An ancient Greek vase is a difficult object for the non-expert to come to terms with. Faced with rows of apparently undifferentiated black, red and buff pots, he or she is at a loss as to where to begin. Greek vases are treated as objets d’art in the modern world, but how much were they worth in the ancient? They are often used to demonstrate ‘the Greek genius’ and aspects of ancient Greek society, but why do many of them carry Eastern motifs, and why do so many turn up in Italy? Why were the Greeks not content with simple patterns on their pottery? What did the pictures on the pots mean to them? Why should a vase depict a scene from a play?

These are the sorts of questions that this book attempts to answer. As the title implies, it is a series of ‘looks’ at Greek vases, offering suggestions on how to read the often complex images they present, and also explaining how they were made and distributed. Chapters have been contributed by a distinguished team of scholars, who have written with a wide readership in mind. The book is intended to be read by students of Greek art in universities and schools and also by museum-goers and any one who feels curiosity about the society and history of ancient Greece.
Looking at Greek Vases
Looking at Greek Vases

EDITED BY TOM RASMUSSEN
AND NIGEL SPIVEY
To Robert Cook
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Preface

Greek vases are important. Even in a culture such as our own, enslaved to the lords of cash and quick profit, the importance of Greek vases can be measured in terms of the millions of dollars, pounds and yen annually expended in their trade. The museums of the world, from London to Tasmania, Moscow to Osaka, are stocked with Greek vases. Men go to jail for the sake of Greek vases; academic careers are constructed on expertise in Greek vases; and exceptional students of Greek vases may receive knighthoods.

Greek vases are probably more important now, artistically and commercially, than they ever were in antiquity. This is partly due to their technical accomplishment: although some good forgeries have been produced, it remains extremely difficult, even with the benefit of twentieth-century machinery, to reach the standards of potting and draughtsmanship set over two thousand years ago by the rude mechanicals of sixth- and fifth-century B.C. Athens. But the importance of the vases is also perpetually bolstered by the images they present. Ways of seeing vary from century to century, decade to decade. What was esteemed under George III is reviled under Elizabeth II. What the Marxist art historian of the seventies saw on a Greek vase is not what the feminist of the nineties may see. So the title of this book, Looking at Greek Vases, is bound to be confined to some extent by current aesthetics: but we have tried to include variations of angle and perspective, and the book opens with a discussion, by Martin Robertson and Mary Beard, of possible lines of vision. They weigh up the values of two disciplines: attributing Greek vases to painters, and interpreting what was painted on Greek vases. The former enterprise has to a large extent already been accomplished;
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which leaves us to attempt the iconology, the ‘image-reading’ involved in the sensible interpretation of what the painters have left us.

Greek vases mean different things to different people, and the truth is that they would have done so at the time when they were made. Museum-goers may be puzzled that Greek vases on display seem nearly always to bear a label of Italian provenance. Why, if such-and-such a vase was made in Athens, and can be given an Athenian meaning, does it figure amongst the treasured possessions of an Etruscan buried at Vulci? Readers who admit to being puzzled should perhaps begin with Alan Johnston’s contribution, ‘Greek vases in the marketplace’, where an explanation is given of how the vases travelled, and proceed backwards to Nigel Spivey’s essay, which focuses upon Etruria as one popular destination of Greek vases, and speculates on the ‘Etruscan’ meanings that may consequently have been fixed upon them.

The rest of the book is ordered more or less chronologically. Looking at Greek Vases is what it claims to be: a series of ‘looks’, not a comprehensive handbook of the development of styles of Greek vase-painting. We commissioned internationally recognised experts to divulge some of their expertise upon themes of enduring or topical interest: and since the ‘figures’ on Greek vases are the principal objects of attention, the first ‘look’ comes from Nicolas Coldstream, and is directed at the earliest properly figurative painting by the Greeks. In the context of this book, it is quite right to subtitle Coldstream’s chapter ‘birth of the picture’. Once born, the picture grows: in its eventual maturity, plenty of lookers at Greek vases will agree with the pronouncement: ‘You cannot draw better, you can only draw differently’ (made by J. D. Beazley). But to present Greek vases as achieved solely by that much-invoked force, ‘the Greek genius’, would be foolish and false. Though the Greeks were well aware of their Hellenic identity, they were open to influences from outside: indeed, some of the best-known painters of Greek vases were outsiders or ‘metics’. So Tom Rasmussen’s chapter on ‘the Orientalising phenomenon’ at Corinth is concerned with one good example of Greek receptiveness: whether you call it ‘genius’ or something else, the Greeks had the gift for transforming what they received into a distinctly Hellenic product.

The Greek vases with which the world is most familiar belong to the period addressed by the central contributions of John Boardman,
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Dyfri Williams and Lucilla Burn. One modern attitude towards the vases of this period would make them mere mirrors of what silversmiths were producing: but since the work of Athenian silversmiths has not survived, this attitude does not get us very far. The black- and red-figured vases of Athens that span the years from Solon to Socrates are often used as illustrations for the history of Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.: it may be that neither Solon nor Socrates ever cared a biscuit for the potters and painters of vases, but without the images of Athenian vases there would be large gaps in our knowledge of Athenian society. The supposed silver vases have gone; the wall-paintings have gone; but thousands of vases survive, and some ancient historians are using their images not just for book covers but as primary documents – witness Kenneth Dover’s Greek Homosexuality (1978), or Eva Keuls’ The Reign of the Phallus (1985). In a period active with experiments in politics, art, literature and philosophy, it is tempting to elevate the vase-painters into men of genius, though we know that pottery was only a modest sibling of a highly creative family; but in their examination of the vases, our contributors keep one eye on what is happening outside the Kerameikos, ‘the potters’ quarter’, of ancient Athens.

Iconology is a project that involves more than simply providing a picture with a caption, or furnishing a text with an illustration: but there is a hierarchy of media which determines that pottery will always occupy a lesser position than a play, a temple pediment, or a mural. Even the most committed admirer of the most-admired Athenian black-figure painter, Exekias, would hesitate to claim that a painting by Exekias of Ajax contemplating suicide could later inspire Sophocles to write a soliloquy for that moment. Vase-painters were not slavish imitators, and some may move us with their powers of figurative expression: but essentially we are bound to see their work as reflective, or supportive, of other media. In that capacity, looking at Greek vases is valuable even to those who are not particularly interested in ancient art. As Dale Trendall demonstrates in his contribution, ‘Farce and tragedy in South Italian vase-painting’, images on pottery illustrate not only dramatic texts with which we are well acquainted, but also some plays that have not survived as texts.

The discovery of Greek vases is a process of archaeology, and the refined chronology evolved for the styles of potting and painting has enabled many excavators of Classical sites to establish sequences of occupation. But not all Greek wares have been studied with the same
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degree of refinement: one scholar who has remedied the imbalance is John Hayes, who here tackles the problems posed by Hellenistic pottery. As the decoration fades away, or becomes less complex, so attention turns to the contexts in which the various shapes of pottery were found: in sanctuaries, graves, boudoirs and kitchens. And we finish where perhaps we should have begun: in the potter’s workshop, with a practical view from Jaap Hemelrijk of how the vases were made.

Hemelrijk may be the only one of the authors ever to have sat at a potter’s wheel; but he is not alone in being a former pupil of Robert Cook. Looking at Greek Vases was conceived from a sentiment: a toast of gratitude to Robert Cook, Emeritus Lawrence Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge, from his former students, colleagues, friends and sometimes opponents. His own handbook of Greek Painted Pottery, first published in 1960 and still available in its second edition (a third is being prepared for a Greek audience), may consider itself both complimented and complemented by Looking at Greek Vases. Robert Cook taught his pupils to regard new ideas with scepticism, but not unduly to venerate the old; and if our collection of essays lacks consensus, then that is a feature of which Robert Cook would approve. He would certainly not have approved of a traditional Festschrift (his favourite book is Candide, and his favourite character from that book is probably Pococurante): instead of that, we have tried to make a book which will serve not only scholars, but also students of art, connoisseurs of fine pottery, the museum-going public, and anyone who admits curiosity about the society and history of ancient Greece.

Our thanks are due to those who gave their time to write and illustrate this book; to the museums and institutions that allowed us to use their vases as exemplary pieces; and to Pauline Hire at Cambridge University Press, whose support and shaping of the book has been fundamental.

Tom Rasmussen
Nigel Spivey
Feeble pottery has ever borne the impress of man more vividly than marble. From these they quenched their thirst, over these they laughed and joked, and gossiped, and sang old hunting songs till the rafters rang, and the dogs under the table got up and barked.

Richard Jefferies
The Mediterranean: locations mentioned in the text

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