

Greek Vase Painting Project:

Acknowledgment

This project was created by Shelby Brown (archaeologist) and Susan Sullivan (ceramicist) at the The Archer School for Girls, Los Angeles, CA.

TEACHER OVERVIEW

Short Summary

This project is a messy, time-consuming, fun, multi-disciplinary, hands-on introduction to Greek vase painting and culture for students of many ages. The topic is especially appropriate for teachers whose curricula center on ancient civilizations, visual arts, ceramics, classical languages, gender studies, and mythology.

The vase painting project and associated lessons were designed by an archaeologist and a ceramicist to help students appreciate Black and Red Figure painting. Students “become” ancient painters and create an image, using realistic tools and techniques, in both Red and Black Figure painting styles. In advance, they learn about the context of vases used in Greek dining rooms and the range of images of daily life and myth that decorate the pots. Thus, they view the vases from the perspective of a viewer and buyer before taking on the perspective of the artist.

Using leather-hard clay tiles and appropriate tools and slip, students re-enact the process from burnishing clay through painting and incising on it, and experience the joys and frustrations of creating an image in the two styles. While aiming to make the procedures authentic, we have also considered practical reality and expense, and offer choices.

Background

Greek vase paintings, especially Athenian Black and Red Figure vase painting styles of ca. 650-400 B.C.E., are among the most famous of ancient art forms. The classical vases of the fifth century B.C.E., in particular, influenced generations of artists in antiquity, and others again from the Renaissance until today. Red Figure succeeded Black Figure as the Athenian vase style of choice after about 500 B.C.E. There is a fair amount written by scholars about how artists painted the two styles and why they changed from Black to Red Figure, and there have been successful efforts to recreate ancient pottery shapes. Only a few classical scholars have re-created the painting process, however. Students rarely have an opportunity to make the art themselves, except perhaps as a craft exercise on paper. Usually they simply look at a picture or slide and are told that a painting is “beautiful” or that it depicts a certain scene of daily life or mythology. Through this project, we hope that students will gain a more lasting understanding of this art form and have a more meaningful experience when they see Greek vases in a museum.

Goals

The primary goals of the project are to:

1. Teach students about the cultural context of ancient Greek, and especially Athenian, vase painting and expose them to the range of vase painting depictions of daily life and mythology

2. Allow students to experience the artistic and technical process of creating Greek Black Figure and Red Figure painting
3. Introduce students in an immediate and kinesthetic way to the concept of positive and negative space (which are reversed from Black to Red Figure) and to the use of two dominant colors
4. Enable students to come to a genuine and informed personal opinion about Greek vase painting from the perspective of both a viewer and an artist

Ages/Grades

As described here, the project applies mostly to 8th through 12th grade students, and includes an analytical component and a write-up. It has been used successfully with younger students, however, and it has also been carried out with graduate students and adults. With younger students the painted images should be kept simple and greater emphasis should be placed on the activity than on background information and analysis. With older students and adults the focus can vary with the nature of the class; however, in all cases the purpose of the exercise is to come to an informed opinion about the vase painting process, and not just to carry out an artistic exercise in a minimal context.

Class Size and Number of Helpers Needed

The project becomes unwieldy with more than 20 students, even for a teacher familiar with the process; for first-timers and teachers working with larger numbers of students, assistance from other adults is very helpful! Reliable students can also be assigned specific jobs. An ideal ratio is one helper for every ten students; the teacher can also simply proceed more slowly and ask everyone to wait until all participants have reached the same stage in the process. If students work more at their own pace, individuals' questions slow up the group and distract the attention of the teacher, but they also promote experimentation and enthusiasm. Practical necessity should govern practice.

Preparation, Cost, and Set Up

The most expensive items are the clay and the glaze or underglaze, since these cannot be re-used. These will cost about \$2 - \$4 per student, assuming a minimum of 20 students participating. Teachers working at schools with a ceramics studio will ideally join forces with a ceramics teacher to create an interdisciplinary project, and they can borrow/share materials. Brushes and other tools can be re-used over the years. It is worth it to invest in good brushes and tools, both because they make the project more effective and because they last.

The process is messy, and requires newspaper on the tables, a bucket of water and rags or hand wipes (unless there is a sink in the room), and time to set up and clean up daily.

As described here, the project will take approximately five 45-50-minute class periods to complete (once the students have their tiles in hand), not counting introducing the cultural elements and allowing class time to write up results. Teachers may alter the focus and the goals to take less time.

Materials

1. Tiles: terra cotta, bone-dry or nearly bone dry (4" to 6" square clay tiles).
 - For the teacher with resources of time and money, 6-inch tiles are best since they provide enough surface space for the student to experience painting the red Figure side and incising with a needle into the Black Figure side. We have found that a 4-inch tile offers too little surface to give the student a full experience of the two techniques. If money is a problem, however, 4 inches is far better than nothing!
 - For teachers with access to a ceramics studio/kiln:

Any cone 04-06 reddish terracotta clay will work (Laguna, for example). Students can roll out the clay with rolling pins and cut out the tiles, which takes time. In our case, we order 4 or 6-inch tiles pressed for us by a professional tile-maker, which adds to the expense. Teachers with no kiln handy may want to determine whether a local studio (such as the many designed to handle birthday parties) will fire the tiles for a fee.

- For teachers without access to a kiln:
Amaco Self-hardening Mexican Pottery Clay (X-119, product #48652C), 5 lbs. Cost, approximately \$7.50 (in 2005). The clay comes in a rectangular block, and can be kneaded and rolled out with a rolling pin, or (for greater convenience) tiles can be sliced off the block lengthwise. **Careful** -- if square tiles are sliced off the short end of the block (as seems logical, since this will create square tiles), the tiles will crack when they dry. Instead, slice the clay into rectangles and cut them in half, or roll them out into thinner, larger rectangles and cut them in half. When burnishing this clay with a metal spoon, there is a greater likelihood of tarnish coming off onto the surface of the tile.
- 2. Burnishing tools: cheap metal spoons, rounded river stones, strips of chamois, rib bones
- 3. Shiny Black Glaze, Mayco S-2121, slightly thinned, OR Laguna Black Underglaze.
- 4. Copies of designs taken from coloring books (see Bibliography)
- 5. Charcoal pencils, compressed charcoal or graphite sticks
- 6. Sharpened pencils
- 7. Scissors
- 8. Masking tape
- 9. Brushes: several sizes, with plenty of small ones. Torrington brushes of synthetic sable come in 1/16 diameter; real sable brushes go down to 1/64 diameter. Catalog # 1/2005 (telephone number 1-800-525-1416).
- 10. Needle tools, sewing needles
- 11. Small plastic cups with lids (the size for take-out salad dressing and salsa)
- 12. Paper towels
- 13. Newspaper
- 14. Camera and film
- 15. Posters of Greek vases and images from books, or projected slides/digital images
- 16. Samples of each stage in process

What Is Our Evidence for Greek Vases and Vase Painting and their Uses?

- The vases themselves, found in a variety of contexts
- The images of mythology and daily life painted on the vases
- Images on vases depicting kilns, potters, and painters
- Experimental archaeology: replication of possible procedures by modern scholars
- Descriptions in literature of dining and dining room behavior

Teacher Documents

- Suggested Approach for Introducing the Vase Painting Project
- Suggested Approaches to Introducing the Context of Ancient Vases and Vase Painting
- Archaic and Classical Style Summaries
- Assessment Method/Grading Rubric
- Bibliography/Resources (Short)
- Bibliography/Resources (Long)

Student Documents

- Project Overview
- Short Process Description and Guiding Questions
 - The Process Description can be used by the teacher to guide each step and can be handed out to the students if desired
- Guiding Questions for Vase Painting Process-Description and Evaluation
- Guidelines for Vase Painting Process-Description and Evaluation

For Ceramicists and “Do It Yourselfers”: Making Your Own “Greek Slip” (pending)