Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Creativity in the Vase-Painting of Euphronios

Guy Hedreen (Williams College) -- 2016-17 Ridgway Lecture

Friday, March 3, 2017 - 7:30pm

CMU (Communications) 120

Euphronios is widely held to be the most innovative ceramic artist working at Athens at the end of the Archaic period. His obvious fascination with the problem of depicting the complex dynamism of the human body on a flat surface, evident in all of his vase-painting, anticipates the revolutionary new style of painting and sculpture that we call Classical.

In this talk, Guy Hedreen explores a new facet of the artist who calls himself Euphronios. Shifting the attention away from his approach to the objective translation of the visible into the pictorial, he explores the painter's subjective conception of his own artistry. Fundamental to this exploration of subjectivity within the art of Euphronios is its relationship to a series of vases signed by an artist who calls himself Smikros or, in English, “Tiny.” Though calling himself Tiny, the artist takes responsibility for several ambitious vase-paintings, including the earliest “self-portrait” in the history of Western art. In this picture, Smikros depicts himself as the guest of honor at an improbably lavish party. All of the vases signed by Smikros are hard to distinguish stylistically from the vase-painting signed by Euphronios as painter. In this talk, Hedreen draws the surprisingly not hitherto ventured conclusion that “Smikros” is a fictitious creation, an alter-ego, of the vase-painter and potter Euphronios himself. Perhaps his greatest achievement as an artist, beyond his conquest of the depiction of the human body, was the creation of a fictitious artist so compelling that it fooled the greatest connoisseur in the history of the study of Athenian vase-painting, Sir John Beazley. Within several of the vase-paintings signed by Smikros, however, there are anomalies that puzzled Beazley. Those anomalies are best understood as intentional: they are invitations to scrutinize the identity, artistry, character, and ambition of “Tiny,” the artist with the oversized ego. In turn, they invite us to think about the creativity of Euphronios, who is, after all, the painter who (sometimes) calls himself Smikros.

If modern scholars have failed to appreciate the subjectivity of Euphronios, that is due to differences in our expectations. The vase-paintings were intended for a social context, the symposium, which featured the performance and re-performance of poetry. Some of the iambic poetry that circulated within symposia featured ideas very similar to those explored by Euphronios. They include first-person narratives in which the poet appears in the guise of someone else, and first-person narratives in which the poet's rivals are fictitious artists. Exaggeration, boastfulness, and implausibility surround many of the claims of iambic poetic narrators. Their outlandishness focuses critical attention on the
persona of the poet, just as Euphronios’ vase-painting calls critical attention to the persona of the ceramic artisan Smikros. The aim of Euphronios was to be recognized as an artist equal in creativity to any practitioner of sympotic art, even a great poet.

**A reception in the Simpson Humanities Center (CMU 202/204) will follow the lecture.**

This talk is the annual Ridgway Lecture, sponsored by the [Puget Sound Society of the Archaeological Institute of America](https://www.archaeological.org). Through the generosity of an anonymous donor, the Puget Sound Society of the AIA is privileged to have its own endowed lectureship, established in 1992 in honor of and inaugurated by Professor Brunilde S. Ridgway of Bryn Mawr College. The lectureship allows the society to invite a speaker of its choice each year. Click [HERE](https://www.archaeological.org) for a list of previous Ridgway Lectures.

Please note that Professor Hedreen will be giving a departmental lecture, to which all are invited, on Thursday, March 2, at 4:00 PM (391 Paccar Hall). Click [HERE](https://www.archaeological.org) for details on that lecture.