ANCIENT GREEK VESSELS
PATTERN AND IMAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the many individuals who helped make this exhibition possible. As the first collaboration between The Trout Gallery at Dickinson College and Bryn Mawr and Wilson Colleges, we hope that this exhibition sets a precedent of excellence and substance for future collaborations of this sort. At Wilson College, Robert K. Dickson, Associate Professor of Fine Art and Leigh Rupinski, College Archivist, enthusiastically supported framing the ancient Greek vessel seen here from the Barron Blewett Hunnicutt Classics Gallery/Collection. Emily Stanton, an Art History Major, Wilson ’15, prepared all of the vessels for our initial selection and compiled all existing documentation on them. At Bryn Mawr, Brian Wallace, Curator and Academic Liaison for Art and Artifacts, went out of his way to accommodate our request to borrow several ancient Greek vessels at the same time that they were organizing their own exhibition of works from the same collection. Marianne Weldon, Collections Manager for Special Collections, deserves special thanks for not only preparing the objects for us to study and select, but also for providing images, procuring new images, seeing to the documentation and transport of the works from Bryn Mawr to Carlisle, and for assisting with the installation. She has been meticulous in overseeing all issues related to the loan and exhibition, for which we are grateful. At The Trout Gallery, Phil Earenfight, Director and Associate Professor of Art History, has supported every idea and initiative that we have proposed with enthusiasm and financial assistance, without which this exhibition would not have materialized. James Bowman, Registrar and Preparator, was a constant source of reassurance with all matters regarding preparation, didactics, design, and installation. Jennifer Kniess, Visual Resources Curator for the Art & Art History department, lent her much-needed expertise with scanning and photoshopping the large map included in the exhibition. We have greatly enjoyed working with Heather Flaherty, Curator of Education, who will be conducting several exciting programs for diverse audiences. Finally, Stephanie Keifer and Rosalie Lehman have kept the day-to-day operations of The Trout Gallery running smoothly throughout the process, and we thank in advance our Gallery attendants, Satoshi Swither, Catherine Sacco, and Rosalie Lehman. I must extend special recognition here to Sarah Eisen ’15, who approached me a year ago with the idea of undertaking this curatorial independent study, and which has now culminated in a very fine exhibition and catalogue. Her dedication, industry, and expertise is evident throughout all aspects of this project, and they are qualities that will serve her well in her future studies. It was a pleasure to work with her.

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With works from the
Barron Blewett Hunnicutt Classics Gallery/Collection, Hankey Center, Wilson College and Bryn Mawr College Art and Artifact Collections.
successive Geometric period of pot production, capitalizing on maintained a prominent international role in trade during the strong trade economy during the late Bronze Age.1 Cyprus exporter of both timber and tin, the latter of which was a including Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Greece, and Crete. As a major (1050–750 BC). The third largest island in the Mediterranean, ornamental patterns of its ceramic vessels during the late Bronze Age (1625–1050 BC) and early Geometric period of pot production, capitalizing on exports including oil, perfumes, and timber.2 This high volume of trade required distinguishing goods from certain geographic locations, resulting in the development of specific shapes of ceramic vessels to signify an object’s country of production and origin.3 Simultaneously, this high amount of trade also had an effect on the visual patterns of the vessels, as new motifs were introduced to Cypriot ceramic workshops from foreign imports and the transmigration of artistic ideas. For example, the frieze of latticed lozenges, which can be seen in this exhibition on the neck and shoulder of a Cypriot amphora, is an Aegean-influenced pattern, introduced at the end of the Bronze Age and beginning of the Iron Age in Cyprus around 1000 BC.4 Foreign examples of ceramic art in the Early Iron Age were most likely prompted by mass waves of immigration from Greece, following a series of events including earthquakes that contributed to the decline of the Mycenaean kingdoms that forced populations to relocate. Although the Cypriot vessels in this exhibition can be dated to the Late Bronze Age and Early Geometric period, the vessels from Greece were crafted at a later period in time. A majority of the vessels here come from the 5th and 4th centuries BC and were produced in the region of Greece around Athens, which is called “Attica” by Classicists and Archaeologists today. During this time, Greece was experiencing what can be called a “golden age,” characterized by the flourishing of writing, philosophy, and art. In defining Greek cultural identity, which was focused around the “polis” (city), religion and ideology permeated art and vase painting, which, at this time generally represented idealized figurative imagery and perfected, standardized ceramic construction. Athenian ceramics were distinguishable by the specific clay used from the region of Attica, which was rich in iron and produced a rusty-red color. In fact, ceramics produced in other locations in Greece, such as Corinth, were sometimes painted with red ochre or an additional slip that would imitate the color of Attic clay. The reason for this practice was not only for the sake of aesthetics—the clay from sources outside of Athens usually required an additional layer of slip added to the exterior surface of vessels in order to render the walls smooth enough to be suitable for decoration.vi

Despite the presence of ceramic workshops all over Greece and the larger Greek-colonized Mediterranean, Athens held a monopoly over fine exported ceramic-ware in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. The ceramic production center in Athens was located in a section of the city called Kerameikos, located northwest of the agora.vi Archaeological excavations there have revealed a high concentration of potsherds, whole vessels, and a number of kilns and structures resembling workshop quarters. Although the quality of ceramics from 5th-century BC Greece that have been excavated in archaeological projects varies because of the high quantity of vessels and sherds found widespread throughout the Mediterranean, it is logical to assume that specialization in craft was highly developed, and artisans were both potters and decorating vessels with great care and training. Despite the elaborate detail, imagery, and time invested in the painting of patterns, figures, and narratives, Greek ceramics at their core are functional objects of art. The shape of these vessels was formed in a way that would aid in the function intended for each vessel. This begs the question: what were the functions of specific ancient Greek and Cypriot ceramics? Did decorative design interplay with shape and function, and if so, how? The physical evidence of vessels and their imagery argue that the function of a vessel affected the motif or figural imagery depicted on it, with the decoration somehow relating back to its intended use and purpose. Furthermore, the shape of the vessel provided the painter with guidelines and limitations that affected pattern and design.

**OINOCHOE**

A shape that was specific to Cyprus during the late Bronze Age/Proto-Geometric Period (1225–1050 BC) is the trefid mouth, which can be seen on the large “basketball” oinochoe in this exhibition [fig. 2]. This vessel functioned as a wine poucer (as its etymology suggests) coming from the Greek words ὀίνος (wine) and ποῦς (pout). The neck and trefid mouth would aid in controlling the flow of liquid out of the vessel, while the belly would hold a large volume. This required a larger spout and mouth, which would allow for a more controlled flow of liquid. The neck and shoulder of the vessel would hold a large volume of liquid, while the belly would hold a smaller volume, allowing for a more controlled flow of liquid. The neck and shoulder of the vessel would hold a large volume of liquid, while the belly would hold a smaller volume, allowing for a more controlled flow of liquid.

![Fig. 1. Cypriot Amphora. Late Bronze Age, ca. 1000 BC. On loan courtesy of the Barron Blewett Hunnicutt Classics Gallery/Collection, Hankey Center, Wilson College.](image1)

![Fig. 2. Cypriot Oinochoe. Geometric, Black-on-Red Ware, ca. 950–750 BC. On loan courtesy of the Barron Blewett Hunnicutt Classics Gallery/Collection, Hankey Center, Wilson College.](image2)
**LEKANIS**

The black-figure lekanis in this exhibition is attributed to the Polos Painter (575–565 BC), who produced vessels of mediocre artistic quality and was named after a diagnostic crosshatched “polos” crown, worn by women, sirens, and sphinxes that often appear in his imagery [figs. 4, 5]. These crowns are easily seen on the numerous figures on this vessel, which John Beazley identified as sirens.10 A close examination of the incised decoration in the black-figure style reveals the lack of finesse – lines are over-drawn in a careless manner [fig. 6]. The lower quality of his work indicates that this vessel and others from this painter were intended for what Boardman calls, “less-discriminating” buyers.11 In other words, the vessels created and decorated by the Polos Painter were less expensive than vessels produced by artisans who invested more time and care into their craftsmanship. The lower cost of the vessel made it accessible to the population of lower fiscal income, who could not afford to “be discriminating” and purchase vessels from the elite vase-painters. In addition to a clay slip that was incised as a medium for decoration, a matte brown paint was also applied for tonal variety.

A lekanis is a shallow, footed dish with two horizontal handles, in this case, ribbon handles.12 The archaeological record indicates that the lekanis became a popular ceramic shape in early black-figure painting around the early 5th century BC. Some lekanis were lidded, although few lids survive in the archaeological record. Lekanis functioned primarily as holding vessels, which it turn dictated the shape and size of the vessel; a deeper dish with more vertical walls could hold food, while shallower lekanis would hold small items like thread, spices, or dressing and grooming objects for women. The shape was also associated with nuptial ceremonies and occasionally a wedding procession would be depicted on lekanis.13

The bowl-like shape of the lekanis, which was determined by its intended holding function, consequentially affected how the vessel could be decorated. The specific curved shape of the lekanis created zones of decoration, which included the foot, the exterior and interior curves of the body, and the handles. On the Polos Painter lekanis, these distinct zones are emphasized with different decorations, motifs, and patterns – a frieze of sirens on the exterior body, plain black gloss on the interior with a single siren in the tondo, and a dotted pattern on the rim.14 A majority of the figurative imagery occurs on the exterior part of the bowl-shaped body, possibly because the inside was intended to hold objects, and therefore the visibility of imagery in the interior of the body would be obscured. The exterior curvature of the lekanis also naturally supports a long, frieze-like decoration. A ray pattern is present on the base of the vessel, possibly included to make the transition from the body of the vessel to the foot less abrupt. This pattern was common at the foot of black-figure vessels.15 While the location and extensiveness of the painted and incised-gloss decoration is partially determined by shape, the subject matter for this vessel was most likely determined by the consumer market. The Polos Painter is notable for selling vessels to buyers in the Eastern Greek world (i.e., Syria, Turkey, Egypt), and, therefore, would choose to paint subjects and images relevant to the consumers.16 Animal friezes, while not as popular in vase painting in Mainland Greece during the 6th century BC, were abundant in places like Rhodes, famous for its wild-goat style friezes, as well as in Egypt and Syria, where “exotic” animals like sphinxes and sirens are commonly depicted in stone relief and jewelry.

Therefore, the decoration seen on the lekanis was marketable. Overall, the function of the vessel affected the shape and location of the decoration. Even though the lekanis has elaborate figural imagery, decoration was not the first priority to the maker. Rather, shape was the most important aspect of the ceramic, which was determined by its intended function.
and genre. Because the lekanis did not have a single religious or metaphysical function, the subject of decoration was not pre-determined. The interests of the targeted consumer population in the eastern Mediterranean most likely determined the figural imagery of this specific lekanis.

**SQUAT LEKYTHOS**

A lekythos is a shape with perhaps one of the most specific intended purposes, it is an oil flask. The sitzation of this vessel type is well documented in the archaeological record, allowing us to date examples based on their proportions quite accurately.20 The lekythos in this exhibition is a squat lekythos, characterized by the short, bulbous body, and dates to the late 5th century BC. [Fig. 7] Squat lekythos, while first present in the archaeological record during the late 6th century, do not become a popular shape until the late 5th and early 4th century, and are most common in the red-figure style.18

Lekythos are associated with funerary rites and would be deposited in graves as offerings for the dead. Consequently, the archaeological record has a vast number of preserved lekythos, and many have funerary scenes depicted in the figural decoration. However, lekythoi were also used in everyday life to hold oils. Around 490 BC, lekythoi began to include false bottoms at the base of the neck of the vessel, so that it held less oil and consequently was cheaper as a funerary gift.19

The small size of the vessel limits the type of imagery and decoration, a large narrative or multi-figural scene could not fit on a vessel that is only approximately four inches tall. However, the artist’s choice to depict a panther is intriguing, as animal imagery was rare in Attic red-figure vase painting, but it is possible that the panther was painted to allude to Dionysus. Iconographically, panthers are the symbolic animal of Dionysus, and are depicted on numerous other vase paintings as either reclining with the god, or with Dionysus wearing a panther skin, recognizable by the spots on the hide. These spots are present on the panther on our squat lekythos.21

However, the question arises - why does an allusion to Dionysus occur on a squat lekythos? Dionysus is the god of wine and frenzy, but he is also associated with a secret cult in Ancient Greece concerned with extracting pleasure from life and connected with death and resurrection cycles. The cult was particularly popular with wealthy families and women, and Dionysiac imagery in vase painting increased significantly from the 5th century onward following the increase in popularity of the cult.22 Because of the god’s role in metaphysical cult rituals, it seems surprising that an allusion to Dionysus occurs on a vessel that is commonly used as a funerary offering; the imagery relates to the function of the vessel.

–Sarah Eisen

3. Robertson, The archaeology of Cyprus, 92.
4. Karageorghis, Ancient Cyprus. 106.
9. John Boardman, Athenian Black Figure Vase (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 19.
10. J.D. Beazley, Attic Black Figure Vase-painters (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 43.
13. Clark and Eltis, Understanding Greek Vases, 112.
15. Cook, Greek Painted Pottery, 113. The ancient Greek metaphysical beliefs included an afterlife in the underworld, Hades. Complete death and burial rituals and ideology, which will not be described in detail here, was an integral part of Greek life. Funerary gifts dedicated both during inhumation and afterwards would include offerings and final offerings for the deceased in the afterlife. In addition to the deceased’s possessions being buried with them, other objects, such as of food, would be buried with them. Oil was used in life, and also be used in the afterlife, for activities such as bathing and athletics.
16. Beazley, Attic Black Figure Vase-painters, 43.
18. Clark and Eltis, Understanding Greek Vases, 96.
20. Clark and Eltis, Understanding Greek Vases. 240.
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On loan courtesy of Bryn Mawr College Art and Artifact Collections.