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CHECKLIST

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

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

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

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

**A Space for Dialogue, founded with support from the Class of 1948,
is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967,
Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. '66, and Pamela J. Joyner '79.**

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

BEYOND APHRODITE: INTERPRETING PORTRAYALS OF “REAL” WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE



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

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

—Pericles to the Athenian widows,
Thucydides, *Histories*, 2.45.2

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

as minors, in fact, women were denied participation in civic life and, as indicated in the funeral speech above by Pericles in Thucydides’ *Histories*, ideally regarded as absent, rather than present, in public life.

Given the dearth of textual evidence describing the day-to-day lives of “real” women, representations of females in Greek art provide the greatest insight into their world. Each object in this installation portrays a different representation of the female figure during the Classical and Hellenistic periods (about 480–146 BCE). These representations both provide insight and raise questions about the social dynamics and cultural values of ancient Greece while highlighting some of the major problems inhibiting our understanding of women in the ancient world.

The *symposium* scene depicted on the red-figure bell *krater* attributed to the Hearst painter (about 430–420 BCE) reflects the difficulty attendant upon determining the various roles of women in ancient Greece. Females most visibly appear in the roles of brides, mothers, celebrants of religion, and mourners of the dead (Lewis 58). However, the female flute-player (*auletris*) in this scene represents a different group of women in the ancient world: entertainers. *Symposia* were important social institutions for males in ancient Greece. Usually held in

the men’s quarters of the home (*andron*), they provided a social environment for younger and older men to eat, drink, hold conversations, and enjoy entertainments such as music and poetry. Based on literary accounts such as Xenophon’s *Symposium*, we know that female entertainers, including dancers, musicians, acrobats, and courtesans (*hetairai*), were often present at *symposia* as well. Respectable women in Greek society were forbidden from attending *symposia*, indicating that these female entertainers represent a special class of women who served a specific purpose in a male-dominated social space. While we can identify the *auletris* on this *krater* as one of these special women, we know very little about her personal identity. We see what she is doing in the scene and how her hairstyle and clothes are portrayed, but there are no visual indicators of her nationality, economic status, or social class. As a female entertainer, she may have also played a sexual role in the context of this all-male setting. She may even be a generic representation of the music played during such events. Despite the ambiguity of this figure, her appearance as an entertainer on this *krater* indicates that there were some differences among the roles of women in Greek society that distinguished between those included or excluded from the activities of men.

A closer look at an ancient Greek object’s intended function can supply a framework for the interpretation of ambiguous iconography as well. For example, the cosmetic function of the red-figure squat *lekythos* attributed to the Meidias painter (about 400 BCE) influences the iconographical scene portrayed on the vessel. As cosmetic containers primarily used for women’s wares, squat *lekythoi* often displayed images connected to the beautification process. The goddess Aphrodite and her retinue frequently appeared on tools of adornment, indicating that this goddess likely set an example for women on how to enhance their own beauty and allure through the use of cosmetics (Segel 76). On the present object, the figure of Eros and the partridge evoke connections to Aphrodite, and the function of the vessel as a beautification tool implies the presence of the goddess in the scene. Since the seated female lacks Aphrodite’s characteristic mantle decorated by stars, this figure may not be an actual representation of the goddess. However, certain attributes, such as her jewelry, clinging drapery, and location in a garden, indicate that she may symbolize a Greek ideal of feminine beauty. Based on the presence of Eros, she is likely not a “real” woman as well, but she serves to emphasize the importance of physical beauty in ancient Greece, especially among wealthy individuals whose families or husbands could afford expensive cosmetics like the ones held in this squat *lekythos*.

The two terracotta figurines in this installation present slightly more ambiguous representations of the female figure. This is primarily due to the fact that we do not know their intended functions or have a known archaeological context for their discovery. Comparisons with other terracotta figurines found in graves around the Boeotian city of Tanagra place the figurine of a standing woman (about 300–275 BCE) within the artistic traditions of the Hellenistic period. Many of these Tanagra-style figurines depict similar standing females, wrapped in elaborate drapery. The poses of the Tanagras vary, yet the renditions of the hair, delicate facial features, and elegant robes recall the forms seen in the present figurine. Such figurines have been found in graves, sanctuaries, and domestic buildings, but we do not know their functions or meanings. Those

found in the former most likely represent votive offerings, but their domestic counterparts are more mysterious. Because the faces, heads, and hands of many Tanagra figurines are often veiled, they seem to evoke some ritual practice, or even the virtue of modesty in public. Their popularity, along with their relative consistency, indicates that such figures represented some key concept or value in the Hellenistic period that is no longer inherently evident in modern times.

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

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

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