

Etruscan Black-Figure Master Painting in the Archaic

Michael Svetbird embarks on a photographic odyssey of black-figure vases in the Louvre

Etruscan civilisation spread across central Italy in the eighth century BC, spanning the Po valley to the Tyrrhenian Sea. While their tradition was firmly embedded in the region, they developed an impressive network of artistic and commercial trade across the Mediterranean, owing much of their culture – arts and crafts, literature, religion, warfare – to Greek civilisation while retaining their own distinctive identity. This was particularly expressed in the working of bronze, gold, and terracotta; soft stone – alabaster, limestone, sandstone, and tufa; as well as perishable materials such as wood, textiles, and other material; and monumental architecture and tombs adorned with wall paintings – the latter preserving most of the objects that survive today.

In the early sixth century BC, black-figure vases began to be imported from Attica (the region of Athens) into Etruria (the Etruscan domain) along with amphorae containing olive oil via long established trading links in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Much of this material was preserved in the tombs at Cerveteri (north-west of Rome, Lazio), where most, if not all, of the hydriai featured from the Louvre derive. However, after the defeat of the Etruscan fleet at Cumae by the Syracusan fleet in 474 BC, trade patterns were dislocated, resulting in a sharp cessation of imports. Before this mechanism of trade was disrupted, a considerable number of artisans emigrated to Etruria from eastern Greece, adapting their expertise to the demands of local markets. At Cerveteri, painters from northern Ionia specialised in producing hydriai decorated with mythological or hunting scenes; and dinoi at Vulci (northern Lazio) were decorated with scenes associated with the myth of Dionysus. In the

early fifth century BC, the production of black-figure ceramics began to taper off and was replaced by red-figure works, which were favoured for the range of expression offered by this technique.

A select number of vases in the Louvre, hydriai, united by their consistent shape (rounded with three handles), function (to hold water for symposia (banquets) in life or the afterlife), and theme (mythology/animals), represented ideal photographic subjects. Modern studies of paintings on ancient Graeco-Italic vases mostly relate to mythological scenes – deities, heroes, banqueting and erotic scenes, and mythological creatures; and are concerned less so with scenes from everyday life, especially those which focus on nature and/or the animal world are not as commonly considered by specialists or a broader audience. Animals/animalistic scenes are quite rare on Attic vases from the fourth to sixth century BC, but more popular on Etruscan vases. In light of this imbalance, the visual interest of this article is faunal – both real and mythical – in the black-figure technique. As with other vases in Italy and Greece, painted in black-figure and later red-figure, these themes are given a sense of proportion with the application of splendid floral decoration (palmettes, lotuses, and other motifs) and geometric motifs and patterns (meanders, swastikas, rays, tabs) which serves to divide the figurative scenes and frame them.

In the early seventh century BC, Corinthian painters invented the black-figure technique which endured for nearly two hundred years. Most large vessels were made in sections, with the neck and body sometimes thrown separately, and the foot often attached later. Once these sections had dried



Four of the hydriai featured in the present article in the Louvre. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



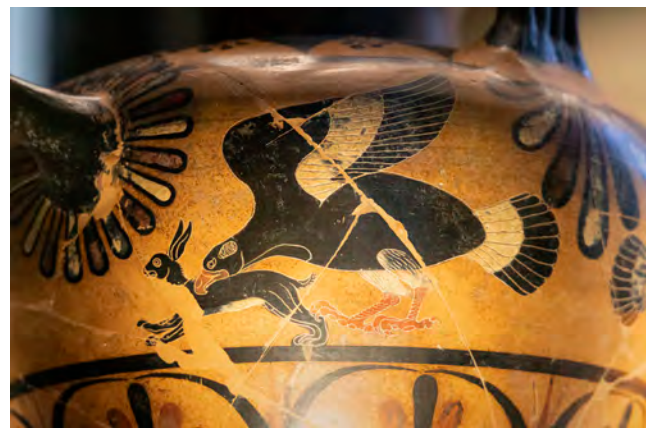
to a leather hardness, they were assembled by the potter with slip (liquid clay), and the handles added. Figurative and ornamental motifs were applied with a slip which blackened during firing, while the background retained its colour. Vase painters created individual forms by incising the slip or by adding purple, red, and white details with a mixture of clay and pigment. This ‘forerunner’ to the red-figure style resulted in less complex compositions that were clearly demarcated.

The hydriai featured in the present article fit squarely into the decorative tradition of Cerveteri, with two vessels depicting hunting scenes while the other three are decorated with mythological scenes. It is extraordinary to consider that with such simple lines the painters who decorated these vessels could convey, in a natural setting, a heightened sense of drama, mood, movement, poignancy, and violence – or potential for violence – with such exceptional artistic accomplishment.

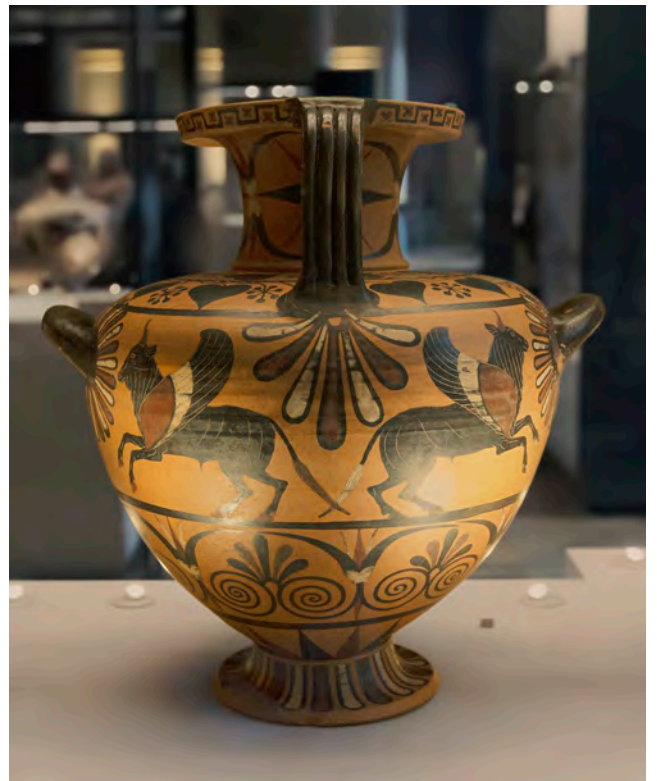
On the first vessel featured (above and below), two hunters brandishing spears (the first with a protective garment wrapped around his left arm) rapidly assail a rearing lioness who confronts them with unbridled viciousness, protecting her cubs who are about to be

– or have been – suckled by their mother (side A), the scene with its violent rhythm, and, in all probability its terrible outcome, has a visual pathos which is also felt by the modern viewer; but whether this stirred the same emotion in the ancient beholder is debatable in a world where hunting and violence of this nature were the norm. On the other side (B), similar feelings are conveyed and felt, orchestrated in symmetry with two eagles swooping down on their prey (rabbits), simple lines achieving a sense of aggression in the eyes of the hunter and fear in those of the hunted.

Our second vessel features a stag hunt (page 23), and in this case the artist achieves a perfect sense of movement employing the use of three colours (black, red, white), the cloak of the hunter flowing behind, the white line on the black of the animal subjects emphasises the expectant and determined expression of the horse and the fearful anticipation of the stags (simply yet realistically decorated with white dots) (side A). On the other side (B), a symmetrical representation of two mythological winged bulls, is masterfully captured in motion with wonderful clear, sharp lines, their anatomical details expertly accomplished with white linearity, the wings coloured in black, red, and white.



Black-figure hydria depicting a lion hunt (side A) and two eagles preying on rabbits (side B), from Cerveteri, Etruria, c. 515 BC, height: 42cm. The Louvre, inv. E. 698. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Black-figure hydria depicting a stag hunt (side A) and two winged bulls (side B), from Cerveteri, Etruria, 510–500 BC, height: 40cm. The Louvre, inv. E 697. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Black-figure hydria depicting the Calydonian boar hunt (side A) and the myth of Europa and Zeus (side B), from Cerveteri, Etruria, c. 525 BC, height: 44cm. The Louvre, inv. E 696. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Mythology is central to the third hydria featuring two scenes from Greek mythology (page 24). The first side (A), depicts the myth of Europa (daughter of Phoenix or Agenor, king of Phoenicia) whose beauty inspired the love of Zeus who carried her across the sea from Phoenicia to Crete; the sea is given its context here with the inclusion of a dolphin or porpoise leading the way, and the appearance of Crete by a rabbit darting up a hill from the seashore. The other side (B) shows the Calydonian boar hunt, an event that featured a monstrous wild boar sent by Artemis to ravage Calydon, a Greek town in Aetolia ruled by Meleager, who hunted and killed it with the able assistance of Atalanta (the third figure). The scale of the bull is notable here, considerably larger than the figures that confront it and four times the size of the hound that unsuccessfully pursued it (being cut in half), unlike usual representations of the boar in

ancient media, adding a clear sense of menace to the drama that unfolds.

Our fourth hydria is gently animated with the myth of Hermes and the cattle of Apollo, which delicately unfolds around the vase (above and below). One side (A) shows Hermes as an infant in his cradle, who as a precocious trickster, he promptly leaves to embark on a journey to Pieria in northern Greece with the objective of stealing cattle from his half-brother Apollo. On the other side (B) the painted figures are not so well preserved but this only serves to accentuate the delicacy of this work; in this case showing Eos, the winged goddess of dawn, pursuing Kephalos, the youthful Athenian hunter after she has kidnapped him.

On the fifth hydria, the Greek hero Herakles accomplishes one of his twelve labours (page 26), which entailed bringing Kerberos – the three-headed hound



Black-figure hydria depicting the myth of Hermes and Apollo's herd (side A) and the myth of Eos and Kephalos (side B), from Cerveteri, Etruria, c. 525 BC, height: 42.5cm. The Louvre, inv. E 702. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



of Hades, guarding the gates of the underworld – to King Eurystheos, who ordered Herakles to carry out his labours, depicted here in hiding and terrified in contrast with Herakles, who appears tranquil (A). As in the case of the Calydonian boar, great care is taken to essentialise the ferocity of Kerberos with artistic virtuosity, in this instance demarcating each head in different colours (black, red, white). On the other side (B), things appear to be calmer, with two eagles in opposed symmetry, the predator on the right set to pounce on a hare; once more the painter essentialises the foreboding in the detail of the birds’ eyes and the look of trepidation on the part of the quarry.

The five selected hydriai represent the zenith of Graeco-Etruscan black-figure vase painting. It is also remarkable how each myth is visually reduced to a mere ‘snapshot’ yet is so brilliantly essentialised, one scene being

sufficient to convey a visual narrative that was familiar in the literature of the period to the beholder, which, after two and a half millennia, still resonates with the modern viewer. This extraordinary technique is perhaps without equal in its simple refinement and was surpassed only by red-figure painting; both arguably remain unmatched in the subsequent history of ceramic artistic painting.

Michael Svetbird is a British artistic photographer currently based in Milan (www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird).

Further Reading

Beazley, J. D. (1947). *Etruscan Vase-Painting*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.



Black-figure hydria depicting the myth of Herakles and Kerberos (side A) and two eagles circling a hare (side B), from Cerveteri, Etruria, c. 525 BC, height: 42cm. The Louvre, inv. E 701. Photo: 2022. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird