

EXHIBITS

'A Passion for Antiquities'

No matter what the theme, the opportunity to view rarely seen examples of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan art should never be missed. This is certainly the case for "A Passion for Antiquities," an exhibit on display now through Jan. 15, 1995 at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, and re-opening Feb. 15-April 23 at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Getty Museum is the perfect place to view these works of ancient art from the private Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Collection. On a bluff overlooking the Pacific, the museum is itself an exact replica of a First Century A.D. Roman villa. The first floor of the villa is home to the best collection of ancient art west of the Mississippi; the second floor houses works by Rembrandt, Raphael, and many other notable Gothic and Renaissance artists.

In an exhibit of Classical Greek or Roman art, most museum-goers expect to be dominated by lifesize statues, torsos without heads, heads without torsos, magnificent *bas-reliefs*, or row after row of vases. Such works are from temples and public buildings, and the Getty's permanent collection has a good sampling of them.

But, since the 223-piece Fleischman

Collection is privately owned, it tends to demonstrate a different approach to acquiring and displaying works of art. The bulk of the collection is composed of smaller pieces, many of which played an integral part in the everyday life of the ancient world. But rather than diminishing the value of viewing such a collection, this enhances it: for, although no individual piece demonstrates the level of artistic or metaphorical genius associated with the greatest artists of the ancient world, yet, the collection demonstrates the depth of love for the beautiful at all levels of daily life in the Classical age.

Metaphors of Daily Life

The exhibition is organized according to the eye of the collector. Rather than a chronological and cultural organization (i.e., a Classical Greek group, a separate Etruscan group, etc.), it is grouped according to subject matter. For example, there is one section devoted to the role of men, and another to the role of women.

In the section on women in the ancient world, there are three pieces that combine the image of beauty and power of metaphor. One is a black-figured amphora depicting the wedding procession of Alcestis and Admetos (by command of the gods, Alcestis was to later sacrifice her life to save that of her husband). The others are two bronze figurines—no more than five inches in height—which, although they come from two different epochs, are displayed together. From the early Fifth Century, the figure of Eriphyle is seen fingering a necklace hidden below her gown, a necklace for which she betrayed her husband. And from the late Hellenistic period, approximately First Century B.C., there is a figure of an old woman, whose combination of beauty, pathos, and age, when pre-

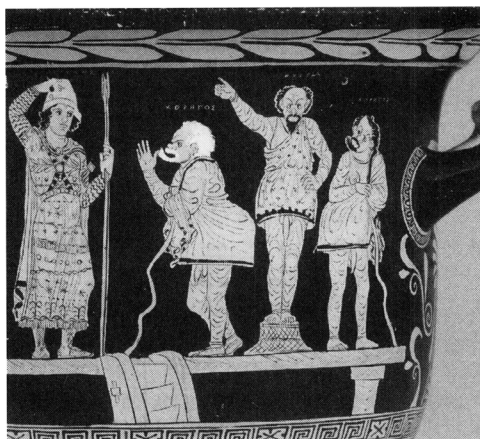


Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California
Late Hellenistic Statuette of an Old Woman, 1st Century B.C.-1st Century A.D.

sent in such a tiny figure, are reminiscent of a drawing or etching by Rembrandt.

As you enter the room dedicated to the role of men in ancient society, you are greeted by a beautifully sculpted head of a youth, dating from the Fifth Century. Of all the Fleischman Collection, this work is the best representation of the Classical metaphor of the divine beauty of man. Another outstanding display is the Fourth Century *bas-relief* of a young hunter, which once formed the left wall of funerary shrine (*naiskos*), and depicts a companion of the deceased. This sadly smiling figure typifies both the pastimes of youth, and the heroism of the hunt.

Two vases in this section demonstrate the use of myth, war, and athletics as the source for metaphor throughout



Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California
Comic actors contest against tragedians on this 4th Century B.C. bell krater (detail).

the ancient Mediterranean. One large amphora, painted by an artist known as the Berlin painter, portrays a Greek warrior pursuing a Scythian foe, and another by the same painter portrays the story of Heracles defeating King Geryon and stealing his cattle. Both are from the late Sixth to early Fifth centuries B.C. That such stories permeated the entire ancient world, can be seen in a late Seventh century Etruscan *pinthos* (a very large vase for storing wine); here, Homer's Odysseus and his men are blinding the cyclops Polyphemus.

For the Classical Greek mind, there were no divisions between the metaphors of drama, poetry, and the plastic arts, and a particularly interesting section of the exhibit shows works devoted to the theater and the god Dionysus. A red bell krater by the Choregos painter features an unexpectedly ribald comedy starring Aigisthos and Pyrrhios, engaged in a contest between tragedy and comedy [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. In contrast to the dramatic actors, the comics wear typically amusing costumes and exaggerated masks.

Hundreds of other examples of religious and domestic art can be seen in the exhibit. There are bronze and marble statuettes of gods and goddesses, for use in small home or village temples. One excellent example is a statuette of Tyche, the Greek goddess of Fortune, which seems to be copied from a colossal public monument. And there is an antefix (section of a building cornice) from a small Etruscan temple, that depicts mythological followers of Dionysus [SEE inside back cover, this issue].

Poetry vs. Pornography

Although there are some excellent works from the Greek Classical period (mid-Fifth to mid-Fourth Century B.C.), both the Fleischman and Getty collections are dominated by works of the later

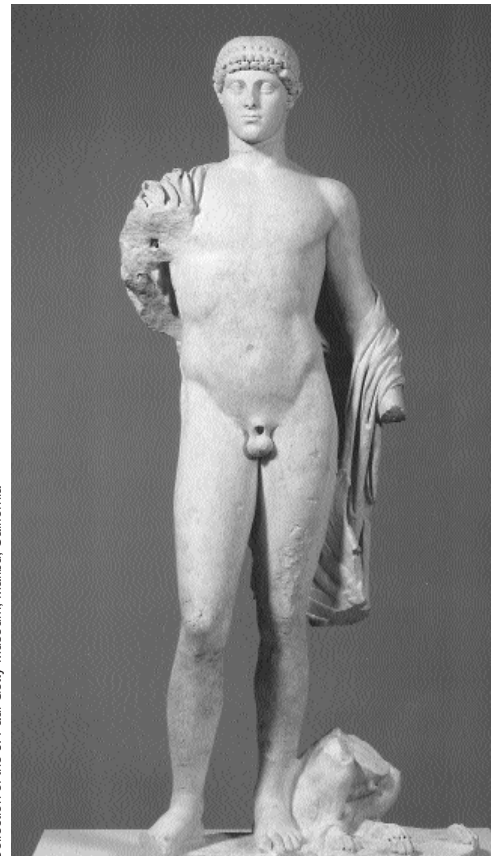
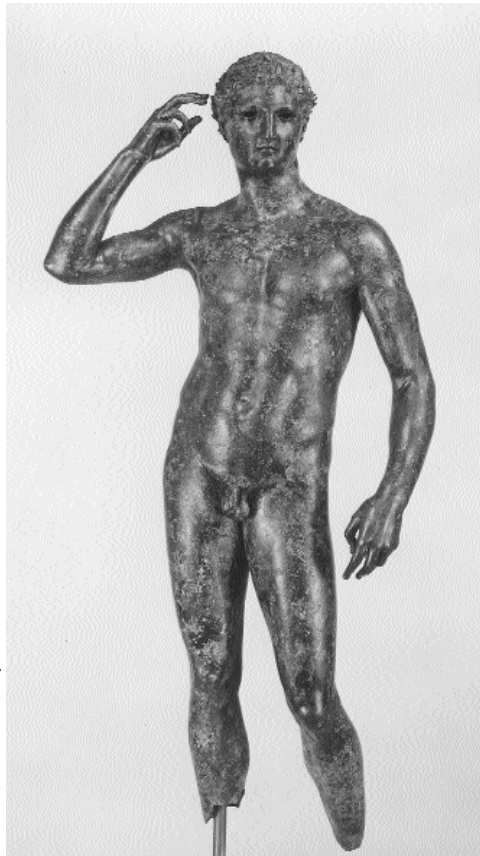
Hellenistic period (c. 325-100 B.C.), or even artworks from the still-later Roman world. This lack of works from the Classical period is a major flaw in the exhibit, although it is understandable, as such works are extremely rare, especially outside Greece itself. The decline in beauty and metaphorical vigor from the Classical to subsequent periods is quite visible if comparative works are available. The disastrous paradigm shift from the Classical to the Hellenistic/Roman periods is positively stunning, as two distinctly different concepts of man and God are readily seen.

There is a marvelous example of this within the permanent Getty collection. Compare two statues: one is a life-size bronze figure of an athletic victor from the Fourth Century B.C., and the other is a Roman rendition of the god Apollo. The beauty, form, and archetypal qualities of the bronze demonstrate the central metaphor of the Classical period:

man has divine potentials which are reflected in works of godlike beauty. But the Romans reverse the equation. For them, the gods are in the image of man: Apollo is presented as a hedonist, a soft, cynical, sybaritic youth. The "technical accomplishments" of the two works are comparable, yet one is poetry, the other pornography.

Despite this weakness, "A Passion for Antiquities" holds many rewards for the visitor. As the collector, Lawrence Fleischman, explained his decision to make the collection available to the public: "No matter what our ethnic origin, we have all been raised in the Western aesthetic. The roots of this are in Greek, Etruscan, and Roman culture. It is very important at this time that our youth are given the opportunity to see these beautiful things. What are our standards? What are our role models? They are to be discovered in this beauty."

—Ted Andromidas



Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California

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Left: Statue of a Victorious Athlete, 4th Century B.C. (bronze). Right: Statue of Apollo, 2nd Century A.D. (marble). The paradigm shift from Classical Greek to Roman periods shows two distinctly different concepts of man and God in these works from the permanent collection of the Getty Museum.