

ANCIENT HISTORY AND CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
ADMISSIONS TEST

SAMPLE B

Answer ALL parts of BOTH questions. You have NINETY MINUTES for this test. We recommend that you read the entire paper before beginning to write your answers. Spend about a third of your time on reading, thinking and planning, and the rest of the time writing.

If you find the text in Question One and the image in Question Two difficult and unfamiliar, don't worry: the exercise is meant to be challenging, but we hope you will also find it thought-provoking. There is no 'right' answer to the questions: you will be judged on the intelligence of your case, how clearly you make it and how effectively you support it. You should use your own words in answering the questions.

Question One (50 marks)

The first question is based on an adapted section from an article about stylistic developments in Greek sculpture. Please read through the extract carefully and think about what it is trying to argue. You do not need to know anything about Greek history or art to answer the question below.

Question: What assumptions does the author make concerning the social role of sculpture in the Greek world and its relation to stylistic developments? How would you go about criticising their argumentation?

The great corpus of late sixth- and early fifth-century Athenian vase painting reveals a rapid and impressive development of the art of drawing, as the painters strove in successive experiments to enhance the vividness and plausibility of their naturalistic representation. In sculpture too we can trace a similar kind of daring innovation, for example in the decoration of the temple of Aphaia on Aegina and the temple of Zeus at Olympia. The surviving monuments are, naturally enough, predominantly marble architectural sculptures; but the increasing use of bronze at this time for free-standing statuary greatly augmented the sculptor's freedom to explore novel and more adventurous compositions, as is witnessed for us by a number of ambitious Early Classical studies of figures in motion – for example the Tyrannicide group, the Diskobolos, and the Athena and Marsyas group of Myron. (This is perhaps rather a case of the chicken and the egg, for it was presumably this feature of working in bronze which encouraged its espousal at precisely this time.) The sculptor Myron became especially famous, even in later ages, for the lifelike quality of his works.

The archaic kouros [statue depicting a male youth] was more a symbol of a man than an actual man. His stylized forms, his rigid hieratic stance, set him outside the realm of the living, the world of change. In this he is directly comparable to Egyptian figures: the product of a conceptual art – 'art for eternity' as it has been aptly dubbed. By instilling their creations with greater life Greek sculptors had certainly attained greater vividness in their presentations, and undoubtedly won great esteem for their artifice; but by strengthening the illusion of life in their figures they inevitably brought them closer to the living world and sacrificed some of the timeless monumentality of the archaic style, some of its mysterious and supernatural power. And to those in the business of providing monuments one may take it for granted that any significant loss in monumental quality would be keenly felt. Here then we have a specific artistic problem, developed within a tradition. Technical advances in the sculptor's art actually threaten his ability to perform his traditional – and at this time primarily religious – function: the perennial task of the artist-craftsman, which Sir Ernst Gombrich has fittingly described as 'to create a satisfying order out of his well-tried elements'.

How was this problem to be resolved? The logic of the situation may be adduced, I think, in the following manner. The popular excitement and admiration which, it has been suggested, were attendant on the conquest of naturalistic representation meant that there was no way sculptors could simply go back to producing surrogate kouroi; in the light of the new knowledge and the break in tradition, such figures, if produced by a modern sculptor, could only appear ridiculous – precious and artificial, without any of their original primitive strength. Furthermore, sculptors were no doubt both conscious and proud of the progression of their art, an attitude which was recorded, slightly later, by Plato:

... the sculptors say that Daedalus, if he were to be born now and create such works as those from which he got his reputation, would be a laughing-stock.

Art then was inexorably set on its course towards greater naturalism; but certain concessions would definitely have to be made if some of the symbolic and monumental quality of archaic work was to be retained. And it is here we should see the basic motivation behind the development of the classical style.

Sculptors must endeavour to reconcile the artistic requirement that their creations be more 'alive' and naturalistic with the functional and religious need for a monumental symbolism, a perceptible sense of order. And the characteristic tendencies of Classical sculpture may all be seen as attempts to do just that.

Question Two (50 marks)

The image below shows a relief from a family tomb in the city of Rome, set up by non-elite individuals for themselves and their children. You do not need to have any advance knowledge of the object or of Roman history.

Question: Describe the image, explain what it might tell us about the family buried there, and how we might use it to learn about the family's social status.

