Professor Sir John Boardman, Britain's most distinguished historian of ancient Greek art, talks to **Diana Scarisbrick** about his dazzlingly ambitious new book, his early career and his current campaign against politically correct obstacles to the collecting and study of ancient art. Portrait by **Derry Moore**.

A CLASSICAL WARRIOR

Since his retirement from his Oxford teaching career 12 years ago, Professor Sir John Boardman has worked from a tiny office in the Ashmolean Museum's gallery of casts of ancient sculpture (Fig. 1). Although he is the most distinguished British art historian of the classical world, it is a setting that seems appropriate to his kindly modesty, and certainly does not suggest grand visions or sweeping perspectives. Yet his latest book, *The World of Ancient Art*, to be published by Thames and Hudson in June, has a breathtaking scope based on exceptional intellectual ambition.

Eschewing the customary divisions between the cultures of the ancient world, he treats their art in three environmental zones: the nomadic peoples of the north, the urban agricultural societies of the temperate zone, and the peoples of the tropics. As he explains, this brings to light the similarities rather than the differences: nomads, whether in Asia, Europe or America, have an art that is based on small, portable objects, usually depicting animals; monumental architecture and art is confined to the middle zone, defining and protecting power and with a sense of the past and of progress; and in the tropics art is based largely on the human figure, with an emphasis on families and ancestors. At the interfaces the art of one zone tended to have very little influence upon the others, but the exceptions are revealing. It is a thesis exemplified by the book's jacket, which juxtaposes an Egyptian pharaoh with a Mayan god (Fig. 2).

To those who do not know the immense pleasure Boardman takes in global travel, the book may come as a surprise, as he is most often associated with the meticulous study of ancient Greek vase painting and gem engraving, topics that require precise attention to minute details. But then, as he observes, his career has not developed in a pre-ordained way, 'it just seemed to happen: if things turned up that suited, I tended to go along with them. There was certainly no preconceived plan or grand design. And I had an early interest in Greeks overseas, especially to the east, leading to an interest in the easterners themselves.'

1 Professor Sir John Boardman in the cast collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The cast is of a statue from the pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Photo: © Derry Moore

2 **The book jacket for Boardman's *The World of Ancient Art,* which will be published by Thames & Hudson in June**

3 **Among Boardman's current projects is a study of the collection of nearly 800 ancient gems owned by the dukes of Marlborough. Dispersed in 1899, most have not been traced, but their appearance is recorded in impressions and electrotypes in the Beazley Archive, Oxford. This example is of a cameo depicting the marriage of Cupid and Psyche, signed 'Tryphon', mid-1st century BC. The cameo, which was formerly in the collections of Rubens and the Earl of Arundel, is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 112 x 107 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford**

There was no tradition of scholarship in his family. 'We lived in Essex. My father would take me to the Victoria & Albert Museum, where the cast of the Michelangelo *David* made a great impression, and I remember the thrill of seeing the extraordinary "bull-men" in the Assyrian Galleries of the British Museum for the first time.' His interest in ancient Greece – he has never had much time for the Romans – began with its literature. 'At Chigwell School we had a brilliant teacher who, after one lesson spent teaching us the Greek alphabet, went on the next day to open up the poetry of Homer to us, and the magic began to work. That is how it began. Then in the sixth form, although our routine was often disturbed by air raids (this was during the war), under the headmaster R.L. James I probably succeeded in learning more about the classics than I was to learn in my three years at Cambridge. He ran the sixth form so well that a high proportion of us obtained university scholarships, all as a matter of course, for we were never subjected to pressure. We encouraged each other to discover obscure Greek texts in the complete set of Loeb classics, in those days to be found even in a local public library. It was this sort of teaching that introduced me to the pleasures of research.'

Chigwell was followed by Magdalene College, Cambridge, where the old traditions were quickly reinstated after the war. 'I was comfortable and happy there – I certainly liked having a breakfast tray brought up to my room, but Magdalene has always been an exceptional place. The classics teaching was not intense, and there was time to attend lectures by Nikolaus Pevsner and Bertrand Russell. The real turning point came in my second year, with two memorable slide lectures by the numismatist Charles Seltman, which showed us how to relate the literature to objects – sculpture, coins, vases. This was the moment when my interest switched from Greek lyric poetry to classical archaeology.' Surprisingly perhaps, he spent almost no time in the Fitzwilliam Museum, as classes were held in the cast collection in the Museum of Classical Archaeology.

After taking his degree Boardman was awarded a two-year studentship, which he spent in Greece. 'In Cambridge Professors Jocelyn Toynbee and A.W. Lawrence were teaching classical archaeology for our special subject in the last year. The Reader, Robert Cook, an authority on Greek pottery, advised me to work on a specific project connected with vases and then publish it, rather than waste time over a doctorate. The problem was that Greece was still virtually in a state of war and the vases in the National Museum were all locked up. But Semni Karouzou, the wife of the museum's director, remembered a group of vases from Eretria stacked away in the basement and I set to work on them, as well as on what there was still on the site, and published an article on them.'

After National Service in the Intelligence Corps, he returned to the British School for another three years, this time with Sheila, his wife. It was an opportunity to do some excavating. 'Emporio, on the island of Chios, with its little harbour and remains dating from prehistoric times to the Roman and early Byzantine period, was the most fruitful. I was there with the [British School's] Director, Sinclair Hood and for a while, as draughtsman-surveyor, Michael Ventris, who was to become famous through deciphering the Linear B script. Trained as an architect, he was very ingenious and seemed able to plan and draw with the very minimum of fuss.' Years later, Boardman led a British School dig at Tocra in Libya. This was in the 1960s, before Colonel Gaddafi, and the physical conditions were deadly. 'It turned out well, for we found plenty of Greek material from the 7th-6th centuries BC.'

However, as he points out, most digs are not so productive, indeed they are inherently destructive, and an alarming number are never published. 'On behalf of the British Academy I once

investigated excavations funded over a five-year period, ending five years before I started, and I found that only a small proportion had been published. This was very bad news, for an unpublished site is a destroyed site and the perpetrators do not seem to realise that they are "burning the pages of history as they write them". I would judge that over the past 50 years far less than 50% of professional archaeological excavations have been published and the rest have never got beyond the preliminary reports. While the major objects are released if they can enhance a reputation, the others are usually squirrelled away for the finder's eyes only, if at all, with the odds strongly stacked against publication. Robert Cook described the process as a form of necrophilia.'

In 1955, after three years as assistant director at the British School in Athens, Boardman temporarily exchanged jobs with Llewellyn Brown of the Ashmolean Museum. When Llewellyn Brown died of leukaemia shortly afterwards, the Keeper of Antiquities, Donald Harden, offered Boardman a permanent job. 'He encouraged me to do the rounds of the London salerooms and dealers and acquire inexpensive study pieces for the museum.' He recalls the atmosphere of the museum in the late 1950s as 'wonderful'. 'The staff was small and we had to diversify our interests. The library was – like its reincarnation in the Sackler Library – magnificent, for it covers so many aspects of the history of ancient art. Then there was the stimulus of my predecessors as Lincoln Professor, Bernard Ashmole and Martin Robertson.'

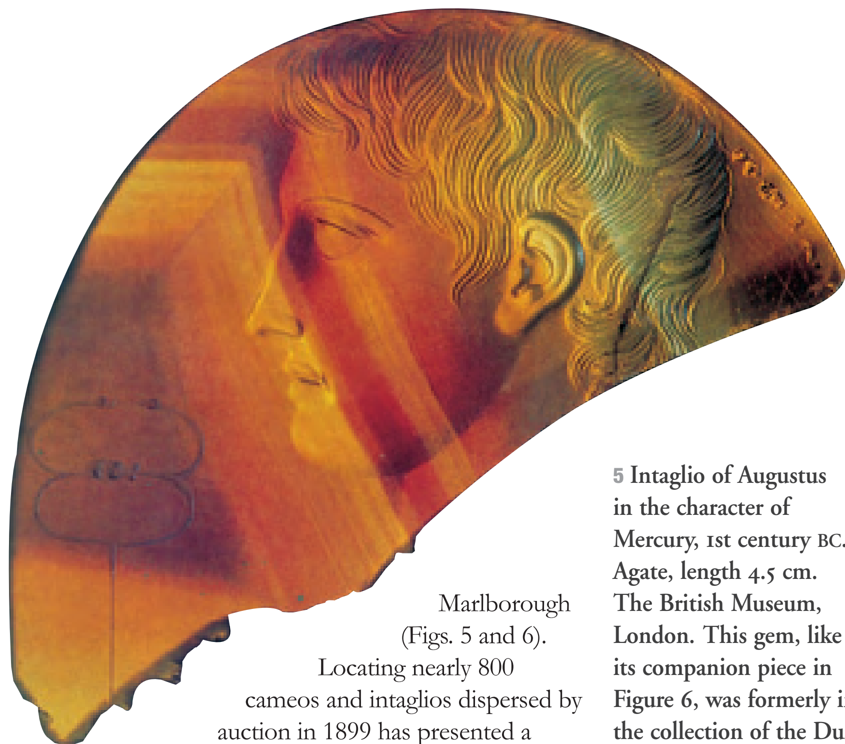
Boardman's name is often linked with that of J.D. Beazley, whose high reputation as a scholar of Greek vase painting has been called into doubt from time to time. 'I should think that there may have been some element of jealousy in this, since he had succeeded in devoting almost all his career to just one subject, the Athenian vase – something that many might have found somewhat boring – but he had mastered a massive subject and it had to be a one-man job. I heard him lecture only once but it was certainly a *tour de force*. By spending the entire hour analysing the painting of a single vase, he taught us how to look at an object properly.' In particular, Boardman absorbed Beazley's tradition of Morellian connoisseurship, whereby the examination of minor details – such as a painter's depiction of ears – allows attributions to individual artists. 'What is so remarkable is that this technique can be applied to so many other fields, even gem-engraving, and its efficacy can be proved, for example, by study of details such as ears on Japanese woodcuts, all signed by their artists. Similarly, Michael Roaf's Morellian classification of the figures on the Persepolis reliefs was vindicated by the discovery that the signature marks on each relief corresponded with the physical details which were characteristic of the different sculptors. Beazley's approach has stood the test of time.'

4 **This electrotype is of one of the Marlborough gems that has not yet been traced. It is a 16th-century cameo bust of a warrior, said to be King Pyrrhus and was once in the collection of the Earl of Bessborough. The electrotypes record the elaborate jewelled settings made for the gems. 115 x 92 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford**

'A politicised group of archeologists are responsible for what amounts to a witch-hunt of those who disagree with them'

Boardman's international reputation as an authority on Greek gems and finger rings started in the library of the British School in Athens, when he came across A. Furtwängler's three-volume history *Die Antiken Gemmen* (1900). 'I was bowled over by his scholarship and by the gems themselves.' Another influence was Beazley, who had also given his attention to gems when he published *The Lewes House Collection* (1920). 'He treated every gem as an important object in its own right, like a vase.' One contribution Boardman will make in this field is to the catalogue of the collection of HM the Queen, which has been 30 years in preparation: 'Publication is imminent, but as there are so few ancient gems in the Royal collection my part only amounts to about a dozen pages of text. It was Sir Anthony Blunt, then Surveyor of the Queen's Works of Art, who asked me to contribute and I like to think that I am one of the few Cambridge graduates he recruited, but not to spy for the Soviet Union.'

Boardman recognises the great value of computerised information, which he has exploited by helping to set up on the internet, as part of the Beazley Archive in Oxford, photographs of the entire collection of 15,800 sulphur impressions of famous gems made by James Tassie and catalogued by R.E. Raspe in 1791. 'I felt it was still such a valuable research tool that it should be made accessible to students everywhere, instead of being hidden away in the museums of Edinburgh, London and St Petersburg.' A current project is the reconstruction of the great gem collections of the Earls of Arundel and Bessborough, which in the second half of the 18th century were merged with that of the Duke of



Marlborough (Figs. 5 and 6).

Locating nearly 800 cameos and intaglios dispersed by auction in 1899 has presented a great challenge. 'I have located about 170 of them but I know what they all looked like, thanks to the presence in the Beazley Archive of impressions of almost the entire Marlborough collection, with electrotypes of the cameos (Figs. 3 and 4).' These were made in the 19th century by Professor Nevil Story Maskelyne, who wrote the catalogue of the Marlborough gems. 'The electrotypes are wonderful to have but of course they do not show the colour outlines of the heads and figures. Arundel's collection particularly interests me because so much came from the dukes of Mantua who in their day were patrons in the Medici mould.'

As Reader in Classical Archaeology from 1959 and then Lincoln Professor for 16 years, from 1978 to 1994, Boardman taught generations of students, many of them from abroad. The teaching needs inspired him to produce a series of handbooks on vases and sculpture, encouraged by his publisher, Thames & Hudson. 'I find that those who come to me having studied other disciplines usually bring to Greek art a breadth sometimes lacking in their English counterparts, who may be better grounded in Greek and Latin. Some of my happiest experiences have been in America, beginning with a semester at Columbia University in New York in 1965 and continuing to the present: I have been invited to Stanford next month.' He has seen how modern technology has transformed education and scholarship: 'Photocopies have replaced notebooks for many students and electronic databases mean that years of research can be accessed with a click. The danger is that students may not realise that they must take all this material much further. Downloading an article is not the same as reading it.' He argues that a knowledge of Greek is a valuable prerequisite for the study of ancient art, although it has been widely dispensed with. 'The present decline of the teaching of the Greek language is a great pity, for without the language the literature cannot be truly understood and with it the thought of the day. But this is an élitist study: it has always been and always will be.'

5 Intaglio of Augustus in the character of Mercury, 1st century BC. Agate, length 4.5 cm. The British Museum, London. This gem, like its companion piece in Figure 6, was formerly in the collection of the Duke of Marlborough

6 Intaglio of Octavia in the character of Diana, 1st century BC. Agate, 5.6 x 4.6 cm. The British Museum, London. This gem was once owned by the Earl of Arundel

Boardman has largely steered clear of the disputes that characterise so much academic life. 'At the outset of my career I crossed swords with a philologist, Leonard Palmer, whose observations led him to accuse Arthur Evans of misrepresenting the dates of some finds at Knossos in Crete. I was able to prove that he had been too hasty in coming to this conclusion. Now I find I need to speak out against a highly politicised lobby of archaeologists who are, I think, responsible for what amounts to a witch-hunt of those who disagree with them, especially collectors, but with severe implications also for museums. They put one in mind sometimes of the more fanatical animal-rights activists.'

This is the vexed topic whether or not it is right for individuals or museums to acquire ancient artefacts that have no documented provenance, and so may have been looted. There is a powerful lobby, whose most prominent spokesman in Britain is the prehistorian Professor Lord (Colin) Renfrew, which argues that such works should be neither collected nor published, perhaps not even conserved. Boardman addresses this argument with fierce rigour in an essay in a book published this month by Oxbow, *Who Owns Objects? The Ethics and Politics of Collecting Cultural Artefacts*. There he criticises as 'disastrous, wrong and unjust' legislation designed to control the sale of antiquities. 'It has failed to curtail the looting of sites and museums. By driving trade underground it has led to the destruction of objects, such as silver and gold coins that simply get melted down. It has imposed an absolute restriction on the collecting of antiquities deserving of protection, study and display by museums and collectors. It has led to the censorship of original scholarship, has resulted in the stifling of a legitimate trade and has denied museums and

7 Calyx-krater signed by Euxitheos as maker and Euphronios as painter, Attic, *c.* 515 BC. Terracotta, ht 45. 7 cm. The Republic of Italy, on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In February of this year the Metropolitan Museum agreed to return to Italy six antiquities (including a group of 16 Hellenistic silver pieces) that are believed to have been looted, although it is acknowledged that the museum acquired them in good faith. Among them is this celebrated vase, painted by a leading Athenian artist, which was acquired by the museum in 1972. Under the terms of the February agreement, it has been lent by the Italian government to the Metropolitan until 2008.

collectors the freedom to acquire antiquities neither demonstrably stolen nor plundered.'

Boardman condemns obviously illegal activity, such as the looting of sites or thefts from museums, which must be tackled as any other criminal activity, in the source countries. The answer is not, he says, to restrict the freedom of collectors and scholars. 'The authorities in the source countries should take a far more serious approach, including the policing of their own officials, and there should be a far more determined international effort to bring to justice the middlemen and anyone who sponsors such activities. The best analogy is with the drug trade, where the prime targets now are the sources and middlemen, not the street dealers and consumers.'

The return of objects to Italy by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, including a celebrated Greek vase painted by Euphronios (Fig. 7), seems to him a good example of the vagaries of what can be argued about 'national heritage'. 'The vase was made in Athens, traded to Italy in antiquity, then traded to New York in the 20th century. It might be argued that it has been a more effective cultural inspiration in New York that it ever was in Greece, where it was made, or Italy, where it was soon put in a tomb. Its tomb context was its least important feature. We know who painted it, when and where, and can explain its decoration in detail.'

Boardman is quick to come to the defence of not only public museums whose aspirations to increase their holdings are stifled, but also private collectors, stigmatised by so many of his colleagues. 'In my experience it is the private collector who is the most anxious to share his knowledge and possessions while so many archaeologists and even a few museum officials in source countries are unwilling to do so. In this respect a controversial figure, George Ortiz, has been exemplary. He has also a wonderful eye and this is reflected by the quality of his collection, which, with its wide-ranging mixture of prehistoric, Mesopotamian, classical, Polynesian and other objects, is a microcosm of the theme of my new book.' As Boardman's career makes plain, such breadth of vision can only be achieved when grounded on the scholarly freedoms that he so strongly defends.

Diana Scarisbrick is an independent art historian, specialising in jewellery. She is currently organising a travelling exhibition of engraved gems from Alexander the Great to Napoleon III, which opens in Tokyo in 2008.