Iconographic Series in Attic Vase Painting: Technical Simplification or Semantic Strategy?

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The repetition of iconographic motifs and compositions is a widespread phenomenon within Attic vase painting. Most commonly, repetitive motifs are considered 'standardized' in terms of iconography, or 'mass products',[1] if one focuses on the production process. Seriality is perceived as triviality and contrasted to more varied iconographic compositions, less common decorations, masterpieces, or bespoke products, whose uniqueness or rarity are indicative of their value and esteem.[2] However, in Torelli's words: "[…] è la ripetizione del pezzo (o della forma o della classe e dello stile) che crea il fenomeno artistico non la sua unicità (o inclassificabilità)".[3] Thus, repetition means that a motif or shape has been popular and commercially successful. Examining the process that leads to the crystallization of iconographic series, such as serial productions, reveals information about aesthetic and semantic phenomena that may have influenced the economic success of wares in ancient society. It can help to shed light on the productive factors behind the aesthetics of images.

Before focusing on the repetition of iconographic motifs in vase painting, one must first consider issues of definition. I will first delineate what defines a series, how and why a motif becomes a serial product, and what technical factors may influence this process. Closely related to this is the concept of standardization, which then must be reviewed. This poses questions about the dynamics of series formation: should this be seen as a purely technical phenomenon or are its semantics more significant? This analysis will be supported by the exemplary case of mantle figures, one of the most popular motifs of the Athenian imagery, whose first signs of standardization appeared between the first and second quarter of the 5th century BC, drastically developing into a relatively uniform mass production.

Series, Mass Product and Standardization

Dealing with the concepts of replication and copying within Attic vase painting, Konrad Schauenburg recognized different types of replicas: 1) images repeated on different sides of the same vase; 2) different vases with identical motifs painted by the same painter; and 3) different vases with identical motifs decorated by different painters.[4] However, the use of the same motifs is not enough, Schauenburg argues, to constitute a replica: the composition has also to be the same. Consequently, Schauenburg excludes mass products from this classification,[5] although he remains concerned with isolated replicas and copies of extraordinary 'works of art'. When thinking about series, Volker Michael Strocka focused on compositions which match in dimensions and were produced at

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Fig. 1: Left: New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, X.21.21; Right: New Haven, The Yale University Art Gallery, 1913.137.

the same time, assuming they depend on the use of models in the case of Attic vases.[6] The serial production is limited to certain workshops or to the distribution of templates from the same cultural background and chronological period. Such an approach seems to have been influenced by a terminology adopted from sculpture research. However, if one tries to transfer this concept to iconography, the definition requires revision.

An iconographic series in vase painting can not only refer to the repetition of the entire composition, but also to a single motif used independently from the scenes and standardized by the repetition of distinctive features. This is what makes it adaptable to different contexts. Cases of motif repetition on the same vase shape are rather rare, but examples were produced during the second half of the 5th century and became more frequent during the 4th century BC (fig. 1).[7] Iconographic series in vase painting may well have been limited to a specific time period, yet it is not uncommon for motifs produced in series to go beyond their temporal boundaries and workshop walls, to develop diachronically across a wide geographical area. A series therefore results from the repetition of an archetype of either figure or composition that produces a standardized iconography and can extend over a longer period of time. In vase painting, iconographic series are more flexible, because, in contrast to sculpture, variations

are not interpreted as errors or inaccuracies[8] but belong to series development. The accuracy of the repetition of a model is otherwise, in the case of terracotta, guaranteed by the use of matrices.[9] Again, this is not the case in Attic ceramics, in which figures and compositions were not meant to reproduce precise copies, since the drawings were always designed by hand.

In addition, iconographic series are not static, as characterizing features of a motif are gradually standardized into series. Nevertheless, 'standardization' has been mostly considered as mere simplification or trivialization, caused by technical needs. For example, Trendall considered that the figures wearing a himation on the 'reverse' of south-Italian vases became standard objects by being repeated so often and monotonously.[10] Similarly, Giampiero Pianu interpreted the standardization of Etruscan pottery by the Sokra- and Fantasma-Groups in the 4th century also as a regression of quality. He connected the phenomenon with increasing demand[11] and linked it to apprentices in the workshops, who would have been in charge for monotonous and easier procedures.[12] This technical and economic causality would have led, according to Pianu, to lower quality products, resulting in a levelling and depersonalization of the object. Trendall, on the contrary, sees the reason for the repetition as an attempt by the painter to transmit his Greek identity, therefore recognizing its semantic value.

Following this debate on the dichotomy between economic and semantic factors influencing the series, I would like to point out how these aspects should rather be regarded as integrating parts of a consistent strategy.

The Creation of Iconographic Series

On a theoretical level, the standardization of motifs appears as the result of the development of mental patterns (the form of an object in the mind of a creator).[13] The prototype, with all its necessary characteristics, must have always been present in the memory of the painter. Afterwards, familiarity with the technique and the motif itself led to the simplification of frequently repeated figures. However, technical aspects cannot be detached from semantic contents, since the pictorial vocabulary[14] of the imagery also standardizes in order to guarantee the communication of essential narrative contents.[15] Therefore, the development of iconographic series must be considered both from the technical and the semantical point of view.

Mantle figures serve as an adequate example, as they are a uniform series with common and recursive characteristics, reproducing redundant figurative schemes or image compositions. Literary sources also offer an additional overview on the semantic of the himation. The best-known representations of the 4th century BC represent the endpoint of a standardization process (fig. 1), which can be traced back to the beginning of the red-figure production. In the second quarter of the 5th century we recognize the first signs of the standardization of mantle figures, gradually developing into a series

Fig. 2: Left: Munich, Antikensammlungen, 2313; Right: Vatican City, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, 16544.

and being often depicted in so-called 'conversation pieces', which have groups of static figures, apparently not involved in an action. At this point, the motif is in a consolidation phase, characterized by the fixation of basic iconographic details. Consequently, this process is to be considered as a vivid and non-linear development, which led to youths with one arm free from the mantle or completely draped, to be the most represented figures. Perhaps this is also, but not only, because they were easier to draw.[16]

The first stages of the development of this motif in the first half of the 5th century BC can be illustrated concretely by considering the œuvre of the Berlin, Harrow and Achilles Painters, as well as the Penthesilea Workshop. Focusing on the workshops also allows the technical requirements involved in the design and production processes of the motif to be highlighted.

Considering some examples of draped men by the Berlin Painter, we can recognize the tendency to repeatedly depict certain standardized figures corresponding to the same type. Some figures (fig. 2)[17] stand with their right knee slightly bent and turn their heads to the right, stretch their right arm forward and hold a stick with their left hand; the mantle is draped in the same way and even the wrinkles are similar, if we look, for example, at how the mantle folds on the left shoulder or how it falls down by the left leg.

Fig. 3: Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, 1965.5.

Of course, there are also variations that affect the age of the figures, the different kinds of stick, the gestures of their hands, or even how they turn their heads. Concentrating on the small details, the patterns of the figures are not identical: each one is a new creation, even though it refers to the same scheme.

Fig. 4: Ferrara, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, T475.

All the considered figures (see fig. 2 and note 17) appear in a similar composition: they are alone on one side of the vase and address themselves to persons on the other side. Nevertheless, the same type was used by the Berlin Painter in different contexts: the mantle figure could be involved in a ritual,[18] other draped youths receive a lyre – probably as a love gift – from an older man,[19] or a wreath from a flying Nike (fig. 3). Despite the evident variations, the scheme remains the same.

The repetition of the same compositions is best explained with examples by the Harrow Painter, although these are rarely identical. Between two completely draped figures we could find another draped youth (fig. 4) or a bearded older man.[20] Repetition of almost identical compositions appears more frequently from the second quarter of the 5th century BC within the workshop of the Penthesilea Painter. The phenomenon spreads not only to vases attributed to the same hand, like some vases by the Painter of Bologna 417 (fig. 5), but also links different painters with each other, as in the case of some *kylikes* by the Veii and Curtius Painters.[21] Also in these cases, the variations do not significantly alter the general pattern, but indicate that no intentional copy or replica was meant, rather that the painters worked with simplified archetypical models and combined them freely.

Fig. 5: Above: Tübingen, Universität, E 83; Below: Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F2526.

The vase shape can in part influence the composition. The outside of *kylikes* were well suited for three-figure groups (fig. 5), while the tondi were often used for two mantle youths, like in some examples by the painter of Orvieto 191A (fig. 6)[22]. Such

Fig. 6: Orvieto, Museo Civico, 1050.

considerations can also be made for amphorae by the Berlin and Achilles Painters. Isolated figures, as those described above, are often on one side of amphorae and usually show a standardized iconography. Considered alone, these figures look enigmatic and detached from the communicative system of the vases and seem more likely to be regarded as ornamental. However, their gestures restore the relationship between different image fields (fig. 7),[23] allowing us to interpret them as co-agents or spectators of the events taking place on the other side.[24] Thus, reconstructing the macro scene extending over both sides of the vase, on one of which there is always a mantle figure, the painter reveals the conscious use of a specific strategy, in which figure schemes, composition patterns and vase shapes concur to define a series.

Based on the examples presented here, as representative of many more vases, the consolidation process of iconographic series has to be defined diachronically[25]

Fig. 7: Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, 48.54.

by the constant repetition of standardized features, details, figure types and image compositions, being reproduced in the same way. Thus, the evident similarities allow for the clear recognition of a series.[26] Nevertheless, variations cannot be avoided in Attic vase painting, since every vase, despite the increasing standardization, is an autonomous creation not depending on matrices or intentional copy.

Economic Success and Semantic Strategy

When reproducing similar schemes, the painter potentially reduced the production time, thereby affecting also an immediate production cost saving. By choosing to use standardized figures and patterns – which are the easiest to be sketched – the painter is already familiar with the figures and does not have to be particularly original, even if it definitely does not mean he is uncreative. Variations are always present

and affect actively the meaning of the images. Saving the painter time should not be underestimated, since at this stage the quality of both sides of the vase is the same. Standardization cannot be seen as a consequence of the shoddy work of the apprentices in the workshop.[27] Simplification, therefore, becomes an economic factor in the work process; nevertheless, it is not enough to cause the development of an iconographic serial production, mostly because such series develop diachronically and not only within the workshop of one painter. Therefore, semantic factors must also be considered to explain the broad marketing of iconographical series.

"The selective reference reveals not just what the eye observes, but what the brain has been culturally conditioned to see as crucial in making a human appear human or a Greek appear Greek".[28] What Osborne says here about the perception of the image of the body can also be applied to the discussion on the creation of series, especially in the case of a mantle figure. Thanks to their repetition, figures and patterns mould the perception of the viewer and point out the important element of the visual narration. Thereby, the viewer was also used to receive the omnipresent element of the image, as the most relevant content bearer. Thus, details become superfluous in the simplification process: it is enough to show core archetypical elements in order to achieve visual communication with the viewer.

To understand the meaning of the mantle figure, we also require the help of literary sources, which clearly refer to an Athenian context, in which the himation denotes the affiliation to the male polis acting in the Athenian public space.[29] "Ἑλληνικὸν δὲ τὸ σχῆμά ἐστι τῷ Ὀρφεῖ":[30] wearing the himation turns even the Thracian Orpheus into an Hellene, showing that mantle figures refer not only to the Athenian polis as a socio-cultural background, but moreover to a broadly perceived Greek koine. Since simplification and redundancy reinforce its significance and serve to build narrative structures and strategies,[31] the repetition of mantle figures forms a meta-discourse.[32] This allows the viewer to have a different perspective on the picture and serves as a link between different representations and different vases, thus, permitting to perceive the image in the context of its cultural environment.

Yet there is another important effect of this process. The serial production of iconography and their consequent simplification render these figures more understandable and, therefore, valid, not least by amplifying their meaning and making them 'universal' in essence. This is of the highest relevance, if we consider that mantle figures spread throughout the Mediterranean.[33] The more the iconography is simplified and generalized, the greater the opportunity is for each viewer to recognize themselves in familiar mantle figures. Consequently, the serial reproduction *in primis* guarantees the greater diffusion of the motive. This, in the end, helps to answer the economic question of the marketing of series as 'mass-production', since the achieved general understanding ensures that the vases appeal to a broader audience. This popularity justifies, therefore, the success on the market.

To briefly conclude, different factors concur to define the question of the *Produktionsästhetik* of iconographic series: both technical issues and semantic aspects closely affect the impact of the series on the perception and taste of buyers. On one hand, the craftsman plays an essential role in the development of series production, by reducing the labour to speed up the process. On the other hand, the serial simplification and redundant repetition increase the general validity of a motif in the perception of the viewer, thus contributing to its economic success.

Notes

[1] For this definition of mass products, see Langner 2012c, 11 f.

[2] The discussion is strictly connected to the debate on the alleged dichotomy between image and decoration, see newly Squire – Dietrich 2018, esp. Reinhardt 2018, 300 f.

[3] Torelli 1985, 5.

[4] Schauenburg 1977, 198–200. Unlike Beazley, who only speaks of replicas when vases are of the same shape and iconography (cf. ABV 569, 664, 567, 634, further examples in Schauenburg 1977, 195 no. 3), although the term is not always used consistently.

[5] Schauenburg 1977, 197.

[6] Strocka 1979, 158.

[7] See also, with the same motif: Pilsen, Museum of Western Bohemia, 8314 (BAPD 230321; CVA Pilsen [1] pl. 21, 1); Saint Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, B4256 (BAPD 30552); New Haven, Yale University, 136 (BAPD 230323; CVA New Haven [1] pl. 6, 2).

[8] Schauenburg 1977, 197 f.

[9] For series and variation in terracotta reliefs see Reinhardt 2016; about Terra Sigillata see Flecker in this volume.

[10] LCS, 11. Nevertheless, standardization offers considerable help for connoisseurship: where the iconography rarely changes, any variation can refer to a different painter.

[11] Pianu 1978, 171 f.; Pianu 1985.

[12] Pianu 1978, 172; also: Beazley 1959, 47 f.; Heilmeyer 2008, 245 f.

[13] Marks et al. 2001, 26.

[14] Catoni 2005, 3; see also Steiner 1997, 167.

[15] For the semantic of repetition as syntactical element see Steiner 1993; Steiner 1997; Steiner 2007, esp. 39 f. 52–73. 94–128; see also Pirson 2014, 211.

[16] See Franceschini 2018, esp. 121–150.

[17] See with the same motif also: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 56.171.38 (BAPD 201811; Kurtz 1983, pl. 1. 36); Montpellier, Musée Fabre, 139 (BAPD 201818; Landes – Laurens 1988, 156 no. 100); Napoli, Museo Nazionale, 86049 (BAPD 201826; Beazley 1922, 77). Other examples feature youths stretching their arms, with or without a stick, to one side of the amphorae: Baranello, Museo Civico, 93 (BAPD 9882; Dareggi 1977, pl. 7); Boulogne, Musée Communale, 656 (BAPD 201856; Beazley 1974, pl. 16); Havana, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 160 (BAPD 201910; Olmos 1990, 104–107 no. 29); Munich, Antikensammlungen, 2319 (BAPD 201830; CVA Munich [5] pl. 210, 4).

[18] See Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, KÄ423 (BAPD 275095; CVA Basel [3] pl. 40, 1).
[19] See Mannheim, Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, 11 (BAPD 201872; CVA Mannheim [2] pl. 17, 1. 3).
[20] See Caltanissetta, Museo Civico, 352517 (BAPD 352517; Panvini 2005, 41 fig. 37).
[21] e.g., Gotha, Schlossmuseum, 80 (BAPD 211961; CVA Gotha [1] pl. 47, 2–3) and Columbia, Museum of Art and Archaeology, 66.2 (CVA Columbia [1] pl. 32, 3–4).
[22] See also Rome, Villa Giulia, 50513 (BAPD 212646); London, Sotheby´s (BAPD 212620).
[23] See Isler-Kerényi 1971, 28–30; Franceschini 2018, 211; see also Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, B1561 (BAPD 213829; Oakley 1997, pl. 9 c; 45 d no. 11); Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 696 (BAPD 213831; CVA Vienna [2] pl. 63, 1–2).
[24] Franceschini 2016, 175 f.
[25] In this paper, I focus on some painters and workshops, but the same figure types are repeated and continue to be simplified until the 4th century BC, e.g., for the types in fig. 2 and 4 see Franceschini 2018, 81–84. 109–111. 115–118.
[26] Cf. Heilmeyer 2008, 244.
[27] For workshop organization see Langner 2016, 774; Mackay 2016.
[28] Osborne 2011, 45.
[29] See Langner 2012b, 14; Franceschini 2018, 215 f.
[30] Paus. 10.30.6.
[31] Steiner 1993, 211; Steiner 1997, 163; about repetition linking images together see Pearson 2015, 150. 158 f.
[32] For repetition in general as meta-discourse, see Steiner 1997, 163. 167; Steiner 2007, 53–62. 100–108.
[33] Thereby mantle figures are relevant in regards to the acceptance of the product, see Langner 2012a, 45 f.

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Abbreviations

ABV – J. D. Beazley, Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters (Oxford 1956).
BAPD – Beazley Archive Pottery Database. (http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/databases/pottery)
LCS – A. D. Trendall, The Red-Figured Vases of Lucania, Campania and Sicily (Oxford 1967).

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