

HELLENISTIC SILVER BOWL DECORATED WITH ACANTHUS LEAVES AND ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS

Greek-Hellenistic, late 3rd-2nd Century B.C.
Silver and Gilding
Height: 15.3 cm
Reference: 19413



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This extraordinary vessel was cast in a mold, while a large part of the decoration and final additions were cold-worked after casting (carvings, engravings, incisions); the elements in very high relief were made separately and soldered. The decorated zone is covered with thin gilding that perfectly adheres to the silver surface. The thickness of the silver is important and, when lifting the cup, one is surprised by its impressive weight. The bowl is hemispherical and deep, with a slightly flared edge and a rounded lip; there are neither handles nor stem, nor foot, but the bottom of the vessel presents a beautiful six-petaled rosette carved in relief. The interior metal is perfectly smooth.

The decoration is entirely comprised of the garland, which begins a few centimeters below the edge, and the base. By and large, the artisan followed a perfectly organized scheme, which observes a rigid and clear symmetry; one can nevertheless notice a nice touch of fantasy, thanks to the presence of the animals (a fox or a wolf, birds with spread or closed wings) incised on top of the decorated zone, just below the garland. The rest of the decoration is only based upon the vegetal kingdom. The composition is arranged into three wreaths of different types (especially acanthus leaves, the so-called Seleucid, with rounded edges), which spring from the central rosette and form a star. The surface of the leaves, whose contours are in relief, is decorated with vertical ribs and grooves (acanthus) or with half-circles resembling bird's feathers. A splendid and rare detail – even for related silver cups – consists in the large acanthus leaves three-dimensional tip, completely detached from the container's surface. Between the

largest leaves, stems with circular flowers (rosettes), spirals and engraved small dots complement the decoration. Although these patterns can originally be found in the Near Eastern world, their arrangement and style are typically Greek. Besides the acanthus is the basic element of the so-called Corinthian architectural order, since it adorns the lower part of its capital. This shape (which also existed in gilded or mosaic glass) is similar to one of the most distinct classes of Hellenistic pottery, namely the so-called Megaran bowls: their decorative design has the same structure, with various vegetal motifs springing from a central rosette. This shape, especially attested to by silver examples, is of course very rarely made of metal; its pattern may be simply incised, in light relief, or, like here, in very high, almost modeled relief.

The convention of decorating metal vessels with vegetal elements that are three-dimensionally modeled is documented during the Hellenistic period also for lower and wider cups (the phialai), whose central medallion is totally detached from the interior (examples on display in the Metropolitan Museum, New York). Furthermore, there are other container forms whose iconography is based essentially on rosettes and chalices of acanthus leaves and water lilies (cups, jugs, alabasters). Among the related silver cups still preserved, one should mention in particular the three examples of Civita Castellana (Naples, Museo Nazionale), which are thought to have been manufactured in Pergamon or by a Seleucid workshop (Syria), the bowls of Munich and Toledo, produced perhaps in Egypt (Fayoum) and the pieces of the Nihavend treasure (in present-day Iran). These bowls were drinking vessels, which were part of what Romans will later call the *argentum potorium*, that is to say the dinnerware used at the most important banquets. Similar bowls may probably have served to make libations.

We know, by Latin authors (Pliny, Plutarch, Cicero, etc.), that there has

been a real passion for silver tableware among the wealthy and noble Romans, especially from the late Republican period on. Actually, in the 2nd century B.C., after the first victories against cities from Greece and Asia Minor, and mostly following the donation of Attalus III, King of Pergamon (in 133, he bequeathed his kingdom to the Roman people), significant testimonies of Greek and Oriental troyics – now almost totally lost, except for a few exceptions – were transported to Rome, where members of the wealthier families could acquire them at auctions organized on these occasions. The three aforementioned cups, which were primarily part of an important treasure discovered in Civita Castellana in the 19th century, arrived perhaps in Italy during the 2nd century B.C. as Asian war loot, or after the donation of Attalus III (the rest of the treasure has been dispersed and melted after its discovery).

L. BYVANK-QUARLES VAN UFFORD, Les bols mégariens: la chronologie et les rapports avec l'argenterie hellénistique, in *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*, 1953, pp. 1-20.

CONDITION

The piece is intact. The gilding is in an excellent state of preservation, the acanthus leaves incised near the center are blackened. Traces of black oxidation partially cover the edge of the cup.

PROVENANCE

Ex-Swiss private collection; American collection, New York.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On silver bowls with decoration in relief or incised, see:

AHRENS D. in *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 19, 1968, pp. 232-233, fig. 5-6 (Fayoum).

OLIVER A., *Silver for the Gods: 800 Years of Greek and Roman Silver*, Toledo, 1977, pp. 69ff.

PFROMMER M., *Metalwork from the Hellenized East*, Malibu, 1993, p. 34 (Nihavend) and p. 55 (Fayoum).

PFROMMER M., *Studien zu alexandrinischer und grossgriechischer Toreutik Frühhellenistischer Zeit (AF 16)*, Berlin, 1987, pp. 110ff., Pl. 56-58.

PIRZIO BIROLI STEFANELLI L., *L'argento dei Romani, Vasellame da tavola e d'apparato*, Rome, 1991, pp. 6-7, pp.53ff., pp. 251-252, n. 1-3 (Civita Castellana).

On cups with central medallion in relief, see:

MERTENS J.R. (ed.), *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Greece and Rome*, New York, 1987, p. 80.

Hellenistic glass bowls:

TAIT H., *Five Thousand Years of Glass*, London, 1991, pp. 47ff.

On Megaran bowls and silverware, see: