The Lycurgus Painter:
AN APULIAN ARTIST OF THE FOURTH CENTURY B.C.

by ANDREW OLIVER, JR. Curatorial Assistant, Department of Greek and Roman Art

Scholars have distinguished five schools of vase painting that flourished in Southern Italy: Paestan, Campanian, Sicilian, Lucanian, and Apulian. Of these, Apulian is the most important, for the potters and painters of Taranto, where Apulian vases were made, produced the finest vases of all the South Italian schools, as well as the greatest number. The earliest Apulian vases, of about 440 to 430 B.C., are imitations of Attic ones, but when Athens ceased to export vases to Italy at the close of the fifth century, Apulian painters became quite independent of the traditions of Attic vase painting. By about 400 B.C., a style had developed that is unmistakably non-Attic in its use of gesture and expression and in its interest in perspective and the illusion of depth.

Among the Apulian red-figure vase painters of the second quarter of the fourth century is an influential artist called the Lycurgus Painter, named after an illustration of the madness of Lycurgus on a calyx-krater in the British Museum. In 1956 the Metropolitan Museum acquired from the estate of William Randolph Hearst a situla attributed to this artist. To demonstrate how this vase fits in with the painter’s works we should study briefly his name-piece, the calyx-krater in the British Museum.

Each side of this vase is decorated with a subject inspired by Greek tragedy: one is the madness of Lycurgus, the other, an episode from the story of Pelops, the suitor of Hippodameia. Figure 2). In order to win her hand, Pelops had to compete with Hippodameia’s father, the king of Pisa, in a chariot race. Fearful lest he lose, Pelops bribed Myrtilos, the king’s charioteer, to tamper with the axle pin of his master’s chariot, thus assuring Pelops’s victory. The famous bribe is represented in this picture: on the lower level are Hippodameia, her mother, Pelops, and Myrtilos; on the upper level appear Pan (not visible in the illustration), Aphrodite, Eros, and another goddess.

Some features of this composition belong to the tradition of Apulian vase painting. The practice of arranging figures on two or more levels is common on most large South Italian vases and originates in late fifth century Attic vase painting. The artist makes his figures small in relation to the area of the vase reserved for decoration and displays them in several levels in order to introduce a greater number. He is more interested in illustrating myths than in decorating a vase with figures and subjects that would be complementary to its shape. Taking advantage of this system, the artist can create the illusion of depth and can distinguish the invisible from the visible, gods from heroes. The gods and goddesses in the Bribery of Myrtilos, for instance, are invisible on-lookers who play no part in the episode below. Also found on most Apulian vases after the turn of the fourth century are the rows of white dots under figures and objects, that stand for ground lines.

Certain elements of the composition are inventions of the Lycurgus Painter. These include the figures of the four theatrical characters that illustrate this particular story, with their statuesque poses and studied details; but they are not helpful in making further attributions simply because they are not likely to reappear on other vases. On the other hand, some figures and objects that belong to the painter’s repertory recur on several vases: Pelops’ rock, for instance, the marble basin, the rosettes, the plants, and even entire fig-
ures, particularly those not essential to the story, such as the two goddesses on the upper level. While making attributions, however, one must be cautious about judging the authorship of a vase solely from the presence of such elements, because they may occur on vases not by the Lycurgus Painter; in fact, rosettes, marble basins, and women seated on boxes occur as small terracotta cut-out reliefs that may have ornamented furniture. Of course, what is important is the manner in which the Lycurgus Painter renders his choice of figures and objects, and only close scrutiny of his vases will reveal this aspect of his style.

Let us turn to the vase in the Metropolitan Museum (Figures 1, 3, 8), called a *situs* after the Latin word for pail. It served as a decanter for wine, and is an imitation of a metal *situs*. A bronze example in Berlin has a pair of semi-circular handles, which, when laid flat, rest evenly on the rim of the vessel; and on the rim of this terracotta *situs* the potter has imitated for appearance’s sake the small handle attachments. The Lesbian *kymation*, the pattern resembling a sawblade encircling the *situs* under the rim, is an illusionistic reproduction of decoration that is cast in relief on the Berlin bronze.

The concave surface is divided into two parts, front and back, by groups of palmettes that fill the areas beneath the handle attachments. On the front, while an old satyr plays his flute, Dionysos drives up in a biga drawn by griffins to join two seated maenads and another satyr, ladling wine from a calyx-krater into a phiale. This time the two levels are used to express the illusion of depth, and they are united by the upward glance of the semi-nude maenad, the downward glance of Dionysos, and the oblique direction of the chariot.

What are the links to the name-piece? The seated women are similar to the two goddesses on the upper level of the London krater: note in particular how alike are the profile faces of each of the women at the right, and that both wear mantles with spangled decoration and embattled borders, which fall over their laps in the same manner. (The fashion of wearing the chiton off the shoulders, which appears in both pictures, is too common at this period to be of much value in attributing vases.) The three-quarter faces of Pelops and Dionysos are very close; strikingly similar is the position of the ear, placed low on the side of the head.

Often the individual mannerisms of an artist can be seen more clearly in the drawing on the back of a vase than on the front. When the painter decorates the back of a vase with a stock subject, a scene that he repeats on many vases with slight variations, he casts aside his studied, precise manner of drawing in favor of a loose, casual style where “trademarks” appear. The Lycurgus Painter is a case in point, and the back of the *situs* is decorated with such a scene (Figure 3). Dionysos, holding a thyrsos and phiale, sits on a folded *himation*, his cloak, and looks up at a maenad, while behind him stands a satyr. On the back of a volute-krater in Adolphseck (Figure 4), a vase also attributed to the Lycurgus Painter, we see a similar scene, complete with Dionysos, maenad, and this time two satyrs rather than one. Rocks, a fawn, and a ribbed cylin-

3. Back of the Museum's situla shown in Figure 1

drical vessel called a cista are also repeated in both. Characteristic of the painter is the casual, open grouping of the statuesque satyrs and mae- nads around Dionysos; even their poses are alike, although the objects they hold are not the same. Backs of this sort, however, do not show the full range of the artist's capability, since there are few gestures and little action, all heads are presented in profile (hence with less expression), and there is no exploitation of depth by overlapping or by movement in and out of the background.

The front of a volute-krater in the British Museum (Figure 6), whose back is a further variation of those we have just discussed, displays more of the painter's virtuosity. It illustrates an Attic myth, the abduction of Oreithyia by Boreas, the North Wind. The winged god has grabbed Oreithyia around the waist and has lifted her off her feet. A second girl, a companion, clutching a piece of her chiton, cowers at his onslaught, while another sits calmly beside a marble basin. The event takes place in a sanctuary: a priestess who was officiating at the altar has dropped her phiale and temple key in alarm.

A satyr who was, perhaps, spying on the girls hurries off with an expression of mischievous glee. The roughly symmetrical composition is divided into three overlapping planes: Boreas and Oreithyia dominate the picture in the middle ground, the priestess and the girl beside the basin occupy the background, the satyr and cowering girl the foreground. The figures in the different planes are connected by the direction of their glances and by the illusion of continuous space from foreground to background. This is enhanced by several devices. Part of the figure of the priestess is concealed by the altar, and part of the marble basin by the girl. Perspective is also skilfully employed: the basin into which water spews from a fountain-spout is seen as if from above, with the far side of the rim visible; the bottom of its fluted stem curves up to indicate roundness; and the round body of the footbath (podanipter) is drawn as an oval with two of the three feet showing. The marble altar, as well as being shown at an oblique angle, is highlighted with added white on its front. (Incidentally, marble basins, altars, and bronze footbaths of this time have survived from antiquity, indicating that the artist drew his objects from life.) The links in style and detail to the London calyx-krater and the Museum's situla are many: the drawing of Oreithyia's face, the basin, the seated girl who takes no real part in the action, the satyr, and the wings of
Boreas (which are particularly close to those of the griffins) are the more obvious.

So distinctive is the Lycurgus Painter's style that not only complete vases, like the ones discussed above, but even a small fragment can be assigned to his hand. A fragment of a calyx-krater in Amsterdam, showing a falling Amazon holding her shield (Figure 5), can be safely attributed to him. The piece of ground below the Amazon is rendered in a manner similar to the rock beneath Pelops. The position of her left knee and foot recalls the figure of the cowering companion of Oreithyia. Most convincingly the work of the Lycurgus Painter are the delicate details of her dress: the spangled decoration, together with the lozenges on the central panel, the embattled borders on her flowing cloak, and her belt with white dots can all be seen in the dress of Oreithyia.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the situla in New York is that on its broad, unglazed underside appears a drawing of the face of a chubby boy (Figure 8). The lines that the Lycurgus Painter favored for his three-quarter faces are found here with one exception: no stroke was needed for the nose because both nostrils have been indicated. Additional details include the eyelashes, the whites of his eyes, and his teeth. Although such isolated frontal faces rarely occur on Attic vases, they are frequently seen on the necks and shoulders of Apulian vases, including


one on the neck of a volute-krater in Bonn attributed to this painter (Figure 7). The head on the New York situla and the one on the vase in Bonn look like portraits of the same boy, and the necks of both terminate in a shallow V. But the difference between the two is impressive: the relatively large area and the absence of black glaze on the bottom of the situla have given the painter more freedom in drawing than he could have found in the red-figure technique. Only in the situla has the Lycurgus Painter ventured outside the red-figure or white-ground techniques and made a picture that is as close as we can come, in antiquity, to a pencil sketch.

NOTES

1. The situla was found about 1878 together with an Apulian squat lekythos in a tomb near Ruvo in Southern Italy. Both vases were acquired by Alessandro Castellani. When his antiquities were sold in 1884, the British Museum bought the squat lekythos (now G 23), and Alfred Bourguignon, the situla; when, in turn, the Bourguignon collection was sold in 1901, the situla was obtained by Mr. Hearst.

2. The following is a list of vases that the writer considers to be by the Lycurgus Painter. For the most part it coincides with a list proposed by Professor A. D. Trendall; the writer has added some, including the fragment in Amsterdam and the volute-krater in Bonn.

Hydria in London, F 352
Volute-krater in Bonn, inv. 100 (Fig. 7)
Volute-krater in Naples, Gerolomini Library
(Archeologia Classica 3 [1951] pp. 168 ff., pl. 40)
Volute-krater in Ruvo, Jatta collection, inv. 1097
(Japigia 3 [1932] pp. 269-70 figs. 50-51)
Volute-krater in Leningrad, St. 523
(Österreichische Jahreshfte 16 [1913] p. 155)

Volute-krater in Adolphseck, Landgrave Philip of Hesse, no. 178 (Fig. 4)
Volute-krater in Milan, Torno collection
(A. B. Cook Zeus vol. III p. 513, fig. 324)
Volute-krater in London, 1931.5-11.1 (Fig. 6)
Calyx-krater in London, F 271 (Fig. 2)
Fragment of a calyx-krater in Amsterdam,
Allard Pierson Museum, inv. 4669 (Fig. 5)
Amphora in Trieste (Philologus 104 [1960] p. 5, fig. 2)
Situla in Naples, H. 2910 (M. Schmidt Der Dareiosmaler
und sein Umkreis pl. 1)
Situla in New York, 56.171.64 (Figs. 1, 3, 8)
Column-krater in Montpellier, Musée Fabre, 837.1:1116


8. Underside of the Museum's situla