GREEK PAINTING:
FOUR NEWLY ACQUIRED VASES

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Since no monumental Greek paintings of the classical period have survived, the paintings on Greek vases assume an importance even above their own intrinsic worth. It is through them that we can, at least in some measure, visualize these lost major paintings and trace the development of ancient pictorial art, for the painters of murals and of pots worked on similar problems. In the current Exhibition of Greek Painting in Gallery D 8, we tried to trace the development which took place in Greece during the late sixth, the fifth, and the fourth century B.C., when artists learned, for the first time in history, to represent depth on a flat surface; and we utilized for this purpose mostly vase paintings of those periods. In an explanatory pamphlet (Greek Painting, 1944) we briefly summarized the evidence which has enabled archaeologists to reconstruct the evolution from two-dimensional to three-dimensional representation and referred to the few specific statements on the subject by ancient writers that have survived—by Vitruvius, Pliny, Plutarch, Pausanias, and Hesychius—as well as to some general remarks by Plato.

Considering the importance of the subject and the magnitude of the Greek achievement, these accounts are lamentably few, and, moreover, most of them were written centuries after the events they record had taken place. What a grievous loss is the total disappearance of the early Greek treatises—for instance, those on perspective by Agatharchos, Anaxagoras, and Demokritos and those on

ABOVE: Revelers on an amphora by Euthymides in Munich. About 510-500 B.C.
Scene from the story of Achilles and Troilos, from the hydria shown below. About 575-550 B.C.

proportion by Polykleitos and Euphranor—which are known to us only from casual references by later writers!

In this dearth of contemporary comment an inscription dating from the very time that the changes in pictorial representation were being initiated assumes importance. I refer to the well-known and often quoted inscription by the vase painter Euthymides on his signed amphora in Munich: ὡς οὐδέποτε Εὐφρῶνος, “Euphronios never did anything like this” (see opp. page). It has hitherto been interpreted merely as a general challenge to a rival, for we know that competition among Greek potters was keen. It may be asked, however, why Euthymides wrote his boast on this particular vase, which is by no means his extant best? And certainly the rather sedate scene of the arming of Hektor on one side of the vase does not compare favorably with, for instance, Euphronios’s magnificent Herakles and Antaios in the Louvre or with his aristocratic young horseman in Munich. Euthymides’s boast does not seem justified. However, if the inscription is taken to apply specifically to the figures near which it is written—the two gay revelers on the left—it acquires a new meaning; for in one important respect these figures excel all Euphronios’s extant works and are indeed among the most successful of their time. They are drawn in three-quarter front and three-quarter back views with the farther side of the chest, abdomen, back, and shoulder foreshortened with considerable understanding. In this respect the other figures on the same vase, and indeed in most of Euthymides’s paintings, as well as in all Euphro-
A battle between Greeks and Greeks, from the amphora shown below. About 400 B.C.

Euthymides's works, seem less advanced; when not in strict profile they are to a large extent still pieced together from full front and profile views, in the manner which had been prevalent for thousands of years. We may surmise, therefore, that it was the foreshortening in the Munich picture on which Euthymides prided himself.

If this supposition is correct the interest of the inscription is greatly enhanced. It would furnish another witness from the past, one from the very time that the new manner of drawing was being evolved. And it would supply positive proof that some of the vase painters were deeply interested in the new problem of three-dimensional representation and were making their own efforts to solve it. In other words we should know—what we have long suspected—that the vase painters were independent artists and did not merely copy the mural and panel painters of their time.

Four Athenian vases recently acquired by the Museum strikingly illustrate the change from two-dimensional to three-dimensional representation which took place in Greece. One is decorated in the manner of the sixth century, when the Greek artist kept to the conventions inherited from his predecessors. Two were painted about a century and a half later, when he had achieved the task he had set himself and was able to represent figures
and objects three-dimensionally as they appear to the eye. The fourth—a product probably of the late fourth century—carries the plastic conception one degree farther, being decorated in relief. It will be instructive to examine these vases in detail.

The early example is a hydria (water jar) of the early, ovoid form with a black-figured decoration in three zones consisting of animals and monsters and a scene from the famous story of Achilles and Troilos (illustrated on p. 167). The latter, in spite of its primitive rendering, is vividly conveyed. We are in the outskirts of Troy, early in the ten-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Achilles is crouching behind a fountain, unseen by Polyxena and Troilos—daughter and young son of King Priam—who have come to water the horses and fill a pitcher (note the lifelike rendering of the thirsty white horse). On the fountain is a bird of ill omen, a raven or a crow, perhaps sent by Apollo, in whose sanctuary the boy is said to have been killed. Behind Troilos are three armed warriors, evidently the Trojans who tried too late to come to his aid. They are balanced on the other side by the supporters of Achilles—his mother Thetis, Hermes, and a draped bearded man holding a spear (perhaps Zeus or Agamemnon).

On this hydria the drawing is still two-dimensional without any attempt at perspective or three-quarter views. The figures all

A battle between Greeks and Amazons, from the amphora shown below. About 400 B.C.
move in the front plane and are ranged along one line. They are either in profile or are pieced together from full front and profile parts (as in the case of Achilles). The shields are in full front or full back. The eyes are drawn full front on profile heads. Depth is suggested merely by the overlapping of forms. No folds are indicated in the draperies. Only the front planes of the fountain, spout, and basin are represented. The date of the vase should be some time in the second quarter of the sixth century B.C., about the time of the François vase in Florence.

The scenes on the two red-figured amphorae illustrated on pages 168-169 were painted around 400 B.C., at the end of the internecine Peloponnesian War. They depict battles between Greeks and Amazons and between Greeks and Greeks. What a contrast the rendering of the figures presents to that on the early hydria! Three-quarter front and back views of figures and shields and foreshortened arms are now drawn with ease. Depth is effectively suggested by the placing of the figures on different levels. How natural are the folds of the swirling draperies, and how convincingly the roundness of the tree trunks and shields is rendered by contours and washes! In less than two centuries the Greeks had transformed the art of drawing from the age-old conception in which the figures were pieced together according to a set of formulas to a representation based on visual impressions.

The logical next step after this epoch-making development may be seen in our fourth vase (illustrated on pp. 170-171). It is a small oinochoe and is decorated with a scene representing Aphrodite and her retinue. The goddess is sitting on a rock with a dove perched on her shoulder. She extends one arm toward a little Eros, who is about to fly to her, assisted by a shaggy young Pan. The Eros is evidently a baby learning to fly. Two older brothers appear behind Aphrodite, one flying at ease, the other sitting by a tree. It is a pretty scene in the intimate, playful vein of the late fourth or the early third century. What interests us especially here, however, is that this decoration is no longer painted but is modeled in clay on the glazed surface of the vase (and then colored white, gold, and blue).

We have here the end of our story. The change from painted decorations to reliefs, which was probably, inspired by the new “plastic” conceptions, came about gradually. At first a few objects—such as fillets, wreaths, shields, and baskets—were made to stand out in relief, then a few of the figures, then the whole scene. Not many of these Attic “relief vases” have survived; but their importance is great. They initiated a new chapter in vase decoration. Painted pottery had run its course. It had been produced in Greece continuously for several centuries, had enlisted at times great talent, and had been exported far and wide. A change was due. Henceforth Hellenistic relief ware, with motives often derived from metal vases, became prevalent and con-
continued its popularity throughout the ancient world until the end of the Roman Empire.

The hydria (acc no. 45.11.2, 13 13/16 in. high) has an interesting history. It was found at Vulci more than a century ago and was published by F. T. Welcker in the Annali dell'Instituto in 1850 and by J. Overbeck in Die Bildwerke zum Thebischen und Trojanischen Heldenkreis in 1837. For a number of years it formed part of the Forman collection in England. After it was sold it disappeared and for a long time was considered lost. Recently it was offered to this Museum. After its acquisition the extensive nineteenth-century repainting was removed and the old, vivid coloring brought to light again; also a few slight restorations were made in plaster. The style of the paintings relates it to vases in London, Munich, Athens, Baltimore, and elsewhere which Professor Beazley has called the Group of London B76, after the number of a vase in the British Museum. On our sources for the story of Achilles and Troilos and on other representations of this theme see C. Robert, Die Griechische Heldensage, vol. 11, p. 1123, note 1, and M. Mayer in Roscher's Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie, vol. v, s.v. Troilos. On Greek "fountain buildings" cf. B. Dunkley in Annual of the British School at Athens, pp. 142 ff.

The two amphorae, acc. nos. 44.11.12 and 44.11.13, are respectively 14 1/16 and 13 15/16 inches high and are intact except for a few breaks on the lip and foot of one. They were found at Suessula in South Italy, together with an amphora previously acquired by the Museum. All three once formed part of the Borelli Bey collection, which was sold at auction in Paris in 1915. The paintings resemble the large battle scene on an amphora in the Louvre, and Mr. Beazley in his recently published Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters has attributed all four vases to the so-called Suessula Painter.

The small jug (acc. no. 44.11.10, 5 1/4 in. high) is said to have been discovered at Eretria. When it was acquired by the Museum the relief was covered with a thick incrustation, which has now been successfully removed without injury to the delicate color traces underneath. The only restoration is part of the trefoil lip of the vase.

The illustrations at the top of pages 167, 168, 169, and 171 are from composite photographs arranged by Lindsley F. Hall.