

Greek Art and Architecture

The Architecture of Athens

Athens was considered the cultural center of ancient Greece. The city best exemplifies the typical **architecture** to be seen in a Greek city-state.

Towering above the city of Athens stood the **Acropolis**, the sacred hill dedicated to the city's patron-goddess, Athena. Below the Acropolis lay the **Agora**, the commercial and political center of the city. During the fifth century B.C. at the peak of Athens' political power, Pericles initiated the construction of many public buildings to replace the ones destroyed during the Persian Wars. These monuments still stand today and are admired by many tourists who visit Greece.

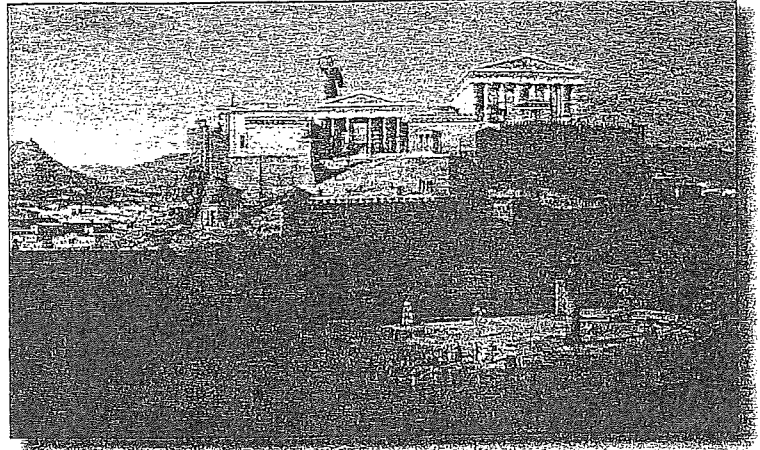
Among the most impressive buildings is the temple dedicated to Athena Parthenos on the Acropolis, the **Parthenon**. In the construction of this temple, perfection in both technical skill and proportion in design was achieved. The Parthenon housed the golden and ivory statue of Athena, which was created by the famous sculptor Pheidias. Other temples in the city included the **Erechtheion** on the Acropolis, dedicated to both Athena and Erechtheus (a legendary king of Athens); the **Hephaesteion** in the Agora, a temple dedicated to the god of crafts, Hephaestus; and the **Olympion**, the temple dedicated to the almighty king of gods, Zeus. Each city-state had fine temples, but none exemplify Greek architecture better than those of Athens.

Greek Temples

The Greek **temple** was the most important public building in any city. Its purpose was to house the statue of the patron-god or goddess and sometimes to keep the offerings made to the deity. Outside and in front of the temple lay the altar where the worshippers gathered and sacrifices were carried out. The temples were built of big limestone or marble blocks and stood on a low stone platform that could be reached by steps. The standard temple plan was rectangular in shape with a central windowless room, called the *naos*. In this room stood the deity's statue. The naos opened out onto a porch with columns (*pronaos*). The central part of the temple was encircled by a row of columns that formed the *colonnade* or covered walkway. The superstructure of the temple consisted of four main parts: the column, the architrave, the frieze, and the cornice (roof). Traces of color on building blocks indicate that parts of the temple were painted in bright colors such as reds, yellows, and blues. (See the diagram on page 24 for more detail on the parts of a temple.)

Three different styles of decoration developed in Greek temples throughout the centuries. Temples originated in the seventh century B.C. with the Doric order. About 500 B.C. the Ionic order developed, and in the fourth century B.C., the Corinthian order was introduced. Although the three styles were created in progressive order, one style did not replace the other.

The orders are distinguished mainly by their columns. A column was made up of the shaft and the capital. In the **Doric order**, the capital was plain. The capital of the **Ionic order** had a *volute* (a decoration in the form of ram's horns) with an egg-and-dart pattern underneath. The **Corinthian order** capital was decorated with acanthus leaves growing from the shaft. The frieze, which lay



The Acropolis was the sacred hill in Athens where the Parthenon (top right) and other temples stood.

between the cornice and the architrave, was decorated with stone carvings. In the Doric order, it was divided into panels (*metopes*) separated by three vertical grooves (*triglyphs*), while in the Ionic order, the frieze was decorated with a continuous strip. Whereas the architrave was plain in the Doric order, in the Ionic order, it was divided into three equally wide horizontal sections. The Corinthian order had only the capital as its distinguishing feature. The rest of the superstructure was taken over from the Ionic order. The roof of the temple, known as the cornice, was triangular in shape. It consisted of the pediment and the geison, which are the outer edges of the roof. The pediment was always filled with sculptures that represented stories related to the temple's deity, such as the birth of Athena on the Parthenon. The sculptures were brightly painted like the building parts of the temple itself. The three Greek architectural styles, especially the columns, have often been copied in the architecture of subsequent periods and in modern times.

Sculpture

The Greeks were not only great architects but also great sculptors. As already mentioned above, the temples were decorated with sculpted carvings, and a statue of the deity stood inside the building. One famous **sculptor**, mentioned earlier, was Pheidias, who made the statue of Athena entirely out of gold and ivory. Nothing of this statue remains, but descriptions exist in literature and from Roman copies. Most temple statues, however, were made of marble or bronze. Female and male statues of gods, heroes, and Olympic victors (mostly nude) also decorated many of the houses and public buildings or lined the streets. The statues were life-sized figures sculpted either from marble or cast in bronze. Detail was stressed and natural movement and appearance were emphasized. Many of the original statues have not survived, because they were either broken or, in the case of bronze, melted and reused. However, Roman copies have survived, and they provide valuable information about the original Greek works.



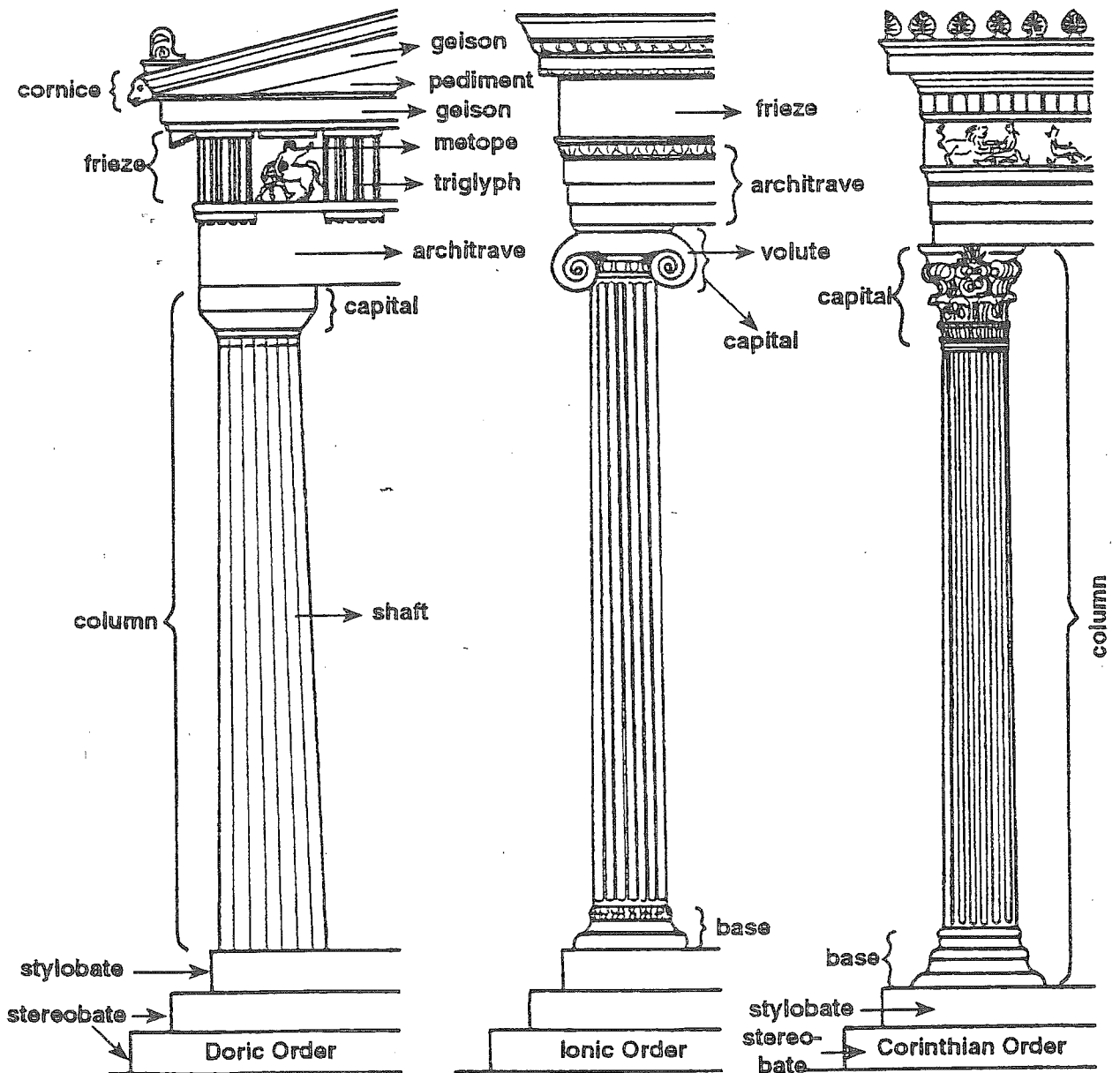
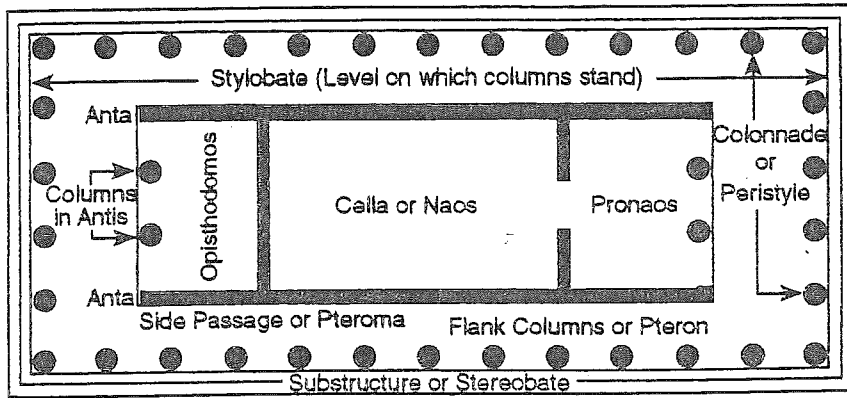
Reproduction of Pheidias' Statue of Athena

Pottery

Pottery was another important form of Greek art. It was widely traded throughout the Mediterranean. It came in a variety of shapes depending on the practical purpose. Pottery was used to transport perishable goods such as wine, olive oil, grain, or perfume. It was also used in domestic activities such as cooking and eating, or in religious ceremonies to carry offerings to the gods and as offerings in temples and tombs. Sometimes it was made and traded solely for its artistic merit. Pottery provides useful information for the historian, because many of the vases were painted with scenes of daily life, athletic activities, religious ceremonies, or mythological subjects. Like all forms of Greek art and architecture, Greek pottery production reached its height during the fifth century B.C. Two popular types of pottery were produced: Black Figure and Red Figure pottery. The clay used to make the pottery was fired red in color, due to its high iron content. In **Black Figure pottery**, the figures were drawn in black on the red background. In **Red Figure pottery**, the reverse was true. The figures, outlined in black, were left red on a black-glazed background. Writing was common on pots either to mark the potter's name, to indicate names of mythological or historical figures shown, or to describe the subject matter.

Today, Greek architecture, sculpture, and pottery are highly valued as historical evidence and as skilled works of art.

Architectural Orders and Parts of a Greek Temple



Name: _____ Date: _____

Knowledge Check

Matching

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| _____ 1. Acropolis | a. artform that uses clay to make pots, vases, etc., used to store and serve items and as art objects |
| _____ 2. Agora | b. the art or science of designing and building structures |
| _____ 3. temple | c. the process of carving or forming hard materials to produce a three-dimensional work of art |
| _____ 4. Ionic order | d. the commercial and political center of Athens |
| _____ 5. Doric order | e. the sacred hill in Athens dedicated to Athena |
| _____ 6. Corinthian order | f. featured a capital with ram's horns and egg-and-dart pattern |
| _____ 7. sculpture | g. featured a plain capital |
| _____ 8. architecture | h. featured a capital with acanthus leaves |
| _____ 9. pottery | i. building that housed the statue of the patron-god or goddess and sometimes kept the offering made to that diety |

Multiple Choice

10. The Olympeion was a temple dedicated to what Greek god?
- | | |
|---------------|--------------|
| a. Athena | b. Erechteus |
| c. Hephaestus | d. Zeus |
11. Which type of pottery had the figures outlined in black and left red on a black-glazed background?
- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. Black Figure pottery | b. Red Figure pottery |
| c. Red Line pottery | d. Black Background pottery |

Constructed Response

12. Was a Greek temple like a cathedral or church either in appearance or in the way it was used? Use details from the reading selection to support your answer.
