The Theseus Painter
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B. ICONOGRAPHY

VIII. INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapters are devoted to aspects of the Theseus Painter’s style, vase-shapes, workshop connections, etc. Above all the Theseus Painter is remarkable because of his subject matter; his choice and execution of them are often innovative.\(^5\) This would contrast with what might be expected of a painter working in black-figure when the technique was more or less in decline. Moreover, the painter’s unusual subjects form an uncommonly large percentage of his total extant output.

Unique, rare or yet unexplained subjects, of course, were depicted by many other late black-figure painters, but within the work of a single painter these are often one-off occurrences and might even be only one of his few thematic oddities. Many of the Theseus Painter’s vases, on the other hand, show subjects that are not or only rarely met on the vases of other painters. Sometimes they recur on more than one of his vases as well as occasionally in the work of some closely related painters. All this makes it seem highly likely that the extraordinary nature of much of the Theseus Painter’s iconography results not from the accident of preservation or discovery but reflects an integral part of his character as an artisan. Examples are Herakles dragging a female monster by a rope (two skyphoi, Cat. nos. 15-16, pl. 7 a, c, and one by the Athena Painter\(^5\)), amazon/Arimasp and a griffin (two skyphoi, Cat. nos. 6, 10, pls. 3 a, 5 a), Dionysos in a ship-cart (two skyphoi and one near the Theseus Painter, Cat. nos. 2, 8, pls. 2 a, 4 a, and Cat. no. N46, as well as a fragment of uncertain shape in Tübingen,\(^5\) of which so little remains that it is impossible to say for sure whether it is by or near the Theseus Painter, or neither). This apparent individuality in the Theseus Painter’s iconography culminates in his particular type of representations of the so-called ephedrismoi, as seen on no less than 10 of his vases and fragments. The subject is otherwise very rare in Attic vase painting, and an ephedrismoi picture of exactly the same type as the Theseus Painter’s is not known to be repeated by another painter.\(^5\)

A fundamental problem regarding such uncommon iconography is the definition of ‘uniqueness’. The difficulty is how to demarcate the borderline between rare or otherwise special subjects, and how to distinguish whether a subject really was unusual, or whether it simply appears so because of the chance of discovery or preservation. With regard to the Theseus Painter the matter is made slightly easier by the fact that many (actually most) of his uncommon themes find counterparts by his own hand (but not by other painters, outside his direct environment), and thus that he specialized in them.

Certainly the Theseus Painter also portrayed more common subjects: some of the canonical Labours of Herakles,\(^5\) blinding of Polyphemos and Odysseus escaping,\(^5\) Apollo playing the lyre with muses,\(^5\) Theseus and the Bull,\(^5\) prothesis.\(^5\) But even in quite a few of these pictures the Theseus Painter introduced peculiar variation or otherwise uncommon features. The consequence is that the interpretations of some

\(^{504}\) See also Laxander, *Individu"*um, 19, who also underscores the painter's iconographic innovativeness. She proposes that the unusual nature of subjects might be related to mercantile or economic considerations, for instance, an increasing mass-production of small vase shapes in late Attic black-figure which would induce capable painters (like the Theseus Painter) to depict something out of the ordinary in order to distinguish themselves and thus to be able to compete. See further, present author in *Proceedings AIAC*, 87-89.

\(^{505}\) Boston 98.924, *ABL* 260,129; *ABV* 524,1; *Beezley Addenda* 131.

\(^{506}\) Tübingen S/10 1497, *CVA* 3, pl. 6.4, apparently unglazed inside, see also n. 552.

\(^{507}\) Cat. nos. 54-63, pls. 25-27.

\(^{508}\) Herakles and the Lion: Havana, Lagumillas coll., and once Paris, Peyrefitte coll. (Cat. nos. 11, 146, pls. 5 b, 46 f); Herakles and Kerberos: Amsterdam 2604 (Cat. no. 12, pl. 5 c-e); Herakles and amazons: London 1926.11.15.1 (Cat. no. 17, pl. 8 a-c).

\(^{509}\) Louvre 342 (Cat. no. 165, pl. 52 c-d), New York, White and Levi coll. (Cat. no. 32, pl. 15 a), Oxford 1934.372 (Cat. no. 141, pl. 45 a-c).

\(^{510}\) London B 346 and Madrid 10930 (Cat. nos. 159-60, pl. 50), St. Petersburg 4498 (Cat. no. 71, pl. 30 b) and, possibly, Acropolis 843 (Cat. no. 209).

\(^{511}\) Petit Palais 313 (Cat. no. 167, pl. 53 d).

\(^{512}\) On some of the Theseus Painter’s loutrophoroi, for example, Cat. no. 181, pl. 57 g.
subjects and iconographic details sometimes diverge widely and, it seems, be entirely incorrect.\footnote{13}{The goat in the tondo of Chicago 1967.115.256 (Cat. no. 206, pl. 65 d), for example, has (incorrectly) been identified by L. Hanerfeld as Acheloos, presumably because of the long beard (the rest of the figure's face is missing). Such a long beard, however, is a standard trait of the Theseus Painter's goats. Nor in other respects does the Chicago tondo figure appear to deviate from the Theseus Painter's goats; compare pls. 1 c-d, 3 d, 8 d-e, 20 c, 22 a, 24 c-d.} Therefore a basic problem concerning much of the Theseus Painter's iconography is the difficulty of interpretation. An example of such uncertainty is illustrated by two skyphoi: Harvard 1960.321 and fragments in Thasos (Cat. nos. 64-65, pl. 28). It has been suggested that these skyphoi (first the Harvard skyphos and, by extension, the Thasos fragments which had not yet been excavated when the Harvard skyphos was first published) might represent the building of a granary, a wine jar or a kiln,\footnote{14}{the process of purifying clay\footnote{15}{or even a harvest feast or the preparations for one.\footnote{16}{Most of these interpretations do not seem satisfactory and the difficulty is compounded by the absence of good comparisons in Attic vase painting. In contrast, other subjects for which a close parallel is hardly found outside the Theseus Painter or his direct vicinity are relatively easy to identify, like the ship-cart featured on more than one of his skyphoi (Cat. nos. 2, 8, pls. 2 a, 4 a).} The general divergences in the Theseus Painter's iconography can be grouped. Many subjects are unusual, distorted versions of more commonly known representations. In several instances the comparisons are found only rarely in black-figure or exclusively in contemporaneous red-figure, or they occur in black- or red-figure which postdates the Theseus Painter's examples (which might indicate that they were adopted from him and, in turn, that he introduced them). The parallels to other subjects are confined to the Theseus Painter's direct vicinity, for example painters of the White Heron Group or the Athena Painter. In the most extreme cases the subject is not met in the work of another vase painter at all (see also Tables 12-13). Moreover, even the meanings of some of the Theseus Painter's scenes which would seem at first sight unambiguous might be open to debate; his numerous 'komoi' were (and are) generally regarded as nothing more than that, although some scholars suggest for various reasons that they instead illustrate some kind of ritual procession.\footnote{17}{Remarkably enough, most of the Theseus Painter's exceptional subjects are confined to his skyphoi.} The Theseus Painter does not stand completely alone in the 'revival' of iconographic inventiveness in late black-figure, which can be observed in the work of other competent late black-figure artisans like the Athena Painter, Edinburgh Painter, Gela Painter, Sappho Painter and Diosphos Painter. However, the imagery of the bulk of late black-figure from the period of the Theseus Painter consists of virtually unchanging stock subjects repeated in large quantities of vases, for example a goddess mounting a chariot,\footnote{18}{Dionysos reclining,\footnote{19}{amazon with three-quarter chariot.\footnote{20}{But even among the painters and groups that produced such vases unique or rare representations are not entirely unknown; see for instance the exceptional subjects of several skyphoi connected to the CHC Group: chorus of old men with torches and youths standing on their heads,\footnote{21}{ostrich and dolphin riders;\footnote{22}{procession of ostrich riders, wagon pulled by a crane, dwarfs with a donkey and camel laden with merchandise or offerings;\footnote{23}{unexplained gathering of men in a building;\footnote{24}{symposium of men wearing cocklike headdresses.\footnote{25}{Nevertheless, such pictures appear in only a very small percentage of the huge number of skyphoi of this group.} The direct forerunners of the Theseus Painter, that is, the Krokotos Group, were generally not a source of remarkable imagery. The majority of their skyphoi and cups show Dionysos accompanied by gods or others figures, Dionysian masks, komasts and hetairai as well as satyrs and maenads, symposia and thiasoi.\footnote{26}{The only notable exception is the Painter of Munich 2100, with his snake-women in an orchard and erotic couples, themes in which, it seems, the other painters of the Krokotos Group and the Theseus Painter had Many Leafless Group cups among the vases in ABV 633-48.\footnote{27}{CHC Group, ABV 617-18.\footnote{28}{Thebes BE 64.342; Green, Birds, 102, no. 12, fig. 15 a-b.\footnote{29}{Green, Birds, 103, no. 17, fig. 20 a-b.\footnote{30}{Louvre F 410; V. Dassen, Dwarf in Ancient Egypt and Greece (Oxford 1993) 307, 113, pl. 75.\footnote{31}{Louvre M 11, MNC 661; R. Olmos Romeira, 'Die Einnahme von Oichalia', MM 18 (1977) pl. 36.\footnote{32}{Agora P 32413; Hesperia 65 (1996), pl. 72, no. 22.\footnote{33}{See for examples Ure, Krokotos, 90-103; ABV 205-209; Para 93-99; Bell, Krokotos Cups, 1-15; CVA Athens 4, 41-43.} Nevertheless, such pictures appear in only a very small percentage of the huge number of skyphoi of this group.} The direct forerunners of the Theseus Painter, that is, the Krokotos Group, were generally not a source of remarkable imagery. 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little or no interest. The iconography of the Sub-krokotos Group and the White Heron Group is, as a rule, equally unexceptional, although the depictions of some painters seem to have sometimes been inspired by the Theseus Painter.  

Furthermore, the Theseus Painter's iconography betrays little influence of other painters or workshops. Somewhat of an exception is the Athena Painter whose influence is apparently discernible in the subjects of the Theseus Painter's later work, especially his lekythoi which, as explained above, are connected, among other things, by shape with the Athena Painter's workshop. On the other hand, it may also be that the Theseus Painter, in his turn, influenced the Athena Painter; note for example the latter's portrayals of Herakles dragging a monster or of heroes at a mound, which he seems to have borrowed from the Theseus Painter. Thus the imagery of the Theseus Painter — and to some degree that of his late black-figure contemporaries — seems to mark a slight break in the black-figure iconographic tradition. It is hard to imagine what the causes might be. Linked with this, is the question of how a subject originates, what its sources or influences might be, and how it subsequently develops. With regard to the Theseus Painter, the matter is doubly important because of his frequent portrayal of uncommon subjects. It could be that around 500 B.C. the function of black-figure vases changed or that customer demand altered, both in and outside Greece. Additionally, sources like literature, drama or mythology may have influenced transformations, and rituals and religious festivities could have increased in importance as source. It could also be that the shapes on which these subjects occur were geared to specific functions which were decisive for the subjects' selection. In any event, the Theseus Painter's iconography seems too special for us to leave personal inventiveness out of consideration. Nevertheless, the latter cannot be the sole explanation because, however exceptional he may be, the Theseus Painter is not a completely isolated case.

The Theseus Painter's treatment of subjects and scenes shows some typical elements. On many vases, especially skyphoi, a scene is doubled, painted on both sides. Often the two scenes differ slightly in details only. In other instances different pictures are thematically linked; they may portray episodes in a single cycle, like the Deeds of Theseus, or related parts of one story, for example the skyphos Taranto 4448 (Cat. no. 14, pl. 6 c-d) with Herakles and Alkyoneus, on one side, and, on the other, Hermes leading the cattle away. Further, in a series of vases with comparable representations individual traits are sometimes interchanged; note the various placement of the boar and the bull on either side of the 'sacrifice' skyphoi Tampa 86.52 and Stuttgart KAS 74 (Cat. nos. 40-41, pl. 17).

Throughout his career, the Theseus Painter seems to have treated some of his themes consistently. The komoi of his skyphoi, for instance, do not significantly differ in detail from those of his kyathoi, which are stylistically much later. Both shapes also show the Theseus Painter's characteristic nude amphora-bearer. However, a general tendency towards less iconographic inventiveness marks his later vases as the subjects become increasingly restricted to komoi, thiasoi, athletes and the like. Therefore his most remarkable representations are narrowly connected to his skyphoi, which, as remarked, he stopped making after the transitional phase from middle to late. But it is unclear whether this results from dictates of the shape, in this

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527 Compare, for example, the ship-cart of Dionysos in Bologna 130, Herakles mouisikos in Athens, NM 635, Herakles reclining with a warrior or Ares in Athens, NM 13907 (Cat. nos. N46, N30, N48).

528 Several of these subjects are not found on the Theseus Painter's skyphoi, but suddenly appear on his lekythoi: Peleus and Thetis, Syracuse 33501 and London 1904.7-8.5 (Cat. nos. 137-38, pl. 43 c-e); Judgement of Paris, Berlin 2005 (Cat. no. 144, pl. 146 c); Polyclita and Achilles, Athens, NM 9684 (Cat. no. 139, pl. 44 a-b); siren-musicians with bystanders, San Antonio 86.134.54 (Cat. no. 128, pl. 39 d-f). The Athena Painter's depictions of these subjects are: Palermo, Mormino coll. (CV 1, pl. 18.1-3); Asbach, Cahn coll. HC 909 (Kreuzer, Zeichner, 115, no. 122); Basle, Antikenmuseum (ABL 254.2; Para 260); Leiden 33 (ABL 254.3; ABV 522; CV 2, pl. 93-1-4); Cambridge (ABL 259.11; CV 2, pl. 2.3); Malibu 86.AE.140 (CV 2, pl. 66.3); Louvre F 366 (ABL 256.40); Munich 1906 (ABL 257.78); Karlsruhe B27 (ABL 257.79; CV 1, pl. 13.1-2); Basle, private coll. (Para 261); Amsterdam 3737 (Para 261; CV 1 forthcoming); Toledo 47.62 (ABV 523; CV 1, pl. 28.2-5); Muzzano, private coll. (MuM 40, 1969, 46, no. 77; LIMC 1, s.v. 'Achilleus', no. 233); Washington Univ WU 3278 (K. Herbert and S. Symeonoglou, Ancient Collections in Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri 1973, 13, figs. 15-17); London 1920.3-151 (ABL 255.27); London B 651 (ABL 256,48); Amsterdam 8977 (Para 261); Bari 2732 (ABL 257,68, pl. 48); once Roman market (ABV 523,4-5, twice).

529 For cross-influences between the Theseus Painter and the Athena Painter see also ABL 141 ff.

530 Theseus Painter: Herakles and the monster, Cat. nos. 15-16, pl. 7; heroes at a mound, Cat. nos. 33-34, pl. 14. Athena Painter: Boston 98.924 (ABL 260.129; ABV 524.1; Beazley Addenda 131) and Palermo, Mormino coll. (CV 1, pl. 18.1-3), resp.

531 Like the prothesis of ioutrophoroi.

532 See also Steiner, Visual Redundancy, 197-219.
instance the skyphos, perhaps because of a particular function, a possibility which has been mentioned above, or from the painter's development as an artisan. If the latter applies, it might be said that the Theseus Painter's earlier imaginativeness tended to wane parallel to his weakening painting style.

In comparison to earlier black-figure and contemporaneous red-figure, the Theseus Painter's pictures illustrate less action-packed mythology. Notwithstanding the fact that Herakles is by far his most popular subject, very few of the hero's canonical labours are known to have been painted by him. Instead, he preferred Heraklean scenes which are generally less commonly seen in Attic vase painting. Also nearly completely omitted are episodes of the Trojan cycle, centauromachies, amazonomachies, and gigantomachies. Evidently, the Theseus Painter's preferences centered mainly on quieter events, often including mythological personages in a restful mood, and scenes of daily life and religious activity. Some pictures might even be associated with stage performances; and a rather large group, as noted, might be regarded as depicting ritual, that is, processions or the like, although such identifications cannot always easily be made and maintained.

Below, chapters IX-XI deal mainly with the identification, iconographic comparison and origin of the Theseus painter's more special subjects. Sometimes a representation fits into more than one iconographic category; for instance Dionysos in his ship-cart could be placed under 'Dionysos' or 'ritual processions'. As a rule, I have decided to assign such themes to the chapters on their primary personages, while also noting them in the other appropriate chapters.

To avoid any misunderstanding concerning numbers of vases and numbers of subjects, identical or nearly identical scenes on both side of a vase are counted in the text as one. When I mention that the Theseus Painter is known from ten ephedrismoi (four more or less complete vases, and fragments or groups of fragments with six different inventory numbers), this actually means that he painted fourteen individual representations of ephedrismoi, because on his whole vases they are painted twice, one on each side of the vase. A supplementary count of the Theseus painter’s individual representations can be found in Table 12.

Lastly, chapter XIII explores the more difficult questions of the possible meanings, purposes and backgrounds of the Theseus Painter's special subjects, and includes some suggestions about connections between function (particularly skyphoi) and iconography.