

Imagery in Greek Vases: Current Interpretations

Pottery's importance to the archaeologist comes from its virtual indestructibility, and therefore its frequency in finds, allowing us to date finds relatively, and then hook them up to an absolute chronology. Painted pots in particular give us scenes from life. The black-figure (natural red background) and red-figure (black background) Athenian vases of 6th-5th century are especially useful because their dates and painters can so often be determined.

Pots supplement the written texts, especially in areas of daily life that no one wrote about (e.g., the boy fishing -c. 500-480 or the young man vomiting, c 480 - by the Brygos painter),. We must often ask not only what was going on in the picture but also why that was chosen for the specific pot/cup/etc.

There are 3 main sources of pictures in the vases 550-400 BC: (1) literary texts, (2) the genius of the artist, and (3) real life.

- (1) Painters often illustrate something already known from a literary text, e.g., the Brygos painter's rendition (c. 480) of Achilles on a couch, under which the body of Hector can be seen, and, to the left, Priam approaching. (Iliad 24) Did painters read Homer? Hear him recited? Or did the paintings come not directly from Homer but from a common fund of story that was source to both the poem and the picture?
- (2)
- (3) The vase painting of Iris being attacked by Centaurs (c. 480-470) may illustrate a story from some play or other text not extant or may have been made up out of whole cloth by the painter.
- (4)
- (3) Many pots depict non-fictional scenes from daily life: people kissing, picking olives, making sandals, attending school. Their charm as vignettes may have been sufficient reason for representation.

Some of the paintings are puzzling, like the black Skythian. Archers wearing pointed caps, long suits (with pants and sleeves) decorated with woven patterns, and pointed beards seem to be Skythians, whom Athenians used as police, but no literary texts suggest Skythians at Marathon or earlier battles, despite their representations. There are, nevertheless, early paintings of men with Ethiopian features in Skythian attire on chariot scenes with hoplites. Is this mixture of northern and African attributes merely artistic inventiveness? We should assume that a contemporary viewer would have understood (at least minimally) the meaning of the picture, even if we do not, and that it is part of a system of communication between the producer of the art (painter, poet, etc.) and the receiver/purchaser/listener. Images must be part of the system of representations from the culture in which they developed similar to a language, in which all understand that a particular sign has a particular meaning. If we do not know the meaning of a particular sign or picture, we should be able to figure it out from other similar representations. But that raises the question of what constitutes a semantic unit. Must a Skythian have all his elements or will just the suit or cap or whatever suffice?

The same question applies to a frequently recurring figure, the Spinner, the woman working wool, frequently but not always represented with a distaff and a drop spindle. The standard spinner also has a wool basket and is often being courted by a young man bringing a gift (e.g., a

hare). The pictures sometimes have the inscription "kale" ("pretty"); one has "kale nymphe" ("pretty bride"). The reverse side of some shows a pair kissing.

Many courting scenes are depicted on pots, men courting either girls or young boys, but whatever the sex of the person being courted the representations are similar. Boys and girls are always fully wrapped. One standard version of the spinner shows a young man offering a bag of some sort, and sometimes other women are around. Carl Robert proposed in 1932 that the bag contained money and that the spinner therefore must be a prostitute, dressed up modestly to command a higher fee. The representations of a spinner and a few other women around would therefore show a madam of a brothel and a few of her employees. Beazley, on the other hand, maintained that the spinners were modest housewives and that the bags, still containing money, merely showed the husband bringing home the bacon.

In reality (says Prof Pinney) the bags do not contain money but a small courtship gift, probably knucklebones for the popular game. Roland Hampe has pointed out knucklebones as a courting gift on a stele, and we also have a clay model of a bag showing knucklebones within. There are, in fact, two types of bags, a smaller one and a larger one with a flap, the latter often shown at tomb offerings and in scenes with musical instruments. Some scenes depict such bags hanging on the wall - including the wall of the women's quarters - unlikely if they contained money. The bags also hang next to writing tablets and, in a field, from a tree while boys play nearby. Also attested is a woman offering a bag to a young man. In addition to the visual examples of knucklebones being given as gifts, there is the literary testimony of Plutarch, who says you can seduce a man with oaths but for a boy you need knucklebones.

Looking back at the visual concept of the woman working wool (525-400 BC in Athens), Professor Pinney said that all the instances she has collected so far (i.e., about half-way through the entire corpus) of wool spinners (or women with wool basket or spindle or weaving) are basically similar, though sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the woman has in her hand a spindle or a mirror or an empty distaff. Such scenes divide into 2 major categories: (1) scenes of courtship = 88 and (2) pretty girls in a house with no man present = 305. One standard feature repeated is the wool basket/chest/alabastron, the same feature that appears on scenes of preparing a bride for her wedding (the bride often shown spinning). Of the scenes found, 18 are specific figures from myth, including Thetis, Aethra - with the wool basket, Penelope (who is, after all, being courted by the suitors in Odysseus' absence). A notion basic to the "woman working wool" scene is that the woman is pretty and of marriageable age.

The scenes, then, of women working wool range from courtship to wedding, but not beyond. Such women are not prostitutes, not housewives; they are pretty girls who are available for marriage.