

Not Long for This World: Late Classical Bronze Hydriai for the Living and the Dead

Late Classical bronze hydriai represent the apogee of the long series of more than 600 surviving bronze hydriai begun in the last decades of the seventh century. They mark a profound transformation in the conception of the vessels, signaling reassessments of shape, technique, and decoration that ultimately produced the last, most elegant iterations of the type before production virtually ceased in the Hellenistic period. Most importantly, these bronzes signal a new desire to express meaning through imagery. Mythological scenes on delicate repoussé panels featuring pairs of legendary lovers, languid Erotes, Dionysiac revelers, and victorious winged Nikai replace the animals, monsters, and abbreviated figures of the previous centuries. These more elaborate compositions offer tantalizing opportunities to draw connections between iconography and function that were rendered less explicitly in the earlier expressions of the type.

Despite their suggestive compositions and finely carved reliefs that bear clear affinities with other important types of decorative bronze objects produced in the fourth century, this key group of kalpides has not been considered as a distinct body of evidence for over 60 years, since Charles Picard and Gisela Richter debated whether their appliqués should be understood more properly as ornaments to delight living owners or as poetic mementos to accompany them into the grave. Since that time, the number of known vessels of this type has nearly doubled and contextual evidence for bronze hydriai, fourth-century Greek metalwork, and Late Classical culture has increased dramatically, meriting reassessments and allowing for new conclusions.

This paper will consider iconographic, stylistic, and archaeological evidence for Late Classical bronze hydriai in order to suggest that both the craftsmen and owners of these vessels may have anticipated multiple phases of use and selected images that could be interpreted opportunistically by different audiences at various stages of life. Interpreting the newly

discovered mythological scenes alongside those known to Picard and Richter offers new perspectives for understanding their versatility and significance both as water jars and in the contexts of their diverse secondary functions. Finally, by establishing parameters for relationships between ornament and use in the fourth-century vessels, the earlier, less fully rendered motifs can be considered more productively and the importance of the reliefs as evidence for the highly valued status of the bronze hydria in ancient Greek culture can be assessed.