

# GREEK VASE PAINTING PROJECT

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This project is a messy, time-consuming, fun, multi-disciplinary, hands-on introduction to Greek vase painting and culture 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.

## DOCUMENTS FOR THIS PROJECT

1. For Teachers:
  - a. Overview
  - b. Suggestions for Introducing the Project
  - c. Detailed Description of Project (can be used by the teacher to guide each step or can be handed out to the students if desired; it is addressed to students)
  - d. Grading Rubric
  - e. Bibliography/Resources
2. For Students:
  - a. Short Description of Project
  - b. Detailed Description of Project (same as teacher's version; can be handed to students if the teacher chooses to do so; it is addressed to students)
  - c. Guiding Questions about the Painting Process
  - d. Guidelines for Writing about the Painting Process
  - e. Grading Rubric (same as the teacher's)

Please direct any comments and questions about this project to [info@archaeological.org](mailto:info@archaeological.org). Include **AIA Lesson Plans** in the email subject line.

This lesson was originally created and placed online in 2005. The lesson was updated by Shelby Brown in 2021.

## TEACHERS: OVERVIEW

### Short Summary

This project is a messy, time-consuming, fun, multi-disciplinary, hands-on introduction to Greek vase painting and culture 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 vase painting project and associated lessons were designed by an archaeologist and a ceramicist to help students appreciate black and red-figure painting and especially Attic and Athenian vases. Students “become” ancient painters and create an image, using relatively realistic tools and techniques, in both red and black-figure painting styles. In advance, they will ideally learn about the context of vases, especially those used in Greek dining rooms, and the range of images of daily life and myth that decorate the vessels. Thus, they view the vases from the perspective of a viewer and buyer before taking on the perspective of the artist.

Using leather-hard or bone-dry clay tiles and appropriate tools and slip, students re-enact the process from burnishing clay through painting on and incising into it, and ideally, they experience some of the joys and frustrations of creating an image in the two styles.

While aiming to make the procedures authentic, we have also considered practical reality and expense, and offer choices. The complete project as outlined here in depth takes time and resources many teachers may not have. Shortening the timeline and altering the materials may be necessary.

At the end of the process, students are asked whether they would have chosen to favor red-figure over black-figure as the dominant painting technique. Of course, it is not that simple. Technical and practical considerations, contexts outside the world of vase painting, and unknown factors influenced this change, not just artists’ personal preferences. The question does, however, allow students to reflect on the process as well as the appearance of vase painting while articulating a personal opinion. It can be an effective prompt.

### Background

Greek painted vases, and especially Athenian vessels of about 652-325 B.C.E., painted with figurative scenes in black and red-figure techniques, are among the most famous of ancient art forms. The iron-rich clay used to make pottery also provided the refined, watered-down slip or gloss with which pots were painted. Multiple stages of firing (and possibly multiple firings) produced the final glossy red and black colors.

Vase painting was a male profession, but some women are attested. The classical vases of the fifth century B.C.E. in particular, alongside marble sculpture, especially influenced artists from the Renaissance until today. Red-figure appeared around 530 B.C.E. and succeeded black-figure as the dominant technique in the early fifth century B.C.E.

There is a fair amount written by scholars about how artists painted the two styles and many hypotheses about why the change in focus from black to red-figure occurred. There have been

successful efforts to recreate and fire ancient pottery shapes. Scholars have also analyzed and re-created the painting process, and they continue to question and refine our understanding of how painters worked and how potters and painters interacted. It is important to stress that while there was a likely sequence of actions by painters, close studies of vases do not suggest a one-method-fits-all, inevitable procedure. See the Bibliography/Resources.

Students rarely have an opportunity to make or paint in a Greek technique, on clay. Usually, they simply look at pictures or slides, assess aesthetic qualities, or learn about certain scenes 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 or a book.

Vase types exist for a wide variety of functions, and many vessels survive from contexts of dining and drinking. There are accessible resources about these topics, including on the male drinking party called the *symposion*, for which many surviving vessels were created. These bring up many fascinating and fruitful topics about attitudes towards beauty, gender, status, and slavery that teachers may wish to pursue in presenting background information.

### **What Is Our Evidence for Greek Vases and Vase Painting and their Uses?**

- The vases themselves, found in a variety of contexts.
- The images of daily life and mythological behavior painted on the vases.
- Images on vases depicting kilns, potters, and painters.
- Scientific analyses of ancient vases and replicated slip and gloss.
- Experimental archaeology: replication of potting, painting, and firing practices.
- Descriptions in literature of dining and drinking behavior.
- Texts describing vases, potters and painters, kilns.

### **Goals**

The primary goals of the project are to:

1. teach students about the cultural context of ancient Greek, and especially Athenian, vase painting and expose them to a range of depictions of daily life and mythology.
2. allow students to experience to some degree the artistic and technical process of creating Greek black and red-figure painting.
3. introduce students in an immediate and kinesthetic way to the concept of positive and negative space (which in the use of black color are reversed in black and red-figure painting) and to the use of two dominant colors.
4. 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.

Additional goals when establishing context for the project can be to:

- expose students to chronological changes in ancient art and to a consideration of styles as identified in art history.
- invite conversation about Greek vases, their owners, makers, and functions, and issues of status and gender that their decoration and uses may suggest.

### **Ages/Grades**

As described here, the project applies mostly to 8th through 12th grade students and includes an analytical component and a write-up. It has been used successfully with younger students, however, and

it has also been carried out with graduate students and adults. With younger students, the painted images should be kept simple and greater emphasis should be placed on the activity than on background information and analysis. With older students and adults, the depth of focus can vary with the nature of the class. The graded aspect of the exercise asks students to express an informed opinion about the vase painting process. Teachers may modify or replace the assessment strategies.

### **Class Size and Number of Helpers Needed**

The complete 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. The teacher can also simply proceed more slowly and ask everyone to wait until all participants have reached the same stage in the process. If students work more at their own pace, individuals' questions slow up the group and distract the attention of the teacher, but they also promote experimentation and enthusiasm. Practical necessity should govern practice.

### **Smaller-scale Versions**

We understand that most teachers do not have the luxury of carrying out this project as described in here in depth, and we encourage you to modify goals and expectations in ways that work for you. A smaller-scale version of the project with a small amount of self-hardening clay and acrylic paint is manageable with fewer helpers.

### **Preparation, Cost, and Set Up**

The most expensive items are clay and the glaze or underglaze for those with a kiln, or the self-hardening clay and acrylic for those without since these cannot be re-used. These will cost about \$3 - \$5 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 borrow/share materials. Brushes and other tools can be re-used over the years. It is worth it to invest in them, both because they make the project more effective and because they last.

The process is messy, and requires newspaper on the tables, water and rags or hand wipes (unless there is a sink in the room), and time to set up and clean up daily. As described here, the project will take approximately five 45-50-minute class periods to complete (once the students have their tiles in hand), not counting introducing the cultural elements and allowing class time to write up results.

### **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 a needle into the black-figure side. We have found that a 6-inch tile offers enough surface to give the student a full experience of the two techniques. If money is a problem, however, 4 inches will work.

### **Clay**

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. A teacher can also order 4 or 6-inch tiles pressed by a professional tile-maker, but this adds to the expense.
- Teachers with no kiln handy may want to determine whether a local studio (such as the many designed to handle ceramics-focused birthday parties) will fire the tiles for a fee.

For teachers without access to a kiln:

- Amaco Self-hardening Mexican Pottery Clay, 5 lbs., approximately \$20.00 (in 2021), also comes in larger amounts. The clay comes in a rectangular block, and pieces can be kneaded and rolled out with a rolling pin, or (for greater convenience) about ¼-inch tiles can be sliced off the block lengthwise. Be careful -- if tiles are sliced off the short end of the block (as seems logical, since this will create square tiles), they may 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.
  - When burnishing this clay with a metal spoon, there is a greater likelihood of tarnish coming off onto the surface of the tile.

#### **Alternate Clays**

- Other options in terracotta colors include Crayola Air Dry Clay, Jovi Air Dry Modeling Clay, DAS Air-hardening Modeling Clay, and Activa Natural Self-hardening Clay. These come in bulk and in smaller sizes. Grey and white colors may be cheaper than terracotta and other colors, so use your judgment about whether to spend money on a more authentic appearance.
- Usually, these products harden within 24-48 hours, depending on the weather. Do not use an oven-bake clay and avoid products that stay pliable and do not harden. You want them to harden.

**Tools** (available from art supply stores and hobby shops, and online)

- Burnishing tools for clay to be fired: cheap metal spoons, rounded river stones, strips of chamois, rib bones, plastic bread dough scrapers – experiment!
- Mayco shiny black glaze or Laguna black underglaze (for firing)
- Glossy black acrylic paint to use with air-drying clay (brand examples: Liquitex and Apple Barrel)
- Copies of designs taken from coloring books (see Bibliography)
- Charcoal pencils or sticks of compressed charcoal or graphite
- Sharpened pencils
- Scissors
- Masking tape
- Brushes in several sizes, including with very fine pointed tips and with small but squared-off bristles for covering broader areas
- Needle or very fine embossing tools (brand example: Kemper), sewing needles
- Small plastic cups with lids (the size for take-out salad dressing and salsa)
- Paper towels
- Newspaper
- Images from Greek vases, or ancient templates
- Examples of each stage of the process (or use illustrations in the Detailed Description of Project)

It can be difficult to replicate the glossy shine of a Greek vase. You may want to use an acrylic fixative or varnish spray on the finished fired or air-dried tiles.

## TEACHERS: SUGGESTIONS FOR INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

The teacher can start with a brief overview of Greek vase painting, beginning with early black-figure of about 700 B.C.E., but focusing mainly on the Athenian black and red-figure vases spanning about 625-325 B.C.E. Depending on the nature of the class, topics can include the context of the vases used in Greek dining and symposia (drinking parties), the varied shapes of vases related to their 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” or “gloss”) of the same material as the clay vessel, sometimes with an additive. The way the vase was fired produced the glossy red and black colors. See other ideas for project goals in the Teacher Overview.

Students will need to see a number of vases decorated in black and red-figure techniques 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 image standing out against a black negative space. Ask what effect the strong contrast has on the viewer and what other differences the students notice between the two.

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 more, and to color the skin of women white, or the coats of horses. What effect does this use of added color have? 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.

Students will be working on a relatively small tile to re-create the two techniques side by side, changing across a dividing line, 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 appeared briefly together on pots – but on opposite sides (the vessels painted in both styles are called “bilingual”).

Black-figure painting survived into the fourth century B.C.E. as a technique on certain vases, such as the Panathenaic amphorae given as athletic prizes. It can be interesting to compare both Archaic and classical black-figure images as well as to compare black-figure and red-figure. Classical figures will look very different from Archaic ones (see the Archaic and Classical Style lesson).

### **Practicing with markers on paper to create black and red-figure images**

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 to transition on the tile, across a dividing line, from black to red-figure, although this reinforces the differences.

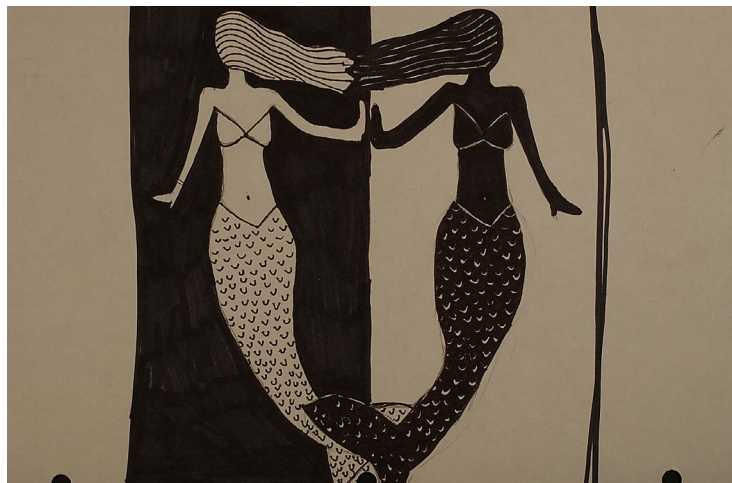
One preparation strategy is to have students to draw an image or choose a photocopied image, divide it in half, and, using sharpies or markers, create a black-on-white and white-on-black version of the image as if it were a black and red-figure painting.

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, since a needle is not used to incise into the black silhouette down to the clay layer below. The student needs to turn each black-on-white line white-on-black; since this is not really possible, students can 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.



**Figure 1:** Student's red-and-black version of hearts

Another option is to have students draw a simple shape, like a heart (good for exercises carried out near Valentine's Day), divide it or 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.



**Figure 2:** Student's Black-and-White version of mermaids

Students may also choose to be adventurous and attempt black and red-figure versions of a variety of images they design.



**Something Fun: Mirror Writing**

Students will enjoy this: Greek potters and painters signed their work (and what does that tell us?), and they could write backwards in reverse (mirror writing). In a number of ancient scripts, the direction in which the viewer was expected to read could vary (for example, left, right, or top-to-bottom). If a vase painter wanted to name a person or show words being spoken, he (usually 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, aesthetically pleasing, or might prevent smudging. Inscriptions were positioned creatively to engage the audience, encircle and emphasize parts of figures, and even to allow characters to speak.

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:

- Right-handers: holding a pencil in each hand, place the points in the center of a piece of paper and write outward. Left-handers need to cross their arms and work from slightly more extended arms in toward the center.
- Focusing on the message the brain sends to the dominant hand, simply start writing, letting the other hand follow mindlessly. 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.



## STUDENTS: DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Welcome to the world of an ancient Greek vase painter! Your teacher will provide context for the project, which will focus mainly on Athenian vases from between about 625 and 325 B.C.E. You will be working with square tiles of terracotta – reddish clay that mimics the ancient color – to re-create the process of making a black-figure and a red-figure vase painting. Unlike a Greek vase painter, you will not need to sit holding your arm up as you paint on a curving 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 technique, 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 ancient techniques: is one style easier for you than the other? (Do you like the needle or the brush?)
- think like an ancient artist and buyer: which style do you prefer, and why? (The Greeks in the end used red-figure as their dominant technique. While you will not be experiencing Greek clay and kilns, you can still observe some of the process and see the differences between the two techniques. Which do you prefer?)

After observing the techniques and results carefully, you will write up your process and conclusions clearly.

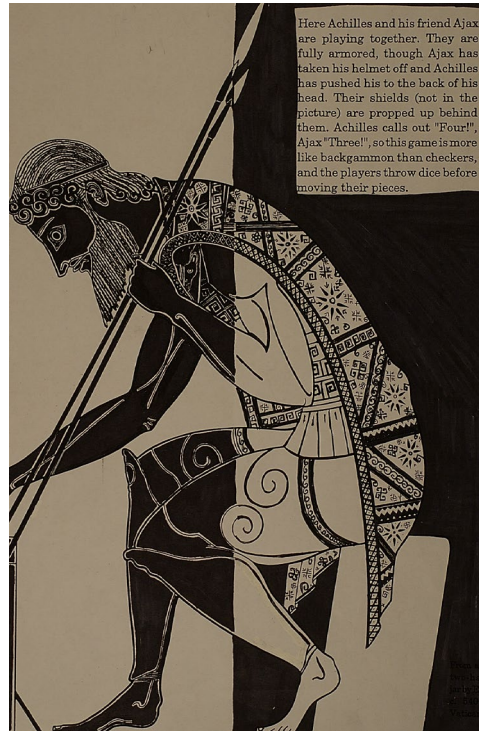
### **Your grade:**

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 included with this project description. Please be honest and thorough in your reactions to the two Greek painting techniques.

### **The Two Techniques:**

In both black and red-figure painting, there is a dramatic contrast between the image and the background.

- In black-figure painting, the figures are a deep, shiny black, painted as black silhouettes against the reddish clay background. To indicate the interior lines and details, the artist incised (scratched) through the black coat with a needle tool to expose 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.”
- Artists often painted purple and white colors on top of the black to decorate clothing and armor and used white to indicate female skin. You will not be adding color.



**Figure 1:** Example of a black and red-figure version in marker of a painting by Exekias from the *Coloring Book of the Trojan War*, vol. 1.

- In red-figure painting, dark and light are reversed; the figures are red, and the background is black. The painter used a brush to outline the figure and paint all the interior lines of the image in black on the red clay. 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."



**Figure 2:** Example of a student's black and red-figure Valentine's Day heart.

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

**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; **black glaze or acrylic** depending on the clay you are using, standing in for the black slip on Greek pots; and **brushes** of varying sizes for painting.



**Figure 3:** Examples of tools and equipment

**Watch out for these:**

- 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.
- You will need to keep your tools clean and remember to dip the brushes in water when you are not using them, or they will not make even lines.

**TO BEGIN:** *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 ONE:** *Burnish your tile. Assess with your teacher whether the clay you are using will benefit from burnishing. This may not work with some air-drying clays.*



**Figure 4:** Burnishing with a spoon



**Figure 5:** Burnishing with chamois strips



The Greeks sometimes burnished (“polished”) their pots to harden and compact the clay. This 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 and don’t overdo it. You can compare circular, vertical-back-and-forth, and cross-hatched rubbing motions to see which works better. The tile may develop some lines and color variations, which is fine.

NOTE: as the surface is burnished, platelets of clay align, become compact, and can be damaged by gouging, especially on clay intended for firing. 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. The final tile will not show irregularities as well as the unpainted 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 TWO:** *Pick an image and transfer it onto the tile.*



**Figure 6:** Template of the Cattle of the Sun from the Iliad/Odyssey coloring book

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

- If you like detailed imagery, are especially adventurous, or simply feel 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 (figure 1). Otherwise, choose an image with

simple lines, such as the Cattle of the Sun (figure 6). Remember, your process is more important than the beauty of your final product.

Greek artists made preliminary freehand sketches on clay, but they did not transfer images 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.

- You can plan ahead by turning your template into a half black-figure and half red-figure image using a black marker (figure 6)
- Center the image as you want it to look on the tile and cut it into a square to fit the tile. Write your name on it.



**Figure 7:** Rubbing graphite with a pencil on the back of the template

1. 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. (**Do not use charcoal or graphite with air-drying clay; use a pencil.**) If you can see the lines of the image through the paper, you can rub just on the lines rather than the entire back of the paper. Charcoal is darker and therefore transfers the design more clearly, but it is messier! It will burn off during firing.



**Figure 8:** Template of the Gorgon Medusa taped onto a tile

2. 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. (You may also stick a needle through both to make a small hole.) 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 the tile as you continue.



**Figure 9:** Transferring the image from the paper template onto the tile



**Figure 10:** Finished transfer with the template folded back



3. Using a pencil or a pointed 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 graphite lines are transferring to the tile surface. It is OK to press firmly enough that a faint indentation of the image is imprinted into the tile; but do not press deep lines. In the end, you should have a faint outline of your image lightly pressed into the clay. 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. If you are having difficulty seeing your lines even if you tilt the tile into the light, use a needle tool to incise some of the important lines (lightly).



**Figure 11:** Incising the image with a needle to help visibility of lines



**Figure 12:** Examples of tiles split diagonally and horizontally

4. Next, split the image into halves: one side will be black-figure and one red. Think about which technique 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 careful work you may have to do!

**STEP THREE:** Prepare to paint.

To keep the two different techniques distinct in your mind, you can complete the outlines of the figures on both sides of the tike, and then compare the technique of creating the interior lines, comparing the needle on the black-figure side and the brush on the red-figure side.

Pour glaze or acrylic 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 fine brush.

Have a cup of water handy for cleaning the brushes if needed and leave them in the water when you are not using them.

- A close look at a well-painted Greek pot will reveal that the Greeks used some unbelievably fine brushes. You will come to appreciate their work! A fine, pointed brush is essential for fine lines. Scholars are still researching the nature of the bristles and hairs in ancient brushes as indicated by the lines in the paintings themselves.
- A square-tipped brush may work well for darkening larger areas without streaking. Experiment with what works and be able to describe what you did and what the result was.

**STEP FOUR:** Create the silhouettes of figures.

With a very fine, pointed brush, carefully outlines the figures on both sides. Don't worry about interior lines yet, or background color.

***ONLY on the black-figure side, then*** paint the outlined figures completely to create a solid black silhouette. Remember, you are going to show the interior lines later by scratching with a needle down to the red.

- 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 to fill in the center of the silhouette not near the outline.
- Make slow and even strokes with your brush over the entire surface, let the coat dry, and repeat. "Cross-hatching" will give the most even final coat. Do not give in to the temptation to keep working in one area until it looks right. You will merely build up too much of the black coat in that spot. Use two or three coats depending on the consistency of your painting medium.

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

You will complete your figures now, comparing the brush and needle as you work. Do one step and then the other in the order you choose, observing and comparing the two techniques carefully.



**Figure 13:** Completed red-and black-figure silhouettes

#### Black Figure

- Incise details with a needle tool through the black-figure silhouette (just until you reach the reddish clay below), so that the black silhouette now has pale reddish interior lines showing through. If you are lucky, the image you impressed into the clay may faintly show through the glaze or acrylic after you paint on top of it; if not, you may (when the black coat dries) put the template back down and go over the image again with a pencil so that a faint version of it reappears. Greek artists probably worked completely freehand, though, so even if you cannot see any interior lines below the black glaze silhouette, you can simply re-create them as well as you can, the way they did.

#### Red Figure

- Carefully paint the interior lines with the finest brush you have.



**Figure 14:** Painting interior lines in the red-figure silhouette with a brush (#16)

**ONLY on the red-figure side,** now paint the background solid black all around the silhouette, leaving the figures a pale reddish color. Be very careful not to cross into the black-figure side, where the background

should remain the color of the reddish clay. Along the exterior of fine lines, use a fine brush for greater control so that you do not accidentally cross into the interior of the figure. Use a bigger brush for full coverage of the background.

The red-figure side will end up with a reddish figure – the color of the clay –with fine black interior detail lines, and a black background.



**Figure 15:** Paper template and fired tile. The artist switched the black and red-figure sides between coloring the template and completing the tile

**STEP SIX:** *Write up your project.*

Follow the guidelines 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.

## GRADING RUBRIC

### The TILE

Care and attention to detail	10 points	_____
Black Figure correctly executed	10 points	_____
Red Figure correctly executed	10 points	_____
Just for trying!	10 points	_____

### The WRITE-UP

Introduction	10 points	_____
1. Burnishing	10 points	_____
2. Putting the image on the clay	10 points	_____
3. Black-figure image	10 points	_____
4. Red-figure image	10 points	_____
5. Comparing black and red figure	10 points	_____

**Total** points out of 100 \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

### Explanation of write-up point system:

Points	Explanation
10	Your description of the goals and steps you took is clear. Results are fully described.
9	Your description of the goals and steps you took is usually clear. Results are well described.
8	Some areas of your descriptions and conclusions still need support.
7	Sections are unclear because of missing information.
6	Insufficient information is provided in many places.
5 (or lower)	Unfinished to varying degrees.



## STUDENTS: SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

### PLEASE READ OR LISTEN TO ALL INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN!

You will be working with square, leather-hard or bone-dry tiles of reddish clay to recreate the process of making a black-figure and a red-figure Greek vase painting. Your teacher will give you background information about Greek vases and their decoration.

In black-figure painting, the artist paints a black silhouette of the desired image against a pale red background. All details are incised into the black with a needle tool. The final painting looks “black on red.” In red-figure, the painter uses a brush to paint an image on the pale red background, and then paints the background entirely black. The final image looks “red on black.”

#### Your tools include:

**Newspaper** to protect the table; **water** for cleaning; **spoons, stones, chamois**, for smoothing and burnishing your tile surface; **pencils, graphite, or charcoal** for transferring an image onto the clay, pencils or pointed **wooden tools** for pressing an image gently onto the clay; **needles or incising tools** for incising the Black Figure image; **brushes** for painting; and **black glaze** (or underglaze) or acrylic paint somewhat similar to the black slip on Greek pots.

The clay will generally wash out of clothing, but it may stain if you really rub it on your clothes, so be careful. The glaze will stain.

You need to keep your tools clean and to dip the brushes in water when you are not using them. When you are painting, stir your glaze sometimes.

#### STEP ONE:

Lay out newspaper to protect the table. Take a tile, turn it over, and incise your name gently on the back with a needle or metal incising tool.

#### STEP TWO:

Smooth (burnish) your tile, on one side only, by rubbing with a spoon or other polishing implement. Experiment with various tools. Repeated rubbing in one spot may cause indentations, so move across the surface and try to apply consistent pressure. Experiment with circular, vertical, horizontal, and cross-hatched motions.

The Greeks burnished clay to harden and compact it to create a smooth, shiny surface. Platelets of clay align themselves as you burnish, and you can usually see the surface become shinier and feel difference between the front and back of the tile. At the very end of the smoothing process, you may need to use your fingers to rub tiny ridges away. You will often be able to see more clearly that the tile of someone sitting opposite you looks shiny, since you are looking straight down at your own tile and do not easily see the reflection of light.

**STEP THREE:**

You will pick an image from a selection of Archaic Greek scenes on Greek vases and impress it onto the tile. There are examples or pictures available of in-process and completed black and red-figure tiles.

While Greek artists made advance sketches, they did not impress an image from a template onto the clay the way you are doing. But since working freehand is very 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. Rub the BACK of the image with pencil, graphite, or hard charcoal. You are making the equivalent of carbon paper.
3. Lay the paper template graphite-side-down onto the tile and fix it in place by taping it down at the top (so that you can lift up the template again easily). Establish one mark or spot on the tile and the paper so you can easily re-align them if the paper moves. (You might also push a needle through both to make a small but visible hole.) 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 the tile as you work.
4. Using a pencil or the pointed end of one of the wooden tools, GENTLY press down on the lines of the image to transfer the image in graphite or charcoal lightly onto the tile surface. Lift up the template to check that the lines are transferring. In the end, you should have a faint outline of your image on the tile, very slightly pressed into the clay. 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, and to tilt the tile.
5. Next, split the image in half with a ruler: one side will be black-figure and one red. Think about which process (BF or RF) may be more difficult for you and which half of the picture may be more appropriate for one technique.

**STEP FOUR:**

Pour black glaze, underglaze, or acrylic paint into little bowls, and take a brush. For filling in large areas, use a bigger brush; for fine work near design edges, use a finer brush.

Where possible, USE THREE COATS and let them dry. Don't start incising or painting details yet!

1. Completely outline the image carefully with a fine brush. Then paint over the figure(s) on your black-figure side. Cover the entire image, even if that is painful for you to do! Work across the whole area and do not focus on one spot for too long. The image you just incised into the clay should show through the black just a bit, at least in places. Remember, the black-figure side will have an all-black silhouette of the image on a pale reddish background.
2. Next, carefully paint the outline of the figures of the red-figure side: it needs to have a black line painted solidly all around the silhouette, with the figure left a pale red.



**STEP FIVE:**

You will complete your image now. Start with the implement with which you feel more comfortable: brush or incising needle. Work in the order you choose:

1. Incise details carefully with a needle tool through the black coat of the black-figure silhouette (just until you reach the reddish clay below; don't gouge), so that the black silhouette now has pale reddish lines showing the pattern you chose. Do not paint the background, which should stay red.
2. Paint the details inside the red-figure image using a very fine brush. Then start to fill the background in with black. Start with the small brush near the outline or contour of the figures, and then transition to a bigger brush to fill in the background.

**STEP SIX:**

Think about the process you have gone through and write an assessment of your project. Use the Guiding Questions (separate handout) as prompts. Write specifically about the process *you* carried out and the results *you* achieved.

## STUDENTS: GUIDING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PAINTING PROCESS

Please answer these questions on a separately typed page or pages, either in numbered paragraphs, or in one uninterrupted essay. Two full, double-pages is the minimum acceptable length. The questions are a starting point, not intended to limit you to yes and no answers. **Your individual experiences should govern how you answer these questions.**

### Introduction

First, introduce the project, your goals, and your procedures. Set the stage for your answers to the questions below. Make sure that a stranger could understand what you were assigned to do.

### Guiding Questions

1. Burnishing: How well did it work on your tile?

For example: Which tools did you use? How did the different tools work? Did the tile seem to become harder and smoother? Was the burnished surface smooth? Useful? Was the burnished tile easy to paint on? Suggestions?

2. Putting the image on the clay: How successful were you?

Did you incise or draw well enough to see the image clearly, or did you press too deeply or too shallowly? Was it difficult later in the process to paint on top of drawn or incised lines or to see the lines through the black-figure silhouette?

3. Creating Black Figure: How skilled were you?

Could you see the design below the black coat? As you incised into the silhouette, did pieces of clay peel up or clog your line? Could you create fine designs? What worked and what did not?

4. Creating Red Figure: How skilled were you?

Could you paint as cleanly as you wanted to? Did you come up with strategies to make fine lines? Did you have difficulty when the black background met a black line or shape?

5. Comparing Black and Red Figure: Which do you prefer?

From the perspective of FIRST a VIEWER and SECONDLY an ARTIST (from “just looking” at each style and also from having carried out the process yourself), which style do you prefer? If you were an ancient Athenian, would you have chosen to switch from black-figure to the red-figure style in the early fifth century B.C.E.?

## STUDENTS: GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ABOUT THE PAINTING PROCESS

This is a project focused on process, The write-up is a description of your process and an evaluation of what worked and what did not.

1. Put your name and the subject of your tile image at the top of the page.
2. Attach early drafts to your finished write up, especially drafts with teacher comments!
3. A stranger should be able to read your descriptions and understand what you are talking about. If the write-up flew into someone's lap, would that person be able to follow along easily and enjoy reading about your project?
  - Do not discuss a conclusion or result before you have described a process.
  - Do not refer to "the" tile or needle -- or other tool or procedure --unless you have first introduced that tool or procedure.In other words – don't jump into the middle! Start at the beginning.
4. Introduce the overall assignment in a brief introduction about your goals, BF and RF, the tile, the tools, and the process. Then as you discuss the 5 steps, make sure to:
  - explain what you were supposed to do/achieve.
  - describe what specific actions you took, using which tools or procedures/techniques (for example, how you rubbed a rock in small circles moving from left to right across the tile surface).
  - note the results of your actions (for example, how the rock made the surface smoother to the touch but it also left marks on the tile).
  - compare the effects of different tools and techniques.
  - say how you felt about different activities and results. (You do not have to like the project.)
5. Remember to provide support for your statements (about what was easy/difficult, pretty/not, etc.) and give details when you describe processes and results.

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