

The top 10 ancient Greek artworks

From rare bronzes found in the sea to goddesses that proved a millennium ahead of their time, ancient Greek art is majestic, vital and full of high drama

Jonathan Jones [The Guardian](#) Thu 14 Aug 2014



Sculpture of a fallen warrior from the temple of Aphaia at Aegina. Photograph: Print Collector/Getty Images

Fallen Warrior from Temple of Aphaia (c 480-470BC)

There is a tragic pathos to this mighty sculpture of a dying hero from a temple on the Greek island of Aegina. Tragedy is a Greek concept. The tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus are still performed. This statue shows a strong man fallen, heroic to his last breath.

The Pergamon altar (180-160BC)

Classical Greek art changed rapidly as Greece itself went through wars and imperial transformations. In what is called the Hellenistic age it became much more emotional, sensual and even sensationalist. The furious sculptures on the Pergamon altar – which can be seen in its own museum in Berlin – are full of passion and psychological drama.



Pergamon Altar. Athena against the giant Alcyoneus. Photograph: Phas/UIG via Getty Images

The Riace bronzes (460-420BC)

These tremendous statues found in the sea off southern Italy in 1972 are important because so few original Greek bronze statues survive. Most of the classical nudes in museums were carved in marble in the Roman era, as reproductions of such rare, and now largely lost, originals. Here we see the true majesty of Greek art in its classical age, which occurred in the fifth-century BC.





One of the two Riace bronzes: the Warrior Photograph: Alinari Archives/Alinari via Getty Images

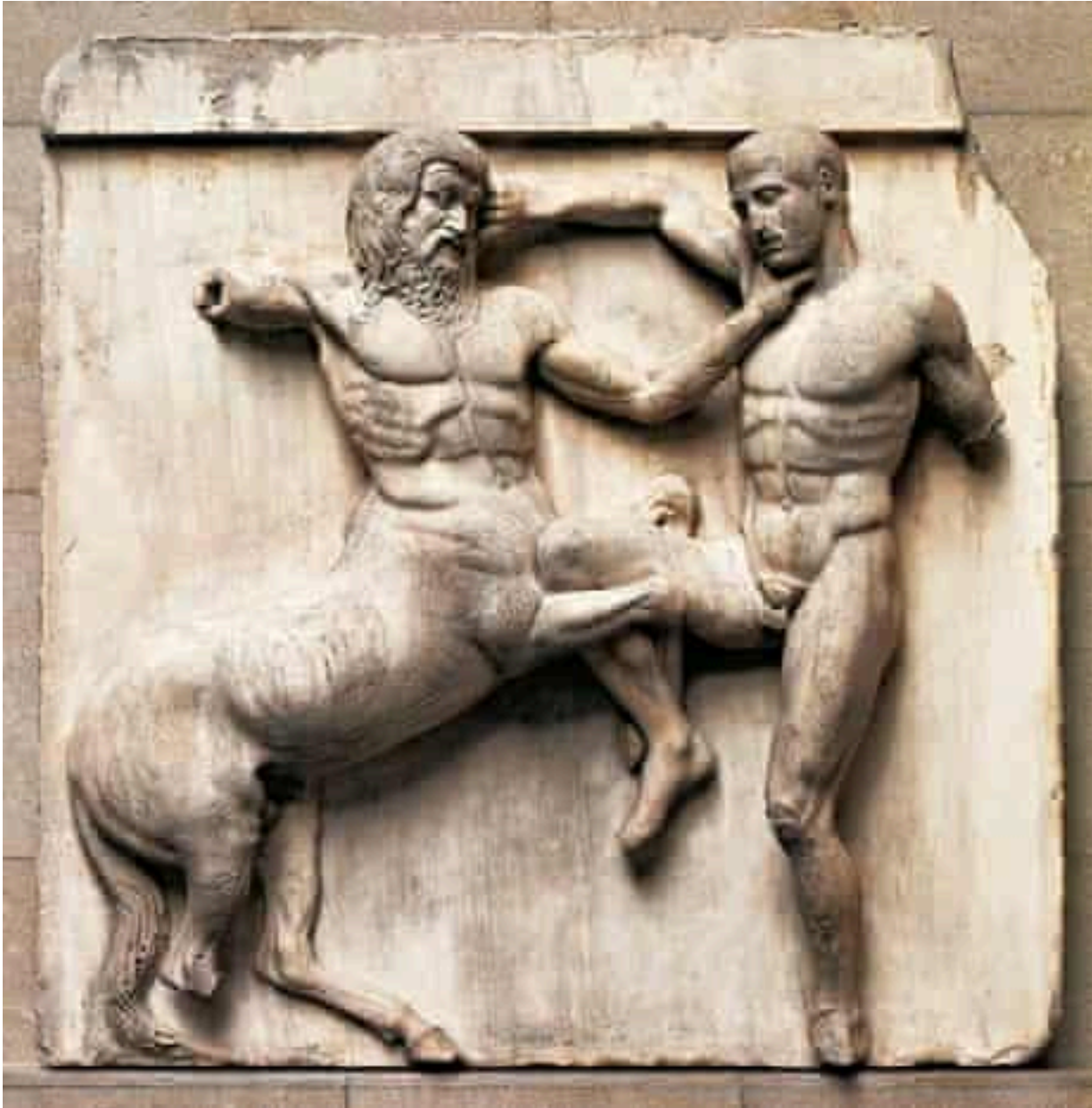
Goddesses from the east pediment of the Parthenon (c 438-432BC)



Three goddesses from east pediment of the Parthenon. Photograph: ©The Trustees of the British Museum

Sitting and reclining in graceful unison, these goddesses carved in marble for the Parthenon in Athens are among the most beautiful and mysterious images of the human form ever created. Incredibly, the artist makes the draperies that cover their bodies as real and richly textured as similar garments painted by Leonardo da Vinci a millennium later – and who didn't have to produce his illusions in stone. These are dream goddesses.

Marble metope from the Parthenon (c 447-438BC)



Metope from Parthenon, battle between Centaurs and Lapiths. Photograph: DEA/G Nimatallah/De Agostini/Getty Images

Violence is a favourite theme of ancient Greek artists. Reared on the myth of the Trojan war and experiencing the reality of wars with Persia and between Greek cities, classical artists found new ways to show conflict. This human fighting a centaur, carved for the Parthenon in Athens, is astonishingly real in its detail and dynamic energy.

God from the sea, Zeus or Poseidon (c 470BC)



A bronze sculpture of the god Zeus, or possibly Poseidon Photograph: Archive Photos/Getty Images

This majestic bronze, found in the sea off Greece, conveys the magic of Greek mythology. The god – probably Zeus, lord of Olympus himself – is caught in the act of hurling a thunderbolt. His body is charged with divine power, and yet, it is a human body, neither colossal nor ethereal but the mirror of ourselves. The Greek gods are human, all too human, and their petty squabbles cause wars and sorrow in the world.

The Siren vase (480-470BC)



The Siren vase. Photograph: © Trustees of the British Museum

In Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the founding epics of Greek literature, Odysseus longs to hear the seductive yet dangerous song of the sirens that lure sailors to their deaths. So all his crew plug their ears, and Odysseus has himself lashed to the mast. This powerful painting captures the tension as Odysseus strains at his bonds, his whole body agonised, his head raised in rapt listening.

The Motya charioteer (c 350BC)



The Motya charioteer. Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

This is one of the most startling Greek statues to survive, and highly revealing about the erotic charge of the Greek nude. This youth is not technically nude, but wears a tight-fitting garment that instead of hiding his body, heightens every contour. Greek statues are portraits of human beauty that are meant to be arousing as well as noble. This athlete poses in sensual triumph.

The Dionysus Cup by Exekias (c 540BC)

Dionysus, god of wine and madness, sails on his boat, surrounded by dolphins, in this delightful painting. Part of the fascination of Greek art is that its themes were taken up by artists down the centuries, as the myths of this culture were constantly being rediscovered. So this image of Dionysus can be compared with later portrayals of the wine god by Titian, Michelangelo, or Cy Twombly.

- [Close](#)





Mask of Agamemnon (1550-1500BC)



Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. Gold funerary mask. Photograph: Universalimagesgroup/Getty

When the enthusiastic, romantically minded archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered this golden mask at Mycenae in 1876, he had no doubt that it must be the death mask of Agamemnon himself, the king who led the Greeks in the Trojan war, only to be assassinated on his homecoming. Of course there's no proof of that, but it is one of the most compelling faces in art.

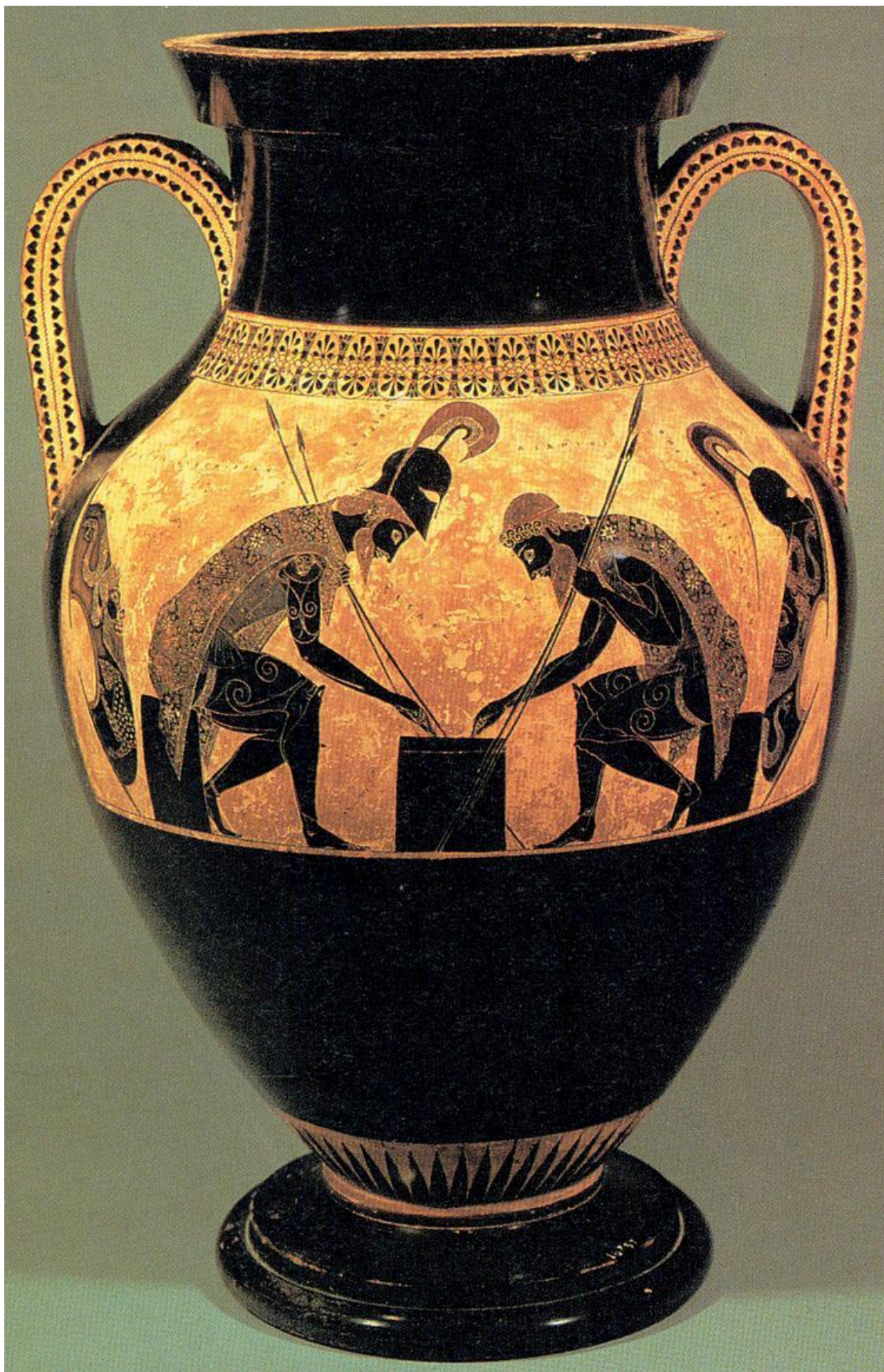
Ajax and Achilles Playing a Board Game

ARCHAIC BLACK-FIGURE POTTERY

<http://arthistoryresources.net/greek-art-archaeology-2016/archaic-BF-exekias-achilles.html>

Exekias 540-530 BCE. Terracotta amphora. Height 2 feet (Musei Vaticani, Rome)





An example of black-figure painting is **Achilles and Ajax Playing a Board Game** on an amphora signed by Exekias as both potter and painter (at left is written: *Exekias epoiesen* = "Exekias made [me or it]." At right is also written, less relevantly, *Onetorides kalos* - "Onetorides is beautiful").

The central image is a narrative scene, with geometric patterns subsumed into border devices. In the panel framed by a lustrous black "glaze," **Ajax** (*Aiantos* = "of Ajax [Aias]") and **Achilles** (*Akhilleos* = "of Akhilleus") are depicted playing a board game during a lull in the Trojan War. In a symmetrical and deceptively tranquil scene, the Homeric heroes bend over a table and call out the scores of the game (which are written before their lips - *tesara* = 4, for Achilles, *tria* = 3, for Ajax).

Figures seen as silhouettes against the light ground. Clear contours and precise lines. Details within the forms, especially the patterned cloaks and armour of Achilles, rendered by means of delicate and meticulous incision. The scene is composed to suit or fit the surface and shape of the amphora. The outlines of the figures follow the outlines of the vessel. As the figures bend toward the gaming board, the curve of their backs echoes the curve of the amphora. Exekias also places the spears so that they lead the eye up to the top of the handles, and arranges the shields behind the figures so that they continue the vertical line formed by the lower part of the handles. The two warriors wear elaborately patterned cloaks, arm and thigh armor enlivened with elegant spiral designs, and greaves (shin protectors). The stylized frontal eye persists from Aegean, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian art, but the shoulders are rendered more naturally in side view.

Exekias, the most insightful black-figure artist, transforms the personal rivalry between the two Greek heroes of the Trojan War into a board game. Both Achilles and Ajax are heavily armed; Achilles still wears his helmet, and both hold their spears as if they may suddenly have to use them. No poem known describes such an episode. But the situation is made clear from other later vase paintings of the same subject. Achilles and Ajax are neglecting their duties and irresponsibly play at a board game while the Trojans enter the Greek camp.

Exekias emphasizes their intense concentration by using the combined diagonals of their spears and their gaze to focus on the game board. Exekias integrates form with psychology to convey the impression that Achilles, the younger warrior on the left, will win the game. On the right, Ajax leans farther forward than Achilles so that the level of his head is slightly lower than Achilles', and he has removed his helmet. Achilles' helmet and tall crest indicate his dominance. Also, the board game - a game of chance - can be understood as metaphor for fate. Both Ajax and Achilles die at Troy (Ajax commits suicide).