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METROPOLITAN MUSEUM STUDIES

Separate Reprinted from Volume IV, Part I

FEBRUARY, 1932

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Addendum to *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, volume II, part 2, pages 187-205

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Jan 23 1932





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## A POLYCHROME VASE FROM CENTURIFE

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By GISELA M. A. RICHTER

Shortly after the article on Centuripe vases in *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, volume II, part 2, was in press, the Metropolitan Museum acquired another example of this ware, perhaps the most notable so far known.<sup>1</sup> It was briefly discussed in the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum*<sup>2</sup> for May, 1931, and is here described in greater detail, with additional illustrations including a colored plate.

The comparatively good preservation of our new piece (fig. 1) enables us to get at last an adequate impression of this fantastic, colorful ware (found, it will be remembered, exclusively at Centuripe, in eastern Sicily). For though the vase was broken into a number of pieces and has been put together, little is missing and the colors and the gilding are exceptionally bright<sup>3</sup> (see plate opp. p. 46). There are few such dramatic effects in the whole range of Greek ceramics. The vase consists of a large, two-handled dish and a high conical cover on which is perched a cylindrical finial.<sup>4</sup> On the front of the bowl (fig. 2) is a highly decorative band with a Medusa-head in the middle and arabesques of flowery scrolls, Erotes, and birds on either side. It is worked partly in relief and partly in the round, gilded, and attached by small supports to the background—which is painted pink (fig. 3). On the front and sides of

the cover are painted several figures, with decorative moldings above and below, and there are lion-heads in relief along the lower edge. On the finial and above the foot are leaves in relief, painted and gilded.

Our chief interest naturally centers on the painting of the cover (plate and figs. 4-7). Here we see four figures. On the left is a woman (fig. 4) standing quietly in three-quarter front view, her head turned to the left. She wears a yellow chiton with reddish brown lines indicating the folds and over it a pink himation with mauve folds.<sup>5</sup> Then comes a woman in three-quarter back view (fig. 5), her right hand held over an object on a large round stand, apparently an altar, her left also extended, perhaps originally grasping an object.<sup>6</sup> She wears a white chiton with yellowish folds, a bluish mauve mantle, now partly white (perhaps the color was confined to the borders<sup>7</sup>), and apparently red shoes (some red color below her dress is best explained in this way); on her arm are two yellow bracelets. Opposite her is another woman (fig. 6), seated, in three-quarters view to the right, but turning round to the left to hold one hand over the object on the stand; in the other hand she holds a tambourine. She wears a pink chiton with black folds and contours, a yellow himation with

<sup>1</sup> Total h., 24 $\frac{3}{16}$  in. (61.5 cm.); h. of bowl, 8 $\frac{1}{4}$  to 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (21 cm. to 22.6 cm.); h. of cover, 11 $\frac{3}{16}$  in. (28.4 cm.); h. of finial, 5 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (13.3 cm.); diam. of cover, 16 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (42.7 cm.); w. of bowl, including the handles, 24 $\frac{1}{16}$  in. (62.4 cm.); diam. of bowl, 17 to 17 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (43.2 cm. to 44.2 cm.).

<sup>2</sup> Richter, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum*, pp. 123-125.

<sup>3</sup> There is some repainting at the joints; part of one handle has been restored; a few of the leaves and

lion-heads and parts of the beading are gone.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the similar example, without finial, in Palermo; Libertini, pl. XLV, 5.

<sup>5</sup> For the bluish gray portions cf. p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> What looks now like a pointed white object is due to modern paint, as was shown by examination under ultra-violet rays.

<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to differentiate always between the superimposed blue and the bluish discoloration of the ground (see p. 50).



FIG. I. POLYCHROME VASE FROM CENTURIFE



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*Color Collotype by Max Jaffé, Vienna, Austria*

DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE I





FIG. 2. BOWL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 1

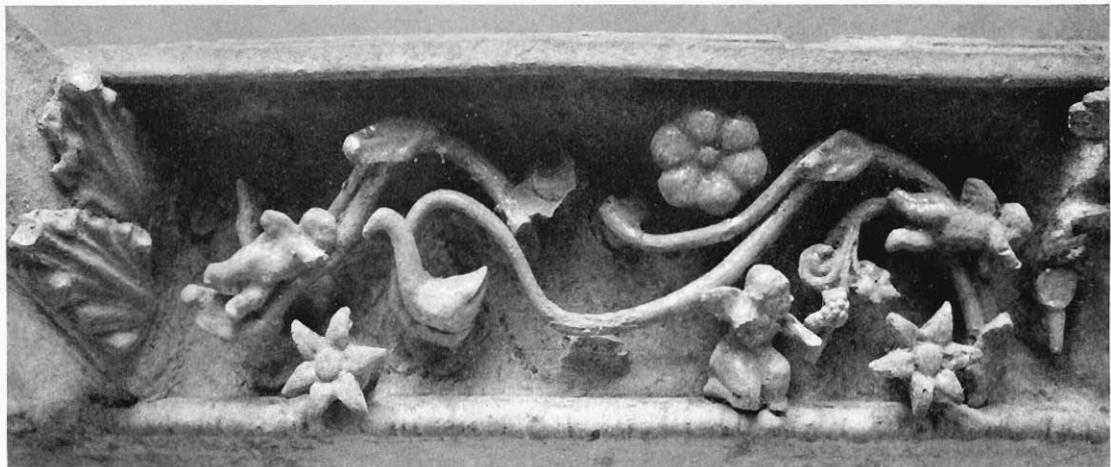


FIG. 3. DETAIL OF THE BOWL SHOWN IN FIGURE 2

brown folds and contours, and two yellow bracelets. The object over which two women hold their hands is not easily explained. We see at present a roundish area, red on white, laid over what appear to be black crosspieces. If

served for exact definition. We can only interpret the picture in a general way as the performance of a mystic rite, a subject apparently popular on Centuripe vases. A similar scene of two women with hands outstretched over a



FIG. 4. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 1



FIG. 5. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 1

the white stand is an altar the women may be sprinkling incense over a fire; but the hands seem almost too close to the fire. Finally, we see a fourth woman (fig. 7), standing in profile to the left, evidently watching the proceeding. She wears a yellow chiton with reddish brown folds and a himation now mostly white, but originally blue with blackish folds. The head has disappeared.

It is a pity that the object on which the action of the scene is centered is not well enough pre-

stand occurs on a conical cover from Centuripe in the British Museum.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately its preservation is poor and the scene is very indistinct. Figure 8 is made from a photograph on which the lines have been reinforced in pencil.<sup>9</sup> In essentials it corresponds with the drawing<sup>10</sup> pub-

<sup>8</sup> Walters, D 1.

<sup>9</sup> By C. O. Waterhouse of the British Museum in consultation with me. We have only admitted lines of which we were reasonably certain.

<sup>10</sup> Kekulé von Stradonitz, p. 55, fig. 118.



FIG. 6. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 1



FIG. 7. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 1

lished in Kekulé's *Terracotten von Sicilien*, except for the stand between the women. The vertical outlines of its support are not determinable but were probably not unlike those of our stand (fig. 1).

On the back of our cover are two large white scrolls of which only a few traces remain (fig.

the ware; only below the figures is there an underpainting of white. In places where the colors and the white underpaint have disappeared a bluish gray tint remains; it can generally be distinguished from the superimposed colors by the fact that it is not on the same level. There are traces of red on the back of the akan-



FIG. 8. COVER OF A VASE FROM CENTURIFE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

7, right). This portion of the vase was evidently not intended to be seen.

The technique of our new piece is similar to that of other Centuripe vases, that is, it is painted in tempera colors (unfired). White is not applied as an engobe over the whole surface, for the pink background is painted directly on

those leaves on the lower part of the bowl and of bright blue on the finial. The hair, where preserved, is brown, the skin flesh-colored.<sup>11</sup>

In our discussion of the other examples of Centuripe paintings we stressed their resemblance to Pompeian frescoes of the first centuries before and after Christ. This similarity is

<sup>11</sup> From the point of view of their composition the colors can be identified as yellow ocher (for yellow), umber (for brown), chalk, i.e., calcium carbonate (for white), finely crushed copper-blue glass (for blue), cinnabar (for vermilion), lamp black, and red ocher

mixed with chalk (for pink). The flesh color can be obtained by mixing the pink and yellow. (This determination was made by C. F. Binns of Alfred University.)



FIG. 9. DETAIL OF A FRESCO IN THE  
VILLA DEI MISTERII, POMPEII



FIG. 10. MEDEA  
IN A ROMAN FRESCO IN THE  
NATIONAL MUSEUM, NAPLES



FIG. 11. DETAIL OF THE  
ALDOBRANDINI WEDDING. ROMAN FRESCO  
IN THE LIBRARY OF THE VATICAN

striking in our new example also. The color scheme, the attitudes of the figures, the faces, the rendering of the draperies,<sup>12</sup> all remind us of frescoes from Pompeii and elsewhere. The



FIG. 12. AMPHORA FROM OLBIA  
IN THE HERMITAGE, LENINGRAD

woman standing apart on the left of our picture (fig. 4) brings to mind the famous painting of Medea in Naples (fig. 10). The seated

<sup>12</sup> For yellow draperies with brownish red folds, compare the fresco of Apollo and Python (Herrmann and Bruckmann, colored plate preceding pl. 20).

<sup>13</sup> Trever; Minns, pp. 353 ff., figs. 259-261.

figure (fig. 6) recalls one in a similar attitude in the frescoes of the Villa dei Misterii (fig. 9). Her companion on the left (fig. 5) is not unlike a figure in the Aldobrandini Wedding (fig. 11). A close relationship in time or tradition must have existed between the two arts—and we look forward to the time when the chronology of Centuripe ware will be determined by scientific excavations.

There is one further comparison, omitted in my former discussion of Centuripe vases, which throws light on this subject. The relief decorations on this ware find an interesting parallel in those on the famous polychrome amphora from Olbia in the Hermitage, Leningrad<sup>13</sup> (fig. 12). Here too there are ornamental scrolls in applied relief (in this case laid directly on the background), with rosettes, human heads, and akantos leaves (figs. 13, 14). The reliefs, instead of being entirely gilt, as those on the Centuripe vases, were gaily painted over a white engobe; for there are traces of pink, blue, violet, and gilt. The amphora form and the fluted body covered with black glaze are closer to the earlier Greek tradition than the Centuripe vases with their fantastic shapes and tempera paintings. The date generally assigned to the Olbia piece is the second century B. C., its inferior black glaze being characteristic of second-century pottery from South Russia, but there is no specific reason why it could not be of the first century B. C.<sup>14</sup> So we have here either a precursor or a contemporary of our Centuripe ware from an entirely different part of the Hellenistic world, expressing a similar tendency in ceramic decoration but keeping more strictly to earlier traditions. It bears out the dating in the second to first century B. C. which we provisionally assigned to the ware of Centuripe, and enables us to gauge the degree of originality in the contributions of her potters.

<sup>14</sup> This is what I gathered from discussions with my colleagues in the Hermitage in the summer of 1930. I am much indebted to them for permission to publish the illustrations here shown.



FIG. 13. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 12



FIG. 14. DETAIL OF THE VASE SHOWN IN FIGURE 12

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