



HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2012 SPRING **SUMMER** AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

“BENE LAVA — HAVE A NICE BATH!”

„*Neatness pleases*” – ran Ovid’s advice to young men setting out on amorous conquests in his didactic poem *Ars amatoria*. A clean body and a neat face was not only indispensable in the art of love, but was also an essential social demand for a Roman citizen wishing himself success in everyday life. An orderly and well-groomed appearance was considered as a fundamental feature of *Romanitas*, frequently contrasted with the uncleanness of Barbarians living outside the borders of the Empire.

Private and public baths, attended by both men and women regularly and with pleasure, served as the place for bathing and sporting activities, and also for building social relationships. Roman bath culture went back to the Greek tradition, and is attested not only in the stately ruins of luxurious baths throughout the Empire, including Pannonia, but also by the accessories once used during bathing and the physical exercise that was closely connected to it.

Bathing utensils (*instrumenta balnei*) – complete with good wishes – were frequently depicted at the entrances of baths, sometimes held by citizens hurrying to the pools or by servants accompanying their masters. Besides the towels, bath robes, and slippers with a wooden sole (*soccus*) used in steam-baths, bathing sets, which were hung on a single ring and compiled of functionally coherent elements, included curved metal scrapers (*strigilis*) and bathing dishes. After sport, bathers used these strigils to scrape sweat and dirt off their anointed bodies (1). The most beautiful bronze examples were made with cast handles and dot-punched decoration. One such piece is the find from Pannonia on display here: a strigil found in Érd, in the tomb of a local nobleman dating to the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Its blade was decorated with dolphins representing vivacity and swiftness, and the symbols of victory: palm branches placed in a vase. The club-shaped handle evoked Hercules, idol of all ancient athletes (2). Besides the strigils, ring holders were usually also equipped with a round, flat, long-handled bathing dish, represented by the bronze vessel in the exhibition (3). These were used to draw hot water from the bath in order to wash any left-over oil off the body before diving into the pool, and – getting used to the water’s temperature –





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dilate the pores of the skin. The shape of the dish comes from southern Italy, its production in Italy, and in the Gallian provinces lasted from the mid-1st century to the first third of the 2nd century. Even though a hair dye and toiletry made of grease and vegetable ash called *sapo* (hence our word *soap*) was known in antiquity, bathing was unthinkable without oils used as body lotions. The most spectacular and ornate accessories of bathing sets

were small flasks (*ampullae oleariae*) made of glass, bronze and silver in a variety of shapes, used both for storing and transporting bathing oils. Besides bottles and globular vessels hung on a chain or worn with the help of handles, anthropomorphic oil flasks also appeared in the 2nd century. The busts represented deities, such as Bacchus and Hercules, or handsome youths evoking the portrait of the ideal male of the age, the hero Antinous, favourite of the emperor Hadrian. Craftsmen producing vessels used in baths and palaestrae readily drew on exotic motifs as well. The most characteristic examples are busts of young men with Negroid features (4), such as the anthropomorphic oil vessel in the Collection of Classical Antiquities (5). The bust portrays a Nubian or Ethiopian youth, his origins indicated by the hair arranged in distinctive curly locks and the singularly trimmed beard, even though the face itself lacks any Negroid features (such as full lips and a broad, flat nose). The flask was considered a forgery for a long time. Parallel examples, however, make it plain that it belongs among this well definable group of Roman oil vessels. The majority of Negroid head vessels represent handsome, gentle-looking youths, such as the piece from Intercisa (Dunaújváros), kept in the Hungarian National Museum (6). The busts portray African bath servants, popular both in Greek and Roman baths, who accompanied their masters or mistresses, carried bathing utensils (including the

bust vessels), and served food and drink during bathing. Some vessels shaped as Negroid heads, however, such as the pieces in the Museum of Fine Arts (5) and the Hungarian National Museum (7), show scary faces, with features distorted into terrifying grimaces. From the profane environment of everyday cleaning and bathing, these faces lead us into the world of demons and the struggle against the evil eye. Bathing – an essentially joyful activity – was also fraught with dangers and accidents. Contemporary sources mention people drowned in the pools, whose deaths were assigned to demons living in the baths. Nude bathers were especially defenseless against curses triggered by envy and hatred, against magical practices and the power of the evil eye. Curse tablets were also frequently deposited in baths. This explains why bathers were constantly seeking protection against dark powers, which they found in the apotropaic symbols on the mosaics and frescoes decorating the baths on the one hand, and in the decoration of their own bathing utensils on the other. An ithyphallic black figure was believed to have apotropaic power in general, but this is especially



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true for figures with exaggeratedly angry features. The grotesque ugliness and the terrifying facial expressions served to ward off curses and the evil eye.

In order to enhance the comforts of the bath, well-off people even took folding iron chairs with them, so that after bathing their servants

could scrub their bodies sitting down. Bath mosaics often show figures draped in bath robes sitting on foldable chairs, or servants carrying such chairs on their shoulders. A lady beautifying herself among her maids is also sitting on such a chair, while other scenes represent the chair next to the bed, together with bronze bathing dishes. The iron chair (8) from the above-mentioned tomb in Érd, found next to bathing utensils, was probably also used for this purpose. Sets of lamps and lamp-holders can often be regarded as instruments of personal hygiene as well. The Romans, too, conducted daily personal care in the morning or right before going to bed, that is at times when it was dark outside in most of the year. The *dominus* and the *domina* accomplished their usual morning and evening care by the light of lamps set on lamp-holders, aided by their servants. The bronze lamp decorated with a horse's head on display is typical of the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD (9).

ZSOLT MRÁV



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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE

CURATOR · MARIANNA DÁGI

OPEN · 12. 06. – 02. 09. 2012

RESPONSIBLE EDITOR · DR. LÁSZLÓ BAÁN

GRAPHIC DESIGN · JOHANNA BÁRD

PHOTOGRAPHS · ANDRÁS DABASI, LÁSZLÓ MÁTYUS

PRINTING · MESTER NYOMDA