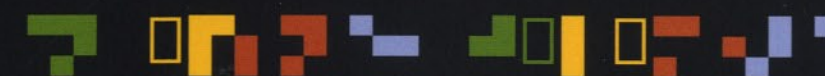




MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE
CURATOR - MARIANNA DÁGI
OPEN - 10. 03. 2009 - 31. 05. 2009
RESPONSIBLE EDITOR - DR. LÁSZLÓ BAÁN
GRAPHIC DESIGN - JOHANNA BÁRD
PHOTOGRAPHS - LÁSZLÓ MÁTYUS
PRINTING - MESTER NYOMDA



HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2009 **SPRING** SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS - COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

HADRA HYDRIA FROM CRETE

In the 4th century BC, the Athenian pottery workshops, which had developed the red figure technique of vase painting and had dominated production of this type of ware for about two centuries, went into slow decline. By the century's final third, they had almost completely disappeared. South Italian red figure workshops, partly descended from Attic precedents but boasting their own native stylistic traditions, outlived their Athenian rivals by decades. But the red figure style was dying. The mid-fourth century BC saw the appearance of new techniques of vase painting in different parts of the Hellenic world. In Apulia and later in Sicily, new artistic centres were established which developed out of the South Italian red-figure workshops and continued the tradition of figural vase painting in a new technique: polychrome decoration with matte paint. In south Italy,

mainland Greece, and the islands (including Crete and Cyprus), a new style of vase painting abandoned the figural style of decoration altogether, turning back to ornamental schemes composed of stylised floral and geometric motifs. Regional schools which adopted this new style followed two different techniques. Light-coloured, often polychrome decoration added over a ground of black glaze first appeared in Tarentum (modern Taranto), and was soon adopted in Athens and other parts of the Hellenic world. Another technique, which applied dark paint to the natural light ground of the bare clay developed independently in several areas (Messapia and Daunia in southern Italy, and the islands of Rhodes, Cyprus, and Crete). Out of these regional styles, only the Cretan Hadra ware had a broader art historical significance.

The first workshops to adopt the new style in the first half of the 3rd century BC, following antecedents in the fourth, were active in and near Phaistos in southern Crete. It was these Phaistian workshops which worked out the ornamental scheme that was to define the style even in its later development. Only the principal surfaces of the vases were painted, and the secondary zones (except the foot, which was painted black) were left empty. Just after the middle of the century, an independent centre of production appeared in Knossos. Unlike the Phaistians, who confined



themselves to floral ornament, the Knossos workshops experimented with more ambition. Often, they painted figural scenes. Several Knossian painters decorated, besides Hadra ware, black ground vases in the Athenian fashion, which

means they were skilled in two different styles. Although a few other shapes (pyxides, kraters, amphorae, and stamnoi) were also decorated, in both centres the principal pottery type was the hydria, a water jar with two horizontal handles for lifting, and a vertical one for pouring. This over-representation of hydriai was not caused primarily by the demands of the local market. Most Hadra vases were made for export to a market much larger than Crete: Ptolemaic Alexandria. The significance of exports is clearly indicated by the fact that the great majority of these vases were excavated in the Egyptian metropolis. Moreover, since for some time Alexandria was considered to be the only findspot of Hadra ware, the vases were once believed to have been made there. The name refers to a quarter of Alexandria, in the ancient necropolis of which the type was first identified. Contrary to Crete, where Hadra vases have also been found in domestic buildings, the pieces exported to Alexandria were used as cinerary urns. Some Alexandrian vases bear Greek inscriptions in ink which reveal that they belonged to foreign dignitaries summoned to the Egyptian court who died in Alexandria, and whose funeral was paid for by the royal administration. At the same time, the great number of vases without inscriptions which came to light in Alexandrian cemeteries makes it clear that the use of Hadra vases as funerary urns was much more widespread, and that they in fact constituted an accessory of a characteristically Alexandrian funerary custom. Although the use of hydriai in a funerary context is not without parallels, the sepulchral function of Hadra vases still needs to be explained. It is possible that the custom was in some way connected to a special form of the Egyptian god Osiris, Osiris Hydrios, who was worshipped in the form of a vase and symbolized the fertility and regeneration of the deity after death, and whose cult became widespread in and around Alexandria in the Hellenistic period.

At the time when Hadra vases first appeared in Alexandria, Crete belonged to Ptolemaic Egypt. Since the island was of strategic significance as a connecting point between Egypt and its provinces in the Aegean, two bases for the Alexandrian Aegean fleet were established in Cretan Itanos and Olus already under Ptolemy II Philadelphos (282–246 BC). It was at this time that Cretan Hadra ware reached Alexandria. A local workshop was also soon established, closely following the Cretan models. The heyday of production dates to the second half of the 3rd century BC. The unusually small Budapest hydria, which mirrors the characteristic later style of the Phaistian workshops, was also made in this period. Although the usual technique of decoration of Hadra vases is sporadically attested in Crete until the first century, the great workshops ceased functioning soon after 180 BC. The relatively swift disappearance of Hadra ware cannot have been unconnected to the fact that, in consequence of a series of military failures, Egypt was forced to give up its Aegean provinces with three exceptions by the end of the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (180 BC). The Cretan workshops thus lost their principal market. Besides the workshop imitating the Cretan style, another school was established in third-century Alexandria which developed a new technique of decorating Hadra vases. These painters adopted the polychrome decoration experimented with in Southern Italy, but turned for their principal shape to another type of hydria, which differed from the Cretan hydria and belonged to the repertoire of vase production in bronze and silver. Similarly to other hydriai, these vases were also meant to be deposited in tombs, but the main subject of their decoration was the representation of religious symbols and the personal effects of the deceased. Besides vessels with colourful genre scenes that mirror contemporary fresco painting, vases with much simpler decoration and a red or white monochrome design were also frequently made. This modest ornamental style, found on some pottery intended for local use, is demonstrated by the pointed amphora also on display in the exhibition. The amphora is decorated with a red ribbon motif: it was produced in an Egyptian workshop in the late third or second century BC.

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