GREEK CATS

Exotic pets kept by rich youths in fifth century B.C. Athens, as portrayed on Greek vases

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Some years ago a Greek vase (Figs. 1, 2) that the University Museum had lent to Bryn Mawr College aroused my curiosity about cheetahs in antiquity, starting me on a long trail of Classical cats.

The vase, a two-handled pear-shaped oil container named 'peleke' by archaeologists, was covered with a black glaze, now pitted and flaking. It was painted on each side with the unusual theme of a young man with a cat. On side A the youth is drawn walking a spotted feline which trots jauntily along in front, head up, tail slightly raised. He is naked except for a short cloak that is wrapped around his right shoulder and flutters out behind. His right hand grips a hooked staff tied round with a ribbon; his left hand is held out, palm down. The subject of the reverse is unique in vase painting: here the youth looks down at the animal which, tall extended for balance, climbs up a knobby staff. The youth braces himself against the staff; his right hand rests on his hip. He wears a long cloak draped to expose his right shoulder. Both youths have short curly hair.

The picture panels are framed above by a lotus pattern (bounded by single glazed lines) and at the sides by a net pattern (bounded by double glazed lines) and below by a reserved band.

The animals appearing in both scenes are not ordinary cats: this can be determined by comparing them with the cat on the kylix in Switzerland by the Cat and Dog Painter (Fig. 3) where the cat, unlike the pelike felines, is unspotted, has a shorter tail and heavier body. The animals on the pelike are leopards since they are spotted, and hinting leopards, or cheetahs (Acinonyx jubatus) because of their body proportions, their long tails (approximately half the length of head and body) and tame behavior. Alfred Brehm, writing of the domestication of the cheetah, says: "Good nature is the essential trait of the cheetah's character. A cheetah when tailed will never think of biting through the slender cord which holds him. A tame cheetah never attempts to harm anybody and it is perfectly safe to walk boldly up to him. He accepts carrion with indifference, or at best only acknowledges them by purring a little louder than usual." Both animals on this vase are small, so probably cubs. There is no trace of a leash in either scene.

The University Museum pelike is the only vase I know of which shows a climbing cheetah and this must surely be a first-hand observation by the vase painter. Although a cheetah's claws are blunter like a dog's and are less retractable than are a cat's, the cheetah is still able to climb: the action pictured on the vase is strikingly similar to that in a photograph of the cheetah 'Pippa' climbing a tree (Fig. 3), whereas on the vase the forelegs are more bent than the rear legs. Dietrich von Bothmer tells me that there is a fine red-figure lekythos by the Eukrates Painter in a private collection in New York showing a woman performing the same trick.

The University Museum pelike should be added to a small group of seven vases listed by W. L. Brown showing scioticotic Athenian youths with cheetahs. The pelike emphasizes this exotic theme by painting the animals on both sides (one of the others shows two cheetahs). The scene may be outdoors because of the cloak and staff, but perhaps painted indoors so. The other listed vases depict cheetahs at a music lesson (Figs. 5, 6), being petted on the lap of a youth (Fig. 7), being walked (Fig. 10), or rearing up at the sight of a dog (Figs. 12, 13). The latter scene illustrates Alfred Brehm's observation that a "passing dog immediately excites him [the cheetah]: he ceases purring and turns a

4. Detail of no. 7.


9 Column krater in the manner of Myson, side A showing a cheetah being held on the lap of a youth. Staatliche Museen, Berlin West (Charlottenburg), no. 3140. Beazley, ARV, 249, no. 4.

10 Interior of kylix by Apollodorus, showing a cheetah being walked. British Museum, E 57. Beazley, ARV, 120, no. 9.

11a, b, c, d White-ground lekythos of the Teukros Group, showing a cheetah being walked. "a" is a detail. Staatliche Museen, Berlin West (Charlottenburg), no. 310. Beazley, ARV, 101, no. 4.

12, 13 Peplis by the Pyxideus Painter, showing a cheetah running up at the sight of a dog. Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. 124, Beazley, ARV, 243, no. 47.


18 Detail of krater in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, no. 189. Reprinted from D. A. R. M. Heron & B. Shelton, Greek Vases from Nancy, (Harry Abrams), 1963, pl. XXIV.

19, 20 Black-glazed askos (profile and side view) from Nola, Exchange Loan in 1932 from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the University Museum; formerly in the collection of Dr. Francis W. Lewis, 1819-1909. Height of body, 0.7 cm; height with handle, 9.7 cm; diameter, 9.0 cm; width of mouth, 11.5 cm. In excellent condition.

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keen glance upon the bystander, who usually looks somewhat sheepish at such a moment, and the cheetah pricks up his ears and sometimes tries to overtake the dog in a few bounds.

In addition to this University Museum pelike I would like to add a second vase to Brown's list, Acropolis Museum No. 779 (Fig. 14), where a playful cheetah crouches on a stool between two men. A third addition to the list would be a squat lekythos in the collection of Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, No. 1915:41 (Fig. 17), where a dejected man is looking at a young man who is restraining a cheetah on a leash. The dejected man is leaning on a staff, in a pose closely paralleling that of the man on side B of the University Museum's pelike. A fourth addition to the list is a cup in the Agora Museum (Figs. 15, 16), where a cheetah stands under the cup handle; youths occupy both sides. This Agora cheetah is in the tradition of leopards as sub-handle decoration; it is not part of the major scene. A fifth addition called to my attention by Dietrich von Bothmer is an unpublished cup by Douris, formerly Geneva market, "that shows on A a dog snarling at a full grown cheetah that has climbed on a chair. Here the pelt is especially carefully rendered."

Brown's listed vases and the five additions date from the first half of the fifth century; all depict men, not women; and the cheetahs, with the exception of the Agora cup, play an important role in the scene. The scenes are less conventional and the cheetahs are life-like, suggesting the actual presence in Athens of a cheetah cub as the pet of certain upper-class young men. The cheetah's body is always rendered in profile and the head, with the exception of the Agora cup and the Boulese-potter pelike, is in profile, too.

The cover of the 1975 Summer issue of Expedition illustrates the earliest representation of the hunting leopards in vases painting; a cheetah sits under the chair of the seated man of this Lycian Arcosolium cup (Cabinet des Médailles No. 189) dated ca 655/600 B.C. (Fig. 18). Between this cup and the University Museum's pelike is a gap of some eighty years or more. The type of picture shown on the pelike is not continued into the later fifth century, for later 'cats' are shown by themselves, and not as being admired by young men.

The leopard as pet, perhaps the cheetah (it is impossible to say which), became extremely popular on small vases, such as askoi and squat lekythoi. There is an example of each type in the University Museum. On these two the animal is less precisely drawn, apparently not from life. One vase, L 64-199 (Fig. 19), is a deep askos with a small vertical spout at one side, an overhanging handle and a hollow tube through the center. The askos is a shape which served for pouring liquids slowly and may once have held honey, oil or perfume. Side A is painted with a lion; side B with a running (?) leopard (Fig. 20). Below is a reserved border. The leopard's expression is fierce as he glances back at the pursuing lion. Distinctive are his small triangular head, the angular contours of tail and belly, the very delicate, neatly drawn, double arc of the shoulders and the unusual straight strokes diagonally across the back legs. The spots are rendered by heavy vertical strokes, the body spots are lighter along the spine but along the body are angular and unusual in being loops which are arranged in neat rows; solid strokes represent spots on legs and feet; faint dots spot the forehead. The strokes along the back and the open circles are artistic license and conventions. The confusing black area below the animal's right eye is actually
the last in the top line of open spots; indicating that the animal was first spotted and then the face marking applied.

This leopard is unlike the mass of late fifth century askoi hastily painted with leopards. Accurate observations are the swell of the forehead, the upstanding ears, the curl of the tail and the narrow hip area. The as Skloos leopard is more closely related to the earlier types than is the leopard on a second small vase in the University Museum. This latter is a squat lekythos, an oil container, L-64-169 (Fig. 27, 28), with fat, bulging body and broadfoot. The leopard here is squattling with left paw raised, its head turned to the viewer. The leopard is much more carefully drawn; its body is lumpy; the legs are cruder and lack detail; the tail is too short; thick at the top and, unlike the finely curled tail of the other leopard, is unrealistically bent; the ears; with their black centers, are too large and bat-like. The rows of strokes between the ears form an arbitrary, unreal pattern. The spotting of this cat is achieved by thinly scattered pairs of fine dots arranged rather at random on the body, and by dots running roughly along the spine. The body lines are less fine than those of the askos leopard. The face is different here; the nose is narrow between the eyes and the nose lines spread far apart as they approach the muzzle; these latter lines are partly lost.

There are many lekythoi and askoi decorated with felines and it is a thankless task to identify painters of these hasty products. One can say that the artists spent a limited time on some while others can be execrable. These small vases can also be arranged according to certain basic traits such as the contours of the body, the curve of the shoulders and the manner of dotting, which reveal the artist's individuality.

The University Museum's lekythos leopard was drawn rapidly; the toes were barely indicated, the paws are sketchy, the spots haphazard. Parallels for the long shoulder curve are and are: above to the right rear: the dots along the back, the quite small pair of dots randomly set on the body, are to be; found with a leopard on a squat lekythos in the British Museum, F-30 (Fig. 24). For these details as well as the large bat-like ears, forefoot, dotted face, and the blunted back ground below the stomach, compare British Museum lekythos F-641 (Fig. 23).

I return once more to the University Museum pelike with which we started—the vase is not attributed to an artist. Parallels in shape and border patterns occur in the work of the Emblithos Painter, but his lotus buds in the black-figure pelikai borders seem thinner than those on the Philadelphia pelike. Dietrich von Bothmer points out in a letter that the "schema of decoration is typical for Myson and his group," and also refers to "Boston 61.434 (ABV 1610) which Beazley has put near the Goettingen Painter." Myson was a decorated painter whose work leads on to such mannerist artists as the Pig and Agnigest Painter. Close parallels can be drawn among his pelikai. One in Syracuse (No. 157199), nearly identical in height to the University Museum vase, shows his characteristic heavy-thighed men with down-turned noses. Comparable among the Syracuse athletes are the manner of holding a stick with hand loosely on top, the long spread apart fingers of the left youth, narrow biceps; also note the long firm continuous lines of cloth and curve of the drapery across the mid-torso of the truncheon at the right.

A pelike of the Drawing Collection (Fig. 25), with similar border schema, a draped athletic trainer leans on his staff; similarly generalized and specific parallels occur. Characteristic is the manner in which the contour of the leg bends into the hip. A column krate in Wurzburg (No. 5202) and one in Copenhagen (No. 3808) afford further parallels. On the latter the round, heavy dot spotting of the leopard pelt worn by a satyr parallels the cheetah spots. Among Myson's followers is the Pig Painter not the Agnigest Painter who continues this pelt rendering. The date of the University Museum pelike is around the end of the first quarter of the fifth century.

In these three University Museum vases, pelike, askos, lekythos, it is possible in one collection to see a continuous interest in leopards but with a shift away from the unique drawn-from life cheetahs on the pots of the early fifth century to the less accurate, hastily-drawn leopards on later mass-produced cheaper small vases. The pelike scene also provides an insight into life in ancient Athens, namely the popularity of the cheetah cub as a pet and status symbol for certain sophisticated Athenian young men.