A masterpiece of potting and painting: this is the Attic red-figured calyx krater that the Metropolitan Museum has recently acquired. Made about 515 B.C., it is signed by the painter Euphronios and by the potter Euxitheos. Surpassing in beauty and excellence any vase in the Museum’s large collection, it ranks in importance with the acknowledged masterpieces of Greek art. In the field of painted Greek pottery, it may without exaggeration be considered the finest Greek vase there is. The illustrations on the cover, frontispiece, and later in this article (Figure 15) demonstrate clearly and immediately why the krater has become the keystone of the Museum’s collection of Greek vases. Through its purchase our holdings in this fascinating field have taken on a new significance: an important collection has risen to one of distinction. Conversely, this newcomer would lose some of its meaning if it could not be seen and studied in the proper context.

A work of art whose impact is so direct may kindle interest in a field that is appreciated by only a few. What distinguishes Greek vases from all other decorated pottery is that their decoration, both in content and technique, rises above the level of ornamentation and justifies the special term vase painting.

Painted Greek vases are known from the second millennium B.C. until almost the end of the first century B.C., and pottery was produced from one end of the Greek world to the other. In the beginning many local styles flourished, but by the middle of the sixth century B.C. the vases of Attica and its capital Athens had exceeded in quantity and quality those of their nearest rival Corinth, with whom they had been competing for the lucrative foreign markets. This Attic supremacy — never surpassed — lasted for a century and a half and survived many wars and political upheavals, until the disastrous end of the Peloponnesian war in 404 B.C.
The picture at the bottom of this page is taken from the neck of a loutrophoros, and it shows a woman carrying a loutrophoros-amphora, surrounded by other women who raise their hands in grief. Loutrophoroi are vases in which the water for the bridal bath was fetched; the same shape, however, was also employed for vases put into the tomb. In the fourth century, a wedding vase carved in stone becomes, by transferred symbolism, the grave marker of those who died unmarried.

At the top of the opposite page, three women are depicted at a fountain house with hydriai (water jars). One has placed the empty jar sideways on her head; another holds it by the back handle.

The scenes at the middle and bottom show a woman pouring wine from an oinochoe (wine jug) into a phiale (libation bowl) held by Athena, and into a kylix (wine cup) held by a youth.

Aptt vases show their superiority for the first time.

The next phase of vase painting coincides with what is called the orientalizing period of Greek art: contact with the Near East opened Greek eyes to the Orient with its long tradition of floral ornaments, exotic beasts, and weird monsters. Much of the geometric austerity is abandoned, as incredible plants luxuriate in ornamental bands or even become part of the principal scene. In the drawing of the human figure, the strict silhouette of the geometric age now gives way to outline drawings that look curiously unsubstantial, since most of the available background is still filled with all manner of patterns. It is during this orientalizing period, however, that a decisive innovation was made in Corinth: the establishment of the black-figure technique. This meant a return to silhouettes, but now enlivened and articulated with incised lines and two additional ceramic colors, red and white.

In the second half of the seventh century this technique spread to Athens, where, from the very beginning, the skill demanded by the engraved lines encouraged artists to develop personal styles. It is, therefore, from the late seventh century on that style becomes the property of the artist instead of being merely a general fashion. Not surprisingly, signatures now begin to appear, and even unsigned vases can be attributed to individual painters with some assurance of accuracy. Although ornamental friezes still appear, the emphasis on human figures now becomes the overriding principle that is to govern vase painting for more than two centuries.

Most of the scenes on geometric works that portray human figures occur on vases used as grave monuments, and depict subjects related to the burial: the lying in state with mourners or funeral processions (Figure 1), for instance. But slowly other subjects are introduced that seem to be taken from the rich world of mythology. To watch the development of the narrative is one of the most rewarding studies of Greek vase painting. Most of the scenes represented are known to us from Greek literature, especially the early epics, but the artists appear to have been quite selective in what they show and how they tell a story. At no time do vases furnish book illustrations in the modern sense, with a picture for each episode. In this development of a narrative style, certain iconographic traditions are adhered to, but, more and more, thanks to the creative spirit of the individual artists, the stories told and scenes shown break with the time-honored formulae and introduce fresh aspects, novel groupings, or even subjects not before depicted. The great masters of Attic black-figure — Sophilos, Kleitias, Nearchos, Lydos, the Amasis Painter, and Exekias (Figures 6, 7, 8, 9) — not only manage to incorporate every artistic advance into their drawing of figures and entire compositions, but they also succeed in endowing their scenes with something of a personal experience. The gaiety and exuberance of a revel are strongly differentiated from the grim scene on a battle-
field, where the victors are easily distinguishable from the vanquished. Then there are solemn processions of worshipers, and grieving mourners at a bier. Among the heroes, Herakles becomes the favorite, perhaps because he was the most human. Yet he, too, is shown with subtle variations: the tense protagonist in strenuous labors differs from the relaxed hero who has been rewarded by immortality and Olympian status. This growing emphasis on human interpretations as opposed to hieratic formalism is one of the many accomplishments of the great black-figure painters.

The limitations of the black-figure technique, particularly the unrealistic color scheme, began to hinder artists who strove for ever richer and more varied representations. About 530-525 B.C. a new technique is introduced, which is called red-figure. Now the figures are left the color of the clay (and hence turn red when the vase is fired); details are indicated either in a very fine line drawn in black glaze, which is slightly raised (and hence called a relief line), or in lines of varying thickness executed in diluted glaze, with a tonal range from dark brown to translucent yellow. The dilute glaze is also at times applied to limited areas as a solid wash. The entire background — the space between and around the figures — is now painted a lustrous black, as if the system of illumination had been reversed. Most black-figure scenes look like sun-drenched open spaces in which figures are silhouetted, as if seen against the light. Red-figure, by contrast, reproduces the principles of modern theatrical lighting, with each performer bathed in his own spotlight. The immediate benefit for the spectator is twofold: not only does the picture carry better over a greater distance, but the contour of the vase itself is also less eroded by the decoration: the black of the background merges with the portions of the vase that bear no figures. Thus the contour of the vase and its rotundity are reestablished, with the proper stress on the profile or silhouette of the vase.

The path of black-figure from its powerful though unsophisticated beginnings in the late seventh century to its almost decadent daintiness a hundred years later is straight and clear. Red-figure in its initial phase seems brutally rustic by comparison, and its earliest practitioners, the Andokides Painter and Oltos (Figures 11, 14), can hardly have been a serious challenge to the older, fully developed technique. In early works by the Andokides Painter, for instance, the heavy inner markings, not even consistently drawn in relief lines, are no match for the subtle incisions of, say, the late Exekias.

All of this, however, changes rapidly and radically in the next generation, when a group of first-rate painters sets out to perfect the new technique. This group, considered the pioneers, no longer translates black-figure scenes into red-figure, as the Andokides Painter had been prone to do; instead, the old subjects are treated in novel compositions, as if they had never been painted before, and new subjects are introduced with a surety as if they had a long tradition behind them. It is in this period, and within the circle of the pioneers, that the individual styles of the painters can most readily be distinguished, and almost every one of their works is a masterpiece. By a happy coincidence (if indeed it is merely a coincidence), the greatest of the pioneers are known to us by name. They are Euphronios (the painter of our newly acquired calyx krater), Euthymides, and Phintias. Each of the three goes his own way and can thus be recognized, even though not all their works bear a signature. Each, by himself, contributes a solid chapter to Attic vase painting, but it is clear that they looked at each others’ work and learned from one another. Taken together, they bring about a primavera that painting did not see again until the Italian Renaissance.

Statistically speaking — and here we must make allowances for the fortuitous circumstances of the survival of their works — not one of them painted for very long or in great quantity, and just how they passed on the torch is not clear. At the height of their artistic activity, several new shapes begin to make their appearance,
The details in the middle of this page are taken from the sides of a wine cup, and depict two naked girls at a party. One lifts a heavy cup filled with wine carefully to her lips. The other peers into the bottom of an amphora to see whether there is any wine left; her flute case is dangling from her leg.

The scene at the bottom is taken from an Apulian situla (pail). A satyr fills a phiale with an oinochoe from a calyx krater (mixing bowl). The krater itself is decorated with two figures.

Opposite page: A man and hetaira at a drinking party. The girl has hooked a finger into the handle of a nearly empty kylix and spins it around in a game called kottabos. The man’s kylix must be full, because he holds it by the foot and stem and the pioneers seem to have collaborated with the potters in laying out the scheme of decoration on them; the specialized preferences for certain shapes that characterizes later generations of vase painters is not yet apparent. Nor is there much, if any, repetition of subjects or, for that matter, any limitation. Both the invisible world of the gods and the everyday life of Athens and her inhabitants are drawn with equal love, and the heroes of the past are shown with the features of the noblest contemporaries.

The next phase of Attic red-figure opens with the Berlin Painter and the Kleophrades Painter; all the technical achievements of the pioneers are continued with ease and consistency, as if they had been taught for generations. What is new now, apart from relatively minor anatomical refinements, are novel decorative principles through which the heavy borders that had framed scenes are lightened or altogether abandoned, and most compositions are reduced to just a few or even single figures. The beginnings of this trend can be detected in late works by Euphronios, but a perfect balance is not achieved until such figures as the Berlin Painter’s ecstatic kithara player (Figure 17), whose very contours seem to agree with the silhouette of the vase, or the balanced apposition of Herakles and Apollo on the neck amphora by the Kleophrades Painter (Figure 16): here the story—the struggle for the Delphic tripod—is neatly divided between the two sides of the vase, each giving to its half of the composition a self-contained stability.

At about this time the painters begin to show preferences for certain shapes, with a resulting degree of specialization, so that a distinction can be made between cup painters and pot painters. The Attic drinking cup (kylix) has a long and distinguished history going back to the first quarter of the sixth century B.C. Though the shape passed through a great many changes, the figure decoration remained attached to the same areas: a tondo—or disk—on the inside and friezes on the outside. The standard kylix afforded much freedom of decoration. Freedom and challenge—for the tondo, with its denial of verticals and horizontals, required a compositional skill not readily mastered by every painter. The great cup painters of this period are Onesimos, Makron, Douris, and the Brygos Painter (Figures 19, 20, 21), whose activities came to an end shortly after the victory over the Persians in 479 B.C.

With liberty and independence established, Athens grew powerful and rich. In the arts we approach what is justly called the classic period, culminating in the new buildings on the Acropolis. It is at this time that wall and panel painting emerges from its obscure beginnings, and we hear of masterpieces by Polygnotos and Mikon painted on panels for walls of buildings like the Theseion and the Painted Porch. Of these enormous paintings not a scrap has been recovered, but we have guidebook descriptions of their subjects and other scattered references to them. Neither literature nor vase painting informs us about any comparable large-scale panel or wall paintings of the archaic period; but, beginning in the second quarter of the fifth century, vase paintings suddenly include new types of compositions and a curious preference for certain mythological subjects, which must be attributed to outside influences. In the early classic period, many favorite scenes begin to disappear, and more and more of the vase painters seem to be competing not among themselves but with the famous painters of their day. As the archaic restraint gives way to the greater freedom of the classic period, something is lost of that balance by which shape and decoration were united: 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. The potting itself becomes increasingly poor—that is to say, less inventive. Almost all the shapes that already existed continue, but they are now “refined” to an elegance that often borders on affectation.

Great vase painters, however, still flourish for two generations, and many a vase in the early classic and classic period is truly memorable. The most significant advance lies in the treatment of moods and attitudes. The “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” with which Winckelmann characterized classic Greek art are intro-
duced into even the simplest groupings; each figure keeps a certain distance from the next and moves or stands with an almost trained grace. Even scenes with satyrs and maenads become unexpectedly quiet. Some of the finest vases of this period are no longer painted in the red-figure technique, but employ a white slip on which the subjects are drawn in outline with several additional ceramic colors for garments and accessories, as well as some ever-so-sparse indications of landscape. White-ground and red-figure go side by side, and while the Penthesilea Painter, for instance, is named after a monumental red-figured cup in Munich, his white-ground pyxis with the Judgment of Paris (Figure 23) ranks securely among his masterpieces.

In battle scenes, on the other hand, the big paintings on the walls of the Theseion and the Painted Porch had introduced a technique of suggesting depth by what is called cavalier perspective: since true perspective, as we have known it since the Renaissance, had not yet been mastered, the figures, whether near or far, were all shown of the same height but on different levels, with considerable overlapping. Many a vase painter tried to translate this fashion into the much smaller area of a vase, and it is thanks to these ambitious attempts that we can grasp something of the overall effect of the lost wall paintings. One of the favorite subjects is the battle between Athenians and Amazons (Figure 24): in an age that avoided direct political propaganda, the legendary Athenian victory over a band of foreign invaders served as the mythical precursor of the more recent victory of the Athenians over the Persians. In keeping with the new interest in the prehistoric Athenian past, Attic heroes and their exploits gradually displace heroes like Herakles, so popular in the sixth century B.C.

The new freedom in composition is paralleled by innovations in draughtsmanship: the human body is now shown in every conceivable pose and position, with much foreshortening and with a great many three-quarter views. Drapery folds lose their starched rigidity and hug the contours of the body. There is also some shading to show the hollow of a fold, the convexity of a shield, or the roundness of an object, but the figures remain evenly lit and cast no shadows. Toward the end of the fifth century, added white suddenly reappears for the flesh of women and
small figures of Eros, and for numerous details. Gilding, which in the archaic period had been used to represent exceptional objects like scepters or golden libation bowls, now becomes commonplace. Women in all their occupations predominate and are always shown as ladies, even when being abducted.

The Peloponnesian war, culminating in the defeat of Athens, all but stopped the profitable export of Attic pottery to the West, and the void was filled by local schools that arose in the Greek colonies of Southern Italy and Sicily. At first, these local artists cling close to their Athenian models both for shapes and decoration. In the fourth century, however, the gap widens, and the contacts, if any, become scarce. Much of South Italian vase painting is rather summary in design and execution, but there were enough talented painters with original ideas to create imposing works. Few of them, however, seem to have succeeded in mastering the complex relationship of painting to vase, and even the finest paintings suffer from being unrelated to the shape of the object they decorate.

Red-figure had gone a long way, and all the possibilities of its technique had been exhausted. But the glaze fired as black as ever, and among the more pleasing vases are those that have figures — or only ornaments — painted in opaque ceramic colors on the lustrous black ground (Figure 28). This technique, called “Gnathian” after a town in Apulia, had been briefly fashionable in Athens about 500 B.C., a counterpart, as it were, to the white-ground technique; how it reached Southern Italy a hundred years later is not entirely clear, but as it was also practiced in Etruria from the early fifth century on, it may have reached Apulia from Central Italy.

Toward the very end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century, red-figure comes to a complete halt in all parts of the ancient world, although black-figure, or the simpler form of silhouette decoration, had never entirely ceased and lingers on. In Sicily, the last phase of red-figure had seen the addition of non-ceramic colors to the vases after firing; later in the third century B.C., red-figure, which even with added colors is essentially a ceramic technique, was completely supplanted by pottery that was first fired and then painted. Now, for the first time, we have the full palette of the painter, and these vases, of which one of the finest is illustrated as Figure 29, curiously anticipate in their compositions and color scheme many of the wall paintings of two hundred years later found in the cities and villages buried by Mt. Vesuvius.

This is a sketch, in barest outline, of the history of vase painting. Its long development, remarkable continuity, and abundant survival make pottery the most important material in any study of antiquity. Paintings on vases tell us more about the Greeks, what they looked like, what they did, and what they believed in than any single literary text. Thus even a vase with poor drawing oftentimes takes on a special significance because of a story told for the first time, or a detail illuminated. A series of vase paintings of a given period is our best evidence for its artistic taste, and a comprehensive collection of vases, like the one in the Metropolitan Museum, becomes an encyclopedia opened simultaneously at all the important places. The large number of masterpieces in the Museum guarantees that the collection is not just an assembly of footnotes conveniently displayed, but that it deepens our appreciation of Greek art. In this context the average does not take away from the best; rather, like the broad base of a pyramid it directs the gaze to its summit and supports it.

Each of the vases illustrated here, while typical of its time and artist, should serve as a starting point toward that fuller exploration of the field that is rendered so easy by the collection from which these representatives were chosen. Here the inquisitive visitor will be rewarded beyond his expectations, as he discovers for himself the wealth of material waiting for him. No doubt he will soon find his own favorites, but let this brief survey and the following highlights act as a map on which some of the peaks and most of the boundaries are indicated.
This view of a large wall case in one of the Museum’s vase galleries gives most of the shapes of Attic vases from the late sixth to the fourth century B.C. In the top row, reading from left to right, we see one-piece amphorae of types A, B, and C; a neck amphora, and a pelike - all used for wine and oil. The last vase is a hydria (water jar).

The second row, again from left to right, has an aryballos (oil bottle), an alabastron (perfume vase), an amphoriskos (perfume vase), three pyxides (cosmetic vases), a lekanis (covered dish), a smegmatotheke (perfume vase), a miniature lebes gamikos and a loutrophoros (both used in wedding ceremonies and for the tomb), and two lekythoi (oil jugs) – one small and squat, the other tall and cylindrical.

The third row gives a variety of drinking cups: kylx type A, type B, and type C; a stemless kylx, four different, deeper bowls (skyphoi), and two kantharoi.

The short fourth shelf displays almost all the known types of wine jugs (oinochoai); the third from the end may also have served as a drinking cup.

In the bottom row is shown first a stamnos (a storage jar for wine), and then five types of mixing bowls: dinos, column krater, bell krater, volute krater, and calyx krater. Into the bell krater has been put, as if floating, a psykter (wine-cooler).