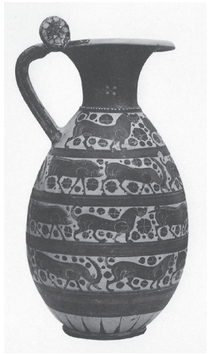
Ancient Greek Pottery



Attributed to the Joslyn Painter, *Italo-Corinthian Olpe*, ca. 580 B.C., 38.9 cm high, Museum Purchase, 1963.478

The study of Greek pottery is just one of many interdependent disciplines which combine to form classical archaeology. From an objective assessment of pottery, one is able to reconstruct not only chronology and economics, but elements of myth and religion, daily life, and of course, aesthetic standards.

Rank. Some vase-painters were certainly master artists, although in antiquity, potters and vase-painters as well as sculptors, architects, and poets were paid and regarded more as craftsmen. Vases were made to be sold, in most cases with no particular buyer in mind. There were unique commercial considerations which affected pottery-making, such as the need to package a particular product. Unlike any other category of art, pots were made to be used in daily life to meet ordinary domestic needs, such as storage and serving of food.

Shape. Although thousands of Greek vases survive, there are rather a limited number of shapes and they function primarily to store and serve liquids and solids. Many shapes were established during the Geometric period (900–700 B.C.) and remain essentially the same until the beginning of the Hellenistic period (323–31 B.C.). This conservatism and limitation of types are characteristically Greek approaches to the problem of dealing with change in the human experience.

Decoration. Scholars attempt to discern the hands of particular artists and to assign objects to these individuals. Most of this work was completed by the British scholar Sir John Beazley (1885–1970). To make attributions to artists, he used what is called "Morellian analysis" that was developed by 19th century art historian Giovanni Morelli. This system relies on a comparison of small details in the rendering of features, dress, and pose to determine a particular painter's style. If the painter has signed any of his works, we learn his name from the signature; more commonly, the painter is assigned a nickname based on some aspect of his style or the location of one of his important works. Note, for example, *Attic Black-Figure Ovoid Neck-Amphora* by the Omaha Painter and *Italo-Corinthian Olpe* by the Joslyn Painter.

Early in the history of the study of vases, scholars interpreted scenes on Greek pottery as "illustrations" of Greek literature, and this theory only serves to explain a small selection of preserved representations. In some cases, depictions on pottery are derivatives of major artistic creations, such as well-known monuments. There is a also correspondence between representations on vases and Greek myths; we see fights with Amazons and the activities of heroes and gods, who may be identified by the standard attributes which they wear or carry. For example, on *Attic Black-Figure Kyathos*, the messenger god Hermes is identified by his broad-brimmed traveling hat, short cloak, and winged shoes.

Attributed as "related to the Theseus Painter," *Attic Black-Figure Kyathos*, ca. 515–500 B.C., 16.3 cm high, Museum Purchase, 1963.484

Daily life scenes with realistic representation of the human figure, weapons, and armor encourage us to see such scenes as reliable reproductions of human activity. Two forms of entertainment appear on Joslyn vases: dancers who wear padded garments to exaggerate bellies and thighs as in *Attic Black-Figure Komcast Cup* and the symposium, where men are eating on dining couches while being entertained by female companions as in *Attic Black-Figure Ovoid Neck-Amphora.*

Dating. The sequence of Greek pottery has practical applications for archaeologists and ancient historians. Developments in shape, coupled with the evolution of figural decoration, provide a relative chronology. Undecorated pottery is also useful as a dating tool.

Commerce. Pottery provides evidence of the commercial and economic picture of the Classical world. One example of this is reflected in the responsiveness of the Athenian potters to the demands of the Etruscan market. Early on, Attic (pertaining to, Greece or Athens) craftsmen developed pottery called "Tyrrhenian." Because these amphoras are found only in Italy, scholars believe that the shape was developed exclusively for export to Etruria. It has been suggested that the decorative scheme consciously evokes that of Corinthian pottery which had enjoyed enormous commercial success in Italy during the preceding century.

Attributed to the Falmouth Painter, *Attic Black-Figure Komcast Cup*, ca. 590–570 B.C., 8 cm high (without foot), Museum Purchase, 1951.885

It is important to remember that Greek pottery is utilitarian, intended for daily use by ordinary individuals. Vases are recovered from graves, civic centers, religious shrines, and houses. At the same time, the high aesthetic standards, apparent in shape and decoration of its pottery, reflect the great achievements of Greek civilization.

The Omaha Painter

(attributed to) (Greek, 6th Century B.C.)

Attic Black-Figure Ovoid Neck-Amphora

ca. 570 B.C.
terracotta, 15 in. high
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas C. Woods, Jr, 1963.480

This amphora, produced in Athens during the Archaic-Classical Period (600–400 B.C.), is an outstanding example of one of the most common shapes in the repertory of functional Greek pottery. Probably used as a decanter to hold liquids, it is termed a "neck-amphora," because the neck is sharply set off from the body. Almost exclusively exported to the Etruscans as an item of trade by the Greeks, the characteristic features of this type of amphora include the use of Corinthian-inspired color and animal friezes and florals in the lower horizontal bands of decoration. Potters from Corinth, another important pottery-producing city in Greece, had previously controlled Etruscan markets. The Attic potters, realizing that the Etruscan clientele had become accustomed to "Corinthianizing" elements, responded by using consciously old-fashioned Corinthian pottery shapes and color and decorative schemes to make their products more commercially successful.

Designs on Greek pottery pieces were based on scenes from daily life and mythology. The scene here depicts a Greek hero slaying an Amazon. The Amazons, a mythical race of barbarian women who fought as men, are distinguished from male warriors by the contrasting white color of their flesh. The opposite side illustrates an event called a symposium, an early form of the gentlemen's club. Because names of the vase painters are not known, identities are assigned based on an aspect of style or the location of an important work. The painter of this amphora was identified and named the "Omaha Painter" by Dr. Dietrich von Bothmer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The only other vase attributed to the Omaha Painter is in the collection of the Louvre.

Omaha Painter (Athenian) *Birth of Athena, Black-Figure Neck Amphora*, ca. 60–550 BCE, ceramic, height 37.5 cm, diameter 27 cm, Musée du Louvre, photo by Hervé Lewandowski

Discussion Questions

What do you see on Joslyn's *Attic Black-Figure Ovoid Neck-Amphora?*

❍

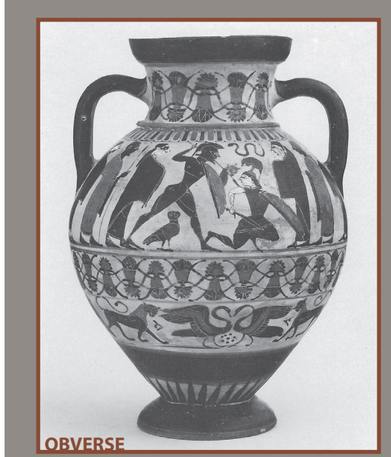
What can you learn about Greek daily life by looking at these vases?

❍

What is the difference between black-figure and red-figure techniques?

❍

What style of Greek pottery do you like best, and why?



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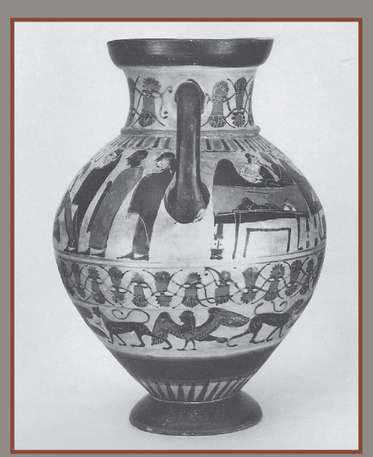

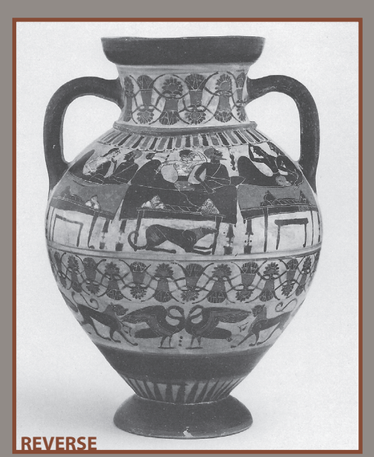

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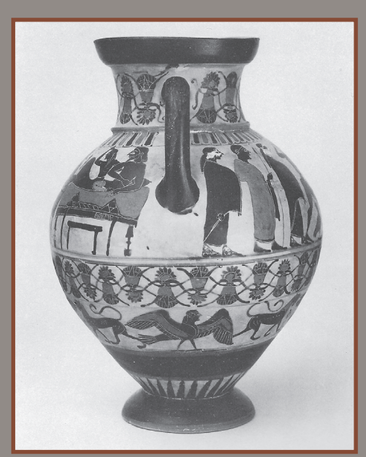

Greek Vase Anatomy

Names given to parts of a vase correspond to parts of the human body. The primary side is called "A" or "obverse" and the side of less importance, "B" or "reverse."

About this Vase. Joslyn's *Attic Black-Figure Hydria* was decorated by The Affecter who painted over one hundred known pieces in the sixth century B.C. and only two others are hydriai. This example is extremely rare in terms of its shape and decorative scheme, both of which are old-fashioned for the period in which the painter worked. The low pouring handle and broad neck, as well as the rounded shoulder, differ from most contemporary pots, and the extension of the decorative shoulder panel beyond the main panel is unusual. As his name suggests, the painter is an affected, or self-consciously stylized, artist. The Affecter's attention to intricate and varied detail is apparent in the added color and lively, angular juxtaposition of the shoulder panel images, as well as in the elaborate treatment of the horses and larger figures on the main panel.

The Affecter (attributed to) (Greek, 6th century B.C.), *Attic Black-Figure Hydria*, ca. 530 B.C., terracotta, 17 1/2 in., Museum purchase, 1953.255

Greek Vase Shapes

Alabastron
A flask, with an elongated body, rounded base, narrow neck and flat lip, used to contain and pour oil.

Amphora
A two-handled jar used for storing liquids, such as oil and water, and solids, such as grain; a *Neck-Amphora* has the neck sharply set off from the body.

Aryballos
A small flask, usually no more than 8 centimeters high, with narrow neck and flat lip, used to contain and pour oil.

Hydria
A jar with wide belly, narrow neck, and three handles: two are horizontal, for lifting, and one is vertical, for pouring. It is used to store and transport water.

Krater
A large, deep bowl with two handles, used for mixing wine and water. *Bell-krater* has horizontal handles and a bell-shaped body.

Column-krater has vertical, columnar handles and a neck which is set off.

Volute-krater has vertical handles, which terminate in spirals, and a set-off neck.

Kyathos
A dipper with one high-swung vertical handle, used as a ladle.

Kylix
A drinking cup which has a shallow bowl, two horizontal handles, and a tall foot. The term "kylix" covers a wide variety of shapes, many of which are called simply "cups" or "bowls."

Lekanis
A shallow basin with narrow ring foot, two handles, and a rim with a ledge to receive a lid.

Lekythos
A slim jug with a narrow neck, one vertical handle, and a flat lip, used to contain and pour oil.

Oinochoe
A pitcher with high vertical handle and trefoil mouth, used for pouring wine.

Pelike
A type of amphora with low, sagging belly.

Skyphos
A drinking cup with nearly vertical sides and horizontal handles.

Images : Drawings of shapes are reproduced from *Attic Red-Figured Vases: A Survey* by G.M.A. Richter (1958)

Development of Greek Pottery

Bronze Age: 3000–1100 B.C.

Potters were expert craftsmen. Much of their subject matter was taken from nature; their tradition was a conservative one, and mainland potters received many of their motifs from their Cretan predecessors. This jar is an example of a mainland piece which uses a natural motif, the octopus, and emphasizes the vertical axis of the pot by placement of the body of the sea creature.

Mycenaean Stirrup Jar, ca. 1150 B.C., 29.2 cm high, Gift of the Joslyn Women's Association, 1960.265

Dark Age: 1100–900 B.C.

The collapse of Mycenaean civilization brought production of the major arts and manifestations of culture to an end. Although creation of monumental painting and architecture stopped, pottery production continued and is the single continuous aspect of material culture which we have from the Dark Age.

Joslyn does not have an example of Dark Age pottery in its collection

Geometric: 900–700 B.C.

With the regeneration of a more advanced level of culture, pottery production picked up intensity. Athens and the surrounding region, called "Attica," became the center of the craft. Several technical innovations helped to improve the quality of pottery: a faster potter's wheel; the compass; and the multiple brush. This style is characterized by the use of linear and circular elements, in dark paint on a light background.

Attic Geometric Tankard, 750–725 B.C., 19.1 cm high, Museum Purchase, 1963.479

Orientalizing: 700–600 B.C.

Corinth was established as the center of pottery production. Corinthians used motifs in large part acquired from the Near East; they developed the black-figure technique, characterized by the use of dark figures against a light background. Details in black-figure are indicated by incision, a process of using a very sharp instrument to engrave the clay before firing. Added red and white paint indicate other details.

Corinthian Aryballos, ca. 600–575 B.C., 6.3 cm high, Gift of Mrs. A.F. Jonas, 1954.3

Archaic-Classical: 600–400 B.C.

Black-Figure. Athenian craftsmen once again dominated the pottery industry, both commercially and artistically. They took black-figure technique and elements of style and iconography from the Corinthians. The peculiar red-dish-orange Athenian clay contrasted with the Corinthian buff. Representation of myth became more common.

Unattributed, *Attic Black-Figure Band-Cup*, ca. 540–530 B.C., 14 cm high, Museum Purchase, 1966.56

Red-Figure. Technical innovations changed the course of Athenian pottery at about 530 B.C. The Attic red-figure technique dictated a reversal of color scheme, where figures are reserved in the natural color of the clay and the background is painted black. This increases the natural appearance of the figures, since their light color more closely approximates reality. Moreover, details can be rendered much more naturally, in thick glaze called "relief line" and a thinner glaze called "dilute glaze."

Unattributed, *Attic Red-Figure Nolan Amphora*, ca. 450 B.C., 32.6 cm high, Gift of Dr. J. Hewitt Judd, 1965.407

White Ground. This technique appeared at the same time as red-figure. Potters covered the clay with a thick white slip on which the figures were rendered in dark glaze, with details often in polychrome paint. In this delicate technique, Greek vase-painting achieved its closest proximity to monumental wall-painting, very little of which is preserved from Classical Greece.

Attributed to the Tymbos Painter, *Attic White-Ground Lekythos*, ca. 475–450 B.C., 18.4 cm high, Gift of Mrs. A.F. Jonas, 1954.1

Fourth Century: 400–323 B.C.

Black-Glaze. Athenian production of red-figure pottery continued into the fourth century B.C. During the second quarter of the fifth century B.C., plain black pottery appeared in large quantity. By the fourth century, this was the primary product of Athenian potters.

Attic Black-Glaze Skyphos, ca. 475–450 B.C., 9 cm high, Gift of Mrs. Wentworth Dodge, 1962.209

South Italian. During the third quarter of the fifth century B.C. the South Italians began to produce their own red-figure pottery. Although basically derivative, this type developed its own character and several regional styles emerged. Generally, these vases are gaudy, with liberal use of added color. The quality of clay and glaze varies; frequently a thin red wash was applied to reserved areas to heighten the color of the clay. Typically South Italian vases are "one-sided": there is one side which was clearly the most important to which the most care was devoted.

Attributed to a follower of the Dijion and Iliupersis Painters, *Apulian Red-Figure Pelike*, ca. 365–355 B.C., 45 cm high, On permanent loan from the Anthropology Division, University of Nebraska State Museum, Formerly in the collection of George W. Lininger, Omaha 7.1984

Background Image: The Omaha Painter *Attic Black-Figure, Ovoid Neck-Amphora* (detail), ca. 570 B.C., terracotta, 15 in. high, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas C. Woods, Jr, 1963.480

This project is supported by the generous contributions of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska, The Dixon Family Foundation, Gilbert M. and Martha H. Hitchcock Foundation, Iowa West Foundation, Mammel Foundation, Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and Wells Fargo

THE OMAHA PAINTER (ATTRIBUTED TO) (GREEK, 6TH CENTURY B.C.)

ATTIC BLACK-FIGURE OVOID NECK-AMPHORA

CA. 570 B.C.

TERRACOTTA

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM© OMAHA, NEBRASKA

GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. THOMAS C. WOODS, JR, 1963.480