

# The Art of Ancient GREEK Theater



1. Mixing Vessel with Chorusmen as Satyrs  
Greek, made in Apulia, South Italy, 410–380 B.C.  
Terracotta  
H: 33 cm (13 in.); Diam (rim): 36 cm (14 1/8 in.)  
Red-figured bell *krater* attributed to the Tarporley Painter  
Lent by the Nicholson Museum, The University of Sydney, Australia  
VEX.2010.3.1

These three chorus members are shown in the moments before or after their performance in a satyr chorus. While the two men on the left hold their masks quietly, the one on the right wears his mask and continues to dance the *sikinnis*, the dance of the satyrs.



2. Fragmentary Relief with an Actor Holding a Tragic Mask  
Greek, made in Athens, ca. 350 B.C.  
Marble  
H: 78 cm (30 11/16 in.); W: 25 cm (9 13/16 in.)  
Lent by the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen  
Photograph: H. R. Goette  
VEX. 2010.3.2

In ancient Greek drama, all roles were played by men. Carrying the full head mask of a tragic heroine by a strap, the actor depicted in this relief wears the costume of a female role in a tragedy.



3. Mixing Vessel with Dionysos and the Cast of a Satyr Play  
Greek, made in Athens, about 400 B.C.; found in Ruvo di Puglia  
Terracotta  
H: 75 cm (29 1/2 in.); Diam (rim): 33.5 cm (13 1/4 in.)  
Red-figured volute *krater* attributed to the Pronomos Painter  
Lent by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples  
VEX. 2010.3.48

On this magnificent vase, the actors and chorus of a tragic trilogy and satyr play celebrate their performance in the company of Dionysos, the god of theater. The piper Pronomos is seated directly below the god to show his prominence. He is surrounded by chorus men still wearing their satyr costumes, while the actors who played the roles of Herakles and Papposilenos (the father of the satyrs) stand in the realm of Dionysos above them.



4. Mixing Vessel with Dionysos and Comic Actors  
Greek, made in Apulia, South Italy, 390–380 B.C.  
Terracotta  
H: 38 cm (14 15/16 in.); Diam (rim): 40.3 cm (15 7/8 in.)  
Red-Figured bell *krater* attributed to the Choregos Painter  
Lent by the Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund  
VEX.2010.3.92

A colossal bust of Dionysos dominates this scene. With his otherworldly expression the image may represent an actual prop in a stage performance or symbolize the god's dominion over wine and theater. At left a comic actor reaches for a cluster of grapes, while at right another actor—dressed for a satyr play—holds a large drinking cup.





5. Fragment of *The Trackers* by Sophocles  
 Roman, A.D. 175–200; found in Oxyrhynchus (present-day El-Bahnasa, Egypt)  
 Papyrus  
 H: 17.3 cm (6 13/16 in.)  
 Lent by the British Library, London  
 © British Library Board (Papyrus 2098)  
 VEX.2010.3.71

Although just over 400 lines survive, Sophocles' *Trackers* is the second most completely preserved Greek satyr play. Satyr plays were an important part of the tragic experience as they provided a chaotic foil to the serious themes of the tragedies. This one tells of the satyrs' search for Apollo's stolen cattle. In their journey they come upon Hermes, who has just invented the lyre, and are terrified by its sound.



6. Mixing Vessel with Medea Departing in a Chariot  
 Greek, made in Lucania, South Italy, about 400 B.C.  
 Terracotta  
 H: 50.5 cm (19 7/8 in.); Diam (rim): 49.9 cm (19 5/8 in.);  
 Diam (foot): 22 cm (8 11/16 in.)  
 Red-figured calyx *krater* attributed to near the Policoro Painter  
 Lent by the Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund  
 VEX.2010.3.91

In Euripides' well-known play, Medea murders her two sons in revenge against their father, Jason. She flees in a snake-drawn chariot, which when performed would have been lifted by a *mechane*, a type of crane used by the Greeks to provide special effects.



7. Pitcher with a Bird Chorus  
 Greek, made in Athens, about 480 B.C.  
 Terracotta  
 H: 16 cm. (6 5/16 in.)  
 Black-figured *oinochoe* attributed to the Gela Painter  
 Lent by the British Museum, London  
 © The Trustees of the British Museum  
 VEX.2010.3.73

On this small jug, a musician plays the double pipes for a choral dance of men costumed as birds. Their masks and the straps attaching their wings to their arms are evident. Choruses of birds and other animals were performed in Athens long before Aristophanes' famous comedy, *The Birds*.



8. Tragic Mask of a Young Man  
 Greek, about 150 B.C.; found in Amisos (in present-day Turkey)  
 Terracotta  
 H: 17 cm (6 11/16 in.)  
 Lent by the Département des Antiquités Grecques, Etrusques et Romaines, Musée du Louvre, Paris  
 Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY  
 VEX.2010.3.104

No performance masks have survived from antiquity, but votive masks deposited in graves provide evidence for their appearance. This mask shows the open mouth and smooth features characteristic of a young male character in a tragedy.



9. Incense Burner in the Shape of an Actor as a Slave on an Altar  
 Roman, A.D. 1–50  
 Bronze and silver  
 H: 23.2 cm (9 1/8 in.); W (base): 13.3 cm (5 1/4 in.)  
 The J. Paul Getty Museum  
 87.AC.143

This wily slave has escaped to an altar to avoid punishment for some mischievous deed. The altar is a functioning incense burner designed so that the smoke would float through the widely grinning mouth of his mask.



10. Theater at Epidauros. Photo: H.R. Goette

The largest of remaining ancient Greek theaters, the theater in the Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros was constructed in two phases. The first phase is dated to 330–300 B.C. and could hold an audience of about 6,200. In 170–160 B.C. the seating area was expanded to hold about 12,000 spectators.



11. Wine Cooler with a Chorus of Dolphin Riders  
Greek, made in Athens, 520–510 B.C.  
Terracotta  
H: 30.2 cm (11 7/8 in.)  
Red-figured *psykter* attributed to Olto as painter  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of the Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989 (1989.281.69)  
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY  
VEX.2010.3.100

Dolphin imagery was associated with a type of choral performance called the dithyramb, an important event in the worship of Dionysos. The dolphins are designed to appear as if leaping over water on this unusually shaped vessel.



13. Statue of an Actor as Papposilenos  
Roman, A.D. 100-199; found in Torre Astura  
Marble  
H: 94 cm (37 in.)  
Lent by the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome  
Photo: Vanni / Art Resource, NY  
VEX.2010.3.118

Papposilenos was the father of the band of satyrs that raised the young god Dionysos. In satyr plays, he is the leader of the satyr chorus. The actor's costume consists of a short, sleeved tunic and leggings covered with dense curls of goat wool. Many details – including the lips, teeth, and eyes behind the mask – communicate the presence of the actor caught in the moment of performing.



15. Mixing Vessel with Zeus Courting Alkmene  
Greek, made in Paestum, South Italy, 350–340 B.C.  
Terracotta  
H: 37 cm (14 1/2 in.); Diam: 36 cm (14 1/4 in.)  
Red-figured bell *krater* attributed to Asteas as painter  
Lent by the Vatican Museums, Vatican City  
Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY  
VEX.2010.3.53

According to myth, Zeus courted Herakles' mother Alkmene with the help of the messenger god Hermes. In this comic parody, we see the two gods struggling to get a ladder up to her window. Inappropriately for the mother of a hero, Alkmene peers out of the window with her fingertips protruding over the ledge in the manner of a prostitute.



12. Storage Jar with Orestes Slaying Klytaimnestra  
Greek, made in Paestum, South Italy, about 340 B.C.  
Terracotta  
H (top of handle): 47.7 cm (18 3/4 in.);  
Diam (body): 19.8 cm (7 13/16 in.)  
Red-figured neck amphora attributed to a painter close to Asteas  
Gift of Stanley Silverman, The J. Paul Getty Museum  
80.AE.155.1

The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.) is one of the cornerstones of western dramatic literature and the only tragic trilogy to survive from antiquity. Klytaimnestra's desperate gesture as her son, Orestes, is about to murder her is played out onstage in the *Libation Bearers*, the second play in the trilogy, when she says "Stop, my son, and take pity on this breast."



14. Fragmentary Mixing Vessel with Oedipus Discovering the Truth  
Greek, made in Sicily, 330–320 B.C.; found in Syracuse  
Terracotta  
H: 24 cm (9 7/16 in.); Diam: 30 cm (11 3/4 in.)  
Fragmentary red-figured calyx *krater* attributed to the Capodarso Painter  
Lent by the Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi,"  
Syracuse, Sicily  
Su concessione dell'Assessorato ai Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana della Regione Siciliana - Palermo  
VEX.2010.3.55

In this rare depiction of a tragedy performed on a stage, an aged man stares out to the viewer, his horrified expression evoking a tragic mask. Next to him, Oedipus and Jocasta begin to comprehend their tragic destiny.



16. Statuette of an Actor as a Soldier  
Greek, 200–100 B.C.; probably found in Myrina (in present-day Turkey)  
Terracotta  
H: 23.5 cm (9 1/4 in.)  
Signed by Nikostratos  
Lent by the Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin –  
Preußischer Kulturbesitz  
Photo: Karin Marz/bpk  
VEX.2010.3.33

The comic poet Menander (342–291 B.C.) was immensely popular in antiquity; figurines representing his characters were produced and sold throughout the Mediterranean. This colorful soldier is a mercenary who moves from one job to another, boasting of his bravery and fictitious exploits.



17. Mixing Vessel with a Comic Scene of Pipers

Greek, made in Apulia, South Italy, 365–350 B.C.

Terracotta

H: 35 cm (13 3/4 in.); Diam: 35 cm (13 3/4 in.)

Red-figured calyx *krater* attributed to the Suckling-Salting Group as painter

Lent by Malaguzzi-Valeri, Rome

VEX.2010.3.45

The lively musicians on the stage are costumed actors only pretending to play the double flutes. The music is being played by the piper hiding behind the tree at right. This vase is remarkable for its depiction of scenery and the apparatus of the ancient stage.