

A Cultural Playdough: The Globalization of Classical Greek Art

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the long-lasting perspective of Hellenocentrism and its influence on archaeological interpretation. Tying different globalization theories into this research, the paper aims to demonstrate the flexible definition of the term “classical”, and extend the conversation of how to define what is “classical”. In this paper, I dissect the traditional central-peripheral, in which the Greek World is centered in the viewpoints of the ancient Mediterranean world and Near Eastern regions. This paper examines the extensive cultural exchange and reciprocity of influences from Early Iron Age to the pre-Hellenistic, Late-Classical period, using archaeological, mostly monumental, examples from the Eastern sphere of antiquity, such as the Nereid Monument and Egyptian sculptures. Further examples such as the Pazyryk carving motifs are examined and compared to its Greek counterpart, to display the influence of Greek culture. This also shows the heavy mark of local style, revealing a multi-foci network model of culture exchange rather than a dictating, single-focused model of cultural dominance. Such localizations are seen throughout the wider antique world, as it is one of the keystones of constructing a globalized past, thus assigning a new and more inclusive meaning to “Classical”.

Introduction

The idea of Classicality is conventionally restrained to Greece. The exclusive Greek image of "classicalness" stems from Hellenocentric superiority and domination. This restricts the definition and the ownership of the Classical art style to Greece, acting as the geopolitical justification for a purified version of archeology that encourages Orientalism and, thus, White supremacy. It is standard to disregard the contributions of the "peripheral cultures" to Classical art; we have to decolonize and decentralize our modern-day considerations of the ancient world. Since "classicalness" is an arbitrary concept, it should be reconsidered regarding its inclusivity. “Classicalness” was not a singular movement that only appeared in Greece; it was a phenomenon that was featured in various cultures with unique nuances. It should be seen more as an adaptable element, like a "playdough," rather than a rigid block of marble. Therefore, it is essential to deconstruct the concept of classicality to redefine this term with the perspective of globality.

1.1 Interconnectivity Shaping Greek Art

The ancient Mediterranean world was heavily interconnected, and as a result, the mobility of people brought about the exchange of culture. When discussing the global factors in Classical art, it is crucial to cover the influences from other cultures that contributed to the earlier stages of development of Classical Greek art. Foreign influences were prominently interfering in the early days of cultural development. Towards the end of the Bronze Age and the start of the

Iron Age, the Mediterranean saw an increase in interconnectivity (Hodos 66-94). Multiple factors, such as climate change, global economic pressure, and issues of overpopulation urged people to expand beyond their motherland (Hodos 66-94). These expansions encouraged the crossover of cultures across the wide Mediterranean. Peoples around the Mediterranean Sea resorted to reaching outside of their cultural sphere for resources, resulting in the creation of an intricate network of exchanging goods and ideas (Hodos 66-94).

‘Network’ here is the hypothetical model which provides a tool for analyzing the globalizing phenomenon in the ancient world (Hodos et al. 29-41). Knappett laid down the importance of the network concept as something that is not only a tool with which scholars could construct a model of globalization, but also a tool for decentralizing the hierarchical thinking of globalization — the “core-peripheral thinking” (Hodos et al. 34). Network is the measurement of globalization from which we can trace the development process of certain cultural ideas or artistic phenomena. As a major part of the cultural network, Greece accelerated globalization in antiquity.

1.2 Foreign Influences On Greek Art

The Classical art of Greece was spatially and chronologically dependent on the global network. The monumental designs of Classical Greece were the product of both foreign influence and localization of the craft. Chronologically speaking, the fifth and fourth-century monuments have their roots in the Early Iron Age cultural network, which established the foundational aspects of the later Greek Art.

Egypt was the leading figure of influence in Mediterranean antiquity, other cultures in the sphere adopted their artistic expression. Before the 700s BCE, Greece had not displayed an “irrational” obsession with stone monuments (Vlassopoulos 231). It was due to the expansion of their network that Greece had connected with Egypt on a larger scale, which provided them with the means of communicating ideas, expediting the appearance of the rather Egyptianized monumental sculptures (Vlassopoulos 231). The Egyptian influences are evident in the formality of the *kouroi* statues. However, the *kouroi* statues displayed symbolization and ideologies indigenous to Greece (Vlassopoulos 233). The portrayal of the statue with nudity differs from the Egyptian standards of morality (Vlassopoulos 233).

This surge in stone monuments paved the foundation for the later Classical style, as one of its essential features. This process was coined as “Orientalizing,” which denotes the adaptation of foreign ideas from non-Greek, peripheral cultures. However, such a process was a part of a wider network amongst the entire Mediterranean sphere, within which the concept of a ‘core culture’ does not apply (Vlassopoulos 233). Egypt and the wider Near East were arguably largely the influencers, rather than the influenced, making it inaccurate to single out Greece as the dominant culture from the network that it participated intricately within.

It is also crucial to note the importance of the local influences on the adopted motifs. Robbie Robertson says that globalization is the inevitable process of copying what could bring profit to society from others (Hodos et al. 56). However, simply coining globalization as copying does not cover its localized aspects. Globalization is a dynamic network where cultures

are interconnected without a fixed "core culture," due to its ever-evolving nature. Egypt has proven itself as a forceful source of inspiration for Greece in the Iron and the Bronze Ages. Nevertheless, Egypt was not the only culture that influenced the artistic expressions of Greece.

Many Near Eastern cultures had significant influence on the early development of art in Greece as well. The emergence of various life-like, mythological motifs, such as those of creatures and floral patterns in Greek art in the Iron Age, were influenced by Near Eastern traditions (Gunter 88). Nevertheless, such designs were not carbon copies, with their essentially Greek patterns and motifs appearing simultaneously, which later developed into uniquely Greek-looking styles. This does not belittle the influences of the Near East, but demonstrates the localized aspect of globalization, or as Vlassopoulos puts it— *glocalization* (Vlassopoulos 234). Therefore, it is abundantly clear that foreign inspirations only laid the foundation upon which Greece inserted its ideologies (Vlassopoulos 234). It is hard to say whether Classical Greek art would exist without the influence of foreign technology and ideas, and yet, the creations are still uniquely Greek.

1.3 Globalization And Glocalization Of Greek Art

To further understand the intricacies of the global network system in antiquity, and to deconstruct its “classicalness” and globality, it is also important to look at the influences of the Greeks on other cultures. It is reasonable to argue that Greece was hardly the cultural center where the peripheral cultures came to study. It was more likely just a significant body, a crucial conduit, in the Mediterranean world's network. The intensive colonization and trading by Greece within the Mediterranean scene had its merits in spreading culture, creating a facade of a “*cultural koine*”.

As a vital connector of the Mediterranean sphere, Greece, as its power grew, exerted influence further through Eastern Europe and the Near East (Barnett and Ugarković 90). The often-overlooked regions of the Adriatic Sea displayed an array of evidence of intensive trading and communicating with Greece (Barnett and Ugarković 90). It was not until later in antiquity that the Greeks started establishing colonies in these regions. Research shows that these areas exhibited an interesting mixture of interconnectivity and insularity (Barnett and Ugarković 90).

In Barnett and Ugarković’s article, they inspected one of the Greek occupation areas — Issa, which is modern-day central Dalmatia (99). This site was occupied for some time, from the late Classical to Hellenistic periods. Issa maintained independent practices of the local indigenous communities, but still connected with Greece on practices such as funerary traditions (Barnett and Ugarković 99). In the necropolis outside of Issa, archeologists discovered several visibly Greek offerings, including tableware, drinking sets, and oil containers. Further, there is evidence of the indigenous tribes’ participation in the trans-Adriatic and Mediterranean trading network, with the discovery of Attic and Corinthian style pottery (Barnett and Ugarković 98).

These discoveries demonstrated the “Greekness” of the city. The funeral wares from the necropolis were imported from the greater Mediterranean and the Near East, while some were locally produced. These items suggested some insularity of the region (Barnett and Ugarković 102). This case study shows the cultural influences of Greece were not linear and one-sided. Localization was an inevitable part of the process of globalization. It was less of a cultural

domination and more of an exchange or adaptation.

The Near East has long been an active part of globalization in antiquity. This region was the cradle of one of the very first cultures in the Euro-Asia sphere. With its geographic advantages, the Near East was abundantly packed with resources and thus became one of the most influential geopolitical entities in antiquity. In this intertwined network of globalization, the cultural transactions between Greece and the empires in the Near East flourished. Peter van Dommelen mentions that the Classical Age was an era of expansion, and colonization, which used to symbolize the cultural domination of Greece over the others — cultural koine (Hodos et al. 619).

The Nereid Monument in Xanthus (or Xanthos) is a fascinating piece of architecture that encompasses the essence of globalization. It is one of the monuments in the Near East that exhibits a strong influence from Greece, as it often appears in books under the category of Greek architecture (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 361). The Nereid Monument is an important piece that expresses the complex history of the period in which it was constructed. Robinson says that this architecture encapsulates turbulence and crisis, for art pieces are mirrors reflecting reality (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 363). This monument is Greek in form, but Persian in detail, as its iconographies are heavily based on Near Eastern motifs (Vlassopoulos 265). The scenes of banquets, city sieges, and hunts are all explicitly Near Eastern. In Xanthus, the Classical art style is transformed on the Nereid Monument, with a new identity. The localized alteration changes the narrative of the art piece, making it unique to the culture.

Such redactions of multiculturalism can also be deliberately forged to serve a political purpose. The monument was erected by the King of Xanthus, Erinna, who had risen to the throne through force (Vlassopoulos 367). One feature that aroused Robinson's curiosity was the pillar's inscription in four different languages: Lycian, Milyan, Greek, and Solymian (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 368). It is rare for an inscribed pillar to have four different languages, thus, Robinson argued that this action was catered towards symbolism rather than practicality (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 368). The language's symbolism was created to appeal to the people living within Xanthus, as it asserted the region's inclusivity to ensure the kingdom's stability (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 368). Erinna erected a Greek-looking monument on foreign lands while ruling as a Greek-identifying monarch, needing to secure his rule by securing the citizens' loyalty (Tsetkhladze and Robinson 369). In this example, the Greeks are the foreigners. In order for a temple of Greek style to be erected on colonized land, it had to submit to the locals. The interconnectedness, in this case, was not organic but deliberate. A Hellenocentric, Greek-dominated perspective fails to convey this full picture.

This Hellenic influence and globalization occur in another monument, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. This monument was in a more fractured state than the ones mentioned above (Waywell 108). However, the remaining pieces have shown a similar degree of homogenization of Greek Classical and Near Eastern motifs. Compared to the Nereid Monument, the Mausoleum has a somewhat different approach towards harmonizing “Greekness” and “Persianess”. In a featured piece from the Mausoleum, a fragmented colossal horse-riding statue, the body movements and the fabric stylization shows an unmistakable Greek essence. However, the outfit for the rider is possibly Persian in style (Waywell 109).

The Mausoleum's entire design is based on a hybrid ideology of the Greek and Persian artistic styles. Its colonnade structure shows an essential Greekness, and its iconography of hunting, banqueting, and city sieges displays a heavily Near Eastern style (Vlassopoulos 259). This architecture is arguably the epitome of globalization in cultural motifs. The collision of art styles in the Mausoleum was potentially a tool of asserting the power of the kingdom by adopting the styles of different orders.

The globalization of Classical Greek art was distributed far beyond the Mediterranean and Near East, which did not receive as much attention as they deserved. A cultural network is not a linear model but a complex one with multiple conduits and cultural transmission routes; human mobility accelerates the spread of artistic ideas (Hodos 67). A great example is that of the Pazyryk people in the Altai region, far away from the Mediterranean (Azarpay 313). Greek art was possibly present in the Altai region from the 6th century onwards through the Persian trade routes (Azarpay 314). The Pazyryk people, with a high level of localization, adopted Greek motifs. For example, the floral pattern, lotus and palmette, which were prominent in the design of Pazyryk art pieces, were presented with a different touch (Azarpay 314). The palmette-hook motif appeared in several wooden bridle ornaments, and a leather applique purse used in Greek art with tendrils turned up. In this case, a similar Greek motif, through the localization process of globalization, turned into a unique design, using different media that served the purposes of the local peoples.

The Medusa head was another popular symbol that the Pazyryk people borrowed from Greece. However, they expressed these motifs with heavy-handed assimilation into the local culture (Azarpay 314). The Classical Greek art motifs in this region were heavily transformed, separating them from their original designs. In this case, the classical elements can be detected, but to say these artifacts are the same as those in Greece is insensible. Then, what genre do these artifacts belong to? It is hard to coin a genre under which these artifacts should be categorized. Still, in an interconnected network of classicalness, they could potentially be seen as belonging to Classical art; however, it is not Classical Greek Art, but simply Classical art.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ancient world was an interconnected entity, linked by a global network. The cultures were constantly undergoing phases of influencing each other. This global network brought about the exchange of ideas, technologies, language, and art. The 'Classical' was a phenomenon that had spread across the Mediterranean, Near East, and farther into the steppes of central Asia. However, it was more diffusion than domination. Every culture that either chose or was forced to include the Classical Greek elements in its own artistic expressions, incorporated the localized aspects that defined their style, and contributed different meanings to the original designs of Classical art. Therefore, with the understanding of globalization in the forging of the Classical style, the myth of Hellenocentrism and core vs. peripheral comparison falters easily. It is to say that there did not exist a single culture that dominated and assimilated all others in its vicinity and beyond, for the prerequisite of "cultural koine" means total domination. Classical is not a sedentary style that simply grew within Greece, nor is it a devouring power that annihilated the autonomy of other cultural arts. It is a concept that grew with other cultures, and was in turn

used by those. It was a playdough that could easily be shaped by will, not a block of marble.

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