

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet



### The Ancient Greeks Pottery

Children are often surprised at the large number of Greek pots on display in the Museum. There are various reasons why the culture of Ancient Greece is often well represented in museums by exhibitions of pottery. Clay is a readily available, easily worked material that serves many basic functions and pottery is one of the oldest of human crafts. So one reason that the Ancient Greeks made so many pots was that, as in most Ancient cultures, large numbers of pots were made to meet the everyday needs of containing and transporting goods.

Today these same functions are met in our society through the use of a wide variety of materials and the application of later technologies.

**Red figure technique Wine-jar (amphora) showing warrior and youth with a horse**  
**Case 6, Object 17, museum number GR.21.1937**

### Pots of all Shapes and Sizes

As the Greeks made pots for a wide variety of functions, the designs of the vessels had to meet various needs. The shape and size of pots is often a common-sense guide to their use; larger pots were used to carry and store more common liquids needed in large quantities, whereas smaller vessels held rarer or more costly substances used in smaller quantities. Narrow necked vessels held liquids to be poured in a slow stream, and the converse is true of wide necked pots used for mixing and more rapid pouring. The decoration of a pot is often also a guide to its original use; make-up containers, for example, often show scenes of women holding mirrors.

However, much of the pottery produced in Ancient Greece had uses that stretched beyond the domestic. These vases were highly prized and were themselves objects of export. Many of the pots in the Museum's collection are from tombs and sanctuaries, because according to the Greek concept of the afterlife, the well-being of the soul on its journey to Hades or the Islands of the Blessed depended on the continued solicitations of the living. A fairly common feature of Greek burials was a pipe, inserted into the tomb, through which food and drink were poured. Tomb contents often included pottery alongside more personal items such as armour or jewellery. Pots were placed in tombs for purely practical use in the afterlife, but also came to hold associated symbolic meaning in their own right.

On appointed days libations and offerings were carried to the tombs and poured from specially produced pots of distinctive shapes such as *lekythoi*. *Loutrophori*, vessels with long necks and elegant volute handles of distinctive shapes were often placed on the tombs of those who died unmarried. The paintings on such pots often show their spiritual function.

The majority of Greek pots on display in museums are examples of fine work produced by some of the most skilled Ancient Greek potters. It is important that children understand that not all

pottery made and used in Ancient times was of this standard and that much of it was roughly made and purely functional.

## The Production of Pottery

The processes described below are those used by potters in the classical period 500 - 360 BC for the production of red- and black-figure pottery.

Children can deduce a great deal about the production of Greek pottery from their own careful observations; any experience they have of handling and forming clay will be invaluable when they are learning from these objects.

## Preparing the Clay

The first stage of making any object is gathering the raw material. For pottery, this entails digging clay, which is hard work and in many cultures was carried out by low-paid members of society, or in some cases, by slave labour. The weight of clay is also a determining factor in the location of potteries as transporting clay for any distance is difficult. It is, therefore, common to find potteries situated near clay pits.

The clay used in Ancient Greece was plastic, tough and contained a high percentage of iron which turned pink when fired. In order to clean the clay it was watered down in a levigation (filtration) pit, the mixture was allowed to settle and the finer surface fraction tapped off. The diluted clay was then left in shallow trays for the excess water to evaporate in the heat of the sun. The resulting clean clay was then pugged (kneaded) to increase plasticity and rid it of air bubbles.

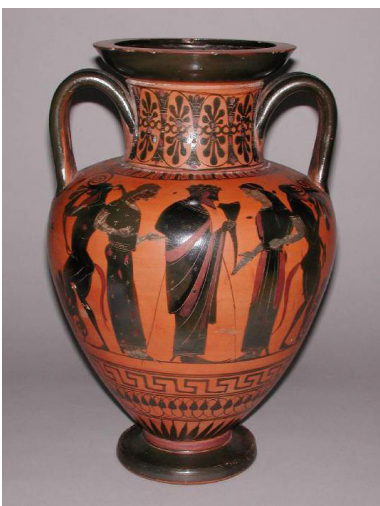
## Forming the Pots

The pots are symmetrical, regular and smooth, they were formed on a potter's wheel. Greek potters used two basic types of wheel:

- (1) The turntable which was in use up to 600 BC
- (2) The kick wheel

Smaller pots were made in one piece but the largest were made in sections and joined at structural points - between neck and body, or body and foot - with an extra coil of clay smoothed into the body of the pot. These joins are often still visible on the inside. Handles, hand-formed rather than moulded, were added when the body of the pot was complete. When the body had been formed the pot was placed upside down on the wheel and shaved to produce a smooth, even surface, essential for the fine and detailed decoration which followed.

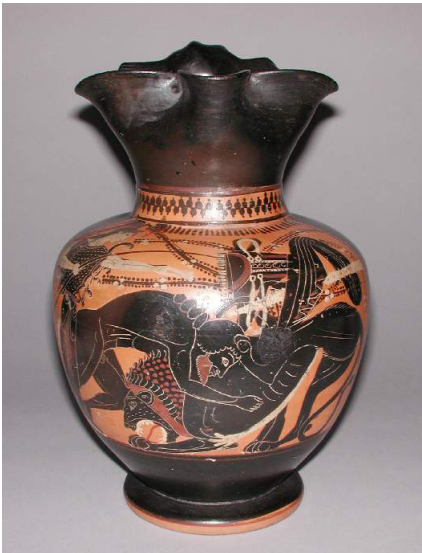
## Decorating the Pots



Ancient Greek pots were only fired once and the decoration took place while the clay was still leather hard. The medium of decoration was not a glaze, but liquid clay. The black slip was made from clay, water and wood ash and the white from diluted white clay. The whole surface of the pot was covered with a thin coat of diluted red clay to give an added depth of colour and a slight gloss after firing.

On black-figure pots (550 - 480 BC), the design was painted like a silhouette with black slip against the red background. Details were either scratched through the black slip or painted in red and white on top of it.

**Black figure Neck-amphora**  
Case 7, Object 36, Museum number GR.I9.I917



In the red-figure style (begun 530 BC), a blunt tool was used to draw a sketch in the clay and then the negative space around the figures was painted black whereas the figures were the colour of the red clay ground. Details were added in white and then the whole background was filled in with black.

The decoration was often carried out by a specialist pot-painter.

**Wine-jug (oinochoe)**  
**Case 6, Object 7, museum number GR.7.1937**  
**Black figure technique. Made in Athens c. 500BC**

## Firing the Pots

When the pots were decorated and completely dried, a single firing took place in three stages:

- 1) Air was let into the kiln through vents and the whole pot, body clay and black slip turned red due to oxidation.
- 2) The vents were shut and smoke was introduced to the kiln which turned the whole pot black.
- 3) The temperature was allowed to drop and the air vents were re-opened; this oxidised the red areas once again, returning them to their original colour, but as oxygen could not penetrate the thicker covering on those parts painted with black slip these areas remained black.

These Ancient pots can give information about many areas of Greek life such as the technology that formed them, their various functions, trade and ownership, all of which are just as important as the scenes painted on them.

## Content and Style

The main themes of Greek vase painting echo the central preoccupation of Greek culture, that is, humankind itself - everywhere the children look they will see people. If a comparison is made between the decorations on Greek pots with those from other cultures this concentration on mankind comes sharply into focus.

The Greek style of painting shows this focus as strongly as the content, for the Greeks were the first artists who worked to create an illusion of visual reality. This style, which can only have developed from careful observations of real life, reflects the fundamental energy of Greek culture, which stemmed from an abiding interest in all aspects of human life and understanding.