
INTRODUCTION

This book explores the birth and development of some aspects of culture and art in ancient Greece, their spread and endurance in the ancient world, and their gradual diffusion via Central Asia to China and Japan.

It is a story of persistence of Greek, and to a lesser extent, Roman forms, motifs and images, particularly but not exclusively, mythological ones. It shows the assimilation of classical forms and ideas with those existing in the more eastern world, and demonstrates the interaction of peoples and cultural exchange.

The story starts with the foundation of colonies in almost every direction within the Mediterranean and Pontic world, followed by the conquests of Alexander the Great in the East and the subsequent Hellenization of the former Persian Empire. Then, the Greek world was incorporated into the Roman Empire, where the Emperors Augustus and later Hadrian became addicted to Greek culture. The need of the Romans for Chinese silk urged the extension of trade through Central Asia, while almost contemporarily Buddhism spread, first from India northwards, picking up classical elements, and then gradually via Central Asia and China to Japan.

All this activity, in the course of about twelve centuries (6th century B.C. - 6th century A.D.), was not simply connected to geographical expansion and extension of contacts for commercial reasons. Basically it had to do with adoption, adaptation and assimilation of cultures over a long period and over an enormous distance and it has been our interest to follow this process for a number of classical motifs and images during this period.

Next, their preservation in the art of the Tang period (618-906 A.D.) and thereafter, their diffusion to Japan as well as their development within a Japanese artistic context has been made part of this study.

The process of diffusion as indicated above is not always to be taken for granted. For almost a century ethnologists have worked with two opposing theories: diffusion of techniques, ideas, concepts and art forms *versus* their independent “spontaneous generation”. The evolutionary concept, proposed during the second half of the 19th century, suggested that similar cultural characteristics arise at parallel phases in the development of different societies because of something universal and common in mankind’s elementary problem-solving abilities.

However, in an art-historical context diffusion is usually accepted as the leading principle, although perhaps the degree and character of diffusion may be discussed¹.

Another term in the title deserves attention from the outset. The term “classical” is used in the title (and elsewhere in the book) in a strictly historical sense, meaning “of or pertaining to Greek and Roman culture”². However, the subject matter deals more often with Greek than with Roman culture, the Romans being intermediaries for Greek culture. Thus, the word “classical” refers to the general style of art and culture devised in Greece and propagated in our era by the Roman Empire.

In our subtitle “fiction, conjectures, facts” there is an increasing component of reality suggested, as “fiction” is the making up of imaginary happenings, and “conjectures”

is inferring, theorizing or predicting from incomplete or uncertain evidence. All three degrees of reliability are represented when we follow the diffusion of ideas, motifs and artefacts from the classical world to the East.

In the 19th century –after the final opening of Japan in 1868- the interest in the West for Japanese culture was greatly fostered by international exhibitions of Japanese art, fully sponsored by the Japanese government, the first in Vienna in 1873, followed by Melbourne (1875), Philadelphia (1876), Paris (1889), Chicago (1893), Paris (1900), St. Louis (1904) and London (1904).

In an article entitled “Grèce et Japon” in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, E. Pottler gave a report of his visit to the exhibition of 1889 in Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris:

“Dès ma première visite au Quai Malaquais, une comparaison s’imposa invinciblement à mon esprit : je trouvais à chaque pas, dans un contour de bras, dans les plis d’étoffes, dans une silhouette d’homme nu, des rapprochements à faire avec des œuvres grecques, et, en particulier, avec des dessins de style attique J’en parlai à plusieurs personnes dont le jugement m’intéressait En particulier M. Rayet. Collectionneur passionné de terres cuites grecques, Rayet avait été très frappé de l’expression vivante et familière que les Japonais ont su donner à leurs odorables netskés ou figurines d’ivoires ; il rêvait de placer dans sa vitrine un de ces types populaires d’extrême Orient à côté des amusants bâterleurs et marchands forains, fabriqués par les céramistes ioniens, qu’il avait le premier fait connaître”³.

Obviously Pottler became impressed by stylistic elements in Japanese art similar to classical ones. He then continued comparing all sorts of examples and details of Japanese art with Greek ones, and wondered if the analogies were the result of climatological and psychological influences⁴, thus suggesting independent invention. Further on in his article, however, he concludes that diffusion must have taken place between Greece and Japan, Persia being the intermediary⁵.

In the minutes of the meeting of the Japanese Society of London of February 18th, 1883, the following remark of Mr Alfred East has been recorded.

“Mr Alfred East, member of the council, called attention to the remarkable similarity between certain features of ancient Greek ornament and old Japanese designs. He was willing to admit that, as the lecturer had stated, these designs, such as the Greek Fret or key-pattern, might have been produced in Japan quite independently of any influence from the outer world, yet the similarity was so striking, the instances of accord were so numerous and parallelism of some rites and customs – such as providing the dead with coin to pay their fare over the Styx, - so remarkable, that he sincerely hoped some of the members versed in classical archaeology would turn their attention to the subject and ascertain what possibility there was of any contact having ever existed between the Hellenic race and the nation who deserved the title of Greeks of the Far East. ...”⁶

Certainly, by the turn of the century a craze in the appreciation of Japanese art can be spoken of, and the interest in a resemblance between Greek and Japanese culture remained alive in the decades thereafter as revealed e.g. by the article of Walter Weston in the magazine *Discovery* of August 1929, entitled “The Greece of the Far East”.

“While in a fondness of athletics and bodily training the ancient Greeks have been compared with the English, they also bore a more remarkable resemblance to the Japanese in many striking points of detail regarding the customs, manners and religious practices of the two peoples. We will here think of the Japanese in a general way, as represented by the ordinary type, which is as yet little touched by Western Civiliza-

tion, and of the Greek as we find him, mainly in Athens, during the age of Pericles”⁷.

However, about that time research in various areas had started already, which may be seen as the beginning of a process where knowledge replaced speculation about the interference between East and West.

At Turfan, at the eastern section of the Northern Silk Road, a cemetery containing about four hundred tombs, dating from ca. 300-800 A.D., was excavated by the Japanese explorer Count Kozui Ōtani in 1902 and 1910 and by Aurel Stein in 1914. Thousands of objects were unearthed and revealed that e.g. during the early Tang period (618-906 A.D.) Central Asian merchants had settled there and artistic motifs from the empires of Persia and Gandhāra flowed freely into the region.

Between 1913 and 1934 John Marshall unearthed a veritable treasure trove of artifacts at the site of Taxila, in the Gandhāran area, which had been founded by Bactrian Greeks during the 2nd century B.C., although the Achaemenids and the Indian Mauryans had occupied the site earlier (6th to 3rd centuries B.C.). Greek rule was maintained there until the 1st century A.D. Taxila was situated at the meeting-point of three great highways linking India with China, Western and Central Asia, and Europe.

In 1929 a study of Indian art was published by the pioneering scholar in the field, A. Coomaraswamy, covering art history (in particular architecture and sculpture), aesthetics, language, history and philosophy, and based on archaeological evidence from the earliest period up to the mid 19th century. The greatest part of the study dealt with Indian art, but Indonesia and the peripheries of south-east Asia were covered also in as far as they reflect Indian influences.

In 1931 Hudson published a scholarly study on the relationship between Europe and China, also covering the influences of Hellenistic culture upon China, the development of trade routes by land and by sea, and the commercial contacts between Rome and China.

The French Archaeological Mission under J. Hackin and J. Carl between 1939 and 1940 carried out excavations in Gandhāra at Begram, some 70 km north of Kābul. The older section of the city dates back to the Greco-Bactrian kings of the 2nd century B.C. It was one of the cities that sat astride the ancient routes linking the western world, Central Asia and China and it had a direct link to the maritime routes between India and the Mediterranean. Between the 1st and 3rd centuries A.D., Begram must have been one of the richest of all cities on the Silk Road, as testified by the contents of the excavated rooms of a palace-complex. Glass vessels from Egypt and Syria, Greco-Roman bronzes, jewellery and robes, Indian ivories, all decorated with motifs from their respective area were found, but also fragments of Eastern Han-period (25-220 A.D.) Chinese lacquer.

Today we know that the art of Gandhāra –almost exclusively Buddhist in subject matter- drew its inspiration from Greek, Roman, Persian and local Indian styles. The art discovered in the early years of the 20th century, however, looked so “Greek” that it was dubbed “Greco-Buddhist”. Fully aware of the fact that Roman art was founded upon the Greek, René Grousset entitled his book, published in 1948, “De la Grèce à la Chine”.

Detailed studies on the history of Greek rule in Bactria (present-day Afghanistan) and northern India after the conquests of Alexander the Great have been published in the book of Tarn in 1938 and in the second edition of 1951 with revisions to indicate the advance of knowledge. Tarn considered the Bactrian kingdom as a purely Hellenis-

tic state, in which opinion he was challenged by Narain in 1957, who stated that Bactria was part of the Indian history. More recently F.W. Holt (1999) proposed the truth to lie somewhere in between.

In 1963, the Tang specialist Edward Schafer provided a comprehensive account of the exotic goods brought to the Tang court of China. Among the many different goods were textiles like wool, silk damask, brocades and embroideries. Coins, -Sasanian, Byzantine and their imitations- were used in great number as currency, bullion and even decoration. Along with the merchants and monks, other travellers joined the caravans: missionaries, pilgrims, ambassadors, soldiers, scholars, artisans, horse trainers, acrobats, musicians and dancers. All these people carried with them their personal goods, symbols, talismans, artistic ideas and motifs, thus becoming intermediaries in the diffusion of images.

More recently, excavations (1965-1968) have been conducted at places such as Ai Khanum, a Greco-Bactrian city on the banks of the Oxus River in northern Afghanistan, which may well have been “Alexandria on the Oxus”, one of the cities founded by Alexander the Great. The finds have not only dramatically removed all doubt about the Greek presence in that area by the mid-2nd century B.C., but also clearly support the view that the artists in Gandhāra adopted classical prototypes that were already known to them, and that they adapted them to their own purposes.

Further evidence of a similar process of Hellenization was discovered by a joint Soviet-Afghan expedition in 1978-1979 at Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan. Over 20,000 objects were found there, many decorated in a Greco-Bactrian and Roman style.

Jessica Rawson’s pioneering research, published in 1984, demonstrated in detail that the source of Chinese flower patterns lies not in the Far East but in the Mediterranean world of Alexander the Great. Hellenistic architects then further developed the floral motifs to decorate buildings in the Near East. Subsequently these were reinterpreted in Buddhist temples of Central Asia and taken to China with the spread of the Buddhist faith.

John Boardman offered an overview with his publication in 1994, in which he shows how art of Classical Greece was carried far from the Greek land by colonists, merchants and armies to Italy, Egypt, and further east, at first by Greeks and later, with and in the wake of Alexander the Great, up to the River Indus.

By the nineties of the last century, Katsumi Tanabe and Frantz Grenet, contributed much to the understanding of the assimilation, during the 1st century A.D., of representations of Greek gods and heroes with those of the Near East and western Asia, and its subsequent influence in Central Asia and the Far East.

The recent publications of Etienne de la Vaissière revealed the dominant role of the Sogdians as merchants along the Silk Roads and in China.

Between the fall of the Han Empire in 220 A.D. and the rise of the Tang Empire in 618, China was ruled by a succession of short-lived dynasties. During these centuries, China’s ancient civilization and art was almost totally transformed by the flourishing of Buddhism and by the increased commercial activity along the Silk Road. The gateway to China was through Gansu and Ningxia in north-west China, connecting the desert regions of the West with China’s heartland and its imperial cities Chang’an (present-day Xi’an) and Luoyang. Gansu’s cities became, from the 4th century on, thriving centres of religion, commerce and culture, where Buddhism and Buddhist art flourished.

Excavations carried out in the People's Republic of China during the last quart of the 20th century have greatly contributed to an understanding of the complex cultural interactions that took place in the period between the Han and the Tang Empires, which saw the coming together of cultural influences from all over Asia, including reflections from the Mediterranean world. Yet, much is still unpublished or published in Chinese only, and therefore only partly available to the scholarly world to improve the synthesis of all extant information.

In some works diffusion of classical motifs to the East has been discussed in various degrees of detail with results of various conviction. Often, comparison of hypotheses brings controversies to light. In others, strong cases for recognizing the classical pedigree have been advanced or the dissemination has been convincingly demonstrated for specific motifs. When appropriate, we have borrowed from the monographs and articles of specialists in widely separated areas of expertise.

We have done our best to locate and consult every scholarly work, at least in a western language, which bears upon our theme; certainly we have not succeeded but hopefully we have found nearly everything of importance.

However, almost all of these works follow motifs on their way from the Mediterranean world to Central Asia and China. Only very few follow a motif into Japan, the main interest of this work.

It is worth noting from the outset that throughout this book tacitly a number of guiding principles have been followed as summarized below.

Uncertainty

On their way motifs were often transformed and adapted to local needs and became difficult to recognize as descending from their original. This is especially so for forms of imaginary mythical beings that change continuously because their iconography is based on oral or pictorial tradition. This is contrary to the treatment of e.g. live-animals for which the artist can turn to nature for his model.

Also, by paucity of archaeological evidence, the precise track of a diffused motif may be unclear and only resemblance to a presumed classical original makes the relationship likely, although it cannot be proven.

Regularly, in the past, a classical ancestry of a motif has been proposed by scholars without much factual support, and their opinion may then not be accepted unreservedly. However, often we have incorporated their conclusions in our discussion in order to evaluate their usefulness in the context of the present knowledge, also at points where experts disagree.

Sometimes these uncertainties caused us to enter into the realm of speculation and conjectures, but we were happy to do so, because the suggestions may stimulate others into refuting or reshaping the propositions.

Ubiquity

For a motif or image to fit in the discussion of this book, it is not important whether it can be demonstrated or not that it has its ultimate origin in the classical world. In fact, many motifs and images current in Greece before ca. 600 B.C. were not indigenous there, but were probably introduced from the Near East. Rather the criterion will be whether it was or became an essential and prominent element of Greek and Roman culture, and therefore it has been applied ubiquitously as a decorative motif or image in art and architecture.

This ubiquity was the reason for its spread into the empire of Alexander the Great and later to Gandhāra and further east in Buddhist context.

Local interpretation

It will not be our primary concern whether or not, or to what extent, a western motif or image was appreciated as such in the recipient culture. For example, the image of the Heavenly Horse as decorum on Tang mirrors has certainly triggered the awareness of Chinese people that they had to do with a motif borrowed from the West. The same holds for grapes. But whether or how these symbols fitted in their notions of cosmology is beyond the scope of this book.

This book is not a strictly chronological survey. Rather it adopts a more thematic approach. It has been organized in two Parts.

Part I contains background information, which is considered essential and preliminary to the discussion of the subjects in Part II. In Part I the development of Greek culture has been briefly described, together with its expansion in the Mediterranean area, followed by its diffusion to the East into the empire of Alexander the Great. Then, the opening of the trade routes between China and the Near East by the initiative of the Chinese, not of the West, and the role of the Roman Empire are reviewed. Finally the second major propelling force after Alexander, Buddhism, is discussed. These are all indispensable elements in order to understand generally the most important features of these interacting cultures. A specific point that has to be mentioned is that we described the Greek culture as the major “donor” culture. But following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century B.C., Greek civilization spread over the entire area of the former Persian Empire and beyond. Greek motifs were affected by those of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and Iran to produce a hybrid culture called “Hellenistic”, united by the use of the Greek tongue as a *lingua franca*. Later, cultures of Central Asia and China acted likewise as “recipient” cultures and had their influence, while India has been a factor of importance as well.

Thus, any attempt at completeness would require a sketch of the individual characteristics of all these cultures, but so great a task cannot be undertaken within the scope of the present work. Moreover, we try to indicate and elaborate some classical elements which survived on their way to the East in these recipient cultures, ultimately to Japan,

and therefore a detailed insight in these cultures is not of primary importance. Therefore –apart from in Part I- we have chosen to present relevant characteristics of these cultures at various instances throughout the work as appropriate.

In Part II, for a number of subjects, details have been treated such as: their role played in the classical world; their diffusion to Gandhāra, if so; their appearance in Central Asia and China; and their appearance in Japan. In all cases, the cross-cultural modifications which the images experienced on their way were explored.

Japan has continually absorbed influences from the Asiatic continent and often, not always, the foreign cultural impulses were transformed according to Japanese preferences. How did the Japanese artist select and transform his models? Answer to this question will be pursued elsewhere, not in this book, by analysing basic Japanese patterns of adaptation. Here we concentrate on the identification of classical elements.

We tried to improve the accessibility of the work by cautiously incorporating terminology and short explanations in the Glossary, instead of explaining the terms on the spot in the text where they appear.

It is our hope that readers with different interests and levels of knowledge may be stimulated to look further into the subject area of this book, and that they may be intrigued by the tokens of interaction between different cultures from Greece to Japan.