The development of the Greek vase collection

Like the goddess Athena, the collection of classical antiquities at the University of Melbourne was born fully-equipped and mature. It was created to honor the memory of John Hugh Sutton, of Trinity College, who was killed in a motorcycle accident soon after he had completed his second year of studies in classics. As a memorial to their son, in 1926 his parents donated the sum of £500 for the establishment of a classics museum. The terms stipulated that the funds were to be expended within three years on objects selected by the professor of classics. With the advice and very active assistance of CT Seltman of Queen's College Cambridge, Professor CA Scutt rapidly assembled a superbly representative collection of 37 vases and other artefacts, 100 coins and nearly 80 reproductions.

From 1929 to 1970 very few items were acquired: a Campanian bell krater bought at the suggestion of Professor AD Trendall, who praised the collection in his 1951 survey of Attic vases in Australia and New Zealand; and a trefoil oinochoe donated by Professor TBL Webster in gratitude for the hospitality afforded by Professor HAK Hunt and colleagues during a sabbatical visit in 1961. The Nolan amphora is on permanent loan from the estate of Rev. JS Drought, who was a student of Trinity College and the Classics Department in 1913–16.

The other forty-nine vases in the collection stand as a monument to the work of Peter Connor. In 1969 he succeeded John Carter as curator and, with the energetic support of Professor GW Clarke, embarked on a systematic program of research, exhibitions and collection development. Over the next twenty-five years he won support from the Faculty of Arts, which recognized that these purchases constituted important teaching and research equipment. Always a teacher, he observed that, 'the vases offered the greatest scope for usefulness in class and for attracting students who were not especially involved with the visual arts or the material culture of the ancient world'. His ten published studies of individual vases (and those of other scholars) and several exhibition catalogues demonstrate the exemplary research value of the collection and its appeal to the broader community.

This is an edited version of 'Development of the collection' by John Burke, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Peter Connor: classicist, curator and archaeologist

Peter Connor on site at the excavation of North West Tower, Jebel Khalid, Syria, 1986

Courtesy Professor Graeme Clarke
Mycenaean wares

Mycenaean pottery is usually cream-coloured with black or red decoration. The Mycenaean potters imitated Minoan (Cretan) pottery styles. But where the Minoan pottery features flowing naturalistic scenes of sea creatures and plants the Mycenaean imitations appear more stylized and symmetrical.

The Mycenaean wares in the University of Melbourne collection are all from the Late Helladic period 1300–1200 BCE, a period when the cities of Mycenaean Greece attained their peak of power and prosperity. This is the age of legendary figures such as Agamemnon of Mycenae and Nestor of Pylos and of the Trojan War, but historically its prosperity was due to commercial expansion and the exercise of rigid economic control, as documented by the Linear B tablets.

Mycenaean pottery or its contents were part of this economy; the stirrup jar, especially, with its contents of perfumed oil, travelled far and towards both East and West. The University of Melbourne collection has two of these small vessels, typical products of the era. Their shape, a highly practical one, originates in Minoan times but the decoration has changed greatly from the Minoan naturalistic, organic representations of plants and sea creatures, freely painted on the vase, to repetitive and schematic versions of those designs in highly organized zones which seem on their way to becoming geometric.

During the twelfth century the Mycenaean palace culture collapsed, for reasons much debated. Whatever the cause, many Mycenaean centres were destroyed or abandoned. The following two centuries are known as the Dark Ages; no written records survive. The only archaeological evidence comes from burials, and this is the context of the so-called 'Submycenaean' amphora. The shape of this cremation urn could belong to the Geometric period but the decoration looks back to the curves and free-form octopus tentacles of Mycenaean, if not Minoan, style, although much simplified. Nothing could be more different from the compass-drawn circles of the later Geometric style.

This is an edited version of 'Mycenaean wares', in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Attic Geometric wares

The Geometric period is mainly represented in the University of Melbourne collection by Attic wares. This is not surprising given that Athens in the eighth century had a flourishing pottery industry, as evidenced by the huge funeral kraters which stood as markers over graves in the aristocratic burial area near the Dipylon Gate of the Kerameikos or Potters’ Quarter. These are relatively sophisticated in decoration compared with the earliest Protogeometric style, which consists of compass-drawn circles or semi-circles, a style which lasted until c. 1050–900 BCE. The little hand-made cup or kalathos, with its wheel-spoke decoration stands between this period and the beginning of the true Geometric, when circles were replaced by a largely linear style organized into concentric zones and later becoming very complex and highly patterned. Neither this full Geometric style nor the preceding Protogeometric offered any animal or human representations. The decoration was monochrome, using a diluted brown or black paint (slip). When animals did appear, they were tucked into a metope or used in a repetitive frieze where they would not interfere with or interrupt the all-over patterning. They were rendered with the minimum detail and formed part of the pattern.

Probably the first animal to come to life on Attic vases was the horse, often neatly enclosed in a panel or metope. Horses were of great importance in Attica and sometimes a status symbol, closely linked as they were with the aristocracy. In addition to conferring status, they may have signified the taming of the wild and the possession of land and good pasture. Many horses have a rope attached to them. Other animals, such as the goat, graze peacefully and seem thoroughly domesticated. Birds, usually long-legged water birds, are almost as popular, probably for the opportunity of hatching or patterning which their wings afforded. These animals are never dominant; they are painted in the same washed-out, non-confrontational tones as the rest of the patterning. The grazing stag on the neck of one of the trefoil oinochoes stands out because the decoration of the rest of the jar is quiet and simple and represents a later development. By this time figured scenes had appeared, with the human forms rendered in terms of geometric shapes. Since the majority of Attic Geometric vases come from graves, it is not surprising that the figured scenes depict the funeral rites. However, other scenes of fighting and seafaring justify the claim that in the Geometric period pictorial narrative was born.

This is an edited version of ‘Attic Geometric’, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
East Greek wares

The seventh century was a period of Greek expansion overseas and colonization of places such as Al Mina in North Syria, Phrygia and Lycia in Ionia, Naukratis in Egypt and sites in Italy and Sicily. The term ‘East Greek’ is rather broad, as the vases so designated in the University of Melbourne collection come from as far apart as Caria in Asia Minor (Turkey), Rhodes, and Naukratis; one of the so-called ‘Ionian cups’ was probably made in Italy in imitation of the Rhodian variety. If one could pinpoint a major centre of influence and production in this wide area, it would probably be Rhodes.

The earliest East Greek vase in the collection, the Carian bird bowl, is still a product of the Geometric period with its linear decoration and long-legged water birds. The Rhodian stooded plate, with its rosettes and goose protome, is a long way from Geometric style, which never admitted florals. Rhodes is also represented by the little aryballos in the form of a seated man, a figure which perhaps recalls in miniature not only the massive Egyptian statues of seated figures but also the huge seated figures associated with the Temple of Apollo at Didyma. The little faience hedgehog (Egyptian species) is most probably from the faience factory discovered at Naukratis (in the Egyptian Delta), if not from Rhodes itself.

The University of Melbourne collection also includes two examples of the almost-ubiquitous ‘Ionian cup’: a simple banded cup made for everyday use, of a practical shape which certainly influenced the form of Attic black-figure cups. The wide distribution of these cups over the Mediterranean area attests to the importance of East Greek pottery production in the early sixth century, before Athens seized the market.

This is an edited version of ‘East Greek wares’, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Corinthian wares

Corinth was a very powerful city in both the Greek and Roman periods of ancient Greece, thanks to her economic importance. Her position on the Isthmus, which linked central and southern Greece, and her harbours on two gulfs allowed her to control both north–south and east–west traffic, giving rise to her best known epithet, wealthy. Imports and exports flowed through these harbours, and nothing was so characteristic as her pottery. The pale primary clays of the Corinthia are unmistakable as is the normally subdued decoration, contrasting greatly with the red clay and elaborate figured scenes from myth and everyday life of the pottery of Athens.

The Corinthian vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne are quite modest and characteristic. The earliest examples are typical products of early Corinthian pottery showing the technique known as black-figure, invented in Corinth and rapidly taken up in other centres. Many of the Corinthian vases in the collection are miniature and used to hold perfume or scented oils, an important Corinthian export.

It is appropriate that one of the Corinthian vases with human figures, an aryballos, shows padded dancers. These humorous figures, who danced probably for Dionysus and other gods at Corinthian festivals, appear on hundreds of Corinthian vessels of all shapes but especially on the perfume vase. Corinth was known for many important inventions, including very early stone temples, and one of her contributions was the dithyramb, a choral song in praise of the gods; although it is unlikely that these burlesque creatures are enacting that song, they do remind us of the culture of this important city.

This is an edited version of ‘Corinthian’, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Attic black-figure vases

The beginning of the black-figure technique, whereby details are incised into black figures on a reserved background, was seen in Corinthian ware of the seventh century BCE. It became in the sixth century the top genre of vase painting and Athens dominated the market, with her glossy black-figure narrative scenes on the warm pink-orange Attic clay, so much more of a visual contrast than the Corinthian brown gloss on pale yellow clay. The economic environment at Athens under the Peisistratids in the second half of the sixth century favoured the pottery trade: foreign craftsmen were encouraged to settle at Athens and ply their trade. The cultural environment, which saw the introduction of the Panathenaic Games, the recitals of poetry, and Homeric epic, and the drama festivals, not only provided painters with images and ideas for their scenes, but also customer demand for certain vessels and themes, such as the Panathenaic amphorae and scenes of chariot-racing or harnessing chariots. The recitations must have created a demand for heroic scenes of fighting and dying, of farewells and arrivals, of journeys and monsters vanquished.

The black-figure vases in the University of Melbourne collection range from mid-sixth century to the very tail end of the technique in the first quarter of the fifth century, when red-figure had swamped the market. Many of the Attic black-figure vases in the collection were found in Italy and may have been designed for the export market. Even so, the repetition of certain themes gives us some idea of Athenian taste. Attic vase scenes, both black-figure and red-figure, are renowned for the multiplicity and repetition of themes which may be heroic or mythic in origin, but are not necessarily to be identified as such. The armour and costume is always contemporary; the warrior’s mother or sister wears Athenian dress. Thus, a fight can be Homeric or real; two riders can be the Dioskouroi or two young Athenians out for a hunt.

A hero of great importance to the Athenian (indeed, to all Greeks) and always identifiable, is Herakles. A huge proportion of Attic vases feature Herakles slaying monsters and clearing the civilized world of pests; very often, on Attic vases, the goddess of Athens, Athena, is there helping him; the association was obviously important to Athenians. The god Dionysus appears very early and it is surely quite natural for the god of wine to appear on drinking vessels or jars that serve wine. However, towards the end of the century Dionysian scenes multiplied, and it has been suggested that his position as patron god of drama festivals urbanized the rustic, agricultural cult.

This is an edited version of ‘Attic black-figure vases’, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Attic cups: black-figure to red-figure vases

Black-figure and red-figure wares are often catalogued separately, as though needing different treatment, but the invention of the red-figure technique did not oust black-figure for some fifty years and the two techniques existed side by side for at least the last quarter of the sixth century and the first twenty-five years of the fifth. Several known painters worked competently in both techniques, employing the same themes in both. The University of Melbourne collection possesses several cups from this Late Archaic period in both techniques; they represent a great variety in shape and an interesting change of taste in the decoration of cups.

A feature of Attic cups is the decoration of the interior floor or tondo of the vessel. This is a circular area posing particular problems of decoration and it is interesting to see the varied ways it is tackled over the fifty or so years covered by the cups in this collection. The picture in the tondo greets the eye when the cup is drained dry. It is not surprising that the Gorgon's head is the earliest reaction to the space, with the difference in one example of snakes from the nose rather than from the head in order to fit the space. Narrative followed quickly, in one case Theseus and the Minotaur, Theseus being somewhat of an icon of Athenian youth, for whose edification the hoplite duel may have been intended. The single human figure of the boy about to throw the discus in the tondo of the Epeleios cup reflects the end-of-the-century interest in portraying human activity, in particular athletics, and the red-figure painter's experimentation with portrayal of the naked human body in movement. The scene in the tondo of one example is even more poignant: a naked boy running with heavy wineskin, presumably to replenish supplies.

The collection also represents a good range of variants in shape and size of cups. Both red-figure cups are quite large and conjure up images of large symposia. One cup is elegantly decorated with a simple wreath of ivy leaves, such as would be worn by the revellers themselves.

This is an edited version of 'Attic cups: black-figure to red-figure', in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Attic red-figure vases of the Classical period

Red-figure vase painting is one of the most important styles of Greek vase painting. It developed in Athens around 530 BCE and remained in use until the late third century BCE. It replaced the previously dominant style of black-figure vase painting within a few decades. The most important areas of production, apart from Attica, were in southern Italy. The style was also adopted in other parts of Greece. Etruria became an important centre of production outside the Greek world.

Most of the red-figure vases in the University of Melbourne collection come from the mid-fifth century, contemporary with Perikles and with what Professor John Boardman calls the ‘Parthenon period’, when the Parthenon was being planned and built. The early red-figure interest in the dramatic events of the Trojan saga, in riotous symposia and energetic athletics, has given way to more sober and dignified compositions of one or two figures highlighted by large areas of plain black glaze. The pursuit scene, along with scenes of leave-taking, was particularly popular at this period and may have some contemporary significance to do with marriage rituals. Indeed the life of women and their preparation for marriage is one topic that increased in importance.

The red-figure trefoil oinochoe, dated to the end of the fifth century, is of great interest, not only for its relationship to the important circle of the Meidias Painter, but for its iconography which is almost certainly associated with the important spring festival of the Anthesteria, held in honour of Dionysus. So, too, may be the tiny squat lekythos, with its entirely appropriate decoration of a fat, crawling baby. Both vases show the interest in representing children more realistically and not just as miniature adults.

This is an edited version of 'Attic red-figure of the Classical period', in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Attic white-ground lekythoi vases

The white-ground technique was already well-known in the Late Archaic period. Most likely it derived either from black-figure technique or from imitation of major painting. It has also been suggested that it was connected with painting on non-standard materials such as ostrich eggs or ivory. Its connection with lekythoi vases dates from early on; but it could also be used on an oinochoe, a kylix, a pyxis, or an alabastron. White-ground lekythos was the standard grave-offering in Classical times. They contained oil that was always used in the burial rite. There was often a smaller space inside the lekythos for oil, so that the user did not have to fill the whole vessel, thus economizing on the expenditure of costly oil on the grave.

The University of Melbourne collection contains only two vases employing the white-ground technique. One example uses a white-slipped ground, instead of the reserved red ground, as a background for black-figure palmettes, which are its only decoration. The workshop of the Beldam Painter mass-produced these small lekythoi, probably for ritual or funerary use.

The second example, by the Reed Painter, is the only vase to employ the true white-ground technique whereby the white ground is painted in polychrome. The figures were drawn in outline on the white, using at first a dilute brown glaze and later a matt black or red, which was a more fluid medium. Solid colours were used for garments and a white-on-white for the women's flesh. The colours include brilliant red, yellow, purple, blue and green, but because the colours were not fired, they were fugitive; often little or no trace of the colour is apparent and only the outline is left.

This may be one of the reasons that the white-ground lekythos became, or perhaps was predominantly a funerary vessel, its decoration making it impractical for domestic use. The scenes often involve visits to the grave or domestic preparations for such visits. Such scenes are our chief source of knowledge about Attic funerary practices in the fifth century BCE.

This is an edited version of “Attic white ground lekythoi”, in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
South Italian vases

Greeks began to settle in south Italy and Sicily from the middle of the eighth century. It was not long before these colonists started to fashion vases using local clays, and painted pots continued to be turned out until the third century BCE. The collection of the University of Melbourne includes only one example of this first phase of South Italian vase-painting, a black-figure, or rather black silhouette, neck-amphora, of the very end of the sixth or early fifth century, which was probably made in Campania.

However, the collection has several vases decorated in the red-figure technique. Red-figure pottery was first produced in southern Italy in about 450 BCE in imitation of the similar Athenian vases that were exported throughout the Mediterranean from the later sixth century. Production continued for some 150 years, until about 300 BCE or a little later. Today well over 20,000 South Italian vases are preserved in museums and private collections throughout the world, and they provide a fundamental source of information about many aspects of colonial Greek and native culture in south Italy and Sicily during the Classical period.

On the western side of Italy local red-figure vases appear first in Sicily during the last quarter of the fifth century, again in imitation of Attic. From Sicily the style spread in the years around 370 BCE, perhaps through the migration of potters/painters to Campania and to the important Greek/Lucanian city of Posedonia (Paestrum). The only two South Italian artists whose names are known, Asteas and Python, worked at Paestum. Their workshop is represented in the University of Melbourne collection by a small lebes (with a characteristic Paestan bird on one side).

Campanian red-figure was produced in a number of different centres, of which one was probably Cumae. The Campanian bell krater in the University of Melbourne collection, with its white-fleshed women, well illustrates the colourful nature of this Cumaean red-figure.

This is an edited version of 'South Italian', in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.
Black-glazed and related wares

Fine Attic ware is usually taken to mean figured vases, but the same workshops that produced figured vases also produced plain black-glazed ware, sometimes of great elegance, the shapes enhanced by the lack of distracting figured scenes. Athenian potters had excelled in the black-glaze technique since the sixth century BCE, and Athens's dominance of the market lasted until the end of the fifth century. This influence lasted even longer because workshops in other parts of the Greek world copied and adapted Attic prototypes up until the third century BCE.

The true Attic product of the fifth century is represented in the collection by the Gallatin plate, a particularly fine example of tableware; by the lekanis with its elegant lines and reversible lid, and by the simple drinking skyphos. The latter two shapes illustrate the functionality of this ware; other black-glazed items in the collection are useful domestic vessels, such as the guttus, the askos and the 'salt-cellar' (more probably a kitchen measure) which afford a fascinating glimpse into domestic life.

It is not always easy to tell the difference between the true Attic product and South Italian ware, although clay colour and quality of black-glaze are some indication. Attic black-glaze of the sixth and most of the fifth centuries had a deep, rich blue-black gloss which became more metallic towards the end of the fifth century, perhaps influenced by the appearance of metal vessels. The stamping of designs into the black is also a feature of metal ware. The University of Melbourne’s collection features one bowl with stamped patterns which is an excellent example both of this kind of decoration and good quality black-glazed ware produced by a South Italian workshop.

This is an edited version of 'Black-glazed and related wares', in A catalogue of Greek vases in the collection of the University of Melbourne at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, by Peter Connor and Heather Jackson with the assistance of John Burke, Macmillan, South Yarra, Vic., 2000.