

July 2000

## Chapter 3: Human consciousness and time

J.L. Benson

*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art\\_jbgs](http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgs)

---

Benson, J.L., "Chapter 3: Human consciousness and time" (2000). *Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements*. 7.  
[http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art\\_jbgs/7](http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgs/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art, Architecture & Art History at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

### III.

## HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND TIME

### JUSTIFICATION OF THE PERIODS

The rationale of defining periods in art history, including the Greek, seems not to be regarded as an important field of research, especially in recent decades. Despite one or two valiant attempts<sup>1</sup> to find principles, there has been no general discussion nor much interest in the matter. A conventional framework is either accepted silently or else this framework, behind which a certain wisdom can indeed be discerned, is—equally without discussion or justification—expanded or simplified at will; and this too is accepted without comment. It is almost axiomatic that not much significance is accorded to the *structure* of setting periods. This I believe to be a result of the modern conception of time. We perceive the flow of time as a continuum of events (in this case an object of art is an event in past time) that, particularly in earlier art, may not be well documented. In later art, where the documentation may be more plentiful, the continuum of events is not necessarily clear and uncontested. It is thus understandable that the concern with external documentation—given the vital necessity of it for ordering artistic events—should have become a disproportionately large content of art historical studies. “Disproportionate” because I believe that many in the profession today would agree that this concern should ideally be only ancillary to a search for a core of spiritual values that actually link past and present, researcher and the consciousness of the creator of the art researched—and nevertheless have to admit that the process of finding new information (or putting old information in a new context) takes precedence in the current academic milieu and leaves little time for the more contemplative activity mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> Even when very favorable conditions make this possible, re-interpretation is likely to be proscribed by academic custom within fairly narrow limits (I leave out of account here feminist art approaches with which I am insufficiently acquainted).

In an earlier generation somewhat different attitudes were feasible, as my survey of the history of scholarship revealed (Chapter II). Even then there was hardly much real

interest in a fundamental philosophy of periods in Greek art; but as a critical interest in an accurate apprehension of relative chronology arose, it was realized—almost instinctively, it might seem—that the flow of events in Greek art could best be grasped in terms of the generations of artists who accomplish specific work in the development of style<sup>3</sup>; in other words, human beings themselves are the ultimate measure of time. The work they did and the work we do (in grasping theirs) coalesce into one in our consciousness. There is not only no place here for the idea of a disinterested spectator—there is no possibility of it; it is an illusion. If we did not have a personal interest in Greek art, we would be doing something else. And with that personal interest we bring our particular talents, enthusiasm and shortcomings. A spiritual value therefore arises across the ages, if we let it, when we concern ourselves with the work of a Greek master. Difficult as this is in most areas of Greek art, owing to lack of information about artists' lives, the great achievement of the 20th century has been the providing of a framework for relative chronology on the basis of vase painters—representing the one medium preserved in sufficient numbers to facilitate this. That this achievement is very much dependent upon the work and fostering inspiration of one scholar, Sir John Beazley, thus demonstrating the kind of spiritual relationship that is entirely dependent upon unique human gifts across the ages, is, I believe, widely appreciated.<sup>4</sup>

Respect for, and concern with, the succession of generations of artists wherever and however these can be established in any medium is therefore taken as a matter of course in this study. Yet, interlocking with this, another criterion is available, *viz.*, the collective—perhaps one could say here, macrocosmic—unfolding of soul faculties of the triadic ego in an internally logical order. The sequence proposed by W. Dilthey to explain the rise and fall of *Weltanschauungen* (see Chapter I), something at least distantly connected with the rise and fall of states, was not intended to explain the unfolding of artistic styles. Yet if it has any validity it should also have some application to them in that artists are an integral part of the “understanding of life” of any era, and in fact I have already shown that it can be used in considering the unfolding of Attic Geometric painting.<sup>5</sup> The relatively closed geographical situation of the Greeks, combined with their strong originality in a long continuity, makes them an ideal test case for the politico-cultural sense intended by Dilthey. On the *generalized* level on which I intend to use his insight, there can be no supposition that the manifold complexities of period-setting will be exhaustively met; but one can hope that a never-before-realized human content in Greek art may emerge from such an approach.

As a background, accordingly, to the discussion of other problems, I will present a brief review of Greek art from the Archaic through the Hellenistic periods in this light. It may emerge from this attempt why the Classical Greeks could not formally propose an adequate philosophical framework for the triadic ego. They had first to experience all of it; that is, it was their role, so to speak, to demonstrate it across the centuries of their culture-making, although they can have had only a rudimentary consciousness that they were doing this, as we have seen in Chapter I, and perhaps none at all of the diachronic aspect of the triadic ego which emerges clearly enough in Dilthey's system. The Classical Greeks had not yet experienced the end (Hellenistic) phases of the collective triadic ego's development.

Finally, the justification for looking at Greek art (and culture) in this framework is as follows: just as the four elements were in existence and provided the frame of reference for human thought and behavior long before they began to be understood intellectually in the fifth century B.C., so also the three faculties of the human ego were in existence and to some extent being used long before they began to be understood intellectually, which may not have happened at all in antiquity and perhaps not before Descartes' work<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, since this is for historical reasons our *modern* frame of reference, all philosophical trends and fashions notwithstanding, we *have* been using it in conventional period-setting already, even if unconsciously and unsystematically (I will return to this). It is appropriate therefore to attempt to discuss it systematically. Nevertheless, this does not relieve us of the obligation of trying to understand how the Greeks did explain time-processes to themselves—in relation to the way modern man now attempts to explain time-processes theoretically. Here a truly formidable gulf opens up and it must not be ignored.

## THE CYCLICAL QUALITY OF GREEK ART

In a purely external evaluation of the “geometricizing” era of Greek civilization (including the Protogeometric period) we could envisage the people involved facing the ruin of a culture (the Mycenaean) that had become well developed in a material sense, and reacting with demoralization, inaction, indifference or even indolence as measured by that predecessor. Not until the Geometric period ends is there much of an inkling that anything of importance might emerge and even this perhaps in only one or two places. There were no impressive artifacts, no substantial architecture and no writing. A parallel phenomenon was manifested in Egypt, where the people lived amidst the ruins of former greatness, although they never found a path back to the level of creativity of Bronze Age Egypt. In the Near East the same decline manifested but in certain areas was to an extent overcome, in the case of Assyria earlier than in Greece.

However one chooses to account for the apparent arrest of cultural development in all this, from the point of view of periodicity it seems better to let the geometricizing era float as a separate phenomenon with its own internal structure, neither altogether an end nor altogether a beginning, between two ages of immense material and cultural creativity. For it *could* have been—from an indifferent historical standpoint that sees only change in human affairs rather than evolution—simply the protracted death of Late Bronze Age culture; indeed this thought might actually apply to certain parts of Greece, such as the outlying regions (if not more) that had to be pulled into the new age. However, in terms of the evolution of consciousness I prefer to understand this process as a macrocosmic narrowing of consciousness, distantly comparable to the microcosmic requirement of sleep.

This frees us to regard the post-Geometric stage of Greek art as a really new beginning—a new cosmic “day”, even though its character was in some way pre-

determined by the geometricizing interlude. In other words, what is usually called the Archaic period<sup>7</sup> begins again a process of intellectual exploration in the sense of a new artistic “understanding of life” (*Weltanschauung*). I say “again” because I have already shown in great detail (see note 5) that the Geometric period can also be seen as a separate “understanding of life” with its own stages of intellectual, emotional and volitional maturation. That fact, moreover, allows us to see the contours of that seemingly amorphous geometric interlude between the two phases of high culture much more sharply. Taken internally it was not a period of decay and inaction but of re-integration.

Furthermore, within the entire “geometricizing” era the Proto-geometric phase seems to function as a minor (though not unimportant!) linkage between Late Bronze Age and Geometric experience with its own rationale that can probably also be viewed in the triadic framework. However, it is not a question of using this framework in a routine way. In some cases there may never be enough assured external certainty about chronology to justify it. At the very least, it is clear that the collective work done by the Proto-geometric potters, our main evidence for life in those centuries, formed the point of departure for a whole new cycle, the Geometric, and that the collective work of the Geometric potters, coroplasts (modellers of terracotta) and metal workers formed the point of departure for yet another cycle of totally new and unpredictable content. Thus I extend the implications of the cyclic concept worked out by J.J. Pollitt<sup>8</sup> (see Chapter IV, paragraphs 3–4). While it is undeniable that the problem of the opposition of appearances and ideality he works with can never have been far from the consciousness of Greek artists, the actual suprapersonal work (content) of each cycle with its internal stages has the greatest cognitive value for us in its *cumulative* sense. With a certain inevitability, archaeological practice (not theory!) has bequeathed and decreed the triadic schema: Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods, which is likely to survive current tendencies to speak only of fifth century, fourth century, etc. developments. Useful in some contexts, these terms should not be allowed to obfuscate the profoundly cyclical character of Greek art as a whole.

This tripartite system (Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic), though explicable in terms of the philosophical concept of Dilthey, goes back at least as far as Winckelmann, in its essence, and can reasonably be said to have arisen spontaneously from the spiritual connection between the creative processes of the artists themselves, whose work was being studied, and the analytical intelligence of critics and researchers studying them rather than from any theoretical considerations. Triadic structuring is used also in other provinces of art, such as the Bronze Age and Egypt, where it coincided with purely historical differentiation.

In view of all this, why have scholars of the 20th century—most particularly those of its latter (“post-modern”) part—become reluctant to discuss the foundations of, or in some cases perhaps even to use, the concept of an internally meaningful system of articulation of periods bequeathed by earlier generations of scholars who, apart from a few hesitant theorists such as Wölfflin, Buschor and Foçillon, hardly accorded them more than pragmatic value? While this is undoubtedly a complex question (see Chapter II), it should be sufficient for our purposes here to summarize the attitudes toward time-

processing as an historical problem which has not gone without some attention from—among others—representatives of the physical sciences, appropriately enough since it was the rise and flourishing of the physical sciences that have created the formidable gulf mentioned above (see Chapter III, *Justification of the Periods*, paragraph 5). I shall use the term *straight-line time* for the view resulting from that rise and now flourishing, and the term *organic time* for the previously existing, now displaced view. This latter view is essentially synonymous with Greek experience but more inclusive than merely that. Thus it must be stressed that organic time is actually more highly experiential than straight-line time—a condition not of diminished but of intensified consciousness which can be felt, for example in literary or musical masterpieces.

What I am calling straight-line time has been, in effect, defined by the physicist David Park<sup>9</sup> using the designation Time 1, in the following way: This is the time of physical theory, what is represented in the equations of dynamics as  $t$ . It is what is registered by the clock.

What I am calling organic time has been defined by Park, using the designation Time 2, as follows: This is the time of human consciousness. It is related to time 1 but the relation is not obvious. It is the time that Eliot had in mind when he wrote “All time is eternally present....”

Straight-line time, therefore, is an abstraction of the scientific mind, based historically on the analogy of the planetary system with a clock. Yet the planetary system existed before clocks just as the human eye existed before cameras and the human mind before computers. When natural phenomena are habitually explained and experienced in terms of their mechanical derivatives, time starts to be experienced as a one-way track toward endless progress (or destruction?). Organic time, on the other hand, has been experienced historically to an overwhelming degree as the manifestation of a Divine world, constituting the substance of all religion and all philosophy and it often leads to a conception of what is called cyclical time. An example of this is given by the Divine Pymander of Hermes Trismegistus,<sup>10</sup> a compilation of Egyptian teachings colored by Greek philosophical thought of the Hellenistic period. It recognizes five aspects of reality which have to do with organic time.

1. God contains Eternity.
2. Eternity contains the Cosmos.
3. The Cosmos contains Time.
4. Time contains (or is the basis of) generation.
5. Generation contains Death: “There cannot be generation without corruption; for corruption follows every generation in order that it may be generated again.”

The relation that Park referred to as present but not obvious is, I think, this: since the beginnings of modern science in the Renaissance the straight-line view of time has slowly but inevitably been laid like a new template over the old organic one, equally slowly altering older views of world reality without entirely suppressing them,<sup>11</sup> so that much lives incongruously side by side. The increasingly intensive experience of mechanistic time has brought with it a feeling among our contemporaries that art must

be a kind of passive mirror reflecting the driving currents of the age. Doubtless, art is becoming, or has become, that. Thus, it is at precisely this point that the difference between the modern experience of time and that of cultures of the past that still experienced the earth as a living organism (whence “organic” time) must be kept firmly in mind. For in the “understanding of life” of these older cultures, art was not a mirror of life but the means by which a Divine world imparted to mankind appropriate values in the form of inspirations specifically acknowledged in literary works and, of course, in such things as cultic architecture and oracles. In the next chapter I shall make immediate use of the ideas presented here.