

Vase Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The ancient Greeks used vases extensively for multiple purposes, including the storage of dried goods and liquids, such as water or wine, and as markers for grave sites. In this lesson, you will learn to identify types of Greek vase painting based on stylistic elements and compare and contrast these styles. This lesson covers:

1. [Time Period and Location: Vase Painting](#)
2. [Styles of Vase Painting](#)
3. [Examples of Vase Painting](#)

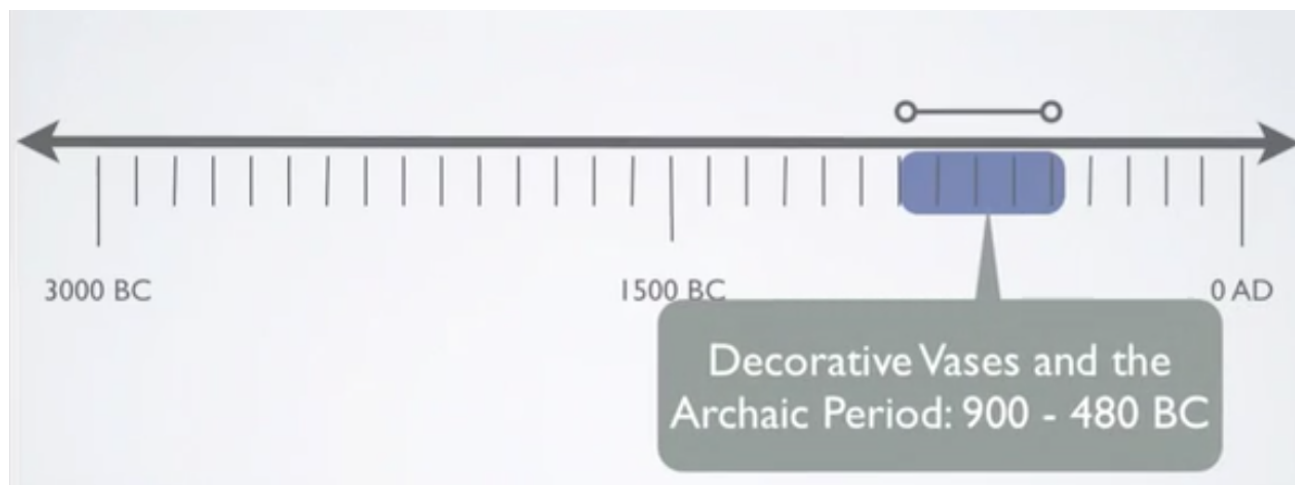


BIG IDEA

Decorative vases from ancient Greece are important examples of the blending of artistic form with function.

1. Time Period and Location: Vase Painting

This lesson covers the period that begins around 900 BCE and ends around 480 BCE. The timeline below highlights this. It includes decorative vases and the **Archaic** period. The geographical area covered today will be the lands of ancient Greece and the city-state of Corinth, which is just a bit southwest of Athens and very close to Mycenae.



Below is a map of the region of Greece covered in this lesson. The city of Athens and the city-state of Corinth are noted.



TERM TO KNOW

Archaic

Period of Greek art that literally means “old-fashioned” and refers to depictions of the human figure from this period that are stiff and unnatural in appearance.

2. Styles of Vase Painting

Let's start with the geometric style of vase painting, which lasted from about 900 to 700 BCE. The **geometric** style, as its name implies, incorporates geometric patterns and shapes, including:

- Lines
- Diamonds
- Zigzags
- Cross-hatching

As the geometric style began to lose popularity around 700 BCE, a new style called **orientalizing** began to gain ground. This new style began in Corinth, a city in Greece. Exposure to foreign travelers to the area influenced the designs of these vases, which were characteristic of more open compositions as opposed to the limited open space in geometric designs. Animal, human, and floral motifs were the most common design elements. The orientalizing period lasted for about 100 years and ended around 600 BCE.



TERMS TO KNOW

Geometric

A style of Greek vase painting, characterized by an emphasis on geometric shapes.

Orientalizing

A style of Greek ceramic painting influenced by the ancient Near East and characterized by floral and animal motifs.

3. Examples of Vase Painting

Below is an example of a funerary vase from Dipylon Cemetery:



Funerary vase from Dipylon Cemetery (showing the cremation of someone important)

740 BCE

Ceramic

Notice that this ceramic vase uses geometric shapes for decoration. It is very large—about 3' 4" tall. This is much too large to use as a drinking vessel or liquid storage vessel. It was meant as a decorative piece to adorn the gravesite of someone interred at the Dipylon Cemetery in Athens. It was created around 740 BCE and depicts the cremation of someone important, the person for whom the vase was made. The artist is a master from the Dipylon workshop in Athens who made vases for those people residing in the Dipylon Cemetery.

These vases had holes drilled in the bottom to allow for drainage. Loved ones would pour libations of wine into the vase so that the liquid would drain into the ground where the person was buried.

You can tell that this is a geometric phase vase because the shapes of people and horses are silhouettes that have been greatly simplified into geometric shapes. The scenes have also been divided into registers, or rows of imagery.

Next is an example of an Olpe from Corinth, created around 600 BCE:



Olpe from Corinth

600 BCE

Ceramic

The ceramic vase above is an example of a container for holding liquids—most likely wine, possibly water. It is analogous to a pitcher. Some of the functional elements include the attachment of a handle, as well as the wide-mouth rim to help with pouring.

This is an example of the Orientalizing phase because it is covered in images of lions and other animals, thought to have been a stylistic influence from the Middle East, maybe Assyria.

Now let's look at an example of a **black-figure** amphora, which is a vessel used for holding liquids or dry goods—but usually wine.



Black-figure amphora (depicting Ajax and Achilles playing a dice game) by Exekias
540–530 BCE
Black painting on ceramic

This vessel depicts the mythical figures of Ajax and Achilles playing a game of dice, likely during the Trojan War—hopefully not during the particular battle. It was created by the artist Exekias between 540 and 530 BCE.

Finally, here is an example of a kylix, or drinking cup. We know that it was used for this purpose because it is shallow and has two handles so that one can easily grasp it. The subjects frequently depicted on these cups involved scenes of drinking and debauchery that often occurred at drinking parties, or symposia.



Red-figure kylix (procession of wine-drinking men)

480 BCE

Red figure on black

This is a view from the top down so we can see the bottom inside of the cup. It is an example of **red figures** on black. It depicts a procession of wine-drinking men and was created around 480 BCE. It is attributed to the artist known as the Triptolemus Painter.



DID YOU KNOW

Decorative vases are some of the first examples of artwork where the artist has been indicated by name, which suggests that the Greeks viewed these as true pieces of art.



TERMS TO KNOW

Black-Figure

A type of ancient Greek ceramic painting involving painting black figures on a red background.

Red-Figure

A type of ancient Greek ceramic painting involving painting red figures on a black background.



SUMMARY

From decoration to storage of dry and liquid goods, vases have been used throughout time. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of vase painting** in ancient Greece.

Styles of vase painting were also explored in this lesson. The geometric style was rendered using geometric patterns and shapes. Vases painted with orientalizing were characteristic of more open compositions, and animal, human, and floral motifs were the most common design elements.

Finally, you looked at some **examples of vase painting**. Remember, vases were used for many things throughout history, including storage of dried goods, liquids such as water or wine, and as decorative pieces to adorn gravesites. You viewed examples from each of these categories.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Archaic

Period of Greek art that literally means “old-fashioned” and refers to depictions of the human figure from this period that are stiff and unnatural in appearance.

Black-Figure

A type of ancient Greek ceramic painting involving painting black figures on a red background.

Geometric

A style of Greek vase painting, characterized by an emphasis on geometric shapes.

Orientalizing

A style of Greek ceramic painting influenced by the ancient Near East and characterized by floral and animal motifs.

Red-Figure

A type of ancient Greek ceramic painting involving painting red figures on a black background.