

KYLIX WITH THE REPRESENTATION OF A HORSEMAN

Greek, late 5th century B.C.
Gilded silver
Diameter: 19.2 cm with the handles
Reference: 18754



This cup is in remarkable state of preservation: with the exception of some cuts at the edge, it is practically intact.

The incredible thinness of the walls and the perfect profile indicate that the cup was molded and wheel made rather than hammered. The low, curvy body has a ridge halfway up the side of the vessel that separates the hemispheric profile from the bottom of the cup; the flared rim possesses a rounded lip; the bowl is supported by a low ring foot. The handles, which are circular in cross section, are soldered at the level of the ridge; in spite of their size, they do not pass the height of the lip. Their placement on the body follows and accentuates the horizontal axis marked by the horseman's movement to the right.

Typologically, the same type of cup is seen in Attic black glaze ceramics from the 5th century B.C. along with all of the different variations in proportion, size, size of the handles, etc.

On the interior at the exact center of the vessel, one sees the impression of the tool used to make the cup and especially to execute the decorated medallion: all of the motifs were very finely incised and then leaf gilded. In spite of the image's miniature size, the precision of the work is remarkable and rivals that of the finest metal vessels known.

A garland of leaves, knotted above and below, and a circle ornamented with dots border the tondo, which presents a bearded horseman. The young and well-groomed man is depicted in the prime of his life with perfectly developed musculature. His anatomy, which consists of his head, arms, hands, leg and foot, are perfectly detailed and drawn: even if one looks only at the classical profile of the face, one observes the short trim beard and the eyes seen in profile and detailed with lashes and brows!

The man urges his horse to a gallop and grasps the reins in his left hand while the right is armed with a long lance. He wears a short, very finely pleated linen chiton while a belt cinches his waist. A thick cloak with a triangular motif embroidered onto the fabric is clasped at the neck with a circular fibula; the cloak billows out behind him thanks to the wind created by the galloping horse. The warrior wears a pointed leather bonnet on his head with cheekpieces; a finely chiselled metal skullcap covers the crown of the head.

The horse, rearing slightly, plants his hind legs on a sandy ground strewn with flowers. Like on the horseman, all of the animal's details (cf. musculature, position as well as harnessing) were incised in a perfectly natural fashion that corresponds with the typology of Greek representations from the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.

The people who dressed in this manner were not only Thracian soldiers (who were most often foot soldiers or fully armed cavalry) but also Athenian nobles who chose to adorn themselves in exotic fashions: among the best examples of this type of dressing is the horseman in the tondo of a cup by the Foundry Painter (ca. 480 B.C.) and especially some of the horsemen sculpted on the Parthenon frieze, whose Athenian origins are without doubt. One can mention in particular a group from the Western Frieze (plaque IV, 8), whose image is an almost perfect match with the horseman on this cup, as if the craftsman had copied the Athenian temple relief.

If the artistic quality of this cup is of the same level as that of the best red figure kylikes and can be compared with the great sculptural groups, then the use of two precious metals such as silver and gold mark this as an extraordinary object. It possesses only a small number of parallels among ancient jewellery from what is essentially Northern Greece (Thrace, colonies on the Black Sea): in this case, one can imagine the pride of the dignitaries or the Thracian military leaders (people

whom the Greeks saw as barbarians), who were sufficiently wealthy enough to acquire a piece of goldwork of such great value, on which an Athenian noble is depicted dressed in a Thracian fashion.

CONDITION

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PROVENANCE

Ex-Swiss private collection.

American private collection, acquired in 1996.

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