

ROMAN ROCK CRYSTAL JAR

Roman, 1st century B.C. - 1st century A.D.

Rock Crystal

H: 4.9 cm (1.9 in)

Reference: 28552



This small elegant vessel was skillfully cut from a single block of rock crystal. The shape is characteristic for the miniature jar, a container with relatively ample body and single handle linking to the neck.

The amount of liquid contained was quite small, suggesting that it was rather an expensive ointment or perfume oil. The shape is harmoniously proportioned and all parts are carefully measured: the horizontal line of the upper part of the handle corresponds directly to the straight line of the rim, the thickness of the rim and the handles is almost the same. When seen from above, the rim reveals that it is wider on one side – no one would consider this as a technical imperfection, it makes the vessel even more individual. The body is perfectly ovoid and based on a low foot; its bottom has a concave shape.

The vessel was designed with the possibility to keep it in the upright position on a surface, and also to be carried suspended. Most probably it was attached to the belt with the help of a leather string or a metal chain; there was certainly some kind of a lid or a cork to keep the precious oil unspoiled, also attached to the handle by small chain. A rock crystal perfume jar in the Metropolitan Museum of Art preserves its crystal stopper mounted in gold with filigree work, a piece of jewelry, attached to the vessel with a tiny gold chain.

Rock crystal, a transparent and colorless quartz, was believed by the ancients to be formed from ice which had been hardened into stone through intense freezing. Pliny the Elder reports (Natural History 37.9) that it was found in many places, but the best was brought from India. Vessels made from rock crystal are known in Greece and Egypt since the second millennium B.C., however, they are extremely rare during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, and they became highly popular luxury products in the early Roman Empire. Whole sets of drinking vessels from rock crystal were among the extravagances of the wealthy Romans. The surface of the vessel is polished overall and reflects light;

the translucency and the shining effect of the rock crystal are especially admired by gem and hardstone connoisseurs. One can also observe the microscopic concentric marks left on the interior surface by the lathe work employing an abrasive (Pliny refers to Naxian emery, Natural History 36.10). It is assumed that workshops in Alexandria manufactured most of the rock crystal vessels in the Late Hellenistic and Roman period.

Vessels of rock crystal were considered as highly desirable and extremely valued objects by the Romans, "objects the very fragility of which is considered to enhance their value. In fact, it has come to be looked upon as a proof of opulence, and as quite the glory of luxury, to possess that which may be irremediably destroyed in an instant", – as it stated by Pliny (Natural History 33.2). He particularly mentions the existing large vases of crystal as a great wonder (Natural History 37.10). It is also known that the Romans appreciated another physical property of rock crystal: they used to cool their hands in summer holding small balls of this mineral (Propertius, Elegies, II. 24.12). The present jar which fits comfortably in the palm of the hand proves this and provides an unexpected experience.

CONDITION

The vessel is preserved almost intact: there is a chip on the foot; natural flaws and fractures run through the body; remains of dry substance inside.

PROVENANCE

Ex- British private collection; Ex- US private collection, New York, 2001.

PUBLISHED

Hardstones from the Ancient World, New York, 2000, No. 21.

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