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## Review of Ancient Luxury and the Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville at the Getty Villa

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Concise, critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies

September 24, 2015 Kenneth

Lapatin, ed.

*The Berthouville Silver Treasure and Roman  
Luxury*

Exh. cat. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2014. 224 pp.; 98 color ill.; 21 b/w ill. Cloth  
(9781606064207)

*Ancient Luxury and the Roman Silver Treasure  
from Berthouville*

Exhibition schedule: Getty Villa, Los Angeles, November 19, 2014–August 17, 2015; Fine Arts  
Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, September 19, 2015–January 10, 2016; Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, February 14–May 22, 2016; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas  
City, June 25–October 2, 2016

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*Mercury* (175–225). Silver and gold. 22 3/16 x 6 5/16 in.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies,  
médailles et antiques, Paris.

The Berthouville Treasure, discovered by a farmer in Normandy, France (ancient Gaul), in 1830, represents one of the largest and best-preserved collections of Roman silver to survive from the ancient world. The objects, most of which date to the second and third centuries CE, were found within the confines of a sanctuary to the god Mercury, and functioned as votive objects. The treasure, on loan from the Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, is on display as part of the exhibition *Ancient Luxury and the Roman Silver Treasure from Berthouville* at the Getty Villa.

The region of Gaul was conquered and incorporated into the Roman domain in the middle of the first century BCE. With the advent of the imperial period at the end of the century, Gaul was actively brought into the Roman world through program governmental and cultural imperialism. By the second and third centuries CE, when most of the works of art included in the Berthouville Treasure were produced, the region was firmly of the Roman Empire, with a Roman system of government infrastructure, temples to gods worshipped under Roman names, and the usage of Latin as one of the main languages of the province. Yet, as evidenced by the Berthouville Treasure, the art produced in Gaul was not identical to that in Rome. These objects from Berthouville are not simply Roman, but rather Gallo-Roman, a distinction that speaks to important issues in current scholarship on Roman art and culture.

Scholars have long struggled with definitions of Roman art, especially in regards to that produced outside of the Italian peninsula. What makes an artwork, a piece of literature, or even a person Roman? Does an artwork have to be produced within the city of Rome or on the Italian peninsula?

Roman? Is art produced in Gaul, North Africa, or Syria as Roman as that made in the capital? How can differences in style, iconography, and function that exist across the spectrum of Roman art a culture be reconciled? Traditionally, these questions have been considered in terms of center versus periphery or capital versus hinterland, and have examined provincial Roman art in terms of how it differs from or resembles that produced in Italy, offering art produced in Rome as the model for others to follow. Roman imperialism has been viewed in terms of how local populations integrate into the Roman way of life that was imposed on them by the imperialist center. Over the past few decades, scholars have begun to reevaluate the process of Romanization (itself a debated term), influenced by postcolonial theory and the study of imperialism in more modern periods, have challenged these assumptions and examined provincial art as a transcultural product.

The academic reevaluation of Romanization is not explored overtly in the exhibition at the Getty. Yet through the display of these artworks and the accompanying labels that describe the circumstances around their production, patrons, and dedications, the exhibition participates in the scholarly debates. It is impossible to discuss the Berthouville Treasure without an understanding of the culture that produced it, and discussions of the objects highlight their context as art either produced or dedicated in an area on the edge of empire.

This context is immediately visible at the Getty Villa. The display consists of three rooms and a hallway: the first and largest room is dedicated to the display of the Berthouville Treasure; Roman luxury goods, including notably four large, silver *missoria* (plates), occupy the two other rooms. The hallway includes objects related to both parts of the exhibition.

The room dedicated to the Berthouville Treasure is anchored by a statue of Mercury (late second to early third century CE), which is the largest silver statue in the repoussé technique to survive from antiquity. Mercury was a Roman god whose worship was introduced to Gaul after the conquest. He resonated with the local Gallic population and received a privileged place in the Gallo-Roman pantheon. The Mercury worshipped at Berthouville, Mercury Canetonensis, had a local form that differed from his Italic counterpart, with an increased emphasis on the god's oversight of trade and prosperity and the addition of a consort, Rosmerta, who was a local Gallic goddess.

The distinctly Gallo-Roman identity of Mercury is visible in the Berthouville silver statue. The statue was made in Gaul by a local artist from multiple sections of hammered silver with separately cast hands. This construction technique, along with numerous stylistic features, such as the stiffness of the god's pose and his stylized facial features, indicate local Gallic influence. Yet the statue's heroic nudity and contrapposto pose recall Greek and Greek-inspired Roman artworks, speaking to the hybrid nature of art produced in the Roman provinces.

Other objects from Berthouville displayed in the exhibition, notably the figured relief cups, are equally impressive for both their aesthetic beauty and Gallo-Roman identity. Many of the objects in the Berthouville Treasure were dedicated by individuals with Gallic names or were made by Gallic artists, yet they all express their participation in the social, political, or religious life of the Roman empire, whether as citizens or as free inhabitants of the province, through their use of language or iconography. Nine of the pieces were dedicated by a single individual, Quintus Domitius Tutus, who inscribed his name on each of his dedications. While many of the objects dedicated by other patrons depict the patron god of the temple, Tutus's vessels, except for a small ladle, are not explicitly connected to Mercury. Most of Tutus's objects are decorated with mythological subjects, including scenes from the Trojan War, depictions of Bacchic-themed revels, and a vignette of Omphale who enslaved Hercules. It is highly likely that the vessels were not created deliberately as votives, but were rather made in Italy as dinnerware and used by Tutus and his family before dedication. Little is known about Tutus, other than his name, which indicates that he was a Roman citizen. He may have been an ethnic Italian who was stationed in Gaul as part of the imperial apparatus, or he may have been a local landowner. In either case, his dedications, constructed at the heart of the empire in the classical style of the high imperial period, speak to the transmission of ideas and objects in the empire along with the difficulties of categorizing people and art as either Roman or provincial.

One of the cups in particular, the *Beaker Commemorating the Isthmian Games* (mid-first century CE), highlights the difficulties inherent in determining definitions of Romanitas. The exhibition curators, led by Kenneth Lapatin, believe that the beaker, dedicated by Tutus, was probably produced outside of Gaul as part of a set of four cups, each of which celebrated one of the Panhellenic Games. The four Panhellenic Games that took place at Isthmia, Nemea, Delphi, and Olympia were an important part of Greek society, and athletes and spectators traveled from throughout the Greek world to take part in these events. The Isthmian Games, which were celebrated at a sanctuary dedicated to the god Poseidon (Roman Neptune) outside the city of Corinth, had a complicated history in the Roman period. The city of Corinth was destroyed by Roman troops in 146 BCE, and games at Isthmia were moved to the city of Sikyon for the next hundred years or so before returning to Isthmia in either the late first century BCE or early first century CE. The dedication of a cup relating to the most controversial of the Panhellenic Games in the Roman period at a site far from Isthmia with no connection to either Poseidon or athletic competitions seems surprising at first glance. Yet, it speaks to the complicated nature of Roman imperialism. The beaker has Greek significance, was patronized by a Roman citizen, was found in Gaul, and speaks to the continuing debate over Romanization.

The objects included in the exhibition are intellectually as well as sensually stimulating, and the shimmer of the silver under the museum's spotlights underscores the curators' main organizing principle. This theme of luxury is what ties the Berthouville Treasure to the rest of the exhibition. Displayed in two rooms accompanying the treasure are Roman luxury items including the silver *missoria* joined by jewelry, gems, and statuettes. The display emphasizes the role of luxury items in the life of upper-class Romans as symbols of economic prosperity, education, and membership in

certain social groups, while highlighting that in reality the exhibition has two separate parts. One section presents the Berthouville Treasure, while the other focuses on Roman luxury goods. It is a situation that is well-recognized by the Getty; two different paint colors have been used on the walls: navy blue for the rooms dedicated to the theme of luxury and aubergine purple for the Berthouville Treasure. While the Berthouville Treasure room represents a cohesive curatorial framework, the connection between the objects in the rooms dedicated to the theme of luxury do not tie as neatly either each other or to the exhibition's featured silver.

Nonetheless, the show is a strong one. One of its greatest strengths is a technical focus on conservation and restoration, highlighting the expertise of the Getty Villa's conservation department. The Berthouville Treasure, along with the four *missoria*, were brought to the Getty from the Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques in late 2010 for conservation. Over the next few years, the objects were restored and conserved before being placed on display in November 2014. The process of conservation is emphasized throughout the exhibition with labels describing the scientific processes undertaken to remove tarnish from the statues, accompanied by photographs depicting the artworks before and after restoration and displays of restored objects next to similar unrestored objects. A video, which recreates the production of one of the artworks included in the exhibition—a cup decorated with reliefs of frolicking centaurs—complements the conservation theme by tying the process of original construction in the ancient period to the cup's restoration in the modern era.

The accompanying exhibition catalogue expands upon discussions of luxury, conservation, and Roman identity raised in the exhibition. Six essays are included, in addition to entries on individual objects scattered through the text as multi-page inserts. Three of the essays focus on the Berthouville Treasure, examining its original Romano-Gallic context, its discovery, and its conservation. The conservation of the *missoria* is also discussed, while the iconography and style of the plates are treated in more detail in a fourth essay. The fifth essay looks generally at the concept of luxury in the Roman period with discussions of some of the specific objects from the exhibition. The final essay examines the history of the Cabinet des Médailles, now the Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, and its collecting policies. The essays are all well written with high quality color images, and strike a good balance between making the material accessible to the general public while still addressing themes of interest to scholars.

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