

VOTIVE ALTAR

ROMAN, 1ST CENTURY BC
MARBRE

HEIGHT: 74 CM.

DIAMETER: 50 CM.

*PROVENANCE:
FORMER EUROPEAN PRIVATE
COLLECTION SINCE THE 18TH CENTURY
BASED ON THE RESTORATIONS
TECHNIQUES.
SAID TO HAVE BEEN FOUND IN THE
REGION OF APT, VAUCLUSE.
ACQUIRED FROM LA REINE MARGOT
ART GALLERY, PARIS, MAYS 1997.
IN THE SWISS PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
ART TRADER ALAIN MOATTI (1939-2023)*



This large, cylindrical altar is distinguished by its careful composition. A support, reminiscent of the lower part of the shaft of a column, dovetails harmoniously with a base. The whole piece, crafted from white marble, presents a rich relief ornamentation featuring bucrania, festoons of fruit and wreaths – emblematic motifs of the sacrificial iconography of ancient Rome.

The relief decoration on the upper part of our altar features three sacrificial bucrania arranged at equal intervals around our sculpture. These skeletal ox heads, which traditionally symbolised sacrifice in the Roman world, demonstrate a meticulously detailed anatomy. Wide and elongated, each of the fleshless skulls is crowned with two curved horns. Each horn is tied to one end of a festoon of fruit by a knot. A vertical incision runs down the frontal bone of each skull, tracing a sharp juncture between the upper part of the skull and the beginning of the muzzle. An ornamental *infula* delicately adorns the forehead of each animal.



Infulae were made of flocks of wool dyed red and white, knotted at regular intervals with a ribbon (*vitta*). The arrangement forms a long decorative fillet, which, in Roman tradition, adorned priestesses, Vestal Virgins and



sacrificial victims. Here, the fillet falls elegantly on each side of the muzzle, adding a refined decorative touch while reinforcing the ritualistic, sacred dimension of the composition. The eye sockets, deep and hollow, are carefully sculpted to accentuate the macabre, realistic aspect of the animals' anatomy. Circular in shape, they are underlined by three lateral hollows, underlining the contours of the sockets and forming the frontal bones. The lower part of each muzzle represents the maxillary bone, made up of dental alveoli, additional proof of the attention the sculptor paid to the anatomical characteristics of oxen. On either side of each horn streams a ribbon, probably a *taenia*, subliming the upper part of the altar. Lower down, a finely sculpted festoon links the bucrania. Adorned with leaves and fruit – probably pomegranates – it falls from one skeletal head to rise to the next. As for the base on which the cylindrical support rests, the upper part, now missing, could be imagined as a round table, probably slotted into the support through an ingenious fitting system, typical of Roman funerary altars.



Bucranium and wreath motifs originated in the Hellenistic art of Asia Minor and, more

precisely, Pergamum, during the reign of the Attalid dynasty (3rd century BC). These decorative elements, initially associated with religious and funerary contexts, symbolise festivities and sacrificial rites, immortalised in stone. They often represent wreaths of foliage hanging from supports such as the heads of sacrificed animals, thus establishing a strong link between architecture and sacred rituals. Bucrania, representing the skulls of sacrificed oxen, are central iconographic elements in such compositions.



Often adorned with ribbons (*taeniae*) or wreaths, they symbolise purification and offerings to the gods. The wreaths are shaped with naturalistic precision and are made up of laurel leaves, fruit and flowers, evoking both fertility and prosperity. These motifs were part of an artistic tradition that linked the representation of nature with cult practices. From the 2nd century BC, these motifs were widely disseminated in the Aegean world and reached their height in the Augustan Age. Integrated into Roman art, they took on a more political and cultural dimension. Cylindrical altars adorned with bucrania and wreaths served both votive and commemorative functions. Placed in

sanctuaries and public spaces, they were used for sacrifices and for celebrating religious events. The refined ornamentation, a testament to the excellence of the sculptors, served to amplify the prestige of the patrons and the importance of the rituals the altars facilitated. This cylindrical altar is thus part of a rich artistic and cultic tradition, marking the continuity between Hellenistic heritage and its appropriation by the Romans.



The first examples of this iconography – made up of bucrania, wreaths and festoons of fruit – appeared on the frieze of the façade of the temple *in antis* dedicated to Demeter in Pergamum, built between 302 and 263 BC by Philetærus and Eumenes I of Teos. That frieze, considered the oldest example to feature both wreaths and *infulae* adorned bucrania, became a major reference in the history of the motifs (Ill. 1). In the 1st century BC, the altars of the Augustan Age cemented the durability of these decorative elements, as attested by the Ara Pacis in Rome (Ill. 2). That monumental altar, built in the honour of Pax, goddess of peace, linked Hellenistic heritage and Roman monumental art, while introducing an opposition as to its function, which was

more political than votive. Inside the majestic monument, the decoration features bucrania surrounded with *taneia*, as well as festoons of fruit, similar motifs to those of our cylindrical altar. However, the absence of *infulae* adorning the foreheads of the animals shows a slight iconographic variation. An altar from the same period, discovered in Mauretania and now preserved at Musée Saint-Raymond in Toulouse (Ill. 3), displays a more moderate ornamentation, while still preserving the essence of that Hellenistic decorative tradition.



The Roman imperial period also offers noteworthy examples, particularly an altar preserved at the Louvre (Ill. 4). Although the motifs are similar, there are some variations, particularly in its shape. Finally, for an idea of the missing upper part of our sculpture, the example of the votive altar dedicated to the cult of the goddess Feronia, discovered in the sacred site of Lucus Feroniae in Capena, Italy, is particularly enlightening. Dating from the 1st century BC, the altar is similar to our object in both shape and decoration, with a base topped with a cylindrical shaft adorned with bucrania and festoons of fruit. The sanctuary, located near Capena, to the

north of Rome, was a major religious centre that gathered various peoples – Latins, Sabines, Etruscans and Falisci – for religious ceremonies and trade.

Our altar was probably found in the region of Apt in Vaucluse. Formerly known as Apta Julia, the region was once a large Roman colony founded in around 45 BC. The town had all the typical features of a Roman city, including temples. It thus seems logical that an altar from that period could come from such a place of worship. In 1880, major archaeological discoveries were made in the area, particularly the “Treasure of Apt”, which consisted of many bronze objects from the Roman period. In 1997, our sculpture was sold to a private collector who acquired it from La Reine Margot, a Parisian art gallery specialising in archaeological pieces and founded in 1938.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Frieze of the façade of the temple *in antis* dedicated to Demeter, Greek, between 302 and 263 BC, marble, Pergamum, Turkey.



Ill. 2. Ara Pacis, Roman, 1st century BC, marble. Museo dell'Ara Pacis, Rome, Italy.



Ill. 3. Cylindrical altar adorned with animal heads and a laurel wreath, Roman, 1st century BC, marble, H.: 84 cm. Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse.



Ill. 4. Altar, Roman, 1st century BC–1st century AD, marble, H.: 65 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

