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2

How Did the Greeks Translate Traditional Tales into Images?

LUCA GIULIANI

ANCIENT GREEK IMAGERY is frequently dedicated to subjects from traditional tales. But how did the Greeks succeed in such a transfer from tales to images, from one medium to the other? What kind of problems does such a translation entail? Anyone who tries to find an answer to these questions will (or, at least, should) begin by clarifying the limits of the field he (or she) wants to deal with; to do this it is helpful to distinguish between images that relate to mythological narratives and those that do not. In this sense it is common to contrast *images of myth* and *images of life*; sometimes we also find the distinction *myth* versus *genre*.¹ The meaning remains basically the same, it looks clear-cut and easy to understand: tales of "myth" belong to the realm of collective imagination; they form a wide web of stories that may even contradict each other and their reliability is always open to doubt; the term "life," or "genre," however, refers to everyday experience: this is the common ground of reality that we all rely on in our thoughts and behavior.

Contrasting ancient images of myth and images of life (or genre) has obviously been influenced by the art-historical distinction between history painting and genre painting. A certain difficulty lies in the fact that, in English as well as in French, the term *genre* is used in two different senses; when we say "paintings of genre" we mean a specific class of paintings, to be distinguished from history paintings, portraits, still life, etc.; but when we say "genres of painting" we mean the different classes of painting, of which genre painting is one, history

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¹ See, e.g., Fittschen 1969:18 and *passim* (the contrast is between *Sagenbilder* and *Lebensbilder*); Snodgrass 1980:51 starts with the opposition between "episodes of heroic myth and legend" and "real contemporary life"; Bažant 1981:13-16; Ferrari 2003; Langdon 2008:5 and 22.

painting another, etc.; this ambivalence has been there, as we shall see, from the very beginning, and there is no way to get rid of it.

There is a strong similarity between our distinction, images of myth versus images of life, and the art-historical distinction, paintings of history versus paintings of genre. But are the phenomena to which these terms refer also similar? Can we really consider images of life an ancient equivalent for paintings of genre?

I shall begin with a brief look at the genesis of the modern opposition between history painting and genre painting. In the late sixteenth century, some Italian painters started producing a new species of paintings with quite unprecedented subjects. Two famous examples are Carracci's *Boy Drinking* (Fig. 2.1: painted around 1581)² and Caravaggio's *The Fortune Teller* (Fig. 2.2: painted 1597–1598):³ the latter depicts a gypsy girl telling an elegant young man his fortune after examining the palm of his hand—and thereby stealing a ring from his finger. What is so new about these paintings is their subject: neither of them relates to a Biblical episode or to pagan myth; they do not belong to what we call history painting, nor are they portraits in the traditional sense; both focus on members of the lower social strata and on actions that until that time had not been regarded as subjects worthy of depiction. The formulation of an adequate terminology for this new species of paintings came much later, namely in the eighteenth century: in his *Essai sur la peinture* of 1766, Diderot was the first person to draw a distinction between “peintre d'histoire” and “peintre de genre.” This completed what became established as a hierarchy of five classes or genres: 1) history paintings, 2) portraits, 3) paintings of genre, 4) landscapes, and 5) still lifes, with prestige declining in that order: history painting is at the top of the hierarchy, still life at the bottom. The implications of this prestige gradient are illustrated by an episode that occurred in Paris at the end of the 1760s.

In 1755, the painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whom Diderot greatly admired, had been made a *membre agréé* of the Royal Academy of Art.⁴ This was tantamount to probationary membership: Greuze was accorded the right henceforth to have his works exhibited in the yearly exhibitions reserved to members of the Academy; at the same time, the Academy expected him to submit a painting officially marking his appointment. However, Greuze took his time, and it was only after the Academy posed an ultimatum in 1769 that he finally produced

one. What he chose to submit is a classic example of history painting (Fig. 2.3).⁵ It shows the emperor Septimius Severus in his bed, where he has just sat up. With one hand he is pointing to a drawn sword lying on a small table by his side, while with the other he is gesturing languidly towards his son Caracalla, who is facing away from his father with an aggrieved expression on his face; at the head of the bed, two old soldiers are whispering uneasily together. The long, explanatory title runs: *L'empereur Severe reproche à Caracalla son fils d'avoir voulu l'assassiner dans les défilés d'Écosse, et lui dit: “Si tu désires ma mort, ordonne à Papinien de me la donner avec cette épée ...,”* “The emperor Severus reproaches his son Caracalla for having attempted to assassinate him in a ravine in Scotland and says: ‘If you want my death, then order Papinian to kill me with this sword.’” The title relates to an episode recounted in Dio Cassius' *Roman History*. After Caracalla had made a half-hearted and unsuccessful attempt on his father's life, Septimius—according to Dio—summoned Caracalla together with Papinian, the commander of the Praetorian Guard; he ordered that a sword be brought and then said to Caracalla: “Now, if you really want to slay me, put me out of the way here; for you are strong, while I am old and prostrate ... But [if you] hesitate to murder me with your own hands, there is Papinian the prefect, ... whom you can order to slay me; and surely he will do anything that you command, since you are virtually emperor.”⁶

It is not very likely that all the members of the Academy remembered this (rather obscure) passage of Dio; Greuze therefore provided his painting with a long title that summarizes the essential aspects of the episode. Without this aid, it would probably be impossible to understand the scene. This may be why the painting was given a predominantly negative reception. In fact, Greuze was renowned for a quite different type of image. A good example is the painting produced in the same year under the title *La mère bien-aimée caressée par ses enfants*, “The beloved mother caressed by her children” (Fig. 2.4):⁷ a man returns home from the hunt and, barely having entered the room, stands deeply moved, his arms outstretched. In front of him sits his wife, who has just breastfed the youngest of her six children; now sated, the child is crawling up to kiss her. The older children also nestle close, seeking their mother's touch. The smallest one, only half-dressed, has placed itself right between her legs; while this child is clutching her left hand, two siblings are squabbling over the right hand.

⁵ Paris, Musée du Louvre, Collection de l'Académie, inv. 5031; for preparatory sketches concerning the head of Caracalla, see Munhall 2002: 191–193, no. 67.

⁶ Dio 77.14.4–7, trans. Cary 1927:269–271. The French translation used by Greuze puts even more stress on Septimius' statement about his own weak state of health, “J'ay esté autrefois sain et fort, mais maintenant je suis faible et maladif, cassé et abbatu de vieillesse”: de Bandole 1616:375. This is why Greuze depicts Septimius lying in bed.

⁷ Madrid, Coll. comte de la Viñaza, marquis de Laborde: Barker 2005:90–112, pl. III.

² Oxford, Christ Church Picture Gallery, JBS 180.

³ Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. 1122; Spike 2001:73, cat. 15.

⁴ Brookner 1971:65–70; Arasse 1986.

The mother herself, overwhelmed by so much love, is leaning back and gazing upwards, allowing her children to do as they will. The painting's charm and its wit lie in the combination of perfect innocence and sensual eroticism, as the mother's attitude can easily be read as one of sexual fulfillment. It seems that the artist's contemporaries had a strong liking for this kind of image—and that they were severely disappointed by the Septimius Severus painting. The members of the Academy told Greuze that he would be admitted as a member, but as a *peintre de genre*—a designation never before used in connection with the Academy—rather than as a *peintre d'histoire*. Greuze was affronted by what he saw as a downgrading of his work.

According to the conventional definition, paintings of history and paintings of genre are distinguished by their subjects. Whereas the themes of history paintings are taken from the Bible, from pagan mythology, or from religious or secular history, genre painting does not depict "heroic acts or historical events, or well-known and significant individuals, but rather anonymous figures ... in their individual spheres of life."⁸ With reference to the two paintings by Greuze, we can add that the historical image is set in the distant past, the genre image in the present. The historical image is based on the testimony of a text; by contrast, the genre image refers to a sphere of life with which we are all familiar and which, in its universality, remains anonymous. *La mère bienaimée* depicts a beloved mother—any mother; the man coming home from the hunt could be any husband; there is no need to ask for names.⁹ What is reflected here through the prism of prevailing bourgeois sensibility is a supposedly universal human constellation: the eternally feminine and the eternally masculine. The question now is: can we find, within the sphere of ancient iconography, an opposition between depictions of myth and depictions of life that is similar to that between history painting and genre painting in the modern period?

In the late sixteenth century, we encounter genre painting as a new fashion that consciously breaks away from the tradition of history painting and opens up a new thematic horizon. The intended audience for such paintings was made up of collectors who were establishing the first private galleries of paintings; a new public that at the time was only just emerging. When we consider history painting and genre painting as different genres, this is in keeping with the intentions and understanding shared by the painters and their customers.

⁸ Gaehtgens 2002:13.

⁹ It is worth noting that the painting was commissioned by the marquis de Laborde as a group portrait of his family in the form of a genre scene (Munhall 2002:200–203, no. 70). So we have to make a careful distinction between two different levels of interpretation. If we ask who is performing the action depicted, the answer is: the marquis de Laborde and his wife; but if we ask who are the subjects of the genre scene, the obvious answer is: any mother and any husband.

All these factors need to be borne in mind when comparing the distinction between historical and genre paintings with that between images of myth and images of life. In the case of ancient Greek iconography, however, what we first need to ask is: how far do we get here with a categorical myth–life distinction in the first place? I shall limit myself to Attic vases; here the first elaborate scenes involving several figures occur in the so-called Geometric Period, in the early eighth century. A small cup in Eleusis (Fig. 2.5a–b)¹⁰ shows on one side spearmen and archers engaging in combat, with figures floating between them, wounded or dead: what is happening here seems to be immediately comprehensible. On the other side of the cup we see a warship, identified as such by the ram at the prow; if we try to interpret the scene as an action located in time and space, we immediately run into problems, as a recent interpretation shows: "[T]here is a ship facing toward the left ... A helmsman guides the ship at the right, while an archer crosses the ship in the middle, running and aiming his arrow leftward ... More obscure are the two shield-bearing figures to either side that face inward toward the ship ... They may indicate that the actions of the ship are taking place near the shore, as in an attempted landing and raid, and stand defensively against it. Alternatively, the ship might be defending itself and attempting to flee after an unsuccessful raid."¹¹ The action that is here proposed sounds unclear, complicated, and inconsequential; the obvious question would be: why should one want to depict such an unsuccessful raid? The interpretation I quoted is mistaken, because it tries to see a coherent action and a narrative plot where actually there is neither.

The structure of the image cannot be understood without referring to the structure of contemporary society. In archaic Greece, war is what one does away from home; going to war means to go on a raid, to make a journey: mobility is the precondition of war and war is one of the ultimate ends of mobility; hence the importance of the ship (or, in other images on Geometric vases, the chariot). A warship without warriors would make no sense whatsoever: such a ship has no other function than to carry warriors. On the Eleusis cup, the two warriors appear not on board the ship but beside it: this is purely for the sake of enhancing their visibility; their size mirrors their importance; they are the main figures (and aristocrats who could afford heavy armor were, of course, the main addressee of this kind of vase¹²); the ship is nothing but their instrument—and the archer

¹⁰ Eleusis, Archaeological Museum, inv. 741; Pittsches 1969:46–47; Ahlberg 1971b:34–36; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1995:327–329, with extensive bibliography.

¹¹ Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999:37 (I have corrected the terms *left* and *right*, because in Stansbury-O'Donnell's book they refer to a figure that is laterally reversed); for a very similar interpretation of the same scene, see Schweitzer 1969:36.

¹² In an influential essay, T. B. L. Webster attempted to interpret this warrior iconography, especially the so called Dipylon shields with their characteristic shape, as referring not to the present

is their subordinate companion; he is depicted running and shooting, but this is not one of a variety of ways in which archers can behave: archers are *always* represented running and shooting; this is a constant pictogram. Our image, therefore, does not show a fight between opposing parties: it simply displays all the essential elements of marine warfare.¹³ The concrete experiences of war, chaotic and painful as they undoubtedly were, are brought into a form that is both condensed and clarified, so that the beholder can look at it with pleasure and handle it. Taken together, the two sides of the cup show how men conduct war, at sea and on land, for this is the way of the world; the cup describes standard situations and patterns of behavior: it is not in need of a story.

For a better understanding of the non-narrative character of such scenes, it is useful to compare them with the most famous description of an object decorated with figurative scenes in contemporary epic poetry. In the *Iliad* (18.478–608) the poet describes at length the new shield that the god Hephaistos is crafting for Achilles. It is lavishly decorated with a complex iconography: it shows scenes of agricultural activity, a trial being held in the public space of a town, and also

but to a distant mythical past (Webster 1955). His claim that Dipylon shields were not real objects of use in the Geometric period was mainly based on the fact that no Dipylon shield has ever been found. This remains true even today, but such an absence of archaeological evidence is not particularly surprising: shields in general were rarely given as grave goods; moreover, they are likely to have been made of leather, which makes their chances of survival even smaller. Nevertheless, Webster's view has been largely accepted. One of its most prominent supporters, Anthony Snodgrass, has pointed out that we also have bronze and terracotta figurines carrying Dipylon shields, but he admits that these "are no more decisive evidence for the reality of their shields than are the vase-paintings, since they are just as likely to have portrayed divine or heroic figures" (Snodgrass 1964:60). This interpretation is indeed possible for the figurines, but not for Attic vases, where warriors with Dipylon shields are depicted attending the lamentation for a dead person (*prothesis*). In 1971 Gudrun Ahlberg was able to show that on such vases the gender of the dead appears to be carefully differentiated: on kraters and neck amphorae, both of which belong to male burials, the corpse is male; on jugs and belly amphorae, which are found only in burial contexts for women, the corpse is always female (Ahlberg 1971a:39). Burials of women are *not* the subject of any known myth: from this it follows that the depictions of *prothesis* must refer to contemporary funerals and the figures carrying Dipylon shields to contemporary warriors. For an extensive refutation of Webster's arguments, see Giuliani 2010:36–38; see also Haug 2012:241. There can be no reasonable doubt that Geometric images included *no* temporal indicators that would prevent aristocratic beholders from referring what they saw depicted to the actual present—and to themselves.

¹³ For a very similar case, see the more or less contemporary Geometric krater in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 34.11.2: Moore 2000:13–38; see also CVA, New York 5, pls. 1–7 (with bibliography). A frieze that encircles the whole vessel depicts a long row of warriors, all of them moving from left to right; this row is interrupted by two warships, also oriented toward the right: on board, swordsmen, spearmen, and archers participate in ongoing combat. To us, it would seem obvious to ask to which party the marching warriors belong: are they attacking the ships or defending them? But this is a question that the image refuses to answer. The frieze simply shows warriors fighting on board ship, with no attempt whatsoever to depict a military operation of any coherence.

scenes of war: a town is being besieged; men are engaged in battle. The latter scenes are obviously very close to the story of the war between Achaeans and Trojans, which is, of course, the subject of the whole poem and the context in which the episode of the crafting of the shield is itself embedded. But there are two main differences between the battles narrated in the *Iliad* and the scenes of battle depicted on the shield. First, in the *Iliad* every warrior who enters the scene, even if only to be killed a few verses later, is given a name; on the shield, all the figures remain anonymous, and the same is true for the place of action: what happens could happen anywhere and to anyone. The second difference lies in grammar: in epic narration, the dominant tense is the aorist; in the shield description there are hardly any aoristic forms and the poet uses almost exclusively the imperfect. The aorist denotes a completed action, the imperfect an ongoing process; the use of the imperfect serves to remind the listener that he is not hearing a story, but looking at a picture, where of course the action depicted never comes to an end. This has further implications. In the *Iliad*, as in epic poetry in general, the entire narration is permeated by a strong tension over its outcome: will Achilles' withdrawal from combat lead to a defeat of the Achaeans? Will there be reconciliation between Achilles and Agamemnon? Will Patroklos, when he enters the combat as a substitute for Achilles, survive? The uncertainty about the outcome makes the listener focus his expectations, wanting to hear more. The iconography of the shield, however, never gives rise to questions of any kind, and there is no suspense; a town is being besieged, but it could be any town; as it happens, some towns get captured, others are successfully defended; the shield does not tell us particular stories, it gives a paradigmatic description of how the world works.

Exactly the same holds true for the cup in Eleusis and for Geometric iconography as a whole: the images on Geometric vases give us a normative paradigm for the ways of the world. Images that refer to a specific narrative emerge later, around the beginning of the seventh century BC.¹⁴ I will not go deeper into this here. But I would like to point to a fundamental difference between Greek Antiquity and our modern era. In the modern era, i.e., since the early Middle Ages, images referring to Biblical or mythological narrative have always been the norm; genre images emerged later, as a new phenomenon; if we turn to ancient iconography, it is *non-narrative* iconography that takes precedence, whereas images of myth are a younger variant. The chronological relation between the two seems to be exactly reversed. But, of course, saying this begs the fundamental question: how helpful is it in the first place, for ancient Greece, to distinguish categorically between images of life and images of myth?

¹⁴ I have treated the advent of pictorial narratives in the seventh century in Giuliani 2013:53–88.

For it might be clear that the war scenes of the Eleusis cup are not narrative and do not refer to myth: but is this a good reason to consider them images of life? And what do we, then, mean by this term, exactly? For it is obvious that it would not be plausible to define the images on the cup or on Achilles' shield as *genre*.

Let us for a moment reflect on what we do by positing a binary opposition between images of life and images of myth. Such an opposition tends to bracket together distinctions that actually belong to three different conceptual levels and, from a logical point of view, have nothing to do with one another. First, there is the distinction between images that refer to a story and images that do not; second, the distinction between fiction and reality; and, third, the distinction between past and present.¹⁵ When we characterize images of life as *non-narrative* representations that refer to something that is *real* and belongs to our *daily experience*, such a definition arbitrarily blurs the levels on which these three distinctions operate. This can lead to considerable problems.

On several Geometric vases we find depictions of centaurs.¹⁶ A krater of the late eighth century in Paris (Fig. 2.6)¹⁷ depicts on both sides two centaurs face to face, holding branches; in a lower frieze we see a procession of warriors and chariots. In our view of the world, the ontological status of centaurs and chariots is quite clear: chariots exist, centaurs do not. But does the fact that no centaur can be found at the zoo constitute sufficient grounds for characterizing the centaurs on our krater as fictional and therefore as images of myth? The two centaurs simply form a symmetric couple; they are not involved in an action that could be made the subject of a story; the difference between them and the procession of chariots is not one between fiction and reality, nor one between past and present, but simply one between wilderness and civilization.

Another example concerns far more dramatic scenes involving an animal that actually can be found in a zoo. A stand in Athens shows on each of its four legs a man fighting a lion (Fig. 2.7a–b).¹⁸ How are we to understand this? We know that early in the first millennium there actually were lions in Asia Minor and even in Macedonia. Nevertheless, by the eighth century their presence in central Greece is most unlikely: Attica was intensely cultivated, and in such an environment lions would not find enough prey to survive; a population of lions is compatible with a society of nomads breeding cattle, but not with sedentary

peasants living from intensive agriculture. If they do not belong to real life, then, are the lions on our stand imaginary beings? The lion scenes, as one interpretation would have it, are “closely related to images drawn from myth: it is only a small step from the legendary beast of prey to the giant Polyphemos. What we are dealing with here are, as it were, proto-mythological images.”¹⁹ Is this conclusion satisfactory? Can we really define our lion fights as *proto-mythological images*? Given that the lion was not part of the fauna of central Greece, we can of course designate its image as a product of imagination. But does this make it closely related to myth? Polyphemos is a mythological figure not because there were no one-eyed giants in the Mediterranean world but simply because Polyphemos is the subject of a *story* (as are his sheep and his cheese, irrespective of the fact that sheep and cheese were certainly part of everyday reality). When it comes to the images of lions, we need to distinguish clearly between two levels of inquiry: one concerns the ontological status of lions, the other the function of their depiction. On the first level, the question we are dealing with is whether lions were part of real experience in the eighth century, and whether people at that time regarded them as real beings. On the second level, we are asking whether in the case of a given image there is plausible reference to a narrative. The two questions are completely independent of each other.

For the first question, whether lions were considered part of the real world or not, it is helpful to refer to epic poetry. In the *Iliad* as well as in the *Odyssey*, the story has, of course, no lions in it. On the other hand, lions appear frequently in the similes; since these deal exclusively with elements of the real world, we have to regard lions as part of this reality. After all, what is considered real in a culture goes far beyond the horizon of everyday experience: lions were certainly not to be seen every day—but the Homeric poems and their audience seem to have had no doubt that they existed. There is no reason to assume that the potter who produced our stand had a fundamentally different opinion about this.

Having clarified that lions belong to the real world, we still have to answer the second question: do these images refer to a story? Let us take a closer look. The lion fighters all wear helmets: they seem to be warriors. Two of them hold a young calf in their arms and are protecting it from the beast's attack; the other two warriors are each handling a sword and a spear. Is it possible to relate these pictures to a myth? In Greek mythology there is only one lion fighter, and this is Herakles. But it is difficult to connect this figure and the relevant story with our images. First, Herakles is a most violent hero, whose main job is to kill: caring for a calf would seem most inconsistent with his character. Second, it is characteristic of Herakles that when he fights a lion, he does so with his own

¹⁵ For this, again, see Giuliani 2010.

¹⁶ LIMC VIII/1 (1997), 674–682 s.v. Kentauroi 3; 6; 81–83; 92–93; 110–112; 127 (Lila Marangou); in none of these images do the centaurs engage in any kind of action that could be made the subject of a plausible story.

¹⁷ Louvre, CA 3256; LIMC VIII/1 (1997), 678–679 s.v. Kentauroi 82 (Lila Marangou); Langdon 2009:101–103, fig. 2.17.

¹⁸ Athens, Kerameikos Museum, inv. 407; Hurwit 1985:113–119; Ahlberg-Cornell 1992:24–25; Giuliani 2013:27–32.

¹⁹ Junker 2009:67–68.

hands and without the help of weapons. The Herakles myth therefore does not fit our scenes; and in Greek myth there is no other lion-conquering hero available. What, then, was the painter's intention? For him (as for the epic authors of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), the lion is the strongest and most dangerous of all predators; it represents the greatest conceivable threat and the ultimate test of an aristocratic warrior-hunter's courage. To this extent, the lion, although it was not part of everyday experience, plays an indispensable role in the Greek worldview. Our stand was produced within a culture in which livestock belonged to aristocrats and every aristocrat was also a warrior: the warrior and the herdsman are not contrasting identities but two facets of one and the same figure. The struggle with the lion is the supreme act of fighting, the high point of courage: we are very far away from everyday life; nevertheless, it is every nobleman's fight and every nobleman's courage. The lion fighters are as anonymous as the warriors in procession around the rim of the stand; once more: what can be seen here does not ask for a story.

Let me draw a provisional conclusion. The dichotomy between images of life and images of myth seems to be based on two implicit assumptions; first, that objects that are not real must necessarily belong to the realm of myth, and second, that whatever is not a subject of myth must belong to the horizon of everyday experience. Such assumptions are both unwarranted and confusing. This is why I suggest that we abandon the dichotomy altogether; in its place I would like to use the much simpler distinction between images that require a story and images that do not. Already in the *Iliad* we find a clear distinction between narrative and descriptive passages: the narrative mode is used to tell the story, the descriptive for similes and, as we have seen, for the iconography of Achilles' shield. Picking up this traditional terminology, I call images that require a story *narrative* and images that do not *descriptive*. If you think that the latter term applies better to texts than to images, because it is based on the Latin *scribere*, "to write"—then let me remind you that *scribere* means also "to draw"; the same is true for the Greek *graphein*, the product of which, *graphē*, can designate both a text and an image.

Descriptive images depict what is the case and what at the same time matters; they mirror not only the world but also a certain worldview, and as such they frequently have a normative touch. Narrative images, for their part, confront us with events that deviate from the ways of the world that we know and from our expectations and, because of this deviation, they require an explanation. What provides this explanation is a story. It is important to note that the narrative image does not itself *provide* the story; it *requires* a story that it cannot tell by itself; the story must be told by someone else—usually by the beholder. And, of course, not just any story will do; that is why the narrative image has to

deliver certain key elements that enable the beholder to identify the *right* story in the first place—which is only possible if the beholder knows this story already. Narrative images therefore presuppose stories that have already become canonical and with which their beholders are familiar.

Let us now turn to some concrete examples of narrative images. One of the most frequent subjects on Attic vases, occurring from the late seventh century onwards, is the fight between a man and a lion. On an amphora in Berlin we see the two wrestling (Fig. 2.8).²⁰ Now this is definitely not how the world works: men do not wrestle with lions; wrestling is one thing, hunting lions quite another. It is precisely this deviation from the normal ways of the world that demands an explanation. In our case, the beholder needs to know that in the area of Nemea there existed a lion with an invulnerable hide that no weapon could penetrate. Herakles solved the problem by strangling it, without using a weapon and without damaging its hide. Two other amphorae provide an illuminating comparison: one makes the lion's invulnerability explicit, displaying a bent sword at the center of the image;²¹ the other completely assimilates the fight to an athletic performance in a palaestra.²²

Narrative images of this type occur again and again. Let me give you a few more examples. What we see on the neck of a hydria in Florence (Fig. 2.9)²³ at first sight would look like an anonymous boar hunt that could happen anywhere and at any time—except for the gigantic size of the animal and, more decisively, for the fact that one of the hunters is female: the archer on the right used to have a white skin (which is no longer visible, because the color is not preserved; this feature, however, is used only for women); of course, in archaic Greece no lady would ever participate in a boar hunt; the image must therefore refer to a myth, and there is only one myth that fits: it is the story of the lady Atalanta, who took part in the boar hunt in Kalydon and made the hero Meleager fall in love with her (with tragic consequences that need not concern us here).

Another example is the iconography of a banqueting man reclining on his couch. A hydria in Berlin shows an elaborate version of the motif (Fig. 2.10):²⁴ a

²⁰ Neck amphora Berlin, Antikensammlung F 1720; Beazley 1956:143, no. 1; Mackay 2010:117–133; Schwarzmaier, Scholl, and Maischberger 2012:68–70, no. 29 (Ursula Kästner).

²¹ Rome, Villa Giulia, M 472; Schefold 1978:94, fig. 114; *LIMC* V/1 (1990), 25 s.v. Herakles 1882 (Wassiliki Felten).

²² London, British Museum, B 193; Beazley 1963:4, no. 8; Schefold 1978:94, fig. 111.

²³ Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 3830; *LIMC* VI/1 (1992), 417 s.v. Meleagros 17, dated 550–540 BC (Susan Woodford).

²⁴ Berlin, Antikensammlung, F 1890; Furtwängler 1885:375–378; Beazley 1956:269, no. 34; Burow 1990:86, no. 61; Schmitt Pantel 1992:24, fig. 20. More than one mythological interpretation has been proposed for this scene; for a systematic rejection of them all, see Shapiro 2009:177–180 (whose proposal of a scene from hero cult I find no more convincing than all the others).

young woman is sitting on the couch, near the foot, offering the man a flower; in front of the couch there is a table with bread and strips of meat on it (the knife in the man's hand is for cutting the meat); under the table a dog is snuffing at the ground; around the bed there are other revelers, one of whom is a woman, while three are men; two of the men are supporting each other, and the movements of all three look insecure, as if they were drunk; the picture displays a certain wealth of anecdotal detail, but none of it seems surprising in the context and no further explanation is required. This, however, is certainly not the case with an amphora in Kassel (Fig. 2.11):²⁵ again we see a man reclining on his couch; the arms surrounding him (two shields, two helmets, and a sword) designate him as a warrior. By far the most conspicuous element is a corpse lying under the couch; according to the iconographic conventions of the time, the corpse is shown as if it were alive, with the legs bent and one arm lifted behind the head; only the eye is closed; nevertheless, the context makes it clear that this man is not sleeping: he is dead. An old man approaches from the left, followed by a woman grasping her veil, and stretches out his arms in a gesture of sorrow. This combination of a reclining man and a dead body, of reveling and sorrow, is disturbing, not only for our modern sensibility but also for the ancient beholder; it certainly requires an explanation and, thereby, a story. The reclining man is, of course, Achilles, the old visitor is Priam, king of Troy, and the dead man under the couch is Hektor, whose body Priam has come to release: all this is told in the last book of the *Iliad*. I will not enter into the details of a comparison between text and image; let me instead point to a single feature: were it not for the presence of Hektor's dead body, our image would conform to the ordinary iconography of a banquet and there would be no need to ask for a narrative interpretation; Hektor's body makes all the difference. We would expect the painter to have derived this element from the text, but this is not the case: in the *Iliad*, the corpse is of course talked about, but without being physically present: Achilles does not allow Priam to see his son's body, out of fear that he might lose his temper and curse his son's murderer, thereby provoking Achilles' rage. Had the image-maker followed the text, we would not be able to recognize the narrative character of the image; it is exactly because the image deviates from the plot as it is narrated in the text that we are able to recognize it as referring to this plot.

My next example is an amphora in the Vatican (Fig. 2.12).²⁶ It features a scene of mourning in forested surroundings. On the ground lies the body of a

warrior, with his weapons propped up to the far left. At the feet of the corpse stands a grieving woman. Her left hand reaches into her hair, while her right draws the edge of her cloak in front of her face. Mourning, however, is normally a collective ritual connected with the *oikos*, the household of the deceased: it is here that the deceased is laid out and mourned. This ceremony, called *prothesis*, is frequently depicted; one example out of many is a funerary plaque in New York (Fig. 2.13).²⁷ The Vatican amphora adopts the general scheme of such a ceremony, but with significant changes. The deceased does not lie on a couch but on brushwood; the mourner is completely alone, not embedded in a community; the absence of fellow mourners is additionally emphasized by the fact that in their place we see trees and a lone bird. This is not a depiction of a rural idyll, but rather a scene marked by its separation from both *oikos* and *polis*. This remoteness from the polis would be unthinkable in the case of a mortal woman; it must be a goddess who is mourning here and the deceased can be none other than her son: possible mythological candidates for these roles are Eos and Memnon or Europa and Sarpedon.

It is time to sum up. We started with the categorical opposition between images of myth and images of life, which in the case of ancient iconography turned out to be more confusing than helpful. We therefore proposed to get rid of it, replacing it with the much simpler opposition between images that refer to a story and images that do not, between narrative and descriptive images. This seems to work much better. Nevertheless, and approaching the end, I would like to ask: are we really to understand descriptive and narrative images as two genres, just as we distinguish *peintures d'histoire* and *peintures de genre*? Do they really constitute two separate classes, defined by distinctive features? Are they not far too similar to each other? We consider the image we have seen on the shoulder of the Florentine hydria to be a narrative one only because one of the hunters is female (see Fig. 2.9); if it were not for this detail, it would be the descriptive image of a boar hunt, showing the way men in general are supposed to hunt boar. Here there is only one detail that deviates from the ways of the world, a detail that requires an explanation and that relates the image to a myth.

A very simple way to provide such a detail is to inscribe names. From the point of view of iconographic originality and effort, inscribing names implies a very small cost: it is by far the easiest solution. That is why image-makers make use of this device again and again. Let us have a look at how this works. I will take three depictions of combat with warriors struggling over a fallen body, one party trying to seize the body and the other trying to defend it. Let us begin with

²⁵ Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, T 674; Beazley 1971:56, no. 31 bis (E-Group); LIMC I/1 (1981), s.v. Achilleus 645 (Anneliese Kossatz-Deissmann); Giuliani 2013:145, fig. 31.

²⁶ Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, inv. 16589 = inv. 350; Beazley 1956:140, no. 1; Simon 1981:88–89, pl. 77; Dietrich 2010:363–365.

²⁷ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 54.11.5; Boardman 1955:62, no. 23, pl. 4; Picon et al. 2007:73, no. 69.

a cup in Munich (Fig. 2.14),²⁸ we see a dead body lying under each of its handles, with three warriors approaching from either side. One of the two fallen warriors is lying on his back, naked (i.e., robbed of his weapons), while the other is armed and lying on his stomach. The two images under the handles show complementary versions out of a (very limited) range of possibilities based on a common, underlying model. This model depicts a general combat situation, one that can occur anywhere and at any time. This is how the world works: in battle warriors fight over the corpses of the fallen.

A very similar depiction occurs on a krater found in Pharsalos in Thessaly (Fig. 2.15).²⁹ It was produced in the same workshop as the Munich cup, and its iconography is closely related. Again, we have two groups of three warriors fighting each other; the fallen body is naked and lying on its back. Again, there is nothing surprising, nothing that would require an explanation: this is how brave men behave in battle; this is the way of the world.

Another krater, found on the north slope of the Athenian Acropolis, is again a product of the same workshop as the previous two vessels, and it shows very similar iconography (Fig. 2.16).³⁰ The main difference is the fact that this time the painter has added name inscriptions, three of which have been preserved: in the right-hand group, the warrior at the front is identified as Hektor; in the left-hand group, the warrior at the back is Diomedes; above the head of the fallen warrior is the name *[P]a[tr]oklos*. The other name inscriptions have been lost, but the few that survive suffice to connect what we see with a very specific story: this is the struggle over the corpse of Patroklos. If we look up the story in the *Iliad*, where it occupies the whole of Book 17, the match with our krater is good, but not perfect: among the Achaeans fighting for Patroklos, the poet gives us the names of Ajax, son of Telamon, and Ajax, son of Oileus, as well as those of Menelaos and Idomeneus; Diomedes is not referred to in this context. However, one can hardly expect that the painter would have known the corresponding verses by heart—let alone that he would have had access to a written version of the text. Nevertheless, the function of the name inscriptions is perfectly clear: they remind the beholder of a very specific and very famous story: what he is shown is no longer a generic fight; it is the struggle over the body of Patroklos, it is the Iliadic episode.

The scene on the Pharsalos krater I would therefore call *descriptive*, the scene on the Athenian krater *narrative*. But it obviously makes little sense to

consider the two images as belonging to different genres in a sense that would be comparable to the difference between *peinture d'histoire* and *peinture de genre*. Both kraters deploy the same iconography: the only difference lies in the absence versus the presence of name inscriptions. What are we to make of this difference? There are two approaches. The first starts from the inscribed names and relates them not only to the vase on which they are used, but to the iconographic type as such; whenever we are shown three warriors battling against three other warriors over a naked fallen warrior, we are to recognize this as the combat over the corpse of Patroklos; this is what the painter meant to depict, regardless whether he has given us name inscriptions or not. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the painter's intention; and I see no reason why we should take the presence of name inscriptions more seriously than their absence. This leads us to the second approach. I would take my starting point rather from the anonymous, generic, descriptive image: it depicts what is the case and what matters—and it shows us what it should look like: this is the way brave men ought to fight. The narrative image does not, of course, contradict this description—and this is true for narrative iconography in general. Every image I call narrative is inevitably rooted, grounded in description; it is exactly this descriptive dimension that makes it comprehensible in the first place; on top of this, it has something that purely descriptive images lack: a deviating surplus, something in need of further explanation, something that calls for a story. Narrative iconography cannot be understood without a backdrop of descriptive images; narrative and descriptive images do not relate to each other like apples and pears, but like figure and ground (using the terms in the sense of Gestalt psychology).³¹

The difference between narrative and descriptive images can indeed be very small. On our krater from the Agora, the narrative element is supplied only by the inscribed names; these imply questions: who is Patroklos, who is Hektor, who is Diomedes? To answer this, one must tell a story; and of course, it has to be a story about Patroklos, Hektor, and Diomedes. The anonymous scene on the Pharsalos krater does not pose such questions and does not require a story.

Nevertheless, the beholder is free to associate such an image with any story that fits, referring to a myth or to something he has been told or to his own lived experience: borders are permeable. Precisely because descriptive images show the world as it normally works, they can be associated with any number of stories. Let us look again at the Geometric four-footed stand with the lion fight (see Fig. 2.7). In eighth-century Attica, there were no lions; but there might have been tales circulating about valiant men who, up in the north or far in the

²⁸ Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, inv. 8729 = J339 = inv. 2044; Beazley 1956:146, no. 21 ("Exekias"); Mackay 2010:221–241.

²⁹ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 26746; Beazley 1956:148, no. 9 ("Manner of Exekias"); Mackay 1988:373–376.

³⁰ Athens, Agora Museum, AP 1044; Beazley 1956:145, no. 19 ("Exekias"); Mackay 2010:354–357.

³¹ Arnheim 1974:227–233.

east, had actually met and overcome a lion. Why should some contemporary Athenian, looking at our stand, not have recalled some tale of this kind? We do not know and we cannot tell; the only thing we can say for sure is that no such story entered the canon of Greek mythological narrative, as we know it from later sources; in this narrative canon there is only one lion fighter, Herakles—and what we know about him and his deeds does not match what the stand shows.

If, in the end, we attempt to put our distinction between narrative and descriptive images in general terms, we should keep in mind that all the vases we have been discussing were meant to be used in the context of symposia. In the playful but at the same time highly competitive interaction among the participants in a symposium, the vases must have played an essential role: the function of the images on vases was to be talked about.³² In this concrete sympotic situation, it was for the individual beholder to decide *how* to talk about an image. Nevertheless, in this decision he was never completely free: any image posed a specific challenge that needed a response. In this respect, the difference between a narrative and a descriptive image seems to be crucial. Any narrative image referred to a story from the mythological canon, which the beholder had to know; the canonical story is like a key that fits; without this key, the beholder was at a loss; but, of course, exactly this could be part of the thrill: that some were able to identify the story, perhaps even to quote the lines of a corresponding poem, and others were not. A descriptive image, on the other hand, required no such key: the beholder was free to interpret it as a paradigmatic image of the ways of the world or to associate it with any story that did not deviate from such ways—which allowed for a broad choice among different possibilities; this was more relaxing but might, just for this reason, have constituted less of a thrill.

The distance between us and the original audience is huge; we do not use the vases for symposia and we do not speak ancient Greek any more; still, we keep talking about vase images that were meant to be talked about. That is exactly what they were designed and constructed for. If we want to understand the design and the demands of such images, the distinction between a descriptive and a narrative mode proves to be a useful analytical tool.

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³² See Neer 2010:9–26; Catoni 2010:183–287; Dietrich 2013:52.

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Fig. 1.12: Togate statuette. Pompeii, 1st century AD.
Akademisches Kunstmuseum, Bonn, D 273. Height: 17 cm.



Fig. 2.1: Annibale Carracci, *Boy Drinking*. Oil on canvas, 1580s.
Oxford, Christ Church Picture Gallery.
By permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford.



Fig. 2.2: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Fortune Teller*. Oil on canvas, 1597–1598. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Réunion des Musées Nationaux. Photo by Lutz Braun.



Fig. 2.3: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *L'empereur Sévère reproche à Caracalla son fils d'avoir voulu l'assassiner ...* Oil on canvas, 1769. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Réunion des Musées Nationaux. Photo by Michael Urtado.



Fig. 2.4: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La mère bien-aimée caressée par ses enfants*. Oil on canvas, 1769. Madrid, Collection Viñaza-Laborde.
After Munhall 2002: Fig. 14.



Fig. 2.5a-b: Attic cup, ca. 770 BC: men fighting. Eleusis, Archeological Museum, inv. 741. D-DAI-ATHEN, Neg. Eleusis 512.



Fig. 2.6: Attic krater, late 8th century BC: centaurs (above); procession of warriors and chariots (below). Paris, Musée du Louvre, CA 3256.
Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Réunion des Musées Nationaux.
Photo by Hervé Lewandowski.



Fig. 2.7a: Attic cauldron stand, ca. 740 BC; on each leg: combat between man and lion. Athens, Kerameikos Museum, inv. 407.
D-DAI-ATHEN, Neg. Ker. 4830/4923.



Fig. 2.7b: Attic cauldron stand. Description as Fig. 2.7a.



Fig. 2.8: Attic amphora, ca. 550 BC: man strangling lion. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F 1720. Photo by Johannes Laurentius.



Fig. 2.9: Attic hydria (shoulder), ca. 560 BC: boar hunt. Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 3830.
Photo by Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana, Florence.



Fig. 2.10: Attic hydria, ca. 520 BC: man reclining at banquet. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F 1890. Photo by Johannes Laurentius.



Fig. 2.11: Attic amphora, 540–530 BC: man reclining, with corpse underneath couch. Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, T 674. Photo courtesy of the Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Antikensammlung.

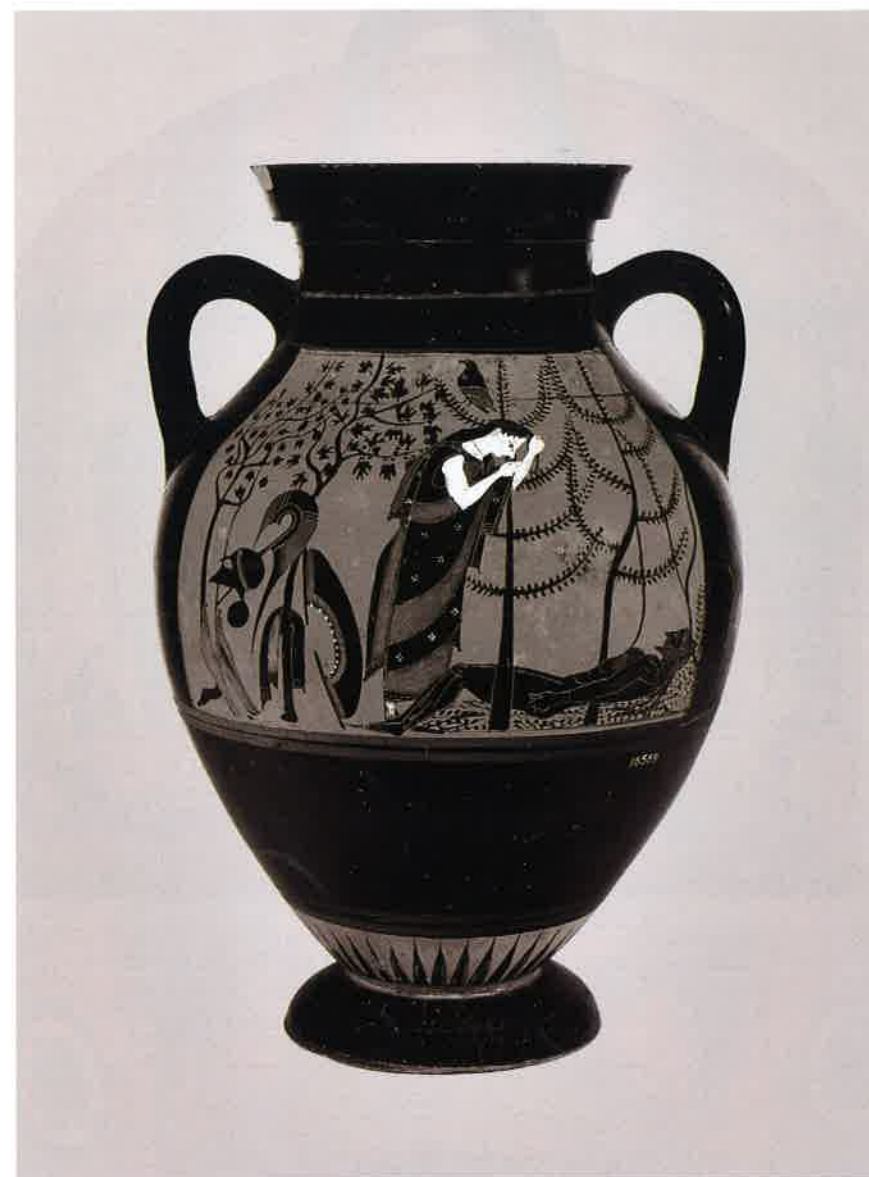


Fig. 2.12: Attic amphora, ca. 540 BC: mourning scene. Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, inv. 16589 = inv. 350. Photo © Musei Vaticani. All rights reserved.



Fig. 2.13: Attic plaque, ca. 500 BC: *prothesis* ceremony. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 54.11.5. Photo by Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz / The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 2.14a–b: Attic cup, ca. 540 BC, exterior images: warriors fighting over corpses. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, inv. 8729 = J339 = inv. 2044. Photo by Renate Kühling.



Fig. 2.15: Attic krater from Pharsalos, ca. 530 BC: warriors fighting over corpse. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 26746.
Photo by Giannis Patrikianos, © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Archaeological Receipts Fund.



Fig. 2.16: Attic krater, ca. 530 BC: warriors fighting over corpse, accompanied by identifying inscriptions. Athens, Agora Museum, AP 1044. Photo by Craig Mauzy.