

HELLENISTIC TERRACOTTA STATUETTE OF A GROTESQUE

Greek-Hellenistic, 1st Century B.C. - 1st Century A.D.

Terracotta

Height: 13.5 cm

Reference: 11860



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In archaeology, the term "grotesque" designates an important class of objects, generally of small size and of ranging artistic quality, that exploit physical deformations and human maladies for the amusement of its viewers: ancient artisans did not always treat these afflictions and deformities in a realistic manner, but they inspired them to create an exaggerated, caricature-like effect. This style developed throughout Asia Minor (Smyrna) and in Egypt (Alexandria), but during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, grotesques fascinated the entire Mediterranean.

Images of men, or more rare, of women and children, old men, dwarves, Africans, the obese or emaciated etc., the repertoire of "grotesques" is extremely varied. One can list a large number of figurines in terracotta and statuettes in bronze, but also from painting, reliefs, mosaics, etc. This piece is a beautiful example of a statuette of a grotesque from the end of the Hellenistic Period: the figure is certainly an old man, indicated by his domed, emaciated back (one can count the ribs and vertebrae), the frail, thin arms, the deeply lined face and his total baldness, which accentuates the irregular contours of his skull. He is probably a street vendor seated on a stool or rock; the plate or basket (?) for carrying and displaying his wares would have been inserted into the slot clearly visible below his stomach (the rectangular tenon fixed to the right shoulder appears to have been for a strap which would have helped the man carry his merchandise. The legs of the figure are lost. Behind the neck, the large circular ring would have been used to suspend the statuette from a support whose nature is unknown: this detail is present only on some other grotesques.

The position and the caricature-like mask of this old man are not without comparison to Attic red figure images of Geras (the personification of age, son of the night), who, in spite of his ugliness and physical weakness plays with the power and superiority of Heracles: thanks to his manner of speaking, he even knows how to run

away and avoid the club of the hero.

CONDITION

Legs are missing.

PROVENANCE

G. Weber Kunsthandel, Cologne, acquired in 2000.

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