

**PICTURESQUE GREECE:
ARCHITECTURE,
LANDSCAPE, LIFE OF THE
PEOPLE**

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Picturesque Greece: architecture, landscape, life of the people by Hanns Holdt & Hugo von Hofmannsthal

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HANNS HOLDT & HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

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HANNS HOLDT / HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

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LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Of all our journeys, that to Greece is the most spiritual. Of that semi-sensual curiosity, ever the secret underlying base of so many journeys, there is little that speeds us on our way to Greece. And when, ere we have set foot upon her shores, she greets us with that which we had thought of least: her entrancing and wholly eastern perfume distilled from orange blossoms, acacias, laurels and thyme, we are, for a fleeting moment, almost startled.

Ours was a spiritual pilgrimage, and we had forgotten that from this landscape might emanate another perfume than that of memories alone. We confront that which we wish to see with too much spiritual impatience. In us dwell too many souls alloying their aspirations with our own towards these hills and temple ruins. We arrive lost in the company of a crowd of shadow-like companions. But they desert us the moment we step on shore, sense the actual rocks beneath our feet, inhale the fresh and sunny air. 'Tis then we stand in the forecourt of our desires and feel that we have lost our guides. But a short time ago, while our ship was sailing the Sicilian, "Greater Grecian" main, Goethe was with us. We leave him as we left Italia's shores. And suddenly we feel that he is a Roman. The great head of Juno Ludovisi intervenes between us and him. We remember that he never saw a real antique, nor a statue of the fifth century. And the placidity into which, together with Winckelmann, he steeped his antiquity is to us the condition of the German soul at a certain moment: nothing more. But also the great intellectuals of the last century who unveiled a darker and wilder antiquity — also their intuition suddenly possesses no longer the same luminousness. Burckhardt, his countryman Backofen, Rhode, Fustel de Coulanges — incomparable interpreters of the dark foundations of the Greek soul, bright torches that lit up a graveyard world — yet there is something more here. Here is no sepulchre. Here there is so much light, and they never breathed in this light. All their visions are as the colour of lead in this lustre, and we leave them far behind us. — The first impression of this landscape is stern, set foot in it where you may. It casts off all dreamy visions, be they historical or otherwise. It is dry, close-fisted, expressive, and strange as a fearful emaciated countenance. But on it shines a light the like of which the

eye has never seen before, a light that fills it with such joy that it would seem the eye had first learnt the meaning of seeing to-day. This light is at the same time inexpressibly mild. It shows up clearly the slightest detail with such distinctness, a gentle distinctness that sets the heart beating higher, and it surrounds that which is nearest — I can but use a paradox — with a luminous enveilment. It can only be compared with spirit. Things must exist thus in a wonderful intellect, so wakeful and so restful, so set apart, so joined. But how joined? Not by *Stimmung*. Nothing is more remote here than this gossamer psycho-sensual dream element. — No, by the spirit itself. The light is bold, and it is young. It is the symbol of youth penetrating to the very core of the soul. Hitherto I had looked upon water as the most wonderful expression of that which is eternally young. But this light is still more emphatically so.

They tell me this is the light of Asia-Minor, the light of Palestine, of Persia, of Egypt, and I understand the unity of history that has determined our inner fate since thousands of years. Troy, Xenophon's Ten Thousand, Cleopatra, and also Byzantine Theodora. All these thousand-year old adventures become both comprehensible and uniform as the parts of a single melody. Odysseus' ruses, Platon's irony, Aristophanes' impertinences: there is a wonderful identity in all, and the formula of such identity is the light.

Everything that lives in this light lives fully and really: without hope, without longing, without grandezza. It lives. It is this: "they live in light". To leave this light, to become as shadows; it was this that was most dreadful. For this there was no consolation. "Rather a serf there than Achilles here". — He who has not seen this light does not understand such words. . . . From a hill I see somewhere a few goats on a slope. Their climbing, the movement of their heads; this all is real, and at the same time as though drawn by a supreme artist. The air invests these creatures with something divine beyond their animalism. This light is the perpetual marriage of the spirit with the world. A steep summit, a pine-tree or two, a small wheat-field, a tree with old roots clinging to the riven rocks, a cistern, an evergreen shrub, a flower. Individually they have no aspirations to blend with the whole, each lives unto itself, but in this light to be alone does not spell solitude. Here or nowhere the individual is born; but he is born to a divine and companionable fate. In this air one is magnificently secluded — but no more deserted than one of the gods, wherever he might appear or pass through the air. And here all creatures are gods. This pine, beautiful as a column of Phidias, is a goddess. And of the spring flowers scattering their perfume and splendour from meadow-side it has been said — and rightly said — that they stand there like little gods.

Here, man, as we understand him, was born, for here harmony of measure was born. The proportions of a temple remnant, three columns and a ruined gable shadowed by a solitary oak whose foliated crown looks heavenwards are all so beautiful that they almost rend our soul, even as the deepest harmonies

of music rend the soul. The sky itself, the height of the apparently solid dome, is somehow included in the magnificent computation. And when a man steps between the columns, a peasant seeking a patch of shade, or a spot to eat his frugal meal, a shepherd with his dog, the whole scene becomes so beautiful that our heart swells with joy. Nothing we know of their ways, and manners, and cult appeals directly to our power of imagination. Their ceremonies, as far as archaeology divulges them to us, are as unpleasant as the sight of dancers for him who does not hear the music. We cannot grasp anything of their mysteries, save the relation of the human body to the stone-built sanctuary.

The view from Acro-Corinthus extends to two seas with many islands, the snow-clad summit of Parnassus and the Achaian Mountains. Light creates out of all these an order that fills the heart with bliss. We know no better word for this than music. But it is more than music. — And what a lesson this light gives to the thoughtful observer! Here is no exaggeration, no admixture. Let each one see for himself. But see it in its pristine purity. Seek not to discriminate, nor to group. Each stands in its allotted place, the whole is conjoined. Be calm, breathe, enjoy and sense your life.

Nothing is more difficult than to guess in this landscape whether an object be far or near. The light makes it distinct, and at the same time spiritualizes it, makes it but a breath. But the power in a movement at a distance of one hundred and fifty paces is great. The beckoning of an Agogiate calls forth from a distant rock crevice the shepherd with his water skin. It is wonderful to think how in the Battle of Salamis the sea captains issued their commands on their gaudy wooden bridges which never could have been conveyed by human voice through the roar and din of battle, and how the Grecian eye seeking the outstretched hand of Themistocles in this atmosphere of vibrating silver decided towards evening the fate of the world.

The Homeric gods and goddesses are always stepping out of the bright light. Nothing seems more natural as soon as one knows this light. We are from the north, and the semi-darkness of the north has formed our imagination. We divine the mystery of space, but we considered no other means of glorifying it possible than Rembrandt's chiaroscuro. Now here we recognize that there is a mystery in full light. This light shrouds forms in mystery and familiarity at the same time. They are but trees and columns which meet our eyes in this light, or mayhap the mute bodies of the Erechtheum Caryatides, half virgins, half columns. And yet their corporeal beauty is of irresistible power in this light. But the gods and goddesses were statues of flesh and blood. From beneath the heavy and almost hard forehead the fire in their blood glowed forth. And in this air which wraps a veil of both awe and desire around every form, and if it be but a blossom-laden branch, we divine the look with which Paris, the lonely shepherd, measured the three goddesses, when they stepped towards him out of the glittering light, high-breasted in their pride and jealousy of one another, and ready to give all to win the victor's prize.

What a situation! — And does it not bear like a diamond, uncrushed by any weight, the whole of the stupendous and dark happenings of the Iliad? — Yes, these myths are true in another way than we thought. We loved them as the products of harmonious imaginative power. But there is more of magic in them, than we knew, a magic which enters man's soul straight from the actual. Before the first rays of the sun touch the heights of Parnassus, there is really something of the colour of the rose that floods its uppermost summit. This colour is exactly that of the living rose-petal, and exactly only two fingers wide, two fingers of a woman lightly laid on the bulwark of a ship, and just as light as the movement of a woman's hand. And it requires here a lesser effort of fantasy to see Eos fly westwards with rosy fingers, rapid as a dove, than to imagine a burning bush in the semi-darkness of our eternal winter afternoons.



But this journey of ours is no journey to the picturesque. We are searching here for one of the sublime experiences of humanity. We wish to place our hand on the sanctuary. We wish to assist at festivals which, in their austerity and beauty, verge on the sublime. We wish to take direct, nay, physical part in that which we guessed at more than we experienced whilst deciphering our Aeschylus. A restless impatience stirs in us to discover the sublimely spiritual in forms. In this impatience lies the yearning of how many generations. And is it not above all Schiller's bold and great soul rising within us? His visions of the antique, this ever-recurring petulant demand to find somewhere on earth the incorporated idea of the beautiful which his inner eye was so strong to discern. Let us beware of confounding these things with the irresponsible "writings" of the average literati. Schiller believed what he wrote. And he unfurled his whole *ego* like a far-flung flag in the tumult of a perpetual spiritual battle in which future and past are blended, and in which we too stand somewhere.

The idea of recognizing in physical traces a spiritual sublimeness loses here on the soil of Greece its exaggeration akin to arrogance. And, indeed, in this light the spiritual is more embodied and the physical more spiritualized than elsewhere in the world. If, under these skies, we turn over the leaves of one of Pindar's odes glorifying a pugilistic combat, the battle itself and the gigantic struggle issues forth into the very middle of this silver flame of poetry. The Olympic plain where they met brings into close relationship Athens, of which we think we know so much, and Sparta, of which we know so little. We surmise that they were both Greeks, and that their locked embrace and the mortal combat that slew them both was Greek life in its highest sense. Our faded Winckelmann vision which drew the beautiful too near to the charming, and to an enervated charmingness at that — too near to Canova! — a vision that still lives in us somewhere has made us forget how closely beauty and strength, as well as strength with all that is terrible and threatening, to life are related: how could it otherwise bring life to its knees?

But here, before these stupendous remains we recollect that Castor and Pollux were Helen's brothers, that they were robbers of women and mighty fighters. If we think of Antigone here, we swear she was a sister of Achilles, and the defiance with which she met her king is of no less force than that of Thetis' son who stayed in his tent in spite of the commander and a hundred princes. These nameless epebes, these "dew sisters" from the Acropolis, these Corai virgin priestesses, dug up from the ruins of Persian destruction, are magnificent beings, and powerful ones withal. There is something unattainable about them, something more incomprehensible than the most beautiful Gothic figures. And also something more complete. Yet never before were the spiritual and physical within us so moved in the deepest roots, where they are united, by the sight of the physical. This completeness is the last word of the culture in which we are rooted. Here, neither the Occident nor the Orient are alone, and we belong to both worlds.

Perhaps, with a romantic eye, we still conceive a complete figure that rises up in marble before us. Perhaps we vest it with too much of our consciousness, of our "soul". Let us be careful not to confound the infinitely different worlds. But even a cool and yet very attentive look fixed on one of these relics: an arm with a hand, a half-nude shoulder, the knee of a goddess under a flowing garment, even this cool look which refuses any share of harmonious contact with this art feels, after a few seconds, absolutely in tune with this conception of completeness in which both spirit and senses have an equally wonderfully harmonious part. These hands, as beautiful as they are strong, and so unostentatious of strength or beauty, how they justify Anaxagoras' words: man is the cleverest being because he has hands. And how freely the *χέρη* of Anaxagoras moves in these wonderful organs of the body. They are indeed organs, tools, but not blunt ones; and are no less spiritual than words. The sight of these supple, powerful, clever princely limbs reveals to us the philosophical language of the Greeks flashing like a chain of mountain peaks. Verily, here the spiritual and physical footsteps lead along the same path, and they all lead to the lion's den.



Greek landscape, as it is to-day, may be disappointing when first seen. But it is only the first glance that disappoints. Present-day Greece is a woodless country, and has thus a certain hardness in its outlines, which, it is true, is bathed in the life-giving light. In vain we search for the "swelling hills" which enchanted Fallmerayer, when gazing across the country from the shore, or the chestnut thicket, and the platanes and oaks interspersed with a thousand bushes, into which he descended from a mountain cliff. But the swelling hills were near Trebizond, and he looked into the woods from the summit of Athos. Still to-day the peninsula of Volo — for centuries the forest reserve of the Dowager-Sultaness — has its famous chestnut woods; all this lies outside of Greece-proper. But Attica had only one little wood left, and this was set on fire during the war to remove the King whose country-house was situated in its midst. The erst-