A note offers a correction to the reading of one inscription on an Attic red-figure vase in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the pyxis 09.221.40 (Figure 1). The subject, a “domestic” scene, or “women at their toilet,” is common on vases such as this one used as containers for perfumes or cosmetics. These are not, however, ordinary women. Inscriptions on the pyxis identify Aphrodite, who sits by her wool basket, and six companions, who have the names of appropriate virtues: Paidia (Joy), [Eu]daimonia (Happiness), Peitho (Persuasion), Euklea (Good Repute), and Hygieia (Health).

The inscription attached to the sixth figure, which stands behind Peitho, is particularly faint and cannot be read at a glance. Lindsley Hall interpreted it as Ponia (Toil, Labor) in his drawing of the vase in Red-figured Athenian Vases in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; in the catalogue text Gisela Richter, who could see one more letter before the one that looked like a pi, proposed [A]ponia. The emendation had the advantage of removing what was perceived as an inappropriate connotation for the goddess whose business is pleasure; it should not be ponos who accompanies her but its absence—Freedom from Toil, Leisure. This reading was in agreement with modern notions about femininity that associate beauty with pleasure and free time; its truth was never doubted. As the only known instance of the personification of Aponia, the figure on the Metropolitan pyxis eventually acquired a small life of her own.3

"It is not the case," as Hayden White says, “that a fact is one thing and its interpretation another.” But it was a different explanation of the nexus of glamour and labor that the images offer—in the form of Aphrodite, perfumes, and the wool basket—that led me to question Aponia’s existence. In an iconographic scheme common to hundreds of fifth-century Attic vases, Aphrodite sitting among the Graces is represented on the pyxis as the fairest of a group of females who play together, groom one another, and work wool. In the course of my research on the subject, it became increasingly clear that such scenes depict not the housewife but the marriageable maiden—the parthenos, la jeune fille en fleur. The wool basket that inevitably accompanies the maiden serves to mark one of her defining traits: philergia, that is, industriousness. If labor is a key element of the representation of Aphrodite as parthenos, the presence of Euklea on the pyxis is appropriate, because Good Repute is, after all, the daughter of Ponos. But what was Leisure doing in this entourage? [A]ponia was a small fact that stood in the way of an hypothesis for which much support could be found otherwise. As a last resort, I decided to question the accuracy of Richter’s reading of the inscription.

At the request of Joan Mertens, curator in the Department of Greek and Roman Art, Richard Stone, conservator in the Objects Conservation Department of the Museum, examined the inscription. He not only arrived at the correct reading, but he...
was also able to document it in extraordinary photographs (Figure 2). It was something of a letdown, albeit a welcome one, to learn that the figure is the predictable *Eunomia*, Good Governance, one of Aphrodite’s constant companions.  

**SOME TECHNICAL NOTES ON THE PYXIS**

Richard Stone, Conservator  
*The Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Virtually the entire body of the pyxis survives, minus some insignificant chips, despite having been broken into about a dozen fragments. The vessel has clearly been in a fire, as it is severely discolored; in fact, the fragments are no longer all the same shade.

The inscriptions are all quite difficult to read, as they have lost all trace of their paint, presumably the usual red ochre. They nevertheless can all be read with care, all but the name *Eunomia*. Here there is simply no difference in color, only the slightest difference in reflectivity, which the lightest trace of fingertip grease obliterates.

After carefully degreasing the surface with benzine, Bruce Schwarz of the Metropolitan Museum’s Photograph Studio and I were able to prepare photomacrographs that reveal the ghost of the inscription, even the initial epsilon. As can be seen, there is no doubt about the reading.

**NOTES**


5. As, for instance, in Aristotle’s statement of the ideal qualities of a female child: “Female bodily excellences are beauty and stature, their moral excellences self control and industrious habits free from servility (philergia aneu aneleutherias),” *Rhetoric* I, J. H. Freese, trans., Loeb Classical Library (London / New York, 1926) pp. 5–6. The full argument for the interpretation of the image of the parthenos is given in chapters 1 and 2 of my *Figures of Speech*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. The model of the band of maidens was uncovered by Claude Calame in his study of Alkman’s *Parthenion*: *Les Chœurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque* I (Rome, 1977).


7. Carlos Picón, Robert Guy, and Joan Mertens first reexamined the inscription and reported that two letters could be seen before the alleged *pi*, the second of which was *upsilon*. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Mertens for looking at the vase again with me and for pursuing the matter to the end.