Undoing the Past

Changing Attitudes Towards the Restoration of Greek Pots

KYLE M. PHILLIPS
ANN H. ASHMEAD

When we first started working on the publication of The University Museum's Attic red-figure pottery for the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum, Dr. Roger Edwards, then Curator of the Mediterranean Section, showed us a large, heavily restored vessel of a type called a stamnos by Classical archaeologists. After our initial examination of the pot, it was sent to the conservation department for cleaning and restoration using modern techniques and materials. When next we saw the stamnos it was in a transition stage, stripped of its overpaint, and exposed as an undressed pastiche made up of pieces from eight different pots, including an "alien" neck and foot.

Relegated to the storage shelves in The University Museum for half a century, this pot is an excellent example of certain appalling 19th-century techniques and attitudes towards restoration. In contrast to the present-day desire for archaeological "purity," the previous restorer labored to create a complete pot, with all its figures fleshed out, to be treated as a prized decorative object. This article documents a shift in attitude, and hence in restoration methods, as seen in this one pot—a pot now cleaned of overpaint, relieved of its foreign parts, and rebuilt so that it is worthy of gallery display (Fig. 1).

The First Restoration

To study what the initial restorer had created, we turned to old photographs of the overpainted pot, which showed it with its 19th-century accretions (Figs. 2, 4-5). On Side A (the best-preserved side of the painted vessel), an armed warrior extends a phiale mesomphalos or shallow bowl to receive ritual wine, which he will later pour out in libation. The wine is being poured by a woman at the left who holds a pitcher. At the right is a partially preserved figure, restored as a woman. On Side B, the center is dominated by a standing bearded male who holds a staff; he is flanked by two women.

The restorer had fleshed out the scene, making it appear complete from a normal viewing distance. We suspect that cracks and minor blemishes visible on the early photographs were also painted over at one time, but we have no photographic evidence to prove this. Even in its overpainted state, some specific aspects of the restoration were visible:

Side A: The woman at the left (figure 1) is complete. On the central warrior (figure 2) the lower legs and feet, the lower portion of his cloak, and part of the shield were added. The restorer even cut in the (missing) compass incised lines on the shield's border. The figure at the right (figure 3) is the most extensive-
The Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum

The University Museum has one of the largest and most diverse collections of Classical pottery in the country. Of the more than 2000 vases in the collection, there are examples from the Bronze Age through the Hellenistic period. Only a small percentage of these vases have ever been on display and only a quarter of them have ever been published in any way. In order to make these pieces accessible to scholars for study, the Museum has begun the publication of the collection through the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum (CVA).

The CVA is an international series that serves as a vital research aid in the study of Greek pottery. The volumes provide scholars with detailed commentary and comparanda for each vase, descriptions of shape and decoration, and comprehensive illustrations of each item. The first fascicle appeared in 1936; since that time more than 225 fascicles have been published in 25 different countries.

In 1986 The University Museum published the first of its CVA fascicles, The South Italian Pottery, Part I, by J.H. Green, in 15 volumes are planned, including a fascicle written by Kyle M. Phillips and Ann Ashmore.

2
The stamnos after its first restoration.
ACCESSION NUMBER: MS 49-202 (formerly L-2-3)
PAINTER: The Oxyrhynchus Painter (Dohan), confirmed by Beazley
SOURCE: Beazley in 1948 of Miss Annie May Hegeman, who lent the vase in
1936, Purchased by Miss Hegeman's mother in Rome about 1879
DIMENSIONS (as restored): Height, 0.40 m, diameter of body, 0.325 m;
diameter at rim, 0.218 m; diameter of foot, 0.616 m
CONDITION: Extensively restored, with entirely modern neck; "missing
portions of the pictures have been supplied by pieces of unguentory
pottery cut to the right size, covered with two plaster and painted; the foot
is ancient but does not belong" (Dohan 1936).

3
The stamnos by the Oxyrhynchus Painter as now restored.
SHAPE: This stamnos has a full body, flat shoulder, and sturdy handles which
rise upwardly slightly
DIMENSIONS: Present height, from lower body to shoulder, 0.460 m; diameter of body, 0.325 m
CONDITION: Incomplete; foot, neck, and large segments of lower body
missing. Two panels, separated by palete pattern at the handles, decorate the stamnos. Side A is better preserved than B, which has lost
most of its surface.

The handle zones (Fig. 5): These are nearly intact: only the leaf tips and tendrils of the upper right
palmette of the CVA vase needed retouching. The tongue pattern on the
shoulder and the base meander were heavily overpainted.

First Publication and a Misleading Drawing

In 1936, Edmund Hall Dohan gave the vase its initial scholarly publication. Since the vase was a loan from a
Miss Hegeman, Dohan was faced with a dilemma. Had the vase been owned by The University Museum,
the artist would have removed all extraneous restoration before presenting
it, as she stated in a letter to John Beazley, a noted Classical archaeologist and expert on Greek
classic vase painting (12 Dec. 1936: Archives of The University Museum).

The solution was to provide a Museum Journal article (1936) with two fine drawings by M. Louise
Baker, illustrating what she considered to be the original painted lines (Fig. 6a,b). Baker's drawings
are an essential complement to the old photographs, and succeed in conveying the style of the artist. Nevertheless, they must be used with caution since Dohan was deceived by the extensive overpainting.

In the light of our knowledge of the cleaned painting, inaccuracies in Baker's drawings become clear. On
side A, there are errors in the depiction of all three figures. Although a segment of the warrior's shield lying
between 1 and 3 o'clock is actually restoration, Dohan was misled by the compass drawn lines of the restorer in believing that the entire shield and upper portion of the staff were original. A black palmette front on an inserted fragment was inter-
preted as a female hairdo on the figure (5) at the right; this probably led Baker to interpret the entire figure
as female. The folds of this figure's cloak from knees to head were obscured by extensive overpainting.

On Side B, details in the original painting of the woman at the left (figure 4) were obscured by paint added in restoration, so that Baker's drawing of her neck, chin and
upper cloak folds are missing; near her knee, a long vertical fold was eliminated but two (overpainted)
arcades were added. The fingers of her outstretched hand, held behind the
head of the central male (figure 5), had been painted out and of course are not in Baker's drawing. As for the
central male, the restorer covered up his eye, the leftmost lines of his
shoulder, small drapery folds at his
waist, and the long line of internal drapery crossing the body from below the shoulder fold to the lower stomach. This unnecessary obscuring of original internal drapery folds by the restorer strikes us as peculiar.

Dohan could see that most of the tongue pattern on the shoulder of the vase was not original. The restorer had overpainted this area to cover plaster, which had been
applied to result in the curve of the vessel between the shoulder and
the neck (the latter supplied from another pot; see Fig. 7a). The under-
lying, original tongue pattern was visible only in one or two small seg-
ments. Recently a ray pattern near the base of the world-famous Fran
cois Vase in Florence was discovered to be a similar overpasting and
painting.)

There are omissions too in Baker's drawing. On Side A, for example, she left out the dotted decorative band on the lower skirt of the woman at the left. Perhaps be-
cause of the considerable overpaint, Baker chose to draw only the central panel with figures, omitting the
bands of pattern that provide a frame for the central scenes, as well as a drawing of the pot's contour. As a result, the drawings produce an impression of flat panel paintings, lacking any indication of how the figures relate to the vase's curved shape.

The Vase Comes Apart

As stated above, the entire pot surface was recently cleaned of all overpaint, and of the fine plaster which was used to fill the con-
tours of the stamnos, omitting what was an intriguing conglomerate of the neck, which Dohan had believed modern, proved instead to be an
cient and probably Etruscan rather than Greek, based on its shoulder decoration of applied red tongues (Fig. 7a). The foot was also ancient (Fig. 7b); it appears from a large amphora, or possibly from the same vessel type as the body (a stamnos), or from another form, such as a krater. Just as the curvature at the juncture between shoulder and neck was forced, the profile of the lower body was also altered so that it could continue into the alien foot.

The most distressing restoration technique to 20th-century eyes was the use of scraped, sanded, and cut-down fragments from five black- and red-figure pots. These had been used as filler with no regard for their archaeological value, inserted into gaps where a part of the primary (red-figure) stamnos was missing. The filler sherds include fragments of a small cup, a black-figure stamnos, a red-figure amphora(?), and two other large pots. These pieces were placed randomly, at a diagonal or upside-down. Two decorated sherds show upside-down black palmettes. One, placed as the head of figure 3, confused Dohan who interpreted it as a woman’s hair (see above). The other palmette was substituted for a male head (figure 5, see Fig. 7a).

The same two fragmentary figures had filler sherds in their lower bodies: a sherd with black-figure legs filled the space where the legs of figure 5 ought to have been, and black-figure drapery was placed where the drapery of figure 3 was missing (see Fig. 7b). One filler sherd has traces of a guilloche (braided) pattern.

The New Restoration

Once we had studied the cleaned pot minus all overpaint and overplaster, we asked that the pot be taken totally apart in order to document its component vessels. This has now been accomplished under the skillful hands of conservator Stephen Koob, and the primary stamnos pieces rejoined (Figs. 3, 9, 10). What has emerged is a handsome vase, the creation of a man known to Classical archaeologists as the Oretthys Painter. Secondary or filler sherds come from at least seven vessels (see box).

The Oretthys Painter stamnos dates to the 2nd quarter of the 9th century B.C., and takes its place within the period that produced similar restrained monumental works in sculpture, for example, the masterpieces from the Zeus temple at Olympia. This vase is an excellent

The Pieces Used by the 19th-Century Restorer

The varied range of sherds which the restorer used suggests that he had access to a large supply of Etruscan and Greek pottery, both large and small pots, painted with black- and red-figure scenes. It therefore seems probable that the vessel was restored in Italy, where such a selection would have been available.

The two major pieces used to complete the stamnos of the Oretthys Painter are the neck, shoulder, and rim of an Etruscan stamnos which has typical Etruscan clay and overpaint, and a foot from another large Attic pot. In addition, fragments from at least five other Attic pots were pressed into service; identifiable are a cup and red-figure closed pots. A large black-figure closed pot provided the greatest number of fragments, ranging in size from large shoulder pieces with palmettes to good-sized body fragments with human legs, drapery, and a lower skin, to a tiny fragment with a red lampa. In all, 55 individual fragments from this pot were built into the stamnos of the Oretthys Painter, many of them rasped down to fit the contours of the new composite vessel. We will never know more about this fine but fragmentary black-figure pot.

One problem remains, the possible source for these filler sherds. Many of these pieces show gouges made by trowels, traces of hasty excavation. Although we cannot prove that the pieces all came from the same tomb, such a possibility must be held open. The types of sherds suggest an Etruscan site as their source, and the range of dates that they represent suggests that this hypothetical tomb was laid down in the 2nd quarter of the 9th century B.C., with some of the pottery pieces placed within it as grave goods dating as early as the late 8th century.
example of a painter who was content to work with a restricted subject matter because it so perfectly expressed his sentiments. (A stamnos in Edinburgh by the Oenomaia Painter, No. 51.44.24, depicts very similar scenes; see Dohan 1962:64-74, Figs. 6,9; Beazley 1963:496, no. 3). Understated elegance and pathos of the moment were important to the Oenomaia Painter rather than the lively experimentation of the late archaic examples (for example, the work of the Foundry Painter, Fig. 8).

Using the new restoration, we can now give an accurate description of the vase and an interpretation of the scenes portrayed. In the center of Side A, a middle-aged, heavily armored warrior (figure 2) is about to receive wine for a farewell libation from a finely dressed woman (figure 1), either his wife or mother. Behind the warrior stands a draped figure (3) who can be identified as a male (see below).

The two best preserved figures (1 and 2) are drawn neatly and in great detail. The warrior, identified as a mature man rather than a youth because of his dark beard, stands calmly, burdened by elaborate and obviously expensive armor which tells us that he is a man of property. The archaic-looking black lion shield-blazon, small in proportion to the overall size of the shield, is especially detailed, with full bushy mane, open roaring mouth with tongue and teeth indicated, and high curled tail. This archaic device may indicate that the shield was a family piece, perhaps from the late 6th century or early 5th century B.C. The warrior has not yet finished arming, as his saura (a helmet) (which he wears over a closely pleated tunic, a chitonikon) is open, its right flap projecting above his shoulder. His articulated scabbard should hang from a baldric, but none is visible across his chest, he holds his helmet and long spear in his concealed left hand. The helmet (a pilos type) is elaborate. The warrior wears greaves, which mold to the knees and terminate in projections. His knee and thigh muscles are very completely rendered in lithic glaze, best seen in slanting light. His hair is bound in a fillet.

The warrior holds a shallow bowl (phiale megalonphalos) with central boss, a form frequently made of metal by the Greeks. He carries his cloak bundled over his concealed left arm and waits to make a farewell libation. The painter has captured a calm, monumental scene in this panel. In the warrior’s preparations for departure there is a moving poignancy, for this man is in such haste to be off that he makes his farewell libation with his corselet still unsecured. The warrior seems heedless of his fate, which may be to fight and die.

The woman standing before him is, as one would expect from this period, timeless in her beauty. Her curly hair is rendered by close dots; the tie of her elaborate cloth head-dress or anokos is also dotted. The broad folds of her cloak imply that it was woven from fine wool. These heavy folds contrast with the finer folds, perhaps linen, of her full-length chiton. The thin, tall handle of the oinochoe she carries suggests that this pitcher was also metal. The woman gestures with open palm.

Unfortunately, the third figure standing quietly behind the warrior cannot be precisely identified. The heavy cloak and fine, long undergarment could be worn either by a man or a woman; however, the staff held at a vertical is only appropriate for a male or a goddess. We consider the figure a male, quite possibly the warrior’s father.

Two areas of Side A have inscriptions: the word kallai, or “beautiful” (reading from right to left), extends between the faces of the woman and the warrior. Two letters of another inscription are preserved above the shield, to the right of the staff. The word may be (kalos), or a name, reading from right to left.

On Side B a bearded man holding a staff (figure 5) may be returning from or departing on a trip. He faces
a woman (figure 6), who greets him with a standard greeting gesture of upraised hand, palm towards him. A second female figure (4) stands to his rear, at the far left. Two of her fingers project behind the man’s shoulder, showing that she is gesturing to the right.

Many of the refined technical features of red-figure drawing are present on this pot despite its worn state. On Side A are visible the contour strips and delicate relief lines that originally outlined the figures; fortunately those of the faces are well preserved. The preliminary sketch (impressed guide lines laid down by the artist for his original design) is difficult to see because of wear, but the lines are present. Details painted with dilute and thinned black glaze, such as those on the helmet crest and the corset, are especially fine.

The geometric patterns that surround the painted scenes were carefully executed. Motifs within the handle zone were placed so as to accent the sturdy handles: a single large palmette between handle and base counterbalances the pair of smaller palmettes between handle and neck; each palmette is crisply outlined with relief lines. A tongue pattern accents the shoulder. Below the picture field is an elaborate double interlocking meander alternating with filled rectangles; this band is edged above and below by lines. The artist started painting the meander border under the A/B handle where the center rectangle is lacking.

### Conclusions

We have documented the restoration techniques used in the 19th century on a single Greek pot. Some of these techniques are totally unacceptable to modern archaeologists and conservators. The question then raised is: To what extent do these restoration techniques relate to 19th century attitudes?

When the 19th century restorer, whether working for a dealer, a scholar, or a museum, wanted to complete a pot, he frequently used spare sherds for which he had little regard; he had access to a varied supply of Etruscan and Greek fragments and used them to build up the pot’s shape or just fill in its gaps. He did not hesitate to mutilate these pieces by cutting them down to size, and by scraping and sanding away entire painted surfaces. Such sherds were common then, but today these same sherds would be respected items of value in collections of ancient pottery. (One such group is in the Ella Riegel Memorial Museum at Bryn Mawr College, which we published in the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum many years ago).

Subsequently the restorer applied fine plaster—generously, to mask the uneven surface and to smooth over and hide blemishes and fractures. Lastly, he wanted a complete scene. To achieve this, the entire decoration was repainted; missing figures, limbs, and drapery were completed, and fractures and other defects were then touched up with paint. So thorough were these efforts that only the most well preserved sections of the pot showed the original work of the ancient potter and painter. In contrast, the 20th-century restorer attempts to conserve what actually remains and to present only actual fragments of the pot, incomplete as the resulting design and shape may be. Fractures, gaps, and even minor chips and abrasions are left as they are, documents of the final stage of the artifact’s existence.

### Bibliography

Beazley, J. 1942

Dohan, Edith 1939

Phillipos, B. 1979

Richter, Gisela 1946

Noble, Joseph Vech 1965

Kyle M. Phillips received a PhD in Classical Archaeology from Princeton University in 1962. His excavations at the Italian site of Muro, near Siena, sponsored by Bryn Mawr College from 1960 to 1975, established the importance of the region in the 6th-5th centuries BCE. He taught Classical archaeology at the University of Michigan and at Bryn Mawr College. He was a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome in 1976-77, and then directed a Bryn Mawr center for graduate students at the Villa Mussueneria in Rome until 1982. In 1982 he moved to Florence as Director of Marlo Publications. He was a Research Associate at the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania from 1976 until his death in 1988. Phillips was the author of numerous articles and several exhibition catalog, co-author with Ashmead of a fascicle for the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum.

Ann Harwood Ashmead received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Classical Archaeology from Bryn Mawr College. She was the Ella Riegel Fellow from Bryn Mawr College to the American School at Athens in 1956-57, and was Curator of the Ella Riegel Museum at Bryn Mawr from 1959 to 1964. She has lived in the Orient (a year each in Japan and Taiwan) and in India. She was co-author with Kyle M. Phillips of Attic Red-Figure Vases from the Ella Riegel Memorial Museum, Fasc. I, Bryn Mawr College, Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum (Princeton 1971); the Catalogue of the Classical Collection, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (Providence 1978); and various articles. She and Phillips were writing a catalogue of the Attic red-figure vases held at The University Museum for the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum, Volume One, on the cups, was completed, and the two volumes on the large and small pots were partially complete at the time of Phillips’ death.