



Title	<i>Introduction to Art of the Ancient World</i>
Description	Donna Kurtz and Sir John Boardman talk about Sir John's life, his career and experiences as a classical scholar and also the relationship works of art from different cultures around the ancient world have with one another
Presenter(s)	John Boardman and Donna Kurtz
Recording	http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/oucs/classics/boardman-kurtz-oxonian.mp3
Keywords	art, archaeology, classics, greece, rome, maya, aztec, china, antiquity, Q800, W100, V400, V350, I
Part of series	<i>The Beazley Archive - Classical Art Research Centre</i>

Interviewer Well, we've come right up to date with iPod applications which could bring my subject to a broader audience. Could we perhaps now look backwards. Could we ask you to talk about how you got to where you are today. From my perspective, scholars of your generation had a much easier time. They seem to have been much less affected by the global community of politics and the economy and technology. Is it true? Were things easier for you?

Respondent No, it wasn't. I was a schoolboy living in London through the Second World War. That wasn't easy. But it was in that period of time that I was introduced to the Greek language, not by my choice but because that was what I was expected to do. And I found it fascinating and then when I got to Cambridge – I'm decidedly a pre-welfare state educated scholar, that is to say my education was totally free from the age of 5 to 23 which is not – can't be said of anybody I think nowadays.

But in those circumstances, one wasn't led from traditional Greek classical, mainly language orientated studies in Cambridge, almost by accident to be made to realise that there was something beyond that as well. I drifted into a lecture by a man called Charles Seltman who was a numismatist and for the first time I ever saw a picture of a Greek vase. Well, that couldn't happen nowadays but in those days this was a novelty and one suddenly realised that this was a real world I was reading about and it was worth further investigating. Which led me then to go to Greece for a couple of years after Cambridge.

Interviewer And when was that?

Respondent I was at Cambridge between the end of the war '45 to '48, then 2 years in Greece doing research and then 2 years in the army. So I had a taste of what Greece was like in difficult conditions, I mean Greece was still at war virtually, civil war, but one got about, one saw things, one learnt about excavation and that sort of thing. And came back luckily after that to the British School at Athens as Assistant Director for 3 years to be able further to develop all that.

One had a sort of focus of research which one was given. Working in Greece naturally sort of widened one's horizons and although I did have an object to research which was Greek pottery, I couldn't get terribly far with it, though it proved quite useful in the long run. But it meant one looked around rather more and it didn't commit oneself as, say, a classist might wholly to the study

of two plays of Euripides and so an archaeologist might wholly to the study of Athenian vases in the second half of the sixth century. But one was forced to look around through excavation and all the rest of it.

One of the stray things that in fact proved very influential later on was almost accidentally picking up a big German book full of photographs of ancient gems and cameos and looking at them and thinking "Well my goodness, some of the patterns on these look very much like the vases I've been studying. It would be worth looking at these a little more closely" without realising that that moment was going to set me off on a totally different course for parts of my career in the years to come.

But then the main value after the breadth which Greece imposed, was coming to Oxford. I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, where all the best people go, but Oxford gave me a job and that was in the Ashmolean Museum. And working in a museum, again, bore them to mind because I found myself looking after not only the classical things but also many of the Egyptian things, prehistoric things, medieval, goodness knows what.

Interviewer What job did you have in the Ashmolean?

Respondent It was Assistant Keeper in the Department of Antiquities, which in those days was really, really quite small. There were basically about three of us looking after a very large and very important collection of antiquities. You had to find out about lots of different things and they were always wanting to re-do displays and you had to find out how to label Egyptian necklaces and one thing and another. And at the same time, pursuing one's basic Greek and classical studies on pottery or whatever it was.

The accident of the brother of a distinguished old archaeologist, Dawkins, coming in one day with an old sock full of archaic Greek gems which he had inherited from his brother, set me back on to the gem production from that point on and it started producing monographs and essays and books on ancient gems. It wasn't my main preoccupation but it remains a major preoccupation to the present day.

Pottery was important. The little pottery I'd been able to study in Greece came from a particular part of Greece which, by accident, turned out to be vitally important and the fact that one could study it and recognise it, led to something much more interesting in being able to identify it being found in the Near East for instance, in Syria.

Book writing, I suppose I've always quite enjoyed writing but...

Interviewer What was the first book?

Respondent Well...

Interviewer There have been so many.

Respondent I think it was a gem, I think it was a gem – not it wasn't, it was a book for the Ashmolean, the Cretan Collection in Oxford.

Interviewer That's right.

Respondent Because we had to reorganise the display of the Cretan antiquities and I thought well, the part of it which is not prehistoric, not Minoan, is important so let's write it up. So we wrote it up and the Press published it and that was fun. But then there was a very good Penguin series on archaeology which run by Max Mallowan and he phoned me up and said "Would you do one on Greek Colonisation?" And I thought that might be rather boring but I had become interested in Greek Scopes, the East and Syria and that pottery.

So could I do one simply called *The Greeks Overseas* which would do both of them, which was very lucky because by leaving “Colony” out of the title, that saved one a great deal of pain in later years. Because nowadays there are those who think that you can’t write about Greek colonisation without being influenced by the British Empire, which of course is absolutely absurd. But avoiding the title “Colony” was obviously quite a good move.

And that was fun. It made one look at eastern sources. It made one look at all sorts of different things I never dreamt of before and it was a continuing interest in Greeks outside Greece which I’ve developed ever since.

One of the other publishing ventures was the production of these handbooks, several handbooks on Greek vase painting, Greek sculpture. They were stimulated by me being able to pick up in a second hand bookshop a handful of German pamphlets *Kunstgeschichte in Bildern - History of Art in Pictures*, which had a wonderful series of quite small but perfectly clear photographs of sculpture and vases and all the rest.

And I thought these were jolly useful, one can turn to these, one can find the picture of what you want very very quickly but they haven’t got a text. What you need is a text book which is going to have lots of pictures but also the text to guide you around them and through them. And I sold the general idea of this to Thames & Hudson and we had a sort of an experimental volume on Athenian black figure vases and they reckoned it was working.

So we went on to do what, I don’t know, 3 - 4 on vases, 3 - 4 on sculpture over the next 20 - 30 years. And they all did very well. They are fairly hard, straightforward. There are no frills. They try to be comprehensive and they’ve been translated into, I don’t know how many different languages.

At the same time I did for them a general book on Greek art and that was because I’d done a chapter on Greek art for one of their big portemanteau books and they said “We’ll turn it into a book on its own.” And one did that and that’s done well in translations as well. It seems to hit the right sort of level for the public. The last translation was in Korean which of course I can’t check very closely I’m afraid. It looks alright.

Being I suppose, a bit of a jack-in-a-box in one’s interests, I was keeping up some work on excavation. I went and had an excavation on the coast of Libya at Tobra where there was a Greek sanctuary. That was pre-Gaddafi days. It’s when the British Army was still about the place there. And the developing interest in Greeks overseas in general was eventually further fuelled by travel.

And an exciting fortnight in Persia, a fortnight in Afghanistan in the years just before the Russians got there and later than that, a longish journey with my daughter from Pakistan over the Karakoram Highway, which was just open for a few months and we were able to get over it then. And then across China to Hong Kong.

One began to get a taste for the appearance of these places. I wasn’t positively looking for Greeks or Greek art there, but as soon as one got home, one started reading around and began to realise that this was not only a fascinating country and countryside, but that there were traces of what had interested me there before. And traces and achievements of other civilisations, no less than the Greeks when you get down to it and of fascinating contrast with them and that I suppose led me to take rather more seriously, the arts of the rest of the world.

Okay, we live in a sort of classicising civilisation or the tail end of one in the Western world, but the rest of it is out there and it’s brilliant some of it. And they impinge on each other the various civilisations and their arts and cultures, which led me ultimately to produce this – not all that long ago – the book on the world of ancient art which is going to be the basis, we hope, for a *Masters Degree* in Oxford.

Well I thought, well if one’s going to look at the world in general, one should look at it fairly comprehensively in its art and not only at the classical world. This was helped out by two weeks

holiday in Mexico which took in a little bit of the pre Columbians as well and also helped by oddly enough, having to give one or two lectures for general exhibitions by collectors which had art from all over the world, in which one was obliged to try to find a theme or an idea which suggested that world art is a subject.

It's not just Chinese here and Greeks there and Egyptians there. But there's something common to the whole thing and mainly the element which is common is environment. But if you're living in the far north up in the steps, you had one particular way of life and the art that is appropriate to it. If you're in the sort of middle zone with cities and big civilisations, farming, agriculture, what have you, you respond in much the same way whether you're in Mexico or in China, in building a civilisation and art which will serve it and it's practical in early antiquity. Art has a practical purpose, it isn't just pretty stuff.

And if you're down in the tropics, well to put it crudely all you need to do is sort of stretch out your arm and pick off a banana, there's less incentive to do anything particularly grandiose. Life is rather easier and there's a commonality between the arts of the southern areas from South America through Africa, Australasia and that by looking for these common elements, instead of looking at the differences between Chinese and Egyptian, one could perhaps stimulate – it certainly stimulated me – other people to look at world art in a different sort of way.

And I found it extremely exciting trying to write this book. I didn't spend enough time on each of the individual arts. One couldn't possibly do that. One ought to spend sort of 5 or 10 years on each of them instead of 4, 5 or 6 months. But at least I think it got somewhere. It has stimulated me and it seems to have affected other people in much the same way.

But this desire, I think to apply what one has learnt in a narrow way, in classical art to other subjects and other areas is, I feel, quite an important one in scholarship. One meets too often and I'm referring particularly in classics, scholars who refine their attitudes, their skills in one particular area and they never look outside it. They never think that "Well, these are skills which might be applicable elsewhere in ways that other people haven't thought of. Let's see what happens." They don't do it. This seems to me to be self-defeating. It's not what scholarship's about.

I don't think people should race around the world all the time trying to do everything but circumscribing scholarship is not in the interests of scholarship in the long run. So, running around and looking at, for instance, doing a book like this on everything from China to Peru as it were, at the same time as writing a catalogue of a collection of gemstones which was made in Blenheim Palace in the 18th century and includes everything from antiquity through the Renaissance to the 18th century itself, it all somehow seemed to be the same thing, it wasn't different.

It wasn't a different subject. It was still the history or the civilisation of man as seen through his physical achievements in arts and architecture and sculpture, whatever it might be, beyond his literature which is there also as a background to it. There are many of these civilisations which don't have a literature. It's either to us unintelligible as in China or as in Peru or Mexico virtually unintelligible but it's there still.

Interviewer I think you've made it very clear to us why having a series of podcasts on the world of ancient art is going to be exciting and fun and we're going to travel these journeys and I'm going to be asking you questions and I think we hope it's going to be very good for all of our listeners. So, we thank you very much and we look forward to making our journey together.

What I might add is, all of the time you were telling us about your fantastic work, you haven't said that you have taught hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of undergraduates and you've supervised probably several hundred graduate students and taken, probably, 50 students through Doctorates. Your community of students around the world is very great.

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