

GILDED ARM OF AN EQUESTRIAN

Ro-Imperial, 1st century B.C. - 2nd century A.D.

Gilded bronze

Length: 60 cm

Reference: 32567



This impressive and exquisite arm was once part of a larger than life size figure made of bronze with overall gilding. This fact immediately suggests the representation of a god or a person of power or high social status and wealth. Several opportunities for its iconography and composition could be explored, however we believe it to be the arm of a grand equestrian figure holding a short sword, reins or curved wand (lituus), considering the relatively lightweight and presumably diagonal position of the object.

The half figure of Augustus, the survived part of the bronze equestrian statue at the National Museum in Athens, has one hand (left) with a similar gesture and gracefully extended fingers, for which a short sword has been suggested. The official iconography of the Roman emperor as the supreme priest (pontifex maximus) includes the augur's staff (curved wand, lituus) in the right hand; such a small attribute is not always survived in large statues, but it is represented in the historical reliefs on cameos (Gemma Augustea, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; Grand Camée de France and Cameo of apotheosis of Claudius, both Paris, Bibliothèque nationale): they represent the deified persons, half-naked as gods and omitting the usual priest's veil, but holding the lituus.

The arm is bent at the elbow and is somewhat raised; the muscles are articulated but not exaggerated; the absence of the strong and developed musculature, especially in its upper part, may suggest an older age of the represented person. The fingers have typical narrow distal phalanges and rather small nails, which are naturalistically rendered; on the palm between the fingers there are remains of lead which indicate the connection to an attribute, in our theory, a short sword, reins, or lituus. The index and middle finger did not touch the object and the thumb was not pressed against it, only the little and ring fingers are curled which brings us to the conclusion that the object was not heavy, which is also observed in the fact that the muscles of the arm are not strained.

The arm is hollow and was cast separately of the rest of the statue in the lost wax model technique. The gilded surface is highly preserved with the exception of an area where it has been roughly scraped,

possibly in late Antiquity as if in attempt to collect the gold.

There are three techniques of gilding that were commonly used: foil gilding, which involved wrapping gold foil around an object; leaf gilding, which used sheets of gold leaf directly on the surface of the bronze with a layer of adhesive; and fire gilding (the technique used on this arm): which is characterized by dissolving gold powder in hot mercury, applying the amalgam to the bronze and heating the surface, and allowing the mercury to evaporate, leaving behind a layer of gold firmly bonded to the bronze.

Several fragments, fragmented figures and few entirely preserved gilded bronze statues of the Roman period have survived, among them the famous equestrian statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (the Capitoline Museum, Rome), statues of Hercules (the Capitoline Museum; the Vatican Museums) and the group of two women and two equestrian men from Cartoceto, Pergola.

CONDITION

Remains of lead on the palm; the upper edge of the arm has the cuttings to join the shoulder; multiple long scratches and few indentations on surface; gilding is partially missing; oxides.

PROVENANCE

Ex- European private collection; Ex- Bill Blass Collection, New York, acquired from Phoenix Ancient Art in 1999; Ex- Sotheby's New York, 21-23 October 2003, lot 42

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