SUMMARY

In the light of the elements defining the Theseus Painter as an individual craftsman – namely his style of painting and drawing and the specific vase-types he decorated – several noteworthy observations can be made. The Theseus Painter's work is marked by a highly characteristic decorative style that can be most clearly discerned in his drawing technique, that is, incising. His personal style of drawing can be quite easily described and recognised in the core of his work. Furthermore, his drawing provides the most evident indications of his stylistic development: he begins with sound incising, qualitatively comparable to that of the best of late black-figure painters and many earlier ones as well, then passes through a period of less and less detail and increasing carelessness, and lastly reaches the point when he totally abandons incising, as seen in the silhouette figures of an alabastron (Cat. no. 205, not illustrated).

Besides forming an interesting case study in the overall artistic production of an individual Attic vase painter, the Theseus Painter's stylistic development is instructive as a means of determining the span of a vase painter's career. The significant stylistic changes during the Theseus Painter's career strongly imply that he must have worked for a rather long time, 30 or perhaps nearly 40 years, from 515/510-480/475 B.C. Although the length of the period may seem exceptional, it appears to be corroborated by the shapes which the Theseus Painter decorated.

As explained above, the Theseus Painter evidently started his career in the workshop of the Krokotos Group, decorating mainly skyphoi of Heron Class type. The close stylistic similarity to the painters of that group, especially the Krokotos Painter, suggests that the Theseus Painter's early output cannot be very much later or was indeed even contemporaneous with the late pottery of the Krokotos Group, hence the date of his artistic starting point. Later, he turned, for the most part, to adorning lekythoi connected to the workshop in which the Athena Painter was also employed, who, so to speak, can be regarded as the Theseus Painter's stylistic brother. Afterwards, he apparently got his pottery from various other workshops, among which, that of the Beldam Painter.

During his entire career, furthermore, the Theseus Painter seems also to have decorated pottery stemming from other unrelated workshops, which led Haspels' to suggest that he might have been a 'travelling artisan', as it were, moving from one workshop to another offering his skills. Although the suggestion may be correct, it is, of course, difficult to substantiate. The same applies to possible alternative explanations: for example, he was an independent craftsman who operated his own painting atelier and variously acquired his vases from different potters.

In any event, the Theseus Painter's varied affiliations make him a special case among vase painters, especially those working in black-figure. As a rule, it seems, the relations between vase painter and workshop(s) were more stable than the Theseus Painter's appear to have been. Moreover, regarding the variety of the vase types he decorated, it seems unlikely that he actually was involved in the shaping of any of them. In this regard, it is especially notable that even his skyphoi, the shape with which he is most closely associated, were evidently fashioned by more than one potter, perhaps as many as three. Therefore it seems most probable that he was exclusively a vase painter.

Apparently, none of the other accomplished late black-figure painters embellished as many different shapes as he did, least of all the Athena Painter who concentrated on lekythoi and oinochoai only. In contrast, the Theseus Painter's shapes include skyphoi, lekythoi, large and small pelikai, large and small kalpides, olpai, oinochoai, cups and cup-skyphoi, loutrophoroi, kyathoi, alabastra and plates.

The Theseus Painter's vessels were exported over a large area of the Mediterranean. The most westerly find-places are the western coasts of Italy and Sicily; the farthest east, Rhodes. To the south, a single fragment has turned up in Cyrene and nowhere else. Thasos and northern Italy are the most northern regions. Looking at the numbers, however, we see a different, more limited picture. By far the bulk of the painter's known work, as far as a single site is concerned, has come to light in and around Athens. Less numerous are his vases at other sites in mainland Greece, although even they are numerically considerable. Another relatively significant source, however, is southern Italy, especially Apulia, namely Taranto. Other areas to the south of Rome and Sicily have also yielded quite a few specimens. In contrast, very few of his vases are known to come from northern Italy, and even fewer from Etruria. None of his work seems to have been discovered in the East Greek mainland.
To judge from the apparent concentrations of find-places in certain regions, the Theseus Painter's vases have qualities that appealed not to the Etruscans but specifically to Greeks, particularly Athenians and those in southern Italy. The exact nature of the attraction (or lack of it) inevitably remains a subject of speculation, but preferences for certain shapes, iconographies and functions (especially regarding the skyphoi) would have all played their parts.

Quite some variation marks the range of the Theseus Painter's subjects: gods, heroic deeds and other mythological scenes as well as pictures of more or less daily life. Among them, elements can be discerned which are specific to the Theseus Painter. First of all, uncommon or unique scenes are numerous and seem therefore to be a speciality of his. Secondly, some general features are shared by many representations. On the one hand, a relatively minor role is reserved for narrative mythological subjects like the deeds of Herakles, Trojan episodes, etc. On the other hand, he seems to have largely been preoccupied with festive or religious subjects ranging from the obvious ritual or cultic depictions, like processions, sacrifices and Dionysos' ship-cart, to less explicit scenes which might (or might not) refer to ritual activities, theatrical performances and the like.

The Theseus Painter's possible motives for such thematic choices can only be guessed at. Most simply, his personal preferences may have played a role. A more substantial influence could have been, in terms of buyers and usage, the general position of black-figure in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C. when, it seems, the kinds of scenes portrayed by the Theseus Painter were more in demand than in earlier black-figure. In addition, a generally increased interest in the illustration of theatre and cult at Athens at this time might also have had some bearing on the Theseus Painter's preferences.

Another factor could have been of influence, too. Many of the ritualistic, cultic and theatrical scenes occur on the Theseus Painter's skyphoi, and there are reasons to believe that the large Heron Class skyphoi, precisely the type which he decorated, may, in part, have had a ritualistic function, which perhaps helps to explain his thematic focus. Unfortunately, however, as a ritual connection is much less certain for the Heron Class skyphoi than for other shapes like loutrophoroi with their funerary contexts, the possible interrelation of shape, representation and function remains highly tentative in regard to the Theseus Painter's skyphoi. Nevertheless, at the moment this seems the only possible, comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon.

Another important aspect of this monograph is the definition of the Theseus Painter's artistic environment, which has become evident to a large extent. In his stylistic features, choice of shapes and, partly, overall iconographic preferences he belongs firmly among the last generation of accomplished black-figure vase painters. Even his place in defined workshop environments poses, up to a point, not many problems. For instance, he can be firmly linked to the Krokotos/Heron workshop and the workshop of the Athena Painter. Other possible affiliations are more elusive, however, especially with regard to much of his latest work, like kyathoi and alabastra.

All in all, the Theseus Painter undoubtedly represents only a minor component in the development of Attic vase painting. Yet, as I hope to have shown, his work possesses a degree of complexity and accomplishment that justifies the attention given to him. But he is certainly not unique among his contemporaries. Much that is relevant for vase painting of the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C., especially in relation to late black-figure painters, potters and workshops, is still unsolved or unclear. Additional detailed research will doubtless clarify much about vase painting of the period. Moreover, such studies will be of continuing importance regarding not only Athenian culture in general but also the Athenian production of decorated pottery in particular around the turn of the sixth century B.C.