

**Susan WOODFORD**, *An Introduction to Greek Art: Sculpture and Vase Painting in the Archaic and Classical Periods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1-47-252364-8, £19.99.

“This book is only a beginning!” – these words are published by the author at the end of her book, and we must admit that it would be hard to think of a better and more succinct motto for a book whose aim is to introduce the reader to, and encourage a deeper study of, the art of the ancient world. The first exercise is, however, a key one for the reader who wishes to become acquainted with a certain problem – he cannot be discouraged, disappointed, bored or intimidated. It is a great art to write an academic study in a way that is comprehensible and accessible but without undermining the high level of its subject matter and its scholarly reliability. This has been achieved without doubt by Susan WOODFORD (= W.), whose textbook *An Introduction to Greek Art. Sculpture and Vase Painting in the Archaic and Classical Periods* has been reprinted by Bloomsbury Publishing. As the author herself notes in the introduction to the first edition (London: Duckworth, 1986), the book is aimed at students, travellers and art lovers. The overriding conceptual organization of this publication is the demonstration of issues discussed in scholarship, limiting itself to a small number of examples, so that the reader is not overwhelmed by and lost in the sheer volume of information and images. This idea worked well twenty years ago, but an even better effect might be achieved today, in times when students are faced with a vast quantity of information. The young generation, accustomed to constantly consulting the internet and to changing images, is slowly losing its ability to concentrate on one concrete thing and analyse that in depth. Yet W. discusses phenomena and problems in the history of art using one example for illustration, or on rare occasions two. Each time she must of course make a difficult decision in choosing from the available artefacts the one which best illustrates the phenomenon under discussion. But she usually selects material in such a way as to keep track of the development of the technique or motif. The book is characterised by a low-key exposition; the narration is not loaded with information of an encyclopaedic nature. Professional terminology is italicised, so that the reader is aware of which words he must note and remember. Such terminology is confined only to what is absolutely essential. The author hardly ever digresses from the matter in hand; she avoids superfluous deviations from the subject, with the sole exception of mythical descriptions. Because she is aware that the book’s reader might be a complete layman in the question of Greek culture, she reaches out to him by explaining in a simple fashion the myths which are connected with what is presented on the artefacts. Thanks to this, the book is not only about art but also in a certain sense about Greek civilization. She has a particular fondness for the Homeric epics, which were essentially a huge inspiration for artists of the archaic and classical eras. And so, instead of imposing specialist epic expressions on the reader, she patiently translates in a logical and organic fashion the connections between Homeric formulae and the ornamentation of Dipylon vases. She also frequently demonstrates astute observations on connections with literature (e.g. the description of the François vase, pp. 18 f., or Exekias’ work). Thanks to this the textbook reads pleasantly, and in addition the reader sees that there is a natural and obvious correlation between literature and imaginary art, that the artefacts do not originate in a vacuum, but are rather the result of complex cultural processes. This is where W. of course aims to also show the historical and social background. This is easy to see in examples such as the discussion of methods of presenting war and its terrors in vase paintings during the Persian Wars, or in the presentation of sculptures such as the Tyrannicides. At the same time she avoids considerations of sexual subtexts, demonstrations of sexual violence or obscene presentations. It appears that this is a very sensible selection and one which is dictated by attention to the sensibilities of the reader. The book abounds in illustrative material, containing over 250 photographs, diagrams and charts. These schematic drawings and models are helpful in enabling an

understanding of the principles of composition (e.g. fig. 125), symmetry (e.g. figs. 195 and 196), or questions as prosaic as the method of pinning the peplos and chiton (figs. 70 and 71).

The current edition differs from the first not only in the addition of interesting sections, but also in the quality and distribution of the illustrations. The number of colour illustrations has increased significantly. This has been particularly helpful in improving the visibility of uniquely beautiful coloured drawings on white *lekythoi*. The method of presenting black and red vase paintings has also benefited through this. The best example here is fig. 154, where on the *hydria* of the Pan Painter, the intensely red blood spilling from the neck of the Medusa figure is clearly distinct from the orange background. In the same illustration in the old edition this unusual effect employed by the painter was almost completely invisible. In some instances the author has decided to use additional illustrations to show magnified details (the perfect choice would be e.g. fig. 152), or an additional drawing of the detail (e.g. fig. 5). The places where W. has left the illustrations in black and white has been dictated by the quality of the contrast, in which the chiaroscuro extracts the structure of the artefact and its composition in a much better way; this is especially visible in the instances of sculpture. On the side, it is worth noting that there is no lack in this book of surprising and simultaneously splendid solutions in the presentation to the reader of conundrums which are difficult to imagine. It is common knowledge that in the instance of Greek sculpture of the classical and Hellenistic periods we often have to deal with only Roman copies of various qualities. We assume that these copies differ – often very significantly – from the originals, something which was dictated by various factors: a lesser talent on the artist's part, different material (bronze and marble), the influence of the different aesthetics of the era and indeed of the one purchasing the copy. W. has decided to show these varying factors by using drastic examples: in illustrations 186 and 187 she has presented Michelangelo's David and its modern souvenir copy in plastic on a reduced scale. It is probably impossible to find a better example which shows how difficult it is to imagine the Athene Parthenos of Phidias on the basis of the extant copies.

W. has added not only many short paragraphs to the new edition, but also a whole section on the topic of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the wonders of the world which was known to the ancients, as well as the very useful section *Art in Greek Society*.

The book's most important asset is, however, simply the fact that it is well written, without superfluous rambling, with concern for the reader and with clear and elegant language. This is actually a very good handbook for people who are establishing their acquaintance with Greek art: school pupils, students, businessmen or retired people on holiday, who want to find new intellectual stimuli in antiquity and intelligent relief from everyday life. Let us return for a moment to the book's closing motto: "The way the works illustrated in this book *look* is unlikely to change, but the way we *look at* them is far from immutable. This book is only a beginning!" Yes, essentially every time we return to a museum and look at an artefact which we have already seen, sometimes more than once, it awakes in us different emotions and associations. The artefact itself is something that obviously does not change, but we and our feelings about life, art and that particular artefact do. It is similar with valuable literature: whenever we read a good book, it opens up new perspectives to us each time. Who has not got the impression when reading Homer for the fifth time that he is reading something completely new and revealing? The reader of W.'s handbook, who might be seeing some works of Greek art for the first time in his life, will be at the beginning of this road. Perhaps this book will give him precisely the chance of meeting and making the wonderful discovery of the works of Exekias, who will then encourage him to read Homer. It is just this power of potential which slumbers in textbooks for beginners: it cannot be underestimated.

*Agnieszka Kotlińska-Toma*  
*University of Wrocław*