

Dangerous **PERFECTION**

FUNERARY VASES FROM SOUTHERN ITALY

*Several artists, especially at Naples, have brought the art of vase restoration to an extremely high degree of perfection; one could even speak of a *dangerous perfection* for knowledge, given the difficulty that ensues in distinguishing areas that have been restored.*

—James Millingen, *Peintures antiques et inédites de vases grecs, tirées de diverses collections*, 1813

Discovered at Ceglie del Campo, near Bari in Apulia (southeastern Italy), the thirteen vases displayed here were unearthed in hundreds of fragments. Acquired by Baron Franz von Koller in Naples in the early nineteenth century, they were entrusted to Raffaele Gargiulo for restoration. Reassembly and repainting were conventional practice at the time, yet there were growing concerns that the work of Neapolitan restorers could be too effective—even potentially deceptive. It was often difficult to distinguish ancient parts from modern additions, leading to what one antiquarian termed “dangerous perfection.” The methods used to achieve such perfection are revealed in this exhibition, which follows a six-year collaborative conservation project that involved disassembling, cleaning, and reconstructing the vessels.

Intended for the grave, the exuberantly decorated vases on view provide insights into the fourth-century B.C. funerary customs of the Peucetians, one of the native peoples of Apulia. Depicting episodes from Greek mythology, the images of heroic conquests, divine abductions, and Dionysian revelry serve as expressions of hope in the face of death and the unknown.

This exhibition was organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum in collaboration with the Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Generous support was provided by the Getty Museum's Villa Council.



Ancient Funerary Customs IN SOUTHERN ITALY

Ceglie del Campo, where the vessels on view here were found, was a substantial settlement in Apulia populated by the Peucetians. Their close engagement with Greek culture is evident in the red-figured pottery deposited in large quantity in their tombs. Such vases were produced from the late fifth century B.C. at the Greek colonies of Taranto and Metaponto in southern Italy. They were distributed throughout the region, and by 350–325 B.C. it is likely that there were local workshops in native settlements, catering to the growing demand.

Vessels created for rich Apulian graves could attain massive proportions and were frequently fashioned with a hole in the bottom. This means that they were not used for storing or mixing but were intended primarily for display during burial rites. Accordingly, their elaborate decoration was often tailored to their funerary context. Mythological scenes, in some cases requiring detailed knowledge of Greek stories and texts, provided the consolation that even great heroes suffered and that it was possible to prevail over the most frightening of terrors. The recurrent presence of Dionysos and his entourage enjoying wine and leisure embodied the conception of an afterlife free from mortal concerns.



Map of Italy marking key locations mentioned in the exhibition

The Collector

BARON FRANZ VON KOLLER

The vessels displayed in this gallery were purchased by Baron Franz von Koller (1767–1826), a distinguished Bohemian military attaché stationed in Naples in 1815–18 and 1821–26. Koller was deeply interested in classical archaeology and even obtained permission from the Neapolitan king to excavate at Pompeii. Naples was the perfect place for an aspiring collector of ancient art. It was the hub of the South Italian antiquities market and home of the dealer and restorer Raffaele Gargiulo, who was crucial to Koller’s acquisitions. So closely did they work together that at one point another eminent collector complained that he could scarcely get Gargiulo’s attention.

Koller was particularly keen that his native land should host a collection of antiquities that could rival those in western Europe. During his time in Naples, he accumulated around ten thousand artifacts for his residence at Obříství, north of Prague. But his death cut short this ambitious project, and Koller’s family was compelled to sell the collection. A major part of it—including 1,348 vases—was acquired by the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1828 for the newly built museum in Berlin, which today houses the Antikensammlung.



Portrait of Baron Franz von Koller, 1821–26, Vincenzo Abbati. Courtesy of the National Museum, Prague

The Restorer

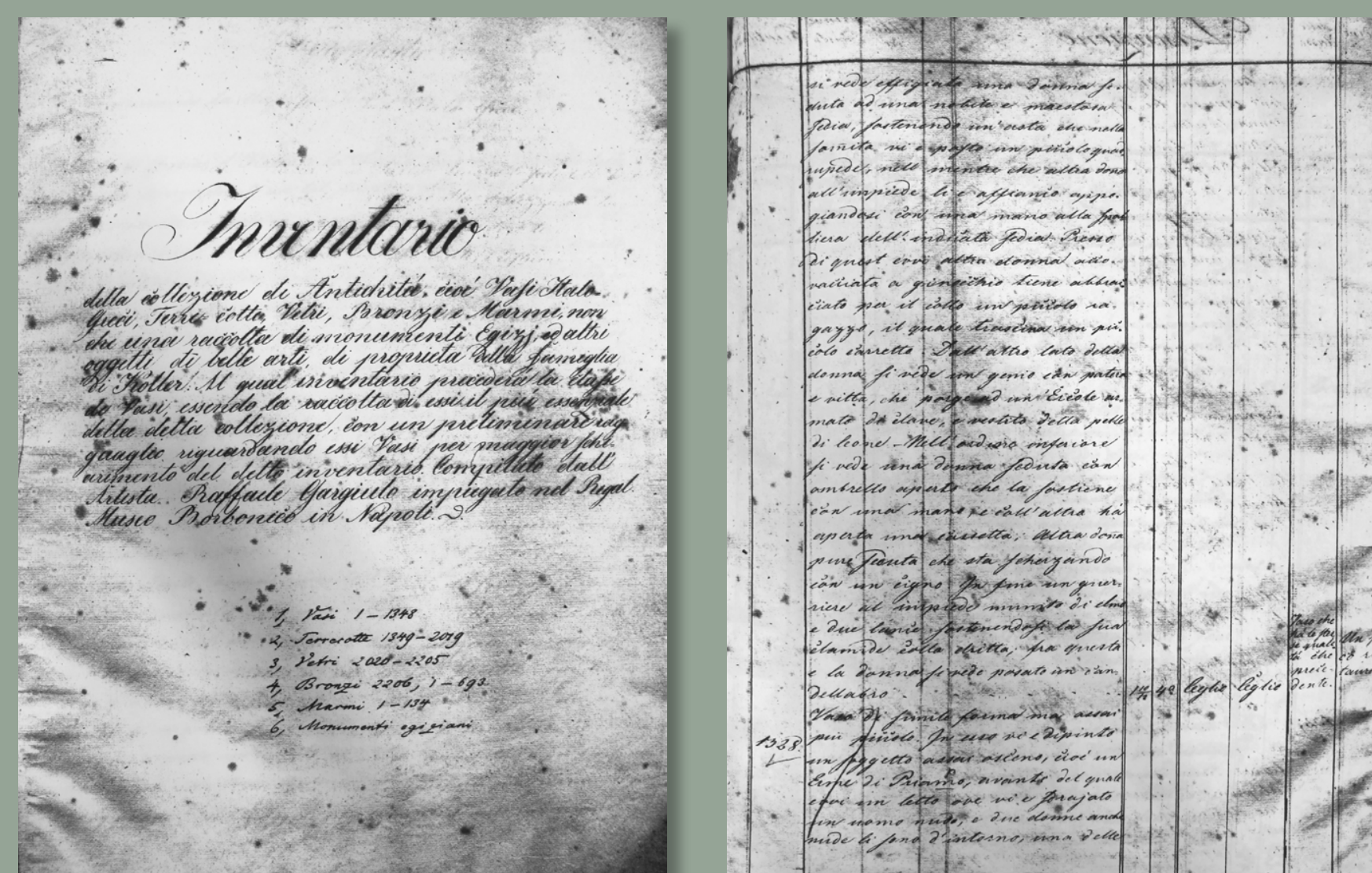
RAFFAELE GARGIULO

On various occasions when I have had the honor of presenting ancient terracotta vases to Your Majesty, I have made particular note of the exactitude and mastery employed by the Royal Museum's restorer, Raffaele Gargiulo.

—Giuseppe Zurlo, minister of the interior, in an 1812 letter to the king of Naples

Raffaele Gargiulo (1785–after 1870) played a pivotal role in the history of the vessels in this gallery. It was to him and a colleague that the collector Baron Franz von Koller entrusted the fragments for reassembly after they were found. A renowned restorer at the Royal Museum in Naples (now the National Archaeological Museum), Gargiulo was also a dealer with an international clientele in the Neapolitan market for antiquities.

Trained at the Royal Porcelain Workshop in Naples, Gargiulo entered the museum in 1808 to restore terracotta vases. He soon acquired responsibility for bronzes and was ultimately involved in the daily management of the institution. Gargiulo's work on ceramics won great praise, but his interventions—particularly the completion of painted decoration—could be so effective that it was often difficult to identify what was ancient and what was modern. This “dangerous perfection” was troubling enough to result in legislation in 1818 that heavily restricted the extent of vase restoration. Gargiulo was frustrated, claiming the new law an insult to his profession. Yet he found ways to continue his craft, especially when employed by private collectors such as Koller.

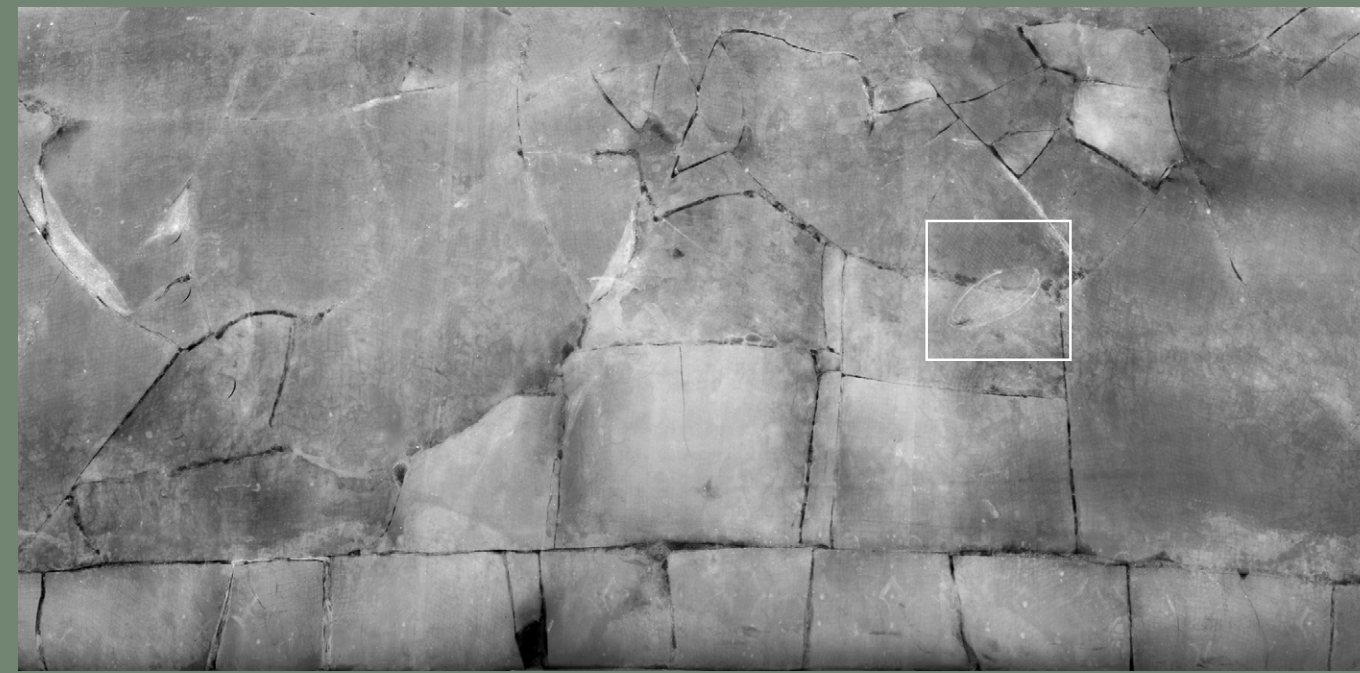
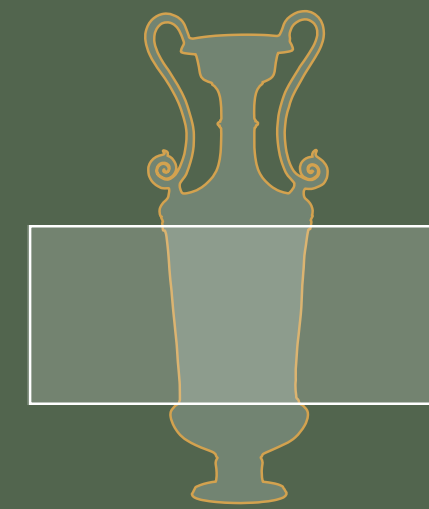
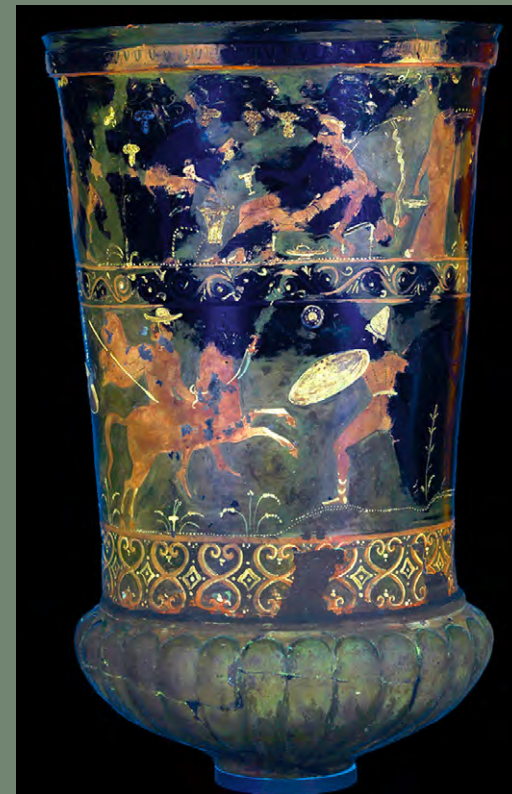


Pages from Gargiulo's inventory of Koller's collection. Courtesy of the Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Familiar with Koller's collection of antiquities, Gargiulo was well-placed to draw up an inventory of about three thousand objects following Koller's death in 1826. To do so, Gargiulo requested a five-month leave from Naples. The inventory was instrumental in the acquisition of much of the collection by the king of Prussia in 1828.

FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The vases in this exhibition were the subject of a collaborative conservation project initiated in 2008 between the Getty Museum and the Antikensammlung in Berlin. During the six-year campaign, a variety of techniques were employed to illuminate each vessel's history and inform the manner of treatment. They allowed conservators to distinguish ancient sections from nineteenth-century restorations, and revealed some of the tools, materials, and methods used by Raffaele Gargiulo and his colleagues in Naples.



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