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0521853184 - Vase Painting, Gender, and Social Identity in Archaic Athens
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ONE



SEEING SPECTATORS

When one looks at Greek pottery of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., one finds a trove of figural scenes with all kinds of action, from mythological encounters to battles to scenes that seem drawn out of the rhythms of daily life. The sheer number of figural scenes in a medium that was in large-scale production is staggering when one looks at other pottery in the ancient world, and this richness has made vase painting an important source for our knowledge of Greek mythology and customs. For example, a black-figure amphora in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts shows a warrior wearing his helmet and cuirass, carrying a shield and striding toward the right away from a woman and an older man with beard (“Minneapolis amphora,” figure 1).¹ He turns his head back to look at them, while the woman holds both of her hands in front of herself at different angles and the older man raises his left arm and hand in a gesture to acknowledge the warrior’s actions. To the right is a beardless younger man wrapped in a mantle, his right hand in front of him but wrapped in the cloak so that he essentially makes no movement or gesture. Such scenes are typically labeled as the warrior leaving home and are common in both archaic and classical vase painting.

What is striking about the picture, however, is that three out of the four figures essentially watch the remaining figure perform an action. That many figures on vases watch others doing things is quite normal for Greek art, and each one on this vase has some plausible role for being there. The woman could be a wife or perhaps a mother of the warrior, reacting with some distress to his departure, while the older male is likely a father watching his son depart, saluting his performance of his duties as head of the household and as a member of the *polis* or city-state.² The role of the young man to the side is more difficult to construct. He could be a son of the warrior or a younger brother, but he observes the actions of the warrior, perhaps looking to the day when he, too, will do the same. Even though we can conjure a narrative role for each of the figures in the action, the striding warrior alone is the essential nucleus of the

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1. Attic black-figure amphora, attributed to the Painter of Vatican 359, c. 530. Side B: Departure of warrior. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 57.1. (Photograph, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts)

scene. The remaining figures add depth to the action and provide it with a context, but the fact remains that they will do nothing that will change the course of the action or determine whether the warrior will come home with his shield or on it.

In essence, these figures watch the action, not unlike a viewer of the vase. If one considers the original viewer, the member of a household in which the amphora would have been used, or member of the family who would have left the vase as an offering in a tomb, then the reactions of these peripheral figures are like those of the viewer to the events in his or her own life. Men go to war; sometimes they come home and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

SEEING SPECTATORS



2. Attic black-figure amphora, attributed to the Painter of Vatican 359, c. 530. Side B: Detail of shoulder: warriors fighting. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 57.1. (Photograph, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts)

sometimes they do not. The departure is stressful, but others can take pride in it for its social and civic importance. Undoubtedly the variety of reactions of these figures mirrors the variety of emotional responses by the different types of viewers of the vase, although it is highly improbable that the scene appeared just like this in real life. The scene is a construction that represents the events, ideas, and values of the period, of its maker and its viewers.

The division between actors and watchers becomes even more striking if we look at the picture on the shoulder of the same amphora (figure 2). In the center of the long frieze are two warriors fighting. The figure on the right has helmet, cuirass, skirt, and shield just like the departing warrior below, and the repetition of these features serves as an index to connect the two pictures in a sequence. The second warrior in the fight has a helmet and shield, but is otherwise nude as he crouches to attack. This shoulder scene forms a logical sequel to the action of departure on the body of the amphora, but whereas the former scene took place in a domestic/civic setting where one might expect non-warrior viewers, the battle frieze is even more populated with spectators. On either side of the warriors are horses ridden by nude, youthful riders. Usually called squires, their presence makes a certain amount of sense for the idea of the elite warrior,

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who might own or use a horse to get to the battlefield where he would fight on foot. The nudity of the rider, like that of the one warrior, would be a departure from what one would expect at a real battle, and his lack of a weapon makes his function in a battle dubious at best.³ Still, his presence lends a heroic patina to the combat in the center. Indeed, the fight itself is a departure from the combat practices of the sixth century, which emphasized fighting in tightly organized, group formations, rather than in hand-to-hand duels, so the presence of a battlefield attendant is not so strange given that the picture is not reality. Behind the right horse appears Hermes, identified by his wide-brimmed hat or *petasos*, winged boots, and *kerykeion*. As conductor of the souls of the dead, his presence makes logical sense for a battle, although his appearance here is not meant to be taken any more literally than that of the squires or warriors themselves.

More striking, however, are the figures at the ends of the frieze: a woman and youth on both sides. On the left, behind the horse, a nude youth, with a cape or *chlamys* over his left arm, raises that arm in a gesture like the older man in the picture below. At the far left is a woman wearing a belted garment and holding her left hand before her body. Her pose and gesture recall those of the woman in the departure scene below. Behind Hermes on the other side of the frieze, we find a mirror image of the woman on the left. Behind her at the end of the frieze is a mantled youth, who holds out one hand wrapped within his mantle, like the youth in the picture below. Clearly the repetition of so many motifs and figures in the two sections of the vase must lead us to the conclusion that the two pictures are meant to be viewed as an ensemble. However, the logical possibility of women and youths on a battlefield watching the fight is far more remote and artificial than the presence of the same figures in the picture of the departure, or even of Hermes and the squires who could, in theory, become involved in the action. Structurally, the women and youths at the margins of the fight play a more detached role in the picture.

What are these figures doing in a picture of a battle where they would have no real or imaginary role? Certainly they fill out the long surface of the frieze, maintaining a steady rhythm of decorative accents matching the neck and body of the vase. However, the painter could easily have shown a series of warrior duels that would have served the same decorative function and would have had more internal narrative consistency as well, or might have used a non-figural pattern to fill out the surface, such as the scrolls that appear below the handles on the amphora. The careful repetition of the larger figures on the body in the smaller frieze above also argues for intentionality in the scheme beyond its decorative potential. What, though, are we to make of the figures, and what is the relationship between what they watch and what the actual viewer of the vase sees? Whereas these figures have usually been labeled as onlookers or spectators, and thereafter overlooked, they appear on hundreds of vases. In many cases they so intrude visually and compositionally upon the main action that their decorative role must be decidedly secondary to their narrative role. Indeed, these peripheral figures bear scrutiny in their own right. As one looks at a vase and thinks about the original

SEEING SPECTATORS

viewing context, one should consider that these watchers provide a diagram of the viewing experience to guide us in looking at the images. Essentially, these figures can help us to understand the role of images, narratives, and actions in developing the identity of the ancient viewer.

1.1 EARLIER WORK ON SPECTATORS

There has been little systematic study of spectator figures on Greek vases, although their presence has long been noted. In an early article on the Amasis Painter, J. D. Beazley described a vase in the Guglielmi Collection in Rome, saying that:⁴

As to the flanking figures, the young man with the spear is repeated almost unaltered on the other side of the vase, and elsewhere in our painter's work, and another favourite of his is the naked youth holding a round aryballos, of Corinthian type, by its cord. It would be ideal to seek names for these two: they are onlookers, courtiers, retinue: let us call them Rosincrantz and Guildenstern.

The term onlooker has become common for these figures, although it lacks the evocative quality of the Shakespearean characters as a label. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, were involved in the action that they witnessed, even if witlessly, and were ultimately and extremely affected by it. This is not the situation in pictures such as the warriors fighting in figure 2.

D. von Bothmer continued the stage analogy in a later article on the Amasis Painter, saying that these "figures are like stock characters in a play lined up afresh for another curtain call . . . their part in the scene (and thus the scene itself) defies recognition."⁵ He notes that the grouping of such figures is "almost haphazard and certainly unconventional" and is found in the work of other painters. Ultimately, these loose figures are "supernumeraries" that the Amasis Painter uses less and less as his career progresses. Certainly, in formal terms, the figures have a peripheral role in support of the main figures in the center of the composition and, with their regular spacing, play a decorative role by helping to fill up the surface of the vase. The occurrence of spectators, however, continues into the late archaic period after the Amasis Painter, and in many cases they intrude upon the main figures when their absence would hardly be felt from a decorative point of view (see, for example, figure 69).

More recent study has sought to provide a broader overview of the spectator phenomenon. S. Korte-Konte approached the subject from an iconographic point of view, and was the first to document and describe spectators, *theates*, in a range of scenes.⁶ She cataloged 95 scenes of Theseus and the Minotaur that contain spectators, 43 of Herakles and the Lion, 23 of other labors of Herakles, and 46 combat duels like that on the Minneapolis amphora. Importantly, her catalog shows that most of the works are Attic black-figure, with only a small number of non-Attic works. Her catalog

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does not contain other mythological scenes with spectators, or scenes like athletic and other contests, but the number of vases that she included in her catalog suggested for the first time how widespread the phenomenon of spectators actually was. She also noted that in some cases the spectators had no discernible place in the story, whereas in scenes like Theseus and the Minotaur they had an iconographic identity.⁷

T. Carpenter focused in more detail on the use of spectators, which he termed “stock figures,” in the work of the C, Heidelberg, and Amasis Painters and their associates.⁸ He noted that these figures include men, youths, and women, and that they have repeated elements of pose and dress and often occur in groups of two and three. Such figures appear frequently in the work of the C Painter, but many of his works are without a narrative core, so they are not truly spectators or onlookers like those we have seen. The Heidelberg Painter does provide a narrative focus for the vase pictures, now providing something for the stock figures to see but without making any direct connection to the figures performing the action. Carpenter notes that:⁹

It can probably be assumed that for both painters the stock figures simply represent types of upper class Greeks. The conspicuous fillets worn by the men, particularly in the Heidelberg Painter's works, suggest that they are not dressed in everyday clothing, but rather that they are prepared for some special occasion. The presence of clearly respectable women in public with men and youths also points to the special nature of the occasion.

Carpenter went further, however, in suggesting that the figures are not merely decorative but contain some kind of meaning:

Since the Heidelberg Painter seems to have borrowed these figures from the perfectly logical scenes by the C Painter, it is possible that he intended a symbolic connection between the stock figures and the central scene. In other words, the central scene may in some way be symbolic of the occasion for which the festive Greeks are dressed, but this, of course, must remain surmise.

Carpenter's suggestion that the figures reflect public, festival types of dress is noteworthy, and draws a firmer connection between the spectator and the life of the city.

I. Scheibler raised further this question of the meaning and value of the spectator (*Zuschauer*) for the ancient viewer.¹⁰ She observed that archaic pictures are not a coherent field of space and time and have their own logic. She noted, for example, the deliberate variety of observers in a scene like the warrior leaving home; like the Minneapolis amphora, these pictures often contain an older man, a younger male, and a female figure whose identities are ambiguous and variable. She suggested that the variety is not simply an aesthetic preference or delight, but that artists such as the Amasis Painter are taking care to distinguish different forms of youth and men that represent different stages of life, from boy to ephebe (with first growth of beard) to adult man. Thus the variety of the figures reflects the variety of ancient viewers, particularly in the more detailed work of the Amasis Painter.

SEEING SPECTATORS

Carpenter and Scheibler focus on the work of a very few painters, but the inquiry into spectators broadened as part of the Munich exhibition *Kunst der Schale, Kultur des Trinkens*. B. Kaeser's short article on spectators noted that they are very common on band cups and they were already employed on earlier Little Master cups.¹¹ He remarked on their formal constancy, like the stock figures of the Heidelberg and C Painters, despite changes in subject matter ranging from Theseus and the Minotaur to Peleus and Atalanta to erotic scenes. Their presence in the picture is important, and in general they are witnesses to the reality and importance of the action that they observe. In particular, he suggests that the active spectators are models for the activity of the viewer of the vase, and that the men and youths on the cups represent the citizens of the community.

H. A. G. Brijder provided a new dimension to the study of spectators in his work on Siana cups, particularly by the Heidelberg Painter.¹² He observed that some activities, such as athletic events, komos, and symposion, are exclusively for male spectators. Women are present at combats and in scenes with Herakles, but have no exclusive subjects that they witness, as do male spectators. Women's behavior typically follows the *aidos* gesture of drawing the veil, and, following the suggestion of A. Steiner, he suggests that these women may be potential brides.¹³ He also notes that it is sometimes hard to decide whether a figure, particularly a more active type, is part of the central action or belongs to the onlookers. He compiles a catalogue of spectator types, noting five examples of adult men, three types of male youths, and six types of women, who, unlike the male spectators, are not distinguished by age.

The result of this body of work indicates the potential for seeing spectators as models for the contemporary viewers of the vase and makes a strong case that the figures are not marginal and simply decorative in their intent. H. van Wees draws upon this to look at spectators as documenting social behavior, particularly among upper class Athenians, based on their dress and adornment.¹⁴ He notes that many of them carry spears, indicating their status; because many of these scenes with spear-bearers are of contemporary events such as athletic contests, the presence of the spears is remarkable and reflects actual social practice. Thus, the spectators represent the habit of "bearing iron" or carrying weapons in public until the end of the sixth century. The difficulty here, however, is that the picture is regarded as a literal recording of contemporary events. It is important to remember that these pictures are constructions and not snapshots, and that the logic within them may be conceptual rather than literal. Indeed, spectators were not part of the scene at warrior duels, and it is unlikely that a scene of contemporary action is any more real. As J. Barringer has stated more broadly, "... the vase paintings are not scrupulous records of real life either and are instead, selective constructs of a culture's ideas about itself."¹⁵ It is on these terms that we need to look more closely at spectators.

The recent studies on spectators collectively make several points. First, the number of vases with spectators is potentially large, and includes a number of different artists, vase types, and subjects. Second, the figures reflect in some manner the members of

VASE PAINTING, GENDER, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ARCHAIC ATHENS

contemporary society, especially their civic and public life. Third, it is likely that the figures have some meaning, given the intentionality in their depiction and variety. There is some recognition of the variety of spectator types and of differences by gender and age, and that the relationship between the spectators and the central action is complex. The studies are limited, however, by their narrow focus. Many look at the work of only a few select painters or scenes and none makes a comprehensive effort to document the range of spectator and vase types and their context. It is also clear that an iconographic approach is limited by the lack of literary sources that mention these spectators.

There remain, then, a number of unanswered questions that these studies have raised in part. How can one define and categorize the range of spectator types and the relationship of spectators to the central action? Can one develop some sense of the number of vases with spectators, and of patterns in their occurrence, such as vase shape, chronology, and point of production? Can one develop interpretive models that will provide a stronger foundation for discerning the meaning of the figures within the picture for the original viewer? Are there differences in the behavior of spectators based on their gender or on the type of scene that they witness, and what do these tell us about norms of behavior and social stereotypes?

1.2 APPROACHING SPECTATORS

To answer these questions requires a systematic approach because there is no guidebook or discussion from antiquity that helps us to understand them. First, it will be necessary to define what a spectator is, and to distinguish different categories of onlookers from each other. This, then, would allow one to gather data on their appearance on vases, thereby contextualizing their deployment. Finally, from this data one can determine how to approach the question of interpretation, and what models and methods to use in developing that discussion.

Interpretation thus raises the issue of theoretical models, and whether there are alternatives to the approaches discussed in the previous section that should be used. Before outlining the methodologies that will be used in this study, we should consider briefly the question of the use of theory.¹⁶ On the one hand, there are scholars who advocate the importance of theory for scholarly inquiry, particularly the injection of theories developed in the study of literature or of the social sciences. On the other hand, theory itself has been criticized as too abstract, non-empirical, and difficult to engage. The symposium hosted by the journal *Critical Inquiry* on April 11, 2003 and the essays subsequently published in the winter 2004 issue highlight some of the turmoil and disagreements in the academic community regarding the nature and future of theory.¹⁷ For the study of ancient art, there are questions about the interjection of a modern perspective back onto ancient material, the producers and users of which did not concern themselves with theory.¹⁸ Some would question whether theoretical approaches are too abstract in nature, and whether they predetermine the interpretation of an artifact

SEEING SPECTATORS

or question. Students frequently desire “facts” rather than methodology, and resist the frequently difficult writing style of theoretical texts. The deployment of theory can be intensely political, seeking to nullify other, usually more traditional, interpretive models. Is the use of theory, then, just a way to say much and little at the same time, and is it of any concern outside of academia?¹⁹

The critiques of theory are often justified, but this does not negate the importance of developing a range of theoretical models to use in the study of ancient art. Any form of scholarly study has its theoretical foundation and assumptions. We assume, for example, that vases with very similar stylistic features were produced around the same time and place, and possibly even by the same potter and painter. We assume that literary sources can aid us in the identification and interpretation of pictorial scenes and that poet and painter shared a common culture. Although both of these assumptions have validity, both stylistic analysis and iconography have relegated spectators to the margins of scholarly interest because, according to these approaches, they are secondary in importance and only vaguely contribute to the meaning of the picture, despite the signs of their intentionality. To develop the picture of spectators, one needs to consider alternative approaches, not because the more traditional approaches are incorrect, but because one needs additional tools to see the evidence of spectators fully.

Theory, however, should not be thrown wantonly at a subject. Indeed, as M. Povey articulated at the *Critical Inquiry* symposium, “Theory and practice must somehow be brought together so that the construction of theoretical paradigms draws more closely upon observable evidence.”²⁰ In other words, theory does not have to be iconoclastic and abstract; indeed, it should be practical and functional. Its application should be grounded in the testimony and outlook of the time period, and adapted to the circumstances of the culture. Its use should build upon the material evidence itself, and be the result of detailed observation and description. For the study of ancient art, this means that one should rely upon a range of interpretive models and look toward the convergence of lines of inquiry and analysis. In some cases, a different theoretical model will contradict scholarly opinion, but in many cases a new approach can provide an alternative means for confirming and offering nuances to established interpretations. Given the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of the ancient world, subjecting its art and other remains to multiple approaches and tests can provide a larger framework for our understanding. Thus, to view spectators, I would propose taking a multidimensional approach in the hope that a combination of viewing points can shed some light on the context and interpretation of the vase paintings.

To begin, we must define and differentiate spectators based on their role within the picture and their behavior, as will be seen in chapter 2.1. Here, we can draw upon structural analysis in narrative to offer definitions for different kinds of spectators. Based on these definitions, it is then possible to develop some sense of the extent of spectators in vase painting by gathering data on their occurrence, using primarily the volumes of the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, but also data derived from excavation reports from

VASE PAINTING, GENDER, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ARCHAIC ATHENS

sites in Athens as well as a sample of vases in the online Beazley Archive (chapters 2.2–2.4). The data show that spectators are a phenomenon that is not a widespread feature of Greek art generally; they are localized by time and place, distinctly Athenian in their appearance and belonging mostly to the period 565–490. Therefore, any interpretation of their meaning must consider this specific historical context.²¹

Following this general definition and survey of spectators, in chapter 3 we consider broadly the question of seeing and how what one observes is important in defining one's self and place within society. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory offers a general model for considering the function of the gaze and object in the construction of identity, as will be reviewed in chapter 3.1; we will also see that the physical and psycho-physiological nature of Greek theories of vision offer grounds for using this type of approach (chapter 3.2). To the degree that the modern approach to vision and identity corresponds to ancient Greek theories of vision, one can perceive that seeing mattered, and that what one saw became part of one's self. As a result, we will consider the dynamics of the viewing experience and identification in the final section (chapter 3.3), using the model of a viewing matrix that describes the components of the image, viewer, and viewing context.

In the remaining three chapters, we will focus on archaic Athens and how the spectators model the construction of civic and gender identity. Significantly, it is during this period that the major festivals of Athens were reorganized and expanded, that there was new construction in the sanctuaries, and that Athens greatly expanded its political and economic ambitions in Greece. As we shall explore in chapter 4, it is this expansion of ritualistic activity that illuminates one aspect for the meaning of spectators, in that the figures become models for choral performance and for civic observation, and in so doing help to forge an identity for the viewer as an Athenian, or what it meant to be an Athenian. A brief review of ritualistic theory will provide a context for analyzing the relationship between spectators and the central narrative, and between the ritual performers and observers in the city on the one hand and the image on the vase on the other.

The data also show that gender is not a neutral aspect in the determination of where spectators are found and how they behave. Gender, indeed, is a critical element of social and civic identity, and so we need to consider in more detail the varieties of spectator reactions and what they convey about gendered social expectations. In chapter 5 we will utilize a coding scheme for the categories and types of gestures and actions of spectators that is applied to the database. Looking first at adult men and then at male youths, we will consider what the frequencies of different types of spectator behavior imply about their relationship to the central narrative scene and its importance. We will develop this further by looking at the behavior of men and youths to specific subject matter to see whether different and patterned reactions and attitudes are encoded into the behavior of the spectators depending on the type of action that they witness. In the final chapter, we will apply the same approach to women spectators, exploring the nature of archaic stereotypes as they are encoded in the behavior of