

Everything You Need to Know

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OVERVIEW

This project is a fun, hands-on introduction to Greek culture and art designed for students of many ages. It was created by an archaeologist and a ceramicist to help students appreciate Greek vases, especially Athenian Black and Red Figure vases of about 650–400 B.C.E. 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.

First students learn about the context of vases used in Greek dining rooms and the range of images of daily life and mythology that decorate the pots. Then they step into the shoes of an ancient painter and paint a clay tile in Black and Red Figure techniques using realistic tools and procedures. While aiming to make the procedure authentic, we have also considered practical reality and expense. The teacher can replace clay that must be fired in a kiln with self-hardening clay, polymer clay, or any malleable, clay-like product.

GRADE LEVELS

As described here, the project applies mostly to eighth through twelfth-grade students. It includes a write-up that emphasizes careful description and requires writing with support. With younger students the teacher can choose simple images and place more emphasis on the activity than the write-up. With older students and adults the focus can vary. In all cases the purpose of the exercise is to come to an understanding of the vase painting process and develop an informed opinion about the art.

GOALS

Some goals of the project are to

- 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.
- allow students to experience the artistic and technical process of creating Greek Black Figure and Red Figure vase painting.
- 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.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

The process is messy and requires suitable set-up and clean-up. The most expensive items are clay and glaze or underglaze, since these cannot be reused. Brushes and other tools can be re used over the years.

Supplies

- Tiles (terracotta): 4" to 6" square clay tiles. For teachers with access to a ceramics studio/kiln, any cone 04-06 reddish terracotta clay will work. For teachers without access to a kiln: Amaco Self-hardening Mexican Pottery Clay is a good alternative. Teachers can also replace clay tiles altogether with polymer clay that bakes in an oven (Sculpey, for example) or any commercial (malleable) clay-like product, or even (in a pinch) Play-doh (obviously, do not bake this!) to achieve some of the same effects.
- Burnishing tools: cheap metal spoons, rounded river stones, strips of chamois, rib bones.
- Shiny Black Glaze, Mayco S-2121, slightly thinned, or Laguna Black Underglaze, or a comparable glaze or underglaze. If the tile will not be fired, use black acrylic paint instead.
- Copies of Archaic or classical designs taken from coloring books (see *Resources on Vases and Vase Painting*).
- Charcoal pencils, compressed charcoal or graphite sticks, sharpened pencils, scissors, masking tape, brushes (several sizes, with fine ones), needle tools, small plastic cups with lids, paper towels, newspaper, posters of Greek vases and images from books, or projected slides/digital images, samples of each stage in process, camera and film to record the fun!

CLASS TIME

It is up to the teacher to decide how much time to spend introducing the project, but several class sessions are ideal. Once the students have their tiles in hand, burnishing the clay, applying an image, painting, and incising 6" squares will take at least four or five class periods of about 45 minutes each. The write-up can then be done in class or as homework.

PROCEDURES

Leading into the project: the context of Greek vases

Students should be introduced to vase painting in its ancient

context as dinnerware, not just to the techniques of painting. The teacher can choose to focus on Greek male dinner parties and gender issues brought up by vase painting and dining practices, on scenes of daily life and mythology depicted on the pots, on Archaic and classical vase painting styles, or on all three. Suggestions are provided in the full lesson.

Introducing the techniques, tools, and materials of Greek vase painting

It is worthwhile to explain that the Greek “paint” was actually 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. The teacher should discuss the differences between the two styles, noting particularly the change in color of the positive space: from a deep black in Black Figure, highlighted against a red background (the negative space), to a pale red in Red Figure, standing out against a black background.

Carrying out the project

Review with students the *Greek Vase Painting Project Procedures* handout, in which every step is explained in detail. The teacher hands out tiles of leather-hard to bone-dry clay and students inscribe their name on the back. They burnish the surface, testing the effectiveness of various tools. Then they select (or design) an Archaic Greek image to transfer onto the tile using a technique similar to old-fashioned carbon paper (the transfer process is not an ancient one!). They divide the tile in half and consider whether one technique is particularly suited to one side of their design. They start with the Back

Figure side, and paint entirely over the figures to create black silhouettes into which they incise details with a needle tool. Lastly, they use an extremely fine brush to paint the Red Figure image, and a fatter brush to fill in the black background on the Red Figure side.

ASSESSMENT

The tile

Part of the final grade is based on the students’ correct execution of the two techniques; they should be reassured that they will not be graded on their artistic ability.

The write-up

Students should take notes as they work. The write-up is an exercise in describing each step of the project clearly, so clearly that if the write-up blew into the window of a car driving by, the driver could understand what the project entailed. This is a great deal more difficult than it sounds. Students conclude by comparing Black Figure and Red Figure and deciding whether they would have switched to Red Figure if they were ancient Athenians. They express and support their opinions about the two techniques, choosing which one “looks better” and which was the easiest for them to execute. Some students enjoy the feel of the needle, and others the feel of the brush.

FOLLOWING UP

When students later study the Romans, they compare Greek and Roman dining habits and artistic expression. We generally hold a Greco-Roman Feast in the spring at which guests can recline for part of the meal. Questions about Greek vases and Greek dining are featured in a Jeopardy-style game.