

Ancient Greece

A room by room guide



Please note:

This guide is intended as a brief introduction to the contents and character of the principal rooms containing Greek material. We advise you to make a preparatory visit before bringing your group. If you want to use a room which is indicated as liable to closure, please let us know when you book your visit. We will do our best to ensure that the room is available for you, but temporary staff shortages or essential work may make it necessary to close areas without notice, so it is important that you always plan flexible work. Please book all visits with the Box Office on 020-7323-8181.

Lower Floor Rooms

Ground Floor galleries

Two tall pillars of green marble, from a huge tomb at Mycenae, frame the doorway to Room 11.

Room 11 [about 3200 – 2000 BC] has prehistoric material mainly from the Greek islands including Cycladic figurines. These stylised carvings of human figures have influenced a wide range of artists, including Henry Moore.

Room 12 [about 2500 – 1100 BC] has Bronze Age objects from Minoan Crete and from Mycenaean Greece. These include a statuette of a bull leaper, a huge storage jar, pots showing sea creatures such as octopuses and restored frescoes from the palace at Knossos.

Rooms 11 & 12 form a through route and so can be very busy. As an alternative, Mycenaean pottery upstairs in the Cyprus Gallery (Room 72) has good images of animals for drawing.



Marble Cycladic figurine.
(2600-2400 BC)

Room 13 [about 1050 – 520 BC] is a large room with material from early Greece, from mainland Greek city-states like Athens, Sparta and Corinth, the Greek islands, the coastal Greek cities of Asia Minor (East Greece), and Greek territory in Egypt (Naucratis). The large sculptures are from Apollo's oracle at Didyma.

- There are bronze helmets from Corinth and many battle scenes on the pottery.
- Corinthian pottery with its patterns of plants and animals has a case to itself. Its influence spread to Athens, as illustrated by the big bowl in its own case, the Sophilos bowl, which has all the Greek gods and goddesses painted around the top. Their names are added next to them.
- Other pottery produced in Athens has scenes of gods, mortals and monsters in the black-figure technique.
- There are three main displays of exquisite gold jewellery, some of which was buried with the dead, and some of which was offered at the great sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus. From Ephesus come the earliest coins of the Greek world.
- Sculpture and relieves depict the human figure and animals such as lions. At the far end of the room are two statues, one of a clothed girl, the other of a naked youth.

This room can be good for children to work in as the main through route cuts across just one end of it.



A drinking cup from Corinth with a hound in the black-figure technique (670-650 BC)



A bronze figurine from Sparta of a girl running (520-500 BC)

Room 14 [about 520 – 500 BC] is a very small room leading into Room 15. It contains pottery showing the change from the black-figure technique to the red-figure and other new techniques. The big pot showing Herakles fighting the Nemean Lion in red-figure has a design in black-figure on the back.

Room 15 [5th century BC] has material from Greece in the early classical and classical periods.

- On the walls and in the centre, is sculpture from tombs found in Lykia (now in Turkey). On the Harpy Tomb in the centre of the room you can see winged harpies or sirens carrying off the dead.
- There are many small terracotta figures, some of which may have been toys. Younger children may like the man riding on a goose. Other terracottas are figures of goddesses offered at temples.
- Flat terracotta plaques have scenes from myth on them, like Bellerophon and the Chimaera and Perseus and Medusa.
- Some pottery vessels have scenes of everyday life, like girls preparing wool for spinning, and you can also see scenes of drinking and feasting.
- Mythology, with scenes of heroes, is found on large and spectacular pots, like the huge mixing bowl for preparing with and water with two scenes of Achilles at war.
- You will also find a pot showing Perseus escaping with the gorgon's head and one showing Theseus fighting the Minotaur.

This room has open space in which pupils could be gathered together for discussions and briefing.



The inside of an Athenian drinking cup showing a scene from a symposium (drinking party)

Room 16 [late 5th century BC] is a small, quiet room up a short flight of stairs, but is sometimes closed. It contains the sculpted frieze from the temple of Apollo at Bassae arranged as if it were still inside the temple. The frieze shows battles between Greeks and Amazons and between Lapiths, a Greek tribe, and centaurs. There are many vivid scenes: Heracles can be seen in his lion-skin brandishing his club; two centaurs are beating a Lapith into the earth; two Lapith women have taken refuge at a statue of Athena. The whole composition is very exciting with lots of billowing cloaks and even quite young children will like exploring it.

Room 17 is very large and can get congested and noisy as it is a throughfare into the Parthenon Room. It holds the Nereid Monument, a large tomb from Lykia built early in the fourth century BC. It is a miniature temple in design, in the Ionic style.

- There are friezes showing details of battles being fought by people in Greek armour, some of them against Amazons. There are details of a city under siege. One panel, on the right hand wall in front of the tomb, shows what seem to be ambassadors approaching a Persian official (called a satrap).
- The tomb is called the Nereid Monument because of the wonderfully carved Nereids, nymphs who were daughters of the sea-god Nereus. In Greek mythology they carried off the dead across the ocean to the other world.
- The two lions are the guardians of the tomb.

There are benches grouped together in this room.



Relief from the Nereid monument (390-380 BC)

Room 18: The Parthenon Sculptures.

The Parthenon was the temple to Athena Parthenos, Athena the Virgin. It was begun in about 448/7 BC and dedicated in 438 BC, although not fully finished until about 432 BC. It contained an 11 metre high statue of Athena in gold and ivory.

The three types of sculpture on the Parthenon are: the pedimental sculpture which is carved completely in the round; the almost square metopes which are carved in very high relief, and the frieze, which is carved in very low relief.

- The sculpture of the two **pediments** (gable ends) of the temple showed stories about Athena. The east end showed the moment after her miraculous birth from the head of her father Zeus. The west pediment showed the contest between Athena and her uncle Poseidon for control of the territory of Athens. It was badly damaged when the Venetians tried to remove the sculptures.
- The **frieze** shows a long procession of horsemen, chariots, sacrificial animals, people and gods probably celebrating the Panathenaia, the great festival of Athena. The frieze background was bright blue, other parts of the sculpture may have been painted and objects like spears and the reins of horses were added in bronze.
- More than thirty **metopes** survive, out of the ninety-two in total. The ones in the gallery show the battle between the Lapiths, a Greek tribe, and the Centaurs.

The side galleries contain pieces of architecture and sculpture from the Parthenon and a full-size cast of the west frieze and of a corner of the building above a column. These galleries also set the Parthenon sculptures in their context on the building and on the Acropolis. The southern gallery contains a very useful video showing how the three types of sculpture were placed on the building and how the frieze is composed.



Frieze from the Parthenon (438-432 BC)

Room 19 [late 5th century BC] is sometimes closed, so please check before your visit. Behind the Nereid tomb is a doorway leading through to Room 19, which contains a column, a piece of architectural decoration and a Caryatid from the temple at Athens called the Erechtheion, built at the end of the fifth century BC. The Caryatid is herself a column.

Also in this room are several carved grave stones (stelae), some pots and bronze mirrors. One pot shows all the adventures of Theseus, another shows Herakles in the Garden of the Hesperides.

Room 20 [4th century BC] (also closed at times) has the large tomb of the ruler Payava from Lykia, plus gravestones from Athens. There are some large pots for the olive oil that was the prize at the Panathenaic Games at Athens and many small terracotta votive offerings, bronze vessels and mirrors.

Room 20a [520 – 300 BC] (also closed at times) holds the museum's reserve collection of Greek red-figure and white-ground pots. The pots

are arranged by shape, allowing an opportunity to help students learn and identify shapes and types.

Room 21 [4th century BC] has some of the remains of sculptures from the most famous tomb of the Greek world, the Mausoleum, built for Maussollos, ruler of Halikarnassos (on the coast of Turkey). Stairs to Room 77.

- The drawing shows how it may have looked.
- One of the four huge horses from the top is here, plus a lion and two statues of members of the royal family of Halikarnassos. The horse was still wearing its metal bridle when it crashed down, possibly during an earthquake.
- The sheer size of the sculptures, along with the emotion depicted in the frieze showing Amazons and Greeks fighting, give an insight into one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



Horse from the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos (350 BC)

Room 22 [323 – 31 BC] has material from the Hellenistic period, following the death of Alexander the Great. There are portrait busts of Alexander, the playwright Sophocles, the poet Homer and others. There is gold jewellery, seal stones, terracotta figurines and sculptures including one of a seated Demeter and a section of a column from the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus with Hermes and others.

Room 23 [400 BC – 100 AD] has two statues of Aphrodite bathing, statues of athletes and a large statue of a bearded Dionysos. However, it is a through passage to the Nereid Monument and the Parthenon Gallery and tends to be busy.

Basement Rooms

Room 77 (Greek Architecture) may be closed at times, however closures in rooms 9-12 do not affect it as stairs lead there from the end of the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery (Room 4).

- It contains enormous early Ionic capitals from Ephesus, and pieces of Doric architecture from the Temple of Hephaistos at Athens and from the Acropolis at Athens.
- There is a capital from the Temple of Athena at Priene, which is the model for the colonnade of the British Museum.
- Other Corinthian capitals use the acanthus plant as part of their decoration, and sometimes animal heads or a theatre mask.

Room 78 (frequently closed) contains a range of stone inscriptions and is excellent for showing students examples of Greek lettering on different types of objects. This room is affected by any closure of Room 77.

Rooms 79 – 81 are closed until further notice.

Rooms 82 – 85 [about 1st century BC – 3rd century AD] (frequently closed) have sculpture of the Roman period, much of it copying of adapting Greek originals. There are some appealing greyhounds in Room 84, and the famous statue of the discus thrower can be seen on the South stairs. One side of a large sarcophagus showing the Labours of Herakles is on the wall of Room 83.

These rooms are quiet and when open are very good places for detailed observational drawing.

Upper Floor Rooms

You can get to the first floor rooms either by going up the main stairs from the Front Hall, turn sharp right at the top of the stairs, and go through the HSBC Money gallery to Room 69, the Greek and Roman Life room. Or, use the west stairs at the far end of the Egyptian sculpture gallery, Room 4, and turn right at the top of the stairs into Room 73.

Room 69: The Greek and Roman Life Room is the best place to find out about life in ancient Greece, but can get very busy indeed. A large number of the objects illustrated in the Eyewitness Ancient Greece book are in this room. Some of the cases display both Greek and Roman material, which can be hard to distinguish from each other – encourage students to use the labels to help. Other cases are entirely Greek or entirely Roman. There is a low level water pool and fountain in one corner of the room.

Cases containing material on Greek topics are given below.

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. marriage | 19. chariot racing |
| 2. burial customs | 21. drama |
| 3. medicine | 22. music |
| 4. dress | 24. the Athenian festival |
| 5. spinning and weaving | gods of the Panathenaia |
| 6. women | 25. trade and transport |
| 7. reading and writing | 26. potters and carpenters |
| 8. children | 27. metal working |
| 9. games | 28. gold & silver smithing |
| 10. furniture | 29. steal-stone engraver |
| 13. water supply | 30. stone carver |
| 14. transport amphorae | 31. the drinking party |
| 15. farming | 32. gods and goddesses |
| 16. armour | 33. sacrifice |
| 18. boxing and wrestling | 34. minor and Eastern |

There are also pots showing the exploits of Herakles and Theseus and scenes from the Trojan War and the story of Odysseus in wall cases 8 – 15.

The balcony provides a display of Greek and Roman terracotta figures and glass vessels.

Room 71 [3000 – 100 BC] has Etruscan and other material from Italy before the time of the Roman Empire. Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa's painted sarcophagus shows her dressed in the Greek style. There are many objects showing Greek influence and the room offers the opportunity to look at other important peoples of the Classical world.

Room 72 [4500 BC – 330 AD] has wonderful material from early Cyprus, including Greek objects. In case 14 you will find Mycenaean bowls decorated with bulls, fishes and plants.

Room 73 has material found in Greek settlements in south Italy and Sicily.

- In case 27 in one corner is a big pot with the scene of the mother of Herakles, who is about to be burned because her husband suspected her of adultery. Zeus, the adulterer, is ordering the clouds to put out the flames.
- There are several pots illustrating the story of Odysseus, some of which are to be found in cases 44, 63, 66 and 73.
- Cases along one wall, numbers 40 – 44 display material to do with Greek theatre.
- Armour worn by Greeks in Southern Italy in the mid 6th century is in corner cases 38 – 39.

In all these rooms there are quiet areas away from the central thoroughfare. The rooms are also carpeted.

The influence of Alexander the Great's empire can also be seen in the Hotung gallery, Room 33, on the north side of the museum and in Room 52, The Iranian Gallery. In Room 33, look for sculptures showing a strong Greek influence from Gandhara in modern day Pakistan in the third bay on the left, when you are standing in the centre of the gallery facing the long wall of windows.



Etruscan cup (600-575 BC)

Ancient Greece: topic by topic

History topics	Relevant displays	Room number Case number
The city state: Athens	18 The Parthenon sculptures, 15 vases, 69: 24 Festivals	
Sparta	13:2	
Citizens and slaves	69	
The economy (also food and farming)	69: 15, 25, 26 2 Crete 72 Cyprus	
Sea transport	69: 25	
Everyday life	69 13, 15 72 Cyprus	
Writing	69: 7	
Sport (also the Olympics)	69: 18, 19, 20 South stairs discus-thrower	
Greek religion and thought	19 Gravestones 69 wall cases	
Scientist, philosophers, writers	22 Sophocles, Homer & others	
The Arts: vases, sculpture	11,12,13,14,15,19, 20, 69, 72, 73 Vases 11 – 23, 69, 72, 73 Sculpture	
Architecture	16 Bassae temple 18 Parthenon 19 Erechtheion 15, 17, 20 tombs 77	
Persian wars	51 Ancient Iran 19 reliefs from Temple of Athena Nike	
Warfare	13, 69, 73 Weapons, helmets and armours 13, 15, 69 Vases showing warriors	
Legacy	70 Rome 41, 42 Byzantine Empire The British Museum building	

Ancient Greece: introductory reading list

Lucilla Burn	The British Museum Book of Greek Art	British Museum Press
Ian Jenkins	Greek and Roman Daily Life	BMP
Judith Swaddling	The Ancient Olympic Games	BMP`
Mary Beard and John Henderson	A very short introduction to Classics	Oxford University Press
John Boardman (Editor)	History of the Classical World	Oxford University Press
Paul Cartledge	Illustrated History of Ancient Greece	Cambridge University Press

For younger readers:

Emma McAllister	Pocket Timeline of Ancient Greece	BMP
Sean Sheehan	The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece	BMP
Sandy Ransford	Fun Book: Ancient Greece	BMP
Richard Woff	The Ancient Greece Olympics	BMP
Richard Woff	The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Greek Heroes and Heroines	BMP
The British Museum	Ancient Greeks Activity Book	BMP
The British Museum	Ancient Greeks Colouring Book	BMP
Anne Pearson	Eye Witness Guide: Ancient Greece	Dorling Kindersley