ITALY
VILLANOVANS AND ETRUSCANS

Historical Introduction

The Villanovans, early inhabitants of Italy in the Iron Age (1000-700 B.C.), lived mostly in the north and west of the Italian peninsula, a region of rich agricultural land and mineral resources which they mined and traded. Characteristic of their culture are their metalworking skills and a particular type of pottery, known as impasto ware.

The Villanovans were the ancestors of the Etruscans, whose land, Etruria, stretched from just north of Rome into the area near Florence. In the 7th century B.C., although influences from Greece and the Near East had a profound impact, Etruscan culture developed its own characteristic exuberant style. Etruscan cities flourished in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.; their armies were powerful, and the aristocracy lived lives of luxury, based on agricultural and mineral wealth. During the 6th century, Etruscan settlements extended as far north as the Po Valley, east to the Adriatic, and south to Campania. For a time, Etruscan kings ruled Rome.

The 5th century B.C. was a period of crisis. Control over Rome and Latium was lost, and Etruscan dominion of the sea was destroyed, leading to impoverishment. Political struggle and social conflicts arose. By the early 4th century B.C., however, Etruria began to recover. Imports from Greece were renewed, new buildings were constructed, and crafts flourished, but this century also saw the beginning of Rome's expansion in Italy. Annexation or defeat of individual Etruscan cities by Rome continued in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., and the eventual unification of Italy by Rome completed the absorption of Etruscan culture into Roman society and caused the loss of Etruscan political autonomy.
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**Biconical Cinerary Urn with Incised Decoration**
Etruria, Tarquinia(?)  
Villanovan, 750-700 B.C.  
Impasto ware (63.15)

The culture of the Villanovans, the Iron Age inhabitants of Etruria, was first uncovered at the small town of Villanova, near Bologna. In the 19th century, archaeologists began excavations here and named the characteristic urnfield culture Villanovan. The name "urnfielders" denotes the burial practices of people who, after cremating their dead, bury the ashes in urns placed in tombs.

Villanovan cinerary urns are usually made of impasto ware, the typical, thick-walled, black burnished pottery fabric of the Villanovans. The clay still retains many of the impurities that naturally occur in clay-beds. Impasto pottery is handmade, until the introduction of the potter's wheel ca. 750-700 B.C.

The Villanovans buried the ashes of their dead in two types of cinerary urns: biconical and hut. The museum's urn is the biconical type, which is so-called from the resemblance of the body to two cones, one inverted on top of the other. Biconical urns are more common than hut urns. The general shape and decoration are fairly standard throughout the region, but the lids in the northern area were covered with a bowl, whereas in the south the Villanovans used a lid made in the shape of a helmet. Sometimes the lids were made of bronze. The museum's lid imitates a bronze bell-shaped helmet.

Villanovan urns were buried in small graves. These were rectangular pits, usually lined with stone slabs and covered by a large roof slab.

The decoration on these urns, when they were decorated, was confined to a simple geometric repertoire: squares filled with crosses, swastikas, or zigzags; triangles or zigzags; meanders; concentric circles; rows of dots. The decoration was incised or stamped into the urns and often filled with white clay to make the designs stand out.
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Tripod Supporting a Bowl
Italy, Vulci(?)
Villanovan, 8th c. B.C.
Bronze (67.138)

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The dangling double spiral ornaments place this tripod in a Villanovan context.

The tripod (three-footed vessel) was essentially a cooking vessel or cauldron that was placed over a fire without the need for a separate support. Three legs provided sufficient stability. Although the form served a domestic function, it also achieved religious meaning, probably from its association with feasting at games and festivals.

In Greece, in the Homeric epics, tripod cauldrons were awarded as prizes for games. In the later Greek world, tripods were also awarded as prizes. At Delphi and Olympia, tripods played an important role. The sacrificial meat was prepared in them at Olympia, and great numbers of them were dedicated there from the Geometric period on. At Delphi, sacrificial meat was kept in a tripod cauldron, and the priestess sat on the tripod to deliver the oracle. It was this tripod that Herakles and Apollo battled for, a struggle that is frequently represented in art. The legs of Greek tripod cauldrons differ, however, from the Villanovan one on exhibit. The Greek ones have a wide flat surface, which was often decorated. The Villanovan tripod resembles more a basin on three legs. It is, besides, much smaller than Greek tripod cauldrons.

Among Etruscan bronzenworkers tripods were a specialty. Elaborately decorated tripod stands, dating to the 6th c. B.C., have survived from tombs. It is assumed that, like their Greek counterparts, they had some religious significance.
Characteristic of Etruscan culture are bronze mirrors bearing engraved scenes from mythology and daily life. Over two thousand of these mirrors have survived, an important source for our knowledge of the Etruscans. The handles of these mirrors were either bronze, cast in one with the mirror, or separately made wooden, bone, or ivory ones; a bronze tang cast with the mirror fitted into each handle. Although no wooden handles have survived, a number of bone ones, carved with simple patterns, still exist. Very rare, however, are bone handles carved with figured decoration; the Museum's bone handle is one of only eight so far known.

The handle is almost complete, missing only a narrow border at the bottom. Carved in relief around it are four figures—two winged females and two small seated children. The winged females, one young, the other older, are depicted as moving to the left. Each wears a diadem consisting of a narrow ribbon, or fillet, with leaves rising from it. Both are clothed in chitons, or tunics, and they carry enigmatic objects that resemble small bags or purses but which may be folded fillets. Originally, the handle was painted and gilded, and enough remains to restore the general scheme: dark blue background; small wing feathers in red and gold; the women's lips red; some gilding and touches of red on the bodies of the seated children; possibly gilding on the borders of the women's garments. The overall effect must have been rich and colorful.

The figures can be interpreted from comparison with scenes engraved on Etruscan mirrors. There, winged figures, identified as Lasae or messengers, are often shown carrying a fillet, or crowning another figure with one. The females on the handle, carrying what may be folded fillets, are thus probably Lasae.

The handle is dated to ca. 300 B.C. from the date of the other known figured handles. These seem to have begun late in the 4th century B.C. Stylistic comparisons reinforce this date for the Missouri handle. The other surviving figured handles preserve none of the color that the Missouri handle suggests probably decorated them. The Missouri handle thus adds new information about a class of luxury objects. Given the delicate nature of the handle and the fugitive paint, we must interpret the handle and the mirror it once supported as being intended as a grave offering, rather than an item of daily use.
Bronze mirrors with engraved decoration are an important aspect of Etruscan art. Their beginnings date back to the late 6th century, although most date from the 4th century and the Hellenistic period. Many of the subjects engraved on the mirrors are based on Greek mythology, but the myths are so imbued with the Etruscans' own beliefs that they are often an invaluable source of knowledge of Etruscan culture. In other instances, however, the significance of the scenes portrayed is now obscure.

On the museum's mirror, the hero Hercle stands with his foot on an overturned amphora, talking quietly to Turms (the Greek god Hermes) who is recognized by his attributes: winged cap, or *petasos*, and herald's staff, or *caduceus*. Hercle also derived his attributes (lionskin and club) from the Greeks. He is based on the hero Herakles but played a different role in Etruscan religion than he did in Greek. In Etruria, he was primarily worshipped at sanctuaries where healing baths were taken.

The scene on this mirror is obscure. Possibly the amphora, a storage jar for water (or wine), is a topographical allusion to a spring or running stream, although no water is flowing from it. Alternatively, the amphora may be a reference to Hercle's cult in sanctuaries with baths. Yet a third suggestion has been made that an agonistic scene is portrayed. Hercle is the victor, and the amphora is his prize. If this third interpretation is correct, the choice of a little known episode in the life of Hercle is characteristic of Etruscan taste for the obscure.

Other mirrors by the same engraver are known; his work forms part of the San Francisco Group, named after two mirrors in that city.
This cast bronze handle attachment is from a straight-sided bucket, or situla. One of a pair, it held the curved ends of a double handle. The situla itself was supported on three feet, two of which were originally sold on the art market with the handle attachment but which subsequently were separated from it. The vessel type, a cylindrical situla, is a specifically Etruscan vessel-form that was used for drawing and carrying water and, although a household vessel, was probably also used in cult practices, particularly of Dionysos. Satyrs and maenads in Etruscan vase paintings are often shown with situlas.

The main interest of this handle attachment is provided by the charming figure of a female, dressed in an unbelted chiton which she holds up to reveal her clawed feet. Her wings and tail frame her body. Details of feathers, folds of the tunic, buttons and gathers on the sleeves, hair and facial features are all beautifully rendered and attest the high quality of workmanship.

The identification of the figure is not certain. She may be a siren, one of the mythical half-bird, half-woman creatures, whose song charmed sailors and lured them to death. Odysseus managed to escape them by having his sailors block up their ears so that they would not hear the song. In order that he himself might hear it, he had himself tied to the mast of his ship.

The museum's figure does not carry a musical instrument that would definitely identify her as a siren, so she may be a harpy. Harpies are also shown as birds with women's faces. They were mythical beings, apparently winds in origin, who "snatched," as the name implies, and carried off different things.

The problem of identification does not detract from the quality of the piece. Its Etruscan character is revealed by the combination of naturalistic working, as on the treatment of the hair, together with the stiff pose, stocky body, and the use of incision. The short, unbelted, sleeved chiton is also an Etruscan feature.
Harpago (Meathook) or Torch Holder
Etruria
Etruscan, late 5th-4th c. B.C.
Bronze (84.1)
Weinberg Fund

A prong that projected from just below the horizontal ring is broken off from the shaft of this elaborate implement, but otherwise the piece is in excellent condition. Preserved are six long hooks radiating from a central ring below which lies the horizontal one. The handle is socketed for attachment to a wooden shaft.

This type of implement, many of which have been found in Etruscan tombs, is purely Etruscan. The function is disputed. One theory explains that such tools were used to pull meat out of cauldrons, either the sacrificial meat boiled during religious ceremonies, or the meat cooked in the home for normal consumption. A second theory proposes that they were used as torch holders. Twigs could be twisted around the prongs. Whatever their function, such implements are an example of the Etruscan metalworkers' skill.
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Fibula with Serpentine Bow (Drago Fibula)
Italy, Castellamare di Stabia
Italic, ca. 700 B.C.
Bronze (79.76)

The fibula with serpentine bow has six projecting bosses. Their dark yellow color resulted from dipping the piece in molten metal after it was cast.

The form of the 7th century fibula is one of two common Italic types. First made in the Geometric (Villanovan) period, it continued into later times as shown by this example. Such fibulae were elaborately decorated, particularly those made of gold. This example is incised with herringbone design and small circles, the former deriving from the Geometric repertoire. Fibulae are commonly found in Etruscan graves. Like their Greek counterparts, they were used as clothing fasteners.

Fibula
Etruria
700-650 B.C.
Bronze (69.947)
Gift of Mr. J. Lionberger Davis

The fibula with serpentine bow has six projecting bosses. Their dark yellow color resulted from dipping the piece in molten metal after it was cast.
Veiled Female Head
Etruria, Veii
490-475 B.C.
Terracotta (78.27)


This female head is one of the earliest Etruscan votive heads in an American collection. The head is solid, except for a hollow cone projecting up from the base, and made from a two-part mold, one for the front of the head, one for the back. The woman wears a veil that covers the top of her head and falls behind, visible as two folds flanking the neck. A wide band at the base of the neck is the upper edge of a tunic. The face is broad and wears a solemn expression. Three rows of snail-curves cover the forehead and temples.

The provenance of the head has been established from comparison with heads found in excavations at Veii in 1937-38. All are part of the same mold series. The right ear of the mold that produced both the Missouri head and heads from the excavations was damaged before firing, resulting in a damaged ear on all heads made from the same mold.

The date of these heads is based on comparisons with Attic sculpture. The broad facial type, the level eyes with prominent lids, and the depressions at the corners of the mouth compare with heads carved in the period ca. 490 B.C. Greek influence reached Etruria through the Greek cities in southern Italy and Sicily.

This head forms part of a class of votive offerings made in Etruria beginning in the last quarter of the 6th century B.C. They appear in sanctuaries dedicated to a mother goddess, and the early ones may represent the goddess herself. Male and female heads that seem to represent worshippers appear slightly later ca. 500 B.C. It is to this latter class that the museum's head belongs.