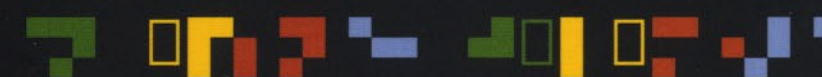




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## HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES



## A GNATHIA JUG

Owing to their great number, painted clay vases are our richest source for the history of ancient Greek art between the eighth and fourth centuries BC. From around 520 BC, figural vases in Athens, the main centre of production, were decorated mostly in the so-called red-figure technique, which means that the figures appear in the red colour of the clay, reserved against the painted black background. This method of vase-decoration was later adopted by the South Italian Greek workshops which were founded by Athenian masters around 430 and 420 BC, first in Metaponto, and Taranto.

After about a quarter of a century a new technique came into fashion in the red-figure workshops of South Italy, partly as an imitation of large-scale free painting, and partly to meet demands in local taste, for which the red-figure style, though increasingly enlivened with added colours, had become monotonous and dull. According to the new fashion the bodies of the vases were painted black all over and the decoration was added to this black ground in a variety of colours. In Apulia in the South Eastern corner of Italy, vases decorated with the new technique were named after the town of Gnathia (today's Egnazia), an early find spot on the Adriatic coast. This name is still in use today, even though it has become clear that Gnathia ware was first produced in Tarentine red-figure workshops, and that Taranto remained the main centre of production even later.

Gnathia vases, produced in ever-increasing quantities, were received willingly in the surrounding settlements. They were imitated as early as

the fourth century by local workshops above all in the coastal town of Canosa, but possibly in other Apulian cities as well. Gnathia vases were first imported from Apulia and later produced locally alongside other groups of vases made with a similar technique, in more distant regions of Italy as well: in Paestum first, and then in Etruria. Prolific workshops developed in Sicily also. From the third century onwards, increasing amounts of Gnathia ware appear at sites overseas, especially in Alexandria in Egypt. It also reached several centres on the North African coast such as Cyrene and has been found sporadically as far as Carthage. Vases originally of outstanding quality, attributable to master hands and decorated with human figures, were replaced by pieces adorned mainly with floral ornaments as early as the third quarter of the fourth century. Based on the evidence of grave finds, these continued to be produced to an ever-worsening standard of quality down to the end of the second century BC. After the middle of the fourth century, figural motives like birds, vases, wreaths, and the like appear only rarely among the floral patterns on Gnathia vases. On Tarentine examples of the second half of the century comedy-masks represented as hanging "on the wall" of the vases were particularly popular. One such mask appears framed by the usual sprays in the



centre of the small vase recently acquired by the Collection of Classical Antiquities. Taranto in the fourth century was one of the major intellectual centres of the Western Greek world. The theatre, and especially comedy, enjoyed great popularity there.

According to a barely credible, but entirely typical later historiographer's note, when the Roman fleet approached Taranto in 282 BC, the inhabitants did not realize what had happened until the fleet reached

town, because they were all in the theatre celebrating a festival of Dionysus. The theatre itself, with its seats facing the sea, has not yet been located, but is often mentioned by ancient authors.

Painted scenes on locally produced pottery testify that the standard repertory of plays popular in homeland Greece, and especially in Athens, was well known in Taranto. Even though this repertory included tragedies as well, it was really two genres of comedy which attracted the greatest interest in Magna Graecia. One was known as the *phlyakes* ("fat-boys") play, named after the padded costumes of the comic actors. This form of Italian popular theatre, which was known from Campania to Sicily, was first written down in Taranto around 300 BC, but representations of such performances were a favourite subject for vase painters already from the beginning of the fourth century. The other type of comedy, the so-called Athenian New Comedy, which after a short transitional phase replaced the Old Comedy of Aristophanes and his contemporaries, differed from its predecessor both in its restrained plots and its stagecraft. The most famous master-playwright of New Comedy was Menander, who lived between about 340 and 290 BC. Until the beginning of the last century he was known only from his portraits. Since then, however, papyri containing more or less complete texts of his works come to light. Several scenes of his comedies on mosaics dated to the Roman Imperial Period and authenticated by inscriptions have also been uncovered by excavations.

New Comedy was distinguished from the Old by its lack of concern with current affairs and mythological topics, a characteristic known also from the plays of the Roman Terence. It also employed a largely stereotyped cast of characters restricted to a few types and their variants. In line with this, the actors, who always wore masks in Greek theatre, wore masks with typical features this time, which helped the spectators to recognize what role the actor was playing the moment he went on stage.

The *Onomasticon* ("Word list") of Julius Pollux, a scholar from Naucratis on the Nile Delta active in the last quarter of the second century AD, which survived in an excerpted version, was a kind of encyclopaedia of rare words and expressions

classified by subject matter. It also contained a list of the typical masks of New Comedy, together with a short description of each. The identification of the masks as represented in two-dimensional and plastic art is based primarily on this work. The masks are frequently shown on their own, without their wearers, painted on a vase or carved in stone, or most often in small-scale terracotta (fired clay) models which functioned as grave goods, votive gifts, or decorations in houses.

We do not know whether Athenian New Comedy was ever actually performed in Taranto, but the

great majority of masks appearing on Gnathia-vases can undoubtedly be identified with those found in Pollux' lists. It is not hard to recognize one of these in the female mask of the Budapest jug. By the characteristic wavy locks hanging down at the sides, this is — in the words of Pollux — "the *hetaira* (courtesan) adorning her head with a colourful band". Comedy masks hung up on walls appear on South Italian red-figure vases as well, often as elements in symposion-scenes emphasising the Dionysiac atmosphere. This characteristic gives significance to the fact that of the two functional classes of Gnathia-vases, masks only adorn those used in symposia and never appear on perfume vases.



The terracotta masks on display around the Gnathia jug present a selection of the New Comedy masks listed by Pollux. These terracottas were widespread around the Mediterranean world from the fourth century BC down to the period of the Roman Empire. They are found principally in graves, and their rich variety gives a true picture of the typical plot-types and characters of New Comedy.

At the head of the company stands the so-called leading slave with his raised brows and furrowed forehead, the ingenious character whose plans and deceptions drive the action forward. Then come the others, including among the exhibited pieces the "wolfish" gap-toothed old madam, the wronged maiden with her hair fastened high up, the bald slave and another with a wreath, who turns the last-act revelry. The fragmentary figurine of a comedy actor modelled with particular finery, and wearing an elaborate servant mask and stippled sleeves still used in the Imperial Period, is a unique work of art. The pieces were made in South Italian, Asia Minor and Egyptian workshops between the third and first centuries BC.



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