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A JOURNAL OF ROMAN  
MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

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EDITED BY

DANIELE MALFITANA, JEROEN POBLOME,

JOHN LUND

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ANIMATING OBJECTS:  
EKPHRASTIC AND INSCRIBED LATE ANTIQUE  
MOVABLE MATERIAL CULTURE\*

HALLIE MEREDITH

THE dialectic that underpins this study is the inheritance of a Renaissance tripartite division and its misapplication to an earlier social world of cultural production. During the *paragone* debate, Renaissance and Mannerist courts focused on the individuality of artistic production, debating whether painting, sculpture or architecture was the highest art form. Reductionist terms, such as high *art* as opposed to low *craft*, were applied to these arts and have been maintained as labels with which modern scholars have continued referring to late antique material culture.<sup>1</sup>

Objects in texts (*ekphraseis*) and texts on objects (inscriptions), however, provide two kinds of ancient art historical source that interconnect art, text and material culture. A large body of fascinating work exists for both fields.<sup>2</sup> This discussion, more specifically focuses on a single category of aestheticized, movable material culture – highly carved vessels – of the late Roman period. This case study was selected, in part, to provide a cross-media analysis from a period of transition.

At its core, what distinguishes usable art objects from non-useful art is that the former mediate social interactions. *Ekphraseis* of usable art circulated animated imagery in para-narratives represented via social exchange. Inscriptions on usable art framed use, viewing and interpretation. Whilst the conceptual category of what I shall call “usable art” is typically a reflection of a character, personalised through use, in contrast, incidental objects rendered in *ekphraseis* often remain inert and stationary, neither in motion nor part of a highlighted interaction.

The late Roman novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius briefly foregrounds a visual description of a carved usable art object, a rock crystal vessel. The transformation visible in the depiction of this usable art object clearly parallels concurrent narrative events. Activated through use, the vessel’s transformation mirrors that of the title characters. The author presents the overlap between narrative

\* I am grateful for the support provided whilst a Research Fellow at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, NY. This paper benefitted from conversations with Jaś Elsner, Anthony Cutler and Kenneth Painter.

<sup>1</sup> For a biographic account of these issues in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see CELLINI [1949] 1995. Whilst the inherited binary resulting from the *paragone* debate serves as the starting point, this work will not explore 16<sup>th</sup> century issues of patronage, or ‘low’ vs. ‘high’ taste. On patronage in late antiquity, see CORMACK 1989; WRIGHT 1998; TANNER 2000; MACKIE 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently on *ekphrasis*, see WEBB 2009 for a complete bibliography. Within the field of epigraphy, see for example, *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* or *Inscriptiones graecae*. Omitted from this discussion are issues of literacy, differences as perceived in late antiquity between originality, copying and imitation. Nor are treatises by noted individuals in antiquity on aesthetics or the laws of art discussed. On originality and emulation, see for example BIEBER 1977; HÖLSCHER 2004: esp. pp. 58-85; PERRY 2005. For an example of treatises in antiquity, see Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*, III.1-4 and VII.1-18.

events, use of the vessel, significance of imagery, and the application of the engraved, animated design. The textual description of the Tattus rock crystal vessel punctuates a moment of change.

*Ekpraseis* were products of the same cultural fabric that created open-work vessels. Figural imagery and action portrayed on open-work vessels feeds the eyes. Viewing within the context of domestic Roman dining, for example, provided a myriad of social contrivances with which to bring *paideia* to the fore. How did the incorporation of open-work inscriptions affect late antique viewing and use? What did the “voice” of an inscribed open-work vessel articulate to viewers and users? What contributed to a tradition of inscriptions as decoration on highly carved, functional vessels? Writing is in its infancy as an art historical subject. A tacit division exists, typically separating the study of epigraphy from art. As a consequence, a potentially rich source for art historical study remains relatively untapped.

The visual study of epigraphy may be approached in a manner similar to iconography. The synergistic effect on original audiences, namely the role of inscriptions as an explicit part of an overall decorative programme, or in terms of use, is all too often omitted. Inscriptions on useful art objects invoke the viewer, the potential user, and the use of the object in order to perform an action. As a form of decoration, inscribed content unites text and object directly to help frame viewing and use. Text on open-work vessels provides evidence concerning contexts of use and display otherwise missing from these decontextualized objects. As records of interactions, text as decoration originally framed viewing and visual adornment. Today, it provides one of the few means of accessing original late antique social contexts.

This paper will (1) define the conceptual category of *useful art* as found in ancient written sources, (2) present an analysis of a visual description of a literary object (*ekphrasis*) as a textual case study, (3) present inscribed open-work vessels as a contemporaneous case study of surviving useful art, and (4) consider the social utility of the late antique imperial practice of inscribing emblems of office and other useful art objects.

#### THE CATEGORY OF USEFUL ART

*Usable* or *useful art* has a potential function as a utilitarian conceptual category with an aesthetic component; in addition, however, this category of object can be manipulated as part of an interaction with a given viewer.<sup>1</sup> The contexts in which useful art appears and is used can change because of its movable nature. In ancient ekphrastic treatments of usable art, mobility is often more relevant than size. Whilst usable objects are typically small in scale, they need not be. Consider, for example, Tryphiodorus’ Wooden Horse in the *Taking of Ilios* (57-102). The larger than life-sized Horse is involved in very different interactions with Greeks as compared to Trojans. Part of the deception inherent in the divinely inspired idea for the Horse is its mobility, enabling movement from outside of Troy’s city walls to within them.

<sup>1</sup> The terms *useful* and *usable art* are referred to interchangeably to refer to extant objects as well as real or imagined material culture.

Inscriptions on aestheticized, movable material culture can frame use, viewing and interpretation. Turning first to ekphrastic movable material culture before addressing an illustrative example of inscribed useful art, I will discuss one vessel in particular – a rock crystal vessel from a work by *Achilles Tatius* – as a case study of a carved vessel rich in late Roman social meaning.

#### Ekphrasis and Late Antique Viewing

As a source of evidence concerning late antique viewing, descriptions of vessels have been analyzed from the history of descriptions of literary objects (*ekphrasis*).<sup>1</sup> Descriptions of vessels sometimes closely approximate surviving objects. Despite their functional and decorative nature, shields are typically described with artistic license. Compare for example the *cup of Nestor* (11.632-636) to the *shield of Achilles* in the *Iliad* of Homer (18-19.22). In late antiquity, however, literary centrepieces are not restricted to functional, movable objects but often to paintings. Second Sophistic prose novels and later poems may contain a conspicuous or dominant literary description, for example a painting of the *Abduction of Europa* in *Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (1.1) or *Tryphiodorus' Wooden Horse* in *The Taking of Ilios* (57-102). Familiar objects are, however, frequently found in domestic or personalised dining contexts in narratives. As shared cultural symbols, *ekphrasis* of objects in motion raise questions concerning social meaning. *Ekphrasis* on the subject of movable material culture often played a role in mediating social interactions.

#### Useful Art in Ancient Texts

According to writers of Greek handbooks, one can only presume that surviving texts with prominent *ekphrasis* on useful art are the result of the application of years of training in the principles of rhetorical composition which, in turn, then have formed part of the canon taught to future generations of students.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary *progymnasmata* address how a novice was (theoretically) inducted into the art of rhetoric, specifically ekphrastic composition.<sup>3</sup> Selected from among *ekphrasis* composed and in circulation in late antiquity, this discussion will concentrate specifically on literary descriptions of vessels, principally on the late antique *Tatius rock crystal vessel* rendered in *Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon*.<sup>4</sup> Addressing the mechanism of evoking specific, shared images from speaker to listener, the recurring presence of the visual form

<sup>1</sup> This work will not address *ekphrasis* as part of its broader literary context. For such work on vision, viewing and *ekphrasis*, see FRIEDLÄNDER 1969 [1912]; HEFFERNAN 1993; MANAKIDOU 1993; ELSNER 1995; PUTNUM 1998; ELSNER 2000; LEACH 2000; ZANKER 2004; ELSNER 2005a, pp. 300-318; WEBB 2009.

<sup>2</sup> FELTEN 1913, pp. 1-2; KENNEDY 1999, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Surviving rhetorical handbooks are attributed to: *Theon* (first century AD), '*Hermogenes*' (c. second century AD), *Aphthonius* (fourth century AD), and *Nicolaus* (fifth century AD). For the surviving Greek texts, fragmentary and complete, on *Theon*, SPENGLER 1854-1856 vol. 2, pp. 118-120; PATILLON-BOLOGNESI 1997; on *Hermogenes*, RABE 1913, pp. 22-23; on *Aphthonius*, RABE 1926, pp. 36-41; *Aphthonius*, SPENGLER 1854-1856 vol. 2, pp. 46-49; on *Nicolaus*, FELTEN 1913, pp. 67-71. For a translation of all four texts, see KENNEDY 1999. On *ekphrasis* as a genre, see ELSNER 2002, pp. 1-18, WEBB 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as the *Tatius vessel*.

of literary vessels (i.e. useful art objects) indicates that useful art represented a category of “culturally significant images”.<sup>1</sup>

Late antique examples of *ekphrasis* are a crucial body of evidence with which modern scholars can gain access to an otherwise lost, learned approach to viewing, perceiving, and understanding useful art. *Ekphrasis* provides descriptions of objects and shows how contemporary late Roman eyes looked at and were trained to look at crafted usable art objects and their manufacture. If the history of *ekphrasis* provides the context in which users of similar real objects would have interpreted those objects, how did repeated use of this literary device in canonical works over several centuries shape people’s perceptions of highly crafted objects?

#### PHILOSTRATUS THE ELDER’S CLASSIFICATION OF VISUAL ART FORMS

*Philostratus* produced a didactic work devoted exclusively to the task of interpreting two-dimensional painted images. Dating to the third century AD, *Imagines* utilises painting as the source material with which to offer young men learned interpretations of visual meaning by drawing upon the literary arts.<sup>2</sup> The text promotes the view that there existed a hierarchy of art forms whereby poets and painters were acknowledged as equivalent practitioners of the foremost arts (*Imagines*, 1,1-5). *Philostratus* distinguishes the pre-eminent art forms from the lesser arts. In contrast to the findings of the *paragone* debate, the narrator explains how painting, demonstrated through use of colour, is the superior visual art form (*Imagines*, 1,2). In the opening line of his preface, *Philostratus* refutes the claim that painting is dishonest, declaring «art partakes of reason» (*Imagines*, 1,1). The rhetor establishes equivalence between poets and painters,<sup>3</sup> and credits wise men with the ancient art of imitating nature.<sup>4</sup>

After establishing his personal scholarly credentials with respect to the learned study of painting, the sophist’s assertion placing poets and painters on an equal footing is taken as the basis for the stated aim of his work which calls for a poet and erudite scholar of «the science of painting», like himself, (*Imagines*, 1,3).<sup>5</sup> The fact that his preface was a means of validating his stated aims compels the modern reader to question the presumptions made from the outset. The question arises: To what extent is *Philostratus*’ interpretation biased, and does more impartial evidence exist concerning a fundamental imbalance in late antique visual arts privileging painting over the plastic arts?

*Philostratus* broadly defines the *plastic arts* (*πλαστικὴν*) as distinct from, and second to, painting, (*Imagines*, 1,1-2). Whereas painting is characterised by the manner of rep-

<sup>1</sup> WEBB 1999, pp. 13, 18. The number of examples in which workmanship is the subject of useful art suggests that as an aspect of narrativity, movable, active objects were reinforced by discussions of craftsmanship.

<sup>2</sup> For works attributed to *Philostratus* the Elder, see *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*; *Lives of the Sophists*; *Philostratus Letters*; *Imagines*. See also, ANDERSON 1986; BEALL 1993; BRYSON 1994; CASSIN 1995; ELSNER 1995, pp. 21-48, for bibliography see notes 2-3 and 7; ELSNER 2000; LEACH 2000; BOWIE-ELSNER 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Simonides*’ dictum ‘painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking painting’ is «quoted by Plutarch to illustrate a discussion of *enargeia*», WEBB 1999, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> By implication, verisimilitude in the visual arts is prized above abstraction, a premise borne out in *ekphrasis* of *Philostratus*.

<sup>5</sup> *Philostratus* concludes his preface by underscoring the need for clarity (*σαφῶς*), *Imagines*, 1,5.

resentation (i.e. light and colour) as well as content, in contrast, he characterizes the non-painted visual arts by their use of modelling. The broad category of plastic arts is only further differentiated according to material. Philostratus' bipartite classification groups rock crystal carving, carved wooden, gold, silver and gilded vessels together, alongside carved gems, the Trojan Horse and any other modelled usable art object. Craftsmen are identified in relation to a list of materials rather than with the subject of a modelled form.

Upon surveying useful art objects in epic poetry and the later development of Greek prose in late antiquity, it is evident that the role of *ekphrasis* of usable art does not change greatly.<sup>1</sup> Literary works as early as the first century BC contain extended descriptions of murals entwining the subjects depicted with emotional responses experienced through the eyes of the principal character (*Aeneid*, 1.454-495). However, it is not until the fifth century AD that, for the first time, a rhetorical handbook identified *ekphrasis* on 'art' as we have come to understand it: "descriptions of statues or paintings or anything of that sort".<sup>2</sup> Although used to dissimilar ends, foregrounded ekphrastic treatments of three-dimensional functional objects were part of an established literary technique in antiquity, revealing a shared cultural outlook.<sup>3</sup> Thus, canonical literary objects, together with rhetorical training manuals support the identification of *useful art* as a category from Homeric times to late antiquity.

In order to ascertain whether historically, the verbal arts treated dissimilar aestheticized materials differently, *ekphrasis* of useful vessels are taken as the focus of this work. What is the role of functional vessels as part of meta-narratives within a literary text? How are utilitarian objects treated with respect to paintings in the same work? Do *ekphrasis* on functional objects, as opposed to painting, betray an inherent imbalance that favours painting? Is any such imbalance noticeable in late antiquity?

#### INCIDENTAL OBJECTS AND THE LIMITS OF THE CATEGORY OF USEFUL ART

Ancient textual sources contain a panoply of objects. What, then, is not considered a useful art object? What are the limits of the category of usable art? The category of useful art is drawn from among the wealth of texts that survive from Homeric times to late antiquity. Within this category, however, are less clearly defined areas. Objects that function as adornment for the body, such as textiles and jewellery, obscure the definition of the category of useful art. Consistent similarities in the use of the narrative framework describing useful art objects, such as shields and carved vessels, suggest that contemporary writers placed embroidered textiles and carved precious stones alongside carved and forged utilitarian art objects given and used by people.<sup>4</sup> Similarly it is unclear whether or not monumental architecture (e.g. *Aphthonius*' description of the *Serapeum* in Alexandria)<sup>5</sup> would have been considered sufficiently different – on the basis of scale if nothing else – to have been disassociated or excluded from the category of useful art.

<sup>1</sup> FRIEDLÄNDER 1969 [1912].

<sup>2</sup> FELTEN 1913, p. 69; KENNEDY 1999, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> One need only consider Homer's iconic *Shield of Achilles*.

<sup>4</sup> See my forthcoming book, *Art in Ancient Texts: Layered Objects, Layered Meanings*.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by KENNEDY 1999, pp. 118-120.

As indicated by conventional literary devices, useful art did not exist in the literary arts with independent visual meaning. Typically, imagery served as a para-narrative with specific references to its user, makers, donor or intended recipient. Examples of useful art in which only imagery or function is described are by no means commonplace. Apart from usable art, at least two differentiable, somewhat overlapping, object types are found in textual sources, further delimiting the boundaries of the category of useful art. The first type of object is described only by its functional nature. These incidental objects serve as 'stage props,' objects moved around but otherwise largely ignored. Such objects may have links to one or more named characters; however, they do not have any significant character-related visual meaning. The second object type is equivalent to a literary background. When described by their function and decoration, they are not associated with specific individuals, but remain inert and stationary. They are neither in motion nor operating as part of a highlighted interaction or exchange between important individuals.

Clearly, not every description of a worked functional vessel served as anything more than part of a catalogue of largely inconsequential objects. This is evident in descriptions of prizes rendered in poetry that, potentially, could have been won by anyone. The omission of an identified recipient or pre-existing owner typically results in the conspicuous absence of a role with respect to an individual character's development or emotional state. For example, in the *Iliad* a silver mixing bowl is given as a prize for a foot race. Although attention is drawn to craftsmanship, through high praise, the object serves no other discernible purpose in the narrative. The description introduces its function and material; however, subsequently it diverges from a conventional useful art object description (*Iliad*, 23.741-745). This suggests that the object is a commodity rather than a gift or an extension of a character. Such objects are shown but not used. The underlying idea present in the description of this object is that, although small, it is an excellent example of Sidonian skill. The inclusion of human craftsmen and a comparison specifically with other vessels, presumably wrought by man, distinguishes this depersonalised vessel from marvels crafted by the divine Hephaestus as gifts commissioned by deities (whether for heroes or romantic liaisons). The narrative attempts to personalise the prize as though it were created and brought as a gift for the victor, *Thaos*. The lack of any other personalised feature or association, however, is confirmed by the conspicuous absence of use. In the *Aeneid* another prize is given with most of the description devoted to its materiality: «[t]he third prize was a pair of bronze drinking cauldrons and some embossed (*perfecta*) drinking cups of solid silver» (*Aeneid*, 5.266-267). Again, the depersonalised nature leaves these vessels as nothing more than a display of wealth in the form of functional drinking vessels.

The different stages in the figurative lifecycle of such objects are made clear through their depictions in *ekphraseis*.<sup>1</sup> Such prizes indicate the perceived differences brought about through personalisation as a form of visual representation or marking out the character of an object. Whilst the prizes in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* are at the beginning of their useful lives, in contrast, literary gifts of useful art visually reference their identified recipient (e.g. the *shield of Achilles*). At an advanced stage in an objects' lifecycle, personalised possessions can serve as extensions of their users.

<sup>1</sup> See APPADURAI 1986; KOPYTOFF 1986.

## ACHILLES TATIUS' ROCK CRYSTAL VESSEL

As one of the earliest of a handful of Greek prose texts, Achilles Tatius' *Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* represents a turning point in the use of visual art in ekphrastic composition.<sup>1</sup> Tatius' novel is perhaps the earliest known, dating to the late second century.<sup>2</sup> Less than a dozen Greek novels are known, all of which date from the late first/second to fourth centuries.<sup>3</sup> The novel contains a greater number of paintings than was typical of earlier literary works.<sup>4</sup> With descriptions of one figural sculpture and three paintings all with multiple figures, *Leucippe and Clitophon* has the potential to advance modern scholars' understanding of the newly emerging Roman development of *ekphrasis* of paintings and sculpture. Alongside descriptions of stationary works of non-useful art, Tatius retained the long-lived tradition of employing useful art, most notably in the form of a rock crystal vessel, as part of the narrative of events on the subject of a ten-day Dionysiac festival.<sup>5</sup> By continuing the tradition of interweaving useful literary art objects, *Tatius'* work can further our understanding of treatments of useful art as part of the broader history of *ekphrasis*.

The *Tatius vessel* briefly foregrounded in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, near the beginning of the second book, changes colour from green to red when filled with wine. *Tatius'* makes his own late antique innovative additions to the established literary *topoi*:

Interestingly, although the *ekphrasis* of a wrought wine bowl or wine cup has a tradition extending from Homer (*Il.*, 11.632-34) through Theocritus I and the third eclogue of Vergil (in the last two, the cups are likewise described as carved with laden vines or with ivy bearing berry clusters), the conceit of the deepening color of the grapes here seems to be Achilles Tatius's own addition to the tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The evidence shows that *Tatius* drew upon a varied tradition of descriptions of drinking vessels with decoration which (on one level) mirrored the vessels' function. However, it is not known whether *Tatius* created the literary object entirely from imagination or whether he drew upon elements from one or more drinking vessels known to him.<sup>7</sup>

## DECORATION: ACTIVATED VISUAL MEANING

Temporarily omitting the narrative context within which the drinking vessel is depicted and used, the useful art object is introduced in the novel with reference to its

<sup>1</sup> On *Leucippe and Clitophon*, see ANDERSON 1984; BARTSCH 1989; ANDERSON 1993; ANDERSON 1997; MORALES 2004 for bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> In the introduction the *terminus post quem* is given based on surviving fragmentary papyri copies of the text, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, translated by GASELEE 1984 [1917], pp. x and XII-XIII. See also CONCA 1969; WHITEHOUSE 1989.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of extant Greek novels, BARTSCH 1989, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas Virgil's *Aeneid* has one mural only, Petronius' art gallery «had a wonderful variety of paintings» (*Eumolpus*, 83).

<sup>5</sup> The absence of such non-useful works of art as prescribed subjects in the rhetorical handbooks does not mean that, in practice, they were not considered appropriate subjects. Textiles have a long tradition as crafted literary gifts; however, they are not mentioned in the handbooks.

<sup>6</sup> BARTSCH 1989, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of such decoration rendered in carved Roman period open-work glass which changes from green to red (FIG. 1).



FIG. 1. The Lycurgus Cup, British Museum, London (MLA 1958.12-2.1), circa fourth century AD. With Medieval metal rim, H: 165 mm, Diam outside of metal rim: 132 mm, dichroic glass which changes from pea green to wine red. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.

owner, the protagonist's father, the agent responsible for the vessel's display. The vessel is described as a splendid luxury used after the necessities for the dinner were already prepared. No doubt in part due to its decoration, the vessel was selected as a means of visually invoking the god *Dionysus* during a festival in his honour. The audience is directly told that the vessel is second only to "the famous goblet of Glaucus of Chios",<sup>1</sup> further elevating the stated value of the vessel. Moreover, the usable art object's function is given at the beginning of the description preceding any mention of decoration, observing the Homeric model. The vessel is «used for libations to the god» of wine himself, *Dionysus* (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 3).

Having taken pains to establish that the object is expensive, using more than one allusion, specifying its owner and primary function, the vessel's material and visual form are then described. As is customary in descriptions of useful art objects since Homeric times, the material is specified as the means of introducing a visual description.<sup>2</sup> The transformation visible in the useful art object clearly parallels concur-

rent narrative events. Whereas the title characters are introduced as inexperienced and 'green' in the ways of love, events show them falling in love 'little by little.' Just as the *Tatius vessel* changes colour when filled with wine, so too are we shown a parallel change within *Leucippe and Clitophon*: both are emboldened by wine (FIG. 1). Uniting *Dionysus* and Cupid in the representation of the Dionysiac festival with the transformation of *Clitophon and Leucippe*, the change in the *Tatius vessel* used at dinner connects the depiction of Eros in the opening artwork – the painting of the *Abduction of Europa* (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, I, 1), which serves as the visual frontispiece to the novel – with the explanation of the origins of the Tyrian festival.

Thus, (at least two) earlier references are visually entwined in a new context. *Clitophon* entwines the subject of wine and Eros to and the development of love between the main characters (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 2-3). Metaphorically, the gods act on the drinkers, changing *Leucippe and Clitophon* from green to red:

<sup>1</sup> On the most famous goblet, see *Herodotus*, I, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondences have been noted between the *Tatius vessel* and glass open-work vessels that change colour, e.g. fig. 1, see WHITEHOUSE 1989, pp. 120-121; VICKERS 1996, p. 63; VICKERS 1997, pp. 8, 10; ELSNER 1998, pp. 46, 48.

The ripening of the fruit, the change of color from pale to a deep red, and the erotic and Dionysian associations of the crop itself provide on the one hand a metaphor of the simultaneous progression of the mutual attraction of hero and heroine... On a deeper level, the description, in which the vessel is filled with red wine and undergoes a corresponding change in color, also suggests itself as a parallel for the physical process of sexual arousal.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of wine upon the couple are presently visually represented through the vehicle of the *Tatius vessel*. This is achieved by activation through use. Visually, decoration shows the transforming effects of the contents of the *Tatius vessel* in parallel with narrative events.

#### THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT

The *Tatius rock crystal vessel* punctuates a moment of change. Serving as a means of linking vivid visual settings with characters and the ongoing development of their emotions, the literary vessel is employed as a useful object whose use activates meaning, both adorning the object and occurring within the arc of the narrative.

The vessel is part of a scene of a festival dinner (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 2-3). Events before and after the dinner are relayed to the audience by the character of *Clitophon* in a first person account.<sup>2</sup> Yet at the dinner itself, the most direct expression of *Leucippe's* thoughts and feelings is introduced by an account of the mythological origins of the Dionysiac festival (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 2). This provides the context for the change experienced by the two principal characters of becoming a couple in love.<sup>3</sup> Although *Clitophon* maintains his first person account, the scene of the festival and the portrayal of both characters falling in love through the eyes, by a mutual exchange of gazes, explicitly draw upon language and metaphors established in the description of the festival (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, I, 4 line 4). During the Dionysiac festival, the 'duel of eyes' functions as one aspect of the development of the couple falling in love. Before their figurative change from green to red *Leucippe* and *Clitophon* are shown as green, in the verdant family garden (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, I, 15). References to furtive glances prefigure the emboldened duel of eyes. Additional thematic parallels visually established earlier include the description of a meadow in the opening painting and the Tyrian nature of both stories,<sup>4</sup> descriptions of flowers<sup>5</sup> and birds, *Leucippe's* song praising the rose which *Clitophon* then imagines transformed into her mouth (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 1), and the brief explanation concerning the origins of the Dionysiac festival. All of these related visual themes reinforce and raise the pitch of their timid romantic expressions to a more intense, reciprocated exchange of direct and mutual looking.

<sup>1</sup> BARTSCH 1989, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> FRIEDLÄNDER 1969 [1912], p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> MORALES 2004, pp. 156-172, esp. 164-166.

<sup>4</sup> For a similar interpretation concerning parallel thematic content between the meadow and the *Tatius vessel*, see BARTSCH 1989. On shared Tyrian stories (i.e. in the frontispiece and *Tatius vessel*), see MORALES 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The description of the flowers refer back to the painting and foreshadows the scenes which come shortly thereafter in the representation of the *Tatius vessel* (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, I, 15 and I, 19).

As well as successive introductions<sup>1</sup> and reiterations of varied visual content, the layered repetitions continue after their mutual love is visually represented, consummated by immortals in the festival scene. The notion of exchanging an object as a – physically – meaningful interaction is reinforced within the narrative by visually exchanging kisses, presumably using the very same Dionysiac vessel. The protagonist is advised to continue his amorous course of action moving from love through the eyes, to speech, and finally touch. After somewhat lengthy instruction from Satyrus, what follows are the anxious moments leading up to the first kiss shared by Clitophon and Leucippe (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 4-5, 6-9). The pivotal moment of change embodied by the presentation and use of the *Tatius vessel* is referred to after the fact (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 8). Just as aspects described within the opening painted scene have wide narrative application with recurring thematic parallels, after invoking the useful art object that was originally used and displayed as part of an extended festival, the characters return to dinner to use the same vessel in a post-transformation state. Having experienced the change from green to red with the inflamed experience of love through the use of the Vessel, the narrator depicts a game that resonates with the earlier festival scene. Kisses are secretly shared between Clitophon and Leucippe by pressing one's lips to the vessel, the other pressing their lips to the same spot (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, II, 9).<sup>2</sup> The notion of pledging one another via a drinking vessel prefigures the first scene with the *Tatius vessel*. After the vessel's decoration is activated through use and connected to the frontispiece through Eros, the Vessel is presented as a physical, material object. The absence of any further mention of decoration suggests a similar conception of useful art to that evident in the *ekphrasis* of Homer's *shield of Achilles*.

Useful art in *ekphrasis* with respect to vessels articulates highlighted interactions often between one or two central characters. The interaction may begin with a simple physical exchange, something that engages the characters in the use of a useful art object. Typically, however, the visual description goes beyond the mere physical act of use to activating the representations adorning the useful object. Often the imagery has resonances with the wider narrative and thus provides thematic parallels. In the example of the *Tatius vessel*, the literary description of the object echoes its broader narrative context.

#### ACTIVATED THROUGH USE

No longer referring to the activated visual meaning in the Vessel's decoration, the vessel is shown after the decoration has been activated, thus returning it to the role of physical object. Three references to the *Tatius vessel* render its depiction in a similar vein to that of the *shield of Achilles*. The Homeric Shield is first described as a physical object, then experienced as a world therein, then, only once more, described in the role of physical object.<sup>3</sup> In a related but distinct manner, the Vessel is introduced by material and function, followed by a visual description of imagery. Unlike the Shield, the *Tatius vessel* is shown activated through use. Its decoration parallels events

<sup>1</sup> See MORALES 2004, pp. 36-60.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Inscribed Voice: Conviviality and Reception* on convivial inscriptions on open-work vessels.

<sup>3</sup> BECKER 1990, p. 140.

within the narrative and thus shows a moment of change within the title characters. This is *Achilles Tatius*' version of the represented world contained within the decoration. Whereas the Homeric Shield depicted a represented world in a peaceful, 'other' location, *Tatius* presents overlap between narrative events, use of the vessel, significance and the application of its activated decoration. *Tatius* first presents the decoration as meaningful and applicable to present events, focuses out for the 'material' kiss on Clitophon's lips, (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, 11.8), then thematically focuses in, as kissing and the *Tatius vessel* are explicitly connected through a game of indirect secretive kisses via the vehicle of the vessel.

Eros is mentioned by name in the opening painting and, after the Dionysiac imagery has been activated through use, when Clitophon and Leucippe are shown to have fallen in love through shared gazes. This is the key moment in the narrative served by the useful art object as a vehicle for that change: the expression of activated, reciprocated love, vividly and visually evoked.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN USEFUL AND NON-USEFUL LITERARY ART OBJECTS IN LEUCIPPE AND CLITOPHON

In *Leucippe and Clitophon*, *Tatius* uses both useful and non-useful art to punctuate and transform thematic content. The literary frontispiece of the painting establishes the ideas that are visually and thematically echoed throughout the novel. Without the *Tatius vessel*, however, functioning within the narrative as a useful art object to underscore the thematic content of the opening painting, to relate it to the development of subsequent narrative events, the parallels would not have been so effectively underscored throughout the novel. The two paintings and one sculpture, which appear after the key useful art object, have limited references to events. In contrast, the *Tatius vessel* demonstrates a parallel visual transformation in the two principal characters. Unlike the works of art that follow, it is the only art object with visual meaning that parallels transformative events shown activated through use. In contrast to the primary painting however, the role of the useful art object is comparatively limited. Whereas themes in the opening painting are referred to throughout the novel, references directly to the *Tatius vessel* are largely restricted to just before and after the pivotal moment when Clitophon and Leucippe are shown falling in love under the influence of *Dionysus* and Eros.<sup>1</sup>

The placement of primary to secondary *ekpraseis* is inverted in *Leucippe and Clitophon*. The late antique practice of positioning a painting at the opening of events within a prose narrative (e.g. *Leucippe and Clitophon*, *Daphnis and Chloe* and *Aethiopica*)<sup>2</sup> establishes the most extensive description of visual themes from the outset. Subsequent artworks with similar themes then resonate with the visual frontispiece. In contrast, in the *Iliad* the visual *tour de force* of the Shield is located within the final third of the poem. Moreover, the *Iliad* does not contain a single painting, thus removing

<sup>1</sup> As expressed in Greek texts, characters are shown falling in love through the eyes (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, 11, 3; *Moschus, Europa* 74-76; *Catullus, Carmina* 64.91-93). See also BARTSCH 1989; MORALES 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The transposition in the *Aethiopica* demonstrates that the placement of the painting in book four serves as both a starting point and a *crescendo* akin to the portrayal of the Homeric Shield, see also BARTSCH 1989.

any need to bring characters to a venue with a stationary painted surface. Although the *shield of Achilles* is clearly the ekphrastic centrepiece of the poem, comparable descriptions of useful art objects prefigure the paradigmatic usable art object of the 18<sup>th</sup> book in abbreviated form.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the principal *ekphrasis* in the *Iliad* is presented as an apogee, a culmination of related, miniature, secondary visual descriptions, instead of foreshadowing the content of the narrative as the primary *ekphrasis* does in *Leucippe and Clitophon*.

#### ANIMATED DESIGN: CULTURAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DESCRIPTIONS OF VESSELS AND EXTANT USABLE ART OBJECTS

Based on the history of *ekpraseis* of usable art objects, it is clear that imagery, the significance of that imagery, and activation through use are the salient features which underlie their incorporation into written text. Although material worth is clearly noted, the artistic value of a carving is made evident by an author's distinction between material properties as opposed to engraved animated design. As one example of Roman material and usable art objects, open-work vessels contain intricately carved geometric patterning, representational imagery or inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> 87 open-work vessels or vessel fragments are known. The majority of surviving open-work vessels are made entirely of glass: some are, however, made entirely of precious stone, or a pierced, open-worked metal outer vessel with glass liner.

*Ekpraseis* were created within the same culture that made open-work vessels, although obviously by participants in that culture other than craftsmen – by writers and for an audience which utilised usable art objects. The history of useful art objects rendered in *ekpraseis* continued for centuries. The production of open-work vessels demonstrates a commensurate world view concerning usable art. The corpus of open-work vessels displays a contemporaneous, cultural aesthetic with literary descriptions of usable art objects. Open-work vessels were not simply carved with forms pleasing to the eye. Their content exhibited significance in relation to the occasions for which they were designed to be used and displayed. As usable art objects, open-work vessels demonstrate that objects gain agency through culturally-specific decoration, activated through use. It is in this light that open-work vessels are presented and analysed as a case study of inscribed late antique usable art.

#### THE PROMINENCE OF INSCRIPTION ON USABLE ART OBJECTS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

A tacit division exists, typically separating the study of epigraphy from art. The aesthetics of inscribed decoration, or 'art of writing' is not a commonplace art historical subject.<sup>3</sup> Whereas figural, vegetal and symbolic imagery fall within the generally accepted parameters of representational art,<sup>4</sup> inscriptions, often part of the aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> *Ekpraseis* on useful objects in the *Iliad* are: Agamemnon's sceptre, fashioned by *Hephaestus* (2.100-108), the bow of *Pandarus* (4.105-113), Agamemnon's shield (11.32-11.7) and the *cup of Nestor* (11.631-636), see BECKER 1995, pp. 51, note 95.

<sup>2</sup> See FIG. 1 for an example of a well-known open-work vessel now in the British Museum.

<sup>3</sup> See MACMULLEN 1982; MEYER 1990.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, WINCKELMANN 1779; WÖLFFLIN 1950 [1932]; PANOFKY 1957; GOMBRICH 1979; RIEGL 1985; HÖLSCHER 2004.

programme of material culture, have been largely undervalued, overlooked or under explored, and placed within the confines of epigraphy. As a consequence, a potentially rich source for art historical study remains relatively untapped.<sup>1</sup>

The visual study of epigraphy may be approached in a manner similar to iconography. The divided, often non-integrated methodology of art historical work is curious. Too often specialists provide exceptional studies along material lines, focusing exclusively on a single material, yet keep their conclusions isolated and specialised, such that their wider applications are never realised. Art historical studies rarely integrate discussions of epigraphic forms and content as part of a broader context-based approach. Conversely, a majority of epigraphic studies only discuss inscriptions in their own right or as a means of dating. When carving is examined technically, it is most frequently assessed with respect to representational imagery.<sup>2</sup> Only a handful of interdisciplinary studies address the visual form of epigraphy as it relates to art history. Text has remained divided from image as though aestheticized inscriptions and palaeography do not form part of an integrated visual culture. A volume which includes several papers delivered at a symposium on sixth century ecclesiastical silver plate, focusing primarily on issues related to the *Sion Treasure*, bequeathed discussion of inscriptions to an epigrapher.<sup>3</sup> It is striking that what consistently served as part of designs in silver, inscription and imagery, are consistently divided in specialist studies in which art historical analyses do not address epigraphic content.

Perhaps largely the result of omission within art historical studies, isolated examination by epigraphic specialists, or a combination of both factors, few non-epigraphers discuss the visual ways in which inscriptions are rendered as a constituent of artistic production in a particular medium.<sup>4</sup> Although visually-based discussions focusing on 'works of art' generally include translations of inscriptions, the extent of epigraphic discussion tends to be narrowly restricted to bare facts, i.e. the removed content of inscriptions in commentary focusing primarily on imagery. The synergistic effect on original audiences, namely the role of inscriptions as an explicit part of an overall decorative programme, or in terms of use, is all too often omitted. Similarly, hallmarks or stamps are not *a priori* the subject of art history, rather they can be subsumed within the broader category of inscribed dating evidence.<sup>5</sup> Unlike epigraphy, however, the use of historical texts and hallmarks are commonplace in art historical discussions. Historical and literary texts are clearly differentiable from visual culture and as such often provide evidence of non-visual contexts for reception. Objects in texts (*ekphraseis*) and texts on objects (inscriptions), however, provide two types of art historical source which interconnect art, text and material culture.

<sup>1</sup> For notable exceptions of art historical studies addressing inscriptions, see MANGO 1991; CUTLER 1994; ELSNER 2005b.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, SCOTT 1995, pp. 51-64; WELZEL 2002, pp. 391-407; LIERKE 2001, pp. 174-177. A noteworthy exception is R. D. Grasby, a modern British practitioner of stone letter carving.

<sup>3</sup> ŠEVČENKO 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions to the rule often focus along material-specific lines, see DODD-KHAIRALLAH 1981; MANGO 1991; CUTLER 1994; AUTH 1996; FILIPPINI 1996. Some investigations remain at the level of specialist studies rather than re-contextualizing a material-based study more broadly within a given period.

<sup>5</sup> For an exception, see DODD 1961; DODD 1964; DODD 1992.

Although it may often form the primary basis of palaeographic evidence, palaeography is not limited to the study of ancient handwriting on papyri, tablets and *ostraka*.<sup>1</sup> The use of ink or paint does not delineate the limits of visual forms of inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> According to *the Oxford English Dictionary*, palaeography is «the study of ancient writing and inscriptions; the science or art of deciphering and interpreting historical manuscripts and writing systems». What characterises palaeography is the broader study of ‘writing systems’ composed by *manus*.

Writing is in its infancy as an art historical subject. In a discussion of Middle Byzantine ivories, it was argued that «[t]he relation, if any, between inscriptions on works of art and the contractions employed by scribes [commonly used abbreviations] is an unstudied subject.<sup>3</sup> Even the filiation between letter forms on sculpture and those used in books is a topic still in its infancy».<sup>4</sup> These observations highlight the conspicuous absence of art historical studies on a range of epigraphic considerations which are constituents of the production of visual material culture. Omitting discussions concerning the extent of literacy or the use of epigraphy as a means of dating, numerous potentially revealing and interesting questions generally remain unasked. The art historical and social considerations too often overlooked include: (1) evidence for or against the preconceived design of inscriptions, (2) imagery and inscriptions combined on an art object, (3) evidence for or against different hands executing an object’s inscription and imagery, (4) the varied means of integrating text and image as part of an object as a whole, (5) the division of pictorial space and the proportions devoted to text and image respectively, (6) the scale and depths of carving used in text and imagery, (7) the placement of text on objects, (8) the range of epigraphic content found throughout a single vessel type, (9) the extent of overlap between the content of inscriptions and the subject of imagery, on a single vessel or object type, (10) implicit rules for the placement of text and imagery within pictorial space on a given vessel type, (11) the use and meaning attributable to stop-marks as constituents of inscriptions, (12) similarities or differences in the use or meaning attributable to stop-marks throughout a single category of vessel, (13) or in relation to monumental epigraphy, (14) distinctions between object types using contractions from comparable objects with inscriptions that do not use contractions, (15) the use of abbreviations on inscriptions constituting part of an art object in relation to commonplace contractions and abbreviations on epigraphic monuments, (16) general epigraphic conventions used on usable art objects versus monumental epigraphy, (17) consistency or variation within the individual letter forms of a single inscription, (18) or throughout inscriptions found on a single type of usable art object, (19) colour or colours used in the construction of inscriptions, (20) colours used within an inscription in relation to colours used elsewhere on the vessel body or adjacent imagery or patterning, (21) the angle of carved lettering in determining the intended position of viewers, (22) ways of inscribing points of view, (23) known or

<sup>1</sup> For example, HOOGENDIJK-VAN MINNEN-CLARYSSE 1991.

<sup>2</sup> In a study aimed at furthering cross-media study in the history of art, C. Mango addressed the relationship between letter forms on sculpture and those used in codices, MANGO 1991, esp. pp. 241-243, 246.

<sup>3</sup> This lacuna is not present in the study of numismatic inscriptions, for example.

<sup>4</sup> CUTLER 1994, p. 137.

expected contexts of display or (24) the content of inscriptions as contexts for viewing or use.

As a discipline, art history suffers greatly by side-stepping the inclusion of inscribed content (literally *con-text*)<sup>1</sup> often positioned next to imagery or patterning. Noting dissimilar approaches to viewing representational imagery as opposed to inscribed decoration, in the 'reading' of the Roman imperial monument of Trajan's column, one scholar articulates an often overlooked distinction between viewers' responses and approaches to viewing writing as opposed to imagery:

The way the vocabulary of art is displayed on a monument changes according to monuments and even according to viewers. Several readings of the same monument may be made, even by the same reader. Unlike writing, there is no such rule in images as a reading from top to bottom, left to right. Some clues can be left on the monument about a preferred order to decipher it, but there is scarcely an obligation to follow them, and, anyway, segmenting a monument into details need not prevent the viewer from perceiving it as a whole. One of the main advantages of reading a monument is that it forces the reader to be aware of his or her methodology and of the analogies and differences between the analysis of a monument and that of a text. It also encourages one to notice the interplay between text and art... The inscription on this monument asks the viewer to see the monument in relation to its surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, inscriptions on useful art objects invoke the viewer, the potential user, and the use of the object in order to perform an action.<sup>3</sup> Active framing of a visual scene on a vessel is tacitly achieved contemporaneously by the addition of handles, or another means of handling the vessel, for use.<sup>4</sup> As a form of decoration, inscribed content unites text and object directly to help frame viewing and (at least on movable art objects) use. Text on open-work vessels provides evidence concerning contexts of use and display otherwise missing from the now decontextualized objects. As records of interactions, text as decoration originally framed viewing and visual adornment. Today, it provides one of the few means of accessing the original late antique social contexts.

#### INSCRIBED USABLE ART OBJECTS: THE CASE OF OPEN-WORK VESSELS

Decoration and function are the defining features of open-work vessels. Inscriptions on vessels provide evidence concerning the intended contexts for display and use. They are, therefore, the ideal case study with which to examine relationships between literary usable art objects and an assemblage of real, extant, useful art objects.

Open-work vessels are made of two layers. The decorative outer layer was pierced and extensively carved in antiquity, whilst the plainer, inner layer served as a container (FIG. 2).<sup>5</sup> Open-work vessels, known today as *open-work*, *cage cups*, *diatretra*, *kaniskia* and *canistra*,<sup>6</sup> represent a trend during a period that was not merely one of transition, but which displayed a character neither classical, nor Byzantine, yet related to both. According to the current state of the archaeological record, 87 open-work vessels are

<sup>1</sup> ELSNER 1995, pp. 1-20; ELSNER 2002, pp. 1-18; ELSNER 2005a, pp. 300-318.

<sup>2</sup> HUET 1996, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> HUET 1996, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> HUET 1996, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Diagram adapted from HARDEN *et alii* 1987, fig. 135.

<sup>6</sup> THORPE 1938; BOYD 1988. For the less common *kaniskia* and *canistra* (*basket* or *little basket*), see STERN 2003.

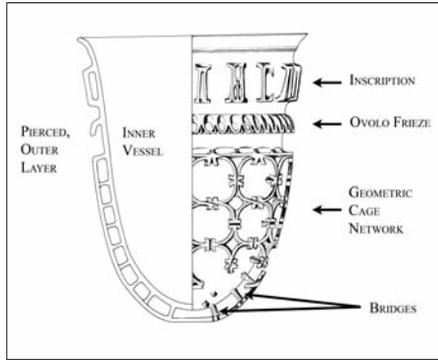


FIG. 2. Diagram of a glass open-work Vessel.  
Diagram adapted from  
HARDEN *et al.* 1987, fig. 135.

known. Of the total number of open-work vessels, over 70% are made entirely of glass. Between the third and fifth centuries, Roman craftsmen produced a type of vessel that displayed a remarkable degree of technical skill. Although an earlier Roman version of glass open-work is known on vessels dating to the late first century, there is no evidence of continuous production from the late first through to third centuries.<sup>1</sup> This kind of vessel had more than one known use, for example as drinking vessels, libation vessels and lamps. When confronted with an open-work vessel, undoubtedly the first feature that captures any viewer's attention is the delicately

pierced or undercut outer layer. Craftsmanship is given material form in this type of exceptionally constructed object.

With the possible exception of fourth century jewellery, vessels dominate late antique open-work. Questions concerning how Roman artisans achieved this effect still fuel ongoing debate. Late Roman craftsmen consistently made these pieces to a high standard, removing all evidence of toil to such an extent that historians remain puzzled by the working methods originally employed. Glass and stone vessels are carved from a single, continuous blank. The two layers remain connected only by a network of perpendicular glass bridges.

#### IMAGERY

There are only a handful of types of imagery adorning open-work vessels. Many of the iconographic categories used overlap and are, therefore, often combined on a single vessel. The most commonplace kind of open-work imagery is vegetal. Vine scrolls, garlands, flowers, leaves and grape clusters are frequently combined with other forms of decoration. The second most common type of imagery is animal imagery. Generally depicted in motion, animals that move in air, on land or underwater are found rendered in open-work. The third most common type of imagery is Dionysiac. Figures such as the god *Dionysus*, satyrs or maenads are rendered in open-work in scenes portraying movement. In addition to a climactic moment in a mythological scene, a second dichroic fragment – dichroic or dichromatic glassware appears as one colour in transmitted light (light passing through), and another colour in reflected light (light bouncing off) – shows the divine Dionysus. Surviving vessel fragments portray Dionysus alongside figures cutting grapes, and a reclining female figure lying with a lioness.

Taking a contextual approach, the motif of the *Lycurgus* myth is found on open-work vessels and in their viewing space, such as on pavement mosaics in *triclinia*. The commonplace Roman theme and visual motif of the *Lycurgus* myth represents a cli-

<sup>1</sup> MEREDITH 2009, pp. 191-197.

mactic moment in the narrative. The significance of this iconic moment was, and continues to be, understood from textual and visual dissemination via a shared cultural reference. Looking at the visual treatment of such elements across media and through space, in two-dimensional and three-dimensional depictions, helps build up a richer understanding of the image represented in literary and visual arts, often in a shared viewing space.

#### SHARED THEMATIC DISPLAY: COMPARANDA FOR OPEN-WORK IMAGERY

In addition to movable open-work vessels, presumably circulating and displayed in domestic *triclinia* as drinking or libation vessels, representations of Dionysiac imagery, vine scrolls and grape clusters are found on contemporaneous mosaics. The climactic moment of the *Lycurgus* myth has proven a commonplace motif in late Roman art. Lycurgus is ready to pelt a maenad with stones, with the help of *Gaia* and *Dionysus*; however, she is about to exact revenge as vines are preparing to ensnare King Lycurgus. The myth of Lycurgus is recorded in Nonnus' sixth century *Dionysiaca* (Nonnus, 21.1-161). The dichroic glass open-work vessel is carved flat with generalised figures and is estimated to c. the fourth century AD (FIG. 1). Another remarkably similar depiction, showing the action just a moment earlier, portrays *Lycurgus* with his axe, not yet ensnared by vines. This depiction is from an early fourth century pavement mosaic from Saint Romain-en-Gaul, 7 × 5.15 metres.<sup>1</sup> As on the open-work vessel, the mosaic exploits the use of colour in a scene highlighting the *Lycurgus* myth. The large mosaic contrasts black and brown leaves and stems, against a green background. The figure of Lycurgus is volumetric, with a defined outline, highlights and shadows. Bearded, wearing boots, with a billowing drapery tied around his waist, the barrel-chested figure is shown with arms raised behind his head, holding the up-turned axe along his back. The figure's expression displays concentration, as though ready to extricate himself from the vines. Cloth in motion is a visual feature shared by representations on both the three-dimensional open-work vessel and two-dimensional mosaic.

A less complete mosaic portrays the *Lycurgus* myth combining elements found in the open-work vessel and the mosaic from Gaul. In a semicircular mosaic from the apse of a *triclinium* in the fourth century villa at Piazza Armerina, Sicily, *Lycurgus* is centrally positioned encircled by vines.<sup>2</sup> The scene is set within a peripheral guilloche pattern with a parallel band above and below the border. Five surviving *Erotes* are en-framed within vine scrolls along the bottom of the mosaic. Each *Erotes* is differentiated by hair and posture. Several figures surround the central figure of *Lycurgus* whose appearance resembles the Gaulish mosaic, bearded with barrel-chest, wearing boots with arms raised and an expressive face turned in three-quarter profile.

The popularity of the *Lycurgus* myth on open-work vessels and mosaics suggests that it was selected as a form of *paideia*.<sup>3</sup> The climactic moment depicted in these

<sup>1</sup> STRONG-TOYNBEE 1976, p. 286, fig. 218.

<sup>2</sup> HARDEN-TOYNBEE 1959, pl. LXXII.

<sup>3</sup> On *paideia* and education in general in antiquity, MARROU 1981, esp. pp. 194-205, 217-226; LEMERLE 1986, pp. 87-93; KASTER 1988; BROWN 1992, pp. 35-70; MORGAN 1998; LEADER-NEWBY 2004, pp. 123-171, esp. note 12. For a literary example, see *Imagines*, ANDERSON 1986; ELSNER 1995.

examples is of king Lycurgus as he becomes ensnared by vines. The action depicted feeds the eyes. In the fifth century, *Sidonius Apollinaris* wrote that a house «is not so much property as the property of your friends...It feeds your guests with feasts and you with guests. Its lay-out charms the eye of the beholder» (*Apollinaris, Poems and Letters*, 8.4.1). It is in such a shared, convivial domestic space that decoration displaying overlapping themes presented unified and erudite content reflecting the owner's taste and discernment.<sup>1</sup> Stationary mosaics and circulating vessels adorned with the Lycurgus myth operate in the same physical contexts and during shared occasions of dining.<sup>2</sup> Such overlapping displays used or viewed during banquets frequently depict eating, drinking, the god of wine, catching game or cutting vines, «often with a certain ironic commentary».<sup>3</sup> As evident in *Philostratus the Elder's Imagines*, viewing within the context of domestic dining provides a myriad of social contrivances with which to bring *paideia* to the fore. The host has the potential to be credited with refinement, thus reinforcing or elevating his status through a personal gallery of works of art, functional and non-functional. Guests have the opportunity to present themselves as learned through a display of informed appreciation. Layered meaning decorating open-work vessels resonates with the imagery and themes appropriate to conviviality and a display of erudition on occasions of shared social dining.

In addition to depictions of the *Lycurgus* myth, Dionysiac imagery is also found on fourth century mosaics decorating elite and imperial monuments. At S. Costanza in Rome, the mid- fourth century vault mosaics of the vintage scenes contain an intricately entwined web of vines, grape clusters, *Erotes* and birds adorning a private imperial chapel. The upper part of S. Costanza dates to between 337 and 354.<sup>4</sup> Two busts in the ceiling mosaic have been interpreted as portraits of Constantine's daughter, subsequently buried in the chapel. Thus, the vegetal and Dionysiac imagery were clearly understood to be appropriate to the context of burial at an imperial social level.

Another mosaic in Sicily contains imagery similar to that found on the open-work *Hunt situla*. The fourth century 'Great Hunt' mosaic in the corridor of the villa near Piazza Armerina indicates that hunt scenes were depicted in wealthy domestic spaces. Dated c. 330 AD, an *opus sectile* wall mosaic from the basilica of *Junius Bassus* the Elder on the Esquiline Hill in Rome shows a tigress attacking a calf.<sup>5</sup> The culmination of a hunt between predator and prey, this scene adorned the walls of a former consul's reception hall. These villa and imperial wall decorations demonstrate that imagery prominently found adorning open-work vessels were also found in elite villas as architectural decoration. Similar themes were selected in order to permanently adorn elite domestic space, and movable objects used and on display in shared communal spaces.

<sup>1</sup> For an example of the reverse, see *Cena Trimalchionis* in *Petronius' Satyricon*, xv.26-78, esp. 50-51.

<sup>2</sup> See DUNBABIN 1996; DUNBABIN 1998; DUNBABIN 2003; GOLD-DONAHUE 2005.

<sup>3</sup> ELSNER 1998, p. 46. On *paideia* and art in the Roman *domus*, see ELSNER 1998, pp. 44-50, 106-113.

<sup>4</sup> For a painting of the mosaic programme before reconstruction, see MACKIE 2003.

<sup>5</sup> STRONG-TOYNBEE 1976, pp. 284, fig. 16. See also IBRAHIM-SCRANTON-BRILL 1976; GUIDOBALDI *et alii* 1994; DUNBABIN 1999; SAPELLI 2001.

## INSCRIPTIONS

Inscriptions are never the only form of decoration on open-work vessels. An inscription always has one or two other decorative elements positioned below, never above. No inscription has ever been preserved on a stone open-work vessel or vessel fragment. Most letters have defined right and left sides, thereby creating a rectangular format. Consistent use of this practice reinforces the idea that the vessels were circumambulated or turned in order to be read in their entirety. The inscribed content surviving on metal vessels typically differs from that found on glass open-work vessels.

Although Greek was certainly spoken in the eastern provinces, throughout the third through the fifth centuries, the official language of the Roman Empire was Latin. Unlike inscriptions on imperial gifts of gold cross-bow *fibulae* (inscribed gifts given by the State to the army, civil servants and foreign envoys), inscribed open-work vessels are found with Greek inscriptions.

The convivial content of a small number of inscribed open-work vessels are found in Greek. Whereas the content of these Greek inscriptions indicates domestic, convivial, and Christian use, the language used for open-worked imperial inscriptions in the official Latin of the late Roman Empire.

## THE INSCRIBED VOICE: CONVIVIALITY AND RECEPTION

Unlike inscriptions found adorning engraved, locally produced glassware (for example Cologne bowls inscribed *ESCIPE ME PLACEBO TIBI*, *Take me and I shall please you*),<sup>1</sup> neither silver nor glass open-work vessels adopt the “voice” of a vessel. One Cologne glass bowl with mythological imagery depicting Apollo and Artemis has the following inscription: *ESCIPE POCVLA GRATA*, *Take the pleasing bowl*.<sup>2</sup> Both of these inscriptions refer explicitly to the vessel as a material object. In contrast, a similar Cologne bowl has a depiction of the Fall of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis. Surrounding the imagery is the inscription: *GAVDIAS IN DEO PIE Z*, *Rejoice in God, drink, and may you live*.<sup>3</sup> In this series, the bowl with the early Christian imagery portrays an abbreviated, transliterated version of inscriptions found on glass open-work vessels, *PIE Z*. The Wint Hill type bowl with boar scenes and mythological subjects each typically refer to the bowl itself through the content of the inscription.<sup>4</sup> This is not the case in glass open-work. Given the pairing of the ‘*drink may you live*’ inscription with Christian imagery, the question arises: would contemporaneous viewers have interpreted ‘*drink may you live*’ as a particularly Christian expression?

In contrast to the dissimilar content on inscriptions adorning silver open-work vessels, a majority of Greek and Latin glass open-work inscriptions express equivalent ideas. More open-work inscriptions are preserved in Latin than Greek. The most commonly preserved Latin inscription is: *BIBE MVLTI ANNIS*, also found is the more complete form, *BIBE VIVAS MVLTI ANNIS*. Although complete inscriptions are

<sup>1</sup> See HARDEN *et alii* 1987, pp. 226-227, fig. 126.

<sup>2</sup> HARDEN *et alii* 1987, p. 228, fig. 127. Within the represented scene a *krater* is shown. Thus, the inscription may refer to the user or viewer as well as the figures portrayed on the vessel.

<sup>3</sup> HARDEN *et alii* 1987, pp. 229-230, fig. 128. Z is an abbreviation for ZESSES and is written in reverse.

<sup>4</sup> HARDEN *et alii* 1987, pp. 226-230, figs. 126-128; CHEW 2003.



FIG. 3. The Trivulzio Cage Cup (previously referred to as the *Cup of Nero*), Il Civico Museo Archeologico, Milan (A.o.9.2840), *circa* first third – second half of the fourth century AD. H: 120–121 mm, letters: 14 mm high, rim diam: 121–125 mm, decolourized inner vessel, translucent emerald green inscription, opaque pale yellow to light cobalt blue network of rings.

Photo courtesy of Il Civico Museo Archeologico, Milan.

rare, at least one intact inscription along with a stop-mark, remains for each of the two most commonly found Latin inscriptions.

Open-work vessels are frequently found in burials. There is typically little or no information in a grave concerning original contexts of use, except for inscriptions on the vessels themselves.<sup>1</sup> The content of open-work inscriptions suggests that the mechanism underlying inscriptions is that at social occasions individuals adopt the role of viewer and user. Inscribed convivial content reinforces the notion that viewers responding to what they read become users. Regardless of whether the inscribed content led to use in toasts, or selection for use on convivial occasions led to corresponding inscribed content, the fact remains that inscriptions as decoration displayed content appropriate to use.<sup>2</sup>

The same basic phrase is found repeated on glass open-work vessels in Greek and Latin inscriptions (FIGS. 3 and 4). The verb

BIBE is in the present singular imperative active tense. The voice is, therefore, directed towards a single user or viewer, commanding: '(you) *Drink* (now)!' The second verb VIVAS, when present, is also directed at an individual.<sup>3</sup> It translates as: '*may you live*.' The use of the subjunctive tense expresses a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event rather than a fact. The phrase '*Drink! may you live*' is, therefore, a command to drink followed by a wish that the specified drinker may live, a toast to the life of the imbiber. MVLTIS ANNIS is the plural male second declension noun, *years*, preceded by a modifying adjective, *much* or *many*. The adjective and noun are therefore either in the dative or ablative case, either of which is positioned in the sentence to represent the consequence of the subjunctive wish or exhortation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the inscription commands an action in order that a gift is then conferred on the one performing the action: '*Drink! [A wish that you] may live for many years*.' If the ablative was selected in combination with the subjunctive case, the in-

<sup>1</sup> Omitted from this discussion is a treatment of the inscribed letter forms. See my forthcoming book on open-work vessels for an illustrated discussion.

<sup>2</sup> On Latin forms of address, see DICKEY 2002; TOMLIN 2005.

<sup>3</sup> VIVAS is in the present, second personal singular subjunctive active tense.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the dative case «commonly denotes the indirect or more remote object of the action of a verb, that *to* or *for* whom or which we do a thing, or *to* whom we give a thing. Having the right to give. Of the nature of a gift; conferred or bestowed as a gift.» OED online, s.v. 'dative.' The function of the ablative case «was to express *direction from* a place, or *time*... the *source* whence an action proceeds, the *cause* or ideal source of an event, the *instrument* and *agent* or material sources of an action, the *manner* in which, and sometimes the *place* and *time* at which anything is done.» OED online, s.v. 'ablative.'

scription communicates the idea that, by the voice commanding the viewer and user to drink, living for many years is the consequence of the voice's agency: *'Drink! [A wish, the source of which causes you to] live for many years.'* In either case the meaning of the toast is a command to a single user to drink, wishing the user long life.

Separate from BIBE VIVAS MVLTI ANNIS, the truncated BIBE MVLTI ANNIS is also found. The latter version of the inscription retains the present imperative command to a single user to *'Drink!'* The use of the subjunctive tense, however, to convey a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event, has been excised. Without the verb VIVAS the meaning of the sentence is altered. It more closely expresses the idea of the dative case: *'Drink! to many years.'* Since the wish that the user live has been omitted, expressed in the subjunctive use of VIVAS, comparatively the idea expressed is reduced to that of mere motto. This statement is an order to drink to many years. It is devoid of a wish for an individual viewer and user.

The Greek equivalent, also found in two corresponding versions on glass open-work vessels, is: ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΑΙC ΚΑΛΩC ΑΕΙ and ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΑΙC ΚΑΛΩC. Although Greek inscriptions are less commonly found than Latin ones, at least one nearly complete inscription remains of both Greek inscriptions, each with a stop-mark. ΠΙΕ is a second person singular, active, strong aorist, the imperative form of the verb 'to drink.' The aorist indicates aspect (duration), *'Drink! (completed aspect, do it now! this moment!)*' ΖΗΧΑΙC is a second person singular, optative, active, an optative of wish: *'may you live.'* Used adverbially, ΚΑΛΩC describes how one should live, well. ΑΕΙ is the adverb always. ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΑΙC ΚΑΛΩC ΑΕΙ, therefore, translates to: *'Drink, may you live well always!'*

Thus, in addition to following the same visual principles concerning placement, BIBE and ΠΙΕ function semantically in the same way in their respective inscriptions, *'Drink (now)!'* directed to a single viewer. VIVAS and ΖΗΧΑΙC serve to denote a wish for a prospective event expressed: *'may you live.'* The Latin adjective and noun MVLTI ANNIS are substituted in the Greek by the approximately equivalent adverb ΚΑΛΩC or corresponding adverbial pair ΚΑΛΩC ΑΕΙ. The Latin *'Drink, may you live for many years!'* is, therefore, equivalent to the Greek *'Drink, may you live well always!'* Moreover, the surviving evidence suggests that in Latin or Greek, MVLTI ANNIS and ΚΑΛΩC ΑΕΙ express the kind of descriptive terms typically found.



FIG. 4. The Köln-Braunsfeld Cage Cup, The Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne (60.1), first half of the fourth century AD. H: 121 mm, rim diam: 101 mm, decolourized inner vessel, red inscription, yellow band below inscription, from top to bottom: yellow, colourless then green network of rings. Photo courtesy of The Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne.

The Greek toast is a translation of the more common Latin. The toast is the most commonplace open-work inscription.<sup>1</sup> As a basic component of inscribed open-work inscriptions, a toast may represent the purpose behind these functional vessels. The conspicuous absence of individual names suggests that when displayed as part of domestic, convivial use, the inscription addressed each viewer, and thus potential user, individually.<sup>2</sup> The content of the inscription on the *Szekszárd cup*, however, uses the traditional language of toasts in combination with an early Christian reference to Jesus Christ by the addition of the epithet, 'the Shepherd.' Such inscriptions typically commanded action in order to confer a gift onto the one performing the task, via the agency of the inscribed voice. Thereby, the content of inscribed toasts strongly suggests that most (of the inscribed vessels at least) were used and on display during convivial occasions.

Could inscriptions have been intended to serve divine users, as a libation? The representation of the use of the *Tatius vessel* in *Leucippe and Clitophon* is illustrative not only for its description, but also for explaining that the vessel was used during a festival to give libations to the god of wine. Was its use restricted to the deity alone? The use of the subjunctive tense in inscriptions indicates a wish or exhortation for the user as a result of the performance of the command 'to drink.' Is it a subjugated user that performs the command at the behest of the voice in order to gain the contingent end result? The evoked power relation articulated through the language of the inscription is one in which the implied voice exerts influence over the viewer or user, suggesting the nature of a votive.

Early Christian use of glass open-work vessels is further substantiated by the excavation of the *Aila cage cup* in what has been identified as a room for liturgical furniture in an early church.<sup>3</sup> Via an inscription, an implied voice on open-work vessels communicates to a lower status viewer or user. The user is commanded to perform a specified action. Despite the viewer gaining a wish for long life by satisfying the command to drink, the command, wish and agency belong to the voice expressed on the vessel.

#### THE SOCIAL UTILITY OF INSCRIBED LATE ANTIQUE IMPERIAL DECORATION

Evolutionary changes coincided in inscribed form and content whereby increasingly, from the fourth century, the inscribed form as a visual convention or sign was recognisable as a means of expressing loyalty to one's emperor or emperors (especially during the Tetrarchy), one's Christian faith, or pledges of long life to individuals in domestic, convivial contexts. Inscribed gold cross-bow *fibula* were manufactured and distributed during the period of the Tetrarchy. Around the end of the Tetrarchy, the material and decorative form of movable, functional, aestheticized imperial gifts and insignia changed.<sup>4</sup> Although the reasons cannot be ascertained, such widespread

<sup>1</sup> Variations include: *May you live a fruitful life*, and *May your [memory] live well...!* A notable Greek variation is *Offer sacrifice to the Shepherd, drink, you shall live!*

<sup>2</sup> Had an individual's name formed part of the inscription (for example, '*Drink Marcus! May you live for many years*'), it would have been more likely that the vessel was for their personal, exclusive use. When names are included in inscriptions it is as honorific dedications to an emperor or dedications to saints.

<sup>3</sup> PARKER 2000, p. 392; JONES 2003, pp. 180-182, fig. 1; JONES 2005, pp. 135-139.

<sup>4</sup> JOHANSEN 1994, pp. 233-234.

changes had broad implications. Rule by one senior and one junior Tetrarch in the west and another pair of Tetrarchs in the east meant that the ultimate figure of power was multiplied by four. Previous imperial iconography existed, established from at least the time of Augustus, as a means of representing imperial succession. Such iconography generally contained up to two figures. With four emperors, not necessarily all related, imperial imagery stressing similarity in appearance, by birth, adoption or by marriage, would not have served the aims of Tetrarchic rule.<sup>1</sup> Scholars cannot always identify individual Tetrarchs from the generalised style of portraiture.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Tetrarchic portraiture as imperial self-presentation clearly conveyed the shared visual messages of concord and authority, such portraits were generalised, displaying symbolic representations rather than individualised portraits.

During the Tetrarchy, the development of inscriptions on imperial gifts resolved the problem of gaining proper credit for donatives – the emperor's name was recorded as decoration ensuring a perpetual record and memory of the gift.<sup>3</sup> The use of inscriptions as imperial decoration was a natural choice. Among four Tetrarchs, inscribed decoration distinguished one to two emperors, physically recording and displaying otherwise ephemeral imperial benefaction. For example, see the silver *largitio* dish of Emperor *Licinius*.<sup>4</sup> Further reinforcing this interpretation is the fact that after the conclusion of the Tetrarchic experiment, with Constantine as the sole Roman emperor, he maintained the ceremonial of imperial *largesse* but replaced imperial gifts of cross-bow *fibulae* in costly gold material in favour of gilded bronze.<sup>5</sup> Constantine simultaneously elected to forego documentary, inscribed decoration in favour of a return to conventional, imperial imagery previously established expressly for familial imperial succession. The history of inscribed decoration on gifts of imperial *fibulae* are indicative of the primary purpose behind their design and distribution.

Concerning the origins of inscribed late antique imperial gifts, three significant conclusions can be drawn from a study of the codification of Tetrarchic gifts.<sup>6</sup> First, gilded bronze cross-bow *fibulae* replaced their inscribed gold counterparts as imperial *largesse*. Second, the content of the late antique development of inscribed decoration allied recipients to the Tetrarchs: “the majority [of gold rings and *fibulae*] have inscriptions linking them [these inscribed imperial gifts] to Diocletian and Maximian, Licinius and Constantine”.<sup>7</sup> The third and most widely applicable point is that geometric patterning, representational imagery and inscriptions are all forms of decoration used, continuously, from late antiquity onwards.<sup>8</sup> Similar to Renaissance paintings, which paint a donor venerating Christ, text as decoration on useful art preserves

<sup>1</sup> See MACCORMACK 1981.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example HARDEN *et alii* 1987, p. 23, no. 3; HANNESTAD 1986, p. 306, fig. 189.

<sup>3</sup> The same mechanism is apparent in later Christian contexts. See for example, a lone inscription posthumously dedicates the vast sea of representational pavement mosaics in the southern Theodorian Hall of the Basilica in Aquileia to Bishop Theodore. The medallion contains a central *christogram* above a Latin inscription in serified capitals which reads: «Blessed are you, Theodore, who, with the Almighty and His flock, successfully completed this work and consecrated it to the glory of God», MARINI 2004, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> BUCKTON 1994, pp. 25-26, fig. 1.

<sup>5</sup> JOHANSEN 1994, p. 234.

<sup>6</sup> For an examination of imperial gifts, see JOHANSEN 1994, pp. 223-242.

<sup>7</sup> JOHANSEN 1994, p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> JOHANSEN 1994, pp. 234-235.

a record of perpetual commemoration. The donor's aestheticized prominent name, as a surrogate for the person, continually occupies a physical place of honour among each recipient's personal possessions. Use leads to viewing, providing a context to an unlimited number of potential viewers. Since imperial donatives exclude the names of recipients, the content of inscribed decoration is hierarchic and standardised. Every viewer, whether or not a recipient, is explicitly encouraged – via an inscribed text – to honour the emperor. The ceremonial distribution of gift-giving surely increased the contexts and subsequent acts of honouring the ruler by increasing the number of satellite commemorations. Throughout the history of *ekphrasis*, usable art objects are incorporated into narratives in a consistent manner, thereby indicating use of a literary convention. In late antiquity, the language of acclamations was formalised, the content restricted.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, plausible that the act of viewing imperial gifts of useful art objects, most likely in contexts of use, would also have had a ritualistic element framing contemporary viewers' responses.

#### CONCLUSION

*Ekpraseis* contextualize objects and how to look at them generally, at a 'high' literary level. In contrast, the content of inscribed decoration expressly addresses specific contexts of use in relation to a particular object. Often, the subject is interpretations concerning high-relief vessels more broadly, as opposed to a diachronic treatise on one particular vessel. Instead, one vessel is captured synchronically as it is used in a social interaction to mediate exchange. Whereas with reference to open-work vessels, *ekpraseis* are external texts, inscriptions are integral texts. *Ekpraseis* of usable vessels and inscriptions on usable vessels direct use, display and interpretation. *Ekphrasis* and inscribed decoration frame viewing.

Open-work vessels were used in different types of interactions. They functioned as drinking vessels, libation vessels, they were given as gifts of *largesse*, used as lamps, and they were selected as part of burial assemblages. The corpus of glass open-work vessels spans the period of history during which inscriptions appeared as decoration on usable art objects. The contents of inscribed decoration on movable material culture had to do with a narrative unfolding in the real world. Toasting, drinking to long life and benefaction are all examples of specific contexts of use displayed through inscribed content. *Ekphrasis* shows characters within an epic tale or work of fiction interacting with usable art. Frequently there are significant narrative consequences as a result of those interactions. The content of inscriptions on useful art also points to important narrative events, but in the real world, where it is not fictional characters but real users whose interactions are mediated and prescribed by useful art objects.

The ekphrastic framework used to describe usable art incorporated objects as part of a tangible exchange. As well as useful art, it presented viewers. *Ekpraseis* do not just describe objects, they involve dynamic viewing. They are a representation of specific interactions involving viewers, users and an object. *Ekpraseis* are incorporated within a narrative and show an audience what to look at and how to see useful art. Within the narration a mirror is figuratively held up to viewers: in a sight within a

<sup>1</sup> ROUECHÉ 1984, pp. 181-199.

sight. The history of *ekpraseis* of usable art is a history of portrayals of viewers and users interacting and responding to parallel events embodied by material objects. *Ekphrasis* of useful art makes the implicit act of viewing explicit.

In ancient *ekphrasis*, a commonplace context of material display is dining. This context matches the contexts in which inscribed open-work vessels are known to have been used. The material case study and literary portrayals of the same broad phenomenon, useful art, therefore underscore their use as part of an exchange or highlighted interaction. As a form of decoration, inscribed content unites text and object directly to help frame viewing and use.

As objects within texts, *ekpraseis* present the activation of decoration through use. Decoration is enlivened by means of pivotal interactions. As text within objects, inscribed decoration displays content that refers to specific occasions as contexts of use. The evidence from the history of *ekphrasis* of usable art, and inscribed decoration indicates that Romans were aware of usable art as a means of focusing on social interactions. The paradigmatic *shield of Achilles* was an established model of viewing; the repeated, consistent approach to representing a usable art object allows the voice of the narrator to be understood as an exemplar shaping future responses to real useful art objects. As illustrated by late antique usable art objects, crafted words and the circulation and reception of objects mediate social interactions.

The approach utilised in this work has been one that can fruitfully be applied to any period within the history of art. Art historical material has been drawn upon, as has historical and archaeological material. In addition to the integration of art historical, historical and archaeological evidence, a complementary textual treatment of inscribed decoration and *ekphrasis* has been incorporated in order to evaluate how texts formed contexts, framed viewing and directed use, display and interpretation in late antiquity. *Ekphrasis* can be considered as a context for understanding movable, functional art specifically, as demonstrated by the case study of open-work vessels.

The *paragone* debate has unduly influenced scholars through the adoption of inherited terminology. The history of *ekphrasis* of useful art predates the history of *ekphrasis* of paintings and other forms of non-useful art. At its core, what distinguishes usable art objects from non-useful art is that useful art mediates social interactions. To return to the beginning, according to *late antique* sources, the creation, circulation, use and display of carved and other highly crafted, usable art objects comprise an array of socially significant, mediated interactions, between late antique viewers and late antique usable art.

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#### ABSTRACT

The dialectic that underpins this study is the inheritance of a Renaissance tripartite division and its misapplication to an earlier social world of cultural production. Reductionist terms, such as high *art* as opposed to low *craft*, have been applied and maintained as labels with which modern scholars refer to late antique material culture.

Objects in texts (*ekphrasis*) and texts on objects (inscriptions), however, provide two kinds of ancient art historical source which interconnect art, text and material culture. This discussion focuses on a single category of aestheticized, movable material culture – highly carved vessels – of the late Roman period. At its core, what distinguishes usable art objects is that they mediated social interactions. *Ekphrasis* of usable art circulated animated imagery in par-narratives represented via social exchange. Inscriptions on usable art framed use, viewing and interpretation.

*Ekphrasis* were products of the same cultural fabric that created inscribed open-work vessels. How did the incorporation of open-work inscriptions affect late antique viewing and use?

Writing is in its infancy as an art historical subject. A tacit division exists, typically separating the study of epigraphy from art. As a consequence, a potentially rich source for art historical study remains relatively untapped. As historical records, text as decoration originally framed viewing and visual adornment. Today, it provides one of the few means of accessing original late antique social contexts.

This paper will (1) define the conceptual category of *useful art* as found in ancient written sources, (2) present an analysis of a visual description of a literary object (*ekphrasis*) as a textual case study, (3) present inscribed open-work vessels as a contemporaneous case study of surviving useful art, and (4) consider the social utility of the late antique imperial practice of inscribing emblems of office and other useful art objects.

La dialettica alla base di questo studio si rifà all'eredità concettuale della ripartizione rinascimentale delle arti e della sua erronea applicazione nell'ambito della produzione culturale delle società antiche. Termini come "arte" opposta al più basso "artigianato" sono stati applicati e mantenuti come riduttive etichette utilizzate dagli studiosi di età moderna per categorizzare i prodotti materiali delle società antiche.

La rappresentazione degli oggetti nei testi (*ekphraseis*) e di testi su oggetti (iscrizioni) tuttavia, fornisce due diversi generi di fonti che mettono in connessione arte, testi scritti e cultura materiale. Il contributo che si presenta è focalizzato su una particolare categoria di materiali rappresentata da alcuni prodotti mobili – vasi lavorati – di periodo tardo romano.

L'arte di scrivere è da considerare, nella sua fase iniziale, come un soggetto artistico. Una tacita divisione esiste ed è quella che va a separare l'epigrafia dall'arte. Come i documenti storici, il testo come l'immagine figurata è da considerare documento visuale ed è per questo motivo che oggi esso appare come strumento importante per comprendere i documenti dell'arte tardo antica.

L'articolo (1) definirà la categoria concettuale di *arte utile* così come indicata nelle antiche fonti scritte, e (2) presenterà un'analisi della descrizione visiva di "oggetti letterari" (*ekphrasis*); infine (3) offrirà l'analisi relativa a vasi iscritti come casi di sopravvivenza di arte utile per poi (4) esaminare la possibilità dell'utilità sociale della pratica delle iscrizioni sugli oggetti nel periodo tardo imperiale romano.

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