

Kylix Depicting An Erotic Scene

Greece

5th - 4th Century B.C.

Terracotta

H: 29.5cm

This red-figure kylix, a popular wine cup in Ancient Greece, is decorated with an erotic scene. Such drinking vessels were mostly used to sip watered-down wine at social gatherings called symposia, where young men from aristocratic society would enjoy music, dancing, games, food and drinks. Sex also played a central part. Therefore, cups were often decorated with festive and sexual scenes. Kylikes have an elegant shape, with a broad and shallow body, framed by two horizontal handles placed symmetrically and raised on a vertical stem. The wide body of the kylix is ideally shaped for decorations, especially the tondo, the flat interior circle at the base of the cup where the main design was painted. In red-figure pottery, developed ca. 530 BC, the figures and decorations were first outlined, then the background was painted black, leaving the figures red after a complex three-phase firing process. This technique allowed for more expressive paintings than the preceding black-figure style. This kylix is decorated in the centre by a scene of sexual nature, between an ephebos, a beardless young man, and a hetaira, a female prostitute. The young man bends over his female companion, resting his hands on her breasts as she braces herself with her hands on the floor. Hetairai were usually depicted with short hair or, as shown here, with sakkoi (closed up caps or hoods) covering their hair. The bag of money hanging above the couple confirms the nature of this relationship. Hetairai were often present during symposia to entertain men with dances, music, sex and witty conversation. They might be highly educated women and, as such, an important part of society. The tondo is circled by a thin band of discontinuous meander and the rest of the cup is painted black, focusing the attention solely on the erotic scene that would only become visible when the cup was drained. The shape of the kylix also enabled the drinker to play kottabos, a game often enjoyed during a symposium in which, by swirling the cup's contents, men would splash one another. This particular kylix was attributed by J.D. Beazley to the 'Wedding Painter'. After studying a red-figure pyxis painted with the wedding of Thetis and Peleus (470–460 BC, Athens, now in the Louvre Museum, no. L 55-N3348), Beazley identified more than 40 other vessels with similar characteristics, therefore attributing them to the so-called Wedding painter, active in Athens ca. 480–460 BC. Here, the delicate linework is particularly characteristic to this artist.

Literature:

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