

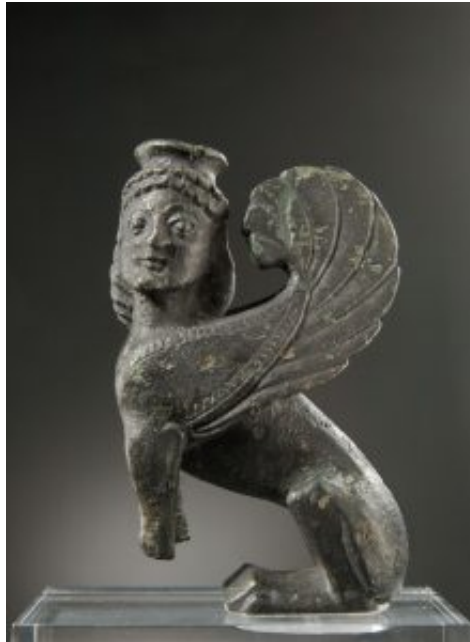
ARCHAIC BRONZE STATUETTE OF A SPHINX

Greek-Archaic, middle of the 6th Century B.C.

Bronze

Height: 6.9 cm

Reference: 10820



Reference **10820**

The Sphinx is represented in the usual manner, with the legs, tail and body of a winged lioness and a young female head with delicate and finely detailed features. Her hair, dressed in wavy locks on the forehead, descends low on the neck, where the braids and the beads form a sort of mat with rounded contours. She wears a flared and low polos on her head. The monster, whose forelegs are partially lost, is represented crouching. Her hind legs are bent and rest firmly on the ground, while the forelegs are extended. The body is shown in profile to the right, but the head, turned to the same side, is seen full face. The spread wings, whose attachments at shoulders level are clearly visible, surmount the back; their shape, with a curved tip, recalls that of a comma. Despite the miniature size of this statuette, many anatomical details, incised after cooling or molded in the clay or wax original, emphasize the body of the Sphinx.

From a typological point of view, this example – which has good parallels coming from different regions of the Hellenic world – belongs to the series of the crouched Sphinx wearing a polos attested in ancient iconography, mostly through the Attic stone funerary monuments. Such bronze statuettes probably served as ornaments, especially for containers (kraters or basins) or for bronze tripods. Stylistically, the precise and elegant shapes, but at the same time schematic and structured, are distinctive of a Peloponnesian workshop, perhaps in Corinth or in Sicyon. Like other hybrid beings of Greek mythology, the Sphinx acquires her canonical female and winged structure from the archaic period on. An interpretation of the Eastern image, the Greek Sphinx keeps her decorative function, adorning the helmets (Athena Parthenos), the thrones (Zeus from Phidias, in Olympia), the fabrics, etc.; her presence on all sorts of numerous funerary monuments (statues, archaic steles, crownings, sarcophagi, paintings on ceramics, etc.) confirms her eminently funeral and

apotropaic function in the Greek and the Italic world, as a guardian and a protector of the tomb. In Rome, this monster, which keeps the aspect that classical Greek artists have given her, becomes a subsidiary pattern again while retaining her core functions: funeral (sarcophagi), ornamental (armored torsos, candelabra, tables, etc.) and narrative (paintings, mosaics telling the Oedipian episode).

In ancient mythology, the only story where this figure plays a leading role is the one taking place near Thebes: after the correct answer of Oedipus to the riddle posed by the Sphinx, the monster, which had before devoured all the other unfortunate candidates, throws herself from her high rock and dies. Many moments of this episode are included in Greek imagery (especially by Attic craftsmen), not only in vase painting but also in sculpture (see, for example, the Phidias group).

CONDITION

The surface of this solid cast statuette, covered with a dark brown-black patina, is in good condition.

PROVENANCE

Ex-G. Mc Kinley Collection, London and New York; Bonham's Antiquities, April 2004, nbr. 55.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DEMISCH H., Die Sphinx, Geschichte ihrer Darstellung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, Stuttgart, 1977, pp. 76-116.

Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC) VIII suppl.,

Zurich- Munich, 1997, p. 1150ff., s.v. Sphinx.

MITTEN D.G. and al., Master Bronzes from Classical World, Mainz / Rhine, 1967