

CINERARY URN

ROMAN, CA. 2ND HALF OF THE 1ST CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 30 CM.

WIDTH: 35 CM.

DEPTH: 26 CM.

PROVENANCE:
FORMERLY IN A GERMAN PRIVATE
COLLECTION.
SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK, ANTIQUITIES, 10
DECEMBER 1999, LOT 294.
THEN IN AN AMERICAN PRIVATE
COLLECTION.



This elegant circular cinerary urn is sculpted from marble and displays sumptuous, abundant ornamentation across its entire body. The front is adorned with a rectangular *tabula* devoid of any inscription. Around it unfurls a spectacular iconographic repertory. Ivy leaves embellished with small

clusters of berries adorn the central part of the urn, while two delicately sculpted birds peck at the fruits under the *tabula*. Each leaf and branch is individually etched, the drill marks creating a play of hollows and solid surfaces that accentuates its ornamental aspect all the more and makes the decoration seem to come to life. Moreover, the changes in relief create a play of shadow and light, adding to the impression of movement. The back, in lighter relief, displays interlaced laurel branches placed symmetrically on either side of a central trunk topped with a pinecone. Again, small birds perched on the branches peck at the berries.





The urn's incredibly-shaped handles further enhance its ornamental aspect. They represent two of the faces of Zeus-Ammon, a syncretic deity blending the Greek god Zeus and the Egyptian deity Amun. Both handles are identical, depicting a middle-aged man. His face is narrow, characterised by high, prominent cheekbones, a broad forehead etched with delicate wrinkles, an elegant nose and small, thin lips. His almond-shaped eyes are delicately carved, enhanced with furrowed eyebrows that accentuate his serious expression. His lips are parted, framed with a full beard and thick moustache. Each strand is individually sculpted and forms small, delicate curls sculpted with a drill, again accentuating the play of depth, shadow and light. His hair, too, is made up of thick, deeply carved locks, creating volume and giving the piece an impression of life. The hair is also adorned

with two finely carved, coiled ram horns, indicating the god's identity.



Finally, the lower part of the body and the foot are decorated with large acanthus leaves with irregular edges, again contributing to its ornamental aspect and showing the attention the artist paid to the slightest details.

Sculpted from white marble, our urn is adorned with a delicate brown patina with golden tints, giving it a certain aura and attesting to the passing of time. The stone was broken in the centre and later restored discreetly, in such a fashion the majestic ornamentation is in no way altered.

In ancient Rome, there were two forms of burial, inhumation and cremation. From the Republican period, cremation prevailed. Made first from terracotta, urns were then

made from marble and became widespread from the reign of Augustus. Their ornamentation became increasingly meticulous and detailed, reaching its height in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The decorative repertory was quite common: garlands of fruit, interlacing scroll motifs, flowers and various creatures and animals, as well as elements linked to funerary rites.



These motifs symbolised human hopes for the afterlife and the soul's journey to luxuriant funerary gardens. Our urn takes up some of these elements in a geometric, aerial composition, in which the leafy branches intersect symmetrically, incarnating the prosperity of the deceased in stone. The two faces of Zeus-Ammon symbolise eternity. The syncretic god of classical origins combines the characteristics of the Egyptian god Amun and the Greek god Zeus. His cult

flourished particularly through the influence of Alexander the Great, who claimed him as his tutelary deity, leading to a proliferation of representations on coins, herms and in funerary contexts. Gorgeous examples of cinerary urns adopting both this plant decoration and the face of Zeus-Ammon are thus currently conserved in various international museums and attest to the popularity of these themes. The examples that most resemble our work are unquestionably those of the Walters Art and Hermitage Museums (Ill. 1-2). Other lovely sculptures are also exhibited in London, Florence, Rome and Berlin (Ill. 3-6).

Our urn was in a German collection before being sold at Sotheby's New York in 1999 and added to an American collection.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Urn with Lid, Roman, AD 50-100, marble, H.: 51.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, inv. no. 23.180.

Ill. 2. Urn in the name of Cornelius Eutychius, Roman, end of the 1st century AD, marble, H.: 51.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, inv. no. TP-4226.



Ill. 3. Cinerary vase, Roman, 2nd half of the 1st century AD, marble, H.: 75 cm. Sir John Soane's Museum, London, inv. no. M971.

Ill. 4. Cinerary urn, Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 46.5 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. no. 1914.992.



Ill. 5. Cinerary urn, Roman, 2nd half of the 1st century AD, marble, H.: 55 cm. Centrale Montemartini, Rome.

Ill. 6. Urn, Roman, 2nd half of the 1st century AD, marble, H.: 59 cm. Antikensammlung, Berlin, inv. no. 1129.