

# World of Socrates seen in D.C. exhibit

by Nora Hamerman

The ancient Athenian society which produced Socrates (and tragically, put him to death) will become palpably real to millions of Americans over the next six months, thanks to an unprecedented exhibit entitled "The Greek Miracle: Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy, the Fifth Century B.C.," which opened at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art on Nov. 22 and will remain on view until Feb. 7. It will then be seen at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art from March to May 1993.

The show commemorates the 2,500th anniversary of the beginnings of Greek democracy, launched with the reforms of Kleisthenes in 508 B.C. This crowned a process that had begun in 594 B.C. when Solon, the lawgiver, overturned debt slavery and extended power sharing beyond the aristocracy.

The Classical style created in Athens in the Fifth Century has always been the touchstone for western art. Although the Greeks' achievements in painting are known only through a minor art form, vase painting, the surviving sculpture from the Acropolis and the temples at Aegina and Olympia set the standard which all subsequent artists have either emulated, or rebelled against.

Nicholas Gage, author of the Introduction to the exhibition catalogue, encapsulated the issues at stake in a thoroughly traditional way when he wrote, "The ancient Greeks believe there is a divine spark to be found within every mortal. . . . This is an essential difference between the Greeks and all previous societies. . . . It was no coincidence that the Greek discovery of individual worth and freedom produced the most profound advances in art and sculpture. If the spark of divinity is to be found in man, then the form and appearance of man would inevitably be the proper subject matter of the artist."

But why did war break out among the Greek city-states after this golden age? Why was Athens defeated by the oligarchy of Sparta? And how was the Athenian democracy manipulated to murder the city's greatest thinker, Socrates? These beautiful sculptures will set the context for those still-timely issues to be discussed.

Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis came to Washington on Nov. 17 to personally open the show. Addressing the press in Greek, he pointed out that three separate miracles are embodied in the exhibit. "The first is the birth of democracy in Athens 2,500 years ago. Until that moment, from the earliest civilizations, freedom of the individual was seen as

certain to cause anarchy and make an orderly society impossible." The second miracle is "the burst of creative energy that followed the birth of democracy!"

The third miracle, he said, is that "the exhibition ever made it to the United States at all. Sculptures from this seminal century are so rare and so prized by the museums that have them—especially our own—that the institutions are naturally reluctant to lend them out. As a result, every past attempt to mount a show of Fifth Century sculpture has collapsed."

The exhibit includes 34 bronzes and marbles, 22 of them from Greek museums, including many which have never left Greece before. These include such seminal works as the Kritios Boy of 480 B.C., considered the first sculptured figure known to survive, which moves into the same space as the viewer. The show begins with an archaic Greek *kouros* (standing youth) figure of 530-520 B.C. The youth is shown rigidly frontal, with a slight smile, giving the face a masklike appearance. As installed in Washington, the viewer can look through openings at either side of this statue into the next gallery, so as to compare it to the Kritios Boy, whose sense of potential movement and introspective expression convey the new ideal of individual freedom and political responsibility. In New York, visitors will be able to make a third comparison, to an even earlier archaic *kouros* which dates from the seventh century B.C. and belongs to the Metropolitan Museum.

The artistic breakthrough came just after the Greeks, unified under Athenian leadership, defeated the mighty Persian empire in 430 B.C. The significance of that political revolution is well conveyed by the placards which accompany the exhibition. The decline of the classical ideal in the era of the Peloponnesian Wars and the death of Socrates is also presented.

A comprehensive educational program is offered in conjunction with the exhibit. In Washington, this includes tours and lectures for school groups; two special day-long programs on the art and culture of classical Greece to be offered to two groups of 500 area high school students each; a multi-image audiovisual program of 15 minutes; introductory slide shows and audio tours; and Sunday lectures by guest scholars. The audiovisual program—using high resolution slides, not videotape—is spectacular and brings one about as close to the sights of Greece as one can get without physically going there.

A weekend film series, "Greek Tragedy on Stage and Screen," will start on Nov. 22 and will include the National Theatre of Great Britain's production of the *Oresteia*, Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* and *Medea*, and Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* and *Electra*.

Admission to the show, which is made possible by Philip Morris Companies, Inc., is by means of advance passes. These can be obtained at the National Gallery for free, or for a nominal service charge from Ticketmaster outlets. A limited number of same-day passes can be obtained at the Gallery.