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LONDON



ROMAN

APPLIQUE WITH A PANTHER CHASING PREY

IST - 2ND CENTURY AD

Gilt bronze

18 cm wide

Provenance:

Collection of B. Grover, Surrey, acquired 29 April 1982.

Comparative literature:

S. Mustata, "A Roman panther-shaped bronze vessel handle from Porolissum (Moigrad, Sălaj County, Romania)", in *Scripta Classica: Radu Ardevan sexagenario dedicate*, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 143.

The ancient Romans were especially enthralled by the exotic elegance of large felines. The lithe agility of these creatures added to their allure. While the lion was the epitome of brawn and domination, the panther was fierce yet enigmatic, a nocturnal beast that would spend the daylight hours concealed high up in tree branches. The panther is classified by its dark fur tones, which allowed for natural camouflaging – a fact that enhanced both the notable fear and veneration the great cat received in antiquity.

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The panther, and especially the pantheress, became a beloved subject for artists and artisans because of its lissome gracefulness. Leaping or pouncing, the elongated torso and lean muscularity proved to be fitting subject-matter for vessel handles and other hardware attachments, adding an ornate liveliness. Master metalworkers found a veritable challenge in illuminating the distinctive features of the she-panther, including her rows of teats, the long curving tail, the expressive face with lolling tongue and rounded ears, and the cold-worked stippled fur – all magnificently represented on the present example. The panther was known in ancient iconography as a consort of the god Dionysus. The creature was widely represented amongst scenes of Bacchic revelry with the deity and his retinue. Although often exuding an aura of playfulness, even Dionysus' panther was known to be savage and ferocious.



Fig. 1: Panther handle, Roman (Louvre, Paris).

This attachment with a pouncing panther is brilliantly gilt, glimmering especially within the meticulously detailed crevasses along the vividly cast and cold-worked surface. What makes this representation of a pantheress so stunningly dramatic is the remarkable addition of the feline's prey, the hind legs of which she seizes with her extended forepaws. Panthers are omnivores, known to prey on small herbivores such as hares and deer, and they would also sometimes attack livestock. Here, the charming but vicious cat pounces upon a lamb as it, too, leaps forward with its forepaws lengthened. The young quadruped is depicted with long wiry fleece, incised horizontally along its body, in contrast to the vertical stippling of the panther. Its triangular ears are pinned closely to its head.



Fig. 2: Pantheress, Roman (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

This dynamic group would have likely been a vessel handle or an embellishing attachment from a fitting or piece of furniture. The panther relates to a plethora of other known examples throughout the Roman world on which the feline was used as a vessel handle. See, for example, a panther handle now in the Louvre Museum (acc. no. BR915, fig. 1), where the feline lunges in attack towards a protome of an oryx. Although quite vibrant, the full figure of the prey and the gilding make our example far more robust than the Louvre piece. A small Roman bronze sculpture of a pantheress in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. no. 07.261, fig. 2)

shows the beast in a seemingly playful position, rolling on to its back, with the left fore and hind legs raised, and an abdomen teeming with swollen teats. The most interesting aspect of this figurine is that her coat markings are ornamented with copper and *niello* inlays.

Such decorative artistic works convey the Romans' great fascination for the panther. As a means by which to receive the protection of the wild feline, Romans would place their likenesses on household objects and other decorative possessions. As has been demonstrated, vessel handles were the perfect form for their lanky physique; this most extraordinary attachment, shimmering with splendid gilding, exhibits the spectacular fierceness of the beast as it grasps the innocent and unsuspecting lamb.