

DAVID LIGARE

Aparchai: Ritual Offerings



Still Life with Grape Juice and Sandwiches, (*Xenia*), 1989
o/c, 20 x 24 in.
Collection: DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, CA

In 1989 I painted a still life of a pitcher of grape juice and a stack of sandwiches, now in the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. The pitcher and the shape of the sliced loaf of bread were distinctly contemporary but the sub-title of the painting, "*Xenia*," put the objects into the realm of history painting.

In ancient Greece, according to the Roman writer Vitruvius, when one had houseguests, "on the first day they would be invited to dine with the family, on the next, chickens, eggs, vegetables, fruits, and other country produce were given to them to eat in their own quarters. This is why artists called pictures representing the things that were given to guests "*xenia*." In my case, the bread and sandwiches depicted were exactly those served to homeless people in a soup kitchen where I volunteered in Salinas, California. They were literally, *xenia* or food gifts for strangers.

Another genre of still life painting in ancient times was the depiction of ordinary objects that played paradoxically with the extreme care with which they were created. These were called *rhopography*, The best example of these was a floor mosaic from Pergamum called "The Unswept Floor," with the remnants of a meal scattered about. There are bits of bone, husks from nuts, a seashell, a bird's foot and even a very real-looking mouse nibbling on a nut.

It has been thought by historians that most existing images of foodstuffs painted in ancient times are either *xenia* or *rhopography*, indeed any real evidence to the contrary is nearly as lost as Greek still life paintings themselves. But I believe that there is another category of imagery - hidden in plain sight - that has not yet been recognized by scholars.

About ten years ago, I began looking and thinking more carefully about the paintings found in ancient Roman Pompeii and Herculaneum. Many of the images were clearly not of items that one would give to a houseguest to eat. The most famous example, usually described as a *xenia*, is of four peaches and a glass vase of water from Herculaneum. It's a very beautiful painting but as a *xenia* it represents a scant meal - with green, seemingly inedible peaches. I recalled from travels in Nepal seeing small shrines with offerings of fruit, rice or flowers and I wondered if these peaches might have served a similar function.

I confess that, while I had made a careful study of Greek art, I had spent no time studying Greek religious practices. Art history texts generally ignore religious practices and the surviving ancient writings may neglect them because they were so commonplace and deeply ingrained. The casualness with which these rituals are performed in Nepal attests to both the obvious depth of belief and the off-handedness of their practices. Ritual offerings seem simply to have been taken for granted as a part of everyday life.

In ancient Greece, ritual offerings and sacrifices may have been extremely commonplace but, according to Historian Walter Burkert, "The most important evidence for Greek religion remains the literary evidence, especially as the Greeks founded such an eminently literary culture. Nevertheless, religious texts in the narrow sense of sacred texts are scarcely to be found." I would add that

evidence depicted on Greek vases is suggestive, if not necessarily specific, of religious practices. Presumably easel paintings (*pinax*) of which



Still Life with Olives and Wheat, (Aparchai), 2012
o/c, 20 x 24 in.
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York

there were vast numbers, would also have included depictions of processions, offerings, sacrifices, burials and other rituals.

The ritual of first-fruit offerings was deeply ingrained. Burkert writes that "an elementary form of gift offering, so omnipresent that it plays a decisive role in...the origin of the concept of the divine is the *primitia* or first fruit offering, the surrender of firstlings of food whether won by hunting, fishing, gathering, or agriculture. The Greeks speak of *ap-archi*, beginnings taken from the whole, for the god comes first." But without specific textual proof that early still life paintings represented *aparchai*, how do we know that it might be so?

First, there are the surviving wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum that depict imagery of foodstuffs in conjunction with small votive statues of Dionysus or Demeter, goddess of the harvest. In these original pine panel paintings (later recreated in fresco, including their frames) the depictions might be stand-ins for the offerings themselves, or representations accompanying the offerings or perhaps allegorical images expressing piety. William Rouse in his book, *Greek Votive Offerings*, notes that, "the offering in kind was often commemorated by a model." He cites gold sheaves of wheat left at the temple at Delphi, gold clusters of grapes at Delos and even a golden radish. In the National Museum in Reggio Calabria there are many terracotta models of fruits and vegetables found at the Temple of Demeter. Animals were also depicted: a gold deer dedicated to Apollo, etc. Indeed, all manner of enterprises might be represented in kind. Herodotus wrote that "Mandrocles, who built Darius' bridge over the Bosphorous, spent part of his fee on a picture of the bridge which he dedicated to Hera in Samos for a firstfruit."

And so it seems clear to me, with these and other evidences, that it is entirely possible that many early still life paintings were representations, not just of hospitality gifts (*xenia*), or pleasurable arrangements of ordinary objects (*rhopography*), but, that they may have been intended to metaphysically stand in for or accompany offerings of thanks to the gods (*aparchai*). Within the art history community, a new archeology is needed to look more carefully at this wholly overlooked genre of ancient art.

David Ligare, 2006

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