

The Human Figure in Greek Sculpture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The human figure, both male and female, was important in Greek sculpture, and over time there was an evolution in sculpture. It changed from an archaic style to a style that idealized the form of the human body. This lesson covers:



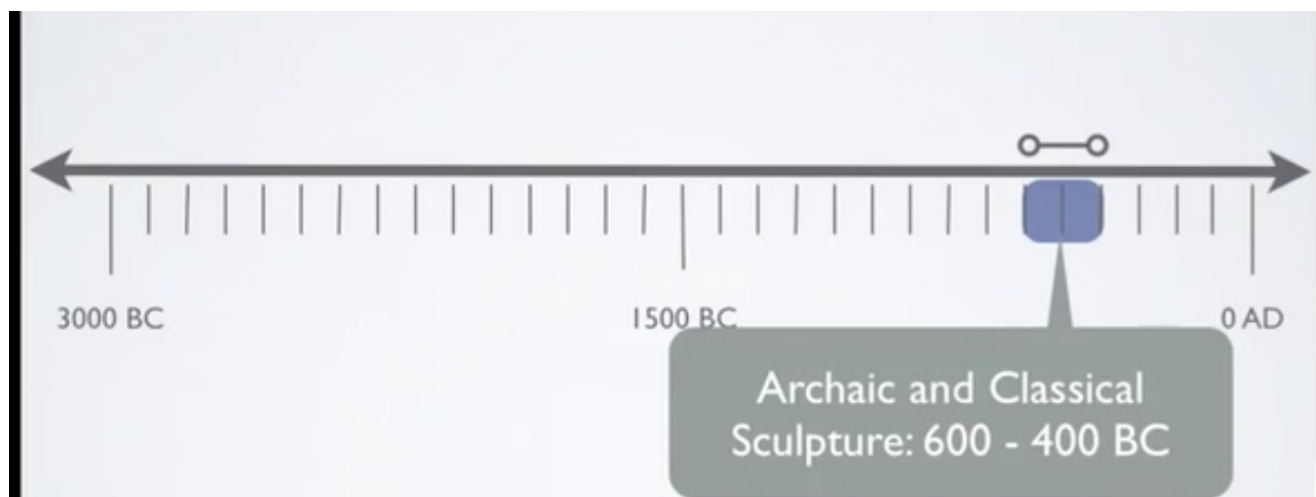
BIG IDEA

Early Greek sculpture was highly influenced by Egyptian techniques and conventions. Later Greek sculpture reflected an idealization of the human form.

1. Period and Location: Greek Sculpture

This lesson covers sculpture from ancient Greece, during the Archaic and Classical periods, which spanned the years 600 to 400 BC.

Take a look at this timeline highlighting this period.



2. “Calf Bearer”

The archaic style borrowed a number of artistic conventions from the Egyptians, in particular the stiff posture and sense of constriction.

The “Calf Bearer,” an example of this archaic style, is made of marble and dates from around 570 BC.





Calf Bearer (from the Acropolis)

570 BC

Marble

It is a dedicated statue that was found in a rubbish heap in the Acropolis in Athens. Most likely it was placed there when the Persians beat Athens during the Greco-Persian wars. It depicts a man carrying a sacrificial calf.

Notice the unusually erect posture and the way the arms are fused to the body, as opposed to cut away from it. The head features, such as the hair, are highly stylized, just like what we see in Egyptian statues, and it has the odd-looking **archaic smile**, which we see on many of these statues.



TERM TO KNOW

Archaic Smile

The stiff, unnaturalistic facial expression seen in many Archaic Kouros and Kore figures

3. Kouros

During the archaic period, there are many examples of **Kouros**, which is an archaic Greek sculptural image of a young athletic man, who's usually nude, standing with one foot in front of the other.

➞ **EXAMPLE** An example is the Anavysos, or Kroisos Kouros, which has the exact same pose as the "Calf Bearer", with one leg in front of the other and the weight evenly distributed.



There are strong similarities between Kouros and ancient Egyptian sculptures, like this sculpture of King Menkaura. Notice that the pose is exactly the same, with the same leg in front and behind in this kind of striding pose. Although Greek art used ancient Egyptian art as a source of inspiration to start out with, it started moving in a very different direction and became increasingly naturalistic and lifelike as time went on.





King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen

2490–2472 BC

Greywacke sandstone

**Kouros**

An archaic Greek sculptural image of a young athletic man, usually nude, standing with one foot in front of the other.

4. “Peplos Kore”

In Greek sculpture, men tend to be nudes and women are clothed. The clothing was typically **peplos**, which is a type of draped gown, or a **kiton**, which is a tailored or sewn piece of clothing.

Take a look at the image below of the “Peplos Kore”:





Peplos Kore (representation of Artemis or Athena)

530 BC

Marble

This statue is thought to be a representation of the goddess Artemis or the goddess Athena. Notice how stiff it is in appearance while still having some attempts at **naturalism**, such as the feminine curvature of its physical features. Again, it has the archaic smile.



TERMS TO KNOW

Peplos

A robe or shawl worn by women in ancient Greece

Naturalism

In a work of art, the quality of appearing lifelike and natural

5. “Kore from Acropolis”

This next life-sized statue, the **Kore** from the Acropolis, is about 5 feet 4 inches tall. It was found, like the “Calf Bearer,” in a state of disrepair at the Acropolis in Athens. Still considered archaic, it is much more realistic in natural depiction, compared to the “Peplos Kore.”





Kore from Acropolis

520 BC

Marble

Notice the attention to detail above. The natural depiction in the draping of cloth is evident, but it's less refined in the realism of the wet drapery technique used by the artist Thaddeus many years later.



TERM TO KNOW

Kore

An archaic Greek sculpture of a young woman wearing loose robes

6. “Krition Boy”

Eventually, sculpture and art began its transition from the archaic style to the classical style of Greek art. The change seems to have coincided with the end of the Greco-Persian wars. The shift to a more idealized representation of the human form correlates with the Grecian notion of the perfection of the human form, particularly in regards to the warriors, heroes, and athletes of that time.

Below is an image of the “Krition Boy,” attributed to the artist Kritios.





Krition Boy by Kritios

480 BC

Marble

Notice in the above image that the smile has disappeared, and it's become a more generic-looking face. The body is remarkably more realistic in its depiction, and it's modeled in what's called a **contrapposto** stance, where the body weight appears to shift to one side of the body. These are all indications of the transition from archaic to classical styles of art.



TERM TO KNOW

Contrapposto

A naturalistic pose in which the human figure places most of the weight on one foot, resting the other foot and creating a slight tilt in the pelvis

7. “Riace Warrior” and “Spear Bearer”

Bronze casting techniques became more refined as time went on. These techniques allowed artists a greater degree of freedom in the way they could pose their models, because of the inherent strength of bronze.

Below is a sculpture of the “Riace Warrior,” which is made of cast bronze.





Warrior from Riace

450 BC

Bronze (cast)

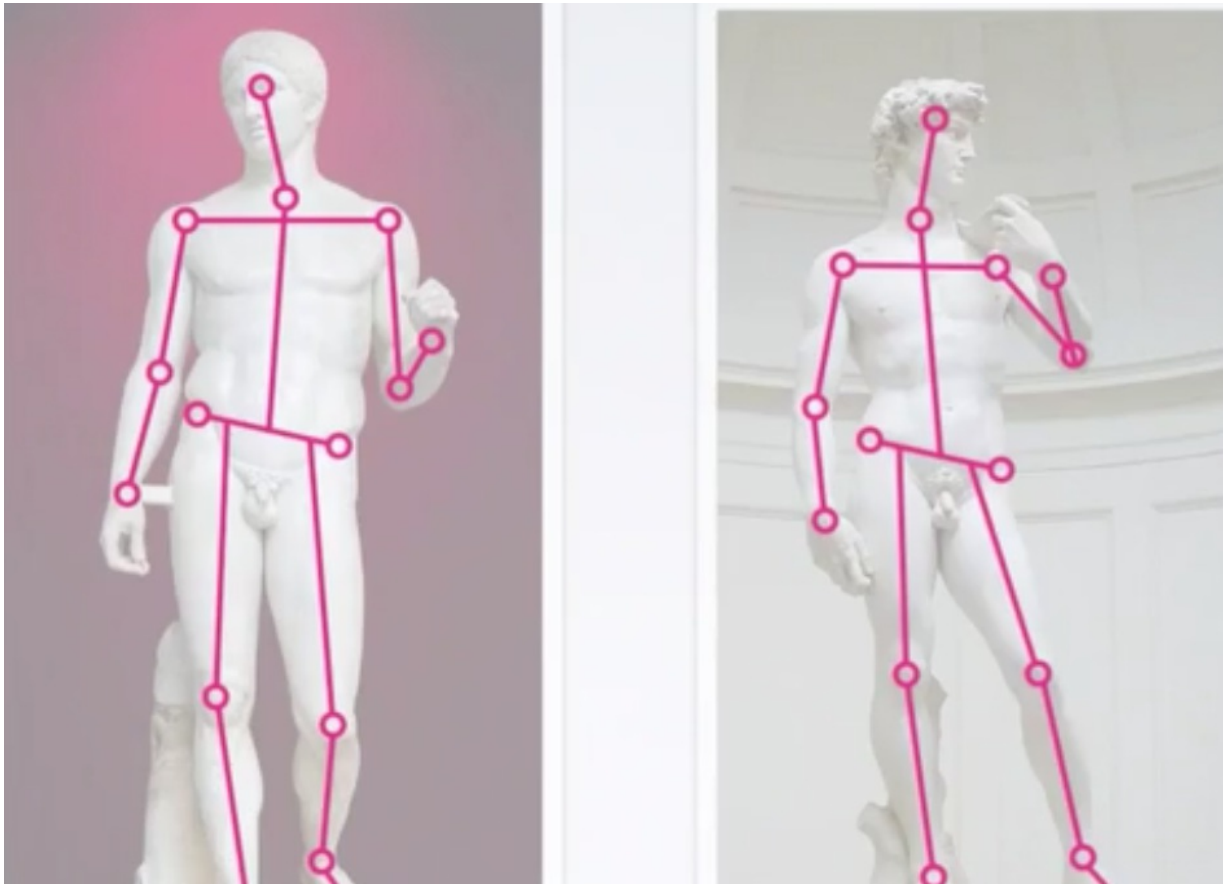
Notice the stylized hair, idealized body, and contrapposto stance.



DID YOU KNOW

A contrapposto is a way of modeling a figure to give it a sense of natural posture, as well as a sense of movement. It's almost as if the sculptor has captured the model in transition, kind of frozen in time.

➔ EXAMPLE Here are two sculptures: the “Spear-Bearer” or “Doryphoros” on the left and Michelangelo’s *David* on the right, which is about 2,000 years younger. Notice the superimposed armature. This is an example of contrapposto.



The “Doryphoros” sculpture, below, by the artist Polykleitos, is the consummate depiction of the classical Greek human ideal. This marble sculpture was created in 440 BC. It is a perfect rendering of weight distribution and a classical example of contrapposto.





Doryphoros (spear bearer) by Polykleitos

440 BC

Marble (copy of the bronze original)



Note the tree trunk in the lower left-hand corner and the little piece that connects the arm to the leg. These support pieces were not uncommon in Roman art. They indicate that the original was not marble, but bronze. This is a Roman marble copy.

8. Canon of Polykleitos

The “Doryphoros” sculpture, pictured above, was the masterpiece of the artist Polykleitos and an example used to illustrate the **canon of Polykleitos**, which was essentially the quantification of beauty into a set of measurable and applicable laws. The musculature, while idealized, is striking in how organic it appears.

Classical Greek art and architecture used the human body as a model, in that the whole is a harmonious collection of parts that are proportional to each other. Polykleitos used a rule of heads, as opposed to the Egyptian rule of fists, in determining the height of his figures. He felt that the ideal proportion for the height to head ratio was 8 to 1, or that the figure was eight heads tall.



TERM TO KNOW

Canon of Polykleitos

A system of ideal proportions for the human figure, seen in the “Doryphoros” by Polykleitos, in which the size of the head was 1/8 of the total height of the figure



SUMMARY

The human figure in Greek sculpture was essential. Over time, there was an evolution in sculpture as it changed from an archaic style to one that idealized the human form. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Greek sculpture**.

Images of artwork were used to guide you through this evolution in Greek sculpture. You looked at: “Calf Bearer”, “Peplos Kore”, “Kore from Acropolis”, “Krition Boy”, “Riace Warrior” and “Spear Bearer”.

Finally, the **canon of Polykleitos** was explored. Remember, Polykleitos used heads as a measurement, as opposed to fists.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Canon of Polykleitos

A system of ideal proportions for the human figure, seen in the Doryphoros by Polykleitos, in which the size of the head was 1/8 of the total height of the figure.

Contrapposto

A naturalistic pose in which the human figure places most of the weight on one foot, resting the other foot and creating a slight tilt in the pelvis.

Kore

An archaic Greek sculpture of a young woman wearing loose robes.

Kouros

An archaic Greek sculptural image of a young athletic man, usually nude, standing with one foot in front of the other.

Naturalism

In a work of art, the quality of appearing lifelike and natural.

Peplos

A robe or shawl worn by women in ancient Greece.