



ANCIENT TERRACOTTAS

Lasting Impressions of the Distant Past

"ANCIENT TERRACOTTAS: Lasting Impressions of the Distant Past" is an exhibition of mouldmade terracottas (baked clay objects) from various parts of the Classical world and ancient Near East. Mouldmade terracottas are one of the most valuable documents of ancient life available to archaeologists and historians, for they were used in the routine activities of ordinary people and thus bear witness to aspects of ancient life about which written history is often silent. Terracottas were inexpensive; their material, baked clay, was readily available, and owing to the moulding technique they could be made easily and quickly. As a result, most people could afford to own them, and in fact they served a broad and socially diverse market, as is indicated by their manifold functions and subjects.

As a supplement to the exhibition, this brochure provides an overview of manufacturing techniques and a survey of functions and subjects. The discussion embraces figurines which were used in antiquity as grave gifts, devotional images, knick-knacks, ornaments, and toys; as well as a range of other mouldmade terracottas which functioned as *ex-votos* (dedications in fulfillment of vows), *apotropaia* (safeguards against evil), lamps, vessels, and architectural decorations. The terracottas on view, all from the collections of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, span nearly a thousand years in time, dating from the 5th century BC to the 4th century AD.

TECHNIQUE

MAKING A MOULDED FIGURINE

The ancient Greeks called makers of terracotta figurines **coroplasts**, or image-makers, regardless of whether the images were handmade or mouldmade. Today, however, the term coroplastic is applied more specifically to mouldmade terracotta objects, especially figurines.

Moulds were first introduced into the Greek world in the 8th or 7th century BC, probably from the Near East, where the craft of casting solid clay figurines in single moulds had been in use since the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. The characteristically Greek technique of making **hollow** images, although used in some parts of the Greek world as early as the late 7th century BC, did not come into common usage until the early 5th century BC. The versatile hollow-moulding technique marked an advance over the earlier solid-moulding method. Thin-walled and light-weight, hollow images were more attractive in appearance, and required less clay. In addition, hollow images did not warp or crack in the kiln as easily as solid images, and hence were better balanced. The hollow-moulding technique did not entirely displace the older method, however: both techniques were used throughout the Greek and Roman periods.

In the production of a hollow-moulded figurine the majority of the work was completed before the figurine was ever fired. First the coroplast made a mould, usually by pouring plaster around a hand-fashioned model or **archetype**, although the earliest moulds were made of fired clay. Once the plaster had hardened, it was removed from the archetype in sections, one generally consisting of the figurine's front and the other of the figurine's reverse. Clay was pressed into the mould a strip at a time and allowed to dry to the leathery-hard (**greenware**) state. The impressions were then removed from the mould and the two halves of the figurines were joined together. As the craftsman pressed the edges of the two halves together a raised seam was formed which was later pared with a sharp instrument.

While the figurine was still in the greenware state, the craftsman might incise the surface, either to retouch details, or to add new ones, making each impression unique. The animated grin on the face of an actor (Fig. 1) is not a moulded feature, for example, but the result of greenware tooling. Also at this time, the surface of the figurine might be coated with a solution of liquid clay (**slip**), as in the case of an incense lamp in the shape of a matron with a child (Fig. 3, left). Consisting of dense, fine clay particles, slips gave sheen to the surface of the figurine and usually fired to a richer color than the terracotta fabric itself.

The final step before firing was to make a vent. The craftsman would bore a hole through one of the walls of the image to prevent the figurine from warping or bursting during



Fig. 1
COMIC ACTOR?
Hellenistic, 4th century BC
KM 29104
Case 13, No. 13

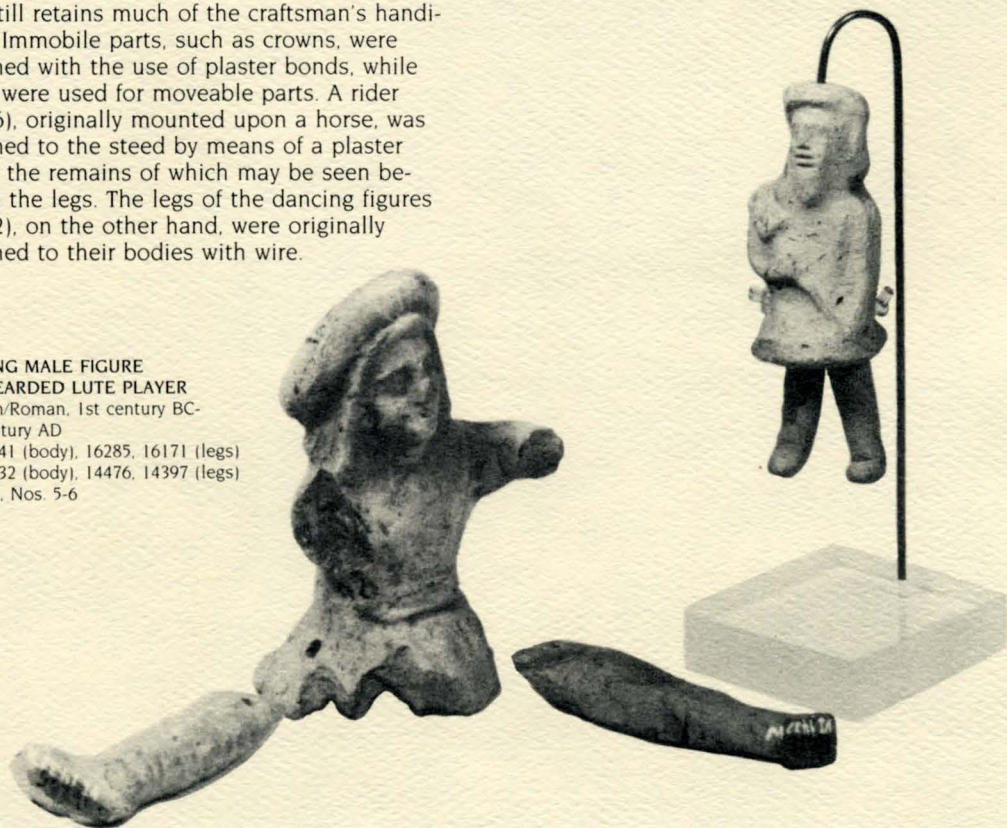
firing from the expansion of gases within the interior. In most figurines the vent was located in the reverse (see Case 2, No. 3), where it would not be noticed. A horse (Fig. 4, below) exhibits a small inconspicuous vent in the lower left abdomen. Finally, the figurine was placed in the kiln and fired into its permanent form.

After firing the craftsman decorated the surface of the figurine. Decoration usually consisted of painting or adding separately moulded elements. Figurines were usually gaily painted, either directly on the surface, or over a lime-wash basecoat. A figurine depicting Harpocrates seated upon a lotus (Case 2, No. 7), for example, still retains much of the craftsman's handwork. Immobile parts, such as crowns, were attached with the use of plaster bonds, while wires were used for moveable parts. A rider (Fig. 6), originally mounted upon a horse, was attached to the steed by means of a plaster bond, the remains of which may be seen between the legs. The legs of the dancing figures (Fig. 2), on the other hand, were originally attached to their bodies with wire.

THE COROPLAST AS ENTREPRENEUR

The objective of the Greek coroplast lay in high yield and low production cost: maximum use was made of each mould to produce as many figurines as possible. The coroplast's shop must have operated along the lines of the modern factory, although the division of labor in the ancient production process could hardly have approached the refinements of the systems of mass production in use today. It is likely that the coroplast's shop consisted of a master craftsman or artist who modelled the originals himself and then supervised a hired or apprenticed crew to carry out such routine labors as

Fig. 2
DANCING MALE FIGURE
AND BEARDED LUTE PLAYER
Parthian/Roman, 1st century BC-
2nd century AD
KM 16141 (body), 16285, 16171 (legs)
KM 15632 (body), 14476, 14397 (legs)
Case 13, Nos. 5-6



preparing the clay, tooling the greenware impressions, and operating the kiln.

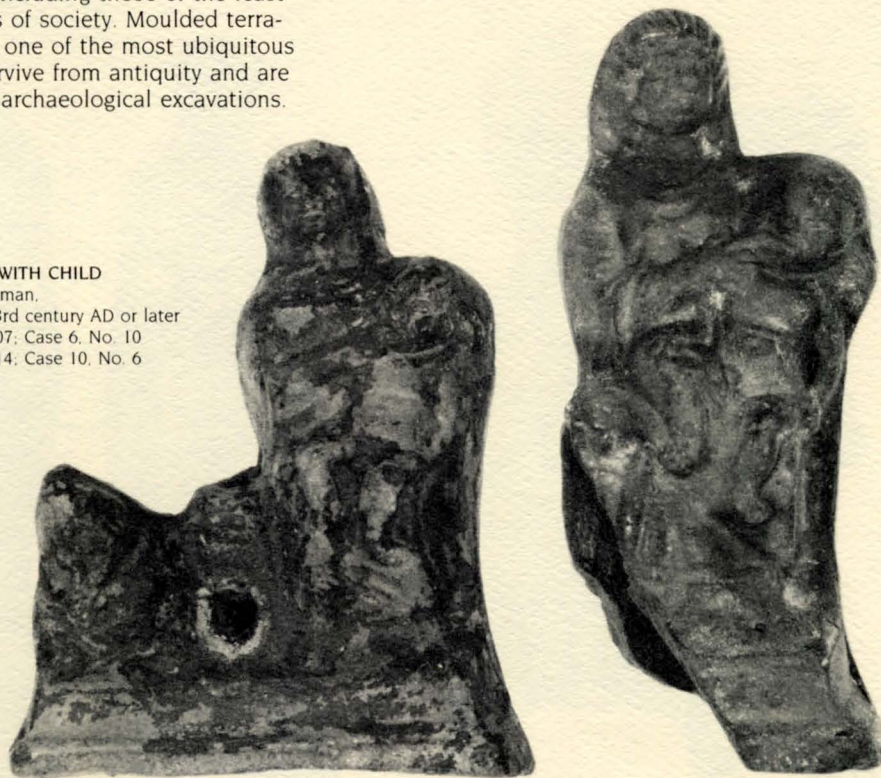
There is good evidence, moreover, that figurine-makers lent (or perhaps rented) their moulds to lamp-makers and potters, who then adapted them for their own use. For example, a figurine of a matron with a child (Fig. 3, right) has a virtual twin among the lamps (Fig. 3, left), and the mould used to produce a head on a horned altar fragment (Case 3, No. 16) may have been shared among craftsmen of varying specializations.

The moulding technique permitted terracottas to be made easily and quickly, and at a price most people could afford. Undoubtedly terracottas made their way into the households of all social levels, including those of the least affluent members of society. Moulded terracottas are in fact one of the most ubiquitous art forms that survive from antiquity and are frequent finds at archaeological excavations.

QUALITY IN PRODUCTION

Quality control was a problem in the shops of the ancient coroplasts, just as it is in modern factories using mass production techniques. Because quantity was a priority, there was frequently little concern for quality in craftsmanship. Seams were not well trimmed, especially in provincial workshops, and careless handling often resulted in damage to the greenware impression. Furthermore, moulds were routinely overused or improperly maintained, causing shallowness in the moulds and a consequent dullness in the detail of the impressions.

Fig. 3
MATRON WITH CHILD
Graeco-Roman.
Late 2nd-3rd century AD or later
KM 71.2.207; Case 6, No. 10
KM 71.2.214; Case 10, No. 6



A severe case of poor tooling and mould dullness may be seen in a terracotta horse found at Karanis, Egypt (Fig. 4, below). A late issue from its mould, and carelessly tooled and handled in the greenware state, this horse is a sorry specimen compared to the mould duplicate with which it is compared here (Fig. 4, above). In another case a cracked mould was used to produce an *Osiris canopus* (Fig. 5, right) causing a raised ridge across the face of the figurine. An undamaged, albeit dulled, specimen of the same type (Fig. 5, left) illustrates the features of the face as they should appear. The fact that figurines representing the standing horse and *Osiris canopus* frequently suffer from dullness suggests there was a high demand for these particular figurine types. The moulds that produced them must have been in frequent use.



Fig 4
STANDING HORSES
Graeco-Roman, 2nd-3rd century AD
KM 6891, 6893
Case 3, Nos. 1-2

Remarkably, poor quality seems not to have affected the marketability of terracottas. Large numbers of dulled terracottas were brought to completion and, presumably, sold and used. The explanation for this phenomenon is twofold. First, superficial irregularities and dullness in detail were to some degree concealed by the use of surface paint. Second, and more important, technical inferiorities were for the most part immaterial: the terracottas were desired for the indispensable services they rendered and for the subjects they portrayed.



Fig. 5
OSIRIS CANOPUS
Graeco-Roman, 1st-3rd century AD
KM 6963, 6962
Case 3, Nos. 4, 5

FUNCTION & SUBJECT

The function of some terracottas is evident from their form, as with lamps, vessels, and architectural decorations. For other terracottas function may be determined by examining the contexts in which they were discovered and the subjects they represent. For example, the fact that terracottas have been found in tombs indicates that they sometimes served funerary purposes, while the consistent discovery of certain types of terracottas in the vicinity of sanctuaries has led archaeologists to believe they were used as votive offerings. Subject provides perhaps the most precise clue to function in terracottas. Indeed, function and subject are intimately related.

VOTIVE TERRACOTTAS

Votive terracottas, also known as *ex-votos*, are those which have been dedicated to a divinity in fulfillment of a vow. Votive terracottas might be presented to the deity in hopes of or in gratitude for receiving a divine favor. Among the most common *ex-votos* are body parts such as heads, arms, and legs found in healing sanctuaries (see Case 4). Scholars believe that such votives represented diseased or injured parts of the anatomy, and that ailing persons dedicated them to the healing divinities of the sanctuaries in order to obtain a cure.

FUNERARY TERRACOTTAS

Terracottas were frequently placed in tombs, either because they were cherished by the deceased during his/her lifetime, or because they had a special meaning in a funerary context. For example, most "**Tanagra**" figurines (Case 15, No. 6), which depict aristocratic ladies in charming and affected poses, have been found in cemeteries, particularly at Tanagra in Greece, whence they derive their name. Scholars believe these figurines were placed in the tombs because they had been personal possessions of the deceased. A figurine of a victorious charioteer (Fig. 6) from a cemetery in Terenouthis, Egypt, on the other hand, was probably placed in the grave as a symbol of the soul's victory over death.

The precise meaning of grave gifts often eludes scholars. The orant figurines from Graeco-Roman Egypt (Frontispiece), so-called because their hands are raised at the side in the **orans** (worshipping) gesture, have sometimes been found in tombs. Two orants from the Terenouthis cemetery (Case 11, Nos. 1-2); for example, were found in niches flanking the door of a tomb. Why orant figurines should be placed in a tomb is not certain, but the reason may have something to do with the *orans* gesture itself. According to some scholars the *orans* gesture is connected with the hieroglyph for the **Ka** or spirit. Another possibility is that the gesture is a sign of respect for a god or the deceased.

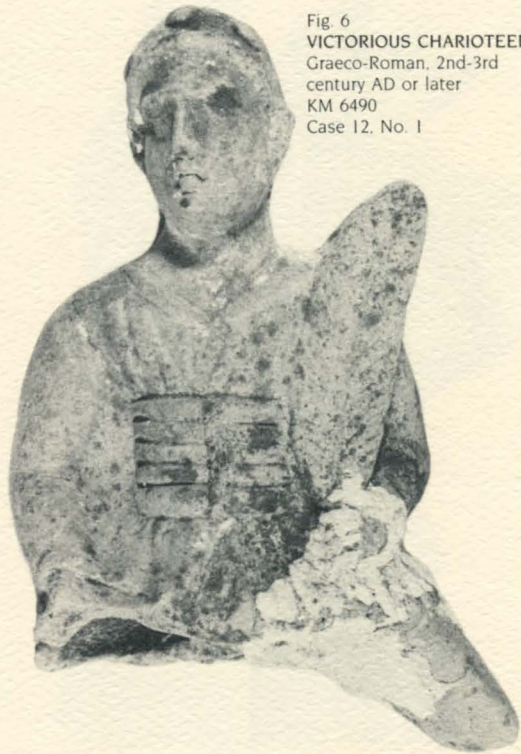


Fig. 6
VICTORIOUS CHARIOTEER
Graeco-Roman, 2nd-3rd
century AD or later
KM 6490
Case 12, No. 1

APOTROPAIA

Apotropaia are symbols used to ward off evil. Terracottas with apotropaic powers usually depict human subjects having grotesque, ugly, or deformed features, which were expected literally to revolt the enemy or evil force. For example the hideous but benevolent divinity Bes (Fig. 7) protected women in childbirth, while images of the scowling fertility god Priapus (Case 10, Nos. 2-3) were sometimes placed in gardens or strung from trees in groves to frighten away demons. The disembodied head of the infamous gorgon Medusa, whose glance turned people into stone, is a frequent apotropaic symbol, appearing on vessels (Case 7), sarcophagi, and in architecture.



Fig. 7
WARRIOR BES
Graeco-Roman,
1st-2nd century AD
KM 71.2.208
Case 10, No. 4

DEVOTIONAL TERRACOTTAS

Terracotta images of divinities fulfilled the needs of the populace to worship, be protected by, and feel close to their gods. These terracottas functioned as embodiments of the divinities portrayed. To possess a god's image was to assure its divine presence and to provide the medium through which the devotee could interact with the deity. Such devotional images were worshipped and admired in the hope of gaining the patronage of the god, as illustrated by a large terracotta image of Persephone from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, Iraq, on view in the exhibition (see Shrine Model). This image, as well as a figure of Adonis (or Tammuz) found with it, were undoubtedly intended to be displayed in a shrine.

One of the most popular deities in Graeco-Roman Egypt was the child-god Harpocrates (Fig. 8), who was usually depicted as a chubby boy, often holding his finger to his mouth in the gesture typical of a child. Beloved of the common people for his protection of agrarian fertility and for his reputation as a pious son, Harpocrates was probably worshipped both in domestic contexts and in public places through the medium of terracotta images and wall paintings (see Shrine Model, side panels). Evidently he was also granted official recognition, for certain terracottas depict temple priests bearing his shrine (see Shrine Model, reverse wall).



Fig. 8
BUST OF HARPOCRATES
Graeco-Roman,
2nd-early 4th century AD
KM 6461
Case 9, No. 5

UTILITARIAN TERRACOTTAS

Certain mouldmade terracottas were purely utilitarian. Moulded vessels, like their metal and wheel-thrown pottery counterparts, served as bottles, bowls, altars, and lamps (see Case 6, Nos. 1-5, 11, 15, 19-24). These vessels frequently imitate the shape and decoration of their metal and wheel-thrown prototypes.

The moulding technique enabled the craftsman to impart to the bodies of such vessels a plastic quality that could not be obtained by the wheel-throwing method. Moulded figural lamps and bottles (Case 6, Nos. 6-10) are far more ornate than most wheel-thrown examples. They were probably intended for special situations. In these cases, the subject depicted provides a clue to specific function. For example, the lamp in the shape of Eros, the god of erotic love, riding a dolphin (Case 6, No. 6) may be a *lucerna cubicularis*, a lamp for the bed-chamber, while a bottle in the shape of a bust of Dionysos (Case 6, No. 3) may have held a libation of wine destined to honor that god. Finally, an incense lamp in the shape of a matron with a child (Fig. 3, left) may have carried much the same sentiment as candles in cathedrals today.

ORNAMENTAL TERRACOTTAS AND KNICK-KNACKS

As early as the 8th-7th century BC in the Classical world, and earlier still in the ancient Near East, mouldmade terracottas were used as architectural ornaments (Case 5). Moulded relief plaques embellished flat surfaces and concealed transitions in masonry, sometimes imparting a sensuous curve to plain or rough edges (Case 5, Nos. 1-2, 7). Plaques called **antefixes** (Fig. 9) covered the junctures of roof tiles facing the front of buildings, and whole figures (*acroteria*) often crowned the gables of temples.

Terracotta figurines probably served on occasion as ornaments, whether as *objets d'art* or simple knick-knacks. Many figurines are small-scale replicas of well-known bronze and stone statuary, as in the case of an Aphrodite *pudica* (Fig. 10). Inexpensive and easily transportable, rep-

Fig. 9
ANTEFIX
Roman.
1st century BC-2nd century AD
KM 69.7.1
Case 5, No. 3



licas served to disseminate antiquity's most celebrated works of art among people of all social levels. Although "Tanagra" figurines (Case 15, No. 6) frequently ended up in tombs, they may originally have been intended as the ancient equivalents of knick-knacks or collectors' items.

Fig. 10
APHRODITE *PUDICA*
Graeco-Roman.
1st-3rd century AD
KM 6533
Case 16, No. 2



TERRACOTTAS OF UNDETERMINED USE

The function of terracottas can not always be determined precisely. In these cases it is tempting to suggest uses based on modern analogies. It was suggested above, for example, that certain figurine types served as knick-knacks. It seems fair to assume, moreover, that the dancing figurines with moveable legs (Fig. 2) were toys or children's noisemakers.

It is often risky, however, to conjecture function on the basis of modern analogies. Three dogs from Graeco-Roman Egypt (Fig. 11) provide a good illustration. So appealing to the modern sense of charm, these dogs have occasionally been identified by scholars as children's toys, and in fact terracotta dogs with pull strings and wheels have been found in the ancient agora of Athens. In rural Egypt, however, where people were conservative and very religious, such dogs may have had religious significance. For example, the dogs may represent Isis-Sothis, the dog-star, whose appearance on the horizon heralded the approach of the harvest season. In fact, Harpocrates, the patron of agrarian fertility and

son of Isis, is sometimes depicted borne on the back of such dogs (Case 9, No. 3), and some dogs of this type bear a star on their foreheads.

It is likely, moreover, that terracottas were not necessarily restricted to any one use, rather, that they could function variously, depending on the whims of their possessors. A terracotta originally intended as an ornament or knick-knack might have become a toy in the hands of a child, for example, and it has already been pointed out that cherished objects could follow one into the tomb as grave gifts.



Fig. 11
STANDING DOGS
Graeco-Roman, 2nd-3rd century AD
KM 6905, 6594, 6592
Case 9, Nos. 16-18

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Although small and centuries old, terracottas, especially the figurines, have a timeless appeal. Inspired in part by scenes of life and in part by the imagination, they afford insights into how the ancients viewed themselves, their ideals, and their gods. Because they were affordable, they held a special place among the common people of ancient times, and in function and subject they are telling documents of a people not so intrinsically different from ourselves. These objects have survived through the centuries to bring us a vivid impression of ancient life and times.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been my great pleasure to prepare this exhibition for the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, and I should like to thank the museum for giving me the opportunity to do so. I am grateful to John G. Pedley, Director, and especially to Elaine K. Gazda, Associate Director/Curator, a long time friend and advisor. My thanks are also due to a number of other staff members at the museum. Technician David Slee attended me at every stage of the installation, bringing my ideas into actuality and enriching them through his skills as an artist and designer. Pamela Reister, Registrar, was a close consultant from the inception of the exhibition. Amy Rosenberg, Associate Curator of Conservation, and Tara Grant, Conservation Intern, cleaned and treated many of the objects in the exhibition. Secretaries Ioanie Howard and Carol Stein assisted in printing the labels, and Administrative Assistant Lorene Sterner performed indispensable administrative and secretarial tasks. Finally, I should like to thank Carol Hellman and Carol Taylor of University Publications for expediting the publication of this brochure.

Marti Lu Allen
Guest Curator

SUGGESTED READING

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