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René Frémin or his entourage

*Allegory of Africa*

c. 1720-1750

France or Spain

White marble

71 x 72.5 x 28 cm

FGA-AD-BA-0009

### **Provenance**

Nicolas Beaujon collection, hôtel d'Évreux, Paris

Sale of the Nicolas Beaujon collection, Paris, 25 April 1787, lot no. 162

Marc-Arthur Kohn, Cannes, 4 August 2010, lot no. 223



### *An Allegorical Representation*

This sculpted female bust, extending almost down to the waist and whose shoulders are partially covered by energetic folds of ample drapery, possesses a number of attributes that permit identification of its allegorical function. Wearing a turban surmounted by an elephant's head and a coral necklace around her neck, she holds in her right hand a cornucopia from which issue ears of corn: all elements linked by Cesare Ripa to the allegory of Africa in the representation of The Four Parts of the World, theoretically also including America, Asia and Europe.



Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, translated by Jean Baudoin, 1643  
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In his famous *Iconologia*, first published in 1593 before being translated and adapted into French by Jean Baudoin<sup>1</sup>, the figure of Africa does indeed have the following characteristics: “[...] almost naked ; frizl'd Hair ; an Elephant's Head for her Crest ; a Necklace of Coral ; and Pendants of the same, at her Ears ; a Scorpion in her right Hand, and a *Cornucopia*, with Ears of Corn, in her left ; a fierce Lion by her, on one Side, and a Viper and Serpent on the other.”<sup>2</sup> Though the definition of such codes was initially a response to a humanist desire to establish an iconographic tradition by means of a fixed symbolic language, it became a source used extensively not only by 17<sup>th</sup> century artists but also during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The principal liberty taken by the sculptor here with regard to the standards set out by Ripa has been to decrease the number of attributes, pared down to the most emblematic ones in order to better adapt the piece to the format of the bust.

### *A Sculpture by René Frémin?*

This sculpture comes from a set of four busts worked in high relief that portray The Four Parts of the World, long attributed to René Frémin (1672-1750)<sup>3</sup>, though no archival or illustrated document has been able to offer proof of this. Trained in the workshop of François Girardon (1628-1715) and Antoine

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudoin's translation was published in two parts: the first one in 1636 and the second in 1643.

<sup>2</sup> C. Ripa, II, 1643, pp. 7-8; Bar and Brême, 2009. English translation by Pierce Tempest, printed by Benj. Motte, London, 1709, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Masson, July-August 1937; Souchal, 1993.



Coysevox (1640-1720) before spending time at the Académie de France in Rome from 1694 to 1699, Frémin was one of the most active French sculptors during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Most of his work was created for the great sculpture programmes of the gardens of Versailles, Chantilly and Marly. At the invitation of Philip V, who appointed him First Sculptor, he subsequently lived in Spain from 1721 to 1738.

Two works from this set are still in existence - *Africa*, held at the FGA, and *America*<sup>4</sup>, belonging to a private collection.



Yet the style of these busts appears to differ slightly from that of Frémin's oeuvre, notably in the incised treatment of the pupils<sup>5</sup>. It is more in keeping with works by other French sculptors active after Frémin at the court of Philip V of Spain on the site of La Granja in San Ildefonso near Segovia, such as Jacques Bousseau (1681-1740), Pierre Pitué or Hubert Dumandré (1701-1781)<sup>6</sup>. These sculptors readily made use of the models left behind by Frémin after his return to Paris, and so adopted a style of modelling close to that of the master, while at the same adding their own distinctive touches, especially in the treatment of eyes and faces.

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<sup>4</sup> *L'Amérique vue par l'Europe*, 1976, p. 134, b/w repr., no. 132.

<sup>5</sup> See Caroline Ruiz's research project, *René Frémin entre Paris, Rome et Madrid ou les séductions de la sculpture française dans l'Europe de la première moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, thesis in preparation, supervised by Pascal Julien and Fabienne Sartre, University of Toulouse 2.

<sup>6</sup> Herrero Sanz, 2012.



### *Nicolas Beaujon's Art Gallery*

These allegories are said to have decorated the art gallery of the Bordeaux patron and banker Nicolas Beaujon (1718-1786) in the hôtel d'Évreux, now the Élysée Palace, whose collection was dispersed in 1787.<sup>7</sup> Assembled around ten years previously, from 1777 onwards, this collection, as varied as it was prestigious, contained not only works by the Great and Minor Dutch masters, including Rembrandt and Rubens, but also many 18<sup>th</sup> century French paintings, ranging from Boucher to Greuze, and one of the jewels of the collection, Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, now at the National Gallery in London.



Louis-Michel van Loo, *Portrait of Nicolas Beaujon*, oil on canvas, 144 x 110 cm, Chaalis Abbey (rights reserved)

It also included a group of works in marble by contemporary French sculptors, from Falconet to Pajou, together with many pieces of furniture, clocks, ceramics and gilded bronze objects, as well as an exceptional library of over 4000 volumes, bequeathed by Beaujon to the Académie de Bordeaux. While some objects and paintings were used to furnish the banker's apartments, most were displayed in almost museum-like fashion in the long gallery with zenithal light that linked the reception areas to the private living spaces. The sculptures of *The Four Parts of the World* listed as being by Frémin in the auction catalogue of the Beaujon collection (not illustrated) were placed next to four other marble busts representing *The Seasons*, ascribed in their case to Philippe Bertrand<sup>8</sup>.

### *In-Between Anthropology and Fantasy*

The busts of *The Four Parts of the World* amount to a representation of the cosmogony whose aim, within the iconographic programmes of which it formed part, such as the Great Commission of 1674

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<sup>7</sup> Masson, July-August 1937.

<sup>8</sup> *Catalogue de tableaux et autres effets des cabinets de feu M. Beaujon*, 25 April 1787, lot no. 163, pp. 57-58.



at Versailles, was to affirm the superiority of a civilised and civilising Europe over the other continents during a period of triangular trade. Created at a time when anthropological knowledge<sup>9</sup> was beginning to emerge, the *Allegory of Africa* for its part attempts to blend the academic ideal with the relatively crude transposition of an African physiognomy.



This attempt is sensitive in the treatment of the curls of hair, the roundness of the features and the wider facial structure, very different from the more classicising treatment of *America*. While this extra width echoes the overall horizontality of the bust, accentuated by the arrangement of the drapery and of the arms with their bent elbows set slightly apart, it also expresses the personal interpretation of a set of elements as stereotypical as they are fanciful. The turban covering the woman's curly hair is thus intended to assimilate the allegorical figure to the orientalisising exoticism of the contemporary Turkish-inspired works known as "turqueries".

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Dr Fabienne Fravalo  
Curator of the Decorative Arts Collection  
December 2019

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<sup>9</sup> Lafont, 2019. See in particular Chapter 2: "Le tournant visuel de la science de l'homme".



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