Fig. 564 Queen Nefertiti, Tell el Amarna, c. 1365 BCE.**



Painted limestone, height 19  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin.

Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY

## River Valley Societies of India and China

Indian civilization was born along the Indus River around 2700 **BCE** in an area known as Sind—from which the words *India* and *Hindu* originate. The earliest Indian peoples lived in at least two great cities in the Indus valley, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. By the early years of the second millennium they were adept at bronze casting, and, as the stone sculpture torso of a “priest-king” (**Fig. 565**) from Mohenjo-daro demonstrates, they were accomplished artists. This figure, with his neatly trimmed head, is a forceful representation of a powerful personality.

**Fig. 565 Torso of a “priest-king,” from Mohenjo-daro, Indus valley civilization, c. 200–190 BCE.**



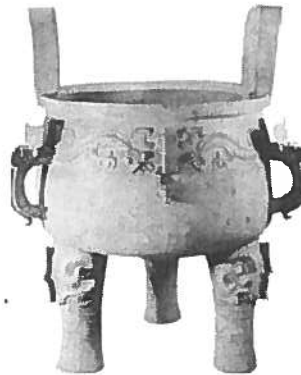
Steatite, height 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan.

Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Harappan civilization began to collapse around 1800 BCE, perhaps as the result of a prolonged drought, and by 1000 BCE its cities had been abandoned. During its decline, the Vedic people, who called themselves Aryans, moved into the Indus Valley. Over time, their numbers increased and they spread east to the Ganges River Valley as well as north and south. Their cultural heritage would provide the basis for the development of Hinduism and Hindu art, as we will see in Chapter 18.

In China, the Shang dynasty ruled the Yellow River Valley for most of the second millennium BCE, and Shang kings displayed their power with treasures made of jade, shells, bone, and lacquer. The great art form of the Shang dynasty was the richly decorated bronze vessel (Fig. 566), made by a casting technique as advanced as any ever used. This vessel was created to hold food during ceremonies dedicated to the worship and memory of ancestors. Many Shang vessels are decorated with dragons, which for the Shang symbolized royal authority, strength, and fertility. Their symmetry in turn symbolized the balance the Shang leadership brought to the state.

Fig. 566 Five-eareddingwith dragon pattern, c. 1200 BCE.



Bronze, height 48 in., diameter at mouth 32 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Chunhua County Cultural Museum.

Art Resource, NY.

## Complex Societies in the Americas

As early as 1500 BCE, a group known as the Olmec came to inhabit most of the area that we now refer to as Mesoamerica, from the southern tip of Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador. They built huge ceremonial precincts in the middle of their communities and developed many of the characteristic features of later Mesoamerican culture, such as pyramids, ball courts, mirror-making, and a calendar system.

The Olmec built their cities on great earthen platforms, probably designed to protect their ceremonial centers from rain and flood. On these platforms, they erected giant pyramidal mounds, where an elite group of ruler-priests lived, supported by the general population that farmed the rich, sometimes swampy land that surrounded them. These pyramids may have been an architectural reference to the volcanoes that dominate

Mexico, or they may have been tombs. Excavations may eventually tell us. At La Venta, very near the present-day city of Villahermosa, three colossal stone heads stood guard over the ceremonial center on the south end of the platform (Fig. 567), and a fourth guarded the north end by itself. Each head weighs between 11 and 24 tons, and each bears a unique emblem on its headgear, which is similar to old-style American leather football helmets. At other Olmec sites—San Lorenzo, for instance—as many as eight of these heads have been found, some up to 12 feet tall. They are carved of basalt, although the nearest basalt quarry is 50 miles to the south in the Tuxtla Mountains. They were evidently at least partially carved at the quarry, then loaded onto rafts and floated downriver to the Gulf of Mexico before going back upriver to their final positions. The stone heads are generally believed to be portraits of Olmec rulers, and they all share the same facial features, including wide, flat noses and thick lips. They suggest that the ruler was the culture's principal mediator with the gods, literally larger than life.

Fig. 567 Colossal head, from La Venta, Mexico, Olmec culture, c. 900–500 BCE.



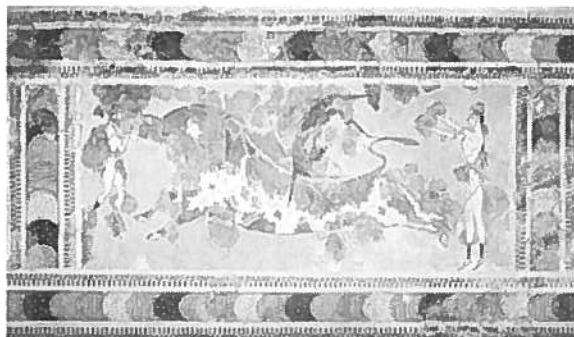
Basalt, height 7 ft. 5 in. La Venta Park, Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico.

Susan Murphy, Getty Images, Inc. / Stone Allstock

## Aegean Civilizations

Impressive centers of power and wealth also appeared in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly those of the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete and the Mycenae on the Greek Peloponnese, the southern peninsula of Greece. The origin of the Minoans is unclear—they may have arrived on the island as early as 6000 BCE—but their culture reached its peak between 1600 and 1400 BCE. The so-called “Toreador” fresco (Fig. 568) does not actually depict a bullfight, as its modern title suggests. Instead, a youthful acrobat can be seen vaulting over the bull's back as one maiden holds the animal's horns and another waits to catch him (traditionally, as in Egyptian art, women are depicted with light skin, men with a darker complexion). The three almost nude figures appear to be toying with a charging bull in what may be a ritual activity, connected perhaps to a rite of passage, or in what may simply be a sporting event, designed to entertain the royal court.

Fig. 568 The “Toreador” fresco, Knossos, Crete, c. 1500 BCE.



Height, including upper border, approximately 24½ in. Archaeological Museum, Iraklion, Crete.

Studio Kontos Photostock.

In Minoan culture, the bull was an animal of sacred significance. Legend has it that the wife of King Minos, after whom the culture takes its name, gave birth to a creature half-human and half-bull—the Minotaur. Minos had a giant labyrinth, or maze, constructed to house the creature, to whom Athenian youths and maidens were sacrificed until it was killed by the hero Theseus. The legend of the labyrinth probably arose in response to the intricate design of the palaces built for the Minoan kings.

It is unclear why Minoan culture abruptly ended in approximately 1450 BCE. Great earthquakes and volcanic eruptions may have destroyed the civilization, or perhaps it fell victim to the warlike Mycenaeans from the mainland, whose culture flourished between 1400 and 1200 BCE. Theirs was a culture dominated by military values. In *The Warrior Vase* (Fig. 569), we see Mycenaean soldiers marching to war, perhaps to meet the Dorian invaders who destroyed their civilization soon after 1200 BCE. The Dorian weapons were made of iron and therefore were superior to the softer bronze Mycenaean spears. It is this culture, immortalized by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that sacked the great Trojan city of Troy. The Mycenaeans built stone fortresses on the hilltops of the Peloponnesus. They buried their dead in so-called beehive tombs, which, dome-shaped, were full of gold and silver, including masks of the royal dead, a burial practice similar to that of the Egyptians.

**Fig. 569** *The Warrior Vase*, Mycenae, c. 1200 BCE.



Height approximately 14 in. National Museum, Athens

Scala / Art Resource, NY.



The City-States of Ancient Greece

## Greek Art

The rise of the Greek city-state, or *polis*, marks the moment when Western culture begins to celebrate its own human strengths and powers—the creative genius of the mind itself—over the power of nature. The Western world's gods now became personified, taking human form and assuming human weaknesses. Though immortal, they were otherwise versions of ourselves, no longer angry beasts or natural phenomena such as the earth, the sun, or the rain.

In about 1200 BCE, just after the fall of Mycenae, the Greek world consisted of various tribes separated by the geographical features of the peninsula, with its deep bays, narrow valleys, and jagged mountains (see the map of Greece above). These tribes soon developed into independent and often warring city-states, with their own constitutions, coinage, and armies. We know that in 776 BCE these feuding states declared a truce in order to hold the first Olympic games, a moment so significant that the Greeks later took it as the starting point of their history.

The human figure celebrated in athletic contests is one of the most important subjects of Greek art as well, and the Greeks showed a keen interest in depicting the human form in highly naturalistic detail. By the fifth century BCE, this interest in all aspects of the human condition was reflected throughout Greek culture. The physician Hippocrates systematically studied human disease, and the historian Herodotus, in his account of the Persian Wars, began to chronicle human history. Around 500 BCE in Athens, all free male citizens were included in the political system, and democracy—from *demos*, meaning "people," and *kratia*, meaning "power"—was born. It was not quite democracy as we think of it today: Slavery was considered natural, and women were excluded from political life. Nevertheless, the concept of individual freedom was cherished. And by the fourth century BCE, the philosopher Plato had developed theories not only about social and political relations but also about education and aesthetic pleasure.

The values of the Greek city-state were embodied in its temples. The temple was usually situated on an elevated site above the city, and the acropolis, from *akros*, meaning "top," and *polis*, "city," was conceived as the center of civic life. The crowning achievement of Greek architecture is the complex of buildings on the Acropolis in Athens (Fig. 570), which was built to replace those destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE. Construction began in about 450 BCE under the leadership of the great Athenian statesman, Pericles. The central building of the new complex, designed by Iktinos and Kallikrates, was the Parthenon, dedicated to the city's namesake, Athena Parthenos, the goddess of wisdom. A Doric temple of the grandest scale, it is composed entirely of marble. At its center was an enormous ivory and gold statue of Athena, sculpted by Phidias, who was in charge of all the ornamentation and sculpture for the project. The Athena is long since lost, and we can imagine his achievement only by considering the sculpture on the building's pediment (see Fig. 373) and its friezes, all of which reflect Phidias's style and maybe his design.

Fig. 570 The Acropolis today, viewed from the southwest, Athens, Greece. Greek National Tourism Organization.



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The Phidian style is marked by its naturalness. The human figure often assumes a relaxed, seemingly effortless pose, or it may be caught in the act of movement, athletic or casual. In either case, the precision with which the anatomy has been rendered is remarkable. The relief of *Nike* (Fig. 571), goddess of victory, from the balustrade of the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis in Athens, is a perfect example of the Phidian style. As Nike bends to take off her sandal, the drapery both reveals and conceals the body beneath. Sometimes appearing to be transparent, sometimes dropping in deep folds and hollows, it contributes importantly to the sense of reality conveyed by the sculpture. It is as if we can see the body literally push forward out of the stone and press against the drapery.

Fig. 571 *Nike*, from the balustrade of the Temple of Athena Nike, c. 410–407 BCE. Marble, height 42 in. Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece.



Nimatallah / Art Resource, NY.

The Greek passion for individualism, reason, and accurate observation of the world continued even after the disastrous defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE, which led to a great loss of Athenian power. In 338 BCE, the army of Philip, King of Macedon, conquered Greece, and after Philip's death two years later, his son, Alexander the Great, came to power. Because Philip greatly admired Athenian culture, Alexander was educated by the philosopher Aristotle, who persuaded the young king to impose Greek culture throughout his empire. Hellenism, or the culture of Greece, thus came to dominate the Western world. The court sculptor to Alexander the Great was Lysippos, known to us only through later Roman copies of his work. Lysippos challenged the Classical canon of proportion created by Polykleitos (see Fig. 203), creating sculptures with smaller heads and slenderer bodies that lent his figures a sense of greater height. In a Roman copy of a lost original by Lysippos known as the *Apoxyomenos* (Fig. 572), or *The Scraper*, an athlete removes oil and dirt from his body with an instrument called a *stirgil*. He seems detached from his circumstances, as if recalling his victory, both physically and mentally uncontained by the space in which he stands.

Fig. 572 *Apoxyomenos* (*The Scraper*), Roman copy of an original Greek bronze by Lysippos, c. 350–325 BCE. Marble, height 6 ft. 8½ in.



Vatican Museums &amp; Galleries, Rome.

Scala / Art Resource, NY.

In the sculpture of the fourth century **BCE**, we discover a graceful, even sensuous, beauty marked by contrapposto and three-dimensional realism (see Fig. 372). The depiction of physical beauty becomes an end in itself, and sculpture increasingly seems to be more about the pleasures of seeing than anything else. At the same time, artists strove for an ever-greater degree of realism, and in the sculpture of the Hellenistic Age, we find an increasingly animated and dramatic treatment of the figure. The *Nike of Samothrace* (Fig. 573) is a masterpiece of Hellenistic realism. The goddess has been depicted as she alights on the prow of a victorious war galley, and one can almost feel the wind as it buffets her, and the surf spray that has soaked her garment so that it clings revealingly to her torso.

Fig. 573 *Nike of Samothrace*, c. 190 BCE.

Marble, height approximately 8 ft. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Musée du Louvre / Art Resource, NY.

The swirl of line that was once restricted to drapery overwhelms the entire composition of *The Laocoön Group* (Fig. 574), in which Laocoön, a Trojan priest, and his two sons are overwhelmed by serpents sent by the sea-god Poseidon. We are caught in the midst of the Trojan War. The Greeks have sent the Trojans a giant wooden horse as a "gift." Inside it are Greek soldiers, and Laocoön suspects as much. And so Poseidon, who favors the Greeks, has chosen to silence Laocoön forever. So theatrical is the group that to many eyes it verges on melodrama, but its

expressive aims are undeniable. The sculptor is no longer content simply to represent the figure realistically; sculpture must convey emotion as well.

**Fig. 574** *The Laocoön Group*, Roman copy, perhaps after Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes, first century CE. Marble, height 7 ft.



The Vatican Museum, Rome.

Scala / Art Resource, NY.

## Roman Art

Although the Romans conquered Greece (in 146 BCE), like Philip of Macedon and Alexander, they regarded Greek culture and art as superior to any other. Thus, like the Hellenistic Empire before it, the Roman Empire possessed a distinctly Greek character. The Romans imported thousands of original Greek artworks and had them copied in even greater numbers. In fact, much of what we know today about Greek art we know only through Roman copies. The Greek gods were adapted to the Roman religion, Jupiter bearing a strong resemblance to Zeus, Venus to Aphrodite, and so on. The Romans used the Greek architectural orders in their own buildings and temples, preferring especially the highly decorative Corinthian order. Many, if not most, of Rome's artists were of Greek extraction, though they were "Romanized" to the point of being indistinguishable from the Romans themselves.

Roman art derives, nevertheless, from at least one other source. Around 750 BCE, at about the same time the Greeks first colonized the southern end of the Italian peninsula, the Etruscans, whose language has no relation to any known tongue, and whose origin is somewhat mysterious, established a vital set of city-states in the area between present-day Florence and Rome. Little remains of the Etruscan cities, which were destroyed and rebuilt by Roman armies in the second and third centuries BCE, and we know the Etruscans' culture largely through their sometimes richly decorated tombs. At Veii, just north of Rome, the Etruscans established a sculptural center that gave them a reputation as the finest metalworkers of the age. They traded widely, and from the sixth century on, a vast array of bronze objects, from statues to hand mirrors, were made for export. Etruscan art was influenced by the Greeks, as the life-size head of the bronze statue (Fig. 575), with its almost melancholy air, makes clear.

**Fig. 575** *Portrait of a Boy*, early third century BCE. Bronze, height 9 in. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence.



Nicolo Orsi Battaglini / Ikona

The Romans traced their ancestry to the Trojan prince Aeneas, who escaped after the sack of Troy and who appears in Homer's *Iliad*. The city of Rome itself was founded early in Etruscan times—in 753 BCE, the Romans believed—by Romulus and Remus, twins nurtured by a *She-Wolf* (Fig. 576). Though Romulus and Remus are Renaissance additions to the original Etruscan bronze, the image served as the totem of the city of Rome from the day on which a statue of a she-wolf, possibly this very one, was dedicated on the Capitoline Hill in Rome in 296 BCE. The she-wolf reminded the Romans of the fiercely protective loyalty and power of their motherland.

Fig. 576 *She-Wolf*, c. 500 BCE.



Bronze, height 33½ in. Museo Capitolino, Rome.

Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



The Roman Empire at Its Greatest Extent, c. 180 CE.

Beginning in the fifth century **BCE**, Rome dedicated itself to conquest and created an empire that included all areas surrounding the Mediterranean and that stretched as far north as present-day England (see the map of the Roman Empire above). By the time the Romans conquered Greece, their interest in the accurate portrayal of human features was long established, and Hellenistic art only supported this tendency. A great ruler was fully capable of idealizing himself as a near-deity, as is evident in the *Augustus of Prima Porta* (Fig. 577), so known because it was discovered at the home of his wife, Livia, at Prima Porta, on the outskirts of Rome. The pose is directly indebted to the *Doryphoros* (*Spear Bearer*) of Polykleitos (see Fig. 203). The extended arm points toward an unknown, but presumably greater, future. The military garb announces his role as commander-in-chief. The small Cupid riding a dolphin at his feet makes claim to Augustus's divine descent from Venus.

**Fig. 577 Augustus of Prima Porta, c. 20 BCE.**



Marble, height 6 ft. 8 in. Vatican Museums & Galleries, Rome.

SuperStock, Inc.

The perfection of the arch and dome and the development of structural concrete were, as we have seen in Part 3, the Romans' major architectural contributions. But they were also extraordinary monument builders. Upon the death of the emperor Titus, who defeated rebellious Jews in Palestine and sacked the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE, his brother, Domitian, constructed a memorial arch at the highest point on the Sacred Way in Rome to honor his victory (Fig. 578). Originally, this Arch of Titus was topped by a statue of a four-horse chariot and driver. Such triumphal arches, as they were called since triumphant armies marched through them, composed of a simple barrel vault enclosed within a rectangle, and enlivened with sculpture and decorative engaged columns, would deeply influence later architecture of the Renaissance, especially the facades of Renaissance cathedrals.

**Fig. 578** *The Arch of Titus, Rome, c. 81 CE.*



Concrete with marble facade, height 50 ft., width 44 ft. 4 in.

Michael Larvey/Canali Photobank.

Another remarkable symbol of Roman power is the Column of Trajan (Figs. 579 and 580). Encircled by a spiraling band of relief sculpture 50

inches high and, if it were unwound and stretched out, 625 feet long, the column details the Emperor Trajan's two successful campaigns in present-day Hungary and Romania in the first century BCE. The 150 separate episodes celebrate not only military victories, but Rome's civilizing mission as well.

**Fig. 579** Attributed to Apollodorus, *Column of Trajan*, Rome, 113 CE.



Marble, height originally 128 ft., length of frieze approximately 625 ft.

Robert Frerck / Woodfin Camp and Associates.

**Fig. 580** Attributed to Apollodorus, Lower portion of the *Column of Trajan*, Rome, 113 CE.



Scala / Art Resource, NY.

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As the empire solidified its strength under the Pax Romana—150 years of peace initiated by the Emperor Augustus in 27 BCE—a succession of emperors celebrated the glory of the empire in a variety of elaborate public works and monuments, including the Colosseum and the Pantheon (see Figs. 465 and 467). By the first century CE, Rome's population approached 1 million, with most of its inhabitants living in apartment buildings (an archival record indicates that, at this time, there were only 1,797 private homes in the city). They congregated daily at the Forum, a site originally developed by the Etruscans as a marketplace, but in a plan developed by Julius Caesar and implemented by Augustus, a civic center symbolic of Roman power and grandeur, paved in marble and dominated by colonnaded public spaces, temples, basilicas, and state buildings such as the courts, the archives, and the Curia, or senate house.

Though Rome became extraordinarily wealthy, the empire began to falter after the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE. Invasions of

<https://portal.phoenix.edu/medialibrary/embedreader.urn:isbn:9780205677207:ch17.html> 11/13/2014

Germanic tribes from the north, Berbers from the south, and Persians from the east wreaked havoc upon the Empire's economic, administrative, and military structure. By the time the Emperor Constantine decided to move the capital to Byzantium in 323 CE—renaming it Constantinople, today's Istanbul—the empire was hopelessly divided, and the establishment of the new capital only underscored the division.

## Developments in Asia

Meanwhile, in Asia, the early artistic traditions developed during the Shang dynasty in China, particularly the casting of bronze (see Fig. 566), were continued. Even as the Roman Empire began to disintegrate, bronze casting in China reached new heights of subtlety and elegance. An example is *Flying Horse Poised on One Leg on a Swallow* (Fig. 581). It is perfectly balanced—almost impossibly so, defying gravity itself—so that it seems to have stolen the ability to fly from the bird beneath its hoof.

**Fig. 581** *Flying Horse Poised on One Leg on a Swallow*, from a tomb at Wuwei, Kansu, Late Han dynasty, second century CE.



Bronze, height 13½ in., length 17¾ in. The Exhibition of the Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China.

Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Though the traditions of bronze casting remained strong, that part of the world developed no less turbulently than the West. By the sixth century BCE, the Chinese empire had begun to dissolve into a number of warring feudal factions. The resulting political and social chaos brought with it a powerful upsurge of philosophical and intellectual thought that focused on how to remedy the declining social order. In the context of this debate, Confucius, who died in 479 BCE, 10 years before the birth of Socrates, introduced the idea that high office should be obtained by merit, not birth, and that all social institutions, from the state to the family, should base their authority on loyalty and respect, not sheer might. At the same time, the Taoists developed a philosophy based on the universal principle, or Tao—the achievement by the individual of a pure harmony with nature (for an image embodying the Tao in a later Chinese painting, see Fig. 6).

The jade *Pi*, or disc (Fig. 582), illustrated here symbolizes the desire of the Chinese to unify their country. Made sometime between the sixth and third centuries BCE, the disc is decorated with a dragon and a phoenix, which are today commonly found in the context of the Chinese wedding ceremony, hanging together as a pair over the table at the wedding feast. The tradition goes back to a time when the ancient peoples of China were united in an historic alliance between those from western China, who worshipped the dragon, and those from eastern China, who worshipped the phoenix. This particular disc was found in a tomb, probably placed there because the Chinese believed that jade preserved the body from decay.

**Fig. 582** *Ritual Disc with Dragon Motif (Pi)*, Eastern Zhou dynasty, Warring States period, fourth–third century BCE. Jade, diameter 6½ in. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 33–81.



Peace lasted in China from 221 BCE, when Shih Huang Ti, the first emperor of Ch'in, whose tomb was discussed in Chapter 13 (see Fig. 377),

united the country under one rule. This lasted until the end of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, when China once again endured a 400-year period of disorder and instability. The Han restored Confucianism to prominence. We know through surviving literary descriptions that the Han emperors built lavish palaces, richly decorated with wall paintings. In one of the few imperial Han tombs to have been discovered, that of the Emperor Wu Ti's brother and his wife, both bodies were dressed in suits made of more than 2,000 jade tablets sewn together with gold wire. The prosperity of the Han dynasty was due largely to the expansion of trade, particularly the export of silk. The silk-trading routes reached all the way to Imperial Rome.

The quality of Han silk is evident in a silk banner from the tomb of the wife of the Marquis of Dai discovered on the outskirts of present-day Changsha in Hunan (Fig. 583). Painted with scenes representing on each of three levels the underworld, the earthly realm, and the heavens, it represents the Han conception of the cosmos. Long, sinuous, tendril-like lines describing dragons' tails, coiling serpents, long-tailed birds, and flowing draperies unify the three realms. In the right corner of the heavenly realm, above the crossbar of the T, is an image of the sun containing a crow, and in the other corner is a crescent moon supporting a toad. The deceased noblewoman herself stands on the white platform in the middle region of the banner. Three attendants stand behind her and two figures kneel before her bearing gifts. On the white platform of the bottom realm, bronze vessels contain food and wine for the deceased.

**Fig. 583** *Lady of Dai with Attendants*, Han dynasty, after 168 BCE.



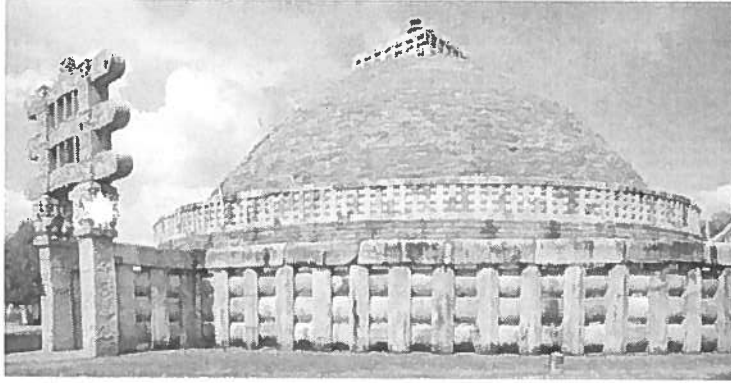
Painted silk banner from the tomb of Dai Hou Fu-ren, Mawangdui Tomb I, Changsha, Hunan, China.

Silk, height 6 ft. 8¼ in. Hunan Museum, Changsha, China.

Wang Lu / ChinaStock Photo Library.

Elsewhere in Asia, the philosophy of Buddha, "The Enlightened One," was taking hold. Born as Siddhartha Gautama around 537 BCE, Buddha achieved *nirvana*—the release from worldly desires that ends the cycle of death and reincarnation and begins a state of permanent bliss. He preached a message of self-denial and meditation across northern India, attracting converts from all levels of Indian society. The religion gained strength for centuries after Buddha's death and finally became institutionalized in India under the rule of Asoka (273–232 BCE). Deeply saddened by the horrors of war, and believing that his power rested ultimately in religious virtue and not military force, Asoka became a great patron of the Buddhist monks, erecting some 84,000 shrines, called *stupas*, throughout India, all elaborately decorated with sculpture and painting. The stupa is literally a burial mound, dating from prehistoric times, but by the time the Great Stupa at Sanchi was made (Fig. 584)—it is the earliest surviving example of the form—it had come to house important relics of Buddha himself or the remains of later Buddhist holy persons. This stupa is made of rubble, piled on top of the original shrine, which has been faced with brick to form a hemispherical dome that symbolizes the earth itself. A railing—in this case, made of white stone and clearly visible in this photograph—encircles the sphere. Ceremonial processions moved along the narrow path behind this railing. Pilgrims would circle the stupa in a clockwise direction on another wider path, at ground level, retracing the path of the sun, thus putting themselves in harmony with the cosmos and symbolically walking the Buddhist Path of Life around the World Mountain.

**Fig. 584 The Great Stupa, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India, view of the West Gateway, founded third century BCE, enlarged c. 150–50 BCE.**



Shrine height 50 ft., diameter 105 ft

Massimo Borchì / Atlantide Phototravel, Corbis, NY

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All the ancient centers of civilization underwent wars, conquests, and dramatic cultural changes. And all produced great philosophers, great art, and great writing, much of which we still find current and useful today. All were organized around religion, and with the dawn of the Christian era, religion continued to play a central role in defining culture.

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