STATUE OF MARSYAS

ROMAN, 1ST – 2ND CENTURY AD
MARBLE
RESTORED IN THE 17TH – 18TH CENTURY AD

HEIGHT: 55 CM.	WIDTH: 20 CM.	DEPTH: 23 CM.

PROVENANCE:
HUNGARIAN PRIVATE COLLECTION, BUDAPEST.
THEN IN AN AUSTRIAN PRIVATE COLLECTION, ACQUIRED FROM THE PREVIOUS OWNER THROUGH INHERITANCE.

This sizeable sculpture represents Marsyas, either a Phrygian satyr or a silenus, who appears in Greek mythology as an adversary of Apollo. A hybrid figure, he is represented as half man, half goat, standing bare chested with his legs and arms tied to a tree, body performing a unique twist. His face, turned to the left, is sculpted with great expressiveness. His eyebrows are knitted and his lips pursed, while his eyes are wide open. Here, Marsyas is portrayed as a middle-aged man with a beard and thick hair. His features are tense and wonderfully convey the pain and anger he harbours.

His torso presents well crafted muscles, particularly his pectorals. The abdominal line is harmoniously suggested, while the muscles of his lower abdomen and groin are deeply carved. His arm muscles are also prominent, giving Marsyas a great deal of power. Completely naked, he is represented

with goat legs, which start at his thighs. One is leaning against the trunk while the other is tensed, supporting the entire weight of his body and creating an accentuated twist of the hips that animates the sculpture and thus gives it its own spatiality. His fur stands out in several wavy strands. The sculptor was able to translate their thickness and the play of matter with great success. Finally, his legs end in hooves.

Marsyas is bound to the trunk of a tree that is slightly smaller than him. A finely sculpted rope ensnares his legs, with one lifted along a branch. His arms are bound at his back, hands tied together and then firmly attached to the trunk. The twist imposed by his bonds creates a play of curves and counter curves, making our sculpture very dynamic and conveying an impression of movement that is quite exceptional.

This iconography is typical for representations of Marsyas. Ovid's Metamorphoses relate that one day, Athena created a double flute called an aulos. She wanted to play it at a banquet, but the gods mocked the way her face was deformed as she blew into the instrument. Furious, the goddess threw the flute on the ground. Marsyas approached, picked it up and began to play (Ill. 1). He was gifted and captivated his audience, who declared that he was even more talented than Apollo, the god of music. The rumour reached the god, who decided to challenge Marsyas. The Muses deliberated and named Apollo the victor. To punish him for the slight, Apollo had Marsyas tied to a pine tree and flayed him alive. In some versions, Marsyas' blood formed the river Marsyas, which flows to the shore of the Aegean Sea. Other versions say that it was created by the tears of the spectators and Marsyas' companions. The moment this scene captures is when the bound Marsyas was awaiting Apollo's punishment. The flute, the instrument with which he had lost the challenge, rests on the ground at his feet.

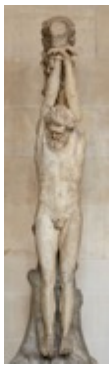
Under the Roman Empire, Marsyas' story served as an example of the consequences of hybris, or pride and arrogance. The myth was thus highly appreciated by the artists of the Greek and then Roman periods, as attested by two magnificent examples that are currently conserved in Paris and Rome (Ill. 2 3). These Roman sculptures are copies inspired by a Greek original from the Pergamon school, centre of the Hellenistic baroque. Like our sculpture, both these examples depict Marsyas as a bearded man standing with his hands and feet tied to a tree. In these models, however, his body is

stretched to the limit, almost drawn, throwing all his muscles and bones into sharp relief. This theatrical staging, the immediacy of the action, the dynamism of the body and the spatiality of the sculptures are all themes that interest artists to the highest degree, all combined in this sculpture. Artists will again be able to find in this subject the possibility of imbuing stone with the pain and fear experienced by Marsyas. Sometimes bound to a tree, sometimes suspended, he is also often represented struggling, trying to escape his punishment. This is the iconography that can be found in the work of baroque sculptors (Ill. 4).

Our sculpture is also original by its patina. The marble used for the sculpture has a very pronounced brown hue, which contrasts with the black patina marking Marsyas' face. This localised black shade could possibly be explained by the marble being burnt at one point in its history. Thus, all these hues imbuing the material over the centuries are a perfect testament to the effects of time on the piece.

Comparatives:

Ill. 1. Marsyas and Athena, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble. Gregoriano Profano Museum, Vatican, inv. no. 9974, 37022, 9975, 9970.



Ill. 2. Marsyas, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 268 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 542.
Ill. 3. Marsyas, Roman, marble, H.: 157 cm. Palazzo Doria-Pamphilj, Rome.
Ill. 4. Pierre Legros, Marsyas, bronze, H.: 63 cm. Liechtenstein Museum, Austria, inv. no. Sk 1488.