

ARTS & LETTERS

MUSEUMS

Where China & Greece Meet the Baroque

By LANCE ESPLUND
Neoclassicism is as much an attitude toward form as it is a period style. Classical themes and motifs reappeared in 16th-century literature, but it was only after the 18th century excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii — and in opposition to the frivolity and exuberance of the Baroque and the Rococo — that neoclassicism's "noble simplicity" took a firm hold in painting, sculpture, architecture, and the decorative arts.

We may be inclined to think of neoclassical style — its symmetry, re-

straint, dignity, and clarity — as most discernible in a Doric column, a Greek vase, or the paintings of Poussin and David. But neoclassical ideals are timeless. They are embodied in objects as various as ancient Egyptian

VASEMANIA: NEOCLASSICAL FORM AND ORNAMENT
Bard Graduate Center

tomb sculpture, a Chardin still life, a shaped canvas by Ellsworth Kelly, or a Le Corbusier chair. These ideals are

alive and well in the fabulous show "Vasemania, Neoclassical Form and Ornament in Europe: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art," which opens today at the Bard Graduate Center.

"Vasemania," as the name implies, explores the pervasive mania for the vase form, both as actual object and as ornamental motif, in neoclassical art of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The title for the show was paraphrased from a quote, written in 1769 by Josiah Wedgwood: "An epidemic madness reigns for Vases, which must be gratified." But before you roll your eyes (as I did) at the improbable merging of "vase" and "mania"; or groan — thinking that an exhibition that sounds like a blowout sale at Pottery Barn could not be worthwhile — hear me out. Don't imagine a show filled with clunky ceramics and dusty old urns, and, whatever you do, don't think that if you've seen one vase you've seen them all.

This beautifully installed show of approximately 100 pieces, not surprisingly, of mostly vases — but also urns, tureens, pots, textiles, woodwork, metalwork, and works on canvas and paper — comprises objects drawn from Metropolitan Museum storage rooms. This means that a number of rarely or never seen Sèvres porcelain and Wedgwood masterpieces have been brought out of hiding.

"Vasemania" seems all the more spectacular when you realize that it was curated (under the direction of Stefanie Walker at the Graduate Center and William Nieder at the Met) by Bard graduate students. This is the first exhibition to come from the collaboration between the Bard Graduate Center and the Metropolitan, and the high level of professionalism demonstrated by the show, which is accompanied by a substantial catalog, is refreshing evidence that serious teaching and scholarship is going on in the field of curatorial studies.

The exhibition concentrates mainly on British and French neoclassicism and is divided into four sections. The first section of "Vasemania" is devoted to the early influence of the collection of antiquarian Sir William Hamilton, whose objects — some of which were excavated from Herculaneum and Pompeii — had tremendous impact on the British designer Wedgwood and the Scottish architect Robert Adam. The gallery is painted a dark matte gray which beautifully

sets off Hamilton's ancient red-figure Greek and the white-figure Wedgwood vases.

All the Wedgwood jasper ware in this show are spectacular examples of his signature vitrified stoneware invention (a process that, through firing, transforms unglazed stoneware into that classic Wedgwood glassy substance). Among more typical tinted Wedgwood pieces (which include designs by John Flaxman), are gilded, variegated ware that resemble porphyry, the dark-colored hardstone excavated from Roman and Egyptian sites. There also several unusual all-black basalt vases with molded figures and applied ornament.

I was struck immediately by the tasteful and spare installation of works of art that are, at times, over-the-top. Upstairs, we encounter galleries in which vases — their shapes, garlands, fret designs, and colors — continue to be used as keys and backdrops to the installation. In typical 18th-century fashion, we find rooms in pink and blue, but the gallery colors also mimic Wedgwood yellow and green, and each room is accented by white molding. The effect is light and airy, understated and austere, and it complements the works on display.

The second section of "Vasemania," "Early Neoclassicism," explores the penchant for *goût grec* or "Greek taste" that took hold in the 1760s. In these print designs and vases, we see Rococo garlands, laurel festoons, florets, Greek meanders, satyrs, and masks, all controlled and restrained within or against the clean austerity and symmetry of the vase.

In the third section of the show, there are a number of great examples of Sèvres royal soft paste porcelain vases. Porcelain, which had been produced in Europe since the 16th century, was introduced in France in the late 17th. Many European manufacturers competed for dominance, but the factory at Sèvres, which originated at Vincennes (where, under Louis XV, it became the Royal Factory), reigned supreme. Sèvres became synonymous with luxury, royalty, and quality — and, in many circles, it still is.

Some of the Sèvres vases on view hark back to the basic, simple vase forms from China that first captivated Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. Most, though, are much more ornate; beautifully strange collisions between China, ancient Greece, and the Baroque. Covered with patterns



Josiah Wedgwood and Sons, 'Wedgwood Portland Vase' (c. 1840-1860).

of classic, dark blue, white, and gold, the vases are decorated with medallions, and hand-painted with elaborately detailed pastoral or romantic scenes based, for example, on paintings by artists such as Watteau. They are adorned with highly slung handles, flowers, pearllike decorations, or, as in "Vase with dolphin handles" (c. 1765), Berniniesque dolphins for handles and a matching fountain for a lid.

"Vasemania" is about the clashing, transition, reinvention, and marriage of various cultures and styles — Chi-

nese, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical — as expressed in the timeless form of the vase. And certainly no matter what happens in the future, artistically or technologically, we will always have a place not only for neoclassical ideals but also for vases. This fine show, through its superb design and intelligent handling of its subject, reinvents its theme by its own neoclassical example.

Until October 17 (18 W. 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, 212-501-3023).



Sèvres Manufactory, 'Vase with a Scene before a Duel' (c. 1765).