

Exploratory Analysis of two Greek Lekythoi in Collection of the Brunnier Art Museum

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Object number:
UM2013.651



Figures 1 & 2. Images of UM2013.651. Right image (2) depicts the collar decoration characteristic of the Athena painter. Left image (1) shows a side view of this lekythos's decoration. Images taken with permission of University Museums

Date

490-460BCE

Provenience

Athens

Artist

The work of the Athena Painter has been identified by the addition of tendrils to the palmettes—five in number around the shoulder—and a completely black neck; he often depicted original subjects in the main scene and this is one such example. The Athena painter began painting in the black-figure style (on a reddish-clay ground), as seen here, and moved to the white-ground technique later; as a result, this would likely be one of the painter's earlier works. Based on the shape of this lekythos and the style in which it is decorated, it can be dated to 490–460 BCE. The main scene is very similar to a white-ground lekythos (illustrated below) that is also attributed to the Athena Painter.

This larger lekythos (figures 1,2,&4) was decorated with imagery that is so far unique to this painter: a pair of satyrs each dancing with a goat that stands on its hind legs and flanks a central satyr, toward whom the goats and other satyrs all look. Both dancing satyrs have placed their drinking horns on the ground at their feet, while the third satyr is in the center front of the vase and plays the pipes (double aulos). Satyrs, imaginary creatures who in 5th century BCE Greece were represented as amalgams of human men and horses, were companions and followers of the god Dionysus, the god of wine and intoxication. Satyrs were usually pictured in contexts relating to Dionysus, who was also concerned with the theater and closely associated with the development of Greek comedy and tragedy. Perhaps as a result, satyrs played a key role in ancient theater, too. In Classical Athens, tragic performances were followed by what was called a satyr play because the members of its chorus dressed like satyrs. These satyric dramas often included low-brow humor and irreverence and it is possible that the scene on this lekythos references one from a lost satyr play.



Figure 3. Lekythoi UM2013.651 and 2.1.4 show side by side for scale. Image taken by University Museums

Project overview

This project analyzed these two lekythoi and determined the likely provenance, date, and possible cultural significance to gain a better understanding of these objects to be used in the Global Citizen Exhibit that will appear at the Christian Peterson Art Museum in the Spring of 2020.

These two vases are referred to as cylindrical lekythoi (lekythos in the singular). Lekythos in ancient Greek generically meant “oil or perfume vessel,” although today archaeologists and art historians use this term to describe a particular shape that were produced in a wide range of sizes and used to contain and carry perfumed oil. The vases seem to be products of painters working in the heart of Classical vase painting, Athens. In ancient Athens there were numerous pottery workshops consisting of groups of potters and painters; many painters and their workshops have become known to us either because they signed their work or because they repeatedly used idiomatic design elements that allow us to recognize their work or that of their students. Since the surviving signatures of painters are men's names, scholars tend to refer to all vase painters as “he.” Where signatures are absent, identified painters have been given names that are based on repeated themes in their work, modern places names where their work was first identified.

Methods

In order to find the date, artists and provenience of these Ancient Lekythoi, I looked towards experts in the field to first gain a greater understanding of how specific artists created these objects. Many of them left “signatures” in the pottery's decoration. Once the decoration was analyzed and it was matched with an artist, I could look through works attributed to them to find adequate comparanda. With a matching piece, I could then more concretely give these pots a date, artist, and location of origin.

This smaller lekythos (figures 5,6,&7) is decorated in the white-ground style. The body of this lekythos is white-ground and, although it is difficult to see, decorated with rows of patterns that wrap around the vase: a Greek key running rightward at the top, and lattice or checker patterns that frame a tendril with ivy leaves and berry clusters. Pattern lekythoi were decorated with rows of patterns instead of figural scenes and included various floral or geometric motifs, or a combination of both; they were made in large numbers.

White-ground lekythoi are not found in domestic contexts and were specifically produced as grave offerings. This one may have been intended to be placed with the deceased during the burial process or as a subsequent funerary offering at the grave. The white-ground technique was first applied to lekythoi around 500 and continued to be used until about 400 BCE, while the Beldam Painter worked from about 470–450 BCE.



Figures 4 & 5. Top (4) depicts close up detail of UM2013.651 decoration. Bottom (5) depicts collar detail of 2.1.4. Images taken with the permission of University Museums.

Object Number:
2.1.4



Figure 6 & 7. Left (6) depicts close up shot of 2.1.4 decoration. Right (7) depicts side view of 2.1.4. Images taken with the permission of University Museums.

Date

470-450BCE

Provenience

Athens

Artist

This lekythos appears to be a product of the workshop associated with the artist referred to as the Beldam Painter. The Beldam painter is known for his pattern lekythoi, one of his specialties, and also for framing central decorative motifs with bands in a checker pattern. If one looks closely at this lekythos, small dotted berry clusters—another feature of the Beldam Painter's style—are visible interspersed between the ivy leaves. These features, and his tendency to make ivy tendrils the central decoration on pattern lekythoi, allow us to attribute this vase to the Beldam Workshop, if not the Beldam Painter himself.

