

DESIGN REVIEW

How the Greek Vase Shaped Many Styles And Western Design

By ROBERTA SMITH

If you are among the people who will see an exhibition just because the title makes you laugh out loud, add "Vasemania" at the Bard Graduate Center to your itinerary. If you are undeterred by the show's all-kidding-aside subtitle, "Neoclassical Form and Ornament in Europe: Selections From the Metropolitan Museum of Art," you may be a certifiable vasemaniac. For everyone else, this thoughtful, elegantly installed show offers an airy, inspiring glimpse of artistic osmosis, assimilation and conversion.

Museums are tending more and more to mount single-subject theme shows (the dog in art, the hand in photography, the whatever in Picasso), but "Vasemania" defies the formula. Including plenty of actual vases, of course, as well as prints, illustrated books, silver, painted panels, metalwork, furniture and textiles, it traces the influence of the Greek vase on objects and decorative motifs through late 18th-century European culture and into the Western unconscious.

It also provides an inspiring example of mutually beneficial cooperation between museums. Under the supervision of Stefanie Walker, special exhibitions curator at the Bard Center, and William Rieder, a curator at the Met, students at the Bard Graduate Center selected the objects in the show (and wrote the catalog annotations on them).

Not all the selections are regularly on view at the Met, so the show may deepen your appreciation of the Met's holdings and its collecting history. (The decorative-arts side of this history is recounted in an essay in the catalog by Heather Jane McCormick, a doctoral candidate at Bard.) Meanwhile the students'

"Vasemania: Neoclassical Form and Ornament in Europe: Selections From the Metropolitan Museum of Art" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Oct. 17.

spare, implicitly neoclassical installation of their selections should also expand your sense of the importance of the decorative objects as relatively ego-free vehicles of visual thought and innovation.

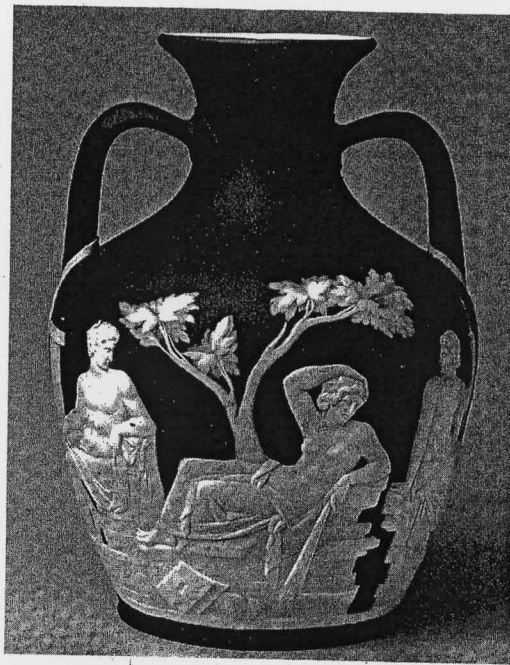
For better and for worse, nothing has done more to shape Western civilization than the culture of classical Greece. The Italians conjured much of the Renaissance from its literature, architecture and sculpture, as derived mostly from second-hand Roman sources. In the 18th century, as excavation of Greece began in earnest, the contact became more direct, the influence more insistent. Large chunks of what was unearthed were carted off to European museums and private collections, where they began to work their spell on artists, designers and architects as well as on the kings and aristocrats who employed them.

David's "Oath of the Horatii," Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the high-waisted, diaphanous gowns favored by the ladies of Napoleon's court, the gold-on-orange Tapestry Room designed by Robert Adam for Croome Court in the 1760's and now at the Met — these are but a few specific examples. Another is the facade of the old New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street, with its temple-like columns and pediment, although in America, neoclassical was usually called Federal.

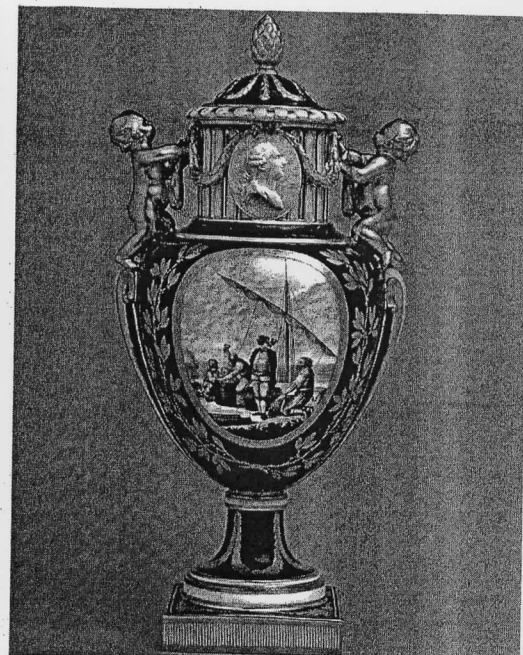
Despite the fame of such landmarks as the Elgin Marbles in London or the Pegasus in Berlin, the chief transmitter of *le goût Grec* was the Greek vase.

As Hans Ottomeyer, director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, writes in his illuminating essay in the catalog, vases were small, portable and intact relative to statues and buildings. They are also fabulously interdisciplinary, their shapes are sculptural and their details are implicitly architectural, as suggested by the Greek column krater at the beginning of the Bard show. In addition their smooth surfaces encouraged what may have been the West's first sustained succession of schools of painting.

In fascinating highly specific ways, the show demonstrates the



The Portland Vase, left, from Etruria, a Wedgwood pottery works, and a Sèvres vase with medallions of Louis XVI (visible) and Marie Antoinette.



Photographs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art

transmission of style as it really happens in the details, object by object. It begins with two red and black vases: the open necked column krater and a relatively bottle-like hydria, or water vessel. Both were in the second collection of Greek vases assembled by Sir William Hamilton, the British envoy to Naples beginning in 1764. Also on view is the frontispiece from the four-volume catalog of Hamilton's first collection (which he sold to the British Museum); its hand-colored etchings were an important source of inspiration for both Adam and the equally great Josiah Wedgwood.

From there the show jumps to the Continent, starting with a print of the Warwick vase by Piranesi (another Hamilton possession) and including a relatively slavish red-and-black hydria from Etruria, Wedgwood's pottery works in Staffordshire. But in the main, the classicism was neo; that is, the Greek style inspired newness. The dominant piece here is the Wedgwood Portland Vase, a black vessel decorated with white bas-relief tableaux. Its mythological figures were taken from a Roman vase

in the British Museum that combines aspects of Greek vase painting and relief sculpture. Wedgwood perfected this vitreous, porcelainlike stoneware, best known as jasperware, in the late 1770's, and its most familiar white-on-blue version is exemplified here by the Wedgwood Pegasus Vase. It, too, is beautiful, especially since its lip and lid swoop gently upward at one point in a beautiful imperfection that may have helped preserve it by keeping it at the factory.

But it is the Portland Vase that really dazzles, partly because, unlike the more ornate Pegasus vase, its only decoration is the tableaux, which are sharply cropped along the top as if by an invisible line. But mainly, the blackness of the vessel creates a kind of grisaille effect by showing through the white relief, especially in thinner details like the leaves of plants and trees. The exhibition also includes examples of Wedgwood vases on which speckled surfaces, achieved with sponged oxide colors, were intended to imitate expensive hard stones.

Another section, featuring vases

from Sèvres, the porcelain works of the French monarchy, shows that neoclassicism could be considerably messier in France, where it often mingled with its seeming opposite, the wonderfully light but indulgent Rococo, as well as Baroque and Chinese influences. Here extreme hybrids rule, and we are reminded once more of the license assumed by decorative artists to mix not only styles and sources but also mediums. This is especially clear in a Sèvres vase from around 1778 on which the decorations include a painted scene of fishermen reminiscent of Watteau, gilt handles shaped like naked putti and white-on-white medallions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

A similar vase also has a luscious white egg-and-dart border that can make you think of fake fingernails. The most outstanding example of Sèvres is a relatively plain and graceful bowl with a low foot and curved handles, like a Greek kylix. It was made for Marie Antoinette's dairy at the Château de Rambouillet in 1787, two years before the French Revolution. Its beautiful glaze of pale blue and white decorated with orna-

mental borders in black and raspberry pink may have been prompted by the queen's milkmaid fantasy, but they are worthy of an Adam interior.

This show includes pristine drawings for sleek-lined tureens and wine coolers from the workshop of Henri Auguste, Napoleon's official silversmith, and a wonderfully plain silver chocolate pot by John Wakein and William Taylor.

There are painted wood overdoor panels where Rococo and neoclassicism mix in images of sturdy vases overflowing with bright flowers, and a lady's writing desk whose marquetry inlay depicts vase after vase. It is, however, in the ceramics where the conversation with Greek precedents seems richest and the innovations most interesting.

The high point in the show's final section is again Wedgwood, represented by two stunning vases made using the dicing method, another of Wedgwood's inventions. It allowed the clay to be checkerboard, like a delicate tile floor, forming the basis for a mixing of colors and patterns and Grecian motifs that easily holds its own against the French.