

# Warwick Classics Travelling Museum

## Greek Vase Paintings Handout

### Decoration Types

#### Geometric style



- The geometric style generally consisted of a series of horizontal bands (called friezes) of geometric patterns. The patterns were sometimes basic, consisting of simple shapes such as triangles etc. or they could be more complex, for example elaborate meander patterns. The bands could contain figures including animals and humans, however these were highly stylized in design. Narrative-type scenes were occasionally depicted on geometric vases. They generally consisted of highly stylized, silhouette figures.
- The key features of the geometric style are repetition, patterns, lines and shapes, and vases that are decorated from top to bottom (though not always).

#### Black figure



- We start to see early black figure vase painting from around the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The style originated in Corinth and was later adopted by Attic painters. The black figure technique consisted of painting figures with slip (watered down clay) that would turn black when the vase was fired. The artists could then incise details (such as hair, facial features, folds and patterns in garments etc.) onto the figures, as well as add touches of paint. White paint was commonly used to depict women's skin, whilst red paint could be used to depict garments.
- Mythology became a very popular subject to depict on vases. Scenes came to take up larger sections of the vases, often occupying the entire belly of the vase, whilst patterns were used to frame the central scene. Vases would often depict two different scenes; one on each side of the vase.

#### Red figure



- In red figure, the artist paints around where he wants the figure to be, leaving the figure red and the background black – opposite to black figure.
- The artist then paints the details onto the figure instead of incising them.
- What do you think the advantages of this are?

## Objects from the Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Warwick

### Corinthian aryballos

- This Corinthian aryballos is made of dark yellow clay, and dates from the 7th century BCE.
- The aryballos was used to store perfume, and this one is likely to have come from a grave, like most other complete examples. The yellow clay is decorated with a harpy in black, a mythical creature with the body of a bird and a female head.
- Corinth was a centre for the perfume trade, and for the manufacture of aryballoi, which ended up all over the Mediterranean, especially in Sicily. Perfume would be made by heating oil with plants, then mixing it with flowers like the iris, or other fragrant substances.



### Oil jug

- An ancient Greek jug used for holding oil or perfume. This specimen dates to the Classical period and is from Attica in Greece, based on the clay and the style. The handle at the top is broken. The decoration used is called 'red-figure' because the figure is red on a black background. Here we can see a female figure running. She seems to be interacting with someone pursuing her but there are no other figures on the lekythos.
- Lekythoi are found in graves and used at funerals and wedding ceremonies. It is a small lekythos. Similar lekythoi display women.
- The potter used a wheel to shape the clay into the shape of the pot. Sometimes pottery was made as a whole piece and sometimes pieces were made separately and then joined together later. The red figure is red because that is the colour of the clay. The painter painted a thin layer of clay called a 'slip' to make the background of the pottery and details black. Then the pottery was fired in the pottery kiln.
- Red-figure pottery like this was invented around 530 BCE. Before this black-figure was popular. This is the opposite of red-figure, black figures on a red background.



### Small wine jug

- This is a small wine jug, used to pour wine into drinking cups. Wine and drinking parties were very popular in the ancient Greek world. These drinking parties were called symposia. Wealthy men used to recline on couches whilst drinking and playing games. They also listened to music, watched entertainment, and shared intellectual conversations.
- It is red-figure pottery with a red bird framed by red vegetation on a black background. Dates to Late Classical period, second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The light orange colour points to Southern Italian provenance.
- This oinochoe is called a chous because it is short and wide with an interesting shaped rim called trefoil. This describes the three leaf shapes at the top of the oinochoe.

