



Terracotta Sphinx, XVIIIth



14 500 EUR

Signature : Non signé

Period : 18th century

Condition : Bon état général

Material : Terracotta

Width : 53 cm

Height : 106 cm

Depth : 141 cm

Description

SphinxTerracottaXVIIIthLarge terracotta sphinx with a woman's head, late Louis XV - early Louis XVI (between 1770 and 1776). This one presents a female torso with a pigeon-shaped bodice, wearing a sleeveless hooded dress called "domino", and a "child's" hairstyle, with hair rounded and teased at the front and raised at the back by a ribbon. The mythological creature, whose two legs rest on a tasseled cushion, wears around its neck a medallion in the shape of a curved heart, establishing a reminder with the similar ornaments of the fabric draping the rump transversely. In one of his paintings representing the young Moses saved from the waters (1638), Nicolas Poussin gives the traditional figure of the sphinx a woman's head. In this sense, the Attic painter, singer of the dreamed Arcadia, brings

Dealer

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back the miraculous survival of the chosen child of God to the triumph over the destruction of life, water, the personified Nile, on which the double symbolism of the sphinx in ancient statuary is precisely based. A mythological animal with the body of a lion and a human head, once emblematic of hieroglyphic writing but still feared even in its chimerical existence, the sphinx can thus appear both as the insidious spirit that denies everything (cf. Oedipus) but also as a tutelary figure, protective and vigilant in its enigmatic power. The sphinx in question here takes on a significance representative of the evolution of the meaning attributed to it in statuary art from the 17th century onwards: initially ambivalent, likely to arouse fear and strangeness, it becomes reassuring and benevolent, always draped in a mysterious silence from which it does not abandon itself to mount an inflexible guard in front of noble residences, or at the edge of a park: its power is transfigured in stone, it represents the eternal sovereign, despotic and paternal. The sculpture which interests us is in fact situated at the confluence of a political manifesto and an aesthetic discourse: among the first sculptures of sphinxes known in France, dating from the end of the 17th century, some, four in number, seem to display the features of several favorites of King Louis XIV (1).

Hairstyles in the Fontange style - one of the last and ephemeral mistresses of the monarch - they display, lying down, their chests uncovered, the grace and restraint of the favor obtained.

Similarly, our sculpture crystallizes a skillful synthesis of a certain elegance of interpersonal relations - and of intimacy, whose chosen place in the 18th century is eloquent: the parks, notably royal and princely. If the most famous sphinxes of the 18th century that have come down to us today remain those enthroned at the top of the grand staircase in the park of the Château de Ménars (Loir-et-Cher), representing the Marquise de Pompadour, (2) it is because the latter, not content with having reigned over the influence of

Decorative Arts at court under Louis XV, breathed timeless life into her own model of favorite philosopher and protector of the Enlightenment through a number of artistic creations - in stone. What identity does this sphinx with the mysterious ribbon tied around its neck have? The pendant, in the form of a medallion and with the figure of a heart, is probably a reliquary of love, and, containing some ardent memory, could evoke another chosen one of Louis XV's heart, with whom it shared the last years until 1774: the Countess of Barry (3). If certain sculptures of sphinxes present similarities between them, there is none which offers a complete bundle of identical characteristics.

(4) Hence the exclusive dimension of the sculpture in question: the delicacy of the head turned in a quarter, uncommon before 1770, the skilful elaboration of a historiated hairstyle, the haughty movement which seems to move the impenetrable and smiling figure, all contribute to a natural majesty which suits the art of Western gardens since the Renaissance, and in this case in the 18th century. Last question however: its purpose and its original location. An enigma, just like the strangeness of its charm remains, in a supernatural silence, whole. (5) RELATED

WORK: 1. Four white marble sphinxes with women's heads; presumed portraits of mistresses of Louis XIV; they are represented lying down, the body partly covered by a drapery decorated with tassels and held on the chest by a ribbon knot. Beginning of the 18th century. (H. 80 - L. 100 - W. 40 cm). Provenance: Château in Brittany, Château de Royaumont then Château de Chantilly. Sale of May 8, 1901 at Drouot. 2. Pair of sphinxes called "Pompadour", Park and Château de Ménars (Loir-et-Cher). 3. Pair of terracotta sphinxes with a child, mid-18th century. (H. 75 - W. 90 - D. 45 cm) Provenance: Sotheby's sale December 2008. 4. Pair of Sèvres biscuit sphinxes representing the Countess of Barry, circa 1780 (L. 10 - D. 16 - H. 14 cm). 5. Sphinxes in the Park of Chiswick House,

Burlington Lane, West London, circa 1730.

Photograph: Derry Moore. BIBLIOGRAPHY: o

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