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## The Etruscans in California: A Review of The World of the Etruscans

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## The Etruscans in California:

### A Review of *The World of the Etruscans*

by Richard De Puma

In North America, collections of Etruscan art are concentrated in a few large museums. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is currently remodeling and reinstalling its Etruscan collection (scheduled to open in 2006). The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu will reopen their newly installed Etruscan galleries in 2003. And, of course, there are attractive Etruscan galleries on view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and smaller collections at other museums in the United States and Canada. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago is one of the few museums in America with extensive Etruscan holdings that has not put its collection on public display for many years, although portions of its collection are known through publication, and scholars can arrange to study objects in storage.<sup>1</sup>

Major exhibitions of Etruscan art in American museums are rare. In recent years there have been only two such exhibitions. In 1991, the Grey Gallery of New York University hosted “Gens Antiquissima Italiae: The Etruscans in Umbria,” part of an international effort to locate, organize, publish, and display little known works of Etruscan art from Umbria. The effort began with a beautiful exhibition that opened at the Vatican in November 1988, and then progressed to Cracow, Budapest, St. Petersburg, and finally New York City. In each venue the exhibition was quite different because it drew from local collections and had different contributing authors for the accompanying catalogue. However, there was a consistent core of objects drawn from Italian museums and an able editorial coordinator, Francesco Roncalli, who guided this project with expert skill.<sup>2</sup> This was an excellent exhibition, which I regret could not travel to other American museums. The four catalogues are invaluable resources.

The second Etruscan exhibition did indeed travel. This was “The Etruscans: Legacy of a Lost Civilization” which opened at the Memphis Pink Palace Museum in 1992.<sup>3</sup> This show, organized by and drawn from the extensive holdings of the Vatican’s Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, traveled to Dallas (Science Place), Morristown, NJ (Morris Museum), and Provo, UT (Brigham Young University Museum) where it closed in 1994. The last venue was the site of a symposium organized in conjunction with the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Thus, almost a decade ago, Provo saw the last major exhibition of Etruscan art in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

American audiences have been starved for Etruscan art. The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, California happily changed this situation. “The World of the

Etruscans,” which opened on October 20, 2001, was organized by the Centro Affari e Convegni di Arezzo and the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Toscana, in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Cultural Institute in Los Angeles. Various workshops, lectures, and a symposium (held at UCLA in early December 2001) have helped to enhance the appeal of the exhibition.

It is difficult to review separately the two parts—exhibition and exhibition catalogue—because they are inextricably bound, perhaps in this case more than in many others where the two elements can stand independently. The exhibition consists of approximately 325 objects drawn from the Etruscan collections of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Toscana, the National Archaeological Museum of Florence, the Guarnacci Museum in Volterra, and the small museum at Colle Val d’Elsa. Very few of these objects have been seen outside Italy until this exhibition was organized, which makes it rewarding for both beginners and specialists alike.

Giuseppina Carlotta Cianferoni, Director of the Etruscan Section of the Florence museum, organized the catalogue and wrote the short introduction and brief synopsis for each chronological period represented in the exhibition. These texts also appear on large didactic panels near the beginning of each section of the exhibition. The catalogue consists primarily of a series of excellent color photographs representing most of the major pieces. These photographs (there are 89!) produced by Daniel Virtuoso and drawn from the Photographic Archives of the Soprintendenza, are superb. They alone are worth the price of the catalogue.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this collection of color illustrations, bound separately before the text, there are small black and white photos for each catalogue entry. Thus, there is excellent visual documentation, including color details, for almost all objects in the exhibition.

At the Bowers Museum, a ramp flanked by small cinerary urns<sup>7</sup> leads to an impressive terracotta sarcophagus (no. 212). This emphasis on funerary objects sets a proper tone for the entire exhibition, because most of the material comes from Etruscan cemeteries. A warm coral-colored fabric has been used to line cases throughout the show. This is an attractive choice that sets off terracottas, gold jewelry and especially the bright green of the patinated bronzes. In general, the lighting is fine and allows one to study details on almost every object. What is missing is attention to the lighting of labels. If the labels are near an object and in a case they are well illuminated. But several are mounted on the wall where little light, if any, reaches them. I like the way objects are grouped or arranged within large cases, but one important element is missing: a sense of chronological progression through the exhibition. Probably this is a function of the gallery spaces available for this large show. Unfortunately, an unsuspecting visitor would not know which way to turn after arriving at the top of that impressive ramp that opens the show. One could move to left, right, or even around and behind the sarcophagus. For me, at least, the tendency to create symmetrical arrangements rather than chronologically discreet ones confuses the chronological distinctions between Villanovan and Orientalizing Etruscan. Later periods are displayed in galleries where the traffic flow is more controlled and one-directional.

My biggest criticism concerns labels, which contain many typographical errors and bizarre translations. According to one museum official, the Bowers was not permitted to alter any of the label copy. The copy apparently had been translated from the original Italian into

Spanish (because the exhibition had traveled earlier to South America) and then into English. Along the way, strange hybrids evolved. Here are a few examples: *Cippus* is a technical word with specific connotations in Etruscan archaeology. It refers to a small stone grave marker; these markers survive in a variety of shapes. Sometimes a *cippus* may mark a boundary. In the catalogue and exhibition *cippus* is translated as “funerary milestone,” a term with very different connotations from grave or boundary marker.<sup>8</sup> No mention is made of the inscription on the “Club-shaped Milestone” (no. 184). On other labels we read about stone urns with “numerous rests of polychromy” (no. 220). In the catalogue entry, “rests” is correctly rendered as “traces.” There is little consistency, especially when describing pottery. For example, shape names may vary even when the objects are next to each other in both catalogue and case (nos. 250-251, *askos* and *ascos*). And what is one to make of no. 123, a vase of “refined beige clay decorated with reddish slip touched up with red and white”? Presumably, “touched up” refers to added color or “overpaints,” a term correctly used for no. 124. However, the term “overpainted” is incorrectly used for “superposed red,” a very different technique, in nos. 209-10.

Attempts to translate Italian proper names, especially for specific sites, should have been avoided entirely. The famous Crocifisso del Tufo Necropolis at Orvieto is well known to students of Etruscan culture. Would they recognize it as “La Toba Crucifix” (nos. 207-208)? And how many visitors know that the “Poggio of the Hanged Man” (i.e., Poggio dell’Impiccato, no. 28) is a hill at Tarquinia? Moreover, there are some objects with no labels at all! Three panels from the Murlo architectural frieze (no. 147, where they are called “facing strips” in the catalogue) are without any identification. There are also two beautifully made models of Etruscan tombs with no labels. One of these, a tumulus, is probably the Tomb of the Fans in Populonia because several objects in the exhibition are from that tomb (nos. 91-103). There are also some instances of labels connected to the wrong object or completely interchanged (nos. 121 and 124; 267 and 269; 299 and 301). Frustratingly, some labels describe the side of an object that is not visible (e.g., no. 249, and several other vases) or describe as the “front” what is really on the “back” (no. 151). Wall labels are also sometimes misplaced. One describes the Figulo tombs at Vetulonia. We might expect to find these objects displayed in the neighboring case, but instead we find objects there from Veii, Chiusi, and several labeled as “without provenance.” Only by examining the catalogue (which does not have an index), does one eventually locate the relevant items, nos. 142-146.

As already noted, the catalogue is beautifully produced with excellent color photographs of many objects. The cover immediately caught my attention. It shows a splendid detail of the famous silver relief mirror in Florence (no. 268).<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, there is no indication in the catalogue’s discussion or bibliography for this item that it is generally believed to be a forgery! Perhaps the authorities in Florence believe this unusual object is authentic, but they should point out that legitimate questions have been raised about it and, if they choose to accept it as ancient, to defend it with reasoned arguments. Instead, there is no hint of any problem. In fact, this points out a general criticism of the catalogue entries: they are all too short, rarely give adequate bibliography (often simply citing the earlier Spanish version of the same catalogue), and miss many opportunities to elucidate important and intriguing details about specific objects.

One is certainly grateful to all who made this exhibition possible, but more attention to some details would have made the show far more accessible to the general public. On a positive note, it is good to learn that “The World of the Etruscans” will continue to travel to another continent. It will be at the Shanghai Museum (June 8 to October 8, 2003) and the National Museum of History in Taipei (October 20 to December 20, 2003).

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#### NOTES

1. J. Davison, *Seven Italic Tomb-Groups from Narce = Dissertazioni di etruscologia e antichità italiche pubblicate a cura dell'Istituto di Studi Etruschi ed Italici* (Florence 1972); R. De Puma, *Etruscan Tomb-Groups: Ancient Pottery and Bronzes in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History* (Mainz 1986).
2. The exhibition catalogues are: F. Roncalli, ed., *Antichità dall'Umbria in Vaticano* (Perugia 1988); F. Roncalli, ed., *Antichità dall'Umbria a Budapest e Cracovia* (Perugia 1989); F. Roncalli, ed., *Antichità dall'Umbria a Leningrado* (Perugia 1990); F. Roncalli and L. Bonfante, eds., *Antichità dall'Umbria a New York* (Perugia 1991). The first two are in Italian; the last two are bilingual, Italian-Russian and Italian-English, respectively.
3. The catalogue, with the same title, was edited by F. Buranelli and N. de Grummond.
4. The fifteen papers from this event were published in J. Hall, ed., *Etruscan Italy: Etruscan Influences on the Civilizations of Italy from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Provo 1996).
5. In this brief review I have not included smaller Etruscan exhibitions such as the “Ombra della Sera” exhibition of objects from the Museo Guarnacci, Volterra. This was held at Baruch College, New York City, in 1998. For a brief report, see M. Benford in *Etruscan Studies* 6 (1999) 2-3.
6. \$19.95 (paperback only). Admission to the exhibition is \$16.00, but this includes admission to other temporary shows.
7. One of these, no. 223, shows a reclining female figure on the lid. The label, however, describes this as a male. The catalogue entry is correct.
8. The catalogue's own Glossary definition for this word is also misleading. For a good definition and description, see M. Cristofani, ed., *Dizionario illustrato della civiltà etrusca* (Florence 1999) 71-72, s.v. *cippo*.
9. Inv. 74831, said to be from Bomarzo. On the object's doubtful authenticity, see Ulrike Fischer-Graf, *Spiegelwerkstätten in Vulci* (Berlin 1980) 2; Fischer-Graf, “Der etruskische Silber-reliefspiegel in Florenz, ein Fälschung,” *Antike Kunst* 25 (1982) 117-23. This is but one of a series of mirrors, all apparently late nineteenth century forgeries, that copy the design of an engraved Etruscan bronze mirror formerly in Munich (inv. 3691). For two recently published examples, see R. Nicholls, *CSE Great Britain* 2 (Cambridge 1993) no. 13 and L. Bonfante, *CSE USA* 3 (New York 1997) no. 25.