CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM MASS-PRODUCT TO LUXURY AND BACK.
DECORATED FINE POTTERY AND
MEROITIC VASE PAINTING

The notion that good = Greek: bad = copyist, native or provincial, can be dismissed as a basic principle though it must sometimes, even often, have been true where it was classical forms that were reproduced.¹

1. Academic Access to Decorated Fine Pottery

In the first publication of a Meroitic pottery assemblage coming from an archaeological excavation, D. Randall-MacIver and C. Leonard Woolley were pleasantly impressed by the quality of the pottery they rescued from the cemetery of Shablul in Lower Nubia, which was, as we learn from the associated mortuary inscriptions,² the family burial ground of Meroitic envoys to Roman Egypt.³ Randall-MacIver and Woolley even considered the painted decoration of the Shablul finds as a key to the understanding of the Meroitic intellect:

[N]aturalism is the keynote of the series, and the naturalism of style is most prominent just where the subject must necessarily be local and not copied from foreign sources—when it is the crocodile, the guinea-fowl, the giraffe. […] It would seem that we have to do with a people loving nature, observing it, and trying to represent it faithfully, as, after his lights, did the Naqada potter […] At heart unsophisticated and primitive […] this people is subject to the mixed influences of civilizations already formed, and contact with them develop at a late date phenomena which there had come to light early in their history.⁴

¹ Boardman 1994 320.
³ REM 0370, 0373, 0386, 0387.
Though it remains within the limitations of the patronizing culture-historical perspective of the day,\(^5\) this view is not less sympathetic to the Meroitic than the Naqada potter. Thanks to the excavations in the south of the kingdom and the archaeological surveys and excavations in Lower Nubia, the evidence greatly increased in the course of the next decades. As a consequence of the evident and necessary primacy of archaeology in the nascent Nubian studies, pottery was considered a category of archaeological finds that functions as one of the archaeologist’s most important tools in defining the cultural position and date of an archaeological context. Accordingly, the main concern was the establishment of typologies of pottery forms, decorations, and wares, in which there was little, if any, place for the stylistic and iconographical analysis of decorative motifs and structures. Replacing the early typologies based on assemblages from individual sites such as Karanog\(^6\) and Faras\(^7\) in Lower Nubia or the cemeteries at Meroe and Barkal,\(^8\) from the 1960s William Y. Adams laid down the bases for a modern typology that embraces geographically as well as chronologically the whole of Meroitic pottery production,\(^9\) a work which is being continued ever since by newer generations of experts. More recently masterly efforts were made at the establishment of the chronology of Early Meroitic ware and form types.\(^10\) As a tradition, writers on the archaeology of ancient Nubia agree that decorated pottery is one of the most independent artistic achievements of the Meroites, but do not enter into its art historical discussion.

The journey from Randall-MacIver and Woolley’s culture-historical interpretation to the quest for an art historical interpretation was long and had to pass through some depressing landscapes. In the knowledge of the rich and varied material discovered by Garstang at Meroe

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\(^7\) Griffith 1924, 1925.

\(^8\) Dunham 1957, 1963.
