

## **African Subjects in Greek Pottery: A Call for Comprehensive Interpretation**

Imagine you are visiting a museum of ancient European art, particularly Greco-Roman, and you come upon this object. It is a Greek *oinochoe*, or wine pitcher, but not in a typical vessel shape. To a general viewer, the subject might appear obvious at first glance: the black skin, broad nose and lips, and tight curls of this head suggest that we are looking at a Black man.\* Curious about this unique subject matter, you read the following label:

“There were marked distinctions of status between those drinking at the *symposium* and those catering to their needs. Occasional scenes on Athenian vases show Africans as slaves, and this stereotyped representation combines servant with serving vessel.”

If this was the only information a visitor was given, they could leave the gallery with the idea that Africans only existed in the Greek world as slaves. This assumption might make sense in the viewer's mind, especially from an American perspective; perhaps prejudice against Black people existed even in antiquity, not just in the modern era following the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Perhaps the viewer internalizes this message, seeing the servitude of Black people as “just the way it's always been.” Perhaps the viewer, if they are also dark-skinned, sees their only source of representation in Classical antiquity in this “slave.” All of these assumptions, however, are not based on the reality of what we know about the Greeks who created this vessel. Yet, both this vessel and this label are on display in the Athenian pottery gallery of the Getty Villa Museum. So what was the intent behind this label?

To give credit where it's due, the online description of this wine vessel has, in fact, been updated to a more comprehensive description that discusses how the vessel is identified as an African, how Africans interacted with Greeks in antiquity, and includes a few quotes from ancient Greek authors Homer and Herodotus that discuss Africans. However, the gallery label, which has been displayed since the last reinstallation in 2018, is still under review. At a large conglomerate institution like the Getty, even the simplest label changes can take months to complete, but I think the stakes around this topic are not heightened enough. The impact such labels could have on visitors, especially Black visitors, who already hardly see themselves represented in European art, could be detrimental to their own ideas about both diversity the ancient world and the motivations of museums who let such problematic labels go unchecked.

As stewards of antiquity, academics and museum professionals alike are responsible for providing interpretations that both make sense within the context of the ancient world and within the context of modernity. The exact message of these interpretations may vary depending on the type of museum too. For example, a history museum, an archaeology museum, and a fine arts museum may write their labels according to what they think is most important about the object within the framework of their respective collections; how the object was used, who owned it, and what it looks like are questions that warrant different discussions. The Getty Villa Museum, as an art museum that specifically houses Classical antiquities, is just one of many institutions that must teach the public about ancient art while also keeping their interpretations

updated to reflect current scholarship. Greco-Roman studies, like any other avenue of academia, is a continuous process of discovery and refinement.

Here, though, is where the problem lies. On the one hand, the study of the ancient Greeks and Romans has long been monopolized by white scholars who, seeing these civilizations as having initiated western advancement, projected their own whiteness onto the Greeks and Romans. The casting of white actors in nearly every Classics-related movie since the birth of cinema is just one result of this. Another would be the misconception of all-white, unpainted sculptures in Classical antiquity- many ancient sculptures were in fact painted, including for skin tone. And as a field still dominated by white scholars and struggling to reckon with its own history, giving unbiased interpretations of artwork requires rigorous self-reflection and a deep understanding of how the ancient people thought of their own art.

So when it comes to Africans in Greek pottery, the academic conversation about race and ethnicity is robust and ongoing. Do we know what the ancients thought about an object like this jug? Who is this “African man” and why is he the focus here? Was this work based on a real person, and is his depiction positive, negative, or neutral? What did the Greeks think of foreigners from Africa? We will likely never have all the answers to these questions, but we do have the scholarship of people who study Greek art and culture for a living.

The goal of this presentation is to go over the difficulties that arise from interpreting an ancient object with a racialized subject. First, we need to establish what we do know about the context of this Greek vessel. Then, in the midst of the United States’ national reckoning with racism and colonialism, we must remove these modern biases in order to provide the public with better information about how the ancients understood the world. By providing objects of this weight with updated, comprehensive labels, we can reduce public misunderstanding of the African’s place in Classical antiquity. Within the very real limitations of word count and opposing scholarly opinions, art professionals must consider which objects deserve more context for visitors. To me, such objects would be those related to race, gender, and sexuality, all of which are constructs that inherently inform how something is interpreted.

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As social constructs that are informed by many things such as cultural priorities, time, and place, we can infer that race and ethnicity looked different 2000 years ago compared to today. Race is socio-historical construct, meaning its definition varies depending on the time and society that informs it. Today we see race as a mostly biological identification, though sometimes related to ethnicity and national origin. For the ancient Greeks, identity was mostly constructed through culture and status, and thus ethnicity is perhaps the better word to use when describing ancient identities. I favor Egyptologist Stuart Tyson Smith’s interpretation of ethnicity; he defines it as “rooted in a sense of common origins, real or invented, constructed ultimately by individuals and both self-ascribed and ascribed by others in order to create

distinctions between people.” Their construction of foreign identity was often informed by how different that cultural group was to their own, and often situated themselves as superior to other groups. This is otherwise known as ethnocentrism. Greek antiquity was clearly different from our modern day race politics. The history of the United States in particular has led to a certain polarization between whiteness and Blackness that simply did not exist 2000 years ago. That is not to say, however, that ancient people did not see the difference between themselves and others both physically and culturally. However, exactly how these lines between self and other were drawn varies throughout time and space, making definitive identification by modern scholars a rather dubious task. To scholars like Rebecca Martin, less important is the exact identification of ancient ethnicities than studying how the concept of “other” manifests and aids in identity-construction.

We can, however, turn to written sources for individual ideas about foreign ethnic groups from ancient Greeks themselves. Greeks writing on Africans shows various opinions; in book one of Homer’s *Iliad*, the “Aithiopians” (which likely references the people of ancient Nubia, rather than the modern country we know as Ethiopia) who fought alongside the Trojans were praised for their piety to the gods. The historian Herodotus describes many types of peoples living outside of Greece, though his information is often discredited for obvious reasons. He describes the Aithiopians as being tall, long-limbed, and beautiful, but Indians are described as savages for their alleged practices of cannibalism and having sex publically. It is worth noting that in the passage, Herodotus mentions that Indian skin and semen (believe it or not) is black, as is the case with Aithiopians, confirming that the term Aithiopian in this context refers specifically to dark-skinned Africans. In the historical period, Aristotle’s work *Politics* similarly centers Greeks (particularly Greek men) as being the pinnacle of goodness and deserving of freedom, while other groups he describes as inherently slavish. Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, describes peoples from Asia as feeble and cowardly, attributing this to the temperate environment they reside in and their reliance on monarchy. These are just a few examples that show that Greeks wrote about foreigners both positively and negatively, a key component to the argument that the Greeks were not racist, just ethnocentrist. However, a deeper look at Greek depictions of these “Aithiopians” shows some potential prejudice.

But first, what did this face mean to the artist or buyer of this vessel, and can we assume both were Greek? Well, the pottery industry in ancient Athens included many immigrant workers, and the exceptional style and quality of Athenian pottery was in-demand across the Mediterranean. This vessel also did not come to the Getty with information about where it was found or who created it, leaving us more in the dark. Few surviving Greek vessels, in fact, are signed by artists, and even if they are, we are still left to make educated guesses about *why* they chose a particular subject; did this artist want to challenge themselves by creating a vessel of an unfamiliar face? Was this based on a person the artist met? Why was there a demand for art of foreign subjects? Without a known provenance or findspot, it is hard to answer these questions. Other images of Africans are often presented without provenance too, though examples from Etruscan tombs suggests there was some demand for these subjects in ancient Etruria. When it comes to our wine pitcher though, we are simply missing this context.

From this vessel, we can tell that the artist sculpted this head with particular phenotypes, or physical characteristics associated with genetics. So in comparison to, say, the typical facial features of an ancient Greek, the nose and lips of this man are wider. His hair texture is very specifically shown as being tightly coiled and closely-cropped to his head. His skin is also marked by the black gloss of the pottery, a feature we will discuss more in a bit.

Let's consider the implications of making an "other," particularly a racialized other, into the subject of a wine pitcher. Many wine vessels are assumed to have been used within the context of the symposium, a traditionally Athenian ritual of heavy drinking and philosophizing among Greek men. In relation to philosophy, it is easy to understand how a depiction of a foreigner in ancient times, particularly one with features a Greek would consider 'exotic,' could spark conversation at one of these parties. It would bring about questions like 'why do some people have dark skin but others lighter skin? Does the environment affect the somatic features of people?' French scholar Francois Lissarrague ("lissa-raug") interpreted this symposium context differently though. His now largely disproven 2002 article argued that the African as the subject would offer the Greek viewer a comparison to the servant or slave who would have been pouring the wine at the symposium. Remember this idea from the museum label? While there is no debate about whether the Greeks had slaves, to assume these slaves were Africans is both anachronistic and baseless. Yes, some slaves were foreigners and, more rarely, Africans, but there is nothing to suggest that the Greek system of slavery was racially-motivated in the same way as the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

When it comes to cups used by symposiasts, especially two-faced or janiform vessels, scholar Sarah Derbew asserts that depicting foreigners, monsters, and even women was an opportunity for symposiasts to perform the role of the "other." If the symposium functioned as a microcosm for Athenian society, where Athenian men were the main actors, this performance, exclusive from women and foreigners and aided by the inhibiting factor of wine, was one more activity Athenian men participated in to, perhaps subconsciously, construct their own identities. As the symposiast lifted the drinking vessel to drink the wine, they visually assumed a new identity. But what about our wine pitcher, and other objects whose use seems more functional?

Derbew points out that if one looks at Africans in Greek pottery more broadly, you'll see that they are depicted as "political allies, musicians, religious worshippers, soldiers, and servants." So if not by depictions of servitude, how do we connect the Greek ethnocentrism that's clear in historic writing to the art depictions of Africans? Though we admittedly have little information about *why* Africans were chosen as subjects for some Greek vases, showing racialized "others" on distinctly Athenian pottery can, whether intentionally or not, give us information about how the Greeks constructed their own identity. Starting with the phenotypes I mentioned earlier- the wider nose and mouth, the kinky hair- we cannot be certain that this pot was based on a real person. In fact, the same phenotypes are repeated in the Greek artistic tradition to signal to the viewer that they are looking at someone who is not only non-Greek but distinctly "Aithiopian."

But if these depictions are not based in reality (i.e. portraits of real people), then couldn't they be considered stereotypes? Frank Snowden, one of the seminal scholars of race in Classical antiquity, argued that these depictions could be read as neutral, good-faith curiosity from Greeks about the foreigners they interacted with. Snowden's own research is flawed, however, as he tries to explain the range of "negroid" types that can be identified in Greek art. "Negroid," like "caucasoid" and other outdated terminology is based on biological determinism, a theory no longer accepted by most scholars. This is because there is not one true or pure "negroid" type; Black people come all in all shapes, sizes, and colors. In addition to this, we have evidence that black skin was associated with Egyptians and Asiatic groups too, not just the Aithiopians. This is why Aithiopians are the only ethnic group the Greeks coded with specific phenotypical features. Even with full-bodied depictions, where other ethnic information can be given via clothing and weapons, we still see these features used. A few scholars have read this reliance on stereotype as the influence of Egyptian art, which Greeks were familiar with. Egyptians also created a *topos*, or characterization of themselves as natives in comparison to that of outside groups, such as the Libyans or Nubians. This does not deny the blackness of ancient Egypt or speak to the very real ethnic connections Egyptians had to their neighbors, but proves that this canonical stereotype of the "Aithiopian," or Nubian to the Egyptian, was not necessarily born from Greek prejudice.

As Professor Rebecca Martin points out, the legendary Trojan ally Memnon is typically rendered as any other Greek hero. His association with "Aithiopia" gave some artists a reason to code his flanking soldiers with stereotypically African phenotypes, but not Memnon himself. We can thus confirm that Attic artists did not want to code this hero as African, though the reasoning for this is unclear. The myth of Herakles and the Egyptian king Busiris was another popular subject in Attic pottery, and it similarly shows a fluidity of racial conventions. While the phenotypes of Busiris and his priests vary, their ethnicity is clear through their white, linen robes, shaved heads, and even the canonically Egyptian "smiting" posture that the artists seem to be toying with. Their skin tone, again, is not an identifying factor, but the message behind these depictions seems to imply judgment against Egyptians. In the myth, Busiris is slain by Herakles for the murder and cannibalism of foreigners. According to Margaret Miller, this association of Greek cultural taboos with an Egyptian king-- such as harm against foreign guests and cannibalism-- intentionally "others" Egyptians as backward barbarians who are justly cut down by a superior Greek hero. As Najee Olya mentions, the relationship Greeks had to Egyptians was not straightforward. While the Greeks were aware of Egypt's long and grand history and clearly took influence from their art, this did not erase the anxiety Greek people had about foreigners.

It is important to remember that prejudice never exists in a vacuum. As mentioned before, Africans were present in ancient Greece but always as a minority, and the general lack of knowledge about what lay beyond the immediate rim of the Mediterranean sea is considerable. Even during the Classical period, where Greeks interacted even more with foreigners, scholar Christopher Parmenter notes the disproportionate increase in xenophobic writings after the Greco-Persian Wars of 490-479 BCE. Additionally, increases in mobility and trade with distant countries, he argues, led to the production and exchange of racialized

commodities that reflect the Greeks “racial imaginary.” It seems then that this identity formation, the dichotomy of the Greek “self” and the barbarian “other,” was partially a result of economic growth and the collateral ideas that individual Greeks formed about foreigners. Further explaining this point, Stuart Tyson-Smith adds: “When ethnicity is founded on self vs. other ascription, as is the case in the Egyptian and Classical ideology, ethnic identities are constructed with immediate and unambiguous symbols of identity.”

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Now that we’ve discussed Greek ethnocentrism as briefly as possible considering the complicated nature of the subject, let’s add another layer: what do we even call these “African” subjects? For simplicity, I’ve used the general term “African” throughout this video, but it is not a perfect way to describe the person on the vessel. Our modern conception of Africa is a huge continent with 54 different countries and even more cultural groups with their own languages, cultures, and histories. The name “Africa” itself may have a Roman etymology, so we cannot know how all ancient peoples on the continent would have conceptualized the boundaries of their land. Aside from the terminology used to denote where these subjects came from, scholars and curators often try to ascribe ethnicity too, which is equally challenging. Are we looking at a Black man? Well, the uppercase “B”-“Black” is a modern socio-political identification- to ascribe it to ancient Africans is technically anachronistic. Even the lowercase “b”-“black,” is not perfect, as it only describes skin tone and generalizes an entire range of skin colors. “Negro,” which is unfortunately still used by some out-of-touch scholars, is inappropriate, obsolete, and similarly anachronistic. In sum, we cannot assume that all Africans do or ever have identified as lowercase “b”-black” in skin tone or uppercase “B”-Black” in identity.

If we wanted to label this vessel as a Greek may have, we could perhaps use “Aithiopians,” a term often used to specifically describe darker-skinned Africans. With its original Greek spelling, this term would be distinguished from the modern country of Ethiopia and would be more specific in identification since it does not have modern historical connotations. The term also speaks to the specific phenotypes often associated with African subjects, particularly Africans that the Greeks associated with the inner part of the continent. However, not everyone agrees that Blackness, as we call it today, was exclusive to just these “Aethiopians.” Talawa Adodo, for example, argues that Herodotus himself discussed the Blackness of ancient Egyptians, not just the Aithiopians, and that the mistranslation of this text is part of a larger agenda to erase the Africanness of Egypt. Lastly, the etymology of the term Aithiopian is likely from the Greek *aitho* and *ops*, which roughly translates to “burnt-face.” This translation is quite similar to modern racist and colorist language against Black people. So given all of these factors, I am not so sure Aithiopian is the best terminology either, especially in a public label where its context may not be explicitly clear.

So what is left? Scholar Sarah Derbew offers up “black-glazed” or “black face” (not to be confused with 19th c. Blackface), with “black-glaze” referring to Attic pottery where, like with our pitcher, the subject’s skin is shown as black through the color of the glaze. “Black face,” on the other hand, if one’s definition of black includes phenotypes, addresses the features of the man’s face that we associate with some peoples of African descent. As a future museum professional, I worry about the complicated semantics associated with all of these terms; how can we find a

term that's as accurate as possible without using inaccessible terminology or bogging down a label with too much explanation? For the sake of clarity, I personally think resigning to the general term "African," or even "dark-skinned African" if the skin tone is intentionally dark, is necessary for public comprehension. Anachronistic as it may be, this gives the visitor a general sense of who the subject is without conflating the depiction with modern conceptions of race. The phenotypes are distinctly African in the conventions of Greek pottery, but skin tone, as we'll discuss next, was less straightforward.

Skin tone in Athenian pottery can have varied meanings. The black-figure technique inherently limited the variation of skin color an artist could play with, as painting over the shiny glaze would defeat the purpose of using the technique. Women are the common exception, sometimes shown with painted white skin, which suggests that their gender was intentionally "othered" for cultural reasons rather than artistic realism. Men, on the other hand, are typically shown with black-glaze for skin, and in later red-figure they are rendered in the orange color of Attic clay. So while the black glaze on our pitcher could be interpreted as an intentional comparison between the beauty of Attic black glaze and the beauty of black skin, black skin can often just be the default for male subjects.

Many prestigious institutions are being called to diversify their artistic subject matter, the artists who they display, and even their own museum staff to combat white supremacy and highlight the multitude of perspectives traditionally left out of museums. This call to action should be on the interpretation level too. The display of this object at all is a critical step in the right direction; the ancient world was by no means a monolith, and seeing such an object in a Greek art gallery confirms this. However, for a visitor to fully understand what they are looking at when they see this object, more information is needed than is currently provided. Art museum labels and their lack of space is an ongoing issue for many museum curators, and I understand how those constraints complicate things. But given the complexity of conversations around racialized subjects of all periods, I think more care needs to be given when interpreting these objects for the public. I also think this fits into the larger conversation about the responsibility of museums to the public they serve.

Janet Marstine and Christina Kreps are just two museum professionals who assert that all museums need to adapt themselves to their local cultural contexts and follow a "new museum ethics." Moving past the white-box collections of art and artifacts (sometimes ripped from their original contexts) for the consumption of the white elite, these scholars call for museums to assert their moral agency via social inclusion, radical transparency, and shared guardianship. This means museums have an obligation to consider the local communities they serve when putting together exhibitions; what are the local demographics of your museum? Are all of these people represented in your collections? Is your information presented in an accessible way? Many museums have implemented DEAI, or Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion initiatives to begin addressing some of these disparities in their collections, but the work is slow and requires looking critically at how diversity and inclusion manifests within the institution's staff too.

At the Getty Villa Museum in particular, the aesthetics of gallery spaces are prioritized over offering much-needed contextual information. It is no wonder, with only 50-60 words to explain an ancient artifact, that curators struggle to say enough information without overwhelming the visitor or taking up too much space. However, larger institutions like the Getty have nearly all the resources in the world to create a solution to this issue. Many museums have floor staff available to answer questions; making sure this staff is trained to talk about all kinds of objects, not just the easiest to interpret, is important. A QR code is also a simple, unintrusive way that some museums use to offer the visitor further information on the topic if they so choose. This gives the visitor more agency in learning about the collection on their own terms and mitigates misleading interpretations, since the museum can offer visitors academic, peer-reviewed resources to begin their research. Lastly, a digital option is one way to make sure that updated information about the topic is always available to visitors, thus taking the onus off of label-writers to fit everything into a label that may be on display for a significant amount of time.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which also houses Greco-Roman antiquities, displays all of their Greek art with African subjects together, allowing the visitor to see that a.) such subjects were more common in Greek art than one might think and b.) the labels for each object are within enough proximity that they can inform each other, taking the burden off of just one label to discuss different aspects of its context: what visual cues tell us that these are Africans? How do we fit them into the social performances of the symposium? From where did the Greeks think these subjects came from? This is not to say that I think the MFA's labels are perfect, though. While I don't prefer using the term "Aithiopian" for a general audience, I think it's translation and contextualization within Greek thought was done well. I do think using Herodotus' book 3 description of Aithiopians is a bit misleading, as it suggests that Herodotus' ideas were commonly held amongst all Greeks. It ends the label on a positive note, but does not address the negative opinions expressed by other Greek writers, like Aristotle. If there's anything we've learned so far, it's that what the Greeks actually thought about Africans is not straight-forward.

In my eyes, an ideal label for objects with African subjects would address the connections between modernity and antiquity, distinct as they may be. Racialized subjects provide an opportunity for the othering of ancient peoples to be connected to the othering of modern peoples. For example, the way that the ancient Greeks codified an Aithiopian type, with very specific features, is not too dissimilar from the way white Americans of the 19th century created "Blackface," a performance where white actors put black substances on their face and exaggerated certain features like their lips to intentionally mock Black people. While mockery may not have been the intention for Greek depictions of Africans, we can see a similar dehumanization through reducing an entire race of people into a few phenotypical traits. While the historical context is completely different, what remains is the othering of the Black body. In the words of Sarah Derbew, "it is impossible to isolate the past while living in the present, but it is the responsibility of curators and academics to confront twenty-first-century notions of Blackness before making conclusive remarks about the representations of blackness in Greek antiquity." Just because these modernity and antiquity are not directly related does not mean they cannot inform each other.

In conclusion, today we've talked about some of the issues in interpreting depictions of Africans in Greek pottery. Focusing on a particular representation from the Getty Villa Museum collection, we discussed how its lack of ancient context makes its interpretation particularly difficult and how Greek pottery conventions must be considered to prevent misnomers in terminology. We briefly discussed scholarly opinions about prejudice in ancient Greece and how this could be connected to the stereotypical depictions of Africans in Greek pottery. Lastly, I pointed out the negative impact that inaccurate and overly-simplified labels can have on what the visitor actually learns about the object. I believe that with enough effort, flexibility, and forward-thinking, museum professionals can find new ways to offer their visitors nuanced, thorough interpretations that enrich their museum experience.