



Water Jar, Etruscan

Water Jar

Attributed to the Eagle Painter
Etruscan, Caere, about 525 B.C.
Teracotta
17 9/16 x 13 in.
88.AE.346

On this black-figure hydria, the Greek hero Herakles battles the Lernean Hydra while a large crab nips at his foot. His companion Iolaos attacks from the other side, cutting off one of the monsters' heads with a *harpe* or short, curved sword. Two sphinxes flank the handle on the back of the vessel and floral decoration covers the rest of the vase: an ivy tendril on the shoulder and a palmette and lotus frieze on the lower body.

This hydria, or water jar, is one of a small group of painted vases produced at Caere in Etruria (modern day Tuscany.) All these vases appear to come from one workshop, which may have had two artists. These vases display

many of the basic elements of Greek vase painting reinterpreted for an Etruscan market, using a more vivid range of colors and emphasizing the importance of floral ornament in the decoration. They are unusual in that the artist used a template for the floral decoration, a technique not otherwise known in Greek vase painting.

Greeks always drank their wine mixed with water, and a vessel like this one would have held the water at a symposium, a drinking party for Greek aristocrats. Chief features of a symposium were wine, music, and women that provided entertainment. Another major feature was conversation, ranging from philosophical discussions to games and the singing of drinking songs.



About the Artist

Eagle Painter (active: 530–500 B.C. Caere, Italy)

The Eagle Painter potted and painted vases in the black-figure technique in the later 500s B.C. He worked at Caere in Etruria, but he probably emigrated from Ionia. In Etruria, the Eagle

Water Jar, Etruscan

Painter appears to have operated a workshop with one other artist and several Etruscan assistants. As with most vase-painters, the real name of the Eagle Painter is unknown, but he is named after his frequent depiction of this bird.

In the mid-500s B.C. many Greeks fled from their cities on the coast of Asia Minor due to Persian military activity in the area. The style of the Eagle Painter's work was heavily influenced by the vase painting of these East Greek cities, but enough differences exist that scholars doubt he was apprenticed to any Eastern workshop. It is unclear where he actually learned his craft.

About Black-Figure Vase Painting

This technique for painting vases, invented in Corinth around 700 B.C. and subsequently adopted by Athenian vase-painters, shows figures silhouetted against a lighter-colored or unpainted background. A preliminary sketch outlined the design of the figures, which were then filled in with a layer of liquid clay or slip. Before firing, incisions were made through the black gloss with a sharp pointed tool to delineate details of the figures in the lighter color of the underlying clay. In the firing process the clay slip turns black. After firing, red or white colors were sometimes applied on top of the black to add details.

Questions for Teaching

This object is known as a hydria. The name might remind you of another word, fire hydrant. If so, what do you think it might have been used for? (A hydria is a Greek water jar. The Greeks never drank wine straight, they always diluted it with water. Decorated vases such as this would have been the container for the water during a drinking party called a symposium.)

Describe the decoration that you see on the front and side of this water jar. Be sure to look at both views of the jar. (There are two figures on this water jar fighting a many-headed snake-like creature known as the hydra. The figures on this water jar are Herakles, to the right, attacking hydra with his club, and his companion Iolaos, who is cutting the head off of one of the monsters. Looking at the side of the jar, one can see a crab pinching Herakles's foot. Next to the handle is a sphinx, a winged creature with the body of a lion and a human head. There are also decorations inspired by nature. An ivy vine circles the shoulder of the jar, while palmette and lotus patterns decorate the lower portion.)



Side view of Water Jar

Water Jar, Etruscan

Read the story of Herakles and the Hydra and discuss what elements of the story the artist has chosen to include in his depiction of this story. What characters did he include? How did he create a setting on the side of a jar?

Do you think this would have been an object used everyday? Why, or why not?

Why do you think the artist, the Eagle Painter, chose to create such elaborate decorations on a functional object for use at a party? (This water jar, or hydria, would have been used to hold water for the mixing of wine at special parties or meals called symposia, a social ritual for men. Chief features of a symposium were wine, music, and women that provided entertainment. Another major feature was conversation, ranging from philosophical discussions to games and singing drinking songs.)

What kinds of objects do you have in your home that are elaborately decorated and used for special occasions?

