

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Greeks Drama, Music and Dance

The Greek concept of worship and dedication was far broader than the modern western idea of prayer. The gods, creators of mankind, were praised by demonstrations and examples of human achievement; these activities encompassed many areas of life including athletics, drama, music, dance, art and architecture.

Drama

The words 'drama', meaning communication through action, and 'theatre', a place where things are seen, both derive from the Greek. Plays were performed at the annual festival in honour of the god Dionysus and as such were part of a religious festival which took the form of a competition. Plays were divided into tragedies and comedies and a panel of judges awarded plain wreaths as prizes to the winning playwrights. The stories were based on the well-known traditional myths; but it was the writer's own interpretation that was of interest. The writer was also the director and took charge of rehearsals and the music and choreography which were essential to the performance.



As drama occupied a central place in the life of the Ancient Greeks, theatres were highly-valued buildings placed in prime sites. They were often built near temples on the curves of hillsides with seats arranged in tiers down the hill overlooking a circular stage. The capacity of these theatres was huge, often over 15,000, but hearing was not a problem as the acoustics were superb.

The actors wore masks partly so that those seated far away could see the faces more clearly and partly because the masks presented the audience with a 'pure' representation of emotion. The women's parts were all played by men and masks therefore also helped to define the character portrayed. The masks worn in the theatre were made of wood, cork and linen and were very light. Those on display in the Museum would not have been worn - they are models which may have had symbolic or religious significance.

Actor playing the part of a runaway slave
Case 10, Object 40, Museum number GR.85b.1937
Figurine made at Tanagra c. 325-100 BC

The disobedient or runaway slave was a standard character of New Comedy, a type of drama that developed around 320-300 BC. This slave has taken refuge in an altar, probably in an attempt to protect himself from punishment. New Comedy featured ordinary people, such as lovers kept apart by angry parents and it specialised in unexpected changes of fortune - the slave may prove to be a prince.

Music

Music was crucial to dramatic performances; actors chanted rhythms to a musical accompaniment and sung at moments of high emotion. Music was also of great importance in everyday life and was part of social events, family and religious ceremonies and work. The instruments most commonly used and depicted were the *lyre*, the *kithara* (a more elaborate lyre), the *aulos* (a wind instrument often called a double flute, but which had a reed and was more akin to the modern oboe), and percussion instruments such as drums, cymbals and castanets. The *syrinx* (pan pipes), was a pastoral instrument and was not used in formal settings.

Although we have some knowledge of their instruments, the musical sounds of the Ancient Greeks are lost to us. There was a basic system of musical notation based on the alphabetic form.

**Statuette of the Goddess Cybele, freestanding
Made in Attica, Greece, about AD 100-200, Marble.
Museum number: Loan Ant.103.92**

This small figure was probably a dedication at a sanctuary. Cybele, a fertility goddess who originated in Phrygia, Asia Minor, is seated on a throne, holding a bowl in her right hand and a musical instrument (tympanum) in her left. A small lion sits on her lap.



Dance

Dance was regarded as a way of maintaining agility and health and played an important part in theatrical performances, gymnastics, military training, and social and religious ceremonies. Dancing, like drama, was associated with the god Dionysus, who, as god of wine, loosened care and inspired music and poetry. Dances appear to have sometimes been wild and passionate. Dionysus is often depicted accompanied by dancing *satyrs* and *maenads*.