

HERM REPRESENTING SILENUS

HELLENISTIC, 1ST CENTURY BC – 1ST CENTURY AD
MARBLE

18TH CENTURY RESTORATIONS INCLUDING LEFT SHOULDER AND BASE

HEIGHT: 120 CM.

WIDTH: 32.5 CM.

DEPTH: 26 CM.

PROVENANCE:
IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION FROM THE
18TH - 19TH CENTURY, JUDGING BY THE
RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.
IN A FRENCH PRIVATE COLLECTION IN
THE BEAUNE REGION FOR SEVERAL
DECADES.
SOLD AT THE AUCTION HOUSE IN
BEAUNE IN NOVEMBER 2025.



This rare sculpture represents Silenus, an old male figure who was part of Dionysus' retinue. His head, tilted forwards slightly, is turned to the right. His face displays features that are purposefully accentuated and grotesque, in keeping with the iconographic

tradition of *sileni*. His forehead is partially covered with a thick headband, one of the figure's characteristic accessory. Thin hair is visible on the top of his head.



His very prominent brow ridges dominate a forehead animated by tense furrows, one of which forms the start of his nose, contributing to his tense facial expression. His deep-set, elongated eyes are heavily lidded and have no pupils. His short, wide nose fits with his grotesque physiognomy, while his small, thin-lipped mouth is slightly open. It is partly concealed by a long, thick, carefully wrought moustache that mingles with a full beard made up of wavy locks and



falling to his torso. The alternating treatment of convex and concave shapes imbues the piece with an impression of mass, matter and movement. The bust, solid and sturdy in its modelling, is clothed in a short *himation* cinched at the waist by a dual tightening system: one part, which is invisible, makes the fabric appear to bulge out while the other, visible and finely sculpted, visually structures the composition. The system creates two levels of drapery, both of which fall in large, supple, regular folds, revealing the attention the sculptor paid to representing the fabrics and accessories. His broad shoulders are partly covered by a lighter *chiton*, the top of which can be seen where the arms would have been.



A second piece of fabric is thrown over his left shoulder, falls fluidly down his back and wraps around his right hip. The particularly masterful rendering of the different garments makes them appear supple and as though in motion. From the waist, the figure turns into a smooth, tapered, quadrangular pillar, which replaces the legs. The pillar rests upon a simple, moulded base, ensuring the stability of the sculpture. The stark transition between human body and architectural

element underlines the hybrid dimension of the work, cementing both its function as a boundary marker and its symbolic and religious significance. Where it meets the pillar, the drapery conceals a facetious detail: the god's sex protrudes slightly. That detail is not inconsistent with the subject represented, as Silenus was associated with Dionysian pleasures, including those of the carnal variety.



The work is sculpted from a velvety, fine-grained marble. Its surface displays a soft patina with warm, slightly ochre tones, a result of both the passing of time and its preservation conditions. The use of a chisel, clearly perceptible in the treatment of the beard and the deep folds of the clothing, produced a sculptural work of great quality. Some cracks show that the head was broken in two places and then mended, perhaps following an impact causing both fragments to detach. One part is situated at the front to the left, going from the top of the head, and the other at the back. The left shoulder and arm, restored in the 19th century with marble very similar to the original, meld harmoniously with the rest of the composition, as does the base of the pillar.

Slight traces of the passing of time – superficial erosions and thin cracks – contribute to the charm and authenticity of the sculpture without marring its formal visibility.



This Roman sculpture representing a sleeping Silenus in the form of a herm is fully in line with Dionysian iconographic traditions. Silenus, sometimes known as Papposilenus, was a rustic deity associated with forests, drunkenness and vinification in Greek mythology. As the faithful companion and adoptive father of Dionysus, he was closely linked to satyrs and often considered the oldest and wisest among them.

Ancient sources ascribed a profoundly ambivalent nature to him. On one hand, Silenus was viewed as a drunk old man who greatly enjoyed Bacchic pleasures and debauchery, while, on the other, he was said to possess a profound wisdom and prophetic powers. That contradiction was essential to his personality and explains the figure's lasting popularity in antiquity. Depending on the source, Silenus' parents were said to be Hermes and Gaia or the pastoral god Pan. He was generally represented in Graeco-Roman mythology as a balding, old

man with a rotund body, a prominent paunch, a snub nose and a thick beard. His exaggerated features contribute to his grotesque nature. The god made an appearance in several major mythological tales. In the Gigantomachy, he fought the Giants alongside Dionysus. Another famous episode is that of Silenus and King Midas. Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, also mentioned the existence of a temple dedicated to Silenus in Elis, where Methe, the personification of drunkenness, offered him a cup of wine. In Athens, a stone on the Acropolis was associated with Silenus and, according to the myth, marked the place where he rested while waiting for Dionysus. The fact this sculpture is combined with a pillar grants the figure a particular symbolic significance. Inherited from the archaic Greek tradition of herms, that typology links the representation with a protective, apotropaic function. Originally, herms were placed at crossroads, in entrances or in other transitional spaces, where they played both religious and symbolic roles.



Our sculpture can be traced back to a period between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, placing it at a critical time in

Mediterranean artistic production, marked by the transition between Hellenistic heritage and its assimilation by the Roman world. At that time, the Roman elites, raised on Greek culture, showed a pronounced fascination for figures associated with *paideia*, or education. Such sculptures could be found in private spaces such as gardens, peristyles and *triclinia*, or banquet halls.

While the representations of *sileni* abounded in the Greek and Roman worlds, the specific type to which our sculpture belongs is extremely rare and only four examples, including ours, are known and currently displayed in prestigious museums. Two particularly similar works may serve as key comparison points: the example preserved in Villa Albani, which dates back to no later than the 1st century AD (ill. 1), and that of the Museum of the Ancient Agora in Athens, which is in a remarkable state of preservation (ill. 2). To those can be added a sculpture the whereabouts of which is currently unknown, illustrated in Salomon Reinach's work in 1928, when it was preserved in Naples (ill. 3). The engraving reproduced by Reinach is extremely interesting, as it makes it possible to picture the complete appearance of the iconographic type: the folded left arm held a tubular object generally interpreted as a *pedum* while the right hand, held out in front of him in a lower position, held a cup. A small mantle, thrown over his left shoulder, fell down his back and wrapped around his forearm, a sartorial detail that is identical in our sculpture, despite some elements being lost. There is another work comparable to our Silenus preserved at the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul (ill. 4). Additionally, although it presents some iconographic differences, a marble statue of Priapus, dating from around 100 BC and preserved at the Archaeological Museum in Delos, has some formal similarities (ill.5). It attests to the dissemination of divine figures associated with fertility, drunkenness and protection

from the end of the Hellenistic period. There is also a remarkable herm from the Hellenistic period, dating from the 1st century BC, preserved at the Louvre (ill. 6), while the persistence of Silenus' iconography in Roman architectural decoration is illustrated by a stand dated to the 1st or 2nd century AD and also preserved among the collections of the Louvre (ill. 7).



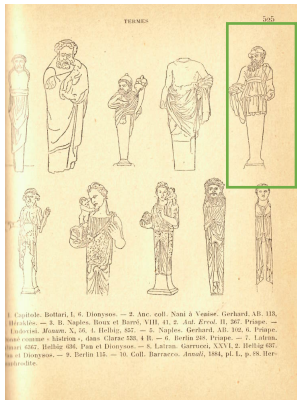
The modern history of this sculpture can be retraced through its state of preservation and restorations. The techniques used – particularly for the restorations of the left shoulder and arm, in marble very similar to the original, as well as the quadrangular base – are typical of the 18th and 19th centuries, when European collectors were keenly interested in ancient sculptures. That indicates that the work was part of a European collection in the 18th century. Later, the sculpture was added to a French private collection in the Beaune region, where it remained for several decades.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Herm representing Silenus, Roman, 1st century BC – 1st century AD, marble, H.: 107 cm. Villa Albani, Rome, inv. no. 406.

Ill. 2. Herm representing a Silenus, Roman, 1st–2nd century AD, marble. Museum of the Ancient Agora, Athens, inv. no. S 2363.



Ill. 3. Salomon Reinach, “Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine”, Vol. 2, Paris, 1928, p. 525.



Ill. 4. Pillar fragment representing a Silenus, Roman, 1st century BC – 1st century AD. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, inv. no. 122.724.



Ill. 5. Herm representing Priapus, Greek, 100 BC, marble. Archaeological Museum, Delos, inv. no. A350.

Ill. 6. Pillar representing a Silenus, Greek, Hellenistic, 1st century BC, marble, H.: 6.7 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MNB 1115.



Ill. 7. Stand in the shape of a Silenus, Roman, 1st–2nd century AD, marble, H.: 86 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Cp 6476.