

Show, don't tell: Case studies from Homer's *Odyssey* in translating speech to image

How can a vase painter show what a character says without resorting to written labels?

Whereas in a written or spoken text, the narrator can report to the audience what characters think, feel, or say, a visual artist must find other, less obvious ways to convey these thoughts or emotions. Using case studies from Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus interacts with Penelope, Circe, and Nausicaa, this paper draws attention to a few strategies to which visual artists could resort.

One strategy was to combine visual "formulas" that usually belong to separate semantic fields. We see this for example on a 5th cent. BCE terracotta plaque in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (30.11.9), where the visual language of mourning (or, per Shapiro 2021, disengagement) mingles with that of a wedding: Penelope sits in a pose often employed on grave reliefs, while Odysseus performs the characteristic *cheir'epi karpō* (hand on wrist) gesture of the groom. This effectively conveys the situation in *Odyssey* 19 where Odysseus is already plotting to reclaim his rightful place, while Penelope still cries for her husband "who was right next to her" (*Od.* 19.208-9).

A less obvious example is provided by a Red Figure krater, also in the Metropolitan Museum (41.83), depicting the moment that Odysseus attacks Circe with drawn sword (*Od.* 10.321-2). Here the visual formulas of attack and erotic pursuit (Osborne 2023; R  uchle 2023; Sourvinou-Inwood 1991) intersect with imagery reminiscent of pederastic formulas. The problem for the vase painter may have been that the erotic pursuit formula, used frequently in depictions of Odysseus and Circe, casts Odysseus as the sexual aggressor, while in the *Odyssey* it is Circe who invites Odysseus to have sex with her (*Od.* 10.334-5). By cloaking Odysseus in

some of the trappings of an *eromenos* (see Brendle 2019), the painter evokes Circe's speech and visualizes the change in dynamic.

A different strategy is shown on a pyxis in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston depicting the meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa (04.18). Here, a clever juxtaposition of symmetrically balanced figures invites a structuralist approach. In *Odyssey* book 6, references to Nausicaa's potential upcoming wedding (*Od.* 6.27) gradually become more specifically linked to Odysseus, until both Odysseus and Nausicaa speak of each other as potential spouses (*Od.* 6.158-9 and 244-5); this culminates in book 7 (312-314) with Alcinous' wish that Odysseus stay and marry his daughter. I argue that the vase painter manages to refer to the idea of marriage, and even to suggest that Nausicaa will get married in the near future, by creating visual links between figures with certain characteristics, either by positioning them opposite each other, or by giving them similar stances.

Although none of the depictions discussed are incomprehensible to a viewer who is not well-versed in the visual language of 5th cent. BCE Athens, closer analysis reveals additional meaning that can often be traced back to the text of the *Odyssey*. Close reading of elements of visual images thus suggests that visual artists, using familiar formulas in new and creative ways, crafted products that were every bit as sophisticated as their literary counterparts.

Works Cited

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