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Visible Wealth: art in Greco-Roman cities

By

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The 2000 C. May Marston Lecture

Visible Wealth: art in Greco-Roman cities

Most of us here in this room have chosen life in an urban community for its economic and socio-political advantages, and the ancient Greeks would also have found this the obvious choice. Ancient cities were places of intense interaction, where critical decisions were made, and where one could have influence outside the immediate family. In the polis--the Greek city—were the opportunities for social net-working and political visibility. Such cities were very small compared to the usual urban centers today, for populations of a few thousand were the norm, and all affairs were public affairs: what we call the private sector was almost non-existent. The important political figures were known and usually accessible; they, in turn, knew most of their fellow citizens from military training, exchanges in the popular assembly and informal conversations. Everyone knew everyone else and who your grandfather was and whether there was scandal or glory associated with your family.

Greek cities were autonomous mini-states with government being the responsibility of all citizens. Thus the public spaces of the city were of far greater significance than private domestic areas. Life was lived, literally, in the open, out-of-doors in the public view. The splendor of a city's public spaces was felt to symbolize the prosperity and civic-mindedness of its citizens; beauty and elegance meant that the polis had energetic support, and its people had the favor of the gods.

Wealth was an important criterion for citizenship in any Greek city, and every citizen was expected to contribute to public expenses: at Athens the wealthiest citizens were obliged by law to do so. A new warship is needed? Aristarchos here is told he will pay for its construction as his contribution to the general welfare of the polis, while Demodokos over there is told he will underwrite the preparation of a chorus to perform at the festival of Dionysos. Much public honor will be given in return for their generosity. People will remember the name of Demodokos if the costumes are sufficiently elaborate and the stage equipment lavish or unusual. Wealth was a sign of divine favor and expected to be shared openly for the benefit of one's community.

Let me illustrate from the comments of Pausanias, an educated traveler who has left us a description of the principal monuments (and stories) he found in mainland Greece; this is a text from the 2nd c. AD

“Lycurgus provided for the state treasury [of Athens] 6500 talents more than Pericles, the son of Zanthippus, collected, and furnished for the procession of the Goddess golden figures of Victory and ornaments for a hundred maidens; for the war, he provided arms and missiles, besides increasing the fleet to four hundred warships. As for buildings, he completed the theatre that others had begun, while during his political life he built dockyards in the Peireus and the gymnasium hear what is call the Lyceum. The gold and silver items were plundered by Lachares the tyrant, but the buildings were still there in my times.” (Attica, 29.16) Obviously, Lycurgus shared his wealth spectacularly!

It was also customary in stressful circumstances to promise a gift to a god in return for divine assistance. Such vows often took the form of a beautiful statue set up in a public area, since the Greeks believed that the gods loved beauty and expected excellence: thus they took delight in human efforts to achieve both.

Aside from objects for daily use, all art in a Classical Greek city was public art, proudly displayed as a visible statement of status made by wealthy individuals. The private collector who owns a piece of art solely for his own enjoyment is a rather modern phenomenon: Greeks would have found the idea of hoarding works of art strange and unnatural. Even more upsetting would be our modern habit of displaying sculpture in isolation, in a gallery or museum. Greek sculpture was always associated with architecture, usually out-of-doors and often in a religious context, as well, for the gods were part of the fabric of daily life, and their shrines were prominent elements in the urban landscape. Much of the marble sculpture we admire today came originally from temple buildings and their sacred enclosures.

*The Greek temple is a rectangular building, at least twice as long as it is wide, with a columned porch on all sides. The inner structure is usually without windows, and displayed the cult statues together with a wide variety of dedications. The triangular pediment provided space for marble sculptures, and rooflines could display terracotta figures. Rectangular areas below the roof, allowed for relief panels called metopes, and along the interior walls a sculptured frieze was usually placed.

The Athena from the temple of Aphaia at Aegina occupied the center of the pediment; her helmet fit into the top angle. The Heracles figure was designed to fit in the right section along the angle, his bow rising to

complete the visual line, and the fallen warrior from the left corner of the same pediment raises himself along the side of that angle, his feet filling the corner.

Pedimental sculptures can often be identified by their composition; *here is an Athena originally from the center of a pediment, *this Herakles came from the right-hand section, and *the fallen warrior from the left corner of the same pediment. The compositions usually illustrated mythological or legendary events appropriate to the city's history or the god honored. *Roof terracottas were much more fragile than the marble figures, and few survive today.

*Carved mouldings, painted in bright colors, and *decorative column capitals enhanced the effect of natural stone, while battle equipment offered in thanksgiving to the gods and *free-standing sculpture in the sacred enclosure around the temple added to the rich effect. *Most of the examples we see today are marble, because later generations melted down the accessible bronzes for the metal, *but some idea of the magnificence obtained can be seen in this model of the great sanctuary at Olympia.

Tonight I wish to emphasize the importance of Greek art in its context, so I will be looking briefly at some specific cities, moving between their appearance today and reconstructions based on archaeology. It is hard to overemphasize the extent to which art was interwoven with Greek urban life, but difficult to demonstrate. I shall try to do this by reference to various surviving works together with comments on the historical context that produced the art we value today. *We begin with Athens.

Life in Athens was centered on the agora, which was a largish open area below the ancient citadel. *The agora was the heart of a Greek city; nearby was the open public assembly place, council meeting house, the state mint, the public fountains to provide water for household needs. * *Shrines to heroes and ancestors were here, there were places to post public notices, and the shops of artisans. On market days the booths for farmers and traders could be set up, and at other times the young men could use this space for footraces and exercise to hone their military fitness.

The offices of city magistrates, and dining areas reserved for their use, could be found in the long colonnaded porticos called stoas, which served to define the agora itself. Such a long, weather-protected area *could be used for the display of paintings done on removable panels, and one at the northern edge of the agora held so many famous illustrations from Athenian history that it was known as "the Painted Stoa". *Along the east a modern building has been reconstructed on the footings of such a stoa, and today it serves as a museum for artifacts recovered from the agora excavations.

*Their protected walls and diffused lighting lent themselves well to the
*display of various art works that could be admired by those conducting
business in the cool shade.

*This city center was crowded with sculptural monuments added over
the centuries, so that it served as a statement of visible history, preserving
the names of artists and earlier citizens who gave of their wealth, as well as
the circumstances under which a work was raised. *At any given time, a
visitor would have seen monuments from many generations of sculptors and
bronze workers, *the inscriptions providing snap-shots of Athenian history.
*Pausanias refers to 91 major art works just in the agora area, in addition to
smaller works and war trophies.

*Overlooking the agora was the elegant temple dedicated to Athena
and Hephaistos. Gifts of statuary and *formal plantings surrounded it, and,
like the Parthenon, the Hephaistaion originally displayed pediment
sculptures and relief decorations, while a *long frieze decorated the inner
wall. Public funds maintained the building, but *individual worshipers
offered special gifts, often in payment of a vow. A beautiful sculptured
figure was a “thing to delight” the senses, *and that is what the Greek word
for such a dedication means.

*The Acropolis rises behind the agora. This was the ancient citadel of
the city, and its most famous building today as in antiquity, remains the
Parthenon. *This great temple honoring Athena as protector of the city was
not the only shrine on the acropolis, but was the most imposing by far.
*Huge amounts of money were used when the city was at the height of her
power to make the entire acropolis area a showpiece: the entry gates, the
many shrines and monuments were all intended to be the architectural
statement of Athens’ preeminence. *Many, like the little Nike Temple,
commemorated military successes, and *the space around the buildings was
filled with notable monuments of all kinds.

*Perhaps the most impressive was the enormous ivory and gold statue
of Athena within the shadowed interior of the Parthenon. Such huge, and
expensive, figures were made with the sheet-gold sections removable, for
the metal constituted part of the capital reserves of the city. *On the eve of
the Peloponnesian War, Pericles recalled the Athenians that such valuable
dedications could be used for the war effort, with the understanding that
anything “borrowed” from the gods would need to be replaced at full weight.
*Even travelers just passing by Athenian territory were reminded of Athens’
wealth, for outside the Parthenon stood a bronze statue of Athena so tall that
the tip of its gilded spear could be seen from ships at sea.

Today the scattered fragments can hardly be imagined in their original state; we must reconstruct the pediments and other decoration in models.

(*One pediment showed Athena's contest with Poseidon to be chosen patron god of Athens, the other her birth in full armor from the head of Zeus.)

*Along the inner frieze the sons of the Athenian wealthy were shown in cavalry parade *to honor their city's goddess, and *magistrates readied the offerings for the formal procession that would bring them to Athena's temple.

*Even funerary monuments were public to a degree far beyond our own custom. These inscribed memorials were placed along the roads leading into a Greek city, since burials were not allowed within the city walls. *By convention, the dead are shown seated, while grieving relatives stand to take leave of them. The family advertised its piety and importance in the community by such display, since works by fine sculpture shops were obviously more expensive and permanent than simple inscriptions.

*The great sanctuaries like Olympia and Delphi were never independent cities in the way that Athens was, but were shrines open to all who spoke Greek. Delphi, in the shadow of Mount Parnassus, housed the oracle of Apollo and attracted large numbers of petitioners, both Greek-speakers and non-Greeks. *The model shows numerous monuments adorning the sacred enclosure; they would have lined the routes leading to the temple, *to the theater higher on the hill, and beyond to the stadium.

*Among the many treasures displayed at Delphi visitors could see fabulous gifts from foreign kings, and spectacular victory monuments, military as well as athletic. *Pausanias, when he visited, say so many works commemorating athletic victories *won in the Panhellenic Games celebrated here that he ignored most of them, choosing instead to focus his comments on images cast from military spoils. To cite only one example, he notes a group of nine large bronze figures from the title of bronze equipment taken in just a single 4th century victory. *The famous "Winged Victory" in the Louvre was such a victory monument, originally set up in the sanctuary of Olympia.

*Individual cities proudly advertised their wealth and success by erecting special small buildings to house the finest of their gifts to the god. Today, the so-called Athenian "treasure house" is the best preserved.

Of the many athletic monuments at Delphi attested in the literary sources, little survives, *although just how spectacular they were is suggested by this bronze figure of a charioteer. *It is all that remains of a monumental group commemorating the victory of a four-horse team owned by the ruler of a Sicilian city. Over life-size, it included chariot and driver,

the matched team of horses, plus an extra horse and groom. It represents a lavish outlay of capital, and is by no means the only monument we know of dedicated by the same man. He set up similar works after victories at Olympia, as well.

*The technological skill of the foundry workers can be appreciated in the separately cast eyelashes and inlaid eyes. Most such monumental bronzes, *many over life-size, have been recovered from underwater discoveries during the last century, and we can now begin to imagine the effect these must have had, *the metal a softly glowing golden color, with details inlaid in rosy copper and silver, *the eyes giving them life. *The images of the gods inspired awe, while the athletic figures were once evoked the splendid young men who had *entered competition to bring glory to their cities through victory in the footraces, the pentathlon or boxing. **The artist commemorates their skill and utter dedication to winning; to submit to the all-out competition of these contests was, to a Greek, a form of worship, and pleasing to the gods.

Few ancient cities in Greece itself still stand to any degree, but *elsewhere in the Mediterranean world there are a few places which were left to lie deserted for one reason or another, and therefore suggest their ancient extent better than Athens does, *since much of that city still lies beneath the modern one. One of the most memorable Greek sites is in southern Italy, and was founded as Poseidonia, though the Romans called it Paestum.

*This is a rather special site, for it wasn't destroyed in warfare or by earthquake or volcano: the inhabitants simply stopped living there and moved away in the late Roman period when the water table began to rise, creating marshy conditions. *Today it is a peaceful, park-like place, the wall footings of a whole large city nearly hidden in the grass around the three great temples which remain.

The *oldest, thought to have been dedicated to Hera, was built around 560 BC. *It is squarish, with columns oddly shaped by comparison with the later designs. *Next to it is a newer temple dedicated to Hera, which retains some of its inner structure. *Like the Parthenon, it had two rows of supporting columns to carry the roof beams. *Here, though, one can walk on the original pavement, and *watch the birds that have made their nests in the eroding columns. *Perhaps its original appearance was like that of the temple at Epidaurus; certainly it was bright with color, bronze and golden ornaments, and crowded with gifts dedicated by Paestum's grateful citizens.

Some *distance away is another temple dedicated to Demeter (Roman Ceres) the grain goddess. *Over the centuries, people took away the small

cut stones which were accessible above ground and carted them off for other uses, leaving only the great temples and *parts of the much later Roman amphitheatre. *But once there were broad streets lined with houses here, formal gardens and monuments attesting to the city's prosperity, the houses decorated with **painted figures *and *mosaics or *even scenes in colored glass set into plaster, like these fragments found underwater, at a site called Kenchreai.

Old sites like Athens, continuously inhabited since the Bronze Age, grew in a haphazard manner. True urban planning on a modified grid-plan was *introduced in the 5th century in the Greek cities of western Turkey. This Ionian coast was settled as far back as the Bronze Age, but cities here suffered badly during the Persian occupation of the area in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. When they were rebuilt or moved, or new cities were founded in subsequent centuries, they were usually laid out with rectangular house-blocks bounded by streets intersecting at right angles.

*The beautiful little city of Priene located just above the flood-plain of the Maeander River, was thoroughly destroyed twice in the 6th century, and refounded around 350 BC on a lovely hillside. Even today one can sense the careful planning which went into the layout, with main streets running parallel to the terraced hill, and cross-streets usually being stairways. *It boasted many fountains, and—in spite of its small size—six temples, the most impressive of which was near the agora, and dedicated to Athena. The agora of Priene was framed by generous *stoas, and within the agora alone some 40 bases for statuary survive. Since many of these would have held several figures, it can be seen that Priene was well provided with generous citizens. *Here are drawings to give some idea of the original appearance of the agora area: * *one notes that statuary was to be found everywhere. There was a theatre seating 5,000 (and also displaying elegant statuary), *and a well-designed council-house providing for 640 members. *Here at Priene, the front of this building was left open to the light and air; passersby could check on how their councilmen were handling public affairs.

*The destruction at Priene was caused by earthquakes during the Roman period, but even what remains of the Athena temple is astonishing. *The city must have been prosperous indeed to have employed the same architect who designed the famous Mausoleum, and *to commission even a half-size gold and ivory copy of the Parthenon Athena. The altar on the outside was a smaller-scale model of the elaborate altar to Zeus from Pergamum, as well.

*Here is this lovely location the architects adapted their grid to make maximum use of a rather small area, arranging the limited space in such a way that *convenience does not result in crowding, *and many buildings had sweeping views out over what was then a bay, and fresh breezes would have kept the air circulating. The number of statue bases remaining is really impressive: Priene's citizens, clearly, were proud to give generously for the adornment of their city.

Geologically, *the eastern Mediterranean is a very active zone, as the disasters in Turkey a few months ago have shown. Earthquakes and coastal subsidence have changed the land, in addition to the inevitable alterations wrought by man. *Changes are especially noticeable along the coastline between Ephesus and Miletus; both of them, in addition to Priene, were located on fine harbors in antiquity. All are now miles from the coast because of the volume of silt brought down by the rivers. The deep bay extending southeast for many miles in antiquity is now completely silted up, except for a shallow brackish lake below ancient Heraclea. *The Meander River played a large part in the current land-locked condition of Ephesus, Priene and Miletus, although this channel (with no discernable current on the day I saw it) looks idyllically peaceful.

Miletus *was a rather narrow peninsula in antiquity, with an island just off-shore, and it boasted usable harbors on both sides of the city. Today the coastline is miles away, no sign of harbors can be seen, and the island of Lade where a famous sea-battle was fought, is now a low-lying ridge to the southwest of the site. Like Priene, Miletus was destroyed by the Persians early in the 5th century and rebuilt, but took damage again in a siege by Alexander. The main visible remains come from the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC, with later additions under the Roman Empire.

Miletus was refounded on a grid layout, oriented on the eastern harbor with an agora nearby.