

NECKLACE WITH A PENDANT IN THE SHAPE OF A BUTTERFLY

Greek, Late 4th or 3rd century B.C.

Gold and garnet

Height of pendant: 4.5 cm

Reference: 19755



This necklace is composed of three long, very thin and beautifully made gold chains; a large pendant hangs from the chains. The pendant depicts a specific scene, quite rare in Classical iconography, although it perfectly reflects, at the same time, the natural and open relationship that ancient Greeks had with the wildlife surrounding them: a butterfly with spread wings gathering nectar from a large, circular flower.

The heart-shaped head of the butterfly is decorated with an inlay carved from garnet; the polychromy was probably embellished by other inlays of semi-precious stone, glass or enamel, which were inserted in the wings.

The flower, whose shape recalls that of a daisy, is of hammered gold, bulging slightly. It is composed of three rows of overlapping, rounded and pointed petals, their edges highlighted by juxtaposed lines of small, gold beads. A disk-shaped center, entirely decorated with granulation, imitates the pollen or nectar of the flower that the butterfly appears to gather by using its rounded proboscis (neatly fashioned by the goldsmith).

The anatomy of the butterfly is elaborate and accurate. The large, symmetrical wings are divided into a large, rounded upper part and a thinner, shorter lower part. The tripartite body, comprising the triangular head, the straight thorax and the spindle-shaped abdomen, is decorated with horizontal elements. Wires terminating in spirals (feet?) descend along the abdomen.

The closest parallel for this example is a necklace from Panticapaeum (an ancient Greek city on the eastern shore of modern-day Crimea), also formed of a chain and a polychromatic pendant in the shape of a butterfly, except that the insect does not rest on a flower.

Such adornments were generally linked to funerary contexts. In this case, one can assume that the owner would have been a wealthy woman of the Greek society from the early Hellenistic period.

Although rarely represented, butterflies have a meaning that can be related to the chthonic sphere. According to a popular Greek and Roman belief, the butterfly, referred to as *psyche* (*yuch*) by Aristotle in his *History of Animals* (IV, 7; V, 19), symbolized the soul leaving the

body after death. At the same time, *psyche* translates, in its primary meaning, the terms corresponding to soul, mind, breath of life. Furthermore, like other insects undergoing a metamorphosis, butterflies start from a larval caterpillar stage, going through the pupal stage to be reborn as butterflies, insects with a brief life and an erratic yet graceful flight; such processes were perfectly familiar to the Ancients.

Butterflies are reminiscent of a very famous myth from the Hellenistic and Roman period, the tale of Eros and Psyche, transcribed in literature only much later, in the 2nd century A.D., by Apuleius in *Metamorphoses*. Eros, the god of love, by uniting with Psyche (the deity of the soul, provided with butterfly wings), made her immortal, but only after she found herself confronted with countless labors – including a descent into the Underworld – so as to purify herself of wanting to gaze on the face of her lover.

CONDITION

Virtually complete and in excellent condition. The inlays that adorned the wings and one of the antennae of the butterfly are now lost. The wings and the flower petals are slightly deformed.

PROVENANCE

Ex-Schaefer collection, South Germany, 1960's.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

HOFFMAN H. and al., *Greek Gold, Jewelry from the Age of Alexander*, Boston, 1966, pp. 142-143.

TROFIMOVA A.A., *Greeks on the Black Sea, Ancient Art from the Hermitage, Malibu*, 2007, n. 41.