

AGAIN: WORKING SCENES ON ATHENIAN VASES – IMAGES BETWEEN SOCIAL VALUES AND AESTHETIC REALITY*

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STATE OF AFFAIRS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

Scenes of working people on Athenian vases of the sixth and fifth centuries BC have more than once been investigated as exceptional testimonies to the social history of Archaic and Classical Athens. Whereas by far the greater part of black-figure and red-figure vases depicting scenes of social life focus on the noble sphere of the upper classes, a small number of images lead us into the world of workmen and merchants. The main question they raise is, of course, the social and cultural evaluation and appreciation of human labor within the historical horizon of that period.¹

As we seem to know, the upper classes defined and legitimized their social status in terms of a leisure elite, exempt from manual work and dedicated to the culture of politics, athletics, and symposia. Yet, it was precisely this social elite that bought and used these painted vases – so what was the reason for decorating such vessels with scenes of labor? What did these users think when they looked at the images of those working people during their banquets? Did such scenes serve to confirm the noble participants in banquets in their elevated social identity, defining themselves against, and distinguishing themselves from, the counter-world of the working ‘classes’? On the other hand, these vases were produced precisely by members of this working ‘class’, so how did the vase painters feel when they represented their own social group for the gaze of the elite symposiasts? Did the producers of the vases adopt the negative view of manual labor held by their aristocratic opposites? Or are such images a proud self-assertion of the working ‘classes’, claiming, whether successful

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1 For the fundamentally elitist orientation of sixth- and fifth-century BC Athenian vases, see now Filser 2017, also with a chapter on scenes of labor (pp. 105–26). For working scenes, see bibliography *infra* nn. 5–7. See Chatzidimitriou 2005 for the fullest catalog.

or not, their acceptance and introduction to the life sphere of the elite? If so, would we have to elevate these vase painters to social spearhead fighters, promoting a specific ideology of the working 'classes', in opposition to the elites' ideals of life? Or do the images testify to a real rise and new appreciation of the working classes in the social scale of pre-democratic and democratic Athens?

Whatever answers are given to these and other questions, they give these vases an enormous weight as historical sources, which will have to be read against what else we know about the role of labor in Archaic and Classical Greece. This weight is even enhanced by the specific intermediate position of vases between the different social spheres, which makes them a unique class of testimonies. For if we consider the specific producers and users of artifacts representing workmen and merchants on the one hand, and the speakers and audiences of literary statements on manual craft and workmen on the other, then we are facing different, and very specific, situations and conditions of communication. This means that such testimonies can only be understood within the frame of discourses in those specific circumstances. The utterly negative statements by Xenophon and Aristotle on manual labor and working people as the opposite of free citizens are opinions of autonomous thinkers addressing an audience of elite readers.² On the contrary, votive terracottas representing lower-class people, such as male clay workers or female cooks, may be proud dedications by such workmen themselves to the gods.³ Vases, however, are a much more complex issue: they were produced by low-class artisans for use in upper-class life contexts. Thus, we may expect that these images in some way correspond to shared views of broader social layers. This does not exclude the possibility that specific groups differed widely in their opinions on these themes, but, in any case, the communicative function of vases, at the crossroads between production and function, makes them particularly precious as historical testimonies.⁴

The approaches of iconological research to these images have changed considerably in the last decades. In 1975 the Polish scholar Juliusz Ziomecki presented the first comprehensive investigation on representations of artisans on Attic vases, taking them as first-hand testimonies to the social reality of the working class. Later, Athena Chatzidimitriou interpreted them as praise and advertisement of Athenian handcraft and agriculture, exalting their methods of production and trade. Other authors focused on the corporeal appearances and social roles of craftsmen. Nikolaus Himmelmann underlined the fact that in Archaic and Classical

2 Xen. *Oik.* 4.2–4; Arist. *Pol.* 1328b–1329a37. See already Hdt. 2.167. Meier 1986.

3 Himmelmann 1994, 9–10.

4 On the use of painted pottery, see now the excellent critical overview in Heinemann 2016, 11–66.

working scenes, realism is not a general stylistic phenomenon but a specific semantic feature. He interpreted the ignoble postures of the *banausoi* as self-confident expressions of religious credibility, while others, such as Burkhard Fehr, saw them as pejorative signs of social discrimination and contempt in opposition to more highly qualified ‘master’ potters and painters whose images are free from social devaluation. In this same sense, Wolfgang Filser regarded the majority of realistic working activities as exemplary counter-images to the world of the rich.⁵ A more complex concept was sketched by Luca Giuliani in his review of Himmelmann, where he proposed to make synchronic differentiations between the artisans’ self-view and their assessment from outside, between the description and appreciation of their technical skill and the contempt of their physical appearance and behavior, and diachronic distinctions between evaluations in Archaic and Classical times.⁶

Recently Annette Haug presented a succinct but comprehensive interpretation of craftsmen scenes in Athenian vase painting, methodologically based on a combined analysis of body language and speaking attributes, such as clothes, workshop equipment, and other indicators of social status. Her basic starting point is a concept of different levels of construction of reality in images, reaching from detailed realism to symbolic motifs, figures, and actions according to the specific messages that are to be visualized. As a result, she first demonstrates that these images do not convey any general social evaluation of the ‘working class’ as a whole, but present us with a differentiated scale of specific workmen, from noble workshop owners to humble helpers. Only the lowest servants in the teams of potters and bronze workers are characterized in a negative way by crouching postures, which often expose their genitals. Other workmen are more or less objectively depicted, performing their specific activities; even nudity is not degrading but describes their physical capacity for work, while the workshop’s owner is distinguished by clothes and attributes of civic status. Secondly, she rightly argues that images do not make political distinctions between social classes, such as citizens, metics, and slaves, but present us with workshop hierarchies based on the type of labor done within the production process. This iconographic hierarchy seems to have a counterpart in social reality insofar as the leading members of such workshops are known to have expressed their social ambitions by precious votive offerings on the Akropolis. Incidentally, she questions the general negative evaluation of physical labor from early times down to Plato. Thirdly, she contextualizes the phenomenon of these vases within the historical frame of the late

5 Filser 2017, 105–26; Chatzidimitriou 2005; Fehr 2000, 114–15; Himmelmann 1994, 22–48; Ziomecki 1975.

6 Giuliani 1998, 629–33.

tyranny and early democracy – not, however, as an immediate mirror of an increasing social appreciation and awareness of handcraft, but as a result of a general process of increasing social competition in which different social groups made their appearance on the stage of the visual arts.⁷

Agreeing with these positions in principle, the following pages are meant to widen the perspectives in two directions: first, by a general reflection on the overall subject matter of these images, which may lead to a reassessment of the role of labor within Athenian society; and secondly by a theoretical concept regarding the images' visualization of these themes, which will lead to the general topic of media.

THEMES: PRODUCTS OF ELITE CULTURE

In former studies on scenes of working, one element seems not to have received particular attention: the specific products of manual craft and commerce. Taking them together, it is obvious that what is presented in vase images does not cover a wide spectrum of what is produced and needed for everyday life but is a small selection of highly valued goods for the elite's life practice and lifestyle.

Goods of prestige and luxury

Starting with a well-known group of vases depicting potters' workshops,⁸ it is obvious that these are symposion vessels decorated with scenes of producing symposion vessels. In several cases the images have a pointed self-referential character: a Little Master cup in Karlsruhe shows the making of a Little Master cup, a kylix in Boston presents us with a painter decorating a kylix (Fig. 8.1), a bell krater in Oxford depicts young men producing bell kraters.⁹ In a more general sense, a well-known hydria, now in Vicenza, displays a whole inventory of precious symposion vessels, with an emblematic set of a kantharos and an oinochoe in the center and another kantharos, a kalyx krater, and two volute kraters being produced by a whole team of differentiated workers, male and female (Fig. 8.2). Clearly, they are producing the kind of equipment that is needed for the

7 Haug 2011. Differentiated scale of evaluation already seen in Fehr 2000 and Giuliani 1998.

8 Chatzidimitriou 2005, 31–54; Scheibler 1983, 71–133; Beazley 1944.

9 Chatzidimitriou 2005, K35 (Karlsruhe), K45 (Boston), K51 (Oxford); cf. K40, K42, K53. The fact of self-reference was rightly stressed by Chatzidimitriou (2005, 185–91), but her explanation of it as a market strategy seems less convincing. The phenomenon as such is too rare within the whole production, and it is difficult to imagine that possible purchasers would have been persuaded to buy a kylix by a depiction of a kylix's fabrication.



Figure 8.1 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 01.8073, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 480 BC. Photo: © 2020 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 8.2 Vicenza, Banca Intesa, Attic red-figure hydria, c. 470–460 BC. Photo: D-DAI-Rom 1962.1123.



Figure 8.3 Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 518, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 480 BC. Photo: Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908 G. 267.

same sympotic occasion on which the hydria itself was destined to be used. Only rarely is the process of preliminary working with clay depicted: as a rule, the vessels have already achieved their final form and are all destined for noble symposia.¹⁰

In a wider sense, vases depicting bronze workshops describe the production of the most prestigious objects of elite culture.¹¹ Workers forge helmets for elite hoplites (Fig. 8.3), as it was already represented by an exceptional Geometric bronze statuette. The helmets are of the Corinthian type, which was the preferred votive offering of noble warriors to the sanctuaries of Olympia and other places. In addition, the workers make elaborate greaves and swords, which were also frequently dedicated to the gods. Moreover, they produce tripods, which were the most appreciated items of aristocratic gift exchange and therefore also the most ambitious votive offerings in the great sanctuaries.¹²

Bronze sculptors are presented, creating highly ambitious statues to be dedicated by wealthy patrons to the gods. On the famous Foundry Painter cup in Berlin, a half-finished statue of an athlete is being worked

10 Chatzidimitriou 2005, K47. Use of hydriae for symposia: Heinemann 2016, 36.

11 Chatzidimitriou 2005, 55–84.

12 Chatzidimitriou 2005, X8, X9 (helmets), X10 (greaves), X11 (swords), X1 (tripods). Of course, Hephaistos forges the most noble armor, destined for Achilles, the greatest of all heroes: Chatzidimitriou 2005, X15–19. Cf. Fig. 1.14.



Figure 8.4 Berlin Antikensammlung 2294, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 480 BC. Photo: Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz (J. Laurentius).

out, and an almost completed mighty warrior-hero statue receives the last reworking of its surface (Fig. 8.4). Athletics and war were the most celebrated fields of the elite's self-representation: two noble observers, characterized by athletic attributes, represent the sort of clientele for whom such statues were destined. Other scenes show bronze sculptors making a horse's statue, in two cases even in the presence of Athena, similar to the marble votive horses from the Athenian Akropolis (Fig. 8.5); here, too, upper-class visitors enhance the renown of the workshop owner, who presents himself proudly behind his sculpted horse like a living image. The high social ambition of this equine product, even in post-Persian times, is attested by Aristotle's information on a horse statue set up on



Figure 8.5 Munich, Antikensammlungen 2650, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 480–470 BC. Photo: © Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek München (R. Kühling).

the Athenian Akropolis, according to its inscription, as a testimony to the donor's rise from the class of the *thetes* to that of the *hippeis*.¹³

Particularly relevant in this context is a kylix in Copenhagen representing a young marble sculptor working out a bearded herm, with an added dipinto praising “Hipparchos kalos” (Fig. 8.6). Scholars have discussed whether this appellation refers to the Athenian tyrant of this name and his erection of herms throughout Attika. Despite prevailing skepticism, I think it is rather difficult to assume that at that date, c. 520–510 BC, viewers seeing a sculptor making a herm and reading an accompanying inscription referring to a person named Hipparchos would not think of the tyrant and his famous initiative. If so, this would strongly confirm the idea that handcraft was primarily depicted on vases as far as it contributed to the culture of the mighty and wealthy.¹⁴

Further confirmation is provided by scenes of shoemaking. On an amphora in Boston, a noble girl or young woman stands on a low table, while two professional shoemakers, having measured her feet, are cutting the leather for her new shoes (Fig. 8.7). With her rich clothes, she appears similar to the famous Akropolis *korai*, lifting her *chiton* in that gesture

13 Foundry cup: Chatzidimitriou 2005, X12. Horses: Γ2, Γ3 (both rather of bronze than of marble; see the smith's hammer). Cf. Γ4, Athena forging a horse's statue of clay, obviously a model for a bronze statue. The figure of Athena on the cup from the Athenian Akropolis (X6) can hardly represent a statue, since no workman is busy with it; thus, it must represent the goddess herself. See *Ath. Pol.* 7.4.

14 Chatzidimitriou 2005, Γ1. Doubts regarding the reference to the tyrant: Haug 2011, 19 n. 64.



Figure 8.6 Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet ChrVIII967, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 520–510 BC. Photo: Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet (L. Larsen).

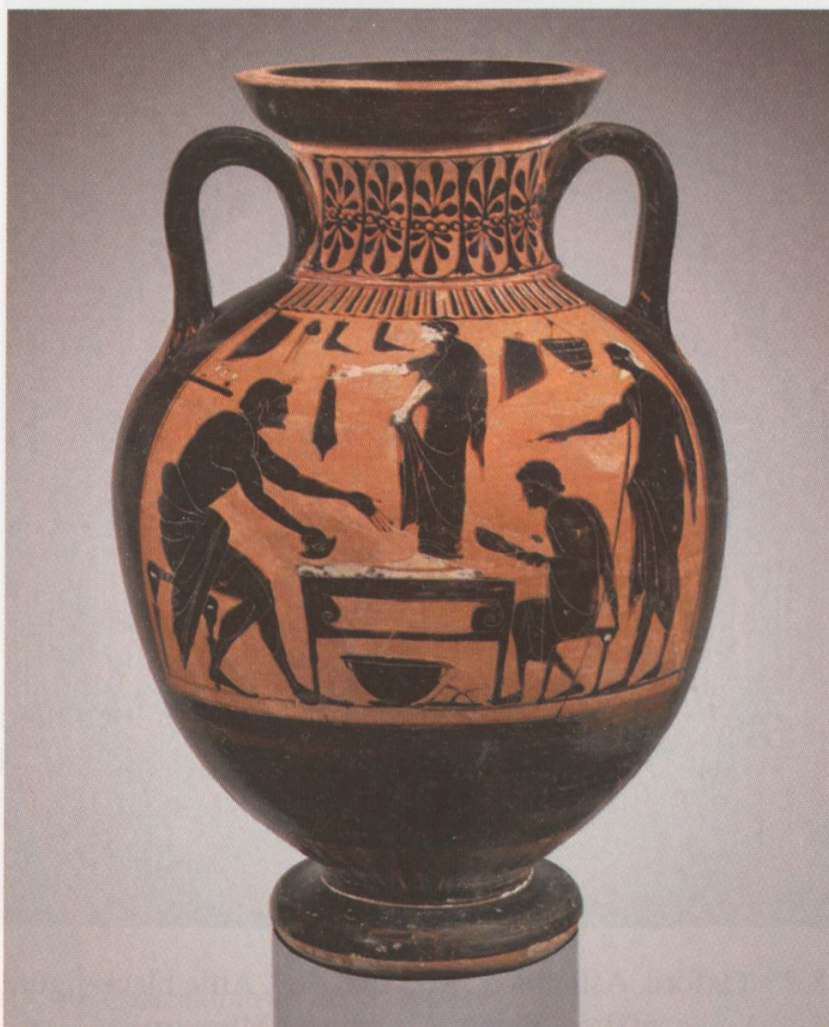


Figure 8.7 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 01.1835, Attic black-figure amphora, c. 500 BC. Photo: © 2020 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

of elegance that, according to Sappho, was the distinctive sign of female noblesse. The *korai* statues have convincingly been interpreted as images of nubile maidens of noble descent, as they appeared at the real festivals in the great sanctuaries, mostly dedicated by upper-class dedicators.¹⁵ In this scene, the elder man to the right represents the maiden's father, preparing her for her appearance at the festival; implicitly, he himself is a potential donor of a *korē* statue. A similar scene of preparing shoes, now for a young boy, is depicted on a pelike in Oxford. Here, the shoemaker and an adult observer, perhaps the boy's lover, wear wreaths in anticipation of the festival (Fig. 8.8). In such contexts the young people are, of course, equipped not with everyday shoes but with luxury sandals, suitable for their appearance at festive occasions. Elegant sandals were an essential accoutrement of nobility and wealth: in this sense, some extravagant oil flasks of this period are shaped as luxury sandals. It is not by chance that the only two Classical Athenian grave stelai to represent craftsmen with



Figure 8.8 Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 563, Attic black-figure pelike, c. 500 BC. Photo: Ashmolean Museum.

15 Franssen 2011; Meyer and Brüggemann 2007; Schneider 1975.

a noble appearance but with the products of their craft were erected for a smith and a shoemaker.¹⁶

Another group of highly appreciated craftsmen were carpenters producing luxurious furniture. They are less common in depictions of contemporary social life, but are prominent in scenes of the myth of Danae and Perseus, where they build the appropriate 'royal' chest, which will carry mother and son safely over the sea.¹⁷

The same applies to merchants.¹⁸ When young fishermen carry their haul in baskets, we cannot recognize the fishes' quality or type: the fishermen may even be youths of noble birth who used to spend their time as *ephebes* fishing at the seashore.¹⁹ But when lower-class fishermen are represented cutting and selling fish in the market (Fig. 8.9), it is clear that

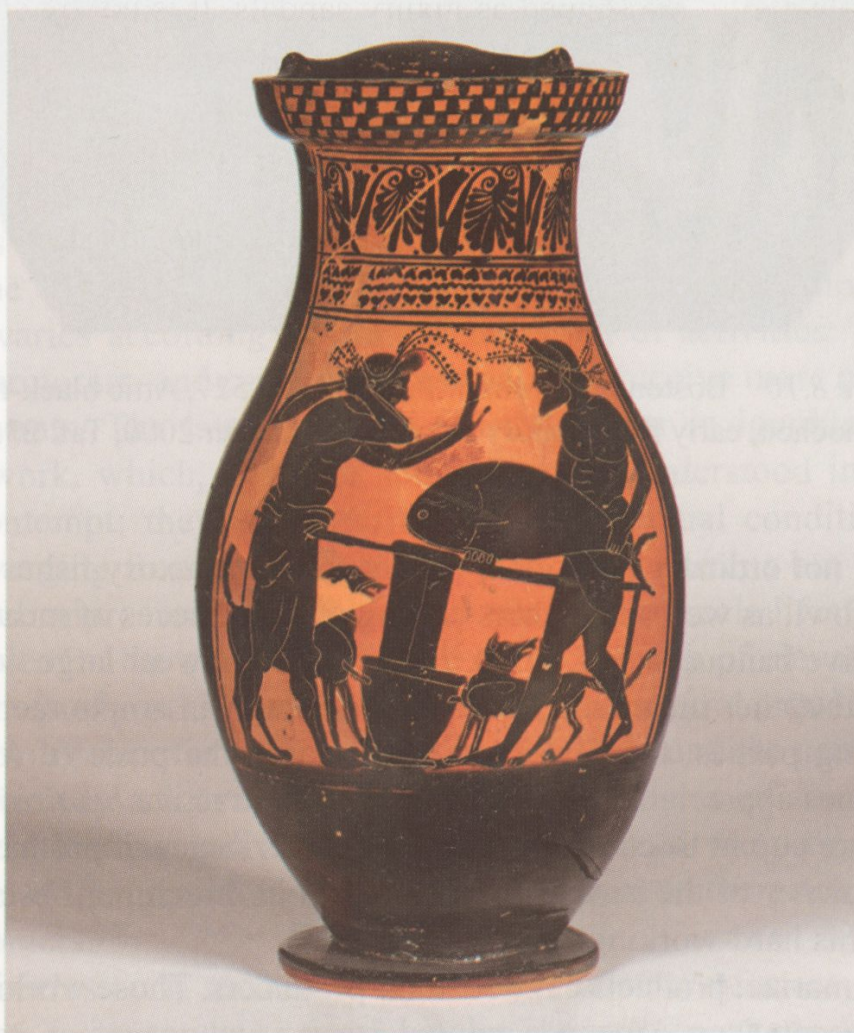


Figure 8.9 Berlin, Antikensammlung F1915, Attic black-figure oinochoe, c. 500 BC. Photo: Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

16 Haug 2011, 19; Chatzidimitriou 2005, 216–17.

17 Chatzidimitriou 2005, 100–3; *LIMC* III, s.v. Danae, 325–37 nos. 41–6 (J.-J. Maffre).

18 Williams 2018; Chatzidimitriou 2005, 104–30.

19 F. Hölscher 1992.

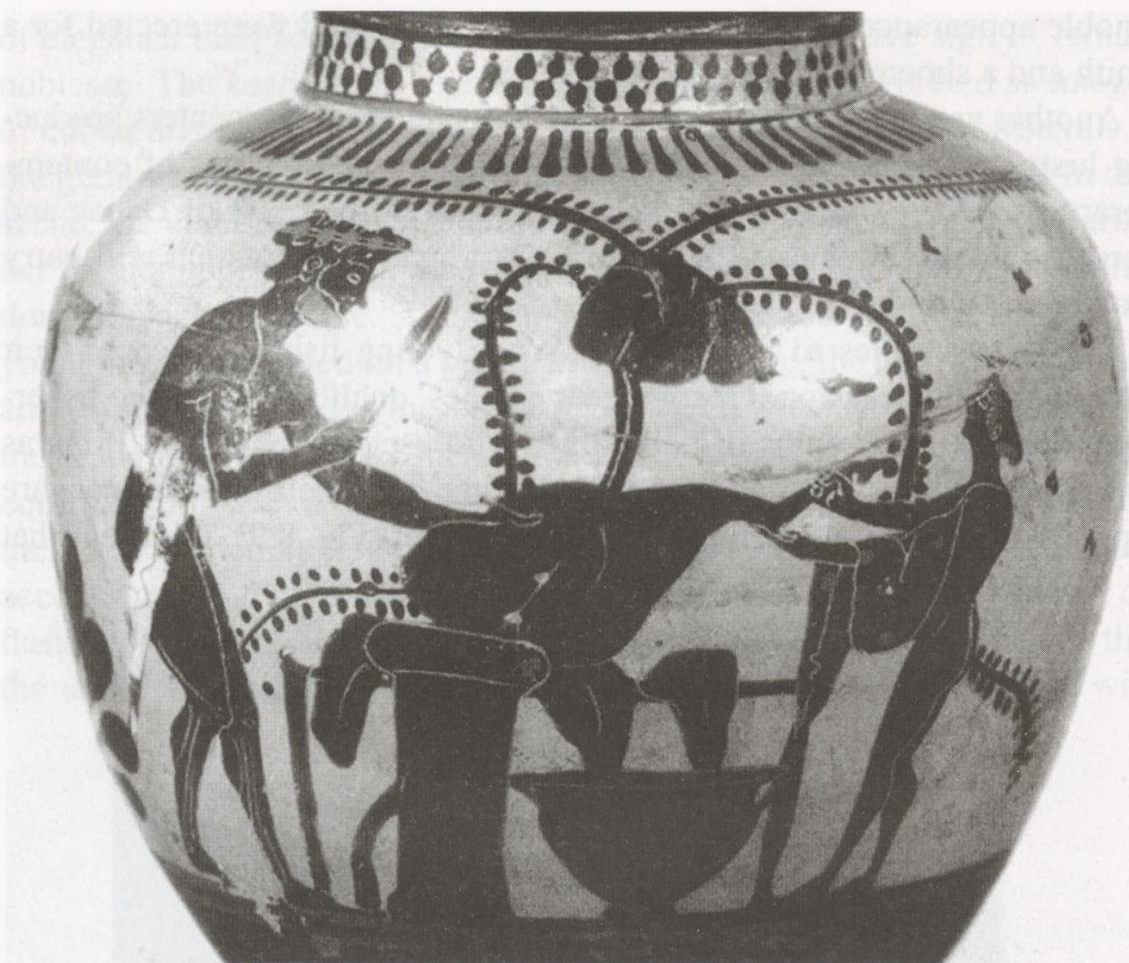


Figure 8.10 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 99.527, Attic black-figure oinochoe, early fifth century BC. After Laxander 2000, Taf. 23:2.

they offer not ordinary barboukia but magnificent luxury fishes.²⁰ Sellers of living fowl, as well as butchers cutting opulent pieces of meat, contribute to festive banquets (Fig. 8.10).²¹ Most of them wear large wreaths for the festival. Other merchants, with their products in amphorae, sell wine for drinking parties, the first-class oil that was the pride of Attika, and the perfumes appreciated by noble ladies and attractive *hetairai*. An Attic black-figure cup in Bochum depicts the various stages of producing wine, with the owner of the vineyard, clad in a civic himation, observing and directing his hard-working team (Fig. 8.11).²²

To summarize: products ennoble their producers. Those working craftsmen represented on Athenian painted vases – who, in fact, represent a narrow selection from the spectrum of manual labor and working activities in Classical poleis – acquire their social appreciation and position from their contribution to the leisure culture of those who could afford this

20 Chatzidimitriou 2005, E24, E25, E26, E29, E31, E36.

21 Chatzidimitriou 2005, E27, E28, E30, E32, E33, E34, E35.

22 Bochum: Williams 2018.



Figure 8.11 Bochum, Ruhr-Universität, Antikenmuseum 1075, Attic black-figure kylix, c. 550 BC. Photo: © Kunstsammlungen der Ruhr-Universität Bochum (M. Benecke).

lifestyle. Their social recognition is attested by the presence of noble observers and wealthy customers, for example in the scene of the bronze sculptor's workshop (Fig. 8.4).

Yet, the degree of this contribution, and of the reputation derived from it, varies according to the specific level of activities: workshop owners, armorers, and especially vase painters receive more praise than their servants. The latter laborers mostly appear in ignoble attitudes of hard work, which, however, should not be understood in terms of social contempt: they are described in their factual conditions, very much diverging from the way of life of normal citizens but providing those much appreciated goods without which no upscale lifestyle would be possible. On the other hand, there exists a group of elevated craftsmen, owners of workshops and vineyards, leading and organizing their teams of workmen, for whom these images claim, and the users of these vases obviously acknowledge, a considerable degree of social reputation. These leading individuals are represented in the proper posture and attire of the upper and middle classes, equal to their noble visitors and customers.²³

This conclusion is confirmed by a small number of more ambitious monuments representing working people. The well-known Archaic votive relief of a potter from the Athenian Akropolis represents the donor holding an elegant Little Master cup as a testimony to his art, while two late Classical grave stelai represent the deceased with products and attributes of a shoemaker and a smith. They appear seated in social dignity and

²³ For the (difficult) distinction between descriptive and discriminating 'realism', see Giuliani 1998, 633.

clothed in well-ordered civic *himatia*.²⁴ How can these phenomena be understood in the frame of the social history of that period?

Interactions of providers and beneficiaries

If these observations concerning the elitist character of the handcraft production chosen for depiction on Athenian vases point to a relevant phenomenon, then we can understand the specific interrelation between this limited group of images representing workers and merchants on the one hand, and the themes of upper-class life that dominate Greek vase painting on the other: they are not as erratic and contradictory as they might appear at first sight. They do not so much represent a negative counter-world to the splendid *kosmos* of the rich and happy as constitute the material basis of the elite's elevated life culture. They are not the despised antithesis of free citizens, defining the latter's elite status, but belong, as a precondition, to this same society. Their first aim is not so much to fence off the elite's identity against 'others' as to describe their world in its socially relevant facets, divergent as they are.

Indeed, the scenes on painted vases are clear testimonies that good handcraft as such was not at all despised in Classical Athens: noble visitors to potters' and smiths' workshops, clad in elegant *himatia* (Fig. 8.5), do not aim to prove their elite identity in contrast to working underdogs, but make their appearance as curious spectators and interested customers, observing and appreciating the production of objects that will increase their own social prestige. Even a philosopher like Sokrates engages in highly professional discussions, not only on complex questions of 'art' with the famous painter Parrhasios and the bronze sculptor Kleitōn, but also on the making of cuirasses with the armorer Pistias.²⁵

In general, the broad social stratum of working people never developed an alternative social habitus of its own. There was neither a definite labor culture nor a specific labor ideology, as in modern industrial societies, nor was labor an end in itself, done for its own sake with autonomous norms and ethics, as developed during the nineteenth century. Manual work was acknowledged by most people as a necessity for those who had to earn their living, and the principal goal in the endeavor for social rise was to participate increasingly in the lifestyle of the prosperous. Producing the goods for the leisure life of the upper class must have been a first step in this participation.

Of course, this does not mean that there were no deep differences. But, as Annette Haug has underlined, the boundaries were not drawn along

24 Chatzidimitriou 2005, 178–81, Στ1-7; CAT 1993, no. 1630 (Xanthippos, shoemaker), 1202 (Sosinos, smith).

25 Xen. *Mem.* 3.10.9-15. See A. Stewart, Chapter 12 (pp. 257–79).

the juridical lines of social classes. On vases representing manual labor, we cannot distinguish between citizens, metics, and slaves. Rather, as Christian Meier put it, distinctions were made between activities. The sphere of labor, service, and toil for earning one's living was, in fact, antithetical to the world of self-determined participation in civic life, athletics, symposia, and political affairs. But these were not so much realms of fixed social groups, the members of which defined themselves through their unambiguous affiliation, as realms of partial social presence, dependent on how much labor individuals had to invest for their living and how much freedom they could afford for the realms of leisure.²⁶

No doubt manual labor was the sphere of the less prosperous and the poor. And the practical exigencies of labor implied specific forms of appearance, clothing, and attitudes that differed from the *charis* of self-conscious citizens, trained in the *palaistra* and accustomed to presenting themselves with well-draped clothes in the public sphere. Behavioral patterns and physical postures of labor could well become habitual, and of course they were considered as negative effects of hard manual working. But this was a judgment not on physical work in general, nor on an entire social class, but on specific conditions and (after-)effects.

The boundaries were fluent and pervious. Vase painters could present themselves with the attributes of the splendid life sphere for which they produced drinking vessels: the Boston cup depicts a handsome young vase painter decorating a drinking cup, surrounded by an aryballos, a strigil, and a knotted staff for visiting the Agora (Fig. 8.1). These attributes of the social elite appear fixed to the 'wall' of the vessel in the same way as the workshop equipment and working instruments of sculptors, bronze workers, shoemakers, and others are proudly displayed, held, or used on many vases as analogous testimonies to their professional competence (Figs. 8.3, 8.4, 8.7, and 8.8). Athena herself not only protects the producers of art and handcraft but herself forges a statue of a horse from a lump of clay; she, too, disposes of a set of working instruments, hung up on the 'wall,' without losing her social standing. And the images do not stop with elevating manual labor to a level of noble activity: they even transfer those workmen into the sphere of the happy. Within the workshop, the owner can appear free from manual toil, wearing a rich himation, holding a long scepter-like staff, and supervising his 'employees' (Fig. 8.12). On a well-known stamnos, the vase painter Smikros portrays himself as a member of a splendid drinking party. Such images must in some way correspond to reality; symposiasts using such vessels cannot have considered them totally unreal: either over-ambitious or ridiculous. Indeed, Athenian and other Greek societies were not bisected, and the life spheres overlapped:

26 Haug 2011. For a comprehensive view, see Meier 1986.



Figure 8.12 Munich, Antikensammlungen 1717, Attic black-figure hydria, c. 510 BC. Photo: © Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek München (R. Kühling).

many must have done some labor, many went to the palaistra and participated in banquets, the spheres were not exclusive. As Aristotle says: the end of labor is leisure.²⁷

Thus, the images of working people certainly do not testify to any overall contempt for manual labor but only show specific low regard for specific aspects of servile toil. In general, however, they are prompted by a solid appreciation of working people's abilities and products and by a very strong priority put on products destined for the spheres of 'higher' cultural practices – warfare, symposium, athletics – for which workers provided the material basis.

27 Aryballos, strigil, staff: Chatzidimitriou 2005, K45, Γ1. Professional instruments: X2, X3, X5, X9, X11, X12, X17, Γ4, Γ6, Σ1, Σ2, Σ3. Athena: Γ4, Γ5. Workshop owner, not working: K10. In contrast to Haug (2011, 8–9), I think one can distinguish between ennobled workshop owners, represented in the center of their workmen, and noble spectators, who observe workshop activities from the side. Smikros: Scheibler 1983, 129–33; Simon 1976, Figs. 110–11.

SOCIAL REALITY AND ARTISTIC REALISM

All interpretations of images as testimonies of the historical past must start from the assumption that they relate in some way to historical reality, not necessarily as mirror reproductions of real persons and scenes, actions and events, but at least as representations of possible or ‘believed’ realities that were of some relevance to those societies. This premise, however, increasingly meets with the opposition of historians and theorists of art in two regards, one specific, the other general. Among art historians, it is *communis opinio* that in Greek art in general, and labor scenes in particular, depictions are only realistic in part, while many of them are highly idealizing or even fictitious imaginations; thus, the whole discussion on this topic is deeply imbued with the oppositional terms of ‘realism’ versus ‘idealism’, ‘realistic depiction’ versus ‘idealizing fiction.’ Among art theorists, images are increasingly seen as visual constructions following their own rules of conceptualizing the world, with only partial reference to the concrete, visible world of reality. Accordingly, they are held to be of little value for reconstructing history ‘as it was’.

Surely few today would see an image as a one-to-one reproduction of objects, beings, and events of reality. Images are constructs, following their own rules of materiality and imagination, and are therefore different from what they represent. On the other hand, however, the Greeks themselves conceived of their images, without hesitation, as reproductions of real things. Even a philosopher such as Sokrates has no doubt of this in his theoretical discussion with the painter Parrhasios. What shall we make of this apparent contradiction?²⁸

Conceptual realism and conceptual reality

In what follows, I argue that Greek representational art is, in fact, fundamentally realistic, but that its relation to reality is what we may call ‘conceptual realism’. Obviously, this is a large topic that requires a longer, in-depth discourse. Here, some basic remarks must suffice: they point to general questions of media and what they can achieve.

The first, and decisive step toward resolving this contradiction is, in my view, to recognize that an image is, in fact, a construct, but that the reality depicted by the image is also a construct. The entire real ‘Lebenswelt’, the world of social and cultural life, is a product of human beings, imbued with cultural meaning and produced by two complementary human activities: formation and perception. On the one hand, human beings *shape* their Lebenswelt, their living spaces and their forms of behavior, according to their specific social structures and cultural norms. The intentionally

28 For what follows, see T. Hölscher 2018, 209–11, 217–28; T. Hölscher 2016.

shaped forms of the material world are cultural expressions of social meaning and, vice-versa, are material preconditions of social practices. On the other hand, human beings *perceive* their Lebenswelt, their material surroundings as well as their living fellow beings, according to their social values and psychological emotions. Perceived reality is always meaningful reality.

A real potter's workshop must in fact have been *shaped* – that is, organized, laid out, and equipped in a specific form – according to the functional requirements of working processes as well as the social structures of the team of workers. Excavated workshops in Athens and Attika do not allow detailed reconstruction, but confirm a general differentiated layout. An *ergastērion* in the outer Kerameikos, with two phases dated from the early fifth to the early fourth century BC, has at least two roofed working rooms and a courtyard with a single kiln in the first phase, then two kilns in the second and a little cistern, corresponding to the representation on a *hydria* in Munich (Fig. 8.12).²⁹



Figure 8.13 Paris, Musée du Louvre E629, Corinthian krater attributed to Athana Painter, c. 600–575 BC. Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) (S. Maréchalle).

29 Monaco 2000, cat. D III, 85–8, 213–16, tav. 42, and cf. cat. A XI, 175–7. No columns seem to be attested in ancient *ergastēria*, although one column, perhaps of wood, is represented on the *hydria* in Munich (Fig. 8.12).

The workshops' spaces and the working personnel must have been adequately equipped for their different practical tasks, but spaces must also have differed in prestige by their more or less 'noble' working conditions, while the personnel involved manifested their social hierarchy by different clothing and behavior. Haug has analyzed such visual messages in the images: from the hot and dirty spheres of the kiln to the shadowy indoor places of decorating and painting, from simple and low cubic seats to comfortable stools, from naked or poorly clothed bodies in laborious or shameless postures to elegant attitudes in skillfully draped *himatia*. Such distinctive signs – whether the same or at least analogous – must also have been true for the real organization and practice of workshop life.³⁰

On the other hand, whoever *looked* at the workshop and observed its personnel would have *perceived* this meaning in those forms of organization, activities, and behavioral practice. Moreover, in perceiving these forms, observers may have compared them with other workshops and formed judgments – positive, negative, or ambivalent – about what they saw. Certainly, the intended meaning in the real workshop and the real behavioral forms of its team are not binding for the perceiving observer: he or she may evaluate them according to different scales of values. Nevertheless, viewers will assign some meaning or other to them.

An instructive case regarding the interrelation between images and the real *Lebenswelt* is the equipment of living spaces with paraphernalia and attributes characterizing their inhabitants. Workshops are often equipped with technical instruments of their owners, bronze workers, shoemakers, and so forth (Figs. 8.3–8.5, 8.7, and 8.8); in addition, there may appear plastic heads and painted pinakes hanging under a pair of goat horns, perhaps an apotropaic motif (Fig. 8.4). All such objects appear hung up on the neutral background like on a wall. Yet, what at first glance seems to be a totally unrealistic symbolic device of characterizing beings and spaces has, in fact, a striking equivalent in real life. For the image on a krater from Corinth, depicting a lively symposion of noble banqueters and beautiful *hetairai*, exhibits rich paraphernalia of aristocratic status 'hanging' on the background: helmets and cuirasses, lyres, and elaborate phialai (Fig. 8.13). There can be little doubt – confirmation comes from Etruscan tombs such as the Tomba dei Rilievi at Caere – that this corresponds to a real habit of rich families who demonstrated their wealth and social rank by displaying objects of prestige on the walls of their reception halls.³¹

30 Haug 2011, *passim*.

31 Corinthian krater: Amyx 1988–91, 235 n. 1. For the Tomba dei Rilievi at Caere, see Blanck and Proietti 1986. Numerous oversized terracotta kylikes, which are too large for practical use as drinking vessels, seem to have been destined for prestigious display, probably hung up on the walls of symposion halls.

Corresponding to architectural walls that were used as exposition panels, the background of painted scenes on vases could be used for demonstrative display of telling objects. In some depictions of potters' workshops, instruments can indeed be imagined as hanging on the interior walls of roofed buildings (Fig. 8.12). But in most other cases, the neutral background of the vase is simply used *like* an exposition screen.

In this sense, the real *Lebenswelt*, too, is a medium conveying cultural meaning and sense. We must give up the antithetical concept of a first-level, pre-given, contingent, and meaningless reality that then, on a second level, is transformed in art or literature into a meaningful product of human culture. Both the *Lebenswelt* and the visual arts are conceptual embodiments, media, of meaning. Of course, they are far from being identical means of expression, they differ widely in their specific material capacities, as well as in their range of possible imaginations. But art, as far as it refers to the world of real beings and things, is as conceptual as the *Lebenswelt* itself. Images and *Lebenswelt* are not identical but analogous. In this sense, we may speak of conceptual realism.

'Ideal' versus 'real': An obsolete antithesis?

If this idea is accepted, then the traditional antithesis between 'realistic' and 'idealizing' art seems to collapse, at least in the realm of Greek art. To start with 'realism': without engaging in a theoretical discussion on definitions, this turns out to be a highly debatable term. In its normal conception, 'realism' means an artistic style opposed to 'idealism'. Yet, Himmelmann, Giuliani, and Haug have convincingly observed that 'realistic' traits, understood as deviations from the normative, typified depiction of the world, are introduced into scenes of working as semantic signs, characterizing specific figures as belonging to a lower social status, along with other persons who are represented in the 'ideal' appearance of the upper class. Thus, this 'realism' is not a general way of perceiving reality for reality's sake, not an overall approach to the world as such, as an objective pre-given fact, as it is in nineteenth-century art, but a conceptual marker of specific meaning. Realism in this sense is not 'style' as a formal system, in opposition to 'idealism': both are elements within the same representational system.

On the other hand, the term 'idealism', as a counter-concept of elevating beings and actions in artistic representation over the triviality of their realistic appearance, turns out to be irritatingly abstract and void of precise meaning. In the visual arts, one cannot depict a subject in a general, 'ideal' way, for art only disposes of specific concrete forms of positive depiction: one can only depict it with concrete positive qualities, as particularly beautiful or young, noble or elegant, strong or big. Such 'ideal' qualities,

however, whether they are elevating or not, can only be represented in their 'real' physical appearance, in principle not different from the 'realistic' appearance of other subjects.

In order to understand the consequences that arise from this consideration, one may look at some of the aforementioned scenes of manual handcraft. First, let us consider the relation of the image to the depicted reality. Regarding the charming young vase painter on the kylix in Boston (Fig. 8.1), we can never be sure whether among pottery workers there were not, in reality, beautiful young lads. The painter of the kylix may have had such particularly good-looking youthful colleagues in mind. Regarding the observers in the foundry scene (Fig. 8.4), we know that upper-class people were 'really' expected to appear and behave in public life in a specific upper-class style. So, if painters depict these forms of appearance or behavior, in which sense can we say that these are 'idealistic' forms in opposition to others that are 'realistic?' In principle, there is no difference in reality between the well-draped *himatia* and the athletic attributes of the customers on the one hand, and the naked bodies and working tools of the bronze workers on the other. Both are parts of a conceptually shaped and perceived reality.

But even if painters deviate from a specific pre-given 'reality', depicting people more beautiful, noble or elegant, younger, stronger, or bigger than they 'really' were (which is, in fact, possible, although mostly impossible to verify, since we do not know the individual appearance of specific subjects that they represent), they can only depict them as real beautiful or young, noble or elegant, strong or large beings.

If modern viewers see the beautiful young vase painter, the noble visitors to the bronze workshop, and indeed most subjects and scenes in Classical Greek art as 'idealizing' representations, they do it from a modern perspective. The depiction of visual 'reality' always depends on how specific societies conceptualize reality. In this sense, according to Greek conceptions of reality, the depictions of the *Lebenswelt* – and no less those of the mythical past – on Athenian vases are realistic representations of their subjects.

To conclude: if 'realism' is always conceptual and 'idealism' always real, then it seems obsolete to use these terms in the sense of an exclusive antithesis. Both converge in what we may call 'conceptual realism'. If, however, realism is, in principle, conceptual, then we can ask for specific concepts of reality, prevailing in specific cultures. Scholars analyzing Greek images have diagnosed inconsistencies in the depiction of reality, as an indication of their constructed character. We have seen that this does not speak against their basic realism. In fact, we may doubt whether Greek sculptors did their work with naked bodies, their civic staffs at their sides; whether a vase painter seated on an elegant armchair (*klismós*) decorated

vases or had his athletic equipment hanging on the wall of his workshop (Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). But this is not unrealistic; there is no reason to doubt that a successful pottery owner or vase painter – who was able to dedicate ambitious votive statues on the Akropolis³² – could afford to acquire a *klismós* and athletic utensils, visit the palaistra now and then, go with his staff to the Agora, and participate in a private banquet.

The representation of such paraphernalia in the context of workshops just follows another concept of reality. Our modern concept of reality is perceptual and relational. Reality is what we perceive with one single glance of our eyes: objects and beings in their interrelation in space and time. Greek reality is more object-bound: the robust body of the bronze worker and the noble equipment and attributes of the vase painter are shown regardless of whether they are visible in a specific space and time situation to a specific viewer. Nevertheless, they are real bodies and real athletic utensils, which are conceptually essential for the theme represented. *We* depict warriors with their shields held by their left hands, with the consequence that when they move from left to right, their shield devices are not visible, while *they* show the devices even if the shields therefore have to be held by the warriors on their right side. *We* are used to depicting a car in a side view with two wheels because we see only two, whereas early Greeks showed four wheels because the car had four. Why is this less realistic?

To come back to Greek working scenes: Yes, the images are constructions, but constructions of a reality that is itself a construct. How much these two constructions coincided, how much the images are reproductions of real facts or imaginations of real wishes is difficult to know. Many indications speak in favor of a reference to the *real Lebenswelt*, but even the imagination of a *possible Lebenswelt* is conceptualized in the forms of a *real* world.