

The Ephemeral Muse:
Ritual Context and Aesthetics in Fifth-Century Athenian Vase-Painting

Responsible for imparting poetic, musical, and artistic inspiration to mankind, the Muses were intimately involved in the creative lives of their human worshippers. Surprisingly, despite their importance for the cultural life of Athens, it is difficult to identify the Muses in the surviving black and red-figure vase-painting from the Archaic and Classical periods, since the visual material makes little distinction among Athenian citizen woman, *hetaira*, and divine Muse. Previous scholarship has taken an iconographic approach to distinguish the Muses from these other women, but it remains uncertain whether the identifications proposed for specific figures can be securely made.

Rather than regarding the distinction among these female figures' identities as a problem, I instead claim that the uncertainty of their identification communicates an essential aspect of the Muses' divinity. In this paper, I explore how the visual effect and religious significance of the Muses' consistently elusive depiction may have affected an Athenian viewer in the fifth century BCE. To explain the significance of the layering of identities inherent to the image of the Muse, I take a *calyx krater* by the Phiale Painter as paradigmatic, emphasizing the musical and ritual context in which the object could have appeared, namely, the symposium. By situating this and other sympotic vessels within this evocative context filled with music and dance, the visual conflation of Athenian woman, *hetaira*, and Muse suggests that the goddesses could manifest among the participants in the symposium, ready to impart musical inspiration to the men and women present.