Who used Greek vases and when? How did the context of their use, that is, when and where they were used, affect the meaning of the imagery on the vases? Is there a connection between the choice of image and the intended audience and context of use? How much did the painter take into consideration the consumer of the vases, be they Athenian or foreign, as he made his choice of images? Calling for contextual studies for vases may be naïve when so many of the vases do not come from known provenances. In fact, answers too many of our questions are constrained by the inability to associate a user, let alone a place of use with vases now on display in museums. It is figural decorated pottery from archaeological excavations that is the key to establishing patterns of image distribution and contexts of viewing. It has been stated that the imagery on vases with known provenances does not reveal any geographic pattern of image preference, and thus Attic painters did not make their choice of images with a particular consumer in mind. Such statements, however, may be a product of the diffuse way questions are being asked. This paper will limit the discussion to a well-defined group of images with a well-defined question in order to discern a clearer pattern.

Figured pottery excavated since 1968 at the Agora excavations, the terminal date of find for the material in Mary Moore’s monumental Agora XXIII (black-figure) and Agora XXX (red-figure) from the Athenian Agora excavations, confirms a pattern clear in Moore’s publications: we still have no graphic erotic scenes on figured pottery from the Agora excavations. This paper will explore both the significance of the absence of erotic images for the contexts of use associated with the Agora and its domestic environs, and review some of the scholarly theories regarding the relationship between painter and his audience in the Archaic and Classical periods by using the distribution pattern of erotic images as a prompt. Old data complemented by some new data will be presented, and finally some cultural analogies that might help us re-imagine the three-dimensional relationship between painter, image, and viewer will be offered. I will argue that more attention must be paid to both contexts of use and chronology when assessing the intentions of the painter. In the end, I will propose that there is no one model or theory that accounts for every pattern of image distribution.

The Case-Study

The case-study for this paper considers only images of heterosexual intercourse, specifically, images that clearly show the act of intercourse (Fig. 1). Thus, other types of scenes with distinctly erotic overtones including chase scenes and courting scenes, as well as scenes of homosexual intercourse are eliminated. The choice to focus on scenes of heterosexual intercourse emphasizes the difference between erotic implications (courting, love gifts) and consummation. As it will be seen, heterosexual intercourse rarely appears on the vases in Athenian houses, but the more subtle, precursors to the act are very common on figured pottery from Athenian domestic contexts. This distinction seems significant, and this paper argues that refinement of our questions – not just looking for “erotic” scenes, but specifically “intercourse” – will lead to a better understanding of the relationship of images and cultural values.

Scenes of heterosexual intercourse reached their most popular level at the end of the sixth century and beginning of the fifth century BC, but still there are only about 150 such scenes. The images begin in limited numbers in black-figure in the mid-sixth century, and all but disappear by the mid-fifth century, although most dating is stylistic, and few actually come from externally datable archaeological contexts. There is evidence for the...
popularity of heterosexual scenes on mid-sixth-century black-figured cup fragments from the Athenian Agora and the Acropolis, but I will focus on the peak of their production at ca. 500 BC in red-figure. Characteristics of the scenes include a man and a woman engaged in intercourse, sometimes from the rear, other times face to face, often in acrobatic positions (Fig. 1). These are not scenes of satyrs and maenads; these are images firmly set in the human world. Robert Sutton has described the sometimes sadistic, heterosexual erotic scenes as having, “…an emphasis on male self-expression…which provided both images to emulate and social catharsis for their male viewers and creators.”

The scenes are common in the tondo of cups, presenting a kind of titillating revelation for the drinker as he drained his wine. Group orgies do occur with the emphasis on a variety of acts of intercourse. Martin Kilmer, in his very useful study, *Greek Erotica on Attic Red-Figure Vases*, collected a great many of the scenes of heterosexual intercourse. Kilmer organized the erotic scenes by manner of intercourse, and he uses the images to explore Athenian sexual customs. Kilmer’s assumption that all Attic vases present Athenian sexual values aimed at an Athenian male audience, combined with my observation that these erotic scenes seem to be absent from Athens, begs a more thorough consideration of the audience and context of viewing for these images. If not Athenians, then who? And is there something non-Athens about their message?

A large body of pottery dating from the height of production of erotic heterosexual images exists in Athens. Pottery associated with the clean-up following the Persian destruction of Athens in 479 BC provides as much of a snapshot as we can get of Late Archaic Athenian household assemblages. The excavations of the Athenian Agora include the domestic zone encircling the public square, and they have revealed 22 deposits associated with the clean-up following the Persian sack of the city. Not all the Persian destruction deposits are from households, since some contain fragments of public architecture and some contain pottery from sales shops. Nevertheless, it is likely that much of the pottery originated “in the cupboards of Athenian houses.” Kilmer, among others, has argued that the reason we have so few erotic images of any type from Greece proper is that preservation of pottery from sites is so poor. In fact, that argument is negated by the wealth of pottery from the Persian destruction deposits, which, fortuitously, coincide with the height of the production of erotic images. Among the some one hundred pieces of red-figured pottery from the Persian destruction clean-up, there are no examples of scenes of heterosexual intercourse. There are some more scenes with erotic overtones among the Persian destruction pottery, including images of hetairai, courting, and even more tangentially erotic references, such as a *hetaira* with dwarf (Fig. 2). In addition to the thorough publication of the red-figured pottery by Moore, and the discussion of the Persian destruction deposits by T. Leslie Shear, Jr., I have also reviewed the published and unpublished figured pottery for all Persian destruction deposits. There remains no example of an erotic image lurking unpublished in the storerooms of the Stoa of Attalos.

It is useful to consider what types of images do occur on the red-figure from the Agora Persian destruction deposits. The images are types usually classified as “genre” or everyday scenes. These include a boy with meat
(Fig. 3); symtopic scenes, including a symposiast playing kottabos; and a man on his way to a symposium. Also absent, along with graphic sexual scenes, are elaborate mythological tales. There are non-narrative references to myth, especially the ubiquitous Dionysos, but surprisingly few images that need be associated with a particular mythological story, with the exception of a handful of oft-repeated deeds of Herakles.

In sum, imagery on the pottery from households of Late Archaic Athens shows no preference for erotic heterosexual images at the peak of their production in the Attic ceramic workshops. Where are the pots with erotic images found? Returning to Kilmer’s lists, the few vases that do have provenances come from Tarquinia, Orvieto, Florence, and Adria. Two do have non-domestic Athenian provenances: a plaque from the Acropolis and an askos from the Kerameikos, which will be discussed below. If one applies the rule of thumb that complete or nearly complete vases in European museums are likely to have come from Italy, and good preservation may indicate a tomb context, this would account for most of the 43 examples that Kilmer lists in his chapter on heterosexual intercourse.

What does the Pattern of Distribution Mean?

What does this pattern of distribution of images with scenes of heterosexual intercourse tell us about the relationship between the painter and the viewer of the vase? Can knowledge of the viewer and the context of use help us? Is the pattern for erotic heterosexual images paralleled by other types of images?

In order to unlock the larger cultural meaning of the pattern, it is useful to consider some of the models proposed by scholars to characterize the relationship between Athenian painter and foreign audience. Summarized here are some plausible models for the relationship between painter and consumer, which will then be applied to the evidence for images of heterosexual intercourse. Since the few known findspots for the images are Etruscan, I will present the models with an Etruscan consumer in mind.

First, a characterization of the relationship between painter and consumer from the painters’ perspective:

- At one extreme: the Attic painter paints what he knows, and has no consideration for consumer, intended context of use, or viewer. Some pots stay at home, some go abroad, but there is no systematic selection for either market. Variations on this view include that the painter is working with only an Athenian viewer in mind, and that subsequent export of the vase is inconsequential to his iconographic choices. This view includes T.B.L. Webster’s “second-hand market” theory.

- In the middle: the painter may know that the vase is destined for export, and selects particular images from his overall repertoire that he has heard do well abroad (this may include tailoring imagery for particular geographic areas). An example of such tailoring includes the work of the Perizoma group, to be discussed in a moment.

- At the other extreme: the painter makes the choice to modify imagery or create new images or shapes to satisfy the export market. Modifications may be based on information about what sells well to the consumer group, or the modifications may be based on stories he has heard about non-Attic consumers, and so he tries to appeal to sensibilities that are not Athenian. Often cited examples are the non-Attic sensibilities expressed on the black-figure Tyrrhenian amphorai and the non-Attic shape of Nikosthenic amphorai, among others.

Second, a characterization of the Etruscan consumer’s side of the equation:

- At one extreme: the consumer buys whatever comes his way, regardless of shape or decoration. He is just happy to have something Athenian.

- In the middle: the consumer buys Attic shapes that appeal, regardless of imagery. Certain sites or areas desired a particular shape, and wanted lots of decoration, regardless of what it was.

- The Etruscan consumer may also prefer images that can be assimilated easily to his worldview. Greek gods and heroes were popular because they can be equated with local characters; the symposium could be equated with funerary banquets; athletes with funeral games, etc.

- Finally, a more subtle view, the Etruscan consumer wants images that reflect what he thinks Attic culture was like, even if that view was itself distorted.
The reality is likely to be all of the above, some of the time. For example, most scholars now agree that certain shapes created in Athens were designed to emulate foreign forms, and had no market at home. The Nikosthenic amphorai and kyathoi follow the model of painter and potter catering directly to the foreign consumer’s taste.24 As mentioned above, the Tyrrenian amphorai and vases by the Perizoma Group also seem to cater directly to the market with both their shapes and modified iconography.25 This direct effect model, however, does not account for every pattern of distribution. In other cases, for example the vast number of generic hoplite warrior scenes, the painter may have had no idea of the pots’ final destinations; some stayed at home, some were sold abroad. The Etruscan consumer may have valued the warrior scenes not because of the cultural implications of the hoplite warrior, but because it spoke to particular martial aspects of his local culture.26 Indeed, the same image has different meanings in different cultural and use contexts. Of course the Attic vases, regardless of their images, held the cachet of imported, Greek goods in the social context of Etruria; nonetheless, pottery had functions in Etruscan culture, and thus, only functionally useful forms would be welcomed.27

The statement mentioned above, that there is no discernible pattern of distribution of Attic vase iconography, must also be re-evaluated. The statement that “all scenes on Attic pots from Athens can be found in export contexts,”28 holds true with some caveats, but the opposite, “all scenes on Attic pots found in export contexts can be found in Athens,” requires a finer resolution so as not to obscure important distinctions. In fact, “all scenes on Attic pots in export contexts cannot be found in the Athenian Agora, that is, in domestic contexts of Athens.” This observation underscores the fact that even within Athens there is a distinction between contexts of use for figured wares. Elaborate mythological scenes are found on the Acropolis, but are almost non-existent in the houses near the Agora. There are, indeed, erotic scenes in black-figure from the Acropolis dating to the mid-sixth century BC.29 Within the time frame of the present study these are a Late Archaic red-figure askos from the Kerameikos and a lekythos from a grave discovered by the Metro excavations.30 What was deemed occasionally appropriate as a votive offering—to the gods or for the dead—was not representative of imagery Athenians had in their own homes.31 Recognizing meaningful patterns in the evidence requires the right resolution of analysis. Too general of a comparison such as Attica vs. Etruria misses important subtleties that reflect cultural use of figured wares.32

The potting industry at Athens was a commercial endeavor. The aim of the workshop or owner – or however the pottery business was organized – was to sell pots. We do not fully understand the mechanisms of pottery trade, although we certainly have the evidence to confirm that Attic pottery was intentionally and commercially exported, not informally carried in small quantities by individuals. Regardless of how sales’ feedback reached the potters and painters in Athens, the production of Attic versions of foreign shapes indicates that some sales’ feedback did exist. If, as Robin Osborne has argued, the non-Greek consumers would have been happy with whatever the trader happened to have on his boat when it docked at the local harbor, then we would not have the distinctive patterns of shape distributions that Christoph Reusser has demonstrated for Attic pottery imported to Etruscan sites.33

The heterosexual erotic scenes seem to belong to the category of manipulated images, and to one of the more complicated relationship models. Alan Shapiro’s recent discussion of the Perizoma Group’s Etruscanizing vases offers some useful parallels for the erotic scenes as products purposely directed toward a foreign audience.34 In both the erotic scenes and the various scenes by the Perizoma Group, we see types of images that look convincingly Greek, but with some unusual features. On the vases from the Perizoma Group, the features include the added loin-cloth where nudity would be expected in a Greek viewing context. In the erotic scenes, we have convincing sympotic settings, but views of sexual activity that are normally not presented on vases. We cannot be sure what the Late Archaic Greek painters thought about the Etruscans, since as Shapiro points out, Greek literary sources that describe the Etruscans as odd, especially in reference to their “barbaric” sexual practices, including wanting to sleep with their wives, are up to two hundred years later than the peak of the vase trade to Etruria. The sources are also very much in the topoi of descriptions of barbarians that reflect Greek fascination, repulsion, and sometimes titillation by the other. In the absence of Late Archaic literary sources, the Perizoma Group along with vases with erotic imagery may be an indication of a Greek opinion about the Etruscans already taking hold. Shapiro comments about the Perizoma Group’s depictions: “To a large extent [the images] involve the same conventional Greek topoi about barbarians in general and Etruscans in particular that we find in later literary sources from Herodotos to the Hellenistic historians.”35 The heterosexual erotic images may also be voicing the same topoi and characterization of the sexuality of the Etruscans.

However, to be my own devil’s advocate, let me introduce another hypothesis: what if the erotic images appealed to the Etruscans not because the images faithfully represented Etruscan views on sexuality, but instead the images appealed because it is what the Etruscans thought about the Greeks?36 It is then Greek sexuality that becomes the titillation, not the Etruscans.37 There is no firm evidence to support this proposition, but I make it to underscore the potential complexity of the meanings of images.

I close with two more modern cultural analogies that may help us to understand how complex and complicated the relationship between producer and consumer of images can become in a commercial market. First, the early modern trade in Chinese pottery for export may help us understand production for a foreign market. When Europe became interested in Chinese pottery in the seventeenth century
AD, European traders brought back pottery comparable to that which actual Chinese (of a high status) would have used themselves. As European demand for Chinese pottery expanded, however, a sophisticated relationship between consumer and producer resulted in Chinese production of shapes that had no cultural meaning within China, such as punch bowls, and decoration that was unmistakably “Chinese” in style, but with elements exaggerated to appeal to the western consumer (Fig. 4). The export pottery assumed shapes and decoration that would never have been found in a Chinese household. It is possible that the Etruscan market similarly affected production so that some “Attic-style” pottery was never intended for use by an Athenian, but still featured “Greek-inspired” imagery. The foreign consumer did not want to see himself on the pottery, but the “other.” This analogy works for the shapes and iconography that appeal more directly to the Etruscans, such as the Nikosthenic amphorae.

Finally, I end with an analogy for the speculative view proposed above that the erotic imagery on Attic vases actually reflects what the Etruscans thought about the Attic “other.” Postcards produced around the turn of the twentieth century for the French market reflect the allure of Orientalism and the construction of exotic sexuality of women from the French colonial world. Imagery of a woman from Algeria produced for the domestic French audience (Fig. 5) plays to the expectations of the French viewers. This is what the French viewers wanted to think went on in the harem; however, the image presents a fiction and does not reflect real behavior of Islamic women in Algeria. In the same way, the Attic erotic imagery may play to the expectations of the non-Attic, Etruscan viewer. It is what the Etruscans wanted to imagine happened in the symposium, and the crafty Attic potters and painters were more than happy to oblige for the sales.

This paper began by giving the conclusion: there are no new erotic scenes from the Agora excavations. This paper explored various models for the relationship between Attic painters and their home and foreign markets in order to understand the significance of the pattern of distribution of heterosexual erotic images in particular. The discussion underscored that the market was multi-faceted, and that some models work for some parts of trade, but not all. We also need to recognize that to find meaningful patterns of distribution; we need to ask more subtle questions. So the statement “scenes found abroad can be found in Athens,” may be true, but misses the subtle distinction of chronological developments and contexts of use even within Athens. Not all imagery found on vases in Etruria has parallels from the houses of Athens. But for some images: athletics, warriors, symposia, the statement is true. If we are interested in what images Athenians chose for use in their own houses, for their own symposia, we need to be more careful about our questions. In order to understand the significance of image choices, it is essential to achieve the right resolution for data analysis. In the end, the absence of erotic images from Athenian houses is significant, but I cannot explain why graphic heterosexual images did not appeal to homeowners in the city of Athens in the Late Archaic to Early Classical periods. Recognizing the pattern is the first step towards understanding it.
Notes

1 These issues are well-explored by V. Stissi, in: J.P. Crielard, V. Stissi and G. Jan van Wijngaarden (eds), The Complex Past of Pottery (1999) 83–133.


3 Stissi (supra n. 1) 98.


6 Lewis (2002, supra n. 4) 116–129 has also focused on the reception of erotic images in Etruria.

7 For example, the keyword “erotic” appears in the Beazley Archive Database for images of courting as well as intercourse.


10 Sutton (supra n. 7) 32.

11 See, for example, the tondo of a cup by the Thalia Painter, Berlin, Antikensammlung 3251; ARV² 113.7; 1592. 1626; Par 332; BAd² 173; CVA Berlin 2 pls 56.4; 57–59.

12 M. Kilmer, Greek Erotica on Attic Red-Figure Vases (1993) vii. The subject of erotic imagery, both visual and poetic, constitutes a vast bibliography. For example, see: J. Boardman and E. La Rocca, Eros in Greece (1978); E. Keuls, The Reign of the Phallus (1985); D. Halperin, Erotic, poetic, constitutes a vast bibliography. For example, see:


15 Shear (supra n. 13).

16 Tondo of the Gorgias cup with a boy holding a hare, Agora XXX no. 1407 pl. 130; nude woman with shoes, Agora XXX no. 1554 pl. 146; fragmentary tondo preserving feet of a homosexual couple indicating a face-to-face embrace, Manner of Euphronios, Agora XXX no. 1556 pl. 147; hetaira with dwarf, Agora XXX no. 1411 pl. 132.

17 Agora XXX; Shear (supra n. 13).

18 Boy with meat, P 32417, J. Camp, Hesperia 65, 1996, 248 no. 29 fig. 8 pl. 74; kottabos player, Agora XXX no. 1572 pl. 148; man on way to symposium, P 32420, Camp (supra) 248 no. 28 fig. 8 pl. 74. Note that there are no multi-person sympotic scenes set in antrones such as the kind the Brygos Painter or Douris depict.

19 For example, sides A and B of the Gorgias cup, Agora XXX no. 1407: side A features an unlabeled battle of Achilles and Memnon; side B Dionysos, satyrs and maenads. Herakles and Dionysos appear more frequently on the late black-figured objects from the Persian destruction debris. For example, a cup-skyphos with Herakles wrestling the Nemean lion: Agora XXIII no. 1519 pl. 103. This composition is reproduced frequently on both cups and lekythoi, see Agora XXIII no. 897 pl. 80.


21 T.B.L. Webster, Potter and Patron in Classical Athens (1972) 272.


26 C. Marconi, in: Marconi (supra n. 22) 27–40.

27 The cultural use of Attic pottery in Etruria also has a vast bibliography. See Scheffer (supra n. 22); Reusser (supra n. 22); L. Hannestad, ActaArch 59, 1988, 113–130; A. Nilsson, AnalRom 26, 1999, 7–23.

28 See, for example, Steiner (supra n. 2) 235.

29 Discussed above, see note 8 (A. Lemos).


31 It is possible that the erotic images had apotropaic qualities in these contexts and/or relate to ritual. See also Lewis (2002, supra n. 4) 117.

32 Osborne (supra n. 2) 282 recognizes that there are differences between the imagery found on the Acropolis and in the Agora, but does not consider how the different contexts may have affected the choice of image.


34 Shapiro (supra n. 24) 315–337.

35 Shapiro (supra n. 24) 337. S. Lewis (2003, supra n. 4) also sees vase imagery as reflecting Greek stereotypes of Etruscans.

36 Interestingly, Etruscan-made, Greek-style vases for the

J. Emerson, J. Chen and M. Gates, Porcelain Stories: From China to Europe (2000) 252. At the height of the market, European artists sometimes created design templates for production in China. It is worth considering if such a relationship between artist and producer may explain other aspects of the Attic vase trade, including the presence of Etruscanizing shapes.

M. Alloula, The Colonial Harem (1986). Although Alloula’s study is post-colonial in its analysis of the postcards, the manipulation and construction of commercial postcard images to suit the viewer’s/consumer’s perspective are universal. The analogy of the general tourist postcard may be less culturally encumbered by post-colonial passions. Tourist postcards present to the viewer (the tourist) ideal or embellished views of their own holiday experience. Attic vase imagery may be created in a similar way: the Attic painters are aiming at the ideal as conceived by their audience, whether true or not. The conceit of the postcard is alive and well in Athens today. Cute, clean kittens stare out from every postcard rack, while dirty, mangy cats tread the real streets of Athens.