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Images at the crossroads: media and meaning in Greek art

Judith M. Barringer, François Lissarrague, *Images at the crossroads: media and meaning in Greek art. Edinburgh Leventis Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. Pp. 584. ISBN 9781474487368 £95.00.

Review by

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This edited volume on ancient, mainly Greek images of all varieties (with emphasis on the periods prior to the fourth century BC) represents a landmark publication insofar as it aims for the first time to bring together a wide range of studies of the use and reception of images in Greek artefacts of every sort. It presents papers from the 2017 conference of the same name at the University of Edinburgh. François Lissarrague, who designed the conference and collaborated with Judith Barringer on editing the volume, died suddenly when it was in press. As a testament to his profound scholarly influence on the study of ancient images, it is fittingly dedicated to his memory.

The title of the book is evocative, suggesting the potential for changes of direction in analysing (ancient) images; it is also indicative, with many intersections of response that criss-cross between contributions. There are twenty-one chapters arranged in six sections; all the contributors are leading scholars in their fields, and their essays are complex, densely argued, and insightful, with intent to stimulate a new approach to image-analysis. A review of this nature cannot offer them individually the justice they deserve.

In the Introduction, the editors situate the collection of papers in relation to the recent shift in artefact study from the object and its maker towards viewer-response; this encompasses *all* potential viewers within a shared culture—*banausoi*, users, and passers-by, in public and in private circumstance—and takes cognisance of viewers' experience of images across media. The six parts seem rather to mark clusters of closely interrelating contributions than to define distinct topics, and the editors' detailed summary of the chapters provides a valuable road-map of their interconnectivity.

Part I, "Making Meaning: How do Images Work?," establishes the conceptual framework for the volume; a recurrent theme is the dependency of meaning-construction on a viewer's prior cultural knowledge. In the first of four chapters, Lissarrague masterfully exemplifies his established methodology in examining a traditional image (eagle and snake) in transmission as icon and metaphor through various contexts across multiple media in ancient Greek

culture. He notes the increasing polysemy of the image as it recurs, and stresses the viewer's contributive role in the process of meaning-creation.

Where Lissarrague's theoretical foundation was largely implicit, the other three chapters foreground their methodologies. Annette Haug (Ch. 2) transfers some of Foucault's categories from textual to visual discourse analysis in discussing polyvalent elements within the well-known late geometric ship-scene on a louterion in London. She rejects prior expectations of either mythological narrative or sociohistorical relevance in favour of analysing image compositions and image motifs, recognising that while even contemporary viewer-responses can differ, yet the images remain "constituents and agents of history" (56). Adopting a structural approach, Martina Seifert (Ch. 3) proposes that, rather than the *Lebensbilder/Mythenbilder* dichotomy imposed by earlier scholarship, the key criteria for distinguishing mortals, heroes and gods in vase-paintings produced c.600-420 BC are gender, class, habitus and status: vase images are constructs to be understood within an historical context, in terms of an individual viewer's recognition based on cultural knowledge of the social order within which the figures belong. Luca Giuliani (Ch. 4) uses the "Chigi Jug" with its pervasive theme of *agon* as an innovative mechanism for examining the respective roles of "descriptive" images (those referring to habitual aristocratic behaviour) and "narrative" images that require knowledge of the story and so are more demanding of the viewer. He suggests that in the symposion context such images may have functioned as elite challenges for winning prestige.

The two chapters in Part II, "Interpretation and Perception," place emphasis on the way medium affects interpretation of images. Discussing the Alexander Mosaic, Mauro Menichetti (Ch. 5) hypothesises that the change of medium and context (from the original Greek wall-painting to a floor-mosaic in a luxurious Pompeian house) coincides with a change of meaning from celebrating a victory to marking it as the starting-point of the opulent lifestyle of the Hellenistic world. Adrian Stähli (Ch. 6) presents his theory of "parapictoriality" (modelled on Genette's paratextuality), incorporating all the elements that shape both the image and the viewer-responses. His examples, clearly selected as best illustrating his argument, can seem like special cases, and a wider range would have been more persuasive.

Part III, "Reflections of the City and its Craftsmen", in contrast to the questioning of historical reference that pervades Part I, examines in two well-matched papers how the real city and its actual craftsmen were represented on vases. Dyfri Williams (Ch. 7), in a complex and rewarding chapter threaded with dry wit, tours the main districts of monument and cult in ancient Athens, identifying depictions of the built and topographical environment in numerous archaic and classical vase-scenes. He explicates the vase images from site evidence and expands upon the latter in light of the former. His stimulating observations (perhaps occasionally a little fanciful) add significantly to understanding how vase-painters' "gaze" fell upon their surroundings. Tonio Hölscher (Ch. 8) analyses potential social distinctions in depictions of artisans' workshops to demonstrate the inapplicability of the modern tendency to seek *perceptual* reality in images, when, he suggests, painters' *Lebenswelt* and their images of it were both constructs manifesting a *conceptual* reality.

In Part IV, "Constructions of Myth through Images," three chapters variously examine how mythological images are affected by the medium and functionality of the artefact, in gems, coins, vases and a (deduced) wall-painting. Marion Meyer (Ch. 9) investigates the pictorial origin of the Gigantomachy scenes (representing the founding myth of the Great

Panathenaia), that begin to appear before the mid-sixth century, postulating on the basis of close analysis of a wide range of artefact-types that there was an authoritative depiction more permanent than the penteteric Panathenaic peplos: likely a wall-painting displayed on the Akropolis, which influenced subsequent versions in various media. Véronique Dasen (Ch. 10) introduces new insights in showing how, on Roman “magical” gems engraved with Greek mythological figures, old established stories were given new, often metaphorical meaning (Herakles and the Lion standing for a patient’s fight against disease, for instance, or Tithonos and the cicada signalling regeneration and rebirth). François de Callataÿ (Ch. 11) offers a thought-provoking take on the special nature of Greek coin iconography: unlike other visual media, coins were mass-produced, eminently transportable, accessible to view across many timespans and locations, and provided in their variants an unbroken chronological record of how official identities were constructed.

Part V, “Clay and Stone: Material Matters,” addresses the actual medium, and especially the adaptation of images from one medium to another. Andrew Stewart (Ch. 12) engages with an age-old philosophical debate over whether sculpture or painting is the superior form of representation, weighing the arguments of Sokrates (*apud* Xenophon) against Quintilian, each in the context of his time. Alan Shapiro (Ch. 13) offers new insights into image transfer in tracing iconographic models for the visual language of classical Attic votive reliefs in red-figure painting of the same period. Among other case-studies, in the reclining hero relief composition he notes the piecemeal introduction of incipient characteristic elements, and identifies motifs in vase-painting that can persuasively be seen as contributing to the formation of the relief scene-type. Judith M. Barringer (Ch. 14) engages with the problem of the perceived discontinuity of figured funerary stelai in fifth-century Athens: she argues convincingly against the conventional notion of a break in stele-production from c.470-430 BC, proposing that the gap was filled by painted wooden stelai, which were undoubtedly regularly used for non-elite graves (and met the requirements of the *post aliquanto* sumptuary legislation), and which provided models for depictions of stelai appearing regularly on white-ground lekythoi throughout the period.

Votive investigation continues in Arthur Muller’s discussion (Ch. 15) of archaic figurative terracottas. Noting that the four main terracotta types coincide with the seated, reclining and standing stone figures of the Geneleos monument, he concludes that the figures are conventionalised representations of mortals in terms of social identity and family status. Their meaning is the same in both burial and sanctuary contexts; in the latter, they represent votaries. Victoria Sabetai (Ch. 16) looks beyond Athens to Boiotia in examining regional red-figure vases, terracotta figurines and the distinctive Boiotian incised black limestone stelai; she focuses on bridal imagery and representations of the ideal Boiotian male as heroic warrior, well demonstrating the rich rewards of studying images as a “dialogue among media” (375).

Stefan Schmidt’s contribution (Ch. 17) pays further attention to Boiotia, moving to the mostly comic, even grotesque, black-figure vases from the Kabirion. Taking account of the context and function of these drinking-vessels, he deftly dismisses the conventional interpretation of pejorative parodies of deities and rituals of the Kabiroi, in favour of their offering entertaining images of the effects of intoxication, intended to provoke laughter amid the feasting and drinking. Kenneth Lapatin (Ch. 18) shifts the focus to small, precious objects; in a very wide-ranging discussion, he displays keen appreciation of the effects of the material on the aesthetic quality of gems, jewellery, and gold or silver vessels, commenting that *Kleinkunst* did not equate to minor art.

Part VI, “Honoring the Dead,” interrogates funerary commemoration from three very different angles. Nikolaus Dietrich (Ch. 19) offers innovative ideas on archaic grave-markers. He observes that relief stelai emphasise to viewers the absence of the deceased by representing their figures individualised with personal attributes that evoke their past life; in contrast *kouroi*, identified only by inscription, stand within the viewer’s present moment, but represent only generic elite values without reference to the past of the dead, and so signify the deceased without actually representing them. Dimitris Palaeothodoros (Ch. 20) examines a series of lavish and “unorthodox” complete assemblages of grave-goods in women’s burials to demonstrate that the objects and images were selected with intent; the items attest to the bereaved families’ ideological beliefs, especially in regard to “life, death, sex, marriage, and family” (458). Mark D. Stansbury O’Donnell (Ch. 21) inquires into what significance Lucanians perceived in images of a winged woman carrying or pursuing a youth, based on the deposition in adjacent tombs in Ruvo del Monte of these images respectively on an Etruscan candelabrum and a Lucanian krater. Looking beyond the figures’ identities (Eos/Thesan carrying Tithonos; Eos pursuing Tithonos/Kephalos) he concludes that the winged figures were reinterpreted locally as protective divinities in the afterlife.

The volume is impressively produced, with illustrations for the most part of excellent quality and sufficient number; the very large number of artefacts that are discussed but necessarily not illustrated are on the whole well-referenced in the contributors’ footnotes.^[1] A couple of minor quibbles: it would have been helpful to have had more consistent inclusion of information in the illustration captions about the dimensions of the objects; this matters when objects of significantly different size are juxtaposed on the same page (for instance, figs. 18.4 and 18.5); also, for convenience, BAPD numbers (although admittedly these are generally supplied in footnotes when relevant). There is not always consistency between the chapters in the use of key terms such as image, image-element, motif and the like.

These small criticisms aside, *Images at the Crossroads* is a truly remarkable publication in whole and in its parts, which stands to have a major impact on future research on the interpretation of images from antiquity. It is ground-breaking in its scope and depth of analysis, and, with its strong emphasis on sociocultural and sociohistorical approaches, constitutes a most appropriate homage to François Lissarrague’s enduring scholarly heritage.

Authors and Titles

PART I: Making Meaning: How do Images Work?

1. François Lissarrague, Ways of Making Sense: Eagle and Snake in Archaic and Classical Greek Art
2. Annette Haug, Images and History in Eighth- and Seventh-century BC Athens: A Discursive Analytical Approach
3. Martina Seifert, Knowledge and the Production of Meaning: Greek Vase Imagery Reconsidered
4. Luca Giuliani, Images and Storytelling

PART II: Interpretation and Perception

5. Mauro Menichetti, The Alexander Mosaic: Stories of Victory
6. Adrian Stähli, Parapictoriality

PART III: Reflections of the City and its Craftsmen

7. Dyfri Williams, *Les Images de la Cité – The Vase Painter’s Gaze*
8. Tonio Hölscher, *Again: Working Scenes on Athenian Vases – Images between Social Values and Aesthetic Reality*

PART IV: Constructions of Myth through Images

9. Marion Meyer, *Of Gods and Giants: Myth and Images in the Making*
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PART V: Clay and Stone: Material Matters

12. Andrew Stewart, *Paragone? Xenophon, Sokrates, and Quintilian on Greek Painting and Sculpture*
13. A. Shapiro, *Communicating with the Divine in Marble and Clay*
14. Judith M. Barringer, *The Message is in the Medium: White-Ground Lekythoi and Stone Grave Markers in Classical Athens*
15. Arthur Muller, *Greek Archaic Figurative Terracottas: From Identification to Function*
16. Victoria Sabetai, *Images in Dialogue: Picturing Identities in Boiotian Stone, Clay, and Metal*
17. Stefan Schmidt, *Images of Drinking and Laughing: Vessels and Votives in the Theban Kabirion*
18. Ken Lapatin, *Beyond Ceramics and Stone: The Iconography of the Precious*

PART VI: Honoring the Dead

19. Nikolaus Dietrich, *Archaic Grave Monuments: Body or Stele?*
20. Dimitris Paleothodoros, *On Vases, Terracottas, and Bones: How to Read Funerary Assemblages from Sixth- and Fifth-Century Greece*
21. Mark D. Stansbury-O’Donnell, *Winged Figures and Mortals at a Crossroad*

Notes

[1] There are very few typographical errors, among which: a translated quote from Nilsson which should surely read “cannot but be Zeus” (81); the unfortunate running header in Chapter 7 (“Images de le Cité”); “BAPD 21675” instead of BAPD [Beazley Archive Pottery Database] 209194 and 216751 (315, n. 17); “a kantharos in Berlin” in the text, footnoted correctly as “ex-Berlin” (395); “lied” for lain (408); “sung” for sang (411); “Crowley” for Crowley (415); *LIMC* Eos/Thesan “21” for 29 (466, n. 27).

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