

What makes vase iconography different? Why it is so important? The complexity of imagery, the variety of pictorial representations, the great number of examples available and the large diffusion of the material all over the Mediterranean and beyond makes Greek vases the richer iconographic source in the ancient world, and at the same time one that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. In this lecture, we present a brief examination of the history of the formation of the sub-discipline, stressing in particular three of its main contributions to the study of the ancient world, namely the birth of narrative (art-historical field), the study of ancient religion (historical-philological field) and the study of Greek society (social-anthropological field). Most approaches and methods take it for granted that producers and consumers of images share exactly the same views on the meaning of images. We argue instead that a new paradigm in iconographic studies is necessary, one operating a shift of focus from the producer of images to his clients. Studying Greek vase iconography within specific archaeological contexts (especially funerary assemblages) allows one to uncover authentic and sometimes erratic or subversive “readings” of the images by their users.