

CINERARY URN

ROMAN, 1ST CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 26 CM.

WIDTH: 36.5 CM.

DEPTH: 29 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*BY TRADITION, FOUND IN CAPUA.
IN THE COLLECTION OF THE ART
DEALER RAFFAELLO BARONI, NAPLES.
THEN FORMER COLLECTION OF ROBERT
BERKELEY (1794-1874), SPETCHLEY PARK,
WORCESTER, ENGLAND, ACQUIRED IN
JUNE 1851 FROM THE ABOVE.
BY DESCENT IN THE SAME FAMILY.*

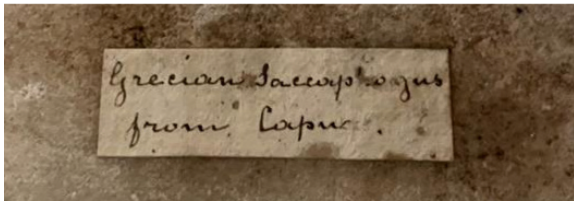


This marble cinerary urn is exquisitely decorated on all four sides, as well as the cover. The front represents an interlace of plant motifs commonly called scrolls. Branches burst out of a large crater and

twine around each other, ending in large flowers with rounded petals for those in the lower part and pointed petals for the two in the upper part. Large leaves unfold, following the movement of the branches and creating a rather spectacular play of curves and reverse curves. A central trunk surmounted by a pine cone motif also surges vertically from the crater, structuring the whole design. Finally, the scrolls are decorated with various creatures: a winged figure playing pan pipes is sitting on one branch while various birds inhabit the scrolls. The periphery of the scene is decorated with classical geometric motifs. The sides are also lavishly decorated with plant motifs: large leaves unfurl from a central branch, while the whole design is surrounded by serrated leaves. Once again, both panels are framed with regular geometric motifs, which give a sense of structure. Likewise, the back of the urn displays a significant ornamental repertory. Again, scroll motifs burst out of a crater and criss cross in a more disorderly way. Large, heart shaped leaves and round fruit thus occupy all of the space. Finally, the cover displays an abundant plant repertory. Scrolls burst from the florets sculpted at the corners, unfolding in volutes and ending in four petal flowers. Lastly, a flower is sculpted in the centre and framed with three borders of abstract geometric motifs. On the underside of the cover, there is still a collection label



with the inked words: Grecian Sarcophagus/ from Capu (ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Collection label on the underside of the cover.



In Ancient Rome, there were two main burial rites, inhumation and cremation. From the Republican period, cremation was predominant. Urns were first made of terracotta and then marble. They became ubiquitous from the reign of Augustus. Their decoration was increasingly meticulous and detailed and reached its height in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The decorative repertory was quite common: wreaths of fruit, interlaced scroll motifs, flowers, various

creatures and animals and motifs linked to funeral rites such as bucrania (ox skulls). These motifs were symbolic of human hopes regarding life after death and the soul's journey to luxuriant funerary gardens. These decorative elements on funerary urns would adorn the monuments of Ancient Rome over the centuries. The Ara Pacis Augustae, for instance, a monument Emperor Augustus had built between 13 and 9 BC, is one of the best known examples of a monument decorated with particularly detailed scrolls. It significantly influenced the decoration of cinerary urns at the time (ill. 2). Similarly to our urn, the panels of the mausoleum show an interlace of acanthus leaves, wreaths and ivy, peopled with animals such as lizards and birds. Magnificent examples of urns using that very decorative repertory are currently conserved at museums in Paris, Cologne, the Vatican and the United States (ill. 3-7).



Our cinerary urn was acquired by Robert Berkeley during his trip in Naples on Wednesday 11 June 1851 to Raffaello Baroni, an antique dealers of the Strada Constantinopoli. Berkeley mentionned it on his honeymoon journal: "Wednesday June 11 [Naples]- Bought of Raffaello Baroni dealer in antiquities in the Strada Constantinopoli an antique marble bust of Antoninus Pius - He asked 500 dollars I offered 200 which he eventually took on condition that I bought a terracotta Etruscan sarcophagus & a marble sepulchral urn - The latter cost respectively 25 & 30 dollars - I gave 6 for the packing & transport to Turners bank - ... - The urn he declares to have been found in a columbarium at Capua. The sarcophagus has an inscription in Etruscan characters - We preferred the urn to a bas relief on which I had at first decided"(ill. 8).

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Ill. 8. Robert Berkeley Honeymoon Journal, 1851.

The urn is mentioned again in their 1949 inventory: "[...] Two marble Roman [sic] cinerary urns and covers, rectangular shape, 14½" x 12" (one cover cracked)". The Berkeley family is an ancient English noble family that owns Spetchley Park in Worcestershire (ill. 8). The residence was purchased by Rowland Berkeley in 1605, but was burnt down at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. The Palladian house we know today, with its Ionic portico, was built in 1811 by a descendent, Robert Berkeley (1764-1845). The project, which was both colossal and extravagant, was carried out in harmony with Robert's desire to decorate the interior tastefully: portraits of ancestors, sculptures probably acquired on a Grand Tour, furniture, wallpaper from China and antique sculptures. In 1830, the estate was transferred to his son, Robert Berkeley (1794-1874), who continued to develop and decorate the residence. With his son, Robert Martin Berkeley, they sustained their love for art and established the Spetchley private museum in the 1840s. A whole collection of various and sundry artworks would be housed in a small room off the Grand Staircase (ill. 9-12). The collections continued to grow under Rose and Robert Valentine Berkeley, then John Berkeley. Our urn is mentioned in the family's 1949 inventory. It remained at

Spetchley Park, passed down as an heirloom, until now.

Comparatives:



Ill. 2. Ara Pacis, 13-9 BC, marble. Rome.



Ill. 3. Cinerary Urn, Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 38.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 1604.



Ill. 4. Cinerary Urn, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 33 cm. Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne, inv. no. 164.



Ill. 5. Cinerary Urn, Roman, 1st - 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 22.5 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican, inv. no. 10519.



Ill. 6. Cinerary Urn, Roman, marble, H.: 22 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican, inv. no. 10577.



Ill. 7. Cinerary Urn, Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 35.5 cm. RISD Museum, Rhode Island, inv. no. 46.083.

Provenance:



Ill. 9. Spetchley Park, Worcester, England.



Ill. 10. Drawing-Room and Staircase Hall, Spetchley Park, Country Life, 8 July 1916, vol XL, no. 1018, p. 45-46.



Ill. 11. Library, Spetchley Park.

Ill. 12. Museum room, Spetchley Park.