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Pin (Fibula)

RISD Museum

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Well, hello, everybody. My name is Boris Bally. I am a Providence based metalsmith, having trained as a goldsmith many, many moons ago, and now a junksmith. Now my medium is primarily recycled aluminum and often traffic signs. I'm going to talk about the Etruscan fibula dating to the 7th century B.C.

So what is a fibula? A fibula is a more classic term or the predecessor of the term broach or brooch. It sounds a whole lot better. In my mind, and I'm not sure if this is true, but I picture this being a closure for some kind of a cape, or something worn as a broach is on a piece of clothing, which you can clearly tell that by the pin that is so cleverly a part of the design here.

If you look at this fibula really, really closely, it really invites you to study the surface. There are animals on it in painstaking detail; not one thing out of place. It's like painting with granules.

The granulation process is what is termed now as eutectic joining. The way that we understand granulation now is the granules, which are small bits of gold, are created by creating snippets of gold, and then heated in a charcoal dust, so that they are allowed to create spheres. When you heat gold, or any metal for that matter, the surface tension creates spheres automatically, so that's the easy part. Then once you have a few hundred of these spheres, they're categorized as per size and consistency, and then used as a painter would a brush stroke; they're used to develop a pattern.

Why would you look at this, to walk into a museum and even care about it? First of all, to me it is the physical manifestation of history. It's not something you read in a book; a little flat word. It's something you can appreciate and see in three-dimension, and realize the age and history of it. I also think that for my field, my little, teensy field of metalsmithing, it's a chance for the public to appreciate what we do and where we came from.

My name is Jonathan Migliori. I'm a Classical Archeologist and an intern in the Ancient Art Department at the RISD Museum.

Today we are going to talk about the Etruscan fibula or brooch or safety pin. The Etruscans were the original inhabitants of what is now Tuscany in central Italy; this object is very exciting because it gives us a snapshot into socioeconomic and cultural changes going on with the Etruscans of this period, the Orientalizing period. This period gets its name because the Etruscans got more involved in the trade networks going on in the Mediterranean, and there was a big influx of luxury goods and ideas coming from civilizations to the east of the Mediterranean, including the Assyrians, what is now Iraq, and ancient Egypt.

In the design of this fibula, we have a motif that's called the Mistress of the Beasts. This is a divine or semi-divine figure depicted usually controlling or wrangling animals, and you can see an example of her on the bow, the large curved part of this fibula, as well as this procession of animals along the stem. That's a very, very common motif in early Greek art and also goes back all the way to the very beginnings of civilization in the Near East.

When the Etruscans started trading internationally, some Etruscans got very rich, because they controlled the resources that were being traded.

They started dressing more lavishly, having very lavish burials, which is very likely the context in which this fibula was found.

For starters, it's beautiful, it's gold, it requires a high, high degree of workmanship—the skill needed to coil the spring for the pin as well as the granulation technique of adhering these tiny, tiny little beadlets of gold to the surface. And by incorporating Near Eastern designs, it was very, very fashionable. So it succinctly captures what was going on in this couple of centuries of Etruscan history.