

Humour: Corrupted Eyes and Visual Puns

Most visual humour in the context of eye-cups lies in the incongruous corruption of the large eyes. This corruption varies from one painting to another. For example, two large staring eyes with eyebrows and flanked by two large palmettes are displayed on each side of a red-figure cup in Munich.²⁴ On one side, a nose is set between the eyes but, on the other, an *aulos*-case, a flute-case, is hanging in between. Because the viewer expected to see a pair of eyes with a nose, the artist painted an *aulos*-case, which looks like a nose because of its vertical position between two eyes and its narrow shape. *Aulos*-cases are often found hanging in the background of pictures. In this case, the presence of the *aulos*-case is unexpected and amusing. Similarly, on a Chalcidian cup in Copenhagen (fig. 6),²⁵ a dog is shown in full-face between two large eyes. Martens (1992: 316) describes it as a *calembour visuel*, that is, a visual pun. The dog is made to look like a nose: it is sitting upright with its front legs straight and it is looking upwards. The general shape of the dog resembles a thick black vertical line, but, because it is crouching, the rear legs are pointing outwards, recalling the nostrils of noses painted between eyes. But it is not a nose, and there is the essence of a visual pun: it is a harmless game the painter plays with well-known images: on a cup in Boston (fig. 7),²⁶ the nose is a huge erect phallus. The comical

²⁴ See also a cup in Oxford that has male genitalia instead of a foot. Cup, Attic BF, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1974.334; (BA 396); Osborne 1998: 134–5, figs. 68–9; AA (1981) 544, figs. 5A–C; Martens 1992: 223–4, 355, figs. 99–100, 160. Lysippides Painter. 530–500 BC. Boardman first published it (1976) and Osborne (1998: 134) notes that just as the foot of the vase is absent, the feet of the drinkers are also hidden from view. He argues that this is a visual pun: ‘if they too have no feet, what do they have instead?’.

²⁵ Cup, Attic RF, Munich, Antikensammlungen, 2581; (BA 200239), ARV² 41.31, 55.11, *Add* 76, *Add*^b 159; Vierendeel 1990: figs 3.24, 39.2, 67.14, 75.5. From Italy, Etruria, Vulci; Olto; 525–500 BC.

²⁶ Cup, Chalcidian BF, Copenhagen, National Museum; Mitchell 2004: fig. 4, 530–520 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

²⁷ Cup, Attic RF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 08.31d; (BA 200261), ARV² 43.55, 56.23, *Add* 77, *Add*^b 159; Vierendeel 1990: 210, fig. 34.1. From Italy, Etruria, Cervetri; Olto; 525–500 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.



Figure 6. *Visual pun of a dog/nose between large eyes.* Cup, Chalcidian BF, Copenhagen, National Museum. 530–520 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

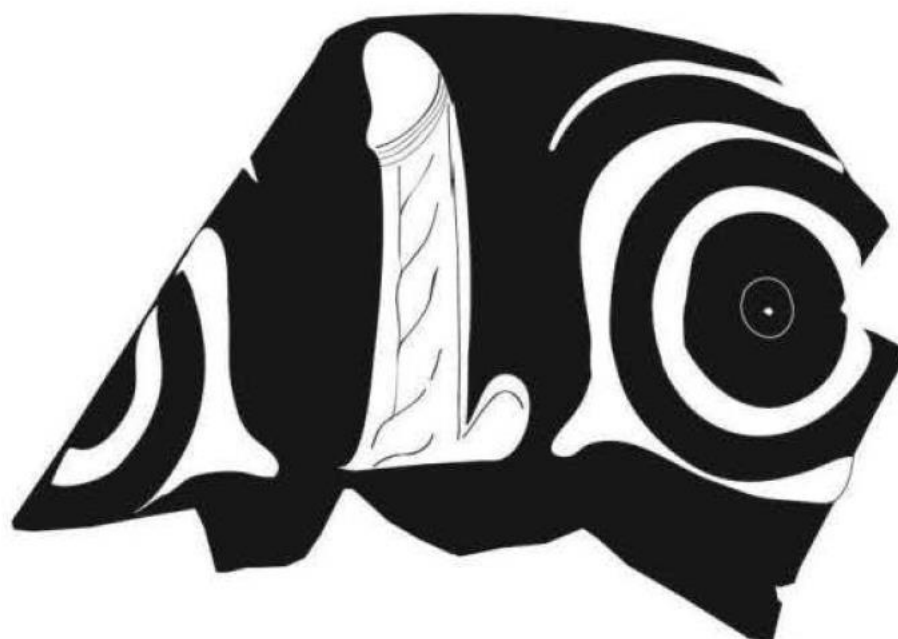


Figure 7. *Visual pun of a penis/nose between eyes.* Cup, Attic RF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 08.31d; Olto; 525–500 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

nature of this image resides in the impossibility of choosing one way or the other to look at the picture. There is no solution: the dog is a nose, and the nose is wagging its tail.

On some vases, the eye itself is transformed: a neck-amphora in London,⁴⁷ attributed to the Eye-Siren Group, shows Peleus and Thetis between two large eyes. Under one

⁴⁷ Neck-amphora, Attic BF, British Museum, B215 (1843.11–3.60); (BA 320288); ABV 286.1; Add² 74; CVA, London, British Museum 4, IIIHe.5, pl. 52.1a–d; Steinhart 1995: pl. 4. From Italy, Etruria (Vulci); Eye-Siren Group; 530–510 BC.

handle stands Artemis, under the other, Hermes. Between the eyes, on the other side, stands Apollo. The eyes on both sides are unusual in that they form the body of sirens,³⁸ one male, bearded, the other female; a cup in Rome³⁹ shows an 'eye-ram'. The tear duct is stretched out into a foot and a head emerges like a *protome* from each eye. Even the eyebrow looks like an outlined wing. Sirens were winged, and, apart from the body-eye, these much resemble the ones shown in earlier vase-paintings.⁴⁰ A black-figure skyphos in Athens⁴¹ shows a female siren between two female characters. The neck-amphora in London⁴² shows a male siren, but sirens are usually female, drawing sailors towards their island with their beautiful and magical singing to make the ships shatter helplessly against the reef (Hom. *Od.* 12.1–200). In the centre of the composition, Peleus wrestles with Thetis. The gods had decided that she would marry Peleus, but she refused. She was a sea-goddess and had the power of metamorphosis as shown on a dinos in London.⁴³ In vase-painting, Peleus is often shown holding her firmly while she is changing into wild animals and waiting for her to cease her transformations. It may have amused the painter to transform the decorative eyes into sirens as a counterpoint to the main scene, as well as adding a beard to a typical female creature. By doing so, the 'male' siren stands by Peleus whereas the 'female' siren assists Thetis.

One of the most comical eye-sirens⁴⁴ is on a cup in Boston (fig. 8),⁴⁵ attributed to the Amasis Painter.⁴⁶ On one side, two figures converse while masturbating. On the other, an eye-siren moves to the right. The iconography is unusual and amusing. Under the handles, the artist has painted a crouching dog, defecating. A similar figure is displayed on a skyphos in Tampa.⁴⁷ These images 'on the edge' are well known in the later, medieval period, in the form of *marginalia* (Camille 1992: 11–55). The viewer tends to look first at the large painted areas and not at the sides. As sirens do not usually have arms, her

³⁸ See Hofstetter-Dolega 1990.

³⁹ Cup, Attic BF, Rome, Antiquarium Comunale, 17417; (BA 2942); Steinhart 1995: pl. 5.1. From Italy, Rome; 530–510 BC.

⁴⁰ Band cup, Attic BF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 61.1073; (BA 350341), *Para* 69.3, *Add.* 47; CVA, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 2, 40, pls. 98.3–4, 99.4. Neandros Potter; 540–530 BC. See also lekythos, Attic BF, Budapest, Hungarian Museum of Fine Arts, 50.105; (BA 352164), *ABV* 587.20, *Para* 293. Beldam Painter; 490–480 BC. And lekythos, London market, Sotheby's, *Sale catalogue* (13.07.1987) no. 274. And lekythos, Attic BF, Laon, Musée Archéologique Municipal, 37.898; (BA 306893), *ABV* 587.19, *Para* 293; CVA, Laon, Musée Municipal, 17, pl. 18.5–7. Beldam Painter; 490–480 BC.

⁴¹ Skyphos, Attic BF, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 1113; (BA 46539); CVA, Athens, National Museum 4, 62, fig. 15.1, pl. 57.1–3. From Boeotia, Tanagra; CHC Group; 490–480 BC.

⁴² London, B215.

⁴³ Dinosaurs, Attic BF, London, British Museum, 1971.11–1.1; (BA 350099); Moon 1983: 60–1, figs. 4.5a–d. Sophilos; 580–570 BC.

⁴⁴ See cup fr., Basel, Private collection, H. Cahn HC883; (BA 18403); Steinhart 1995: pl. 5.2. Eye-Siren Group; 530–510 BC. See also hydria, Attic BF, London, British Museum, B342; (BA 301821), *ABV* 335.8; Steinhart 1995: pl. 5.3. From Italy, Etruria, Vulci; A D Painter; 540–520 BC.

⁴⁵ Cup, Attic BF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 10.651; (BA 310515), *ABV* 157.86, *Para* 65, *Add.* 46; CVA, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 2, pls. 100.5, 101.1–4; Angiolillo 1997: 154, fig. 87; Boardman 2000: 62, fig. 78; CVA, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 2, 43–4, pls. 100.5, 101.1–4. Amasis Painter; 540–525 BC. Photograph © 2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

⁴⁶ See also cup, Attic RF, Amherst, Amherst College, 1962.74; (BA 275229), *ARV* 1651.22bis, *Add.* 233, *Para* 365, 372. Dokimasia Painter; 490–460 BC.

⁴⁷ Skyphos, Attic RF, Tampa, Museum of Art, 86.93; (BA 9054); Schäfer 1997: pl. 47.2–3. 490–460 BC.



Figure 8a-b. *Visual pun of a siren/eye on one side of the cup, and a dog defecating below both handles.* Cup, Attic BF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 10.651; Gift of Edward Perry Warren; Amasis Painter; 540–525 BC. Photograph © 2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

gesture, pointing at the dog, may be significant. She is in motion, which is also unusual. Ordinarily in mythological scenes, they play the *aulos* or the kithara, or like sphinxes, columns or corner-palmettes are used to frame scenes. From the mixture of incongruous elements and visual puns, every part of the Amasis Painter's vase is unexpected.

On a red-figure cup in Cleveland,³⁸ an unusual full-face representation of a falling warrior is shown between two large eyes. The warrior's helmet covers his entire face. His eyes are clearly wide open beneath the helmet's eye-slots. There are three levels of eyes: the large decorative eyes, the helmet's eye-slots, and the warrior's eyes. This *mise en abîme* is not a visual pun, but it uses a similar mechanism to draw the attention of the viewer to the warrior's eyes, like two counterpoints to the large eyes. In the words of Korshak (1977: 23), discussing a neck-amphora in Munich:³⁹ 'By exploiting the tension between the metallic outer face, the helmet, and the real one, visible only through the eyes peering from the mask-like shape of the eye-hole, artists expressed an effective pathetic contrast'.

On a black-figure cup in Cambridge,⁴⁰ a female figure stands between two large eyes. Instead of concentric pupils, two *gorgoneia*⁴¹ have been set in the eyes (Deonna 1957: 60). At first glance, the presence of *gorgoneia* in the eyes seems to affirm that the eyes were half-*gorgoneia* (masks) but, as already argued, large eyes do not originate in the *gorgoneion*. In Greek, the pupil of the eye was called *hē kore* because of the little figure that is reflected in its centre (Soph. F 634; Eur. *Or.* 389; Arist. *An.* 2.8; Plut. *Mor.* 528e). Lissarrague writes: 'Even better, the pupil of the eye, which the Greeks call *kore* (maiden), may be replaced by the grimacing mask of the *gorgoneion*, to convey the fascinating power of the gaze that transfixes the drinker' (1990b: 142–3). In fact, to set one of the most ugly faces known to Greek art in the place the Greeks called 'the young woman' (which usually conveys the idea of beauty) could simply be a joke, thus a visual pun.

Finally, the eye can be made to interact with the narrative of a scene. On a red-figure cup in Boston (fig. 9),⁴² a naked warrior wearing a helmet stands between two large eyes (Delavaud-Roux 1993: 93). Beside him is a shield. Warrior figures are often found between decorative eyes on eye-cups, as on a similar red-figure cup in Munich⁴³ on which a nude soldier is wearing greaves, a helmet, and carries the same large shield, called *hoplon* in Greek. As shown on the cup in Munich, the particular curve of the *hoplon* is such that it could not stand vertically on its edge. The warrior on the Boston cup has found

³⁸ Cup, Attic RF, Cleveland, Museum of Art, 76.89; (BA 200027), ARV² 7.7, 38.8, *Para* 321, *Add* 72, *Add²* 151; CVA, Cleveland, Museum of Art 2, pls. 75.1–2, 76.1–2, 77.1–7. *Psiax*; 530–500 BC.

³⁹ Neck-amphora, Attic BF, Munich, Antikensammlungen, 1563; (BA 1162), *Add²* 391; Korshak 1977: 23. Etruria, Vulci; Manner of Lysippides Painter; 530–500 BC.

⁴⁰ Cup, Attic BF, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, GR61.1864; (BA 302605), *ABV* 202.2, *Para* 92, *Add²* 54; CVA, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 1, pls. 18.2a–b, 20.4. Etruria, Vulci; Painter of Cambridge 61; 560–540 BC.

⁴¹ Paris, Louvre, F121.

⁴² Cup, Attic RF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 13.83; (BA 200362), ARV² 47.153, 57.40, 1622, *Add* 78, *Add²* 157; B. Cohen 1978: pl. 89.2. Etruria, Vulci; Olto; 525–500 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

⁴³ Cup, Attic RF, Munich, Antikensammlungen, 2603; (BA 200040), ARV² 9.2, 41.39, *Add* 72, *Add²* 151; Seki, T. (1985). *Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Gefäßform und Malerei Attischer Schalen*. Berlin: pl. 7.1–3. Etruria, Vulci; Standard Eye-cups; 530–520 BC.



Figure 9. *Visual pun of man leaning his shield on decorative eyes.* Cup, Attic RF, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 13.83; Oltos; 525–500 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

a solution by leaning it against the decorative eye. But this is a structural impossibility. The eyes cannot be simultaneously the frame and the content of a scene. When looking at a visual pun, the viewer is disorientated because it is impossible to choose an exclusive way to see the picture.