Greek Vase Painting

• Introduction
  • Geometric
  • Orientalizing
  • Archaic
    - Transition
• 5th/4th C. Classical
  - Black figure
  - Red Figure
  - White ground
Overview

- Greek vase paintings, especially Athenian Black and Red figure painting styles of c. 650-400 BCE are among the most famous ancient art forms.

- The classical vases of the fifth century BCE, in particular, influenced generations of artists in antiquity, and others again from the Renaissance until today.

- Red Figure succeeded Black Figure as the Athenian or Attic vase style of choice after about 500 BCE.

- There is a fair amount written about how artists painted the two styles and why they changed from Black to Red Figure, and there have been successful efforts to recreate ancient pottery shapes. However, only a few classical scholars have re-created the painting process.
6.66 Above Diagram of a Greek kiln
1 Stoking tunnel
2 Firing chamber
3 Central post
4 Pierced floor
5 Stacking chamber
6 Spyhole and hatch
7 Removable section of the wall to enable loading
8 Vent hole
9 Cover for stoking tunnel
• We will focus our attention on the fine wheel-made pottery, fired at relatively high temperatures, and decorated in a variety of ways.

• However vast quantities of every day undecorated ancient Greek pottery exist today.

• Most of the people who made the finer pottery probably also made other products of clay, such as sarcophagi, roof tiles, small altars, terracotta figurines, and plaques.

• The one place and period where there was more specialized production of fine figure-decorated pottery is Athens in the later 6th and 5th centuries.
• Greek Pottery was made by Greek-speaking people.
• A significant number lived outside the area we know as Greece today.
• There is, for example, a wealth of material from the coastal settlements of modern Turkey, and some of its offshore islands.
• Greek-style pottery was also made in the western Mediterranean
  – in southern Italy and Sicily
• Interaction between Greeks and non-Greeks affected the shapes, techniques, and decoration of Greek Pottery.
• Greek painted pottery has a long history.
• Usually, the earliest examples are dated around 1000BCE, the latest around 300BCE.
• The tradition of painted pottery can be traced back, to Bronze Age (Minoan and Mycenaean) ceramics, and carried on through the later Hellenistic period.
• However, the ceramics from these groups are very different from the main “Greek” sequence that they tend to be studied separately.
Greek Vase Painting can be divided into different time periods

- Geometric Period
- Orientalizing Period
- Archaic Period
- 6th and 5th Century Attic, (Athens)
  - The Classical Period
    - Black figure
    - Red Figure
    - White ground
Overview of Athenian Pottery painting techniques:
Black figure, Red figure and White ground

- From about 600 BCE to 500 BCE, roughly the Archaic period, the principal ceramic techniques were black figures on a red ground, called **BLACK FIGURE**
- From around 500 BCE to 300 BCE, a reversal of the firing procedure, giving red-figures on a black ground, called **RED FIGURE**.
- Neither technique is very realistic
- But both are durable and exploit the natural redness of the Athenian clay, rich in iron.
- A third technique, **WHITE GROUND** outlines figures on a ground which has been made white by using a special clay free from the iron oxides, applied over the common reddish clay
  - It gives a more realistic effect than the black- and red-figures and can add colors ranging from yellow to pink, red, violet and blue - and probably comes closest to painting on panels and walls.
The Geometric Period

- Geometric Period
  - first specifically Greek style of vase painting
  - can be distinguished from Minoan or Mycenaean
  - Geometric Style becomes widespread after 900 BCE in all types of art
  - Characterized by linear motifs, rather than stylized birds/plants of Minoan art
Geometric Style
Funerary Amphora

- Funerary amphora
- depicting (laying-out) and lamentation over the dead.
- Found in Dipylum.
- 800 BCE
- 42 inches high!
  National Museum Athens
• **Orientalizing Period**
  
  • From about 750 BCE onwards, Greeks begin to venture overseas and develop many colonies in southern Italy and Sicily.
  
  • Corinth is an important port city, where luxury wares from Near East and Egypt are traded.
  
  • Greek artists were influenced by the variety of artistic styles of their trading partners.
  
  • By 7th c. BCE, move away from only geometric.
  
  • New Greek style incorporates elements of Near Eastern and Egyptian art,
Orientalizing Period

- This pottery was produced in a variety of techniques, under growing eastern influence from about 700 BCE.
- Some Greeks, among them the Athenians, outlined their figures on pottery, as they might have painted them on walls.
- Others, initially the Corinthians, incised detail on the silhouette of figures with a sharp tool.
Orientalizing Period
Pitcher (olpe)c. 600 BCE

- Large silhouetted creatures in profile in bands
- Overall pattern of rosettes
- Example of black figure pottery
  - Dark shapes over a light ground
  - Here the light ground is the natural buff color of the clay
- Fine details incised with a sharp tool
- Can you see the Middle Eastern influence?
Archaic Period

A time of transition between the geometric and classical styles
6th Century Athens
The Archaic Period

- Potters were creating a limited number of vessel forms, usually based on utility (what does that mean?)
- Painters had to accommodate their painting and decoration to the shape of the vessel
- Athens became the center of pottery production
- Black figure style of Corinthian pottery was widely adopted
- Athenian painters retained the horizontal band composition from geometric period
The Francois Vase

- Attic, Black Figure
- C. 570 BCE
- Moving away from geometric style
- But images are still trapped in bands and figures in profile
- Illustrates many scenes from Greek mythology including the funeral games for Patrokles
Black Figure Pottery
Red clay exposed as background with black figures or designs

- First quarter of the 6th century artist were decorating vessels with animal friezes, and oriental themes on a small scale
- By the third quarter of the century Black figure pottery is at a high point in Athens
- Painters and potters are creating large scale works with complex designs and themes
- Like the amphora pictured here, depicting Ajax and Achilles playing a game. C. 540 BCE
Neck-amphora, 
ca. 540 B.C.; 
Attic, black-figure

This amphora is an excellent example of black-figure vase painting, a technique in which the painter applies glaze in silhouettes and then adds details of anatomy and drapery. When the pot is fired, the glazed areas turn black and the unglazed areas turn a bright orange color. The use of red glaze for some details and white glaze for others creates a contrast of colors.
Achilles killing Penthesilea
560 BCE
Suicide of Ajax

• Attic Black figure, c. 540 BCE
• Ajax was one of the great heroes of the Trojan War.
• He was the cousin of Achilles
• When Achilles was killed, Ajax rescued his body.
• Afterwards, Ajax thought he should get Achilles' armor. When the Greeks decided to give the armor to Odysseus instead, Ajax went crazy and killed a whole flock of sheep, thinking they were Trojans, and also thinking he was killing Odysseus and Agamemnon.
• When he realized what he had done, he was so ashamed that he killed himself.
• Notice the incised detail on the body and the more complicated pose
• What might the ancient Greeks have thought about Ajax’s behavior?
Dionysos and the Maenads

- Later archaic period
- Attic, Black figure
- C. 530 BCE
- Less use of horizontal bands, figures are larger and fill the shape
- Still some geometric designs on the neck and base
- Great use of line
- Note the detail in the hair, beard and animals
- Expression on the faces
- Overall tone is light and expressive and flowing
Fountain house Scene

- Water jar (hydria)
- Greek, Archaic Period, about 520 BCE
- Not all vessels depicted scenes of heroes and god
- Here we see a scene from everyday life in Athens
- Women in ancient Greece were confined to the house except for their daily trip to the communal water fountain or well
- Beautiful combination of vertical, horizontal, rectangular and rounded elements
- Present location: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
We go from this to that in 50 years!!
Amphora, ca. 530 BCE
Archaic; red-figure

- Wanting to create more expressive figures in vase paintings eventually led to the creation of the red-figure technique, sometime around 530 BCE.
- Now, subjects could be drawn with glaze lines, which allowed the artist more freedom with contours and details of anatomy.
- This particular amphora, one of the earliest in the red-figure technique, was made in the workshop of the potter Andokides, where, possibly, the new technique was first established.
The Beginning of Red Figure Pottery
510 BCE
5th Century Athens
Early Classical Period

- The fifth century was a fabulous period in Athenian history.
- We can read about this Golden Age in the contemporary literature, which has survived, and see the monumental art which has also survived.
- The most famous example is the Parthenon.
- The fifth century was also the period when some of the best pottery was made.
What’s so great about this pottery?

- The Athenian potters and painters were highly skilled artists.
- Just as the creative architects and sculptors of the period, they combined three key elements to produce great art:
  - rich narratives
  - technical precision
  - fine sense of aesthetic design

What does all that mean?
Advances in the quest for naturalism

- Until about 520 BC the human figure was depicted as it had been in all earlier two-dimensional art, in profile, or, less commonly, in combination of profile and frontal views.

- Then, toward the end of the 6th Century, BCE, a few painters experimented with more realistic poses, attempting to show the human body as it was in life, not stylized as it had been in art.
Amphora,  
ca. 490 BCE  
Classical; red-figure

- This red-figure amphora beautifully illustrates the symbiosis between the shape of a vase and its decoration.
- The vase painter abandoned the rigid frames of panels on the amphora so that the contour of the vase itself focuses our attention on the solitary figure.
Classical Period
450-323 BCE
Advances in perspective and modeling

- In the middle of the 5th century a small number of fine, large pots have figures placed on different levels, not on a single *groundline* as in earlier art.
- At the end of the 5th century the great painters of the period, introduced two new techniques.
  - One involved using outline in new ways in order to achieve greater realism, and the other involved shading.
  - These technical advances, are as fundamental to later western painting as the abandonment of the rigid profile.
Red Figure Amphora

c. 440 BCE

Notice the use of line

More importantly

Check out the

Controposto pose

His stance is similar to

Polykleitos, *Spear Bearer*

Also, c.440 BCE
Hercules in the Garden of Hesperides
red figure hydria
410 BCE

High point of red figure pottery
Detail of Hercules in the Garden of Hesperides
Right: c. 650 BCE,
Below: c. 400 BCE
White ground

- In the **WHITE GROUND** technique, an artist outlines figures on a ground which has been made white by using a special clay free from the iron oxides, applied over the common reddish clay
  - It gives a more realistic effect than the black- and red-figures and can add colors ranging from yellow to pink, red, violet and blue - and probably comes closest to painting on panels and walls, of which unfortunately very little survives.
Attic, white ground
*Woman Spinning*

c. 480 BCE
White ground Krater

c. 430 BCE
Recent Developments

The Euphronios Krater

- This 2,500-year-old Greek vase, known as a krater, was painted by Euphronios.
- The Italian government has long contended that it was stolen from an Etruscan tomb in Ceverteri and smuggled from the country.
- The krater was in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York since the early 1970’s.
- It was recently returned to Italy.