

● Art History

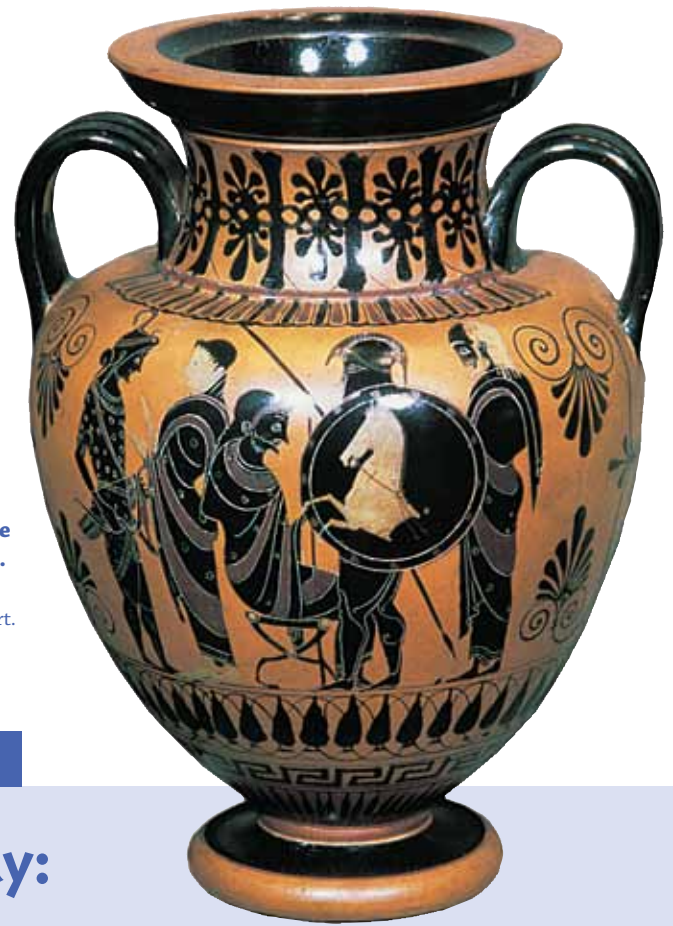
The ancient Greeks created dramatic, detailed images on their ceramics. Ceramic artists first buffed the vase surface, probably with a stone or cloth. This process enhanced the gloss of the surface decoration. They then applied a coat of yellow-ochre, which intensified the clay's natural reddish color. The iron oxide in the ochre was essential in creating the shiny surface of the black glaze.

At first, artists painted figures onto the vases and incised lines to create such details as facial features or clothing. When the pots were fired in an atmosphere with reduced oxygen, the figures turned black, contrasting with the red background. Later Greek ceramic artists developed the “red-figure” technique. They painted the background black and left the figures red. The pots were fired in an atmosphere with greater oxygen.

What are some of these highlights? The narrative pottery of ancient Greece is renowned for its graceful forms and detailed compositional style (see Figs. 1–21 and 1–22). Other cultures focused on sculpting figures in clay. Etruscans crafted full-sized human figures from terracotta in the fifth century BCE. In Africa, Nok full-sized

Fig. 1–21. By reducing the amount of air in the firing chamber, potters in ancient Greece were able to cause their pots to change colors, producing dramatic black-figure ware.

Greek, Archaic Period, *Amphora*, ca. 500 BCE. Black-figure terracotta, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (32 cm) high. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1929.979.



Art History

Narratives on Clay: A Global Interest

Narrative art tells a story, and the Greeks were the first to paint on clay pots as a way of telling stories. They painted action scenes featuring the human figure as early as the Bronze Age (around 2900–2000 BCE).

Art that represents a form or the human figure is called “figurative.” During the Greek classical period, figurative imagery reached a high point. Ceramic artists painted elegant pots with monsters, heroes, and mythological figures. In early classical narratives (seventh century BCE), black figures were crafted on the pot’s natural red background. (See Fig. 1–21.) Lines showing facial features, musculature, or clothing were laboriously incised. Later works (fifth century BCE) featured the red-figure style—the background is painted black and the figure

remains in red. (See Fig. 1–22.) Artists began to paint lines and details freehand with a brush. Until this time, potters had been anonymous. Now potters who shaped the form and painters who added the details typically signed their pieces.

Narrative art also flourished in the ancient Americas. About 500 years after the Greeks first developed black-figure technique, the Moche, a people on Peru’s north coast, were chronicling their beliefs and history on intricately painted pots. The Moche, who flourished from about

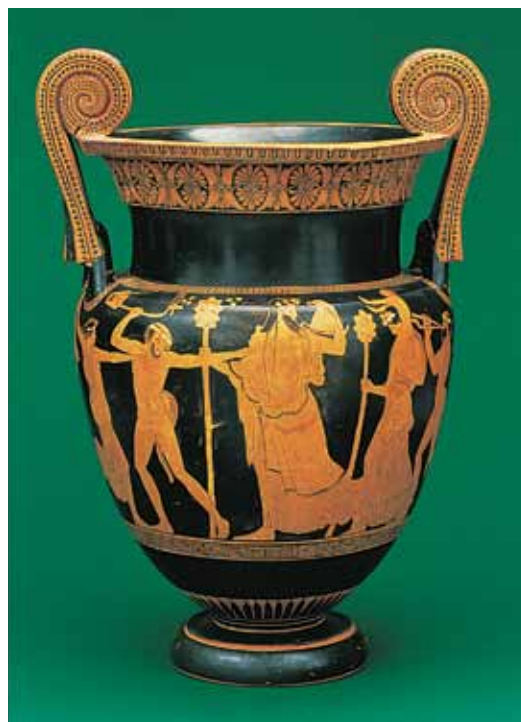


Fig. 1–23. Narrative from a red-figure kylix illustrating the myth of Lapith and the Centaur.

terracotta heads and figures date from fifth century BCE to second century CE. In China around 220 BCE, armies of full-sized terracotta human figures and horses were made to accompany the emperor in his tomb. Consider looking at books, in museums, and on the Internet for examples of these artworks. How were the works fired? Firing techniques and kilns are explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Fig. 1–22. By adding air to the firing chamber, potters were able to create the bright, clear colors we see on red-figure vases.

Greek, Attica. Attributed to the Methyse Painter, *Athenian Red-figure Volute Krater*, 460–450 BCE. Slip-glazed earthenware, 23½" x 13¾" (59.69 x 34.93 cm). The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Centennial Fund: Gift of funds from Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton.



Interdisciplinary Connection

Social Studies

- Have pairs of students research a type of Greek vessel—hydria (water jar with three handles), lekythos (container), volute krater (mixing bowl), amphora (storage vessel), oenochoe (pitcher), or kantharos (drinking vessel). Instruct them to consider whether the vessels were for religious or everyday use. They should also explore the vessel's decoration. Ask them to answer the question, How does the vessel type reflect ancient Greek culture?
- Direct students to study the imagery on Egyptian clay sculptures, Mesopotamian figurines, and Greek vases. Compare and contrast how the objects reflect the priestly centered cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia versus Greek individualism.



Fig. 1–24. Mayan figure in elaborate costume drinking from a bowl. Mayan artists usually painted the face and figure in profile and also used hieroglyphs (picture writing) as a design element.

50 to 800 CE, had no writing system. But scholars compare their ceramics to a library, because the Moche recorded so much on their pots. Moche artists applied fine lines to the pot with a clay slip, a technique known as *slip painting*.

North of the Moche people, the Maya—in the region now occupied by Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico's Yucatan province—created another great civilization. The Mayan classical period (250–850 CE) was marked by multicolor painted ceramics that detailed religious themes, rituals, and history. Mayan artists used basic shapes and relied heavily on lines as

an expressive feature. Like the Moche, the Maya used slip painting to create their designs, which were fired at a low temperature. Artists personalized the pots with their names, the names of patrons, and sometimes the workshop where the vessel was created.

Artists in all three cultures—Greek, Moche, and Mayan—mastered the difficult art of painting a narrative scene on the outside of a round pot. Wrapping a composition around a pot requires careful planning, because artists can see and work on only a small portion of the pot's surface at one time.

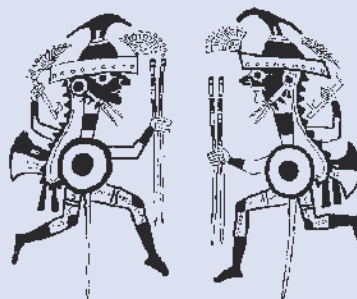


Fig. 1–25. Two Moche warriors in battle gear.