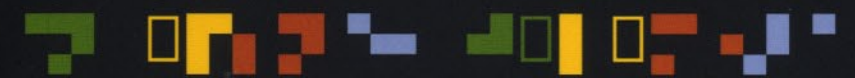




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## HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2006 SPRING **SUMMER** AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

## “ PIGNATE ”

The Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities of the Museum of Fine Arts has long kept a two-handled jug of unknown provenance in its storeroom. It was acquired from the Hungarian National Museum, the collection of which had accumulated over a period of two centuries and included objects from various donations. What makes this pot, which is completely undecorated, noteworthy is the arrangement of its two handles, which are not opposed as usual on each side, but rather set approximately at right angles to each other. The jug is datable, based on its shape and fabric, to the end of the 6th century BC or the 5th century, and may be the product of a Greek workshop in Sicily. It is, nevertheless, not unique among ancient Greek and Italian pottery finds in exhibiting this conspicuously characteristic arrangement of handles.

Jugs of a similar kind were apparently first produced at Corinth in the 6th century BC. Their constant—albeit far from frequent—presence among products of Corinthian workshops up to the 1st century BC clearly indicates that they were not a passing chance phenomenon. This is also confirmed by examination of further examples from a broader range of ancient Greek pottery workshops. Compared with

the total sum of pottery production, such vases are always rarities, in all times and places. Even though a broader area has yielded only occasional finds, it is, however, still possible to determine a few centres or smaller regions where their frequency and unique characteristics suggest that they were a favourite product of local workshops.

To the best of our knowledge, one such centre of production besides Corinth might have been Athens, where the vases are characterized by a mushroom-shaped body. In Athens, their occurrence is restricted to the Classical Period, i. e. the 5th to 4th centuries BC. One further production centre may possibly have operated in Greece. This was in Miletos, one of the greatest centres of Eastern Greek settlement on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey. However, jugs like this one are also to be found in neighbouring areas of Greek settlements: on the coastal area of the Black Sea, in Italy, and in Sicily. It is remarkable that the imported Athenian types or their local imitations dominated in the Pontic region, whereas pieces showing a Corinthian influence are more common



in the western area, and even in Miletos. The presence of a workshop producing local imitations on the Black Sea coast might most easily be assumed in Romanian Histria, a Greek colony founded by Milesians in the Danube estuary. The material from the western zone of the Mediterranean — i. e. Italy and Sicily — is far richer. At present, it seems

certain that two major local workshops which made jugs of this shape were active in Italy: one on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea between Paestum and ancient Velia (Elea), and the other on the Adriatic coast, in a region comprising the Po Delta and the area to the south, between present-day Padova and Ancona.

The production of the former workshop is characterized by a round body and banded ornamentation, while pieces from the Po region are distinguished by the floral decoration on their shoulders. Local workshops imitating imported pottery of the type in question may have operated in Sicily, around Agrigento in the south, Lentini and Syracuse in the east, and the island of Lipari in the north. One example also made its way to the southern coast of France.

Besides the arrangement of the handles, the jugs share some further characteristics: they are 15–20 centimetres in height; their cubic capacity is 2–3 litres; they have a round mouth without a spout, and usually no painted decoration. Even though this peculiar positioning of the two handles can occasionally be observed on antique vases of other shapes, neither these, nor the findspots or the ancient artistic record provide a clear explanation for the arrangement of the handles. Ancient pottery-shapes did not evolve by chance, but to satisfy specific needs—just like their present-day successors, unless they are intended as works of art. When considering the possible uses to which these two-handled jugs might have been put, it is worth considering some of the functions that are assigned to their present-day counterparts. Examples can be taken from three completely different uses of the shape still prevalent in four different cultures today. Italian potters, especially in the region of the Tyrrhenian Sea, but also in Calabria, intend the two-handled jug, called *pignata*, for preparing meals that take a long time to cook. The pots are heated from the side opposite the handles, so that even when the meal is cooked, it is easily held by its handles, which have not been exposed to the fire.



Until recent times, broad-mouthed pots were made in ethnic Hungarian workshops in Transylvania, and intended for a similar purpose. These too had a distinctive name, *aranka*, but they were also called “goat-horn handled jugs” in the popular parlance. The piece on display comes from the collection of the Museum of Ethnography.

The two handles play an essentially different role in Afghanistan, where such jugs are used for churning butter: they make the pot easier to shake with both hands. Turning again to the ancient examples: the possibility of their ritual use has also been raised by some scholars. Yet again, the possibility is corroborated by contemporary practice. As attested by the piece on display, such two-handled jugs are produced to the present day in a Transylvanian workshop, intended for use in traditional Jewish purification rituals. Holding one handle of the jug with one’s still unclean hand, one can sprinkle water on the other, which, thus cleaned, can take the other handle which is still untouched by the unclean hand.

These examples from contemporary craft-traditions clearly show that the unusual arrangement of the handles invariably points to a specific intended use. Such a purpose can therefore rightly be assumed for the ancient pieces as well. But

examples from present-day pottery production also make it clear that instead of one exclusive explanation, the solution is to be sought from a broader range of possibilities, always bearing in mind the principle expressed already in connection with ancient objects, that “similarity in a given detail need not argue for identity of function between different times, fabrics and cultures”.

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