

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)

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SUGGESTED APPROACH FOR INTRODUCING THE VASE PAINTING PROJECT

The teacher can start with a brief overview of Greek vase painting and the context of the vases used in Greek dining and symposia (“drinking parties”), the varied vase shapes related to function, and the nature of the scenes shown on the vases. It is worthwhile to explain that the Greek “paint” was neither paint nor glaze, but instead simply a diluted clay (called “slip” by ceramicists) of the same material as the pot. The way the vase was fired turned the slip black.

Students will need to see a number of vases decorated in Black and Red Figure and discuss the differences, noting particularly the change in “positive space” – the image itself -- from a deep black image highlighted against a red “negative space,” to a pale red one standing out against a black “negative space.” Discuss what effect the strong contrast has on the viewer. (Be sure to choose well-preserved vases, or the faded colors will be unimpressive!)

First show students Black Figure vases that have no added color, to illustrate the basic concept; then also illustrate Black Figure scenes enhanced with added white and purple, used to enliven the dark silhouette and add color to clothing, armor, and the (white) skin of women or the coats of horses.* Does this use of added color reveal a flaw in Black Figure that the color corrects? (Namely, that the dominant black can “flatten” the figure make it harder to see details?) Or does it merely make the image more interesting? Compare a complex, detailed Black Figure image with no added color to one with color, and then compare them both with a Red Figure image. Ideally, to avoid confusing students, stick to Archaic art so as to compare apples with apples. Classical Red Figure vase painting will look very different.

Students will be working on a relatively small tile to re-create the two techniques, and they may assume that vase painters actually painted using both techniques on single pots. Explain that the two painting techniques actually only overlapped chronologically for a brief time (roughly, 525-500 B.C.E.), and also only appeared briefly together on pots -- on opposite sides (the pots painted in both styles are called “bilingual,” borrowing from language terminology).

While students (and adults) can easily understand the concept of “black on red” and “red on black” images, it can nevertheless be confusing to execute Black and Red Figure paintings, and especially to make the change on the small tile, across a dividing line, from Black to Red Figure.

Practicing with markers on Paper to create Black and Red Figure

One preparation strategy is to have students choose a photocopied image, divide it in half, and, using sharpies or magic markers, create a “black on white” and “white on black” version of the image as if it were a Black and Red Figure painting.

The Red Figure side is easy; students simply darken the background of the image. The Black Figure side is trickier, and is not really comparable to creating the real thing (since a needle is not used to incise into the black silhouette down to the pale layer below). The student needs to turn each black-on-white line white-on-black; since this is not really possible, students can



Fig. 1. Student's Red-and-Black version of hearts.



Fig. 2. Student's Black-and-White versions of mermaids.

color the figure black so as to leave a blank space next to the original black lines. It can help them to go through a version of the process in advance and see how the contrasts of dark and light work.

Another option is to have students draw a simple shape, like a heart (good for exercises carried out near Valentine's Day), overlap it with another similar shape, and turn those images into Black and Red Figure, confronting how to transition between Black and Red Figure at the point(s) where the shapes overlap. Students may choose to color in the red Figure side red.

Students may also choose to be adventurous and attempt Black and Red Figure versions of a variety of images they design.

Something Fun: Backwards Writing

Students will enjoy this: Greek potters and painters signed their work (and what does that tell us?), and they could write backwards (mirror writing). In a number of ancient scripts, the direction in which the viewer was expected to read could vary (for example, hieroglyphs could go left, right, or top-to-bottom). If a vase painter wanted to name a person or show words s/he was speaking, he tended to write moving outward from the figure, left-to-right if it was convenient, but also right-to-left, in mirror writing, if that was more convenient or aesthetically pleasing.

Mirror writing

The teacher can have students practice writing backwards/mirror writing their names. If they have a hard time doing so, this fun exercise usually works: holding a pencil in each hand, place the points in the center of a piece of paper. Focusing on the message the brain sends to the right hand, simply start writing, letting the left hand “mindlessly” follow (left-handers need to cross their arms and work from extended arms in toward the center). As the dominant hand writes the name, the other hand does the same in reverse. With some practice, students can start to mirror-write intentionally.

*In this project we did not work with added color, but the addendum for ceramicists explains how to make added white and added purple slip.

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SUGGESTED APPROACHES TO INTRODUCING THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT VASES AND VASE PAINTING

Using selected images and information taken from the books cited in the Bibliography, teachers can introduce this project in a variety of ways. Three possible choices are cited below; ideally the teacher will be able to cover all three briefly and one in greater detail.

1. The paintings are a vehicle to introduce the meaning of *style* in art history, and students learn basic characteristics of both Archaic and classical styles in vase paintings depicting human beings. If the teacher is not going to use images copied from vase paintings, s/he can assign students the job of designing their own Archaic or classical image to paint on the tile.
 - Handout (attached) on Characteristics of Archaic and Classical Depictions of People
 - Pitfalls
 - Students will have a tendency to copy an image rather than to their own idea in a Greek style. One way to help students avoid accidental plagiarism is to have them chose a modern scene to transform. One of my students created a very authentically-Archaic scene of her favorite NBA basketball player dunking a basketball.
 - If allowed to depict a scene from a modern fairy tale, cartoon, or animated movie in an ancient Greek style, many students will tend to stick too closely to the animator's version; however, if they are required to make the image Archaic rather than classical, they can usually start to think for themselves.
 - Students should be required to cite and attach all images that influenced them.
2. Vase painting serves as an introduction to or reinforcement of Greek mythology and/or daily life, themes amply illustrated on the vases. See Henle 1973, Woodford 2003.
3. The context of the Greek Black and Red Figure vases as dinnerware at Greek dinner parties and symposia illuminates:
 - The way available materials and social needs determine uses for media (here, clay)
 - The function of pottery in archaeology and in ancient Greek culture
 - The existence in Greece of clay with amazing properties
 - The layout of a Greek house and the location of the male dining room inside the front door
 - The different roles of the genders
 - The distinction between wives and hetairai
 - The function of the symposium in Greek society

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ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL STYLE SUMMARIES

The Archaic Period: Stylistic Markers (Roughly 600-500 B.C.E)

- Figures flat (paper doll appearance; all limbs are in one plane)
- Bodies do the “twist” (head and legs may face in opposite directions while torso is frontal)
- Zigzag drapery (folds of clothing look “ironed flat” in zigzags)
- Objects, limbs, drapery meant to be “behind” are shown as higher or lower
- Body positions and poses are rigid (borrowed from Egypt)
- Body proportions and positions are awkward
- Elbows are out; shoulders are hunched; limb connections are unclear

The Classical Period: Stylistic Markers (Roughly 500-400 B.C.E)

- Bodies and faces are depicted in three-quarter views
- Successful three-dimensionality shown through perspective, overlapping
- Bodies, drapery, hair react to gravity and motion (they flow, billow)
- Figures Are “posed” against a backdrop, but in shown in fairly realistic positions
- Clothing looks “wet” and clings to the realistic body in elegant curves

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GRADING RUBRIC

The TILE

Care and attention to detail	10 points	___
Black Figure correctly executed	10 points	___
Red Figure correctly executed	10 points	___
Just for trying!	10 points	___

The WRITE-UP

Introduction	10 points	___
1. Burnishing	10 points	___
2. Putting the image on the clay	10 points	___
3. Creating Black Figure	10 points	___
4. Creating Red Figure	10 points	___
5. Comparing BF and RF	10 points	___

Total points _____ out of 100

Comments:

Explanation of write-up point system:

- 10 - Your description of the goals and steps you took is clear. Results are fully described. No mind-reading by the teacher is required.
- 9 - Your description of the goals and steps you took is usually clear. Results are well described. Minimal mind-reading is required.
- 8 - Some areas of your descriptions and conclusions still need support.
- 7 - Sections are unclear because of missing information.
- 6 - Insufficient information is provided in many places.
- 5 and below - Unfinished to varying degrees.

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SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Useful books on vase painting, its context, and the mythological images depicted on vases

Good, Basic Information about Vase Painting

Clark, A. J., M. Elston, and M. L. Hart. 2002. *Understanding Greek Vases*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. (See especially pp. 72, 131, 138-89.)

Boardman, John. 2002. *The History of Greek Vases: Potters, Painters, and Pictures*. London: Thames & Hudson. (See especially pp. 282-289 on decorating the surface of the vase.)

Phoca, Ioanna E., and Panos D. Valavanis. 1992. *Greek Pottery: A Culture Captured in Clay*. Athens: Kedros Publishers.

Rasmussen, Tom, and Nigel Spivey, eds. 1991. *Looking at Greek Vases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (See especially Hemelrijk, ch. 10, pp. 236-244 on working with clay, firing, and decorating the surface; and Williams, ch. 5, p. 103 ff. on the invention of Red Figure.)

Williams, Dyfri. 1999 (2nd ed.). *Greek Vases*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Famous Experiments in Making and Decorating Greek Vases

Noble, Joseph Veach. 1988 (rev. ed.). *The Techniques of Painted Attic Pottery*. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, in cooperation with The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Schreiber, Toby. 1999. *Athenian Vase Construction: A Potter's Analysis*. Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Good, Short Explanations of the Firing Process

Williams 1999 (above): pp. 9-10

Noble 1988 (above): 77-78

Useful Overviews of Mythology in Art

Henle, Jane. 1973. *Greek Myths: A Vase Painter's Notebook*. Don Mills: Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.

Woodford, Susan. 2003. *Images of Myths in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Terrific Large Illustrations of Vase Painting

Arias, P. E., and M. Hirmer. 1962. *A History of a Thousand Years of Greek Vase Painting*. Translated and revised by B. Shefton. London and New York.

Lissarrague, Francois. 2001. *Greek Vases: The Athenians and Their Images*. New York: Riverside Book Company, Inc.

Useful Posters for the Classroom

Greek Vases: Six 11 x 14 Color Prints. 1997. Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum. PS-2.

Sample Coloring Books with Images from Greek Vase Painting

Bellerophon Books:

Miscellaneous

Ancient Greece (ISBN 0-88388-000-8)

Amazons (ISBN 0-88388-201-9)

Greek Goddesses (ISBN 0-88388-253-1)

Gorgons (ISBN 0-88388-109-8)

Homer

Odyssey (ISBN 0-88388-207-8)

Trojan War: The Iliad. Vol. 1 (ISBN 0-88388-179-9)

Trojan War: The Iliad. Vol. 2 (ISBN 0-88388-214-0)

British Museum:

Greek Designs (ISBN 0-7141-2239-4)

Ancient Greece (ISBN 0-7141-2132-0)

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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES ON GREEK VASES AND VASE PAINTING

- Arias, P. E., and M. Hirmer. 1962. *A History of a Thousand Years of Greek Vase Painting*. Translated and revised by B. Shefton. London and New York.
- Biers, W.R. 1996. *The Archaeology of Greece*. Second Edition. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Boardman, J. 1998. *Early Greek vase Painting: 11th to 6th Centuries B.C.* New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Boardman, J. 2000 (reprint, corrected edition). *Athenian Black Figure Vases*. New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Boardman, J. 2000 (1975). *Athenian Red Figure Vases: The Archaic Period*. Reprint. New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
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- Cooper, E. 2000 (1972). *Ten Thousand years of Pottery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Henle, Jane. 1973. *Greek Myths: A Vase Painter's Notebook*. Don Mills: Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.
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- Richter, G.M.A. 1958. *Attic Red-Figured Vases*. Revised Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Robertson, M. 1994. *The Art of Vase-Painting in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Trendall, A.D. 1989. *Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Williams, D. 1999 (2nd ed.). *Greek Vases*. London: British Museum Press.
- Woodford, Susan. 2003. *Images of Myths in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Useful Overviews and Information on Techniques, Tool Use, Slips

- Boardman 2000, BF: 9-12 (BF overview)
- Boardman 2000, RF-Archaic: 11-12 (painting techniques)
- Boardman 1989, RF-Classical: 231-233 (slip, painting techniques)
- Boardman 2001: 282-289 (tools, artist's sketches impressed lightly on the clay before painting, slip)
- Biers 1996: 185
- Clark 2002: 72 (BF); 131, 138-139 (overview RF)
- Hemelrijk, ch. 10, in Rasmussen 1991, pp. 236-244 (working with clay, firing, and decorating the surface)
- Neer 2002: 32-38
- Noble 1988: 37-38 (slip recipe for making one's own black slip for painting)
 - 51-53 (sketching the image on the clay before painting)
 - 56-58 (on the theory that a syringe was used to achieve a raised line; see Boardman 2001: 286 on using a hair, instead)
 - 61 (on burnishing)
 - 65-66 (on incising details into the BF silhouette)
- Robertson 1991: 7-9 (techniques)
- Schreiber 1999: 42 ff. (burnishing); 53-54 (slip/"gloss")
- Trendall 1989: 13-14 (techniques)
- Williams 1999: 8 (on slip and on Greek painters possibly using the equivalent of a "rigger brush")

Modern Explanations for the Change from Black Figure to Red Figure

- Boardman 2000 RF-Archaic: 12-14
- Boardman 2001: 79
- Biers 1996: 185
- Cooper 2000: 44
- Neer 2002: 32-38
- Osborne 1998: 135-137
- Robertson 1994: 9
- Williams in Rasmussen and Spivey 1991: 103-118

Famous Experiments in Making and Decorating Greek Vases

- Noble 1988
- Schreiber 1999

Good, Short Explanations of the Firing Process

- Williams 1999: 9-10

Examples: Images of Greek Potters and Painters at Work

- Boardman 2001: figs. 314, 315
- Noble 1988: figs. 74, 207
- Schreiber 1999: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3
- Sketch made on surface of vase before painting: Schreiber 1999: 3.1; Williams 1999: fig. 123

Useful Posters for the Classroom

- *Greek Vases: Six 11 x 14 Color Prints*. 1997. Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum. PS-2. (Sample coloring books with images from Greek vase painting.)

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