Greek Amphora
Madison Fox
AN137H Honors Art, Culture, and the Museum

Introduction

Art was a very large part of Greek culture in the past. One type of art that can be found all throughout different parts of Greek history is amphoras. Amphoras were found during the Geometric Period of art. There were three different parts of this time period where amphoras were created differently. The Early Geometric Period was from 900-850 BCE and it was defined by the dark brown/black glaze that was found on most amphoras. The Middle Geometric Period took place from 850-760 BCE and was based on vases covered in different patterns. The Late Geometric Period was from 760-700 BCE and was based on the vases with much more geometric design and patterns. Amphoras have been present from the beginning of the Geometric Period until present time. Art has always been an important part of Greek culture because Greeks have shown their thinking and learning throughout their artistic abilities.

Figure 1: The image to the left shows an example of a Greek amphora. The shape of the vase as well as the image painted onto it, create the amphora.

Cultural History and Context

Ancient Greeks rely on thinking in order to understand their lives. This has been static through much of Greek history, as seen through Greek Mythology and art. Greece is made up of over one hundred islands and one main Peninsula. Seventy percent of the island is covered with hills and mountains. The peninsula is built on top of a tectonic plate that is located in the Mediterranean Sea. This environment makes it very difficult to find good land for farming. Along with this, the summers were very hot and dry which also made it difficult to farm effectively. The winters were the better time for farming to take place because they were mild and wet. Farmers typically did not have enough food to feed themselves, so they were not able to use any of the food that was being harvested to trade for other necessary items. Throughout this time, animal husbandry was becoming less important, but still made up a good portion of the economy. This was more difficult because it was difficult to give up healthy land to allow an animal to survive. Due to the trouble in farming, there was little food to go around. Most meals consisted of bread, small amounts of savory food, diluted wine, and sometimes legumes. People were not able to use cutlery, instead, they used bread and their hands to eat their food. In order to eat animals, the state would sponsor a big animal sacrifice where the entire community would come together to celebrate and participate. The state allowed as many people to eat as the animal could feed. The rich and the poor would all participate in this and would all eat the same food on a regular basis. During normal days, the wealthy would only be able to have more food, not better food. Malnutrition was widespread throughout all of Greece during this time.

While the Minoans were in control of Greece in about 1700 BCE, they developed a form of writing known as Linear A. Historians have not been able to decipher this language as of now. The next form of writing used by Greeks is known as Linear B which historians say is a clear form of the writing known as Linear A.

History of the Art Form

Greek amphora production began in approximately 900 BC when the Geometric Period of art began. There were early, middle, and late Geometric Periods which ended in 700 BC, but that was not the end of the production of amphoras. There is evidence of amphora production through 261 BC. All amphoras are similar in shape with a distinct belly and tapering toe. Although the sizes differ over time, the shapes are similar enough to assume that each piece of pottery with this shape is an amphora. Along with this, amphoras have a flaring rim that can range from just barely flaring, to almost flat. Amphoras also have double barred handles that appear on both sides of the pot. Many of these handles are stamped with the artists name or a symbol that represents them.

Figure 3: The image to the right shows an amphora with a different shape. Each amphora has a slightly different shape, while all being considered amphoras.

Materials and Technology

The amphoras are made from different types of clay that can be found throughout Greece. In all the different types of clays that are used to create amphoras, there is the presence of different amounts of iron depending on where the clay is from. In some of these clays, the iron is replaced by aluminum or silicon; chromium and nickel are also present in the clay. Greek amphoras are created in workshops with many different people present. There are people who glaze the fired amphoras, people who oversee watching the kiln, people who work on the wheel to create amphoras, and people who add decorations to the amphoras. After the clay is moistened and brought into the workshop, it needs to be worked into a good form in order to be thrown on a wheel. Once it is ready, it is put on the wheel and one person spins the wheel while another person pushes and pulls the clay in order to shape it correctly. In order to throw correctly, a lot of water must be used. This is to be sure that the clay is makeable enough to be shaped in the correct ways. Other tools that have been used to make these amphoras are wooden tools that help to shape the amphora and also leave patterns in the clay. Once the clay is centered, then the artist can begin to shape it into the shape that they want it to be. The different amphoras could be two different sizes, a large would be 17-18cm, or a small 14-15cm. These measurements are taken from the rim. After it is shaped correctly it must be dried in order to trim it. It is trimmed in order to make the bottom look like it is supposed to. After it is trimmed it is then fired one time to create a hard surface in order to glaze. It is then glazed, typically with figures drawn in black glaze. Each amphora is then fired again in a large kiln in order to set the glaze. These kilns use technology that was first used in other parts of the Mediterranean. These kilns are very important because they created a way to make the amphoras much more durable. After an amphora is fired it is almost impossible to reshape it without completely cracking it all together. The kilns were created in order to work directly with the types of clays that were used. There is little variation in the ways that amphoras were created throughout all of Greece. The largest difference is the composition of the clay that was used.

Figure 4: The photo above shows some images that may have been painted onto a Greek amphora.

Interesting Fact

Many Greek amphoras show images of household chores including cooking, agriculture, wool working, and music. These are typical daily tasks that were done by both women and men, depending on the task. These images represent the culture values of Ancient Greek society because they show men doing activities such as fighting in battles, where they show women doing activities such as teaching children how to garden. This deviation of activities portrayed shows the beliefs of Ancient Greeks, they believed that women were not at the same level that men were. Women were considered citizens of Ancient Greece, but they were not given all of the same rights that men were given. Women were still unable to participate in public religious roles. These ideas are portrayed on the images of the Greek amphora, portraying women as inferior to men.

Figure 5: The image to the right shows an amphora with a woman showing a young child the garden.

An event that was highly portrayed onto the images on Greek amphoras were weddings. Weddings were incredibly important to young women in Greek culture. This would be the time in their life where they became a young woman and were separated from their families. They would move out of their homes and live with their husbands for the first time. The images of weddings typically were romanticized in some way. This could have included the addition of a cupid, flowers, or other images. The vases that show images of weddings were typically for women to use. These were placed on amphoras that would be stored around the house and hold food or other materials that a woman would need access to.

Figure 6: To the left is an image of an amphora with a scene from a wedding painted on it.

Current Status

Greek amphoras are no longer being created. The last evidence of the amphora being made was in 261 BCE. From 260 BCE until 280 BCE amphora production was very high. Greek amphoras were very commercialized during the time that they were being highly produced. This is proven by the amount of amphoras found in shipwrecks by archeologists. The history of the Greek amphora is being threatened by looting and the loss of original knowledge from Ancient Greece. Greek amphoras were looted out of graves for years, leaving many pieces of art with no provenance. The written records from this time are scarce, and the ones that are available are not from the same areas as the amphoras. This creates a difficulty in finding correct knowledge about the time period and the Greek amphoras. These both are creating threats to the Greek amphora.

References

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