



**Jeammet, Violaine (ed.)**

*Tanagra: Figurines for Life and Eternity. The Musée du Louvre's Collection of Greek Figurines*

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The volume, edited by Violaine Jeammet, is dedicated to the exhibition held at the Centro Cultural Bancaja in Valencia, Spain (29th March-7th July 2010). It is an enlarged and revised edition of the catalogue of the exhibitions on the topic shown in Paris (The Louvre, 09/15/2003-01/05/2004) and Montréal (Musée des Beaux Arts, 02/05-05/09/2004).<sup>1</sup> In the seven chapters of the volume, in turn divided into a series of essays, the large collection of items from The Louvre – mostly from Boeotia and in particular from Tanagra – provide the pretext for a broad discussion of the Hellenistic production of terracotta figurines known as 'Tanagras.' The exhibited items are reviewed in light of new interpretative methodologies and recent historical, as well as archaeological, acquisitions. The book offers a detailed and updated summary of many issues related to the objects.

The first chapter is devoted to the reconstruction of the historical background of the research on the collection of terracotta figurines, especially the 'Tanagras'. Everything started with massive clandestine excavations, which between the end of the 1800s and the early years of the following century led local farmers, residents, and professional 'diggers' to plunder systematically an impressively high number of graves (from 8,000 to 10,000) in the territory of ancient Tanagra (Vratsi, Schimatari, Liatani, and Staniates). Behind this phenomenon, analytically reconstructed by J. Becq, lay the frantic search for terracotta figurines, and especially those of females, which, according to the report of the archaeologist and collector O. Rayet, had aroused a great appreciation from the audience at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1878. Among the admirers, the scholar counts well-educated people, but also occasional visitors, as well as ordinary men and women. N. Mathieu's analysis makes clear that no one can understand the extraordinary attention paid to these artifacts made of poor clay, if the phenomenon is not put in an historical context. In the Europe of the post-Neoclassical period, the emergence of industry accelerated economic development, thereby altering relations between social classes and leading to the emergence of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie was the main recipient of the 'Tanagras.' The European bourgeoisie looked with awe and wonder at the formal elegance and detailed accuracy of these specimens. In the collective imagination the idea was that these figurines reflected real-life scenes and that ancient Greek society was very similar to the contemporary one.<sup>2</sup>

V. Aravantinos offers in his fine paper an overview of the region's history. Since the Mycenaean period, Boeotia occupied a central role in the political framework of the Mediterranean world and in Greek trade with the East. R.J. Buck's combined reading of historical sources and epigraphic as well as archaeological evidence allows the reader to perceive the urban plan of Tanagra in the Classical period. J. M. Fossey outlines the history of Tanagra in the Hellenistic-Roman periods. The image of a thriving city emerges, in which women had a different status than in many other cities of Greece. In the Hellenistic period, Tanagra had intensive commercial relations with Athens, Thebes, Eretria, Corinth, Northern Greece, Egypt, Southern Italy, and Asia Minor. Surface and geomagnetic surveys carried out in Grimadhia by J. Bintliff and B. Slapšak suggest that the city flourished already in the late Archaic period.

However, any examination of the artistic terracotta production of Tanagra has to begin with a series of questions that have been already raised in scholarly literature repeatedly. Under what terms can one speak of Boeotian crafts? What are the indigenous characteristics of local products and when and to what extent do they start reflecting the style of other centers? How can the 'Tanagra style' be defined? The essays of the second chapter attempt to answer these and many other questions. According to V. L. Aravantinos, it is with the beginnings of the Mycenaean period that the emergence of a regional production of terracotta artifacts can be deduced from the material evidence. Among these, we note the creation of the painted larnakes. V. Jeammet's detailed analysis shows that in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C. the so-called bell idols became very popular. Stylistically attributed to the 'oinochoe-group's workshop' (750-670 B.C.), bell idols were in all probability produced in Theban pottery workshops. In the Archaic period, the typical features of Boeotian black-figure pottery, according to M. Denoyelle, consist of a rather narrow repertoire of shapes and of a limited choice of subjects. Cups decorated with birds and floral motifs are the unmistakably regional products of the period. On the contrary, the Archaic terracotta production in Boeotia has a much broader spectrum of types (horse and rider groups, plank-like figures, 'genre' scenes, and animals). In the Classical period, workshops seem to continue with creativity the traditional terracotta production firmly established in the region since the Mycenaean period. V. Jeammet shows that great attention paid to the archaeological context and the provenance of the objects (they were usually found in graves) during excavations at Rhitsona, Akraiphia, Thebes, Thespiiai, and Tanagra allowed the development of a firm chronological frame associated with contemporary pottery. Late Classical peplophoroi and naked youths in different scale are widely attested in cemeteries and the few excavated sanctuaries. Late Classical terracotta figurines (Aphrodite, Apollo, Leda with the swan and mantle dancers) reveal clear links with stone sculpture.

With respect to the Hellenistic period, the study of terracotta production, particularly of the so-called Tanagras, until recently was strongly hindered by fragmentation and the absence of concrete contextual information. The origins of the 'Tanagras,' their date,

and the reasons for their disappearance are still controversially debated. V. Jeammet, J. Becq, and N. Mathieux provide a clear and very helpful summary of the status questionis in the third chapter of the book. Thanks to her pioneering studies of the deposits in the Agora of Athens, D. Burr Thompson has argued that the style of Tanagra is the reflection of a new stylistic and technical knowledge developed for metalwork, as well as large sculpture. In Burr Thompson's opinion, the adaptation of models would have been facilitated by the possibility of using the same molds created for bronze figurines and the appliqués of metal vases. Figures associated with the development of Attic Comedy belong to the subjects that first enjoyed some popularity in the context of such an exchange and show, more than others, a metallic texture. The debate over the origin and, in particular, the production frame of Hellenistic terracotta figurines has more recently been boosted by significant contributions addressing plastic decoration of vases and terracotta figurines of the transitional phases between the Classical and Late Classical periods, as well as between the Late Classical and the Hellenistic periods. Parallel to developments in sculpture, these terracotta artifacts document a technical and stylistic progress, as well as a considerable increase in the iconographic repertoire. The occurrence of these products, not only in Athens, but also in centers that had strong alliances and trade contacts with the Greek metropolis, demonstrates how early Athenian workshops adopted the 'Tanagra style.' Thanks to the molding technique (with consequent derivative production) and the marketing of molds, as well as finished articles, on which the insightful essay by A. Muller concentrates, the terracotta figurines marked by this new style were quickly acquired and mass produced by numerous workshops all over the Greek world.

Modern scholarship pays much attention to the definition of the role and function of terracotta figurines based on their original contexts. The clear distinction between the sacred, public or private, and the funerary context is becoming increasingly important. The appendices of the volume in this respect are very helpful. A deeper understanding of these issues is the focus of the 4th chapter. Most depicted subjects seem to be connected with maturation rites involving both girls and boys. A small part of the production of terracotta figurines can be interpreted more specifically as an attempt by concerned family members to place very young children, who are naturally more vulnerable, under the care of the gods. Among the cults that received votive offerings in the form of terracotta figurines, those of Aphrodite, Demeter, Apollo, and Dionysos became the main reference points of this complex social and ideological propaganda.

The 5th chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the Hellenistic terracotta production of geographic areas beyond Boeotia. The structure of the chapter follows the traces of the trade network that involved Greece (Attica, Boeotia, Euboea, Northern Greece), Egypt (D. Kassab Tezgör), the Cyrenaica, Asia Minor, and Western Greece (E. Lippolis, D. Graepler).

The renewed interest in the subject that V. Jeammet and the staff of the Louvre inspired also generated an opportunity to reconsider the largest collection of such objects in Paris using modern diagnostic techniques. The two final chapters illustrate, in fact, the results of a chemical-physical analysis of the clays used for the production of the 'Tanagras.' The analysis confirmed the authenticity of most of the collection, excluded a number of modern fakes, and, more importantly, identified three potential centers of production for the Louvre figurines: Tanagra, Thebes, and Athens. An important aspect of this work was the detailed study of polychromy, which helped clarify problems of the provenance of the artifacts, the organization of the work in the ancient workshops, the skills of the craftsmen, and the approximate costs of productions, which certainly had significant social implications.

The volume is complemented by clearly structured and presented entries in the catalogue, very detailed color photographs of extraordinary quality, useful maps and tables illustrating the geographical distribution of the 'Tanagra' figurines, as well as an extensive and up-to-date bibliography.

Overall, this publication is by no means a simple catalogue of an exhibition. It is successful at targeting equally the common spectator who enjoys the aesthetic delight of the 'Tanagra' figurines, the student who is about to discover the intrigue of these objects, and the scholar who has already dedicated his or her work to them.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>V. Jeammet (ed.), *Tanagra. Mythe et archéologie. Musée du Louvre*, Paris, 15 septembre 2003 - 5 janvier 2004; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, 5 février - 9 mai 2004, Paris 2003. See also V. Jeammet (ed.), *Tanagras. De l'objet de collection à l'objet archéologique*. Actes du colloque organisé par le Musée du Louvre à la Bibliothèque Nationale de France le 22 novembre 2003, Paris 2007.

<sup>2</sup>In the same spirit, the director and scenographer A. Golovin would be inspired by the female figurines from Tanagra a few years later and would shape the stage sketches for Greek tragedy accordingly, see D. Gavrilovich, *Nel segno del colore e del corpo. Il regista scenografo Aleksandr Golovin, sperimentazione e riforma nella scena russa dal 1878 al 1917*, Rome 2011.