

The golden ram at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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As depositories of a varied range of cultural objects, museums have many works in their collections that can only be fully appreciated with knowledge of their provenance. Some *objets*, which at first glance might seem remote from the artistic assets generated by the community that maintains them, facilitate the creation of an attractive historical panorama in which the successive owners are linked by their appreciation of a particular work: from the artist, and the culture, that produced it to the institution that today displays it as a means of fulfilling its stated objective of social participation.

One of the many works that, thanks to the generosity of past donors from Bilbao, have enhanced the city's Fine Arts Museum, is a magnificent piece of ceramics that combines unique significance, an excellent state of conservation and high artistic quality. Representing the figure of a ram at rest [fig. 1], modelled in the fine paste typical of ancient Greek ceramics, the work is part of the Palacio Collection, left to the Museum in the mid-20th century.

A collector and his antiques: José Palacio Olavarría

The Palacio Collection became part of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1953. José Palacio Olavarría was born in Montevideo on 28 September 1875. From his discreet biography¹ we know that, some time around 1920, he moved into a flat on the fourth floor at number 24 on the *Gran Vía*, Bilbao's main thoroughfare, and took an active part in cultural affairs in the city. His death certificate states he was a lawyer, and it is not known whether he ever worked as an architect, which he appears to have studied in Barcelona. A great music lover, Palacio frequented the city's Philharmonic Society and travelled regularly to Paris for the opera season, with the same enthusiasm he showed for visits to exhibitions and museums. His knowledge of the Musée Guimet and the sections of Oriental art in the Louvre was extensive; as a collector, his preference was for the arts of the Far East². Between 1925 and 1932 he was a regular at Paris auctions, particularly those held by Hôtel

1 Sagaste 2007, p. 456.

2 Pereda 1998, pp. 10 y ss.



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1. *Askos* in the form of a ram
Greek, 4th century BC
Ceramics. 13 x 6 x 22 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/1505

Drouot, where he acquired many works, in all likelihood rivalling museums; he kept a close watch on what they acquired. In the Spanish Civil War his collection was confiscated and deposited in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum³, from where it must have been moved to the city's bonded warehouse, known as the *Depósito Franco*, together with the other works in the Museum, until it was returned to him in 1938⁴. He appears not have made any further acquisitions, probably impeded from returning to Paris by the political situation at the time and his own advancing years. He died on 25 January 1952, at the age of seventy-seven. Between 1952 and 1954, his partner and heiress, María de Arechavaleta (1881-1954) took charge of ensuring the collection was donated and bequeathed to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.

José Palacio collected more than three hundred works of Far Eastern art, which he must have considered the part of his collection that best represented him and by which he most wanted to be remembered, so when María de Arechavaleta made the collection over to the Museum, with the works of Oriental art, she also included the books documenting them and the catalogues of the auctions where they had been acquired, many with his own personal notes. The rest of the Palacio Collection comprises a much more varied group of some two hundred works: mediaeval images, carvings and oil paintings from the 16th to the 19th century, miniatures, drawings, engravings, cases, porcelain, bronzes, fans, coins and medals, all of refined taste and representative of the collector's preferences. This may be deduced, for example, from the varied series of cups of European porcelain, parallel to his select collection of Japanese cups for use in the tea ceremony.

Archaeological pieces are, however, much less abundant in the Palacio Collection and do not form large groups. It may be that the collector did not see in them the kind of characteristics that would have enabled him to keep them with the rest. His avowed intention was to give a small set of Egyptian works and other archaeological objects to the Basque Archaeological, Ethnographic & Historical Museum in Bilbao (Euskal Museoa), which María de Arechavaleta did in his memory in 1952⁵. Included in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum donation and bequest were other antique works like coins, the ceramic ram discussed in the present essay and two works that need to be described briefly owing to their physical and thematic proximity to this one: a *lekythos* from southern Italy and a gold earring.

The *lekythos* [fig. 2] has a thick, trumpet-shaped neck that does not narrow at the base, one of a type of squat *lekythos* frequent in southern Italian products from the 4th century BC. At 9.2 centimetres high, it is best identified as a small perfume jar of the sort found in relative abundance in Etruscan and Italian burial sites. The decoration is of the red-figure technique, i.e. with a thick black coat covering most of the piece, leaving in reserve only the area where the figures are cut out in the reddish colour of the baked clay. A small border of ova in the lower part acts as base for the figure of a dappled running fawn delineated by two highly stylized plant stems. Like many works from the later period, it is succinctly rendered. The model for the figure comes from the workshops of Athens, something that is readily appreciable in a delicate Athenian *lekythos* from the late 5th century BC [fig. 3]⁶ and in another in the Museum of Sarajevo⁷. Stylistically, it can be linked to the "Perth group" of Apulian ceramics⁸, which includes a similar *lekythos* from the Domenico Ridola

3 According to information supplied by Mikel Urizar, head of the Museum Archive, the confiscation is noted in the Minutes for 23 December 1936 (Bilbao Fine Arts Museum / Minutes. Vol. II, p. 59R.).

4 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum / Minutes. Vol. II, p. 62R (13 January 1938); vol. II, p. 63R (13 May 1938); vol. II, p. 64R (28 September 1938).

5 Ortuondo/Entrena 2006.

6 Kozloff 1981, vol. 1, p. 127.

7 CVA, Sarajevo, 46, Pl. (168) 41.1. (CVA = Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum. References are cited by the heading of each volume corresponding to published collections and in accordance with the initials used at the Classical Art Research Centre database, Oxford University. <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/index.htm>).

8 Trendall/Cambitoglou 1978-1982, vol. 1, pp. 672 ff.



2. Pot-bellied *lekythos*
Southern Italy, 4th century BC
Ceramics. 9.2 cm (height)
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/1436



3. Red-figure pot-bellied *lekythos*
Attic, late 5th century BC
Private collection



4. Red-figure pot-bellied *lekythos*
Attic, 4th century BC
Museo Archeologico Nazionale "Domenico
Ridola", Matera, Italy

National Museum of Archaeology in Matera [fig. 4], except that in this case it portrays a panther. Even so, both may be said to be by the same hand.

With a diameter of 2.5 centimetres [fig. 5], the gold earring is formed by two parallel rings linked at the edges by tiny laces bearing two facing rams' heads. The piece is rendered in a style common to many Greek and Etruscan works from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BC.

It is interesting to note how the relatively few archaeological works collected by José Palacio Olavarría all have certain affinities that point to the collector's preferences. The *lekythos* may be seen as a minor companion piece to the superb ram under discussion here and the earring, complete with rams' heads, suggest the collector found the animal of interest. Both works share a certain elegant simplicity, perfectly compatible with the sober, serene taste of the Japanese ceramic tea cups that so captivated him.

Acquiring the golden ram

Amongst the Oriental works and the accompanying miscellany in the Palacio Collection is an attractive Greek ceramic vessel with features good enough for it to stand alongside the beautiful Chinese and Japanese objects. Of the origin of this ram at rest all we know is the notes by Palacio in the Drouot auction catalogue, numbered 008031 in his library, which he gave to the Museum⁹. Written in ink at the top of page

9 Poteries archaïques chinoises... 1925.



5. Earring with two ram heads
Greek or Etruscan, 5th-3rd century BC
Gold, 2.5 cm (diameter)
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/1434

3 of the catalogue is: "Bought in this sale a Greek vase (not in catalogue) which according to the expert comes from the Porri collection (my ram). A gentleman from the Louvre congratulated me. I think". At the bottom of page 34, where the list of works goes from the Chinese pieces on offer to those of Asia Minor and Egypt, is the phrase, handwritten in pen and ink, *mío Vaso carnero griego Porri* (mine Greek ram Vessel Porri), followed by a figure that may well be its value, and further below, in pencil, "de la Colección Porri" (from the Porri collection). Also written on the spine label of the catalogue cover is "El carnero romano, el vaso celadon Ming y la Chiniere amarilla y verde Ming de casa" (the Roman ram, the Ming Celadon vase and the yellow and green household Ming Chiniere). It seems likely that Palacio acquired the ram when he attended this Schilling Collection auction, at which he acquired two Chinese pieces from the Ming dynasty. However, as the ram is not actually mentioned in the catalogue, it must have been a work left over from a previous auction, which he found especially interesting and acquired on that date. Palacio would also seem to have hesitated over how to classify it, as in one note he describes it as Roman and in another one as Greek. In any case, Palacio must have been particularly pleased that someone from the Louvre congratulated him on his purchase.

I have been unable to locate any reference to other pieces from the "Porri Collection" at Drouot auctions; the name is not cited as the origin of works in the better-known museums that might have acquired them. The only major match of this name with a collector is the Siena publisher Giuseppe Porri (1798-1885) [fig. 6], who donated to the city an extraordinary collection of books, manuscripts, autographs, drawings, engravings, coins and stamps¹⁰ now held in the *degli Intronati* Municipal Library and the Civic Museum of Siena. The best appreciated of his collections were the autographs¹¹; these he collected thanks to his magnificent connections with important figures in Italian culture of the time. Besides being intensely active in Siena politics, Porri knew the collectors of antiques in his city very well and published a large number of works on the history of Siena, to which he contributed through his study of the city's mediaeval mint¹².

10 Catoni 1975.

11 Bastianoni/Gregorio 1982.

12 Porri 1844.



6. Giuseppe Porri (1798-1885)
Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, Siena

Porri also collected something like nine thousand coins, two thousand two hundred and eighty-one of which are from the ancient world, being Etruscan, Greek or Roman, for the most part acquired through trade-offs with other collectors, whether of coins or books and autographs; one such collector from Siena exchanged duplicated items with Porri¹³, which gives an idea of his frequent involvement with archaeological finds in the area. Apart from what he gave to the Siena library, Porri also left his entire estate to the *Istituto Toscano dei Sordomuti*, founded in Siena by Tommaso Pendola, which must have received the properties, furniture and *objets d'art* Porri owned. The collector reserved just three paintings to thank one of his executors¹⁴. If our ram belonged to Porri and was left to Pendola's institution, it may well have been sold subsequently with other *objets* to help towards the institution's upkeep and, thus, eventually come under the auctioneer's hammer. As we shall see, works have been found at some Etruscan necropolises in the region around Siena with clear chronological and stylistic connections with the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, which means we may be fairly sure that the work comes from there.

Description

The ram at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is a figured fine clay vessel, modelled, polychromed and baked, a maximum of 22 centimetres long by 13 high and 6 wide. On the underside is a label which reads "J.P. 76", which is its series number as part of the Palacio Collection donation and bequest made by María de Arechavaleta.

13 Bonfioli 1984, p. 18 ff., no. 49.

14 Catoni 1975, p. 474, no. 79.



7. Askos in the form of a ram
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
View of hindquarters



8. Askos in the form of a ram
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail

A light, stylized body rests on bent legs, with the head facing frontwards. The forms of the ram's body are well differentiated, the bulges of the front and back leg muscles being correctly modelled to highlight the bone structure, unlike what is usually found in representations of this kind of animal, in which the shape of the body tapers away under the continuous cover of the curls of wool. In truth, the artist has taken the anatomical description as far as possible, as if dealing with the body of a much lighter animal. Its legs are bent perfectly naturally, the front ones beneath the body and the hooves pointing upwards, while the back

legs are flexed forwards with the hooves turned down. A thick tail curls between the two back legs to join below with the testicles [fig. 7]. The whole reveals a close study from the life combined with a slight idealization of the animal, whose elegant pose, with its long neck upright and alert, is similar to the neck of a horse or a reclining bull. Much trouble has also been taken with the treatment of the surface: most of the ram is covered with individualized curls of wool, while the zones of short hairs on the chest, belly, face and the lower part of the legs have been smoothed.

An elongated muzzle, slightly drooping at the front, is a feature of the animal's stylized head [fig. 8]. The horns curve back in a single turn, as if this were a young animal: the ears adhered inside the horns, although today only the stumps are left. The eyes, looking straight ahead, look almost human, this being another feature of the artist's urge to endow the work with the personalized idealization of natural forms. The thick-lipped mouth is relatively elongated, with a small orifice in the centre for use in slowly pouring the vessel's contents. Behind the head, handle and neck scarcely stand out above it, so as not to alter the animal's silhouette.

Technique

A complex process of modelling and polychrome was used to construct the figure and obtain all these nuances. The main part of the body consists of two vertically joined pieces symmetrical to the longitudinal axis; emptied from the mould beforehand, the pieces were then decorated with the tufts of wool using the barbotine technique, each curl being formed independently on circles incised in the surface to ensure stronger adhesion. Some circles at the fringes of the belly were left uncovered. The two pieces were stuck while the clay was fresh and the joint smoothed with the barbotine, some of the curls of wool being slightly altered in the process. Cross cuts were used to obtain a plaited effect and hide the join-line on the tail. The handle, a flat strip thicker at the edges, was subsequently fixed onto the body; the area of the join with the back was decorated with small curls incised to integrate them with the rest of the surface. The small vertically grooved neck was then set on the front end of the handle with the ram's head, also comprising two previously hollowed symmetrical pieces to which horns and ears were then added. Finally, a fine cord was applied on the neck to hide the join of head and body and give greater solidity.

Applied once the piece had dried, the polychrome combines several techniques: the handle and the neck are coated in the black varnish characteristic of Greek ceramics, while the animal's body was carefully coloured. Although most of this colouring has now been lost, some remains of the ground layer and finish are still appreciable. The yellowish tone of the horns and the white of the wool are clearly differentiated.

While the piece was being examined, some small gilt surfaces were also found in the horns; here it looked as if gold leaf had been applied, and research group IBeA, from the Analytical Chemistry Department of the University of the Basque Country's Science & Technology Faculty, was asked to perform an analysis of the remains. Samples were taken in the Museum using non-destructive techniques involving portable energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy and Raman spectroscopy equipment. The analysis confirmed the existence of fine gold leaf on the yellow pigmentation of the horns and the upper part of the head, and the remains of lead white in the body of the figure. The horns of the ram were probably given a bowl of earth-based ground (yellow iron oxide), on which fine gold leaf was then applied, while the body was covered in a layer of lead carbonate-based pigment to obtain the whitish colouring of the wool. At the end of the process, the figure would have had a body of an intense white against which the gilt horns would stand out, while the neck and handle would be less perceptible in black.

Formal analysis

From its form, the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum could be classified as a figured vessel, or “plastic” vessel, as the profile matches the anatomy of the animal portrayed rather than being that of a work turned on the wheel. Its function, as a vessel with neck and spout, would permit of the definition *askos* (from the Greek *ασκός*, wineskin), a word applied to pieces that, like leather wineskins, have an orifice for filling and another for pouring. The Latin term *guttus* might also suit it, as it is the name for recipients that can also pour the contents drop by drop. Of the many variants on this type of vessel, plastic forms of animals abound in singular pieces and are usually fairly small. As is the case here, the mouth of the animal frequently doubles as a spout.

Although the precise function of *askoi* is still uncertain, they are usually taken to be containers for unguents or perfumes. Most of them have been found in tombs, which suggests use in funeral ritual. They must have contained some highly prized liquid administered in small doses. In Greek ceramics and imitations from Italian workshops, the repertoire of animals can be quite varied, including anything from rams and lions to rabbits, birds, dolphins and frogs¹⁵, without the type of animal portrayed or its proportions seeming to have any direct relation to the vessel’s actual function. Birds, particularly ducks, are perhaps the most frequently portrayed animal; examples are recorded in both Greece and Etruria¹⁶. In Carthaginian and Iberian ceramics they were usually produced in the shape of a bird, with the spout in the animal’s beak¹⁷. When digging at the pre-Roman necropolis in Cadiz in the early 1980s, we found fragments of bird-shaped pieces and in the Museum of Cadiz there are half a dozen complete examples¹⁸. There they are associated with infant burials, and were identified as feeding bottles or also feeding cups, as they recall the form of the ancient vessels used to enable the ill and infirm to drink. The Museum of Cadiz also has an authentic Roman glass feeding cup, with a flattened egg-shaped body and a long beak, very similar to more recent ones, which may seem to back the suggestion that *askoi* were used as feeding bottles or cups and that people drank from them by putting their lips directly to the small hole in the animal’s mouth.

Figures of rams in Greek and Roman ceramics

The ram was one of the animals most frequently used as a sacrificial victim or as an offering, so its presence in ancient art is relatively frequent as a simple votive offering to substitute the real thing. However, there is also a good number of examples where the figure modelled in ceramics matches the typology of the *askoi*, i.e. of the vessels with neck and beak as spout; these need to be considered, apart from their probable ritual function, as objects of religious furnishings.

Askoi of complete figures of rams, matching the generic characteristics of this type of vessel, have been known since the Greek geometric period. They generally have a tubular body and are on foot with the body decorated with parallel or crossed lines, with no particular effort at naturalism¹⁹. The same models are also found in contemporary eastern Greek pieces²⁰, although such products from the eastern Greek colonies also

15 Sichtermann 1966, p. 61, no. 109-116.

16 Del Chiaro 1984.

17 Pérez Ballester/Gómez Bellard 2004, p. 39.

18 Muñoz 1992.

19 CVA, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 2, 75, Pl.(392) 1.4.; Berlin, Antikensammlung: 94.

20 CVA, Copenhagen, National Museum 2, 61, Pl.(82) 81.8; Rhodes, Museo Archeologico dello Spedale Dei Cavalieri 2, II.D.O.3, Pl.(486) 2.1-2.



9. Black-figure *askos* in the form of a ram
Attic, 6th century BC
Ceramics. 20 x 29 cm
Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire,
Musée de Cinquantenaire, Brussels
Inv. no. A2092

included figures at rest, with the legs tucked up beneath the body²¹, which in Corinthian-style ceramics take certain forms of polychrome work to reproduce the animal's covering of wool, as well as more naturalistic modelling and poses²². One Corinthian ram in the Louvre²³ and another found in Sicily²⁴ are much closer to the real image of the ram; the modelling is better defined, the legs are well differentiated, the neck erect and the body with small painted bulges rendering the curls of the wool. Even in Attic black figure ceramics there are some examples of *askoi* in the shape of a ram with the legs bent²⁵, in which the filler spout is much larger, almost to the point of looking like *rhyta*, the large vessels of libations that were the most abundant from this period on. A fine archaic vessel in the Museum of Brussels [fig. 9]²⁶ may be considered the most elaborate sample of this kind of figure in the archaic world.

However, although *askoi* in the shape of a complete ram are poorly represented in red figure ceramics from Greece and the Italian colonies, in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, some pieces matching fully naturalistic forms began to appear again. They were clearly industrial works, much less carefully made than their Greek counterparts.

An orange-shaded terracotta ram in the J. Paul Getty Museum [fig. 10], considered to be from Roman times, clearly shows the stylistic and technical transformation from Greek to Roman art. In the Getty piece, the body is again of the non-differentiated tubular shape seen in Greek geometric works, the legs are bent under

21 CVA, Berlin, Antiquarium 4, 31-32, Pl.(1595) 169.2; Copenhagen, National Museum 2, 61-62, Pl.(82) 81.11; Rodas, Museo Archeologico dello Spedale dei Cavalieri 2, II.D.O.3, Pl.(486) 2.6; Heidelberg, Universitat 1, 15, Pl.(438) 4.10.

22 CVA, Heidelberg, Universitat 1, 16, Pl.(440) 6.3; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 1, 15, Pl.(243) 6.2.

23 CVA, Paris, Musée du Louvre 8, III.C.C.5, Pl.(502) 5.11-12.15.

24 CVA, Gela, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 2, III.C.9, Pl.(2354) 17.4-8.

25 CVA, Berlin, Antiquarium 4, 74, Pl.(1627) 201.4-5.

26 CVA Brussels 2, Belgium 2 (1937), III H e, pl. 15.4.



10. *Askos* in the form of a ram
 Roman, 2nd century BC
 Terracotta. 11 x 17 cm
 J. Paul Getty Museum
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Wolfberg
 Inv. no. 77.AE.10

the body, but with the back hooves inverted, and the neck is short and thick. The neck spout rests directly on the animal's head. Another work also in California and offered by the Barakat Gallery²⁷ is of a bulky ram, with tufts of wool treated as layers of ringlets, similar to those found in many ancient sculptures of lions, the legs are also bent contrary to their natural arrangement; the head is too big and the eyes have a distinctly human look. From both figures we may deduce the existence in the apogee of the Greek classical period of fully naturalistic images of rams, like the one in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, which surpassed their archaic precursors in elegance and anatomical precision and were subsequently imitated by the more industrialized Roman workshops, where the craftsmen took much more trouble over the ornamental features, without worrying greatly about the harmony of the complete figure.

No rams with complete bodies are documented in the ceramics of the classical era, although we do find a large number of vessels corresponding to protomes of rams from the 5th and 4th centuries BC, which are of interest for any analysis of how features were gradually transformed and of the way colouring was treated. The period of eastern influence saw the production of plastic vessels in the shape of a ram's head²⁸, which usually used the animal's neck as base and had a small neck spout in the upper part [fig. 11]. In stylistic terms, they are similar to the complete figures, although they point to the path by which, in classical times, the ram's head became one of the preferred figures in the *rhyta*, the vessels of greater aesthetic value that were used in Antiquity for drinking in banquets or to perform ritual libations.

The *rhyton* had its origins in the prehistoric vessels that imitated the shape of cows' horns and which must have been one of the most frequent primary recipients, attested from the upper Palaeolithic. They were frequent in the ancient civilizations of the Near East and it has been suggested that classical Greek pieces

²⁷ <http://www.barakatgallery.com/Store/Index.cfm/FuseAction/ItemDetails/UserID/0/ItemID/20085.htm>

²⁸ Ducat 1966, pp. 95 ff.



11. Archaic *askos* in the form of a ram protome
Archaic Rodia, 6th century BC
Terracotta
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Inv. no. AN1879.134



12. Triptolemos Painter (attributed to)
Red-figure *rhyton* in the form of a ram
Attic, c. 480 BC
Terracotta, 22.5 x 13.9 x 26.6 cm
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund
Inv. no. 79.100



13. Brygos Painter
Rhyton in the form of a ram's head
Attic, c. 480-470 BC
Ceramics, 19 x 12.8 cm
The Cleveland Museum of Art
Purchased from the J. H. Wade Fund
Inv. no. 1988.8



14. *Rhyton* in the form of a ram's head
 Italic, 4th century BC
 Ceramics, 20.2 cm
 The British Museum, London
 Inv. no. 1856,1226.59

might be replicas of Persian vessels obtained by the Greeks with the spoils from the battle of Plataea²⁹, or perhaps through trade established in the 6th century BC³⁰. The fact is that Greek production of *rhyta* developed exceptionally in the 5th century BC and kept a high profile throughout the period of Greek red-figure ceramics³¹, with a major presence in southern Italy³², going into decline in the Hellenistic period.

Many *rhyta* from the classical Greek period changed the sharpened part of the horn for an animal head, at times feline and at others equine. *Rhyta* with the shape of a ram's head are particularly frequent. Their adaptation for drinking suggests use in banquets and Dionysian rituals. In many cases, the open area of the upper part is bell-like in shape and even permits the inclusion of figured decorations predominantly featuring characters associated with bacchanalia: satyrs, maenads and wild figures running riot as befits their mythological nature. In the Dionysian *rhyta* the ram's head shape is habitual, on occasion being combined with the head of a mule, the animal that often carried the drunken *sileni* and Dionysius himself. Rams and kids were also involved in these rituals as sacrificial animals, giving meaning and significance to the combination of ram and mule in the *rhyta* as regards banquets and ceremonies in which the god of wine was commemorated or celebrated.

It is fair to assume that, from the geometric to the archaic period, *askoi* with the figures or heads of rams fulfilled a similar function and that in the classical era the preference for the form of the *rhyta* as luxury vessels led to this type often being used. Some pieces may explain the transition from protomes to *rhyta*; this is true of the famous cup in the Museum of Richmond [fig. 12] where the head of the ram rests on a conical foot and a banquet scene is shown on the ample upper neck spout³³. Attributed to the Triptolemos Painter, the cup itself is signed by the potter Charinos, who must have produced it around 480 BC. Other vessels also

29 Hoffmann 1960.
 30 Richter 1963.
 31 Hoffmann 1962.
 32 Hoffmann 1966.
 33 Guy 1981, Topper 2009.



15. *Rhyton* in the form of a lion
Etruscan, second half of 4th century BC
Ceramics, 15.2 x 17.7 cm
The British Museum, London
Inv. no. 1873,0820.269



16. *Askos* in the form of a deer
Italic
Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Ferrara

have intermediate forms between *askos* and *rhyton*³⁴, including the three attributed to the Brygos Painter, one of the leading Attic vessel painters in the first half of the 5th century BC, in the museums of Warsaw³⁵, Genoa³⁶ and Cleveland [fig. 13]³⁷. In all three the animal's head is perfectly executed; Dionysian motifs are included in the figures painted on the mouth of the vessel. The work in the Polish collection still has the ring-based high foot, while the others have lost the foot, so they may be defined as *rhyta*, although they have still not achieved the elongated form corresponding to the imitation of the bull horn. So it would seem that the adaptation of the ram's head to Attic red-figure ceramic *rhyta* became consolidated around 480-470 BC, the central decade in the production of the Brygos Painter, from the archaic protomes and as part of the development of the crockery associated with banquets and Dionysian *symposia*, where they would have been especially appreciated.

Production of *rhyta* with the heads of rams was prolific in Attic workshops³⁸ and the moulds were even transferred to southern Italy for production in the 5th and 4th centuries BC³⁹; here the general elongation of the vessel and of the animal's head is appreciable, as is the substitution of Dionysian motifs by other, less transcendent themes. Apart from this, one can also frequently appreciate a change in the way the polychrome is treated, as the ram's head on works from the Italian colonies are often black, against which the yellow or white horns stand out. A *rhyton* in the British Museum [fig. 14] clearly shows this kind of colouring. The stylization of the ram's muzzle is similar to what we find on the Bilbao work.

The scarcity of plastic vessels in Greek ceramics from the 4th century BC and from the peripheral workshops of the Mediterranean hinders attribution of the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum to a specific geographical area. Only Etruscan workshops seem to have produced a significant group of *askoi* with plastic forms including similar figures of animals. A vessel in the shape of a lion from the François tomb, in Vulci, also in the

34 CVA, Brussels, *Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Cinquantenaire)* 3, IV.D.1, Pl.(144) 1.7; Compiègne, *Musée Vivienel*, 13, Pl.(116) 18.13.

35 CVA, Goluchow, *Musée Czartoryski*, 20, Pl.(023) 23.4A.4B.4C.4D.4E.4F.4G.

36 Beazley 1963, no. 382.186, 1649.

37 CVA, Cleveland, *Museum of Art* 2, 40-42, Pl.(1825) 79.1-6.

38 Hoffmann 1962.

39 Hoffmann 1966.



17. *Askos* in the form of a deer
Etruscan, 4th century BC
Terracotta, 19 cm
Private collection

British Museum in London [fig. 15] is the most famous work associated with what is known as the “Clusium workshop”⁴⁰, from the Latin name of the city of Chiusi, where the production centre may have been located and at which vessels with the shapes of a range of animals and also with human heads were produced in the second half of the 4th century BC.

Interestingly, the lion at the British Museum has been associated⁴¹ with an *askos* in the shape of a deer at the Louvre (H176), which heads a group comprising several similar deer and other animal figures in terracotta found in Etruscan areas and which is known as the “group of deer-*askos* in the Louvre”⁴². Several of these works are from the necropolis at Spina, and are now in the museum in Ferrara, but the variety of techniques and styles is excessive, as can be appreciated in the one from tomb 83 from the Treba valley [fig. 16]. We need to remember that the *askos* from the Louvre which gives its name to the group is described as being adorned with a ruff and gilt horns, coinciding with the features of the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.

A fine figure of a fawn, from the Pollak Collection [fig. 17], may well be from this same workshop. Auctioned at Christie’s in King Street, London in October 2004, the figure has clearly been made with the same care for realism in the animal’s anatomy and in the delicate colouring. The way the handle and neck are formed and deployed is also very similar.

Dating and significance of decorative techniques

One particularly important feature of the Bilbao figure is the unusual polychrome, especially the remains of fine gold leaf stuck to the horns. As a complement to the painting process of classical Greek vessels, gilding was applied from the 5th century BC⁴³ for ornamental features of figures, particularly in ladies’ jewellery. As Attic red-figure ceramics developed, gilt ornamentation became increasingly frequent as a means of enhancing vessels, usually in combination with small applications in relief⁴⁴. These techniques are directly related to the development of colourful effects in Attic mural painting and were very well received in eastern markets.

40 Harari 1980.

41 Robertson 1938, p. 45.

42 Beazley 1947, p. 192.

43 Noble 1960, p. 316.

44 Cohen 2004.

In peripheral Greek ceramic workshops, polychrome and gilding became the most significant features of Kerch ceramics, called thus after a location on the Black Sea (the ancient *Panticapaeum*) where many pieces have been found, most of which are now in the Hermitage. Kerch ceramics is the most recent group of 4th-century BC Attic ceramics and was distributed in many other Mediterranean areas, although the abundance of vessels found at the eastern edge of the Black Sea suggests that this was their most direct market. A Kerch ceramic amphora in the Getty Museum inspired a recent exhibition and a symposium⁴⁵ that have updated studies on these works. Subsequently, the same museum staged a major exhibition of the luxury objects characterizing the Greek expansion on the Black Sea coast, in particular the Kerch ceramics⁴⁶, together with works in precious metals, statuary and probably also fabrics acquired by the rich monarchs of ancient Ukrainian kingdoms.

Two techniques found in the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum were used especially in Kerch ceramics: the application of fresh clay in relief, used to create the tufts of wool, and the gilding of the horns. In Kerch ceramics, the application of gold leaf was not just ornamentation; it was also a response to an interest in achieving polychrome suitable for obtaining the kind of sleight-of-hand realism found in classicism's final style. In painted vessels gilding was used for jewels, the wings of erotes or any feature that might actually be gilded in real life, so it is very likely that the artist's intention here was to portray a genuinely gilded ram. Plastic vessels in Kerch ceramics are not very common, suggesting that the choice of animal was not random, but had to do with portraying a ram of some rather special characteristics.

This possible link between the work in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum and Kerch ceramics brings us to a scenario in which the existence of a golden ram acquires specific meaning. Colchis, the country Jason and the Argonauts set out for in their search for the Golden Fleece, was located on the far shores of the Black Sea. In Antiquity, the image of the Golden Fleece had the value of an icon of the remote region where it was to be found; this was later transferred to the modern iconography of a branch of the European monarchy, which, like Jason, acknowledges in the *Toisón de Oro*, the Golden Fleece, the symbol of royalty's legality.

The golden ram

Crisomallos (Χρυσομαλλος), the golden ram, was a mythological being that Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 6: 118) described as the child of Poseidon and Theophane, daughter of king Bisaltes. One of Pseudo-Hyginus' *Fabulae* (119) tells in detail how Poseidon had transformed himself into a ram to bed Theophane, herself turned into a sheep, and who conceived the golden ram. Athamas, king of Boeotia, had had two children with the cloud Nephele, Phrixus and Helle, whom their stepmother Ino wanted to kill. Nephele sent them to the golden ram to keep them safe and the ram took them through the air to the Black Sea. However, Helle lost her grip on the ram, fell and was drowned in the straits separating the Mediterranean from the Black Sea known as the Hellespont in her memory. Phrixus arrived in Colchis, the eastern region of the Black Sea, where he sacrificed the ram in honour of Ares and left its fleece hanging from an oak in the god's sanctuary. The ram was transformed into the constellation of Aries, while its fleece, guarded by a monstrous serpent, remained as a symbol of royalty lost, personified in Phrixus.

45 Cohen 2006.

46 Petrakova 2007.



18. Red-figure cup with portrayals of Helle and the golden ram
Attic, 4th century BC
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Inv. no. 1946.52

Inspired by the relic's fame, Jason set himself to recovering the Fleece as a means of acquiring a legitimate title to the throne of Yolcos. He thus organized the expedition of heroes that crossed the Black Sea in the Argos in one of the most famous adventures in the classical epic. Centuries afterwards, the house of Augsburg, which considers itself to be descended from the hero, adopted the fleece as its symbol, leading to the creation of the Order of the Golden Fleece.

As often occurs in ancient myth, some of the details of the story of the golden fleece must have come from an attempt to rationalize stories full of marvels. Now part of the modern region of Georgia, in Antiquity Colchis had a rich metallurgical culture in which gold was one of the most abundant metals. From generic references and some items in the oral tradition, it is believed that one of the systems used in the region to obtain gold from river sandbanks was to place sheep fleeces in the water for the gold nuggets to be retained by the wool. The skins were then hung from trees to dry and the wool beaten to get the gold out. The expedition of Jason and the Argonauts may also be a sort of transformation into epic of the voyages of Greek adventurers in search of the gold that awaited them in the sheepskins hung from trees.

Phrixus and Helle's flight to the East with Crisomallos the ram is portrayed on some Greek vessels. An Attic red-figure amphora in the Museum of Naples⁴⁷ shows Ino pursuing her stepson Phrixus, who appears hanging in the air as he grips the ram's horn. Helle was painted in the same position in the background of a cup of red figures in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford [fig. 18]⁴⁸ and Phrixus on another cup in Berlin⁴⁹. A terracotta plaque in New York's Metropolitan Museum [fig. 19] has the group of Phrixus and the ram on a base of waves and fish. Phrixus is hanging in the air from the ram's two horns, whose head has a shape similar to those found in 5th-century BC Attic ceramic *rhyta*.

47 Beazley 1963, p. 1161.1.

48 Ibid., p. 1518.5.

49 CVA., Berlin, Antiquarium 2, 35-36, Pl.(1020) 91.1-4.



19. Plaque with portrayals of Phrixus and the golden ram
Greek, c. 450 BC
Terracotta
The Metropolitan Museum, New York
Rogers Fund, 1912
Inv. no. 12.229.20

In none of these images is the ram given wings. The semi-divine nature of the animal enabled it to move naturally through the air; the fact that the ram in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum lacks wings does not therefore contradict its identification as Crisomallos. Moreover, the unusual rope around the neck might indicate the intention to portray a ram that can be easily taken hold of, which would be coherent with its role in the voyage of Phrixus and Helle.

For the moment, the ram at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is the only work of ancient Greek ceramics in which we may find a certain portrayal of Crisomallos, an exceptional animal that gives meaning to a significant part of ancient mythology and which has survived in modern European culture through the acknowledgment of the Golden Fleece as a symbol of royalty. The figure was in all likelihood produced in the Athenian workshops of the late 4th century BC, whose production had an easy route to Etruscan areas, where this particular example was probably discovered, perhaps in one of the rich necropolises around Siena where similar finds have come to light. However, at this time Attic workshops worked preferentially for the eastern Black Sea kingdoms. This was where the golden ram had major local significance and where the refinement of modelling and polychrome that enhanced these works, and gave them a special illusion of realism, were particularly appreciated. This work thus acquires full meaning as part of the rich late productions that brought to a close the most attractive era in the history of Greek ceramics.

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