

Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour

By Alexandre G. Mitchell. Pp. xxvi + 371, figs. 143, tables 16. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009. \$95. ISBN 978-0521-51370-8 (cloth).

Humor is a difficult subject to analyze in any culture. Apart from representations of comedy, the subject has not been addressed broadly and systematically over the years, in part because of the problem of recognizing humor when one sees it. Mitchell's book on vase painting and humor joins several recent works in providing a foundation for a more systematic discussion of the comic in art. Building on a database of images that he has compiled, his book provides a comprehensive survey of different subjects and visual techniques and argues that humor could be widespread in vase painting.

The introduction discusses humor generally and sets out some of the terms to be used in the study; Mitchell prefers use of the term "humor" to "comic" to keep the visual arts separate from literary comedy. While he states in the preface that he does not propose a theory of ancient visual humor, he does distinguish mechanisms, techniques (e.g., caricature, parody), genres (e.g., visual puns, parody, situation comedy), and principles (e.g., subversion and revelation, comic relief, feeling of superiority) as components of the visual code of humor. These are useful terms, but they could stand further definition, especially in the distinction between mechanisms and techniques and in regard to how a particular technique might be used in more than one genre. For example, are all representations of Eurystheus and the Erymanthian Boar humorous? Are some more humorous than others because of a different technique? Could an artist show this story in a serious way? Mitchell also emphasizes that pottery is a relatively cheap medium, so there was a certain freedom of expression that was particularly appropriate in democratic Athens for the development of visual humor. He esti-

mates that 4–5% of Attic vases were humorous, based on his data.

Chapter 2 looks at visual humor outside mythology. This is a good strategy, since it allows one to avoid the temptation to compare literary and visual narratives. One can also define, in more purely visual terms, what is humorous: eye cups in which the eye becomes a wineskin carried by a satyr; the misappropriation of an object for another purpose, such as an oinochoe for a chamber pot; misbehaving animals; excessive drinking and eating; and the misbehavior of women (although this centers heavily on the identification of hetairai in the vase imagery).

Most of the illustrations here and throughout the book are vectorized drawings: computerized renderings of freehand drawings. In most cases, this makes the subject matter very clear, but the images can obscure the three-dimensional relationship of the picture to the vase, as on the Eurymedon oinochoe in figure 32. One cannot see both complete figures simultaneously on the actual vase, and I wonder if the posturing of the figures relative to the spout above is not part of the humor of the work. The physical positioning of the inscription, which starts from the mouth of the nude man, is also important but is missing from the drawing, and it is a key point in the differing interpretations of the vase.

Chapter 3 explores images that mock heroes and gods. The discussion covers a wide range of scenes and is valuable for arguing that almost no figure was above mocking and humor. Rather than relying on iconographic comparisons with literary sources, Mitchell works from the visual language. For example, he argues that the image of a winged woman pursuing a young hunter on an amphora in

Naples (fig. 64) is not Eos but Iris, because of the dropped *kerykeion*. Losing one's instrument like this is a signal of lust, such as Menelaos dropping his sword when seeing Helen again, and therefore constitutes a mocking image. Given the wide range of scenes covered, not all are so clearly humorous. The particular difficulty of humor is also found in the analysis of an Ilioupersis scene on a cup in Boston (fig. 42) that depends on reidentifying the figure at the altar as Helen rather than Cassandra. Walsh recently analyzed the same scene as a burlesque, interpreting the figure as Cassandra (*Distorted Ideals in Greek Vase-Painting: The World of Mythological Burlesque* [Cambridge 2009] 80–1).

The next chapter, on satyrs, is more unified in its approach. Rather than seeing their presence as frequently signifying the inspiration of a satyr play, Mitchell argues persuasively that the figures are comic in their own right and that we should only look for literary influence when there are clear signs of costuming. Puns, misused objects, and mimicry of respectable behavior make satyrs a fitting device for parody. They provide a further opportunity to mock heroes and gods by including both hero/god and satyr in the same picture, as in the return of Hephaistos and the blinding of Polyphemos, or in substituting satyrs into standardized heroic scenes.

Chapter 5 discusses dwarves, especially the figural vases from the Kabirion in Boeotia. Dwarves function like satyrs in mocking the normative, while Mitchell argues that the Kabirion imagery should be understood in

the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of carnival. He argues that the images are not masked figures but caricatures that parody a wide range of ritual, daily activity, and myth.

The conclusion presents lists of works discussed in the book and tables of data from the author's database. Mitchell ends with a discussion of the social role of visual humor as promoting group cohesion by ridiculing others or mocking the powerful within the confines of a temporary limit, such as carnival.

While a theoretical approach was not part of his intention, there is an omission from the bibliography: Steiner's extensive discussion of parody in *Reading Greek Vases* (Cambridge 2007), which might have helped define humor more precisely. The text presents a few challenges in reading, particularly in the references to many vases that are not illustrated in the book. There are detailed sources for these in the footnotes, but the shifting examples make the book less accessible to students than to scholars and occasionally obscure the discussion.

In summary, this broad survey of scenes of visual humor will serve as a valuable starting point for further research. The extensive lists and citations will make the book an aid for further work on humor and should encourage more synthesis and refinement of theoretical approaches to visual humor.

MARK D. STANSBURY-O'DONNELL

DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105
M9STANSBURYO@STTHOMAS.EDU