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.

PROCESS DESCRIPTION

Welcome to the world of an ancient Greek vase painter! You will be working with square tiles of reddish clay (terracotta) to re-create the process of making a Black Figure and a Red Figure Greek vase painting. Unlike a Greek vase painter, YOU will not need to sit on an armless, backless chair, holding your arm in the air as you paint on curved pot – instead, you may rest your tile and elbow on the table, and paint on a flat surface! You will divide your tile in two and decorate half in the Black Figure style, and half in Red Figure.

Your goals:
As you create your painting, you will be observing how various techniques work. Your goal is not to paint a perfect product, but rather to:

- Practice some of the ancient painting techniques: is one style easier for you than the other? (Do you like the needle or the brush?)
- Think like an ancient buyer: which style do you prefer, and why? (The Greeks chose Red Figure. Do you?)

After observing the techniques and results carefully, you will write up your process and conclusions clearly (this is hard!).

Your grade:
You will NOT be graded on your artistic ability, but rather on your correct re-creation of the two styles, and on your careful observations and clear write-up of your process. There are 5 “questions” for you to answer. A grading rubric is attached to this project description.

- I am interested in your opinions, but they are not graded and cannot be “wrong”—although they can be too short, or unsupported—so please be honest and thorough in your reactions to the two Greek painting styles.

The Two Styles:
In both Black and Red Figure painting, there is a dramatic contrast between the image and the background.

- In Black Figure, the figures are a deep, shiny black, and the background a pale, shiny red. In creating a Black Figure scene, the artist painted figures as black silhouettes on the red background. To show the interior lines and details, he then incised into the black with a needle tool, which exposed the red below. The black figures with their thin red interior lines stand out strongly against the surrounding red. The final design is “black on red.”
- The Greeks also sometimes painted white and purple on top of the black to elaborate clothing (purple) and indicate female skin (white). You will not be adding color.
- In Red Figure, dark and light are reversed; the figures are red, and the background is black. The painter used a brush to paint all the lines of the image in black on the red
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background, leaving the red visible around the lines. Then, for contrast, he painted the entire background black. The red figures with their thin black interior lines stand out against the shiny black. The final painting is “red on black.”

Although everyone gets confused about the terms, just remember: Black Figure has . . . black figures! And Red Figure has red figures. Easy.

Your tools and equipment include:

- newspaper to protect the table;
- water for cleaning;
- spoons, chamois (leather) strips, and rounded stones to smooth and burnish your tile surface;
- soft pencils (or hard graphite or charcoal) for rubbing on the underside of the image you have chosen (to help transfer it);
- pointed wooden tools or pencils for pressing the image gently onto the tile surface;
- needles or incising tools for creating the Black Figure image;
- and black glaze, similar to the black “slip” on Greek pots; and brushes of varying sizes for painting.

- You will need to keep your tools clean and remember to dip the brushes in water when you are not using them.
- The clay will generally wash out of clothing, but it may stain if you really rub it in, so be careful. The glaze will stain.

STEP ONE: Prepare your desk and receive your tile.
Lay down paper to protect the table. Take a tile, turn it over, and incise your name and section number lightly on the back with a needle tool.

STEP TWO: Burnish your tile.
The Greeks burnished (“polished”) their pots to harden and compact the clay. This protected it from scratches and created a smooth, shiny surface.

- Burnish your tile, on one side only, by rubbing with a spoon, the chamois, and/or your finger; you may also experiment with other tools, such as smooth stones and animal bones (ribs are good). At the very end of the smoothing process, you may even need to use your fingers to rub tiny ridges away.
- Repeated rubbing in one spot may cause dents, so try to apply pressure across the whole tile. You can compare circular, vertical-back-and-forth, and cross-hatched rubbing motions to see which works
better. The tile may develop some striations (lines) and color variations (which is fine; these will generally not show after firing); the surface should also slowly become harder and shinier.

- NOTE: as the surface is burnished, platelets of clay align and become more compact, and can be damaged by gouging. To correct a small scratch, apply a tiny dab of water and rub over it. If the water sits on the surface for too long, it will sink into the clay and leave a permanent soft spot. If this happens, do not keep rubbing; try to arrange your design so that the black glaze covers the blemished area. Know that the fired tile will not show irregularities as much as the dry tile.

You may be able to see the changes in others’ tiles more easily than your own, since you will be looking straight down at your tile. Look around the room and notice the reflected shine from others’ tiles, seen from an angle. Also, compare the silky smooth feel of your burnished tile surface with the rougher back of the tile, and you will be surprised at the difference. Take note of what you did, what worked well, what did not work, and why/why not.

**STEP THREE:** *Pick an image and transfer it onto the tile.*

You will be able to select an image from a variety of scenes taken from Archaic Greek vase painting.

- If you like working with detailed imagery, are especially adventurous, or simply are secure about your artistic ability, pick a complex image from a vase with a lot of detail, such as the Black Figure amphora depicting Ajax and Achilles playing dice, by Exekias. Otherwise, choose an image with simple lines, such as the *Cattle of the Sun*. Remember, your process and description are far more important than the beauty of your final product.

Greek artists did not apparently copy the same image over and over or draw or transfer an image onto the clay the way you will be doing. But since working without a pattern is quite difficult, we are going to cheat a little.

1. Center the image (your template) as you want it to look on the tile and cut it into a square to fit the tile. Write your name on it.
2. Turn your paper template over and rub the back of the paper – the underside of the image – with a soft pencil or with hard graphite or charcoal. Charcoal is darker and therefore transfers the design more clearly, but it is messier! If you can see the lines of the image through the paper, you can rub just on the lines rather than over the entire back of the paper.

3. Lay the paper image onto the tile, graphite-side-down, and fix it in place by taping it with a long piece of masking tape (running from the top of the paper image over the top of the tile onto the back).
   - Establish one mark or spot on the tile and the paper image you can easily re-align if the paper moves. Otherwise you may lose your place if you wish to lift up the paper to check your work.
   - Do not tape the template or tile onto the newspaper or table, since you may need to move them as you continue.

4. Using a pencil or the pointed end of a wooden tool, GENTLY press down on the lines of the image to impress it lightly onto the clay below. Carefully lift the template and check to see that the lines are transferring to the tile surface. It is OK to press so hard that a faint indentation of the image is pressed into the tile; it is better for the impression to be faint, however, so do not gouge deep lines. In the end, you should have a pale outline of your image on the tile, very slightly pressed into the clay, and faintly colored black. Since the Greeks were generally working with a curved surface in natural light, it may be necessary when working indoors on a flat surface to work near windows or to tilt the tile to see clearly.
   - When you are finished, fold the template back, but do not remove it! You may need it later.

5. Next, split the image into halves: one side will be Black Figure and one Red. Think about which technique (BF or RF) may be more difficult for you (do you think you will be able to use a brush or a needle more easily?), whether part of the drawing is more complex (does one side require more detailed work?), and which half of the picture may be more appropriate for one style. Draw a line
across the image, cutting it in two. Literally draw the line on the clay, using a ruler and pencil. You may draw the line horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, or even be creative with a zigzag or stepped line; however, keep in mind that the more creative you get, the more work you will have to do!

**STEP FOUR:** *Paint the silhouettes and backgrounds of the two sides.*

- Remember, the Black Figure side will end up with an all-black silhouette, or shadow, of the image, red interior lines that have been scratched (incised) into the silhouette, and a pale reddish background.

Pour glaze into little bowls, and take several brushes with tips of different sizes and shapes. For filling in large areas, use a bigger brush; for fine work near design edges, use a finer brush.

- A close look at a well-painted Greek pot will reveal that the Greeks used some unbelievably fine brushes, some seemingly only a hair thick, yet they were able to paint long, delicate lines -- without apparently running out of glaze and starting the line over! You will come to appreciate their fine work! We remain unsure about the nature of the bristles and the types of brushes they used.

- An angled or flat square-tipped brush may work well for darkening large areas and filling in lines and corners without crossing the lines. A fine, pointed brush is essential for fine lines. Experiment with what works and be able to describe what you did and what happened.

First, use a fine brush to outline the figures carefully.

*Turn to Black Figure.*

Using a bigger brush, fill in the outlined figures completely with black! Remember, you are going to show the interior lines by scratching with a needle down to the red. Cover the entire image, even if that is painful for you to do!

- If you are lucky, the image you impressed into the clay may faintly show through the glaze after you paint on top of it; if not, you may (when the glaze dries) put the template
back down and go over the image again with a pencil so that a faint version of it reappears on the glaze.

- You may need to paint the area immediately inside the outline of the figures with a fine brush to avoid crossing over into the exterior background. Use a larger brush for the areas not near the outline.
- Make slow and even strokes with your brush over the entire surface, let the glaze dry, and repeat twice more. “Cross-hatching” will give the most even coat of glaze. Do not give in to the temptation to keep working in one area until it looks right. You will merely build up too much glaze in that spot.
- The Greeks probably worked completely freehand, so even if you cannot see any interior lines below the black glaze silhouette, you will simply re-create them as well as you can, the way they did. Keep moaning and complaining to a minimum!
- **DO NOT INCISE THE INTERIOR LINES YET.**

**Turn to Red Figure.**

Paint in the background of the Red Figure side: paint solid black all around the silhouette, leaving the figures a pale reddish color.

- You may need to paint the area immediately around the exterior lines of the figures with a fine brush to avoid crossing over into the interior. Use a larger brush for the areas not near the image.
- **DO NOT PAINT THE INTERIOR LINES YET.**

**STEP FIVE:** *Create the interior lines using a brush and a needle.*

You will complete your image now, comparing the brush and needle as you work. Take your pick: start with the brush or incising needle. Do one step and then the other in the order you choose, observing and comparing the two techniques carefully:

1. Incise details with a needle tool through the black Black Figure silhouette (just until you barely reach the reddish clay below), so that the black silhouette now has pale reddish interior lines showing through.
2. Paint the details of the Red Figure image, using a very fine brush.
**STEP SIX: Write up your project.**

Follow the rubric and write up your experiences and opinions. The guiding questions (separate handout) should not limit your answers. Describe the process you carried out and results you achieved, and be clear. This is your chance to reflect on what you liked, what frustrated you, and where you do and do not agree with the ancient Greeks.