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The Collection of Greek Terracotta Figurines at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Kyriaki Karoglou

- ¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds an extensive and outstanding—but not widely known—collection of figurative terracottas from ancient Greece.¹ Only the briefest of a sketch, this note aims to provide an overview of its scope and offer some highlights. The collection's core was shaped during the years 1906-1931, a formative period for the Department of Greek and Roman Art—called the Classical Department until 1935.² The individuals most responsible for their acquisition and publication were Gisela Richter and purchasing agent John Marshall. Subsequent gifts, bequests, and acquisitions enriched the collection further. In 1953, for instance, the American Institute of Archaeology donated to the museum a large group of fragmentary relief plaques from Praisos on Crete.
- ³
- ² Approximately 800 Greek terracottas form the bulk of the collection, ranging in date from the Late Helladic IIIA (ca. 1400-1300 B.C.E.) to the late Hellenistic period and covering nearly all regional coroplastic workshops, iconographic types, and styles.⁴ Among the earliest are Mycenaean figurines of the standard Phi and Psi types, as well as various animal figurines. Of the several Geometric figurines of the so-called “bird-face” type,⁵ a seated divinity is of special interest because of the diminutive kneeling votary that supports the back of her throne (**fig. 1**).⁶ From the Archaic period, fine examples from mainland Greek, especially Attic and Boeotian, as well as East Greek and South Italian workshops abound. They include korai-like figures and seated females with mantles drawn over their heads or wearing elaborate headdresses.⁷ An Attic example stands apart due to its particularly well-preserved painted detail of the throne (**fig. 2**).⁸ A double-sided East Greek kore holding a dove that served as an alabastron is exceptional for its fine modeling and overall technical mastery (**fig. 3**).⁹ Equally notable is a fragment of a large scale female head from Matauron, a Locrian colony in South Italy.¹⁰

Fig. 1–Terracotta figure in an armchair, 12.5 cm. Fletcher Fund, 1931. Attica. Eighth century B.C.E.

Fig. 2–Terracotta statuette of a seated woman, 15.5 cm. Gift of Louise Crane, in memory of her mother, Mrs. W. Murray Crane. Late 6th–early 5th century B.C.E.

Fig. 3–Terracotta alabastron (perfume vase) in the form of a woman holding a dove, 27 cm. Fletcher Fund, 1930. East Greece. Mid-6th century B.C.E.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

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- 3 Also noteworthy are a class of Boeotian terracottas from the first half of the 5th century B.C.E. showing women in everyday occupations,¹¹ a life-size terracotta head of a sphinx,¹² and a series of standing peplophoroi that combine heads and torso types with varying degrees of success.¹³ The best among them, including a large-scale fragmentary terracotta that probably served as a model for bronze casting (**fig. 4**), are close in style to the Olympia pediments.¹⁴ A statuette that according to Edmond Pottier came from the Athenian Acropolis recalls the Archaic marble korai from the site with its detailed rendering of the drapery and hair as well as the gesture of pulling aside the skirt of her chiton (**fig. 5**).¹⁵ A western Greek example is dressed in a chiton adorned with an enigmatic winged figure in low relief.¹⁶ From the second half of the 5th century B.C.E. come two mythological groups,¹⁷ a robust Nike statuette that is missing its wings,¹⁸ a single Locrian pinax,¹⁹ and three examples of the so-called Melian reliefs decorated with mythological scenes (**fig. 6**).²⁰

Fig. 4. Terracotta figure of a woman, 45 cm. Rogers Fund, 1906. Mid-5th century B.C.E.

Fig. 5. Terracotta statuette of a woman, 30.8 cm. Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971. Attica. First half of the 5th century B.C.E.

Fig. 6. Terracotta plaque, 19.7 x 18.6 cm. Fletcher Fund, 1925. Melos. Ca. 450 B.C.E.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

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- 4 Particularly important is a group of 14 comic actors said to come from an early, 4th-century Attic tomb. They are considered among the earliest known examples of a popular class of terracottas inspired by the stock characters of Middle Comedy—the angry old man, the cunning slave, the shrewd courtesan, the child-holding nurse, the wily merchant, the frustrated lover, and the boastful soldier (fig. 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d, 7e).²¹ These figures of farce, with padded bodies and grotesque masks, continued to enjoy great popularity during the Hellenistic period.

Fig. 7a. Terracotta statuette of an actor, 12.1 cm. Rogers Fund, 1913. Late 5th–early 4th century B.C.E.

Fig. 7b. Terracotta statuette of an actor, 11.0 cm. Rogers Fund, 1913. Late 5th–early 4th century B.C.E.

Fig. 7c. Terracotta statuette of an actor, 10.8 cm. Rogers Fund, 1913. Late 5th–early 4th century B.C.E.

Fig. 7d. Terracotta statuette of an actor, 8.4 cm. Rogers Fund, 1913, 8.4 cm. Late 5th–early 4th century B.C.E.

Fig. 7e. Terracotta statuette of an actor, 8.4 cm. Rogers Fund, 1913, 9.7 cm. Late 5th–early 4th century B.C.E.

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- 5 The museum's collection is strong in "Tanagras," the fine statuettes of young men, women, and children primarily from Athens and Boeotia that epitomize the production of painted figurative terracottas during the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C.E.²² Youths are rather conventional,²³ while groups of young girls are engaged in games like *ephedrismos* (pick-a-back or piggyback)²⁴ and *astragaloi* (knucklebones).²⁵ But it is the young women, standing in restful, often statuesque poses, and sometimes leaning on a pillar, which showcase the coroplast's greatest skill and sensitivity. Draped in fine chitons and with himatia wrapping around the entire body and often pulled up over the head, these women wear pointed sun hats, hold leaf-shaped fans (fig. 8a, 8b, 8c),²⁶ or carry baskets and tambourines. They are not simply ladies of fashion, but rather their meaning and function are closely connected to marriage and wedding rituals. The pleasing diversity of "Tanagras" is achieved by a variation of clay texture, iconographic detail, and, above all, color. All were painted in bright blue, yellow, red, and pink. Applied on a white engobe after firing, these pigments more often than not, are now lost. Sometimes accessories and borders of garments were highlighted by gilding.²⁷ This pictorial use of color is also evident in an excellent assemblage of Tarentine terracottas, especially those of the 3rd century B.C.E. that include polychrome, local Tanagra types²⁸ and several large-scale, reclining symposiasts.²⁹

Fig. 8a. Terracotta statuette of a draped woman, 22.2 cm. Rogers Fund, 1906. Boeotia. Third century B.C.E.

8abc

Fig. 8b. Terracotta statuette of a draped woman, 19.6 cm. Rogers Fund, 1907. Boeotia. Late 4th–early 3rd century B.C.E.

Fig. 8c. Terracotta statuette of a woman, 29.8 cm. Gift of Mrs. Saidie Adler May, 1930. Perhaps Asia Minor. Second century B.C.E.

Fig. 8a

Fig. 8b

Fig. 8c

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- 6 During the Hellenistic period the main manufacturing centers of terracottas shifted from outside mainland Greece to the cities of Asia Minor and the Black Sea, such as Myrina, Priene, Smyrna, and Heraclea Pontica. A major portion of their output duplicated imported Tanagras in local clay and endlessly re-elaborated the established Tanagra types. Following the stylistic trends of monumental sculpture of the period, the garments of these terracottas were made to appear lighter and more transparent, while some of the larger examples assume statuesque poses and a somewhat affected appearance.³⁰ A high quality, large statuette of a goddess, said to be from Myrina, exemplifies these trends (fig. 9).³¹

Fig. 9. Statuette of a goddess standing, 63 cm. Collection of Thomas Colville, Guilford, Connecticut; promised gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Myrina. Mid-2nd century B.C.E.

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- 7 Popular types, such as the veiled or “mantle” dancers,³² flying Nikai³³ and Erotes (**fig. 10**)³⁴, or genre figures from the worlds of theater and mime, are well represented in the collection.³⁵ Later developments in Hellenistic art, including the small scale reproduction of famous 5th-century B.C.E. statues and the representation of caricature and physical deformity, are illustrated by a statuette from Smyrna that reproduces the *Diadoumenos* by Polykleitos, but in slender proportions (**fig. 11**),³⁶ and a 1st-century B.C.E. statuette of an emaciated old woman also from Smyrna that strikingly shows the effects of debilitating disease (**fig. 12**).³⁷

Fig. 10. Terracotta statuette of Eros flying, 25.7 cm. Gift of Waters S. Davis, 1928. Myrina. Ca. 200–150 B.C.E.

Fig. 11. Terracotta statuette of the *Diadoumenos* (youth tying a fillet around his head), 29 cm. Fletcher Fund, 1932. Smyrna. First century B.C.E.

Fig. 12. Terracotta statuette of an emaciated woman, 16.8 cm. Gift of Mrs. Lucy W. Drexel, 1889. 89.2.2141. Smyrna. First century B.C.E.

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

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NOTES

1. The entire collection comprises about 1200 figurative terracottas, of which 600 are currently on display in the Greek and Roman Galleries on the main floor, the Study Center and the Etruscan Gallery on the Mezzanine, and the Cypriot Galleries on the second floor. Among them are 18 Etruscan, 29 Roman, and 408 Cypriot terracottas. All are accessible on the museum's website <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online>.

The Cypriot terracottas were published in CD-ROM format by Karageorghis et al. 2004. This publication will become available online in 2016-2017.

2. On the history of the Metropolitan's Department of Greek and Roman Art see the succinct introduction by Carlos Picón in Picón 2007, 3-23.

3. MMA 53.5.4-47. These relief plaques, depicting frontal, nude females wearing high poloi and helmeted warriors with spears and shields, were part of a rich deposit of offerings discovered by the excavator of the site Prof. Federico Halbherr in 1893-1894.
4. The majority are discussed in Richter 1953, as well as the respective notes on recent acquisitions in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*.
5. MMA 52.11.1; MMA1972.118.120; MMA 1982.232.
6. MMA 31.11.8.
7. See for example MMA 30.11.5 and MMA 35.11.7. The figurine MMA 35.11.6 from Sicily wears a high polos over the veil.
8. MMA 1980.303.5. Hundreds of similar figurines were found on the Athenian Acropolis, and perhaps represent an early cult statue of Athena.
9. MMA 30.11.6.
10. MMA 22.139.57.
11. Such as MMA 56.63 and 51.11.12.
12. MMA 47.100.3.
13. See MMA 06.1156 (Attic); MMA 53.206, MMA 59.48.23 and MMA 1975.417 (Boeotian); MMA1972.118.125 (Rhodian).
14. MMA 06.1151. H. 45 cm.
15. MMA 1972.118.121. Formerly in the Bouasse-Lebel collection in Paris, it was bequeathed by Walter C. Baker in 1971.
16. MMA 18.145.31, possibly from Medma.
17. MMA 23.73.2 representing Europa and the Bull and MMA 07.286.24 showing Hyakinthos carried by a swan.
18. MMA 07.286.23.
19. MMA 12.229.17.
20. MMA 25.78.26: Eurykleia washing Odysseus's feet. The other two are MMA 30.11.9 (mostly restored) showing Odysseus returning to Penelope and MMA 12.229.20 depicting Phrixos carried over the sea by a ram.
21. MMA 13.225.13-14 and 13.225.16-28.
22. Named after Tanagra in Boeotia where they were first discovered in large numbers during the 19th century: MMA 09.221.28; 11.212.16; 07.286.2; 30.117. "Tanagras" is also often used as a shorthand name for draped, standing, female figurines, irrespective of provenance, dating to the period 330-200 B.C.E.
23. See for example MMA 06.1064. Three terracottas of a youth with hat seated on a rock are probably made from the same mold: MMA 06.1118, MMA 06.1119, and MMA 06.1112.
24. MMA 07.286.4.
25. MMA 13.225.15.
26. MMA 06.1168; see also MMA 09.221.29.
27. MMA 07.286.2, from Boeotia.
28. Noted for their good preservation are MMA 11.212.16, MMA 11.212.18, MMA 11.212.20, and MMA 12.232.13.
29. See for example MMA 20.216-20.218.
30. See for example the two 2nd-century B.C.E. statuettes: MMA 24.97.84 with guilt diadem, possibly from Myrina, and MMA 06.1143 from Pontus.
31. Collection of Thomas Colville, Guilford, Connecticut; promised gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
32. MMA 22.138.38 from Trebizond on the Black Sea and MMA 19.192.6 probably from Smyrna, with extensive gilding.

33. Two statuettes are representative of the sculpturally ambitious "flying figure" repertoire at Myrina: MMA 06.1077, dated to the early 3rd century B.C.E. and MMA 21.88.62, dated to the late 3rd-early 2nd century B.C.E. and attributed to the so-called Master of Tomb 112B.

34. MMA 28.55. Much of the original coloring is preserved.

35. MMA 23.259: teacher and pupil; MMA 07.286.30: Nurse; MMA 09.221.33 and 07.286.27: comic actors; MMA 06.1087: boy with cock.

36. MMA 32.11.2.

37. MMA 89.2.2141. See also the statuette of a grotesque man MMA 07.286.12.

ABSTRACTS

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of Greek figurative terracottas is little known, but its size and scope makes it one of the richest in North America. A brief overview of this collection is presented here.

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Keywords: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Greek terracottas, Greek terracotta figurines

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