

More Than Mere Playthings

More Than Mere Playthings:

The Minor Arts of Italy

Edited by

Julia C. Fischer

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For Timothy J. McNiven

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

JULIA C. FISCHER

In 1568, Giorgio Vasari was the first art historian to assert the supremacy of the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture in his second edition of *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.¹ According to Vasari, because architecture, painting, and sculpture required an enormous amount of skill and intelligence, these art forms were inherently greater than all other artistic media. With this opinion of the arts, Vasari was responsible for the subsequent division between the major arts (architecture, painting, and sculpture) and the minor arts (ceramics, metalwork, gemstones, jewelry, glass, figurines, cameos etc.).

While Vasari's division initially applied only to the arts of Italy, this opinion and division of the arts eventually spread throughout the rest of Europe.² By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the separation between the arts had become even greater, with the minor arts looked upon with increasing derision and scorn, which was most likely the result of the

¹ Even the title of Vasari's text points to the supremacy of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Prior to Vasari's categorization in the sixteenth century, there was no such division between of the different media arts. Please also note that in Vasari's first edition of *Lives of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors* (1550), the art historian does not yet make the division between the major and minor arts, and in fact praises metalwork, especially that of Benvenuto Cellini, and gems. It is not until his second edition of 1568 that a formal separation between the arts is promoted, relegating the minor arts to the lesser position.

² Vasari's negative opinion of the minor arts was only gradually accepted. Throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods, scholars and connoisseurs still praised and collected minor arts alongside paintings and sculptures. It was not until the eighteenth century that Vasari's division of the arts into major and minor took hold, resulting in the hierarchy we still see today. For a brief historiography of the scholarship of the minor arts, see Lapatin 2003 and the introduction of Hourihane 2012.

rise of Academies. To this day, the minor arts remain marginalized in art historical scholarship.

Today, scholars are struggling to find the correct words to describe all of those works of art that are not architecture, painting, or sculpture. Minor arts is the most common designation, though this is pejorative and implies that these objects are less important than their counterparts. Some scholars call the minor arts the decorative or sumptuous arts, but both of these terms do not take into account all of the different media of the minor arts and also the fact that not all of the minor arts were made of luxurious materials. Finally, there are some scholars who say that we should no longer bother separating the different media of art, hence the categorizations of major and minor arts are obsolete. For lack of better terminology, which hopefully will come in the future, in this text the arts that are not architecture, painting, and sculpture will be referred to as the minor arts.

Recent studies, including this one, have attempted to bring the minor arts back to the forefront.³ For example, Marina Belozerskaya, Kenneth Lapatin, and Marian H. Feldman have revealed the relationships between the minor arts and reception, contextualization, and portability.⁴ *More Than Mere Playthings: The Minor Arts of Italy* is intended to expand upon the current scholarship and also seeks to discard the modern division between the minor arts and major arts, thereby returning these lesser-known art objects to the mainstream. After all, there was no such division between the major and minor arts in antiquity and the medieval world. In fact, the minor arts were usually highly praised and valued at the time of their creation.

This is the main reason why it is so important to study the minor arts and to cease viewing these works as inferior: because they were not deemed minor and less important until the sixteenth century. These so-called minor arts were anything but minor at the time of their creation. Minor arts, especially those that were made out of luxurious materials, were highly regarded and held in greater esteem than even paintings,

³ This is not to say that there are not books devoted to the minor arts, just that they do not receive as much attention. In addition, many of these so-called minor arts are not part of the official canon of art history, which is something many scholars are striving to change. There are too many journal articles to list here, but for recent book publications that deal with the minor arts, consult Belozerskaya 2005; Belozerskaya 2012; Feldman 2006; Feldman 2014 Hourihane 2012; Lapatin 2015; and Mackie 2015.

⁴ See Belozerskaya 2005; Lapatin 2015; and Feldman 2014.

architecture, and sculptures.⁵ For example, Renaissance tapestries were more expensive than paintings. It is only a matter of preservation that makes paintings more important today.⁶

The minor arts are also worthy of study because of their intimate reception. Typically small in size, a work like an Etruscan mirror or a Roman cameo could be held comfortably in the hand, studied and admired. This differs greatly from the reception of a public work of art. For example, the ancient viewer would have been lucky to catch just a glimpse of the Ara Pacis Augustae from afar as he or she walked by it and certainly would not have had the opportunity to view it closely, alone, and at length.

Many of these works of minor arts, especially those made out of expensive materials, would have had elite patrons thus adding to their prestige. These works, as stated previously, were often the most highly regarded objects of a collection and thus a study of them can reveal new insights.

This book is inspired by the 2015 Italian Art Society sponsored conference sessions of the American Association of Italian Studies and the seven chapters of *More Than Mere Playthings: The Minor Arts of Italy* span the art of ancient Etruria to twentieth century Italy and explore a variety of media, including mirrors, cameos, treasury objects, reliquaries, ceramics, and figurines. Scholars approach the topic of the minor arts from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, including reception, use, patronage, gender issues, propaganda, and iconography. The first goal of this volume is to fill the lacuna in the scholarship of the minor arts. Second, the chapters of this volume reveal that the minor arts are unique and worthy of study for their size, preciousity, patron, audience, function, portability, and material. Ultimately, in revealing the importance of these objects, it will become apparent that the division between the major and minor arts is no longer valid and that these objects of the minor arts hold as much significance as those of the major arts.

Following this introduction, the remaining six chapters of this book are arranged chronologically, beginning with Etruscan art. In Chapter Two, Bridget Sandhoff examines Etruscan bronze mirrors. Despite their

⁵ Writers in antiquity praised the objects of what we now call the minor arts, making it clear that these objects not only belonged beside the “major” arts, but in fact were even more highly regarded. For example, please see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* Books 33 and 34 (Gold and Silver) and Book 37 (Precious Stones). Please also consult Pollitt 1983 and Pollitt 1990 for ancient sources that mention the minor arts in Greece and Rome. For sources in Medieval and Renaissance Italy, see Hourihane 2012 and Belozerskaya 2005.

⁶ See Campbell 2002.

frequency, Etruscan mirrors often take the backseat to more “significant” art forms such as tomb painting, architectural sculpture, sarcophagi, or religious sites. While these major works certainly help reconstruct Etruscan life, the “trivial” mirror can provide just as significant, if not more, insight into Etruscan society. Based on these mirrors and other beauty aids, the Etruscans viewed adornment and fashion very differently. It was not an expression of vanity but held greater implications for Etruscan families and Etruria overall.

Sandhoff’s chapter explores the significance of beauty within ancient Etruria by examining specific mirrors, their imagery, and their usage in life and the afterlife. Fortunately, much work has been devoted to cataloging all known Etruscan mirrors, and studying the imagery and iconography engraved on the non-reflective sides. These studies, however, tend to divorce the artwork from its context and original purpose. At its most basic level, a mirror was a reflective surface that allowed women and men to inspect their appearances. Mirrors were handled, manipulated, and used on a daily basis and therefore, could communicate a potent message. Sandhoff proposes that beauty was not a frivolous matter but a collective concern of the family, the community, and Etruria, and these small, reflective pieces of metal were critical in conveying this ideology.

In Chapter Three, Julia C. Fischer turns to the Early Roman Empire with her investigation of the private propaganda of large imperial cameos, specifically the *Gemma Augustea* and *Grand Camée de France*. These two gemstones are the largest and best-preserved cameos of the Early Roman Empire and possess complex and dense multi-figured compositions that have been the focus of scholarship since the eighteenth century. To date, studies of these Imperial cameos almost exclusively concentrate on one of three issues: the identification of the figures, the date of the particular cameo, or an overall chronology of these Imperial works. Fischer’s chapter, however, will examine the large Imperial cameos of the Early Roman Empire from a different perspective: its female patronage.

If the patrons of the *Gemma Augustea* and *Grand Camée de France* were indeed Livia and Agrippina the Elder respectively, as this chapter will propose, then a case can be made that large imperial cameos are a female art form and the gemstones were specifically utilized as instruments of private propaganda to aggrandize each woman’s role in the imperial family as well as to advance certain members of her family who are displayed enticingly as potential successors to the emperor. Such obvious displays of dynastic succession were not acceptable in the public arts, so Livia and Agrippina the Elder turned to one of the most expensive media of the minor arts. Women had more influence and input in the

creation of these cameos, as opposed to the art of the public sphere that the emperor had a heavy hand in developing. Therefore, large Imperial cameos were a female empress' type of propaganda.

In Chapter Four, Karen Mathews highlights the minor arts of medieval Italy with her examination of the plundering of portable luxury objects in the Italian maritime republics. Pisa, Venice, and Genoa all established traditions of taking precious portable objects as symbols of victory in the course of their crusades against Muslim adversaries in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their appropriations included small-scale artworks of luxury materials and holy relics, establishing an equivalence between the two as worthy plunder. The Pisans and Genoese, for example, brought back luxury objects of bronze from their campaigns against Muslims in Spain, while the Venetians specialized in plundering relics from the eastern Mediterranean during their military expeditions in the Holy Land. In subsequent centuries, warfare against foreign enemies subsided and the maritime republics battled with one another for political hegemony and access to commercial markets across the Mediterranean. In their warfare on both land and sea, the Italians seized symbolic plunder from one another which they displayed prominently on their public buildings. Harbor chains, bells, keys, inscriptions, relics and reliquaries, sarcophagi, stone and bronze sculpture were all appropriated by one republic to exalt itself and humiliate the other, and even the most quotidian objects could be infused with symbolic significance in these bitter conflicts. This chapter demonstrates how the mutability and multivalence of portable small-scale luxury objects allowed them to negotiate the conceptual categories of spoils and *spolia*, fragment and collection, object and thing, making them ideal vehicles for the maritime republics to define themselves and their relationship to one another in the competitive and contentious environment of the medieval Mediterranean.

Turning to the early Italian Renaissance, in Chapter Five Sarah M. Dillon examines fourteenth century reliquaries. Because they fall outside the boundaries of the major arts, Italian Renaissance reliquaries have not received as much scholarly attention as the period's famous fresco cycles or monumental sculptures. This chapter argues that fourteenth century glass reliquaries were not only highly valued art forms during their time but also serve as important windows into our understanding of the development of Renaissance culture as a whole.

Two aspects shared by many so-called minor arts include their functional or utilitarian nature and the private or personal context in which they were used. In the case of glass reliquary diptychs, the artwork served as a devotional tool, which fostered one's meditation on God and the

relationship between the present mundane world and the eternal heavenly afterlife. Because their reception was conditioned by the individual user and the variety of settings in which they were used, it is difficult to reconstruct how such reliquaries were received. This chapter responds to this challenge by approaching questions of reception, intention, and medium from two sides, namely the side of the artist and that of the user. From the artist's perspective—especially a fourteenth century Umbrian artist working for the Franciscan order—the influence and inspiration of Rome was ever present. Not surprisingly, there are many sources of artistic inspiration that reveal connections to the trecento glass reliquaries in both Rome and Assisi.

Glass as a medium is also considered as a rich symbol. This chapter offers some potential reasons why glass, particularly gilded glass, transparent glass, and the decorative treatment known as *verre églomisé*, was used to adorn some of the church's most revered possessions. The Latin West expanded its glass production over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries due to the influence of glassmakers and techniques from Islamic territories. As glass became more widely available, the number of reliquaries featuring glass increased. Though traditionally categorized as a mundane medium because of its man-made origins, glass held powerful symbolic potential. When one carefully analyzes the ways in which glass was used in the case studies, important connections are found between the reliquaries and some of the faith's most important beliefs, specifically the Beatific Vision. Thus, through an examination of glass's earlier precedents, its rich symbolism, and the stunning visual effects produced by it, Dillon's chapter demonstrates how glass could have elegantly resonated with the concept of the threshold of the divine and in turn, shaped Renaissance religion, culture, and art.

Shifting to the modern era, in Chapter Six Adrian Duran focuses on Italian ceramics during the middle decades of the twentieth century, from the last decade of Fascism through to its presence within *arte povera*. The basic contention of this chapter is that by the twentieth century, the category of minor arts had been rendered insufficient and obsolete through a combination of both centuries of Italian artistic production and the innovations of European Modernism. Ceramics should be viewed within the mainstream of Modernist artistic production, not within the marginalized, often pejorative category of the minor arts. Those artists addressed within this study have reconsidered the ceramic medium beyond functionality and the domestic, instead mobilizing the medium as a vehicle of social critique and resistance during the volatile decades of the Cold War, on par and often in direct dialogue with practitioners in other media.

Ultimately, Duran's chapter traces Italian ceramics from their conformist absorption into Fascist autarchy, through a pivot to the Resistance ideologies of the postwar decades, and into the earliest moments of Italian Postmodernism. In doing so, this study will dismantle the false dichotomy of major and minor arts and demonstrate the omnipresent momentum of ceramics within Italy's mid-twentieth century avant-gardes.

Finally, Melissa Hempel concludes this volume with Chapter Seven, which reveals the significance that the Italian figurine has played in daily life and personal collections throughout history. But despite their ubiquity, these figurines have held a lesser place in the canon of art. The breadth of creation and variety should garner more attention and credit. Spanning materials from metal to porcelain, and tracing historic rituals, and modern day collecting, figurines connect cultures and time periods, a large task for a small object.

Found as grave goods in Etruscan tombs and now appropriated in global, contemporary art, figurines adapt to provide context and perspective for artists, historians, and archeologists. Once paid attention to, the small-scaled works seems ever-present, as they must have been in previous time periods. Examining figurines through formal analysis, gallery politics, and collecting practices helps to place them more predominately in Italian art history. Perhaps now, their seemingly ordinary quality can be seen as their greatest attribute.

In total, the seven chapters of *More Than Mere Playthings* bring examples of lesser-known works of Italian minor arts to the forefront. In this book, works like mirrors, cameos, and ceramics are called examples of minor arts, but hopefully one day soon the need to distinguish between the major and minor arts will become obsolete.

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CHAPTER TWO

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL: REFLECTIONS ON ETRUSCAN BRONZE MIRRORS

BRIDGET SANDHOFF

Beauty, adornment, and *cultus* (i.e., care for the body) were typically viewed with suspicion and distrust in antiquity. Concern for personal appearance was usually associated with women, who, unlike men, were solely preoccupied with frivolous matters such as shiny jewelry and fashionable hairstyles. Though men certainly fretted over their looks, they had other, more substantial pursuits to engage their time. The material culture of beauty—jewelry, perfume vessels, combs, hairpins, cistae, mirrors—was (and still is) often categorized under the feminine arts and consequently, considered insignificant. Despite the possible quality and luxury of these items, they are usually left out of major cultural and artistic discussions, and classified as “minor arts.” The term “minor” generates a sense of inferiority of these intimate pieces, and they are considered to have lesser merit when compared to larger monuments and artwork.

Much of the bias against the “minor arts” stems from opinions established in the Renaissance, especially those preserved in the writings of Giorgio Vasari. His value judgments about the elevated worth of “fine art” over “craft” persisted after his time, and Vasari’s beliefs were perpetuated by later institutions, which consequently established a hierarchy of art. As a result, works considered purely decorative or personal in nature were and are overlooked in favor of traditional art forms.¹ The preference for the major three—painting, sculpture, and architecture—still seems to dominate the art world and the manner in which art history is taught. Fortunately, scholars are challenging these antiquated ideas as well as the use of the term minor. Material culture

¹ Krohn 2014, 5-6.

theory has become a popular method in examining the “minor arts.” Jules Prown, one of the forefathers of the field, simply describes material culture as the study of things, and these things can reveal much about a society and its ideology.² Included in this study are how people interact and perceive these works which can affect behaviors and attitudes. With this new method, these intimate items are being re-examined and re-contextualized, and claiming a stronger fundamental position within their respective cultures.

Just as a temple or bronze sculpture can convey crucial information about a society, decorative pieces like jewelry can be equally insightful. For the Etruscans, a woman’s toiletries are just one set of items that provide understanding about their culture. This is especially meaningful because Etruscan literature does not survive, and thus, the art, material culture, and the archaeological remains become our best evidence. While Etruria had grand works of architecture, painting, and sculpture, their so-called “minor arts” nicely illustrate their diverse and brilliant artistic tradition such as candelabras, bronze and terracotta votives, *paterae*, and incense burners. But one beauty item becomes synonymous with Etruria: the engraved bronze mirror.

Most ancient peoples used mirrors or something similar, but they were not accorded the same primacy as we find in Etruria. These generally small metal objects played an integral role within Etruscan daily life but also more extraordinary contexts—the tomb and afterlife. Incredibly, more than 3000 mirrors survive today, and the number may be as high as 4000, making mirrors the largest body of extant artwork in Etruria.³ Based on the quantity alone, mirrors were critical for women, who were the primary users, yet, I would argue, engraved bronze mirrors were crucial for the whole of Etruscan society. They imparted a significant message to the owners but also spoke of issues vital to Etruria.

This chapter aims to explore these issues, using recent scholarship. A brief analysis of basic information about Etruscan mirrors will begin the discussion followed by an examination of their function. Finally, the chapter investigates specific examples that reinforce their purpose and Etruscan philosophies. It is my belief that mirrors were “live” objects that exhibited agency and affected the lives of those who used them. Mirrors reiterated certain Etruscan dogma, shaping and perhaps correcting certain behaviors. For instance, one of the most common subjects engraved on the

² Prown 1995, 1. For more on the merging of art history and material culture studies, see Yonan 2011.

³ De Puma 2013b, 1043; Izzet 2012, 71. Izzet declares 5000 mirrors could still be in existence.

reverse of a mirror is beauty, featuring its most basic role. Unlike Greece and Rome, Etruria placed greater value in appearances, especially for women, as well as the items involved with this beautification. One's visage was treated seriously because how one presented himself/herself was as equally as important as one's accomplishments, wealth, and family name in determining marriage potential; in fact, the married couple comprised the heart of Etruscan society. It is with the husband and wife where family started, which safeguarded familial legacy. And indeed, most of these ideas resonate with the engraved bronze mirror.

Fundamental Information

The manufacture of mirrors can be found as early as Villanovan society, an early Iron Age culture and predecessor of the Etruscans. The earliest example dates to ca. 900-850 B.C.; it is a simple round disc with an attached triangular tang (for the separate handle to sit in) and lacks decoration like most Etruscan mirrors.⁴ Few early mirrors survive, but by the sixth century B.C. (Archaic period), mirror production became more regular, and mirrors were primarily deposited in burials.⁵ Mirrors also transformed, evolving from thick, flat pieces of metal to thinner objects with convex reflective surfaces (obverse) and concave reverses with raised lips around the edges. By the fourth century, the quality (e.g., shape and engravings) reached its zenith as well as quantity, and three major types were produced—circular or elliptical discs (box mirrors),⁶ tang mirrors with an attached handle made of wood, bone, or ivory, and handle mirrors cast in one piece.⁷ A hand full of relief mirrors survive,⁸ and a distinctive pear-shaped mirror was manufactured in Praeneste (modern Palestrina), a Latin city southeast of Rome. Though not Etruscan, Praeneste had strong ties to Etruria, and much of its art imitates Etruscan examples. Consequently, Praenestine mirrors are often discussed with Etruscan specimens. And based on the few analyses/tests conducted, most mirrors

⁴ De Puma 2013b, 1043-1044. See 1044, fig. 58.3 for a drawing of the mirror.

⁵ Izzet 2007, 50. She notes that only four mirrors have been recovered from the Villanovan and early Archaic periods. By the late sixth century B.C., the number of mirrors left in tombs increases exponentially. See the whole chapter (43-86) for possible reasons.

⁶ See de Grummond, 1982a, 21-24, figs. 27-33 for images of box mirrors on other media, primarily Volterranean ash urns.

⁷ De Puma 2013b, 1043-1046. In particular, see the illustrations, figs. 58.3-6. For a more thorough study, see De Puma 2005, 17-23.

⁸ Carpino 2003.

are believed to have consisted of a tin-bronze alloy, but it is debatable; a few were made of more precious metals like silver or electrum.⁹

Etruscan scholar Richard De Puma has speculated that the manufacture of mirrors was not a solo endeavor, but involved multiple artists, similar to Greek vase production. For him, a mirror workshop would have involved a craftsperson making the mirror, two engravers (e.g., figural specialist and ornamental expert), and depending on the type of mirror, a handle designer.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the majority of mirrors lack engravings, but when it is present, the decoration, either engraved or chased, mostly consists of simple floral or vegetal designs. The more intricate patterns typically accompany complex stories or figural groups. As expected, these mirrors receive more attention. The images prove to be invaluable because they can fill in the lacuna left in the absence of Etruscan writing. While “masculine” themes are present such as battles, warriors, and prophecy, topics on beauty, love, adornment, and relationships most frequently decorate Etruscan mirrors. It is the latter topics that are relevant to this study.

Function

At the most elementary level, mirrors were utilitarian objects, functioning as devices to aid beautification practices. The reflective side, polished to a high shine, could project the user’s face in order to assist with applying makeup, creating, fixing and adjusting hairstyles, scrutinizing features, maintaining appearances, or any other grooming. Both women and men engaged in these activities, and beauty seems to have been the prerogative of the elite; their wealth and privilege provided leisure time, which could be devoted to such activities. Though concern for one’s appearance affected both sexes, it was a defining practice for women. A stylish hairdo, expensive jewelry, and fashionable garments created a memorable and worthy reputation, speaking well of her. Men, on the other hand, could be handsome, but it was not critical for their standing within the community; their service—civic, religious or military—distinguished them, not their appearances.

Recent scholarship has addressed the gender usage of mirrors. If based solely on the engraved subjects and stereotypes, mirrors were female objects. However, men definitely used and owned them to maintain their

⁹ De Puma 2013b, 1048. De Puma summarizes the metal analysis done by The British Museum. See Swaddling, *et al* 2000 for the longer report.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1047. See fig. 58.7, which supports this theory.

visages, and indeed, mirrors have been found in secure male burials. Based on carefully excavated tombs (ca. fourth-second centuries B.C.) in the Monterozzi necropolis at Tarquinia, mirrors were not obligatory funerary equipment; to be sure, most women had no mirror present in their burials, but a few men were buried with one.¹¹ Moreover, a handful of mirrors were inscribed with male names, either as owner or giver.¹² Thus, a mirror cannot be an automatic indicator of gender.

Despite this tantalizing evidence, women were the primary owners and “consumers” of mirrors. The common imagery and the few inscriptions indicate that mirrors were probably given as gifts on special life-changing occasions, such as a wedding and/or giving birth; they were likely given by the parents or bridegroom.¹³ A mirror was considered a meaningful gift for such a momentous transition in a woman’s (and man’s) life. Certainly, one’s physical appearance, facilitated by a mirror, played a factor in securing an advantageous marital partnership. Etruscan scholar Vedia Izzet believes the engraved bronze mirror shaped personal identity, which was formed by societal norms and expectations. This new attitude, compared to earlier phases, was the result of identity now focused on the body and its adornment for women and men. With a mirror, a woman could transform her body, at least superficially, into the ideal that she wanted as well as the ideal that Etruria supported. Important to note is that men were instrumental in creating that image, not only women; men likely commissioned mirror artists and suggested topics for decoration.¹⁴ Fundamentally, a woman’s appearance was essentially for the male gaze;¹⁵ however, it also garnered envy and admiration of her peers, creating a greater sense of well-being and worth.

Another critical aspect of mirrors concerns their funerary usage. Most mirrors, when recovered from a secure context, are typically found in tombs, and thus, mirrors probably performed a second role in the next realm. Yet, they do not occupy every burial. The more luxurious examples, considered too precious for the tomb, probably stayed within the family, being passed to the next generation.¹⁶ Examination of mirrors from properly excavated tombs indicates that there was no consistency, and

¹¹ Carpino 2008, 10. See charts I, II, and III, which show the distribution of mirrors in the tombs.

¹² Van der Meer 1995, 20-27

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13-20; De Puma 2013b, 1056.

¹⁴ Van der Meer 1995, 20-27.

¹⁵ Izzet 2007, 46-55. Izzet contends that the focus on the body translates into the objectification of women, but I think the same could be said for men.

¹⁶ Carpino 2008, 28, no. 35.

their depositions probably depended on local customs or family traditions as far as who was buried with a mirror, quantity, gender, and location.¹⁷

For example, a local tradition can be seen in the practice of inscribing the word *śuthina* onto the obverse (reflective) side of the mirror (Figure 2.1). This custom seems to be exclusive to burials in the Orvieto-Lake Bolsena region during the Hellenistic period. *Śuthina* roughly translates as “for the tomb,” rendering the mirror useless for the living. This transformation of objects extends to deliberate damage too (similar to killing a sword in Greek society).¹⁸

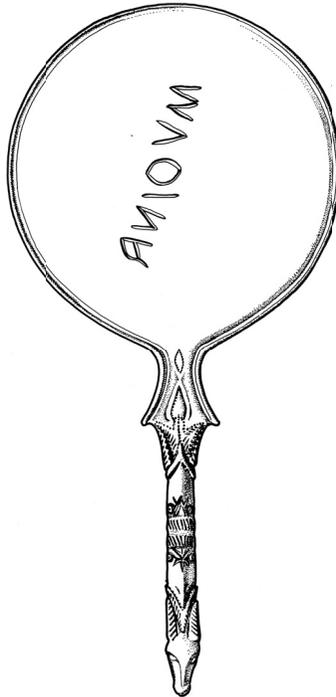


Figure 2.1: Drawing of an engraved bronze mirror with *śuthina* inscribed on the obverse, Chiusi, third century B.C. The British Museum, London. Source: © The Trustees of The British Museum.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16-19. From Carpino’s examination of the Monterozzi burials (Tarquinia), she noted that many of the mirrors were placed physically on or near the legs and feet of the deceased.

¹⁸ De Puma 2013b, 1058-1060; de Grummond 2009.

Once in the tomb, the question is whether the mirror continued to serve. More than likely, a mirror resumed working for the owner beyond the grave but how is up for debate. Multiple theories have been proposed, but most concentrate on the ritualistic/symbolic role of a mirror. Etruscan scholar Nancy de Grummond has speculated that as the mirror reflected a face, it captured the soul or *hinthial* of that person. She believes the act of reflection was magical and in turn, could capture the immortality of the owner.¹⁹ The Dioskouroi—twins Castor and Pollux (Tinias Cliniar, Castur and Pultuke in Etruria)—seem to underscore this idea. They were the most common characters represented on Etruscan mirrors between the fourth-second centuries B.C.²⁰ It may be their double nature that was desirable: they represent the self (mortal) and self-reflected (immortal). This dual image is what de Grummond calls twinning, and it seems to be a common practice in Etruscan art either for symbolic or artistic (i.e., balanced composition) reasons.²¹

Furthermore, the Dioskouroi's unusual birth from an egg illustrates the mortal/immortal dichotomy perfectly. The twins' mother Leda, having been seduced by a swan (Zeus in disguise), gave birth to Castor and Pollux, but the duo hatched from an egg. Ironically, they had different fathers: Castor, son of Tyndareus (Leda's husband); Pollux, son of Zeus. Their Phrygian style hats (*piloi*) also allude to their birth because the cap's shape mimics an egg. As a result of the mixed paternity, the twins would be ultimately separated by Castor's death, the mortal twin. But, in a compromise with Zeus, the brothers were able to share immortality, traversing both realms.²²

The uniqueness of their story was certainly appealing, but also on a symbolic level. The Dioskouroi could illustrate movement into the afterlife: physical movement and mortal/immortal transition. The Dioskouroi are often shown facing each other in mirrored poses, and stylized stars or the *dokana* rest between them (Figure 2.2). The *dokana*, a fence-like form created with vertical and horizontal lines, has been translated as the gateway to the underworld. Castor and Pollux may be guardians/markers of the entrance, and the stars or the *dokana* could indicate the barrier between life and death. Consequently, de Grummond has suggested that the mirror, in fact, may be the portal itself.²³ It is a

¹⁹ De Grummond 1982b, 182-184.

²⁰ De Grummond 1991, 27, no. 2. This note discusses the statistical data on the major topics depicted on mirrors.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²² *Ibid.*, 12. See also De Puma 1986 for the *LIMC* entry.

²³ De Grummond 1991, 22.

seductive theory, but it does not fit all scenarios. For instance, if the mirror was truly a portal to the next realm, would not all burials or every person have one? And as the case study from the Monterozzi necropolis shows, most of the tombs lacked a mirror. Moreover, how do we account for the gender discrepancy? Presumably, men would also need a mirror to achieve immortality but they seem to be mainly used by and buried with women. Perhaps, another way to look at this situation is to consider the use of the Dioskouroi imagery as a localized custom particular to an area or even familial groups.

On a more practical level, the fascination with the Dioskouroi can also be attributed to their birth: two children from one pregnancy. Twins in most societies have often been treated as special, even supernatural. Certainly for the Etruscans, Castor and Pollux were potent figures of fertility, a primary concern for Etruria. The importance of family, its survival, and continuity depended on the reproductive capabilities of a married couple so any assistance from the gods, possibly the Dioskouroi, was welcomed. Furthermore, their unique birth from an egg could imply rebirth into the afterlife. Eggs, after all, were common symbols of fertility and often found in Etruscan funerary art. Castor and Pollux could be visual signs of rebirth and immortality. Additionally, these Spartan brothers were paragons of athletic fitness. In Sparta, physical prowess was a sign of beauty, and indeed, the twins were most handsome, and just as good-looking as their (in)famous sister, Helen. Overall, they were apposite figures for mirrors.

The second most popular characters on late Etruscan mirrors are Lasas, supernatural creatures indigenous to Etruria. Contrary to the Dioskouroi, Lasas are difficult to discuss; they have no secure definition because of the many ways they are represented: single or multiple, female or male, wings or wingless, named or anonymous, clothed or nude. Despite this ambiguity, Lasas are typically represented as young, beautiful, winged, semi-nude women, striding across a mirror. They primarily served as beauty attendants, usually holding a perfume vessel (e.g., alabastron) in hand (Figure 2.3); they could, however, also protect lovers or the vulnerable such as children, and possibly be harbingers of fate.²⁴

A Lasa's main function is appropriately suited for a mirror, and its popularity may be explained as way of maintaining one's attractiveness in the here and now but also in the afterlife. This belief coincides with their high frequency such as the mirrors from the Monterozzi necropolis, which were decorated mostly with Lasas; however, quality is an important

²⁴ Rallo 1974; De Puma 1985.

consideration. After the fourth century B.C., both Lasa and Dioskouroi mirrors show poor craftsmanship with smaller, thinner specimens and crude engravings. Based on these multiple examples from the late Classical and Hellenistic periods, it is likely that the Lasa and Dioskouroi mirrors were made exclusively for the tomb or perhaps for a less affluent clientele. De Grummond has also noted similarities between these characters (e.g., positioning, doubling, and Phrygian hats), and that the two could have been interchangeable.²⁵

Moreover, beauty was a key feature in women's lives that also carried over into the afterlife, and the Lasa played a plausible role. A unique find from a burial in the Cannicella cemetery in Orvieto supports the value of physical beauty. In a wooden coffin, archaeologists found a female skeleton in which a propped up mirror was positioned in front of her face; she was looking at the engraved surface, which was decorated with a Lasa. More than likely, the woman requested that her head be positioned in this way so she could stare at the mirror eternally.²⁶ This occurrence is exceptional, and cannot be considered a universal practice, but it again shows the import of beauty in Etruria.

In addition to a mirror's functionality and funerary usage, I would argue that they also fulfilled a third purpose—vehicle of communication. Izzet again explores the power of the object, employing different modes of interpretation, namely that of material culture studies and the work of social anthropologist Alfred Gell.²⁷ In Gell's theory, the object is not simply inanimate and passive, but can also exert agency and alter the behavior of the user. Instead of art reflecting the values of society, which is certainly possible, it can also work the other way: objects helped to shape society. Izzet believes this is the case for ancient Etruria, and it may help explain a fundamental shift in their cultural practice during the Archaic period. At this time, the body became the locus for personal identity and clearer gender differentiation. For example, an engraved bronze mirror impresses upon the owner to employ it and as a result, to show concern for one's appearance. And if that mirror is decorated with an adornment scene, it strengthens this activity further. In this sense, the mirror exercises influence over the user and can shape her/his actions. For

²⁵ De Grummond 1991, 20-22.

²⁶ Stopponi 1994, 207-209. See the corresponding photos/drawings of the grave and mirror: Pls. XXXIIb-c and XXXVc-d

²⁷ Izzet 2007, 28-31. In particular, she uses *Art and Agency* (1998), Gell's seminal book on the anthropology of art. While Gell's work is not without its flaws, Izzet believes it can provide a new avenue of exploration and interpretation. See also Berger 1977.

Izzet, these mirrors echo and symbolize stricter gender roles. Instead of considering aristocratic Etruscan wives as powerful members of a community, Izzet contends that women were domesticated and objectified, only valued as pretty objects to be looked at by men. Men, on the other hand, interact more freely in society as civic figures and warriors and are judged by their accomplishments.²⁸

While Izzet's argument is solid, I prefer a more positive perspective. Care for the body should not be judged worthless, objectifying, and simply pleasing for the opposite sex. De Grummond believes beauty and all its accoutrements were badges of honor for women who were limited in garnering accolades like their male partners. She endorses this theory with the late fourth century B.C. sarcophagus of Ramtha Visnai and Arnth Tetnies (from Vulci). The side of the coffin shows the elite couple standing together in the center, followed by servants who carry symbols of their station in life. Arnth was probably a magistrate because of the *lituus* and rods (i.e., curved staff), ivory chair, *auloi*, and war trumpet behind him. His wife's servants, on the other hand, show objects of the female toilet: umbrella, situla, fan, lyre, and possible jewelry box.²⁹ These items suggest that her beauty was an emblem of status.

Support also comes in the form of Latin literature. In *Ab Urbe Condita* (34.7.8-9), Livy discusses the 195 B.C. debate over the Lex Oppia (a sumptuary law established in 215 B.C.) and whether to preserve or abolish it. Lucius Valerius opposes this measure, stating that it would deny women their just opportunity to display their rank:

“No offices, no priesthoods, no triumphs, no honorary insignia, no gifts or spoils from war can come to (women); elegance and adornment and apparel—these are the insignia of women, in these they rejoice and glory, these our ancestors referred to as ‘woman’s world’”³⁰

While Livy's passage refers to women in the Roman Republic, de Grummond notes, though, that the ancestors Valerius mentions are the Etruscans, and this assertion validates beauty as a status symbol for aristocratic Etruscan women. The mirror contributed to this status; it helped beautify, but it was also a costly item worthy of praise and admiration. Therefore, the mirror and its imagery generate meaning, and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-84. See her other scholarship: Izzet 2005; Izzet 1998.

²⁹ Haynes 2000, 287. See also 288-289, figs. 232a-d for illustrations of the sarcophagus. Haynes, however, believes Ramtha's items indicate that she was a priestess.

³⁰ De Grummond 1982b, 180. The passage was translated by de Grummond.