

Greek Art

Modern man often judges his architecture in terms of how functional it is; the ancient Greeks judged a building in terms of its beauty. Today, most paintings and sculpture are inside private homes or museums, where only those willing to make an extra effort can see them (or on the internet today, which makes it easier, but has the disadvantage of being only two-dimensional). The Athenians displayed works of art in public places where people gathered to conduct their business, participate in religious festivals, or discuss public issues. Modern Americans must pay to see a Broadway play; Greek tragedies and comedies were free to all.

Athenian citizens diligently cultivated a sense of beauty. Athens expected every citizen to contribute to the arts by creating an artistic work or by giving money to support an artist, build a temple, or finance a play. The nature of beauty was the subject of serious inquiry. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and mathematicians such as Pythagoras and Euclid, devoted much of their attention to defining the beautiful.

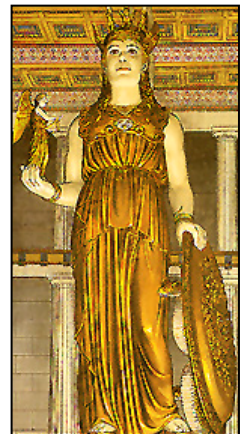


ARCHITECTURE:

The city of Athens was destroyed in 480 BCE by the Persian army of Xerxes. When the Persians were driven off by Themistocles, Athenians began rebuilding their city, completing it during the thirty-five years of Pericles' leadership. They showed their love of Athens, and the pride in it, by erecting many beautiful public places with their finest works of art, especially sculpture. The Athenians made beautiful art a part of their daily life. The Acropolis, the hill where the original polis was located, was the scene of special artistic creations. A magnificent gate stood at the entrance to the path up the hill. Inside the gate, towered a huge bronze statue of the goddess



Athena, seventy feet high. As the special protectress of Athens, she was armed with shield and spear.

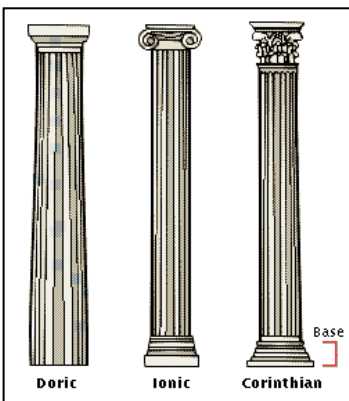


On top of the **Acropolis** stood the **Parthenon**, a temple in honor of

Athena. Begun in 447 BCE, it is considered the finest example of Greek architecture. The beauty of the Parthenon lay not in its great size but in its pleasing proportions--the relation of length to width, and of both to height. A Greek ideal was the

Golden Mean: "Nothing in excess, and everything in proportion." At each end of the Parthenon was a

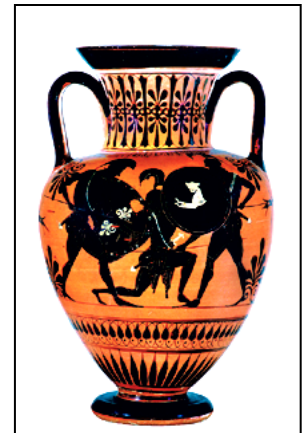
pediment, or gable, adorned in various bright colors. A series of columns, the colonnade, encircled the building. Many works of sculpture stood outside the columns. The temple itself had doors but no windows. Greek temples were shrines rather than meeting places



for worshippers. The inside was seldom decorated as much as the outside. Within the Parthenon, though, stood another large statue of Athena; its surface was of carved ivory, and there were draperies of gold decorated with jewels. Though the Parthenon is almost as large as a football field, its basic qualities are harmony and proportion. The Parthenon stands on the hill that dominates the city of Athens, but it does not reach toward heaven like a medieval cathedral.

PAINTING:

The best-preserved Greek paintings are those used to decorate vases. Vase painters illustrated everyday life as well as myths. They delighted in showing graceful and natural movements. The best of them could depict light and shade on the pottery, and could show contours and depth in figures and draperies. This pottery was characterized by its black vases with red and white figures, or red pottery with black and white figures. Other Greek painters decorated public buildings with murals, or wall paintings, noted for their skillful execution. Few of these have survived. Our knowledge of Greek painting comes mainly from literary descriptions and from Roman copies. The mural painters often chose to illustrate scenes from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. On one of the public buildings, for example, an artist painted "The Sack of Troy." With a true sense of tragedy, he did not depict the massacre at the moment of victory, but the silence of the following day, with the defeated lying in death amid the ruins of the city.



SCULPTURE:

In spite of the tributes to the greatness of Greek painting, it is generally held that the greatest Greek art was sculpture. Many original works of Greek sculpture have also come to us chiefly through copies made during Roman times. Greek sculptures tried to represent the details of the human body with complete accuracy.



Two of the greatest sculptors of all time lived during the Golden Age of Athens. The first was Myron, whose figure of the Discus Thrower is very familiar. The second, **Phidias**, was artistic advisor to Pericles during the rebuilding of Athens. He was the creator of the two wonderful statues of Athena--one at the entrance to the Acropolis and one in the Parthenon. His greatest work was the statue of Zeus at the Temple of Olympia. Greeks who attended the Olympic Games looked at it with awe. A man who had not seen it considered himself unfortunate.

Praxiteles, who lived about a hundred years after Phidias, made quite different sculpture. Phidias' works were large, formal, and dignified, as was fitting for the gods. Praxiteles made his figures more human and life-like. Often they were life-sized. Praxiteles expressed the Greek admiration for the beauty of the human body.

THE NATURE OF GREEK ART:

What were the most important characteristics of ancient Greek art? First and foremost, it glorified man as the most important creature in the universe. It is true that much of the painting and sculpture portrayed gods and goddesses, but you will recall that to the Greeks, the deities {the gods} existed for the benefit of man. When he glorified them he glorified himself. The faces and figures of women represented the Greek ideal of female beauty; images of men suggested ideal traits admired by the Greeks--strength, intelligence, pride, grace, and courage.

Second, Greek art symbolized the pride of the people in their city-states. At the same time, it honored the gods, thanked them for life and fortune, and tried to win their favor. Thus, in giving Athena a beautiful shrine in the Parthenon, the Athenians showed their love for their city and their hope for its continuing good fortune.

Third, Greek art, whether architecture, painting, or sculpture, expressed the Greek ideals of harmony, balance, order, and moderation--the qualities of simplicity and restraint. Pericles was quoted as saying, *We love beauty without extravagance*. Life in this world at its best could be beautiful and satisfying, and this is what the artists sought to represent.

