Life as an Artist in Ancient Greece

Authors: Driscoll, Sally
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Ancient Greek Artists at a Glance

Most artists lived in Athens or other city-states, where wealthy patrons and bristling markets provided most of their business. However, the terms "artist" and "fine art" did not exist in ancient Greece. Similar to other ancient civilizations, the Greeks did not generally view artists as a separate class from craftsmen, and there were few, if at times any, distinctions between sculptors and stonemasons, or arts and crafts. Based only on our modern definition, artists would have included painters, sculptors, architects, and jewelry makers (goldsmiths, silversmiths) as their goods were crafted from raw materials and functioned as artwork.

- **Time Period Dates:** c. 750 BCE-146 BCE
- **Time Period Name:** Ancient Greece
- **Geographic Location:** Greece is a peninsula found in southeastern Europe. The country
also includes numerous islands scattered off the mainland in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. The ancient empire expanded to include parts of Italy, Spain, France, and northern Africa, and eventually parts of India and Afghanistan. These are no longer part of the modern nation, which is officially known as the Hellenic Republic.

- **Class Rank:** Banausoi (Trades-people or artisans)
- **Typical Life Span:** 35 years due to the high infant mortality rate.

**Childhood**
The typical childhood of an artist was spent at home under the care of his mother and one or more female slaves. Fathers did not participate in childrearing and were rarely around the house during the day. (The exception was perhaps the painter or jewelry maker whose workshop was at his home.) Generally, an ancient Greek childhood was filled with leisure time, such as play with siblings. Most children were usually provided with at least a basic education. They also helped with chores. Their contact with society at large was limited to participation in sacred rituals and festivals, such as singing in a chorus or participating in religious processions.

When an Athenian male reached eighteen, he served a two-year compulsory term in the military, or longer if needed in battle. He was then expected to fulfill civic duties and take up an occupation. Males from the militaristic city-state of Sparta, however, were raised from an early age to serve as warriors for life.

**Education**
As artists came from different walks of life, they also received varying amounts and types of education. When a school was available and economically feasible, boys attended from the age of about seven. They generally studied writing, math, music, science and gymnastics. The male children of the aristocracy or noble class continued their schooling through their early teens. Others were homeschooled.

The skills and knowledge necessary for a career as an artist were typically handed down from father to son. Others acquired their skills in formal or informal apprenticeships. Art was generally not taught in schools until the fourth century BCE, and then only the sons of the elite were introduced to painting. The fourth-century painter Pamphilus is generally credited with founding the first professional painting course, a curriculum that took twelve years to complete.

**Personal Relationships & Family Life**
The average male married sometime during his twenties or early thirties, and the marriage was usually arranged with a girl half his age or younger. The man held the position of authority for the household, although he might have spent little time with his children and wife. Artists who led itinerant lifestyles may have chosen to forego marriage, or on the contrary, may have started more than one family in different locations despite polygamy being socially taboo, if not also illegal in most city-states.

**Living Quarters**
There is little evidence of the quality of housing owned by artists, but it likely consisted of a small home of two to four rooms. Wealthier artists might have lived in a two-story house with several rooms, including one used for his business. Urban houses were often built around a communal courtyard that served as a summer kitchen and the artist's workspace. Houses were made of stone with painted plaster walls, and did not have a bathroom until the Roman period. Floors were usually packed dirt, although a wealthy artist could install a mosaic floor, which also became more common during the Roman era.

Some artists had to make do with temporary quarters when they worked away from home. Polygnotus lived at Delphi while painting the scenes of Troy and other legends at the Lesche of the Knidians. It is unknown what quality of housing he endured, but temporary quarters were likely primitive. Itinerant artists may have relied on the good will of their fellow Greeks. Some artists also lived permanently at sacred sites, where visitors who arrived empty-handed could buy a sculpture or special pot to leave as a votive offering.

**Typical Earnings**

Most artists lived on commissions from wealthy citizens, or, as with architects from the sixth century BCE, on the patronage of the city-state, where they competed for contracts. Those who made consumer goods, such as jewelry or figurines, may have depended more on profits from sales in the marketplace and/or from trade. Many artists, especially sculptors whose work progressed very slowly, and who may have earned a commission just once a year as a result, would have been forced to take on other work. Vase-painters were typically employed in pottery workshops and thus earned considerably less than the workshop owner.

Overall, many artists probably lived at near-subsistence levels. Only a small percentage of artists, mostly architects, rose to a level of prominence where they enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle with an abundance of slaves, travel opportunities, and many contacts among aristocracy. The number of artists who fared well increased during the Hellenistic period, as opportunities for teaching during this period also increased and supplemented the artist's income.

**Societal Standing**

Attitudes towards artists were mixed. The aristocracy tended to look down on anyone who earned a living with his hands, especially those craftsmen who performed duties often handled by slaves. This attitude may have become even more pronounced during the fifth century BCE, when a divide began to form between those who worked with their hands and intellectuals. On the other hand, some of the first Greek philosophers espoused what may have been a newfound appreciation for creative talent.

Most scholars believe that artists were at least appreciated by the working class, but there is insufficient evidence to prove this. The inscriptions left by some artists on their pots or sculptures is an indication that some artists enjoyed a higher social standing than most. These would have included the sculptor Phidias, who designed the large chryselephantine (gold and ivory) sculptures of Athena at the Acropolis and Zeus at Olympia, and who was the favored artist of Pericles, a Greek statesman.
The social standing of artists seemed to have gained favor during the Hellenistic period and continued during the Roman period, when even the emperors Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius found painting to be a rewarding hobby.

**Personal Time**
The amount of leisure time an artist was afforded was tied in closely with his economic and social status. Some artists had little money or energy to partake in any leisure activities beyond their religious and political responsibilities. As good citizens, they would have been expected to participate in rituals, processions and festivals that honored their city-state patron deity and other cults. They may have taken part in the day-long dramatic events at the Athens' City Dionysia or athletic events at the Panhellenic Games in Olympia. Some artists may have played an instrument or sang in the chorus at one these major festivals.

The most highly regarded artists would have socialized with the aristocracy, particularly at symposia, where men gathered to enjoyed good company, wine, games and hetairai (female companions). Athletics and board games were also common leisure activities. The wealthiest artists would also have indulged in trips to the Near East, Egypt, or a Greek island to gain inspiration for techniques and designs, buy materials, pick up gifts for the family, and meet other artists. Artists, like most men, may have spent some time away from their workshops hunting or fishing, taking care of household responsibilities, and other mundane chores as well.

**Religious Life**
Everything the Greeks did had something to do with their belief in gods and goddesses. Most of the artwork created in ancient Greece was commissioned for sacred purposes and usually depicted the deities or other sacred elements. The artists attributed their inspiration to the Muses and other deities. Major decisions were made only in communion with a god or goddess.

Artists would have participated in both private and public rituals and festivals, honoring those deities associated with their family, city-state, and possibly a cult associated with their profession. They may have at some time served as an attendant or priest at a temple, as well.

**Political Life**
In Athens, males became full citizens at the age of eighteen. Citizenship granted one voting privileges, the opportunity to serve in the Athenian Assembly and on a jury, and the ability to own land. It also entitled men to participate in athletic events.

Citizens were expected to engage in civic matters. However, many artists who had relocated to Athens from an island or the countryside were denied citizenship and were considered metics, or second-class residents. Itinerant artists who traveled constantly from town to town had even less status, more akin to slaves and women, unless they had gained some amount of professional stature. In some cases it was possible for the most talented and/or industrious artists to be granted citizenship, such as Polygnotus, who was granted citizenship in Athens.
after moving from Thasos.

Bibliography


• This handbook presents an excellent overview of the culture arranged by topic, with brief biographies for every major Greek artist.


• This is a very useful reference book on ancient Greece, with entries for every major artist along with hundreds of entries that provide a comprehensive understanding of the civilization.


• This now-classic work is written by and for academics, and is a good source for understanding the social status of the artist.


• This glimpse of what life was like in the fourth century BCE has an unmatched charm in modern day writings.


• This book covers the life of the ancient Greeks from conception, as understood then, through death, with a glossary of sociological Greek terms.


• Robertson consolidated his classic two-volume History of Greek Art so that the general reader wouldn't be quite so overwhelmed, while also benefiting from his exhaustive coverage.

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By Sally Driscoll, State College, PA
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