

Greek Vase Painting Project: Teachers

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OVERVIEW

This vase painting project is a messy, fun, multi-disciplinary, hands-on introduction to Greek vase painting and culture designed 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 project was designed by an archaeologist and a ceramicist to help students appreciate Black and Red Figure vases. Students step into the shoes of an ancient painter and paint a tile, using realistic tools and techniques, in both Red and Black Figure. In advance, they 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. Thus, they view the vases from the perspective of a user, viewer, and buyer before taking on the perspective of the artist. While aiming to make the procedure authentic, we have also considered practical reality and expense.

Background

Greek vase paintings, especially Athenian Black and Red Figure vase paintings of about 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 painting technique of choice after about 500 B.C.E. Scholars have written a fair amount about how ancient artists painted in the two techniques and why they may have changed from Black to Red Figure, and there have been successful efforts to recreate ancient pottery shapes. Only a few scholars and ceramicists have re-created the painting process, however. Students rarely have an opportunity to practice making the art themselves, except perhaps as a craft exercise on paper. Usually they simply view 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.

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 students to provide support for their observations and opinions. The project has also been used successfully with younger students and with graduate students and adults. With younger students the images should be kept simple and more emphasis should be placed on the activity than on the write-up. 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 understanding of the vase painting process and an informed opinion about the art, and not just to carry out an artistic exercise in a minimal context.

GOALS

The primary 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- bring Greek vase painting to life for students visiting museums.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

The process is messy and requires suitable set-up and clean-up. Newspaper can be used to cover the tables, and if there is no sink the teacher should provide a bucket of water and rags,

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or hand wipes. The most expensive items are clay and glaze or underglaze, since these cannot be reused. 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 then borrow/share materials. Brushes and other tools can be re used over the years. It is worth investing in good brushes, both because they make the project more effective, and because they last.

Supplies

- Tiles: terracotta, 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 does not provide the student a full experience of the two techniques. If money is a problem, however, 4-inch tiles are 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 will do. Cost, approximately \$9.00 for 5 lbs. (in 2007). The clay comes in a rectangular block, and can be kneaded and rolled out with a rolling pin, or (for greater convenience) sliced lengthwise to make tiles. 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. Note: when burnishing this clay with a metal spoon, there is a greater likelihood of tarnish coming off onto the surface of the tile.

- 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. (If the tile will not be fired, use black acrylic paint instead of glaze or underglaze).
- 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. Note: If the final product is not shiny enough to match the glossy ancient originals, simply spray them with a glossy fixative.
- 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 plenty of very fine ones of 1/16 diameter to 1/64 diameter
- Needle tools or sewing needles
- Small plastic cups with lids (the size for take-out salad dressing and salsa)
- 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 (possibly more for larger or more distracted classes, or when there is little help for the teacher). The write-up can then be done in class or as homework. Students who finish early should start the write-up in class. Teachers may alter the focus and the goals of the project to take less time overall.

WHAT IS OUR EVIDENCE FOR GREEK VASES AND VASE PAINTING?

- 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 by modern scholars of possible ancient procedures
- Descriptions in literature of dining and dining room behavior

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. It is important to introduce the topic thoroughly enough that students understand what this art form was that they are mimicking.

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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; ideally the teacher will be able to cover all three briefly and one in greater detail.

1. The context of 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* (educated courtesans)
 - + the function of the symposium in Greek society

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 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. In the sixth century B.C.E., Athenian artists painted figures rather awkwardly in the Archaic style, depicting people with twisted bodies in stiff poses. The more elegant Classical style developed in the fifth century B.C.E. when Red Figure was dominant. Students will be painting an Archaic image in Black and Red Figure, since this was how artists painted at the time of the transition from Black to Red Figure, but they can compare Archaic and classical vases.

For convenience and a simpler project, the teacher can choose Archaic images copied from vase paintings (from coloring books cited in *Resources on Greek Vases and Vase Painting*) as the templates for the students' tiles. Alternatively, s/he can assign students the job of designing their own Archaic image to paint on the tile. This is a fun way for the class to grapple with the essential elements of Archaic imagery. (Students should be required to cite and attach all images that influenced them.)

The Archaic Period: stylistic markers (roughly 600–500 B.C.E.)

- + Figures are flat (they resemble paper dolls; torso and limbs are in one plane, as if squeezed between two panes of glass).

- + Bodies twist (head and legs are shown sideways in profile, sometimes facing in opposite directions, while the torso is frontal).
- + Folds of clothing form zigzags and drapery looks ironed flat.
- + Objects, limbs, and drapery behind the main figure(s) are shown as higher or lower (the hem of a dress may sag on the side of the figure away from the viewer; the head of a person in the back ground may be raised higher than someone in the foreground).
- + Bodies are held in rigid positions (some poses are borrowed from Egypt).
- + Body proportions and limb positions are awkward (elbows jut out at 45 degree angles; shoulders are hunched; limb connections are unclear).
- + Gravity and motion may seem to have no effect, an illogical effect, or different effects within the same scene.

For comparison:

The Classical Period: stylistic markers (roughly 500–400 B.C.E.)

- + Bodies and faces are depicted in three-quarter views.
- + Successful three-dimensionality is achieved through foreshortening, perspective, and overlapping.
- + Bodies, drapery, and hair react to appropriately to gravity and motion (they hang down properly, flow, and billow).
- + Bodies are in proportion and limbs and connections between body parts look realistic.
- + Figures are posed elegantly, although often unrealistically, against a backdrop in positions human bodies can actually achieve.
- + Clothing looks wet and clings to the realistic (although unnaturally perfect) body in graceful curves.

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 Red Figure, standing out against a black background. Evaluate the effect this strong contrast has on the viewer, as well as the way interior lines on the all-black figure are shown by engraving with a needle through the black down to the red clay below. Black Figure vases almost look engraved.

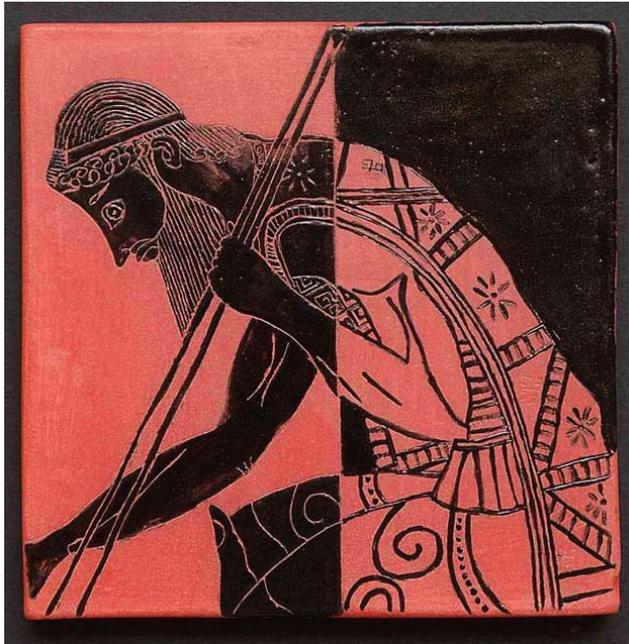


Figure 1. Student tile showing a close-up from a vase by Exekias, from *The Coloring Book of the Trojan War*, vol. I.

Be sure to choose well-preserved vases, since faded black and pale 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 purple, used to add color to clothing and armor, and white, to indicate the 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 and 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. To avoid confusing students, stick to Archaic art so as to compare apples with apples. Classical Red Figure vase painting will look very different. In this project, students will not be working with added color, but the teacher can have them experiment with adding color to the fired tile with acrylic paint.

Practice with markers on paper to create Black and Red Figure (optional)

One preparation strategy is to have students choose a photocopied image (from one of the coloring books of Greek images; see *Resources on Greek Vases and Vase Painting*). It can help to review the process in advance and see how the contrast of dark and light works. Divide the image in half and, using sharpies or magic markers, create a “black on white” and “white on black” half of the image as on a bilingual Black and

Red Figure vase. 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 into a white-on-black one; since this is not really possible, students can color the figure black leaving a white space parallel to the original black lines.

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 be adventurous and attempt Black and Red Figure versions of designs of their own.



Figure 2. Student’s Black-and-White mermaids.

Something fun: mirror writing (optional)

Have students practice writing backwards/mirror writing their names. They will enjoy this!

Greek potters and painters signed their work (and what does that tell us?), and they could write backwards in mirror writing. In a number of ancient scripts, the direction in which the viewer was expected to read could vary depending on artistic or practical need (for example, hieroglyphs could run left-to-right, right-to-left, 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.

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Mirror-writing comes easily for some, but for those who have a hard time writing in reverse with their dominant hand, this is a fun exercise that usually works:

Holding a pencil in each hand, right-handers place the points in the center of a piece of paper. Focusing on the message the brain sends to the right hand, they simply start writing out from the middle, letting the left hand mindlessly follow (the left hand moves to the left, the right hand to the right). Left-handers 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, although usually very badly! With practice, however, students can start to mirror-write intentionally with the dominant hand and improve their handwriting.

Carrying out the project

The teacher should review the separate *Greek Vase Painting Project Procedures* handout that fully explains each step to the students. It is important to introduce the project thoroughly, so that students will know the purpose and techniques of creating their tiles and understand how the project will be graded. Students should receive both the *Procedures* handout, which includes guidelines for the final write-up, and the *Grading Rubric*; the teacher should go over both with the class.

This 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; a teacher with little help can also simply proceed more slowly and ask everyone to wait until all participants have reached the same stage in the process. If each student works at his or her own pace, individuals' questions tend to slow up the group and distract the attention of the teacher, but they also promote experimentation and enthusiasm. Practical necessity should govern practice.

If more than one section is carrying out the project, designate different areas of the classroom for different groups' tiles. Make sure that students incise their names and section numbers on the back of the tiles for easy identification.

Allow time for cleaning up every day, and require students to help. Students will become involved in the process and resist stopping on time! Do not give in to their desire for perfection, since this will leave you to clean up with no help.

PITFALLS

While students 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 from Black to Red Figure on a small tile, across a dividing line. As they create the two styles side-by-side on one tile, students tend to assume that vase painters consistently used both techniques together on one pot. Reinforce the point 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 *opposite* sides of pots.

Note: the pots painted in both styles are called “bilingual,” borrowing from language terminology.

The clay tile should be fairly dry and leather hard. If the clay is too moist or too dry, the burnishing process is hard to control. Nevertheless, even if the surface does not become perfectly hard and smooth, the project will still work and many errors will be disguised during firing. Do not let perfectionist students obsess about imperfections. This is an ancient technique, and if the result looks a bit battered, all the better!

Some students will be able to wield a brush or a needle with natural ability, painting and incising fine lines, while others will create much fatter lines that wobble. It is important to remind the class that they will not be graded on artistic ability.

Once the clay tile has been burnished, the surface will become compacted. A gouge on the surface will make a mark that cannot be erased by rubbing. Applying a very small drop of water to the damaged area and rubbing with a spoon or chamois may harden the area again, as explained in the *Procedures* handout. Additional pitfalls are also addressed under *Procedures*.

ASSESSMENT

Students are graded on whether or not they executed the techniques correctly and described the process and their conclusions clearly, with support. See the guidelines in the *Procedures* handout and follow the *Grading Rubric*.

SUMMING UP

An interesting way to complete the project is to display the fired tiles in the classroom and ask students to discuss their experiences. Volunteers can explain the conclusions they came to in their write-ups. Ask for a show of hands: students who liked Black Figure best versus those who liked Red Figure best, and discuss why.

RESOURCES

See the *Resources on Greek Vases and Vase Painting* handout that includes references to good, basic texts as well as technical information and scholarly opinions.