Course sample

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Open College of the Arts

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Understanding Art 1:

Western Art

A Picture Gallery Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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Times are given here as a guideline: you may want to spend more

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Before you start

Welcome to ***Understanding Art 1: Western Art***. Your OCA **Student Handbook** should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA courses, so keep it to hand as you work through this course.

Course aims

This course will help you to gain a broad understanding of the development of visual culture in the west from Ancient Greece to the present day. You'll develop your observational skills and learn to respond to art historical theory in a practical way, using drawing, painting, annotation and photography, as well as studying a written text and doing your own research.

By the end of the course, you'll be able to:

- demonstrate a basic understanding of the history of western art in chronological order, from classical to modern times
- analyse and research a work of art
- investigate art in a methodical way and research and record key points
- show that you can reflect perceptively upon your own learning experience.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your **Student Handbook**.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of studying art and/or art history so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help them to understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone. You may agree, for instance, that you'll scan or photograph sketchbook images and upload them to the OCA website or a free website such as Flickr or Picassa in between tutorials, if you need your tutor to comment on something in particular, or if you have a problem that you need help with.

Send your tutor a cross-section of the work that you've done for each part of the course in

addition to your assignment piece(s). For example, you could scan or photograph the relevant pages of your learning log and email them to your tutor. Or you could post your learning log as an online blog on the OCA website so that your tutor can see how your work is developing between assignments. It's particularly important that your tutor sees regular evidence of your development if you're planning to have your work on this course formally assessed.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your **Student Handbook** at an early stage in the course. Your **Assessment and how to get qualified** study guide gives more detailed information about assessment and accreditation. For assessment you'll need to submit:

- the work you've done for Assignments Two to Five
- your learning log or blog url (see 'Your learning log' below).

Your learning log

Your learning log is an integral part of this and every other OCA course. If you're new to OCA courses, read your **Keeping sketchbooks and learning logs** study guide for further information.

Use your learning log to record your progress through the course. Your learning log should contain:

- the work you do for each exercise (clearly labelled)
- images (e.g. postcards, images from the internet) that you've collected
- catalogues and guidebooks to exhibitions and places you've visited, together with your comments and reflections on your visit
- cuttings of interest from newspapers, journals and magazines
- your thoughts on the work you produce for each project
- your reflections on the reading you do
- your tutor's reports on assignments and your reactions to these.

Planning ahead

This level 1 course represents 400 hours of learning time.You'll probably spend around 35% of your time on practical work; the rest of your time will be spent reading, researching and writing about art in your learning log. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 8 hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Understanding Art 1: Western Art is divided into five parts, corresponding to the five course assignments. Your first assignment is a diagnostic assignment which will help your tutor get to know you and your work and decide how best to support you. Your tutor will mark this assignment but it won't form part of your assessment folio if you decide to have your work formally assessed. The review that you'll submit as part of your fifth and final assignment will be agreed between you and your tutor, so you'll need to have some ideas mapped out by the time you submit your fourth assignment – preferably earlier – so that your tutor can decide how best to help you with this.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers exercises to develop your understanding of art and relate it to your own artistic practice. The exercises slowly build up and feed into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

Managing your time

Each part of the course should take about 80 hours to complete. You'll need to decide how to divide this time in a way that works effectively for you.

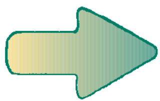
The time you spend on each part of the course will depend on how quickly you work, the time available to you, how easy or hard you find each exercise, and how quickly you want to complete the course. Don't worry if you take more or less time than suggested provided that you're not getting too bogged down in a particular part of the course and that your tutor is happy with the work you're producing. If it helps, draft a rough study plan and revisit this at the end of each part. The course structure is intended to be flexible, but it's always useful to bear deadlines in mind.

Reading

A large proportion of your reading for this course will be from your set text, Honour, H. and Fleming, J. (2009) *A World History of Art* (revised 7th edition). London: Laurence King. You'll do most of this reading during the first half of the course, so you might want to allow slightly more time for the earlier parts. You'll find a further reading list at the back of this course guide and on the OCA website

Audio-visual material

You can download the nine-hour video sequence ***Art of the Western World*** from the OCA website. If you do not have the technology to view the videos online and wish to see them, please contact the OCA office and ask for DVDs to be sent to you. This series is several years old and is slightly old-fashioned in some respects, but it contains a great deal of valuable and relevant material for this course. Try to make time to watch as many of the programmes as you can before you start work on the course then come back to individual programmes at the appropriate point in the course.



Making visits

You'll make ten visits during the course. Start planning your visits now, particularly if you don't live near a major urban centre. To help you, here's a summary.

Part One	A classical building
	A Gothic church
Part Two	An art gallery
	A town or country house
Part Three	A public square
	An artist's studio
Part Four	A portrait gallery
	A cast gallery
Part Five	An interesting interior
	A landscape

There's an alternative to each visit for students who are unable to manage one or more of these visits. Be flexible. If you only go to London once a year, for example, don't pass up the opportunity to make a particular visit because you haven't yet reached that stage in your course.

Collecting and annotating images

As you work through the course, build up your own collection of images, from Ancient Greece and Rome to the present day. These could be postcards or images from guide books, catalogues or magazines. Or search for images on the internet (all students have access to the Bridgeman Education Art Library at www.bridgemaneducation.com. The password is provided on a separate sheet with your course materials). This is your collection so don't feel you have to restrict yourself to images mentioned in this course guide. Follow your own interests and tastes but try to make sure that your collection reflects a wide range of artistic disciplines (painting, drawing, sculpture, architecture) and all the major genres (historical, mythological and religious art, still life, the human figure, interiors and landscape).

At regular intervals throughout the course, you'll be asked to annotate a particular image. Always use the best quality image that you can find for this exercise.

How to start

Take an A4 sheet of paper. Note down the information given on the back of the card, or in the caption to the picture, at the top of the sheet. Now stick your card above the centre of your A4 sheet and draw a line across the bottom of the sheet.

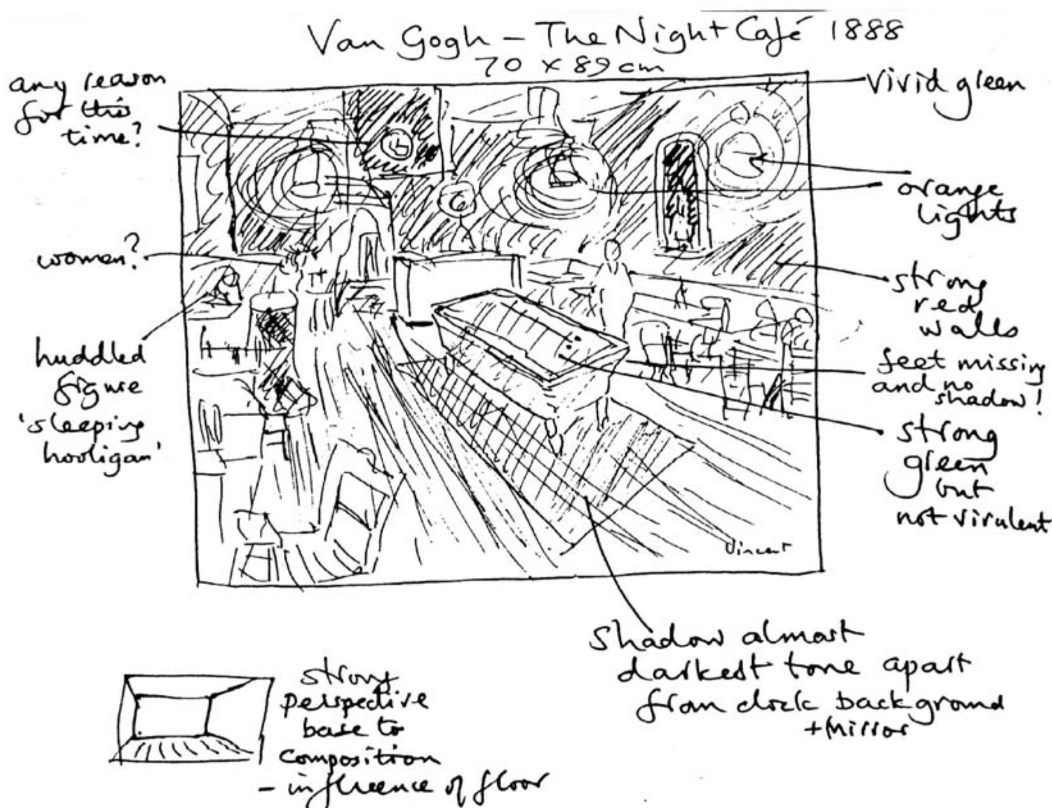
Making notes

Make notes around the card:

- general comments, highlighting why you chose the card
- comments about the card itself, for example the accuracy of the colours (if you've seen the original), whether only part of the picture is shown, or what view of a sculpture is seen
- observations about the elements used in the painting/ sculpture/building, such as:
  lines – thick, thin, etc.
  tones – dark, light, grey, etc.
  textures – coarse, smooth, etc.
  colours – bright, dull, etc.
  space – deep, shallow, etc.
  shapes – square, round, etc.
- observations about how these elements are organised within the painting/sculpture/building:

- to what extent is each element necessary?
- how is variety achieved within the overall unity?
- do some elements dominate?
- are there main stresses, e.g .dominant shapes or colours?
- is there a main rhythm or repetitive element?
- observations about marks (artists sometimes describe all activities of drawing and painting as 'mark making')
- observations about technique
- observations about materials
- notes about information communicated by the artist – subject, narrative, people or places represented, period detail, mood
- notes about the success of the image, its representational skill, whether it tells its story well (if a narrative) or how its presence impresses you.

Around the card, make sketches reflecting the aspects of the image that you can describe visually: linear, tonal, compositional, geometric, technical.



Detail from a student's annotation

Western Art

Part one
Classical and religious art

Imperial portrait of Emperor Caligula 1st century AD

Introduction

There are a number of ways to study art history:

- chronologically – from the earliest preserved artistic remains to the present day
- by genre – the different themes or categories of art (still life, landscape, figure painting, etc.).

In this course, you'll do both.

Parts One and Two, and the first half of Part Three, take a chronological view of art from ancient Greece to the twenty-first century. In the course of this chronological survey, you'll think about some of the major types of artistic representation:

- religious
- mythological
- historical
- symbolic.

The second half of Part Three, and Parts Four and Five, take a more detailed look at the genres of still life, portraiture, figure painting, interiors and landscape. (A further important genre, history painting, is discussed in Part Two).

This course is based on your reading of Honour, H. and Fleming, J. (2009) *A World History of Art* (revised 7th edition). London: Laurence King (WHA). Take some time now to find your way round this book.

A World History of Art is a huge book, but it has been carefully organised to help you assimilate new information. The relevant chapter for this first project is Chapter 4: The Greeks and their Neighbours. Spend some time looking through this chapter now. Don't attempt a detailed reading at this stage.

The Academy of Sciences and Fine Arts Sebastien Le Clerc c1700

Points to note:

- Each chapter starts with a chronological table, outlining the main artistic developments of the time or place under discussion and relating them to the broader historical context. It's worth taking a close look at this before you start reading each chapter. It may help if you can locate what you're reading about in terms of something familiar. For example, you'll see from the chronology at the start of Chapter Four that this chapter deals with a period of approximately 400 years in terms of the visual arts. The first artefact mentioned – the bronze statue of the Helmet-maker – was created about a century after the death of Homer, while the Parthenon was built 70 years or so after the founding of the first Roman republic.

- The 'In Context' boxes take a detailed look at the historical, cultural and artistic context of a particular work or series of works. For example, Chapter Four looks at the cultural context of the Delphi Charioteer, a life-size bronze figure made for the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi c.478 or 474 BC.

- The 'Concepts' boxes look at the philosophy or world view underlying a particular artistic period. In Chapter Four, you'll find a section entitled 'The Ideal: Idealism, Proportion and the 'Canon'' which explains the significance of ancient Greece in the development of western art.

- The 'Sources and Documents' boxes draw your attention to primary sources of information on particular art works or art forms. A source is said to be 'primary' if it originated at around the same time as the object or event it describes, a first-hand account as opposed to an – often much later – second-hand account or 'secondary source'. For example, in Chapter 4 you'll find excerpts from two accounts of the Parthenon written when it was still as originally built.

- Double-page sections deal with particular issues, for example the development of urban planning up to the construction of Athens.

- The glossary at the end of the book explains many of the specialised artistic and architectural terms used throughout the book.

Each project in this course directs you to a particular chapter. The chapters are long and quite detailed so you'll be directed to the sections that are particularly important. Try to make time to read the whole chapter at some point, however.

You'll start this course on western art by going back to where it all began.

Project one **Ancient Greece**

The Greeks of the fifth century believed that the highest aspirations of the spirit could be expressed in a perfection of the human form based on harmony and proportion; that perfection implies the perfection of a universal order.

Donald Strong

The poet Shelley famously said 'We are all Greeks' and certainly the legacy of ancient Greek civilisation is all around us. You may not have seen any Greek paintings, but you'll almost certainly be familiar with the influence of Greek culture in architecture. Think of the columns that adorn many of our public buildings, reflecting the so-called 'classical orders' from simple Doric to elegant Ionian to exuberant Corinthian. But why is it so important for the student of western art to know something about ancient Greek art, in particular Greek art of the fifth century BC?

The Doric temple of Aphaia built c.6th century BC

Classical art – Greek and, later, Roman art – lies at the heart of the western 'canon'. The canon is an important concept but one that can be quite hard to get your head around. In essence, the artistic canon – and similarly the literary canon – refers to the body of works that have traditionally been accepted as 'great' art and therefore of particular value. (The word 'canon' comes from the Greek for a rule or measuring stick.) There is no single identifiable artistic canon, though:

- The western canon is just one example; the Chinese canon, say, will be completely different.
- The term 'western canon' may be further qualified. You might read about the 'academic canon', for example, or the 'modern canon' which would encompass works like Picasso's *Guernica*.
- The canon shifts over time. Artists highly regarded in their own lifetime may fall from favour and be replaced by others. For example, the English landscape artist JMW Turner was not particularly highly thought of until his work was promoted by the respected art critic John Ruskin, but now his work is indisputably part of the British canon (see above), at the very least.

What's indisputable, though, is that the classical tradition – the art of ancient Greece and Rome – is the point of departure for the western canon. As you'll see when you read Chapter 4, this primarily refers to sculpture since few paintings from this era have survived.

The concept of a classically-based canon only came under serious challenge in the nineteenth century, for example with the work of the Impressionists and other artists more concerned with realism than with depicting some sort of 'ideal'. It was in the nineteenth century, too, that the canon expanded to include Gothic art and architecture and Italian art before Raphael (which provided a model for the work of the Pre-Raphaelites). Up to that point, 'canonical' essentially meant 'classical' – which is why Level 1 students of art history need to know something about Greek and Roman art.

The Triumph of Realism George Du Maurier 1879

Exercise: **Thinking about the canon**

Before you start on your reading for this chapter, give some thought to the concept of an artistic canon.

What is the main problem with the idea of a body of great works that other artists try to emulate?

Does the idea of a canon have any relevance today?

Reflect also on this quote from WHA (p.139):

The idealized statues modelled and carved in ancient Greece, much copied in the Roman empire and rediscovered in fifteenth-century Italy, became part of the western artistic canon...They also established a criterion of human beauty that has insidiously conditioned the attitudes of Europeans to themselves and to others, encouraging belief in 'the eternal law that first in beauty should be first in might' as John Keats put it in 'Hyperion' (1818).

Does this imply that idealisation of the human form is in some way dangerous? Why do you think this might be? Make notes in your learning log.

Who decides what's canonical and what's not? Works of art produced within the classical tradition assume a viewer who knows what they're looking at and can interpret it accordingly – in other words, a classically educated social élite. This same social élite controlled the academies that sprung up across Europe after the Renaissance to educate aspiring artists. Clearly the situation is quite different today, when virtually everyone in the west is literate and when there is such open access to the arts, not least via the internet and media like TV and radio. Go and look around your local art gallery, though, and you'll probably find that the choice of works – and the way they're displayed – to a large extent reflects traditional western ideas of what great art is.

Similarly, if you flick through two or three surveys of western art you'll notice the same works appearing over and over again – even in the sections on twentieth and twenty-first century art. Even if many people visiting a gallery have never heard the word 'canonical', there still seems to be a need to be able to point to a body of 'great' works.

Read WHA Chapter Four: The Greeks and their Neighbours.
(All page references are to the 7th revised edition.) Note from the opening paragraphs that Greek civilisation extended over a much wider area than what we think of as Greece today.

Pay special attention to the sections on 'The Classical period' (pp.126–138) and 'Naturalism and idealization' (pp.138–149). Read the short 'Concepts' section on 'The Ideal' particularly carefully.

There was a moment of fine balance in fifth century BC Greece which was difficult to achieve, and proved impossible to maintain. Greek art before the fifth century BC had been part of a religious culture comparable with the Egyptian and Assyrian civilisations, whose temples, devotional images, sculptural reliefs and smaller figures are also impressive. But compare the early static poses of the *Kouros* or the *Kore* (p.121) to the fluent realism of the Parthenon carvings (p.136–7), for example. Later sculptors of the Hellenistic period aimed more at heightened drama and pathos by using exciting stories and strenuous poses, as in the marble carving of a giant from the Altar of Zeus at Pergamum (p 176).

Unfortunately, such comparisons can only be made from partial evidence, since so much is lost; masterpieces by great sculptors, for example, can only be seen darkly through the veil of later Roman copies. During recent times, some fine bronzes have been recovered intact from the sea, for example the *Warrior* from Riace (p.140), as some compensation for the ruinous and fragmentary state of most ancient Greek architecture and stone sculpture. Greek painting, highly esteemed in its own time, has vanished, though we can make some tentative guesses

about it by analogy with the large number of surviving painted vases. Here, as in sculpture, the human figure is represented with ever-increasing accuracy.

Black-figure Panathenaic prize amphora, depicting two boxers, a trainer and Olympias 340-339 BC

Ideally, if we're to understand Greek art, we need to know about its original setting, what the artist intended and what impact the art had on the mind of contemporary spectators. It's possible to get some idea of the latter from near-contemporary accounts, for example the description of the Parthenon by the Greek traveller and antiquarian Pausanias (p.128). But to a large extent we have to use our imaginations and extrapolate from artefacts that are still relatively intact. For example, much Greek stone sculpture was painted in vivid colours which would have made it rather like Egyptian art, whose splendour is still familiar to us from survivals like the Tutankhamun tomb treasures. Browse the internet and see if you can find any images showing reconstructions of Greek sculpture in its original colours. We're conditioned to think of classical sculpture as white or grey. What difference does seeing it in its original form make to the impression created?

Classical architecture

The classical language of architecture is still understood and continues to be practised, as it has been since its revival in the Renaissance. The language analogy is a useful one: once you've mastered the grammar, you should be able to 'read' the architecture of many periods. You'll find the same elements used in different combinations, in varying sizes and for a wide range of plans and purposes. Classical architecture exemplifies, for some, the principle of compositional unity which is so important for organising the visual elements in any work of art (as you'll see in your annotation exercises).

View of an Ideal City Luciano Laurana 1470

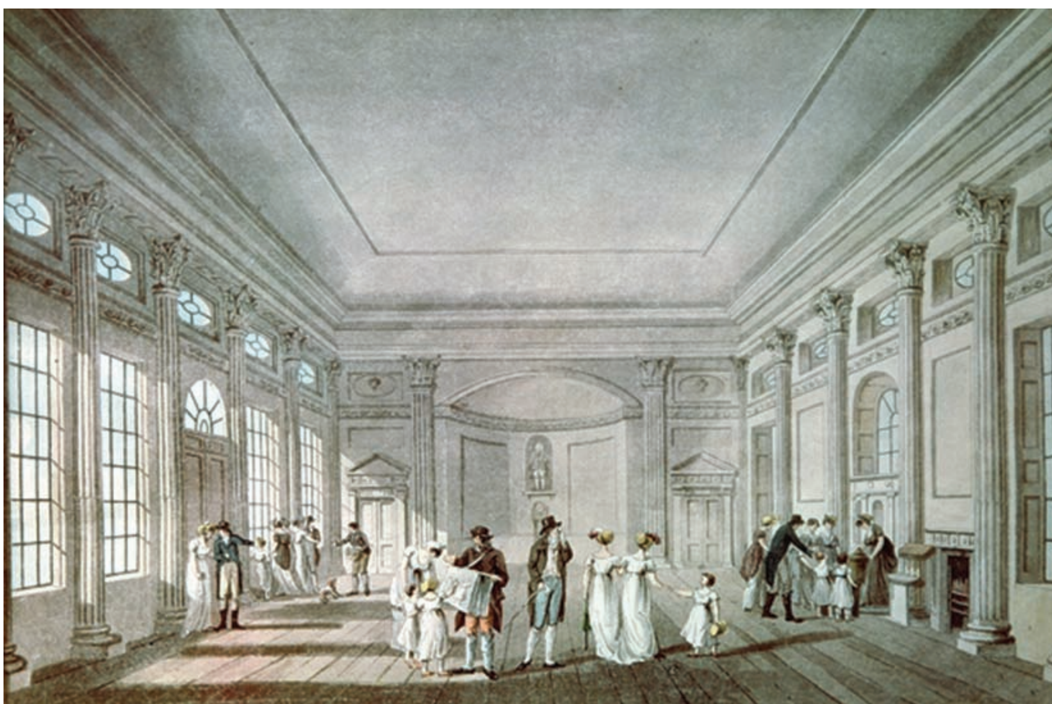
Consider the still impressive Doric columns of the Parthenon (p.127). Together with the other (now missing) classical components of a temple – a sculptural frieze, panels and pediments – these formed part of a heroic architectural ambition to create a unified geographical, artistic and political landmark.

Classical buildings like the Parthenon were designed to match their purpose. Hence, according to the Roman writer Vitruvius, the Corinthian order was more appropriate for a temple to Venus or Prosperine (as opposed to Athena, to whom the Parthenon is dedicated), 'because these are delicate divinities and so its rather slender outlines, its flowers, leaves, and ornamental volutes will lend propriety where it is due.'

Charolais bull with Corinthian column James Lynch 1993

Renaissance architects needed help to make sure that they followed the rules. The Italian architect Sebastiano Serlio published his practical treatise *General Rules of Architecture* in 1537. This listed and defined the five classical orders: Ionic, Doric, Corinthian, Tuscan and composite. Classical architecture remained the principal style for western architecture until it was challenged in some areas of western Europe by the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century. Even then, classical architecture remained a force to be reckoned with. When the Palace of Westminster was destroyed by fire in 1834, argument raged about the style of its replacement, with many favouring a neo-classical building. A competition was held which culminated in the Charles Barry building that we see today. Its perpendicular Gothic style was held to embody more conservative values in a time of revolution and republicanism overseas and political unrest at home than the neo-classical style of the new White House in Washington DC, completed in 1800.

Nineteenth-century buildings are sometimes heavy-handed in their use of the classical orders, albeit based on a sound knowledge of the classical principles of design. You may be lucky enough to have a more beguiling classical building within reach, perhaps an eighteenth-century country mansion like Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. The work of Inigo Jones or John Nash in London, the planning of Bath by John Wood, or St George's Hall in Liverpool, are similarly fine city centre examples of neo-classical architecture.



The Pump Room, Bath Jean Claude Nattes C19th

Exercise: **Annotate a Greek sculpture or vase painting**

Annotate an image of a Greek sculpture (e.g. a small section of the Parthenon frieze) or a vase painting. Before you start, re-read the section on ‘Annotating images’ in the Introduction to this course.

Remember that when you annotate an image – whether it’s a postcard from a museum or an image that you’ve downloaded from the internet – you’re looking at a **reproduction**. This can give you a feel for the original but doesn’t allow you to experience it directly. Similarly, filming can give a rudimentary sense of place and the welcome opportunity to follow a camera round a building, while plaster casts can give you a sense of sculptural scale. Substitutes like these are valuable and can help prepare you for your encounters with art, but they can never tell you the whole story. Make every effort you can to see the original – or something like it.

Here’s an example of an annotation by a former student to help you get started: