

13 Art Materials Children Should Know



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bone, ivory and wood



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What materials do artists use to make works of art?

Lots of materials! If you explore the pages of this book you will discover that there are no limits to the kinds of materials found in art.

Since ancient times people have learned to transform the materials around them into beautiful things. Wood, stone and animal bones were among the first materials that people fashioned to make objects with a magical or religious meaning. These were the first works of art.

Over time artists have learned to use other materials, while at the same time evolving and perfecting new techniques for working with them. Some techniques were handed down from generation to generation, while others were the fruit of continuous innovation and experiment.

In this book you will find very old works of art side by side with modern art. By seeing the old and the new together, you'll discover how the same basic materials can be worked in many different ways, with many different techniques, and with an eye to what the artist was trying to communicate.

It doesn't matter whether an artwork is made with gold or with garbage. What's important is that it's the creation of an artist, a person who has chosen art as a medium to express himself and the world around him.

Difficult words are explained here.

45 • Glossary



42 • When garbage becomes art



40 • New materials, new ways to express art



36 • Materials combined



30 • Wool, cotton, silk: the texture of art



32 • Looking for colors




Material:
Bone, ivory, wood

Tools:
Chisel, carving knife, and other cutting and modelling tools

Used since:
Palaeolithic Era
(ca. 40,000 years ago)

First artworks: bone, ivory and wood

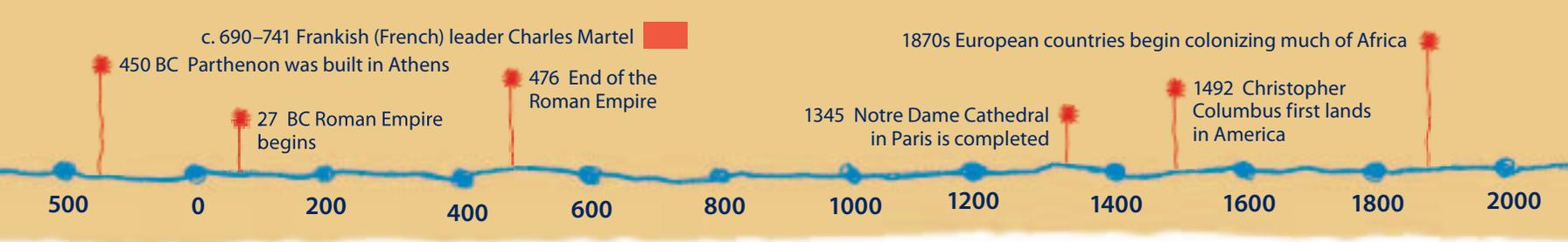
In the safety of dark caves, thousands of years ago, prehistoric people learned how to create the first sculptures from simple materials such as stone, wood and bones.

For thousands of years in the heart of the French Pyrenees mountains, the cave of Mas-d’Azil has preserved the bones of prehistoric* animals—wooly mammoths, wooly rhinos and cave bears. Among these bones archaeologists* also found a remarkable treasure: a reindeer horn only 32 cm (12.6 in) long and carved by an unknown prehistoric artist almost 20,000 years ago!

At one end of the horn this skillful artist depicted a chamois goat in the act of turning its head towards its own tail, where two little birds are sitting! The sculpture is incredibly lifelike, which you can see in the chamois’ lively and attentive look, its legs ready to spring for a big jump, and its accurately carved hooves. It was this careful attention to detail that allowed modern-day experts to determine exactly what animal the artist was depicting.

Perhaps at this point you are wondering: “But what was this object used for?” Archaeologists now believe that it was a tool used by prehistoric people to throw spears farther and faster. The three holes at the base of the stick probably served to fix the tool to the shaft of the spear.

Inside the cave archaeologists also found other things, such as scrapers, needles, wooden spears and decorated pebbles. But none of these



Spear thrower,
ca. 20,000–13,000 BC,
reindeer horn,
Les Mas d’Azil Prehistoric
Museum, Les Mas d’Azil,
France

This carving of a chamois goat, part of an ancient spear-throwing tool, shows how accurately cave-dwelling people could reproduce the animals they hunted.

objects could compare with the beauty of the carved hunting tool. It is truly a masterpiece!

The Mas d'Azil spear thrower is just one example of many tools from the Paleolithic* period with remarkably realistic details. But why did prehistoric* artists reproduce the forms of animals in objects that were made for practical uses?

Did you know?
This spear-throwing tool was found during the last century, during some construction work for a road that now runs partially through the cave of Mas-d’Azil.

Mask, Luba people,
late 19th – early 20th
century, wood and plant
fibers, Ethnological
Museum, Berlin, Germany

Traditional African masks,
which sometimes look
like animal heads, were
often worn to help peo-
ple enter into contact
with the natural world.



The simple answer: they may have wanted
to make something beautiful!

A beautiful object can make you happy, especially
when you show it to others. In fact, archaeologists*
now think that thousands of years ago, something so
beautiful and special as the spear thrower would have brought
prestige — and even magical powers — to its owner.

Perhaps by reproducing the shape of an animal on the spear thrower,
the prehistoric artist wanted to empower this object to make its owner
more successful at hunting: like a good luck charm!

We see something similar in the masks of many African tribal cultures.
These peoples believed that by wearing the masks, they could enter in
direct contact with the forces of nature and the divine. The forms of the
masks vary widely from tribe to tribe. What all of them have in common
are the materials with which they are made: wood, straw and natural
fibres.

Wood was also used as a support structure upon which to attach marvel-
ous ivory sculptures. These objects became popular in Europe during

the Byzantine* period. Ivory, a bone-like material, is rare because it comes from the tusks of elephants. By carefully carving and polishing ivory, artists can make amazingly intricate works of art, such as the tablet shown below. At the center of the tablet is a Roman emperor triumphant on his horse, blessed by a Winged Victory (to his right) and by Jesus Christ (above). Notice how the emperor and horse seem to jump right out of the background!

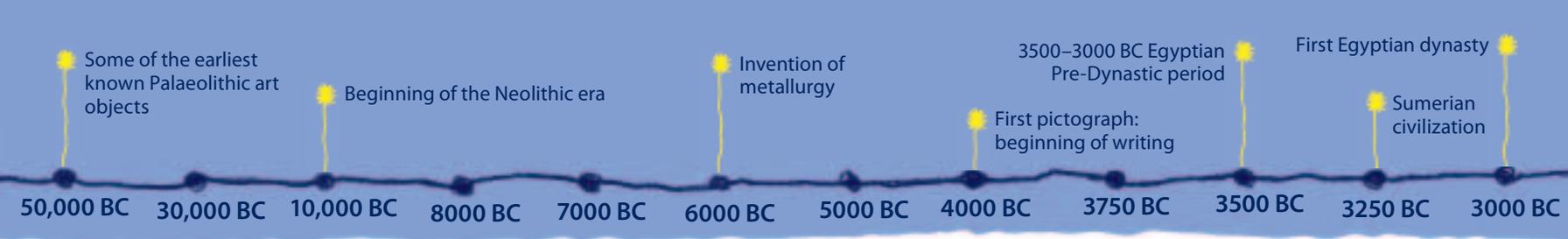


'The Barberini Ivory',
6th century, ivory, Louvre,
Paris, France

This gleaming ivory tablet originally had five intricately carved panels. As you can see, one of the panels (on the right) is missing. Still, we're lucky to have so much of an artwork that is now 1,500 years old!

Quiz

This is not the only artwork in the book that depicts an emperor. On what page can you find another one?



When art celebrates power

Gold was one of the first metals discovered by prehistoric* people. Since ancient times, because of its brightness and malleability, gold has always been a desirable metal for making jewelry.

On the next page you can see a marvelous example of Mycenaean* art: an ancient mask made of gold. It was found in Greece in the 19th century by German archaeologist* Heinrich Schliemann. This object is the most famous and beautiful of all the masks discovered in tombs from the ancient town of Mycenae. When Schliemann later spoke about the mask, he declared "I have gazed on the face of Agamemnon" because he thought the object belonged to Agamemnon, the commanding chief of the Greek army in Homer's *Odyssey**. Even though we now know that the mask didn't belong to Agamemnon, the discovery brought vast fame to Schliemann and helped promote the study of archaeology. The mask shows the austere face of a bearded man, who was certainly a Mycenaean chief.



Material:

Gold, semiprecious stones

Tools:

Smelting (metal melting) equipment, beading tools, hand drill, polishing materials, measuring tools, hammer, fine-toothed saw

Used since:

Late Neolithic Era (ca. 7000 years ago)



Gold processing has a very long tradition in Greece. The ancient goldsmiths used some very sophisticated techniques, and this mask proves it. It was made of one single gold sheet, which was hammered and chiseled with a high-precision tool to bring out the details.

Mycenaean warriors are known to have been a warrior people, and this aspect of their character is often represented in their art and architecture. As you can imagine, precious and beautiful artifacts like the gold mask were made to celebrate the power of their owners.

1811–1750 BC Babylonian King Hammurabi

c. 570–c. 495 BC Greek mathematician Pythagoras

34 BC

2575–2465 BC: The Great Pyramids of Giza are built

ca. 1600–1100 BC Mycenaean Culture in Mycenae

Beginning of the New Kingdom in Egypt

1336–1327 BC reign of Tutankhamun; 1340 BC bust of Nefertiti

460–450 BC 'The Discobolus', or 'Discus Thrower', by the Greek sculptor Myron

conquered by the Roman Empire

2750 BC

2500 BC

2250 BC

2000 BC

1750 BC

1500 BC

1250 BC

1200 BC

1000 BC

750 BC

500 BC

250 BC



Death mask, known as the Mask of Agamemnon, 16th century BC, gold, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece

This glistening mask from the ancient Greek city of Mycenae was almost certainly made for a king. Modern historians, in fact, believe that Mycenaean kings had their tombs filled with golden treasures!

Quiz

Today, women rather than men tend to wear precious jewelry. Can you find an artwork in the next pages that shows a famous bejeweled lady?





Scarab-shaped breastplate, 14th century BC, gold, lapis lazuli and semiprecious stones, Egyptian National Museum, Cairo, Egypt

Ancient Egyptians often made their precious stone jewelry look like animals. This breastplate is in the shape of a scarab, a kind of beetle that was sacred in Egypt.

Since the beginning of civilization, people have learned how to work semiprecious stones and use them in jewelry and other objects.

Semiprecious stones add prestige and importance to whatever they adorn, and many cultures even attribute magical powers to them.

When you think about the fabulous treasure of King Tutankhamun, you immediately think of gold. Few other places on earth had as many gold objects and artifacts as were found in this Pharaoh's* tomb! With all that gold, most people don't remember the beautiful semiprecious stones that embellish many of King Tut's objects (such as the one shown here). For it was in Egypt where artists most often used semiprecious stones to create rich, multicolored effects in their jewelry.

Very early on, Egyptians started using a wide variety of semiprecious stones, some of which came from within their own territory and many of which were imported from distant and exotic lands (a fact that proves the existence, already at that early time, of numerous trade routes).

One of the most famous stones in Egyptian jewelry is lapis lazuli, which has an unmistakable bright blue color. It comes from an Asian country now known as Afghanistan, with whom the Egyptians had a trade route in the 4th millennium BC. The brightness of this stone is so intense, a famous Italian painter named Giotto, who lived around 1300 AD, would grind it into powder so that he could use it as a pigment to paint the sky!

Another stone much used by the ancient Egyptians was turquoise, with its characteristic blue-green color. The Egyptians mined turquoise in what is now the Sinai Peninsula. Both lapis lazuli and turquoise were often paired with carnelian, whose bright, clear red color stood in strong contrast to their blue shades.



Tip

Some people believe there is a relationship between certain stones and the signs of the zodiac. Do you know your sign and the rock associated with it? To find out, search the web using these clues: birthstones - crystallography.



ca. 3200–1050 BC
Cycladic culture in the
Cycladic Islands

ca. 3000–1100 BC
Minoan Culture
in Crete

ca. 1600–1100 BC
Mycenaean culture
in Mycenae

ca. 900–700 BC
Greek civilization,
Geometric period

776 BC First
Olympic games

594 BC Athens has a new
constitution: the beginning
of democracy

5000 BC 4000 BC 3000 BC 2000 BC 1000 BC 900 BC 850 BC 750 BC 700 BC 650 BC 600 BC 550 BC

Shaping artworks with clay

Clay is an extremely useful raw material. Thanks to its versatility it has been used since ancient times for a multitude of purposes. The first known examples of recorded writing are on clay tablets, which were engraved by Sumerian scribes in what is now Iraq.

Clay is a sedimentary rock* composed of microscopic pieces called granules. The granules are capable of absorbing a large quantity of water, which in turn makes clay soft and easy to mold into almost any shape you want. This explains why clay has been used since prehistoric* times for so many different purposes, from building bricks and tiles to making sculpture. To give you an idea of how popular clay was, remember that the Bible* states that God used clay to create the first person, Adam, in His own image.

Material:

Clay

Tools:

Clay-modelling tools with half-rounded edges, with semi-sharp cutting edges, and with smoothing ends; caliper (measuring tool); wire.

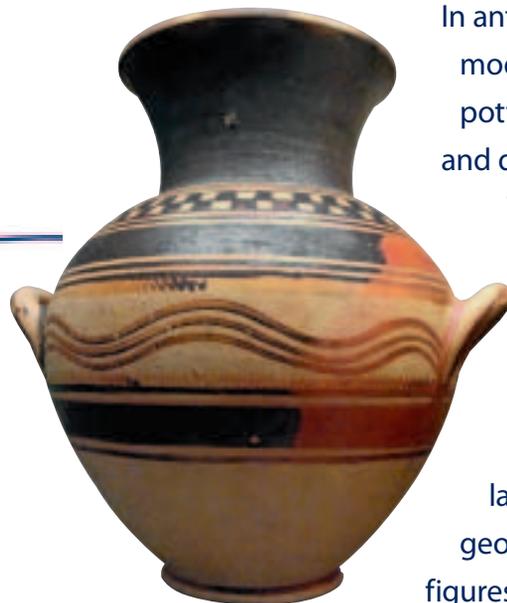
Used since:

Neolithic Era
(ca. 16,000 years ago)

Protogeometric belly-handled amphora,

950–900 BC (Late Protogeometric), terra-cotta, British Museum, London

The earliest Greek pottery had simple geometric designs, as can be seen on this amphora. Such vessels were often used to carry food, olive oil or wine.



In antiquity clay was largely used to model all kinds of pottery. Greek pottery, with many different shapes and decorations, is extremely famous.

The very first Greek vases (ca. 900 BC) were frequently used for religious ceremonies and burials, and they often served as grave markers. Decoration on vases like this one is usually arranged in overlapping bands characterized by geometric decorations or stylized* figures.

510–479 BC Persian Wars

c. 287–212 BC Greek mathematician Archimedes of Syracuse

c. 4 BC–30 AD

Jesus Christ

447 BC
Parthenon
is built in
Athens

440–429 BC Age of
Pericles in Athens

338 BC Philip II of
Macedon conquers
all of Greece.

The Terracotta Warriors
sculpted in China

146 BC Romans
conquer Greece

AD 43 Emperor Claudius.
Romans begins the
conquest of Britain

500 BC

450 BC

400 BC

350 BC

300 BC

250 BC

200 BC

150 BC

100 BC

50 BC

0

50 AD



'Euphronios krater',
ca. 515 BC, clay,
Archaeological Museum,
Cerveteri, Italy

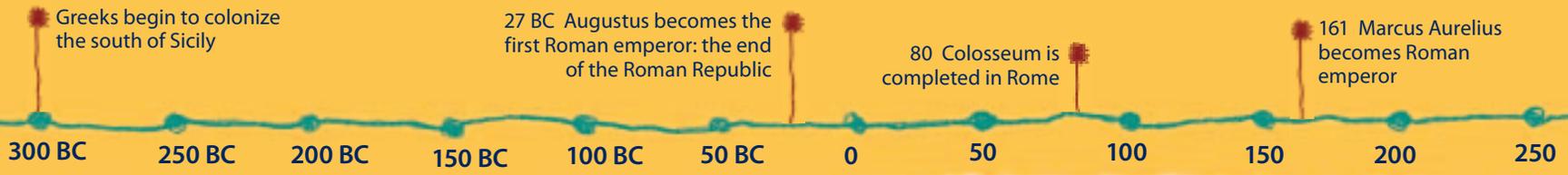
This ancient terra cotta krater, a vessel used to mix wine and water, includes one of the finest examples of Greek painting. It shows the death of Sarpedon, who was the son of Zeus, king of the Greek gods.

You can make your own ancient Greek vase. Get a small clay pot, the kind used for potting small plants. With a pencil, starting from the upper edge, trace parallel lines around the circumference of the vase so as to form bands about 2 cm (1 in) apart. Inside these bands draw simple geometric shapes all around the vase. Finally, mark the lines with a black marker.

Over time, the techniques and decorative styles varied significantly, becoming particularly elaborate during the 5th century BC, when red figures began to stand out from their black background. The vase you see on the right is a magnificent example of this very refined style.

Did you Know?

Do you see the two winged figures on the painted krater (above)? They are meant to represent Sleep and Death. They are helping Hermes, messenger of the gods, as he carries the dead body home.



Casting beauty

The discovery of metals played an important part in human history.

Bronze, a mix of copper and tin, was so important that it gave its name to an entire historical period: the Bronze Age* (from ca. 3300 BC to 600 BC). Copper and tin are metals extracted from under the ground. When melted together at a high temperature they become another metal called bronze, which is very strong and stable. Owing to its particular properties, bronze was first used to make many different objects, from tools to weapons. Beginning around 2000 BC it also became common in art. The first bronze artifacts we have are small statuettes. They are very simple and highly stylized, mostly depicting warriors and deities. Over time people became more expert in working with bronze, and by the 5th century BC artists were making statues on a much larger scale.

On the next page you can admire the beautiful equestrian statue* that depicts the great Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Examine it carefully:



Jean Arp,
'The Shell of Venus',
1958, bronze, Städel
Museum, Frankfurt
am Main, Germany

Unlike Roman art, many modern sculptures are not made to reproduce anything in nature. This work by French artist Jean Arp seems to come directly out of the sculptor's imagination!



Material:

Copper, tin

Tools:

Molds, furnace,
hammer, chisel,
cutting disks, various
grinding and sanding
tools

Used since:

Bronze Age
(ca. 5000 years ago)