

HELLENISTIC BRONZE STATUETTE IN THE SHAPE OF A BULL

Greek-Hellenistic, 3rd Century B.C. - 1st Century B.C.

Bronze

Height: 15.5 cm - Length: 16.7 cm

Reference: 30109



This beautiful statuette representing a bull was cast in bronze, using the lost wax process. It is composed of several elements made separately and then soldered; the body is hollow, but the legs and the head are in solid metal.

The animal stands, with its legs slightly staggered, in a calm attitude that reflects a kind of sturdy confidence and that seems to come from its extraordinary physical strength. It raises its head, turning marginally to the right, and appears to look into the distance.

The outstanding technical and artistic qualities of this piece reveal the great sensitivity of the artist for naturalism, with the harmonious proportions, the strong, accurate modeling and the close attention to detail. The whole body shows powerful, though limber, muscles and finely incised, engraved and modeled anatomical details that carefully recreate the anatomy of the bovid. There are small decorative incisions in such places as the ears, the scrotum and the penile sheath, and especially on the forehead and between the horns. The long tail with a bushy tip curls proudly above the croup; the horns are long and curved. The almond-shaped eyes, with the incised pupils and irises, framed by brows and clearly marked skin folds, convey a certain strength of character.

Bronze representations of animals were very popular in Greek art, from the Bronze Age up to the Greco-Roman period, in an uninterrupted continuum. Bulls were among the favorite subjects for such representations because of their symbolic link with power, virility and strength.

Images of bulls appear as ex-votos in many Hellenistic sanctuaries (Olympia, Delphi, Dodona Cabirion of Thebes, etc.), more particularly in the shrines dedicated to Zeus and more rarely in those dedicated to Poseidon. Associated with these two major deities, bulls played an important part in many myths, especially those recounting the exploits of Zeus. One could even imagine that the present statuette, characterized by its aura and calm strength, represents the god himself, since Zeus (the king of the Greek gods) was known for taking the form of a glorious white bull when he was among mortals.

Moreover, our current knowledge of religion attests the importance of bulls in the religious practices of ancient Greece; the bull was one of the most prestigious of beings both in official and civic rites and in private ceremonies.

The significance of bulls as sacrificial and votive animals would also have been related to the fundamental economic importance of bovines in a society where livestock farming and agriculture played a key role. Cattle were a major source of food (the meat of the sacrifices was consumed by humans, while only the entrails were burned and dedicated to the deities); furthermore, they represented a substantial workforce on the land and provided an essential raw material in the tannery.

Our statuette, which has no real parallel, is quite different from the many depictions of bulls and oxen from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (this is not an Apis bull, since it is not decorated on the upper neck or on the head). The closest parallels can be found in the Hellenistic Greek world and come from continental sanctuaries. It is worth mentioning, in particular, the statuette from the Cabirion of Thebes, now housed in the Louvre, and the example in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, found at Preveza, though probably from the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona. The absence of other parallels does not enable us to determine a precise date for the present statuette, but all three pieces are thought to have been produced between the 4th and the 2nd century B.C.

PROVENANCE

Formerly Peter Hartmann Collection, Geneva, Switzerland, 1975.

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