SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHECKLIST

Attributed to the Hearst Painter, Greek, Apulian
Red-figure bell krater with a symposium scene, about 430–420 BCE, terracotta
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Rebecca Darlington Stoddard, 1913; 1913.324

Attributed to the Meidias Painter, Greek, Attic
Red-figure squat lekythos with Eros and a seated female, about 400 BCE, terracotta
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Rebecca Darlington Stoddard, 1913; 1913.151

Greek, Boeotian
Figurine of a dancing/captive, about 330–300 BCE, terracotta, mold-cast
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William Witman II, B.A. 1935; 1993.46.49

Greek, Boeotian
Figurine of a standing woman, about 300–275 BCE, terracotta
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William Witman II, B.A. 1935; 1993.46.47

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Beyond Aphrodite: Interpreting Portrayals of “Real” Women in Ancient Greece

Greatest glory will be hers who is least talked of among men, whether for good or for bad.

—Pericles to the Athenian widows, Thucydides, History, 2.45.2

Many aspects of the lives of ancient Greek women remain a mystery to us today. While surviving literary sources and artifacts often feature powerful female goddesses, images and texts describing the daily lives of “real” Greek women are more difficult to identify and understand. Since few women in the ancient world knew how to read or write, references to women in the literary record are based predominantly on masculine perspectives. Male authors often characterized females as the weaker, soulless sex, unable to control their emotions and therefore requiring oversight (Neils 31). Legally defined as absent, rather than present, in public life.

Given the dearth of textual evidence describing the day-to-day lives of “real” women in ancient Greece were contrived by male artisans, they reveal more about how men viewed females than about how “real” women actually went about their daily lives.

The symposium scene depicted on the red-figure bellkrater attributed to the Heaist painter (about 430–420 BCE) reflects the difficulty attendant upon determining the various roles of women in ancient Greece. Females most visibly appear in the roles of brides, mothers, celebrants of religion, and mourners of the dead (Lewis 58). However, even these roles reflect the importance placed upon the male figure itself. Classified as an image of a dancer or captive by the Medidas painter (about 400 BCE) influences the iconographical scene portrayed on the vessel. As cosmetic containers primarily used for women’s wares, squat lekythoi often displayed images connected to the beautification process. The goddess Aphrodite and her retinue frequently appear on tools of adornment, indicating that this goddess likely set an example for women on how to enhance their own beauty and allude through the use of cosmetics (Segel 76). On the present object, the figure of Eros and the partridge evoke connections to Aphrodite, and the function of the vessel as a beautification tool implies the presence of the goddess in the scene. Since the seated female lacks Aphrodite’s characteristic mantle decorated by stars, this figure may not be an actual representation of the goddess. However, certain attributes, such as her jewelry, clinging drapery, and location in a garden, indicate that she may symbolize a Greek ideal of feminine beauty. Based on the presence of Eros, she is likely not a “real” woman as well, but serves to emphasize the importance of physical beauty in ancient Greece, especially among wealthy individuals whose families or husbands could afford expensive cosmetics like the ones held in this squat lekythos.

The two terracotta figurines in this installation present slightly more ambiguous representations of the female figure. This is primarily due to the fact that we do not know their intended functions or have a known archaeological context for their discovery. Comparisons with other terracotta figurines found in graves around the Boeotian city of Tanagra place the figurine of a standing woman (about 300–275 BCE) within the artistic traditions of the Hellenistic period. Many of these Tanagra-style figurines depict standing females, wrapped in elaborate drapery. The poses of the Tanagras vary, yet the renditions of the hair, delicate facial features, and elegance of their forms are similar to the present figurine. Such figures have been found in graves, sanctuaries, and domestic buildings, but we do not know their functions or meanings. Those found in the former most likely represent votive offerings, but their domestic counterparts are more mysterious. Because the faces, heads, and hands of many Tanagra figurines are often veiled, they seem to evoke some ritual practice, or even the virtue of modesty in public. Their popularity, along with their relative consistency, indicates that such figures represented some key concept or value in the Hellenistic period that is no longer inherently evident in modern times.

Compared to the other objects in this installation, the final terracotta figurine raises the most questions, about both its intended function and the particular form of the figure itself. Classified as an image of a dancer or captive by the Yale University Art Gallery, the figurine depicts a half-clothed female bending over a rectangular object, possibly representing an altar. However, despite its curved body motion, this terracotta figurine bears similarities to those representations of dancers in Hellenistic artwork, who are typically shown standing with their heads veiled and their dresses billowing out to the side in a manner symbolizing movement. The fact that the hands are clamped over the head may indicate that this figure represents a captive, yet images of female captives are extraordinarily rare in Hellenistic art. Although the exposed breast and short chiton recall the mythical Amazonian figures, female victims of sexual violence in Greek art are also represented with their garments torn or by their hands bound (Attic kylix 188). On a more technical level, the long hair of the figure contrasts sharply with the melon coiffure commonly seen in female Tanagras, suggesting that this figurine represents a different class of woman, or, alternatively, may not even depict a woman at all. The mold-made technique of this terracotta figurine implies some level of mass production, yet no extant examples of this type are known in either ancient literature or archaeological remains. It is tempting to continue the search for comparable objects and imagery; but, until similar terracottas are found, this object remains a mystery.

Though the objects in this installation cannot produce definitive conclusions about the lives of “real” women in ancient Greece, they call attention to some of the major problems surrounding the interpretation of the female figure in Greek art. Female iconography provides glimpses into the basic value systems and social dynamics of the Greek world. However, since portrayals of women in ancient Greece were contrived by male artisans, they reveal more about how men viewed females than about how “real” women actually went about their daily lives.

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