

## Narrative Vase Painting of the Classical Period



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### *Preface*

Red-figure vase painting is one of the most prominent styles of Greek pottery and fine ware. Stemming from Greece's classical period (480-323 B.C.E), these intricately crafted vases were not simply prestigious goods, but also functional items designed to be used. Greek vases were mainly made to store three liquids central to Greek life: wine, water, and olive oil (Noble 2). Aside from their functionality, Greek vases double as distinctive works of art that depict realistic human figures or mythic narrative scenes. In turn, this paper will focus on a particular pair of obstinate objects that allude to a visual rhetoric intrinsic to the ancient world. The first, an Attic *lekythos* from Greece's classical period depicting a mythic scene of Dionysus and his satyr (figure 1). The second, an Apulian *krater* from the second half of the fourth century B.C, decorated with conventional funerary imagery (figure 2). More specifically, this paper will illustrate how both objects jointly articulate the aesthetic standards of their time while expressing cultural values and ideals through myth and legend.

### *Pottery Production and Narrative Painting in the Classical World*

The Mediterranean Sea provides a unique connectivity that facilitates the movement of goods and people. This connectivity prompts the exchange and distribution of products and skills, providing people with both simple needs and prestige goods. In this respect, classical Greece thrived due to its geographic position, allowing its material and social culture to circulate throughout the Mediterranean region. This Mediterranean trade network harnessed an entanglement of material culture, providing an explosion in the range and variety of artifacts

aided by a wide range of technological strategies. Archeological evidence, in particular pottery finds far removed from their place of production, provides a tangible representation of an extensive trade system. As a result, pottery fragments provide insight into the customs, practices, and beliefs of those in the ancient world while attesting to the “intersection of diverse political cultures, artistic styles, trading systems, and forms of consumption,” (Oleson, 487).

Given the scattered distribution of pottery finds across the Mediterranean, it is not surprising that Greek cities along the coasts of South Italy and Sicily often imported their pottery from Greece, more specifically, Corinth and Athens (Cook 193). The flourishing of pottery production and craft specialization between these two cultures compliments the development and innovation that defined Classical Greece. At the time, Athens dominated the region politically, socially, and economically, prompting a thriving aesthetic culture that resonated with Greek authority of the region. Greek artists of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. “attained a manner of representation that conveys a vitality of life as well as a sense of permanence, clarity, and harmony,” (Hemingway 2). In turn, the economic and aesthetic achievements that came to define this period were synonymous with the Golden Age of Greece.

However, here it is important to note that the local production of red-figure vases did not start in southern Italy until several generations after it were introduced to the region. This was primarily due to external factors but also international relations. More specifically, the period of classical expression was halted by the Persian Wars (490-479 B.C) and after the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C) between Athens and Sparta, resulting in the declined flow of imported wares from Athens. Up until that point, it was more preferable for the port cities of Southern Italy to

engage in trade with Athens in order to stimulate their economy through trade rather than putting financial and material resources forth for local production. This is in part because fostering local workshops and training local craftsmen was difficult and required the acquisition of certain skills (Schidmt 444).

Due to the decline of pottery imports from Greece, schools in the West emerged that mirrored the artistic tradition of Attic pottery that was in high demand in Southern Italy. By the second quarter of the fourth century, Southern Italian craftsmen split into four schools, of which the Apulian was the largest and most important (Cook 165). The Italian schools stemmed from the Greek tradition; pottery production, after all, had a very academic basis in Greece –it required perfection of skill and training. It was based around a tradition of development and innovation of technique and style. As well, Italian craftsmen developed their own local standards, that were not only influenced by the Attic style but also their own communities and cultures. Through this scheme of cultural integration, a significant ethnic tie between the Attic *lekythos* and the Apulian *krater* can be established. These two objects exemplify the interchange of iconography, procedure, and ideas as a result of commerce and trade between Greece and South Italy, fostering a cultural parallel between the two regions.

However, before being able to fully grapple with the appealing narrative of the vases specific to this paper, it is important to recognize the process by which these vessels came to be. Through a compositional analysis of pottery findings, a better understanding of an ancient economy can be articulated such as “patterns of continuity and change in the trading of ancient ceramics,” (Oleson 503). For example, variations in ceramic composition may reflect workshop distribution, access to materials, and preference for different ceramic types

which intimately dependent upon the nature of the raw material. Thus, the structural styles of the Attic *lekythos* and Apulian *krater* provide insight into nuances of pottery production during the Classical Period. Since “production technology is governed by the physical properties and firing behavior of clays,” it is possible to initially determine the manufacturing techniques of the vessels by visual observation (Oleson 501).

Looking at the Attic *lekythos*, its immaculate curvature is smooth and symmetric. This suggests that the *lekythos* is wheel-made, because it is nearly impossible to achieve such geometric precision simply by hand. This Attic *lekythos* stands at 25.6cm tall and has a width of 12.0cm, it is inferred that the wall thickness of the *lekythos* is 0.2cm. To create a *lekythos* such as this one, the potter threw the body, shoulder, and foot into one piece, shaping the vessel by hand as it turned on the wheel. Turning allows for the sharpening of the profile and mouth, the thinning of the neck wall, and perfecting the profile of the vessel while removing excess clay from the shape of the body (Toby 173). The smoothing of the disk foot (the underside of the *lekythos*) is also important, because it is visible when oil is poured from it. This visual detail attests to the implication and importance of material appearance in the Classical World.

Likewise, the Apulian *krater* resonates with the material culture specific to Southern Italy. Defined as is “a wide-mouthed, broad bodied, footed vessel used primarily for mixing wine with water,” the *krater* fosters a robust frame (Toby 129). A key difference between Greek vases and the Apulian ones is that the fired clay varies in color and texture. Sometimes it looks like an Attic vase; however, “more often it is duller or paler ranging as far as a yellow which may be mistaken for Corinthian,” (Cook 194). Looking at the Apulian *krater*, it is of a lighter hue than the rich burnt-orange material of Attica. This difference allows archeologists to help distinguish the origins of a specific vase, more specifically, whether it

was locally produced or imported from abroad. In the case of the *krater* specific to this paper, it can be inferred that by distinction it is from Apulia, in Southern Italy.

In addition, like the Attic *lekythos*, the Apulian *krater* was also wheel-made, but unlike the *lekythos* it was made in three sections joined at the foot and neck. This Apulian *krater* style is typical of a volute-krater, which “its scrolled handles rise well above the rim of the vase, having a monumental quality,” (Toby 135). Its top-heavy form furthers the *krater’s* monumentality and grandiosity. In order to achieve such ceramic geometry, it is inferred that the *krater* was made in three sections starting from the bottom up because the neck of the volute-*krater* is quite high. However, the moderate size of this Apulian *krater* allows for it to stand up unsupported (unlike some larger and more grandiose craters).

Furthermore, the diameter of the vessel reaches its greatest length at two distinct points: the mouth of the vase and the upper portion of its shoulder. These sections are also the two areas that the handles are joined. The handles, which as noted are central to the vase’s form, were fashioned separately and applied secondarily to the completed vessel as they were molded by hand (Root 2). This juncture offers the vase an organic symmetry and leaves a trace of the craftsman’s hand, adding to the vase’s aesthetic while framing the figural zone of the vase’s belly. The handles are also central to the monumental quality of the Apulian *krater* through their Hellenistic *oeuvre*. The faces depicted are flattened and show no depth or recession – making them look like caricatures of a sun more so than a human head. As well, the handles allude to the iconic capital of Corinthian Greek architecture through their very elaborate capital decorated with acanthus leaves. However, it is interesting to note that the Corinthian style was seldom used in the Greek world, but was often noted on Roman temples, further supporting the *krater’s* Italian origin (Alchin).

The mode of production, more specifically, the firing techniques of both the Attic *lekythos* and Apulian *krater* also adhere to the aesthetic motifs of their time; moreover, the Attic *lekythos* and Apulian *krater* exemplify the red-figure technique that was popular between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E. The red-figure technique is characterized by “decorative motifs that retained the color of the clay (of a burnt sienna color in our case) while the background, filled in with a slip, turned black,” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). The figure was drawn in outline on a light ground, inner detail was marked by the brush instead of the burin, and the background filled in with solid black. This is notably the reverse aesthetic of earlier black-figure technique seen in earlier Greek Pottery such as an Attic Terracotta hydria from 510–500 B.C (figure 3). Looking at the Attic hydria, the limits of black-figure technique are noticeable; especially the difficulty in humanizing a figure. Interest in expressing natural anatomy and the manifestation of mood called for a freer medium –one that would allow articulating a subject in greater detail (Cook 162). Thus, by a simple comparison of the Attic *lekythos* and the Attic *hydria*, the linear detail inherent to red-figure painting on the *lekythos* enhances the naturalistic representation of anatomy and garments of the figures unlike the outline drawing of the black-figure Attic *hydria*. A closer look at the Attic *lekythos* further attests to this dichotomy: the draping folds on the linen that covers the reclining figure are fluent, expressing pleats, both parallel and diverging. As well, the softness of the linen is enhanced through diluted and oblique lines marking transverse folds of long himation. Here, the elegant form of the drapery becomes subject itself.

As noted, the red-figure technique “permits a rounder illusion of humanity and the human figure,” while ultimately enriching the clarity of a narrative painting (Cook 163). In turn, by being able to articulate small details, a larger more coherent narrative is formed. During the

Classical Period, a greater interest in articulating fine anatomical details and diverse facial expressions became central to red-figure pottery. Looking at the details on both the Attic *lekythos* and Apulian *krater*, the representation of figures attests to such aesthetic awareness central to their time: the head and limbs were in profile while the torso was either in profile or facing forward, the waist acting as a point of pivot. The standard depiction is better described as being “three-quarter chests and backs, front legs and feet, and in kneeling figures masking the lower leg by the thigh,” (Cook 163). This illustrative schema is not unique to red-figure technique, but also intrinsic to the aesthetic motifs of the time (for example, such representation is present on the black-figure Attic *hydria* as well). However, since the red-figure technique permitted the ability to articulate detail, the features of the ribs and musculature began to be more closely studied; in turn, this new generation of vase painters more realistically expressed muscles and movement. Thus through the red-figure vase painting technique, Greek pottery reach edits highest level in respect to the depiction of the traditional standards of Greek beauty (Cook 163).

The articulation of traditional standards of Greek beauty is one example as to how narrative painting transmits cultural information, allowing ideals and cultural values to be expressed through a code of imagery. More broadly, for the Greeks, mythology was a form of early history of their own people as they saw themselves in a direct line of descent from the men of the Heroic Age (1400-1200 B.C.) (Shapiro 1). Those heroes were, in turn, three generations apart from the Olympian gods. Thus, the gods, the heroes, and the historical Greeks of the Classical age formed a long continuum, despite periodic movements of peoples and wars. The many tales about these heroes and gods were passed down over long centuries through a variety



of mediums –painted pottery being one of them and a central carrier of pictorial narratives. Often, such narratives attest to a painter’s perception of reality, giving insight into the every day life of those in the Classical World. In a sense, the painter took on the role of story teller, presenting a conventional survey of Greek mythology through his *oeuvre*.

In turn, it is important to note the influence of the Homeric texts that shaped the understandings and oration of tales about the Gods, the heroes, and the historical Greeks previously mentioned. The advancement of the figural arts in Greece followed a path parallel to that of heroic saga (Shapiro 4). Homer’s most notable works, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* served as a source of inspiration to many painters. These heroic epics “unified visions of the gods and their heroes, their relationship to one another, and the fundamental issues of life and death,” (Shapiro 1). As a result, it is not surprising that many narrative scenes depicted interactions between divinities and mortals since pottery was often used as a commemorative grave good. Such scenes are often presented in a similar manner across an array of pottery finds, ranging from panoramas of celebration that serve to venerate life or those of harvest and hunt that attest to the growth of existence. These recognizable motifs offer a new visual rhetoric and in turn establish a language of symbols– one that is both abstract and figurative, complimenting written or orated tales central to the customs and traditions of their respective cultures. The imagery of Greek myth did not solely constitute a religious mantra; rather it was freer in choice of subject and mode of representation allowing the viewer to partially construct their own narrative off the foundation of an existing tale. In turn, the painter’s syntax became structured by the way he arranged images on a vase (Steiner 17).

Looking at the Attic *lekythos*, the painted mythic scene shows a male reclining on a table-like surface with a basket of white and cadmium yellow flowers underneath him. The

figure holds a drinking cantor in his right hand and thyros, “a light staff wrapped with leaves of ivy and pine cone on its top,” in his left hand (Cook 280). Facing the reclining figure, a satyr (as noted by the figure’s tail and horns) passes a larger cantor to the reclining figure. As well, the satyr is slightly bent over in a submissive manner towards the reclining figure. The muscularity of both the figures is enhanced by the red-figure technique through the illusions that the contour lines create. In other words, the delineation of the satyr’s abdominal muscles provides a sense of dimension; the area in between the lines is perceived as having mass and volume. This visual illusion provides clarity for the viewer while attesting to the importance of physique in the Classical World – and again, the tradition of Greek beauty mentioned above.

Likewise, the Apulian *krater* also depicts a common Greek myth through striking imagery. From the outset, the articulation of detail is apparently greater on the Apulian *krater* than that of the Attic *lekythos*. Starting from the most prominent detail on the belly of the *krater*, the central male figure sits slightly reclined with a staff in his left hand, his left leg extended forward, while his right leg is bent with his heel lifted slightly off the ground. His right arm gestures with two fingers toward a hound, establishing an enigmatic dialogue between the two figures. The figuration of the man’s body follows the standard formula mentioned above, in which the torso acts as a central pivot point. Like the figure on the Attic *lekythos*, the man depicted on the *krater* is entirely nude aside a cape that covers his back and a sword tucked away in it.

However, the painting on the Apulian *krater* goes a step further in highlighting the nuances of classical culture by referencing the common architecture of its time. The man and hound sit under a *naiskos*, a small temple of classical order (Root 9). The columns are of Greek Ionic order, contrasting with the lavish Corinthian style of the *krater*’s handles. The depiction of

this classical Greek style attests to the Greek influence on the aesthetics of architecture in South Italy, further implying the integration of Greek culture in the region.

Looking at the *naiskos*, there is an evident attempt by the artist to create a sense of depth. Using the basic understanding of perspective, the painter shows the wooden beams receding from the front and slight converging toward the back of the *naiskos*. Furthermore, the artist has placed a pair of leaves on the front building and another object in the rear. This awareness of perception is significant because it sets the foundation for figural depiction that is not only flat, but has dimension. To further suggest volume, depth, and texture, the painter plays with the utilization of an array of colors (light yellows, whites, and maroons) to accentuate certain dimensions and features (Root 9). Here, a similar utilization of color is noted on the Attic *lekythos* through the sprinkling of highlights around floral patterns. On the *krater*, this technique is most noted at the neck through its floral pattern as well as the highlights of the *naiskos*.

Furthermore, the neck of the *krater* fosters a series of patterns and repeating decorative elements that uphold the central narrative. Starting at the mouth of the *krater*, a wave like pattern circles around the rim. This pattern is also present on the Attic *lekythos*, but in a reversed manner. Again, these similar patterns attest to a shared sense of aesthetic standards between both regions. Under the pattern of waves, a section of geometrically adorned flowers circle around the vase. This further adds to the theme of harvest and hunt that seems to resonate with the central imagery. At the neck of the vessel, the bust of a man blossoms out of a blooming flower. The roots of the flower rise up and swirl into another, beautifully curving toward the head, drawing the viewer's attention to it. The floral theme also continues in a more abstract fashion on the sides of the vessel, resonating with the geometric palmlette present on the neck of the Attic

*lekythos*. Collectively, these figural elements and gestures foster a theatrical aura, making the central figure sitting under the *naiskos* the lead actor.

In relation to the renditions of architectural elements, outside the *naiskos*, four figures frame the central scene – all their heads face toward figure. The two upper figures (one nude man and one clothed woman, on the left and right, respectively) are depicted in a seated position but are virtually floating in space. They have a similar reclining stance as the sitting man that again attests to the standards of figural representation. The surrounding figures face away from the central man as they offer him garlands of flowers and baskets. The bottom two figures are also a clothed woman and another nude man, both baring offerings in their hands. The crouching woman on the left offers a cylinder (perhaps a drinking vessel) in her right hand and a wreath headpiece in the other, while the man on the right stands tall with a walking staff nearby him. The offering of goods to the central figure attests to his potential power and importance. However, the central figure is seemingly unaware of the figures around him and the goods they offer him; his disinterest suggests his potential detachment from society or the living.

In order to make more sense of the mythic scenes on both vases, it is important to understand the context in which these vases were used. Painted vases were purely secular and domestic context, most of them would be used at drinking-parties or funerary ceremonies (Shapiro 5). In addition, it is helpful to consider other narrative vase paintings of similar origin and time since frequently “divinities are discernable through pose, attire, stature, juxtapositions, and/or action, but most readily by attributes,” (Warden 11). For example, the *Attic Red-Figure Drinking Cup 420 BC* depicts the notable attributes of the God Dionysus: a thyros staff in his left hand, a wreath-like headband decorated with ivy leaves, and a drinking kanthros in his right hand (Warden 11, figure 4). By simple comparison, these very same motifs appear on the Attic

*lekythos* specific to this paper. Yet, unlike *the Red-Figure Drinking Cup 420 BC*, the Dionysian imagery is on a funerary oil container, not a festive drinking vessel.

The placement of imagery of wine and joy on a funerary grave-gift seems counterintuitive. However, an explanation for such juxtaposition is present by Erwin Panofsky's in his novel, *Tomb Sculpture*. Panofsky offers an insightful approach to the grave-gifts and their aesthetic, attributing a "retrospective" character to Greek grave-gifts, which were meant to "commemorate the life that had been lived rather than to meet the needs of a life to come," (Panofsky 75). This suggests that Dionysian imagery is not out of place on the Attic *lekythos*, but rather very much in place: the visual rhetoric serves to remember life through celebration in a retrospective and idealized way.

Likewise, the imagery on the Apulian *krater* harnesses a similar narrative, although it is not outwardly apparent. Similar motifs, such as the repetitive flowers and the palmlettes allude to a theme of harvest and the fruitfulness of life. As noted, a hound accompanies the central figure on the Apulian *krater*. The relationship between man and animal is one that is essential to Greek and Roman life, especially the polytheistic principles and religious customs (Lazenby 245). Again resonating with Homeric text, the only animal to be given a proper name in the *Odyssey* is Argus, the loyal hound that identifies his master upon his return. Thus, the theme of man and his dependable animal appears both in literature and painting through this man-and-dog motif. If placed on a funerary vessel, it is commonly understood that "the human figure is deceased in the company of a dog he knew in life," (Root 9). Pertaining to the Apulian *krater*, the depicted theme can be such a relationship or allude to one that may have existed. As well, another reading of the motif suggests dogs, along with being trusted companions, were also important for hunting and warfare. On the Apulian *krater*, the nuances of harvest (the flowers and grains) as well as the

sword that the central figure bares, attest to these themes of harvest and combat.

It is here that a dynamic narrative can be strung together through these seemingly desperate entities. One on hand, the vase painting may serve as a memorial to one's life and the relationships central to it (such as that between a man and his dog). On the other hand, the narrative could serve as a sentimentalized commemoration, in which the young man is symbol of the "prowess of war and hunt"; his relationship with the hound could be an emotive technique to uphold the "deceased's generosity of spirit and the strength of his bonds of loyalty to a bygone life," (Root 9). The floating figures that the young man does not notice further prompt speculation that he has lost touch with human life, perhaps even his own. Furthermore, the figures' positioning adds to the divine rhetoric of the scene. In a sense, the viewer is left to ponder about the mortality of the individual: is the young man dead or still alive? It may not be apparent.

Thus, while the narrative painting on the Attic *lekythos* functions through legend and myth with satyrs and gods, the Apulian *krater* functions through a visual motif that resonates with the divine. These different painterly narratives (one divine and mythic and one sentimental and common) show how aesthetic languages vary to the degree to which they chose to exploit the viewers' emotive responses for culturally specific purposes.

In addition, both narratives are monoscenic, depicting a single instant and scene central to a particular story (Shapiro 8). They do not showcase several different moments or episodes or string together a narrative in a cyclic manner. By doing so, both narratives are able to preserve the unity of time and space while calling attention to a specific moment. Here, the artist is able to amplify the importance of a certain event while perhaps ignoring another. This method of narrative painting corresponds most to the viewer's perception of reality and is the least

conceptual, as the viewer does not need to bring together and take apart different entities that belong to different units of time and space. In a sense, the monoscenic narrative functions as a photograph of a specific moment – a still frame of sorts. However, this still frame depends on the viewer's knowledge of the outcome. For example, in order to understand the nuances of celebration associated with the narrative painting of the Attic *lekythos*, the viewer must recall a narrative in which Dionysus' character celebrates with wine and feast.

Thus, through the repetition of symbolic moments such as that of Dionysus and his bacchanalian manners, these narrative paintings reinforce connections between the narrative itself and the symbolism associated with it. This allows even the modern day viewer to understand these narratives through the eyes of a classical artist. In both cases, an initial identification of a visual motif and prior knowledge of the myth is necessary to relate the images to one another and to a story. As a result, the painter relies a great deal on the memory of the viewer (Stiener 97).

In turn, it can be accepted that many of these narratives were common knowledge to a certain extent. Such narratives can help explore the customs, practices, and beliefs of the deceased as well as those of their families on a personal, private, and public level. For example, if the Attic *lekythos* and the Apulian *krater* are grave goods, they can provide evidence regarding the extent of cultural diversity present in their respective regions during this period since burial sites offer a wealth of fine wares that place material items in dialogue with trade, politics, and social customs as previously noted. Just as importantly, the burial customs that these vases were part shed light on the importance of religion during the classical period.

Ancient Greek law mandated that “anyone who chanced upon a corpse at least to cover it with earth,” and if a citizen that held a position in office disregarded the dead, they could lose

their position (Graves 10). Here, a strong sense of respect and commemoration sets the foundation for burial practices in the Classical World. It is not surprising then that the corpse would be extensively prepared for burial: from being draped in fine garments to being surrounded by prestige goods. Wreaths of flowers, like those depicted on the both the Attic *lekythos* and the Apulian *krater*, were made for the burial – especially for the young (Graves 23). This resonates with the imagery of the young man and the hound on the Apulian *Krater*, in which the women hand floral wreaths to him.

It is said that Socrates once stated, “when the soul has departed, men carry away the bodies of their near friends and bury they as soon as they can,” this way their spirit would not have to struggle and make it to the gates of Hades as soon as possible (Graves 30). It is important to note that here, the very myths and legends that shaped the literature and tales of the Heroic era blended in with the religious customs of the time. Moreover, the very divine narratives illustrated on Greek pottery directly attested to the specifics and traditions of religious practice –they also adhere to a category of generic story telling. Thus, these mythical stories become historical stories, rooting themselves in the ethnic culture of their people.

In turn, both the Attic *lekythos* and Apulian *krater* exhibit the significance of the visual arts as a medium for transmitting cultural and historical information. The pictorial depictions on the vases attest to the power of the image; more specifically, the mythic narrative scene depicted prompts a discussion about religious and social perception. As well, narrative painting often bridges the boundaries between literature and painting through a system of recognizable motifs and symbols. This element adds a timeless quality to these pieces, allowing viewers of the common day to read and interrupt the nuances of the classical world.



**Figures**



**Figure 1:** The Attic *Lekythos*, The Kelsey Museum. Ann Arbor, MI



**Figure 2:** The Apulian *Krater*, The Kelsey Museum. Ann Arbor, MI



**Figure 3:** The Return of Hephaestus. 430 - 420 BC. Toledo Museum of Art. Toledo, OH

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