



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

## BYZANTINE ART FROM AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE

The painted storage jar of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

In 332 BC the land of the Pharaohs was conquered by Alexander the Great. The country was ruled until 30 BC by the descendants of Ptolemy, son of Lagos, one of the generals among whom, after Alexander's death, his empire was divided up. Throughout the first century of Ptolemaic rule Greeks migrated in large numbers to Alexandria, the superb new capital founded by Alexander, and to the Greek cities of the countryside.

In the earlier part of the Hellenistic era the Greeks and the Egyptian population of the villages and provincial towns lived parallel lives. Motivated partly by political pragmatism and partly by the traditional Greek respect for the culture and the gods of the Egyptians, the new rulers of Egypt also preserved the institutions of Egyptian religion, maintained the Egyptian cult temples and provided for their priesthood. With the preservation of political conceptions, cults, religious and social institutions of pharaonic Egypt, also traditional architectural types, artistic themes and means of expression survived side by side with the Hellenistic-style architectural

and artistic production that was unfolding in the capital and the Greek cities. Increasing social interaction between Greeks and Egyptians, the impact of the Egyptian cults and the attempts of the ruling élite to present a popular Egyptian interpretation of the Greek gods especially venerated by the Ptolemies led to a cultural and ethnic merging, to the amalgamation of Greek and Egyptian conceptions and forms in the arts and the increasing prestige of education in Greek literacy. This process also continued after 30 BC, when Egypt fell under Roman dominion.

The unifying effect of Greek language and Hellenic culture proved essential for the preservation of Roman rule not only in Egypt but also in the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean. Roman dominion greatly promoted ethnic and cultural fusion and, for the first time in history, Egypt was entirely integrated into the Mediterranean world. Egyptian architecture, sculpture, painting and minor arts in the Late Roman (3rd–5th centuries) and Early Byzantine (5th–7th centuries) periods constituted an organic part of the culture of the contemporary Mediterranean. Certain traditions of Alexandrian Hellenistic art, such as the illusionistic representation of spatial relationships in relief sculpture or the Classical rendering of the human figure in painting and in figured textiles, were, however, also preserved.

With the general dissemination of Christianity in the fourth century, a new artistic language of images and symbols mingled with the Classical traditions of artistic expression. This new language was greatly influenced by the artistic themes and forms emerging in the great centres of Eastern Christianity, first of all Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, and Alexandria in Egypt. The Christian teaching was "inscribed" on the walls of the churches in the form of figured narratives telling the stories of the Scriptures. Images and symbols of the new faith became organic part of the life of the Egyptian Christians. Christian imagery was incorporated into the household of the rich and the poor alike. Figures of saints and sacred symbols occurred on luxury objects produced for aristocrats and on modest objects of daily use made for the household of the less wealthy. Be it applied on a silk garment or a cheap linen-and-wool tunic, on a silver dish or a clay vessel, a Christian image was believed to possess an amuletic power and it was meant to protect the object and its owner from destructive forces. The Christian imagery occurring on domestic textiles and on objects of daily use was treated in an increasingly simplified style of representation which was determined by the symbolic-amuletic use of these images rather than by the skill of the artesans who executed them.

The Nile silt jar (inv.no 2003.1.A) exhibited here was produced some time in the sixth century for the storage of grain. The large vessel (height 69.5 cm) was thrown in two parts joined at major point. The base ring and the small handles (one of which is a later addition) were separately made and added. The exterior surface of the vessel was covered with a matte creamish white wash and the upper part of the vessel was decorated in dark brown and red painting. Rope impressions below the major point reveal that the lower body was held together with rope supports while the upper part of the jar was added. The thin walls of the vessel and its excellent firing reveal that the jar was produced in a pottery workshop which possessed a good quality kiln built for mass production. Nevertheless, the separately thrown upper and lower parts were joined carelessly, as a consequence of which the vessel wall cracked at one place in the course of the firing process.

The painted decoration was executed in dark brown and reddish orange colours. The pigments used were mineral colours. The quality of the painting indicates that the pottery workshop did not employ a specialist painter: the decoration was the duty of the potter who was, however, aware of the meaning of the images and motifs he painted in the two-figured panels on the upper part of the vessel. One half of the upper half of the jar is filled with the figure of a dove under an oval arch formed by an interlace frieze between red bands and a frieze of large dots; the



opposite half is decorated with two birds, probably doves, under an arch with hatched frieze. The birds are flanking a vine-stock, the tendrils of which bear bunches of grapes and form a vine arbour. The cross on the neck of the solitary dove associates the bird with the Christian conceptions of Salvation and Paradise and identifies it as an image of the Christian believer, subject of the Redemption. The same conceptions are also apparent in the decoration of the other side of the jar. The vine is a symbol of Christ, the source of eternal life. The believer is represented again in the form of a bird; the painting is a symbolic image of Redemption and Paradise. Similar images, with the triumphant Cross in lieu of the vine, belong to the most frequently represented Christian images symbolising the triumph of life over death. The palm branches separating the two main decoration panels are also symbols of Paradise.

The decorative system as well as the iconography of the jar show the impact of painted vases produced for an elite clientèle. The double-line contours of the bird figures recall a characteristic feature of the decoration on a special group of fine vessels. Their majority comes from Saqqara and it may be presumed that the workshop in which they were produced in the sixth century was closely associated with the famous Monastery of Apa Jeremias, one of the great artistic centres of Early Byzantine Egypt.

LÁSZLÓ TÖRÖK

