

Athens 5th Century BC



by the editorial staff

Single or repeated, painted or carved, used as architectural, vascular or wall decoration, or on furnishings, the palmette is one of the most widely used ornaments in the history of art, from pre-Classical antiquity to Art Deco and beyond. Repeated and modulated, it is most often used as an ornament in friezes and borders. Botanically, the starting point is extremely diverse. In ancient Egypt, plants such as papyrus, lotus, and lily are implicated in the foliate or floral stylizations that gradually follow. Greek solutions within the Ionic and Corinthian orders are mainly based on acanthus, but may also include thistle and aloe. In any case, the graphical translation is so generic that it is almost impossible to identify this or that species. The palmette motif is characterized by a crown of leaves or petals arranged symmetrically in an arc on either side of a vertical stem. Numerous variations can be found far from the Mediterranean area. The arrangement of several palmettes in a line takes the Greek name of anthemion (ανθέμιον), and among the most exquisitely crafted examples are those in bas-relief that adorn the friezes and columns of the Erechtheion, on the Acropolis of Athens. Reproduced here is the anthemion that surrounds each column of the Erechtheion, just below the capital. The circular sequence alternates palmettes (with the lower part folded into a double scroll) and flowers.

Above: Detail of the capital and column of the eastern facade of the Erechtheion, Athens, Acropolis, late 5th century BC (Benjamín Núñez González/Wikimedia).