Stylistic Characteristics of Classical Greek Art

As Greek society became more humanistic, the art gradually became more naturalistic.

Naturalism in art means that the images are realistic in that they are recognizable and have features that the society identifies with realism. This is always a matter of degree. In classical Greek art, the human form looks “real” yet it is idealized. The models for these sculptures and vase paintings were young, healthy, beautiful adults. The proportions for their figures were worked out mathematically. No one actually looked like that. In Classical art, we do not see people who are old or fat or deformed, unless they are intended to be comical.

 Seeking ideal forms is a characteristic of the Classical period in Greek art. Plato taught that these ideal forms existed in the minds of the gods, and that it was the duty of the artist or architect to discover and capture these ideals through mathematical formulas.

Sculpture

To create naturalistic sculptures, artists developed the following techniques:

Sculpture in the round: In earlier Greek sculpture, figures were block-like and frontal. Although the image might be carved on the sides and back, there was only one important view—the front. Classical sculpture is fully three-dimensional. All viewpoints are visually interesting. Often the pose or posture of the figure invites us to continue our gaze around the form.

Open form—sculpted figures reach out and interact with space. Figures display contrapposto, creating a graceful S-curve and twist of the body.

Contrapposto—the weight of the figure rests on one leg and the head turns in the opposite direction. The torso twists in an elongated “S” curve.

Cannon of Proportions—a set of rules for constructing the ideal human figure. The parts of the human form in sculpture were to be related rationally and proportionally by mathematical formulas.

Vase Painting

The only existing examples of classical painting style are the paintings on pottery.

The terms “black-figure” and “red-figure” identify an important difference in the visualization of the Greek artists.

The black-figure decorating style shows a conceptual approach to representation. Conceptual art is based on what the mind knows, and selects the most characteristic
views of its subject. The images are stylized and flat, shown as silhouettes with inscribed details. The *red-figure* style presents a **perceptual** approach to art. Perceptual art is based on what the eye sees, emphasizing visual realism.

**Characteristics of red-figure painting style:**

- Foreshortening — the distortion of form to show its position in space.

- Definition of individual forms of the body (muscles, fingers, etc.).

- Occlusion — one form blocks our view of another form.

- Greater variety of poses than is seen in black-figure style.

- More dramatic action, with comment on the scene by the artist, and by other figures in the paintings.

**Terminology**

- Sculpture in the round
- Fully three-dimensional
- Contrapposto
- Open form
- Canon of proportions
- Black-figure
- Conceptual
- Stylized
- Red-figure
- Perceptual
- Visual realism
- Foreshortening
- Definition
- Occlusion