

## The Classification of Athenian Painted Pottery

Good to excellent quality pottery with painted decoration was made in Athens for at least 700 years, from around 1000 BC. The length of time during which it was produced and the unbroken continuity of the ceramic tradition are without parallel. The vases were valued in antiquity and widely exported. When many were being found outside Greece, especially in Italy, during the 18th and early 19th centuries, opinion was divided on their place of manufacture, but for more than a century now the vases have been recognized as Athenian. They are the best known and the most fully studied of all ancient pottery.

In this lecture I would like to explain how they can be recognized and classified. The broadest categories of classification are common to other types of ancient pottery. What distinguishes the Athenian, in addition to quantity, quality and continuity, is the systematic, I think we can say scientific, classification of details of draughtsmanship. These reveal the artistic personalities of men who are rarely known from their own signature and are wholly unknown from contemporary literature. After I have described the principles of classification in general terms I would like to demonstrate their application to some specific examples made in Athens around 500 BC.

Scientific analysis is welcome but not essential to the mainstream production because these vases have been studied intensively for a very long time and are now well understood, but outside the mainstream it is vitally important. Even for the 5th and 4th centuries, where our documentation is exceptionally full, it can be difficult to distinguish vases made in Athens from those made elsewhere under strong Athenian influence.

Before we consider how to recognize and classify the vases we need to bear in mind that we are dealing only with *painted* pottery. Indeed our broadest distinction is between *finer* vases with painted decoration and coarser without. During the entire period of more than 700 years some pottery, probably great quantities, was left unpainted, for storage, cooking and many

other purposes. Some shapes are common to coarse and fine pottery but generally the two lines of production seem to have been separate.

The finer vases could be decorated with patterns or with patterns and figures. This is a well known early 5th century red-figure vase with abstract patterns below the figures and florals above. Vases with figures but without patterns are rare; patterns are omitted to achieve a particular effect not to save time. For example, the man who painted this vase wanted to spotlight the figure, to accentuate its light contours, against the dark ground. Both patterns and figures were absent from what we might call plain fine ware. In the 5th and 4th centuries black vases had stamped, incised or minimal painted decoration. The shapes of the figured, patterned and plain vases are often the same, and they must have been made together, but the variety of shapes is much greater for the figured.

Scholarly attention has always focused on them because the Athenians, unlike most Mediterraneans, preferred human to animal figures from as early as the 9th century. Even during the 7th, when much Greek pottery had animal friezes in the eastern or orientalizing manner, Athenians relegated animals to subsidiary friezes. Man was supremely important and the wealth of information about life in ancient Athens that can be gleaned from the scenes on Athenian vases is without parallel. Some scenes are taken from mythology, others from daily life.

On this early 6th century black-figure vase, for example, 270 little figures, drawn with the greatest care and set out in 6 zones, tell famous stories about gods and heroes, including, in the largest and most important frieze on the shoulder, the most celebrated wedding in antiquity, that of Peleus to Thetis, during which the dispute arose that ultimately led to the most celebrated armed conflict in antiquity — the Trojan War. The pictures on some Athenian vases recount events from the mythical past more fully than any literary text that has been preserved. The other group of scenes, those from daily life, give us information that no contemporary literature would have recorded — how, for example, ordinary men married — here in a simple procession of country carts on a mid-6th century black-figure vase — and how they were buried when life came to an end. Pictures of men in a variety of activities tell us a great deal about contemporary life but they also offer scope for careful classification, as I shall demonstrate later.

To recognize and classify a vase we begin with general characteristics, for example the colour and quality of the clay, the technique of decoration and the shape. The clay beds of Athens and the nearby area were good; the pottery needed no «base coat» to cover imperfections in the surface before decoration could be applied. The clay was rich in ferrous oxide and for this reason fired a warm orangey red colour. From the later 7th century

Athenians exploited the impurity of their clay to produce a strong visual impact with glossy black paint on the naturally red clay.

We now consider the technique. Over 700 years the figures were painted in a mass of one opaque colour, in silhouette, or they were outlined. In the 9th, 8th and 7th centuries they were black silhouettes against an unpainted surface, in the 7th outlines on a surface that was unpainted or covered with a light to white coloured slip, and from the end of the 7th century the black silhouettes were enriched with incised details to create what we call black-figure. Towards the end of the 6th century the black on red of the black-figure technique was reversed, in a simple change of firing procedure, to produce the light reddish silhouettes on a black ground of the red-figure technique in which details were painted in black. And sometimes, during these years of transition both techniques could be used on one vase.

The fundamental elements of these techniques persist over centuries. The black silhouette of the early vases with geometricized figures underpins the black-figure technique which, despite the introduction of red-figure, continues to flourish for centuries on special vases awarded to victors in the Panathenaic games. This, for example, is a detail from a later 4th century black-figure Prize Panathenaic amphora, made more than a century after the mainstream production of black-figure pottery in Athens had ceased. Similarly the outline technique of the 7th century can be found on some 6th century vases and on many more 5th century vases with a specially prepared white-ground. The painting on these later 5th century white-ground vases must approximate quite closely to the great paintings on panel and wall for which the classical Greeks were famous. Ancient literary sources describe the paintings in late 5th and early 4th century Athens. They tell of the famous painter Parrhasios who was able to create an illusion of space through line and of his contemporary Zeuxis who preferred shading, or *skiagraphia*. On these white-ground vases from the years around 400 we can glimpse the sensitive linear treatment of Parrhasios, and here the shaded colours of Zeuxis. In this way Athenian vase-painting can open a very small window on to the lost world of monumental Greek painting.

We now consider the shape. Just as there was continuity in the technique of the vases there was continuity in shape. Over 700 years there were fewer than 30. About 10 are uncommon and 10 rare. Among the common shapes, such as the storage amphora and water pot hydria, continuity is unbroken. The greatest variety and the finest potting come in the 6th and 5th centuries when the strong black- and red-figure techniques dominate production. *Native* shapes ranged from those that were probably first made from clay, to those that were originally made from skin, wood, stone and metal. Foreign shapes usually have a relatively short life which corresponds to the period when Athenians were in contact with the people who used them.

Judging from the number of vases of this shape made by a later 6th century potter who copied an Etruscan model, covered it with mediocre decoration in the sought after Athenian style, and exported in to the Etruscan home land, there was money to be made from imitating local shapes. This man was proud of his commercial skill and signed many of his vases « Nikosthenes made it ». Since few potters identified their work in this way the analysis of shape, by eye or with the help of the computer, in order to recognize individual potters, has become extremely important.

After we have examined the clay of the vase, its technique and shape, we look at the decoration. Where is it? What is the overall *design* of the vase? At any given time Athenians tended to put decoration in the same place probably because the men who made these vases worked together and because there were certain obvious areas on each shape where decoration of a particular type looked best.

On the early Iron Age vases such as this patterns could be drawn with very great care and occupy more space than the figures. In the 9th and 8th centuries they were abstract and the meander was especially common. From the end of the 8th patterns become less important, figures become more numerous, and they are drawn more carefully. From around 700 the old abstract patterns of the Geometric style give way to the florals of the 7th century eastern orientaling style and on most later black- and red-figure vases abstract and floral patterns accompany figures, as they do on the vase with which we began. One man normally drew both and could, therefore, adapt the patterns to suit the composition of the figures.

We turn now to them. Their position on the vase depends on its shape. Some had only one area for figure decoration, such as this early 5th century red-figure plate, but most had at least two, and some had more. A cup, for example, could have decoration inside and on both sides of the exterior. It is not always possible to determine which side of the vase is the front but often one has more figures or more elaborately composed figures than the other. Then, from the early 5th century there was a tendency to decorate the back of certain shapes hastily with a draped figure such as this. The so called mantle-figure is the single most useful type of decoration when we try to recognize a painter's style because it was drawn over and over again, virtually without change, as this selection demonstrates. These drawings were made from 9 different vases by a single mid-5th century painter.

The attribution of a vase to a painter is the last stage in the process of classification and the one that sets Athenian vases apart from most other ancient pottery. Attribution is not essential because we already have enough information about the vase — technique, shape, general style of decoration — to assign it to Athens and to date it quite closely. It is not at all difficult

to date within 20 years of the manufacture. It is possible, but I think unwise, to try to date more closely.

The attribution of Athenian vases began more than 100 years ago and was prompted by the appearance of inscriptions on a small percentage of black- and red-figure vases that said that X made it or X painted it. Here, for example a man called Hieron has incised his name with the verb *epoiesen* made on the under side of a handle, and here a man named Nearchos has painted his with the verb *egraphisen*/painted in front of the horses of Achilles. The presence or absence of signatures seems to have had nothing to do with quality of workmanship. For a long time the significance of the inscriptions was not fully understood and the attribution of vases to painters was not carried out systematically. Then, from 1910, Beazley began to publish his findings.

John Davidson Beazley was born in 1885, twenty years after Bernard Berenson. When Beazley was an undergraduate at Oxford Berenson was attracting a great deal of attention in London through influential publications which attributed Renaissance paintings to artists. Berenson was acting on the « principles of connoisseurship » developed by Giovanni Morelli whose life spans much of the 19th century. Like his contemporary Charles Darwin he was committed to classifying large amounts of previously unordered material on the basis of physical differences and similarities. Towards the end of the century he published a book entitled *Italian Painters of the Renaissance - Critical Studies of their Works* in which he advocated close scrutiny of the way in which lines were drawn, especially in details that are repeated often. These he felt revealed the identity of an artist as clearly as his own handwriting. To make the point he sketched the same feature by different artists and placed the sketches side by side in his book. Although Morelli is best known now as the father of modern art history he was by training a scientist who had specialized in comparative anatomy and medicine. Morelli's knowledge of the human body had trained his eye to observe its structure and drawing from skeletons had taught him to be accurate. Styles change in architecture and costume but the human body does not : arms, legs, hands and feet remain in the same place : furthermore the bones and muscles that create their forms also remain the same. Man himself is, therefore, the best guide to connoisseurship.

We return now to the early 5th century red-figure vase with which we began. Morelli's close observation of detail, especially in the human body, in order to identify an unknown artist, was ideally suited to Athenian vase-painting because man is the dominant subject and the names of few artists are known. In some of his earliest publications Beazley went to great lengths to point out that « nameless » does not mean « unknown ». In 1918 he wrote :

Nameless, but not unknown ; for the name of an artist is the least important thing about him.



By examining the way the lines were drawn in the patterns and figures of more than 70,000 vases Beazley was able to recognize more than 1000 painters and groups. There are signatures of fewer than 1% of them. In the absence of signatures and with no mention of these men in ancient literature, Beazley was obliged to create names. For example he named the man who painted this vase, and several hundred more, the Berlin Painter, because this especially fine piece is in the collection in Berlin. Beazley described his method in the following words:

The process of disengaging the work of an anonymous artist is the same as that of attributing an unsigned vase to a painter whose name is known. It consists of drawing a conclusion from observation of a great many details: it involves comparing one vase with another, with several others, with all the vases the enquirer has seen ... However obscure he may be, the artist cannot escape detection if only sufficiently delicate tests be applied.

A scientist would discuss his method in similar terms. It might amuse you to learn that the young Beazley and his method were criticised in Oxford for being scientific. It was thought then, as it still is in some dark corners of scholarship, that science is inappropriate to art.

It needs to be stressed that attribution is not essential to the classification system. Beazley assigned to painters roughly half of the Athenian black- and red-figure vases known to him. These attributions were published in lists from as early as 1918. This, the second edition of *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters* was published in 1963 in three volumes of more than 1500 pages. The vases that Beazley could not assign to a painter he classified by technique, shape, museum and inventory number. Today in Oxford, in the Beazley Archive, Beazley's photographs and notes are ordered according to this system. He was so careful and consistent in his documentation that we have had little difficulty converting his criteria of classification into computer fields for our database of Athenian black- and red-figure vases.

This database has ten fields which can be searched in any combination. It runs on the University of Oxford's mainframe computer and is one of the largest of its kind in the arts. It is efficient and easy to use. It was created for the international scholarly community and we are already making arrangements for people in Europe to consult it directly on international telecommunications networks.

Our database is dedicated to the black- and red-figure vases made in Athens during the 6th, 5th and 4th centuries, but the system of classification can be applied to other types of Greek vases with figured decoration, just as Beazley's method has been applied by other scholars to the Geometric vases of several regions, Corinthian of several different styles, Laconian, Boeotian, Euboean, Etruscan, South Italian and others.

Thus far I have described broad categories of classification but not the most specific which takes account of subtle differences between vases that

look very similar and, which can reveal an individual painter. The process is scientific. We observe characteristics that are generally agreed to be significant, we record our data, draw conclusions and test their validity by comparing this vase with others we have seen. The system produces invalid results when the researcher has ignored the more general preliminary stages of the classification in an effort to obtain a result quickly or when he has focused on one type of detail to the exclusion of others on the vase. It is rare even for the most highly trained specialist to be able to recognize a painter in the absence of a signature with one swift look at a vase. The process of recognizing a painter is not a reflex reaction triggered off by one detail which the researcher recognizes and considers to be important. It is a slow and painstaking task. In the time that remains we will try to undertake it with a few fine vases made in Athens around 500 BC.

If this one was found today in excavation, or if it appeared on the art market, how would we classify it and attempt to determine who painted it? The vase was, in fact, found in excavation at Capua more than 100 years ago. It bears many inscriptions but none of these identifies a maker or painter.

The technique is the red on black of red-figure. We know that this technique was not practised in Athens before about 525 BC. In red-figure incision is not used to outline any part of the figures and most of the details inside the outline are painted in dilute brown not black. Looking more closely we notice that the outline of the boy's hair is incised and many of the lines on his body are black. For these reasons we know that the vase was painted during the early years of red-figure, that is before 500, when the technique was fully formed.

The shape is a large open vessel with handles attached to the lower part of the body. It is a mixing vessel or crater. Craters were made in Athens from the beginning of the Iron Age but this particular type, with handles set low on the body and curving upwards gracefully, rather like the calyx of a flower, is not known before about 525.

Looking now at the patterns we notice that most are red-figure but some are black on red, as they would be on a black-figure vase. The pattern on the rim is a fine tendril with ivy leaves and cluster of berries, an appropriate pattern for a vase that was used to mix wine. The patterns on the lower part of the body are palmettes connected by tendrils and aligned horizontally instead of vertically. These appear on vases made in the years around 500 and in the painted decoration on some buildings erected in Athens. Just as we are able to find parallels for the figures in vase-painting and sculpture, we can also find them for the patternwork on vases and architecture.

On the basis of a shape that was not yet in common production during the last quarter of the 6th century and the unusual patterns we can conclude that we are examining an important vase.

Now we will look at the figures. The floral patterns at the handles create two sides even though the area to be decorated on the body is not cut into two parts by the handles. On each side the figures are set out in a frieze. Some but not all of them are seen in profile. Before about 525 virtually all figures were painted in profile but during the last quarter of the century great progress was made by Greek artists towards understanding the structure of the human body and representing it naturalistically. This is beautifully illustrated by the grander marble statues of youths who from the later 6th century begin to relax their proud stiff poses, and as they do the *kouros* type comes to an end.

On our vase one of the youths is seen in full frontal view and another is seen from behind. Since only a few of them are shown in these new poses and since the rest look like reverse images from black-figure we conclude that the vase was painted between about 520 and 500. We shall look more closely at details of their anatomy in a moment, but first we must look at the drapery to see what it can tell us. There are folds in the material. The hemline is not horizontal and the underside of the material at the hem is indicated. Features such as these can be paralleled in sculpture after 525. Then we observe the flatness of the drapery over the body and the artificial patternwork of lines that define its folds. These indicate that the vase was painted before 500 when the body beneath the drapery, in sculpture and in vase-painting, is revealed and the material falls more realistically.

Therefore, without considering who painted the vase we have been able to determine that it was made between about 520 and 500. This date can be confirmed by the forms of the letters in the inscriptions and by the content of two of them which call a man named Leagros handsome. Leagros was a famous Athenian, a contemporary of Themistokles, who was probably born soon after 530. Leagros is called handsome on the vases from about 515 to 500, when he was a young man. Twenty-five years later his son, who identifies himself as Glaukon the son of Leagros, is also called handsome. In Athenian vase-painting chronologies can also be established through artist's signatures since a younger man can sign as son of an older artist.

Another detail that gives a clue to the date is the way in which the youth on the far left stands. One of his hips is higher than the other and the muscle of his flank on this side is smaller, as it is in life when we stand at ease. Until around 500 man in Greek art stood rather stiffly, with his weight evenly divided between both feet and both hips level. Then sculptors and vase-painters learned how to reproduce nature more accurately. The famous Kritian Boy from the Athenian Acropolis represents a similar stage of development.

Now that we have determined that we have an Athenian red-figure calyx-crater made in the last quarter of the 6th century and decorated with some



figures that break away from the old profile view we are well on the way to attributing our vase to a painter.

When we said that man dominates Athenian vase-painting we should have added that he is often shown naked. How an artist draws surface features of anatomy can reveal his identity more clearly than his rendering of drapery because fashions change but the structure of the human body does not. « How he draws them » means not only the *form* of the lines but also their *technique*, as we shall see.

The man who painted our vase has shown most of the figures naked and has taken great care to indicate many features of superficial anatomy. It would take too long to show you all of them. I shall select only a few of the more obvious. His collar bones, for example, are long black lines terminating in a small open loop. The lower border of his chest muscles is one curving black line which extends into the upper arms. His head is lowered and encircled with a wreath. His long thin eye has a single black dot pupil.

We detect the same lines even in an incomplete figure. This fragmentary vase also had some patterns painted black on a red ground and an inscription about Leagros, just as our vase. We recognize the same youth again; Leagros is named; the drapery falls in an artificial pattern of lines which bear no relation to the body beneath or to the force of gravity.

These youths are attending a recital on the reverse of a famous calyx-crater found more than 150 years ago at Cerveteri. It bears many inscriptions, including a signature as painter of a man named Euphronios. Here, on the front of the vase, as on the unsigned crater with which we began, some of the figures are shown in old fashioned views and some are posed differently. Herakles wrestles with the giant Antaios. Our eyes tend to focus on the giant's stomach because his torso has been turned towards us and the musculature has been drawn in great detail. Some scholars have thought Euphronios must have dissected cadavers to be able to render so much detail, but the muscular male body reveals all these forms. The divisions of the giant's stomach are regular and even, like the patternwork of a Greek vase, but this man's display the irregularities that are found in nature, and which are conspicuous in this dissection of the human abdominal region. The forms are not as regular, or even quite like, Euphronios'.

The rendering of the giant's stomach, flank muscles, groin line and the pubic hair correspond closely to the youth's on our crater, but he was one of several figures of equal importance and not the focus of attention as the giant and for this reason his features are somewhat simplified. This simplification of forms could be demonstrated in countless details of draughtsmanship but that exercise would take far more time than we have today.

To be able to recognize an artist — or rather his style of drawing — when he has not signed his work we need to know whether his style changed

over the years — did it improve or deteriorate? or does it seem to change little? We also need to be able to recognize him on different scales, because large figures can be drawn differently from small ones. And we need to know whether he is consistent — consistently good, mediocre, or poor. Some of these questions cannot be answered but many can through patient and close scrutiny of the smallest detail.

To demonstrate how much we do know about men who died more than 2500 years ago and about whom there is no literary documentation I could show you how we can recognize Euphronios as a young man, a mature man, as a man striving for new ways to improve his style or content to accept what was then old fashioned, but that too would take more time than we have today and it might better to conclude by showing you that we not only know a great deal about him, we also know those who worked with him, in a similar style.

The style is similar because it is the one of the period, but in the hands of another man it looks somewhat different. On this vase one of Euphronios' friends signed his name as painter, adding that he, Euthymides, was the son of Pollias, a famous sculptor. In the spirit of the time he too explores the anatomy of the naked body but his lines are slightly different and many that Euphronios would have painted black, Euthymides renders in brown. These very subtle differences, which require much time and patience to detect and record, reveal the identity of the artist as clearly as his own signature.

In these sketches Euphronios' work is shown above Euthymides'. At first sight they all look very much alike but we would expect this because they are all of the same part of the body. The most conspicuous features of superficial anatomy are always selected. In the chest these are the collar bones and chest muscles. Looking more closely at Euphronios' above, notice that the collar bones are black and that the lower border of the chest, also black, is one line with little curvature. Euthymides, below, prefers brown collar bones and a chest line with two deep curves. He also likes to indicate the central line of the breast bone. Euphronios rarely does this, but he can, and this is why we need to see how he draws all of the lines on the body, not just one, and we need to observe their technique. In the abdomen the most conspicuous features are the divisions of the abdominal muscles which we have examined earlier in connection with Antaios. Almost all of Euphronios' lines are black and there is a large amount of pubic hair whereas Euthymides' are brown and there is little pubic hair. In the frontal lower leg the most conspicuous features are the knee cap and shin bone. Euphronios prefers more detail, even for the simplified figures. In the ankles the bones of the lower leg are most conspicuous. The two men choose similar forms but different techniques. No one of these details identifies an artist but a consistent combination of them does. This consistent and coherent system of

forms for the rendering of the human body belongs to one individual, the man who created them. We looked at two men whose names happen to be known to us but the process of identification is the same when the names are not known.

We began with broad categories of classification common to much ancient pottery and concluded with a systematic means of recognizing an artist that is common to post-antique painting. It is for this reason that the study of these vases can be considered Fine Art.

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#### REFERENCES

- The text is reproduced here as it was delivered in Ravello. The format was adopted to enable the largely non-English speaking audience to understand the text easily.
- A survey of the types of pottery discussed in this lecture can be found in R.M. Cook's *Greek Painted Pottery* (London, 1972) which also gives a full bibliography.
- The fullest account of John Davidson Beazley's life can be found in the obituary notice prepared by Bernard Ashmole for *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, 56 (1970), p. 443-461. It is reprinted in *Beazley and Oxford*, ed. D.C. Kurtz (Oxford, 1985), p. 57-71.
- « Beazley and the Connoisseurship of Greek Vases », *Occasional Papers on Antiquities*, 3, *Greek Vases in The J. Paul Getty Museum* (198), p. 237-250 (Kurtz).