Sicily: The Greek Legacy

by Gail Leggio

Classical antiquity—"the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome," in Lord Byron's neat formulation—has long been considered the bedrock of Western civilization. But our understanding of that heritage is ever-changing, as archaeologists uncover fresh evidence and historians speculate about how to adjust their models of the past, always acknowledging that much has been irretrievably lost. How do we define ancient classicism? Increasingly, we are recognizing how complex and vital were the cross-currents of life around the Mediterranean. An exhibition recently at the Getty Museum, and now at the Cleveland Museum of Art, "Sicily: Art and Invention between Greece and Rome" focuses on a crucial place and time: Sicily in the era of Greek colonization.

The Greeks arrived around 734 BC, founded settlements and began calling themselves Sikeliotes (Sicilian Greeks). Sicily was no backwater; it was a major force in Magna Graecia. For half a millennium, Syracuse was one of the great cities of the ancient world. The temples at Segesta, Selinunte and Agrigento are among the best and best-preserved Doric architectural examples in the world. This exhibition—with 150 objects, many on loan from museums in Sicily—consists necessarily of portable artworks, but they suggest the splendor of the temples.

Two figurative sculptures from Selinunte, now in the archaeological museum in Palermo, offer dramatic testimony. A terracotta altar depicts the dawn goddess Eos leading the hunter Kephalos (early fifth century BC), and a limestone and marble metope shows Zeus on his throne, tenderly lifting the veil from Hera's face, a gesture from the wedding ceremony (460–450 BC). These remarkable works should whet any art lover's appetite for a visit to the Salone di Selinunte in the Palermo museum. The artistry on display is superb, and the subjects reveal the original energy behind the familiar myths: Dementer and Kore; the rape of Europa, with attendant dolphins; Perseus slaying Medusa, and the winged horse Pegasus springing from her blood. Other works from around the island—the nineteen lion-head waterspouts from the Temple of Victory at Himera (480 BC) are particularly striking—fill the museum's seventeenth-century building, originally a convent, with its cool, landscaped cloisters. The collection is not limited to Greek artifacts. There are Egyptian gods and hieroglyphs, Roman sculpture and Phoenician sarcophagi.

Although the catalogue authors—forty international scholars participated in this project[1]—do not delve deeply into the non-Greek culture of ancient Sicily, the island has always been multicultural. Carthage in North Africa exerted a counter-pull to Athens, and the Phoenicians dominated the west of

Statue of a Youth (*The Mozia Charioteer*), Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek), 470–460 BC
COURTESY OF THE GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

the island, even as the Greek colonies and city-states flourished. Situated in the Mediterranean at the crossroads of Greece, Italy and North Africa, Sicily had strategic importance and was blessed by nature with a temperate climate, abundant crops and a bounty of seafood. Over millennia, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans and Spaniards have contributed to a heady mix of cultures, with a uniquely Sicilian flavor.

The Duomo in Syracuse is typical of the fusion of eras and styles. The site was already considered sacred before the ruler Gelon built a great temple to Athena in the fifth century BC. When the site became a Christian church, raised to the status of cathedral in 640, the temple's cella became the nave, and its Doric columns provided the still-visible skeleton of the building. Remnants of Norman furnishings also remain, behind the Baroque façade, constructed after an earthquake. The novelist Lawrence Durrell describes, in his very personal travel memoir *Sicilian Carousel*, the "deeply harmonious and congruent" feeling of the place, which embodies "the quick or the quiddity of Sicily":

> It has a peaceful feeling of inevitability, as if it had been achieved during sleep, inerringly.... It was also a sort of living X-ray of our whole culture, or let us say, the history of the religious impulse in one vivid cross-sec-

tion.... Here we were standing on a spot which had been consecrated ground before the Greeks, then during the Greek reign, and finally for the Christians.[2]

This sort of inspired, organic hybridization goes on across Sicily, even when the evidence is too subtle to be immediately apparent. The Temple of Concord at Agrigento (fifth century BC), with its thirty-four Doric columns, is a masterpiece of classical architecture, but we owe its state of preservation to its conversion to a Christian basilica in the fourth century AD. (It was restored to its ancient form in 1748.)

The curators of this exhibition aim to untangle a single, important strand from Sicily's multicultural tapestry, adopting a Hellenocentric view. They further limit the subject by focusing on a specific timeline, choosing 480 BC, with the Sikeliotes' victory over Carthage, as a starting point, and 212 BC, with the Roman conquest of Syracuse, as an end. Within these relatively narrow parameters, a dazzling civilization is revealed, and several masterpieces grace this show. The statue of a youth, known as *The Mozia Charioteer* (470–460 BC) is a stunning work. The head has an elegant severity, and the body is a tour de force. The relaxed way he shifts his weight—a subtle contrapposto—radiates confidence. The pleating of the thin linen accentuates the muscular limbs. The mix of realism and idealism exemplifies what we think of as classical humanism.

In one of the catalogue's Focus sections, devoted to important objects, Maria Luisa Famà discusses various theories about the figure, favoring the interpretation that it represents a victorious charioteer in the Panhellenic games. Other scholars, she acknowledges, have different ideas. *The Charioteer* was unearthed in 1976, on the island of Mozia (or Motya), the site of Phoenician ruins. Another interpretation takes the findspot into account, suggesting the statue may represent a priest of the god Baal, whose epithets include "divine charioteer." Or could it be a Greek statue taken as spoils of war by the Carthaginians in one of the island's many wars?[3] The catalogue

Coin with a Head of Apollo
Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek), minted Kantane
410–403 BC
MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICAL REGIONALE PAOLO ORSI, SYRACUSE

Coin with a Head of Silenos (The Aitna Tetradrachm), Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek) minted in Aitna, 476–466 BC

COURTESY OF AND © ROYAL LIBRARY OF BELGIUM

texts, for the most part, slant toward specialists rather than a general audience. Historians today tend to distinguish between what we actually know about the past and what we think or assume we know. Mary Beard, author of *The Roman Triumph* (2007) and *The Fires of Vesuvius* (2008), among other titles, manages to combine these subtleties with a vibrant narrative. The writers of this catalogue are less adept storytellers, but there is much to be gleaned from their analyses, and the objects are compelling.

Another highlight of the exhibition is a spectacular religious offering dish, known as a phiale mesophalos (late fourth–early third century BC). Made of two-and-a-half pounds of gold, the libation bowl, used to pour wine onto the altar, is similar to the ones carried by the caryatids at the Erechteion in Athens (reproduced at the Emperor Hadrian's villa outside Rome). The phiale mesophalos exemplifies the wealth and craftsmanship of ancient Sicily, and the design—spirals of ivy, along with concentric bands of stylized beechnuts, acorns, bees and blossoms—celebrates the natural beauty of the island.

The level of artistry extends to coins, as well, and a number of designers took the unusual step of signing their miniature bas-reliefs in tiny script. A silver tetradrachm, (410–403 BC) signed by Choirion, features a frontal head of Apollo, with dynamically sculpted waves and curls framing a pensive face. He wears an oak leaf crown and is flanked by a bow and a lyre, attributes of the god. On the reverse, Nike flies over a chariot, preparing to crown a victor. The quadriga—with four horses at full gallop—was a favorite motif, an opportunity to display the artist's skill. Numismatists have identified twenty Sicilians who signed their coins, such as Kimon, represented here by a silver decadrachm (405–400 BC) with a head of the nymph Arethousa, who was transformed into a spring on the island of Ortygia at Syracuse. Unsigned but confidently attributed to the Aitna Master is a silver tetradrachm (476–466 BC) with a marvelous profile head of Silenos, companion to Dionysos, on the obverse, and a seated Zeus, on the reverse. Details tie the iconography to Mount Etna,

Statuette of Demeter
Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek)
425–400 BC
MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICAL
REGIONALE, GELA

including vine leaves, a fir tree and a specific beetle, all associated with the fertile slopes of the volcano.

The Greek pantheon settled comfortably into the life and topography of Sicily. Of all the deities, Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, took root most decisively. By the fifth century BC, it had become canonical that Persephone had been abducted by Hades in Sicily, near Enna, in the meadows, fragrant with wildflowers, around Lake Perusa. Ancient coins from Enna depict Demeter with her attributes, the emblems of her myth: ears of corn, appropriate to the goddess of agriculture and the Eleusinian mysteries of death and rebirth; and the torch she carries as she searches for Persephone. A coin from Syracuse shows Persephone crowned by ears of corn and, on the reverse, Demeter and her torch, lit by the fires of Etna. In her catalogue essay, Caterina Greco notes the dramatic power of Demeter and Persephone as archetypes of female divinity: "the never-ending play of ambivalences and mirrorings—virgin/mother, life/death, human fertility/natural abundance."[4] The story resonates on several levels: as the personal drama of a mother who loses and regains her child, as an explanation of the cycle of the seasons, as the paradox at the heart of ancient mystery rites (echoed in the Christian theme of the seed buried and resurrected). John Milton refers to the myth, using the Roman versions of the deities' names, Ceres and Proserpine, in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*:

> That faire field
> Of Enna, where Proserpin gath'ring flours
> Her self a fairer Floure by gloomy Dis
> Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson captured the earthly devastation when Demeter withdraws her favors in his Victorian dramatic monologue "Demeter and Persephone":

> My quick tears kill'd the flower, my ravings hush'd
> The bird, and lost to utter gried, I fail'd
> To send my life thro' olive-yard and vine
> And golden grain, my gift to helpless man.
> Rain-rotten died the wheat, the barley-spears
> Were hollow-husk'd, the leaf fell, and the sun,
> Pale at my grief, drew down before his time
> Sickening, and Aetna kept her winter snow.

With the seasonal balance restored, Demeter renewed her vital protection to Earth and—especially, according to the ancient poets—Sicily. The ancient poet Pindar writes of the honors paid to "purple-footed Demeter" by Hieron I of Syracuse, and Bacchyledes says that Zeus put Sicily in the hands of Demeter and Persephone.

The cult of the goddesses was pervasive and may have built on even more ancient traditions on the island. The exhibition features a wide range of artifacts, some humble, such as a small terracotta vessel (late fourth–early third century BC) with wheat, barley and spelt seeds, associated with the mysteries. Votive statuettes were a major part of coroplastic production, the manufacture of terracotta objects. A head of Hades—the chthonic deity who abducted Persephone—from c. 350 BC still bears traces of paint. He is a striking individual, with heavy curls and beard; his deep-rimmed eyes may have been embellished with metal eyelashes. A statuette of Demeter (425–400 BC) wears long braids and a basket-shaped crown (*polos*). A votive relief of Demeter and Kore (420–400 BC) in marble (Kore was Persephone's alternative name) has a processional dignity. Demeter walks in front, carrying her torch, but with none of the desperation associated with her search. Persephone/Kore follows her, and their graceful movements seem almost choreographed. The relief may illustrate the Eleusinian mysteries.

Suggestions of another mystery cult, under the auspices of Dionysos, appear on a terracotta vase, a polychrome lebes gamikos (300–200 BC). It depicts a marriage ceremony, although the figures with a tympanum and an ivy crown also hint at the bride's participation in a religious initiation. The vessel serves a symbolic function. The conical lid, fixed to the body, looks like a

temple roof, with lion's-head waterspouts. A red-figured calyx krater (375–360 BC), which may have been used in a cremation burial, reveals another side of Dionysos, his rule of the theater. As the god, enthroned, watches, an acrobat does a handstand, and two comic actors cavort. The masks are evidence that North African performers appeared in Sicilian theaters.

In their catalogue introduction, Claire L. Lyons and Michael Bennett note that Sicily "was an irresistible magnet for talent from... mainland" Greece.[5] The founder of tragedy, Aeschylus, spent significant time in Sicily, drawn by a tradition of theater and the patronage of rulers in Gela and Syracuse. Aeschylus wrote his *Women of Aitra*, based on the myth of Thaleia, mother of the local deities, for Hieron of Syracuse, and, according to some accounts, wrote the *Oresteia* trilogy at Gela. Sicily was also the birthplace of the comic dramatist Epicharmos, much admired by Aristotle. Pindar wrote odes to Hieron, celebrating his victory in an Olympic horse race and praising the greatness of his court. The Sicilian courts were formidable centers of intellectual and artistic life, and Plato was one of the luminaries who flocked there. But Plato quarreled with the rulers and left denouncing the lavish tastes of the Sicilians, known for taking their everyday pleasures seriously, especially their food. The first celebrity cookbook authors were Sicilians from the late fifth century BC, Herakleides of Syracuse and Mithaikos. The exhibition features a red-figured bell krater (380–370 BC) depicting a lively exchange between a fishmonger and his customer over a fine tuna.

The homegrown Sicilian talent was equally impressive, including the Pre-Socratic poet-philosopher Empedokles, who developed the theory of the four elements and famously died by flinging himself into Mount Etna, and the master rhetorician Gorgias, who taught oratory to Pericles. Two of the most celebrated were the genius inventor Archimedes and the poet Theokritus. Bennett's assertion that "Archimedes... was the Einstein of antiquity"[6] seems convincing, considering the master's reputation in mathematics, physics and mechanical engineering. His inventions included a water clock, planetaria (kinetic working models of the planets) and various ingenious weapons, including sophisticated catapults. The exhibition represents his genius with the Archimedes Palimpsest, the oldest extant manuscript containing some of his treatises, the unique source for his *Method of Mechanical Theorems* and *Stomachia*, and the only Greek text for *On Floating Bodies*. The Palimpsest itself has a fascinating history, reminiscent of the stories in Stephen Greenblatt's fascinating study of the rediscovery of Lucretius, *The Swerve*. The Palimpsest, discovered in the early years of the twentieth century, is a medieval prayer book written over a scraped-down ancient manuscript. The undertext has been recovered through modern technology.

Archimedes was killed during the Roman conquest of Sicily, against the orders of the general Marcus Claudius Marcellus. The Roman admiration for Archimedes—and the role of Sicily in the Hellenization of Roman cul-

Lebes Gamikos (Lidded Wedding Vase), Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek), 300–200 BC
COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

ture—comes into focus in the career of Cicero. When Cicero was quester of Sicily in 75 BC, he restored a monument to Archimedes, a tribute depicted, in high rhetorical style, by Benjamin West in his painting *Cicero Discovering the Tomb of Archimedes* (1804). The orator made his career, in 70 BC, arguing the case of Sicilian clients in the corruption trial of Gaius Verres, a former governor accused of despoiling the temples. The Roman acquisition of conquered art is a complex issue, combining connoisseurship with looting and admiration. In her catalogue essay, Gabriella Cirucci cites the Roman historian Livy on the treasures of Sicily, the "adornments of a long peace and of royal wealth," bronze, silver "and many marble statues, with which Syracuse had been adorned more highly than most cities of Greece."[7]

Understandably, given its parameters, the catalogue cannot fully explore the scope of Sicily's influence on Rome as a vital conduit of ancient culture, not just through physical objects but also through ideas. The Sicilian poet Theokritus created, in the pastoral genre in poetry, a world of natural beauty, love laments and elegies that came down, through Virgil's Eclogues, to shape the imaginations of Renaissance writers and artists. Theokritus' *Idyll I* is set in Sicily, on the banks of Himera River. The cast of characters—shepherds and shepherdesses, poets and lovers, mingling with mythic creatures—would reappear in art for millennia. A Renaissance translation by Thomas Creech, from 1684, begins:

> I dare not, faith I dare not pipe at Noon,
> Afraid of Pan, or when his Hunting's done,
> And he lyes down to sleep by purling streams,

> He's very touchy if we break his dreams:
> But Thyrsis (for you know fair Daphis pains,
> And singst the best of all the tuneful Swains)
> Let's go and sit beneath yon Myrtle boughs,
> Where stands Priapus, and the Nymphs repose....[8]

Priapos, a guardian of orchards and symbol of virility, appears in the exhibition in the form of a limestone statue (250–212 BC) that captures the ardent personality of the god. That same full-bodied grace appears in the smaller form of an ivory appliqué of a satyr (200–100 BC). Such handsome physical objects exemplify the rich cultural legacy of the Sicilian Greeks. "Sicily: Art and Invention between Greece and Rome" was on view April 3–August 19, 2013, at the Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades, California. Getty.edu. The exhibition is now on view (September 29, 2013–January 5, 2014) at the Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106. Clevelandart.org

NOTES

1. Claire L. Lyons, Michael Bennett and Clemente Marconi, *Sicily: Art and Invention between Greece and Rome* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013).
2. Lawrence Durrell, *Sicilian Carousel* (New York: Marlow & Company, 1976) pp. 79–80.
3. Maria Luisa Famà, "Focus: *The Mozia Charioteer*," *Sicily: Art and Invention*, p. 84.
4. Caterina Greco, "The Cult of Demeter and Kore between Tradition and Innovation," *Sicily: Art and Invention*, pp. 50 ff.
5. Lyons and Bennett, Introduction, *Sicily: Art and Invention.*
6. Bennett, "Focus: Archimedes' Genius," *Sicily: Art and Invention*, p. 128.
7. Gabriella Cirucci, "The Roman Conquest of Sicily and Its Consequences," *Sicily: Art and Invention*, pp. 134–35.
8. *The Oxford Book of Classical Verse*, ed., Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 189.