

HELLENISTIC GREEK STATUETTE OF AN ACTOR (A SLAVE?)

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

Bronze partially silvered

H: 10.7 cm

Reference: 19805



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The figure represents an old man characterized as a comic actor by several elements: he probably wears a half mask on the face (a light ridge in relief under the cheekbones, mostly visible on the right, marks the lower edge of the mask); the size of his abdomen, probably padded with a large cushion, is abnormal; his disproportionate phallus seems to be an attachment. His chest is entirely wrapped in a mantle from which only the left hand sticks out at hip level: he holds an oinochoe (wine jug) with a trefoil mouth which, despite its miniature size, is partially emphasized by silver details and, most of all, decorated with patterns in relief that probably depict a komos (a Dionysian procession, composed here of four figures resembling satyrs and maenads).

The actor has a beard composed only of four tufts of very long hair attached to his chin and jaw; his hair is flat, like a thick skullcap, and partially hidden by a wreath of grape or ivy leaves that adorns his head. The large folds of the cloak form a long diagonal in the back and, in the front, a triangle that frames the rounded belly. The legs of the actor are bare and muscular. It is impossible to identify this figure, but one can reasonably imagine that the actor was a slave serving wine at a banquet or that he was about to make a libation near an altar. The presence of the jug with the komos and the wreath at least favor a festive Dionysian sphere. Except for the mouth and cheeks, the face of the man is hidden by a mask, likely made out of soft leather, whose form recalls the masks of 16th century Italian "commedia dell'arte". Such masks are unusual in the ancient world. Only a few statuettes of actors with a similar mask are preserved: a figurine of a bronze dancer from Teramo (Italy, now lost) and mostly terracottas coming from Alexandria, Asia Minor and Magna Graecia, often only whose heads are the most preserved.

There is no precise parallel for this figurine. However, from an

iconographic point a view, one must note the relationship between this actor and the phlyaxes, who were the protagonists of a very popular satirical genre, mostly in Italy, between the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. These comedies are primarily known today through scenes painted on Italiote ceramics. Phlyaxes are characterized by an almost grotesque appearance, due to their artificially inflated buttocks and abdomens and oversized genitals; their masks also display exaggerated comical features. The chronology of the piece is problematic: the comparison with the phlyaxes could trace the dating back to the early Hellenistic period, but no other elements can currently confirm this hypothesis: the Fine Arts Museum in Boston houses a bronze statuette with typological similarities (a standing old man wearing a coat but without a mask and not holding a jug) dated to the Graeco-Roman period, but without more precise details; terracotta actors with a half mask are generally attributed to the late Hellenistic period (2nd – 1st century B.C).

CONDITION

This solid cast bronze statuette is covered with a beautiful green patina, which adds to its remarkable artistic qualities an aesthetic element that is particularly attractive to the modern eye. Except for a slight bending of the feet, this bronze is nearly intact. Many small details are silvered: some elements of the wreath, the eyes, parts of the oinochoe, etc.

PROVENANCE

Ex-American private collection, acquired on the Paris Art Market.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On images of phlyaxes:

TRENDALL A.D, Phlyax Vases, London, 1967, pl. VII, f (a phlyax making a libation).

BIEBER M., The History of the Greek and Roman Theater, Princeton, 1961, p. 132, fig. 482 (a phlyax making a libation).

On actors wearing a half mask:

FRANKEN N., Männer mit Halbmasken. Ein verschollenen Bronzefund aus Teramo und ein seltener Subject hellenistischer Terrakotten in Antike Kunst 45, 2002, pp. 55-70.

LEYENAAR-PLAISIER P. G., Les terres cuites grecques et romaines, Cat. de la collection du Musée National des Antiquités à Leyden, Leiden, 1979, p. 340, n. 923, pl. 123.