

# Collectors' Focus

## Attic vases

### Emma Crichton-Miller

*Red-figure and black-figure vases capture some of the lost magnificence of ancient Greek wall-painting. What was once a field purely for connoisseurs is now opening up, with new buyers drawn to the precision of the pottery's painted surfaces*

In 1772, the British Museum bought perhaps the world's most famous collection of Greek vases for 8,000 guineas. Its owner, Sir William Hamilton, Britain's Envoy Extraordinary to Naples, first popularised interest in these ancient vessels during a period when large numbers were being excavated from cemeteries in the Roman Campagna. But it was his contemporary, the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who established that these vases were Greek, rather than Etruscan or Roman, and brought to Italy by trade and conquest. He recognised the red- and black-figure painted scenes on their surfaces as masterpieces, reflecting the lost splendour of ancient Greek wall-painting.

Since then these vessels have become some of the most studied objects in art history. They are windows on to a sophisticated culture, where art, mythology, ritual and everyday life are deeply intertwined. Detailed stylistic comparisons have enabled scholars, chief among them the Oxford classical archaeologist Sir John Beazley (1885–1970), to identify more than 500 individual artists, especially among those active in Athens around 625–300 BC. More recently, attention has begun to focus on the potters, who created a highly elaborate vocabulary of elegant, functional forms that dominated production for more than 300 years.

According to Claudio Corsi, an antiquities specialist at Christie's London, it is Athenian vases, made in the region of Attica where the clay was finer and the artists more adventurous, that are primarily sought after by collectors. These divide into black-figure vases, where adhesive black paint is applied to red clay; and

1. Attic red-figure calyx-krater, c. 430–420 BC, attributed to the Dinos Painter, terracotta, ht 49.2cm. Christie's New York, \$1.05m





red-figure vases, where it is the background rather than the figures that is painted in. The latter began to emerge in 530 BC and gradually eclipsed black-figure vessels. 'Red-figure vases are considered the epitome,' says Corsi, describing the technique as 'more elaborate'. The scenes depicted are generally full of figures, whether mythological or from real life, running, fighting, having sex. The great period of Attic vases was over by the end of the 5th century.

Corsi cites the auction record for a Greek vase of \$1.77m, achieved at Christie's New York in 2000 for a red-figure kylix, attributed to Douris the painter and his long-term potter collaborator, Python. In the same sale, a slightly later calyx-krater (430–420 BC; (Fig. 1) achieved \$1.05m. The vessel was given to the well-known Dinos Painter and depicted a typically bloody tale, the death of Actaeon. Another highlight, at Christie's New York in 2010, was the \$422,500 achieved for an elegant amphora of around 490–480 BC. Largely black with two single red figures – a young warrior on one side, and a falling, older warrior on the other – the vase was attributed to the so-called Berlin Painter. With its minimal ornamentation, it is highly characteristic of his style. He is regarded by many, alongside his great rival, the Kleophrades Painter, as the finest artist of them all, working with both black- and red-figure technique.

Basel-based dealer Jean-David Cahn comments: 'These artists have the capacity, like an Old Master, to reduce down to one image. The concentration of the image is important, along with the quality of the glaze. The drawing is precise and austere, unlike the sketchy liveliness of many late 5th-century pieces.' He adds that, with the decline in classical education, collectors are drawn to 'vases you understand straight away – Herakles with a club in his hand and a lion – rather than those with complicated

iconography. It's an aesthetic approach more than a connoisseurial one.' James T. Demirjian of New York's Ariadne Galleries says: 'Proportion, symmetry, compositional elegance, and fine execution of drawn or incised details are all markers of a high-quality work. A vase bearing the signature of its potter or painter is also a rare and very desirable feature.' Last summer the gallery held an exhibition during London Art Week of both vases and fragments. The vases sold well but so also did the fragments. 'These intriguing snapshots allow the viewer to focus on a particular detail, and make for miniature works of art in their own right,' Demirjian says. Cahn comments more generally of the market that it is stable and robust, although recently a generational shift has seen it flooded with middle and lower value pieces, offering opportunities for new collectors.

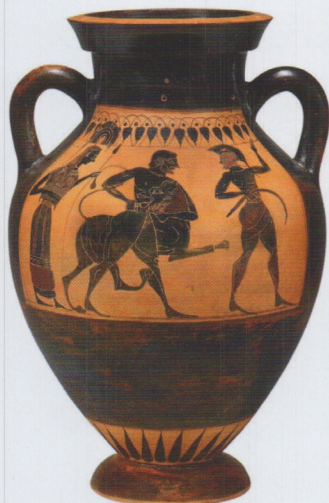
Francesca Hickin, head of antiquities at Bonhams, confirms that 'the star pieces are increasingly hard to find'. At the next level, personal taste makes a difference. 'Obviously, larger vases are worth more than smaller vases, but vase shape is a matter of preference,' she says. 'The choice between red- and black-figure is largely personal,' she observes. 'Black-figure is of course earlier, and can be more finely executed, but there is a verve and wit to red-figure vases, which are often more inventive with their decoration.' Last November, a black-figure amphora of around 540 BC, with provenance dating back to the 1970s and painted by Group E, one of the most important groups of the period, sold at Bonhams for £68,750 (Fig. 2). 'The antiquities market has been growing stronger since around 2007,' says Hickin, 'with the biggest boom in prices coming between 2009 and 2012.' Demand outstrips supply, though Bonhams offers work priced from £1,000 to the hundreds of thousands, with a diverse collector profile and 'increasing activity in the Middle

East, China and South America'. While condition is always an issue, Hickin emphasises the paramount importance today of provenance. Last summer a bell-krater, attributed to Python, was seized from the Metropolitan Museum of Art; there were suspicions that it had been illegally excavated. The museum had bought the piece from Sotheby's in 1989 for \$90,000. This follows the dramatic case in 2008 when the Met was forced, after protracted negotiations, to return the famous Euphronios Krater, from the 6th century BC, to Italy on similar grounds.

Martin Clist of Charles Ede says that the Art Loss Register is 'an important tool to determine if something may have been stolen', but other indicators, such as 'Swiss private collection' with acquisition dates from the late 1980s and 1990s, can act as warning signs. 'This doesn't mean the pieces aren't legally located on the market, but one may have to dig further.' In 2016 Charles Ede sold 'a particularly fine black-figure kantharos' to a client in New York and, more recently, to Yale University, a red-figure kylix with Bacchic scenes on the outside and a tondo of a maenad attacking a satyr (Fig. 3). The dealer currently has a black-figure eye amphora from 530–520 BC (£120,000).

Parisian dealer Antoine Tarantino sees no decline in demand. All collectors, he says, are looking for 'rare subjects, rare designs. They want something published during the 1960s that hasn't been on the market for a while.' He also reports that young people – 'the heroes of the modern age!' – are becoming interested in the field. Clist agrees. Collectors become hooked, he says, 'once that magic door has been opened, once one starts to appreciate the scenes as works of art. If you think about it, these are paintings from ancient Greece and as such should be placed alongside works on paper from the Old Masters – with which they often compare very well in price.' **A**

2. Attic black-figure amphora (Type B), c. 540 BC, attributed to Group E, terracotta, ht 42cm. Bonhams, £68,750



3. Attic red-figure kylix, 470–460 BC, attributed to the Oedipus Painter, terracotta, ht 10.5cm. Charles Ede

