

# 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.

## 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.