

RARELY EXHIBITED GREEK POTTERY

Part I: Bronze Age-Orientalizing (2700–530 BCE)

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Minoan and Mycenaean Pottery

Wheel-made pottery was long established by the Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1100 BCE), and utilitarian vessels, decorated or not, were essential to the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean. Like later Greek culture, Minoans and Mycenaeans were prolific potters. The earlier Minoan culture was centered on the island of Crete, while Mycenaean Greeks lived on the mainland.

Minoans and Mycenaeans were two distinct cultures, with different languages, belief systems, and artistic tendencies. Minoan art, including pottery, has long been described as freeform and naturalistic, often depicting the natural world such as aquatic life. By contrast, Mycenaean art is often characterized as less naturalistic and more standardized in its decoration.

Minoans of the Middle Bronze Age had a profound influence on the Mycenaeans of the Late Bronze Age. The consensus today seems to be that seafaring brought Minoans into contact with Mycenaeans around the fifteenth century BCE. We know this because elite Mycenaean tombs from that time suddenly contain Minoan and Minoan-influenced goods. Some suggest Mycenaean elite were collectors of Minoan “antiques.”



Pyxis

Gray Ware, Early Minoan II, 2700–2150 BCE
From Lendas, Crete (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (60.21)

The *pyxis* is a round, lidded container, with numerous examples known down through the Hellenistic period (300–30 BCE). *Pyxides* may have been used to hold cosmetics or jewelry, and some could be suspended, though the reason for suspension is unclear. “Gray Ware” has a smooth, metallic-like surface achieved with fine-grained *slip* (liquid clay used like paint). The gray color was, however, produced through an oxygen-deprived kiln environment. The chip on the vessel shows that the actual clay of the vessel is a pale buff.



“Teapot”

Middle Minoan IA–Middle Minoan IB,
2050–1850 BCE

From Crete (Greece)

Pottery

William and Anna Weinberg Purchase Fund
and Museum purchase (72.81)

Many cultures have versions of the “teapot,” a vessel held with one hand while pouring a liquid, though what these vessels contained for Minoans is unknown. The tiny size of this example (H: 2.9”) makes interpretation difficult, though wine, oil, and water are the most common liquids in antiquity. Crete’s pale buff clay is visible under the red *slip*.

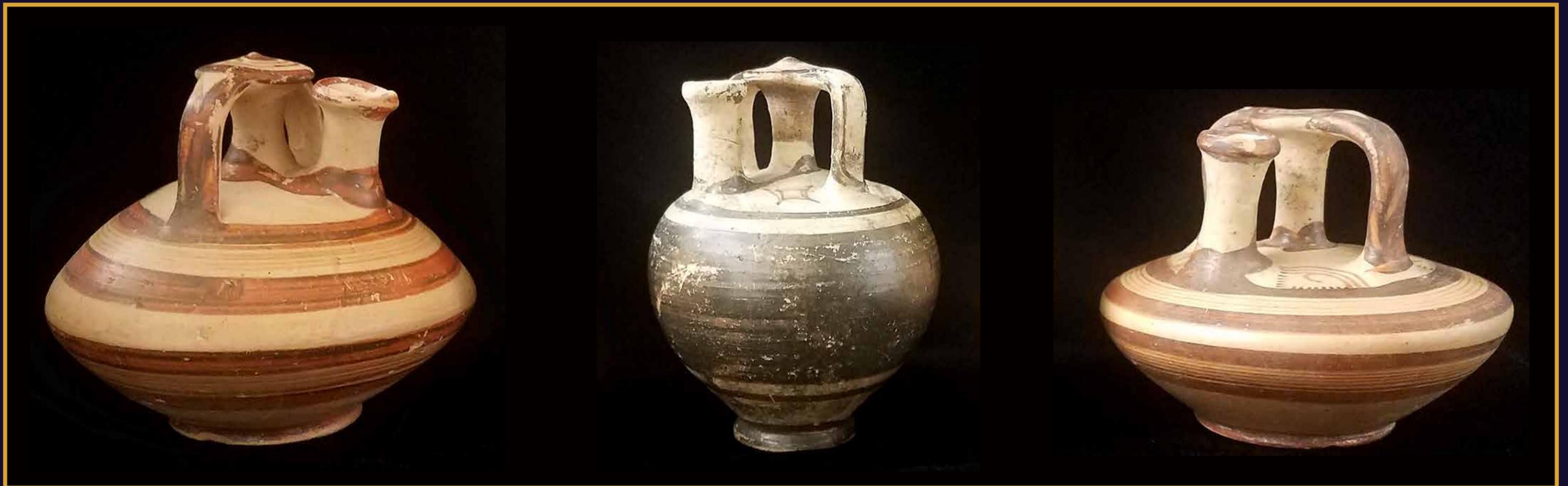


Middle Minoan IA?
Ca. 2000 BCE
From Crete (Greece)
Pottery
Museum purchase (64.71)

Middle Minoan IB
1900–1850 BCE
From Knossos, Crete, (Greece)
Pottery
William and Anna Weinberg Purchase Fund (72.276)

Jugs with Barbotine Decoration

“Barbotine” refers to the raised, tactile decoration on the surface of these vessels and such embellishment remained popular for a long while on Minoan pottery. The one-handed spouted jug was commonplace in Minoan ceramics, and its shape was probably based on models from nature, such as gourds, shells, or other natural forms.



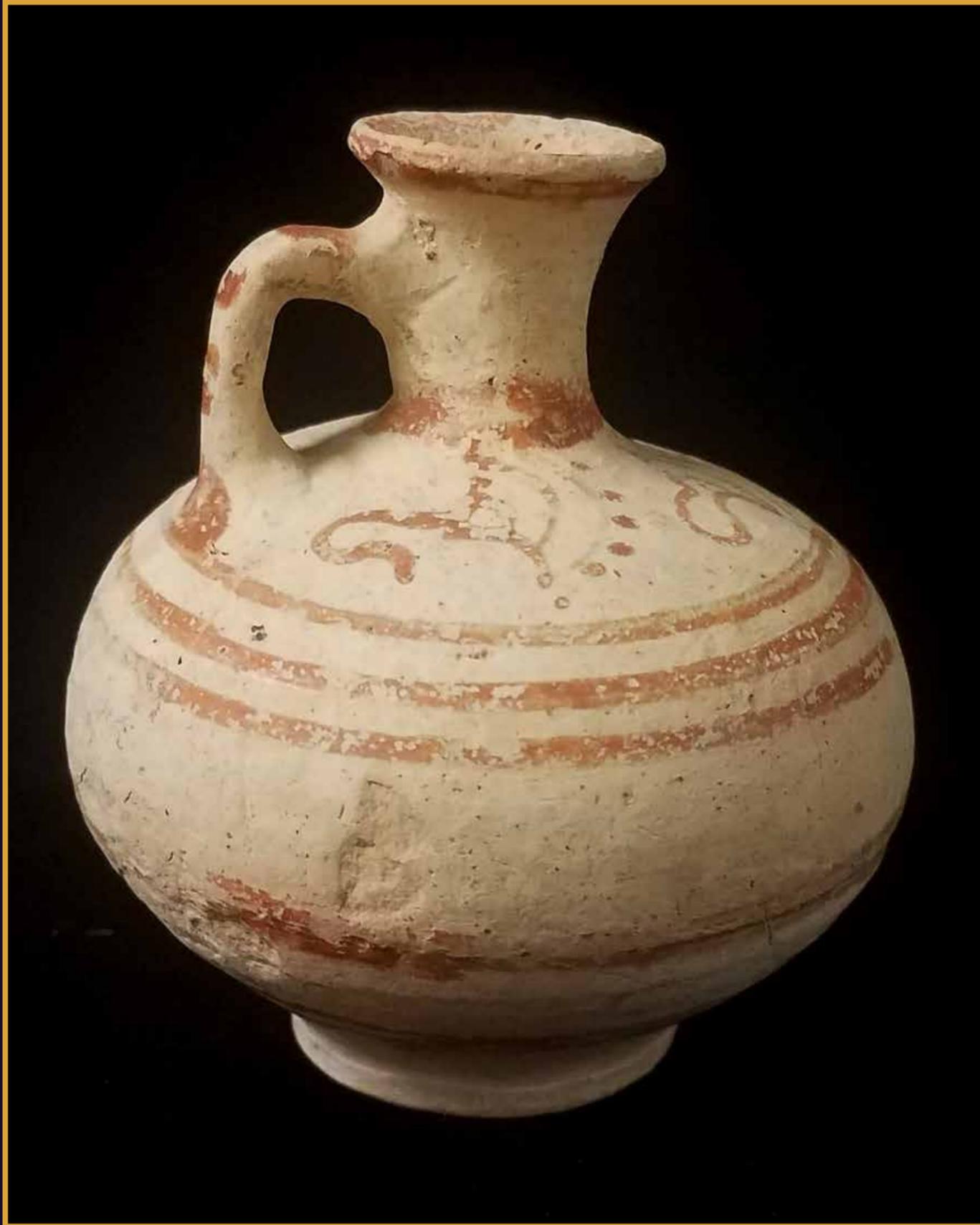
Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIA2–Late Helladic IIIB1
1390–1225 BCE
Made in Greece but allegedly found in the
Hebron area (Palestine)
Pottery
Museum purchase (68.243.1)

Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIC
1070–1030 BCE
Pottery
Museum purchase (64.69.2)

Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIB1
1300–1225 BCE
From Tanagra (Greece)
Pottery
Museum purchase (58.22)

Stirrup Jars

Though synonymous with Mycenaean culture, stirrup jars originated in Minoan workshops. The stirrup-like handles give the vessel its name, and their simplified decoration is typically Mycenaean. Scholars believe these vessels contained scented oils, and the restricted spout prevented too much of the precious liquid from dispensing at once. Evidence for perfume making is known from the Mycenaean site of Pylos, and the presence of these vessels in areas outside Greece, such as Palestine, indicates the export of perfumes. Stirrup jars were also recovered from the Uluburun shipwreck, dating to about 1300 BCE.

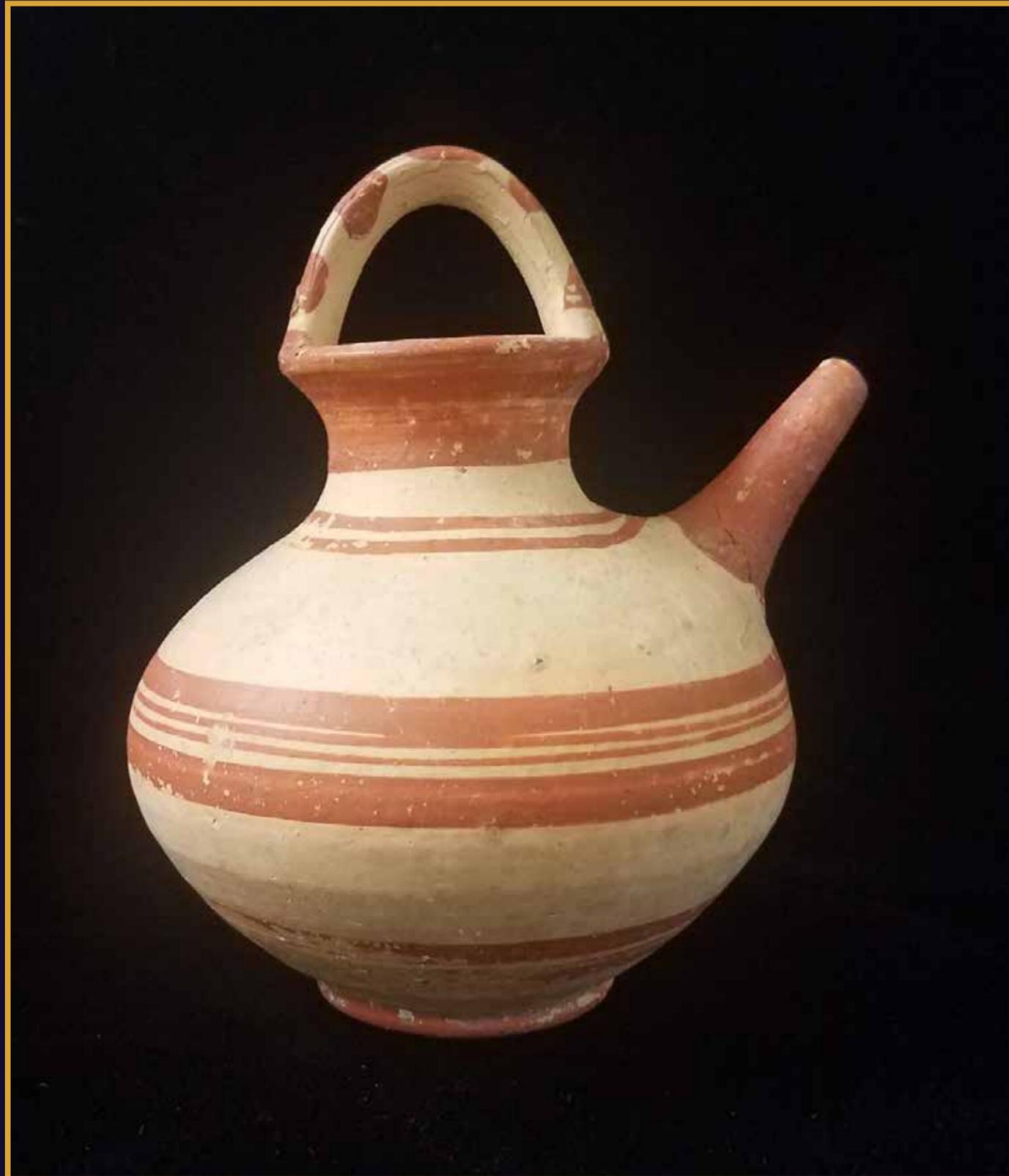


Lekythos

Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIC, 1190–1130 BCE
Pottery

Museum purchase (64.69.4)

Also for containing oil, the *lekythos* eventually replaced the stirrup jar in Mycenaean culture. The shape, with its restricted spout and single handle, is essentially a simplified version of the stirrup jar. The *lekythos* would grow in popularity, even surviving the collapse of Mycenaean culture and continuing in use for hundreds of years in later Greek society (see below). This example is about the size of a modern perfume vessel (H: 2.7") while later *lekythoi* would be much larger.



“Feeding Bottle”

Mycenaean, Late Helladic IIIC, 1190–1130 BCE
Pottery

Museum purchase (68.104)

This vessel is small (H: 4.9”) and its spout narrow, indicating a use for dispensing small amounts of liquid. The mouth is also restricted to prevent sloshing. Such vessels have sometimes been labeled “baby feeders,” but they were probably for dispensing small amounts of oil (for what purpose?). Variants continued to be made by Greek potters for centuries (see below). The simplified, banded decoration connects the bottle to the previous Mycenaean pottery.

Geometric Pottery

After the collapse of Minoan-Mycenaean culture in the twelfth century BCE, Greece entered into a transitional period as the Bronze Age “palace societies” disappeared, along with monumental architecture, writing, and quality goods like pottery. In the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, Greek society re-emerged, and colonization began in many places around the Mediterranean. This period is known as “Geometric” after the predominant artistic style, particularly evident on pottery. Following a marked decline in pottery quality in the previous two centuries, technical expertise and creativity returned. The mature Geometric style consisted of regularly dispensed bands of complex decoration over most of the vessel. In addition to abstract patterns, human and animal figures reduced to geometric forms became the standard. Sometimes these figures told simple narratives.



Skyphos

Greek, Protogeometric, 900–850 BCE
From Euboea (Greece)

Pottery

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund
and Gift of Museum Associates (90.109)

Typically used for wine, *skyphoi* have a long history in Greek culture. Euboean *skyphoi* with semicircles have been found throughout the Eastern Mediterranean as well as other places. The island of Euboea was one of the more active regions during this period, and its trading partners were many. The semi-circular designs of the vessel were created by brushes attached to a compass. Tiny holes, where the compass was placed, are sometimes visible on the surfaces of such vessels. “Protogeometric” designs set the stage for the “Geometric” that would take off and define artistic style for the following two centuries.



Footed Krater

Greek, Late Geometric, 760–700 BCE

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (62.7)

Kraters were larger vessels used for diluting wine with water before serving. Given the frequency of these and other dining vessels, ceremonious meals must have been important; such traditions would continue in later Greek society. But *kraters* such as this example (H: 12.9") could also serve as cremation urns. Much other Geometric pottery comes from graves as well (perhaps commemorative dishes from funerary feasts?). The decoration—including chevrons, zigzags, lozenges, and animals—is typical of the Geometric style, and gives the period its name.



High-Rimmed Bowl

Late Geometric IIa, 735–720 BCE
From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Gift of Saul and Gladys Weinberg (77.392)

The high-rimmed bowl (H: 3.7") originated in the Attica region of Greece (where Athens is located) during the Geometric period, and many such bowls have been recovered from Athenian graves. The snake-like, "ribbon handles" are common to the shape while zigzags and checkerboards are typical Geometric decoration.





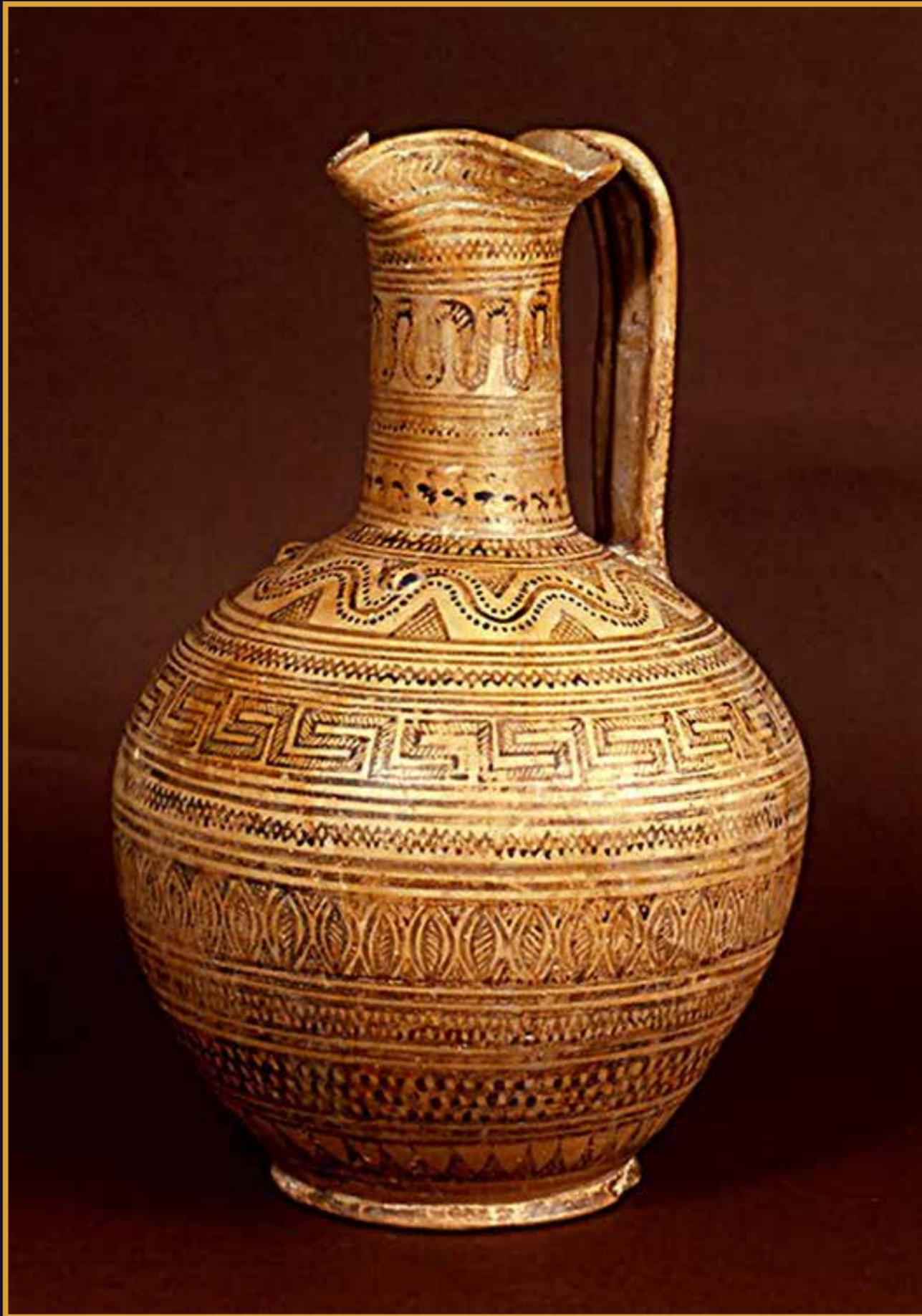
Footed Bowl

Greek, Late Geometric, 760–700 BCE
From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (61.28)

This shape is essentially a high-rimmed bowl with the addition of a tall, flaring foot, like the earlier *krater*. The foot is “fenestrated” (from the French *fenêtre*: window), which denotes the open slots. This example represents a later version of the type (H: 6.1”); the earlier vessels gradually became taller. “Bowl” may be a misnomer if the vessel served as a drinking cup. Grazing deer complete the decoration.



Oinochoe (wine vessel)

Greek, Late Geometric, 760–700 BCE

By the Sub-Dipylon Workshop (?)

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (60.19)

The *oinochoe* (from Greek *oinos*/wine and *cheo*/pour) was a standard on the ancient Greek table, and would evolve into many forms. This example was modeled on a vessel created by an artist known as the “Dipylon Master,” whose real name is unknown. His work, recognized on numerous finely-crafted pots, was influential on many artists including those of the “Sub-Dipylon” workshop, which perhaps made this vessel. “Dipylon” refers to a double gate into the city of Athens; a prolific potters’ quarter was located nearby.

Snakes, represented twice on this vessel, were symbols of the earth and the Underworld and may indicate this vessel was associated with a funeral or made specifically for the grave. The famous “Greek key,” in the center band, became popular during this period.



Lekythos (oil bottle)

Greek, Late Geometric, 760–700 BCE
From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (58.21)

Created in the Attica region during this period, the flat-bottomed version of the *lekythos* is a dramatic departure from its earlier, Late Bronze Age ancestor (above). Recalling modern cruets, this diminutive vessel (H: 4.6”), with very restricted neck, was for pouring small amounts of oil, perhaps for anointing the dead. The Greek key, increasingly popular during the period, decorates the neck.



Skyphos (*drinking cup*)

Greek, Late Geometric, 760–700 BCE

From Attica (Greece)

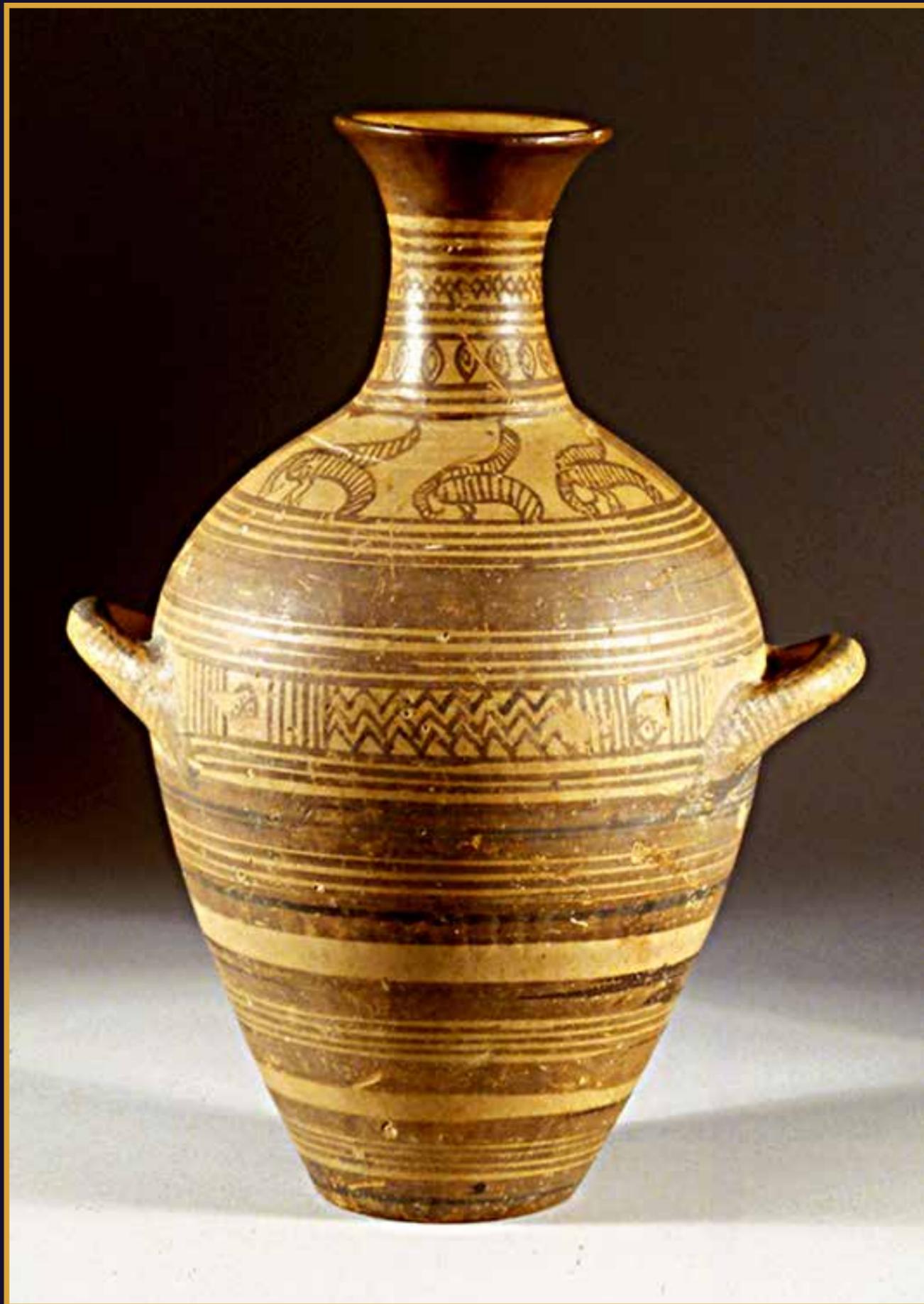
Pottery

Museum purchase (60.23)

This *skyphos* represents an evolution of the earlier Protogeometric example (above). This one is smaller (H: 2.6”), squatter, and the body has a snake as its focus, as opposed to the compass-drawn semicircles that were popular earlier. Snake imagery was important to Athenians, who claimed to have been sprung from the earth. Some of the early Athenian kings were said to have been part snake.

Orientalizing Pottery

This period witnessed the Geometric style slowly replaced by one with Eastern-inspired motifs, usually various animals, monsters, and decorative patterns. Beginning during the late eighth century BCE, when trade increased with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, the new style would persist for more than two centuries. While several parts of Greece felt the influence from interaction with eastern neighbors, the international trading port of Corinth is particularly known for its pottery representing the new “Orientalizing” style.



Hydria (*water jar*)

Greek, Early Orientalizing, ca. 700 BCE
From Crete (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (69.118)

The *hydria*, or water jar, was not uncommon on Crete but this elegant, slender variety heralds a new period. At first glance, the banded zones, some decorated, remind us of Geometric pottery, but the panel of birds below the neck is more typical of the Orientalizing period. These birds are peculiar, however, with a raised wing and beaks to the ground, quite unlike birds that would follow on succeeding pottery. The peculiarity of the birds is probably the result of local influences.



Pyxis (cosmetic container?)

Greek, Late Protocorinthian, ca. 650–625 BCE
From Corinth (Greece) but allegedly found in
an Etruscan tomb

Pottery

Museum purchase (61.9 A–B)

We introduced the *pyxis* in a Minoan example, perhaps dating 2,000 years earlier than this one. The shape survived, evolved, and continued to be common in women's graves. Like the early example, this one also has lateral suspension lugs. "Protocorinthian" denotes the transitional period between Geometric and Orientalizing styles. The Orientalizing style became prevalent in the city of Corinth. Like the *hydria* (above), the style of the *pyxis* still retains elements of the Geometric style.



Broad-Bottomed Oinochoai (*wine vessels*)

These two vessels show the evolution of style in the city of Corinth. Like the two previous vessels, the smaller pitcher (H: 4.6") still reflects Geometric designs though the shape is indicative of the Orientalizing period. The larger vessel shows the mature Orientalizing style with its complex friezes of animals and fantastic creatures against a floral background. This painter was a follower of the "Dodwell Painter," who masterfully painted similar vessels and influenced other pot painters. His most celebrated work is the "Dodwell Pyxis," once owned by antiquarian Edward Dodwell (British, 1767–1832).

Greek, Middle Corinthian
Ca. 575–550 BCE
By a follower of the Dodwell Painter
From Corinth (Greece)
Pottery
Museum purchase (57.15)

Greek, Early Protocorinthian
Ca. 700 BCE
From Corinth but found in
Asia Minor (Turkey)
Pottery
Weinberg Fund (82.247)



Aryballoi (oil vessels)

Greek, Early Corinthian
Ca. 600 BCE
From Corinth (Greece)
Pottery

Museum purchase (59.22)

Greek, Early Corinthian
Ca. 600–575 BCE
By the Duel Painter
From Corinth (Greece)
Pottery

Museum purchase (61.32)

Greek, Early Corinthian
Ca. 600–575 BCE
From Corinth (Greece)
Pottery

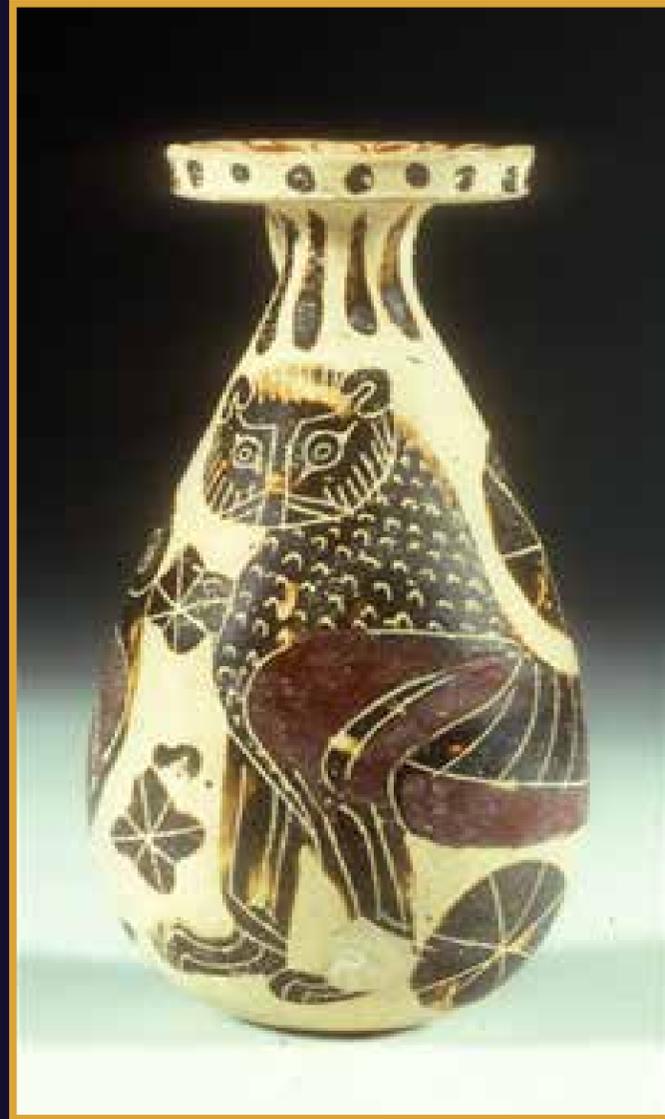
Museum purchase (61.30)

The *aryballos* was the standard oil vessel for Greek athletes, who used the oil somewhat like a soaping agent after exercising. They then scraped the excess oil from their bodies using an implement known as a *strigil*. *Aryballoi* are known in various sizes and mediums (including bronze and glass) and were frequent grave goods. Decoration varied, some reflecting the larger pottery with figural decoration. The skilled “Duel Painter,” who painted the central example, was influential at Corinth. He is named after fighting scenes on some of his vessels.

Trace analysis of some of the Museum’s Corinthian *aryballoi* in the 1990s revealed the presence of conifers such as pine, fir, or juniper. While these tree resins scented the oils, they may have also functioned as insect repellents.



Greek, Early Corinthian
Ca. 600–575 BCE
From Corinth but found
in an Etruscan tomb
Pottery
Museum purchase (61.8)



Greek, Early Corinthian
Ca. 600–575 BCE
By a follower of the
Dolphin Painter
From Corinth (Greece)
Pottery
Museum purchase (67.48)

Alabastra (perfume vessels)

The *alabastron* was a perfume vessel that imitated Egyptian alabaster bottles. They were similar to *aryballoi*, though *alabastra* are not associated with athletes. The contents, however, may have been related. Trace analysis of one *alabastron* (61.8) indicated the presence of olive oil, a coniferous tree sap, and perhaps verbena. Such a perfume would have been rather inexpensive compared to the imported and exotic fragrances mentioned in ancient sources. The decoration of *alabastra* in this period reflects the other pottery at Corinth.



“Feeding Bottle”

Greek, Late Corinthian

Ca. 550–530 BCE

From Corinth (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (59.55)

Kothon (perfume vessel)

Greek, Late Corinthian

Ca. 550–530 BCE

From Corinth (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (59.28)

Like the Mycenaean “feeding bottle” of several centuries earlier (above), this Corinthian example must have served a similar function, though these vessels were not particularly common at Corinth. Unlike the Mycenaean bottle, this one has a strainer opening through which liquid was poured to fill the vessel. The *kothon* was probably meant for dipping a finger into perfume while someone else held the vessel. *Kotha* were not common in graves, but rather in sanctuaries, perhaps indicating ritual anointing.