Pottery is known from almost every part of the world and from all times, and decorated pottery is almost equally universal. What distinguishes Greek vases is that their decoration rises above the level of ornamentation and justifies the special term vase painting. This term calls for a qualification and an explanation that must precede any appreciation of the subject.

To most of us paintings are the works of artists working with a palette in front of an easel, or on a scaffolding facing a white wall or ceiling. Brushes, pigments, and binders round out the picture, as do canvases, wooden panels, and frames. That there were such painters in this accepted sense in classical antiquity is well known from ancient literature, which has given us the names of many artists, the stories of their lives, descriptions of their works, and even the prices fetched by their works. But none of their creations has remained above ground, and excavations, which have restored to us so much of classical antiquity, have been singularly disappointing as regards Greek painting. Some idea of the general appearance and the subjects can be formed from the paintings in Etruscan tombs and the large number of wall paintings of Roman times, but these are at best reflections and do not qualify as either accurate reproductions or full-scale copies. In Greece proper the recovered evidence is too scant to permit even a tentative reconstruction. We have a few small archaic votive paintings on cypress wood, found in August 1934 in a cave at Pitsa, near Sikyon; several unsigned paintings on marble; and a series of provincial painted tombstones from Thessaly; but none of these relatively minor works can even be compared with the masterpieces of the great painters about whom ancient literature is so eloquent—Kimon of Kleonai, Polygnotos of Thasos, Mikon and Apollodoros of Athens, Zeuxis of Herakleia, Parrhasios of Ephesos, Apelles of Colophon, Philoxenos of Eretria, Timomachos of Byzantium.

But easel and wall paintings are not the only ways in which the ancient painter exercised his art. There was work on terracotta. Time has been kinder to this material than to any other, for, once fired, clay could not be converted to another use; the elements did not affect it, and its small material value did not encourage the rapacity of conquerors and looters. Fire, break-

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FRONTISPIECE:
White-ground lekythos (oil jug). Attributed to the Achilles Painter.
Attic, about 440 B.C.
Height 15⅜ inches.
A woman handing a rolled-up garment to a girl. There are traces of red on the garment and traces of yellow on the woman’s dress. Dodge Fund, 54.11.7
cotta sculptures, both statues and statuettes, and reliefs.

Clay was also, of course, used for pottery, and these vases have come down to us in great quantity from prehistoric times to the end of classical antiquity. Pottery is the only category of ancient art in which the continuity is never interrupted and in which subtle changes in style and taste can be watched from generation to generation.

Now, vases formed on the potter’s wheel cry out for decoration to relieve the monotonous color of the surface, and vase painting begins as an art the moment the decoration rises to the level and ambition of well-composed pictures, interesting in themselves. The subjects of these pictures are almost exclusively human beings and animals, in preference to landscapes and still lifes. Another consideration that distinguishes vase painting from painting as understood today is that the colors are not those of the spectrum; they are limited to the different clay mixtures that attain a distinctive hue when fired. Chief among these colors is the celebrated Greek “black glaze,” at its best a deeply lustrous, almost metallic black. Certain matte colors, particularly white and a purplish red, were also produced ceramically. A fourth color was provided by the clay ground of the vase itself, which ranged in tone from a pale brown to a deep orange-red. If these limited colors strike us as insufficient for what we expect of a painting, it must be borne in mind that the full chromatic scale was never expressed or observed by the ancient Greeks, not even in their language. The very words for the different colors were never defined narrowly enough to allow accurate scientific equations and were more apt to denote the degree of brightness than the character of the pigment itself. Other words alluded to the ethnic or mineral origin of the color or used comparisons, such as the famous “wine-dark sea” of Homer.

The luxuriating exuberance of the Minoan-Mycenaean representations, both on walls and on vases, was succeeded in Greece, at about 1000 B.C., by a deliberate austerity, the geometric style. Here the decoration is in black glaze on the pale reddish brown background. The patterns are straight, angular, or circular with much emphasis on a disciplined articula-

1. Black-figured lekythos. Corinthian, about 560 B.C. Height 8 3/8 inches. Dionysios in his chariot; the names of two of the horses, Melanas and Euphorbos, are inscribed. Rogers Fund, 60.11.5

age, and abrasion are the only damages this material can suffer, and it is therefore not surprising that fired clay, terracotta, has survived in such great quantities. Clay, known to men since prehistoric times, was cheap and abundant; it could be formed into many shapes—roof tiles, gutters, spouts, altars, and sometimes even metopes, as well as loom weights, spindle whorls, dolls, and other toys. In addition there are terra-

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tion that respects and follows the natural divisions of the vase itself. In the beginning the ornamentation was almost timid, but in the eighth century B.C. simple silhouettes of human figures appeared for the first time in groupings that merit the term composition. The subjects are connected with the purpose of the vases on which they appear, and since most of the more impressive vases of this period, at least those that are preserved, are grave monuments, the figured decoration was drawn from the repertory of funereal subjects: mourners at the bier, processions, and battle scenes. Slowly the scope increased and mythological subjects, which were to become the principal theme of later vase paintings, began to appear.

For the next four hundred years we can watch the gradual development of vase painting from the rows of silhouettes of the geometric style, in which men and beasts are rendered like stick figures, to the very end of the classic style, when full familiarity with complex groupings, three-quarter views, and perspective is displayed. Parallel to the sequence of style goes one of technique, but the dividing lines of the two do not always coincide, and there is also the variety caused by the difference between centers of manufacture.

In the earlier periods many local wares existed side by side, perhaps because trade was still in its infancy, sporadic and fortuitous. In the early seventh century Corinth refined the technique of geometric vase painting by introducing incised lines within the figures that had been blocked out in silhouette, adding details and precision to the representations. Later the use of the matte accessory colors, dark red and white, came to be used regularly, and with it the black-figured technique, as it has become known, was created. Throughout the seventh and the early sixth centuries Corinth was the most important center for the production of painted vases, which reached the Greek colonies in the East as well as the West. Toward the end of the seventh century Athens adopted the black-figured technique, and for several generations the two wares, Attic and Corinthian, were in fierce competition. After the middle of the sixth century Attic vases dominated; Corinthian went into a rapid decline, and black-figured styles produced in other parts of Greece, such as Laconian, Chalcidian, Boeotian, Eretrian, and East Greek, never became serious rivals.

From then on the pace quickened, and while pottery was still made independently in all parts of the Greek world, vase painting developed best and most rapidly in Athens. Human figures lost their parade-like rigidity. Bodies are shown in action (Figure 3); feet are no longer both planted on the ground; movements become more natural; and even garments no longer look painted on but are “worn,” and the folds are clearly indicated (Figure 5). At the same time, moreover, vase painters made themselves known as individual artists. We have many signatures, and even the unsigned vases can safely and surely be attributed. It is this highly pronounced development of individual styles that distinguishes Attic black-figure from other black-figured wares. The principles of attribution have, of course, also

2. *Black-figured amphora (jar). Attributed to a painter of Group E. Attic, about 540 B.C. Height 15 ¾ inches. Theseus slaying the Minotaur. Fletcher Fund, 56.171.12*
been applied to Corinthian, Laconian, Chalcidian, and the like, but there even the soundest attributions tell us little about the personality of the painters, who seem to have remained more formal and tradition-bound.

The Attic clay, too, explains the superiority of Attic vases. Being richer in iron than, for instance, Corinthian, it fired redder; and the same material, when processed, yielded the perfect black glaze—a slip that turned into a lustrous deep black through a special three-stage firing process and remained firmly fused to the clay ground. The Corinthian glaze, in contrast, was not produced from the same clay as the body of the vase, and consequently often fired with a craquelure and tended to flake off (Figure 1). In Attica, from the middle of the sixth century on, the red of the clay body was deepened through the application of a red ocher wash. This pleasing contrast between the deep red of the clay body and the deep glossy black of the glaze became the envy of Corinthian potters and painters, who, during the height of the rivalry between the two centers of painted vases, tried to imitate the effect of Attic by applying a red slip to the picture panels of their vases. But the same difficulties as with the glaze bedeviled the Corinthians: the red background always looked painted on rather than stained, and it was subject to the same flaking as the black glaze.

But the Athenian vase painters had other technical advantages, too. Shortly after the middle of the sixth century B.C., an instrument came into use that allowed the glaze to be applied in fine raised lines, called relief lines. Used sparingly at first, these sharp lines stand out in relief. They became the logical successors to the equally sharp and delicate incised lines the moment the entire color scheme of vase painting was reversed, about 530 B.C.

It must have struck the Athenians as peculiar and unnaturalistic to people their vase paintings with men always painted a glossy black and


4. Black-figured lekythos. Attributed to the Painter of Vatican G.31 (near the Edinburgh Painter). Attic, late 6th century B.C. Height 8 inches. Athena appearing during the siege of Troy before Ajax and Achilles, who are engrossed in a game of draughts. Rogers Fund, 62.11.2
women a dead white (Figure 2). Ever since the late eighth century there had been an alternative to the silhouette technique, the outline technique. This manner, in which human beings are drawn in outline instead of as solid silhouettes, continued side by side with the standard black-figure technique in the sixth century, but was employed modestly. The disadvantages were obvious: with the bodies the same color as the background, the figures lacked substance and were held together, as it were, only by the contour lines. These contour lines, moreover, as well as the interior markings, were done with a brush and looked heavy; but with the tool for the relief line, these lines could be made sharp and strong. The moment a vase painter first thought of painting out the background around each figure with the black glaze, the red-figured technique was born (Figure 8). This at once restored substance to the bodies and helped the onlooker to concentrate on the figures. The background, in any event, had never been considered important, and the black provided the same neutral-


ity that in our own day portrait photographers strive for. More disadvantageous, perhaps, was the loss of color in the new technique: the matte dark red and the flat white continued to be used, but far more modestly and only for details—wreaths, fillets, inscriptions, and the like.

If the color aspects of vase painting slid into a temporary decline, the draughtsmanship, on the other hand, rose to new heights. The problems of corporeal perspective were solved, allowing the representation of back views and three-quarter views (Figure 7). Many of the earlier anatomical conventions were replaced by correct drawing based on accurate observation; the eyes, for example, which on archaic vases and reliefs had been shown frontally in a profile face, began to change toward a profile view: first the two corners of the eye were differentiated, then the inner corner became open, and the pupil shifted toward the open corner.

Another advance was the variation in the glaze lines possible with the red-figured technique. The relief line was the strongest and, in the best period, the late archaic phase, was used not only for inner details but also for the contours of the figures. Other lines, somewhat thinner and not so precise, were drawn with a brush, and a diluted glaze was used not only for inner anatomical markings, such as muscles and sinews, but also in places where brown was preferred to black, such as hair, grain on wood, and patterns on garments (Figure 8). Depending on the degree of dilution, the black glaze could be made to run the whole gamut from deep black to very pale brown and permitted the intermediate tones that were needed for shading.

Since the background of the designs was now the same color as the body of the vase, it was no longer necessary or desirable to put the paintings in panels framed by ornaments above or on three sides, as had been the rule on some shapes in black-figure, where the compositions with their light backgrounds appear as if viewed through a window and are self-contained within the frames. In red-figure the trend was toward letting the contour of the vase itself provide the frame, and the ornaments, which were formerly so powerful as to encroach on the pictures, now became subsidiary to them.

The change from black-figure to red-figure was
not, of course, accomplished overnight, and the production of black-figure did not by any means stop with the introduction of the new technique. For at least one generation both techniques flourished side by side, and there are many instances of first-rate vase painters who were fluent in both—who were, so to speak, bilingual. As the new technique became accepted, however, the young painters of ambition were apprenticed to red-figure masters, and the black-figured technique went into an eclipse.

Contemporary with red-figure was another technique of vase painting in which the body of the vase, or at least the picture zone, was covered with a clay engobe that fired white—a priming coat, as it were. On this white background the painters at first used the silhouette technique; in a more developed stage, silhouettes were combined with partial outlines. Lastly, silhouettes were abandoned altogether; the entire figure was drawn in outline (Frontispiece). Garments, hair, weapons, and other accessories were then colored with matte colors. In the beginning these matte colors were purely ceramic, applied before firing; later, other colors, especially blue, yellow, green, pink, purple, and matte black were added after the firing. These non-ceramic colors have often faded or disappeared, or have run and become smudged. The technique, which lasted into the beginning of the fourth century B.C., was not used indiscriminately. It was chiefly employed on lekythoi, especially those destined for the tomb, but it also appears on oinochoai, kylikes, pyxides, bobbins, and even kraters. Many of the red-figure vase painters occasionally decorated white-ground vases; others can be said to have divided their time between the two techniques; and some appear to have worked exclusively in the white-ground technique.

Yet another technique that appeared in Attic vase painting in the late sixth century B.C. goes to the other end of the scale and may be called the black-ground technique. Here the body of the vase or at least its picture zone was first covered with the clay slip that fired a lustrous black, and the figures were painted over the black background with ceramic colors. Sometimes their contours and inner markings were merely incised through the black glaze of the background; at other times there was a direct attempt to imitate the effects of red-figure: the figures were painted in opaque red over the black, and the inner markings were incised shallow enough so as not to scratch the black base. These incised lines, therefore, appear black on red, almost as if they were painted relief lines. In Attic vase painting the black-ground technique remained rare, but in Southern Italy it attained unexpected heights of perfection, both for ambitious figure work and modest ornamental decoration. In the latter form it survived even in Attica long after red-

7. Detail of a red-figured kylix. Near the Kleophrades Painter. Attic, about 500 B.C. Diameter of bowl 7 ¼ inches. Reclining banqueter playing the game of kottabos with a wine cup. Fletcher Fund, 56.171.62
figure, and vase painting as such, had expired.

To return to red-figure, it began during the archaic period of Greek art and shared in the rapid development of this phase, which came to an end after the Persian Wars, at about 480 B.C. The best vase painters of this period must have been, one is certain, the peers of contemporary easel and mural painters. The sureness of line, coupled with the mastery of composition and the nobility of the subject matter, could not have been surpassed by the large-scale paintings of the period on wood or walls. One even suspects that an archaic vase painter found time on occasion to practise his art in other media. As one looks, for example, at the paintings on wood from Pitsa mentioned above, one is struck at once by the stylistic resemblance these votive pictures bear to contemporary vase painting. The difference between the techniques is limited mostly to the use of colors: on the Pitsa plaques there is much blue, which could not be produced ceramically.

A real divergence in the paths of the two branches of Greek painting, between pictures on vases and pictures on panels or walls, can be noticed in the course of the transitional or early classic period, shortly after the Persian Wars. All archaic art was governed by certain conventions that classic art broke, and the very freedom that the new style brought with it did not favor all branches of art equally. In sculpture, for instance, the transition was smoother, for neither the scale nor the technique underwent a fundamental change. But in painting the new style brought with it an interest in ambitious compositions and increased size that do not suit the vase as they do a panel or a wall. In the archaic period of Greek painting all figures share a common ground line, overlap is kept to a minimum, and each picture can easily be read, usually from left to right. The classic style, by contrast, abandoned these conventions: figures are staggered on a variety of short ground lines,

8. Red-figured lekythos. Attributed to the Nikon Painter. Attic, about 480 B.C. Height 15 inches. Apollo playing the kithara. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Leon Pomerance, 53.224
there is much overlapping, and some are half hidden between hillocks or folds in the terrain. Thus the interrelation of the figures becomes so complex that a picture can no longer be read in linear fashion; it has to be seen all at once before the eye can allow itself to follow the intricate groupings or action. For paintings of this kind, vases, with their restricted dimensions and curved surfaces, no longer could serve as a convenient vehicle; mural painters, on the other hand, could reach out, limited only by the dimensions of the buildings. In some ambitious vase paintings we seem to detect an echo of the pictures by Polygnotos and Mikon, but even if one enlarges and flattens out the vase painting and supplies in the imagination the colors that could not be produced ceramically, one feels that one is still a long way from the famous paintings that won the admiration of the visitors to Athens and Delphi, just as modern paintings lose at times all vestiges of interest and beauty when they are reproduced on a black-and-white postcard.

Fortunately not all vase painters of this period yielded to the temptation of rivaling large paintings. Some contented themselves with showing only a few figures, maintaining the right balance between the vase and the picture (Figure 9). Besides, there is more to the classic style than merely the new freedom of movement and composition. For the first time in Western art something of the thought and mood of the figures is conveyed in their representation. This feeling for the inner man was expressed even in the shorthand of the artist in many ways: in the stance, the gestures, or the facial expression, as well as in the very way in which two or three figures are grouped. There is, moreover, a gentleness that could hardly have been expressed at a time.
when the artist was still struggling with the primary problem of rendering the human body accurately. Toward the end of the fifth century this trend brought vase painting dangerously close to an effenesis that borders on the ornate and sentimental.

When this point is reached it becomes hard to sustain an interest in vase painting, for even the subject matter became somewhat insipid. Gone are the great exploits of the heroic age or the abandoned revels of Dionysos’s followers, and the palaestra has been replaced by the gymaeum. Even the ornaments, which had been held in check, if not subdued, during the greatest period of vase painting, seem to have grown back and take up more than their allotted share of the available space. Potting itself went into a decline: at the beginning of red-figure, a great burst of new shapes accompanied the arrival of the new technique; at the end many shapes had gone out of fashion and no new ones were invented.

The decline of Attic red-figure need not hold us long, for our attention now shifts to Southern Italy. Even before the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War had brought about the loss of the markets in the West, Greek settlers in Southern Italy started to imitate Attic red-figure. For a short time these imitations were close to the Attic prototypes; later the style became more native in flavor, and the differences became more marked (Figure 13). The costumes and armor became purely local, and the drawing became less disciplined. The shapes were mostly those known already in Attica, but some were peculiar to Southern Italy. Several centers can be distinguished: Apulia, Lucania, Paestum, Campania, and later Sicily. As the style developed, the divergences became very marked, and within each ware different painters can be recognized. Andrew Oliver’s article, further on in this Bulletin, deals with one such personality.

In Athens red-figured vase painting came to an end in the last quarter of the fourth century B.C. In Southern Italy and Sicily it continued a little longer, but by about 300 B.C. the art of red-figure had died out in all parts of the ancient world.

With these historical and technical remarks as a background, the visitor may be in a better posi-


tion to appreciate the painted Greek vases in the four recently opened galleries in the Museum: they are displayed in chronological order, from the geometric period to the end of the fourth century, on the west side of the second floor of the South Wing. He will want to look at them for many different reasons, and the new exhibition opens up many different aspects. Some, who are interested in pottery, will find a dazzling variety of shapes; others, more intrigued by the styles of vase painting, will not only be able to understand the similarities and differences between the various contemporary painters, but will also, thanks to the chronological arrangement, appreciate the development of the styles and techniques. The student of mythology will find most of the Greek legends illustrated not by academic artists, textbook in hand, but by painters who knew the stories by heart and believed in them. And even the most casual visitor cannot but be struck both by the wealth of artistic expression and by the sheer variety of subjects: he will take with him a surer and deeper knowledge of Greek life and of Greek art.