

Current and coming

By Allison Eckardt Ledes

The vase in the decorative arts

In recent years the study of the decorative arts, particularly glass, ceramics, and metalwork, has benefited enormously from archaeological excavations carried out on land and beneath the ocean floor. Yet, for the most part, the resulting artifacts are of interest only to a relatively small number of professionals in the field. A much larger wave was

made when two great archaeological digs of the eighteenth century uncovered the ancient Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1738 and 1748, respectively. These finds had an enormous impact and considerably amplified the vocabulary of ornament that designers and craftsmen used to embellish luxury objects of all kinds. One of the most ubiquitous motifs

Design, and Culture in New York City through October 17. It is entitled *Vasemania—Neoclassical Form and Ornament: Selections from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. The show includes some one hundred objects, and is the outgrowth of a collaboration between a group of graduate students under

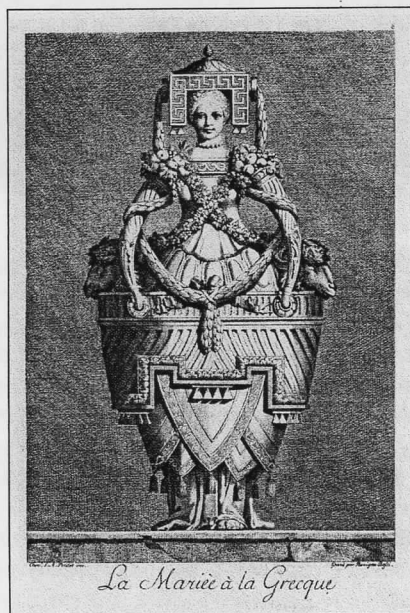
the leadership of Stefanie Walker, a professor and curator at Bard, and William Rieder of the department of European sculpture and decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum.

The ceramics, metalwork, furniture, textiles, and works on paper in the show are mostly drawn from the storage rooms of the museum, and therefore are not often seen by the public. Almost all the objects were made in France and England and are either functional, like vase-shaped inkwells or

perfume burners, or they incorporate vases in their decoration.

Collectors and antiquarians were largely responsible for the vogue for collecting antiquities that took root in the eighteenth century. Among them were Sir William Hamilton in England; Anne Claude Philippe, comte de Caylus, in France; Giovanni Battista Piranesi in Italy; and Johann Joachim Winckelmann in Germany. Vases were the most highly sought after of all the antiquities then available. The

(Continued on page 16)



found on objects made during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the vase. At first the various vase forms made in ancient times were copied by European craftsmen, but then classical vases became a point of departure for the creation of something new. An exhibition that traces the evolution of the vase in the decorative arts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the subject of an exhibition on view at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts,



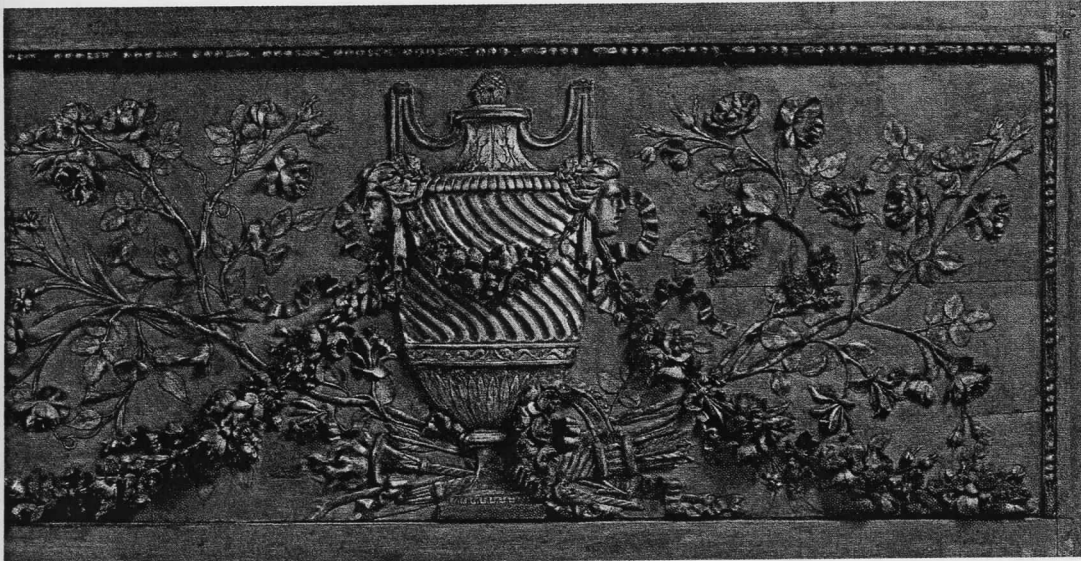
Sideboard pedestal with urn, one of a pair, English, c. 1775. Mahogany with mahogany veneer; height 74, width 22 1/2, depth 23 1/2 inches. The objects illustrated on this page are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Gift of Irwin Untermeyer.

La Mariée à la Grecque (The Greek bride), etched by Benigno Bossi (1727–1801) after Ennemond Alexandre Petitot (1727–1801), Pl. 6 in *Masquerade à la Grecque* (Parma, 1771), 1771. Inscribed "Chevr. E. A. Petitot inv." at lower left and "Gravé par Benigno Bossi." at lower right. Etching, 10 5/8 by 7 1/4 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund.

Vase with a scene before a duel, possibly designed by Étienne Maurice Falconet (1716–1791), with painted decoration attributed to Jean Baptiste Étienne Genest (c. 1725–1789), Sèvres porcelain manufactory (established 1756), Sèvres, France, c. 1765. Marked with crossed L's on the underside of the base. Soft-paste porcelain, height 18 3/16 inches. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.



(Continued from page 14)



exhibition examines the important role the Hamilton collection played in the rise of the neoclassical style. Hamilton served as British envoy extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the court of Naples starting in 1764. While in Italy he formed an enormous collection of antiquities, which, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, included some 730 vases, 175 terra cottas, 300 glass objects, 627 bronzes, 150 ivories, 150 gems, 143 gold ornaments, more than 6,000 coins, and a few marble statues, all of which he later sold to the British Museum in London.

When the collection was published in several volumes with beautifully hand-colored engravings and a text in French and English in 1766 and 1767, it was promoted to craftsmen and designers as a definitive source. Among the most astute makers of decorative objects was the innovative businessman Josiah Wedgwood, who quickly saw the

potential in producing both faithful reproductions and interpretive adaptations of antique vases. Hamilton formed a second collection that was partly lost at sea en route to England. What did survive was bought by the influential designer Thomas Hope in 1801.

In France starting in the 1760s the neoclassical style developed in three stages: the *goût grec*, the *goût étrusque*, and *goût antique* (or early Empire style). Like their British counterparts, French designers were not always strictly imitative. For their imaginative interpretations they used the geometrical symmetry of the classical past as a point of departure, but they pulled out bits of the decorative ornament—swags, garlands, ram's heads, and masks—

and combined them in innovative ways. The exhibition examines how artisans at the Sèvres porcelain manufactory created ceramic objects that are classical in overall form but much more voluptuous and flamboyant than their prototypes, particularly because of brilliant colors and gilding, which are not found on their antique counterparts.

The evolution of the vase as a

form and a decorative motif examined in this exhibition and its catalogue provides an exemplar of the progress of the neoclassical style in France and England. The catalogue is edited by Stefanie Walker and contains essays by Heather Jane McCormick and Hans Ottomeyer. It is available from Yale University Press and may be obtained by telephoning 800-405-1619.

The lowly flowerpot

The terra-cotta flowerpot is the workhorse of all ceramic objects, which is probably why its shape has changed lit-

(Continued on page 18)

Overdoor panel representing spring, one of a set of four, possibly made under the direction of François Joseph Bélanger (1744–1818), Paris, c. 1777–1781. Carved, gilded, and painted oak; 24 1/2 by 52 3/4 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan.

The studio of Eric Ellis Soderholtz (1867–1959) in West Gouldsboro, Maine, in a photograph of c. 1914. Photograph by courtesy of Patrick Chasse and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

