

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Art Conservation Triumphant!

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, January 21st, 2015

ON VIEW AT THE GETTY VILLA

Ancient Luxury and the Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville

through August 17, 2015

Dangerous Perfection

through May 11, 2015

What is the distinction between conservation and restoration of works of art? A lot!

This dichotomy is the underlying theme of two new temporary exhibitions, *Ancient Luxury*, *Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville*, and *Dangerous Perfection*, currently on view at The Getty Villa. Restoration could be described as a long established process in which the person responsible for correcting the physical deterioration of artifacts makes personal judgements about their original condition and appearance proceeding to initiate “improvements.” Following World War II, traditional restoration practices were questioned and discredited. A new practice, conservation, became the standard for preserving and improving the condition and appearance of artifacts. While restoration was generally idiosyncratic, conservation is impersonal and scientific.

Although art and cultural history are the primary focus of The Getty Villa, these exhibitions draw attention to a less glamorous, but equally important aspect of its mission. Conservation is the fulcrum around which knowledge and appreciation of all historical artifacts revolve. The unifying theme of these exhibitions is the recent completion of conservation of the objects on view by the Antiquities Conservation Department of the Getty Museum.

Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville and Ancient Luxury

Discovered in 1830 by a farmer in Normandy, France, these artifacts represent an exceptional find. Buried underground for possibly 1,500 years or more, they are a rarely discovered time capsule. Most silver objects from this era were melted down by succeeding conquerors of fragments of the once extensive Roman Empire. Upon discovery, their custody was acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris where they have remained ever since. Purchasing them from the farmer who discovered this trove, the Bibliothèque nationale outbid the Louvre. Through a joint agreement between the Bibliothèque nationale and the Getty Museum, their conservation was

entrusted to The Getty. This exhibition marks their first public viewing since conservation was completed.

At its height, the Roman Empire was a vast amalgamation of conquered territories stretching from what today is Great Britain, across Western and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin including Egypt and other countries in The Near East. It was a meritocracy in which residents of conquered territories could become citizens and slaves were manumitted.

Emperors Hadrian and Trajan were born in what is now Spain. At the time of the Roman Empire, the area now known as Berthouville was located in a Roman province in Northwestern Gaul. It could be described as third degree provincialism, with Nîmes in Narbonensis in southwestern France, as second degree. First degree would be described as cities on the Italian peninsula in proximity to Rome. Within these provincial cities, as the objects on display testify, one would find the work of skilled craftsmen on a par with those in Rome. Therefore, it is possible to make assumptions about the silver which might well be applied to similar objects utilized in the capital city, as well as in other provincial locations.

The Berthouville objects were associated with a Celtic/Roman sanctuary dedicated to the worship of the god Mercury, the most popular god to be drawn from the Greco/Roman pantheon. Mercury was honored as the bestower of wealth and as the patron of traders. By 1992, more than 650 Celtic/Roman sanctuaries had been identified in France. More recently, some 300 new sites have been added.

The artifacts in this exhibition deserve serious consideration both for aesthetic appeal and quality of craftsmanship principally utilizing silver with some gold added as decoration. Their range is considerable, from pitchers of silver and gold with scenes from the Trojan War to a Statuette of Mercury also of silver and gold. The Romans admired Greek cultural achievements often replicating Greek sculptures in entirety. It should be noted that the head and neck of this figure does not adhere to the Greek canon (adopted by the Romans) of the head's being one seventh of the height of the figure. Here the ratio is five to one.



1. The Berthouville Treasure, Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.



2. Statuette of Mercury, Roman, 3rd century A.D. Silver and gold mounted on an early 19th century wax support. Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.



3. Cup with Masks, Roman, Mid-first century A.D. Silver and gold. Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.

Roman culture was visibly materialistic, class oriented and accented with notes of fashion such as the changing style of women's hair. A patrician town house, *domus*, would combine living space, ritual space and space for the accumulation and display of possessions. There was never any sense

of embarrassment regarding ostentation and wealth. (See The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Helbrunn Timeline of Art History*, "The Roman Banquet.")

A notable collection of luxury items from the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris fills one gallery. Here we can see accouterments of upper class Roman society. There are: bowls, cameos, cups, jewelry and small statues. They emanate from varying locations. Some might have been manufactured in Roman workshops, some might have been acquired through trade and others might have been the booty of Roman legions on missions of conquest and displayed on the streets of Rome in triumphs accorded to conquering military leaders.



4. Plate with Hercules Wrestling the Nemean Lion, 500-600 A.D. Silver. Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.



5. Offering bowl with Bacchus, Hercules and Coins, "Rennes patera," Roman. about 210 A.D. Gold. Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.



6. Cameo of Emperor Trajan, Roman, about 100 A.D. Sardonyx set in a 17th century gold, enamel and ruby mount. Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des monnaies et antiques, Paris.

Dangerous Perfection

In a separate gallery, thirteen Fourth Century B.C. funerary vases from the collection of Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin demonstrate another collaborative project with the Museum Antiquities Conservation Department, J. Paul Getty Trust. They were discovered in Apulia, a southwestern Italian province facing Greece across the Adriatic Sea. In design and context, they represent the manifestation of Hellenistic culture, the Greek geographical empire that stretched from the Black Sea to the Westernmost shores of the Mediterranean. Funerary urns, such as these figured prominently in funeral ceremonies.

Ceglie del Campo, where the thirteen vases on display were found, was a substantial settlement in Apulia, inhabited by the Peucetians, one of the regions indigenous tribes. By the Fourth Century B.C., their association with Greek culture is evident in the red-figured pottery deposited in their tombs. Vessels created for rich graves could reach massive proportions. (As can be seen in some of the vases on exhibition.) They show elaborate decorations that were often tailored to their funerary context and were used mostly for display during funeral rites.

The history of these vases since their discovery in the second decade of the 19th century is more the subject of this exhibition than an examination of their historical relevance, cultural identity or aesthetic merits. When unearthed, they were a collection of fragments later acquired by Baron Franz von Koller, Bohemian military attaché stationed in Naples between 1815-18 and 1821-26. von Koller entrusted the reassembly of the fragments to Raffaele Gargiulo, both the restorer at the Real Museo Borbonico (now the Naples National Archaeological Museum), and a private dealer in antiquities. His work on ceramics won praise, but his interventions – particularly the completion of painted decorations were so effective that it was often difficult to determine what was ancient and

what was modern. The exhibition reveals some of the methods used to attain this level of perfection and the challenges posed to conservators today.

During the six-year collaborative project between the Getty and the Antikensammlung, a number of techniques were utilized to identify what was ancient and what was modern. At the time of Gargiulo's restorations, Naples, the largest and most populous city in Italy, was, after Paris, the second largest city on the European continent. It was the Spanish Bourbon capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In 1737, the Teatro San Carlo, home to the exuberant opera performances of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi, opened its doors. Life in Naples was characterized as flamboyant. Gargiulo functioned in an environment of excesses; however, that does excuse his methodology. As a result of extended scientific and technological investigations, these objects now possess a more accurate resemblance to their original state.



7. Assemblage of 13 funerary vessels, South Italian, from Ceglie del Campo, Apulia, 375 – 310 B.C. Terracotta. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



8. Funerary vessel with (A) Orestes Seeking Sanctuary in Delphi; Nike Sacrificing a Ram; and a Horse Race; and (B) a Dionysian Scene; a Boar Hunt; and a Horse Race. South Italian, from Ceglie del Campo, Apulia, about 350 B.C. Associated with the Illupersis Painter (South Italian (Apulian) active about 350 B.C.) Terracotta, H: 44 1/8 x 22 x 19 1/2 in. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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