Summing Up

Anonymous Prototypes

Before we focus on the Dionysiac imagery—Dionysos, satyrs, dancing or otherwise ritually engaged women, the komos and the symposium—which clearly dominates the mythological repertoire of the vase painters of the classical era, it seems expedient to have a quick look at the possible meaning of the much more common ‘youths’, ‘boys’ ‘men’ and ‘women’, as Beazley described them. As far as one can see, these are typical representatives of distinctive social groups: indeed boys, young men, adult men, and women. They are frequently encountered on the B side of large vases: single individuals on amphorae and pelikai, twos, threes and fours on kraters. As far as their poses, dress and attributes are concerned, they are unremarkable, uniform and rather passive. They usually just stand around, waiting while leaning on a stick, watching, quietly talking to each other. Apparently, they are supposed to be ‘commentators’, evaluating the event shown on the A side of the vase: mythological chases, departures of warriors, encounters with the goddess of victory. Like the chorus in ancient drama, they represent the large, anonymous group of those for whom the vase painters intended their work. For such individuals holds good what Beat Kaeser has said about the anonymous audience of mythological scenes on black-figure vases: “…the figures in the audience are ‘witnesses’, whose presence demonstrates the reality and significance of the acts they witness, and at the same time indicates the significance of the society for which such acts are important.”

1 These are also the terms used in the separate files of the Beazley Archive. The following extensively illustrated volumes from the Kerameus series have provided the basis for the present discussion: the volumes about Douris and Makron for the cups (Buitron-Oliver 1995 and Kunisch 1997), the volume about the Eretria Painter for the cups and small-size closed vases (Lezzi-Hafter 1988), and the volume about the Phiale Painter for the closed vases (Oakley 1990). In addition to the latter, there is the monograph about the Achilleus Painter of a similar format, which was published elsewhere (Oakley 1997).

2 For examples see Oakley 1990, pls. 31–36 and 58b, 60b, 61b.

3 Kaeser 1990, 156: “…die Zuschauerfiguren [sind] ‘Zeugen’, welche die Realität und Wichtigkeit der Tat anzeigen—und zugleich die Bedeutung der Gesellschaft, für die solche Taten wichtig sind.” Compare what Ferrari 1990, 186 states about youths wrapped in mantles on the B sides of kraters: “This is not to say…that the image is meaningless. On the contrary: by definition, what
Men and youths who are not individualized are grouped on the outsides of countless cups by Douris and Makron in characteristic but impassive scenes, apparently familiar to the original viewers of the imagery. There is not much to distinguish these images from komos scenes or scenes with men and athletes, which we, too, can recognize. In the eyes of the vase painters they seem to have been interchangeable. On some cups by Makron, and a few by the Eretria Painter, we find groups of women, who cannot always be identified as hetaerae.4

Incidentally, such images of anonymous individuals are more characteristic of second-rate painters reluctant to attempt complicated mythological scenes, than for the leading artists discussed in this monograph.5 Athenians of the 5th century BC who went to the Kerameikos to acquire a decorated piece of pottery for a happy or a sad occasion would mainly have seen images they interpreted as images of themselves. The mental universe of the vase painters and their customers was not primarily peopled with gods and heroes, but with mortals in familiar circumstances, handling familiar objects. Nevertheless, they were not ordinary, but somehow characteristic—not referring to the individual case, but beyond that to the values and norms of society at large. However, when the customers were drawn to the more expensive, up-market merchandise, Dionysos and his world came into view and, in the most exclusive range, also the exemplary images of the divine and heroic mythology. In such instances, gods and heroes were the object of the gaze and interest of people like you and me.

Despite the fact that the mental world of the original customers was largely inhabited by humans, the transition from the here and now to the divine or heroic sphere was gradual and practicable. It is this characteristic that distinguishes vase painting from other forms of art, especially wall painting, and gives it a personal touch and a particular communicative quality.6 After all, the image is part of an object the customer can take in his hand, look at from all sides, and relate to his own situation or to the specific occasion for which the object is acquired. Here we should not only think of the Athenian clientele, but

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5 See for instance the cups by the Eueriges Painter, a contemporary of Oltos (ARV 88–96), by the Splanchnop Painter who belonged to the Penthesilea workshop (ARV 891–898), and by the so-called Sub-Median Cup-Group (ARV 1391–1397).
6 Similarly Schmidt 2005, 281 about the "engen Verknüpfung der Bildthemen mit der Gefäßform beziehungsweise mit einem potentiellen Betrachterkreis": "Mit diesen bewusst gewählten Beziehungen wurde deutlicher als vorher begründet, dass es sich bei den Bildern um Mitteilungen handelt."