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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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EXHIBITION OF EARLY GREEK ART AT NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D.C. - An exhibition of 67 Greek works of art from the 10th to the 5th centuries B.C. will open at the National Gallery of Art on January 31, 1988. Highlighting the subject of the human figure in early Greek art, the exhibition will feature important objects that have never been seen in the United States, and some works that will be on display for the first time ever outside Greece. Her Excellency Melina Mercouri, Minister of Culture of Greece, will inaugurate the exhibition at the National Gallery. She was in Washington last October to announce plans for the exhibition.

In discussing "The Human Figure in Early Greek Art" with J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, Minister Mercouri said: "It gives us gr̄eat pleasure to share an important chapter of the cultural legacy of Greece with audiences in the United States. The fact that some of the objects will be leaving our homeland for the first time demonstrates our commitment to fostering understanding between our cultures."

The exhibition includes marble sculptures, bronzes, painted pottery, and terracotta figures from the geometric period (9th and 8th

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centuries B.C.), the orientalizing period (7th century B.C.), the archaic period (6th century B.C.) and the early classical period (5th century B.C.) of Greek art -- a critical, evolutionary span during which Greek artists learned to represent the human figure in a naturalistic way. The first representations of mankind in early Greek art are silhouetted stick figures illustrating scenes of mythology or stories told in the Homeric poems the Iliad and the Odyssey. Later objects bear witness to the increasing ability of Greek artists to depict naturalistic movement and lifelike proportions of the human body. This accomplishment set the stage for the achievements of the high classical style expressed most completely in the sculpture of the Parthenon.

Mr. Brown noted: "This exhibition provides an opportunity to observe the treatment of the human figure during a critical formative period in world art. The trends illustrated by the objects led to the flowering of Greek classicism, which has functioned as the basis for the Western aesthetic of art throughout history. We are delighted by the generosity of the Greek people in making these works of art available to be seen in the United States."

The oldest object is a painted clay centaur, a creature that is half man, half horse, made in the late 10th century B.C. in the town of Lefkandi (north of Athens). It is widely considered the most accomplished artistic creation of the Greek Dark Ages, the period after the decline of Mycenaean culture. The bronzes include an unusual statuette of a running girl athlete. Painted vases in the exhibition feature a range of human depictions from schematic stick figures to naturalistic youths skillfully rendered in black-figure and red-figure styles. One famous example made by the potter Gorgos is a drinking cup, which carries a beautifully executed red-figure drawing of a kneeling youth holding a hare.

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While present in many forms throughout the exhibition, the emphasis on the perfection of youth is perhaps best illustrated by the inclusion of several marble kouroi, statues of idealized young men standing upright, and korai, statues of young women, from the Acropolis. Commissioned to mark the graves of deceased youths or to pay homage to Greek gods or goddesses, this 6th and 5th century B.C. statuary progressed from early experiments in representing the human form to a mastery of the ability to make the figures look lifelike.

The exhibition, which has been organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Greek Ministry of Culture, has been selected from the permanent collections of four museums in Athens and many regional Greek museums. It is supported in part by The Paradina Inc. Trust and Joannou & Paraskevaides (Overseas) Ltd., and by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The official airline carrier for the exhibition is Olympic Airways.

After its Washington showing (January 31 to June 12, 1988), The Human Figure in Early Greek Art will travel to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri (July 16 to October 2, 1988), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November 13 1988 to January 15, 1989), The Art Institute of Chicago (February 18 to May 7, 1989) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (June 7 to September 3, 1989).

A fully illustrated color catalogue will accompany the exhibition, featuring essays by well-known American, British and Greek scholars on bronzes, vase painting, terracottas, stone sculpture, and the history of the period under consideration.