Bell Krater (Slide #1)
Niobid painter
Glazed earthenware
Greece
c. 450 B.C.
Gift of Martin A. Ryerson
1922.2197

The Bell Krater is the oldest object in this exhibition. It was made some 2,400 years ago in Athens during its Golden Age. In this ancient city the arts flourished and great achievements were made in science, philosophy, law, and government.

Myths helped the Greeks explain the natural world. The story on the vase is possibly based on the life of Achilles. This great hero's mother was a goddess and his father was a human. Achilles is preparing to depart for the Trojan War as his mother brings him his armor. His mother was immortal and wanted her son to live forever. When he was a baby she dipped him in the River Styx, a magic river that encircled Hades, the world of the dead. She held him by his heel, which did not get wet. This became the only spot where he could be hurt. The expression “Achilles’ heel” comes from this event in Greek mythology.

Being a warrior was a very important and honored occupation in ancient Greece, where many wars were fought. The departure of the famous hero Achilles came to represent the departure of any warrior. Achilles wears his helmet, and his mother holds his shield. On the wall is a pair of greaves, leg armor worn below the knee. The armor of soldiers was such a source of pride for the Greeks that they kept it hanging on display on the walls of their houses.

One of the reasons Olympic games were invented was to keep soldiers in shape when they were not fighting in battles. Some of the ancient games are part of today’s Olympics, such as the throwing of the discus or the javelin. Excellence and fame were the primary goals of sports heroes of ancient Greece. Great athletes were crowned with a laurel wreath, received an urn of
fine olive oil, and had a poem written about them. They were not paid for their glory; fame on earth was the ultimate human goal.

Greek homes were filled with finely decorated clay containers that were placed on shelves, hung on walls, or, if very large, left standing on the floor. Greek homes were simple and these containers provided the decoration. In ancient Greece, each clay vessel was a unique creation. Greek potters worked with a few shapes that were repeated again and again with subtle variations in size, curves, and proportions. We now use the term vase for Greek vessels that were containers for storing different solid foods and liquids.

This *Bell Krater* was not for everyday use. Something so finely painted would only be used for very special occasions, and other, more ordinary vessels would be used daily, just as we often have plain dishes for daily use and fancy china for special guests and holidays.

There were many types of Greek vases. The shape of the vase determined how it was used and what would be held inside. The vases are identified as follows:

An *amphora* (am-for-ah) is used for storing many things from wine to grain. When filled with oil it was often a prize in the Olympic games.

A *hydria* (hid-rē-a) is used for storing and pouring water. Two of the handles were used for lifting and the third for pouring.

A *krater* (crā-tur) is used for mixing wine and water. It has a large mouth to make this easier.

A *lekythos* (leck'-ē-thoss) is used for holding oil and special ointments. It has a narrow neck to prevent the contents from pouring out too quickly.

A *kylix* (kī-licks) is used for drinking. It is often decorated on both the inside and outside.

An *oinochoe* (oy-nok'-oh-ē) is used for serving wine. It is in the shape of a pitcher.
CURRICULUM

The suggestions for discussion and activities listed below refer to a number of the objects in *Art Inside Out* and elaborate upon information presented in the Objects Descriptions. They can be used prior to a museum visit or upon returning to the classroom.

**BELL KRATER**
(Slide #1)

**SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION**
Observe carefully the image of the warrior, possibly the great hero Achilles, that appears in the slide of the Bell Krater. The artist has translated the myth of Achilles into a simple image with a few characters. Have students describe in detail the scene that is depicted (note also clothing, furniture, and objects that give more information about the event). What is the most important part of the picture? What do you see that tells you that? What is the subject of the scene depicted?

Many liquids were stored or carried in these ceramic vessels for domestic or ceremonial purposes. Discuss how the form of these vessels relates to their particular function. Ask students to quickly draw the shape of the Bell Krater. Also have students draw some containers that we use today to store liquids (watering can, gas can, milk carton, pitcher, and water bottles). Make a list (on the blackboard) of contemporary materials used for today's containers.

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
Read students the arming scene from the myth of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. Who would be our contemporary Achilles? Have students summarize traits/characteristics associated with Achilles. Have students brainstorm and list heroes and myths that are unique to our culture, such as athletes, actors/actresses, etc. What traits are similar to the traits of Achilles? Have them depict a myth from our culture in a simple drawing or brief essay using
two to three characters and a limit of two colors (as seen in the *Bell Krater*). What shape of vessel or container might they attach to their mythological drawings?

Research some of the other forms and functions of Greek vases. Have students design an original ceramic vessel for a specific purpose following the idea of “form follows function.”

Have students research the origins of the Olympic games. Compare and contrast the original games to the Olympic games of the 1990s. What is similar and what is different about our Olympic games of today? Have students develop a sports commentary of an event at an ancient Olympic game. Present these to the class. Discuss their findings and ask them to think about how competitive amateur games have survived 1,550 years.