HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2012 SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS – COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

INTERNAL LANDSCAPES

We rarely meet representations of the countryside amongst the monuments of antique art preserved to us, and there are practically no landscape pictures in the modern sense of the term. There is, however, one sphere in which landscape elements play an essential role: the decorative art of the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period. Its best known examples are the wall paintings of sumptuous dwellings in the Gulf of Naples and in the city of Rome, where they appear sometimes as backgrounds to large-scale mythological scenes, sometimes as window views in the frame of painted architectures, sometimes as small pictures, in individual frames. These high-status and isolated documents of ancient painting were produced throughout the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD and were clearly intended for the decoration of spaces where Italy's elite spent the hours of *otium*, intimate private life enhanced by intellectual activity. However, landscape elements, plant motifs rendered with fascinating lifelikeness, still lifes composed of apparently casual groupings of objects appeared also in other genres: the most important one is the class of decorative reliefs of marble and terracotta. The central piece of the exhibition is a fragment of a large-scale marble relief, according to the most probable setting, the right upper corner of a panel. It represents a plane-tree bough, rendered with botanical precision, with the foiled leaves overlapping the molded edge of the panel; under the frond, the wing of a bird flying to the left can be recognized. The most convincing hypothesis concerning the art historical collocation of the fragment so far suggested is to connect it with a famous series, the so-called Grimani reliefs, named after their collectors, two of which are conserved in Vienna and a third one in Palestrina, all representing animal scenes in a landscape setting. On the Vienna panels there is depicted a lioness suckling cubs and a mother sheep with her lamb, on the Palestrina piece a female wild-boar suckling piglets; in all cases surrounded by vegetation rendered with the same realism and plastic qualities as the plane bough of the Budapest fragment (on the lioness-relief, the upper zone of the panel is filled by the branches of a plane-tree). The provenience of the Grimani reliefs was ascertained by the discovery of the piece in Palestrina: with all probability the whole series was set up there, in the city of Praeneste, a city-center placed about twenty kilometers to the east of Rome, in the picturesque countryside of Castelli Romani, profoundly linked

to Hellenistic culture. It seems to be equally certain that the reliefs decorated originally the sides of a fountain, given the presence of holes inserted in each of them, skillfully hidden in the mouths of the animal figures. Whether we imagine the fountain at the center of the inner court of a private dwelling or in the middle of a public space, we can in all cases get an idea of the spirit of exploiting the landscape motif: a sort of delightful amusement, which probably succeeded in surprising its ancient viewers, just as it does with those of our days. The style and the sculptural workmanship which characterize the Grimani reliefs are closely related to a famous and well dated monument of the Augustan era, the Ara Pacis built in the Campus Martius between 13 and 9 BC, which thus provides a useful reference for the beginning of the genre.

It is more likely, however, that the Budapest fragment is not a part of another panel of the Grimani series, which can be excluded on the ground of technical and compositional observations. Nevertheless, its style and genre connect it to the same milieu. In fact, marble reliefs of the same kind in terms of style, destination and conception range to more than two hundred known pieces today. Most of them come from Central Italy, a number of others from the Eastern Mediterranean. In the cases when it can be determined, they are made of marble from Luna (Carrara) or, in a smaller amount, from the Greek islands. The dating of the whole class and the question of the origin of this genre is the subject of a complex and not yet concluded debate; however, it can be taken for a generally accepted opinion today that they represent one of the latest branches of Hellenistic art that flourished mostly on Italian soil. At the beginning of the 20th century the fragment with the plane-tree bough was dated to the age of Hadrian (reigned from 117 to 138 AD), but its relationship with the Grimani reliefs and their milieu point rather to the age of Augustus or the decades immediately after. The rendering of the plant motif, slightly larger in proportion and partly overlapping the casing suggest a slightly different composition, closer to that of a panel conserved in the Museo Gregoriano, decorated with a fantastic-mythological scene, most probably again a fountain panel.

The common trait of landscape reliefs and contemporary painted landscapes is a continuous blending of realism and fantastic character – at least this is how the modern viewer can formulate the most easily the contradiction that fills these pictures with tension. As in the plane-tree fragment, almost in every piece of the series single elements of real life are modelled with masterly precision and enlightening sensibility, but the picture as a whole appears nevertheless rather dream-like. It is particularly true, in the cases where the elements of nature and objects of everyday life provide a background for the apparition of recognizable figures of the mythological tradition, the common fantasy world of antiquity: satyrs, Erotes, Silens, or figures known from epic or tragic literary tradition. An example of these "life likely fantasies" is provided by the terracotta cornice element on display, on which a mixture of animal, plant, symbolic item and mythological figure composes a decorative motif: we see a horse-tailed, child-bodied satyr riding a panther, approaching an oversized cantharos – the animal sacred to Dionysus and Dionysus' vase – but the hindquarter of the animal transforms into a leafed tendril and the bridle over its neck is also a vine tendril with a bunch of grapes. This way of connecting motifs is a widespread phenomenon in the 1st century AD, in the genre of

decorative terracotta reliefs as well as in stucco, marble carving and painted decoration. A sense of uncertainty among reality and dream is evidently enhanced also by the way, as ancient masters perceived and let the viewers perceive the space, according to the rules of a perception which is wholly extraneous to the modern viewer, educated by the linear perspective used since the Renaissance and by the scientific rules of optics. These landscapes have no single viewpoint adapted to the viewer's eye, there is no horizon and no vanishing point, thus the pictures could continue endlessly and become landscapes without boundaries, even when they appear in a frame. It is particularly apparent in the pictures, where objects and landscape elements are disposed in the field in several zones, one above the other. In these multi-layered landscapes elements of nature, human life and divine presence come close to each other even more often. An example of these "sacred" landscapes can be recognized in the smaller marble relief fragment, even if it is of average quality and strongly weathered. In its field we see two small figures (children?), wearing tunics, moving to the right with the gesture of prayer, in the zone above them an altar and a trunk of a palm-tree, on a ground line indicating another level. From a structural point of view it can be compared to the so-called 'Satyrspiel' reliefs, in which we see a similarly rendered space filled with children satyrs, sacred objects, flourishing plants and figures alluding to the world of theatre (equally sacral in antiquity).

It is beyond doubt that early imperial Roman landscapes and decorative motifs closely related to them were compositions full of symbolic content: playful mixtures amongst the experience of the senses, memories of religious tradition and creatures of fantasy. For the modern viewer they have, however, no evident reading, and often a scholarly deciphering of their motifs can not translate them into clear allegories, either. A part of their motifs bore a generally known meaning in the official art of their time, but these dream landscapes created for the private realm must have displayed their effect in a less immediate way, connecting the learned mind's readings of symbols with the impressions of the delighted eye.

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