

ROMAN ROCK CRYSTAL SKYPHOS

Roman, 1st century A.D.

Rock Crystal

H: 7.6 cm (3 in) D: 17.5 cm (6.9 in)

Reference: 30553



This marvelous and rare vessel was skillfully cut from a single block of rock crystal. The shape is characteristic for the skyphos, a deep drinking cup on a low foot, with horizontal handles linking to the rim. The size is impressive; the hemispherical cup with thick wall is based on a low profiled foot, the wide mouth is accentuated by a simple rim, its upper line coincides the upper parts of two elbow-shaped handles that join the body. The thickness of the wall, rim and handles is identical – what makes the cup such a perfect work of the gem-cutter. The handles are widening toward the rim, where they are undercut to keep the shape precise. This particular feature derives probably from the imitation of the handles in silver cups; it lets to appreciate the meticulousness of the execution. The surface of the vessel is overall smooth, polished and reflects the light; the shining effect of the rock crystal is especially admired by gem and hard-stone connoisseurs.

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 Rome. Whole sets of drinking vessels from rock crystal were among the extravagances of the wealthy Romans. The most precious examples received the additional carving, a high relief decoration consisting of the human figures (ecstatic Maenad on a fragment of a cup in the British Museum) or vine tendrils; and the gilding, traces of which were found on a kantharos in the National Museum in Kabul. 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 became 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 and clarified in the following story (Natural History 33.2; 37.10): "Nero, on receiving tidings that all was lost, in the excess of his fury, dashed two cups of crystal to pieces; this being his last act of vengeance upon his fellow-creatures, preventing any one from ever drinking again from these vessels. Crystal, when broken, cannot by any possibility be mended. Vessels in glass have been brought to a marvellous degree of resemblance to crystal; and yet, wonderful to say, they have only tended to enhance the value of crystal, and in no way to depreciate it."

It is also known that the Romans reserved vessels of rock crystal for the chilled wines. Whether this one was used as a drinking cup, is not clear because of its small size. There is another physical property of rock crystal appreciated by the Romans: they used to cool their hands in the summer by holding small balls of this mineral (Propertius, Elegies, II. 24.12). The present cup which fits comfortably in the palms of the both hand proves this and provides an unexpected experience. The vessel also contributes to the history of skyphoi in rock crystal, the best-known examples of which are preserved in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, the

Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne, and the Treasury of San Marco in Venice.

CONDITION

Reassembled from large fragments; a few chips on the rim, edge of the foot, and handles.

PROVENANCE

Ex- Swiss private collection, Geneva, 1997

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