

# ATTIC BLACK-FIGURE LIP CUP WITH DONKEY & MAENAD ATTRIBUTED TO THE TLESON PAINTER

Greek, 540 B.C. - 530 B.C.

Greek ceramic

Height: 20.60 cm

Reference: 20088



Decorated in the so called black-figure technique, it features many elements in added purple and / or white paint (especially the skin of the maenad); incisions add anatomical and clothing details. The black paint still retains its original metallic and shiny luster.

This cup is of the type known as a lip cup by archaeologists (*coupe à lèvres* in French), characterized by the unpainted lip – most often covered with figural scenes – whose base is slightly recessed in the profile view of the vessel (mostly visible in the inner vessel).

The decoration, very sober from a structural point of view, hinges on two registers: the lip and the handles area. The main motif is composed only of two figures, each painted in the center of one side: an ithyphallic donkey galloping to the right of the viewer and, on the other side, a maenad who runs in the same direction fleeing from the vague desire of the quadruped. The female figure, dressed in a long, richly woven chiton, holds a vine branch and, in her other hand, two stems whose meaning is enigmatic (a double flute?).

The lower frieze is decorated with two pairs of palmettes and scrolls painted near the handles and mostly with a long inscription (which uses the same words on both sides), perfectly readable despite small errors: the container speaks directly to the drinker, exhorting him to drink without excess: "Be happy and drink well" (?? ????? ??? ???? EU TOI).

As it is often the case for Greek vases, the decor and shape are closely related to each other: in the Hellenic world (mostly in Attic), the cup was the archetypal drinking vessel, used at banquets and parties (*symposia*) whose main figure was Dionysus, the god of wine; this beverage was essential for the proper conduct of the banquet. The maenads are the followers of Dionysus, the female counterpart of the satyrs, that they accompany in their orgiastic processions, while the donkey (always shown in erection) is the archetypal animal of the god. The sentence "pronounced" by the vessel strengthens the link between these different elements.

For these technical and artistic qualities, this piece can easily be compared with the best contemporary "Little Masters" cups (*coupes*

des "petits maîtres" in French), as evidenced by the treatment of the maenad's chiton and of the donkey's body (even the bridle of the quadruped is decorated with small white dots).

The connection between this cup and the works of the Tleson Painter, one of the most important Attic painters of the mid-century (he signed his cups only as a potter), was proposed by Pieter Heesen. It is justified for several reasons: stylistic and qualitative first, but also thematic (on one hand, Dionysiac scenes and animals are among his favorite subjects; secondly, he was used to write texts on his cups) and formal (he almost only produced cups).

## CONDITION

The cup is complete, but it has been reassembled from a number of fragments; the holes at the top of the stem and inside the tondo could indicate that the cup had already been broken and repaired with metal staples during antiquity.

## PROVENANCE

American Private Collection, New York.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

On the Tleson Painter, see:

BEAZLEY J.D., *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters*, New York, 1978, p. 178ff.

BEAZLEY J.D., *Paralipomena*, Oxford, 1971, p. 74-75.

BOARDMAN J., *Athenian Black Figure Vases, A Handbook*, London, 1997, pp. 58ff.

VIERNEISEL K. et al., *Kunst der Schale, Kultur des Trinkens*, Munich, 1990, pp. 170-174.