GREEK VASES

A THESIS

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"A Attic shape! Fair attitude, with breeze
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
How, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity! Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
How shallt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

John Keats.
A Thesis upon Greek Vases.

A recent writer on art paid it took him a long time to fully appreciate the Greek vases, but that when he did finally find out their true value, he was utterly amazed at his previous blindness. Nearly every art student has a similar experience. The Greek vases, I mean of course the antiques, are not especially pleasing at first sight. The best of them seem dull and uninteresting in color, while the drawing upon them appears quite crude and harsh, so that the beauty of line or contour is lost sight of. But a wondrously artistic beauty lies hidden about those old dusty terra cotta jugs and vases, a beauty that never fails to reveal itself to the intelligent art student, a beauty that has stood the test, nay, has formed art taste, almost, during more than two thousand years, and which is yet on a par with the richest productions of Sévres, Dresden, or
Stoke-upon-Trent. Just now it is quite the fashion in certain circles to rave over bric-à-brac of any description, and anything that looks old or curious is considered worthy a place in an "art" cabinet. But the Greek Ceramics, though indeed old, and often curious, need be judged by no standards applied to bric-à-brac. They have an intrinsic merit, a beauty that is as truly artistic as is the graceful figure of a Venus de Milo or the heavenly radiance of a Sistina Madonna.

But as admitting all the beauty involved in these bits of clay, the question may properly be asked, of what practical value to the Architect can the study of such things be, and it is hoped that this Thesis will show how such study has seemed, at least, valuable to one student of the Mother-Art.

In designing a building, the Architect has to keep before his mind two things. First, a harmonious grouping of parts. Second, a proper treatment and arrangement of details.
In considering the second, the designer has generally to obtain the desired effect by the use of mere lines. Color, and light and shade, have a part in the detail, and sometimes a leading part, but the pure line is, in the generality of cases, what one has most to deal with. Mouldings, leaf work, geometrical patterns, all are combinations of lines. Therefore it is very important that the Architect should have a clear, keen perception of what good lines are, and should have the intellect so trained that bad lines, or bad combinations of lines do not even suggest themselves. Now, wherein lies the pre-eminent beauty of the Greek vases? Surely not in the drawings upon them, for far better examples abound everywhere. Not in the decoration alone, though the decoration is very effective. But it is in the exquisitely graceful outlines, the beauties of pure line, that lies the characteristic charm of the Greek ceramics. So viewed in
in this light they offer aid to study in one branch of artistic design.

As a necessary sequence of their refined beauty, the Greek vases can be of great value to the student in engendering and maintaining a fine art taste. Hardly anything is more subtle in its beauty than the contour of a typical Greek vase. The line seems perfect, —we can not exactly say why, but yet we feel as though a deviation of a hair's breadth to right or left would make the shape commonplace, if not positively ugly. When one has studied such a form until it is his own, until he can shut his eyes and trace its delicate outline, until he can thoroughly feel its sensitive beauty, he has an art standard in his own mind worth far more than a volume of Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc and Eastlake combined, and the value of such a standard will be soon felt when he is dealing with pure lines in
architectural details. Art taste is with most people a thing difficult to acquire, and was more difficult to preserve unattainable amid the distractions of practical architecture; and the best correctives of bad taste have seemed to the writer to be, careful study of the Greek vases, and study of the human form from good living models. It is hard to say which is the more valuable.

Tradition says that the amphora, perhaps the most graceful of the Greek forms, was suggested by the hips of a beautiful woman. However this may be, we surely find in both the human form and in the Greek urn, much the same elements of beauty, and though we may not, like Charles Blanc, consider all forms of beauty as derived from the
human figure, still it is easy to see whence the Greeks drew their inspirations. The Greek dress was very light and open, leaving much of the body exposed, and where the body was covered, even the loose clinging draperies allowed the full beauty of form to be displayed. Among such people, developed in every faculty of the mind and body, it was doubtless very easy to cultivate and maintain a general aesthetic feeling, and so the elegance of form in nearly all of the many thousand pieces of Greek pottery remaining today, is easily accounted for. The whole instinct of the Greek was what we today call artistic, and therefore, with manners dress and customs as they are now, a good collection of Greek vases has an almost unbounded value to the student.

In the accompanying plates are shown a few of the forms obtained by the writer in the Museum of the Louvre,
Paris. None of the sketches were measured, and the attempt was made rather to catch the spirit of the particular form, than to obtain an exact reproduction of it. The common forms are too well known to require reproduction here, though the fact of their being common or well known does not in the least detract from their artistic merit. If a thing be good, it is good no matter how often reproduced.

I said that the drawings on the Greek vases seemed harsh and crude at first sight. That is true, but they improve wonderfully upon study, and in time again come out very strongly the value and effect of simple lines. No attempt is made at color or shade, everything is hard, black lines on the red clay, but each line counts, there are no weak hesitating strokes, not a single dash too much. The figures may be out of drawing, false in perspective, with expressionless faces, and fingers and toes...
like so many clothes pins, but they are drawn with such a bold dash and the lines are struck out with such
unhesitating freedom, that we forget the coarseness or
mistakes of drawing. Far better to be bold even to
rudeness in design, than to be weak and puny. A
painter who ranked among the first in Gérome's atelier
at the École des Beaux Arts, once told me that the study of
the Lyre's vases had been a great help to him in acquiring
boldness and freedom of touch in pencil sketching. As an
example of how effectively the Greeks used lines, notice the head
on Plate I. This was painted on the inside of a flat
dish or plate, about ten inches across. It is impossible
to represent a face with fewer lines, and yet all the lines
are there that are needed in a decorative figure and the
white is used just enough to give accent to the dull red
and black. And the equestrian group on Plate 2.
I did not half catch the expression of the lines, but enough is there to show the meaning the lines had to the Greek who drew them.

The ornamentation of the Greek vases deserves a great deal of study. Again it is all in pure lines, white or a second shade of red being sometimes used with the black. These ornaments are seldom drawn with much care, not with half the precision shown on these plates. Precision and careful drawing was not what was desired so much as a certain effect of a band here, a spray of honeysuckles there, a fret around this rim, or a leaf pattern down the sides. The Greeks aimed at the essential in art, and if we had their art sense, we would never be troubled in the expression. As examples of good effect with simple means, consider the second ornament on Plate 3, on the right, where the tip of white on the border gives character to the
simple pattern, and raises it quite above mediocrity. Or, again, in Plate 4, the first zig-zag pattern. This was painted on the flat rim of a large urn, and was strikingly effective, though nothing could be simpler. And in the second figure on the same plate, the simple carrying of the center leaf up above the rest adds greatly to its effect.

Plates 5 and 6 are examples of the conventional honeysuckle ornaments such as were painted under the handles of the larger vases. These two were the best found in the large collection of the Louvre, and may fairly be taken as types.

Aside from questions of art, the Greek vases are exceedingly interesting as exhibiting the inner life and habits of the people who made them. Dress, furniture, arms, combats, religious ceremonies, hunts, and tranquil domestic life are in turn represented in black and red, and a collection of
On top of a small vase. Black lines.

Ornament on top moulding of a vase.
Figures below are in white.
Greek vases form a very valuable supplement to a history of Greece. It is, indeed, almost a history by itself, and written by the Greeks, too.

It is sometimes thought that no people of today have the art feeling of the Greeks. Perhaps not in as full a measure, but some of the French and English work of the past decade compares very favorably with the best of the Greek vases, and far excels them in decoration. The vase on Plate 9, a levers vase of the end of the Seventeenth century, though not at all Greek in outline, yet possesses a great deal of elegance, and would not suffer by comparison with an Attic shape. Plate 10, 15 shows a replica of the same vase, with different colors. These and the one on Plate 10 are in the Museum of the National Porcelain Factory at Sèvres, France. The drawing can give but a poor idea of the last. The outline was very pure and graceful,
and the idea of representing a semblance of the human body, the breasts, the tunic, and the locks of hair about the neck, was quite unique and very pleasing.

Plate 11 represents an antefix from the Acropolis at Athens. It is inserted here merely as an example of the use of lines in a detail, and as showing how readily the Greeks would adapt the same form to entirely different usages, the ornament being essentially the same as often on vases.

Art never sleeps, but advances all the time, and if the Nineteenth Century has not surpassed the Greek models, we may take them as helps and guides, and hope for a race of modern Greeks, with whom art shall be an instinct, and good taste the rule instead of the exception. — But perhaps that is too Utopian an expectation.
These shapes are somewhat unusual.