
AN
ARCHAEOLOGY
OF
REPRESENTATIONS

ANCIENT GREEK VASE-PAINTING
AND CONTEMPORARY METHODOLOGIES

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ATHENS - 2009

CHAPTER FOUR
How not to Tell a Story*

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I grew up with a fake painted Persian wall hanging from the 1920s-1930s. Fake—because on the back on the bottom hem, it says “Made in France” not even “Fabrique en France.” On it was depicted a rousing battle scene that I tried to understand when I was older and supposedly had all the iconographical tools I needed to dissect any figured scene, even non-classical ones. After years of staring at it, I slowly came to the conclusion that it simply made no sense. It was impossible to tell who was on whose side and which way the battle was going not because of the fog of war, but because of ineptitude on the part of the artist. This chapter examines classical instances of the same phenomenon.

First it is necessary to understand what good visual story-telling is. Exekias is a master narrator. Not only is his choice of subject often unusual, but also his choice of moment. For example, for his suicide of Ajax Exekias selects the earlier moment of Ajax intently focused on putting the sword in place on a small mound with a “weeping” palm tree on the left and his armor (two spears, shield and helmet) on the right.¹ The simplicity and starkness of the scene are far more effective than the gorier representations of Ajax already impaled on his sword. For example, the moment of discovery

* This chapter is for my mother, the only other person in my family who appreciated the wall hanging; when my father declined to rehang it after a repainting of its wall, she passed it on to me much to my father’s relief. I thank Susan Woodford for her helpful comments on a draft of this chapter. Please note that I have not given full references for the objects I discuss. I do include the basic identifying information (current location, Beazley and *LIMC* references, etc.) as well as at least one published photograph.

¹ Boulogne, Musée municipale 558; *ABV* 145.18; *LIMC* I Aias I no. 104 (p. 329 with pl. 245) where dated to ca. 540 BC. A. F. Stewart, “Narrative, Genre, and Realism in the Work of the Amasis Painter,” in *Papers on the Amasis Painter and his World*, Malibu 1987, 32-33, discusses and illustrates (figs. 4-5) this same comparison, but obviously with a somewhat different analysis. On the palm tree, see J. M. Hurwit, “Palm Trees and the Pathetic Fallacy in Archaic Greek Poetry and Art,” *Classical Journal* 77 (1982), 193-199.

of the dead Ajax by the Greeks appears on an earlier Corinthian cup by the Cavalcade Painter (Fig. 1).² Ajax has awkwardly fallen forward onto his sword which pokes through his mid-section. Standing on either side of him are two white-haired, bearded men labeled Phoinix (on the left) and Nestor (on the right). Four more Greeks surround the central figures with two horsemen enclosing the scene. Not only do the additional figures visually diffuse the focus from Ajax, but also they add nothing appreciable to the story, though admittedly it can be useful to know who was present when he was discovered. Exekias, in contrast, knows how to distill a story to a single encapsulating moment.³

Exekias also knows labels are necessary, when the action is insufficient to identify the story. For example, on his famous amphora in the Vatican with Achilles and Ajax playing a game, he labels both participants.⁴ Otherwise the two warriors, who have no particular identifying attributes, could be any two warriors. The difficulty of assigning names is compounded in this case for us, because this event is not described in any extant literary source. Furthermore, Exekias preferred to err on the side of over-identification. His depiction of the duel between Achilles and Penthesilea needs no inscriptions, for only one story tells of a fateful duel between a Greek warrior and a woman who too late realize their love for each other.⁵ Exekias brilliantly captures that moment, as they gaze helplessly into each other's eyes. In contrast, the Penthesilea Painter about 80 years later, like the Cavalcade Painter, lessens the impact by including an additional Greek

² Basel, Antikenmuseum BS 1404; *LIMC* I Aias I no. 122 (p. 330 with pl. 248) where dated to ca. 580 BC; D. A. Amyx, *Corinthian Vase-Painting of the Archaic Period*, Berkeley, CA 1988, 197 and pl. 80

³ The Corinthian vase may be easier to interpret than the Exekias vase because of the labels. Nonetheless, I believe that no depiction can be fully understood without knowledge of its story. While both scenes clearly depict suicides, the names alone do not explain, for example, who Ajax is and why he committed suicide.

⁴ Rome, Vatican, Museo Gregoriano 16757, from Vulci; *ABV* 145.13; *LIMC* I Achilleus 397 (p. 97 with pl. 97). For the case that the story was created by an artist, see S. Woodford, "Ajax and Achilles Playing a Game on an Olpe in Oxford," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982), 173-185; against, see S. Lowenstam, "The Arming of Achilleus on Early Greek Vases," *Classical Antiquity* 12 (1993), 215.

⁵ London, British Museum B 210 (neck-amphora); *ABV* 144.8; *LIMC* 7 Penthesilea 17 (p. 298 and pl. 234) where dated to ca. 530 BC.



Figure 1: Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, inv. BS 1404.

warrior and a dead Amazon; nor does he include inscriptions.⁶ For Exekias the story is paramount and he wants his viewers to know precisely who is who and what is happening. Sadly not all Greek artists were as gifted as Exekias. The rest of this chapter focuses on them.

The first type I examine honors my “Persian” hanging. As certain vase painters decorated their vases with meaningless inscriptions to give a patina of learning, so some vase painters adorned their pots with meaningless scenes to suggest a story without quite telling one. One of the prime exemplars is no less than the Amasis Painter whose figures are aesthetically pleasing but who seem grouped together more for the aesthetic effect than for the story. The Amasis Painter’s lack of skill in this area is well-known. For example, Bothmer with some special pleading says: “Puzzling though some of the subjects are, they are not, as Sir Thomas Browne put it, ‘beyond all conjecture.’”⁷ On the other hand, Boardman is probably right when he says that: “The excessive ingenuity that often has to be summoned to make sense of many of these [scenes] is, I suspect, misapplied. It was not that Amasis was stupid or did not care, but he was less interested than, say,

⁶ Munich, Antikensammlungen 2688 (interior of *kylix*); ARV² 879.1; LIMC 7 Penthesilea no. 34 (p. 298 and pl. 235) where dated to ca. 450 BC.

⁷ D. von Bothmer, *The Amasis Painter and his World: Vase-Painting in Sixth-Century B.C. Athens*, Malibu 1985, 45.

Exekias or the main artist of Group E, in plain storytelling.”⁸ Stewart says that “the keynote [of the Amasis Painter] is realism.”⁹ He makes this assessment regarding the panel-amphora in Würzburg with satyrs making wine.¹⁰ Now anyone who portrays shaggy satyrs performing “everyday” tasks is not truly interested in realism. We would certainly not claim that Disney’s *Snow White* showed a realistic depiction of mining with the seven dwarfs performing the various tasks, though that cartoon does tell its story marvelously well.

Instead the Amasis Painter prefers stock designs for his scenes often with flanking standing figures. To understand the Amasis Painter’s lack of skill in telling stories, consider one of his vases with an easily recognizable mythological scene. A panel-amphora in Berlin shows a subject popular in the sixth century BC, the introduction of Herakles into Olympus (Fig. 2).¹¹ The subject takes a moment or two to identify, because unlike other representations of this subject, the four major participants are reduced in the number of attributes they have and the fifth figure, an unidentifiable youth with a dog on the right end takes up the same amount of visual space as his counterpart on the left, Zeus, depicted without his thunderbolt and wearing a short *chiton* and *chlamys*. Zeus receives the other four, including the youth, who are led by Hermes with his caduceus, *petasos*, and one of the two dogs. Athena stands in the center and takes up the most room with the crest of her helmet extending into the crowning molding. She has her spear, but lacks both her shield and aegis. Behind her comes Herakles, bearded, and with a puny club resting on his right shoulder and a bow held in his left hand. Notably Herakles wears a short *chiton* and is without his signature attribute, the lion skin. Normally all participants are fully dressed, as appropriate for the formal reception of Herakles, as on, for example, an amphora

⁸ J. Boardman, “Amasis: The Implications of his Name,” in *Papers on the Amasis Painter and his World*, Malibu 1987, 147. Boardman believes that the Amasis Painter and Amasis the Potter are the same person, Amasis.

⁹ Stewart 1987 (above, note 1), 36.

¹⁰ Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum L 265; *ABV* 151.22; Bothmer 1985 (above, note 7), 113-118, no. 19 and 61 (color photograph); Stewart 1987 (above, note 1), 36, fig. 10.

¹¹ Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung F 1688; *ABV* 150.9; Bothmer 1985 (above, note 7), 90-92, no. 9 where dated to ca. 540 BC; *LIMC* 5 Herakles no. 2852 (p. 123).

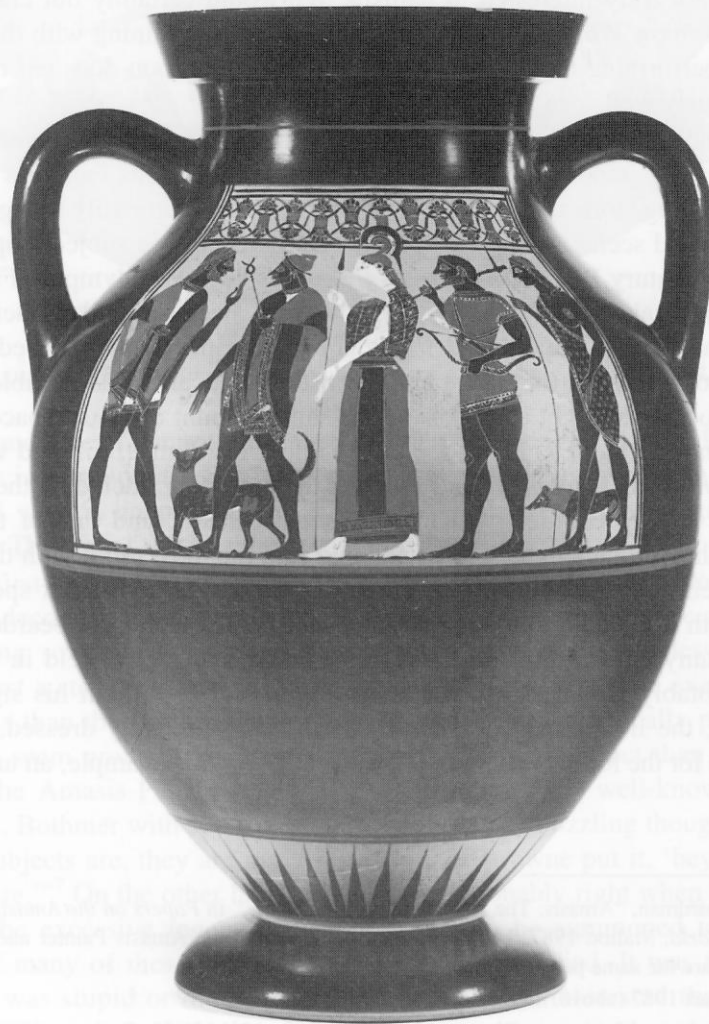


Figure 2: Berlin, Antikensammlung F 1688.

attributed to Group E, now in Basel (Fig. 3).¹² There all the figures are standing, as on the Amasis Painter amphora, and Athena again takes the center, but this time she carries a large shield with a massive gorgon's head filling it as a device. In front of her is Hermes with his dog and now also wearing his winged boots. On the far left both Zeus and Hera receive the divinities. Zeus holds his thunderbolt in his right hand. Herakles in full regalia (lion skin, club, sheathed sword, and quiver) stands behind Athena. Behind him come Poseidon and, as in the Amasis Painter scene, an unidentified youth. Only one dog appears between Hermes and Athena. Zeus and Poseidon wear long *chitons* and mantles.

Side B of the Amasis Painter vase is more problematic than Side A, since the only recognizable figure is Hermes, with his *petasos* and caduceus, standing in the center and flanked by two pairs of youths with dogs (Fig. 4). The youths next to Hermes have bows and the ones on the ends have spears. While Carl Robert came up with an interpretation of Apollo and Idas for the two youths, this identification has in Bothmer's words "become somewhat less certain" because of similar figures on other vases by the Amasis Painter.¹³ In short, the issue is not us and our lack of knowledge of tales from the sixth century BC, but rather that for whatever the reason the Amasis Painter does not tell stories well. Of course the Amasis Painter is not alone in being narratively challenged, but the high quality of his vases sets him apart from those who are neither good draftsmen nor good storytellers. In some cases these artists are like the person who begins to tell a joke and then forgets the punch line. In this category belong the representations of Herakles wrestling the lion, but already wearing its skin.¹⁴ Yes, the lion skin makes Herakles quickly identifiable, but its presence destroys the whole point of the encounter.

¹² Basel, Antikenmuseum BS 496; not in *ABV*; *LIMC* 5 Herakles no. 2850 (p. 123 with pl. 113) where dated to ca. 550 BC.

¹³ Bothmer 1985 (above, note 7), 91.

¹⁴ The *LIMC* entry for Herakles lists one secure and one slightly less secure example. The first is a carnelian scarab dated to ca. 500 BC which focuses on the two combatants: Paris, Cabinet Médailles, de Luynes 257; *LIMC* 5 Herakles 1790 (p. 19 with pl. 35). The second is an Attic red-figure bell-*krater*: Utrecht, University vH 18, from Naples; *ARV*² 1053.42 = Polygnotos Group; *LIMC* 5 Herakles 1891 (p. 25 with pl. 47). R. Vollkommer (*Herakles in the Art of Classical Greece*, Oxford 1988, 3), in discussing this vase (his no. 5 with 3, fig. 2) says that "[t]he fact that Herakles already wears a lion skin does not tell against this, since several painters had depicted Herakles in this way."

At other times artists err on the opposite end by not distinguishing their figures sufficiently enough to determine who they are. One might think that Herakles ranks among the most recognizable with his lion skin and club, but he gets confounded with Theseus in their respective fights with bulls.¹⁵ Herakles captures the Cretan bull and Theseus the Marathon bull. While the way one would tackle a bull might be similar, the distinguishing attributes for the two heroes should be different. Unfortunately Herakles does not always wear his lion skin during this labor. That forces the viewer to make an awfully close analysis of the scene to figure out which hero is involved. According to Shefton, Theseus does not appear bearded or with bow and arrows during this episode, though Jackson notes that Theseus sometimes has a beard when killing the Minotaur, an episode that occurs before the one with the bull.¹⁶ She also adds that in the archaic period Herakles tends to have short curly hair and Theseus long hair pulled back into a *krobylos*. Even these distinctions do not always work for routine Attic black-figure painters like the Gela and Haimon Painters.¹⁷ There is even an Attic black-figure neck-amphora with Herakles and the Bull on both sides.¹⁸ The moment chosen differs with Herakles literally taking the bull by the horns on one side and tying him up on the other. The curiosity is that in the first case Herakles appears nude and in the center with his cloak tied about his waist and a second cloak hanging on the tree. On this side Herakles also wears a sheathed sword.

Similar ambiguities occur in depictions of duels. Beazley said:

We now turn to the uninscribed pictures. Many of the Attic black-figured pictures in which the two combatants are flanked by two female figures must represent Achilles and Memnon in the presence of Thetis and Eos. . . . If there is no distinguishing mark like the flower (i.e. an attribute of Aphrodite,

¹⁵ While Jason also fights a bull using a club as his weapon, the context tends to separate this encounter from the other two. Jason generally does his deed in the presence of Medea. For example: Apulian red-figure volute-*krater* Naples 82261 (H3252) from Ruvo; *RVAp* II 977 no. 200 (connected with the White Saccos Group); *LIMC* 5 Iason 17 (p. 631 with pl. 427).

¹⁶ B. B. Shefton, "Herakles and Theseus on a Red-Figured Louterion," *Hesperia* 31 (1962), 344-353 and 367-368 (summary of differences between Herakles and Theseus fighting their bulls); H. Jackson, "Herakles or Theseus? An Attic Black-Figure Vase at Monash University in Melbourne," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 5/6 (1992/1993), 134-138.

¹⁷ Shefton 1962 (above, note 16), 368, notes the swapping of attributes with references.

¹⁸ Melbourne, Geddes Collection Gp A1.8; *Para.* 169.9bis = Manner of the Acheloos Painter; Jackson 1992/1993 (above, note 16), with pl. 41.



Figure 3: Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, inv. BS 496.

indicating an Aeneas and Diomedes duel), there is a strong probability that the subject is Achilles and Memnon.¹⁹

The problem is that when the same set of figures—two warriors dueling with female figures in attendance—occur in Etruscan art, they are labeled Eteocles and Polyneices with Iocasta and Antigone as the two women.²⁰ Beazley's initial "must represent" no longer reflects even his weaker "strong probability" in identifying the duelists. We simply do not know and are probably

¹⁹ L. D. Caskey and J. D. Beazley, *Attic Vase Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. Part II, Boston/London 1954, 17 with bibliography.

²⁰ For full discussion, see J. P. Small, *Studies Related to the Theban Cycle on Late Etruscan Urns*, Rome 1981, 108-110 with specific examples and further bibliography given. For a Greek example, consider an Attic red-figure *kylix*-*krater* by the Tyszkiewicz Painter: Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 97.368; *ARV*² 290.1; *LIMC* I Achilleus no. 833 with pl. 139. For an Etruscan example, compare a late Etruscan funerary urn in Volterra: Volterra 557; Small 1981 (above, note 20), 34, no. 32 with pl. 15b.

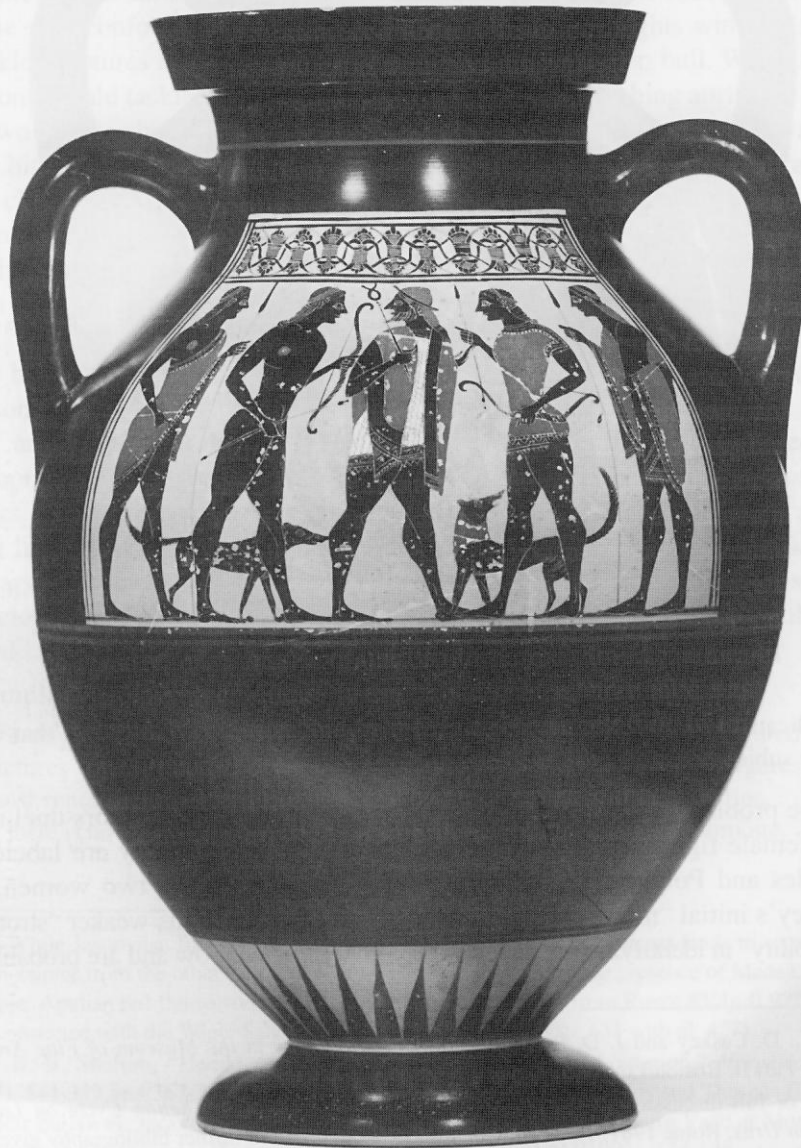


Figure 4: Berlin, Antikensammlung F 1688.

better off not forcing a specific identification. In fact, the very ambiguity of the participants makes the scene more attractive to a buyer who can interpret the conflict as he wishes and even as a duel between two warriors whom he knew personally.

Etruscan art again highlights my last type of problematic narratives. The Etruscans liked to depict groups of figures, often named, but not doing anything particular. For example, on a Hellenistic mirror Mevntie, Zelachtra and Ethun, all three otherwise unknown to us, appear with Achle (Achilleus) on the far right (Fig. 5).²¹ It seems to me that these scenes are not meant to tell any story or, in fact, even imply a story. Instead they are group portraits produced in the same spirit as modern photographs of the visiting celebrity shown with the local dignitaries. In some cases, such assemblies of figures resemble casts before a play has begun. In fact, Achle on the Etruscan mirror sits grasping his right leg with both his hands in a manner closely resembling the seated hero on the reverse side of the Niobid *krater*.²² I cannot name that hero on the Niobid vase nor anyone other than the two figures clearly identified by their attributes, Athena and Herakles. While the scene may have once been meaningful to a contemporary Athenian, scholars have offered such disparate interpretations as the battle at Marathon, the Argonauts, and the Seven against Thebes.²³ We cannot decide, because the figures are standing and sitting around waiting for the action to begin with each one more or less isolated in his or her own space. They are not interacting, as do Artemis and Apollo on the other side, as they slay the Niobids one by one. Labels, of course, would have helped, but the Niobid Painter did not realize that he needed them.

In conclusion, I have referred to three major artistic mechanisms that lead the scholar astray: meaningless scenes, ambiguous characters, and group portraits, which we misinterpret as narratives. No doubt others exist. The real point is that we should not always blame ourselves for not knowing enough about ancient Greek art and culture to figure out what their scenes mean. Sometimes it is their fault for not providing enough information.

²¹ Bronze hand mirror, Rome, Villa Giulia 56135; *LIMC* I *Achle* no. 164 (p. 209) with pl. 155; *LIMC* 6 *Mevntie* no. 1 (p. 566).

²² Attic red-figure *kalyx-krater* by the Niobid Painter, Paris, Louvre G341, from Orvieto; *ARV*² 601.22; J. P. Small, *The Parallel Worlds of Classical and Art and Text*, Cambridge 2003, 19, fig. 9.

²³ E. Simon, "Polygnotan Painting and the Niobid Painter," *American Journal of Archaeology* 67 (1963), 61-62, provides a chart of previous interpretations.



Figure 5: Rome, Villa Giulia 56135.