

Daily Life in Ancient Greece at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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At the end of 2017, the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston opened a new permanent exhibit entitled “Daily Life in Ancient Greece.”¹ As the museum’s website press release indicates, the installation consists of more than 250 objects, one-third of which have not been on display before.² The exhibit in Gallery 212A–B shares a room with the earlier installation of ancient coins in Gallery 212C (fig. 1) and is a pendant to the other thematic exhibits of the permanent collection housed in Gallery 215A–C, which focus on themes of Homer and the Epics, Dionysos and the Symposium, and Theater and Performance. The themes of the new exhibit complement these earlier installations, and the new areas have a similar design, using cases with gray tones and beige labels. This and the subdued lighting work to unite the Greek installations visually on either side of the much lighter room of Roman art (Galleries 213 and 214) that lies between them, at the head of the stairs from the first floor.

The old installation followed a more traditional organizational scheme, concentrating on period, medium, attribution, and object type. With the new permanent exhibit, most of the Greek art on display at the MFA is now thematically organized and is more densely populated. As the museum’s website explains, many objects were conserved beforehand in a publicly viewable lab, giving the public a chance to see a wide range of media being treated.³ This certainly brought well-deserved attention to more utilitarian or modest objects like tools, terracottas, and plainware pottery.

The gallery must have presented a design challenge, as one entrance to the room leads from the Roman gallery into the coin gallery on the east end of Gallery 212, and the two other doors, at the west end, provide a transit path that connects the Roman gallery to a hallway with Roman sculpture (fig. 2). The change in light, palette, and case design from 213 to 212 does signal that you have left Rome, but the subtlety and restrained design do not immediately draw the visitor’s attention to the exhibit nor boldly announce its theme. However, if one does turn to engage with the exhibit, the restrained design focuses attention on a wealth of objects whose scale and variety can and do attract the interest of viewers. Observation of the flow of visitors through the gallery on a crowded open-admission Saturday showed the layout and

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¹ Figures 2, 4, and 5 are the author’s, used by permission. Additional figures can be found with this review on AJA Online (www.ajaonline.org).

² See www.mfa.org/news/daily-life-in-ancient-greece.

³ See www.mfa.org/collections/conservation/conservation-in-action/daily-life-in-ancient-greece/introduction.



FIG. 1. View of “Daily Life in Ancient Greece” from Gallery 212C (coin gallery), Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (photograph © 2019 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

presentation to be effective in drawing the attention of visitors in motion, inducing them to look more closely at something and then to engage with other works in the display.

In each of the cases, general labels describing the theme of that case are located above the objects, just above eye level, whereas individual object labels are placed below the bottom shelf of the case and tilted upward for viewing. While this makes finding the information on a specific item at times a bit of a hunt, when there are many small objects close together in the display, it allows the viewer to look at the artifacts with limited distraction from labels.

A large display case fills the west end of the room between the two doors and presents the six broad themes addressed in separate cases in the rest of the gallery: Family, Women, War, Athletics, Livelihood, and Remembrance (fig. 3). The symposium and wine is a theme in Gallery 215 and so wisely is not included here. This general case includes figured pottery, both sympotic and for other purposes, as well as relief sculpture, terracotta figures, and a transport amphora. A similar mixture of objects of various media plus representational pictures of activity on figure-painted vases runs throughout the gallery. The label for each theme above the objects sets out a question or topic to consider when looking at the objects; the individual object labels below call out details that connect the object or

its picture to that topic. Representational images of activities such as fishing (MFA inv. no. 01.8024; online fig. 1)⁴ seem a natural juxtaposition, immediately connecting contemporary viewers with a highly legible image of an important activity of daily life: procuring food. For them, it is a seemingly familiar image (as are the fishing hooks nearby), but yet at the same time strange, not simply because of the nudity of the fisher but also for his unsustainable pose. Curiously, it is likely that an ancient observer would also have noted the anomalous character of the representation, that it might be representative but not realistic in all of its details. The MFA exhibit does not pretend to illustrate daily life, but rather, through the combination of objects, representations, and the didactic labels, aims to engage the viewer while also acknowledging that images are not snapshots of reality.

Brevity is a necessary requirement for label copy, but even in the small amount of text available to them, the curators do raise some important points for the viewer to consider immediately in each display case and throughout the gallery. For example, after listing a few professions under Livelihood, the text ends with the statement: “Both the state and private individuals profited from enslaved labor in a variety of settings—

⁴ See AJA Online for online-only figures.



FIG. 2. View of “Daily Life in Ancient Greece,” Gallery 212A–B from the east.

from quarries and mines, to the home, and beyond.” The text on Remembrance recognizes class distinction by acknowledging that wealthier families commissioned stone grave markers. These are important reminders that the representations cannot necessarily be viewed at face value and should be considered within a social and historical framework. Comments on individual objects call out the ambiguity and layers of meaning of representational images, such as that for a hydria attributed to the Dwarf Painter (MFA inv. no. 03.798; online fig. 2) that notes: “At first glance, this vase seems to show a typical departure scene . . . but faint inscriptions identify the figures as Amphiaraios, a legendary seer, and his wife, the heroine Eriphyle.” Other observations, such as the rarity of representations of old age, as noted in the label on a head from a fourth-century grave stele (MFA inv. no. 01.8192), signal that the apparent realism of some representations should be tempered by an awareness of selectivity by the artists in constructing scenes more broadly. In summary, the selection of objects in this case and the didactic texts offer both guidance and caution for viewers in seeing daily life of the Greeks as both like and

unlike their own. One should also note that a touch of humor can be found throughout these galleries, such as the inclusion of a red-figure kylix tondo showing a squatting, defecating man wiping himself (MFA inv. no. RES 08.31b; online fig. 3). The label below asks, “Was it meant to disgust, or amuse, or spark conversation?” before suggesting that it might be a warning not to drink too much. The placement of this object under the heading Athletics but next to the livelihoods group invites further bemused consideration for the viewer.

Before turning to the cases in the rest of the gallery that explore the six themes, one should note a couple of possible considerations for future displays. One is the question of markets for objects that are produced in large quantities, such as pottery vessels and terracotta figures. The tondo just mentioned, for example, was acquired by Edward Perry Warren in Orvieto, according to the museum’s collection website, and so presumably was exported to Etruria. With so much of Attic pottery being exported, should one consider the role of the consumer, particularly the non-Greek consumer, as a factor in the choice of scene for the kylix? This is beyond the scope of the exhibit theme and a



FIG. 3. View of theme overview case, west wall (photograph © 2019 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

topic for a lengthy discussion beyond the format of an object label, but it is worth keeping in mind. So, too, the display of the stamnos attributed to the Polygnotos Group (MFA inv. no. 95.21; online fig. 4) showing four nearly nude women at a wash basin and holding strigils does not permit viewers to see that on the other side there is a young man facing two clothed women, complicating the gender-bending representation. The limitations of space and exhibit design mean that many three-dimensional objects are reduced to two dimensions, which in some cases hides the opportunity for complete engagement with an object that merits closer scrutiny. Such necessary choices are an unenviable reality for curators. On the other hand, the freestanding pedestal vitrine with a red-figure loutrophoros (MFA inv. no. 03.802) showing a wedding procession, located next to the general theme cabinets on the other side of the transit path, offers an opportunity to use technology for selective and deeper engagement with an object (fig. 4; online fig. 5). The label invites one to use the touch screen next to the case to “decode a joyous celebration” by guessing the identity or role of each of nine figures on the vase. It directs the viewer to look at clothing, gesture, and placement as clues to identifying figures, and it offers feedback or congratulations in response to the viewer’s choice. The placement of this interactive display provides an invitation to visitors

walking through the gallery to interact with an object on their path and, in doing so, orients them to the more detailed exploration of the six themes in the remainder of the space. A few more such displays that allow such active viewing would be a welcome means for deeper engagement with a complex object.

The rest of the gallery consists of two large, multi-sided display cases (Women, Family) marking out a central corridor in the gallery; two wall cases (Livelihood, Remembrance) on the north and south side flank these two. A massive two-sided case forms the east boundary of the installation and separates it visually from the coin gallery, while allowing passage on either side. The Athletics case faces the rest of the exhibition, and Warfare faces the coin gallery. A half-dozen vitrines, like that of the loutrophoros, fill in spaces between the large cases, and reliefs mounted on the wall supplement the smaller objects in the cases. There are other themes that might have been addressed—such as production and trade or various forms of identity—but the six themes do promise to offer a connection to the lives of most of the museum’s visitors and are well suited to the mixture of representational images and implements used in all of the displays.

The case focusing on Family explores two main sub-themes. Spinning, Weaving, Sewing features a number of weaving tools, including suspended loomweights,



FIG. 4. View of Gallery 212A–B from northwest door with view of interactive display for loutrophoros.

spindle whorls, and a needle, alongside a figured pyxis showing women working wool. Children is the sub-theme on the other side, facing the middle of the room. The mixture of figured pottery, terracotta figures, a doll, and game pieces such as dice, a ball, and a top are attractive and capture the eye of visitors well. The labels add further details that make the life of a Greek child both familiar and foreign. The ends of the case show lamps and scenes of women in the household, preparing for ritual or holding storage boxes while attendants hover. The ambiguous identity of these figures could have been explored a bit more, as it was in the introductory case, along with a reminder that attendants might well be slaves.

The other large central case, focusing on Women, includes one long side that more successfully acknowledges these issues. The subtheme of Dress describes different forms of costume such as the chiton and peplos, and the variety of pin types emphasize the untai-

lored construction of clothing. A kylix attributed to the Calliope Painter (MFA inv. no. 21.04) nicely portrays some of the dressing process and also shows that the costume of men and women had similarities. A white-ground lekythos attributed to the Achilles Painter with a woman and “servant girl” (MFA inv. no. 13.201) connects dress to the issue of class, but not potentially to issues of slavery as elsewhere in the exhibit. The other long side of the case addresses Beautification (fig. 5). Several different types of mirrors, perfume vessels, and jars show the importance of cosmetics, at least for the elite. The adjacent figural terracotta and vases show objects such as the mirrors in use. The theme emphasizes the role of adornment for marriage, and this is further addressed at the end of the case by figured vases showing Eros attending brides and mirrors with representations of Hymenaeus, Aphrodite, and Eros. These objects face the loutrophoros with the wedding procession, which also mythologized and idealized the



FIG. 5. View of Beautification theme case.

marriage. The label provides a clear description of the wedding rites, though the highly mythologized scenes on the vases do not build directly on that information.

The case dedicated to livelihoods has three sub-themes. Medicine focuses mainly on medical instruments and small bronze figures of Asklepios and Hygieia (and the description of the use of instruments does not make one pine for ancient medical care). The section on Artisans includes the making of terracottas, presenting a mold for creating a terracotta object and a kylix showing a terracotta head being painted. Similarly, Fishing includes hooks, fishplates, and the well-known kylix tondo showing a boy fishing, mentioned earlier (see online fig. 1). A freestanding pedestal nearby adds scenes of the blacksmith and shoemaker, and its label considers issues of class and patronage. Finally, a section on Agriculture has many terracottas with food preparation activities and animals.

The Remembrance theme area includes some grave stelae and funerary reliefs mounted on the walls, with a wall case that focuses on funerary rites and visits to the grave. Funerary plaques, white-ground and red-figure

lekythoi, and a loutrophoros serve to both show funerary or grave scenes and themselves double as offerings or functional objects in the rites. The figured pottery spans several centuries, from the seventh through the fourth, emphasizing, as the labels note, the continuity of funerary customs over time. The label for a stone grave lekythos (MFA inv. no. 63.140) near the case includes a reconstruction of the original coloring.

At the end of the gallery is the case with Athletics, with subthemes of Training, Athletes, and Competition. Each section mixes actual objects used by athletes, such as a strigil and aryballo, with painted representations of activities. The label for a black-figure skyphos (MFA inv. no. 61.1233) ties athletics to education by showing a music lesson, and the role of music more broadly in athletics is highlighted in other scenes. A phallus-shaped aryballos (MFA inv. no. 13.105) does not have a comment on its label but invites contemplation by viewers as either a usable or a symbolic artifact.

On the other side of the end case, facing the coin gallery, is Warfare. The section on Armor features a

shield (MFA inv. no. 1971.285) that is one of the largest objects in the exhibit, and in fact, it draws attention away from the smaller-scale coins in the adjacent gallery. The armaments continue with more helmets in the central section, on Warriors, and small terracotta, bronze, stone, and figure-painted representations of hoplites, archers, and horsemen below. The final section, on Battle, includes figured pottery with scenes of fighting, though noting that the focus on single combat does not reflect the reality of warfare. Two large red-figure vases with scenes of departure anticipate the theme of Departure in the general case at the other end of the room, if one were to enter the exhibit from this direction. Indeed, this is but one example of the nice interweaving of themes and representations across the exhibition and its many themes and subthemes.

Most of the objects on display were acquired by the MFA more than a century ago. There are five objects acquired since 1973, for which no provenance before 1973 can be established, according to the museum's collections database: inv. nos. 1977.718 (funerary relief with woman and her servant), 1985.934 (fibula), 1986.242 (a cuirass fragment, briefly discussed in 1987), 1987.297 (honorific stele), and 2004.2234 (helmet).⁵ For an exhibition rooted in exploring context broadly, one must point out "how much information and value is lost when an object is illegally removed from its archaeological context," as articulated by the *AJA*'s policy on the publication of recently acquired antiquities.⁶ Although there are only a few such objects in "Daily Life in Ancient Greece," this could have been an opportunity to educate the public on this issue and the continuing threat that is posed to unexcavated sites in Greece and elsewhere around the world. To its credit, the museum's collections search web pages provide clear information on the acquisition of each object,⁷ but a thoughtful highlight of the biographies of a few select objects would help viewers understand the lives of ancient objects and their sometimes ill fortune. It would also help them understand that attitudes toward collecting change and develop

and that resources, whether archaeological or natural, need to be conserved and preserved.

Exhibits on ancient daily life, in various forms, have appeared in a number of museums in recent years. What distinguishes this one is its scale and the museum's shift away from a typological approach of period, object, and artist in the use of the permanent collection. The curators of "Daily Life in Ancient Greece" have done an excellent job of bringing to viewers a wide range of artifacts and representations that allow them to think about the experiences of the ancient Greeks and to see both similarities and differences in relation to their own lives. Bits of humor in label copy and recognition of the ambiguity of constructed representations are welcome touches, as is an occasional casualness of tone in the writing. Questions about gender, class, and status are noted in ways that will invite further thought. The interactive screen identifying the figures of a wedding procession allows that type of exploration, and one wishes there were more such resources immediately available for the viewer. Of the visitors observed, most walked through the galleries with smart phones, and therein lies an opportunity to further engage them when they stop to look at an object, by directing them to online content and resources. The MFA exhibit successfully offers much to draw the eye and hopefully will stimulate viewers to think more deeply about ancient culture.

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⁵ None of these objects has received formal publication, though the cuirass fragment was discussed by Vermeule (1987, 34). Both the cuirass fragment and the helmet appear in the display case in figure 1.

⁶ Norman 2005, 136.

⁷ See <https://collections.mfa.org/advancedsearch>.