

# Ornament and Figure in Graeco-Roman Art



Rethinking Visual Ontologies in Classical Antiquity

Edited by  
Nikolaus Dietrich and Michael Squire

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## Ornament, incipience and narrative: Geometric to Classical\*

This chapter advances two claims, one theoretical and the other historical. The theoretical claim is that the distinction between figure and ornament is at once essential and contingent. Essential, in that the two terms are dialectically implicated; contingent, in that the boundary between them can shift, so that what counts as ornament under some conditions may count as a figure under others, and vice versa. The historical claim, meanwhile, concerns the way in which the ancient Greeks articulated this distinction. A *de facto* distinction between figure and ornament has its roots in the Geometric period; with time, Greek craftsmen came to exploit it as a source of visual interest in its own right; by the Archaic period, they were recruiting the figure-ornament distinction to the task of telling stories and articulating communities of viewing. Eventually, the establishment and manipulation of figure and ornament could be no less important than the narratives themselves. The historical argument depends on the theoretical one, so I will start with the latter.

### Defining terms

I begin by defining my terms: first ‘figure’, then ‘ornament’. The term ‘figure’, in what follows, is a component of pictorial or sculptural representation. Specifically, it concerns representational content or subject matter. As Richard Wollheim argued, in a widely admired series of papers, pictorial representation has a distinct phenomenology: ‘Looking at a suitably marked surface,’ Wollheim maintained, ‘we are visually aware at once of the marked surface and of something in front of or behind something else.’<sup>1</sup> This definition has two parts. First, Wollheim evoked a dichotomy, familiar from *Gestalt* psychology, of figure and ground: pictorial representation involves the visual awareness of a spatial relation (‘something in front of or behind something else’). But figure-ground relations pervade daily life, so this component alone will not

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\* I would like to thank Nikolaus Dietrich and Michael Squire – along with the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and Luca Giuliani – for hosting the June 2015 conference from which this chapter derives, and for overseeing publication of the volume so ably. Throughout this chapter, I use the abbreviation ‘BAPD’ to refer to the Beazley Archive Pottery Database (<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/testSearch.asp>); all other abbreviations follow those of the fourth edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

1 Wollheim 1998: 221. Further citations will appear in the text. For a discussion of Wollheim’s thinking, see also Grethlein’s chapter in this volume.

suffice to capture the specific phenomenon of depiction. Secondly, therefore, Wollheim insisted that the awareness to which he referred did not exclude, but was coincident with, an awareness of the material support of the picture: its ‘marked surface’, or facture. The resulting experience is ‘twofold’, a simultaneous awareness of two aspects of the same perception: representational content and material support. Both components are necessary to pictorial depiction; in tandem, they are sufficient.

Wollheim’s account has not met universal acceptance, but it has become a touchstone of serious reflections on depiction in the anglophone academy.<sup>2</sup> Minimally, Wollheim suggests that a figure in depiction is anything that is seen as being in front of or behind something else – seen, that is, in the requisite ‘twofold’ way. Figurality, therefore, is relational, not absolute. It is relational in terms of *space*: a figure is seen to be ‘in front of or behind something else’. It is also relational in terms of *materials*: a figure is seen in a ‘twofold’ way. Importantly, twofoldness can misfire or fail: one can see figures while failing to see the material support at the same time (as when taken in by a *trompe-l’œil*), and one can see the material support while failing to see or notice the figure (as when one mistakes a child’s drawing for a mess of squiggles). In such cases, one does not see the picture *as a picture* at all; one sees it as something else. To see a *trompe-l’œil* as the very thing it represents is precisely not to see it *as a picture*; neither is seeing a drawing as a mass of squiggles.

These considerations suggest that the distinction between *Bildraum* and *Bildfeld*, which Nikolaus Dietrich has used to such brilliant effect in his study of Athenian vase-painting, is heuristic but not absolute: pictorial depiction consists precisely in the fusion of the two.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, if Wollheim’s definition suggests that one cannot have a figure absolutely without space – *ohne Raum* – it is not prescriptive about what ‘space’ will look like in any given picture or group of pictures. The definition merely lays down that a certain visual experience is analytic to figurality, without specifying conditions for that experience to occur. This open-endedness is, surely, a virtue: it allows for historical and comparative accounts of depiction, while accounting for the way that people can and do see pictures in all sorts of natural phenomena, such as stains on walls.

Having defined depicted figures in terms of a spatial relation plus twofoldness, it may seem natural to define ornament in the opposite way: as ‘flat’ or ‘airless’ motifs without twofoldness. In ornament, one might be inclined to say, there is no visual experience of ‘something in front of or behind something else’; rather, there is just

<sup>2</sup> For recent responses to Wollheim, see Kemp and Mras 2016, with further bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich 2010 (and compare also, in the context of the pictorial space surrounding the handles of Attic painted vases, Kéi’s chapter in this volume). I might be tempted to say that the concept of *Bildraum* is redundant, insofar as *Bild* entails *Raum*, and that all that matters is the elastic relation between the component elements of a *Bildfeld*: there is no *Bild* without *Raum* – however inconsistent and provisional each may be. But I am not sure whether insisting on this point would be useful or would, on the contrary, merely overdramatise what is ultimately just a difference of emphasis.

a configuration of paratactic marks, as in fretwork or tiling. This simple inversion of terms is, however, plainly inadequate, since many things that it seems natural to call ornament are neither ‘flat’ nor ‘airless’. A simple frieze of chevrons may, arguably, involve no figure-ground relation, but palmettes, lotuses and the like certainly *may* do so, as will processions of sphinxes, putti with scrolls, all the way up to the synchronised Tiller Girls that Siegfried Kracauer took to epitomise ‘mass ornament’ in the modern culture industry.<sup>4</sup> A great deal of ancient Greek ornament trades very openly on pictorial space; the Alexander Mosaic, for instance, has a *trompe-l’œil* border, and it is by no means unique. Ornament, in short, is not the antithesis of figure, because figures can be ornamental, too.

Any plausible account of ornament must accommodate this diversity. Many, however, fail to do so. Exemplary in this regard is E. H. Gombrich, whose book-length study of ornament, *The Sense of Order* (1979), was intended as a counterpart to his classic study of pictorial representation, *Art and Illusion* (1960).<sup>5</sup> Gombrich started out with an analytic distinction between what he called ‘meaning’, or representational content, and ‘pure ornament’ or ‘pure design’.<sup>6</sup> Such purity was, he allowed, a mere normative ideal: in practice, a certain play between the two poles was the very ‘warp and woof of the decorative arts’.<sup>7</sup> This latter formulation licensed subtle analyses of the interaction of the two strands (the book’s title, punning on two meanings of ‘sense’, was typical in this regard). Ultimately, however, it merely reinforced the underlying distinction. Wollheim was quick to point out that the antithesis of ‘order’ and ‘meaning’ tracked the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘illusion’, material support and pictorial content, that had been crucial to Gombrich’s earlier work on pictorial representation.<sup>8</sup> Just as Gombrich believed that one could not attend simultaneously to facture and image, so he now claimed that figure and ornament were analytically antithetical and set himself the task of undoing their complex interweave in perception. The art historian Henri Zerner argued cogently that this premise was flawed: ‘the opposition between design and representation is not as deeply rooted in our mental activity as Gombrich would have us believe’, and the result was ‘confusion’.<sup>9</sup> Purism is a problem, not a solution.

More generally, a lot of ink has been spilled trying to define ornament: to distinguish it from pattern, from figuration, from decoration, from functionality.<sup>10</sup> It is not clear, however, just what is to be gained by being prescriptive. Certainly it is possible

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<sup>4</sup> Kracauer 1995, 75–89.

<sup>5</sup> Gombrich 1960 and Gombrich 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Gombrich 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Gombrich 1979, 152.

<sup>8</sup> Wollheim 1979, 323. Cf. Gombrich 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Zerner 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Ornament vs. pattern: Holz 1972, 140–160. Ornament vs. decoration: Grabar 1992. Ornament vs. abstraction: Morgan 1992. Ornament vs. function: Trilling 2003; Brett 2005. All of these topics and

to do good work without drawing a tidy frame around the concept. Historically, for instance, the great titans of the study of art-historical ornament are doubtless Gottfried Semper and Alois Riegl. It was a rare point of agreement between the two that ornament is always at least incipiently representational, although they differed categorically about the impetus behind the ‘stylisation’.<sup>11</sup> Neither, however, offered a definition of this representational aspect. Riegl, for instance, was frustratingly opaque about what he meant by ‘surface ornament’ (*Flächenornamentik*, *Flächenverzierungen*), in particular about the relation between the constituent elements of each.<sup>12</sup> His German fused the terms, but we must prise them apart if we are to ask about the specific relation between *Fläche* and *Ornament*. How surface-bound must ornament be, if it is to remain ornament and, as Riegl argued, ‘structurally symbolic’? At what point does it disengage from surface so much as to be figural? Riegl is unforthcoming. Although he associates certain features with ornament (‘stylisation’, ‘symmetry’, ‘repetition’), he seems to take the coherence of the category for granted; a mere list of characteristic associations is precisely not a definition in terms of conditions. Margaret Olin is surely right to say that ‘Riegl did not regard ... [his] use of terms as imprecise’, but that is what they are.<sup>13</sup> Yet the richness of Riegl’s studies derives, at least in part, from the fact they are ultimately unsystematic: they proceed from evolutionary taxonomy in the early *Questions of Style* to perceptual psychology in the later *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* without ever laying out cut and dried categories. This antireductive tendency is, in no small part, why Riegl’s local descriptions of particular objects and classes can remain compelling even as his larger evolutionary narratives are tediously racist.<sup>14</sup> He is most convincing when most impure.

Behind Semper and Riegl, Kant’s account of ornament, or what he called *parerga*, stresses its subjective aspect, hence its resistance to determinate criteria. Kant certainly understood that figure and ornament are not antithetical: his prime example of the *parergon* was sculpted drapery, which he understood to be ancillary to, and a foil for, the rendering of the human body, even though it is depictive through and through.<sup>15</sup> The key passage, however, is a brief discussion of Greek or Neoclassical ornament, ornament ‘à la grecque’, in the *Critique of Judgment*. Interestingly, Kant

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more are discussed in Necipoğlu and Payne 2016; especially germane is Hay 2016. On the historiography of such distinctions, see also Squire’s introduction to this volume.

**11** Riegl 1992; Semper 2004. For a useful historiography of ornament (mostly architectural), see Payne 2012.

**12** Evelyn Kain (Riegl 1992) translates both *Flächenornamentik* and *Flächenverzierungen* as ‘surface decoration’; I have modified the translation for the sake of consistency.

**13** Olin 1992, 135.

**14** Michaud 2012.

**15** Kant 2000, 111. Numerous chapters in this volume return to Kant’s thinking – e. g. those by Squire, Platt and Barham. On Kantian aesthetics, and its (non-)applicability to ancient imagery, see now the chapters in Platt and Squire (eds.) (2017), esp. Platt and Squire 2017, 38–59.



specifically excludes such ornament from the ranks of the *parerga*. His reasons for doing so are intrinsically interesting in the context of a volume on Greek and Roman ornament, but they also shed light on the basic problem of definition.

Kant begins by contrasting two kinds of beauty, which he calls free and adherent: free beauty ‘presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be’, while adherent beauty ‘does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it’.<sup>16</sup> Examples of free beauties are flowers, sea shells and parrots, which have no purpose whatsoever but are just beautiful (for us). Examples of adherent beauties are things that possess some function, such as churches or houses: the beauty of the cathedral of Chartres is ‘adherent’ upon its religious function, in that the beauty is at once logically separable from the function but also conditioned by it. For Kant, free beauty is superior to adherent, because it allows of wholly disinterested judgment. Greek ornament goes in the first, superior category, free beauty, by virtue of its abstraction: ‘Designs *à la grecque*’, says Kant, ‘foliage for borders or on wallpaper, etc., signify nothing by themselves: they do not represent anything, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties’.<sup>17</sup> It is because he extols ornament in this way that Kant has been read variously as a prophet of twentieth-century abstraction, and as a nutty formalist who thinks that a sample of Neoclassical wallpaper is aesthetically superior to Chartres Cathedral.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, free beauties can be made adherent by giving them a function and setting them in relation to other works. Take some wallpaper *à la grecque*, trim it with scissors and make a picture frame out of it, and suddenly the free beauty is adherent and ‘parergonal’. ‘Foliage for borders’, a free beauty in itself, becomes adherent when it is actually employed as a border, that is, a *parergon*. Examples are easy to dream up: a picture frame made of sea shells, a border of roses around a garden statue and so on. Kant, in other words, did not simply oppose figure to ornament. Instead, he relativised the terms in a complex, multi-dimensional way. He proposed a labile relation between two subsidiary pairs: figure-ground on the one hand, and figure-ornament on the other. Aesthetic judgment was a way to synthesise these relations and subsume them under concepts.

At its most helpful, Kant’s account encourages an unsystematic and *ad hoc* approach to ornament, even as it warns us against a simplistic assimilation of ornament to surface or pattern. We need a better way to capture the improvisatory, hence historical relations involved (the usual problem with Kant). To that end, it might be helpful to shift the discussion away from properties of objects (or features that it is all too easy to talk about as though they were properties), such as ‘space’, ‘figuration’ and ‘pattern’, and toward ways of seeing and modes of comportment, rather as Riegl pro-

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**16** Kant 2000, 114.

**17** Kant 2000, 114.

**18** Cf. Schaper 2003.

ceeded from taxonomy to psychology. As Steven Adams puts it: ‘The task, perhaps, is not to search for a definition for “ornament” or even to suggest that it might form a substantive cultural category but to track ways in which the term’s meaning and use have changed and to ensure that this process of change is held together by a narrative that makes comparison meaningful.’<sup>19</sup> If ornament has an essence, it may be expressed in how the concept fits into a larger pattern of reference- and assignment-relations that is itself historically variable. The perennially enticing thing about this topic is, precisely, the analogy it invites between ornamental patternwork and conceptual patterns: an historical grammar of ornament is really an historical grammar of concepts, the possession and deployment of which will be exemplified in practice.<sup>20</sup> This, in a Hegelian inflection that would identify such patterns precisely as historical *Geist*, that is, as a communal like-mindedness sensibly apparent in and through art, was basically Riegl’s project. The challenge is to reconfigure it without recourse to hand-waving or to overtly metaphysical terms such as *Kunstwollen*.

One alternative might be to approach ornament in terms of attention and focus. Ornament, we might say, is everything to which you do *not* attend when you look at a picture or a sculpture; everything you overlook. As Jacques Derrida put it, the *parergon* ‘disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy’.<sup>21</sup> Ornament is visible, even eye-catching, yet one ‘brackets’ it; it always threatens to fall out of experience, rather like what perceptual psychologists call *redundancies*.<sup>22</sup> This ‘bracketing’ may, but need not, involve suppressing the perception of figure and ground entirely to see mere patternwork. Some orna-

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<sup>19</sup> Adams 2006, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Grammar of ornament: Jones 1856. ‘Essence is expressed in grammar’ [*Das Wesen ist in der Grammatik ausgesprochen*]; Wittgenstein 2009, 123, § 371.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida 1987, 61; cf. Platt and Squire 2017, esp. 47–59.

<sup>22</sup> It may seem that the phrase ‘in a work’ surreptitiously introduces a concept of boundary, limit or frame and, in so doing, re-ontologises a distinction that I am trying to recast in procedural or ‘grammatical’ terms. It bears emphasis, therefore, that the term ‘in a work’ is itself open-ended. The case of the *Mona Lisa* will illustrate. The picture, as it hangs in the Louvre, is shielded from view by a pane of bulletproof glass. Much effort has been made to make sure that this glass is unobtrusive: viewers will, it is hoped, bracket or overlook it. Is the glass, therefore, an *ornament* to the work, on the definition offered here? It depends on what you consider the ‘work’ to be in this case. If you define the work narrowly as a picture produced by Leonardo da Vinci on panel in the fifteenth century, then the glass is not an ornamental element of the *Mona Lisa*. If, however, someone should take a larger view, and see the *Mona Lisa* as an example of contemporary installation art, encompassing the whole room that it occupies, and all the tourists who pass to and fro, then it could perfectly well be viable to describe the glass as an ornamental element (any thorny issues would be like those that apply to other installations, such as sculpture: on which, see below). Redundancy: see, for example, Driver and Baylis 1996; Jiang et al. 2010; Brown 2012. The analogy with perceptual psychology is inexact: redundancy has proved a useful term for understanding internal features of repeating patterns (like much ornament), but my suggestion is that ornament is *itself* ‘redundant’. The latter sense of redundancy may depend upon and overlap with the former, but the two are not identical.

ments are not normally candidates for the status of figure (say, a solid gold band as a frame), while others can solicit attention to the point that it is not clear whether they are ornamental at all (think of Michelangelo's *ignudi* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or Carracci's *trompe-l'œil* frames in the Galeria Farnese). The relations are loose and fluid, the rules local and *ad hoc*. Pay special attention to a picture frame, to the detriment of the picture itself, and the usual hierarchy can flip, so that the picture becomes *de facto* the ornament of the frame.<sup>23</sup> This potential reversibility expresses the contingent aspect of ornament: 'figurality' and 'ornamentality' may be essential but they are not *properties* of an object. They are, rather, functions of the beholder's attention; ornament is more a way of seeing than a coherent class of entity in the world. On this view, nothing is necessarily ornamental, but anything might be: there is no telling, in advance, where the ornamental might 'end'.

Such capaciousness might be counted a virtue, rather like the analogous capaciousness to Wollheim's account of figuration. It certainly facilitates comparison across media.<sup>24</sup> It is, after all, no easy thing to map terms such as 'figure', 'ground' and 'ornament' from pictorial art onto sculpture: in particular, the distinction between figure and ground does not carry over in any simple or straightforward way.<sup>25</sup> In sculpture, relations of 'in front' and 'behind' can be simultaneously depictive and non-depictive, most obviously in sculptural groups that array discrete figures in space. What is the 'ground' of a freestanding statue, and how (if at all) is it like a 'ground' in painting? Where does a statue's 'diegetic world' come to an end? And so on. Compared with such questions, the distinction between relative attention and relative oversight seems straightforward in conception, however slippery it may be in application. We might say that, in sculpture as in painting, ornament is a visible, even conspicuous element that the beholder *regularly* or *normatively* sets aside to a significant degree. It may be more than that as well: this definition is not exhaustive but let us see how far it takes us.

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**23** For further examples of such interpretive 'flipping' – explored in the context of moving between the pictorial field and the zone underneath the handles of painted Attic vases – compare Kéi's chapter in this volume.

**24** For recent discussion of transmedial ornaments, see Cummins 2016; Pullins 2016; Wolf 2016. Compare also Grethlein's chapter in this volume (on the ornamental in the context of both vase-painting and Homeric poetry).

**25** See Vance 1995; Hopkins 2010. See also Neer 2010.

## Geometric

One way into this problem, well suited to students of antiquity, is to ask how the distinction between figure and ornament came to seem so important in the first place. If figure and ornament are dialectically implicated, then it is tempting to say that there was little or no ornament at all in Greek art between the end of the Bronze Age (Late Helladic IIIc) and the eighth century BC. To put it this way may sound perverse: the period in question is known as ‘Geometric’ exactly because of its pervasively ‘ornamental’ or ‘decorative’ pottery. Unambiguous instances of figuration are almost non-existent in Protogeometric, Early Geometric and Middle Geometric, which means that ornament must have been almost non-existent as well; it is vacuous and anachronistic to say that the Geometric style of pottery is ‘ornamental’ if the term contrasts with nothing.<sup>26</sup> The apparent absence of figuration from Geometric, the apparent dominance of the ‘ornamental’ or the ‘decorative’, suggests that a purist notion of ornament is ultimately self-defeating.

This point encourages closer scrutiny of Geometric figuration. There is, after all, some figuration before Late Geometric, as on the odd Protogeometric pot or on Eastern imports and Bronze Age heirlooms of the sort found in the heroon at Lefkandi.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, though, the terms (to belabour a point) are *always improvisatory*. One should not be dogmatic about what can or cannot be seen even in an apparently surface-bound array of lines.<sup>28</sup> If the Greeks themselves did not police this boundary, there is no need for us to do so for them.

Many Geometric artefacts are, in fact, *incipiently iconic*. What is more, as Annette Haug explores in this volume, Greek craftsmen made this incipience a source of visual interest. Pots, for example, can be vaguely anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, as in the case of Attic belly-handled amphorae that flirt with being figures of squat, long-necked women (Fig. 8.1; cf. e.g. Fig. 4.6).<sup>29</sup> These amphorae routinely marked the graves of women as σήματα and could also be interred as containers for women’s bones. They

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**26** This formulation is literally ‘figurocentric’, insofar as it defines ornament dialectically as that which is peripheral to figures. Some might suggest that it is Eurocentric as well, insofar as some traditions, such as the Islamic, are said to be non-figural. Yet, as Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne have recently argued, there is a certain amount of essentialist (and, one might add, formalistic) myth-making in the idea of wholly non-figural tradition (Necipoğlu and Payne 2016, 3–4).

**27** On Geometric figuration, with special emphasis on continuity with Mycenaean, see the essays in Rystedt and Wells 2006.

**28** Henri Zerner makes a similar point in his incisive review of Gombrich 1979, emphasising that even seemingly decorative or ornamental patterns may be ‘physiognomic’ (Zerner 1979). More recently, Necipoğlu and Payne 2016 devote a section to the middle ground between ornament and figuration (arguably, in some instances, reifying the distinction: Necipoğlu and Payne 2016, 192–248).

**29** On Bronze Age anthropomorphic vessels, see Simandiraki-Grimshaw (2013). On belly-handled amphorae, see Whitley 2015, with further references. More generally on figure and ornament in the context of plastic Geometric vessels, see Haug’s chapter in this volume.



**Fig. 8.1:** Attic Middle Geometric belly-handled amphora, ninth to eighth century BC. Athens, Kerameikos Museum.

flirt with iconocicity: compass-drawn circles can be seen as breasts, handles as arms, the swelling belly a torso, etcetera. The resulting play of resemblance and representation is perhaps a visual analogue to the way that Greek writers persistently liken women to vessels, as when Hesiod associates Pandora with a *pithos*, or the Hippocratic writers liken the womb to an inverted jar.<sup>30</sup> Modern distinctions, as between pottery and sculpture, or between plastic and ordinary vases, are certainly useful, but also tend to close down such ambiguities.<sup>31</sup> There are good reasons why we classify belly-handled amphorae as pottery and distinguish between compass-drawn circles and pictures, but the legitimacy of those classifications need not come at the expense of other ways of arranging the corpus. Vessel, sculpture, figure, ornament: must we choose and, if so, must we be consistent?

Moreover, a great many Greek 'ornamental' patterns involve figure-ground relations or even recognisable iconographies (e. g., Late Geometric animal friezes). Even bichrome patterns lend themselves to so-called '*Gestalt* switches', in which figure and ground oscillate in perception (Fig. 8.2).<sup>32</sup> Most of the motifs and patterns in the Geometric repertoire may be seen indifferently as light-on-dark or dark-on-light, one aspect replacing the other in an endless to and fro. The Middle Geometric example in Fig. 8.1 contains numerous examples, such as the prominent sawtooth bands above and below the handle zone: pendant light triangles on dark, or upright dark triangles on light, take your pick. Even to speak of figure versus ornament in such situations seems inapt. Greek has plenty of more capacious terms, such as ποικιλία, 'rich complex adornment', and κόσμησις, 'well ordered adornment'.<sup>33</sup> When, for example, Pindar says that an Athenian amphora is *pampoikilos* (παμποίκιλος, *Nem.* 10.36), he is telling us that it shimmers and shifts, like the skin of a serpent or the hide of a fawn. Such terms address the tension between different ways of seeing the same thing; logically, we may distinguish the two, but phenomenologically they interfuse. It is this duplex, shifting experience of the incipient that captured the imagination of the Greeks.

Late Geometric combines pattern and figure in repetitive animal friezes; *horror vacui* – which results in sprinkling chevrons and dots everywhere – obviates the whole question of any strict logic to pictorial space.<sup>34</sup> On the name-piece of the Painter of Athens 877, for instance, it would make no sense to get too hung up about the exact spatial relations of the various fish, horses, pendant triangles, floating rhomboids

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Sissa 1987: 76–93; Reeder 1995; Zeitlin 1996, 64–68.

<sup>31</sup> See Neer forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup> The classic introductory discussion of '*Gestalt*-switches' is Köhler 1947: 181–187, 202–203.

<sup>33</sup> On *poikilia*, see Detienne and Vernant 1978: 25–31, 49–51, 288. *Poikilia* and vase-painting is explored at length in Neer 2002; cf. also the chapters in this volume by Lissarrague and Kéi (esp. 132–134, 144–145).

<sup>34</sup> See Martens 1992.



Fig. 8.2: The Gestalt circle-cross.

and so on (Fig. 8.3).<sup>35</sup> It would be quite inapt to speak of games of *mise en abyme* or paradoxes in such juxtapositions of ‘figure’ and ‘ornament’, because the operative distinctions do not pertain; it would be a bit like wondering how characters in Athenian tragedy manage to speak in iambic trimeter, even when highly distraught.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say, by any means, that the spatial relations in Greek art are *never* important (any more than it is to say that tragic metre is never important), just that any effort at internal consistency is by no means given or self-evident. Pots are *poikiloi*.

At the opposite extreme from the incipiently iconic is what might be called the *incipiently hieroglyphic*. Late Geometric figural motifs sometimes appear in formulaic combinations that cry out for symbolic reading or even decipherment. Susan Langdon, for example, has described how Argive Geometric repeatedly features a man leading two horses, each with a fish floating beneath its midsection (Fig. 8.3).<sup>37</sup> The formula is so pervasive that the group should probably be regarded as a unit. On the one hand, it is hard to dismiss the fishes as mere filler, even though they are clearly ancillary to the larger, central motif; on the other, it would surely be obtuse to insist on any sort of spatial or diegetic relation between the two animals, e. g., that the fish must be leaping into the air while the horse walks on water. The relation between fish and horse is meaningful, yet it is neither ornamental nor diegetic, but, it seems, diagrammatic or symbolic. Langdon suggests, plausibly, that the entire unit may derive from Near Eastern antecedents, even if the Argives themselves did not understand its original significance. For present purposes, the interesting point is that neither figure nor ornament is really apt to this motif. The terms themselves ‘melt away’ in the incipient, the potential, the possible transformation of *all* of the figural

<sup>35</sup> Argive Late Geometric krater by the Painter of Athens 877, from Melos: Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 877. The word *κόσμος*, note, is translated into Latin as *ornamentum*: on the terminology, cf. the chapters in this volume by e. g. Squire (with further bibliography at 2, n. 3), Hölscher, Barham and Reinhardt.

<sup>36</sup> For a classic discussion of such ‘silly questions’, see Walton 1990, 174–183.

<sup>37</sup> Langdon 1989. See Boardman 1983; Langdon 2008.



**Fig. 8.3:** Argive Late Geometric krater by the Painter of Athens 877, from Melos, c. 730–690 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum: inv. 877.

elements into a system in which the principle of combination is conceptual or even linguistic.

It requires a certain acculturation to know what, if anything, is correctly to be seen in these pictures. Their play of convention and improvisation seems to presuppose a well-informed viewership, capable of dealing with, or even ignoring, apparent incongruities. There is an analogy with the content of what seem to be narrative scenes in the same period: although some Late Geometric vignettes do resemble later representations of mythological narrative, it is notoriously difficult to be certain whether they are anything more than generic.<sup>38</sup> Yet the absence of iconographic signposts is revealing in itself. It was, perhaps, Jean-Pierre Vernant who first drew attention to a pervasive disregard for broader communities of viewing in early Greek art, an innate provincialism or elitism.<sup>39</sup> Geometric art, even when bound for export, was produced in small, ‘face-to-face’ communities, and most people never travelled more than a few miles from home. It seems never to have occurred to Geometric craftsmen that their imagery might be incomprehensible to anyone who was not in the know; or, if it did occur to them, they did not care. This outlook may be typical of oral cultures, in which direct conversation is the basic model of communication.

All of which is to say that, in Geometric art at any rate, the distinction between figure and ornament is more social than pictorial. Exactly because it is not self-evident and rigid, but improvisatory and inconsistent, its negotiation requires a certain know-how or *phronêsis*. Geometric art presupposes this know-how, and is in this

<sup>38</sup> On this much-discussed topic, see the superb but very different overviews in Langdon 2008 and Giuliani 2013, 19–52.

<sup>39</sup> Vernant 2006, 333–349.



sense deeply parochial. The boundary of figure and ornament is the boundary of a community of beholders, of people who can see distinctions that are not fixed, who can pick up the cues, finesse the unwritten laws: a society of *phronimoi*.

## Blinding and bedazzlement

Greek craftsmen of the Archaic period recruited this distinction between figure and ornament for the purposes of narrative. They *thematized* the distinction and, with it, the closely related one between figure and ground. A good example is the well-known krater from Cerveteri, signed by Aristonothos, the ‘Noble Bastard’ (Figs. 8.4–8.5).<sup>40</sup> On one side the krater depicts a familiar scene: Odysseus and his men blinding Polyphemus. On the other, two ships do battle. The ship on the left is clearly Greek, its prow adorned with an apotropaic eye; the one on the right is, according to Mauro Cristofani, probably Etruscan.<sup>41</sup> As Carol Dougherty and others have emphasised, there is a parallel between the two sides: in each case, the Greeks charge in from the left, ramming or blinding the Etruscan ship or the mythological equivalent, the Cyclops.<sup>42</sup> The krater is, for this reason, a good example of how the Odysseus myth provided a means of reflection on the Greek experience in the West.<sup>43</sup>

But there is more going on here than a simple antithesis of Greek vs. Etruscan, hero vs. monster. The krater makes vision itself an important theme. The Greek ship bears an eye on its prow as it rams the eyeless Etruscan craft; turn the vase, and the Greeks are blinding the one-eyed Cyclops.<sup>44</sup> Here it is important to remember that a krater is symposium furniture, used for getting drunk. Polyphemus is not just an exemplar of the Etruscans, but of a bad host as well: he devours his guests and passes out from drink, and his punishment is the loss of his single eye. In this context, in which vision is so prominently at issue, what are we to make of the role of ornament? Floating between the two ships on side A is a large, black-and-white rosette. It is visible to us, as beholders, but it has no place in the depicted narrative; it is no part of the ‘diegetic world’ of the naval battle. To know the distinction, to see the scene properly, involves what I have been calling *phronêsis*. In the case of the Geometric

<sup>40</sup> Rome, Musei Capitolini, Palazzo dei Conservatori, inv. 172. See Schweitzer 1955; Mingazzini 1976; Martelli 1987 no. 40; Jeffery 1990, 239, 241; Wachter 2001, 29–30; Dougherty 2003; Izzet 2004; Cordano 2007; Gianni 2007; Harari 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Cristofani 1983, 28–29, 47; Martelli 1987, 264; Dougherty 2003; Izzet 2004, 201–202.

<sup>42</sup> Martelli 1987, 264; Dougherty 2003.

<sup>43</sup> The ethnically differentiated naval battle is, however, a motif that goes back to LH IIIC: Mountjoy 2005. On the *Odyssey* and colonisation see, *inter alia*, Malkin 1998; Dougherty 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Izzet 2004, 202.



**Fig. 8.4:** Krater from Cerveteri, signed by Aristonothos. Side A: Odysseus and his men blind Polyphemus, mid-seventh century BC. Rome, Capitoline Museums: inv. C 172.

krater and countless vases like it, such ornamentation is unremarkable and poses no special problem for viewers.

With Aristonothos, however, matters are more complex. The rosette takes up a position at the focal point of the entire decorative programme: the point where the ships clash and where the curving wall of the krater, when seen head on, extends closest to the user. More importantly, the rosette is composite, precisely in the matter of figure-ground relations. It is, in fact, nearly identical to the *Gestalt* ‘circle-cross’ illustrated earlier (Fig. 8.2). Like the cross, the rosette shuttles or oscillates between two competing aspects: do we see white petals lying atop black ones, or black petals atop white ones? Whichever option we choose – or, more likely, if we let go and oscillate promiscuously between options – the answer is apt to put a certain strain on the



Fig. 8.5: Side B of the same krater: sea battle. Mid-seventh century BC.

easy compatibility of figure and ornament. By virtue of its prominent placement and its distinctive composition, this little device puts at issue, renders conspicuous, the crucial experience of seeing ‘something in front of or behind something else’.<sup>45</sup> This sheer visual prominence, moreover, compromises the practical distinction between figure and ornament: something eyecatching and puzzling at dead centre is hardly apt for inattention or overlooking, rather it cries out for focalised attention. The figure–ground oscillation corresponds, here, to a figure-ornament oscillation.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Shefton has studied compass-drawn rosettes, a distinct but related phenomenon that likewise plays with *Gestalt*-shifts, and has demonstrated a Phoenician origin: Shefton 1989.

In this way, Aristonothos combines multiple figural regimes in a single field. The figure-ground relation, the center-periphery relation and the figure-ornament relation all coincide in mutual incompatibility – so that, at the very site where Greek and Etruscan collide, the status of our own vision becomes uncertain. Given that the ideal viewer of such a krater is a symposiast – a half-drunk man at rest in the half-light of an *andrôn* – its themes of wine and blindness are nothing if not topical. Looking at the rosette, our eyes fail us, and there is no certainty in vision. Are we drunk? Blind? Monstrous?

It is easy to make too much of such effects. To produce them is, however, part of the *technê* of an artisan; their interest and importance depends, paradoxically, on their triviality, their sheer ordinariness. It is probably best to see the resonance between the blinding of the drunken Polyphemos and the bedazzlement of the symposiast who stares too long at the rosettes as playful rather than sober. *Gestalt* shifts amount to riddles with no answer; they may best be understood by analogy with the jokes and paradoxes that symposiasts would tell as they reclined around tens of thousands of krateres from Ampurias to Panticapaeum, everyday subversions of the sort that the symposium existed in order to stage and contain.<sup>46</sup>

That said, it is interesting that the Protoattic Eleusis amphora should use the identical motif for a nearly identical purpose (Fig. 8.6; cf. Figs. 3.2–3.4).<sup>47</sup> On the shoulder, Odysseus again blinds Polyphemos; on the belly, the Gorgons chase Perseus alongside the decapitated body of Medusa, their staring faces turned outward at the viewer (cf. Figs. 3.2–3.3). Robin Osborne has shown that a thematic of vision unites the two scenes, blinding above, petrifying gazes below – and the same thematic is apparent in the seemingly non-narrative, non-depictive ornament as well.<sup>48</sup> Rosette crosses pepper the background: again, are they light on dark or dark on light? The ‘Polyphemos Painter’, as he is called, draws attention to the shift of black and white, juxtaposing two ‘positive’ versions in the background with a ‘negative’ version incised on a sailor’s thigh – a tattoo, or a stray bit of ornament? The amphora’s lattice-work handles feature a nearly identical motif: two interlocking crosses of four wedges each, the one comprised of cut-out voids, the other of solid clay with painted accents. A horizontal band demarcates each unit above and below. Here a literal interplay of solid and void, bright emptiness and black silhouette, reiterates the purely pictorial or virtual oscillation of foreground and background in the painted rosettes. The effect seems cultivated, insofar as the deployment of similar motifs to similar effect in both two and three dimensions seems too much for coincidence. Some confirmation is

<sup>46</sup> On the relation between symposium jokes and pictorial space in Athenian vase-painting, see the first and second chapters of Neer 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Eleusis, Archaeological Museum, inv. 2630. See Mylonas 1955, along with Grethlein’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>48</sup> Osborne 1988.



**Fig. 8.6:** Neck of the Middle Protoattic amphora from Eleusis: Odysseus and his men blind the Cyclops Polyphemus, mid-seventh century BC. Eleusis, Archaeological Museum: inv. 2630.

provided by a corresponding mark on the thigh of the leftmost sailor: a braid pattern, matching the braids that run at the top of the scene and on the outer faces of the handles. In each case, the sailor's thigh bears a single unit of a pattern that repeats elsewhere on the pot.

It may be significant, in this light, that the stake that Odysseus drives into Polyphemus' eye is continuous with the upper border of the picture; the Greek sailors are literally gripping the 'ceiling'. This detail suggests, at the very least, that the painter was willing to improvise: he displays a fine disregard for any consistent differentiation of diegetic and non-diegetic elements. What is consistent, on the other hand, is the juxtaposition of *Gestalt* switches with a narrative theme of vision: the deadly stare of the Gorgon and the blinding of the Cyclops, excess and deficiency. Both stories are subordinate to this overriding concern. More strongly: the two narratives are of secondary importance compared with a general economy of shifting and oscillation in flatness and depth, solidity and void. The stories are a pretext for, and gloss upon, a visual effect. Classical archaeology, rooted as it is in philology, tends

to assume that narrative and iconography are the most important things about any picture, but the Eleusis amphora is a powerful counterexample: to its pervasive thematisation of *Gestalt* shifts there corresponds a matching inversion of methodological hierarchies in our modern discipline. In this situation, where the ornament is really the main element, standard categories and procedures are all potentially reversible: even, or especially, that of figure and ornament.

Returning to Aristonothos (Figs. 8.4–8.5), an ornamental motif – a rosette – is at once central, visually conspicuous and yet distinct from the depicted action. We are not to imagine that a large flower has intervened between the two ships; neither, however, are we to pretend the flower is not there. Diegetic space is still improvisatory and inconsistent, or, if you prefer, virtuosic; *horror vacui* still obtains, but now the picture makes that fact conspicuous by the prominence it gives to a decorative motif that also establishes inconsistent and shifting relations of foreground and background. The oscillating rosette occupies the same place in the composition as the sharpened stake does in the Blinding of Polyphemus – a structural equivalency, rosette and stake being each, in their own way, destructive of vision, the one by confounding what we see, the other by destroying the organ of sight.

The signature on the vase gives away the game. It is a canting name, meaning ‘The Noble Bastard’, or ‘The Good Phony’, an oxymoron if ever there was one. Is it a joke, an indication of servile status, a reflection of hybridity at the Graeco-Etruscan frontier?<sup>49</sup> These questions are as intractable as the question of whether the floral between the ships is light on dark or dark on light. Here, in a drunken revel at the border of East and West, the noble and the illegitimate, Greek and foreign, guest and host, vision and blindness, all grow confused, on a bowl purpose-made for mixing up wine and water. The joke is a prosopographical analogue to the treatment of space and ethnicity elsewhere on the pot; beyond that, speculation seems fruitless.

In sum, one might see these oscillating rosettes as so many glosses upon the story, a metaphor for the action, or conversely one might see the story as a narrativisation or acting out of the formal articulation of space, the *Gestalt* switch itself. For present purposes, two points are especially germane. First, the ornamental motif has become a thematic element in a larger narrative assemblage. Second, the optical distinction has become a way to manipulate distinctions of community, in this case, Greek and Etruscan, human and monster, ἰθαγενής and νόθος. Both the play between figure and ground and the play between figure and ornament have become resources that the painter can exploit to enrich and complicate the presentation of narrative.

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49 Coldstream 1993; Wachter 2001, 29–30; Izzet 2004, 194–201; Cordano 2007.



## Indecorous decor

Much Archaic ornament works in this fashion, establishing *Gestalt* shifts between foreground and background with greater or lesser artifice. I have argued elsewhere that the riddles, puns and jokes of the Greek drinking party – attested in Athenaeus and the corpus of early iambic, elegaic and melic poetry – provide a ready vocabulary for coming to grips with such features.<sup>50</sup> Visual uncertainty is a great theme of Athenian ceramic imagery, emerging as it does from the bibulous, Dionysiac world of the symposium. The rays that adorn the bases of countless black-figure amphorae can provoke the same figure–ground reversals as the double florals of Aristonothos and the Polyphemus Painter, shifting between light rays on a dark ground or dark rays on a light ground. The invention of red-figure lent impetus to this tendency. Red-figure, after all, reversed a centuries-old tradition of figure–ground relations, from black-on-red to red-on-black. In so doing, it simply ‘scaled up’ the principle at work on ornamental bands to include figural scenes as well. ‘Bilingual’ amphorae often traded on this doubleness by matching identical configurations in each technique. Although the result is not literally a *Gestalt* shift – there is a salient difference between a bilingual pot and the Aristonothos rosette – these technical innovations did make relations of figure, ground and ornament visually conspicuous simply by upending tradition. One result is that the rendering of space became an issue for vase-painters in the later sixth century as it simply had not been previously. In short, a standing tradition of ready-made *Gestalt* shifts combined with technical innovation to make pictorial space conspicuous and encouraged painters to play and experiment.

Figures themselves can be ornamental, especially *Mischwesen* such as sphinxes; shown here is a cup by the Euergides Painter of the late sixth century BC, featuring a late descendent of the Geometric ‘horse-leader’ motif (Fig. 8.7).<sup>51</sup> If Orientalising rosettes are *spatially* or *formally* duplex, then these composite monsters are *iconographically* duplex.<sup>52</sup> Most obviously, they are literally composite in their anatomy. More subtly, most *Mischwesen* can be both singular and multiple: there is *the* Sphinx, the one that terrorised Thebes, and then there are generic sphinxes that can pop up anywhere; there is *the* Centaur, Cheiron, and then there are more or less generic centaurs; there is *the* Gorgon, Medusa, and then there are her sisters Stheno and Euryale, *the* Silen, Pappasilenos, and then the chorus of satyrs, and so on. Vase-painters can be coy about this distinction, as when the Eucharides Painter depicts what is either a group of Thebans confronting *the* Sphinx and puzzling over the riddle, or a group of

<sup>50</sup> This paragraph summarises Neer 2002, 9–86. Much of this work is inspired by Lissarrague 1987. See also Neer 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Cup by the Euergides Painter: London, British Museum, 1920.6–13.1 (BAPD 200698).

<sup>52</sup> On composite monsters see, most recently, Müller 1978; Kourou 1991; Lada-Richards 1998; Wamser et al. 2000; Padgett 2003; Winkler-Horacek 2006; Hughes 2010; Biella 2012; Perego 2012.



**Fig. 8.7:** Cup by the Euergides Painter: youth between horses between sphinxes between palmettes, late sixth century BC. London, British Museum: inv. 1920.6–13.1 (BAPD 200698).

Athenians clustered around a grave stele crowned with a sphinx, a generic, sculpted finial.<sup>53</sup> It is never clear what we are looking at, a mythological character or a decorative motif, a type or a token.

As usual, things get especially interesting at the margins.<sup>54</sup> When sphinxes play a framing role, as with the Euergides Painter, their iconographic doubleness seems to license a certain liminality, as the composite monster can interact with decorative palmettes: here the sphinx's paw overlaps a stray tendril.<sup>55</sup> Such figures at once tug the florals into the diegetic space of the picture, and extract the sphinx from it. Relative to the youth with horses, the sphinxes are framing devices; relative to the palmettes, they are focal. The painter subtly exploits the different possibilities, as the sphinxes' curly tails resemble trailing tendrils, and the painter pairs them with the foreleg of one horse, the tail of another, to produce an overall weave of repeating shapes and subtle fretwork, overlapping and silhouette. The much-maligned term 'decorative' seems quite apt here, insofar as it captures the easy coexistence of different spatial regimes in the enlivening of patternwork and the patterning of habitable space.

<sup>53</sup> Attic black-figure pelike by the Eucharides Painter: Chicago, Smart Museum, inv. 1967.115.68 (BAPD 302992).

<sup>54</sup> Framing devices in Attic vase-painting have been discussed superbly by Jeffery Hurwit and, more recently, Nikolaus Dietrich. See Hurwit 1977; Hurwit 1992; Dietrich 2010, esp. 106–177 (with very thorough discussion of earlier bibliography); Platt and Squire 2017, esp. 13–21; Marconi 2017. See also Mitchell 2009, 162–169, and Kéi's chapter in this volume. Standard accounts of the topic outside of classical studies are to be found in Duro 1996.

<sup>55</sup> Again, the liminality of ornament is a major theme of Grabar 1992.





**Fig. 8.8:** Attic red-figure cup from the Wider Circle of the Nikosthenes Painter, showing orgiastic satyrs, early fifth century BC. Berlin, Antikensammlung: inv. 1964.4 (BAPD 275638).

A cup from the workshop of Nikosthenes, dating to the 490s BC, trades on just this liminality by taking it to a logical extreme (Fig. 8.8).<sup>56</sup> It shows an orgy of satyrs, whose anal eroticism is licensed, as it were, by the fact that they are not quite – not even – human. Satyrs are good to represent, as François Lissarrague famously put it, precisely because they provide a way to think the taboo, the anti-social, the impermissible.<sup>57</sup> In this case, however, it is worth noting that sexual transgression – the anal penetration of a masculine body, the fellation of one male by another – combines with pictorial transgression. The satyr at far right is preparing to assault an ‘ornamental’ Sphinx, a violation of pictorial decorum no less striking than the erotic gymnastics going on at centre. The excited *Mischwesen* oversteps a boundary, crosses a line, such that everything is mixed up, hybrid, plural.

There is usually no reason to find any special significance in the way Greek painters permeate such boundaries. For example, wayward spears and helmet crests overlap the upper frames of pictures all the time, and there seems to be no standing criterion to indicate whether such occurrences are important or insignificant. It all depends on whether or not, as they permit their figures to interact with their frames, overlappings simultaneously assert any significant cleavage or distinction between the two. A painter may articulate the relation between image and frame as an *antithesis*, such that blurrings or transgressions of that distinction can seem like contradic-

<sup>56</sup> Attic red-figure cup from the Wider Circle of the Nikosthenes Painter: Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 1964.4 (BAPD 275638). See Mitchell 2009, 163–164; Lissarrague 2013, 94.

<sup>57</sup> Lissarrague 2013.

tions or paradoxes, or as a *continuum*, such that there is really no border to overstep. The latter situation pertained in Geometric, which is why it makes no sense to see Geometric art as transgressive or self-referential in its articulation of figure and ornament, Late Archaic is different. The distinction turns on the articulation of a diegetic space. On the one hand, the Euergides Painter does not seem to care at all about whether there is or is not a consistent or coherent difference: he produces a continuous braid that incorporates stock motifs, an approach to which the very concept of transgression seems inapt. On the other, the Nikosthenic cup does establish a difference between tendrils, Sphinxes and satyrs, precisely in order to confound it: the joke of a satyr attacking a sphinx depends on the distinction. The painter establishes a reciprocity of sorts between the burlesque narrative – *Mischwesen* mixing among themselves in a vulgar fashion, literally transgressing each other's boundaries – and the visual joke of a picture that tries to penetrate its own frame. This is mixing as a metaphor, mixing as a concrete way of coming to terms both with social constraint and depictive possibility. If the Aristonothos krater thematised the distinction between figure and ornament as, among other things, one of community and legitimacy, the cup casts it as a matter of decorum and comedy. It is self-consciously 'naughty', hence deeply normalising – much like iambos.<sup>58</sup> But it works neither by stark juxtaposition, like Aristonothos, nor by continuous modulation, like the Euergides cup, but by a neat two-step of presentation and negation.

## Dismembering the scene: Douris

A cup by Douris, now in Fort Worth, presents an even more sophisticated version of this game (Figs. 8.9–8.10).<sup>59</sup> Dating to around 480 BC, it shows the death of Pentheus at the hands of his mother Agave. Aeschylus told this story, as did Euripides in the *Bacchae*: Pentheus, the king of Thebes, refuses to allow Dionysus to enter his city; in revenge, the god sends frenzy upon the women of the city, transforming them into maenads; Pentheus sneaks out to spy upon the spectacle; he is set upon by the women, including his mother, who are so crazed that they see him as an animal, and tear him apart.<sup>60</sup> Douris shows the climactic moment: Agave holds the upper body of her son; blood pours from the trunk, a bit of spine dangling horrifically; all around, extending to the other side of the cup, wild women, clad in leopard skins, cavort with bits and pieces of his legs, a thigh here, a calf there. 'One woman was carrying an arm', says Euripides, 'another a foot still in its boot, his flanks were stripped bare, the

<sup>58</sup> On *iambos* and decorum, see Kurke 2000: 69–72, with Kurke 1994; Rotstein 2010: 281–346 and passim; Kurke 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, inv. AP2000.02 (BAPD 11686, *LIMC* 7, s. v. Pentheus, no. 43).

<sup>60</sup> Aeschylus, *TrGF*<sup>3</sup> F183, p. 299. See Jouan 1992; di Benedetto 2004.

flesh torn from them, and every woman, hands red with blood, hurled Pentheus' flesh about like a ball' (ἔφερε δ' ἡ μὲν ὠλένην, | ἡ δ' ἴχνος αὐταῖς ἀρβύλαις, γυμνοῦντο δὲ | πλευραὶ σπαραγμοῖς· πᾶσα δ' ἡματωμένη | χεῖρας διεσφαιρίζε σάρκα Πενθέως).<sup>61</sup> Of course, there is no question of Euripides knowing the cup, although it is not impossible that Douris could have been influenced by Aeschylus' version of the myth.

The scene layers mixture, dismemberment, hallucination and depiction. Crucially, Douris adopts a stratagem that is quite common in early pedimental sculpture, rather less so in vase-painting: he lays down a distinction, a caesura as it were, between what 'we', the beholders, see and what 'they', the characters, see.<sup>62</sup> Late Archaic and Classical pediments often include at centre an epiphanic deity of whom the other figures are unaware: for instance, the Lapiths and Centaurs in the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia take no notice of the awesome Apollo who rises in their midst; the Pisans assembled in the east pediment of the same building seem unaware that Zeus is presiding over them, save only the elderly seer, who gasps with wonder at the sight (cf. Fig. 2.4). In such cases, what the beholder sees (Apollo, Zeus) is not what the depicted characters see. The Douris cup is, if anything, more complex. 'We' see a dismembered boy; but that is not what Agave and the maenads see. 'They' see a forest creature (Euripides specifies a lion).<sup>63</sup> Eventually, of course, they will come to their senses and realise what they have done. But in this picture, that moment has not yet arrived. Here all is still festivity and madness, and the image's dramatic power, and indeed its pungent irony, derives from this intoxicated inability to distinguish truth from falsehood, reality from illusion. This failure of vision (or is it success?) is the equivalent of the theme of blinding in the Aristonothos krater: a figure for the power of wine to discombobulate the eye. In the words of the Dionysus of Euripides, 'You see now as you ought to see' (νῦν δ' ὁρᾷς ἄ χρί σ' ὁρᾶν, *Bacch.* 924).

Douris grounds this theme in the cup's formal structure and, specifically, the relation of figure to ornament, methodically stating and negating basic distinctions of figure and ground, image and frame, surface and depth. He does so by playing on the relation of the figural scene to the surrounding palmettes. At the right end of Side A, for instance, he has some fun with the assimilation of a palmette-tendrill to the tail of a maenad's panther-skin. The maenad to the right of Pentheus wears a *pardalis* or panther-skin; the panther's tail is curiously stiff, hovering like a large letter 'S' between her and the dancing satyr nearby. This tail is visually continuous with the tendrils that snake from beneath the handles: the one curls behind the satyr's right elbow, the other behind his left knee. Douris arranges two matching volutes, one within the diegetic world of the myth, the other outside it – one is figure, the other ornament – precisely to confound or ironise the distinction.

<sup>61</sup> Eurip. *Bacch.* 1133–1136 (translation follows the Loeb edition).

<sup>62</sup> On this distinction in pedimental sculpture, see Neer 2010, 92–99.

<sup>63</sup> Beast (θηρός): Eurip. *Bacch.* 1108, 1180. Lion cub: Eurip. *Bacch.* 1142, 1174.



**Fig. 8.9:** Attic red-figure cup by Douris. Side A: the Death of Pentheus, c. 480 BC. Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum: inv. AP2000.02 (BAPD 11686).

On its own, this little joke is no more (and no less) unsettling than a pun might be in ordinary speech. There is nothing in it that undermines the intelligibility of the image as such. It is very like the play of tendril and tail on the Euergides Painter's cup (Fig. 8.7). True, the creeping tendril violates the space of the picture; but the space of the picture is, in this passage, not something that we have any reason to believe is inviolable, or even coherent, in the first place. Something like paradox does arise, however, in the combination of this matched pair of volutes with the dancing satyr at the extreme right of the scene. This latter figure pulls out all the stops of pictorial illusionism. By the standards of the time, he is radically foreshortened, turned frontally to the viewer and, more striking still, with his foot penetrating deep into the background – a depth, and a background, suggested first and foremost by the foot itself. Foreshortening implies just the sort of coherent spatial environment lacking in the other figures; it suggests a more or less fixed, more or less determinate relation in space between the beholder and the represented bodies, and between one represented body (or one part of a represented body) and another. The dancing satyr lays claim to pictorial space, to depth, in a way that his fellows do not. Yet he is also the crucial bridge between the panther's tail and the palmette's tendril, for he is superimposed over both. More than that: it is precisely the most strongly foreshortened part of his body that *overlaps* the tendril. Here the gears really do crash. Foreshortening and overlapping are both ways of representing space. Douris employs them in tandem, such that the satyr's leg is not just perpendicular to the painted surface,



Fig. 8.10: Side B of the same cup: the satyrs and maenads with *sparagmata* of Pentheus.

but also stands ‘in front of’ the tendril. That tendril, however, cannot and should not inhabit the same space as the satyr: it is not part of the diegetic world of the myth. In short, because the floral lies, impossibly, behind the foot, the establishment of space that goes with foreshortening collapses. Overlapping, which ought by rights to complement the foreshortening, now contradicts it. Where the Euergides Painter drew a continuum, plaiting figures and tendrils around the outside of a cup like a pictorial wreath, Douris draws conflict and carnage.

Lest this account seem to pay too much attention to feet and thighs, notice that the maenads are toting exactly these body parts elsewhere on the vase, holding them carefully over palmettes and tendrils: making legs and thighs discontinuous, doing violence to them and wrenching them out of context, is what this picture is all about. Douris is capable of great subtlety in this regard: note, in particular, what happens when our satyr’s right leg disappears behind the maenad’s skirts, the swelling muscle of his calf peeking out; yet the *rear* contour of her leg, visible through the sheer fabric, comes to seem like the *front* contour of his own, the inside of her knee becomes his kneecap, the hem of her garment becomes the back of his heel. His leg is there and it is not, we both see and do not see under the wine-god’s spell.

It is probably no coincidence that such games of perception should occur in a scene that narrates illusion and dismemberment. Our position is not, in the end, so different from that of the Theban queen. For us, as for her, the power of Dionysus distorts vision itself; the result, in each case, is disarticulation and disjunction,

whether of Pentheus or of *the scene itself*. Douris effects a sort of rending or *sparagmos* (σπαράγμος) of the picture – establishing the conditions of spatial coherence, of a distinction between figure and ornament, only to negate them – even as he disarticulates what the beholder sees from what the depicted characters see. In short, the foreshortened foot effects a *Gestalt* switch similar to, but not identical with, the rosettes on the Aristonothos krater. The difference being that now the shifting motif is fully integrated into the very diegetic world it dismembers.

## Public art and ‘ornamental iconography’

The ornamental, to repeat, ‘disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy’. The gambit of Aristonothos, Douris and the anonymous Nikosthenic painter is to make ornament reappear, to ‘disinter’ it and reconstitute it. These differences, however, are not merely formal but social: they establish conditions of intelligibility and contradiction that are not intrinsic but relational. All of these pots thematise an essential problem of *community*: the necessity, and the limitation, of mutual attunement in perception. As noted earlier, this social dimension was integral to Vernant’s account of the history of Archaic figuration, which he saw as moving from relatively obscure, talismanic artefacts, comprehensible only to elites, to styles of realism that the whole *polis* could appreciate.<sup>64</sup> Aristonothos is clearest on this point, insofar as he articulates the encounters of Greeks with the West in terms of vision and blindness, but the erotic fellowship of satyrs on the Nikosthenic cup, and the vicissitudes of the Cadmean house on the one by Douris, are no less powerful in their identification of community with perceptual attunement.

Yet it is, arguably, in public art that these issues are most salient, for it is here the stakes of attunement are highest. If the issue of ornament is always that of a community of beholders, or a shared *phronēsis* in seeing, then that community will (like any other) have internal divisions. Public art makes these divisions visible. This brings us to architecture.

It by no means obvious what counts as ornament, what as figure, in architectural sculpture – even if, thanks to Vitruvius, architectural ornament has been very nearly paradigmatic of ornament in general.<sup>65</sup> Tonio Hölscher has recently emphasised the overall obscurity – both literal and figural – of much architectural sculpture in Greece, suggesting that it is largely ‘decorative’, and this insight is very much worth pursuing.<sup>66</sup> In the case of the so-called Erechtheum at Athens, for instance, part of

<sup>64</sup> Vernant 2006, 333–349.

<sup>65</sup> See, e. g., Hersey 1988; Picon 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Hölscher 2009 – along with Hölscher’s chapter in this volume.

the job of a figural sculpture is, curiously enough, to make itself decorative or ornamental, to efface itself and melt away. The Erechtheum building boasts some of the most exquisite ornament in the history of Greek architecture, including guilloches inlaid with coloured glass beads. It also had a sculpted frieze on the outside, which employed an unusual technique whereby the figures were carved in white marble and then dowelled into slabs of blue limestone.<sup>67</sup> The frieze is quite fragmentary, so it can be difficult to identify the scenes. The same building also featured the famous caryatid porch: six maidens serving as columns. In keeping with the iconographic paradigm of current scholarship, the big question with the caryatids is: who are they? Participants in the Panathenaic procession, mourners for Cecrops, ancient princesses transported into constellations, a lyric chorus – all have been mooted in recent years.<sup>68</sup>

Yet there exists an exactly contemporary description of both the Erechtheum frieze and the caryatids: an ephrasis of sorts, if only we could recognise it. This description comes in the form of public records concerned the carving of the frieze and the construction of the building.<sup>69</sup> The accounts, dating between 409 and 406 BC, tell us exactly who carved which figure and how much he was paid, and along the way they describe each figure:<sup>70</sup>

[ὄν τὸ δ]όρυ *héχοντα*,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}$ . Φυρόμα-  
 [χος Κ]εφισιεύς, τὸν νεανίσκο-  
 [ν τὸ]ν παρὰ τὸν θόρακα,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}$ . Πραχ-  
 [σίας] ἐμ Μελίτει *χοικῶν*, τὸν *h*-  
 [ἵππο]ν καὶ τὸν *hoπισθοφανῆ* τ-  
 [ὄν πα]ρακρόοντα,  $\text{H}\Delta\Delta$ . Ἀντιφάν-  
 [ε]ς *heκ*] Κεραμέον, τὸ ἄρμα καὶ τ-  
 [ὄν νε]ανίσκον καὶ τὸ *hίππο* τὸ  
 [ζευγ]νυμένο,  $\text{H}\text{H}\Delta\Delta\Delta$ . Φυρόμαχ-  
 [ος Κε]φισιεύς, τὸν *hάγοντα* τὸ-  
 [ν *hίππο*ν,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}$ : Μυρνίον *haγυλῆ*-  
 [σι] *χοικῶν*, τὸν *hίππο*ν καὶ τὸν  
 [*hά*]νδρα τὸν *heπικρόοντα* καὶ  
 [τῆ]ν στέλεν *hύστερον προσέθ*-  
 [ε]κ]ε :  $\text{H}\Delta\Delta\Gamma^{\text{H}}$ . Σόκλος *haλοπεκῆ*-  
 [σι] *χοικῶν*, τὸν τὸν *χαλινὸν hέ*-  
 [χο]ντα,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}$ : Φυρόμαχος Κεφισι-  
 [ύς], τὸν *hάνδρα* τὸν *heπὶ τῆς βα*-  
 [κτ]ερίας εἰστεκότα τὸν παρὰ  
 [τὸ]ν βομόν,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}$ : *hίαςος Κoλλυτε*-  
 [ύς], τὴν γυναῖκα *ἔ* *ἔ* *παῖς* προσ-  
 [πέ]πτοκε,  $\text{F}^{\Delta}\Delta\Delta$

67 The basic publication of the Erechtheum frieze is Boulter 1970.

68 Scholl 1995; Robertson 1996, 34; Gaifman, forthcoming.

69 *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 474–476. See Stevens et al. 1927, 278, 416–422, 457.

70 *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 476 ll. 159–180.

For the man holding the spear 60 drachmas. [To] Phyromachos of Kephisia, [for] the young man with the breastplate: 60 drachmas. [To] Praxias living in Melite, [for] the horse and the man who is visible behind it and who strikes its flank: 120 drachmas. [To] Antiphanes from Kerameis, [for] the chariot, the young man, and the horse being harnessed: 240 drachmas. [To] Phyromachos of Kephisia, [for] the one leading the horse: 60 drachmas. [To] Mynnion living in Argyle, [for] the horse and the man striking it and the stele which he added later: 127 drachmas. [To] Soklos resident at Alopeke, [for] the man holding the bridle: 60 drachmas. [To] Phyromachos of Kephisia, [for] the man leaning on his staff beside the altar: 60 drachmas. [To] Iasos of Kollytos, [for] the woman embraced by the girl: 80 drachmas.

And so on. Here we have exactly contemporary descriptions of the sculpture, designed for a public readership at the apogee of the radical democracy. What do they tell us about ancient habits of beholding?

Of particular interest is the following entry (*IG I<sup>3</sup> 476* ll. 150–151): [..]ς τ[ὸ]ν γρ] ἄφοντα νεα[ν]ίσκον | καὶ τ[ὸ]ν πρ]ο[σ]ε[στ]ῶτα *ἑαυτοῦ*: H. ('For the youth who is drawing/writing and the man standing by him: 100 drachmas'). This description matches a pair of surviving figures (Fig. 8.11).<sup>71</sup> The crouching figure is performing a very specific action and is clearly part of a larger narrative of some sort: perhaps mythological (as on the Hephaestion frieze), perhaps ritual (as on the Parthenon frieze), perhaps historical (as on the Nike temple frieze). The inscription, however, is uninformative. One of the building accounts even mentions the porch with the caryatids, to which it refers simply as 'maidens', *korai*.<sup>72</sup> In short, the building accounts fail to provide positive identification for any figure: they name the sculptors, but not the figures they carved. Instead, they provide thumbnail descriptions, like 'the man holding the spear'. Modern scholars have been able to identify some of the figures – Apollo, for instance, has an *omphalos* on his lap – but no thanks to the public records.<sup>73</sup>

The Erechtheum accounts have been mined for the information they provide about workshop organisation and payment systems, but neglected by iconographers.<sup>74</sup> Yet the importance of these texts for our understanding of Athenian art can hardly be overstated. As public records, they tell us what the Athenian state believed an average Athenian would see when looking at the sculpture. Apparently, the state felt that it could not count on the average Athenian to be able to make sense of the iconography, so it used simpler, more general descriptors. The clear implication is that, as a practical matter, *most people did not know what the frieze represented, or who the caryatids were*. Indeed, it is not even clear that the functionaries who composed this document knew what they were talking about; they may have been as mystified as everyone else. Here it is well to recall that, on the best estimates, literacy in Athens ran at about 5–10 per cent; the democracy's habit of carving texts onto stone was as

71 Athens, Acropolis Museum, inv. 1073. Boulter 1970, 19–20; Holtzmann 2000.

72 *IG I<sup>3</sup> 474* l. 86.

73 Apollo: Athens, Acropolis Museum, inv. 1293; Boulter 1970, 18–19.

74 See, e. g., Randall Jr. 1953; Lambert 2000; Pakkanen 2006.



much symbolic as practical, an attempt to impress and overwhelm an illiterate public as much to inform.<sup>75</sup>

The Erechtheum inscriptions may be set alongside an almost exactly contemporary passage from the *Ion* of Euripides (c. 414 BC). Some Athenian women are visiting Delphi; as they look at the sculptures (presumably the metopes) on the temple of Apollo, they read out the iconography:<sup>76</sup>

- ἰδοῦ, τᾷδ' ἄθρησον·  
Λερναῖον ὕδραν ἐναίρει  
χρυσείαις ἄρπαις ὁ Διὸς παῖς·  
φίλα, πρόσιδ' ὄσσοις.
- ὀρώ. καὶ πέλας ἄλλος αὐ-  
τοῦ πανὸν πυρίφλεκτον αἴ-  
ρει τις· ἄρ' ὅς ἐμαῖσι μυ-  
θεύεται παρὰ πήναις,  
ἄσπιστὰς Ἴόλαος, ὃς  
κοινούς αἰρόμενος πόνους  
Δίῳ παιδί συναντλεῖ;
- καὶ μὰν τόνδ' ἄθρησον  
πτεροῦντος ἔφεδρον ἵππου·  
τὰν πῦρ πνέουσαν ἐναίρει  
τρισώματον ἀλκάν.
- πάντα τοὶ βλέφαρον διώκω.  
σκέψαι κλόνον ἐν τείχε- λαίνοισι Γιγάντων.
- τῷδε δερκόμεσθ', ὦ φίλαι. †
- λεύσσεις οὖν ἐπ' Ἐγκελάδῳ  
γοργωπὸν πάλλουσαν ἴτυν ...;
- λεύσσω Παλλάδ', ἐμὰν θεόν.

– Look! come see, the son of Zeus is killing the Lernean Hydra with a golden sickle; my dear, look at it!

– I see it. And another near him, who is raising a fiery torch, is he the one whose story is told when I am at my loom, the warrior Iolaus, who joins with the son of Zeus in bearing his labours?

– And look at this one sitting on a winged horse; he is killing the mighty fire-breathing creature that has three bodies.

– I am glancing around everywhere. See the Battle of the Giants, on the stone walls.

– I am looking at it, my friends.

– Do you see the one brandishing her Gorgon shield against Enkelados?

– I see Pallas, my own goddess ....

<sup>75</sup> Harris 1989, 90; Thomas 2009. Pébarthe 2006 argues for higher rates, as does Missiou 2011; both have met with scepticism.

<sup>76</sup> Eurip. *Ion* 190–210. On this passage, see Steiber 2011, 284–302, with earlier bibliography. On the metopes of the temple at Delphi, see Bookidis 1967, 189–192; Neer 2004, 84–85 (with reference to incomprehensible iconography).

And so on. The women of the chorus are servants of an Athenian princess: they actually live on the Acropolis, in the predecessor of the Erechtheum. Perhaps for this reason, they are capable of correctly identifying figures by iconography; they adduce details (a sickle, a torch, a Gorgon shield) and propose names. It has been argued that this display of skilful beholding is paradigmatic of everyday viewing experience, a precious guide for modern art historians.<sup>77</sup> Yet the Erechtheum inscriptions suggest just the opposite. The inscriptions do not presuppose even basic literacy in matters of iconography: they do not assume that readers or auditors can match proper names to iconographic details as the chorus does, or even that they will be inclined to try.

There is, in short, a conflict in the evidence, as the buildings accounts suggest one thing, Euripides another. Because the public record is purely functional, conveying information in as economical way as possible, it seems a better guide to the everyday experience of sculpture. ‘I see Pallas, I see, I see,’ repeat the women of the *Ion*, but the building accounts tell us that that is exactly *not* the sort of thing that an average Athenian could be counted on to say when confronted with the sculptures of Pallas’ own temple at Athens. The average Athenian could only be counted to see something like ‘a man holding a bridle’, ‘a young man drawing’, a ‘maiden’ ... or a ‘rosette’. Whoever oversaw the building project must have known as much.

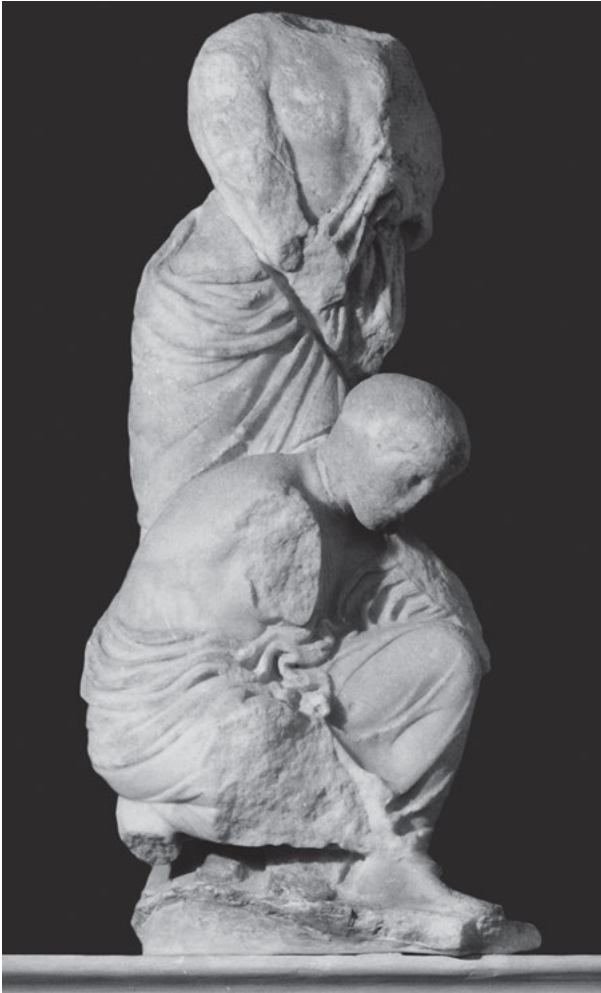
A calculated obscurity may seem an odd strategy for public art, but it has ample precedent in Greek poetry and elsewhere. Pindar, for instance, could boast of his own incomprehensibility: ‘I have many swift arrows in their quiver under my arm; they speak to the perspicacious, but the crowd needs hermeneuts’ (πολλά μοι ὑπ’ ἀγκῶνος ὠκέα βέλη | ἔνδον ἐντὶ φαρέτρας | φωνάεντα συνετοῖσιν· ἐς δὲ τὸ πᾶν ἔρμανέων | χατίζει, *Ol.* 2.82–86).<sup>78</sup> We might approach sculpture on similar terms, and distinguish the ‘perspicacious’ (συνετοί) from the masses (τὸ πᾶν). It bears repeating that the chorus of the *Ion* is an insider group, attendant on Creusa the princess of Athens. If its ecphrasis is strikingly dissimilar from the democracy’s own building accounts, the contrast is nonetheless revealing. It brings out a *social differential* to the capacity to see architectural sculpture. Euripides’ well-born characters inhabit a privileged visual world. Their perceptions exemplify what Jacques Rancière has called the ‘distribution of the sensible’, the distribution or sharing out of the capacity even to see, to have visible for one.<sup>79</sup> The Erechtheum, for all that it is democratic, public art, instantiates a differential between those who can see and those who cannot, those who are perspicacious and those who require hermeneuts.

Even Derrida threw up his hands at the question of whether a caryatid is or is not a *parergon*: ‘So as not to add to these complications’, he wrote, ‘I shall leave to

<sup>77</sup> Marconi 2009, 168.

<sup>78</sup> On this thorny passage which, by virtue of its obscurity, practically enacts its own statement, see Willcock 1995, 161–162.

<sup>79</sup> Rancière 2000.



**Fig. 8.11:** Athens, Temple of Athena Polias ('Erechtheum'): fragment of frieze with standing male and kneeling youth, c. 408/407 BC. Athens, Acropolis Museum: inv. 1073.

one side, provisionally, the case of columns in the form of the human body'.<sup>80</sup> But if ornament is provisionally, relatively, that which 'disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy', then the architectural sculpture of the Acropolis both was and was not ornament. It all depended on who was looking at it, under what circumstances. If the average Athenian could not understand iconography then this frieze of small, inscrutable figures will have been no more meaningful than a generic band of waterfowl on a Geometric pot, except to those in the know. The caryatids, for instance, might have been generic 'maidens', or they might have been specific characters out of mythical history, depending on who

<sup>80</sup> Derrida 1987, 59.

was looking – and the difference between these visual experiences was a function of a distribution or social rationing of sensibility.

In such cases, *iconography itself* will have been ornament, *iconography* will have disappeared, buried itself, melted away. The difference between a woman and a goddess, which iconography typically secures, is an aspect of the building that ‘the many’ are simply not in a position to see. Once again, it is a matter of know-how, a *phronêsis* of the visible, and one function of public art is to establish a space for such games of vision. That is where we should be looking for the ideology of this monument, not in the symbolism of this or that iconographic detail. Ideology is upstream from iconography: it is here, in the distinction of figure and ornament, which is first and foremost a social one. Iconography itself can be ornamental when it is effectively illegible, when it is produced precisely to reiterate a distinction between, as Pindar puts it, the ‘perspicacious’ (συνετοί) and the masses (τὸ πᾶν).

In the case of Geometric, we saw the perceptual difference between figure and ground, figure and ornament, as essentially flexible and *ad hoc* – an improvisatory approach so open to misunderstanding as to presuppose a great deal of acculturation on the part of beholders. The Aristonothos krater cast this same matter in terms of violence – a confrontation, whether in myth or in the present day, between Greeks and the West, Etruscans and Cyclopes. The capacity to see, to navigate pictorial space, is not uniform but is, on the contrary, a marker of difference. Douris casts the matter in terms of a confrontation, not with the Etruscan but with wine and Dionysus. The difference between figure and ornament is still relative, and the question is still shot with violence, but the tragedy of Pentheus is precisely one of a failure of vision under intoxication. Finally, with the Erechtheum, architecture itself becomes simultaneously figure and ornament. Here the distinction is, in itself, the very mechanism of a differential of the power to see. Even under what Plato famously called *theatocracy*, ‘rule of the beholders’, some could see more than others – and the architectural adornment of the city is the establishment of social and political difference.<sup>81</sup> It is here that the distinction between figure and ornament becomes that of political and social visibility, where the question of figure and ornament becomes, strictly speaking, ideological. If we do not know, in advance, the limits of the ornamental, then that is because, ultimately, we do not know the limits of our polities.

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81 Pl. *Leg.* 701a.

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