I. ATHENIANS AND PAINTED VASES

By examining the painted vases of 5th century BC Athens, we can gain a wealth of knowledge about customs, beliefs, and daily life of the people who made them. However, it is essential to note that just because there was a close relationship between the depictions and real life, it does not necessarily mean that the vase painters depicted what was most important or most frequently seen during that time. One of the main issues with understanding the motivations behind the vase painters' choices is that there is no evidence from ancient literature to help us understand how they chose their subjects and how the intended audience perceived their works.[6] We only possess the vases themselves, and none among them can definitively be said to have been created to represent the daily life of Athenians. Scholars have assumed that Athenian vase painters depicted life during that time because of analogies drawn from a much later period and a vastly different cultural context, namely that of 19th- and 20th-century Western civilization.

Between 1840 and 1880, a surge of paintings in Europe aimed to depict life objectively.[7] Honoré Daumier's painting of a washerwoman climbing the steps of the Paris waterfront is a notable example of this (Fig. 1). Despite the weight of the laundry she just washed, the mother leans tenderly towards her daughter, who carries her washing paddle and struggles with the stairs. This painting is a profound commentary on the societal norms of the time and showcases how Realist painters used their art to criticize their society. Daumier's painting: 'illustrates how working women were also primary caregivers to their children and had to combine these two roles when alternative child-care arrangements were unaffordable or unavailable'.[8] During the emergence of the Realist movement in Europe, classical archaeologists discovered that Athenian vases contained precursors to French Realism.[9] In 1843, Theodore Panofka published 'Bilder antiken Lebens' (Images of Ancient Life), which started a series of books to reconstruct ancient life using Athenian vases.[10]

Around 500 BC, Athenian vase painters made a revolutionary change in their traditional schemes of depicting the human figure by observing reality. This effort greatly aided scholars in believing that Athenian vase paintings depicted Athenians precisely as they looked, behaved, and thought. This concept led to the notion that these vase painters were forerunners of the French realist artists of the time. Jules François Félix Husson (Champfleury), the theorist of that artistic movement, encouraged scholars to stop focusing exclusively on famous ancient artworks inspired by myths and devote themselves to works depicting life. Champfleury wrote:

> The art of antiquity is widely known and admired, but we should not overlook the art of everyday life (l'art domestique), the portraitists, the decorators, the painters of scenes from life (des tableaux familiers), can teach us more about the

[6] Schmidt 2005, 12–18; Dietrich 2018.
[7] Nochlin 1971, 13.
[8] Sussman 2018, 92.
[9] Bažant 1980; Topper 2012, 2–3.
[10] On the depiction of life on Athenian vases, most recently: Oakley 2020.

> way people lived (moeurs) than images of gods and emperors. Therefore, modern scholars should broaden their horizons by studying this type of art.[11]

In twentieth-century classical archaeology, the belief that Athenian vases 'give us a picture of contemporary Athens' became dominant.[12] Some scholars have argued that the vase paintings give us: 'absolutely true picture, while […] the picture provided by the literature must be corrected as necessary by evidence that is both concrete and contemporary'.[13]

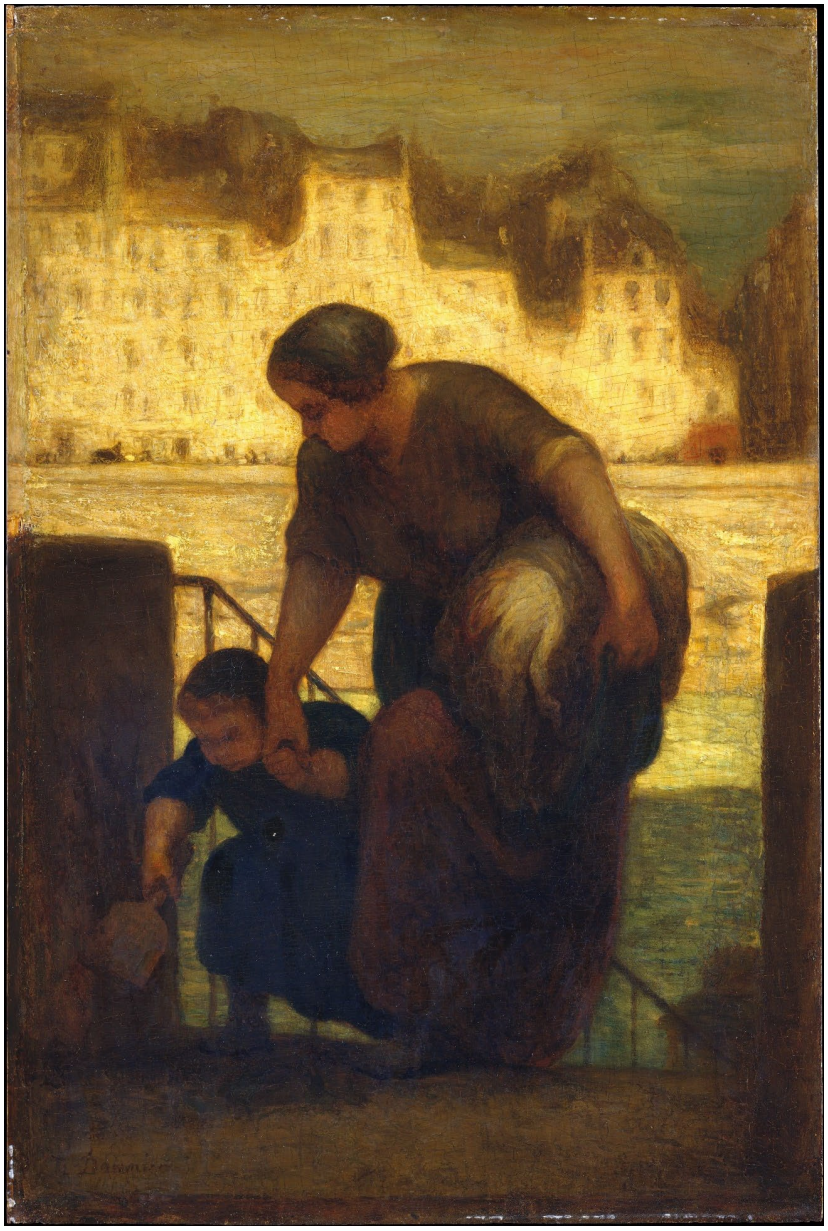

Figure 1. Honoré Daumier, The Laundress, oil on wood panel, 186(3). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 47.122. Bequest of Lillie P. Bliss, 1931. Public domain.

[11] Champfleury 1865, 41.
[12] Gomme 1925, 6.
[13] Seltman 1956, 79 (the book was reprinted in 2018). Cf. also Bennett 2019.

In the 1970s, scholars radically reinterpreted the traditional concept of scenes from life on Athenian vases. They believed the vase painters portrayed the Athenians as they envisioned them, not as they lived. They did not depict the world but created it. Inspired by the structuralist interpretation of myth and ritual, they suggested that these stories do not refer to anything outside themselves. Instead, they only develop their agency and ritual actions.[14] Similarly, scenes from life on Athenian vases were understood to be not an image of reality but a means of expression in which reality was only a tool. The vase paintings did not refer to the Athenian reality of the time but provided the substance for creating the myth of reality. According to the author of the first study of this type, the animals, hunters, warriors, cohabiting couples, or various mythical figures depicted on red-figure askoi should not be taken literally. Instead, they were intended as signs emphasizing the necessity of sacrifice.[15] Scholars from Paris and Lausanne collaborated on a new approach that became popular. They believed that the scenes of life on Athenian vases depicted Athenians, but only as they existed in the imagination of the time. To promote this new approach, they created a successful travelling exhibition of photographs of Athenian vases and published a book called *A City of Images*.[16]

Claude Bérard wrote of Athenian vase paintings:

> In fact, the system of imagery, like any system, is closed: the formal combinations are limited in number. For this reason, recourse to language remains the only possible alternative […] The image-maker […] is more or less prisoner of a repertoire of grammatical and symbolic elements, figures, and relations out of which he can only make a kind of bricolage.[17]

Bérard argued that the vast array of representations of life on Athenian vases is not as varied as it appears. Instead, it is like looking through a kaleidoscope, where a new image is formed by rearranging the coloured pieces of glass each time it is turned over. The vase images created a city that shared commonalities with Athens of that time by making its unchanging essence visible. However, some Paris-Lausanne scholars were aware that the depiction of life evolved, as was emphasized by the author of this book in his Prague works influenced by the structuralism of the Prague Linguistic Circle.[18]

The structuralist interpretation of vase paintings is not a closed chapter in the history of classical archaeology. Athenian scenes of life understood as a sign system, were still encountered at the beginning of the twenty-first century. On a hydria at Harvard (Fig. 2), Sheramy D. Bundrick wrote:

> The lady of the oikos hands her infant son to a second woman, perhaps a nurse; if this is a nurse or servant, then her presence quickly characterizes this particular oikos as prosperous, reminding the viewer that overseeing servants

[14] The main inspiration was the works of Claude Lévy-Strauss, about him cf. Wilcken 2011.
[15] Hoffman 1979.
[16] Bérard, Bron, and Lisssarrague 1984 (English translation: Bérard 1988). Cf. Topper 2012a.
[17] Bérard 1988, 168.
[18] Schnapp 1988, 85–86. Bažant 1981, 13–22; 1985; 1987. Cf. Karul 2019.

Figure 2. Red-figure hydria, 440–430 BC. Cambridge (MA), Harvard University, inv. no. 1960.342. BA 8184. © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

> was an essential aspect of a wife's duties. Gesture and gaze unite the central trio of wife, child, and nurse (?). They are framed in turn by two vertical compositional elements, a standing loom (with textile in progress) at left, and a standing, beardless man at right with a staff, almost assuredly the husband. The loom, serving as a visual counterpoint to the husband, suggests the wife's contributions to the oikos, whether she is doing the weaving herself or supervising someone else's work.

This passage explores the interpretation of a depiction that follows the tradition of the Paris-Lausanne school and the customary notion of life scenes from the 19th century. According to Bundrick, each element in the depiction has a metaphorical significance. However, the view is conceived as a glimpse into the room where the lady of the house resides. The author appears to be looking through a keyhole into the room where a married couple, a child, and a maid have just gathered. It is important to note that the life scenes depicted on Athenian vases were never meant to be similar to the paintings of the French realists or the subjects of a television report about people's lives.

The hydria in Harvard features a woman sitting on a chair holding a child, which is being taken away by a woman who appears to be an enslaved person, maid or wet nurse. Behind the maid is a loom, and behind the lady of the house is a male bystander. A similar scene can be seen on a vase of the same shape and period, where two women are depicted, one sitting on a chair, and the other standing up in what could also be the women's section of a Greek house (Fig. 3). However, unlike the seated woman who is clothed, the standing woman is naked, and her clothes are on the chair. The traditional explanation for this scene was that the nudity characterizes the standing woman as a prostitute, and it is a scene from a brothel. However, this interpretation has recently been challenged, with Sian Lewis writing: 'To ask why the woman is naked is to look for a story which is not present'. She was right, but only partly, because it should be added that there is no story as we know it. The hydria in Copenhagen, like the vase in Harvard, does not have a story in the spirit of modern European paintings. However, that does not mean the Athenian vases do not have a story.

Figure 3. Red-figure hydria, 440–430 BC.
Copenhagen, National Museum, inv. no. 153. BA 214971. After Schröder 1915, pl. 3.

The Athenians loved stories; their painted vases were full of stories. However, they are different stories, and they are told in a different way than we are used to. Nudity characterized hetairae, but also brides because bathing was part of the wedding ritual. If the vase painter of the hydria in Copenhagen did not feel the need to indicate whether the woman standing was a prostitute or a bride, the audience for whom the vase was intended did not expect it. Spinning emphasized her industriousness, which she shared with aristocratic Athenian women. The nudity emphasizes the erotic appeal of the woman in question, which she shares with the prostitutes without necessarily belonging to them. Scenes with wives and scenes with prostitutes are not distinguished. While at one pole, there are wedding-related scenes that depict wives, at the other pole, there are depictions of revellers having group sex with women who are prostitutes. In between these two poles are scenes that may depict both wives and prostitutes. The absence of boundaries between the series of Athenian vase paintings depicting wives and prostitutes demonstrates that the art of professional sexual partners was not antithetical to marital sex. The polyvalence of nudity was an integral part of the story of women told by the Athenian vase painters of the fifth century BC.

The relationship between the scenes depicted on Athenian vases and daily life in Athens differs from that of French Realist paintings and French reality. A vase adorned with a scene from everyday life was likely desirable to buyers in Athens precisely because such a scene was not typically seen in real life. Athenian women did not undress while spinning, whether they were prostitutes or wives. The scenes of life on Athenian vases were not meant to be viewed as keyhole peeks, nor were they a sign system. There is no evidence to suggest that these scenes conveyed any message other than what they depicted. The loom on the Harvard vase was a loom, and the naked woman on the Copenhagen vase was simply a naked woman. These statements raise the question of why the scenes of life on Athenian vases were created. In short, they were produced for the same reason that scenes from myths were created or that some vases were covered entirely with an ornament. Whatever the decoration, it increased the market potential of the ceramic vase. The notion that there was some sophisticated meaning behind the vase paintings is unlikely, as these were inexpensive products intended for immediate consumption.

In ancient Greece, ceramic vases were decorated with painted scenes to increase their marketability. However, these scenes were not just for show; they reflected how people lived in Athens. Robin Osborne recently emphasized this point:

> Painters wanted to attract buyers' attention, and might do that by being thought provoking, but they did not seek to teach. Insofar as the market for pottery was a discriminating one, it was certainly not narrow in its discrimination. The pattern of choice of scene to depict on pottery therefore have a strong chance of reproducing the way in which painters saw the world, unconstrained by any need to persuade others or conform to others' views.. The scenes of life depicted on Athenian vases do not necessarily show how Athenians lived, nor do they have to be accurate. Often, they portrayed the opposite of what Athenians saw around them. However, these scenes still had to relate to the reality of the time and represent the status and values of their potential buyers. If they did not do

this, they would not have been able to attract buyers. Herein lies the hitherto not fully appreciated documentary value of Athenian scenes of life.[19]

Ancient Athenian scenes depicted on vases offer valuable insights into their reality. However, we should avoid imposing modern-day expectations on them, influenced by 19th-century realism. Above all, we cannot interpret solo scenes in isolation. Every scene on an Athenian vase, for which we have no comparable representations, must be treated cautiously because nothing definitive can be said about it. Even if we form an idea of what it might represent, we can never verify it. We do not have a time machine to take us back to Athens at that time, and we cannot ask the Athenians of that time how they interpreted such a scene. Therefore, it is impossible to verify how accurately it corresponds to Athenian reality objectively. We must not assume anything about isolated representations. The Athenian vase painter may have painted something he saw, but he could have also depicted what he wanted to see or what his customers would have wanted to see. He could have painted something he had read about, seen in the theatre, or heard being told about. It is also possible that he painted something he remembered, which, as we know from experience, may not be reliable.

It is unlikely that Athenian vase painters could have painted anything without the viewers being able to understand the scene depicted. Therefore, the scenes of life on Athenian vases were not sophisticated metaphors.[20] In interpreting these depictions, the Athenians could only rely on the scenes, just as we do today. While knowledge of the verbal tradition may have facilitated Athenians' understanding of the depictions of myth, the scenes depicting Athenian life were not connected to any such thing. Athenians were familiar with heroes of Greek myth, but there was no "myth of the child", "myth of the wife", or the "myth of the prostitute". Instead, there were only civic ideals and social norms shared by the Athenian community.

Focusing on mechanical replication and the idealization of originality defines our current culture. However, this was not the case in classical Athens. In this society, the norm was the absence of repetition and the constant renewal of familiar themes. The most notable example was in the theatre, where each play was performed only once but was always part of a series that renewed traditional mythical stories. Unlike today, the Athenians of the fifth century BC did not have reenactments of plays but instead relied on this cyclical pattern of renewal.[21] Nor do we find replicas in Athenian vase paintings.[22] The painters of ancient Greek vases were motivated by the demand for their creations. However, they could only partially mechanically copy successful paintings, as we currently do with our porcelain mugs. If they had done so, they would have produced more painted vases and increased their profits. However, this did not happen. It means that the buyers of the vases were cautious and selective, scrutinizing the vase paintings closely. The vase painters, therefore, had to be innovative to meet their expectations. However, these innovations had to be limited, and the painters had

[19] Ferrari 2003.
[20] As we read in Ferrari 2002.
[21] Lissarrague 2013, 21.
[22] Osborne 2018, 37. The examples given by Anne Steiner in her work on repetition in Athenian vase painting demonstrate the opposite (Steiner 2007). Vase painters always more or less varied their themes.

to stick to the themes that the Athenians preferred. Each vase painting had to be unique yet familiar and overlap with what was already painted on the vases. The painters drew on these existing themes but added variations to emphasize their creativity and attract buyers' interest. By doing so, they increased the marketability of their products.[23]

Athenian vase painters had a tendency to create various versions of popular scenes in order to boost their sales. As a result, the existing collection of vase paintings is likely to be a good representation of the main trends in portraying each theme, [24] even though only a small percentage of the painted vases made in Athens have survived till date. [25] We can gain insight into their evolution by analyzing the frequency of different themes and their changes over time.[26] Fortunately, John D. Beazley's work has enabled us to date individual vase paintings to the exact decade and attribute them to specific artists.[27] The Beazley Archive Pottery Database provides access to most information about Athenian vases online.[28] By analyzing the details of the scenes depicted, such as attitudes, clothing, gestures, and attributes of figures, we can learn about the interaction and hierarchies of the characters, as well as the environment in which the scenes are set.[29] This knowledge helps us understand how the Athenians interpreted these vases by exploring the vocabulary used by the vase painters and the grammar based on which they constructed their scenes.

In New York, there is a lekythos that shows a girl playing the diaulos (Fig. 4). Although it is not clear for whom she is playing, it is evident that she is putting all her effort into it, as evidenced by her raised head and determined expression. To convey the atmosphere, the painter has included a stool with a cushion in front of the girl and a diaulos case hanging behind her. The scene could be interpreted as a girl practising to play the flute at home. The interior characterizes the stool and the diaulos case hanging behind it. However, the girl is dressed in elaborate clothing, wearing an undergarment, a chiton, over which she has a neatly draped overcoat, a himation, a sakkos cap, shoes, earrings, and a striking red bracelet on her arm.[30] The stool pointing to the interior and the girl's elaborate dress pointing to the scene outside the house should not be taken literally; the stool and dress are attributes of the girl being depicted.

On another lekythos from the same period, there is a similar scene where a young man is playing the diaulos, which is the same instrument as before (Fig. 5). In the background, we can see a diaulos case and in front of him is the Athenian citizen's cane that he carried when he went out. Although these objects may be part of the setting, they are there to characterize the characters depicted. The way the flute player is portrayed suggests that he is not at home or school but out on the street after a boisterous drinking party. He is shown in a drunken revel called a komos.[31] During

[23] On the advertising and marketing of Athenian vases see Volioti 2017.
[24] Osborne 2018, 40.
[25] Cook 1959; Sapirstein 2013; Sapirstein 2014.
[26] Bažant 1990.
[27] Williams 1996, 245–50.
[28] https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/carc/pottery [accessed 24 March 2024].
[29] Yatromanolakis 2009.
[30] On ancient Greek dress: Lee 2015.
[31] Bron 2002.

ancient Greek times, there used to be festive processions that would happen at night. These processions were usually associated with a Greek after dinner party called symposion, and they would usually involve wine drinking, dancing, and playing musical instruments while singing.[32] Vases depicting these processions show a cloak thrown carelessly over the shoulders or arm, along with a precarious stance and contorted dance figures, as common attributes of the komos participants called komasts. The komasts would not hold back and would dance freely, causing their cloaks to flutter behind them or sometimes even losing them altogether. Even the flute player in the procession would be half-naked, and his cloak would be draped over his shoulder and arm, recoiling behind him as he walked, making it likely that he would lose it at any moment.

Figure 4 (left). Red-figure lekythos, *c*. 480 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fletcher Fund, 1924) , inv. no. 24.97.28. BA 204117. Public domain.

Figure 5 (right). Red-figure lekythos, 480–460 BC.
Prague, National Museum, inv. no. NM-H10 773. BA 208094. © Prague, National Museum.

The same artist who painted the flute player in the Metropolitan Museum also painted the flute player being embraced by a half-naked symposiast on a cup in Florence (Fig. 6). They met at the symposium, as indicated by the floral wreaths they wear on their heads. The man is characterized similarly to the young man playing the flute at the lekythos in Prague; he is half-naked with a cane in his hand. His intentions are clear; he walks before the flute player but turns his head towards her and holds

[32] On symposion: Topper 2012.

her shoulder firmly with his right hand. Flute players performing at symposia may have ended up in the arms of the symposiast, as we see in the bottom of a late sixth-century BC cup (Fig. 7). A naked symposiast with an erect penis embraces a flute player in a chiton on a bed who no longer needs her instrument, as indicated by holding it in her raised hand. In the background on the left is a basket in which the man has brought food to the banquet, as was the custom in Greece, so he is not at his home but a guest at the symposium. The flute player is, therefore, a prostitute.[33]

Figure 6 (left). Red-figure cup, tondo, 490–480 BC.
Florence, Museo Archeologico Etrusco, inv. no. 3921. BA 203929. After Hoppin 1919, vol. 2, 495.

Figure 7 (right). Red-figure cup, tondo, 520–510 BC.
New Haven (CT), Yale University, inv. no. 1913.163. BA 200208. Public domain.

Sian Lewis believed that the depiction of an emotional relationship between the flute player and the guest suggested that she was not a prostitute.[34] However, we must remember that we are not in the world of 19th-century realist paintings. In the second half of this century, prostitution became an issue in Europe, and painters of the time often commented on it. Nevertheless, there is no indication that prostitution was a problem in classical Athens. Therefore, there is no reason to assume that a vase painter would depict a flute player as a victim of sex work. A real flute player in classical Athens might have sold her body and pretended to enjoy it, or she might have genuinely enjoyed it. The vase painter could have painted her as enjoying it because that is how it would have appeared to the men who bought his cup. However, it is unclear from the vase painting itself whether or not the flute player is a prostitute. This ambiguity is consistent with the image of flute players in ancient literature.[35]

Around 500 BC, the popularity of ancient vase paintings depicting sex was at its zenith. These paintings often featured flute players in scenes that portrayed erotic fantasies. For instance, in a now-lost painting, a woman was depicted engaging in

[33] Corner 2012. But cf. Topper 2012b.
[34] Lewis 2002, 173.
[35] Goldman 2015.

sexual activity with an overturned amphora.[36] The flute player on a lekythos in New York might have symbolized a daughter from a respectable family during a flute lesson. However, this depiction was part of a broader context that included depictions from the world of the hetaira, a class of highly educated courtesans, as well as ordinary prostitutes.

Simultaneously, the scene on lekythos in New York was related to scenes from the virtuous world of brides and wedding ceremonies, where flute players also appeared. In the third quarter of the fifth century BC, vase painters began to portray the flute player in the company of other women, as seen on the hydria in the British Museum.[37] The standing flute player is positioned on the far left, accompanied by a woman seated on a chair and playing the lyre. Eros is garlanding the lyre player, and on the right, we can observe a woman with a box and lyre and another woman with a cross in the background, likely used for tuning. The presence of Eros hints at the scene's connection to wedding scenes, where female musicians were often present.[38] Thus, the flute player accompanies the lyre player, who might be the bride.

During our discussion on Athenian vase paintings, we noted that they do not convey any moral message or promote any particular viewpoint. The depiction of scenes involving a flute player leads us to believe that Athenians of that era might have viewed her as a schoolgirl, a bridesmaid at a wedding, or a professional musician whose performance might have ended in sexual intercourse. Interestingly, the vase painters did not need to clearly differentiate between these categories of girls. This observation widens the possibilities of identifying the girl and underscores the scene's significance in understanding life during that period.

Athenian painted vases are best understood as a whole. The scenes depicted on them were related to the scenes on other vases and, most importantly, to the vase itself.[39] The shapes of Athenian vases were determined by their function, and their painted decoration was often closely related to that function. Painting on a vase presents a specific challenge. In illustrations of books on vase paintings, we have to deal with the vase's rounded surface.[40] It is a challenge for photographers, who can only capture part of the drawing. However, vase paintings were not intended to be perceived in two dimensions. The Athenians gradually discovered the drawings on vases as they used them. Sometimes, the drawing could not be visible initially, even when the painting was on a flat surface, like on the bottom of the cups. When an Athenian man received a full cup of wine, he had no idea what awaited him at the bottom. Only when he drank the wine did the painting on the bottom appear before him. [41] The Athenian ceramic vase was not analogous to the wall or canvas on which one paints today, or the paper on which one draws, as Charles Dugas thought of it in his time. [42]

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[36] Cup, c. 510 BC, lost. BA 200559. Gerhard's Apparatus of drawings, in the Berlin Museum, xxi, 57, whence Vorberg 1926, pl. 22.

[37] Hydria, 440–430, London, British Museum, inv. no. E189. BA 213779.

[38] Oakley 2013, 114.

[39] On the relationship between function and decoration of Athenian vases cf. Shapiro 1997; Schmidt, 2005.

[40] Mayer and Petsalis-Diomidis 2023.

[41] Osborne 2018, 134–135.

[42] Dugas 1936, cf. Martens 1992, 11–22.

Ceramic vases carry images and co-create their meaning, which cannot be said of a wall, canvas, or paper. The vase's shape, function, and decoration all refer to each other. The vase and its function were part of the meaning of the painting's decoration, which used the vase's shape to comment on its function.

The methodology used in this book emphasizes the importance of the Athenian vase form for interpreting the paintings on it. We will not focus on a specific subject but on the vase shape, which is known as choes. Although scenes with children are prevalent on these vases, their interpretation is based on a systematic survey of all the scenes depicted in them. Therefore, we will study the complex problems associated with Athenian vases and their decoration on a small sample, the limits of which are well-defined. Our findings from this sample may or may not differ from those of other themes depicted on Athenian vases. However, the undeniable advantage of a detailed and easily verifiable micro-analysis, which is the first of its kind, is that it can be followed up by further research. Even if the conclusions we have drawn from this analysis are shown to be erroneous, the findings will remain valid. These generalisations will be discussed in the last chapter of this book, in which we will consider the reasons for the rise and fall of Athenian painted vases.