MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE
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OPEN · 03. 06. 2008 – 31. 08. 2008
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PRINTING · MESTER NYOMDA

HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2008 SPRING **SUMMER** AUTUMN WINTER

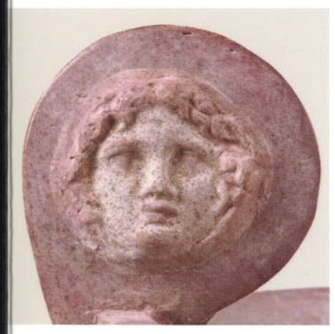
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS – COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

A FUNERARY VASE FROM SOUTH ITALY

The Greek and Roman writers all agreed that only a barbarian would drink his wine straight. The *krater*, a large, wide-mouthed bowl for mixing wine and water, thus came to play an indispensible and even symbolic role in the Greek feast and the ritual of convivial drinking (*symposion*) which followed. The more opulent examples were made of bronze, and at times were almost as tall as a man. Painted pottery pieces decorated usually with figural scenes have survived in much larger numbers: the various types of shape and ornament can be linked to specific centres of the Greek world. One type is known to archaeologists as the *volute krater* from the way the long vertical spar, which continues above the horseshoe-shaped handle, ended originally above the rim of the vase in a spiral volute. It originated in Sparta. In the 6th and 5th centuries BC this shape was popular in the workshops of the Athenian potters' quarter. This Attic ware, delicately made and painted, proved a popular luxury article in the export trade to Etruria, Sicily as well as to Magna Graecia where immigrant Greeks lived for centuries in a state of close cultural reciprocity with the native population. In the first quarter of the 4th century, the volute krater disappeared from the Attic potters' canon, but enjoyed a considerable vogue among users of locally-made South Italian pottery, especially in Apulia (modern Puglia). Between about 375 and 350 BC, a new type developed here, which had discs in place of the earlier volutes. The discs bore brightly painted relief masks. One such example was recently acquired by the Antiquities Collection of the Museum.

Initially, the local South Italian pottery industry of the early fourth century took its shapes and ornamental schemes from Attic models. Vases were most often painted in the so-called *red figure* technique, in which the figures, reserved in the natural red colour of the clay, rise out of the surrounding glossy black or chocolate-brown glaze. Red-figure painting first appeared around 530 in Athens, and dominated Attic production for two centuries In Attica, it fell out of fashion and disappeared around the thirties of the fourth century. But the technique survived in the great South Italian workshops of the fourth century. Here at this time the most significant centre of vase-painting, in terms of artistic quality and influence, was the important seaport town of Tarentum (Taranto).

Red figure ware was produced there in great quantity, moreover local masters expanded the inherited technical canon with new techniques and striking effects of colour. The so-called *Gnathia* technique, which involved mostly floral motifs painted in bright colours on the black-glazed surface of the vase, originated in Tarentum and spread to many other centres of South Italian production, attaining considerable popularity. Other new techniques proved less popular and spread less widely. One important centre of technical innovation was the Apulian town of Canosa, whose master potters and painters, without breaking entirely with the inherited methods of their tradition, proved both courageous and remarkably successful in their introduction and exploitation of new methods of vase-decoration. Ancient *Canusium*, today with a population of about 30,000, lies a few kilometers from the Adriatic on the south bank of the river Ofanto (ancient *Aufidus*), on the southern edge of the territory of northern Apulia known in Greek and Roman times as Daunia. The excavated remains of local pottery workshops show that the town was a centre of ceramic production already in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The interest of the local Italic population in Greek import wares is attested already in the archaic period by numerous finds. The culture of ancient Canosa was marked throughout its history by a successful symbiosis of Greek and local elements. These influenced each other reciprocally. According to one tradition, the city was founded by the Homeric hero Diomedes in the course of his long return from Troy. According to the poet Horace, it was still bilingual after three centuries of Roman rule. It acquired its urban form in the 4th century. In the second half of the century, while the import of Greek ceramics continued, it was an important market for the best masters of the flourishing red figure pottery industry of Tarentum. In the last third of the century, pupils of these Tarentine masters opened large-scale workshops in Canosa. New techniques of decoration appeared both in the red-figure workshops, and in those which continued the native Italic traditions of painted pottery. The Budapest krater is a very rare example of the former. The vase differs in proportions but not in shape from other red figure kraters, but its decoration is as it were the opposite of the usual Attic technique. The ornament was painted over the reddish-brown glaze which covers the whole surface of the vase. With its use of multiple added colours, it is clearly a forerunner of the technique of polychrome decoration which dominated the next phase of ceramic production in Canosa, influencing even the workshop founded by immigrant masters from Tarentum. The style of the drawing points to the followers of the Darius Painter, the most significant Tarentine master of the period. At the time of its production, roughly 320–280 BC, the volute krater had already completely disappeared in Tarentum and its environs. In the production of Canosa, the shape was associated entirely with funerary ritual. These vases were deposited in graves: a use attested in the fact that all the volute kraters from Canosa, including the Budapest piece, are drilled through at the base. The figural decoration must clearly be related to the funerary function of the vase.



The front or main side of the vase is distinguished from the back by the fact that the relief masks which take the place of the volutes in South Italian production are found only here; the discs on the back are smooth. On the front, two mounted youths, symmetrically posed, engage in battle. Note the marked difference in the colour of the horses. One is light in colour; the other is blue-grey: a colour used in Etruscan tomb frescoes to indicate the gods of the Underworld. The scene, to paraphrase a lost Roman play, is thus a *mortis et vitae iudicium*, a Duel of Life and Death; and it is perhaps not absurd to suppose that the combatants in fact represent the same figure in two different states of being. The *dénouement* is given by the funerary purpose of the vase; but meaning of the whole composition is completed by the female figure who rises out of the decorative floral scrolls on the neck. She is a frequent element on vases representing grave monuments with architectural details (the so-called *naiskoi* with their pediments and columns). According to one expert interpreter of South Italian funerary vases, she points "symbolically to the flourishing afterlife which is opposed to the world of death". One can only guess as to whether the female head on the back, conventional and in all likelihood painted by another hand, is related to this iconographic program.

This duel of mounted warriors is at present unique in fourth century South Italian vase-painting, but it does not lack precedents. We find exactly the same scene on an Apulian vase from two centuries earlier, a period when local vase-painters were still largely unencumbered by the influence of Greek art. The mounted figures, one on a red, the other on a black horse, are directly comparable to those on the Budapest vase. The survival of this iconographic scheme testifies to the Apulian painters' strong, conscious conservatism and preservation of their local craft traditions. However, on the other side of this older vase we find a more tragic ending to the duel. The rider of the red horse is headless; and the place of the black horse's rider is taken by a corpse-eating vulture. What role the Orphic and Dionysiac religions, initiation cults designed to assure the survival of the believer in a blessed afterlife, which were spreading through South Italy at the time the vase was made, may have played in defining these two different outcomes can only be guessed.

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