

This exhibition explores the role of the horse in Greek art and culture from its formative years in the Geometric period (ca. 900–700 BC) until the end of the Classical period in 323 BC, marked by the death of Alexander the Great. This era saw the flowering of a distinctive Greek art, philosophy, science, and literature that expressed beliefs about gods, mortals, politics, society, and the natural world—including horses.

In antiquity, like today, owning and maintaining horses was an expensive undertaking, largely limited to the economic elite. The second-wealthiest social class in Athens was the *hippeis*, meaning “knights,” from the Greek word for horse, *hippos*. Members formed the Athenian cavalry corps, as they could bear the expense of a warhorse. The very wealthy also owned and maintained teams of horses to race chariots in athletic competitions, including the famous ancient Olympics.

Successful horses and their owners were celebrated in poetry and the visual arts. Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BC), an Athenian author and pupil of Sokrates, composed manuals on hunting, cavalry, and the care and training of horses, which continue to be used to this day. Beyond their role in society, horses and other equids spurred the Greeks to imagine fantastical horse hybrids like the winged Pegasos and half-human, half-horse centaurs that inspire artists and writers even in the 21st century.

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# Origins of the Horse in Greek Art

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Poseidon, god of the sea, created the first horse, according to the ancient Greeks. Modern archaeologists, however, believe domesticated horses arrived in the eastern Mediterranean early in the second millennium BC. The Mycenaeans, who lived primarily on the Greek mainland and Aegean Islands from about 1600 to 1100 BC, were the first Greek-speaking peoples to depict horses. Following the collapse of Mycenaean society and a period known as the Greek Dark Age, a distinctive Greek culture emerged in the Geometric period (ca. 900–700 BC). These years witnessed the beginnings of Greek art and the emergence of the political, intellectual, and social structures that shaped Greek culture for centuries to come. During this period, the horse came to play a prominent role both in the functioning of society and as a sign of wealth and social prestige. The animal is a common motif in the artistic record and in the earliest works of Greek literature, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ca. 8th century BC).

Under the influence of Near Eastern and Egyptian art, the Greeks of the Orientalizing period (ca. 700–600 BC) introduced greater naturalism into their depictions as well as more clearly narrative scenes, including some that refer to the Trojan War. Evidence from this period also indicates the existence of monumental horse statues and the use of the horse motifs in architectural settings, such as terracotta plaques.

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# Myth and Legend

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Greek mythology and legend abound with tales of horses and horse hybrids. From well-known equines like the winged Pegasus to lesser-known characters like Arion, the mount of King Adrastus, horses symbolize athleticism, nobility, and beauty. The Greeks believed that Poseidon, god of the sea, created the horse in all its beauty to court the goddess Demeter. Heroes rode noble steeds to victories, and horses pulled the chariots of gods and goddesses. Fire-breathing horses drew the chariot of Ares, god of war, and winged horses bore the sun god Helios in his chariot across the sky. Kastor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus, were warrior horsemen who became the gods of horsemanship and protectors of travelers, as well as the source for the constellation Gemini.

Mythological horse hybrids appear throughout Greek art and literature. Centaurs are often portrayed as violent brutes, though some were intelligent and kind, such as Chiron, who tutored the heroes Achilles and Herakles. Satyrs and *silens*, followers of Dionysos, the god of wine, had horse tails, ears, and sometimes hooves. Other hybrid creatures include hippocamps, horse sea serpents who pulled Poseidon's chariot and served as mounts for sea nymphs and gods, and the *hippalektryon*, a mysterious creature with the head and chest of a horse and the legs, hind parts, and wings of a rooster.

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# The Horse in Greek Warfare

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The horse played a key role in Mediterranean warfare from around the mid-second millennium BC. The first known speakers of the Greek language, the Mycenaeans (ca. 1660–1100 BC), adopted the war chariot from their Egyptian and Hittite neighbors. Early in the Iron Age (ca. 1050–900 BC), however, cavalry composed of the wealthy elite began to replace chariots in warfare, and by the Archaic period (ca. 700–510 BC), Greeks had completely abandoned chariots in favor of mounted warriors.

Cavalry was decisive in a number of battles, and the cavalry of pasture-rich, horse-breeding lands such as southern Italy and the plains of Thessaly were highly sought after as mercenaries and allies. In the 4th century BC, the effective deployment of cavalry with armored horses was key to the military successes of Phillip II of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great (whose famous horse Bucephalos was Thessalian).

Greek artists periodically depicted individual cavalrymen, sometimes riding off to war, but rarely portrayed actual combat. Rather, the artists tended to depict mythological battles, including scenes of chariots speeding into battle that clearly evoke Homer's descriptions of the Trojan War. Frequently, Greeks (recognizable by their nudity) are shown fighting non-Greeks, such as centaurs or the mythical warrior women known as the Amazons.

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# Hunting

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“Hunting is good practice: it keeps your seat [the rider’s position on the horse’s back] firm and allows you to use your weapons in all sorts of terrain.”

—Xenophon, *On Horsemanship*

The ancient Greeks hunted on foot and horseback, often with the assistance of trained dogs. Hunting for sport was an aristocratic pursuit associated with the heroes of myth. Hunting scenes in art frequently symbolize warfare or athletic competition. Providing excellent training for both combat and physical sports, hunting skills and knowledge of game animals, hounds, and horses were essential to a young man’s proper education. Although the patron deity of hunting and wild animals was the goddess Artemis, female hunters are rarely found outside of mythology.

Hunting methods depended on the landscape, the prey, and whether the hunt was for food or sport. Hunters used spears and javelins, clubs, snares, nets, traps, bows and arrows, and even swords. The most common game were hare, boar, deer, and fowl. Larger and more exotic game such as bears, wolves, lions, and even wild asses and zebras were hunted across the distant territories of the Greek world. Hounds were bred and trained for the chase by scent, some on leashes as trackers and some running loose.

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# Horsemanship

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The imagery found in art as well as ancient poetry, plays, and scholarly writings illustrate the horsemanship skills of the Greeks. In Aristophanes's comedy *The Clouds* (419 BC), a father bemoans the bills racked up by his horse-obsessed son. With a sentiment that may ring true to modern-day horse owners, he cries out, "Creditors are eating me up alive . . . and all because of this horse-plague."

In his manual on horses and horsemanship, Xenophon stressed the proper care, training, and feeding of horses and offered advice on conformation, or build, and temperament. His instructions for riding, with a focus on balance, became the basis for classical dressage. Xenophon emphasized the importance of patience and kindness toward the animals, declaring, "Never deal with a horse in anger . . . for anger is senseless as it often undoes things so that you are forced to repeat." On handling, he wrote, "care must be taken so that its hooves shall be hard [Greek horses were not shod], so also care must be taken that its mouth shall be soft." Many techniques for horse grooming, such as currying, prying stones from the hooves with a small pick, and scraping sweat or water from the coat with a *strygil* (sweat scraper) remain almost unchanged from ancient methods.

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# Competition

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Equestrian competitions took place throughout the Greek world, usually as part of religious celebrations. The most prestigious of these celebrations were the Panhellenic games, which were open to all Greeks and took place at major religious sanctuaries at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Corinth. Most cities hosted local games, such as the Panathenaic festival in Athens that honored Athena, the city's patron goddess. Prizes for the victors could be as simple as an olive-leaf crown or as elaborate as the valuable olive oil that filled finely decorated Panathenaic amphorae. In addition to prizes, victors could boast of their *arête* (virtue) and divine favor, which were often expressed in specially commissioned poems by such writers as Pindar, Simonides, and Bacchylides.

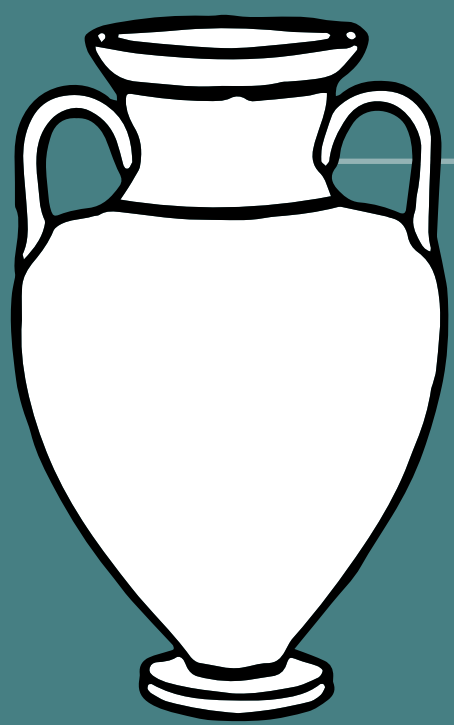
The equestrian events took place in hippodromes—horse-racing stadiums—and included a variety of competitions for individual horses of different age groups as well as for chariots. Riding contests included a race for speed, a torch race, and a race called the *kalpe*, in which a rider dismounted from a mare and ran alongside her in the last lap, as well as mounted javelin-throwing contests. Two-horse (*synoris*) and four-horse (*tethrippon*) chariots were also raced for speed. In the *apobates*, a hoplite—an armoured infantryman—would mount and dismount a moving chariot. A variant of the chariot race was the mule-cart race (*apene*) run at the Panathenaia and, briefly, the Olympics.

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# Shapes and Functions of Ancient Vases

Though pottery was highly valued for its beauty, it also served as functional ware in Greek society. Storage containers, mixing bowls, water carriers, and a variety of drinking vessels were all used at symposia (explored elsewhere in the exhibition) while other vessels were used in the home or gymnasium, where Greek athletes trained and competed. Most pottery was left undecorated, though ornamented vessels were exported throughout the Mediterranean world and some became family heirlooms or luxurious tomb furnishings.



## Amphora

One of the best known vase forms, a two-handled vessel used to hold olive oil, wine, or other goods. Variations of the amphora shape include the *pelike*, which is widest at the bottom, and the *neck amphora*, which has a sharp angle where the body joins the neck.



## Askos

Small vessel modeled after a wine-skin bag



## Krater

A wide-mouthed vessel used for mixing water and wine. Variations include the *column krater* (illustrated), with vertical, column-like handles; the *kalyx krater*, with low-set, curved handles; the *volute krater*, with tightly curved handles above the rim; and the *bell krater*.



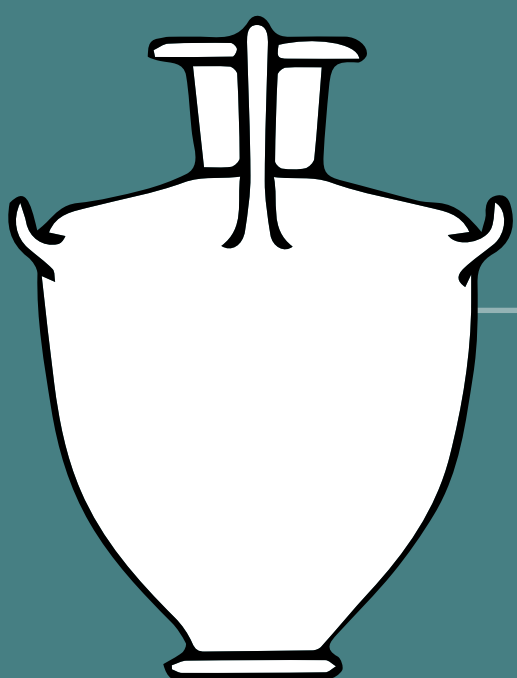
## Lekythos

A vessel with a narrow mouth and small handle



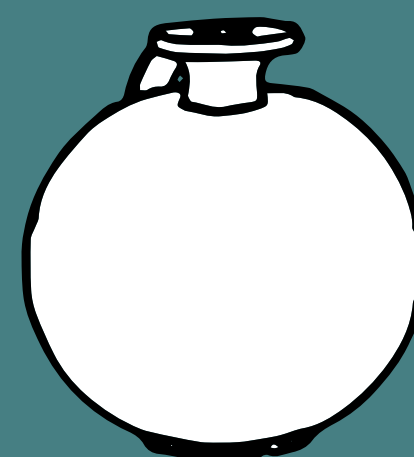
## Kylix

A drinking cup typically with two handles, a tall foot, and broad, shallow bowl that was made in a variety of sizes



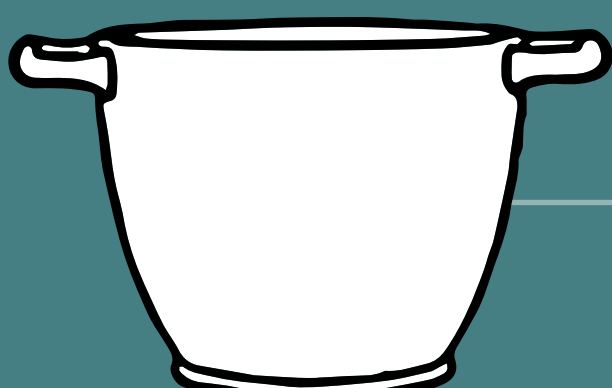
## Hydria

A water jar with three handles, two for carrying and one for pouring. A variation is the more rounded *kalpis*.



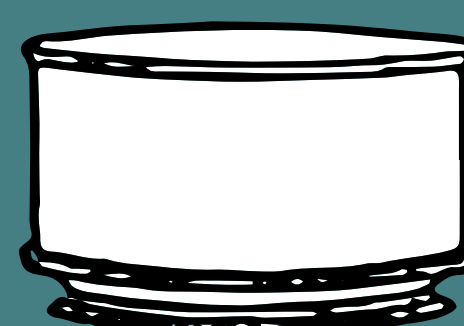
## Aryballos

A small flask for oil or perfume



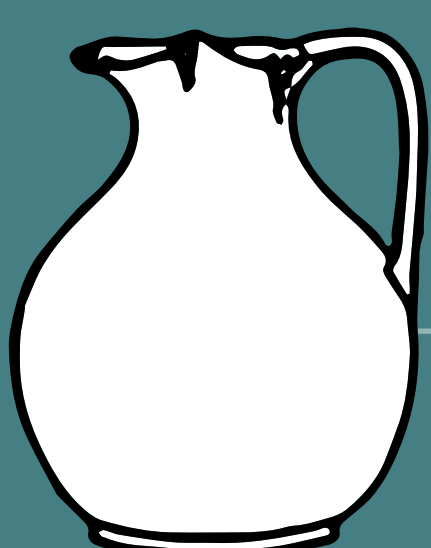
## Skyphos

A deep, two-handled drinking cup



## Pyxis

A lidded box for cosmetics or jewelry



## Oinochoe

A jug used for pouring wine



# Vases and Vase Painters

The finely crafted vases of the ancient Greek world were wheel-thrown ceramics. The most prized were produced in Athens and were usually decorated in either the black-figure or the red-figure technique. **Black figure** first developed in Corinth around 700 BC and was later adopted and refined by Athenian, or “Attic,” artists. **Red figure** was developed in Athens in the mid-6th century BC and brought by Attic artists to the Greek colonies of southern Italy and Sicily. The red on these vessels is the natural color of the iron-rich clay. Artists decorated the vases using thin layers of diluted clay, called “slip,” which turned black in the firing process. Black-figure decoration is closer to silhouettes with figures painted in slip and details incised into them to expose the natural color of the clay. In the red-figure technique, figures are left unpainted except for details added in slip. This method allowed artists to explore foreshortening and perspective. Artists could further elaborate the vessels with added white, red, purple, or yellow pigments.

Most potters and painters left their works unsigned and are anonymous. After careful examination, however, modern art historians have identified the works of specific artists and assigned them names inspired by style, subject matter, or other criteria.



Red Figure

Black Figure

# The Greek Symposium

The symposium was a central feature of Greek communal life that was rooted in the aristocratic culture of the 8th century BC. Small groups of men gathered and reclined on couches in an *andron* (men's quarters) as they drank and conversed about such topics as philosophy, the day's events, politics and literature. Though wives and other "respectable" females were excluded, *hetairai* (courtesans) might be present and take part in the conversation. Male and female slaves served the participants and provided other entertainment, such as acrobatic and musical performances.

The vessels at a symposium were aesthetic but also functional, serving as storage and mixing containers and as drinking vessels; their decoration helped spur conversation and even poetic improvisations and competitions. Participants might, for example, be asked to recount a particular horserace or retell a myth based on a scene painted on a vase. Much of Greek poetry appears to have originated in the symposium.

Symposiasts also played a variety of games with vessels, sometimes balancing them on their bodies, sometimes using cups, like the woman depicted below, to play *kottabos*, a game in which drinkers knock over a target by flinging wine or wine sediment at it.



*Plate: Woman Playing Kottabos*, 480 BC, attributed to the Bryn Mawr Painter, (Greek), terracotta. Harvard Art Museums /Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of David M. Robinson

# Improv Night at the Symposium

Ancient Greek poetry was usually heard rather than read. Based on the interplay of long and short, stressed and unstressed syllables, poetic performances were also accompanied by music, often played on lyres or double flutes. In addition to hearing familiar poems, participants at a symposium might also improvise new poems, sometimes based on scenes appearing on Greek vases.

In the poem below, Richmond-based poet Ron Smith imagines the guests at a Greek symposium taking part in those most symposiastic activities of drinking and conversing.

## DISCUSS: HOW IS OUR SYMPOSIUM LIKE HOMER'S *ILIAD*?

Rage? We feel no Achillean rage  
as we recline here amid swarming  
witticisms, sipping (gulping?)  
our host's excellent wine. So far  
Calistos remains somewhat sober,  
and none of us have smashed any crockery,  
not even Herodion,  
our skillful breaker of painted horses.

Feel free to share your own thoughts in words or images  
in the nearby notebooks.

# Animated Vases

These animations were created in an undergraduate class in the Kinetic Imaging Department of Virginia Commonwealth University in fall 2017. Working with VMFA staff members, students used animation to explore Greek art and culture. One group created “Horsymposium,” a 360-degree immersive animation that allows viewers to interact with a virtual environment via the in-gallery touchscreen or a smartphone by using the QR code. A second group created individual animations for the series “Horses, Gods, and Heroes” that can be accessed in the gallery and on YouTube.

**INSTRUCTOR:** Pamela Taylor Turner

**TECHNICAL MANAGER:** John Wagner

## “Horsymposium”

**Collaborators:** Ina Choi, Joshua Cromwell, Peyton Johnson, Eun-Young Lee, Flow M. Yen, Sheena Zheng

**Sound and script:** Peyton Johnson

**Voice acting:** Robert Kaputof, Joshua Cromwell, Michael Ezeobi

**Music:** Mesomedes of Crete, “Hymn to Nemesis” performed by John Franklin from the CD *“The Cyprosyrian Girl: Hits of the Ancient Hellenes”* (2004)

**Quotes:** Xenophanes of Colophon, Fragment 15; Aristophanes, *Wasps*, lines 1208–1215

## “Horses, Gods, and Heroes”

**Animators:** Mat C. Burnet, Alexander DeMoll, Hye Su Jun, Tanner Miller, Hannah Moon, Wandaryna Phou