17th Century Bronze Sculpture Of An Atlas Set With A Candlestick-globe

9 000 EUR

Period : 17th century

Condition : Bon état

Material : Bronze

Height : 45 cm

Description

17th Century Bronze Sculpture of an Atlas set with a candlestick-globe.
Patinated bronze, gilt bronze, marble.
Italy and France.
17th century (Atlas) ; 18th century (globe).
h. 17,7 in.

Antique bronze sculpture of an Atlas, set with a Louis XVI-period armillary sphere forming a candlestick, in keeping with a trend inaugurated by Severo da Ravenna at the end of the 15th century.

Although the Atlantes have become classic art-historical figures, their origins are obscure and difficult to trace. There are four statues in the Louvre, described by Wilhelm Fröhner, a German

Dealer

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archaeologist and assistant curator of antiquities at the Louvre under Napoleon III :

'[...] their heads bent over their chests, their arms resting on their hips, as if they had the greatest difficulty in holding themselves under the weight imposed on them. Their robust bodies testify to their superhuman strength.'

Those words alone suffice to show the link between these four sculptures and our Atlas. They are, in fact, from a catalogue description of the Satyrs or Sileni Albani, four colossal marbles of the Roman period, carved after Greek Atlantes that were to support a tribune or a pediment of sorts at the theater of Dionysus in Athens. The construction of the theater is contemporary to the orator Lycurgus, between the 106th and 108th Olympiads, i.e. ca. 338-330 BC, and was for this reason attributed, with no further proof, to the great sculptor Skopas, contemporary of Praxiteles, after comparison to a fragmented torso found in Athens and described by art critic and connoisseur Eugène Piot in a letter read at the Académie des Inscriptions in 1869.

Before entering the Louvre in 1803, the Sileni Albani were the support of an Egyptian granite basin, the whole of which formed a famous fountain in the Villa Albani in Rome, immortalised by Piranesi in an engraving entitled Sileni numero quattro antichi di marmo di grandezza molto maggiori del naturale, dated 1778.

Winckelmann had already commented on these statues in 1767, in the second volume of his Monumenti antichi indediti. They were already located 'in the villa of the very eminent Alessandro Albani', and insisted they should not be called sileni but atlantes, since they 'more closely evoke the ancient king of Mauretania Atlas who, according to fable, carried the sky on his shoulders.'

Winckelmann's name for them is based in part on a famous passage from Vitruvius, recounting that architectural statues of this type, the male equivalent of the female Caryatids, were called Telamones (Telamons) by the Latins and Atlantes by the Greeks [nostri telamones appellant ; Graeci vero eos atlantas vocitant].

While Piranesi merely points out that the marble figures, once placed at the under the Sileni at the Villa Albani had been unearthed nella villa Negroni, he says nothing about the provenance of the Sileni ; nor does Winckelmann seem to have anything to say about the life these marbles had before they were acquired by Cardinal Alessandro Albani.

These marbles, however, or some Atlas of the same sculptural type, must have been known as early as the 16th century, according to Italian art historian Renzo Grandi, who upon inspection has dated an Atlas exactly similar to ours (fig. 2), albeit of considerably lower quality, to the end of the 16th century (and then modified in the 19th).

Finding out the date of production of bronzes of this size is a difficult task, as they were often made for the cabinets of wealthy private collectors in the Italian republics and princedoms of the 16th and 18th centuries. Archives and documents related to these private commissions are extraordinarily rare. Iconography, therefore, turns out to be very helpful, added to the technical analysis of patina, fixing and chasing : here, the artist's relationship to the nudity of his figure can be useful in finding a period of production for this bronze.

The effects on painting and sculpture in Italy of the prohibitions adopted by decree in 1563 at the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent are well known ; and we also know that Paul IV, as early as 1559, before the end of the Council, had

asked Daniele da Volterra to hide the nudity of some figures of the Last Judgment, despite Michelangelo being alive. This gave Volterra his nickname : il Braghettone, "the breeches maker".

The series of the Hercules, for example, commissioned to Giambologna in the early 1570s by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I de' Medici, for the Uffizi gallery, was further expanded even after Giambologna's death. It was then under the direction of his successor Pietro Tacca ; and was expanded again under Ferdinando Tacca, Pietro Tacca's nephew, who seems to have succeeded to Pietro in this matter, just as Pietro succeeded to Gianbologna.

The Hercules and Antaeus, the Hercules and the Hind of Cerynia in the Wallace Collection, and the Hercules and the Hydra of Lerna, which wax modello is in the Palazzo Vecchio, are all nude. The iconography for the same series, and one of a secular theme, had already changed by the mid-17th century, i.e. at the time of Ferdinando Tacca : Hercules carrying the Erymanth Boar, in the Wallace Collection, is veiled in drapery, as is the Hercules supporting the globe illustrated in the Douai exhibition catalog by Charles Avery and Michael Hall.

In the 18th century, the antique nude became acceptable again and even desirable : this was the time of Thorvaldsen's Jaso or Canova's Perseus ; and during the 19th century it became disapproved of again in many parts of Europe, so much so that, by the end of the century, all antique statuary nudes were veiled : the Ganymede in the Chiaramonti Museum, the Roman copies of Myron's Discobolus, Polyclitus' Doryphorus, Praxiteles' Sauroctone Apollo, and even the Antinous in the Capitol, are all covered with a vine leaf.

These variations in nudity lead us to compare our Atlas to an strikingly similar work (fig. 3), held at

the Palazzo Mosca in Pesaro. This is a late 18th-century Atlas, that used to be nude, which chasing is not of the highest quality. This seems to be the reason for which it is now attributed to an anonymous Roman workshop, after having been first attributed to Luigi Valadier. Luigi Valadier had in fact produced, in or after 1767, a reduction of the Villa Albani fountain for the Bailli de Breteuil's first deser -- Valadier's Silènes Albani are nude. But the Atlas in Pesaro was also covered with a vine leaf in silver, that could obviously not have been part of the bronze cast.

This bronze sculpture, from the collections of the Marquesses of Mosca, was turned, like our Atlas, to a luminary, more precisely as a 'lucerna', that is an oil lamp. The setting, the lamp, and perhaps the vine leaf, are by the Roman silversmith Filippo Pacetti, active in Rome from 1809 to 1814, which is when they were marked. A drawing in the Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York, shows that the silversmith conceived the object entirely as such. Pesaro's bronze is not as old as ours, as evidenced by the state of the patina.

Sources

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