ART SPOT: Red Figures

Learn about Red-Figure pottery from ancient Greece and create a drawing inspired by *Red-Figure Calyx Krater* with everyday materials.

**Supplies**
Cardboard tube, box cutter, pencil, black marker OR black paint and paintbrush

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**Red-Figure Calyx Krater**

This particular kind of ancient Greek vessel is known as a Red-Figure Calyx Krater. A *Krater* is a type of Greek pottery used for mixing wine with water, and sometimes with fruits and spices. Sometimes water was added to wine to make the wine less strong, and sometimes a little wine was added to water to purify and improve the taste of less clean water sources.

You can tell it’s a krater because of its size and shape, and its shape is a major hint about how it was used. It can hold a lot of liquid, so it has handles to help you move it, and it has a large mouth and sturdy base which makes it easy to mix liquids in and to scoop liquids out with a ladle. The word *calyx* refers to the overall shape of the vessel, which spreads out like a flower’s calyx, which is word for the cup-like part of a flower. Other kraters are shaped more like bells or columns.

The main decoration on this vase is a procession of three women. The first figure at the far right holds a torch. The middle figure carries a *lyre* which is a kind of portable harp. The final figure on the left holds two objects that are sacred to followers of Dionysos, the god of wine. One is a *thyrus*, which is a pinecone-tipped staff. The other is a *kantharos*, which is a high-handled drinking cup. These two objects are a clue that she is a *maenad*, or female follower of Dionysos. You can tell from the shape of the vessel that it’s made to mix and hold large amounts of water and wine, and the painted decoration of this vessel matches what it’s used for too in that it depicts worshipers of Dionysos participating in a ritual devoted to him.

It’s a *red-figure* vessel because of how the figures on it are painted. These aren’t orange figures painted on a black background, it’s actually black marks painted on the natural red-orange surface of the clay used to make this ceramic vessel. Any orange that you see is actually an unpainted area. Today we’re going to make a useful container from everyday household materials, and decorate it using this same red-figure technique.
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Red Figures
All Ages
20 mins

Getting Started

1. Decide how you want to use this cardboard tube. Will it be a pencil holder? A vase for plants? Something to protect drawings? A plastic bag holder? A cord organizer? Something else?
2. Once you know how you want to use it, ask an adult to carefully cut your cardboard tube with a utility knife so that the size of it is best for the job it’s going to perform.
3. Using pencil, sketch out your drawing on the cardboard tube. You want to keep it simple, creating your drawing with lines only and no shadows. Have your picture be a clue about how you are going to use your decorated cardboard.
4. Use your paint or marker to outline your drawing and to color in the background, keeping the insides of your drawing the color of the cardboard, using black for the details and background.
5. You can add decorative borders on the top and bottom as well. Use the example above for inspiration, or watch the Art Spot Episode about Meander patterns to learn how to draw another ancient Greek border design.

Further Explorations
After you’ve finished, try another! This time, try making one that uses your cardboard tube in a different way. Do you have any extra terracotta pots for plants at home? Try to come up with an original design to draw or paint onto it. Use the same art making process of keeping the insides of your drawings the natural color of your planter and color or paint the details and backgrounds of your drawings black. Don’t worry about making your drawing plant-related. Did you know that many years ago people used to use all kinds of ancient Greek vessels as plant holders?