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CIRCLE OF
GIOVANNI DA CAVINO
PADUA, 1500 - 1570

ACHELOUS CROWNED BY NIKE

MID-16TH CENTURY

Bronze
8.5 x 14 cm

Provenance:
Private collection, France

Comparative literature:

M. Gregori (ed.), *In the Light of Apollo: Italian Renaissance and Greece*, exh. cat., Athens, 2003, vols I & II.

G. Gorini, "New Studies on Giovanni da Cavino", in *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 21, *Symposium Papers VIII: Italian Medals* (1987), pp. 45-54.

43-44 NEW BOND STREET
LONDON - W1S 2SA

+44 7500 804 504
INFO@BENJAMINPROUST.COM

WWW.BENJAMINPROUST.COM

VAT: 126655310
COMPANY N° 7839537

This unique plaquette encapsulates the important role played by small bronzes and medals throughout the Renaissance in expressing the gradual rediscovery of the figurative languages of antiquity. As noted by Mina Gregori,¹ such plaquettes are “among the earliest practical intermediaries [...] for the circulation of the inexhaustible well of mythological subjects and types offered by ancient gems, intaglios and cameos.” In fact, parallel to collecting authentic works of art of Greek and Roman origin, a market flourished purveying works of art which sought to emulate the antique.



Fig. 1: A didrachm from circa 275-250 BC, Campania (Private)

The river god Achelous, a suitor of Deianeira famously defeated by Hercules, is represented being crowned by Nike with a wreath of laurel. To the left, Zeus is seated on his throne, holding a sceptre and, in his right hand, one of his attributes, the eagle. The central image of Achelous in the guise of a bull with a man’s head and the Nike, or Victory, is taken from Greek coin types found in Italian regions that were once part of Magna Graecia around 440-250 B.C, and especially Naples (fig. 1), whilst that of Zeus was commonly found on the reverse of coins from the coinage of Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BC).

The plaquette faithfully recreates a language from the antiquity that would have been known to Renaissance connoisseurs through their collections of genuine antique coinage, but also engraved gems and cameos. Interestingly, the depression noticeable in the bronze around the figure of Zeus would appear to indicate the inclusion in the model of an actual replica of a cameo. Although the plaquette’s precise significance eludes us, its format – unknown in antiquity – indicates it was not meant to deceive. The extremely unusual beaded border, running along the three upper margins of the plaquette, recalls the work of a prolific Paduan medallist active in the following century, Giovanni da Cavino (1500-1570).



Fig. 2: Giovanni da Cavino, Anglia Resurgens, British Museum, London (inv. no. M6825).

The son of a goldsmith, da Cavino almost certainly trained with Adrea Riccio (1470-1532) but seems to have specialised in medals of ancient subjects. In particular, a medal of Pope Julius III in the British Museum, London, displays a nearly identical border (fig. 2). The same border appears on another medal, attributed to Cavino by Gorini² (op. cit., p. 47) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Attributed to Giovanni da Cavino, *Hercules*, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

¹ M. Gregori in *op. cit.*, p. 17.

² G. Gorini in *op. cit.*, p. 47.

This, probably executed for the Paduan patron and collector Marco Mantova Benavides, displays on the reverse a figure similar to the Nike in the present plaquette. Northeast Italy, with illustrious Humanist centres such as Venice, Padua, and Mantua, had a long and established history of collecting antiquity and producing art brimming with allegorical themes that was in itself a tribute to the Greek and Roman masters.