ARTISTS AND SIGNATURES IN ANCIENT GREECE

The Greeks inscribed their works of art and craft with labels identifying mythological or historical figures, bits of poetry, and claims of ownership. But no type of inscription is more hotly debated or more intriguing than the artist's signature, which raises questions concerning the role and status of the artist and the work of art or craft itself. In this book, Jeffrey M. Hurwit surveys the phenomenon of artists' signatures across the many genres of Greek art from the eighth to the first century BCE. Although the great majority of extant works lack signatures, the Greek artist nonetheless signed his products far more often than any other artist of antiquity. Examining signatures on gems, coins, mosaics, wall-paintings, metalwork, vases, and sculptures, Hurwit argues that signatures help us assess the position of the Greek artist within his society as well as his conception of his own skill and originality.

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PREFACE

ANCIENT GREEKS LIKED TO WRITE THINGS ON THEIR WORKS OF ART AND CRAFT, and they wrote on virtually every kind of object and on nearly every kind of surface. They inscribed stone statues and bronze statues and their stone bases. They inscribed stone reliefs and stelai and marble tiles and marble discuses. They engraved words on gems and the dies of coins. They inscribed chests of cedar inlaid with myth in ivory and gold. They inscribed stone city walls and the stone walls of temples and treasuries, and they labeled the sections of stone theaters; they even inscribed large rocks. They labeled painted figures on the plastered walls of temples and colonnades. They wrote on large painted wooden panels hung on the walls of clubhouses and banquet halls. They painted words on wooden and terracotta plaques, large and small, and they stamped words upon terracotta tiles and antefixes and amphora handles. They made words out of pebbles or small stone cubes on mosaic floors. They molded words upon terracotta figurines and relief vases and lamps and glassware. They inscribed bronze vessels and gold vessels and silver vessels. They inscribed bronze figurines and bronze knucklebones (*astragaloi*) and bronze helmets and shield bands and spears (both butts and points) and heralds' staffs and tablets and plaques and disks. They inscribed bronze jurors' tickets and bronze weights and lead weights and lead tablets and iron mirrors. They wove words into cloth. And they painted words on vases.

No Greek liked to write more than the Athenian, and it is on the Athenian vase that we find the richest and most varied corpus of inscriptions in ancient art. There are, most often, simple labels identifying mythological figures engaged in heroic or divine action (Herakles, Theseus, Achilles, Athena, and so on). The impulse to name names can be so strong that on one famously text-rich vase the labels "Poseidon" and "Amphitrite" are there, even though Poseidon and Amphitrite themselves are not. Sometimes there are labels identifying historical figures (the poet Anakreon, for example, or Alkaios and Sappho, though their "portraits" are only imagined). There are labels identifying dogs, horses, and asses. There are even labels identifying inanimate objects and places (a water-jar, a fountain-house, a lyre, Mt. Helikon). There are legends identifying the origin and purpose of the vase itself: for hundreds of years the phrase *From the Games at Athens* was written vertically beside an image of

Athena on amphoras awarded, full of olive oil, to victors at the Panathenaic festival; *Public Property* could be written on vases that served as official liquid measures; and the names of Athenian tribes could be written on pots that served as water clocks. There are, rarely, titles or captions: a series of heroic contests on one vase (just part of a chariot race survives) is, we are told, *The Games for Patroklos.* That, at least, is informative: the comments *He enjoys it,* written beside a masturbating satyr labeled Wanker, and *He is going to jump,* in a generic scene of an athlete preparing to jump, are merely superfluous. There are, not infrequently, bits of poetry or attempts at poetry (an erotic epigram involving Helios and a beautiful boy, for example, or the seriously muddled hexameter *Speak to me, Muse, about the fine flowing Skamander I begin to sing* that a schoolboy has evidently written on a scroll that his teacher holds up to him, pointing out his mistakes). There are neatly written dedications to gods (such as Apollo), and, occasionally, there are statements of ownership (*Asopodoros' oil-flask*, reads one), sometimes inscribed upon the vase after firing. On hundreds of vases produced in the last decades of the sixth century and the first decades of the fifth, inscriptions declare that a particular boy is handsome and, far less often, that an unidentified girl is beautiful. Along the same lines, one cup addresses itself *To the fairest of maidens*. There are strings of letters (or even partially formed letters) that mean nothing at all – nonsense inscriptions that only emulate words and that fill the spaces between figures, binding them together, with a visual and decorative rather than a linguistic value (such nonsense can be written even by literate painters). Sometimes the figures themselves speak to other figures in the scene, as if the words were issuing from their mouths (all that is missing is the kind of speech bubble we find in our comics and cartoons): Ajax and Achilles playing a board game at Troy call out their scores, *three* and *four*; Odysseus, bound to the mast, yells in vain *Free me!* to his crew so he can follow the Sirens' enchanting but lethal song; a symposiast, with a flute-player beside him, throws his head back (as symposiasts are wont to do) and protests *I cannot, I cannot* [sing, presumably], which recalls the start of some lines assigned to the poet Theognis but just might be the kind of conventional posturing typical of drinking parties; five small O's – raw vocalizations, not poetry – bubble up from Alkaios' open mouth as Sappho looks on; Herakles, upon entering Olympos, addresses the king of the gods with *Dear Zeus . . .* ; on another vase the great god is beseeched again when a musician walking with his dog sings (in one reading) *O father Zeus, keep me out of poverty*. A courtesan calls out to a handsome youth (depicted elsewhere on the same pot) *This one's for you, beautiful Euthymides!*; on the interior of a wine-cup a man stiffly penetrating a woman from behind tells her (in the most popular interpretation) to *Hold still.* Or figures speak to no one in particular: a symposiast longingly calls out *O most beautiful of boys* as he strokes a hare, a love-gift for the unidentified, absent lad; a rhapsode sings the opening of

an epic poem (*Thus, once, in Tiryns . . .*) to an audience that is not there – or, fictively, to actual symposiasts who once were there and who, having used and read the vase, were prompted to take up the song themselves. Very rarely, there is even a conversation (Youth: *Look, a swallow!* Man: *Yes, by Herakles*! Boy: *There it is!* Caption: *Spring is already here*.). Sometimes the vases speak for themselves in the first person – "egocentric" vases, they have been called, without prejudice – as if they were conscious or self-aware and *could* speak, directly addressing us: *He who now of all the dancers dances best shall have me*, announces an early wine-jug given as a prize; *I am a good cup*, insists one cup; *I am the cup of Korakos*, says another; *I am Pheidias*,' says yet another; *Two obols: keep your hands off*, warns a price-conscious amphora; *I open my mouth wide*, says an open-mouthed wine-cooler; *I greet you*, say some perfume bottles; *greetings and drink well*, say some drinking cups, even more convivially. Sometimes the vase-painter himself addresses his own creations: one writes *Well done!* next to a figure of Theseus outwrestling an opponent; another calls out *Greetings!* to figures of Apollo and Artemis; and another way of reading the inscription on the "Hold Still" cup is that it is the vase-painter who is telling the man to *Stay Calm*. And sometimes the potter and the vase-painter – like the sculptor, panel-painter, mosaicist, gem-engraver, die-cutter, bronze worker, coroplast, mason, and builder – speak to us, through their egocentric works, with declarations of agency: *Kleimakhos made me, and I am his;* or *Euxitheos made me;* or *Euphronios painted me*. And it is that last kind of text that will concern us here.

This book broadly surveys and describes a phenomenon – the art of signing, the inscription of identity – that cuts across the principal genres of ancient Greek art. It does not catalogue every extant Greek artist's signature, nor does it definitively answer every question that the practice raises. We must acknowledge at the outset that not every such question *can* be answered, at least not with the evidence available to us, and we should not pretend otherwise. Fundamentally, of course, a signature simply says "X made this": it is a text displayed by an object naming the person who created it. It is also implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) an expression of pride in one's work, and it is thus a way of distinguishing oneself from one's rivals in skillful artistic production and from one's competitors in the marketplace. Still, it is not clear why Greek signatures first appear in some genres (gem-engraving, for example) later than others (vase-painting, for example, or sculpture). It is not clear why a given vase-painter will sign some works but not others, or why some very fine vase-painters never sign at all (while some very bad ones do). It is not entirely clear why a few cities (most notably in south Italy and Sicily) allowed or encouraged signatures on their coinage, but the vast majority of cities did not. The peculiarly and pervasively agonistic culture of the Greeks may be part of the explanation – signatures function in rivalries between artists – but it can only be a part of it, for it only raises another question: just what was it about

the Greeks that made them so competitive, anyway? But if we usually cannot fathom the intentions or psyches of ancient artists, and if we must repeatedly concede in the pages that follow that most works of Greek art in all genres are unsigned, the practice of signing itself nonetheless sets the Greeks apart from the other peoples of the ancient world. It also offers some insight into Greek conceptions of art, the artist, and artistic originality, and for that reason alone the phenomenon merits our attention.

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A NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations for scholarly journals and standard reference works are the ones in general use listed in the *American Journal of Archaeology* 111 (2007), 14–34 (see also www.ajaonline.org). To that list, add *CEG* (for P. A. Hansen, *Carmina Epigraphica Graeca saeculorum VIII-V a. Chr. n.* Berlin. 1983).

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND TRANSLITERATIONS

Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine. As for transliterations, I have generally favored the Greek form of a name over the Latinized or Anglicized form (so, *Herakles* instead of *Heracles*), but I have not always done so (preferring the more familiar *Athens* over *Athēnai*, for example, and *Corinth* over *Korinthos*). I have tried to be consistent, but Greek, English, and common practice being the way they are, some inconsistencies are unavoidable. So, for example, the Greek letter χ is usually rendered here as *kh*, as in Nearkhos, but sometimes as *ch*, as in Chios or Achilles.

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