Ancient Greek Art: Archaic and Classical Styles

By Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

In this lesson, students learn how to identify representations of people shown in ancient Greek art of the Archaic and Classical periods and how to compose a narrative (storytelling) scene. They discover how archaeologists and art historians can recognize stylistic features of art from different chronological periods.

Grade levels

6-10

Goals

Students will become familiar with two well-known styles of Greek art and show their understanding by creating their own representational image in one of the styles, either on paper or in a digital form. The exercise supports close looking and is transferable across artistic media and disciplines.

Time needed

Presentation and class discussion of the assignment should take about 45 minutes to an hour. If students create their artwork in class rather than at home, this may take them another two hours. The write-up can be done at home or in class.

This is a beginner's lesson that requires context to avoid oversimplification. The teacher needs to take time to become familiar with two-dimensional and low-relief Greek representational art and to prepare images to share with students.

Cultural/historical context

In ancient Athens, ceramic pottery and marble sculptures reflected the interests of society and exploited the high quality of the available clay and marble. Clay vases used largely for drinking in the home take many shapes relevant for holding, pouring, and drinking wine as well as mixing wine with water. The vessels come in a startling variety of sizes and shapes. They were sometimes fired a plain glossy black, but many were decorated with images and narratives in black-figure (earlier) or red-figure (later) techniques.

Vase painters depicted scenes of daily life, the *symposion* (a male drinking party at which such vessels were used), religion, and mythology. Surviving marble sculptures instead often

decorated public spaces and temples and told stories of public figures, mythology and rituals. In both media, women were generally dressed, while men were often shown nude, symbolizing a perfected body and mind as well as athletic and martial prowess.

Style can refer to the manner of executing representational and abstract art by an individual artist, school, or movement, or to the distinctive appearance of the art of a particular place and time. The focus here is on the art of Greece, especially Attica (the area around Athens), in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The evolution from one style to the other was gradual across many media and did not happen in a clear linear chronology. Although changes in ancient art are sometimes simplified (including here!), Greek artists were all not working on a timeline towards a goal.

The names and dates of the Archaic and Classical periods are those of modern scholarship and do not suggest that an artistic change suddenly happened in that year. Often a notable event (a battle, a famous death) serves as a useful historical transition for art historians. For the Classical period, the beginning date of 480 BCE is the year of the Battle of Salamis, a turning point in the Greeks' wars with the Persians, and the end date of 323 BCE is the year Alexander the Great died.

Characteristics of art in the Archaic period (about 800-480 BCE)

In this project the focus is on the sixth century. Artists of this period are sometimes viewed as striving to attain the natural-looking and "better" style of representing humans seen in the fifth century BCE. Yet, as noted above, the artists did not have a vision of the future.

Freestanding sculpture
- Freestanding and high relief sculptures of men and women may appear rigid, with legs close together and upper arms held against the body.
- Mouths are carved in a slight V-shape sometimes called an "Archaic smile."
- Arms and legs in motion may be bent strongly at 45 or 90 degrees.
- Folds of flowing drapery form zigzags.

Figures in vase painting and relief sculpture
- Figures may appear two-dimensional, with torso and limbs in one plane.
- Frontal eyes are shown in profile faces.
- Heads and legs are often shown sideways in profile, sometimes facing in opposite directions, while the torso is frontal.
- Arms and legs in motion may be bent strongly at 45 or 90 degrees.
- Folds of flowing drapery form zigzags.
- Objects, limbs, and drapery behind the main figure(s) may be shown as higher or lower (the hem of a dress may sag; a person in the background may appear higher).
- Gravity or motion may have different effects within same scene.

Characteristics of art of the Classical period (about 480-323 BCE)

The Classical period is often considered a high point in the history of Western art, a Golden Age of great artistic exploration. The identification of classical art as exceptional and beautiful has its roots in both Roman antiquity and the Renaissance. Figures are often described within art history as naturalistic and idealized. The teacher might ask students to discuss what these terms mean before they read definitions.

- Profile eyes are shown in profile faces.
- Poses are intentionally balanced but asymmetrical (*contrapposto* becomes common, with one knee bent and the other straight, causing the hips and shoulders to react).
- Bodies may reflect artists' desire to standardize the ratio of parts of the body to one another. (For example, in the fifth century BCE the sculptor Polykleitos created a canon with a head-to-body ratio of 1/7.)
- Three-dimensionality is represented by foreshortening and three-quarter views.
- Drapery and hair are shown reacting to gravity and motion (flowing, billowing).
- Clothing sometimes appears wet and clings to the body.

Required materials, tools, and preparation

The necessary materials are examples of Greek art, and simple drawing tools:
- paper, pencils, pens, colored pencils, and fine markers, or
- digital tools.

The teacher may choose to create examples or a template by photocopying or projecting images of Greek vase painting and marble reliefs (see Resources). Since students will be drawing in two dimensions, it may be easier for them to focus on ancient painting and low-relief sculptures, such as the Parthenon friezes (British Museum and Parthenon Museum, Athens) rather than freestanding, three-dimensional sculpture.

An effective strategy for this exercise is to compare mid-late sixth-century BCE archaic with mid-late fifth-century BCE classical visual examples to allow students to focus on clearly different attributes a century apart.

Classroom process

After students and teacher discuss the terminology below as needed, the teacher should introduce archaic and classical art and show students examples of Greek vase paintings (and sculptures as desired) to illustrate the stylistic differences between the two periods. Students and teacher should also consider how an artist composed an image to tell a story and how the composition of a scene contributed to its effect.

Students may benefit from trying to position their own bodies the way a person does in an archaic and then in a classical image. They may find that an artist's careful creation of a pose in either style is not actually true to life, even when, in classical art, it may appear to be.

Terminology

Representational art	Art that shows objects, features, humans, and animals of the real world (unlike abstract art), also called figurative art
Naturalistic art	Representational art that aims to reflect how things and people look in the natural world/real life
Idealization	A focus on representing a perfected version of how things and people look (for example, posed to advantage, youthful, fit, wrinkle-free)
Narrative art	Art that tells a story or a significant moment of a story
Style	A way of depicting the visible world in art that evolves through time and varies geographically
Composition	The organization of an artwork's elements to create a pattern and to lead or hold the eye
Setting	Indicators of time and place
Main character(s)	The most important person or people in the image
Background	What lies behind the main character or scene
Foreground	What lies in the main area of the picture or in front of the main character
Depth	The appearance of three-dimensionality or distance in a flat image (in ancient art, shown by overlapping, stacking, or early forms of perspective)
Symbolism	Use of an attribute or symbol (such as Poseidon's trident) to stand for something else, identify a person or god, or provide clues to understanding the setting, character, and story
Pose	The way a body is positioned
Contrapposto	"Counterpose" in Italian. This pose allows a figure standing still to appear more dynamic. The weight rests on one leg while the opposite knee is bent, which causes hips and often shoulders to tilt. One arm may be bent and the other straight. The standing figure is both asymmetrical and balanced.

Assignment (see example of student work at the end)

Students choose to be:
an archaic artist living in the mid sixth century (about 550) BCE
or
a classical artist living in the mid fifth century (about 450) BCE.

They choose to represent:
a scene from a favorite ancient myth
or
a scene of modern life or from a favorite book.

Artistic component

Choose a style
Students decide on an archaic or classical style and examine vase paintings and low-relief sculptures in their chosen style with their teacher to observe characteristic elements.

Choose a story
Everyone chooses a moment in a narrative, which can be a modern tale, a myth, a part of a book they are reading in English class — anything they like. They may select one, two, or three characters.

Invent an arresting composition
To make the image interesting and easy to understand, students create a composition through their placement of figures, objects, or symbols and their use of pattern and color.

Design and draw the image
After designing their image in draft form, students will sketch it, incorporating at least three archaic or classical elements and including symbols to help identify places, people, and gods.

Written component: options

- Students can briefly (in under two pages) tell the story, identify the specific moment they are depicting, and explain any symbols. They should clarify what they did to make the image reflect the chosen style and explain how the composition enhances the story.

- Instead of just describing the composition, students can instead (or in addition) photocopy their final artwork, color-code and label it to reveal the composition they created, and annotate it to explain the story.

Pitfalls

Students should not simply copy an ancient image or aspects of it but show that they are able to design a new image in the ancient style and explain it. It is easier to copy an image than to

develop original ideas. One way to help students avoid accidental plagiarism is to ask them to choose a modern scene of daily life or a scene from a book they are reading.

- 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, which in this context could be seen as classically three-dimensional.

- If required to make the image archaic, however, they can usually start to think for themselves. The teacher should approve students' choices of style and story before they begin their design. It helps to require them to cite all images that influenced them.

Assessment

This rubric can be adapted as appropriate:

Archaic and Classical Style Project Rubric (50 points)

The style is:

Archaic _____
Classical _____

The story/myth/modern scene shown is:

The specific moment shown is:

The composition/pattern is:

Your **grade** is based on the following:

The image is careful and detailed (10 points) _____

It represents the style accurately, illustrating at least 3 characteristics (15 points) _____

The story is clear (10 points) _____

The composition is effective (the eye is drawn to what is important through design elements

such as the placement and size of figures and the use of color) (10 points) _____

Influences and sources are well cited (5 points) _____

TOTAL POINTS _____/50

Comments:

Examples of archaic and classical vase painting

Archaic Greek Storage Jar with Theseus Slaying the Minotaur. J. Paul Getty Museum. Attributed to Group E (Workshop of Exekias), Attic, about 550 BCE. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

Classical Greek Oil Jar with a Departing Warrior. J. Paul Getty Museum.
Phiale Painter, Attic, about 450 BCE. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program.

Resources on Archaic and Classical Art

Archaic vase painting

Storage Jar with Theseus Slaying the Minotaur. Attic black-figure jar attributed to the workshop of Exekias. J. Paul Getty Museum, about 550 BCE (see image on the previous page):
https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VTV

This is a scene from a famous myth about Theseus saving Athenian youths and maidens captured to feed the human-bull Minotaur on Crete.

- In **black-figure** painting, bodies are painted solid black in silhouette and details are incised with a tool like a needle down to the reddish clay below. White and purple provide added color, and white also represents female skin. The technique is called black-figure because the figures are black. The added color on this vessel is well preserved.

Neoptolemos attacking the elderly Trojan king Priam on an altar. Attic red-figure jar attributed to Nikoxenos. Metropolitan Museum of Art, about 500 BCE:
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247265?pos=8

This painting depicts an episode in the Trojan War. Harming someone taking refuge at an altar was an insult to the gods and against human moral codes. The vase might have encouraged conversation about the bad behavior of the Greek "hero," the son of Achilles.

- During the quarter century from about 525-500 BCE, vase painters began to experiment with **red-figure** painting. Artists used a brush to paint black outlines and interior details against the reddish clay and then painted the background black. The technique is called red-figure because the figures are left the pale red color of the clay. This technique endured as black-figure faded from use.

Youths Talking, Attic red-figure jar by Kleophrades. J. Paul Getty Museum, about 500-480 BCE:
https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103V91

Scroll down to find a close-up of the young men on the shoulder of the vessel. This vase illustrates a partial change from a frontal eye in a profile face to a more sideways V-shape.

- The artist has almost but not yet opened one corner of the oval eye to create the "profile eye" we still recognize today. Note the stiff poses of the young men's dog companions. Compare the youths with classical figures in the vase painting below.

Archaic sculpture

Kouroi and Korai, an Introduction. *Khan Academy* video on Archaic standing sculptures, about 530 BCE: https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/daedalic-archaic/a/kouroi-and-korai-an-introduction

The first two figures are a marble youth and maiden each from a different religious sanctuary.

- Compare their rigid stances with the youths and maidens on the archaic jug showing the Minotaur (above) and the classical marble Spearbearer of Polykleitos

(below). The nudity of male figures signaled their education and training for athletics and war as well as a kind of moral uprightness.

Fallen warrior. Western pediment, Temple of Aphaia, Aegina, W-VII. Glyptothek, Munich, about 500 BCE: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aphaia_pediment_warrior_W-VII_Glyptothek_Munich_79.jpg

- In this figure's pose you can find many archaic characteristics noted in the summary list, including sharply bent limbs and an "Archaic smile."

Classical vase painting

Oil Jar with a Departing Warrior. *Lekythos* by the Phiale Painter. J. Paul Getty Museum, about 450 BCE (see image above on p. 7): https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103STS

- Observe how the poses and garments of the couple appear more three-dimensional than those of the women on the archaic jar with the Minotaur.

A loving couple. Attic red-figure oil jar by the Painter of the Frankfort Acorn. J. Paul Getty Museum, about 420-400 BCE: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103WN3

- Note the twisting, relaxed poses, flowing garments, and added white color.

Classical sculpture

Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spearbearer). *SmartHistory* video of a standing marble figure by the sculptor Polykleitos, National Archaeological Museum, Naples, about 550-540 BCE: https://smarthistory.org/polykleitos-doryphoros-spear-bearer/

- Compare this figure's idealized body and balanced contrapposto pose with that of an archaic youth above. The spear once resting on his left shoulder is missing. See the side-by-side comparison of archaic and classical youths in the video at 3:02.

Horsemen on the west frieze of the Parthenon. Marble relief. British Museum, 443-437 BCE: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-47

- Look closely at the way the artist has carefully posed these idealized young riders and their horses. In this period, profile faces often show the line of the forehead extending straight down into the bridge of the nose. It looks natural but is not.

Books on archaic and classical art

Boardman, John. 2016 (rev.) *Greek Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Neer, Richard. 2010. *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Oakley, John A. 2020. *Guide to Scenes of Daily Life on Athenian Vases* (Wisconsin Studies in Classics). Madison: University of Wisconsin.

Osborne, R. 1998. *Archaic and Classical Greek Art*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Stansbury-O'Donnell, Mark. 2015. *A History of Greek Art*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Standards

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Standards (updated 2002)
https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/national-curriculum-standards-social-studies-executive-summary

    Theme 1: Culture

    Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

    Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA)
Standards for the English Language Arts (updated 2012)
https://ncte.org/resources/standards/ncte-ira-standards-for-the-english-language-arts/

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) (2014)
Visual Arts Anchor Standards, https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/

Creating

1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work
   Essential Question(s): How does knowing the contexts histories, and traditions of art forms help us create works of art and design?

Responding

7. Perceive and analyze artistic work
   Essential Question(s): What is an image? Where and how do we encounter images in our world? How do images influence our views of the world?

8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work
   Essential Question(s): What is the value of engaging in the process of art criticism? How can the viewer "read" a work of art as text? How does knowing and using visual art vocabularies help us understand and interpret works of art?

Connecting

11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.
    Essential Question(s): How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures?

Example of a student line drawing in the style of archaic vase painting
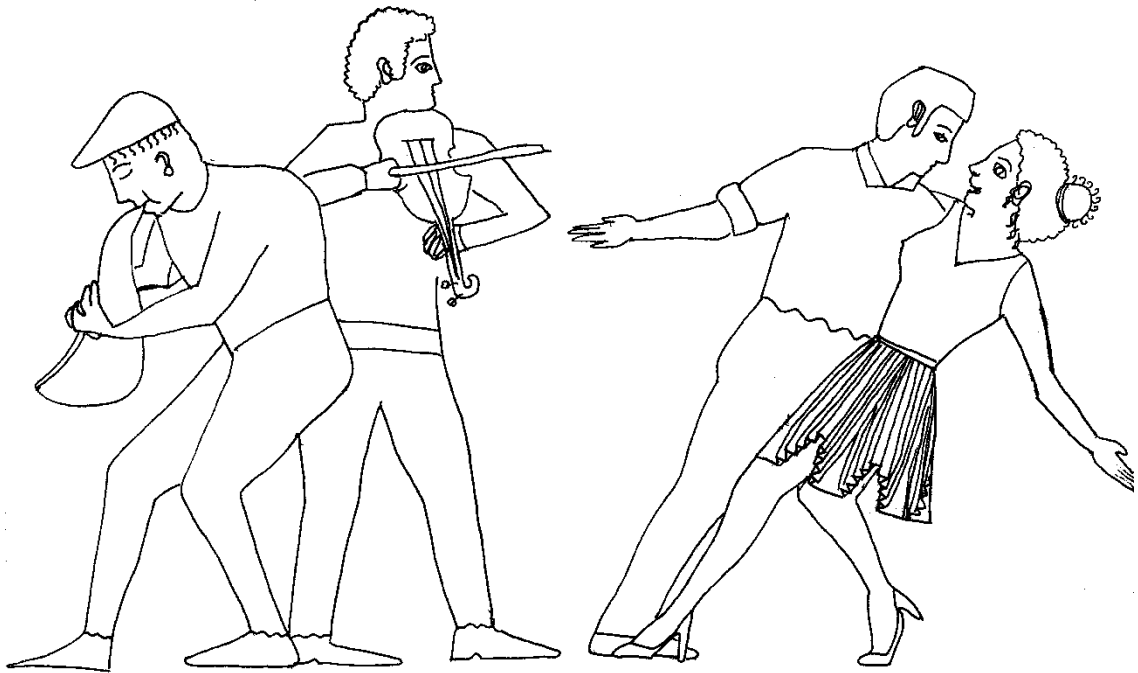
Musicians play saxophone and violin as a couple dances.
Archaic image of a contemporary scene, by Journie Kirdain

Archaic qualities
Archaic characteristics include frontal eyes in profile faces, frontal torsos but profile heads and legs, depth provided by overlapping planes, and zigzag folds on the woman's skirt.

Composition
Compositional elements include the balanced pairs, the visual arc from the saxophone through the eyes of the people and down the woman's left arm, and the symmetry of the saxophonist facing left and communing with his saxophone while the male dancer is facing right and focusing on his partner.