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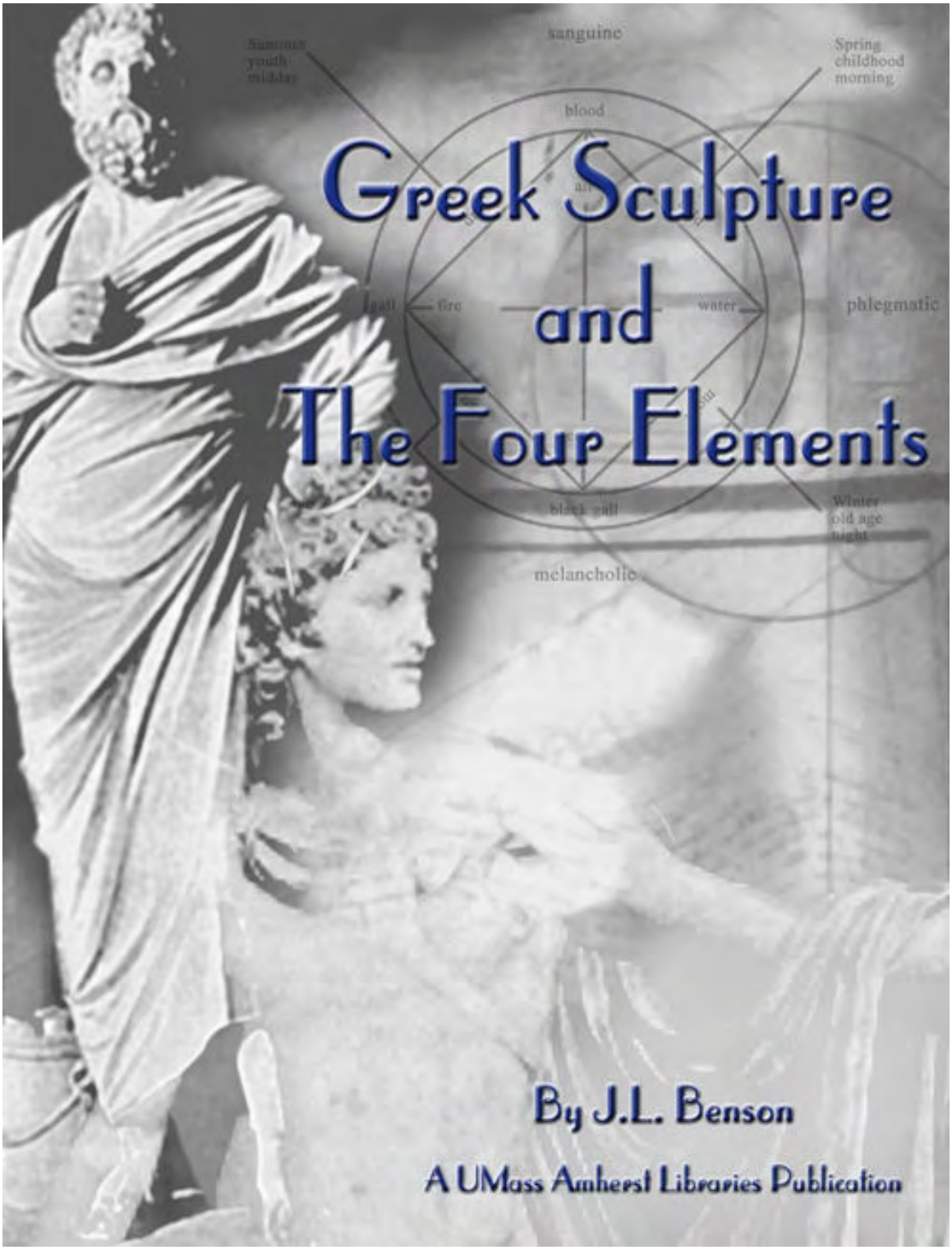

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About this book

This is one part of the first comprehensive study of the development of Greek sculpture and painting with the aim of enriching the usual stylistic-sociological approaches through a serious, disciplined consideration of the basic Greek scientific orientation to the world. This world view, known as the Four Elements Theory, came to specific formulation at the same time as the perfected contrapposto of Polykleitos and a concern with the four root colors in painting (Polygnotos). All these factors are found to be intimately intertwined, for, at this stage of human culture, the spheres of science and art were not so drastically differentiated as in our era.

The world of the four elements involved the concepts of polarity and complementarism at every level. One of the most important results of this approach, taken first mainly on the basis of an analysis of sculpture, is a deeper understanding of the conventional articulation of Greek art (and culture) into large characteristic periods. However, in order to understand the finer subdivisions of these periods, it was necessary to supplement the concern with the four elements as a dynamic system of macrocosmic-microcosmic relationships with a study of the Greek conception of the mind, on the basis both of hints in ancient literature, mythology and art and of certain aspects of modern psychology. The result of this is a different kind of understanding than hitherto suggested for the motivating forces behind our conventional sub-periods. Other laborers in this field have been Bruno Snell and J. J. Pollitt.

Essentially this book presents a new way of seeing Greek art through thought structures based on the work of the Greek natural philosophers themselves. Among these, Empedokles is at last accorded the commanding position he deserves to occupy for his contribution.

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GREEK SCULPTURE AND THE FOUR ELEMENTS

A Psycho-Historical Investigation

J. L. Benson

Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 2000

HYMN TO THE FOUR ELEMENTS

Sirenen

Welch feuriges Wunder verklärt uns die Wellen,
Die gegeneinander sich funkelnd zerschellen?
So leuchtet's und schwanket und hellet hinan:
Die Körper, sie glühen auf nächtlicher Bahn,
Und ringsum ist alles vom Feuer umronnen;
So herrsche denn Eros, der alles begonnen!

Heil dem Meer! Heil den Wogen!
Von dem heiligen Feuer umzogen!
Heil dem Wasser! Heil dem Feuer!
Heil dem seltnen Abenteuer!

All-Alle

Heil den mildgewognen Lüften!
Heil geheimnisreichen Grüften!
Hoch gefeiert seid allhier,
Element' ihr alle vier!

Sirens

The waves are transfigured with fire-laden wonder,
They glitter in impact, in flame leap asunder
Here's shining and swaying, and spurting of light,
With forms all aglow in the track of the night,
And lapping of fire touches all things around:
Let Eros who wrought it be honoured and crowned!

Hail to the Ocean! Hail to the wave!
The flood with holy fire to lave!
Waters hail! All hail the fire!
The strange event hail we in choir!

All voices in concert

Hail light airs now floating free!
Hail earth's caves of mystery!
Held in honour evermore
Be the elemental four!

— JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE
Faust II, Act 2, "Klassische Walpurgisnacht"
Translated by Philip Wayne

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