

LION PROTOME

ROMAN, END OF THE 2ND – BEGINNING OF THE 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 50 CM.

WIDTH: 38 CM.

DEPTH: 35.5 CM.

*PROVENANCE:
FORMER EUROPEAN PRIVATE
COLLECTION, SERVING AS AN
ORNAMENTAL FEATURE FOR A
FOUNTAIN IN THE 18TH CENTURY OR
BEFORE.
ENGLISH ART MARKET.
THEN AMERICAN PRIVATE COLLECTION
IN BEVERLY HILLS,
ACQUIRED IN MAY 1989.*



This exceptionally large fragment represents a roaring lion head. The ferocious animal is represented from the front, muzzle upturned and mouth partly open, which would undoubtedly once have revealed its fangs. Its whisker pads and nose are etched with

prominent muscles, which stand out very clearly against the animal's skin. Its gaze is also imbued with great expressiveness. Its furrowed eyebrows sketch a slight frown while the outlines of the eyes are deeply carved. The pupils are also prominent, accentuating the animal's gaze, which is directed upwards to the left. Its ears are depicted with fur following delicate curves, almost vanishing into the feline's luxuriant mane. All of the artist's dexterity is displayed in the shaping of the animal's fur. Each strand is individually sculpted, creating an effect of depth and giving a rather unique impression of volume. The imposing mane thus entirely frames the face of the king of the beasts, lending the sculpture an imposing presence and even further emphasising the feline's almost aggressive expression.



This fragment is a protome, or in other words, a feature sculpted in very high relief



that very probably served to decorate a sarcophagus. This head is detailed only on the front and part of the sides, the back and upper part being left unadorned. The mouth is also drilled, suggesting that the head was reused as an ornamental feature for a fountain, as was common during the 16th - 17th century.



In the Roman period, the formidable lion was a well known, popular animal. Captured and used to entertain the populace during fights in arenas, they were also frequently represented in art, particularly in funerary contexts. Individual lion heads at the corners of sarcophagi had an apotropaic function, serving to ward off evil and protect the deceased. In the 2nd century AD, such iconography was very widely used for strigillated sarcophagi, as testified by magnificent examples conserved in Rome, at the British Museum in London and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Ill. 1-3). Similarly to our fragment, the lions are depicted very expressively, muscles of the face and mouth tensed while a thick mane

frames the head. From the 3rd century AD, representations of entire lions appeared, often attacking other animals (Ill. 4 5). Finally, it is not uncommon to see lions in some procession or hunting scenes.

This magnificent lion head, quite exceptional due to its size and quality of execution, was on the London art market before being added to an American private collection in Beverly Hills in 1989.

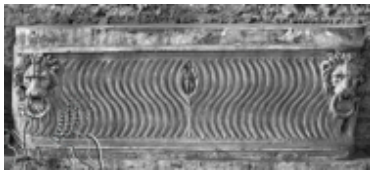


Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Pair of protomes from a sarcophagus, Roman, 3rd century AD, marble, about 57 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1805,0703.115 and 1805,0703.116.





Ill. 2. Sarcophagus with lions, Roman, 3rd cent. AD, marble, W.: 185 cm. San Saba basilica, Rome.



Ill. 3. Strigillated sarcophagus, Roman, AD 220, marble, W.: 217 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 2005.258.



Ill. 4. Sarcophagus with lions, Roman, AD 240-250, marble, W.: 200 cm. Villa Ada, Rome.

Ill. 5. Sarcophagus with lions, Roman, 2nd half of the 3rd century AD, marble, W.: 106 cm. Capitoline Museums, inv. no. MC0223.

