CHAPTER 3: THE PETULANT SQUABBLES OF OXFORD DON S RECONCILED

Contemporary debates over the relative social status afforded those gold, gilded, and silver vessels that have, by now, almost all disappeared, continues. Their status is pitted against that of the virtually indestructible clay vessels, found whole or fragmentary, that line the shelves of even the most obscure museums, about which Andrew Robert Burn dryly observed: "Those middle-class Attic cups and bowls [are] our museum-pieces" (Pelican History of Greece [1966], 262). Both Beazley's high regard for clay pots and Burn's deprecating attitude would find followers in the next generation.

John Boardman overemphasizes the high level of craftsmanship of the Greek sympotic pottery that has survived. Vickers and Gill (henceforth cited as "Vickers" for simplicity) have continued to deride the same as clay "pots," as "cheap knockoffs" made for the lower-end market, as mere copies of the kind of refined gold and silver vessels on which the truly wealthy had always supped.

Because Warren's aim was to provide his hometown of Boston with Classical culture, in the form of original artworks "illustrating all that we read about," and because he felt it especially important to value the erotic materials his contemporaries deplored, he did not discriminate
between clay and silver vessels in his collecting practices. Boardman, however, like his mentor Beazley, in accordance with his own professional focus on ceramics, and openly enthralled with the mystique of clay, has remained a strong advocate for the high esteem in which ceramic ware was held in its own day, due to its exquisite craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal.

Boardman even argues that the clay workers who made and painted the ceramics must themselves have enjoyed significant prestige and social status. Under pressure from Vickers and his followers, however, Boardman retreated to a slightly more realistic position in his book *in Vases* (2001). He acknowledged that pot prices actually reflected a much lower cost for pottery than that implied by the modern rapturous appreciation of their artistic qualities. That inflated notion that can be traced back to the salesmanship of Hamilton’s publicist d’Hancarville, and also to the Arts and Crafts Movement of the early 20th century, which affected both Warren and Beazley. Boardman is clearly not very happy about the way Vickers’ analysis has forced him to bring his ideas of the value of Greek ceramics into accord with the economic reality of their prices.

The motives of the very few scholars who dismiss decorated Greek vases as very cheap are open to question because their condemnation is extended to those who collect and study them and includes the “strange notion that monetary value in antiquity should determine our
estimate of what antiquity has left us” (Boardman, Vases [2001], 158). Very well then: the conspicuous presence of ceramics in museums now is what must determine the value of ceramics. Clearly Boardman is much happier reasoning backwards than forwards; no doubt those Ancient Greeks who bought ceramics loved their pots as much as he does.

On the other hand, the brilliance of the Warren Cup renders plausible the metal-centered views of Gisela Richter, Burn, and Vickers, by reminding us of the powerful attractiveness that arises from the combination of glittering, precious metal and fine craftsmanship (we are referring here to “bright, polished silver” of the Warren Cup in its museum state; Vickers’ arguments, conversely, hinge upon the supposed blackness of tarnished silver, as will be discussed below). Warren’s interests span and indeed transcend this contemporary debate between Boardman and Vickers, inasmuch as he collected both precious metal and ceramic wares. For in addition to acquiring the silver cup that now bears his name (which he dubbed the “Holy Grail,” because he had so long searched for it, and found it in the Holy Land), Warren also subsidized and guided the man who would become the world’s authority on Greek pottery, John Davidson Beazley, Boardman’s teacher and predecessor in ceramic connoisseurship. Beazley was married but homosexual; his wife was a beard, a consort of convenience and camouflage who was also the photographer of the vases.
Vickers, too, has been forced to retreat from his original extreme position, admitting that silver sympotic ware was not always as prevalent as he had previously claimed, and in particular was much less common before 480 BCE. In comparing the original 1984 article “Artful Crafts: The Influence of Metal Work on Athenian Painted Pottery” to the nearly eponymous book of 1994 (co-written with David Gill), many scars, bullet holes, and patch jobs become evident, the result of Boardman’s attacks.¹⁴

By pitting the views of Boardman and Vickers against each other, as well as against the evidence, I offer a nuanced compromise, in which Boardman’s ceramic perspective yields to Vickers’ metallic view. These disparate visions converge at the point when Athenians discovered abundant silver at Laurium in 482 BCE, and silverware began to appear on the tables of wealthy Athenians, not just in the more elaborate dining of monarchs and tyrants. Slightly and reluctantly, Boardman and Vickers have themselves recently moved toward a compromise between their earlier extreme views, such that Warren’s unified interest in metallic and ceramic vessels has begun to re-emerge as a more attractive perspective.

I also consider the many sources of Greek silver and the diverse circumstances under which silverware was destroyed. To establish the context more fully, I cite literary references to the very limited use of silver vases by the Greeks before 470 BCE, to the incoming wealth of the

¹⁴ The book is titled Artful Crafts: Ancient Greek Silverware and Pottery.
silver mines, and to the increasing popularity of silver after 470, by which time Athens had been significantly enriched.

Virgil’s Aeneid testifies to the backward-looking power of silver tableware: it offers a connection to the archaic world of Homeric values; it operates to validate claims of aristocratic ancestry; it serves as a tangible symbol of culture, sophistication, and stability. Perhaps silver was given as a remembrancer to youths who had succeeded in reflecting aristocratic ideals and values back to their aristocratic elders, because it is mirror-bright when polished. (This tradition continues today, in the use of silver for athletic trophies and medals.) Such silver gifts cemented the personal bonds between young male aristocrats, as well as served to establish and further large-scale class loyalties.

Petronius’s Satyricon, contemporaneous with the Warren Cup, by contrast, satirizes those “rather Grecian” values in a “rather Roman” way. The mistreatment and abuse of silver by Trimalchio, a freedman and nouveau-riche host, mark him as crude, vulgar, lacking an aristocratic birth, comically grotesque because of his lack of education and culture, and one for whom homosexual liaisons always bespeak the most vulgar, common, and sordid kind of sexuality—hence, never approaching the noble patterning of “Greek Love.” Instead of showing esteem for the best, Trimalchio makes a pet of the worst available youth, a wretched, bleary-
eyed creature: indeed, it is thematic that, in his house, silver is employed for various degrading and abject uses—as a toothpick, as a chamber pot—instead of being employed to express aristocratic friendship or some other grand sentiment. The Warren Cup reflects this sort of orgy with an underage onlooker.

This essay originates in a void—almost no silver vessels having survived from the 5th or 4th centuries BCE and none at all with homoerotic motives. I speculate about what was lost and attempt to correct the exaggerated conclusions others have drawn from today’s visual dominance of ceramics. I am deductive and argumentative. At times this impressionistic essay suggests images that are coordinated with literature. With a controlled, anachronistic playfulness I hope that the delight and revelation this technique might afford students of literature and culture will compensate for the aggravation and shock it will likely elicit among certain professional archaeologists, historians, classicists, curators and dealers.

After a survey of ancient gold and silver tableware from such Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations as were generally known for their wealth—the Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian, Biblical, Persian, and Lydian kingdoms—I turn to the limited presence of gold and silver in early Greek contexts: the Mycenaean, the “Homeric,” the Dark Age, the early Archaic, the Age of Tyrants). Everything changed when silver first became plentiful among the Greeks.
with the discovery of significant amounts of silver at Laurium in 482 BCE, loot from the Persians, during the *pentecontaetia* \(^{15}\) tribute from the Delian League, and, most of all, from trade after the Persian Wars.

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\(^{15}\) *Pentecontaetia,* meaning "the period of fifty years," refers to the period between the defeat of the second Persian invasion of Greece at Plataea in 479 BCE and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 433 BCE. The term originated with Thucydides. The Pentecontaetia was marked by the rise of Athens as the dominant state in the Greek world and by the rise of Athenian democracy.