

VASEMANIA

Neoclassical Form and Ornament:
Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art

JULY 22 THROUGH OCTOBER 17, 2004

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies
in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture



From July 22 through October 17, 2004, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, in collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is presenting *Vasemania—Neoclassical Form and Ornament: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

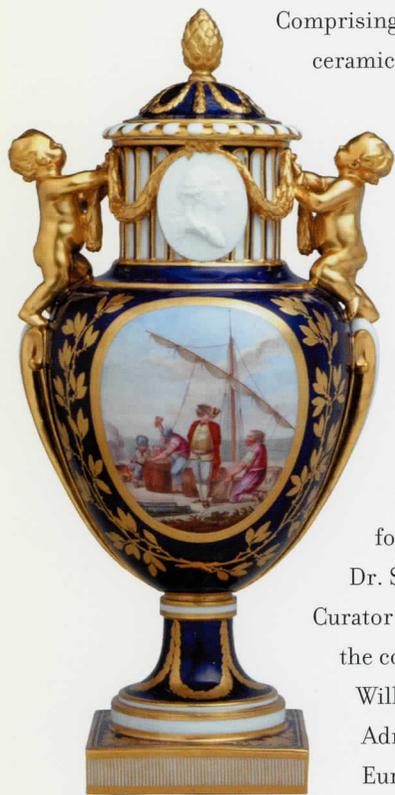
This is the first exhibition resulting from a collaboration between the two institutions that was established in 2001 to give BGC students the opportunity to experience curating an exhibition firsthand with rarely exhibited objects from the Metropolitan's collections.

The exhibition explores the revival of classicism in the 18th century as exemplified by the vase motif.

Comprising approximately 100 examples of ceramics, silver, textiles, furniture, works on paper, and paintings,

Vasemania examines how the vase represents the unity as well as the variety of ornamentation, form, and color during the neoclassical period.

The exhibition was curated with the assistance of M.A. and Ph.D. students from the Bard Graduate Center who took part in a museum studies course that focused on the "Vasemania" theme. Dr. Stefanie Walker, Special Exhibitions Curator at the Bard Graduate Center, taught the course with the assistance of William Rieder, Curator and Administrator of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum.



Significant discoveries during the excavations of the ancient Roman cities of Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748) spurred a renewed interest in classical forms in design as well as the imagery and subject matter found in the decoration of objects. The new style, known as neoclassicism, permeated the painting, sculpture, furniture, and interior design of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. One of the most prevalent motifs of the period—and one that came to symbolize neoclassicism—was the vase.

As a fairly common remnant of the antique past, the vase rose to popularity through the activities of antiquarians and collectors such as Sir William Hamilton, whose influential publication of his vast collection of Greek vases elevated the motif to the status of a cultural icon and historical model. Other noteworthy antiquarians at the time included the Count de Caylus in France, Giovanni Battista Piranesi in Italy, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann in Germany.

Well-known producers, such as Josiah Wedgwood in England and the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory in France, created new ceramic interpretations of ancient vessels. The decorative sensibilities and techniques developed by each illuminate individual company preferences as well as marketing and technological innovations resulting from evolving consumerism. The many manifestations of the vase form in continental Europe provided a new paradigm of beauty based on the common assumption of classicism's universal significance and validity.

Variations on the use of the vase in other media—silver, furniture, woodwork, and textiles—demonstrate the strength and pervasiveness of the motif in direct as well as more imaginative reincarnations. The exhibition is by no means restricted to functional



vessels or garden ornaments; rather, it portrays the vase as the central element of design or ornament in, for example, wine and water urns, knife boxes, inkwells, perfume burners, furnishing fabrics, and carved paneling. English works by Matthew Boulton (1728–1809) and in the manner of Robert Adam showcase objects in precious stones and elegant pieces of marquetry furniture. The reinterpretation of the antique in silver is exemplified by drawings by Jean-Guillaume Moitte (1746–1810) and Henri Auguste (1759–1816), which are juxtaposed with corresponding objects by Jacques-Nicolas Roettiers (1736–1788), Paul Storr (1771–1844), Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier (1763–1850), and other European silversmiths.

Drawings and prints of vase designs by leading artists of the period include works by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), Jean-Charles Delafosse (1734–1789), and Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain (1715–1759). The thematic range of the vase motif—from austere to fantastic to romantic—reveals how artists adapted its archaeological associations with increasing freedom as it was integrated into contemporary design practice.

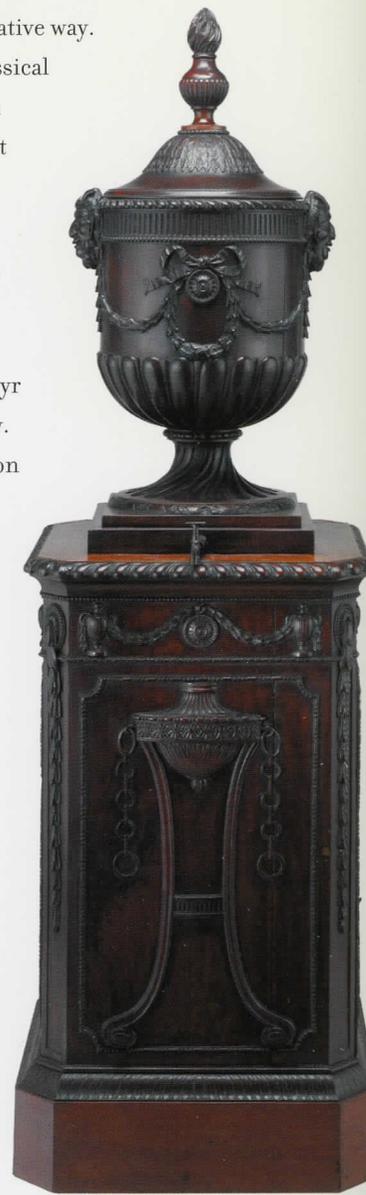
The first section of the exhibition explores the importance of the Hamilton Collection and the use of the vase motif in the development of early neoclassicism. Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803) was British Envoy to the

Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies from

1764 to 1798. He was a renowned collector of antiquities, and his fascination with classical art had considerable influence on artistic life in Britain in the 18th century. His collection included objects from the recently excavated ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. As a designer and manufacturer, Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) was particularly influenced by Hamilton's collections of vases. Wedgwood profited greatly from the production of vessels in the antique manner, many in black basalt painted to imitate classical originals.

The second section focuses on the highly original designs by French and other artists that exemplify the earliest phase of neoclassicism in the 1760s, known as the *goût grec* or "Greek taste." While most of these compositions bear little resemblance to vases or vase forms actually used in the ancient world, they evoke antiquity in a more imaginative way. Many examples adapt motifs from classical architecture and ornament or draw on Renaissance interpretations of ancient vessels. The *goût grec* vase designers helped to establish the ornamental canon for neoclassical decorative arts, which favored motifs such as heavy laurel garlands, Greek meanders, geometric forms, ram's heads, and satyr masks, all arranged in strict symmetry.

The third section of the exhibition focuses on how specific royal manufactories in the 18th century incorporated classical forms and decorations into their ceramic production. Objects produced by the great French porcelain factory at Sèvres highlight this section, along with representative works from German, Spanish, and English makers. The works exhibited reflect the artistic tension that existed within the Sèvres factory between the desire to incorporate antique forms and ornamentation, and the dependence on older rococo styles that made Sèvres Europe's leading manufacturer of ceramics in the early 18th century.



The fourth section contrasts the situation at Sèvres and other royal manufactories with the new, rising entrepreneurial production of decorative vases, in England especially by Josiah Wedgwood. The display of works by Wedgwood and his competitors discusses and illustrates the commercialization and marketing of the vase, which greatly increased interest in classical forms and decoration throughout Europe.

It was not just in the production of ceramics that references were made to classical vase forms and decoration. *Vasemania* also includes works by some of the leading silversmiths of the 18th century. Artists such as Jacques-Nicolas Roettiers, Henri Auguste, Martin Guillaume Biennais, and Paul Storr exquisitely translated many of the forms and ornamentation found in antique ceramics into silver tureens, pitchers, urns, and inkstands. Examples of textiles and furniture reveal how widespread the vase was as a form and ornament in all aspects of 18th-century interiors and design.

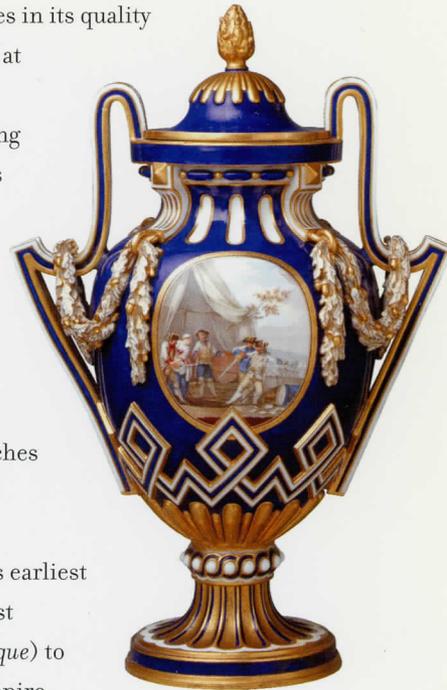
The exhibition closes with a number of images that either exalt the vase form or satirize the "vasemania" that swept 18th-century Europe. Examples include a 1771 etching by Ennemond Alexandre Petitot that depicts an elaborately costumed woman who takes on the form of a classical vase. Entitled *The Greek Bride*, this work fittingly reveals, in a humorous manner, how the vase form embodied the contemporary notion of antiquity like no other motif.

A full-color catalogue of all objects in the exhibition accompanies *Vasemania*. Catalogue entries have been written by the Bard Graduate Center students who participated in the initial museum studies course held in conjunction with the planning of the exhibition and with the help of Jessie McNab, Jeffrey Munger, William Rieder, and Perrin Stein from the Metropolitan Museum. The catalogue contains two essays. The first, "Collecting Neoclassical Decorative Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art," by Heather Jane McCormick, a Ph.D. candidate at the BGC, traces the Metropolitan's history of collecting decorative arts from the neoclassical period, highlighting significant collectors and acquisitions. One of the first substantial collections of decorative

arts that entered the Metropolitan was the one J. Pierpont Morgan purchased from the Parisian architect Georges Hoentschel in 1906 and subsequently donated to the museum. The significance of this collection lies in its quality as well as the fact that its arrival at the Metropolitan prompted the construction of a new gallery wing and the establishment of what is now the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts.

The second essay, "Metamorphosis of the Neoclassical Vase," by Dr. Hans Ottomeyer (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin) chronicles the development of the vase theme throughout this period. From its earliest phase (*goût grec*) through its most refined development (*goût étrusque*) to its final phase, known as the Empire, the author emphasizes the dominant role played by collectors, artists, designers, and critics.

Yale University Press is co-publisher and distributor of the catalogue worldwide.



From left to right

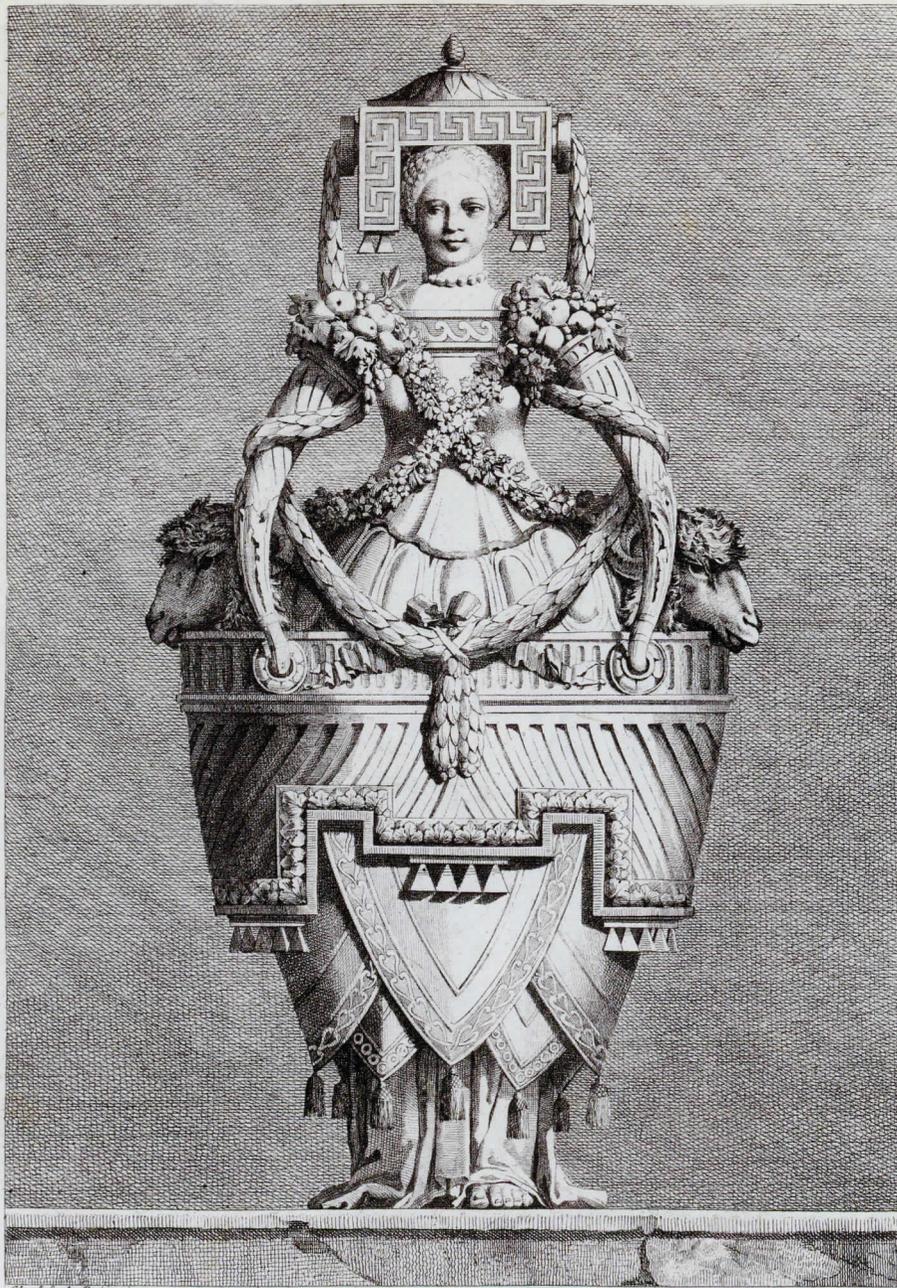
Vase with Putti and a Medallion of Louis XVI. Sèvres Manufactory (c. 1778). Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Coffee pot. Martin-Guillaume Biennais (1797–1809). Rogers Fund, 1934. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Wedgwood Portland Vase. Josiah Wedgwood and Sons, Staffordshire Etruria (c. 1840–1860). Gift of Henry C. Marquand, 1984. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Sideboard Urn on Pedestal. English (c. 1775). Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Vase with a Scene before a Duel (*Vase à batons rompus*), Sèvres Manufactory, (c. 1765). Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



La Mariée à la Grecque

Left

The Greek Bride. (*La Mariée à la Grecque*). Ennemond Alexandre Petitot, designer; Benigno Bossi, engraver (1771). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1940. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cover

Overdoor Panel Representing the Season, Spring. Design attributed to Francois-Joseph Belanger (1744–1781). Gift of J. Piermont Morgan, 1906. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Support for *Vasemania—Neoclassical Form and Ornament: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art* has been made possible with the generous support of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

Celebrating our 10th anniversary



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