

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means. There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

An interpretive question to consider for this vase might be:

What does this amphora tell us about the culture and values of the people of Athens in ancient Greece?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value, and can include more personal and subjective responses to art. Critical assessment can also change over time.

Overall, do you think that the artist who created this Greek vase was successful in expressing its purpose? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it speak to you in some way?

How does this work of art relate to prizes made for athletic competitions today?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this object. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, who adapted text and research provided by Jenifer Neils, Elsie B. Smith Professor in the Liberal Arts, Department of Classics, Case Western Reserve University, and Paul Christesen, Professor of Classics, Dartmouth College.

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The Berlin Painter, Greek,
5th century BCE

Panathenaic amphora

About 480–470 BCE

Terra cotta with slip decoration
Inscribed vertically:
TON ATHENETHEN ATHLON
(From the Games at Athens)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ray Winfield Smith,
Class of 1918; C.959.53

This amphora, an ancient Greek vase with a large oval body, two handles, and a narrow neck, served as a prize at the Panathenaic games in Athens. It is decorated with a representation of Athena, warrior goddess and patron of Athens. Beginning in 566 BCE, games were held every four years as part of the great festival, or Panathenaia, in her honor. Prize vases such as this usually contained oil from the olive trees sacred to the goddess.

As on most of these vases, Athena stands between two Doric columns surmounted by roosters. According to Greek mythology, Athena was born fully armed from the forehead of Zeus, and she appears here bearing a spear and shield. Her shield is adorned with the head of the Gorgon Medusa. Perseus presented Medusa's head to Athena in gratitude for her help in slaying this creature. Medusa's head has the power to turn all who look at it to stone. By mounting it on her shield, Athena created a formidable weapon.

Panathenaic amphoras traditionally represent Athena on one side, and on the reverse, the competitive event for which the vase was awarded. The nude figures on the reverse of this piece are probably wrestlers, and the draped figure to the left is most likely a judge. This amphora is the work of the Berlin painter, one of the most accomplished vase painters of the period, named for his magnificent red-figure amphora in the collection of the Berlin Museum.

This vase appears to depict the beginning of the match when the athletes have tried to grab each other around the neck. The one on the left was not quick enough and his opponent has grasped his left arm just below the elbow. To escape, he spins around, but his rival has raised his right leg in an attempt to force the slower wrestler to the ground. Greek artists preferred to show the moments before the climax of an event. Here, the figure on the right has the upper hand and will probably win.

The first- or second-place winner of an event might receive as many as sixty of these vases, each containing ten gallons of olive oil from Athena's sacred grove, as a prize. The total value was equivalent to two years' pay for a skilled laborer.

In black-figure vases such as this one, the drawing is done in silhouette with details indicated by means of incised lines scraped into the black slip to reveal the red of the clay pot below, or added with red or white slip. While all figures are rendered in black slip on black-figure vases (as the name implies), artists wanted to distinguish gender, so they added a layer of white slip on top to depict female flesh. Here, Athena's skin and the Gorgon's face are white because they are both female. This traditional painting technique, long out of fashion by the time this amphora was produced, highlighted the antiquity of the Panathenaic games.

The vase seems to represent qualities the city of Athens wanted to project. The image of Athena, fully armed and aggressively striding forward, suggests that Athens is eager to challenge any foe. The contents of the vase proclaim Athens's importance as the original home and source of olive oil, an essential agricultural product. The quality of the vase advertises the city's significance as an artistic center, and depiction of the games identifies Athens as a cultural hub.

A Closer Look



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A Closer Look

The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this vase.

What do you see?



Consider the overall shape of this vase.
(The terms for the parts of a Greek pot are drawn from the human body.)

How would you describe the vase’s foot?
Its belly?
Its neck?
Its mouth?
Its handles?

What do you notice about its overall proportions? Is it symmetrical? Asymmetrical?



Spend some time with this side of the vase.

What do you notice about the figure?

The pose?

The color of the skin?

The hairstyle?

What the figure is wearing?

The objects the figure holds?

The objects that surround the figure?



Now look at the back of the vase.

What do you notice about these figures?

Their poses?

The color of their skin?

Their musculature?

What they are wearing?

The objects they hold?

What do you notice about the way in which light and dark colors are arranged on the vase? How has the artist created details in the dark areas?

Compare the figures on the back of the vase to the figure on the front of the vase.

How are they the same?

How are they different?



What sorts of patterns appear on the vase?

Where do they appear?

How are all the decorative elements, the designs and figures, arranged in relation to the shape of the vase?

Finally, what do you notice about the overall condition of the vase?
Its age?

Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

Who do you think the figure on the front of the vase might be? Why do you think this figure’s skin color is different from the skin color of the figures on the back?

What do the figures on the back seem to be doing? Who might the figure with the long forked stick be?

How might the figures on the back relate to the figure on the front?

What might this vase have been used for? What could it hold?

What materials do you think were used to create and decorate it?

What part of the world do you think this piece of pottery might be from?

When do you think it might have been made?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the vase for clues to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides background information you cannot get simply by looking at the object.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the text mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what? Do you have more questions?

How would your experience of this object have been different if you had read the background information first?