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ART REVIEW

Villa shines through Getty's clouds

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January 26, 2006

Visiting the new Getty Villa is a bittersweet affair. The pleasure comes from witnessing an exceptional museum idea executed with verve and skill. Alloyed to that delight, however, is the pain of the project's larger context.

The concept of a sizable museum devoted solely to the art of ancient Greece, Rome and Etruria (the region of modern Tuscany and Umbria) is inspired. For one thing, the modern notion of an art museum as a place of public enlightenment grew, like America itself, from the 18th century European revival of classical ideals.

For another, when it opens to the public Saturday as a museum devoted to art of the ancient Mediterranean, the villa will be unique in the United States. It's a smashing ensemble.

But the villa's Greek and Roman art tells a story, and it's a tale of the rise of civilizations and the fall of empires. First Athens became an imperial power, then Rome. As they did, each society sowed the seeds of its own destruction.

Two dozen centuries ago, the Athenian general Thucydides said that when empires expand, they deteriorate into tyrannies abroad and at home. Athenians doomed the democracy they invented, while the eventual ruin of Rome's republic was never in doubt. Forget the gods or fate; in Thucydides' estimate, human nature was the cause.

There's a lesson buried there, and the villa project teases it out.

The original building — a modern re-creation of a 1st century Roman country house, which opened at the edge of Malibu in 1974 as the J. Paul Getty Museum — is now wrapped in structures carved into the narrow canyon walls and striated like layers of earth. The deft design alludes to an archeological excavation. What's being dug up, however, isn't just old Greek pots and antique Roman statues.

Like a ruined temple discovered in the jungle or an ancient tomb unearthed from beneath the sands of time, an art museum appears to be the primary artifact being exhumed. An emblem of modern reason and enlightenment emerges at the far edge of the American continent, as if from a lost world.

The disinterred Getty Villa is gorgeous, vulgar, filled with astounding treasure, tainted by corruption, often brilliant, more than a little decadent — not unlike the vivid twilight of empire itself. As redesigned by the Boston-based architectural team of Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, the extraordinary complex exudes an unmistakably elegiac aura.

Shuttered nearly nine years ago for transformation, the villa features one of the nation's largest and finest collections of classical art. Altogether some 1,200 antiquities are on view.

Incomparable works include the famous Getty Bronze — a magnificent Greek figure of an audacious young athlete crowning himself in glory — and the Lansdowne Herakles, a beefy Roman statue that was the late oil tycoon's first major purchase.

They are joined by superb vase paintings, exquisite small bronzes, excellent Cycladic sculptures, impressive funerary objects and a startlingly fine collection of ancient glass — recently acquired and having its debut. A commanding, larger-than-life cult statue of Aphrodite, goddess of love, may be the greatest Greek sculpture in America.

It may also be stolen. The statue is one of 34 works on view claimed by the Greek and Italian governments to have been looted. The charges are serious and troubling. But they form only part of the framework for this unprecedented artistic enterprise.

In a second-floor gallery, an astounding marble sculpture shows a ferocious pair of griffins attacking a fallen doe. Griffins combine the lethal features of a lion, a snake and an eagle. Here their spiky talons and beaks tear at the tender flesh of a supine deer. Her placid, elegant head is a stark contrast to the muscular monsters flanking it.

Traces of original multicolored paint, which has miraculously survived for millenniums, retain echoes of the work's archaic extravagance. The dramatic S-curves of the griffins' upraised wings suggest to scholars that this sculpture once formed the base of a ceremonial table. The doe's bloody fate may imply what was carried out on that long-lost tabletop. Griffins, lords of heaven and earth, guarded ancient tombs.

A Getty handbook aptly describes the wondrous sculpture as "the embodiment of deadly beauty." Brutality is fused with loveliness, cruelty with exquisite grace. The work was made in a Greek outpost in southern Italy, about a century after Athens fell.

The griffin sculpture is one of 14 pieces on that subject in the room. They date from 1400 BC to AD 100 and range in origin from Greece and Crete to far-flung corners of the empire — Spain, Persia and Central Asia. The Getty's collection is not installed according to chronology or region, which is the norm. Instead, most items are installed by theme.

One ground-floor gallery is devoted to stories from the Trojan War. Another features Dionysus and the theater. Others host gods, goddesses and similar creations from mythology.

Upstairs there are rooms with art segregated by gender, as ancient society was, and a modest gallery for athletic competitions. The sexy Getty Bronze occupies its own specially climate-controlled room adjacent. There is even a teenage mummy from Greco-Roman Egypt, plus exceptional painted funerary portrait-masks.

Happily, these thematic groupings are fascinating.

Art museum theme installations enjoyed a brief 1990s vogue internationally, culminating with the 2000 debut of London's Tate Modern. But most were poorly received. Sometimes the themes were meant to shake up received ideas; often they just seemed like bald attempts to hide big gaps in a museum's collection, diverting attention like a street hustler playing three-card monte with supple hands.

The Getty's theme installations are uncomplicated, but their cross-cultural comparisons are dramatic and complex. Juxtaposing great objects from different centuries and cultures makes formal distinctions stark. Everywhere the emphasis is exactly where it belongs: The objects take center stage.

This was not always the case. When the Getty Center opened in Brentwood eight years ago, the inaugural temporary exhibition featured a disastrous antiquities installation, meant to prefigure the refurbished villa. The helpless art was drowned in "educational" flotsam — flashy plasma screens, clumsy labels and reams of informational text silk-screened on walls.

But there's no such deluge at the villa, where just the right balance has been struck. A high-tech interactive information room is on the ground floor, tucked off to the side. Wall texts and video monitors are helpful yet discreetly placed, and the numerous display cases are uncluttered with labels. Everywhere the art draws you in first, while supporting information is deferential yet easily accessible.

Clearly the Getty learned from those earlier thematic experiments. The villa is opening more than four years behind schedule — 2001 was the target year — largely because of contentious lawsuits from anxious neighbors determined to block the expansion. They failed, and the site now includes a performance theater, a cafe and bookstore, conservation labs

and a study center. But the extra time was well spent.

It's true that this thematic installation conceals gaps. There's no stellar Attic geometric vase, for example, just a couple of minor ones. But how could there not be holes? The survey spans 3,500 years across the entire Mediterranean.

Furthermore, as recent newspaper headlines have proclaimed, classical antiquities are a collecting area studded with landmines.

The Getty Villa opens under a dark cloud, with former curator Marion True on trial in Rome on charges of conspiracy to receive looted antiquities — including the spectacular Aphrodite cult statue, acquired in 1988 for $18 million. The trial is the finale in a long battle between archeologists and art historians.

Art historians (including most museum curators) value the aesthetic knowledge gained from art. Archeologists, by contrast, value the knowledge gained at the "find site" — the place where an ancient object is dug up. Looting affects archeologists most severely, because the conditions of the discovery remain unknown. In the struggle between them, archeologists have lately — and rightly — gained the upper hand.

Part of the case against True alleges that stolen antiquities were laundered through private collectors, including Getty Trustee Barbara Fleischman, who resigned Wednesday, and her late husband, Lawrence. (Their names are chiseled into the new outdoor theater at the villa.) The Fleischmans sold more than 30 Greek and Roman artifacts to the Getty for $20 million and donated about 300 more with an estimated value of $40 million.

The inevitable crisis represented by the trial was exacerbated by the inaction of Getty Trust President Barry Munitz. He was told in 2002 of an inappropriate loan involving True, the Fleischmans and London antiquities dealer Robin Symes, who sold the Aphrodite to the Getty — but Munitz did not remove the curator. The shocking story exploded in the press last fall. True, whose guiding museum vision is now being unveiled, was forced to resign. The timing could not have been worse.

A visit to the villa shows why the pressure was on to aggressively acquire antiquities. Check the object labels: Those that carry an acquisition number beginning with "96" were mostly part of the Fleischman gift and purchase. A wonderful Etruscan amphora decorated by the Tityos Painter shows the beheaded Medusa, with Pegasus flying out of her bloody neck. The serpent-haired Gorgon turns up again as a dramatic bronze relief on the back of a 5th century BC mirror. A monumental Etruscan storage jar uses linear drawing to show Odysseus and his men jamming a spear into the Cyclops' eye as muscular horses prance nearby.

There are scores more. In fact, the Getty acquired three-fourths of the collection's finest works in only the last 20 years or so, from the time former director John Walsh hatched the plan for an antiquities center. The villa's model is the Cloisters — the northern Manhattan branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted solely to the art of Europe in the Middle Ages. The Cloisters, funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr. and housed in a 1938 building reminiscent of a medieval monastery, is home to the famous Unicorn Tapestries and other treasures. It is a unique and remarkable cultural asset — and for ancient art, the Getty Villa is every bit its equal.

It is likely to remain so, whatever the outcome of the looting trial in Rome. The Getty spent about $275 million on the villa site. Although much of that went into infrastructure, it feels as if every penny is on vibrant display in the deluxe renovation. The modern fantasy of ancient Greece as a pristine world of pure white marble is belied by the flamboyance that actually marked their brightly painted statuary and buildings. Likewise the ancient Romans were notoriously vulgar, reveling in showy excess, and that impression has only been intensified in the remodeling.

Ours is likewise an era when nothing succeeds like ostentatious displays of power. Expect the remarkable Getty Villa to be an enormous popular hit.

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