



Greek Civilization

Art and Architecture



Introduction

Ancient Greek civilization, the period following Mycenaean civilization, which ended about 1200 BCE, to the death of Alexander the Great, in 323 BCE.

It was a period of political, philosophical, artistic, and scientific achievements that formed a legacy with unparalleled influence on Western civilization.

- Ancient Greece wasn't a single country or empire united under a single government, it was made up of a number of city-states.
- The Greek name for a city-state was "polis".
- The two most powerful and famous city-states were Athens and Sparta, but there were other important and influential city-states in the history of Ancient Greece.



Political Factor

The Greek City-State

- Ancient Greece was made up of city-states. A city-state was a major city and the surrounding areas. Each city-state had its own rule and government. Sometimes the city-states fought each other. Athens and Sparta were the two largest city-states and they had many wars and battles.

Types of Government

There were three main types of government:

- **Democracy** - A government ruled by the people, or assembly. Officials and leaders were elected and all citizens had a say.
- **Monarchy** - A single ruler like a king. In Athens this ruler was called a Tyrant.
- **Oligarchy** - When the government is ruled by a small group.

Over time some city-states, like Athens would change governments. Sometimes they were ruled by Tyrants and, at other times, they were a democracy.

Religious Factor

The Greeks had numerous gods and many stories and myths that surrounded them. Greek mythology consists of all the stories and tales about the Greek gods, goddesses, and heroes. It is also the religion of Ancient Greece as the Greeks built temples and offered sacrifices to their major gods.

The Olympians

The twelve Olympian gods were the major gods of the Greeks and lived on Mount Olympus.

[Zeus](#) - Leader of the Olympians and god of the sky and lightning. His symbol is the lightning bolt.



Roman *Seated Zeus*, marble and bronze (restored)

Olympic Games

- The Olympic Games were held in Olympia, hence the name Olympics. They were held there because the gods lived on Mount Olympus and the games were in honor of the king of the gods, Zeus. Athletes would travel to Olympia from many different Greek city-states and sometimes from far away Greek colonies to compete.



Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora
Attributed to the Euphiletos Painter



Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora
Attributed to the Kleophrades Painter



Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora
Attributed to the Kleophrades Painter



Terracotta psykter (vase for cooling wine)
Attributed to Oltos

Four Periods of Greek style of Art

The art of Ancient Greece is usually divided stylistically into four periods:

- Geometric (8th -5th BCE)
- Archaic (5th- 6th BCE)
- Classical (5th- 4th BCE)
- Hellenistic (3rd BCE)

- The **Geometric age** is usually dated from about 1000 BC, although in reality little is known about art in Greece during the preceding 200 years (traditionally known as the Greek Dark Ages)
- The period of the 7th century BC witnessed the slow development of the **Archaic style** as exemplified by the black-figure style of vase painting.
- The onset of the Persian Wars (480 BC to 448 BC) is usually taken as the dividing line between the Archaic and the **Classical periods**.
- And the reign of Alexander the Great (336 BC to 323 BC) is taken as separating the Classical from the **Hellenistic periods**.

Characteristics of Greek Art

- During ancient times, the Greeks established artistic standards that strongly influenced the later art of the Western world.
- The aim of Greek art was to express true ideals. To do this, the Greeks **used balance, harmony, and symmetry in their art.**
- Ancient Greek art has survived most successfully in the forms of sculpture and architecture, as well as in such minor arts as coin design, pottery and gem engraving.

Greek Pottery

The history of Ancient Greek pottery is divided stylistically into periods:

- Protogeometric from about 1050 BC;
- Geometric from about 900 BC
- Late Geometric or Archaic from about 750 BC;
- Black Figure from the early 7th century BC
- Red Figure from about 530 BC.



Proto-geometric Amphora

by Trustees of the British Museum (Copyright)



Geometric Pottery Designs
by Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)



Theseus & the Minotaur
by Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)



Attic Red-Figure Dinos
by Trustees of the British Museum (Copyright)

Greek Sculpture

A major branch of Greek art was sculpture. Greek sculptors did not create realistic works, but instead made statues that reflected what they considered ideal beauty.

Archaic Period Sculpture

- The Greeks from the Archaic Period made sculptures of men called **Kouros (Koroi)** and
- women called **Kore (Korai)**. These statues had similar features and stood stiffly with their arms at their sides.



Kore statue
Marble, c. 520 BCE (Acropolis Museum)

Kore

© Ancient-Greece.org



Korouos (Koroi) are known as Kleovis and Biton

Classical Period Sculpture

- During the Classical Period, Greek artists began to sculpt people in more relaxed postures and even in action scenes. The most famous works from this era include the statue of Zeus at Olympia and the statue of Athena at Parthenos.



The statue of Athena at Parthenos
Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen

Hellenistic Period Sculpture

After [Alexander the Great](#) conquered much of Asia, the sculpture and artwork of the Greeks became influenced by the cultures and people they had conquered. This period is called the Hellenistic Period. This period saw new subjects including women, children, and common people appear in Greek art. Famous works from this era include the Venus de Milo, the Dying Gaul, and the Winged Victory of Samothrace.



Winged Victory of Samothrace
Photo by Adrian Pingstone

Nike of Samothrace

Greek Architecture

In Greek architecture, the most important type of building was the temple. The walled rooms in the center of the temple held sculptures of gods and goddesses and lavish gifts to these deities.

Greek architecture is known for **tall columns, intricate detail, symmetry, harmony, and balance.**

The Greeks built all sorts of buildings. The main examples of Greek architecture that survive today are the large temples that they built to their gods.

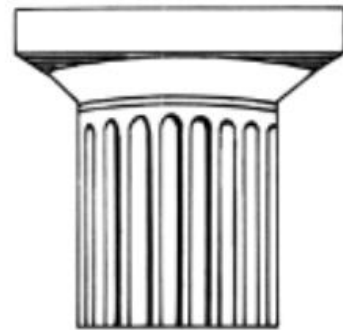
- The most famous temple of Ancient Greece is the Parthenon located on the Acropolis in the city of Athens. It was built for the goddess [Athena](#).



The Parthenon

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Greeks built most of their temples and government buildings in three types of styles :Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. These styles (also called "orders") were reflected in the type of columns they used.



DORIC



IONIC



CORINTHIAN

Greek Orders by Pearson Scott Foremen

- Doric - Doric columns were the most simple and the thickest of the Greek styles. They had no decoration at the base and a simple capital at the top. Doric columns tapered so they were wider on the bottom than at the top.
- Ionic - Ionic columns were thinner than the Doric and had a base at the bottom. The capital at the top was decorated with scrolls on each side.
- Corinthian - The most decorative of the three orders was the Corinthian. The capital was decorated with scrolls and the leaves of the acanthus plant. The Corinthian order became popular in the later era of Greece and also was heavily copied by the Romans.

Of the four Wonders of the World created by the Greeks – nothing whatever survives.

- Statue of Zeus at Olympia
- Temple of Artemis at Ephesus
- Colossus of Rhodes
- Lighthouse of Alexandria

Decline of Greek Civilization

Ancient **Greece** eventually fell into **decline** and was conquered by the Romans, a new and rising world power. Years of internal wars weakened the once powerful **Greek** city-states of Sparta, Athens, Thebes, and Corinth.

Legacy

Greek art and architecture had a significant influence over western art for thousands of years to come. Much of Roman art and architecture was borrowed from the Greeks. Later, the artists of the [Renaissance](#) were inspired by the work of Greek artists.