

Teacher Resource Bank

GCE Classical Civilisation

CIV2C (Athenian Vase Painting) –

Advice for Teachers



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To be read in conjunction with the Specification and Scheme of Work for CIV2C

Introduction

- The aim of this topic is to encourage students to look at a range of painted Greek vases and form their own judgements, rather than to recite a limited range of safe points that they have committed to memory. There remains much dispute even among top academics with regard to the interpretation of many vases, and even over the attribution of certain paintings to particular painters: students should therefore feel confident in putting forward their own interpretations, based on their study of particular vases and the culture and lifestyle that produced them. This document should help teachers to achieve this aim with their students.
- The specification can be summarised as a series of key themes:
 - the purposes and functions of the major vase shapes;
 - the vase shapes and their uses;
 - the development of the black-figure, red-figure and white-ground techniques;
 - the contribution of the prescribed painters to developments in composition, style and visual effect;
 - mythological and other subject-matter and its visual interpretation;
 - what the works studied imply about Greek religious and cultural priorities and assumptions.
- These themes can best be accessed by a careful study of individual vases. A chronological approach will enable the students to gain a confident understanding of the development era by era and style by style. A starting point could be to look in detail at one or two vases by the Amasis painter (the earliest painter named in the specification).
- Students should then move on to examine an unfamiliar vase by the same painter, receiving guidance to help them reach their own judgements. The exemplar questions which follow will help with this. The answers given on the following pages are intended to be neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, but to suggest general lines of approach.
- This approach can then be repeated for each of the painters named in the specification. In most cases students should consider in detail a number of vases by each painter; teachers will need to apply discretion here depending on the number of vases surviving (for example in the case of the Sosias Painter, where there is only one well known example), and the relative importance of each Painter (the Berlin Painter may offer more opportunities here than his predecessor the Kleophrades Painter). As a general rule it would be wise to cover at least three paintings by each painter wherever possible. A wide range of sources both printed and on-line are available to help choose examples: the three Thames and Hudson volumes by John Boardman provide a good starting point.

Suggested Questions

When students are presented with an unfamiliar vase they should be taught to ask themselves a series of questions such as:

Preliminary questions

- What was the function of this vase?
- What painting technique is used in this vase?
- When do you think this vase was made?
- What do you think the picture depicts?
- What is the relationship between the painting and the vase type?

Questions relating to form

- What is the overall design of the vase?
- How does the painting conform to the shape of the vase?
- How are the central characters positioned
 - a) individually;
 - b) with regard to one another;
 - c) with regard to the vase?
- How does the painter render the human body?
- How does the painter render the clothing?
- Based on an analysis of the formal elements, how effective is the painting?

Questions relating to meaning

- What does the picture depict? How do various elements of the design aid our analysis?
- What does this painting tell us about everyday life in ancient Athens?
- For whom is the vase intended?
- Are there other examples of vases of this type? How is this vase similar/different from other vases of this type?
- Who is the artist? *(NB we will never ask candidates to identify an artist from a photo of a vase in the examination.)*
- How does knowing the painter and his dates help to understand the historical context of the vase?

Two Examples

Example 1



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Preliminary questions

- **What was the function of this vase?**

This is an *olpe* (similar to an *oinochoe* but differentiated by being tall in relation to its breadth, and by the typical high handle; also the lack of a spout); this would have been used as a container for oil or wine, and/or possibly as a drinking vessel.
- **What painting technique is used in this vase?**

The illustration represents an example of the black-figure painting technique, the earliest of the styles found on the vases in our specification. The painter applied black paint directly to the unfired pot to create figures and ornaments; delicate detail was then incised to represent dress and features (often reinforced as here with opaque red and white paint) before the vase was finally fired.

- **When do you think this vase was made?**
The black-figure technique as employed in Athens reached its height during the second half of the 6th century BC. This painting shows features typical of this era (arrangement/detail of figures, background ornamentation etc. See below for details).
- **What do you think the picture depicts?**
This appears to be a hunting scene featuring the hunter (centre) carrying two animals (a fox and a hare). He is accompanied by a hunting dog while two other male figures look on.
- **What is the relationship between the painting and the vase type?**
Just a typical scene of everyday life; no direct link between subject and use of vessel other than to illustrate the food alongside which the *olpe* would possibly sit at table to provide liquid refreshment.

Questions relating to form

- **What is the overall design of the vase?**
Three main figures with focus on the central character (the hunter): three subsidiary non-human figures (dog, fox, hare); three inanimate objects (one staff for each character); band of black at top with pattern below; two further black bands below picture; base black; thin black stripe along handle. Mostly regimented pattern with horizontals & verticals stressed; some relief in the diagonal slant of the hunter's staff.
- **How does the painting conform to the shape of the vessel?**
The lower and upper black bands frame the central panel (covering about half of the surface area and at its widest point); the bent poses of the subsidiary human figures accentuate (and are accentuated by) the curve of the vase; this curve is also reinforced by the vertical staffs of the bystanders and the pair of hanging animals; very deliberate use of pattern to mimic vase shape (typical of early black-figure painting).
- **How are the central characters positioned a) individually; b) with regard to one another; c) with regard to the vase?**
There is a clear focus on the central character both with regard to his position on the vase and the relationship of the subsidiary characters (the dog is clearly his underling, the prey are his possessions; the three animals frame him; good 3D effect of dog, quite unusual for the time); the other two human characters each look towards the central character from the periphery of the scene suggesting he is leader; their staffs further frame the central figure while somewhat excluding the two characters from the main scene.
- **How does the painter render the human body?**
All three are shown in profile; the central character appears to be stepping forward (returning home from the hunt?) but the supposed walking position of his legs/feet is far from natural, lacking any real balance, poise or sense of momentum. There is some attempt to suggest musculature in the central character's thighs/knees. For the subsidiary human characters the clothing is used to avoid depiction of their posture; they simply lean forward to mimic the shape of the pot. Facially all three are again in profile: there is little individual characterisation; each has an archaic smile, pointed nose, large (ill-positioned?) eye; differences are in supporting detail (a red hat for the central character, colour rather than texture of hair etc.); all three have similar beards (semi-detached at first glance). Fingers are roughly incised; ditto necklines (body and clothing rather merges here). (Is there more individuality in his depiction of the animals?)

- **How does the painter render the clothing?**
As with the body there is a dependence on pattern rather than individuality. Simple red rectangles serve as cloaks while main garments do not try to model the shape of the bodies beneath; a regular floral pattern is present with variety only in the cut of the garment (the left-hand subsidiary character has an ‘off-the-shoulder’ number while the right-hand figure’s tunic seems to cover the full body: the central figure has a short number, presumably suitable for the exertions of hunting).
- **Based on an analysis of the formal elements, how effective is the painting?**
Any considered opinion is acceptable. It may be helpful to consider what the painter was trying to achieve (and what he was not interested in): is the repetitive patterning and lack of realism/individuality important? Does the painter fill the space well? Does he convey a convincing feeling that here is a man returning from a (successful) hunting expedition? Note that here we are considering what we feel ‘based on an analysis of the formal elements’: the answers to the questions in the next section may well impact on the more general question ‘how effective is the painting?’

Questions relating to meaning

- **What does the picture depict? How do various elements of the design aid our analysis?**
A returning hunter. We assume he has been out on a successful hunt using his dog to retrieve his prey. He is greeted by a pair of (older?) admirers as he returns, proudly showing off his catch. His position in the centre (and their less prominent places to the side, almost bowing to him) emphasises his focal position. Only the dog (his fellow hunter) shares this prominence. The lower bands of black represent the earth; all are firmly grounded in this portrayal – except for the unfortunate prey. There is little excitement – the focus is on pattern rather than movement or emotion. These are all typical features of the black-figure style of painting. Is there any deeper message behind the painting? Not that we are aware of, but this could be a funerary tribute to the great man (or just a suitable picture for the dinner table).
- **What does this painting tell us about everyday life in ancient Athens?**
Importance of hunting for basic survival; use of dogs in hunting as today; what the Athenians ate (on a daily basis? on a special occasion?).
- **For whom is the vase intended?**
Use in ritual – funerary offerings? Possible household use – with a meal (for wealthy family)? Drinking/storage at symposia? Possibly as a measure.
- **Are there other examples of vases of this type? How is this vase similar/different to others?**
Not a great number of *olpai* among the painters named in the specification – best for comparison would be: two more Amasis Painter *olpai* (Athena v Poseidon and Perseus v Medusa) – existence of three by Amasis Painter while few elsewhere may be significant; also an *olpe* attributed to the Kleophrades Painter (c 470 BC: Athletes – in Louvre) – good red-figure example to compare; how significant are any differences in basic composition between this red-figure example and the black-figure paintings of the Amasis Painter?
- **Who is the artist?**
The Amasis Painter (**Note:** we would never ask candidates to identify an artist from a photo of a vase in the examination.)

- **How does knowing the painter and his dates help us to understand the historical context of the vase?**

The Amasis Painter was active between 560 and 525 BC. For much of this time Athens was under the (relatively benevolent) tyranny of Pisistratus; perhaps a time for focusing on non-controversial everyday themes when painting? The desire to go beyond the traditional pattern-based approach to vase painting has yet to kick in. The red-figure technique was invented in about 530 BC, so the Amasis Painter just lived long enough to have been aware of its potential but he is not believed to have attempted any work in this style.

Example 2



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Preliminary questions

- **What was the function of this vase?**

This is a *volute krater* (identifiable as a *krater* by its general shape and large size; the similarity of its handles to the ‘*volute*’ of an Athenian pillar capital led to the term ‘*volute krater*’); this would have been used at a *symposium* for mixing the wine with water; this would then be stored here pending the drawing off of the mixture in smaller vessels for the delight of the (usually male) party-goers.

- **What painting technique is used in this vase?**

The illustration represents an unusual example of the red-figure painting technique, introduced in Athens in about 530 BC by painters who felt the black-figure technique was not capable of accommodating the necessary developments in composition which they were seeking. The unfired red pot was handed to the painter who would sketch in the outlines of figures, then any pattern, details etc. before filling in the black background; the pot was then ready for firing.

- **When do you think this vase was made?**
The red-figure technique as employed in Athens persisted from the late 6th century BC right through the era of classical Athens, but peaked in terms of composition, figure drawing etc. between the work of the pioneers (last quarter of the 6th century) and the Achilles Painter (from about 460 BC). The figure drawing in particular here exemplifies the final advances of the archaic period between 500 and 480 BC (arrangement/detail of figures, background ornamentation etc. See below for details).
- **What do you think the picture depicts?**
This is clearly a battle scene and the two combatants are named on the vase as Achilles and Memnon. This is therefore a Homeric scene (a precursor to the decisive battle between Achilles and Hector depicted on the other side of the vase).
- **What is the relationship between the painting and the vase type?**
It was customary to depict well known mythological scenes on vessels employed at *symposia*. Possibly as the wine went down the guests would be inspired to enact retellings of the myth (or see themselves as potential latter day Achilles figures).

Questions relating to form

- **What is the overall design of the vase?**
Unusually the artist has chosen to use only a small area (the lower half of the vessel's neck) for illustration. The rest is rendered in pure black with the exception of a small patterned decoration near the base and a more emphatic set of decorations on the top half of the neck and on the handles. The skeletal picture stands in contrast to the elaborate decoration above.
- **How does the painting conform to the shape of the vessel?**
Using such a small area for the illustration could be seen as rendering the shape of the vessel irrelevant. However the huge size of the empty spaces (no attempt to involve the curves of the vessel in the figure portrayal) shifts the focus of the viewer upwards to the emphatically straight lines of the diminutive figures. At the same time, rather than offering a vague hint of sky, the 'virtuoso display'¹ of ornamentation above the picture takes the eye in a different way, stressing by its excess the emptiness below – even the area covered by the picture seems dominated by the spaces between the figures rather than by the figures themselves.
- **How are the central characters positioned a) individually; b) with regard to one another; c) with regard to the vase?**
The symmetry of the two fighting figures stresses both their similarity and their differences (compare with Hector and Achilles on the other side where the two figures could almost be superimposed). Achilles is portrayed almost identically on both sides: in an almost black-figure manner the eye is drawn to the angles and shapes of the bodies rather than to their individual characteristics. The back and rear leg of each fighter leans forward at a similar angle; Achilles' spear and left arm plus Memnon's shield and right arm form a horizontal axis to the scene (in contrast to the vertical frame offered by the attendant supporting goddesses at either side); yet all four figures seem equidistant from each other. Above all, they are remote not only from the huge empty spaces below, but from each other. The dramatic decoration above seems to press down on the men (even cutting into Achilles' helmet).

- How does the painter render the human body?**
 Despite the small proportions of the characters there is real evidence of progress in the portrayal of the human form (compared to Example 1 above). The pose of each is quite convincing with muscular tension present in both. Achilles appears to be totally balanced, weight ready to take him forward or back as necessary; Memnon is committed to advance, his weight all on the front foot. His supporting goddess (his mother Eos to his right) seems to be stepping back somewhat concerned (while Achilles' mother Thetis appears more on the front foot). An enlargement of the main picture reveals fairly blank expressions on the faces of the fighters: their attitude is depicted by movement, not features. On the other hand the anatomical detail is quite convincing in both: the poses are natural, no features look unreal. We have nearly reached a focus on the individual but the painter continues to make his point via pattern and position rather than facial expression.
- How does the painter render the clothing?**
 An easy one here: these heroes have no need for clothing. Helmet and shield is enough. There is an attempt with the goddesses (who remain quite peripheral) to look ahead to the classical style of drapery: the angular fold of Memnon's mother's cloak seems to reflect her anxiety, while Thetis seems much more relaxed: her cloak falls smoothly around her body.
- Based on an analysis of the formal elements, how effective is the painting?**
 Again any considered opinion is acceptable. As always, what the painter was *not* trying to achieve may be an important factor: do the empty spaces and the heavy patterning above the picture detract from or add to the focus on the two central figures? Again, if we base our response to the vase's effectiveness on the formal elements alone, we may answer differently than when we consider what the painter was trying to tell us by going against formal tradition.

Questions relating to meaning

- What does the picture depict? How do various elements of the design aid our analysis?**
 A fight between two heroes, each supported by his goddess mother. We know the outcome – Achilles will be victor, Memnon will die. Is the design, so full of emptiness, there to boost Achilles or does it say something about the importance and strength of *all* mortals? Does the heavy decoration above detract from the mortal struggle below or draw attention to it – or is it there for a deeper purpose than either of these? Why does it seem to press down on the mortals? Why are the goddesses so much background figures when they are immortals?
- What does this painting tell us about everyday life in ancient Athens?**
 Only that Homer was central to their recreation time and was seen as being fitting subject material for their *symposia*.
- For whom is the vase intended?**
 The party-goers at a *symposium*. Anyone else?

- **Are there other examples of vases of this type? How is this vase similar/different to others?**

Kraters abound because of their use at *symposia*. Usually the painter takes the opportunity (offered by their size) to draw big figures and grand scenes. Good comparisons could be drawn with: Exekias' Heracles and the lion **or** Ajax and Achilles (good black-figure examples); Euphronios' *calyx krater* of the boy with the ball etc. (Do not overlook the reverse of this particular vase, depicted in Woodford²).

- **Who is the artist?**

The Berlin Painter (**Note**: we would never ask candidates to identify an artist from a photo of a vase in the examination.)

- **How does knowing the painter and his dates help us to understand the historical context of the vase?**

The Berlin Painter was active between about 500 and 480 BC. This was just after the end of Athens' tyranny when the democratic reforms instituted by Cleisthenes were beginning to gain momentum: unfortunately (for the democrats) it was also the time of the wars against Persia (perhaps then a time for getting away from reality and retelling safe old myths at parties – or drawing inspiration from the heroic deeds of warriors of old?). The red-figure painting technique had been around for some 50 years and young painters like the Berlin Painter could draw inspiration from the work of the Pioneers, particularly in seeking improvements in the portrayal of anatomy and movement.

¹ S Woodford, *An Introduction to Greek Art*, Duckworth (1997)

² *ibid*