*Overview and Vocabulary*

Art of Ancient Greece

650 BCE - 150 BCE

The art of Ancient Greece is the art of a culture unique in its own, or any other, time. The rise to power of Athens in the 5th century BCE brought to full development the belief in the worth of the individual and the right of the individual to shape his own life. The concept of democracy (literally “government by the people”), and the recognition and praise of individual thought brought about new ideas and accomplish-ments in many fields—science, philosophy, warfare, literature, theater, politics, art and architecture—which still have an impact on our lives today.

The artistic developments we associate with Ancient Greece can be loosely divided into three periods:

**The Archaic Period** (c. 650 - 450 BCE) was characterized by the STYLIZED treatment of human and animal forms, and the use of repeating geometric patterns. Emphasis was on HORIZONTAL and VERTICAL lines, with forms appearing static and symmetrically balanced.

**The Classical Period** (c. 480 - 323 BCE) was considered the “Golden Age” of Greek culture, and its art became realistic but IDEALIZED. Human and animal forms showed anatomical perfection, displayed in asymmetrically balanced com-positions with emphasis on the S-CURVE.

**The Hellenistic Period** (c. 323 - 146 BCE) saw the invasion of Macedonia and a change in the outlook of the art world. To strive for idealized perfection seemed misplaced in a political climate of occupation, and depiction of human and animal forms turned toward the DRAMATIC instead. The DIAGONAL became the dominant line, showing action and emotion in asymmetrical compositions, and non-flattering realism gained popularity.

During all three periods, the Greeks were perfecting their architectural style, based on the use of columns and beams, in symmetrical, mathematically based designs. The styles of columns they developed—the DORIC, IONIC and CORINTHIAN—are still in use extensively today, nearly 2,500 years later.

The Greeks were skilled painters. Unfortunately, none of these works survive, but we can judge the realistic detail of Greek painting by the figures that adorn their everyday pottery. Many styles of vessels were designed for specific functions, such as drinking vessels, pots for storing wine, oil, perfume, etc. Their decorations reflected their use. There are two main types of Greek pottery: black-figure style, with black figures on red material and red-figure style, the reverse, which became popular after 500 BCE.

Vocabulary

Balance—Balance refers to the distribution of visual weight in a work of art. It can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. When elements on both sides of a central vertical line appear to be about equal in shape, weight, value, and color, the design is in symmetrical balance.

Capital—The carved top of a stone column.

Classical—Pertaining to the art or literature of

Ancient Greece or Rome. In the more general sense, the accepted ideal, in the arts especially, against which other styles are measured.

Frieze—A continuous band of sculpted or painted

decoration.

Idealize—To make or envision with absolute perfection or excellence.

Stylize—To represent a form by using a conventional, previously conceived method, often giving up realism for simplicity.

Symmetrical—The exact, or identical form or configuration on opposite sides of a dividing line or central axis.

Art of Ancient Rome

700 BCE - 476 BCE

Roman art and architecture have had a profound impact throughout the ages by influencing architecture, art and city planning. From our city streets to our football stadiums, and even our tile floors, Roman art and architecture have provided important examples and have been emulated over the centuries. Today’s art students and artists still study the works of this period known as the “classics” for inspiration and knowledge of western art traditions.

Around 700 BCE a Latin tribe built the village that would become Rome. To the north were the Etruscans and to the south were the Greeks, and both these cultures made significant contributions to the art and architecture of the Roman Empire. The Etruscans were great engineers and builders, having developed the arch, used in architecture, and the cuniculus, a trench or tunnel used to transport water. The Greeks had a profound influence on the Romans in the area of artistic beauty, in sculpture and painting as well as architecture. Throughout history, through trade and military encounters, the Romans were exposed to the traditions and customs of many different groups of people. No other cultures, however, influenced them like the Etruscans and especially the Greeks. The Romans were wise to incorporate and build on the accomplishments of cultures they conquered rather than destroying them.

In architecture, the Romans used the knowledge of arches they gained from the Etruscans to develop vaults and domes. These advances allowed Roman buildings to be larger and stronger than their Greek predecessors. They also incorporated Etruscan engineering principles with their own to further develop city planning, irrigation and transportation.

As Roman power grew, the ruling classes gained wealth and used it to facilitate the study and creation of art. The goal of Roman art and architecture was to honor the gods and powerful Roman emperors. Art communicated political ideas and celebrated military successes and individual accomplishments. Romans appreciated the classical beauty and balance of Greek art, and

they used it as a foundation for their own art. By increasing realism in their art, the Romans made their art pieces representative of specific individuals rather than the idealized figures of Greek art. This can easily be seen in Roman portrait sculpture, in which individual facial traits are evident, in contrast to the perfect beauty of Greek sculptures.

Relief sculpture, wall paintings and mosaics were other popular forms of Roman art. Reliefs were used to decorate arches and columns to show historical events. Wall paintings and mosaics were used primarily in homes and some public places. Roman art, in all its forms, continues to be a source of inspiration for artists and architects today and the spirit of merging the ideas and advancements of various cultures, as the Romans did so well, is evident in the world around us.

Vocabulary

Bust—A sculpture of a head and shoulders. In addition to emperors, wealthy Romans also commissioned artists to create portrait busts. These sculptures were frequently painted and showed a great deal of realism (wrinkles, large noses, bald heads etc.).

Deify—To make divine, as a god or goddess (deity).

Relief—A term from the Italian “rilevare” (to raise), applied to sculpture that projects from a background surface rather than standing freely.

Amphitheater—(pronounced “am-fi-theater”) A large round or oval building with rising rows of seats around an open space.

Tesserae—Small pieces of colored glass or stone set into plaster on walls or floors to create mosaics.