

Flowing in-between - the essence of Greek art

A workshop manual for discovering and experiencing Greek art

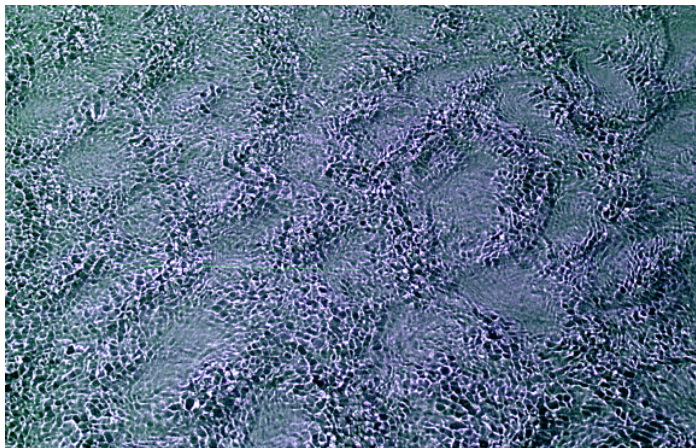
Introduction

This short manual is meant to help people begin to get to know and appreciate examples of Greek art, which can deeply touch us with their astonishing sense of liveliness, harmonious movement and their sense of being at one with themselves and their environment.

We shall attempt to look at Greek art not only as beautiful relics of a bygone time, but as human creations which stem from a certain frame of mind, a kind of consciousness, awareness, openness and inner flexibility which enabled them to connect to the sources of life-giving forces in Nature and in themselves. Through identifying and artistically working with these underlying sources of creation, we may develop some innovative tools and faculties for healing ourselves and our social and ecological environment.

The Water of Life

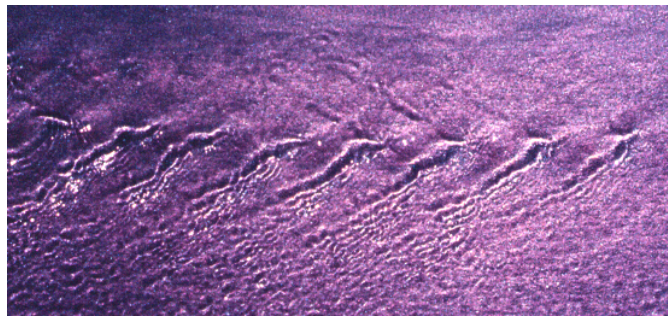
We know water as being an essential ingredient of life – no living thing can exist without water. Water covers the greater part of the surface of the earth organism and makes up the major part of any living organism. One can also speak of the organism of water itself: the cycle of water from the evaporation over the oceans through the clouds, rain, streamlets and rivers back to the ocean. Water always is in a



**Fig.1 Ripples on water surface -
We can feel the enormous sensitivity and adaptability of water**

state of movement. If water becomes stagnant and is prevented from moving it turns foul and loses its live-giving, refreshing properties. Water is a very “selfless” and adaptable substance: it does not have any form of itself, but takes on the form of any container it is offered; water does not have any color – looking into water we can see various shades of blue, violet or turquoise depending on the illumination and the background; a quiet surface of water works like a mirror and reflects its surroundings. Water can also easily change its state from being fluid to being solid (ice) on the one side and to being gaseous (steam) on the other side.

On the other side water can be very powerful and destructive. Water seems to have a mind of its own and can surprise us with how it behaves. Water does not seem to like straight lines: all running water moves in meandering, wave-like movements. Try having a trickle of water run down an inclined, smooth surface (for instance a pane of glass): the water will start to meander left and right instead of taking the shortest, straight course down. The meandering courses of rivers bear witness to the same tendency. Water also has the inherent capacity to generate rhythm once it is set into motion by an outer impulse: similar forms appear again and again one after the other (like the concentric waves, generated by a stone thrown into water)



**Fig. 2 Rhythmical ripples in flowing
water on a sandy beach - the ripples
are pulsating like little hearts and
changing all the time**

You can observe the forming of rhythmical flow patterns whenever you pour milk into your coffee or when you draw a stick through a puddle of muddy water. These patterns are present in water all the time – we only need the presence of an additional substance like mud in the water in order to make the movements visible.

The form shown on the right was created by a stick drawn in a straight line in a basin filled with water. Watching this happen is quite an astonishing experience! How does this happen and what does this mean?

We are drawing a straight line, as it were, separating the water into two parts. But the water does not seem to like separation and borders. Already while we are drawing the borderline the water starts to break the border, moving in sweeping round forms, rhythmically moving diagonally across from left to right, then from right to left, from left to right and so on.



Fig. 3 This flow-pattern was created by moving a stick in a straight line from bottom to top in slow, even motion through a basin filled with water (and a substance which makes the movement visible).

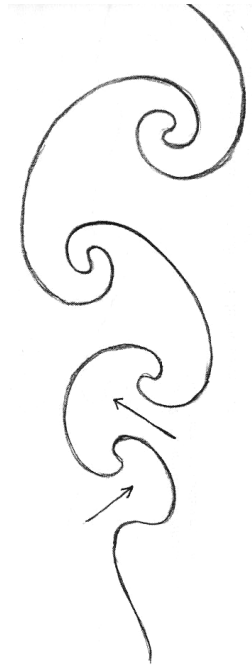


Fig. 4 schematic drawing of flow-pattern

This is also a wonderful example of a form coming about through movement. We can watch the movement gradually developing, water flowing from left to right and from right to left creating in the in-between, as a moving, flexible, dynamic meeting-place a form, which also remains visible for some time even after the movement has come to an end. We can repeat the experiment and draw a straight line over and over again. We shall find that the same pattern repeats itself, revealing its own inner lawfulness and harmony, but also being slightly different each time, depending on the speed of the initial movement and many other factors.

*You can create such a flow pattern in the following **experiment:** A shallow basin (you can construct it with a board, four pieces of wood and a lining cut from a black plastic refuse bag) is filled with a 1:1 water/glycerin mixture (glycerin slows the water movements and makes it easier to observe them. Glycerin in liquid form can be bought at every pharmacy). A small amount of water-based silver or gold paint is added to the liquid to make the forms visible against the dark background of the plastic liner. Pulling a stick or narrow brush in slow motion through the basin will produce a pattern similar to the one shown here. You can try the same in a shallow pool filled with muddy water!)*

What can we learn from this? We can take the way water behaves and creates these flow-patterns as a metaphor for a substance which is able to mediate, dissolve barriers and strict, immobile patterns and transform them into harmonious, balanced forms. What is the substance, or faculty in us which can do such things?

Practicing Fluency:

Here are a number of exercises which can help us to practice our inner “fluency” of movement:

- An exercise to do with a group of people:
Make people stand in a line. Everybody is asked to feel himself a “particle” of water and all the people together a surface of water. Another person is standing outside the line. His task is to act as the “mobilizer”, which will give an initial impulse into the water (without touching anybody - for instance he can make a gesture with his hands as if to push). The people in the line are asked to react together as a body of water, as if there were invisible, flexible strings between them, linking the movement of each of them to everybody else. And don't forget that water gives way – but also gently flows back to fill the gap it has made.

This exercise mainly shows us how difficult it is to be mobile and fluid, individually and as a group. Water is just not made up of particles! We have to work very hard to overcome our being separate entities and feel ourselves as part of a organism of movement. But it is possible – so let's try it again!

- A sequence of simple drawing exercises:

These can be done with a soft pencil or a piece of natural charcoal on paper. Alternatively you can draw with white chalk on a blackboard. They should be drawn as big as possible with generous movements and involvement of the whole body.

The first set of drawings starts with a straight line which gradually begins to undulate up and down in wavelike motion. Each consecutive line has a more amplified movement, making the wave-like forms more pronounced:

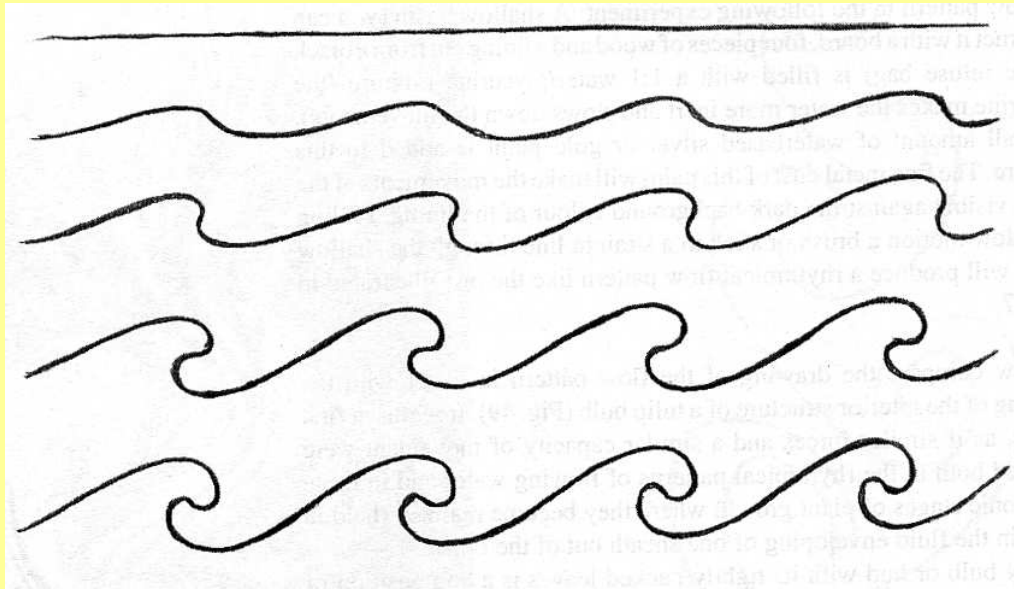


Fig.5

Try to feel the inner symmetry of these movements: the waves rise as much as they fall, they move forward and then backward to the same degree. Feel how the movement of your hand goes together with your breathing: where are you breathing in, where are you breathing out?

Now combine all these stages into one developing wave-movement. You can think of waves moving towards the shore, getting bigger and stronger until they break on the shoreline.

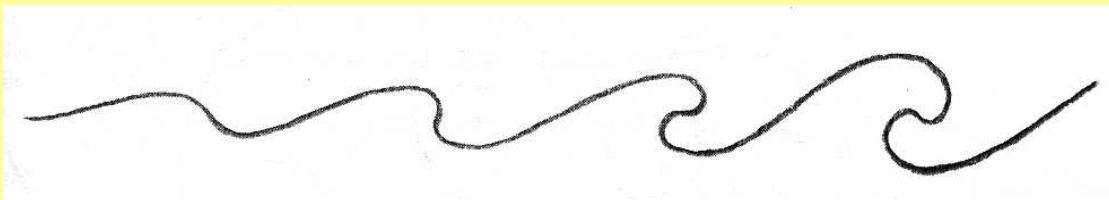


Fig. 6

Here follows a variation of these wave patterns, the different stages of which we can again combine into one movement (at the bottom):

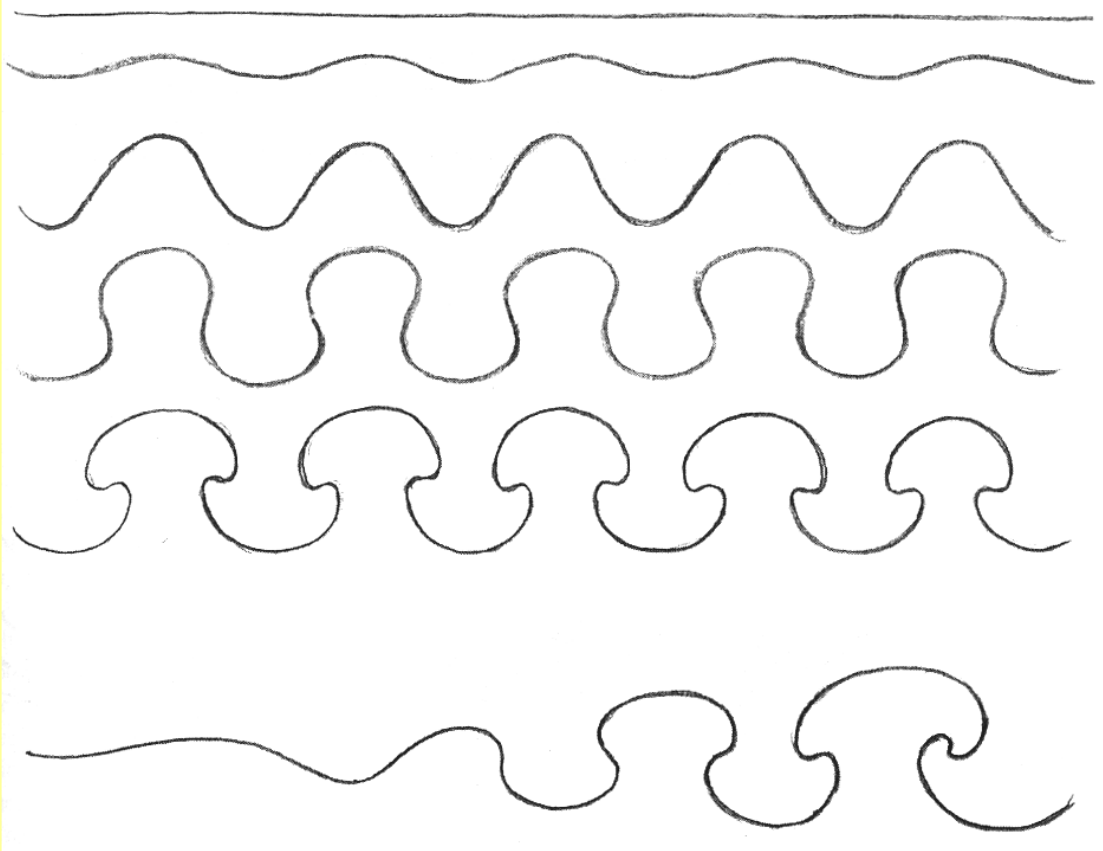


Fig. 7

If we now combine this last pattern with the slanting diagonal tendency of the previous one we come to a form which is very similar to the flow-pattern we saw in the water-experiment described before:

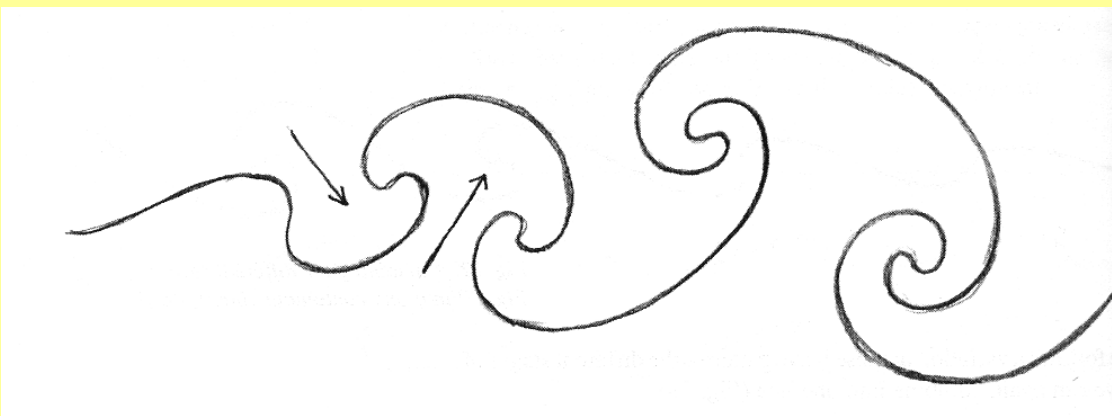


Fig.8

Greek Art and its Sources of Life

Looking at a geographical map of Greece we become aware how Greece is surrounded and penetrated by the element of water. The Mainland of Greece protrudes like a hand into the Mediterranean sea, the fingers of the Peloponnesus being followed by a multitude of islands and islets scattered until the coast of Turkey. The ancient Greek were seafaring people who were traveled the Mediterranean and Black Seas, establishing trade connections with many other cultures. A watery, mobile and open element characterizes their culture and art. Many of their artistic creations echo movements and forms which can be seen in water.



Fig. 9 Mushroom-like vortice form - created by a stream of colored water flowing vertically out of a tube into a volume of still water

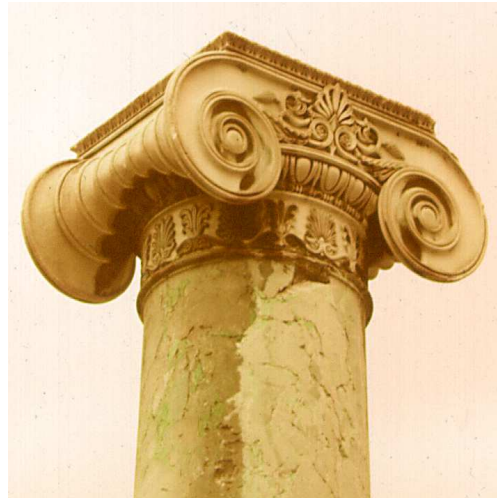


Fig. 10 Ionic capital – One of the three main types of column heads – an artistic expression of the meeting between the vertical supporting force of the column and the weight of the horizontal roof structure

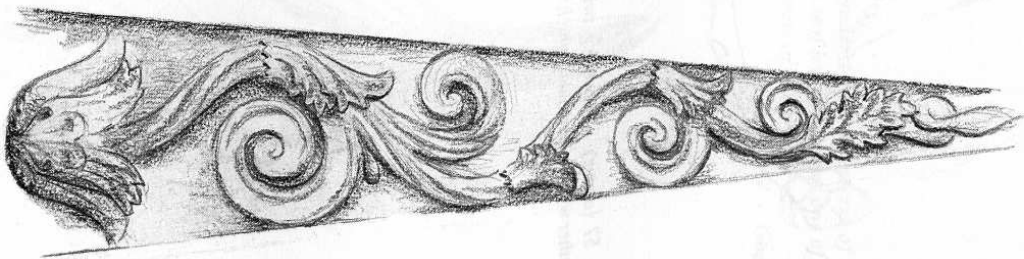


Fig. 11 Ornamental pattern – part of the ceiling decoration of the Tholos, Epidauros, Greece
This ornament shows a wave-like flow-pattern which turns into a vegetative motive, with leaf-like forms emerging from the junction points of the spiral movement

While in many of the architectural forms and decorations the relationship to water forms often is quite obvious even Greek sculptural creations which portray the human form, are permeated, although in a more subtle way, by the Greek artist's profound emersion in the life-giving element of water.

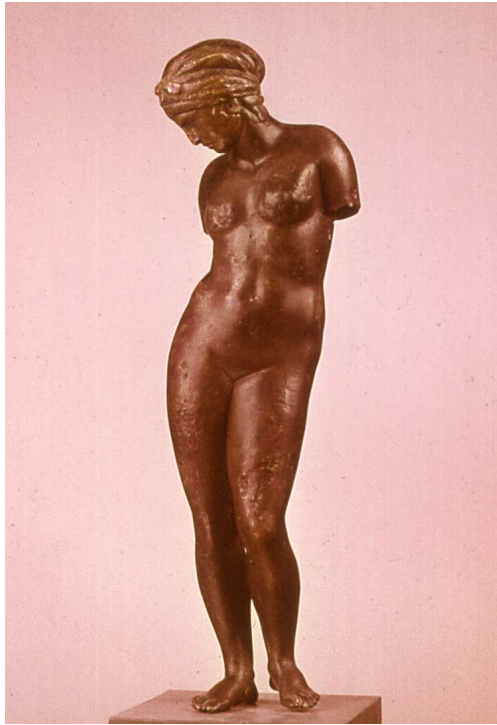


Fig. 12 Girl from Beroia, Greek, end of 5th century B.C.

The picture on the left shows a Greek sculpture from the beginning of the classical period. The sculptor shows the human figure being in a pose which seems permeated by an undulating, wave-like movement, which not only shifts the emphasis rhythmically from left to right, but also twists the body gently in all the directions of the space. Note how the right side (from her point of view) of the hip is higher than the left one, and how her left knee is slightly pushed forward while the right shoulder is pushed backwards. It seems that the main aim of the sculptor was to show us how the figure constantly balances herself out between the different directions of space: left and right, above and below, back and front.

With all her gently movements and twist we can say that the overall impression is one of balance and harmony, even that the arms are missing.

Now try to check out with your own body, how it is to stand like this. Put yourself into her pose with all the little twists and pushes and pulls. And now take notice that she lifts up her left foot! Can you do this as well? Do you notice that you now loose your balance?

We become aware that, as far as the physical balance is concerned, this lady completely lopsided, the bulk of her weight is far beyond her right leg, on which she supports herself.

What do we conclude from this? We are looking at a situation, which physically speaking, is completely unstable and still it looks to us balanced. What the sculptor sought to portray here is not a fixed pose, a static balance, a way of standing which can be maintained for any length of time, rather he conjures up a fleeting moment within a movement, which visually creates a sense of dynamic balance. In this again we feel an activity which is akin to that which we saw represented by the movement of water, which always mediates and harmoniously balances out all the directions.

How different is this from the artistic striving of another, more ancient culture, the culture of ancient Egypt (see picture on the right). Here everything seems to be determined by the straight line, the whole figure seems to be confined to within a rectangular block (from which this figure was carved). The sculpture is characterized by almost complete symmetry and a complete lack of movement. Although one leg is pushed forward, we do not feel that this man is moving forward even an inch. He seems to be glued to the wall behind him, his gaze transfixed on some far horizon. The sculpture has a powerful presence of concentrated energy. But we cannot detect the slightest sign of movement. We may also feel that the person portrayed is not there on his own behalf, free to do as he likes. He seems to be permeated and directed by some power greater than him. The Greek sculpture, on the other hand, radiates a wonderful sense of ease and freedom of movement.



Fig. 13 Highpriest Ranofer, Egyptian, 5th dynasty

Another wonderful example of Greek Art is this fragment of a group of sculptures from the Parthenon. The Parthenon was the main temple of the Acropolis in Athens, which was embellished by a group of sculptures which were neatly fitted into the pediment, the shallow triangle on the top of the temple.



Fig. 14 "Sisters of Dew", fragment of the pediment sculptures from the Parthenon, Athens

This group of three figures seems to be permeated by a lively sense of movement. It is mainly due to way the garments are draped around the bodies, that this sense of flowing movement is achieved. The bodies, which are often only scarcely hidden by the thin fabric, are full and even somewhat plump. But this is fully compensated for by the vigorous turns and twists and the rising waves of movement created by the drapery. Study for a moment the positions of the three goddesses: note how we are led from the right figure (lying) to the left (sitting, but almost getting up) in a progression of increasing movement and activity. Can you imagine the direction of the missing heads? Where would each of them have been looking? Also here we find a gradual shift of direction from right to left.

Not by chance these three ladies were given the name "Sisters of Dew". Not only can we feel the moisture of the garments, as it were, still wet from the dew of the night. We can also experience here a

gradual process of awakening from the world of sleep to the active life of the day. The picture below shows another flow-pattern of moving water, which also shows different stages of development of a movement.

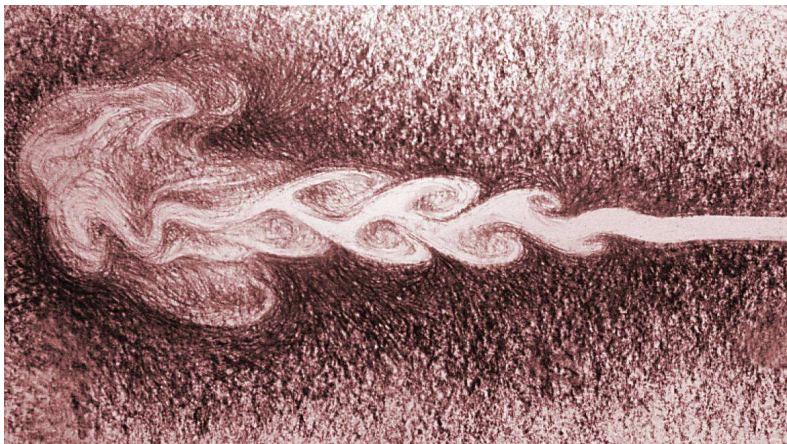


Fig. 15 Flow-pattern created by colored water flowing horizontally into a body of still water. We see a gradual development of movement from a straight flow through a phase of harmonious, rhythmical vortices and ending

Looking at the development of Greek Art and especially the representation of the human form in sculpture, we find that within a relatively short period of time, not much more than 600 years, this representation underwent an enormous transformation, which, interestingly, follows a similar lawfulness as the flow pattern we just looked at. The beginnings are very minimalistic, with very little movement, the whole figure has something of a column, standing in a very upright pose, with a sense of repose and concentration (fig. 16).



Fig. 16 Archaic Kore, approx. 570 B.C.

The middle phase, represented by the figure we already know, is characterized by harmonious, gently undulating and balanced movement (fig. 17).



Fig. 17 Girl from Beroia, end of 5th century B.C.

In the final phase Greek sculpture takes the dynamic movement to its extreme. The sculpture of Laokoon (Fig. 18), which is often referred to as the endpoint of Greek sculpture, chooses to portray the most dramatic moment of the story of Laokoon and his Sons, when they are completely entangled by the snake which is about to fatally bite the father. The sculptor used all his skills to portray the drama and tension of this chaotic moment. In contrast to the previous periods of Greek art, the sculptor here also ventures to express, through the tense body gestures and the facial features, the feelings of the figures portrayed.



Fig. 18 Laokoon and his Sons, Hellenistic Sculpture, end of 1st cent. B.C.



Fig. 19 Poseidon from Cape Artemision, ca. 460 – 450 B.C.

With his right hand the figure is not merely holding the trident, but “reaching out” into back space. Note how loose and relaxed is the grip of the hand!

Finally, we shall look at the sculpture of the God of Poseidon, which was found in the sea off the cape of Artemision. This is a very powerful example of controlled and purposeful movement. The God is taking aim before throwing his trident (tree-pronged spear). We can marvel at the sculptor’s masterly understanding of the essence of bodily movement and activity. Portraying a God throwing the trident is not a matter of merely showing a muscleman. Like with all Greek sculpture, human movement is not conceived as something confined to the physical, anatomical functioning of muscles and bones, but rather as a subtly tuned and balanced organism of relationships in space. Throwing the trident, like the ancient Olympic discipline of throwing the javelin, requires heightened awareness of the whole of space.



Fig. 20



This reaching back is complemented by the reaching out of the left hand into the front space. With this hand he is “touching” and exploring the front space, taking his aim.

Fig. 21

Between these two outreaching gestures we see the head keeping the middle, in complete repose, yet determined and with controlled willpower. Note the accentuated contrast between the contained roundness of the back of the head and the pointed, angular protrusion of the beard thrusting itself forward.

Another surprising contrast awaits us at the bottom of the sculpture (see picture below). In opposition to the powerfully swelling muscles of his chest, full of potentially destructive physical strength, his feet show quite another aspect of this sculpture: the feet are barely touching the ground. The whole powerful gesture of the body is based on a very sensitive and "light-footed", exploring relationship to the ground.

This amazingly complex masterpiece again bears witness to the ability of the Greek artist to experience the living human body, as it were, from within and simultaneously as being intimately connected to the whole of space around it.

Fig. 22

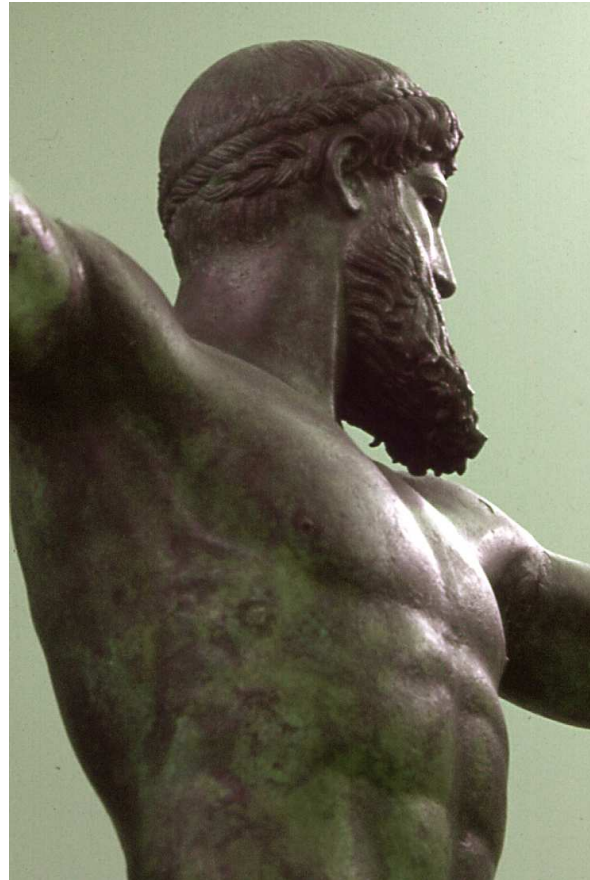


Fig. 23

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All photographs and drawings (except figs 3, 9 and 13) by the author.