**Are Pictures Worth More Than Words? Ancient Greek Painters as Storytellers**

Professor Emeritus Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell Brings Ancient Greek Stories to Life at the Cleveland Museum of Art

Can a single image tell a story more powerfully than a thousand words? And what happens when an ancient Greek artist decides to tell a familiar story differently from the poet whose version we know? These were among the intriguing questions explored by Dr. Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell, Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota, during the Dr. John and Helen Collis Distinguished Lecture in Greek and Byzantine Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Sunday, September 27, 2026. The lecture, *Are Pictures Worth More Than Words? Ancient Greek Painters as Storytellers*, offered a fascinating journey through Greek mythology, ancient theatrical traditions, and the extraordinary narrative imagination of Greek vase painters. Following a welcome from Dr. Andria Derstine, the museum's Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Dr. Seth Pevnick, the museum's curator of Greek and Roman art, introduced Stansbury-O'Donnell, whose distinguished scholarship includes Pictorial Narrative in Ancient Greek Art, recently translated into Greek. The speaker expressed particular appreciation to the Collis family and the Hellenic Preservation Society for supporting the lecture and sustaining public interest in Greek art and culture.

*Ancient Stories, Modern Questions*

Stansbury-O'Donnell began with a wonderfully contemporary comparison: Hollywood's continuing fascination with Homer's Odyssey. Every new cinematic adaptation invites the inevitable question: Is it faithful to Homer? But, as the speaker reminded his audience, ancient Greek stories were never fixed in quite the way modern readers might imagine. Long before they were committed to writing, myths circulated through oral traditions, changing as storytellers adapted them for new audiences. Greek playwrights, too, felt free to alter characters, events, and endings. Why should painters have been any different? Indeed, visual storytelling preceded written literature by thousands of years. And while an epic poem might require twenty hours to recite, a vase painter could capture an entire emotional drama in a single image. The key, Stansbury-O'Donnell suggested, lies in understanding that pictures do not simply illustrate stories. They tell stories according to their own rules, selecting particular moments, emphasizing gestures, and inviting viewers to imagine what happened before and what might happen next.

*A Moment of Decision*

Among the most compelling examples was a magnificent Greek calyx-krater in the CMA depicting Telephos threatening the young Orestes at an altar. Wounded and desperate for healing, Telephos seized the child to force his enemies to help him. Rather than depicting the culmination of the violence, the painter captures a moment of extraordinary suspense. Agamemnon stands ready to draw his sword, but will he risk spilling blood at a sacred altar? The viewer must contemplate not only what happens next but also the moral implications of the character's choices. Other examples were equally dramatic. Images of Medea escaping in the chariot of the Sun after murdering her children presented different interpretations of the familiar tragedy. Some painters placed the children's bodies upon an altar; others portrayed Jason pursuing Medea with a sword. Each artist made deliberate choices about which details to include, where to position the characters, and whose suffering to emphasize. These were not necessarily mistakes or departures from an authoritative

literary text. Rather, they were independent interpretations of stories that belonged to a shared cultural imagination.

*The Tragedy of Troy*

The Trojan War, perhaps the richest source of ancient Greek pictorial storytelling, provided some of the lecture's most memorable examples. In one scene, Menelaos confronts Helen after the fall of Troy, apparently prepared to kill the woman whose departure helped provoke a decade of war. But Helen makes a gesture associated with a bride revealing herself to her bridegroom. Suddenly, the expected violence gives way to the possibility of reconciliation. The painter has compressed anger, recognition, desire, and forgiveness into an encounter whose outcome the viewer must supply. Far more disturbing were depictions of the death of King Priam, sometimes shown seated at an altar while Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, threatens him with the body of his own grandson. By placing this act of brutality at a sacred refuge, painters intensified the horror of Troy's destruction and challenged the distinction between Greek heroes and Trojan victims. Stansbury-O'Donnell also considered the suicide of Ajax. Rather than depicting the hero's death, a painter showed him quietly preparing the sword upon which he would fall. It is a remarkably intimate moment: the warrior alone, contemplating his final act. The image predates Sophocles's famous tragedy by decades, reminding us that painters could convey profound psychological complexity without a single spoken word.

*Pictures That Move—and Viewers Who Move With Them*

One of the lecture's most illuminating observations concerned something easily forgotten when we encounter Greek vases in museum cases or reproduced as flat photographs: these paintings were created for three-dimensional objects that people handled, used, and experienced from changing viewpoints. A krater, the large vessel used for mixing wine and water at a symposium, was often positioned below the eye level of its viewers. Its images unfolded around a curved surface as guests moved about it. On drinking cups, the experience could be even more intimate. Raising a cup to one's lips might bring a scene of death, mourning, or mythological drama directly before the drinker's face. These were not simply pictures to be admired. They were objects that encouraged physical engagement with the stories they told. The lecture also extended beyond pottery to the monumental paintings once displayed in the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi. Known today through the descriptions of the second-century traveler Pausanias, these great panoramas of the Trojan War required visitors to move through space, discovering episodes and relationships as their eyes traveled across the walls. Stansbury-O'Donnell likened their immersive narrative effect to aspects of cinematic storytelling.

*More Than Illustration*

Perhaps the lecture's most important message was that we should resist judging ancient Greek paintings solely by how accurately they correspond to surviving literary texts. The painters were not simply illustrating Homer, Aeschylus, or Euripides. They were storytellers in their own right, working in a medium with distinctive possibilities for suspense, emotion, ambiguity, and surprise. Sometimes they selected the instant before a terrible event. Sometimes they altered familiar details. Sometimes a gesture, an expression, or the placement of a figure transformed the meaning of an entire narrative. And sometimes they left the most important part of the story for the viewer to imagine. For an audience surrounded by the Cleveland Museum of Art's remarkable collections of Greek antiquities, the lecture offered a fresh way of looking at objects that have survived for more than two millennia. These vases are not merely beautiful examples of ancient craftsmanship.

They are evidence of an endlessly inventive visual culture whose artists understood how to captivate, challenge, and move an audience.

*Are pictures worth more than words?*

Stansbury-O'Donnell did not suggest that one medium must triumph over the other. Rather, he demonstrated that ancient Greek painters possessed a remarkable ability to make stories come alive—sometimes by showing us not what happened, but the breathtaking moment just before it did. And that is a storytelling technique as powerful today as it was 2,500 years ago.

*The Dr. John and Helen Collis Distinguished Lecture in Greek and Byzantine Art is presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art through the generosity of the Collis Family Foundation. The lecture series brings internationally recognized scholars to Cleveland to deepen public appreciation of the artistic and cultural achievements of the ancient Greek and Byzantine worlds.*