

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 8: Art & Architecture

ART:

General Introduction:

The impact of the Greeks on the Western world has been phenomenal. However, unlike other ancient worlds, we do not have to painstakingly reassemble their society from scraps – rather, the Greeks speak to us directly and comprehensively through their poetry, prose and drama – but also through their art and architecture.

General trends:

- For generations down to about 700 BC, human forms and animals made only very rare appearances in decoration etc. Instead the inorganic and geometric were used to decorate vases etc.
- Near Eastern influence can be seen entering Greek vase decoration etc (around 700 BC) in the form of sphinxes and lions.
- Early figures were painted with broad shoulders, slender waists and frail necks, with head and legs in profile.
- Later developments showed more fluid shapes, verging on 'freehand' and more naturalistic renderings.

Vases and vase painting:

- Vase paintings of the classical era are representational, and often involve storytelling. They often show us incidents of daily life (and death), pastimes, hobbies, legends, warfare, costume, theatre, sport and banquets etc.

Sculpture:

- Greek sculpture took its initial inspiration from Egypt
- The Greeks developed an increasingly naturalistic style, paying attention to expression and subtleties of stance and modelled clothing.
- The nude *kouros* (male youths) and female versions, *kore*, hover between two worlds – the real and the ideal.
- As well as free-standing statues and busts etc, finely carved wall reliefs were common practice.
- Portraiture as we would understand it today did not really exist in archaic art. Portrait statues were generalized or idealised.

Painting:

- Other than those on vases, very little Greek painting survives. What we do have are (very few) Roman copies of those done in the Hellenistic period.

ARCHITECTURE:

General introduction:

- Greek architecture actually feels very familiar to us because it has so often been replicated in the modern world.
- Greek life was dominated by religion, a fact which is reflected in their architecture. Temples dominate the Greek architectural heritage, and were made of marble or limestone with ceilings of wood. The Parthenon (designed by **Ictinus**) is perhaps the finest example.
- The High Classical period (c. 450 – 400 BC) hosts the height of Greek architecture, including the Athenian Acropolis, designed by **Pericles**.

Building design:

- The basic temple building design remained the same although three different styles of columns developed in different parts of the Greek world; the **Doric**, the **Ionic** and the **Corinthian**.