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Ad honorem Jan Bažant

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Attic Vases, Curves, and Figures

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It is a commonplace that Attic red-figure painters alter the proportions of human figures by making them taller somewhat analogous to what Lysippos did two centuries later in sculpture.¹ Yet I wonder if the figures really were meant by the vase-painters to be seen as taller than before or only seem so to us.

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First, consider how a vase is used affects the placement of its decoration. Kraters are large vessels for liquids. Because they were placed either on the ground or on low tables, they sometimes were decorated on the inside of the lip, and, in the case of column-kraters on the top of the lip.² Parts that would not be seen would not normally be decorated. Hence the location of figured scenes helps explain how the vases were actually used. On an Attic black-figure column-krater in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a series of animals parade across the flat top of the lip and inside the lip are ships and dolphins in water, its waves indicated by half-circles.³ The idea is presumably that the ships and dolphins would seem to be actually in the sea when the krater was full. The important point is that large Greek vases are neither shelved nor kept in cabinets. For example, a market scene on a pelike in Florence shows two hydrias and an amphora on the ground; while a black-figure lekythos in Boston shows the sale of olive oil with large amphoras on the ground.⁴

Some shapes are seen in multiple positions because of the way they are used. For example, oinochoes are depicted either in profile or from the front. A kylix by Douris in the British Museum shows one youth with an oinochoe seen in profile, while the second youth, on the same side, holds it tipped downward and viewed from the front.⁵ In this case, it would seem that an oinochoe could be decorated with either the profile or the front carrying the main scene. Both forms exist, but not together in Greek art. A number of years ago a study of an Etrusco-Protocorinthian oinochoe, with the same basic shape as a contemporary Greek oinochoe, demonstrated that the profile was

¹ PLINY THE ELDER, *Natural History*, XXXIV,65. This essay is an excerpt from my extended study of optics and illusionism in classical antiquity. I thank Susan Woodford for nobly trying to lead me away from error. All URLs were accessed in May 2011. And, finally and certainly most important, this contribution is for Jan with very fond memories of our time together on the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*.

² LISSARAGUE (1990, 32), in fact, says that the krater “is most often found ... set on the ground.” In Chapter 2, “The Space of the *Krater*,” he illustrates a number of column-kraters resting on the ground.

³ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 07.286.76; Lykomedes Painter. *BAD* 10085.

⁴ (1) Florence 72732; *BAD* 9458; SCHEIBLER 1983, 19 fig. 7. (2) Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 99.526; White-ground Attic black-figure lekythos; HASPELS, *ABL*, pl. 24 fig. 4 where attributed to the Gela Painter. For photographs: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/mfa-images>, search under the accession number. *BAD* 2930; SCHEIBLER 1983, 141 fig. 123. Both vases date to ca. 500 BC.

⁵ For example: London, British Museum E 49 [GR 1843.11–3.15] and Rome, Villa Giulia, from Vulci, and by Douris, ca. 485–480 BC. *BAD* No. 205096; BUITRON-OLIVER 1995, 78 No. 96 with pls. 62 (both exteriors and the interior) and pl. 144 for a head-on view of the upright vase. *CVA* Great Britain 17 British Museum 9, 35–36 No. 20, pls. 28–29 and fig. 7b.

the primary view. As a result, the scene begins and ends at the high strap handle.⁶ Knowing where a figured scene starts can make a difference in interpreting its subject. In contrast, the area just below the lip is considered the center of focus on Greek oinochoes. Hence on an Attic red-figure by the Dutuit Painter in Paris, Artemis stands directly below the trefoil mouth with a fawn on the right.⁷ No other figures appear on the vase. Because of the differences between the scenic divisions of Etruscan and Greek oinochoes, Etruscan evidence from vases and tomb paintings must be used cautiously.

Smaller vases, like the oinochoes and kylikes, stand on tables, are hung on the walls, and in the case of funerary vases were sometimes placed on the low steps of grave monuments. The lekythos in Boston with the sale of oil also displays alabastra hanging on the wall. An Attic white-ground lekythos in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shows a stele atop three low steps on which sit six lekythoi, two on their sides, and one kylix.⁸ Again the viewer is looking down on the vases.

Hydrias are a special case. They are displayed in several different positions. In the latter part of the sixth century BC, fountains houses were a popular subject on hydrias, which were used to fetch water. On an Attic black-figure hydria in Würzburg, four women are talking to each other at the fountain house, while a fifth waits as her hydria, standing on a low block, is filled from a lion's head waterspout.⁹ We see that hydria with its high strap handle and two side ones from the back. In each pair of conversing women, the one on the left has a full hydria, upright, on top of her head, while her partner has an empty one lying on its side. When empty, the hydria is sometimes carried just by the strap handle, as in scenes of Poseidon pursuing Amymone.¹⁰ All of the scenes just mentioned appear on the front of the vase, that is opposite the strap handle and below the lip. What varies, as I mentioned above, is how the scenes on the front are placed on the hydrias.¹¹

Enough examples have been given to see that Attic vases are not displayed the way we might expect today, when our quest for germ-free environments precludes placing vessels with edibles on the ground among the mice and roaches. At the same time it is evident that the way the vase was displayed and used could affect how the scenes were placed and designed. Since large vases were either on the ground or on low tables, people looked down on them. In early Attic red-figure vase painting this fact had a profound effect on the execution of figures. If you look down at a vase normally displayed below your head, the bottom of the vase recedes away from view. Hence the painter has to elongate the figure for it to appear to have "normal" proportions. In other words, the elongation of the figures of the Berlin Painter and his contemporaries is an artifact of our modern means of reproduction, because the drawings give actual not viewing measurements and photographs similarly alter the dimensions depending on the angle from which they were taken.

⁶ SMALL 1986. The vase is from Tragliatella, near Caere, and is now in Rome, Musei Capitolini Inv. 358 Mob. For color photographs: MARTELLI 1987, 102 No. 49 and pp. 270–272.

⁷ Paris, Musée du Petit Palais 315 (Dut. 326). *BAD* No. 203153; REEDER 1995, 310–11 No. 91 where dated to 500–475 BC.

⁸ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 23.160.38. Bosanquet Painter. *BAD* No. 216332; NOBLE 1988, 64 fig. 131.

⁹ Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum L 304. *BAD* No. 306484; SIMON 1975, 118–119, pl. 30 (frontal view). BECKEL *et al.* 1983, 82–83 (color photograph), 181; LEWIS 2002, 73 fig. 2.15 (detail), with a brief discussion of the subject on 72–73.

¹⁰ For example, on an Attic red-figure lekythos in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.230.35. The Phiale Painter. *BAD* No. 214280; REEDER 1995, 356–357 No. 113 and detail on p. 14.

¹¹ For this purposes of this brief essay I have somewhat simplified my analysis of the relationship between the changing shape of the hydria and hence the changing form of its decoration and its placement on the hydria.

A simple example of the problem of photographs can be seen in the figure of Herakles on a neck-amphora by the Kleophrades Painter in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹² [Figs. 1–2] In one photograph, shot head-on of the vase, Herakles appears tall and slender. Yet in another photograph he looks quite stocky and even muscular. This photograph was clearly taken looking down on the vase and illustrates how one’s viewpoint can dramatically affect what one sees. I contend that the vase painters at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the fifth century realized that vases were three-dimensional objects whose curves affected how their figures were seen and therefore the vase painters made adjustments to produce the “ideal” height of the figures *when viewed from their optimum position*. Scholars, in contrast, who work from drawings and photographs shot head-on, as most are, have assumed that the aesthetic for the height of the figures had changed.¹³ Instead the stocky Herakles resembles the stocky Achilles on the C Painter kylix¹⁴ [Fig. 3] and was the aim of the vase-painter, as another hydria by the Berlin Painter shows.¹⁵ On it divinities are making a libation. Hermes, who is to the left of the strap handle appears elegantly elongated in a head-on view, but stocky when looking down. Just how remarkable the changes are from the actual vase can be seen in two photographs – a head-on detail of the shoulder region of the front next to an optimum view looking down where it is clear that the shoulder of the vase is virtually flat. Hence the heads of the divinities are painted on the shoulder of the vase and attach to the bodies of the figures at almost a 90-degree angle. The divinities’ bodies, in turn, slowly recede from view on the gentle curve of the body of the vase. Thus what we have is one of the earliest examples of artists trying to counter the natural effect of foreshortening produced by the sharp curves of their vases. In other words, the “canonical” or optimum view of a vase differs between antiquity and now. The general rule is that they looked down on vases, while we look straight at them. This position leads to a basic rule of thumb that heads tend to go above the major curve from the shoulder to the body. Please note my use of “tend”; there are exceptions. I am, however, talking of rules that apply often enough to be truly considered rules.

I also believe that it is not coincidental that this period marks the beginning of the popularity of single, spotlighted figures taking up the entire side of an amphora even in scenes involving two characters. On the New York amphora by the Kleophrades Painter with Herakles just discussed, the story is about Herakles and Apollo fighting over the tripod with the two figures appearing on different sides. In other words, the Kleophrades Painter forces the viewer to walk around the vase to understand the story, because he thinks of his vase as a single three-dimensional unit. At the same time as the viewer circles the vase, he replicates the movement of Apollo chasing after Herakles.

In conclusion, vases are three-dimensional objects and were treated as such by Attic red-figure vase-painters. If we do not view the vases as the artists intended them to be seen, then we cannot understand how they worked and often misinterpret the figures and even whole scenes.

¹² New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 13.233. *BAD* 201666; BOTHMER 1972, No. 16 (shot looking down) where dated to 490–480 BC; SCHEFOLD/JUNG 1981, 119 fig. 146 (shot head-on).

¹³ BEYEN 1954 is the only scholar I know to mention the effect of the curve of a vase on the portrayal of anything.

¹⁴ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 01.8.6. BOTHMER 1972, No. 5 with pictures of the interior (a Gorgon in knielauf position) and exterior (horsemen riding to the left on one side and the ambush of Troilos on the other). *BAD* No. 300381; *LIMC* 1 Achilles No. 307 with pl. 88.

¹⁵ Once Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 1978.45, now returned to Italy. *BAD* 84. *LIMC* 2, Apollon No. 860, p. 289 and pl. 260; *LIMC* 2 Artemis No. 1011a, p. 698 and pl. 523; and *LIMC* 5 Hermes No. 744, p. 348 where dated to 480 BC and listed as Basel, Market, and pl. 260 (two photographs). A photograph is also available as No. 17 in: www.archeologia.beniculturali.it/.../Nostoi_Ceramica_attica_figure_rosse_74-128.pdf.

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Summary

Attic red-figure vase painters recognized that the curves of vases affected the way figures are viewed with the result that they elongated the proportions of their figures in order to maintain the contemporary aesthetic of stocky figures.

Keywords: Attic red-figure vases; proportions; viewing

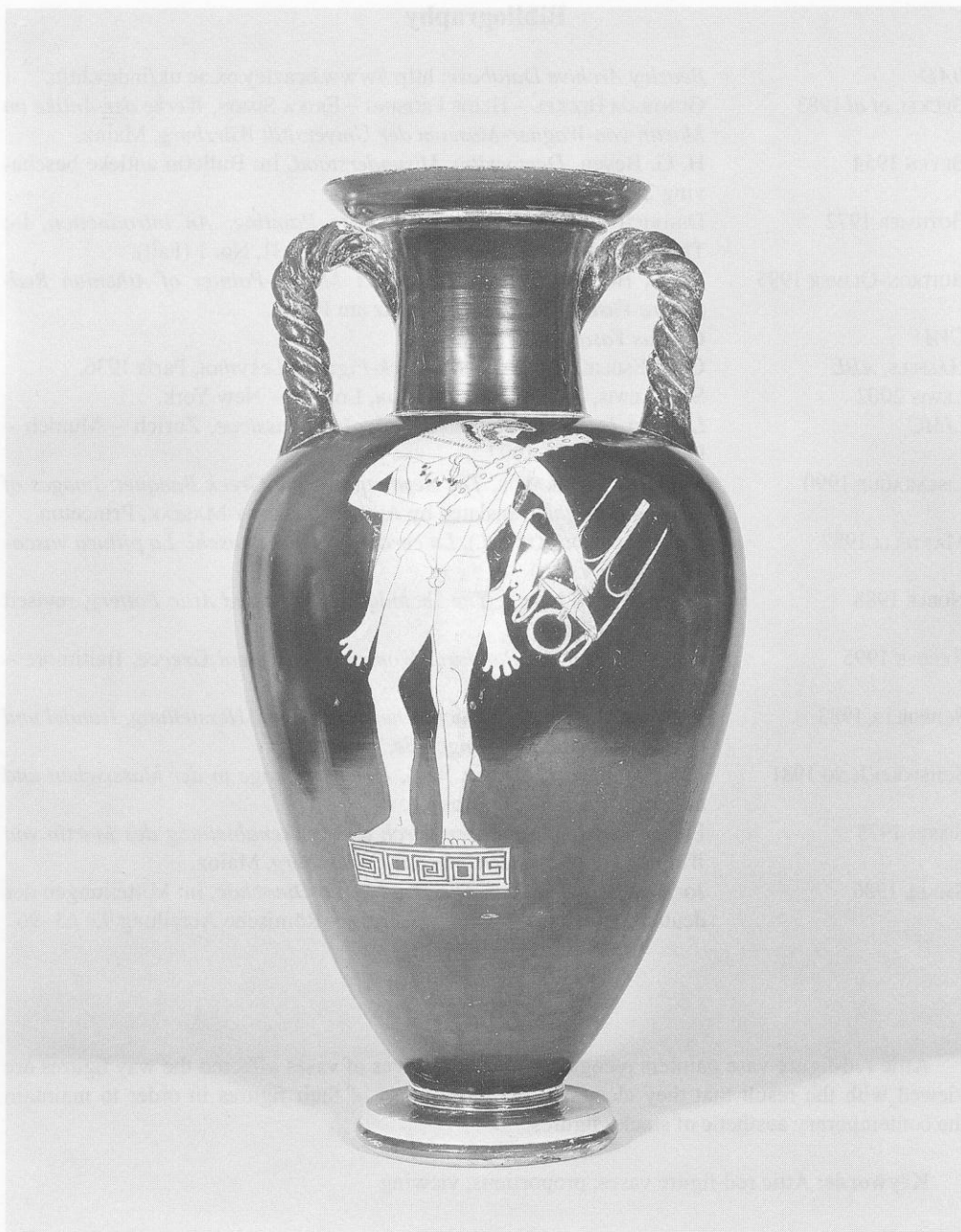


Fig. 1. Herakles on a neck-amphora by Kleophrades. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1913 (13.233). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 2. Herakles on a neck-amphora by Kleophrades. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1913 (13.233). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 3. Achilles pursuing Troilos on a Siana Cup by the C-Painter. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, 1901(01.8.6). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.