

RED-FIGURE PYXIS WITH THREE LABORS OF HERACLES

Greek, Attic, late 6th – early 5th century B.C.

Terracotta

H: 4.3 cm (1.69 in) - D: 7.5 cm (2.95 in)

Reference: 35472



This very simple pyxis is cylindrical and without handles. Its overall shape recalls that of a reel, because of the small ridge in relief painted in black around the lid and the base. The two elements composing the vessel are a clear match, since the circumference of the lid, slightly wider, is perfectly adapted to that of the vertical walls of the box.

The body of the vessel is decorated with three scenes, painted in the black-figure technique, taken from a great mythological story recounting the tasks ("Labors") that Heracles, the most famous Greek hero, had to perform as an atonement for the unintentional killing of the children he had had with Megara, his first wife.

Among the twelve canonical Labors of Heracles, the painter chose to represent the hero fighting the Nemean Lion, the Erymanthian Boar and the Cretan Bull. More than for narrative purposes, this choice would have been influenced by the iconographic similarity of the scenes and by the limitations of the vessel's shape. Each composition shows the naked Heracles in full action, his back bent, fighting the creatures with his bare hands and endeavoring to make them submit. The three scenes are separated by the attributes of the hero hanging from the upper frieze, namely a bow and quiver, a lion skin and a club.

In addition to these three Labors represented on the body of the vessel, there is another scene painted on the top of the lid; an Amazon, holding two spears, walks towards the left, next to her horse. This image can also be linked, though less clearly, to the cycle of the Labors of Heracles and, more specifically, to the hero's battle with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, after he had stolen her magical girdle.

Pyxides generally were small, circular boxes intended to contain small objects or to be used as cosmetic boxes. They could vary in type (with convex walls, with a knobbed lid, with three feet, etc.). The simple, cylindrical shape, like that of our example, is of Corinthian origin (it

appeared in Corinth during the second half of the 7th century B.C.); it was still widespread in Attica in the late 6th and 5th century B.C.

This vessel is of an excellent technical level. But from a stylistic point of view, the painting is slightly hasty and hesitant; the compositions, though correct and perfectly clear, are extremely succinct. More than by the competition of the red-figure style, which at that time already attracted the most renowned artists, this phenomenon can be explained by the great success of contemporary Attic pottery, which led the potters and painters to standardize, so as to respond to the increasing demand, especially for small-sized vessels such as lekythoi, cups and pyxides.

CONDITION

Complete and in very good condition; minor chips and superficial wear; paint now partially flaked off or faded. Large turning traces.

PROVENANCE

Ex- Thetis Foundation collection, Geneva, acquired before 1970;
The Gilbert collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts, acquired in Geneva,
8 May 2016.

PUBLISHED

The Gilbert Collection: by Phoenix Ancient Art, New York, 2019, no. 107

EXHIBITED

La Biennale, Grand Palais, Paris, 11-17 September 2019;

PAD London, Berkeley Square, London, 30 September 6 – October 2019

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On Corinthian pyxides, see:

PAYNE H., *Necrocorinthia: A Study of Corinthian Art in the Archaic Period*, Oxford, 1931, pp. 293 ff.

On Attic black figures at that time, see:

BOARDMAN J., *Athenian Black-Figure Vases: A Handbook*, London, 1974, pp. 146 ff.

ROBERTS S.R., *The Attic Pyxis*, Chicago, 1978, pl. 9-18.

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/testSearch.asp>