

Shedding new light on ancient Greek vase painting

*New Jeppson Idea Lab exhibition opens
at the Worcester Art Museum on April 5*



Worcester, MA (March 24, 2017) – A new exhibition in the Worcester Art Museum’s (WAM) Jeppson Idea Lab focuses on the ancient Greek art of pottery and reveals new findings by WAM conservators and scientists on the methods and tools used by Athenian vase painters. [Master Vases from Ancient Greece](#) features three of the finest Greek vases in the Museum’s collection. Each vase, made in Athens over 2,500 years ago, illustrates one of the major vase-painting techniques: red-figure, black-figure and white ground. The multi-media exhibition, co-curated by WAM Objects Conservator Paula Artal-Isbrand and archaeologist Amanda Reiterman, opens on April 5 and remains on view through October 1, 2017. Artal-Isbrand and Reiterman will discuss the exhibition as part of the Museum’s *Master Series* on Thursday, April 20 at 6 p.m.

According to Artal-Isbrand, Greek potters developed ingenious firing methods to produce the vases’ distinctive red and black colors — a milestone in the history of ceramic technology that scientists were only able to reproduce in the 20th century. These artisans also employed sophisticated techniques for representation, such as foreshortening. In addition, vases, such as these, which survived below ground for millennia may offer glimpses into the lost Greek art of painting on other materials such as wood panels and plaster.

Prior to the opening of the Idea Lab exhibition, WAM conservators restored the three vases and made exciting discoveries in the process. During work on the red-figure *stamnos* (a vessel for mixing wine and water), Artal-Isbrand and the late WAM Conservation Scientist and Paintings Conservator Philip Klausmeyer applied scientific imaging technologies to unlock the mystery of how vase painters created relief lines, slightly raised lines that were used to outline figures and render details, such as mouths, hair, musculature, and drapery folds. The invention of the relief line allowed vase painters to represent figures and their gestures with a high degree of realism.

“We examined [the outlines] under extreme raking light conditions with the help of the Reflectance Transformation Imaging instrument—a technique pioneered at the Worcester Art Museum—and a 3D laser scanning confocal microscope brought out the surfaces’ three dimensions in ultra-high magnification,” says Artal-Isbrand. Once she understood the nature of the outlines, she experimented with brushes (which she fabricated using horse mane hair, hog bristles, human hair, and even cat whiskers) and different paint application techniques using a diluted clay paint until she successfully replicated the characteristic relief lines that she had observed on the *stamnos*.

The conservators made yet another discovery as they worked on the *lekythos*, a container for holding precious oil probably used in the preparation of the dead for burial or as an offering at a tomb. When they disassembled the *lekythos* during treatment they found a small vessel hidden within the neck of the vase. This small container gave the appearance that the vase was full, when, in fact, it held only a token amount of the precious oil.

The story of this restoration project and its discoveries are told in a short video documentary within the exhibition. In addition, an interactive iPad allows visitors to delve more deeply into the history of Greek vase painting, including the historical setting in which these vases were made and used, the manufacturing process, archaeology, and the collecting of Greek vases. The display of the vases, the conservators' findings, and the multi-media presentation about many aspects of Greek vases speak to the Idea Lab's mission — to take a closer look at important works of art and provide an interactive platform for further exploration.

These three ancient vases tell fascinating stories that take some surprising twists and turns along the way. Thanks to the curiosity and committed investigation of WAM's conservators Artal-Isbrand and Klausmeyer, new research and valuable discoveries inform the Idea Lab's multi-media exhibition and contribute noteworthy information to Greek art history.

About the Jeppson Idea Lab

Jeppson Idea Lab exhibitions highlight one object, or a small group of related objects, in focused installations that are designed to answer questions about the works or share new research, often discoveries that have been revealed during conservation treatment. Documentary-style video presentations and iPad interactives provide in-depth background and didactic information to expand visitors' understanding of the work(s), the artist(s), and the conservation treatment.

Related event:

Master Series Third Thursday Art Talk

April 20, 2017, 6 p.m.

Master Vases of Ancient Greece

Speakers: Paula Artal-Isbrand, Objects Conservator, Worcester Art Museum, and Amanda Reiterman, Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania

This Master Series lecture focuses on three exquisite ceramic vases made in Athens over 2,500 years ago. On view in the Jeppson Idea Lab from April 5 – October 1, 2017, each vase has a unique shape and is representative of one of three major Attic painting techniques. The rich depictions on these vases are brought to life by archaeologist Amanda Reiterman, who explains the function and relevance of these finely made objects in the context of the thriving metropolis of Athens. Objects Conservator Paula Artal-Isbrand discusses how these masterpieces were shaped, decorated and then fired using an ingenious—and mysterious—method that potters were not able to replicate until recently. She also shares highlights of discoveries made during the lengthy conservation campaign, including finding a secret inner vessel within one of them. The talk and reception following are free with Museum admission.

Master Series Third Thursdays are hosted by the Worcester Art Museum Members Council and sponsored by Abbvie and the Amelia and Robert Hutchinson Haley Memorial Lecture Fund. Media partner is WGBH Forum Network.

Image caption: Greek, attributed to the Achilles Painter, 450–440 BCE, *Oil Flask (Lekythos): Two Women Carrying Offerings to the Dead*, white-ground painted pottery, Gift of Miss Mary Felton Sargent, in memory of Miss Mary S. Felton, daughter of President Cornelius Felton, Harvard University, 1900.65.

About the Worcester Art Museum

Founded in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum's encyclopedic collection of 37,500 objects covers 51 centuries of art. Highlights include the Medieval Chapter House, Renaissance Court, and Worcester Hunt Mosaic, as well as the recently integrated John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection of arms and armor. The Museum is internationally known for its collection of European and American art. It was the first in America to acquire paintings by Monet and Gauguin and one of the first to collect photography. As the first U.S. museum to focus on collaborating with local schools, it has been at the forefront of engaging audiences and giving them a meaningful and personal experience.

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Friday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and every third Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$14 for adults, \$6 for children 4-17, \$12 for seniors 65+, and \$12 for college students with ID. Members and children under four are free. Admission is free for any college student with a valid ID on the third Thursday of each month. Museum parking is free on a first-come, first-served basis; street parking is also available. For more information, visit worcesterart.org.

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