

CHAPTER 19

STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

THE VISUAL ARTS

The philosopher Aristotle says in his *Politics* that “Art completes what nature leaves unfinished.” If nature doesn’t take something to its perfect conclusion, who does? A human. Art is something that is made better by humans.

But by this definition, anything well built—a machine or a brick or a bathtub—is a work of art. Some people today would agree with that, but probably the Greeks wouldn’t have. Aristotle also said that art reflects an inward reality, not just the outside appearance of an object or person. Most machines or bricks or bathtubs don’t have an inward reality in the way that something living does. For Aristotle, a work of art has to have meaning, and usually represents a person.

One of the most important aspects of a person, to the Greek way of thinking, was humanity’s relationship with the gods. Making something beautiful for a religious reason was one way of worshiping. So it’s not surprising that from the beginning, way back in the Minoan age, art was used to represent the gods and to make offerings to them. A statuette like a woman holding snakes might have helped worshipers picture the deity to whom they were praying.

The bull was very important in the religion of the Minoans. A beautiful drinking-cup in the shape of a bull’s head is one of the treasures of Minoan art. This cup is obviously not very practical. It would be hard to hold and even

This rhyton, or drinking cup, was sipped from its neck end. Many rhytons had pointed bases and rested on a table with holes that supported them. It is hard to imagine the shape of a hole that could support this bull’s head. It was probably rarely used or used only in a ritual where it would be passed from hand to hand.

“ ARISTOTLE, A MINOAN DRINKING CUP, PROTAGORAS, KLEOBIS AND BITON, THE PARTHENON, AND POLYKLEITOS

“ Aristotle, *Politics*, mid-fourth century BCE



“ Minoan drinking cup, about 1700–1400 BCE

A MATTER OF TASTE

The islands in the Aegean Sea known as the Cyclades were under Minoan control, but their art was very much their own. Most of it shows oddly geometric, featureless people. Why didn't the artists show facial features? Maybe the eyes and mouth were painted on. Or maybe the stone was too hard for their crude tools. But maybe it was a conscious stylistic choice and the artists preferred their sculptures to have few details.

harder to drink from. You would have to hold it upside down, so it would look like you were drinking from its neck. And how would you put it down when you were through? It must have been used in some religious ceremony, perhaps one where people would take turns drinking wine from it and passing it around to one another.

The later civilization of the Mycenaeans worshiped gods, too, but they were also eager to show off how powerful they were. An ancient traveler entering the great city of Mycenae would have to wind up a hill, which would make his curiosity about the citadel get stronger as his legs got tired. And to enter, he would have to pass through a huge gate. "How could anyone move those huge stones?" he might wonder, and then he would look up.

Directly overhead, two huge stone lions stood over the arch of the gate. Their heads have been destroyed over the millennia, but they must have looked ferocious. If the traveler had forgotten, in his long climb, that he was about to enter the domain of a very powerful king, these lions would make the memory come back in a hurry.

But as we know, while the Greeks revered their gods deeply, they were also very human-centered. One of the most quoted statements ever made by a Greek is the philosopher Protagoras's claim that "Man is the measure of all things." The human body, especially the young, athletic male body, was supposed to be the closest thing on earth to divine perfection.



The Cycladic artist sculpted this harp player using very few details but managed to convey the mood of the musician, whose hands rest lightly on his instrument as his head is thrown back in concentration.

66 Plato, *Theaetetus*, early fourth century BCE

The idea of perfection has changed. A modern viewer might think that these two statues are not made very well because they are expressionless and identical. But to the Greeks they represented perfection. These two men are the brothers Kleobis and Biton, whose mother was going to miss a religious ceremony because the oxen hadn't come back from plowing the field in time. So they hitched themselves to the cart and pulled her all the way there themselves. This was an act of such piety that their mother prayed that they would be given a great reward. That night they died in their sleep.

To the Greeks this was a reward. The boys died when they were young and healthy and beautiful. They would never face war, or illness, or old age.

Nowhere in their story does it say that they were identical twins. But these two statues, made in about 580 BCE, are identical. The ringlets in their hair are so similar that the sculptor must have used a ruler to make them exactly the same. Their poses and their faces show practically no expression. Was the sculptor just not very talented?

No, this was an expensive monument made to honor Greek ideals, and the person paying for it would be sure to hire a good artist. What the sculptor is showing here is exactly what Aristotle said an artist should show: the brothers' inner reality. If the brothers were perfect, they would *look* perfect. They would also look exactly the same as each other, because their personalities were exactly the same. Most early Greek statues of men look very similar to these, and are called *kouroi* (singular: *kouros*), which means "young man." The female version is *kore*.

As time went on, Greek artists grew dissatisfied with the calm expressions and sameness of the *kouroi*. A warrior, sculpted in about 500 BCE, is dying from a painful and bloody wound. But he looks calm, and his body is lined up so perfectly that it could be used in a geometry lesson. Each little curl of hair is lined up perfectly and he's even smiling.

However, this dying warrior from the same temple, but carved about 480 BCE, is obviously at the point of death. He's slumped over, obviously growing weaker until his arm

“ Kleobis and Biton, about 580 BCE



“ Dying Warrior, 500 BCE



MEANWHILE IN ITALY . . .

This diver from Etruria (central Italy, about 510–500 BCE) comes from a tomb. He appears to have been pushed off the cliff—look at the person who has sneaked up behind him, hiding in the bushes. Judging from the diver's grin, though, it doesn't seem to have bothered him much.

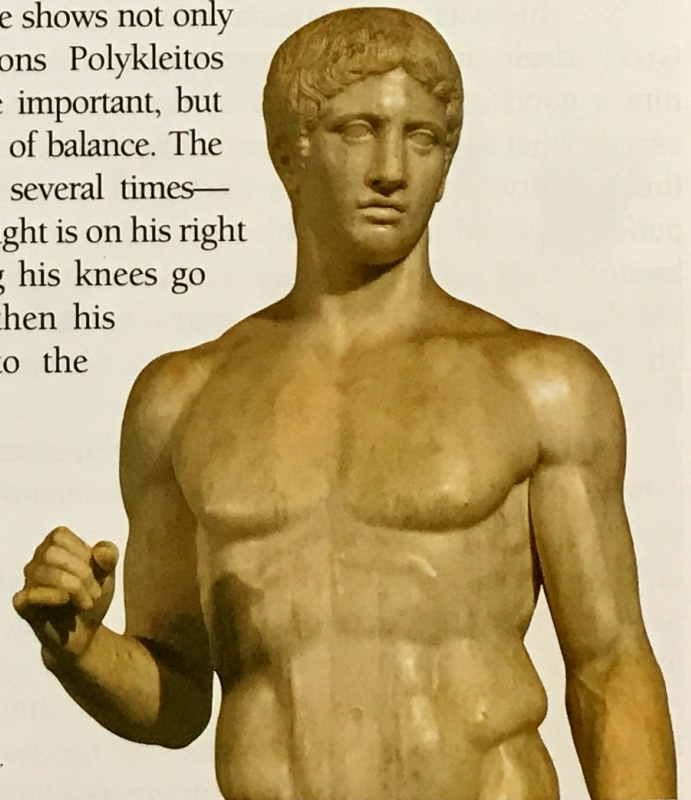


can barely hold him up. His biceps bulge with the effort and his lip is curved in pain.

At the time when the second sculpture was made, after a long and bloody struggle, the Greeks had finally defeated their enemies the Persians. For the Greeks, art was a part of life, not something tacked on when the “important” matters of politics and earning a living got taken care of. When any part of their lives changed, the art reflected it. Artists became more interested in showing feelings, whether it was the pain of death, exhaustion after a chariot race, or the strength and pride of the Greek man, newly rediscovered in the Athenians' military victory.

Figures like the brothers were certainly perfect according to the ideas of their time, but they were hardly true representations of the kind of real heroic men who had fought at Marathon and Thermopylae. One sculptor, Polykleitos of Argos, argued in his book called the *Canon* that human perfection can be shown in mathematical terms of proportion and balance. He made his stunning statue called the *Doryphoros* (spear-carrier) to demonstrate his ideas.

The statue shows not only the proportions Polykleitos thought were important, but also his ideas of balance. The weight shifts several times—the man's weight is on his right foot, making his knees go to the left, then his hips push to the



“ Polykleitos, *Doryphoros*, fifth century BCE

The sculptor Polykleitos of Argos shows the Doryphoros (spear-carrier) in a natural position, similar to how real people look, rather than in the rigid position of a stiff statue.



Classical Greek temples are rectangular with columns all around. They are classified according to the shape of columns they have: Doric (simple and undecorated), Ionic (with scroll-like design), or Corinthian (with leaf-shaped decorations). The Parthenon is a Doric temple.

66 The Parthenon in Athens,
420 BCE

right, his shoulders left again, and finally he is looking to the right. This S-curve is not only a more natural way to stand than the rigid stance of the two brothers, but it also shows more balance—more perfection. For the Greeks of the time of Polykleitos (and for most modern viewers as well) it's also more interesting to look at than a *kouros*.

Something else happened at the end of the Persian War. The Athenians had sworn that they would never rebuild their ruined Acropolis, instead leaving its ruins as a reminder of what they had suffered at the hands of the Persians. After a while some people decided that although this would have been a nice memorial, it wasn't appropriate for the glorious city of Athens to have a pile of rocks where its public buildings used to be. So under the leader Pericles, the hilltop was transformed into one of the most spectacular set of buildings in the world. The best-known structure on the rebuilt Acropolis is the Parthenon, the temple to Athena Parthenos. Its magnificent gold and ivory statue of Athena was made by Pheidias, the most famous Athenian sculptor of the time.