

## INTRODUCTION

Today we're going to talk about ancient Greek culture from 2,000 to 3,000 years ago and how it is so important to us today because it provided much of the basis for our daily lives - how we learn, how we think and communicate through books, art and theater and even how our government works. Many of the things we take for granted originated in ancient Greece; some of these are in fact described by Greek words:

## POSTER 1A – LOOK FOR INFLUENCES OF ANCIENT GREEK CIVILIZATION TODAY!



- **Alphabet:** is the set of letters we use to form all our words. The alphabet we use is based in a large part on the alphabet the ancient Greeks invented approx. 2800 years ago. *Alpha* is the first vowel and *Beta* is the first consonant in the Greek alphabet. (See #5A)
- **Democracy:** The practice of citizens voting and having a say in important decisions originated formally in Greece 2500 years ago. The kind of government we have today is based on this system. *Demos*: Greek for “people; *kratos*: Greek for “power, rule”.
- **Heroes:** Greek poetry and drama introduced the hero into our artistic and storytelling heritage especially through the Homeric Epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey. *Hero* is a Greek word. (See #7)
- **Science or Natural Philosophy:** Ancient Greeks asked important questions in a systematic way about how the world, nature and the universe actually worked and sought logical answers that did not rely upon superstitions or the influence of the “Gods”. Philosophy is from the Greek words *philo* (loving) + *sophia* (skill, wisdom).
- **Athletics:** Organized games that brought athletes together from many different places in order to compete were important to the Ancient Greeks who started the Olympic Games nearly 2800 years ago (776 BC). The modern Olympic Games will be held this

summer in London, England. The English word athlete is based on a Greek word. (See #6)

- **Music:** The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras who lived approx. 2500 years ago helped set the musical scale we use today. He established basic principles of music theory used now by musicians such as Adele and Bruno Mars. Music is from the Greek word *mousike*- “the art of the muse” ; goddesses who inspired the creation of literature, science and the arts. (See #9)
- **Architecture:** The methods, materials and styles of building developed in ancient Greece inspired many of our important buildings. The word is from *arkhi* (first/principal) + *tektōn* (build). Features of this type of architecture include columns with decorated tops (capitals), decorated lintels, pedimented (triangular) roofs, elegant balance, symmetry and proportion. These elements can be seen: (See #5B)
  - In Larchmont:  
Public Library, Larchmont Temple Entrance
  - In NYC:  
Federal Hall, Grant’s Tomb, Metropolitan Museum of Art
  - In Washington DC:  
The White House, the US Capitol Building, the Supreme Court Building, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials

Before we begin our discussion, let’s think about the different containers we all have in our kitchens. **What kinds of materials are they made of?** (glass, plastic, metal/stainless steel). While many plates, cups and pitchers that you have may not look like ancient Greek pots, they’re actually made from the same material – **CLAY!**

**The way that we’re going to learn about ancient Greek culture is through looking at one art form – clay pottery:**

- We’re going to look at different types of ancient Greek pots – how they look and how they were made; then you can take your families to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC to see everything that we show you today!
- We’re going to think about why many pots from ancient Greece survived for thousands of years and are in museum collections today (clay is strong, durable and was used to make all sorts of vessels - cups, jars, wine bottles, buckets and vases); and
- We’re going to recognize that much of the information we know about ancient Greeks comes from pottery, and in particular from the scenes painted on pots to decorate them (daily life, religion, rituals/beliefs, etc.).

## POSTER 1B – MAP OF ANCIENT GREECE



*Map of “The Classical World”/Greece*

### Let’s begin by looking at a map of ancient Greece:

- Mainland Greece is almost completely **surrounded by water - the Mediterranean Sea**. Greece has more than 1400 islands where Greeks settled.
- Because they were surrounded by water, the ancient **Greeks were a seafaring people**, and they traded with other countries around the Mediterranean.
- One of the most important and powerful cities in ancient Greece was called **Athens, which was a great center for art and literature**. Writers, artists and philosophers flocked to Athens, where they could work and think in freedom. The ideas and achievements they had regarding democracy, arts, architecture, science and literature still affect us today.

## POSTER 2A – ANCIENT GREEK POTTER



*Ancient Greek potter*

### What do you think this person's job was in ancient Greece?

#### **Let's quickly discuss how the potter worked:**

The master potter would have worked with several assistants who helped him in all the stages of transforming a lump of clay into a beautiful pot. It's very important to remember that all of these pots were made by hand – without any electricity!

- **Preparing the clay** - First the clay was dug out of the ground, then back at the workshop it was mixed with water and left to settle. Lumps of rock and shells sank to the bottom of the mixture and the finest particles of clay rose to the top. All the excess water was removed from the clay, and it was stored in a dark room until it reached the right consistency for the potter to work with it.
- **Shaping the pot** - The potter would then take a chunk of clay and center it on a wheel. As the assistant steadily turned the wheel, the potter worked the clay with his hands gradually pulling it into shape. He would make the foot and handle for the pot separately. Part of the skill was to attach these in such a way that no one could see them join. The pot would be left in the sun to dry until it was hard.
- **Decorating** - The painter would be called in to decorate the pots with a favorite story – it could be a scene from a famous Greek book (*The Odyssey*), or feature one of the gods (such as Apollo), or a hero (like Achilles or Heracles). He first drew the outline in charcoal, then used a clay mixture to paint and tools to add details.
- **Firing the pot** - The pots were carefully stacked inside the kiln, and the deep colors would show as the pots hardened in the almost 2,000 degree fire. The potter placed a piece of silver next to the pots and this melted when the kiln reached the right temperature.



## **POSTER 3A – GEOMETRIC POTTERY - *Jar with 3 Verical Handles***



*Jar with 3 Verical Handles*, Minoan, 1600-1450 B.C.

**How would you describe the design on this jar?** (wavy, curly, abstract)

**What does the design remind you of?** (ocean waves, water)

- As you saw on the map, ancient Greek civilization originated on islands. You can sense the seafaring nature of the culture represented here.

**How do you think living on the sea helped Greek culture spread?** A number of independent city states developed on the mainland and islands of ancient Greece. They traded goods, including their pottery, with each other and ancient Greek culture then spread throughout the entire Mediterranean area.

**POSTER 3B – GEOMETRIC POTTERY - *Terracotta Stirrup Jar with Octopus***

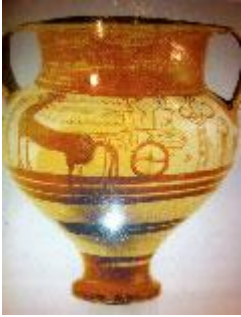


*Terracotta Stirrup Jar with Octopus*, Mycenaean, 1200-1100 B.C.

**What's similar about the design on these two pots?**

- There were many tales and legends about the strange lands and creatures that could be found across the sea.
- These two pots are among the oldest ones we're viewing (from the Geometric period) where designs are big and bold and include geometric shapes, both rectangular and curvy.

## **POSTER 4A – GEOMETRIC POTTERY - Chariot Krater**



*Chariot Krater*, Mycenaean, 1300-1230 B.C.

**What kinds of designs do you see on this jar?** You can see a mix of geometric shapes, but also the beginnings of more realistic designs (figure on horse, chariot).

- Chariot races and processions were an important part of ancient Greek culture. Crowds would cheer for their favorite competitor from a large arena.
- Scenes of mythology and warriors

## POSTER 4B - Monumental Funerary Krater



(note the jar size!)

Monumental Funerary, Attic (Attica – the region around Athens), 750-735 B.C.  
Shape of a mixing bowl for wine and water

### What do you think is going on in these scenes?

- It's actually a very elaborate story about a funeral. **Notice how the main story is on the widest part of the vase.**
- Here you can see the person laid out on what's called a **bier**, surrounded by mourners. Below there is a procession of chariots and soldiers

This piece is from 700 years later. How would you compare the representations – what do you notice that's different? How has the art changed?

- At the beginning of the Archaic period, the geometric designs begin to mix with figures and narrative stories
- The Chariot Krater art is more primitive

Notice all of the cracks on the pot. When you go to the Met to see this piece in person, you'll really be able to see how archaeologists were able to find all of these small pieces and put it back together for people like us to see and learn from today!

## **POSTER 5A – BLACK FIGURE POTTERY – Amphora – Scale**



*Amphora – Scale*, Attic, 540 B.C.

Amphora means “to carry on both sides” and was used for carrying and storing solids and liquids.

### **Why do you think this type of pottery is called “Black Figure” pottery?**

- This type of pottery is achieved by painting on a thin layer of liquid clay onto the unfired pot. Details on the figures were achieved by scraping away this wash. Due to the high iron content in the clay, the color turned black when it was fired.

### **Describe what is happening in this scene:**

- Until this time, art works primarily depicted religious or mythological subjects, but here we begin to see representations of daily life becoming just as important.
- Three men are using a large scale or balance. This activity gives us clues about the beginnings of business and makes us think about the manufacturing and trade that took place.
- We also begin to see the first signatures of the potter and the painter. This shows the importance of individuality and the self-confidence of the artist.

**Can anyone find evidence of the alphabet on the pot?** The signature translates as, “So and so... made me!”

## **POSTER 5B - BLACK FIGURE POTTERY – *Hydria with Fountain Scene***



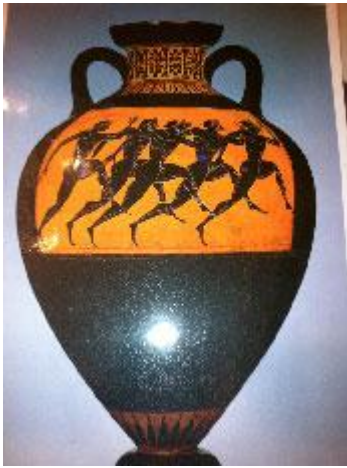
*Hydria with Fountain Scene*, 510 B.C.

### **What do you see pictured on this “hydria” or jar?**

- In ancient Greece, water was difficult to come by. Water had to be channelled into the cities where it could be collected at public fountains. **Note the architecture. Does anything look familiar to you?**
- Hydria were used to carry water. One of the daily duties for women was to collect water from the communal fountain. The women fetching water shows us how this “hydria” was actually used!

### **What do you think is more important – the shape of the vase or what’s represented on it? Why?**

**POSTER 6 – BLACK FIGURE POTTERY - *Terracotta Panathenaic Prize Amphora Runners***



*Terracotta Panathenaic Prize Amphora Runners*, Attic, 530 B.C.

**Tell us what's happening in this image:**

- Five male athletes sprinting, and yes, it was Greek custom to compete nude! 😊

**What does this tell us about the ancient Greeks?**

- Health and physical fitness were very important to the ancient Greeks.
- The painting is actually a picture of a sporting event – a 200 hundred yard race - held at an event called the Panathenaic (means all territories connected to Athens) Festival, which was held every four years in Athens.

**As you look at the image and think about this type of event, what does it remind you of?**

- The Olympics (started in 776 B.C.)! Athens established the Panathenaic games (began in 566 B.C.), which included competitions in music and poetry, as well as the sporting events. The games fostered cooperation among Greek city states and elevated the arts and athletes to heroic status. The games were hosted in the Panathenaic Stadium that's still used and was the site of the Olympics in 2004!

**Does anyone know what Olympic winners today receive as a prize?**

- You'll be shocked to learn that this jar was actually used to hold 42 quarts of special Athenian olive oil and given as a prize to the winner in the Panathenaic games! Don't forget you can go see this in person at the Metropolitan Museum of Art!

## **POSTER 7 – BLACK FIGURE POTTERY - *Kylix with Scenes of the Trojan War***



***Kylix with Scenes of the Trojan War***, Attic, 540 B.C.

**What's different about the shape of this vessel from the ones we've already seen?**

**Can you guess how this may have been used?**

The fact that it's more shallow than the other storage and mixing vessels suggests that it was used as a drinking cup. This special kind of drinking cup is called a **kylix**.

**Describe the scene here:**

- This is a scene depicting the Trojan War (men are harnessing the sea god, Poseidon's, horses to transport to the war). The Trojan War is among the most important events in Greek mythology and was narrated in many works of ancient Greek literature, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer.
- Illustrations often covered the inside and outside of kylix cups, as well as the bottom of the interior.

Special cups with decorations were created for ancient Greek banquets. Wealthy men discussed politics and philosophy, and citizens were trained to participate in Athenian government.

**POSTER 8A and 8B – RED FIGURE POTTERY – *Volute Krater Amazon Women***  
**(front/back)**



*Volute Krater Amazon Women*, Attic, 450 B.C.  
Container for mixing wine and water

**We see a big change here. What do you notice that looks different?**

- Now the figures are red against a black background! This is achieved by reversing the process detailed for black figure pottery.
- Red figure pottery allowed artists to include much greater detail and more realistic representations, which became a hallmark of Greek art and all art subsequently based on it.
- There are signatures indicating the name of the person who actually invented the red figure technique. It's interesting to note that although all of the other ancient Greek artists were making pottery one way, this one person decided to try something new and it became the new fad for hundreds of years following!

**What are the people doing?**

- Amazons-warrior women from (perhaps) what is now the Ukraine appeared in Greek mythology.

**How would you describe the mood represented here?**

## **POSTER 9 – RED FIGURE POTTERY - *Terracotta Amphora***



*Terracotta Amphora*, 490 B.C.

### **Can anyone recognize what this person is doing?**

- Playing an instrument called a wooden instrument called a **lyre** (pronounced “liar”) - a seven-stringed instrument that was associated with the god Apollo
- The ancient Greeks were music lovers, and music was an important part of their daily lives. It was performed at public gatherings, ceremonies, festivals, the theatre, sporting events and even on the battlefield.

### **How would you compare the figure’s body and drapery with the shape of the amphora?** It almost seems to echo the shape of the pot.

- As the red figure style progressed, there was a greater emphasis on the private and domestic scenes as opposed to scenes from mythology. This tradition of depicting the details of heroic and common scenes is fundamental to western art.

### **Do you think the musician is at the beginning or the end of his performance? What type of song do you think he is singing – funny, sad, patriotic?**

### **Compare the mood of this pot to the one we just saw. How is it similar or different?**

## **CONCLUSION / INTRODUCTION TO CLAY ART PROJECT**

**Let's remind ourselves of the kinds of things that are often portrayed on ancient Greek pottery...** geometric designs, waves, myths/stories, sports, banquets, animals, everyday life, etc.

It's now your turn to design your own Greek vase. Think about how you're going to shape your pot and the kinds of motifs you may want to include. Don't forget that all of the ancient Greek pots looked different. You'll have to decide as the artist – are you going to include your signature! Most important, have a lot of fun!