



JOHN
BOARDMAN

THE HISTORY OF GREEK VASES

Thames & Hudson

John Boardman

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Potters, Painters and Pictures

358 illustrations



Thames & Hudson

in memoriam
ROBERT COOK

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The History of Greek Vases



Attic black figure cup
by Exekias, from Vulci. c. 525 BC
See [309], p. 284

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Map 1
The Aegean World

Map 2
South Italy and Sicily



Preface

Greek pottery is one of the most spectacular and familiar crafts of classical antiquity. This is the more remarkable because the raw material could not be commoner or cheaper. Only oriental ceramics seem to have commanded comparable importance in the culture and trade that they served over several centuries AD, and they were not the important field for figure decoration that Greek pottery became. Some classes of European pottery have been decorated with ambitious painted scenes, from Faenza to Sèvres, but were never in such common use. Several Central American wares are informatively decorated but were not widely traded even in the New World. So this is an odd phenomenon. Study of it has more to teach us about Greek antiquity, especially from the eighth to fourth centuries BC, than study of any other ancient medium for art, including sculpture. This is a product of, on the one hand, its plenty and ubiquity, on the other hand, the attention paid to its decoration, which offers a subtle but direct commentary on the attitudes and preoccupations of the day, as well as a great deal of engaging narrative.

In this book I survey the record of the Greek pottery industry from roughly the tenth century BC to the second. This is not, however, the only period of significant pottery production in Greece. Any commodity in such common and universal use was being made throughout the life of all civilised, and most primitive, communities, but the chosen period for Greece embraces the most elaborate and informative products of the craft. There had been, it seems, a certain penchant in Greek lands for elaborately decorated pottery long before, in the Bronze Age: first by the non-Greek Minoans of Crete, and then their successors in control of both Crete and the mainland, the Greek-speaking Mycenaeans. After them came a recession, followed by renaissance, and at this point, in the eleventh/tenth century BC, a virtually new story of crafts and art in Greek lands begins. After the fourth century BC, however, painted decoration for pottery became sparse and relief decoration mainly debased, both dependent on metal models; hence my concentration on the earlier centuries. The geographical area involved is that of the Greek mainland, islands, the eastern shores of the Aegean (western Asia Minor, Turkey), and

to some degree the colonial world of the Greeks on the shores of south Italy and Sicily, the Black Sea and north Africa.

The subject is hardly a new one, and there is no shortage of reference books. In the *World of Art* series of our publisher I have written four which deal with the main classes of painted pottery down to the fourth century, and there is one (by Dale Trendall) for South Italian Greek wares. These books will be often referred to since they are very generously illustrated, but I have tried to make the illustration of this volume as self-sufficient as I can. For the non-painted wares the sources are more dispersed.

The volumes mentioned treat the subject art-historically, by style, date, place of origin and, where possible, artist. Other relevant matters are dealt with, in passing, and it is the purpose of the present book to go on to consider these more carefully, to provide a history of the craft that goes beyond the physical appearance of the vessels. They have then to be considered in their relationship to the prosperity and fortunes of the cities that produced them as well as of the people who made and designed them. Methods of manufacture need to be explored as well as the processes of trade, since they were widely dispersed through and beyond the Greek world, and they have much to tell beyond the simple matter of their own distribution. Their function as containers, fine objects, even as purveyors of messages that the scenes upon them might embody, needs consideration, while the scenes themselves provide a mighty subject that ranges the whole field of art, society, religion and mythology, more comprehensively than any other medium of their day. This 'iconography' of Greek vases has been dealt with in detail in monographs and dictionaries; here I try to explain how the scenes were composed, and to elicit what they meant to viewers and buyers in antiquity, rather than merely providing a key to the recognition of stories and figures. The aim then is to provide both more and less than the standard histories of the subject, to try to explain what might too readily be taken for granted or ignored. So there is a lot of information, leading to comment and speculation, which I take to be more useful than alleged explanations without presentation of evidence.

Though the clay vases were among the cheapest of the products of ancient craftsmen, study of them is, for the historian and archaeologist, among the most rewarding. They are plentiful, in excavations they can provide close dates, and in their iconography they reflect on almost all the other arts of Greece, visual and literary. Sculpture is more grandiose and truly monumental but restricted in its range and messages, more a public or civic art;

other media are either mainly banal (clay figurines) or in their way élitist (jewellery, gem engraving, fine metalwork), less representative of the experience of the ordinary (or extraordinary) Greek, and very seldom so informatively decorated. Other media such as wall or panel painting are lost. But one of the problems must be to elucidate the relationship of this craft to other crafts practised by other (or even the same) craftsmen, in terms of both shapes and decoration.

‘Craft’, ‘art’: it must be understood that we are not dealing with ‘Art’, let alone ‘Art for Art’s Sake’, in the modern sense, but there are vases which can match in artistry of technique, design and execution, the best of any period or place, and this is not the least claim that they have on our attention. Ancient art was essentially functional, but exercising functions forgotten today or served in other ways. There was no ‘Art Market’ as such for Greek vases, or indeed for anything before Roman times. Our ‘artists’ served their public rather than the self-esteem of collectors.

The vases themselves were much prized when they were first found in any numbers, in Italy in the eighteenth century. Etruria and the areas south of Rome, around Naples, had been an especially ready market, and the use there of built tombs has ensured better preservation of whole vases than the burial practices of the Greek homeland. The vases were admired for their finish, their shapes which appealed to and helped form the neo-Classical fashions of the day, and especially for their figure scenes which could be related to classical literature, which was the acknowledged source and inspiration of much western thought. They commanded relatively high prices, though not always as high as their imitations, such as those by Wedgwood. They have remained valuable, some even moving into the Fine Art range of prices. Any collection of classical art is bound to include them, and they can be displayed in various ways. When New York bought its famous Euphronios crater it had a room to itself, lacking only, as Professor Trendall wryly remarked, a *prie-dieu* before it. The new exhibition in the Louvre has them presented both individually and in groups, well lit and backed with modern electronic resources for the curious to discover more about them, if they wish. In Oxford most are now exhibited only in a back room rather like cans of peas in a supermarket, to disguise their individual appeal. The difference is between them being in the hands of a scholar who had to justify considerable expenditure (von Bothmer); a museum curator mindful of the richness of his collection and his public and educational duty (Pasquier); and a curator careless of what he regards as

the 'detritus of antiquity' or 'unrecyclable junk' (Vickers). The motivation of the former two is easier to understand than that of the latter. I hope this book will help readers to a balanced view.

Other revisionist views about the importance of Greek decorated pottery and the methods of study have also come to the fore in recent years, in keeping with a trend in much current scholarship, critical but not constructive, and seldom well based on knowledge of the subject and its ramifications. These chapters answer some of these in passing, not directly, since a free exposition of the evidence is as good an answer as any. For much that is discussed here the evidence is clear, even if the theory always is not. But there has also been a far more valuable shift of interest, away from painter attribution and the iconography of myth, the traditional art-historian's playground, and into enquiry about the craft as a trade, about the meaning of the figure scenes and their social function, if any. This is valuable, and where properly practised it complements the older approaches without in any way replacing them – indeed, as we shall see, it depends on them. It is, however, remarkable how much scholarship of a hundred years ago anticipated much that is thought novel today.

It is necessary to present some continuous history of the craft and this is attempted in Chapter 1. Here I describe the vases with an eye to the political and social fortunes of each centre of production and period, mentioning those other aspects of the subject which will be picked up again in later chapters, and doing no more than summarize the development of style, the range of decoration or the role of individual painters. This complements the more stylistically focused handbooks. Later chapters range more widely, and sometimes in depth, over subjects generally avoided or treated summarily in books for the public and student, but which are crucial to understanding. The Epilogue strikes a more personal note.

Chapter 1: A History of Greek Vases

Introduction

It would be reasonable to assume that every major town in Greece, and many a minor one, would have had its own potters' yard. Few have been located, but then they were generally in areas which have not attracted the attention of excavators, as do temples and cemeteries, and their products would have engaged the archaeologist more than the art historian. Only with the growth of the ancient trade in pottery, and the development of attractive lines in decorated vases in certain towns which could then corner a market, did this relatively domestic situation change, and at any time a local potter of plain wares might be tempted to try his hand at something more exotic. Thus, by the fifth century BC, a figure-decorated vase normally meant an Athenian one. This implies the existence of a complex but not necessarily well organized production and distribution service. So this becomes as much a story of business acumen as of developing styles in potting and painting. There was diversity in other wares to meet special needs or to reflect local taste and interests, and there was no shame attached to copying the ideas of others. Copyright is a modern concept.

Before the fifth century this diversity was impressive, with the styles of different towns freely inspiring imitation or competition, and open even to the influence of foreign arts. Thanks to good archaeological control of the material it is now possible to trace this record in Greece in more detail than we can with most ancient wares, until the advent of mass production of potter-stamped vessels in the Roman period. Regional diversity in the early period might tell us something too about life in the different production centres. That a distinctive pottery style was in some way a deliberate or even accidental form of corporate identifier, like coinage, seems fairly improbable, given that much seems to stem from individual potter/painter choice, or can be explained by propinquity to dominant centres of production, though it was of course always conditioned by the market and local tradition. Not too many Greeks would have been very conscious of such a factor unless some commercial consideration intervened. These vases are only incidentally expressions of identity or ambassadors of state; if it had been otherwise, we may be sure that these functions would

have been quite as unmistakable as they are on, for example, coins or the imperial arts of eastern empires. There was no such thing as a 'Greek state' in our period, but there was intense local pride and frequent horrendous warfare, Greek against Greek. Thus, we do not look on vases for any obvious declaration of the militancy of Sparta, or of democracy and philosophy at Athens, or of rare poetic expression in Ionia. These are not instruments of propaganda, for all that we may find them subtly reflecting on common attitudes to these matters, mainly through the choice and presentation of mythological subjects, rather than of the everyday. Yet the artists' products, in all media, were designed for and acceptable to populations whose fortunes had been in part conditioned by such considerations. Loyalty was to the home town, not the country.

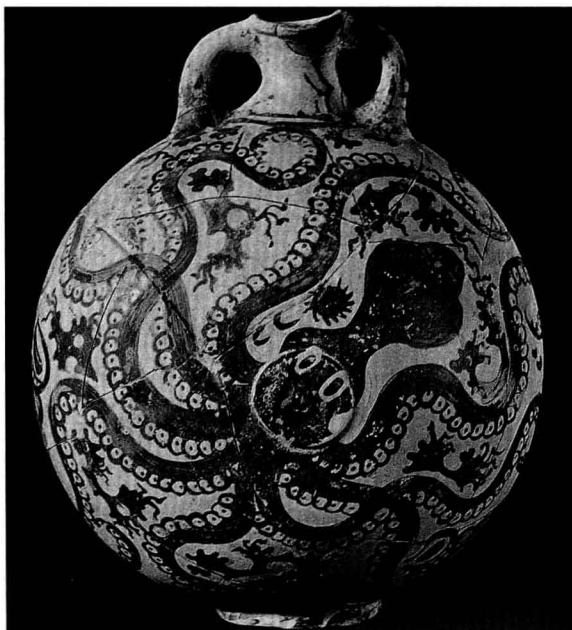
This chapter attempts a summary history of the record of pottery production and especially pottery decoration in Greek lands. It does not repeat the more detailed stylistic accounts to be found in other handbooks, nor does it altogether rely on them, though readers will be helped by their far more numerous pictures. Various matters of technique, trade, and the like, will be discussed later in this book (and where some points may need repeating from this chapter), for their problems rather than just to demonstrate the evidence, or they can be studied in books dedicated to such matters. They can contribute much to our understanding of the subject and appreciation of the vases.

A few words are needed about terminology. 'Geometric period' and 'geometric style' are not necessarily co-terminous, but they are roughly so. Where I write of periods, geometric means roughly late ninth century to around 700 BC; orientalizing, late eighth century to about 600 BC; archaic, late seventh century to around 475 BC; classical, the fifth and fourth centuries; Hellenistic, late fourth to first centuries BC. I use conventional names for vase shapes; these are often in fact wrong, as will be shown in later chapters, but they are the terms familiar in all the books. I have given rough dates in the picture captions but they should not be taken as more than a guide to relative placing, another matter for a later chapter. But I do not believe that they are far from the truth or in any way misleading.

Beginnings

The Greek liking for highly decorated pottery, and especially figure-decorated pottery, was not shared by many other ancient peoples, yet it goes back to their Bronze Age, down to around 1100 BC, a period not considered in this book because after it there was

1. Late Minoan 'pilgrim flask' from Palaikastro (Crete). 16th c. bc.
H. 28cm. (Heraklion)



2. Late Mycenaean crater from Marion (Cyprus). This style is best represented in Cyprus. 14th c. bc.
H. 41.9cm. (London 1911.4-28.1)

3. Sub-Mycenaean stirrup vase, for oil, from Athens. The top is a 'false spout' supporting the two stirrup handles. 11th c. bc.
(Kerameikos)

effectively a new beginning in the craft. The non-Greek Minoans of Crete had made colourful and highly decorative wares [1]. The Mycenaean Greek potters of the mainland learnt from them, but were generally more restrained. Most of the decoration was abstract, floral or marine, with little by way of other animal or human subjects except with the later Mycenaeans [2]. At all times there was production of storage vases: the stirrup vases with narrow spouts for oil are the most characteristic [3], and huge

