

The Spoils of Paestum **By Milton Gendel**

Beneath the artichoke fields south of Naples, and hard by the three great Greek temples of Paestum, archeologists have uncovered the first examples of Greek wall paintings from the time of Pericles

In the new excavations at Paestum, among the temples and artichoke fields south of Naples, some looted tombs were found in which a leisurely ghoul left his initials and the dates of his operations - "M.S. 1863-1864". And if Paestum on the whole is one of the great archeological sites in Italy that remains free of deprivations and vandalism, this happy state is the result of the policies of Mario Napoli, Superintendent of Antiquities for the Salerno region, who applied the laws of "finder's compensation" - and with great dispatch. When a local farmer accidentally found the necropolis that yielded the largest body of Hellenic paintings yet known, he did not hastily cover up the find, to avoid the usually lethargic process of government inspection, or break the law by selling the antiquities, but immediately reported to the Superintendent. In the ensuing excavations the discovery of a vase signed by Python, another example of whose work is in the British Museum, alone paid the farmer \$4,800. The single find was worth considerably more than the entire artichoke crop for the year. Had the Tomb of the Diver - the only known large-scale example of 5th-century Greek painting - not been found on state land the government would have had to pay the owner and finder \$5,000,000. Napoli's secret is the payment of full market prices, based on world auction catalogues, without haggling and without delay.

This policy, backed by a comprehensive digging campaign and the scholarship, experience and flair of Napoli and of Finaldi, director of the Paestum museum, contributed to the sensational discovery of some 50 painted tombs, now handsomely displayed in a new wing behind the stiff and pompous main building of the museum built under Fascism. Because of its three magnificent Greek temples, Paestum has always attracted looters, travelers and artists, from Robert the Weasel to Piranesi, Goethe, Stendhal, Edward Lear and the lamentable M.S. The new frescoes and tomb furniture put it on a par with Tarquinia and Pompeii for anyone who is interested in ancient art.

Like America and Europe, Brazil and Portugal, Texas and the United States, Greater Greece together with its motherland produced a civilization that was bigger if not always better than the stock from which it sprang. In the 6th century B.C., the Greek colonies in southern Italy built some of the most ambitious cities and temples in the Hellenic world. The lavishness of jewelry, pottery and furnishings from the 4th century on would be equaled again only in 19th-century Paris under the Third Republic. But the opulence and ease, the sybaritism, of Magna Graecia was a byword before the destruction of Sybaris by Milo of Croton in 510 B.C. Refugees from the ruined city on the Gulf of Taranto made their way through the Apennine valleys to Poseidonia on the Tyrrhenian Sea, another rich city, which had been founded several generations earlier by Sybaris itself.

Established in an area inhabited since Paleolithic times, close to a famous religious sanctuary, Poseidonia, later called Paestum, was strategically situated for economic development. It became a flourishing maritime and agricultural center for the valley of the Sele and the entire Lucanian plain, and for trade east to Taranto, south to Sicily and north to Cuma and the Etruscan territories. Poseidonia's three great Doric temples, which have survived for two and a half millenniums, were built in the 6th and 5th centuries. They give some measure of the wealth and sophistication of the world that also produced the paintings unearthed during the last few years in cemeteries around the city.

Sporadic finds of painted scenes such as those in the Naples museum of the notable tomb from Ruvo with a frieze of dancing women, and a tomb from Paestum with Samnite warriors carrying banners, had been made in the past. But the new finds, still in course, already amount to some 200 paintings, and constitute the archeological discovery of our generation. Until now it has been generally accepted that the history of painting in Italy began with the Etruscans, and such an authority on ancient Italic art as Massimo Pallottino has suggested that an autochthonous art impulse rooted in Tuscany has been responsible not only for Etruscan art but for the whole sweep of Italian art through the Renaissance. But the new corpus of paintings already outnumbers the 23 surviving cycles at Tarquinia and Chiusi, and the random examples from Veio, Cerveteri, Orvieto and Vulci. Both Etruscan and Paestan painting must be seen in the general context of Greek life, from Ionia and Attica to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

The question of what was central and what was peripheral in Greek painting remained academic until the epochal discovery in a necropolis south of Paestum of the Tomb of the Diver, with its fresco cycle painted ca. 480. Before this unique example of full-scale Greek painting was dug up only a vague idea of how the Greek masters worked could be formed from the indirect evidence of vases, a few painted slabs and descriptive passages in ancient literature. Unique means single, though, and unless other examples are found it will not be clear whether the Tomb of the Diver represents a peak or an average level of painting in the Age of Pericles. It looks like a masterpiece for any age, however, especially in the scenes painted by the more advanced artist of the two that Mario Napoli persuasively distinguishes in his monograph, *La Tomba del Tuffatore*.

The man buried in the tomb died some time between the building of the so-called Temple of Ceres (end of 6th century) and the so-called Temple of Neptune (ca. 450). Three long and two short rectangular limestone slabs decorated with painted scenes were ordered from an artist's studio. These were assembled in a pit at the cemetery to form the sides and lid of a tomb, which was oriented so that the body lay with its head to the east. Overhead, the diver makes his plunge into the infinite, as Napoli explains the scene. On the walls a symposium is taking place, with the ritual number of ten participants (as in the Jewish prayers for the dead) - reclining, four in two pairs, and two singly, on five banqueting couches. Some are playing cottabus, the wine-throwing game; others sing, play pipes or hold lyres; two peer at each other amorously. On the end panel two men are being piped into the party (or away from it) by a little girl. They are leaving, or "Going West," according to Napoli. The gesture of the last man on the north wall is ambiguous; it may indicate a greeting or a farewell.

In the same tradition, but different in expression and looser in composition, are the more recently excavated tombs, all of which have unfrescoed double-pitched slab roofs. Their walls were painted between 340 and 320 B.C., about 150 years after the Tomb of the Diver. By that time Poseidonia had fallen to the Lucanians, who called it Paistom, an approximation of the place's aboriginal name. Apparently the Greeks accommodated themselves to new overlords, who ruled the city until the Roman conquest in 273, for there is no sign of an economic decline. The tombs are rich in armor, precious objects and elaborately shaped and decorated ceramics. Signed pieces by Astreas and Python, as well as works by the Aphrodite Master have been found. As for the frescoes—again painted on limestone slabs in a studio (some retain the marks of the ropes used to lower them into position)—they were also presumably executed for the benefit of the dead and were not to be visible to any living eyes after the burial. Napoli thinks that this practice may indicate that the dead belonged to an Orphic or Pythagorean cult whose eschatological beliefs called for certain imagery. His theory would explain why only certain individuals or groups had to have frescoed graves—the great majority are unpainted. But aside from an unexplained symbol of a disk divided into quadrants, which appears several times on the wall of the Tomb of the Winged Victories, and also on a kylix found in the tomb, the representations do not seem to have esoteric significance.

The banqueting or symposium scene of the Tomb of the Diver, also a common subject in Etruscan tombs, has not reappeared among the 4th-century frescoes. There is, however, a repetition, expressed in a lively variety of styles and personal manners, of a number of themes standard in Greek funeral iconography. The dead lying on a bier and mourned 'by women tearing their hair goes back to the Dipylon vases. A departing horseman saluted by a woman proffering a dish, vase or other object, is also a well-known theme. Chariot racing and bloody combat had been features of Greek funeral games at least since the Trojan War, according to the description of Patroclus' funeral in the Iliad. Etruscan tombs are filled with these scenes, which are the precedents of Roman gladiatorial games, as are the Paestan frescoes. Each combatant in one pair armed with boxing gloves has bloodied the other's nose, and the blood has been represented by the artist in an exuberant spiral of red paint. Two nude wrestlers have raked each other's cheeks with their nails. These ritual combats were accompanied by music, and standing by each pair there is a piper with a curious head harness - said to be peculiarly Lucanian - that served as a sling, or perhaps a mute for the piping. A vein of grotesquerie occurs, and one of the pipers, shown nude, makes a preposterous pot-bellied figure. Somewhat less caricatural is the singer, with mouth at the widest stretch, who is probably wearing a whiskery mask.

Familiar subjects, however, may take astonishing form, as in the winged Gorgon-headed Charon welcoming an elegant matron on board his bark; she steps up the gangplank followed by a retinue of attendants leading a sacrificial ox and carrying furniture and a tray of eggs and pomegranates. But the most interesting of the 4th-century tombs, because of its possible historic significance, is the Tomb of the Captain. On the evidence of the subject and the date, the soldier for whom the scenes were painted may have been the commander of the Paestan forces, one of the victors over Alexander the Molossian, King of the Epirus, who reconquered Paestum for the Greeks in 326 and lost it again to Samnite and Lucanian forces four years later. The end panel shows the Captain cloaked and in armor (his helmet is like a bronze one found in another tomb) leading a yellow horse. On a side panel a heroic nude figure stands in front of one army synecdochically represented by shields and heads, while the enemy host is shown as a band of cattle rustlers in the lee of a hill behind which the stolen herds are hidden and on which an outsize pomegranate appears. On the other side, beautiful paintings of a woman with a jar on her head, accompanied by a red rose (Paestum was famous for its roses), a funerary column and a couple of pomegranates, are done in the same traditional but locally flavored style.

Pomegranates have a particular importance in the history of Paestum, before the Greeks and after. They are as prominent in prehistoric Mediterranean life as the grape and the fig. The religious significance of the pomegranate goes back to the agricultural economy that preceded the introduction of grain as a crop. As an attribute of the Great Mother in the Bronze Age it symbolized divine femininity, thus fertility, mortality and resurrection - following the logic of the recurrent cycles of the seasons and life. The symbol, found as early as the second millennium in Cycladic vases, remained so potent that an entire city, Side in Pamphilia, was dedicated to the pomegranate, and coins minted there bear representations of the fruit. Side was named after the wife of Orion, the mythical hunter who pitched her into Hades for competing with Hera in a beauty contest. In her fascinating essay on ancient pomegranate worship, Ileana Chirassi (*Elementi di Culture Precereali nei Miti e Riti Greci*) argues that this myth records the passage of the cult into the Greek polytheistic pantheon.

But the mythology of the pomegranate is complex and the fruit is not only an attribute of Hera, but of Core and Persephone (daughter aspects and opponents of Demeter, the cereal goddess who superseded them) as well as Aphrodite and Athena. It is also associated with the funerary cult of warrior heroes. Furthermore, the golden apples of the Hesperides, the apple of the Garden of Eden

and the apple in the Judgment of Paris probably were all pomegranates. And of course this was the fruit whose pips ensured that Persephone would spend half the year – winter – in Hades.

At Paestum, Hera, brought in by the Greeks, takes the place of the Great Mother, and the imposing remains of the sanctuary of Argive Hera at the mouth of the Sele, by the coast outside the town, show the importance of the cult. In addition, two of the great classical temples in Paestum proper were dedicated to Hera, and the third to Athena, both goddesses having the pomegranate as an attribute. Pomegranates as a funerary symbol have wide currency, appearing on gravestones in Volos, on the Greek mainland, at Tarquinia (in the Tomb of the Bulls, for instance), in tombs from Cuma and in great abundance at Paestum. Although it does not figure in the Tomb of the Diver - where the only manifest symbol is an egg, also standing for rebirth - it is the most common element in the 4th-century frescoes, used as decoration, realistic representation (as in the trays crowded with eggs and pomegranates) or visionary objects floating among pieces of armor that are on a gigantic scale compared to the departing rider.

The sacrifices connected with pomegranate worship - derived from myths based on cultivation of the tree and fruit - called for enclosing the sacrifice in a box and casting it into the ground. Along with research on the mystic sects current in Magna Graecia it would be worth investigating the painted tomb burials as reflecting the larnax, or box, burials of the pomegranate cult.

As eternal as the cycle of death and rebirth they symbolize, the egg and the pomegranate recur all through medieval and Byzantine art and then figure in such Renaissance masterpieces as Piero della Francesca's Brera *Madonna* and Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate*. But the most remarkable instance, suggesting a vertiginous perspective of cultural survival, is that of the Madonna del Granato (pomegranate), the protectress of Capaccio Vecchio, the town in the hills beyond Paestum to which the last inhabitants of the city fled - from Saracens and malaria - in the 9th century. Ancient Hera might have sat for the portrait of the local Madonna, who holds the Child in one arm and a pomegranate in the other hand. Twice a year there are still pilgrimages to the Madonna's shrine, above Capaccio Vecchio, and until recently on those occasions hundreds of women carrying out vows could be seen making the ascent to the church on their knees, some licking the ground as they held up a pomegranate in one hand or balanced a basket of the fruit on their heads. The pomegranates were left as offerings at the altar of the Madonna.