

Distorted Ideals in Greek Vase-Painting: The World of Mythological Burlesque

By David Walsh. Pp. xxiv + 420, figs. 141, table 1. Cambridge University Press, New York 2009. \$95. ISBN 978-0-521-89641-2 (cloth).

Frivolous, crude, provoking, and complex. These are just a few of the words chosen by the author of this book to describe the assorted iconography featured therein. The choice to examine “Greek painted pottery decorated with burlesque or irreverent images of Greek mythology, heroes, or gods” (xxv) sadly excludes some of the best examples from other media, other subjects, and other periods. That said, there is more than enough to both mull over and giggle about here. The result is a lengthy, exceptionally well-illustrated book based on a catalogue of 144 vases selected from several “fabrics” (actually stylistic groups), including Corinthian black-figure komasts, Caeretan hydriae, Athenian black- and red-figure (mainly with satyrs), the so-called phlyax vases of South Italy, the outline “Sam Wide” Group of Corinth, and the Boeotian Kabeirion Group. Originating as a doctoral dissertation (University of Manchester [2004]), the adopted tone is confident, basic at times, yet inoffensive and highly readable.

Following an informative preface, the overall organization of the work is a division into three major parts, followed by a brief appendix of related material from other periods (mostly Roman), a main catalogue sorted according to “character names,” and a list of catalogue items by fabric. Part 1 is a necessary introduction to the evidence, isolated for discussion and comparison, and the general theme of Greek humor, which drives the main arguments of the book. The preface contains critical definitions and terms employed by Walsh throughout (e.g., burlesque, irreverence, parody, caricature) and is an absolute must read. The very meaty part 2 explores the iconography through four broad themes (“Strange Beginnings,” “Violating the

Sanctuary,” “Ridiculing the Gods,” “Subverting the Hero”), and each further subdivides by individuals (e.g., Zeus, Herakles), episodes (e.g., Telephos at the Altar, the Judgement of Paris), or issues (e.g., rape, theft, heroic virtue). Part 3 is a synthetic analysis of what has come before, an assessment of the evidence in a more archaeological manner (i.e., distribution, provenance), and, by way of conclusion, an attempt to frame the topic in more global terms.

The end result is a major repackaging, by theme, of several sets of vases that are not normally discussed in unison. The author covers his bases well, including medieval and modern comparanda, mention of Mikhail Bakhtin—that guru of the grotesque—as well as other nonclassical scholars concerned with laughter, humor, and caricature. Although based in myth and excluding both “serious art” (104) and “domestic settings” (10), this study bridges gaps between myth, religion, drama, and daily life. By necessity, Walsh privileges theme over artist or artisty. At the end of the day, we appear to have a commentary on how our views and researches of the Greeks have changed in tandem with our approaches to them and our vocabulary to describe them. The author seems aware of the inherent challenges and wisely embraces newer scholarship (e.g., Steiner, Stansbury-O’Donnell) alongside the not so new (e.g., Boardman, Hemelrijk). By the same token, he deals with canonical examples, such as the François vase, in addition to less well-known ones. His attention to textual sources is also commendable.

The material evidence, though proclaimed as diverse, actually falls into tidy workshop-based bunches. Thus, a large number of isolated presentations, or literal readings, high-

light the unique features of a certain group, rather than seamlessly threading a given theme among them. Predictably, the phlyax and Kabeirion vases provide the juiciest examples with their comic, even cartoon-like images. An additional problem is heavy reliance on some older catalogues, namely Seeberg's *Corinthian Komos Vases* (London 1971), particularly for generating statistical information (T.J. Smith, "The Corpus of Komast Vases: From Identity to Exegesis," in E. Csapo and M. Miller, eds., *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond* [Cambridge 2007] 49–54, esp. n. 6). Throughout, there is arguably too much emphasis on comic drama. The author at times seems mired in the question of how to distinguish staged performance from other varieties of visual narrative (e.g., 84) and the "is it Athenian" or "is it South Italian" drama debate. It is welcome to find some serious consideration given to the Kabeirion Class (obviously amusing) as well as the "Sam Wide" Group (less obviously amusing). More attention to shape and function would have been worthwhile.

Regardless of these quibbles, any reader is forced to ponder the obvious questions of audience (both ancient and modern) and perception (who thought what was funny and why). Was it offensive to parody the gods, to distort the heroic body, or to poke fun at serious myth? Can one actually laugh at rape or at disrespecting a sanctuary? Walsh has a somewhat philosophical perspective on such issues, citing at one point both Delphi and Aristotle as evidence of teaching "the danger

of life at the extremes" (242) and stating rather cutely that Plato himself "would disapprove . . . of the material studied here" (106). In the book's conclusion, the author takes things a step farther, implying that wider patterns of human behavior are at work. Walsh claims that there might not be an excessively large quantity of "Greek images which display irreverent attitudes to mythology," but "the underlying mentality which gave rise to their production appears to be more universal" (286). Such a sweeping statement may not endear every reader and would have been more applicable had the study incorporated objects other than figure-decorated pottery. Yet, with its focus on a single artistic medium from different places and times, the book has real staying power. The inclusion of the catalogue (increasingly rare these days) allows it to be used as a reference work, even if the internal numbering system is at first confusing. Apart from excessive length and some unnecessary repetition, Walsh has offered up a publication that is both solid and timely. If, as he has suggested, the vase painters created something as simple as "burlesque bystanders" to orient the viewer, then surely they themselves had the last laugh.

TYLER JO SMITH

MCINTIRE DEPARTMENT OF ART
FAYERWEATHER HALL
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA 22903
TJS6E@VIRGINIA.EDU