A NEW POLYCHROME VASE FROM CENTURUPE

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The modern Centuripe is a small hill town in the interior of Sicily, about twenty miles southwest of Mount Etna; it achieved momentary fame in the last war through being chosen by the Germans, because of its strategic position, as the key point of their eastern defense line, and its occupation on the third of August, 1943, by the Anglo-American army forced the withdrawal of the enemy from the island. The city was originally founded by the Sicels, and it managed to retain its independence almost throughout the period of the Greek dominion in Sicily, submitting, however, to the Romans in 263 B.C. Its strategic value and the example set by its voluntary submission induced the Romans to regard Centuripe with a favorable eye; it was made “free and immune” and entered upon a long period of prosperity—to which the rich finds from its necropolis bear ample testimony—lasting until the disastrous days of Verres (73–71 B.C.) and the wars of Sextus Pompeius thirty years later. Unfortunately there has so far been little systematic excavation of the ancient necropolis; most of the material has come from sporadic finds or clandestine digs, with the inevitable result that it is divorced from its context and in consequence difficult to date with any accuracy.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of the finds at Centuripe is a series of vases decorated with ornamentation in relief and with figure scenes executed in tempera in several colors against a black or rose-pink background. This particular style of decoration is not met with elsewhere, and as no such vases have been found outside Centuripe it is a reasonable assumption that they are of local manufacture. Some fifty vases have so far been recorded and published, in particular by Guido Libertini in his book on Centuripe and in a supplementary article listing a number of additional pieces (see references on p. 166). Of the known vases the Metropolitan Museum already possessed five, and its latest acquisition, illustrated on the cover, adds another unusually well-preserved specimen to its collection.

The new vase is in the form of a bell krater without handles, set upon a low conical foot and covered with an undetachable lid made in one piece with the vase itself. The whole has been recomposed from small fragments and repaired, with little missing but with some slight repainting where the fractures join. On the top of the lid is a hole, closed with modern plaster, into which was probably fitted, as in other vases of this style, a finial in the form of either a knob or a small vase, but this has now completely disappeared. The lower part of the lid is decorated with a row of rays in a rose-pink shade, above which are traces of blue; the rim is molded into a bead-and-reel pattern.

The vase itself is decorated above with a row of small lion heads in relief, yellow on a purple
Detail of the polychrome vase illustrated on the cover, from Centuripe, Sicily, showing the scene on the front. This vase belongs to a group which may well be assigned to the III century, B.C. Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1953
background; below this is a band of enclosed rectangles, some of them painted blue and red, and then comes a band of Erotes and triglyphs, with the intervening spaces colored blue, giving something of the effect of a triglyph-metope frieze. The foot of the vase, just above the base, is decorated with a row of acanthus leaves modeled in fairly high relief and colored blue, pink, and yellow. The design, which, as usual in this fabric, is confined to the front of the vase, is outlined at each side by a broad white line, curving inward at the top; it represents four women against a rich rose-pink background. To the left is a standing figure, wearing a long purple chiton with a light yellow cloak, which she holds up in her left hand. Hanging vertically, like a sash, down the front of her drapery and passing over both chiton and cloak is a strip of blue material. Her hair is parted centrally to leave a triangular forehead in the manner made sculpturally popular by Praxiteles and his followers (cf. the Aphrodite in this Museum), and her lips are painted a deep red. In front of her is another woman in purple chiton and pink cloak, with a blue stripe running down her chiton but not over her cloak. Here and on the drapery of the other two women the central stripe runs down the chiton only and seems to be attached to it; somewhat similar decorative central panels may be seen on the drapery of women on many of the elaborate Apulian vases by the Lycurgus or Darius Painters in the second half of the fourth century. In her right hand she holds up a tympanum, slightly turning away her head, which is wreathed with ivy. Next comes the principal figure, who wears a long purple chiton and over it a yellowish cloak drawn up over the back of her head to serve as a veil; the central panel of her chiton is also light in color, with folds picked out in a darker shade. Her right arm is held diagonally across her body, and her fingers rest lightly upon the edge of the veil. The left hand is concealed behind a piece of folded drapery, pink of a lighter shade than the background with the folds drawn in darker paint, which is held out towards her in the outstretched hand of the fourth woman. This figure wears a necklace and gold bracelet, a purple chiton with a red central panel down the front, and a blue cloak drawn over her left shoulder and across the front of her body.

It is not difficult to find a number of close parallels to our vase in shape, decoration, and style. The best is perhaps a krater in a private collection in Catania (see above). The shape is much the same, though the ornamentation is rather more elaborate, especially round the base. The scene painted upon it represents five women, including a veiled figure with a wreathed tympanist beside her, who will be seen to be the counterparts, in reverse, of the central figures upon our own vase. The two vases must be products of the same workshop, and it is probably not going too far to attribute them to the same hand. Almost identical in shape and decoration with ours is a vase in Syracuse (Libertini, "Nuove ceramiche," pl. 11); here the knob-like finial has been preserved, but only two figures are shown, one holding a tympanum and the other stretching out her hand as if to drop in-
Polychrome vase from Centuripe. In this vase the knob-like finial is preserved. Fletcher Fund, 1927

cense upon an altar which has disappeared. Two other vases are also worth a glance in this connection, especially as one of them is already in the Metropolitan. This is the krater illustrated on this page, on which are represented four figures, the last two showing a general affinity with the corresponding two on the new vase though differing considerably in detail; in shape and decoration it must be associated with a vase in Catania (Libertini, op. cit., pl. 1v), which seems a little later, to judge from the weaker rendering of the egg-and-dart pattern above the design. The Catania vase, however, is provided with two handles and recalls a shape popular in late Campanian and Sicilian red-figured pottery, the skyphoid pyxis, a toilet box modified toward cuplike form. The lids of these vases are regularly provided with knobs like those on the Syracuse vase or the one on this page; several such pyxides have been found in or near Centuripe, and it is not unreasonable to regard the polychrome vases as their direct descendants. This theory is further strengthened by a study of the decoration on some of the latest red-figure and especially that on a fairly large group of vases mostly from the island of Lipari, many of which have come to light during the excavations conducted during the past few years by Dr. Bernabò Brea.

The Lipari group consists mainly of such shapes as the skyphoid pyxis, lekane, and lebes gamikos; all are clearly the products of a single workshop, most of them being by the same artist, who has been called the Lipari Painter. The striking thing about them is the manner in which they are decorated. The scenes depicted on them are usually associated with marriage—the toilet of the bride, the preparations for the ceremony, the dedication by Nike of the girdle of maidenhood—and, although the figures are reserved in the normal manner of red-figured vases, the use of an extremely pale clay together with a rich variety of added colors produces an effect completely different from that of normal red-figured pottery and much nearer to the polychrome style of Centuripe. The colors most commonly found are a light shade of blue, regularly used for drapery, as on the two vases from Lipari illustrated on page 165, deep red, golden yellow, pink, pale green, and mauve; in other words almost the same colors as on the Centuripe vases. The treatment of the female figure is also very similar, especially in full and three-quarter face, and it is difficult not to see in the Lipari vases a near forerunner of the Centuripe style. Polychromy was evidently very popular with Sicilian vase-painters, as the well-known skyphoid pyxides from Adernò and Falcone testify (see references). The last (see p. 166) is a particularly good example, with so wide a range of added colors as not to suggest red-figure at all. As Libertini has pointed out, the earliest examples of the Centuripe style usually depict the figures against a black background, and this practice may well have been inspired by such
vases as those just mentioned. Another point of association between the pottery of Lipari and Centuripe is provided by a group of lekanai and skyphoid pyxes decorated in added mat white and orange paint with vine leaves, tendrils, and grapes. Several of these have been found in tombs at Lipari along with vases like those here illustrated; others of the same style come from Centuripe and the vicinity (e.g. Libertini, Museo Biscari, no. 789, pl. 86), and all appear to be products of the same workshop, which must have been active in the late fourth and early third centuries B.C.

The interpretation of the scenes represented upon Centuripe vases has been the subject of much discussion. Clearly there is a strong Dionysiac element, as may be seen from the presence at times of Dionysos himself or of people associated with his cult. Others have been associated with some sort of cult ceremony or initiation into the mysteries, and by analogy with the scenes on so many of the Lipari vases they are probably to be related to marriage ceremonies. It is clear from the form of the vases, the fugitive nature of the paint used in their decoration, and the fact that figures appear on one side of the vase only that they were never intended for everyday use but were designed exclusively for funerary purposes. In that case scenes associated with the marriage ceremony are particularly likely to have been employed in the burials of those who died unwed; one thinks of the use of the ceremonial vase called a loutrophoros in classical Athens for a similar purpose. This association is to some measure confirmed by the notable similarity between the figures on Centuripe vases and those in the famous wall painting in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii and particularly in the Aldobrandini wedding in the Vatican, which have very similar colors also in the drapery. Some of the scenes on the Lipari vases might almost be an excerpt from the latter painting, and probably both vase and wall paintings look back to some early Hellenistic original.

The date of the vases has likewise been widely canvassed, and suggestions have ranged from the early third to the late first century B.C. In view of their likely association with the Lipari group the earlier date is probably more suitable for them; comparative evidence goes to show that the vases from the necropolis at Lipari belong to the late fourth century B.C., and the Centuripe vases might well be placed in the following century, a date well in accord with the historical evidence for the city’s development and prosperity. The close similarity of

Two vases found on the island of Lipari in Tomb 144, decorated in the red-figure technique with added polychromy. The colors are nearly the same as those used on Centuripe vases. Late IV century, B.C.
shape, style, and decoration suggests that they are the products of a single factory and are therefore unlikely to range over a very long period of time. The use of rose pink for the background is also found on a number of vases from Canosa in Apulia, which, as the direct successors of the latest red-figure in that area, may be dated early in the third century. Our knowledge of Hellenistic painting is too shadowy to enable us to draw any considerable parallels from that source, though the painted stelae from Pegasae in northern Greece provide a measure of support for a third-century date. The relief decoration which occurs on some of the Centuripe vases (see Met. Mus. Studies, vol. iv, pp. 45 ff.) showing a head amidst elaborate scrollwork can also be paralleled from the later fourth and third centuries in vase decoration, mosaic, metalwork, and architectural sculpture; the evidence suggests that these vases are the latest in the series and are probably to be dated not far from the end of the century. Only a systematic excavation will yield the necessary criteria to establish a firm chronology, but in the meantime the rich harvest yielded by other Sicilian sites is filling many gaps in our knowledge of late classical and early Hellenistic art in that area and giving us a more satisfactory context for those precious glimpses of third-century painting which have been preserved for us in the vases of Centuripe.

Acc. no. 53.11.5. Height 15 3/8 inches (39.7 cm.). For the history of Centuripe and its vases see in particular G. Libertini, Centuripe (Catania, 1926) and “Nuove ceramiche dipinte di Centuripe” (Atti e Memorie Società Magna Grecia, 1932, pp. 187-212); also G.M.A. Richter, Metropolitan Museum Studies, ii, 2 (1930), pp. 187-205, and iv, 1 (1932), pp. 45-54; B. Pace, “Ceramiche ellenistiche sicelio” (Ausonia, viii, 1913, pp. 27-34) and Arte e Civiltà della Sicilia antica, ii (1938), pp. 171-178, 478-482. For vase-painting in Sicily see J. D. Beazley, “Groups of Campanian Red-Figure” (Journ. Hell. Stud., 1943, pp. 104-108), and A. D. Trendall, Vasi italici del Vaticano, i, pp. 40-42. For the relations between the Centuripe vases and Roman wall-painting see P. W. Lehmann, Roman Wall Paintings from Boscoreale, 1953, pp. 140-143. For the Adernò and Falcone vases see Trendall, Bull. Ant. Besch., xxiv-xxvi (1949-1951), pp. 32 f.; Gabrici, Mon. Piot, xxiv (1920), pls. 12-14; Pace, Arte e Civiltà della Sicilia antica, ii, pl. 7.

Scene on a vase from Falcone, painted with a wide range of added colors. From Gabrici, pl. 13