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GETTY VILLA EXHIBITION OF APULIAN VASES EXPLORES FUNERARY CUSTOMS OF ANCIENT SOUTHERN ITALIAN NATIVES

Six-year collaborative conservation project between the Getty Villa and the Antikensammlung in Berlin reveals techniques of early nineteenth-century Neapolitan restorers

Dangerous Perfection: Funerary Vases from Southern Italy

November 19, 2014 – May 11, 2015
At the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Villa

LOS ANGELES – Discovered at Ceglie del Campo, near Bari in Apulia (southeastern Italy), thirteen elaborately decorated Apulian vases will return to display for the first time following a six-year collaborative conservation project between the Getty Villa and the Antikensammlung in Berlin. ***Dangerous Perfection: Funerary Vases from Southern Italy, on view at the Getty Villa November 19, 2014 to May 11, 2015,*** examines the funerary customs of people native to southern Italy and the ways they used Greek myth to comprehend death and the afterlife. The exhibition also reveals the techniques employed by one of the expert vase-restorers of early nineteenth-century Naples.

"Since 2008, conservators in our Antiquities Conservation department have worked closely with their colleagues at the Antikensammlung to study and conserve a group of highly important Apulian vases dating to the 4th century B.C. from the Berlin museum's collection," says Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "This exhibition represents the culmination of this collaboration, which has yielded a wealth of new information on early



Funerary Vessel with (A) Orestes Seeking Sanctuary at 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 Iliupersis 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. VL.2008.5

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nineteenth-century restoration techniques, adding an important new reference point for the burgeoning study of the history of archaeological conservation up to the present day."

Ceglie del Campo, where the thirteen funerary vases were found, was a substantial settlement in Apulia populated by the Peucetians, one of the region's indigenous tribes. By the fourth century B.C., their close engagement with Greek culture is evident in the red-figured pottery deposited in large quantity in their tombs. Vessels created for rich graves could reach massive proportions and were used primarily for display during burial rites. They show elaborate decorations that were often tailored to their funerary context. Mythological scenes, which required knowledge of Greek stories and texts, provided consolation that even the great heroes suffered, and that it was possible to prevail over the most frightening of terrors. Numerous vases also depict images of Dionysos and his entourage enjoying wine and leisure, suggesting the conception of an afterlife free from mortal concerns.

The thirteen funerary vases were unearthed in hundreds of fragments in the early nineteenth century. They were acquired by Baron Franz von Koller, a distinguished Bohemian military attaché stationed in Naples in 1815–18 and 1821–26 who was deeply interested in classical archaeology. Koller immediately entrusted the reassembly of the fragments to Raffaele Gargiulo, a renowned restorer at the Real Museo Borbonico (now the Naples National Archaeological Museum). Gargiulo was also a well-known dealer in the Neapolitan market for antiquities with an international clientele. His work on ceramics won great praise, but his interventions—particularly the completion of painted decorations—were so effective that it was often difficult to identify what was ancient and what was modern. Although this was conventional practice for the time, there were growing concerns that this kind of work could be too effective, even potentially deceptive – what one concerned antiquarian described as "dangerous perfection."

The exhibition reveals some of the methods that were used to attain this level of perfection, and the challenges posed to conservators today. During the six-year collaborative project between the Getty Villa and the Antikensammlung, a variety of techniques were employed to illuminate the vessels' history and inform the manner of treatment, which involved their disassembly, cleaning, and reconstruction.

"The opportunity to work with our colleagues in Berlin on this project has been immensely productive. These magnificent vases offer so much for exploration and discussion: their elaborate iconography and Apulian burial customs; the hotly debated issue of how ancient artefacts should be restored; and the many decisions that lie behind their newly conserved state," explains David Saunders, curator of the exhibition and associate curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Dangerous Perfection: Funerary Vases from Southern Italy was organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum in collaboration with the Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The exhibition is curated by David Saunders, associate curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Generous support for the conservation project and the exhibition was provided by the Getty Museum's Villa Council.

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