Editorial

A Moral Dilemma

Dear readers,

After the summer break I would like to confront you with a moral dilemma. Imagine that you see a masterpiece of ancient metalwork. It is adorned with sublimely crafted figures that are intertwined to form a complex composition that is perfectly adapted to the curved surface of the silver vessel; the details are expertly highlighted in gold. So much beauty is almost unbearable, tears come to your eyes. And what is even more amazing – the vessel does not stand alone, but is surrounded by many more of the same perfection. To study them would vastly further our understanding of the art and culture of the period in which they were created – indeed it would revolutionize the field of ancient metalwork. In your mind’s eye you already see monographs, conferences and exhibitions dedicated to these artworks. But – why has this not happened already? Why aren’t art lovers in Paris, New York and Tokyo queuing up to see these magnificent works of art? Why have scholars remained silent on them? The pieces are authentic, there is not the slightest doubt about that. No, these masterpieces of human creativity are tainted by a far greater stigma. I hardly dare whisper it: They were not published before 1970.

Sadly, I am not joking. The German Archaeological Institute requires that its authors “do not publish any artefacts whose legal provenance has not been fully cleared, be they from private or public collections” if they have no pre-1970 documentation. Similarly, in its Code of Ethics the Archaeological Institute of America asks of its members that they do not authenticate, acquire, publish or exhibit antiquities “that are not documented as belonging to a public or private collection before December 30, 1970.”

Their intention is honourable: The AIA wishes to stop activities which sanction the trade with undocumented antiquities, and with its Publication Standards the GAI “aims at increasing awareness and drawing attention to the immeasurable loss of knowledge induced by the damage to an artefact’s find context.”

Despite my understanding for these concerns, I am deeply shocked by this development towards academic self-censorship and by the increasing blindness of archaeologists. Is it not paradoxical to draw “attention to” a “loss of knowledge” by engendering a different loss of knowledge? It is important to remember that even if the find context of an artefact is damaged or unknown, the object itself can still provide us with extremely valuable information, for instance with regard to iconography, style, manufacturing techniques etc., quite apart from the great aesthetic pleasure that it can afford the beholder. If “official archaeology” prohibits itself, for moral reasons, from taking note of such objects, then in my opinion it is no longer a science but an ideology. For how can a discipline be called a science if it deliberately ignores facts and therefore intentionally proposes incorrect hypotheses and wilfully draws faulty conclusions? The reality of the object exists, in spite of all circumstances, and it is unscientific to the very core to ignore it! Yet for years important material has not been investigated. The amount of neglected material is by now enormous and the science of archaeology is in the process of losing its basis.

Is it not an attack on freedom of speech, to prohibit people from talking about something that exists? Very bad memories are brought to mind by the fact that we are no longer permitted to speak about certain objects, and that they may not be exhibited or even seen. And one wonders how long it will be until we hear demands that these objects be destroyed, the same way that tiger skins and ivory tusks are burned to deter the illegal trade in then.

Tragically, this self-censorship which distorts our knowledge of our past and passes on faulty and incomplete information to future generations is USELESS, as the GAI itself admits! In its Publication Standards the GAI writes: “Editors of the publishing bodies of the German Archaeological Institute are aware that these constraints will neither curb the global problem of illegal excavations and the associated irreversible destruction of archaeological contexts, nor diminish the illicit trafficking of artefacts.”

I condemn the illicit trade in antiquities, but I also condemn the deliberate renunciation of knowledge and the condoning of the resulting loss of information. I believe that we are obliged to ensure the preservation ancient artefacts and to make them accessible to the public even if they have a dubious provenance.

While these statements may seem provocative, my intent is to open a constructive debate. I would be interested in hearing your opinion on this issue.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
“The Plaster Age” – On the Historical Significance of the Basel Skulpturhalle

By Tomas Lochman

With over 2,000 plaster casts of ancient sculptures, the Skulpturhalle numbers amongst those Basel museums with an international standing. Few people, however, are truly aware of the importance of this collection. This is probably related to the fact that during most of the 20th century plaster casts were held in low esteem; they were thought to be useful from a didactic point of view but worthless with regard to their material. In the 19th century, however, such copies were viewed in a completely different manner. At that time, almost every European university town could boast a large collection of plaster casts. These “gipsoteche” were, so to speak, the culmination of the enthusiasm for casts after ancient artworks that had been sparked off by the Renaissance. As of the 15th century, plaster casts played an increasingly important role in the imitation, research and dissemination of ancient sculptures. At first, various Italian artists assembled small collections of plaster casts that served as models and were used for practice purposes in their studios. From the 17th century onwards, the leading art academies began to use plaster casts as models for their students. And from the late 18th century, casts were also used in the nascent science of archaeology and as a means of furthering the education of the bourgeoisie.

On the basis of this historical development, collections of plaster casts fulfilled a three-fold role in the 19th century. Artists used them for practice purposes, they served to further scholarly research, and they were a source of aesthetic pleasure for the educated middle classes. It was exactly these three core tasks that were to be addressed in Basel, when, on the occasion of its opening in the year 1849, the Museum on the Augustiner-gasse was provided with a room dedicated to plaster casts (fig. 2; this seminal collection was later to become the Skulpturhalle). Indeed, a not inconsiderable number of persons at the time preferred plaster casts to the marble originals, as the snow-white casts showed the plastic qualities of the sculptures to greater advantage than the weathered originals did. The practical advantages of a collection of casts are today more convincing than such aesthetic arguments: The best and most important sculptures from around the globe can be assembled in a well-stocked collection of casts. Gaps can be filled or, conversely, exhaustive series of comparable pieces built up. Even better, fragments of an artwork that are scattered in different locations can be reassembled, making it possible to reconstruct what the original must have looked like.

Thus, it was only logical that the leading 19th century scholars specialised in the study of sculpture, such as Adolf Michaelis in Strasbourg, Gerhard Treu in Dresden or Wilhelm Klein in Prague, supported their research findings with three-dimensional plaster reconstructions displayed in the university cast collections that they supervised. In Dresden, for instance, Treu first tried out his reconstructions of the two pediment groups of the Zeus Temple in Olympia with the aid of casts, and only then implemented them using the original fragments in the Museum of Olympia. Furthermore, Treu used casts to test his research into the polychromy of ancient sculptures by letting selected casts be painted.

It is as telling as it is deplorable that, for much of the 20th century, these fruitful projects were not continued. The aesthetic dogma of the fragmentary white marble and the devaluation of copies were all too powerful, almost totally ousting reconstructions and research into ancient polychromy from the academic agenda. This makes it all the more remarkable that Ernst Berger, the first director of the Basel Antikenmuseum, which was founded in 1961, used the Skulpturhalle for scientific reconstructions and had it integrated in the Antikenmuseum. In this manner he succeeded, in 1964, in reconstructing the composition of the Hellenistic statue group of Achilles and Penthesilea (fig. 3). Only a few isolated fragments from rare Roman copies have survived as testimony to this bronze sculpture which once graced Pergamon. By making casts of the most informative fragments on site in the museums preserving them, Berger succeeded in collecting sufficient material to reassemble the group in plaster with the aid of a sculptor. Berger later topped this achievement with the reconstruction of numerous Polykleitian...
All these projects make the Skulpturhalle a museum of plaster casts that is unique worldwide. It is important to remind ourselves of this fact, especially in this year which has seen the introduction of massive cost-cutting measures, forcing the Skulpturhalle to significantly reduce its opening hours and activities.

I acquired the sculpture in France. It comes from the estate of the well-known sculptor Paul Dubois (1829-1905). He did well to keep this sculpture either in his house or his workshop, for on longer contemplation the exceptionally sensitive and elegant modeling of the surface becomes manifest. The tip of the nose, which was restored in plaster, and the somewhat cool, classicist pedestal date from the 19th century. We did not remove them, since, together with the head, they form a convincing whole. Furthermore, these additions are representative of the period in which the piece was collected.

Paniskas are the companions of Pan and difficult to define. Their behaviour is erotically charged – albeit of a purely heterosexual nature – and they help the gods at their symposia. They are probably best understood as female counterparts of Pan’s robust sexuality.

In any case, something very attractive is suggested here in a subtle manner. I can well imagine that the sculptor Dubois was afforded much pleasure by this piece.

My Choice

A Head of a Paniska

By Jean-David Cahn

Paniskas are very rarely represented. The type probably emerged shortly after 400 B.C., possibly around the time when the artist Zeuxis created the Taurines. Our charming Paniska was probably sculpted during the reign of Emperor Augustus. She turns her head back slightly and smiles at the beholder with parted lips. Her features are girlish, but the face is still imbued with an idealized femininity. Small bumps on her forehead indicate the horns and her pursed lips reveal pointed teeth; thus, all elements that characterize a Paniska are present. Her thick, curly hair is drawn to the back of her head, where it was held together in a now lost chignon.

The fine crystalline marble is of high quality and has some slight discolourations. Probably the head belonged to a full-length sculpture of a Paniska which once adorned a garden in the City of Rome, evoking a rural idyll within the orderly framework of the atrium. City gardens were often decorated with motifs from nature such as swans, rabbits, nymphs, satyrs and the companions of Pan, whose purpose was to create the impression of a different, happy state of being.

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A Successful Exhibition

The exhibition *Icons and Tools* shown at Gallery Cahn during Art Basel surprised its visitors with an unusual selection of artworks. At the gallery entrance, *Objets Sommaires* by Guillaume Leblon lay arranged on the ground forming a visual axis with *Winterchamäleon (Mantel)* by Katinka Bock suspended on the wall opposite. These sculptures, along with numerous other contemporary works of art, engaged in a fascinating dialogue with the ancient artefacts belonging to the Gallery Cahn. This exciting exhibition in co-operation with Jocelyn Wolff of Paris succeeded in attracting an open-minded audience with a refreshingly novel way of seeing. The opening with culinary treats from Antiquity was exceptionally well attended and on the following days the gallery established itself as a popular stop on the way to or from Art Basel.
In Silent Dialogue with the Gods

An Excursion into the World of Ancient Votive Offerings

By Gerburg Ludwig

Roaming the ruins of ancient sanctuaries such as Delphi, Olympia, or the Amphitheatre of Oropos, visitors will notice a variety of pointers to the offerings (anathema or votive) customarily made there. There are small buildings, like the Athenian Treasury and Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, reliefs showing cultic scenes, and perhaps the base of a statue bearing a dedicatory inscription.

Scenes of cultic practices on Greek vases and the ceremonial offerings or sacrifices depicted in Roman wall paintings and on official or sacred reliefs round off the picture. Thus we can visualize very well how the cult was practised and the gods venerated. But how do all the many small votive offerings fit into this picture? Or to put it another way: Have you not sometimes wondered about the exact meaning of the terms “votive offering” and “ex voto” used in the descriptions of some small works of art on offer at Cahn Gallery or in its auction catalogues? While both can be applied to dedications of all kinds, in practice they are used primarily in connection with small artefacts intended as gifts to the gods, to whom they were made over with irrevocable effect. The votaries who made such dedications did so either in anticipation of some future benefit, conveying their dearest wishes and prayers in a mute, material form, or in thanksgiving for succour already given or in fulfilment of a solemn vow, in which case the gift was indeed made “ex voto” in the truest sense of the term.

Once set up on special benches and altars inside the sanctuary, suspended on walls, or even from trees, these little votive offerings were a constant presence that must automatically have caught the public eye. They were perceived rather like a form of wordless communication between gods, givers, and other worshippers. The votive offerings themselves symbolized the provision of divine assistance. Their advertisement of the cult and the positive light in which they cast the giver – depending on their material value – were practical side effects of their primary purpose.

Such gifts for the gods varied considerably. The citizens of a city-state might collectively give a treasury that would house small votive offerings, weapons, armour (most of it war trophies), coins, hacksilver, or molten metals; but depending on the giver’s social status and economic circumstances, they might take many other forms, too, ranging from large statues and reliefs bearing scenes of cultic practices or sacrifices to votives shaped like body parts or organs offered to a healing cult, small statuettes of humans and animals made of bronze or clay, and even ordinary everyday utensils.

Archaeologists often come across large numbers of the same figures either within the temple precinct, or, for reasons of space, in votive repositories located somewhere nearby, where they were ritually “disposed of”, as well as in settlements or necropoleis. Determining the function of each of these pieces is not easy, but nor is it strictly speaking necessary. Worshippers may conceivably have presented a piece of their everyday lives to the gods from time to time, just as placing such objects in the graves of the deceased was likewise a widespread practice. In order to be able to interpret an artefact as a votive offering, it should be known to have been found within a sanctuary or votive repository, and, ideally, have a clearly legible dedicatory inscription.

Although not of any great value, such small votives served as a silent but direct means of communication between ordinary mortals and the deity. The motivation for such a prayer or token of thanks was deeply personal in most cases and often had to do with the exigencies of everyday life: the hope for good health or wish to be healed, the longing for fertility, personal success, the giver’s own personal prosperity, or that of his or her family members.

This is also the case with the small bronze tablet on offer at Gallery Cahn which bears a dedicatory inscription to Artemis Lochia, the goddess of childbearing (fig. 1). The inscription ardently requests a swift delivery with as little pain as possible. The wish is a personal one and Artemis is named as the addressee. Whether the first word identifies the giver is hard to say.

The occasional dedication of a used tool, household detail, or toy was a way of making over to the gods something that was of symbolic or at least sentimental value to the giver. Such dedications, like the appeal to Artemis Lochia, were highly individualized, intimate cultic acts.

This is certainly not true of most of the votives that have survived, whose iconography tends to reference general cultic practices, as is evident, for instance, from the many miniature versions of the statues of the deity inside the temple that have been found. These were mass produced in external workshops and might be made of bronze, although terracotta was more common. The advances made in casting and the coroplasts’ use of moulds made this form of production possible. Standardization, however, inevitably entailed the loss of the votive's individual character.
Ancient Home Decor

AN APPLIQUE IN THE FORM OF BACCHUS’ OR A MAENAD’S HEAD. H. 10.2 cm. Bronze. Crowned with an opulent wreath of ivy leaves and corymbs, this youthful head with its wild, tousled hair can only belong to the god of wine, Bacchus, or to a member of his entourage, either a maenad or a satyr. The idealised face with its elongated oval shape and tapering chin, slightly curved forehead, flat eyebrows which transition elegantly into the long, slender nose, small mouth with full, sensuously arched lips and pronounced, slightly hanging chin is firmly rooted in the stylistic idiom of the Hellenistic Period, which lingered on well into the Roman Imperial Period. Hollow case, details in careful cold work. The applique may have adorned a piece of furniture. Nose and the tips of a few leaves slightly worn. Formerly German priv. coll., acquired prior to 1961. Late Hellenistic to Roman Empire, 1st cent. B.C.–2nd cent. A.D. CHF 9,800

The two protomes were mould-made, bearing a relief on the front face. The woman in the Classical protome, presumably the representation of a worshipper, wears a stephane with veil. The head of the Archaic protome is crowned with a polos that characterizes the subject as a goddess. Many of the protomes also had holes on the upper edge allowing them to be suspended.

Both the relief tablet (pinax) showing a cultic scene from Lokroi (fig. 2) and the two female protomes (figs. 3–4) on offer at Gallery Cahn belong to this category of standardized votive offering. The pinax belongs to a votive series from the sanctuary of Persephone in Lokroi Epizephyrioi in Lower Italy. Originally painted and furnished with holes, such pinakes were intended to be hung up at the sanctuary. With its festively clad young worshipper with a taenia in her hand, this one affords us a glimpse of the cultic acts performed there.

In all three cases, young women or their family members would have presented these votive offerings – along with a petition for the fertility, renewal, and preservation of nature – to Persephone, Aphrodite, Hera, or the Mother Goddess Demeter.

Such objects could be purchased in the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary. The small rooms to the left and right of the Sacred Way linking Pergamon to the Asklepieion situated on its outskirts, for example, were originally shops for the sale of votive offerings.

As this brief excursion shows, ancient votive offerings are so plentiful and multifarious that they defy any easy classification. We shall turn our attention to another group of these objects in the next edition of Cahn’s Quarterly.

New Artworks Monthly on www.cahn.ch

A PART OF A TRIPOD SUPPORT IN THE FORM OF A GOAT LEG WITH SWAN’S HEAD. H. 8.7 cm. Bronze. Naturalistically shaped leg of a goat, from whose upper end the head of a swan with elegantly curved neck emerges. The texture of the feathers and the beak is rendered by fine incisions. At the transition between the two figural elements the beginnings of a slightly curved horizontal bar that continues to the rear. A small support is attached to the highest point of the swan’s head. This small fragment undoubtedly comes from an ornamental object. Such objects impress us through their wealth of ideas and shapes and were a component of the lavish decoration of Roman villas. Our object may have come from a tripod stand. In Pompeii larger examples with similar decoration that served as table supports were found. Formerly priv. coll. S. D., USA (East Coast), acquired before 1997. Roman, 1st-3rd cent. A.D. CHF 1,500

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A THYMATERION. H. 45 cm. Bronze. The cat climbing up the thin shaft is stalking the promisingly close bird just ahead of it. At the top of the piece is a flat dish with square frame with two birds perched on the corners. Two more, now lost, birds once sat opposite them, as the rivet holes indicate. The shaft is supported by a tripod in the form of humanoid legs with palmettes hanging in the spandrels between them. Shaft with fine spiral incising. Dish reattached. Formerly Coll. Alfred Martin Escher, Zürich, 1950s. Etruscan, 4th cent. B.C. CHF 7,800

A FOOT OF A CANDELABRUM. H. 9.2 cm. Bronze. This magnificent candelabrum stands on three lion’s paws. Each interstice between the legs is adorned by a broad, heart-shaped leaf with finely engraved veins. The ends of the leaves reach all the way up to the hollow shaft, of which the base is preserved. The shaft would originally have been fairly long and have ended in an ornamental support for the oil lamp. Tips of leaves slightly worn. Two ends of the leaves partially preserved. Examples of this type have been found in Pompeii. Comes with three candelabrum fragments (two shaft fragments and one foot support), most probably from the same find context. With Sasson Gallery, Jerusalem, prior to 2000. Roman, 1st cent. A.D. CHF 2,800

A TREFOIL-MOUTHED OINOCHOE WITH HANDLE APPLIQUES. H. 15.2 cm. Bronze. Ovoid vessel with short neck and flared trefoil mouth. Soldered onto the reverse is a separately made arched handle with two fine ribs and figural termini: an applique with the youthful face of a woman on the mouth and an applique with a head of Silenus on the body. Wall, rim and base repaired. Formerly with a Bavarian art dealer, acquired ca. 2007 on the German art market. Etruscan, 5th cent. B.C. CHF 5,800

A THRONE ATTACHMENT. L. 24.3 cm. Bronze. Octagonal, hollow handle whose curved end is shaped as a duck’s head. The eyes are rendered by a deep drill hole for the pupil framed by lids adorned by a line frieze. Delicately engraved lines along the lower edge of the beak. As the object would be unusually large for a ladle, this attractive fragment is more likely to be a furniture fitting, and may have adorned the back of a throne. Representations of such thrones can be found on black-figure vases. Formerly with a Bavarian art dealer, acquired ca. 2007 on the German art market. Etruscan or Western Greek, 5th cent. B.C. CHF 14,000

A COLUMN WITH FLORAL RELIEF DECORATION. H. 39.2 cm. Marble. A slim column lavishly decorated with (acanthus?) leaves overlapping like scales and with flowers arranged between them at regular intervals. Upper edge of the column separately modelled like an ovolos. Underside with anathyrosis. Deep drill hole in the middle on both sides. The column is modelled in the round for viewing from all sides; it therefore seems probable that it served as a decorative support, possibly for a double herm, examples of which are known to us from Pompeii. The relief work matches the decorative taste and style of many Early Imperial works of the 1st cent. A.D. Reassembled from four fragments. Encrustation in places. Formerly Coll. Max Hagemann, prior to 1964. Roman, 1st cent. A.D. CHF 2,800
A PILLAR FRAGMENT. H. 15 cm. Limestone. Fragment of a pillar sawn up in Antiquity with a relief on two sides. On one side a coiled tendril with panicle and cupped leaves, on the other a bell flower sprouting another coiled tendril. Worn, with chipped edges in places. Formerly Coll. Max Hagemann, prior to 1964. Western Greek, 2nd half of 4th cent. B.C. CHF 1,800

A FISH PLATE. Dm. 18.6 cm. Clay, white and pink paint. Flat plate on low foot with broad overhanging lip adorned by a wave band on the exterior. Four bream swimming clockwise around the centre in red-figure technique. A rosette in the central concavity. Reassembled out of large fragments. Formerly priv. coll. L. S., LA County, USA, acquired prior to 2000. Western Greek, Apulian, ca. 340-320 B.C. CHF 8,800

A SILVER OINOCHOE. H. 18.3 cm. Silver. Elegant-ly curved, piriform vessel with slightly flared neck and thickened lip. Low, conical foot with flat base. S-shaped handle with point of attachment articulated as a leaf. The neck and upper part of the body decorated with finely turned grooves. Surface slightly corroded in places. Formerly priv. coll. JVB, s’Hertogenbosch, Netherlands; acquired ca. 1990. Roman, 2nd-3rd cent. A.D. CHF 7,800

A SMALL FEMALE HEAD WITH WREATH. H. 4.8 cm. Terracotta. The head of this young woman is adorned by a wreath and turned slightly to the left. Her slender neck has several rings of Venus. Hair is arranged in the "melon coiffure" that was so popular in Hellenistic times. The charming face is carefully modelled and the full lips smile at the beholder. Mould-made and hand-finished. Tips of the leaves of the wreath slightly worn. Hair at the nape of the neck partially preserved. From a statuette. Formerly priv. coll. Germany, since the 1980s. Greek or Western Greek, 3rd cent. B.C. CHF 1,200

AN OIL LAMP. L. 12 cm. Bronze. The bronze lamp narrows at one end and stands on a ring foot. The handle takes the form of two entwined snakes. Both openings on the tondo are closed by hinged lids. The lid covering the hole for the duck takes the form of a seashell, while the other is round with a ring handle. Intact. Formerly Swiss art market, February 1983, acquired from the Coll. G. Ortiz. Roman, 1st cent. B.C.-2nd cent. A.D. CHF 18,000

A BLACK-FIGURE OINOCHÆ. H. 22.4 cm. Clay. Two hoplites crouching towards the left, covering themselves with small round shields, wearing Corinthian helmets. Behind each one, a tendril. Line and dots as ornaments. Red colour. Reassembled from fragments, complete. Slightly worn. Formerly coll. H. W., Switzerland, acquired 1980. Attic, ca. 510 B.C. CHF 16,000

A RIBBED BOWL. Dm. 15.6 cm. Pale green translucent glass. Robust glass bowl with thirty-four ribs arranged radially around the slightly raised base. The rounded rim is slightly off-set on the interior by a fine groove. Some-what further down the interior wall two further grooves. Mould-made. Interior ground smooth, exterior polished. Intact. Isings Form 3. Formerly Coll. Y. S., UK, acquired in the 1980s. Roman, 1st cent. A.D. CHF 3,400


A BOWL WITH DECORATED RIM. Dm. 17 cm. Yellow-green glass. Bell-shaped bowl standing on a low, flared foot decorated with fine diagonal grooves. Expan- sively flared mouth whose thick lip is offset by a ridge and furnished with fine puncture marks in places, the effect of which is to lend rhythm to the rim. Thin glass thread trailed round the underside of the mouth at the transition to the body. Silvery iridescence. Intact. Formerly Christopher Shoppard, London art market until 1980. New York art gallery until 1990. Priv. coll. Martin Wunsch, New York, 1980s-1990s. Roman, 3rd-4th cent. A.D. CHF 5,500

A BLACK-FIGURE SIANA CUP, ATTRIBUTED TO THE HEIDELBERG PAINTER. Dm. 25.6 cm. Clay. The tondo on the inside of the cup surrounded by red and black tongues contains two nude, bearded men, wrestling each other. The highly skilled painter succeeds in reproducing their athletic, antithetically arranged bodies in three-quarter profile, which has the effect of lending the combat scene an extraordinary dynamism. On the outside of the vessel, the reserved zone between the handles with the carination running through it on one side shows two dancing men with onlookers. On the other side, the reserved picture field is filled with a procession of galloping men on horseback. Handles, upper face of the foot and lower part of the body (interrupted by four reserved stripes) black-glazed. Reassembled. Minor retouching. Siana Cups, which are named after their findspot, the necropolis of the ancient city of Siana on the island of Rhodes, are a group of Attic, black-figure cups which especially in the 2nd and 3rd quarters of the 6th century B.C. were very popular. The offset mouth rim and concave foot are characteristic of this type of cup. The base as a rule is decorated with a pictorial tondo framed by a band of tongues or other ornaments. The Heidelberg Painter, alongside the C-Painter, counts as the most important exponent of this genre. Formerly Millard and Mary Sheets Collection, California, acquired in the 1960s, thence by descent. Millard Sheets (1907-1989) was a renowned Californian artist whose work appears on buildings and museums worldwide. Attic, ca. 560-550 B.C. CHF 28,000
Disastrous Dinners

By Yvonne Yiu

“...it was enough to make you spew. Trimalchio [...] in his repulsive drunkenness ordered trumpeters to be summoned to the dining-room. Reclining on a mound of pillows, [...] he said: ‘Imagine I am dead. Play something nice.’ In harmony, the trumpeters blared out the dead march. [...] The city sentinels, thinking that Trimalchio’s house was on fire, suddenly kicked in the door [...]. We seized this most opportune moment [and] took to our heels.” (Petronius, Satyricon, 78).

Brooding over the series of misadventures they had undergone and “discussing how to avoid the storm-clouds ahead,” the three friends Encolpius, Asclytos and Giton were delighted to receive a surprise invitation to dinner at Trimalchio’s, a freed slave who, as a shrewd businessman, had amassed immense riches but unfortunately was not as successful in attaining social refinement. To be able to wallow in luxury for an evening promised to be just the right thing for them. However, following a “most elegant hors d’oeuvre” feating olives, dormice dipped in honey and sprinkled with poppy-seed, hot sausages, Syrian plums and pomegranate seeds, the pleasure of eating was increasingly paired with disgust. To begin with, Trimalchio simply teased his guests with the possibility that the food served might be repugnant: When, for the first course, peahens’ eggs were distributed, Trimalchio cautioned, “My friends, I gave instructions for these peahens’ eggs to be hatched under the hen. Good Lord, I’m afraid the chickens are on their way out! However, let’s see if they are still soft enough to eat.” Encolpius almost discarded his helping, “as it seemed already to have hardened into a chicken, but then I heard an experienced guest say: ‘There is sure to be something good in this.’ I poked my finger through the shell and found inside a plump little fig-pecker, coated in peppered egg yolk.” (26, 31, 33).

As the banquet progressed and the guests’ initial curiosity was satisfied, the culinary excesses and distasteful behaviour of their host and his entourage became increasingly unbearable. For a moment the merriment of the guests, which had quite vanished, was restored by a sweet course composed of cakes and mock fruits that “when disturbed by the slightest touch, began to squirt out saffron,” the juice even shooting into their faces. However, Encolpius and his friends would have preferred “death by starvation” rather than taste the “preposterous dish” served soon afterwards. “Placed before us was a fat goose surrounded by fish and every kind of bird. Trimalchio then announced: ‘My friends, all that you see before us here is made out of a single body. [...] my cook has made all these out of pork. There can’t be a more valuable man any-where. If you ask him, he’ll make a fish out of a worm, a pigeon out of bacon, [...] a hen out of pork-knuckle. So I [coined] a suitable name for him: he’s called Daedalus.” (60-70).

When Trimalchio invited the servants to join the party and Encolpius had to share his couch with aforesaid cook, who “reek[ed] of pickles and sauces,” the bounds of good taste were most definitely overstepped. The friends’ attempt to leave failed, however, for no guest was ever let out through the same gate: “They come in one way, and go out another.” Thus, they were obliged to witness the staging of Trimalchio’s funeral before they could flee through the entrance demolished by the firemen. (70-78).

Although the narrator Encolpius emphasizes his disgust at what he sees and endeavours to dissociate himself from it, his behaviour is also characterized by curiosity, admiration and delight in eating. This ambivalent attitude towards culinary luxury and extravagance in general is typical of Roman society in the Late Republic and Early Imperial Period.

From the standpoint of moral philosophy, there can be no question that a life governed by the principles of simplicity, moderation and frugality – epitomized by the idealized image of rural life – is to be preferred to the opulence of city life that is dearly bought with worries. The fable with which Horace ends Satire 2.6 sums up this attitude: A town mouse visits a country mouse in his humble hole. Even the best, carefully saved tibits which the country mouse offers his friend cannot tempt his discerning palate. The town mouse suggests that the country mouse accompany him to the city and experience firsthand how wonderful life is there. In a magnificent townhouse the mice recline on scarlet blankets and enjoy the leftovers of a feast celebrated the previous evening, when all of a sudden Molossian hounds burst into the room and chase them away. “Then says the country mouse: ‘This life’s no use to me: and so, farewell! My woodland hole, safe from such fears will comfort me despite the humble legumes that make up my fare.”’ (81-111).

Legumes are also eaten by Horace in the simple dinner described in Satire 1.6. “Then I return home to a dish of leek, chickpeas and lagana. [...] a white stone bears two cups and a ladle; a cheap bowl, two oil-flasks and a saucer stand nearby: all Campanian ware.” (115-118). Like the country mouse, Horace declares that he is satisfied with such a simple life, but Satire 2.7 gives reason to doubt the truthfulness of his avowal. The slave Davus makes
use of Saturnian license to accuse his master of double standards and fickleness, illustrating this with various examples including that of food and dining: “If by chance you’re not asked out to dinner, you praise your quiet dish of cabbage (securum holus) [...] and you call yourself happy and hug yourself that you are not obliged to party [...]. But if Maecenas sends you a late invitation at twilight, you scream: ‘Where’s the lamp-oil? Quick, are you deaf?’” at the top of your voice, then off you scurry (cum magno blateras clamore fugisque).” (2.7.29-35).

Thus, for Horace, if we believe Davus, the prospect of an elegant dinner sweeps away any moral maxims or reservations. However, to partake of a sumptuously laden table, even that of a cultured man, can be a risky venture. In *Epode* 3 Horace relates that Maecenas, in a joking mood (*iocius Maecenas*), took pleasure in almost poisoning his guests with garlic (cf. CQ 1/2017). It is even more perilous to entrust oneself to the cuisine of a vulgarian. The dinner at Trimalchio’s is not the only example of this. Prudently, in *Satire* 2.8 Horace does not accompany his friends to the banquet given by the parvenu Nasidienus, but listens at a safe distance to the account of the disastrous dinner in which one fiasco follows another.

With annoying pedantry, Nasidienus explains the special features of each dish and his parasite Nomenatus is entrusted with the task of “point[ing] out with his finger anything that escaped [the guests’] attention.” However, the wordy commentaries exasperate the guests and cast a dubious light on the food that Nasidienus thus tries to blandish. The Lucanian boar which is served at the beginning of the meal is surrounded by “pungent (acria) turnips, lettuces and radishes” as befitting the special features of each dish and his parasites, or “wool [ius] mixtum (Satire 2.8.45-53)” which Nasidienus “wept, head bowed, as if his son had met an untimely death.” However, when Balatro ended his consolatory speech with the words “But as with a general, so a host: adversity often reveals his genius, success conceals it.” Nasidienus took courage and, to the astonishment of his guests, put on his sandals and left the room. Soon thereafter he returned “with an altered countenance, as if to repair [his] ill-fortune by art.” Slaves carried in a “vast dish” with the mangled members (*discerpta membra*) of a crane, torn-off shoulders of hare (*armos avolos*), blackbirds with their breasts burned off (*pectore adusto*) and pigeons without their rumps (*sine clune*): a downright culinary massacre. The key word “burnt bread” in Balatro’s speech may have reminded Nasidienus of the remaining courses of the banquet, which had been forgotten amidst the turmoil caused by the falling wall-hangings. One imagines Nasidienus sneaking off to repair his ill-fortune by art. Against this backdrop, it is all the more ambivalent when Fundatius pointed out with his finger anything that escaped his notice: “What a paradoxical dish in which not only the life of the fish but also that of its young is sacrificed for the pleasure of eating and in which the dead prawns seem to be alive! The broth (ius mixtum) in which they are cooked contains “fish sauce made with juice of the Spanish mackerel” and vinegar, both the products of fermentation, a process whose proximity to that of putrefaction is underlined: The Methymnean grape is “vitiated” or “corrupted” in order to produce vinegar (*acetum, quod Methymneeum vitio mutaverit urum*). Furthermore, deliberately impure ingredients are added: unwashed sea urchins (*inutos echinos*) supposedly ensure a better flavour. In view of these characteristics, amongst other things, the dish has been interpreted both as a criticism of Roman law (ius) and as a metaphor for the genre of satire. Be that as it may, the lamprey was robbed of its life in vain, for before it could be eaten, “the wall-hanging over it collapsed heavily onto the dish, dragging down more black dust than the North wind blows from Campania’s fields.” (41-56).

For the broth, bring the following ingredients to a boil: 1.5 l water, 250 ml red wine, 50 ml olive oil, 50 ml red wine vinegar, 50 ml fish sauce, white pepper, a handful of chopped rocket and 1 tsp elecampane root. Add sea urchins or fish stock if desired. Place the fish and crustaceans into the hot, but no longer boiling broth and poach gently for ca. 15 minutes. For the *lagana* (thin pastry sheets which are similar to pasta, flatbread or pancakes, which were baked, fried or boiled). In Horace’s *Satire*, there are no clues as to how the three ingredients were combined. However, this tasty chickpea and leek stew with crispbread would certainly have pleased him:

**Horace’s simple dinner (Satire 1.6.115)**

Horace eats a dish of leeks, chickpeas and *lagana* (thin pastry sheets which are similar to pasta, flatbread or pancakes, which were baked, fried or boiled). In Horace’s *Satire*, there are no clues as to how the three ingredients were combined. However, this tasty chickpea and leek stew with crispbread would certainly have pleased him:
Attic vase paintings of the Archaic and Classical Period frequently present one of countless variations of a single motif: that of warriors arming themselves ready to set off for war.

This is the scene that fills the main picture field, framed by rather plain ornamental bands, on side A of this large column krater. Drawn in profile is a quadriga facing right that is still stationary, although there are signs that its departure is imminent: One nervous horse has raised a foreleg in readiness, and the reins are being pulled taut by the charioteer standing in the chariot box at left. A young man with curly hair and a slender, beardless face, he is clad in a long, finely ribbed robe, rather like the one worn by the famous bronze charioteer of Delphi. As a youth no older than an Ephebe, he is smaller than the second male figure facing him in the middle of the scene, who is visibly older and bearded and is shown wearing a headband and a long, billowing cloak. In his lowered left hand he holds the warrior’s weapons, specifically a shield, sword, and lance that are partially obscured by the four horses standing in front of them. In his right hand he is ostentatiously holding aloft a Corinthian helmet with magnificent crest and tail, which as protection for the head was traditionally a highly charged piece of equipment. We are reminded of Homer’s account of Achilles arming for battle outside Troy:

“And he lifted the mighty helm and set it upon his head; and it shone as it were a star – the helm with crest of horse-hair, and around it waved the plumes of gold that Hephaestos had set thick about the crest.” (Iliad, 19, 380-383).

The narratives of such vase paintings cannot, and should not, be read literally. Otherwise, we would have to wonder how the young man will ever be able to take the helmet and other weapons being proffered, given that he evidently needs both hands merely to keep the horses in check, his wide-open eyes firmly fixed on them? The subject is rather the pulling power of the war chariot, the high social status conveyed by the four noble steeds (here shown multiply overlapping), the emblematic significance of the helmet, and the symbolically charged gesture of the older man. The quality of the painter is evident both in the articulation of these ciphers and in the composition itself (the diagonals intersecting at the tail stump of the horse at the front) and clearly he was not one of the greatest.

Following the lead of Sir John Beazley (1885–1970), many archaeologists of the twentieth century devoted a great deal of time and effort to classifying the various Attic vase painters, distinguishing one hand from another, and compiling entire oeuvres. The ceramic vessels that they studied often presented mysteries that remain unsolved to this day. Thus there are no fewer than three different painters (easily told apart) who signed a range of vases: “Polygnotos painted it.” Whether even one of them was really called Polygnotos is uncertain. It is more likely that all three of them wished to be considered direct followers of the famous panel painter of that name. Polygnotus of Thasos, who was also active as a bronze sculptor, was granted Athenian citizenship and painted the Stoa Poikile of the agora in Athens (in ca. 457 B.C.) with multi-figural cycles of both mythical and historical Athenian victories on the battlefield, from Troy to the recently fought Battle of Marathon. While no one who chose a pseudonym linking him to such a painter could be lacking in self-confidence, the aim was presumably to assert analogies of content, too. There is a piece by “our” painter signed “Polygnotos” showing antithetical tripods and Nikes decanting the bulls waiting to be sacrificed in honour of the victory. His oeuvre comprises over sixty vases, while at least another ten have been attributed to his workshop.

But back to the vase at Gallery Cahn: The reverse side B shows a simple, but by no means trivial scene. Standing in the middle is a woman clad in a long robe. Her body is viewed frontally with her right hand planted firmly on her hip, while to the left and right of her are two younger men, who clearly are no longer mere youths since they each hold a gnarled staff and wear the cloak of an Athenian. All three are gesticulating vigorously – that is to say, they are doing what they have learned to do in a democracy, namely debating. And unless the three are anonymous citizens of the polis, then viewed together with the “father figure” on the front, they are most probably the family of the warrior about to set off for war.