
Colour and Luxury

Three Classical Painted Marble Pyxides from the Collection of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens

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The scientific investigation of an outstanding group of marble vessels from the collection of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens has provided significant evidence regarding the variety of pigments and the development of painting techniques used during the Classical period.¹ The small scale, figurative compositions on the walls and the lids of three exquisite marble pyxides (NAM A 11363, A 11372, A 12904) represent rare evidence of figural painting during the Classical period. Despite the paucity of information on the original context of the NAM pyxides,² their shapes allow us to place them in the last quarter of the 5th century BCE. Marble pyxides, listed under the term '*kylichnis*' in Athenian inventories, served primarily as containers for jewellery or cosmetics and their elaborate shapes were probably inspired by wooden prototypes. The technical mastery displayed and the smooth appearance of their highly-polished surfaces are unrivaled among the sculptural products of their time.³ The largest group of marble vessels known today comes from the purification trench at Rheneia.⁴ In her article on marble vessels from Delos and Rheneia, Ph. Zappeiropoulou discusses their various shapes and degree of elaboration and describes the traces of preserved polychromy on a large number of them.

More recently, J. Gaunt presented a synthetic overview of Classical and Hellenistic marble pyxides, inquiring into their dating, the workshops of their manufacture (most probably Attic) and their function as luxury gifts and dedications in funerary, civil and domestic contexts.⁵ However, the pictorial aspects and the rich polychromy applied on the marble vessels have never been properly investigated from a scientific viewpoint. The three pyxides of the National Archaeological Museum Collection presented in this brief essay offer the best-preserved evidence of high-quality figural painting as well as of the use of an unusual variety of precious pigments for the decoration of such luxury artifacts.