

CINERARY URN

ROMAN, *CIRCA* 1ST CENTURY AD

MARBLE

PEDESTAL AND LID FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

HEIGHT: 55 CM.

WIDTH: 40 CM.

DEPTH: 40 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION FROM THE
18TH CENTURY, BASED ON THE
RESTORATIONS TECHNIQUE.
THEN WITH THE DISTILLERS COMPANY
LTD, ACQUIRED FOR 20 ST JAMES'S
SQUARE, LONDON, BEFORE 1938.*



This magnificent marble funerary urn, which is Roman in origin, displays a rounded body with gadroons shaped like alternating convex and concave mouldings, mostly vertical, and is flanked with two lateral handles bedecked with laurel leaves. A band of these same leaves elegantly adorns the lower body, while an egg-and-dart frieze connects body and lid. The lid is decorated

with finely sculpted leaves that evoke a flower in full bloom, as well as a graceful beaded border. On the top of the lid, the knob is shaped like a delicate fleuron. The whole piece rests on a square base surmounted with a fluted circular foot. The variations in relief create plays of light and shadow, as well as an interplay of textures between the smooth and more detailed surfaces. This urn has undergone several restorations and repairs: the lid and the base are later additions, probably from the end of the 18th century.



Throughout the 18th century, the rediscovery of Herculaneum in 1738 and then Pompeii in 1748 led to the establishment of large public



museums such as the Capitoline Museums and the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, as well as the enrichment of vast, princely antiques collections such as those exhibited by the Uffizi Galleries in Florence and the Glyptothek in Munich. It was also, above all, the century of the Grand Tour: rich aristocrats would travel through Europe to complete their education in the company of painters, illustrators and architects, who published collections of engravings upon their return. These illustrations greatly contributed to spreading a taste for Antiquity throughout the courts of Europe.



Many pieces were offered on the art market to meet the growing demand. They were either genuine antiques or copies of famous antiques, as the prevailing taste was for both reuse and imitation. The particular interest in cinerary urns – although it had been sparked during the Renaissance – was very much in evidence in the 18th century, as their shape and size made it possible to display them in rich residences as decorative objects, as was the case of our superb specimen.

In ancient Rome, there were two funerary practices: inhumation and cremation. The latter became predominant from the Republican period. Following the incineration, the ashes were placed in an urn, which was set in the columbarium, composed of many wall niches. The loved ones of the deceased could thus go and deposit offerings to honour their life in the beyond. Cinerary urns were thus an essential part of the ceremony. In the case of our object, marble was a prestigious material, which suggests that the patron sought to distinguish himself. Urns were first made of terracotta and then glass, alabaster or marble and became widespread from the reign of Augustus.

Their ornamentation, which became increasingly meticulous and elaborate, reached its height from the 1st to the 2nd century AD and featured several quite common elements including plant motifs, sometimes enhanced with various creatures and animals or references to funerary rites. We see one part of this decorative corpus on our urn, placed within a vibrant geometric composition dominated by curves and ovals, which symbolise the prosperity of the deceased. The popularity of these themes in the decoration of cinerary urns is thus illustrated by gorgeous examples currently conserved in various international museums (ill. 1-2), while the use of more geometric motifs can be seen in other examples exhibited in Paris, the Vatican and West Lodge (ill. 3-5). Geometric motifs were the least common type of decoration, but they superbly recall the motifs of Greek and then Roman architectural decoration.

Our cinerary urn was displayed in an exceptional house at 20 St James's Square in London (ill. 6). The townhouse was built by the Scottish architect Robert Adam between 1771 and 1774, at the request of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn (1749-1789), a politician and patron. It was a masterpiece that exemplified the architectural and decorative style defined by the Adam brothers (Robert and James) at the end of the 18th century, marked by classical Roman motifs: friezes, plant garlands, pillars, columns, sphinxes, etc. The Adams brothers, who were true pioneers of the neoclassical movement in architecture, built several such houses in London for their aristocratic clients in the 1770s and 1780s. In the middle of the 1930s, the house was expanded and became the headquarters of the Distillers Company Ltd, a business founded in 1877 through the amalgamation of six Scottish distilleries, which rapidly controlled the Scotch whisky industry. A photograph shows the presence of our urn at 20 St James's Square in 1938, in a neoclassical alcove on the first-floor landing, strongly reminiscent of the niches where cinerary urns were placed in the *colombaria* (ill. 7).

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Urn, Roman, 1st - 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 19 cm.

British Museum, London, inv. no. 1805.0703.175.

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

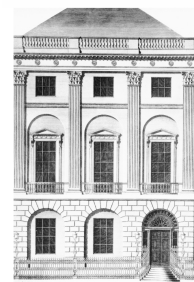
Ill. 3. Urn, Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 55 cm.

Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 5217.



Ill. 4. Cinerary urn, Roman, early 1st century AD, marble, H.: 46 cm. Vatican Museums, Pio Clementino Museum, Galleria Dei Candelabri, inv. no. MV.2489.0.0.

Ill. 5. Funerary urn, Roman, 2nd half of the 1st century BC, marble, H.: 49 cm. West Lodge Museum.



Ill. 6. Façade of 20 St James's Square, London, designed by Robert and James Adam for Sir William Watkins-Wynn, engraving by John Robert, 1777.



Ill. 7. Photograph of the first-floor landing of 20 St James's Square, London, headquarters of the Distillers Company Ltd in 1938 – our urn is placed on a pedestal in the middle of the alcove.