THE WORKSHOP OF PERENNIIUS

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Marcus Perennius Tigranus was the owner of a pottery at Arezzo, then called Arretium, on the river Arno, in the time of the Emperor Augustus. He had at the outset a staff of Greek potters, and the product made by his concern, and certain lesser firms in the town, is called Arretine ware. It is best known as a tableware decorated with reliefs, with a fine lacquer-like red glaze. The Museum has one of the largest collections in existence of this ware, or more especially of the stamps and molds used in its manufacture, for these factory implements are the originals from which the finished vases were more or less mechanically produced in quantity.

No ancient author has told us anything of consequence about this kind of pottery, but from the signatures on it and from discoveries both at the workshops where it was made and at the distant places to which it was in antiquity exported, modern scholarship has been able to learn about the workings of the Arretine firms in surprising detail. So typical were these workshops that they afford an insight into the artistic and industrial life of the Roman people at a moment when the role they were to play in world empire was becoming increasingly clear to them. So it seems worth while, drawing upon the work of a few scholars whose names are given at the end of this notice, and adding the new evidence yielded by a close study of the Museum’s material, to tell briefly the story of the Perennius workshop and to illustrate a few of the objects that once formed part of its apparatus.

The owner of the shop in question was apparently an Asiatic by birth, the freedman of a Roman called Marcus Perennius, whose names he took, adding his own, Tigranus, as a cognomen in the Latin manner. The latter name was borne by monarchs of the Hellenistic kingdom of Armenia and survives today in that region as “Dicran.” This Easterner makes his appearance in Tuscany, or Etruria with his staff of Greek potters soon after the battle of Actium, which was fought in 31 B.C. With this battle, and the ensuing annexation of Egypt, the political center of gravity shifted finally to the West. Rome was now an empire and Augustus its prince. Swarms of merchants and manufacturers of luxury goods from the Hellenistic East must have hurried off westward, to Italy, for the peoples of the Italian peninsula had money to spend, and in the arts they were a nation of customers rather than producers. In response to Roman eclecticism, and to the purity of Roman taste under the early empire, the industrial artists of the time recreated, in many different media, the Greek art of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and of the Hellenistic period. This tendency, to which we owe so much, is summed up in a very concise way in Arretine pottery, for the figures on it unmistakably go back, by what paths we can only guess, to major Greek works that are now lost.
The first step backward toward the Greek prototype, however, is not altogether a matter of conjecture. The immediate ancestor of this pottery is silverware, the product of an industrial art that in turn drew upon the creative sources of sculpture and painting. It is necessary only to place an Arretine cup beside an Augustan silver cup, which it closely resembles, to see that the metallic shapes of foot and handles and the crisp reliefs were conceived by the silversmith and not by the potter. The relation was not new, for pottery had long done duty for silver plate, and even the particular technique of imitation had been in use, among others, for some time. The “Megarian” bowls, for example, which were produced throughout the Hellenistic world, including Italy, were made on the same principle. But Perennius had the business acumen, and his staff the artistic capacity, to realize the possibilities inherent in the process and to create a product which for a time drove others from the market and was exported all over the empire. Indeed, such impetus did they impart to the terra sigillata trade that it thrived later in Gaul and elsewhere and even survived antiquity.

To understand their success we must look at their method. It has all the advantages of movable type and indeed operates on the very same principle. A stamp, or puncheon, bearing a single figure or decorative element was made of clay and fired. Then a mold (see ill. p. 166), with thick walls of the same fine clay, was made on the wheel, and a number of stamps were impressed inside it. The mold, after firing, was centered again on the wheel, and clay was spun inside it, emerging as a cup with the design on the outside surface, in relief, like the original stamps. Foot, handles, and rim could then be added, and the whole thing glazed and fired. This process could be repeated until the mold was worn out.

Before looking further into their procedure, we may inquire who these Arretine artists were. Since at first they signed their work, we know in a sense who they were. Their names are Greek, and the inference is that they were slaves, as was not uncommonly the case with gifted or educated persons of the day. Cerdo and Nicephorus (see ill. p. 169, right), later joined by Pilemo and Pylades, stamped their signatures on the molds during the opening years of the Perennius establishment, from about 25 to 10 B.C. The names of these four master craftsmen occur in the nominative case, along with that of the owner, who signed in the genitive, thus: Cerdo / Perenni, “Cerdo (made it / workshop) of Perennius.” These years, in which each artist identified his work, founded the reputation of the firm. At the end of that time the artists’ signatures were banished and the owner signed alone, resuming his Eastern cognomen, as M. Perenni Tigrani.

Stamps used in making Arretine molds. Actual size

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This was the end of Arretine relief ware, which during the half century of the Perennian firm and its rivals had held the market firmly in hand. It was the greatest of the decorative Roman pottery fabrics, indeed the only one of any importance that was produced in Italy under the Roman Empire. Its senescence and death—if one wishes so to read the evidence of the signatures—may have been brought about by the willingness of the administration to drive its craftsmen to quantity production, to which the stamped-mold technique so readily lent itself. The coup de grâce, it has been suggested, may have come through the invention, some time before this, of the blowing tube, whereby glass tableware could be turned out in quantity. At any rate, glass did become the common household ware in Italy, and its makers sometimes sought to imitate, in their unsuitable medium, the same metallic shapes that had inspired the Arretine potters. Be this as it may, so dead was the industry in Italy before the Vesuvian disaster in A.D. 79 that terracotta relief ware was imported from the second-rate factories of Gaul; a consignment of it was found in the excavation of Pompeii, still in the packing case in which it was shipped.

That the above chronology is so clearly established is due to a fortunate circumstance. The business grew up during a time of imperial expansion on the Rhine and its tributaries. The current fashion in dishes followed the officers and civil servants to distant cantonments, and the broken fragments remain upon these historically dated sites.

We have now before us a curious question, for which we cannot fully provide an answer in the present state of the evidence. It is clear that in the view of Cerdo and his fellows it was the mold which was their creation and to which they affixed their signatures. On the taste with which the various stamps were assembled and drawn together with freehand strokes of the stylus, and on the judgment and the manual skill with which these were impressed, not too deeply, on clay of exactly the right condition, the potters rested their case. They were right, for in this exacting art they

Detail of a mold by Nicephorus (enlarged): part of a banquet scene

For twenty years or so, from about 10 B.C. to A.D. 10, during the prevalence of this signature, the ware deteriorated, but the enterprise went forward unchecked. There are stylistic indications that some of the old workmen continued in the firm, among newcomers whose names we do not know. In some of the smaller rival workshops that sprang up in the neighborhood at about this time both Greek and Latin names appeared on the molds, and it may be that in like manner local potters, having learned at the benches of Cerdo and his three colleagues, now joined the Perennius staff. By the end of this period, when quantity production had taken its toll of artistic worth, Tigranus died or retired, and his heir, M. Perennius Bargathes, took over the firm, and production continued, with a brief recovery in quality, probably until soon after the death of Augustus in A.D. 14. Under Tiberius the Bargathes signatures give way to those of Crescens and Saturnus, both of the Perennian family, in whose hands the ware finally degenerated, and the centers of the terra sigillata industry shifted to Gaul.
LEFT: Detail of a mold by Nicephorus, a banquet scene. RIGHT: Detail of a mold showing the signatures of Perennius and Nicephorus. Both are enlargements.
Details of a mold by Cerdo (enlarged): vintage scenes

were unrivaled. The individual stamps, on the other hand, were in their regard tools, to hang at this or that workbench as the need arose. The stamps passed from hand to hand within the Perennius shop and even appeared outside of it in the hands of competitors, as an examination of the Museum material will show. They even survived Arretium and reappeared in the later factories in Gaul.

Yet in modern eyes, and certainly also in the opinion of the ancient customers who hastened to buy the product, it is just these individual stamps that give Arretine pottery its distinction, setting it above all the terra sigillata wares of antiquity and providing its link with major art. Surely the artist who made these sculptured human figures far outranked the one who impressed them on the clay. Yet the figures are anonymous, and so in a sense is the finished cup, on which the signature appears regularly as part of the molded relief zone and only rarely on the wheel-made surfaces which were not necessarily worked upon by the mold-maker; for the finished mold could be handed over to apprentices who could turn out the vases almost mechanically.

Is it possible that the stamps too were taken for granted because they were mechanical reproductions? Some students have believed that the Arretine stamps were produced by stamp cutters who worked the clay freehand, copying and adapting from the existing treasury of types like, for example, the Augustan cameo cutters, whose peers they were. These stamp cutters, it has been suggested, may have belonged to the potteries, or they may have had their own business, making and selling the stamps to all comers. While there is no
proof that this practice did not exist, there is now good evidence that it was not the only one; indeed it is questionable whether it was even very prevalent. Although ancient silver plate has largely disappeared, nevertheless chance has preserved an Augustan silver cup that is the actual prototype of an Arretine fragment. The stamps used on the fragment were casts of the figures on the cup. Among the early Perennian repertory of figures some are obviously torn from a context that is alien to the scenes in which the potters used them; others are pastiches, with different heads affixed to identical bodies; still others are in the main identical but show variations in details. These scattered findings concern impressions on molds. To them can be added the existence of two actual stamps, one here and the other in Boston, which bear figures of a dancer, identical except for the presence in one of a headdress. All this is very difficult to explain in freehand modeling, but understandable if it is assumed that the stamps were casts of figures on silver cups. And the findings in question affect a large number of the stamps that stocked the early Perennius workshop.

In this way the gold and silver services of the banquet couches set their mark, perhaps in an almost literal sense, on the terra sigillata cups of the middle-class table, and in so doing they mitigated their own oblivion. Once granted a stamp-maker who took his casts from metalware, a new possibility is opened. Such an artisan would have access not only to the metalware of his own time, but to objects handed down from time past, as was elucidated by Miss Richter in the Bulletin for January, 1940. So it is barely possible that the Arretine figures may be in some instances much closer to Greek art than has been supposed. Proof of this, an early silver prototype, is all too unlikely to be discovered.

By whatever intermediate steps, many of the figures seem to go back to marble reliefs or paintings of some importance. The mise en scène more often than not alludes in some way to the mysteries of Bacchus, which were much in men’s thoughts at the time. It was seemly for the wine god to be commemorated on wine cups. One common theme, to which the potter Nicephorus devoted much of his effort, was the banquet scene with couches, usually four
in number and each occupied by a youth and a girl. The style is that of the classical Greek period. In one of these scenes (ill. p. 168) a youth has fallen asleep, overcome with wine or with the lateness of the hour. In another (ill. p. 169, right), a girl has grasped her companion’s cheeks, distorting them. She would like him to look in her direction, but he resists. An excerpt on page 169, left, shows a bath boy emerging from behind a curtain and trying to draw his mistress’s attention by touching her foot. Eros is present here, rattling his castanets in air above the diners. We see deeply into some unknown Greek artist’s thought when we look at such revelry pictured with such restraint. Four molds with these banqueters of Nicephorus are in the Museum collection, and one could not ask for a better demonstration of how he went to work. The composition and the characters are about the same in the four scenes, but there is endless variety in detail. For the four compositions he used about forty different stamps, including human figures, furniture, and decorative elements. He was superbly equipped. Of his tools, two are now in this Museum, one of them illustrated on page 167.

One of the finest molds in existence (ill. pp. 166, 171, and below) bears Cerdo’s signature; a stamp that he impressed upon it is shown on page 167. There are many indications that this mold comes from the earliest output of the firm. Here the style of the figures is Hellenistic. A Bacchic rite is in progress, and a sacrifice is taking place. Processional figures are at hand, and the scene is out-of-doors, after nightfall. A woman holds a young pig while a satyr prepares to sacrifice it with a triangular blade. The preoccupation of these two with their holy, gruesome task is psychologically recorded by the Hellenistic artist, whether sculptor, painter, or silversmith.

Another mold (see p. 170) shows elderly satyrs and young mystae at work at the vintage. The boy, horned and wattled like a kid, fresh and dewy at his immemorial task, brings the grapes to his senior, who treads them out.

All of the scenes here illustrated are from the first phase of the Perennian enterprise. The Museum has, in addition to stamps, finished vases, and fragments, twenty-one molds, from Perenius and from various smaller firms. The molds present difficulties to the observer that interest and sharp eyesight can only partly overcome, for—like engraved gems in intaglio—they have small incuse figures. Photography here comes to the rescue, for it makes the incuse appear to be relief and enlarges at will. The collection itself is shown in the western bay of Gallery K 7.

Christoph Albrecht, George H. Chase, Howard Comfort, Hans Dragendorff, Karl Hähnle, August Oxé, and Robert Zahn have contributed to the study of Arretine pottery. The Museum’s collection of it has been rephotographed by Edward Milla and published in Corpus vasorum antiquorum, U.S.A. fasc. 9, M.M.A. fasc. 1, Arretine Relief Ware, 1943. The latter work gives bibliographical references and distributes responsibility for the statements made above.