The International Museum Institute of New York

presents

VESSELS OF THE GODS
Treasures of the Ancient Greeks

1650 – 410 B.C.
Reflecting the brilliance of a millennium of ancient Aegean culture, four distinct periods produced the designs of these vases: **Minoan, Mycenaean, Corinthian and Attic**. Essentially consisting of silhouetted figures drawn against a background of red, black, or white, this art form gradually dies out after the Persian wars, c. 475-450 B.C. Shaped and painted by hand, these exquisite reproductions were created in Greece by master artists from the originals housed in The National Museum, Athens, The Heraklion Museum, The Thera Museum, The Corinth Museum, The Delphi Museum, The Louvre Museum, The Vatican Museum, and The Museo Civico, Brescia.
MINOAN

The early writing of the tribal islanders of Crete and Santorini, the mysterious forerunners of the Greeks known as the Minoans, marks their emergence from the Stone Age at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. This enigmatic clay tablet, found in Crete and engraved in the elusive Linear A script, remains undeciphered.
2. Mistress of the Snakes
c. 1600 B.C.

Crowned with opium poppy pods surmounted by a crouching lion cub associating the figure with a royal house, this faience votive offering was found in a storage chamber of the Palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. The statuette either represents a deity or an agricultural fertility cult priestess, traditionally garbed as the Cretan Earth Mother goddess she served, carrying a pair of serpents as symbols of seasonal death and rebirth.
3. Gold Funeral Mask of Agamemnon  
   c. 1500 – 1550 B.C.

Decorated with a stylized beard and closed eyes, this precious funeral mask of gold was found in a royal tomb in Mycenae by Heinrich Schliemann, who immediately declared it to be the funeral mask of none other than the celebrated Trojan War commander, Agamemnon himself. It is now thought to have belonged to a Mycenaean prince who died some 3 centuries before the fall of Troy and Homer’s epic hero.
As the Neolithic culture of Crete gave way to urban civilization around 2000 B.C., a number of great palaces appeared which were destroyed within 400 years and re-placed by new palaces. The most ambitious, the Palace of Minos at Knossos was influenced by Egyptian and Central Asian traditions and decorated throughout with images of marine life, a common subject of Minoan painting. Known as a pithos or stirrup jar, characterized by its wide center and stirrup handles and used for transport and storage, this magnificent amphora is alive with dolphins, octopus, nautilus, jellyfish and seaweed floating in the silent depths. From the Minoan New Palace, Knossos.
The complex palaces of the Minoans, which gave rise to the legend of the labyrinth and the Minotaur, reveal an advanced culture which celebrated the beauty of nature. Walls, floors, and vases were decorated with stylized images of sea life. This vessel, with its octopus motif, is one of many found at Knossos.
The cataclysmic eruption of an Aegean volcano, whose subsequent caldera presently comprises the island of Thera (or Santorini) and its neighbors, appears to have been responsible for the fall of the Cretan civilization about 1500 B.C. This allowed the spread of Greek culture (as well as giving rise to the early legend of Atlantis), whose earliest period of art was dominated by a distinctly geometric style inspired by woven basketry. This classic amphora, an early attempt at telling a story on a vase, incorporates a frieze of stylized heroes and warriors bordered by bands of geometric patterns. From the Island of Santorini.
With the rapid spread of Homer’s popular epics of heroes and war, geometrically decorated vases featuring mounted warriors and sail ships grew more and more in vogue. The emergence of Oriental influence can be seen in the less stylized, more realistic looking figures. The 4 volute, or spiral, handles divide this colorful, Proto-Attic amphora into equal panels.
8. Horseman Kylix
c. 700 B.C.

Fashionably decorated with the ubiquitous horseman wearing a helmet and carrying a spear and shield, this vividly painted kylix was a drinking vessel, distinguished by its wide, shallow, and ornate bowl. From the Creto-Mycenaean Post-Palace.
Influenced by the trade between the Greek port city of Corinth and the Middle East and Asia, Corinthian art (also known as the Oriental style) emerged in the 7th Century, B.C. introducing an increased animation in the scenes depicted. Artemis, a goddess of nature is represented on this graceful amphora, surrounded by ancient symbols for life and prosperity. The vertical bands are typical motifs of the Boetian region, while lions, birds, and the fish symbolize the goddess association with earth, air, and the sea. Found in Thebes.
Change from the rigid geometric style of painting to later, more curvaceous styles was gradual. This splendid amphora was painted by the Analatos Painter in a time of transition and experimentation. Sphinxes, musicians, and a procession of chariots are separated by waves, rosettes, and bands of geometric designs.
A result of the growing influence of the Near East on the thriving port city of Corinth, this striking amphora, with its absence of the traditional geometric patterns, is decorated with the exotic figure of a siren, half seductress, half bird, in the company of cockerels, boars, gazelles, and lions. A Transitional Corinthian work.
Archaic vase painting was as ambitious as the painting, many of the artists developing distinctive and recognizable styles. This exquisite vessel, a masterpiece by the celebrated Psiax Painter, depicts in black figure Iolaos and the goddess Athena watching the hero Herakles as he fulfills his first labor of wrestling the ferocious Nemean lion. Two horsemen from Thrace, possibly the brothers Castor and Pollux, are represented on the opposite side. Found in Southern Italy.
Whereas the earlier Minoan painting reflected marine motifs, the later Greek motifs incorporated images of their legendary gods and heroes as well as contemporary popular athletes, particularly during the classical period, exemplified by the design of this colorful belly amphora. Painted in black, white, and red, Herakles fulfills his 12 labors battling with the three-headed dog Kerberos, while Eurystheus, the King of Mycenae (who imposed the labors upon Herakles as atonement for killing his wife and children), along with a centaur and the god, Hermes, are painted on the opposite side.
Depicting nude wrestlers engaged in the world’s most ancient sport, amphoras such as this held oil from the sacred olive trees of the goddess Athena and were given to champions at the ancient Panathenaic Athletic Games, founded in Athens in 556 B.C. Painted in red figure, one of the wrestlers on this vase has pinioned his opponent’s neck in a hold known in antiquity as a *traxelisine*. Before a match, the bodies of the wrestler’s were first massaged with oil, then sprinkled with sand afterwards to diminish their slipperiness. On the reverse side of the vase, Winged Athena Nike (the personification of Victory) watches over the torchbearer as he carries the sacred flame to the altar at the site of the games.
15. Black Figure Amphora, Achilles and Ajax  
*c. 520 B.C.*

Inscribed on the left with the word Exekiaspoiesen (“Exekias made me”), this masterpiece by the renowned Exekias painter is among the most famous of ancient Grecian vase paintings. It depicts in black figure the doomed Mycenaean heroes of the Trojan War playing dice between battles. Touchingly portrayed in simple human pursuits, their underlying tension is evident from the spears readily held by both. The reverse features King Tyndareus looking on as the twins Castor and Pollux bid farewell to their mother, Leda, and a pet dog.
Painted in white, the heroic craftsman Epeius is depicted presenting his creation, the Trojan horse, to one of his leaders under the watchful eye of the goddess Athena painted on the opposite side. This classic amphora shape vase was primarily used for the storage of liquids and grains.
While the mature Greek painting celebrated the regional gods and heroes, this Oriental style of vase, which celebrates animals with a frieze of partridges, originated on the Aegean island of Rhodes. Named for the village where it was discovered, the Fikelura Vase typifies the Corinthian design during the classical period.
This stunning black figure work depicts the pantheon of twelve Olympian gods. In the center are Zeus, the wielder of thunderbolts and supreme ruler of the gods, and his long-suffering wife Hera, queen of Olympos. Above them (clockwise) are: Apollo, the god of light, poetry, music, and dance, the son of Zeus, associated with the sun. Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and romantic rapture, born of the sea foam and unhappily married to Hephaestos. Ares, the cruel and spoiled god of war. Athena, goddess of wisdom, war, the arts, and justice, the favorite child of Zeus, from whose head she sprang at her birth. Poseidon, god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses, the brother of Zeus. Hestia, the gentle goddess of the hearth, the sister of Zeus. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, god of shepherds, travelers, and merchants, youngest of the Olympians. Artemis, goddess of the hunt and wild animals, associated with the moon, Apollo’s twin sister. Hephaestos, the lame and homely god of the forge and volcanoes, Aphrodite’s patient and complacent husband. Demeter, goddess of the harvest, sister of Zeus.
The Peloponnese region of Greece was named for the Lydian Prince Pelops, who legendarily founded the Olympic Games to celebrate his wedding to princess Hippodameia, whose hand he won from King Oinomaios in a chariot race with the help of winged horses. The opposite side of this refined vase depicts the poet Orpheus and one of the muses, the 9 minor goddesses of the arts (who raised him), serenading the islanders of Lesvos where his body washed ashore, torn apart by a band of Maenads, or wild nymphs, after his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his beloved Eurydice from Hades.
Standing in a bronze tripod graced with rams’ heads, this magnificent white ground vase is a rare surviving work of the Darius Painter. It vibrantly portrays Herakles completing his 12th labor in departing from Hades with the 3-headed dog, Kerveros, who guarded the entrance to prevent the souls of the dead from escaping. Hecate, goddess of the night and Herakles’ half-sister, lights the way with torches while herbs on a table wait to soothe the hero’s wounds. Known as a Ryton, a vessel with a pointed bottom requiring a base, this decorative, delicate vase was used to hold perfumes or perhaps ritual oils used by priestesses in rites imparting valor before a contest or battle.
Bearing a lid adorned with acanthus leaves, this charming base is painted in soft tones with icons from the life of Argos of the 100 eyes, the ravaging bull of Arcadia which he slew, and the beautiful Io, over whom Hera, the jealous queen of the gods, commanded him to stand watch so that Io could not be seduced by Hera’s unfaithful husband Zeus. On the opposite side, the god Hermes, disguised as an old shepherd, has lulled Argos’ eyes to sleep with endless stories so that the guardian can be slain and Io spirited away to Zeus. Hera, grieved at the loss of her servant, took the eyes of Argos and placed them on the peacock’s tail. Of Late Archaic Attic design.
Trimmed with a meander band, this delicate plate depicts the god Apollo, his lyre in hand attracting a crow that bears a message from his intended bride who has wed a mortal man instead. Apollo, in his rage, cursed the messenger. But his son by the fickle princess, whom he snatched from her womb, was Asclepius, who was destined to become a demi-god of medicine. Because of the fragility of white ground painting, it was used more for decoration or funerary offerings than for function. From Delphi.
The usually allegorical affairs of Zeus provided religious justification for human foibles. Painted in red figure, this amphora features the king of the gods in amorous pursuit of Ganymede, the most beautiful of the Trojan youths. Afraid of the great god (who one day would carry him off to Olympos to become cupbearer to the gods), the young Ganymede is depicted fleeing from Zeus with his toy hoop in hand as his robes begin to loosen and fall. The reverse side features the winged goddess Nike presenting a victory wreath to a javelin-thrower.
This delicate red figure work portrays the hero Bellerophon who, with the help of the goddess Athena, captured and tamed the winged horse, Pegasus. Called upon by King Iobates of Lycia to battle the dreaded Chimera (a three-headed, fire-breathing monster), Bellerophon is departing with a letter which, unbeknownst to him, calls for the death of its deliverer, while the treacherous and jealous King Prietus, whose straying wife has admired the handsome and youthful Bellerophon, bids him farewell.
EARLY CLASSICAL ATTIC

25. **Red Figure Plate, Presentation of Archilles’ Armor**  
c. 470 B.C.

Following the black figure style of painting, the red figure style, which allowed the natural terra cotta color of the vase to show through, emerged in Athens after 530 B.C. The delightful red figure design of this plate depicts Hephaestos, the lame god of fire and foundry, presenting magical battle armor to Thetis, the mother of Achilles, the great Greek hero of the Trojan War who had generously given his own armor to his friend Patroclus. Holding Achilles by the heel as an infant, Thetis dipped her son in the magical black waters of the river Styx (which separates Earth from Hades) rendering his body invulnerable except at the heel. An Early Classical Attic work.
With the rise of the city-state of Athens as an exporter of pottery throughout the Mediterranean, the black figure style of vase painting (which originated in Corinth during the 7th Center B.C.) came to the forefront in the 5th Century B.C. Pictures from the Trojan War, mythology, or the journeys of Odysseus were greatly in demand. The figures of the sibling deities, Apollo and Artemis, are gracefully portrayed in a pastoral scene in this delicate drinking vessel from the classical period.
The somber motif of this vessel depicts in black figure a dying warrior lying on his shield and draped in his red robe with a grieving woman leaning over him. Outlines of the figures and delicate interior details are incised, allowing the background color to show through. From the height of the Athenian Classical period.
The popular adventures of Odysseus on his voyage home to Ithaca following the Trojan War, immortalized by Homer’s epic verse, were widely celebrated in the art of the Classical period. The dramatic red figure design of this splendid plate depicts Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship so that he may hear the alluring song of the sirens, perched atop their deadly rocks, without succumbing to their call while his oarsmen, whose ears have been stuffed with wax, row to safer waters.
29. **White Ground Stamnos**  
*c. 470 B.C.*

The delicate colors of this white ground vase by the famous Pan Painter portray the legendary hero, Jason the Argonaut, reaching for the coveted Golden Fleece hanging in the branches of a tree at Colchis, under the watchful eye of his patroness, the goddess Athena. Nearby, King Aietes looks on with the hero, Theseus, one of the sailors of the Argo. On the other side of this stamnos shaped vase, the death of Antaios is depicted, pierced by arrows and beset by his own hounds, the result of his boasting that he was a better hunter than Artemis herself, the goddess of the hunt, an insult further complicated by his accidental discovery of the vengeful goddess bathing in the woods.
Regarding a vase as nothing more than a canvas itself, the black figure artists were not concerned with covering the entire vessel with design. Requiring a tripod to stand, rytons were originally employed as vessels for transport and storage (corked and stacked on their sides, in the hulls of ships) but gradually found their way into the house for storage of olive oil. Incised on this graceful vase is a splendid depiction of Leda and the swan. On the eve of her wedding to the King of Sparta, Leda was visited and seduced by Zeus, who was disguised as a glorious swan. Hatched from eggs, their offspring were Pollux, the Argonaut, and Helen, whose later abduction by Paris, a prince of Troy, ignited the fateful Trojan War.
31. **Phaethon Lekythos**

*c. 460-456 B.C.*

Used as a container for fine oils, this stately vessel depicts in black figure the theft by Phaethon of the chariot of the sun god, his father Hellos. Running wild in the sky, Phaethon scorched the Earth, causing the Sahara desert, and froze other places by flying too high, finally forcing Zeus to halt his catastrophic havoc with a thunderbolt. In the neck of the Lekythos vase, sediments were trapped by its incurved lip, an ancient Corinthian design.
As the only female Argonaut, the athletic Atlanta victoriously wrestled Peleus (destined to become the father of Archilles) in a match for a boar’s head prize, held at the funerary games for the King of Iolcos in Thessaly. Designed with 2 pairs of cross-woven handles, this shapely vase vividly depicts on its other side the hero Herakles rescuing the shrouded Queen Alkestis from Hades, accompanied by the god Hermes, who bears the magical caduceus, a winged wand with intertwined serpents.
Dipped in a thin coat of white slip, or wet clay, the outlines of figures were then incised with brush strokes. Because the delicate white background was easy to chip, the elegant white ground vases were more popular as funerary offerings than as vessels for frequent use. Painted by the artist known as the Achilles Painter, this exquisite vase depicts one of the 9 muses. Resting on a slope of Mt. Helicon and playing a lyre, she is watched by another graceful figure draped in robes. The inscription between them dedicates the vase to “the beauty of young Axiopethes,” probably on the occasion of the youth’s burial.
The red figure design of this splendid, 3-handled water vessel depicts the final battle between the 2 heroes Achilles and Hector near the end of the decade-long Trojan War. Hector is wearing Achilles’ armor, stolen from the slain body of Patroclus, to whom it had been given by Achilles himself. Because Achilles knew the armor intimately, he knew where to strike and slew Hector, afterwards lashing the fallen hero’s body to a chariot and dragging it around the walls of Troy. Knowing that his own death was not far away, Achilles was shot in his vulnerable heel by Paris, with a poisoned arrow guided by Apollo. Portrayed on the opposite side are the daughters of King Cadmos of Thebes.
35. Black Figure Dionysos Lekythos  
c. 430-420 B.C.

The design of this Athenian black figure lekythos vase depicts Dionysos, a son of Zeus and the only one of the 12 Olympian gods whose mother was a mortal. The youngest as well, the god of wine is portrayed amid his beloved grapes with his son, Oenopion, a demi-god of vintners while Dionysos’ wife, Ariadne, fated to be turned to stone by the gorgon Medusa, is depicted on the opposite side with her grandsons, Talus and Evanthes, who founded the ruling dynasty of the island of Chios.
36. **Red Figure Apollo Kylix**  
* c. 420 B.C.

The red figure design of this classic 2-handled drinking vessel is a depiction of Apollo, god of light, music, poetry and prophecy. Seated on a golden, winged tripod, Apollo glided around the world searching for a place to make his sanctuary. His journeys stopped at Delphi, where he built a temple above a small cave which emitted strange vapors from deep within Mother Earth. Breathing the mists, the Oracle would pronounce his prophecy which the priestesses would then interpret. This kylix was painted by the distinguished Berlin Painter.
This red figure vase features Eos, goddess of the dawn, the Kephalos, the grandson of Aeolus, god of the winds, with his hunting party. Because he loved to hunt at sunrise, Kephalos caught the eye of Eos, who abducted him, spiriting him away to Olympos where he endlessly longed for his wife, Procris. Finally the spurned Eos sent him back to his wife whom he accidentally killed in the woods with his javelin.
As apparent in the design on this vase, the intricate details in fine black lines allowed by the red figure style enabled artists to explore more complex body poses and motion, a maturity of composition previously hampered in the black figure style. Painted around its circumference with lively red figure musicians and dancers, this decorative vase is embellished with a miniature amphora on top of the lid.
With a narrow neck for pouring oil a drop at a time, this graceful red figure vase depicts the young Oedipus seated before the sphinx to answer the riddle with which it had been terrorizing the Theban countryside by killing all who could not solve it. “Which creature walks upon four limbs in the morning, on two at noon, and upon three in the evening?” Oedipus correctly guessed Man, of course, who crawls as an infant, walks erect in his prime, and requires a cane when elderly, provoking the enraged sphinx to destroy itself on the rocks. Depicted with his walking stick, Oedipus is shaded from the sun by his petasos, a traveling hat. The reverse depicts Hephaestos, god of the forge, wearing a protective goatskin cap worn by foundry workers, as he gives Achilles mother, Thetis, the magical shield and greaves (leg coverings) for her son.
This exquisitely detailed vase is decorated with the great Athenian hero Theseus, son of King Aegeus, who is portrayed fighting the terrible Minotaur (half man, half bull), which he slew in the labyrinth in Crete, bringing an end to the cruel sacrifice of 7 maidens and 7 youths, sent from Athens every 9 years as tribute to King Minos of Crete. On the opposite side is a rarely depicted scene of the hero Herakles’ battle with Geryon, a monstrous opponent with 3 torsos and 6 arms, whose oxen had to be stolen as the great hero’s 10th labor.
Pastel red, ochre, blue, and other natural hues enliven this colorful vase depicting the gift of winged horses and a chariot from Poseidon to Prince Pelops for his race with King Enemas, who had decreed that his daughter, the beautiful Princess Hippodameia, could only wed a man capable of beating him in a chariot race. After defeating the king with the aid of the gods, Pelops established the first Olympic Games. Pelops was favored by the gods because he was sacrificed to them in his youth by his father. Abhorring human sacrifice, the gods restored Pelops to life except for his shoulder which unwittingly had been eaten by the goddess Demeter, who replaced it with one of ivory.
42. **Red Figure Lamp**  
*c. 410-400 B.C.*

The design of this charming vessel, used as an oil lamp, is decorated with graceful red figure musicians, dancers, and cup bearers. The lamp was filled with oil through the central opening and a long wick was inserted in the spout, the short, exposed end of which was lit.