

# THE INFLUENCE OF BASKETRY ON ATTIC GEOMETRIC POTTERY

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## Introduction

The Geometric period constitutes a striking and sharply defined episode in the development of Greek ceramics. On the one side stand the vases of the outgoing Bronze Age: decadent to be sure, but still retaining a good deal of subtlety. The shapes are generously rounded and many of them still show the refining influence of metal work. The painted decoration is still based in large part on local plant or animal life; occasionally it echoes contemporary wall paintings; it is normally confined to certain limited areas, carefully selected for the most effective deployment and display of the design. The painting is done in an easy, freely swinging brush style.

The typical vase of the Geometric Period has quite a different flavour. "This art of thin lines and sharp corners, this small, bleak, thrifty art, presents a strange contrast to the rich swell and swing of Mycenaean forms", -- to use Mr. Beazley's words. Some peasant blood has evidently contaminated ~~the~~ princely stock. A number of the old shapes have gone; several new ones have appeared. The forms of the vases at their best impress one with their clarity and straightforward dignity; as often, however, they are stolid or downright dull. Seldom is the influence of metal work in evidence. In the earlier phases of the style naturalistic

1. Typical  
L.H.vases

2. Geomet-  
ric Oinochoe  
in Toronto

motifs are eschewed, the decorative repertory consisting ~~extensively~~ <sup>exclusively</sup> of geometric and chiefly angular geometric patterns. Only later are water birds, horses and eventually human figures admitted; and their forms partake of the same geometric quality as the abstract motifs. Equally striking is the change in the distribution of the decoration. The designs are now arranged chiefly in encircling bands which cover the surface of the vase evenly from bottom to top and admit of only very limited localization of significant elements in salient areas.

3. Orientalizing vase

The vases of the succeeding, Orientalizing, Period represent in many respects a reversion to the basic principles of the late Bronze Age and to what might be regarded as the more normal Greek ceramic style. Shapes recover their refinement and delicacy, oftentimes in consequence of rivalry between the potter and the metal worker. Naturalistic motifs, plants, animals and human activities, soon push the old geometric designs to subordinate positions. The principal figures are now greatly increased in scale and they are set boldly in specific and carefully chosen areas, with the result that they give the impression of a picture applied to the vase rather than decoration woven into its surface. The vase painter, moreover, is obviously delighted to be able to swing his brush once more as a brush should be swung.

How are we to account for the curious interlude constituted by the Geometric period? After the initial discovery of significant quantities of Geometric pottery in the 70's of the last century and the approximate determination of



its chronology, the intrusion of the style was attributed by some scholars to the coming of the Dorians. The closer dating of the new style, however, appeared to leave a formidable gap between the Dorian invasion and the appearance of Geometric pottery in southern Greece, while at the same time scholars were sobered by the growing consciousness of their ignorance of the artistic pedigree of the Dorian people prior to their arrival in Greece.

It has been argued that the Geometric style represents a revival of motifs and principles of decoration which are discernible as far back as the Early Bronze Age, which flourished in the Middle Bronze Age but which were then largely submerged by a flood of Cretan influence and survived only in peasant handicrafts such as weaving, leather work and wood carving. This hypothesis, though attractive in many respects, is almost certainly invalidated by the virtually complete absence of the significant geometric motifs from the pottery of the Late Bronze Age over a period of several centuries. Pottery-making, after all, was probably the most common handicraft practised in ancient Greece.

Another hypothesis was advanced by Herr Kekulé in a lecture before the Berlin Archaeological Society in July, 1890. Kekulé advised archaeologists to take a leaf from the book of the anthropologists and to note to what extent the potter has been influenced by that other craftsman, the basketmaker. Kekulé pointed out not only that many features in both the shape and decoration of early Greek vases were clearly derived from basketry, but that baskets had been the determining prototypes for certain ceramic styles. Kekulé

promised to develop the theme in greater detail elsewhere, but to my knowledge this promise was not fulfilled and his original message has received, I think, less attention than it deserves.

This afternoon I should like to test and, I hope, confirm Kekulé's hypothesis by examining a few specific examples, and then to point out the wider implications of this hypothesis. In the limited time available, I shall deal only with Attic Geometric which is generally, and no doubt rightly, regarded as the leading school of the period and which should, therefore, provide a good test case.

In seeking parallels in basketry, I shall feel free to roam almost at will in both space and time. Inasmuch as the basketmaker has allowed himself to be governed in a remarkable degree by the nature of his materials and by the limited range of his technique, his products show relatively little variation from region to region and from age to age. It has been observed, for instance, that baskets made by the Fellahin of modern Egypt are scarcely distinguishable from those recovered from the tombs of the Old or Middle Kingdom, while the shapes and weaves of baskets made in the American Southwest today are practically identical with those of pre-Columbian specimens found in the Pueblos. The bulk of the repertory of decorative designs, moreover, is shared by the basketmakers of the world so that resemblances of a sort that in the field of vase painting would appear very striking may commonly be found as between baskets, say, of Central Africa and the west coast



of Canada. A high degree of uniformity exists also in the syntax of decoration no matter where or when the baskets were produced.

Let us now turn to a few comparisons between pots and baskets. I wish to emphasize the interrelation in respect of vase shape, decorative motifs and syntax of the decorative design. These three aspects of the subject will inevitably, however, be somewhat confused in the presentation.

Let me say at the beginning that, for lack of adequate illustration, I am passing over a small group of vases which would seem to have been moulded in actual baskets so that they inevitably reflect with mechanical precision both the shape and decoration of basketry. This mechanical influence, however, is of less interest to our present theme than other, less direct forms.

#### Shapes

Of the three aspects, vase shapes were perhaps the least significantly affected by the interaction between the two crafts. It is quite clear that in Attica at any rate there was an unbroken tradition of vase-making as from the Late Bronze Age throughout the Geometric Period, and the selection and development of shapes occurred for the most part within this ceramic tradition. It can be shown, however, that several shapes which occur most commonly or exclusively in the Geometric Period are taken directly from basketry and that certain other shapes show the indirect influence of the sister craft.

4. Basket-  
moulded bowl  
from Athenian  
Agora

Of the shapes borrowed directly, the most obvious

5. Geometric kalathoi in Athens.

is the so-called kalathos: an open-mouthed container with outcurved sides and with the wall either solid and painted as here or fenestrated in clear imitation of openwork basketry. The shape, of course, is one of the most natural and most familiar in basketry. It is illustrated repeatedly on

6. R.F.Vase with wool basket.

Red Figure vases, usually as a wool container. Let us pause over this actual specimen which comes from Roman Egypt. You

7. Basket from Egypt in Toronto.

will have no difficulty in recognizing here the origin of the openwork in the walls of the clay copies. Let me draw your attention also to the heavy twisted bands, one, two, sometimes three in number which are commonly used by the basket weaver to separate bands of weaving of varying design; and will you note too the whipping which is the commonest means of binding the rim of a basket. I wish I could show you the bottom of this basket for it might have served as

8. Geometric Kalathos from Dipylon.

the model for the design painted on the underside of another clay basket of the Geometric Period. And this common basketry design, I would suggest, may well have inspired the hour-glass pattern which occurs so commonly on Protogeometric vases. You will have observed the painted counterpart of the twisted dividing bands and the transverse bars which clearly recall the straw binding of the rim.

The shape of the kalathos is simple, but its proportions and its curved profile may be thoroughly pleasing. I am inclined to think that it served as the inspiration for the

9. Early Geometric Amphora from Dipylon

upper parts of an amphora of a type that is splendidly represented by this specimen from the Dipylon.



10. Geometric  
basket.

The satchel type of basket occasionally appears in clay in the Geometric Period. The excavators among you will have recognized here the prototype of the zambeli. Note the shorthand rendering of the plaited handles and the rather fanciful imitation of the twined wall. Yet even in a free rendering such as this the Geometric artist is realistic by comparison with the Corinthian of the 6th century who depicted this scene of excavation on one of the Pentaskouphia Plaques.

12. Geomet-  
ric Jar in  
Toronto

Still another type of carrying basket has served as model for this vase. The transverse handle is, of course, distinctive. You will note the suggestion of binding on the handle and the tell-tale cross strokes on the rim. The close-set narrow bands on the wall undoubtedly echo the familiar pattern of coiled basketry. This Pueblo piece will illustrate the foregoing points. The slack, baggy shape and open mouth, so characteristic of baskets of this general type, would seem to have influenced for the worse the shapes of certain Geometric vases, especially pitchers of the sort represented here.

13. Pueblo  
basket.

14. Grave  
group from  
Agora.

Of the vase shapes that came and went with the Geometric Period the most popular and significant was the flat pyxis with curved side wall. Here there can surely be no question that the prototype was the woven basket of the familiar sewing-box type. Apart from the shape, the ancestry is indicated by the way in which the lid is supported on a ledge and very obviously by the spider-web pattern that commonly appears on

15. Sewing  
basket.

the underside. An identical pattern is woven in the grass of my wife's sewing basket, made by an Algonquin Indian. Notice also the criss-cross binding of the rim of the lid, -- a pattern that was frequently used by the Geometric potter in the corresponding position on his vase. The prototype for the lid ledge is evident in this Egyptian bread basket of the 18th Dynasty, which will also illustrate the practice familiar in basketry of securing the lid by means of cords; holes for the cords are commonly found in the rims and lids of the Geometric pyxides. In shaping the knob on his pyxis lid, the potter often indulged his love for turning, though even the basketmaker can produce a knob of sorts. Let me draw your attention to the oblique banding on the fret pattern of this west-coast "pyxis", -- an effect inevitable in basketry and commonly copied by the pot painter, especially on his maeanders, as here.

The top-shaped pyxis makes its first appearance along with the flat pyxis, but is of much rarer occurrence and more short lived. The decoration is derived from basketry, but the shape suggests rather wood turning. It may be presumed, however, that the top-shaped pyxis was carried and hung in a net of straw or cord of the sort found on these little vases of similar shape from an Egyptian tomb of the 17th Dynasty.

A series of tripod stands that runs from beginning to end of the Geometric Period owes both shape and decoration to originals of basket and wicker work. Note the bracing of familiar wicker scheme with characteristic binding. Here a more elaborate specimen again with bracing of a form natural

16. Egyptian basket in Toronto.

17. Indian basket from west coast of Canada.

18. Grave Group in Toronto.

19. Pots in nets in an Egyptian tomb.

20. Early Geometric grave group in Berlin.

21. Terra-cotta Stand.



to basketry but strange and laborious in clay. This original in basketry, from Africa, will leave no doubt about the derivation of the form.

22. African basketry stand.

### Motifs

The same basket will also give us the originals of several of the most common Geometric decorative motifs. In general it may be said that the entire repertoire of geometric motifs found on the vases of our period can be paralleled in basketry. Since these designs are worked out naturally and easily in basketry, but require the most painstaking care when applied with a brush, we may be certain that they originated in the more congenial medium. On this one specimen are represented three of the commonest geometric motifs, viz. the zigzag line, the checkerboard and the twilled weave which was commonly reproduced with the brush by crosshatching. This modern "pyxis" from Sierra Leone depends for its decoration on the checkerboard alone, employed with a brilliant effect that would certainly have appealed to the eye and the fancy of an Athenian pot painter of our period. And here, finally, a group of Salish Indian baskets chosen at random, to illustrate again the zigzag, and also the dotted diamond and a variety of fretted designs.

23. Basket from Sierra Leone.

24. Salish Indian Baskets.

25. Indian Basket with figures.

The figure style of Geometric painting is equally indebted to the sister craft. I need not remind you that the silhouette which dominates the Geometric school succeeded the outline drawing of the Late Bronze Age and gave way in turn to outline drawing in the Orientalizing Period. The

silhouette style, which is thus shown to be intrusive in our period in the tradition of Greek vase painting, is universally employed in basketry. Furthermore, the harsh angularity which must appear strange in silhouettes drawn with the brush is dictated in basketry by the way in which the outline is contracted or expanded by units of uniform size. And then too, the basketer, again because he deals in these fixed units, will be naturally inclined to produce a series of rigidly uniform figures, whereas only the stern discipline of the Geometric Period could compel the Greek craftsman using brush and paint to do the like.

#### Syntax of Decoration

So much for individual motives and style of drawing. Equally significant is the indebtedness of the potter to the basketer in respect of syntax. In basketry the world over, the surface decoration, whether it consists of the simple lines produced by coiling or of geometric designs or of animal figures, tends to be spread uniformly over the vessel from bottom to top. This is natural inasmuch as the decoration is engendered in the actual fabrication which is itself likely to be uniform, and the weaver-decorator, not having been granted *carte blanche* so to speak, more readily composes his design in a succession of small and uniform units. It has frequently been observed, however, that the decoration of geometric vases is marked by a like, all-over application of identical or closely similar motives. This is not the result to be expected of a painter who sets about the decora-



tion of a finished surface with a paint brush. It is a fair presumption, therefore, that in this as in other respects the Geometric vase painter has been the borrower.

27. Indian  
Basket with  
figures.

Another universal characteristic of decoration in basketry is the encircling nature of the design, due partly to the fact that the weaving being uniform throughout the circumference assimilates the design to itself, and partly, no doubt, to the rarity of handles in basketry. Here again the vase decorator has yielded to his neighbor's influence, at the cost of many a strangely oriented figure and many a pathetic half line of maeander.

28. Geomet-  
ric Oinochoe  
in Toronto.

### Historical

Why did the Athenian potter thus subject himself so completely to influences from outside his own age-old craft? Greece and above all Attica are poor in the raw materials of basketry -- even such simple types as excavation baskets are nowadays imported from Egypt. The baskets, moreover, are likely to have made the greater impression by appearing suddenly from outside, -- as was certainly true in the case of oriental textiles in the following period. We may be reasonably certain, therefore, that the baskets came from abroad. By whom were they brought and when? Let us take the second question first. The earliest significant occurrence of the indubitable influence of basketry on Attic pottery within our general period appears to fall at the very end of the Bronze Age, i.e. in L.H. III C. The evidence is well illustrated by the great mass of pottery found by Broneer

in the well below the Cyclopean wall on the North Slope of the Acropolis. Broneer has dated the pottery in the neighborhood of 1200 B. C. and associates its deposition with the closing of the well, which, he argues, was due to the alarm caused by the coming of the Dorians. It is tempting to believe that the Dorians themselves were the basket bearers. If one may argue from the known practice of primitive races of recent times, such as the Indian of this continent, the Dorians, as a migratory people in a comparatively low state of culture, would have come well equipped with baskets. Though Attica, of course, was not overrun by the Dorians, baskets brought by the newcomers may very well have become known to the Athenian either through chance contact or through the influx of refugees to Attica. Athenian potters, realizing that their old ceramic style was fast approaching bankruptcy, must have welcomed the wealth of suggestions inherent in the new material. They would seem to have drawn on it hesitatingly at first, but then with increasing confidence and skill until by the 9th century they were exploiting its possibilities to the full. And it was largely because of their success in transferring the whole scheme of decoration from the exotic basketry to their own native pottery that they achieved a style more consistent, more plausible, and more pleasing than that of any other contemporary school.

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