

Athenian Vase Painting: Black- and Red-Figure Techniques



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Essay

Between the beginning of the sixth and the end of the fourth century B.C., black- and red-figure techniques were used in Athens to decorate fine pottery, while simpler, undecorated wares fulfilled everyday household purposes. With both techniques, the potter first shaped the vessel on a wheel. Most sizable pots were made in sections; sometimes the neck and body were thrown separately, and the foot was often attached later. Once these sections had dried to a leather hardness, the potter assembled them and luted the joints with a slip (clay in a more liquid form). Lastly, he added the handles. In black-figure vase painting, figural and ornamental motifs were applied with a slip that turned black during firing, while the background was left the color of the clay. Vase painters articulated individual forms by incising the slip or by adding white and purple enhancements (mixtures of pigment and clay). In contrast, the decorative motifs on red-figure vases remained the color of the clay; the background, filled in with a slip, turned black. Figures could be articulated with glaze lines or dilute washes of glaze applied with a brush. The red-figure technique was invented around 530 B.C., quite possibly by the potter Andokides and his workshop. It gradually replaced the black-figure technique as innovators recognized the possibilities that came with drawing forms, rather than laboriously delineating them with incisions. The use

of a brush in red-figure technique was better suited to the naturalistic representation of anatomy, garments, and emotions.

The firing process of both red- and black-figure vessels consisted of three stages. During the first, oxidizing stage, air was allowed into the kiln, turning the whole vase the color of the clay. In the subsequent stage, green wood was introduced into the chamber and the oxygen supply was reduced, causing the object to turn black in the smoky environment. In the third stage, air was reintroduced into the kiln; the reserved portions turned back to orange while the glossed areas remained black.

Painted vases were often made in specific shapes for specific daily uses—storing and transporting wine and foodstuffs (amphorai), drawing water (hydriai), drinking wine or water (kantharoi or kylikes), and so on—and for special, often ritual occasions, such as pouring libations (lekythoi) or carrying water for the bridal bath (loutrophoroi). Their pictorial decorations provide insights into many aspects of Athenian life, and complement the literary texts and inscriptions from the Archaic and, especially, Classical periods.

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