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THE THREE GRACES: COMPOSITION AND MEANING IN A ROMAN CONTEXT*

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Introduction

The Three Graces are among the most consistently rendered motifs of the Roman world. The group of the three, nude, embracing women is extant in statuary and numerous two-dimensional art forms, but all adhere to a basic formula of pose, appearance, figural type, and composition, with only minor variations. This uniformity is surprising when one considers the Greek history of the motif. Greek artists depicted the draped, walking and dancing Charites with considerable discrepancies in hairstyle, pose, clothing, attributes, and, evidently, meaning. Worshipped as minor goddesses, the Charites were represented according to local desires and traditions and did not adhere to a widespread cultural or artistic standard.

Explanations for the Roman concept of the Graces have long been sought, but have generally focused upon the composition of the statuary examples: a strongly reduced depth makes the group appear flat and plank-like and accordingly comprehensible from a limited number of viewpoints. This has led scholars to seek a prototype that displays a similar composition. Some posit that the original was a painting whose inherent flatness was reproduced along with the motif, while others suggest that the Graces derive from a sculptural source, perhaps a relief. This modern debate follows a comment by Pausanias (9.35.36: Orchomenos), who admits confusion as to whether the original Graces were executed as a painting or a sculpture. These efforts use the extant replicas specifically to identify or re-create the lost Greek original, but this approach has not reached definitive, provable conclusions, and has, furthermore, provided little insight

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into the Roman versions of the Graces except as pale echoes of an earlier prototype.

A more informative approach focuses on the extant versions of the Three Graces in the context of the culture that produced and used them, regardless of their prototype. Explanations for the consistency of representation, flat composition, nudity, pose, and meaning of the group should therefore be sought within the Roman artistic and intellectual world of sculpture, its practices, and functions.[1] As recent studies of Roman copying practices have shown, by the late-Hellenistic era sculptors had at their disposal the entirety of Greek themes, compositions, poses, and styles and could create a work with any combination of these elements. These artists did not necessarily reproduce a single original but quoted, adapted, or re-arranged aspects of older works into a new creation, or fashioned new sculptures in Greek themes and styles. The Three Graces were continuously replicated with the same pose, style, and composition, but this is likely because something in the group's appearance appealed to the Roman patron and not because sculptors were slavishly replicating a single original. The constant repetition of the Graces' imagery and flat composition should therefore be regarded as deliberate and not as an accident of motif transference or the copying process.

The archaeological evidence

There are at least sixteen large-scale statuary examples of the Three Graces, all of which date to the Roman period (Figs. 1, 2). The motif also appears in wall paintings, mosaics, relief sculptures, metal reliefs, on terracotta lamps, coins, and gems, as well as a single terracotta figurine.[2] These representations contrast strongly with the Greek Charites, which are always shown in relief sculpture. The Graces are fairly consistent: three nude women stand upright beside one another. The two figures on the ends (A, C) face the same direction while the central Grace (B) is turned the opposite direction (Fig. 1). Each woman has a straight weight leg and a bent free leg: the figures on the ends have an outer weight leg,

[1] The term 'Roman' is here used to designate the cultural context that produced and used a sculpture, regardless of the nationality of the sculptor: B. S. Ridgway, *Roman Copies of Greek Sculpture: The Problem of the Originals* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 6; M. D. Fullerton, 'Imitation and Intertextuality in Roman Art', *JRA* 10 (1997), 427, n. 1.

[2] The most complete list of these replicas is *LIMC* 3, s.v. Charis, Charites/Gratiae, nos. 1–139 (Sichtermann).

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Fig. 1: Three Graces: Paris, Louvre: courtesy of Louvre Museum.

while figure B usually rests on her right leg, when the figure is seen from behind.[3] The arms are placed in an embracing pose around the shoulders. The inner arms of Graces A and C cross behind the body

[3] Several replicas vary the leg position: Cyrene, Museum 14.347 (G. Becatti, 'Le tre grazie', *BullCom* 65 (1937), no. 7, fig. 3), Antalya, Museum 4.22.83 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 137, pl. 167), and Side, Museum 129–131 (J. Inan, *Roman Sculpture in Side* (Ankara, 1975), no. 85, pl. 74).

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Fig. 2: Three Graces: Paris, Louvre: courtesy of the Louvre Museum.

of figure B and are set on her shoulders; their outer arms are bent at the elbow with the forearms and hands extended. These hands hold attributes such as fruit, sheaves of wheat, flowers, or branches.[4] Grace

[4] These attributes are frequently present in the two-dimensional renderings as well as the one statuary replica that preserves the outer hands: Cyrene, Museum 14.348 (E. Paribeni, *Catalogo delle sculture di Cirene. Statue e rilievi di carattere religioso* (Rome, 1959), 108, no. 301).

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B bends her left arm and places the hand on Grace A's outer shoulder; her right arm is stretched out and down diagonally across the torso of Grace C towards her extended hand. All three figures lower their heads slightly: Graces A and C look out to the sides while Grace B usually turns her head to the right in profile. Most versions show the Graces each wearing a fillet and a variation on a standardized hairstyle: the hair is pulled back and up from a central part with thick strands falling down the back of the neck.

The group is flanked by two tall vases covered with drapery which stand beside and slightly behind the outer figures; only a group in Siena varies this arrangement and replaces the vessels with a tree trunk between Graces B and C.[5] The figures in each group are the same height and show the same body proportions and facial features, although there is some variation among individual groups. Small differences occur in hairstyle and jewelry, but nothing distinguishes one of the women in any given group from her companions, and the motif is comprised essentially of a single woman repeated three times.

Composition

The group of the Three Graces is fashioned from five elements: the three figures and the two vases. These are upright and give the motif a vertical emphasis. The side-by-side arrangement of these components produces a comparable width. There is little in the way of depth development, however, and the group is only as deep as the figures themselves and their flanking vases. There is also nothing in the motif to lead the eye around the sculpture to investigate other viewpoints, and its restricted depth means that it is not particularly interesting or comprehensible in side or oblique views.[6] The only viable views are from the front, which shows Graces A and C from the front (Fig. 1), and the back, which shows them from behind (Fig. 2). The repetition of a single female and the simultaneous presentation of the figures from both front and back mean that an entire Grace is visible from each of these viewpoints. However, the front view is more feasible as the primary viewpoint because it presents the most information about the motif.[7] For

[5] Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Piccolomini Library (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 124, pl. 166).

[6] For an oblique view of the Graces, see E. Ghislanzoni, 'Gli scavi delle Terme Romane a Cirene', *Notiziario Archeologico* 2 (1916), 59, fig. 30.

[7] Most scholars agree on the primacy of this viewpoint, although M. Robertson argues for a

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instance, only from the front can the attributes held by Graces A and C be seen; these are an important part of the Graces' iconography and meaning and must be visible for the group to be properly understood. These are hidden in a view from behind. The only aspects of the sculpture that arguably might be better seen from the back are the outer Graces's inner arms, which are wrapped behind Grace B's back. However, the fingertips of these hands, visible on the front, provide sufficient explanation without resorting to a secondary viewpoint.

The front viewpoint shows off the vases that flank the Graces. These are covered with drapery that flows down their backs and frames them in front. A side or back view shows them as indeterminate objects covered with drapery but does not identify them as vases (Fig. 2). While vases are a frequent physical support for marble statuary, they often also contain a deeper meaning. Here, they are not needed for support since the width of the group and the stance of the Graces themselves provides ample reinforcement. They also appear in several relief depictions of the group where they are structurally unnecessary, as shown by reliefs on three Roman sarcophagi in Britain.[8] These vases must therefore contain an iconographic meaning. Such vases often accompany Aphrodite, and their presence with the Graces may emphasize their role as this goddess' handmaidens. They imply fertility and growth, typical aspects of the Graces as well as Aphrodite, the Horai, and the Nymphs.[9] These vases also extend the width and height of the Graces and emphasize the flatness of the composition, an important element for the statuary versions.

A number of the preserved bases from statuary Graces confirm the front as the primary viewpoint. These have profiled fronts and sides, with back surfaces left plain because they were not intended to be seen.[10]

secondary, rear viewpoint: *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge, 1975), 550. A recent re-evaluation of single-viewpoint statuary groups finds some with side views that present an alternate, equally viable image, but this does not apply to the Graces: H.-H. von Prittwitz und Gaffron, 'Die andere Seite der Einansichtigkeit', in *Hellenistische Gruppen. Gedenkschrift für Andreas Linfert* (Mainz, 1999), 181–6.

[8] Penrice Castle, Glamorganshire, Wales (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 28, pl. 160); Brocklesby Park (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 29, pl. 160); and Withington Hall, Chelford (Sichetermann (n. 2), no. 30, pl. 160). Some mirror reliefs place smaller versions of these vases on tall pedestals on either side of the group, probably due to restricted space. E. J. Milleker, 'The Three Graces on a Roman Relief Mirror', *MMAJ* 23 (1988), 74.

[9] As water jugs, these vessels provide an additional connection with the Nymphs. See W. Déonna, 'Le groupe de trois Graces nues et sa descendance', *RA* 31 (1930), 298–9; E. Harrison, in *LIMC* 3, s.v. Charis, Charites, 191–200; and Sichtermann (n. 2), 210.

[10] See copies in the Ferroni Collection (E. Schmidt, 'Über einige Fälle der Übertragung gemalter Figuren in Rundplastik' in *Festschrift P. Arndt* (Munich, 1925), 105, fig. 13), and Cyrene, Museum 14.346 (Paribeni (n. 4), 109, no. 303, pl. 145).

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Other bases seem to contradict this evidence: some are decorated on all four surfaces, while others are completely uncarved, possibly for insertion into another block.[11] However, these do not preclude the possibility of a frontal view, particularly when combined with the visibility of the vases and attributes, as they may not have been carved specifically for a flatly composed sculpture like the Graces.

It seems clear that the front side of the Graces was intended to be the primary viewpoint, and some examples were set in architectural contexts that confirm this. Few of the statuary examples have secure findspots, but three groups in Cyrene were found *in situ* with their backs against walls; two of these were also placed between columns.[12] The walls and columns restrict access, both visual and physical, to the sculpture and direct the spectator's attention to the front, and play the same role as the visual barriers provided by the flat composition.

The group's flat composition thus conveys a pre-determined viewpoint that is intended to give the viewer all necessary information. Other characteristic elements of flat statuary are also present; for instance, the increased importance of the work's silhouette. This is a hexagon that is visible and the same from both the front and back (Figs. 1, 2). The line runs across the bottom with the horizontal line of the base. It then moves diagonally up and out to the outer hands of Graces A and C. The line then turns sharply in and follows the shoulders. The hexagon is completed by another horizontal line across the crowns of the figures' heads.[13] This silhouette is based on height and width and does not require depth.

The flatness of the Graces means that the whole sculpture takes the shape of a narrow, rectangular box. Its front boundary is marked by the toes of Graces A and C, their bent knees, the heels of Grace B's weight leg and her buttocks, and the outer hands of A and C (Fig. 1). The back surface is formed by the heels of Graces A and C's free legs, their outer elbows, the toes of Grace A, and the backs of the draped vessels (Fig. 2). The sides are indicated by the vases. Nothing projects beyond these surfaces, but there is still some spatial development within them (Fig. 1):

[11] Replicas in the Vatican, Gabinetto delle Maschere 433 (Becatti (n. 3), 42, no. 4, pls. 2, 3), and Siena (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 124, pl. 166) are carved on all sides. Plain bases are found in Ostia, Museum 182 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 128, pl. 167), Antalya (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 137, pl. 167), and Cyrene, Museum 14.347 (Becatti (n. 3), no. 7, fig. 3), and 14.348 (Paribeni (n. 4), 108, no. 301).

[12] Cyrene, Museum 14.346 (Paribeni (n. 4), 109, no. 303, pl. 145), 14.347 (Becatti (n. 3), no. 7, fig. 3), and 14.348 (Paribeni (n. 4), 108, no. 301). The first and third groups cited here were set between columns.

[13] K. Kell, *Formuntersuchungen zu spät- und nachhellenistischen Gruppen* (Saarbrücken, 1988), 103.

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Grace B stands in front of figures A and C, and her arms are set on top of and therefore in front of, their torsos. The vases are placed slightly behind the outer figures.[14]

Linear accents are also apparent on the front and back surfaces and these produce a strong, internal rhythm that distracts from the lack of compositional depth. The weight legs of Graces A and C force their bodies into a convex curve while the weight distribution of figure B bends her to the right. Because nearly all the sculptures reproduce this pose, the pattern of two outward curves framing an arc to the right (from the front) becomes a consistent element of the group's motif. Over the front surface, short jagged lines appear across the ankles, knees, buttocks, and hips, while the arms of Grace B form an undulating, wavy line across the torsos of figures A and C (Fig. 1). On the back surface, the line of the arms is more irregular, with the arms of Grace B lying awkwardly across the torsos of Figures A and C (Fig. 2). These lines are drawn entirely on the surfaces and do not lead the eye out, around, or beyond the narrow box of the group's composition.

The purpose of these linear elements seems at first contradictory: on the one hand, the group's silhouette and overall narrowness emphasize its flatness, but on the other, the surface details suggest a rounded, more spatially developed creation. It is this contradiction which is at the heart of all flat statuary and places them well within the context of Roman *trompe l'oeil*. Works such as the Capitoline Satyr and Nymph group, the group of Shepherds cooking a Pig, and most of the individual figures of the Uffizi Niobids show the same compositional approach: flat with a single, comprehensible viewpoint, yet containing some degree of internal spatial development (Fig. 3).[15] This is visual illusionism, which makes a three-dimensionally fashioned piece appear to be two-dimensional, reduced to a flat outline enhanced by linear elements, like a relief: a motif spreads out in width and height; its silhouette comes into focus; the pre-determined, single viewpoint provides all necessary information without hinting at secondary views; and linear accents on the surface provide sufficient spatial interest. A physically restrictive setting emphasizes these factors even more. These sculptures thus produce a deliberate deception, which essentially uses depth to deceive a viewer into seeing one thing,

[14] Kell (n. 13), 104–6.

[15] Kell (n. 13). On the Capitoline group, see, most recently, von Prittwitz und Gaffron (n. 7). On the Shepherds group, see R. Amedick, 'Die Gruppe der Schweinsbrüher', in *Hellenistische Gruppen* (n. 7), 187–198; on the Niobids in Florence, see W. Geominy, *Die Florentiner Niobiden* (Bonn, 1984).

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Fig. 3: Chiaramonti Niobid: Vatican Museums, Museo Gregoriano Profano: courtesy of Art Resource.

namely a fully three-dimensional carving, as something different, namely a two-dimensional relief. A visual, and sometimes also physical, background has consequently been added to the composition.

As a stylistic phenomenon, these works are difficult to date precisely, and it is not the purpose of this article to do so; however, they probably emerged at the end of the Hellenistic period as a response to increased Roman experimentation with the decorative possibilities of sculpture.[16]

[16] The initial identification and examination of the phenomenon of flat statuary is Schmidt (n. 10). These were dated to the late-hellenistic period by G. Krahmer, 'Die einansichtige

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By the late first century BC, artists and patrons were regularly integrating freestanding sculpture into architecture for deliberate effect, and flat statuary plays a critical role in this process. For instance, the Prometheus group from the Sanctuary of Athena at Pergamon was carved in the round yet placed against the back wall of a niche so that only the front was visible.[17] Other examples, such as two heads from the Mahdia shipwreck, show flat back surfaces that suggest attachment to a wall.[18]

The statuary versions of the Graces were intended to be freestanding, but they too produce a two-dimensional effect. Architecture often played a role in emphasizing this, as confirmed by the Cyrene groups found *in situ*; pictorial representations also show the group in an architectural context: several mosaics portray the Graces in grottoes that enclose them behind and around the sides.[19] Sarcophagus and other reliefs sometimes show the trio in front of drapery that hangs like a curtain behind them.[20] The intercolumnar setting of the Cyrene sculptures is reproduced in a sarcophagus relief in Tunis.[21] Like the vases in two-dimensional renderings, these architectural entities play no structural role, and their inclusion reinforces the evidence from the Cyrene versions, namely that the statuary Graces were regularly installed in such settings. These architectural contexts provided appropriate physical restrictions for sculptures already severely limited in depth.

The full extent to which the Romans manipulated depth and produced visual illusionism, however, is displayed by several pictorial renderings of the Graces. These are two-dimensional images that include depth, produced through shading, three-quarter views, and

Gruppe und die späthellenistische Kunst', *NGG Phil.-Hist. K.* (Gottingen, 1927), 53–91. This dating is generally accepted: see, for example, F. Hiller, 'Wieder einmal Laokoön', *RM* 86 (1979), 271–95.

[17] The initial publication of this group is A. Milchöfer, *Die Befreiung des Prometheus. Ein Fund aus Pergamon. WPrB* 42 (Berlin, 1882), 1–43. Much of the discussion regarding this work has focused on the identification of the portrait head of Herakles; see, most recently, T. Brogan, 'Prometheus Group in Context', in K. J. Hartswick and M. C. Sturgeon (eds.), *Stephanos. Studies in Honor of Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway* (Philadelphia, 1998), 40–52.

[18] N. Marquardt, 'Die Reliefköpfe' in G. Hellenkemper Salies (ed.), *Das Wrack. Der antike Schiffsfund von Mahdia* (Bonn, 1994), 329–57.

[19] Naples, Archaeological Museum 10004 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 8, pl. 158); Sabratha, Museum (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 12, pl. 158).

[20] Rome, Palazzo Mattei (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 16, pl. 159); Vatican, 9273 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 23, pl. 159); and Erdek, Museum 7760 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 46, pl. 162).

[21] Bardo Museum C1113 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 37, pl. 161); Tivoli, Villa Marco Simone (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 38, pl. 161).

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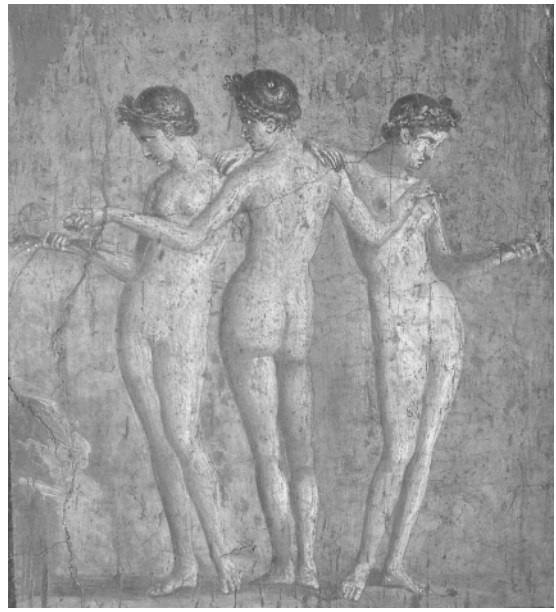


Fig. 4: Wall Painting of the Graces: Naples, National Museum: courtesy of the Alinari/ Art Resource.

diagonal lines. These depictions directly contrast the statuary versions of the Graces in that depth has been added to a physically flat artwork rather than subtracted from a three-dimensional sculpture. This is particularly clear in the wall paintings of the Graces (Fig. 4).[22] It seems curious that one medium should go to some lengths to suppress depth, while another, which actually lacks depth, should include it. This can be explained as a by-product of contemporary painting: such illusionism is, after all, the basis for the Pompeian Second Style. However, the same effect appears in mosaics, a relief of the Graces on a sarcophagus, and on a silver cup, and these suggest a broader application of the conception.[23] The effect of depth can be quite extreme, as in a painting in Naples (Fig. 4): Graces A and C are turned outwards and figure B is represented in a nearly three-quarter

[22] For instance, the painting in the House of Titus Dentatus Panthera (XI.2.16) at Pompeii (J. Ward-Perkins and A. Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79* (Boston, 1978), 15, no. 153). For other wall paintings, see Sichtermann (n. 2), nos. 2 and 6, pl. 158.

[23] Mosaics: Sichtermann (n. 2), nos. 8, 11, 12, 13, pl. 158. Relief: Rome, Terme 113226 (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 31, pl. 160). Silver cup in London (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 80, pl. 164).

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view to the right. The figures are shaded slightly to imply mass and penetration into the background space. The hips of the weight legs are slung out farther in these figures, emphasizing the curve of the group and acting as a pivot for the incipient swivelling movement of Graces A and C.

The compositional versatility of the Graces thus seems tied to the setting and medium of the individual representation. Freestanding sculptures were made to be installed within an architectural context, while pictorial depictions include architecture as a means of reflecting an understood reality. The restriction of depth can make a three-dimensional sculpture appear as a relief, while the addition of it makes a two-dimensional work seem more rounded and spatially complex. What is significant here is that the motif of the Graces is flexible enough to serve a variety of media, art forms, and contexts, but its fundamental concept remains consistent.

The Motif

The Greek Charites were worshipped throughout Greece as local goddesses and frequently overlap in meaning and artistic representation with similar groups, such as the Horai and the Nymphs.[24] There is a long tradition of their depiction in Greek art, yet no consistent conception of the Charites seems to have existed. All renderings appear in the same medium, relief sculpture, and the number of figures is set at three, but each is different, perhaps due to regional preferences and cult variations. The trio was shown either walking in a procession, as in a relief from Thasos,[25] or more commonly dancing, as in a relief from Paros; joined hands always emphasize the unity of the group.[26] By changing the details of each figure, artists added diversity and individuality to the motif. A fragmentary relief from Piraeus shows each Charis wearing different clothing.[27] The Thasos relief depicts the women with varied hairstyles and attributes.[28] The Paros relief shows the possibilities of pose: the women wear the same costume and hairstyle, but the outer figures are shown in profile while the central

[24] Harrison (n. 9), 200–3.
[25] Paris, Louvre MA 696 (E. Schwarzenberg, *Die Grazien* (Bonn, 1966), pl. 2a).
[26] Munich, Glyptothek 241 (Harrison (n. 9), no. 19, pl. 152).
[27] Harrison (n. 9), no. 21.
[28] Supra, n. 25.

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woman has a three-quarter body and a frontal head.[29] The right hands are all raised while their left hands pull at their skirts. Only in the first known depiction of the group are the three figures represented alike: a dinos fragment by Sophilos shows three identical women walking side by side, facing right.[30] These trios are often made specific by inscriptions identifying them as the Charites. Without such inscriptions, however, many female trios are not easily identified. The Charites lack their own clear imagery and are iconographically similar to the Horai and Nymphs. This ambiguity can be cleared up only by an inscription, when a specific identification was desired. In other cases, location can provide recognition: in a cult centre dedicated to the Charites, a depiction of a female trio would naturally be recognized as such.

The Roman version of the Graces has no need for any labels, since the standardization of the group's imagery ensures that it will not be misidentified. The earlier similarities with the Nymphs are avoided since these women are usually shown draped. From the late first century BC, the Graces are represented so consistently that they quickly become part of an iconographic language as the embodiment of grace, beauty, and charm.[31] The form of the prototype cannot be determined, but explanations for both the canonization of the Graces' imagery and their new appearance can be found within the corpus of extant representations.

The Graces' connection with Aphrodite, which had not been a particularly strong element of the Charites' iconography, is much more forceful in the Roman Graces. Like many renderings of the goddess, the Graces are now nude. The vessels beside them recall their role as Aphrodite's handmaidens and attendants at her bath, and it is probably for this reason that the trio is frequently represented in mosaics and as statuary in bath complexes, where both the goddess' birth from the sea and her bath are evoked.[32] This association is

[29] Supra, n. 26.

[30] This version of the Charites seems to have been unsatisfactory and was not produced again.

[31] The earliest securely dated representation of the Graces comes on the costume decoration on the cult statue of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias. Although excavations of the temple with which this temple is associated have not provided a secure date for its original, Augustan coins depict Aphrodite with her decorated dress, including the Graces. The motif was therefore known at least between 27 BC and AD 14. A relief in the Vatican is said to date to the first century BC, but this is debated (Vatican, Sala Rotonda 244: *LIMC* 2, s.v. Asklepios, no. 317, pl. 661; Helbig[4], no. 46 (Fuchs); Becatti (n. 3), 46, no. 15).

[32] For references to the Graces in connection with bathing, see the *Palatine Anthology* IX, 607, 609, 609a, 616, 623, 625, 634, and 638.

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emphasized further in a statuary group of the Graces from a bath in Cyrene, which gives Aphrodite's *pudica* gesture to the outer arms of Graces A and C.[33] The Graces also commonly wear a variation on Aphrodite's typical hairstyle.[34] However, despite some overlapping imagery, the Graces are not easily confused with Aphrodite, although they probably emerged as a result of developing artistic tastes for full-scale, nude female statuary.[35] The Graces always remain a trio, and the consistency of their pose ensures their secure identification. No other group, including the Horai and the Nymphs, previously part of the same iconographic milieu, repeats any part of the Graces' image, nor is the group ever fragmented, with one figure abstracted for a new identification or meaning.

The standardization of the Roman Graces results in a much wider artistic distribution for the group, which is now represented in numerous art forms and media, in two and three dimensions. This contrasts strongly with the limited pictorial depictions of the Charites in vase painting and relief sculpture. The desire to carve the Graces in large-scale sculpture, however, probably contributed to the familiar embracing pose. A straightforward replication of the Greek Charites in statuary form is not possible and would be physically unstable and compositionally awkward.[36] The widespread figure with outstretched arms and flowing drapery is not possible and could only be produced as three individual figures; this type of group would also sacrifice an integral part of the motif, the clasped hands that indicate the solidarity of the figures. A solution to this problem of image transference results in the Graces' pose: the figures are set closer together, nearly touching, and their outstretched arms are then raised into the embracing arm pose.

The position of the individual Graces within the group can be ascribed to a desire to maintain another element of the Charites' motif, namely the activity of the group. Depictions of the Charites show them walking, running, or, more likely, dancing. These lively

[33] Cyrene, Museum 14.347 (Becatti (n. 3), no. 7, fig. 3). The only terracotta version of the Graces also shows this gesture (Brussels, Museum, 561: G. Mendel, 'Musée de Brousse', *BCH* 33 (1909), 370, no. 137, fig. 86).

[34] There is a detailed analysis of the Graces' hairstyle on relief mirrors by Milleker (n. 8), 70.

[35] One of the groups from Cyrene is remarkably similar in figure type to the Aphrodite of Cyrene, and the Graces may have been modelled on the Aphrodite, or vice versa: Cyrene, Museum 14.346 (Paribeni (n. 4), 109, no. 303, pl. 145). On this connection, see G. Bagnani, 'Hellenistic Sculpture from Cyrene', *JHS* 41 (1921), 232–7.

[36] For instance, one of the Cyrene groups shows Graces B and C actually touching (Museum, 13.348: Paribeni (n. 4), 108, no. 301). Two-dimensional versions, in contrast, can spread the figures farther apart, as in a mosaic in Cherchel (Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 13, pl. 158).

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renderings seem at first glance dissimilar from the static and quiet, vertical figures of the Roman group. However, all of these representations contain a common element: each woman is shown in a different position from her sisters – frontal, three-quarter, and profile figures alternate. In the Charites, these variations are intended to lend animation to the group and to indicate different phases or steps in a dance. This dance motif is seen most clearly in reliefs of the Charites from the late fourth century BC where the dance occurs around a central object, often an altar. The dancing effect is heightened by the positioning of each figure in a separate pose and thus in a different dance step and by wildly swinging drapery. A relief from Kos of c. 400 BC dedicated to the Graces by Peithanor, son of Charmis, shows this dance in the manner which becomes regular: they hold hands, and the central figure turns in a three-quarter view to the right, while Graces A and C look to the left; all three wear different garments.[37] Also represented in this dance pattern are other trios whose meaning and function overlap with the Graces, such as the Horai and Nymphs. An Imperial Neo-Attic relief reconstructed from fragments in Rome, Munich, and Florence shows three dancing figures commonly identified as the Horai.[38] Here, the dance motif is further developed. Differentiation of figures through dress and pose relieves the potential monotony of the trio, but also accentuates their activity: A and C, dressed in chiton and himation, are represented in profile to the right, while figure B wears a peplos and is frontal; these figures join hands. A relief in New York shows a trio of unknown women, usually identified as Nymphs (Fig. 5): A and C are in profile to the left, and B is more frontal, with her head to the right; B is further set apart by dress and hairstyle. The three join hands and are led in a dance by Hermes around an altar set in the foreground.[39] These Nymph reliefs are meaningful for their treatment of the dance motif: pose variation is taken to extremes, with each Nymph shown in a separate dance step and thus in a different position from her companions. Wildly swinging drapery enhances the participants' movements, and the illusionistic treatment,

[37] Kos, Museum (Harrison (n. 9), no. 24, pl. 153. Figure A wears a chiton, B a peplos, and C a chiton with himation. See G. Konstantinopoulos, 'Anaglypho me tis Charites apo tin Ko', *Archaische und klassische griechische Plastik II* (Mainz, 1986), 135–41.

[38] All of figure B and the lower portion of A are preserved on the Uffizi fragment; the Vatican piece shows the head and breast of figure A; and the section in Munich (Glyptothek) depicts figure C. They are identified as the Horai because they carry ears of wheat, although these attributes are also associated with the Graces. See Harrison (n. 9), no. 23, pl. 153; and W. Fuchs, *Die Vorbilder der neuattischen Reliefs* (Berlin, 1959), 63–72.

[39] New York, Metropolitan Museum, 25.78.59: G. M. A. Richter, *Catalogue of Greek Sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Cambridge, 1954), 80–1, no. 143, pl. cv, a.

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Fig. 5: Relief of the Nymphs: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art: courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

with near figures in higher relief than those in the background, heightens the overall impression of a circular dance occurring in space around an altar.

The idea of a round dance is developed further with its representation against triple-bodied Hekate herms. On these, each Grace stands with her back to the central shaft, facing outward. They join hands, and are differentiated in their dress; a Hekataion from the Athenian Agora of the first century BC illustrates this type: one figure turns towards the other two, and she is clothed in the manner of an archaistic Hekate with peplos and shawl; her sisters wear chiton and himation.[40] These Hekataia are significant, for they are a nearly three-dimensional presentation of the dance otherwise appearing only in two-dimensional form. Moreover, these renderings testify to a desire at this time to depict the Graces dancing in the round, even though the figures themselves are carved in relief.

[40] For instance, Athens, Agora Museum, 153: E. Harrison, *The Athenian Agora 11. Archaic and Archaistic Sculpture* (Princeton, 1965), 86–107.

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Many of these fundamental elements of the dance performed in relief by the Charites, Horai, and Nymphs are maintained into the depictions of the Roman Graces. These Greek renderings show the trio in a round dance that includes depth in an attempt to present an activity occurring in three-dimensional space (Fig. 5). The varying depths of carving as well as the settings of the individual figures to convey this space are also techniques used in pictorial renderings of the Graces. This manipulation is paralleled by the reduction of depth in the statuary versions, and suggests that visual illusionism was not only a deliberate, but also expected, element within the artistic and intellectual conception of the Graces, Charites, and related figures, at least from the late fourth century BC.

The variation in figure pose that is so essential to the Charites is maintained in representations of the Graces (Figs. 1, 2). The alternating pose is now presented by the front-back alternating figures, which still conveys women in different dance steps. The embracing arm position, which probably results from a change in medium, reinforces the dance motif. The change from the Charites' dance to that of the Graces might proceed as follows. The trio hold hands and move quickly in a straight line or around an object. The figures on the ends join hands in a circle, as in the Hekate Graces. Next, the three women step close together and, as their proximity increases, raise their arms around their shoulders. This forms the pose of the Roman Graces. By stepping back and lowering their arms into clasped hands, the figures resume the round dance of the Greek Charites. The nude Graces thus show the same dance, but with a different step or stage: the Graces still dance, but now in a manner consistent with the desires of the Roman patron, namely to show this dance in three-dimensional statuary form. Indeed, the Hekate herms including the Graces are an important developmental stage between the relief renderings and fully freestanding sculptures.

The major change that occurs in the Roman Graces and separates them from the Greek Charites concerns the group's identification. In the earlier Greek renderings, dress, hairstyle, and pose contributed to lively, individual figures, each with a separate appearance, if not identity, within the group. The Roman conception of the group shows three identical women without differentiation and opportunities for the types of variations exhibited by the Charites have been lost. The repetition of a single female form, along with the nudity and standardized pose, produces anonymous figures with no individual character or meaning; these separate figures are now subordinate to the whole of the group.

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The Graces' new emphasis on unity over individuality is a Roman concept that signals a new meaning and function for the group. They are now an allegory of generic *charis*, a concept that offers wider appeal than did the minor Greek goddesses specific to location and activity, and which can be easily and immediately understood in a variety of settings and contexts by a Roman audience. This new meaning is strengthened by the lack of any cult to the Graces in the Roman west.[41] The Graces have lost their religious associations and are used now for their symbolism and decorative qualities.

The Graces' connection with female beauty is made clear by their appearance on a series of relief mirrors.[42] As part of sarcophagus decoration, they may symbolize the conjugal harmony of a married couple, now deceased, the grace and charm of the deceased, or represent the type of persona desired in the next world.[43] The Graces are further associated with marriage through their fertility connotations, most notably in the attributes they carry, but also through their connection with Aphrodite.[44] The strength of this meaning is confirmed by the Graces on Roman coins struck to commemorate Imperial engagements and marriages; for instance, that of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger.[45] These varied intellectual contexts for which the Graces were deemed appropriate confirm again the flexibility of the motif. Where the composition and medium of the group produce different effects and appearances, the Graces' iconography suits numerous contexts and settings and generates varied meanings: domestic happiness in life and death; the charm, grace, beauty, goodwill, and prosperity of a society and its individual members; and a close connection with Aphrodite, her life, activities, and attractions.

Conclusion

The compositional and intellectual connection between the Greek Charites and the Roman Graces is rarely considered. These two groups, while appearing to be distinct entities, are related through the consistency of their activity, their dance, and their use of visual

[41] G. Rodenwaldt, 'The Three Graces on a Fluted Sarcophagus', *JRS* 28 (1938), 62.
[42] Milleker (n. 8).
[43] For an examination of the Graces in funerary contexts, see Rodenwaldt (n. 41), 60–4, and W. Trillmich, 'Die Charitengruppe also Grabrelief und Kneipenschild', *JdI* 98 (1983), 311–49.
[44] On the Graces' meaning for marriage, see Schwarzenberg (n. 25), 21, n. 17.
[45] Sichtermann (n. 2), no. 102, pl. 165.

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manipulation. This last idea, first presented in Hellenistic depictions of the Charites and related figures such as the Nymphs, is fully developed in the Roman Graces. Whether adding depth to a pictorial rendering or suppressing it in a statuary rendering, the Graces clearly illustrate the Roman preoccupation with *trompe l'oeil*, an artistic approach that encompasses several media and art forms. The Graces thereby take their place in Roman culture as a standardized pattern that has shaken off its localized ritual functions to become a worldwide symbol, a convenient and versatile allegory for both private and public display, a theme whose meaning can be applied equally to numerous situations. The image they present, either in two or three-dimensional form, challenges the viewer in a manner common in Roman art. As such, the Graces are very much a product of their times, yet the motif retains sufficient artistic roots to remind the viewer of its antecedents, the draped Charites of the Greek world.

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