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Statue of Silenus holding a kantharos

Greece, 1st-2nd century AD

Marble

40 x 32 x 35 cm

FGA-ARCH-GR-0134

Provenance

Former collection Thomas Herbert, count of Pembroke, 1656-1733, Wilton House, Wiltshire, Great Britain

Then collection Sidney Charles, count of Pembroke, 1906-1969, Wilton House, through inheritance

Then sale Christie's, London, 28 April 1964, lot no. 82

Then collection James Elmo Williams (1913-2015), Brookings, Oregon

Then private collection

Then sale Sotheby's London, July 2019, lot no. 235

Then Galerie David Ghezelbash Archéologie, Paris

Acquired at the galerie David Ghezelbash Archéologie, Paris, 26 November 2019.

Former publications

Richard COWDRY, *A description of the pictures, statues, busto's, basso-relievo's, and other curiosities at the Earl of Pembroke's house at Wilton*, London, 1751, p. 31.

James KENNEDY, *A description of the antiquities and curiosities in Wilton House*, Salisbury, 1758, p. 36

George RICHARDSON, *Aedes Pembrochianae*, London, 1774, p. 34.

Comte DE CLARAC, *Musée de sculpture antique et moderne*, IV, Paris, 1850, p. 277, n° 1755d, pl. 730a.

Salomon REINACH, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine*, I, Paris, 1897, p. 419, no. 3.

Adolf MICHAELIS, *Ancient Marbles in Great Britain*, Cambridge, 1882, p. 686, no. 62.

Giorgos DONTAS, « Anaskaphē oikopedou Angelopoulou », *Archaiologikon Deltion*, 17 A (1961/62), p. 94.

Simone BESQUES, « La représentation du Silène au canthare », *Revue archéologique*, 1982/2 (*Hommage à Henri Metzger*), p. 263-272, Presses Universitaires de France.

Luca DI FRANCO, *Capreensia disiecta membra. Augusto a Capri e la villa di Palazzo a Mare*, Rome, Scienze e Lettere, 2015, p. 106.



Acting the satyr in a hairy bodysuit

On the occasion of the exhibition *Drinking with the gods* which will take place from the 9th April to the 30th August 2020 at the *Cité du Vin* in Bordeaux, the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art will lend twenty masterpieces of its classical archaeology collection. On the list: wine and inebriation, Dionysus and, of course, Greek and Roman mythology. The perfect occasion to introduce this venerable statue, which will take us from Sicily to Asia Minor, leaving the Dionysiac vineyards for the stages of the ancient theatre ... (read more)

A puzzling iconography

It is not always easy to understand the deep meaning of images coming from Antiquity, because they imply a knowledge of texts which were well-known to the ancients, but which are often lost to us. For instance, this statue recently acquired by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art illustrates the kind of complexities which can sometimes spice up the life of iconographers and collection curators.

This statue, which is mentioned in collection inventories as early as the 18th century, is dated to the 1st or 2nd century AD. It pertains to a long series of similar depictions and even has two nearly exact parallels, one of them complete and coming from the ancient agora of Athens¹, the other being a head fragment found at Palazzo a Mare, the villa of Augustus in Capri². The model which inspired these statues is dated to the 3rd century BC, as suggested by the shape of the high-footed kantharos³. All of them stand out by their very decorative nature; the Capri statue would probably adorn the peristyle garden of the imperial residence⁴. But in spite of all the information we have on their dating, these statues remain enigmatic in many respects.

Who is this little chap?

Well, who might be this slightly stooped little chap apparently scrutinizing the bottom of his cup? His chubby face and pug nose suggest a somewhat bestial being with animal ears. Sitting cross-legged, knees drawn up and ankles crossed, his elbows resting on his thighs, he is holding with both hands a kantharos or drinking cup. The thick crown on his forehead betrays his affiliation with the circle of Dionysus, god of wine and banquet. He is wrapped in a big cat skin covering his head and back and,

¹ DONTAS, "Anaskaphē oikopedou Angelopoulou", p. 94, pl. 38 e; BESQUES, "La représentation du Silène", p. 270-271.

² DI FRANCO, *Capreensia disiecta membra*, p. 105-107, B 4.

³ DI FRANCO, *Capreensia disiecta membra*, p. 76-77.

⁴ DI FRANCO, *Capreensia disiecta membra*, p. 77-83.



underneath, is wearing an unusual bodysuit made of fleece. As we can notice, his right foot (which is the only one preserved) is shod in a kind of sandal, the vamp of which shows concentric strips.

His ugliness and taste for the juice of the vine enable us to identify him at first glance: it is a satyr. Because wherever Dionysus goes, whether he is going down here below to visit mortals or lounging in the vines of the upper Olympus, he is escorted by a frenzied procession writhing all around him. It is notably made of dishevelled women, the Bacchantes, and sometimes of cute winged toddlers, the Dionysiac Erotes. But the bulk of the company consists of satyrs: half-men, half-horses, or men with an equid (later caprine) tail, they also have the pointy ears of horses. If their jokes and behaviour is seldom subtle, they are full of energy and love of life. And above all, they are mad about wine! When mentioned on vases, their names are related to wine, sex, music and dances⁵.

A hairy satyr

For the Greeks, satyrs pertain to the same kin as Centaurs or the Minotaur: the untamed. And like these creatures, they can be depicted with a body completely covered with hair, which makes these already hybrid creatures even more beastly⁶. The earliest depictions of satyrs notably include the fragment of a painted vessel attributed to Sophilos, around 580 BC, showing three of them, two of which are hairy; one of these two hairy satyrs is also holding a kantharos with both hands, a first draft of the topic discussed here⁷.

Silenus, an old white-haired satyr

Among these satyrs, most of whom are young untrustworthy seducers with an animal and exuberant sexuality, one of them stands out: an old and fat satyr called Silenus, to whom old age has brought wisdom – but not sobriety. He is sometimes called Papposilenus: “grandfather Silenus”. Perfect in his role of cupbearer (as shown by another statue of our collections, fig. 2), he is also a very good dancer, and even a talented singer. On a vase attributed to the painter Polion and dated to 420 BC, three white-haired Silenoi with animal ears pluck a zither in front of an aoidos (fig. 3). An inscription on the vessel ironically identifies them as the “Panathenaia singers”, depicted in different positions recalling the steps of a dance⁸.

⁵ LISSARRAGUE, *La cité des satyres*, p. 43-44.

⁶ LISSARRAGUE, *La cité des satyres*, p. 54.

⁷ LISSARRAGUE, *La cité des satyres*, p. 42, fig. 16 (private collection).

⁸ New York, Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 25.78.66 (420 BC); SIMON, “Silenoi”, no. 97; SEIDENSTICKER, “Dance”, p. 225-226.



Inebriation and wisdom are a good combination for him, which is why he had the privilege to become the private tutor of little Dionysus, in the nymph-haunted land of Nysa. According to Greek mythology, this magical place is where Hermes had brought the baby god to hide him from the wrath of Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus. There, Silenus initiated the divine child to the secret mysteries which will make him the god of an initiatory cult comprising the ritual mime of scenes of his myth.

Silenus, the satyr drinking on the sly

There is no possible doubt left: our little chap is a Silenus. He is sitting on the floor and drinking his wine alone, a posture and loneliness fitting a wild being who couldn't care less about the rules of conviviality of the Greek banquet. In ancient Greece, this posture was only authorized for children and slaves⁹. And above all, with no regard for etiquette, he is drinking alone... The theme of the drunk Silenus sitting on the floor and holding a cup is widely distributed in the classical world since the mid-5th century BC, in Etruria, southern Italy, Sicily (on a silver drachma from Naxos dated from 461 to 430 BC, fig. 4) and Greece¹⁰.

Silenus and Euripides' Cyclops

On later monuments from the Hellenistic and Imperial periods in the same vein as our statue, Silenus is raising the vessel to his lips, sometimes even plunging his face into it. A specific behaviour, which might suggest that it refers to oinomancy (divination by wine), as is probably the case on a fresco scene of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii¹¹. But what could this clouded-eyed Silenus possibly predict about the future?

He is rather an illustration of Silenus' immoderate taste for wine, which is notably expressed in the verses of Euripides' play *Cyclops*, a very popular satyric drama composed around 413 BC. Silenus, father of a troop of satyrs, is one of its leading characters. Along with his offspring, he is looking for Dionysus, their beloved master who was abducted by pirates, and captured by the man-eating cyclops Polyphemos. Silenus and his satyrs are coerced to drink milk, as this is the only drink the cyclops knows.

⁹ LISSARRAGUE, "Vêtir ceux qui sont nus : du côté des Satyres", in Florence GHERCHANOC, Valérie HUET (eds.), *Vêtements antiques. S'habiller, se déshabiller dans les mondes anciens*, Errance publisher, Arles, 2012, p. 165-172, notably p. 171.

¹⁰ This distribution was probably made possible by means of drawing compilations: BESQUES, "Quelques problèmes concernant les transferts", p. 71-75.

¹¹ BESQUES, "Quelques problèmes concernant les transferts", p. 75.



This is where Odysseus turns up with goatskins full of pure wine. Both of them decide to blind the cyclops, but in order to achieve this, they have to make him drunk. Wine is therefore quite important in their plan.

“The wine kissed me for my handsome looks”

During the subsequent banquet, the cyclops catches Silenus drinking his wine “on the sly” and blames him for it, to which Silenus wittily replies: “The wine kissed me for my handsome looks”¹². One must admit that exchanging vinous kisses can only be done very close to the cup or kantharos, and all this in the most discreet manner... Crouching under his beast skin, our little chap seems to be hiding to drink, which was probably meant to provoke laughter. But this is not the only case of a rather funny Silenus: a very tiny crouching Silenus, wearing a hairy bodysuit, is hiding under the dress of a Venus *Genitrix* statuette from Capua¹³. Hidden in this way, he is busy gulping wine in a kantharos he is holding between his legs. But what is he doing there, under the skirts of Venus? And how is he related to her? This is a mystery, and another puzzle of ancient iconography...

Swimming in the oversize skin of Heracles

Our inebriated Silenus is hiding under an animal skin which is way too large for him, covering his back, arms and thighs, the large clawed paws of which can still be seen, one between his legs, the other on his right side. With its canines and snout, the animal muzzle crowns his head, which gives him some likeness to Heracles under his lion skin. Except that here the cat skin does not cover the athletic body of Heracles, but that of a podgy gnome!

This skin is also the hide of a big cat, this one without mane: it is a pardalide, or leopard pelt. Among the ancients, the panther (*pardalis*) was supposed to be very fond of wine¹⁴ and to exhale a ravishing natural smell used as a bait when hunting preys¹⁵. This beast was also found in Dionysus’ party. Along with the nebride (or fawn skin), the pardalide is also part of the attire of Dionysus (as seen on the Dionysus *Tauros* applique in our collections) and of his companions. However, if these pelts are tied on the torso, the animal head is never used as headgear.

¹² Euripides, *Cyclops*, v. 552-553.

¹³ Paris, Louvre, inv. Cp. 4445, 3rd – 2nd century BC; BESQUES, “La représentation du Silène au canthare”, p. 264-265.

¹⁴ “Leopards are overcome also by the gifts of Dionysus, when crafty hunters pour for them the crafty draught, shunning not the anger of holy Dionysus”: Oppian, *Cynegetica*, IV, 320-353; DETIENNE, *Dionysos mis à mort*, p. 96.

¹⁵ Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants*, VI, 5, 2; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, VIII, 23; DETIENNE, *Dionysos mis à mort*, p. 94-95.



Worn in this way, the pardalide associates Silenus with Heracles, himself often mocked at the theatre for his fondness for the bottle. But if both of them are heavy drinkers, heroism is a different story... The Greek satyric play confines Silenus to the part of a friendly but ridiculous anti-hero: when he tries to behave bravely, he fails miserably¹⁶.

The hairy bodysuit? An actor outfit!

Moreover, the fleece bodysuit made of horizontal strips of short locks is the other clothing feature of this character, planting seeds of doubt on his real identity. Who is he? A Silenus, or a character in the guise of Silenus? In the end of the classical period, dionysiac iconography becomes very receptive to the art of theatre, of which Dionysus is also protector. Several vases from southern Italy display depictions of actors wearing this kind of costume. On the vase painted by Pronomos, where a scene apparently represents the backstage of a theatre, two actors are facing each other. One of them, dressed as Heracles, mask in hand, the other in a hairy outfit, mask of Papposilenus in hand¹⁷. And on a vase attributed to the Schlaepfer Painter, a woman (perhaps Ariadne, wife of Dionysus?) reclining on a banquet couch is playing kottabos, while a Silenus in hairy bodysuit (and without mask) is gesticulating and jumping in front of her¹⁸ (fig. 5). These two vases of the 4th century BC bear witness to the influence of theatre on the work of painters.

Acting the satyr in a hairy bodysuit in Asia Minor...

The link with theatre was all the stronger because in Asia Minor, a very specific Dionysus was worshipped, notably in Pergamon and Ephesus: Dionysus *Kathegemon*, an ancestral god of the Attalid dynasty. God of theatre, he would gather his worshippers – the mysts – organized in brotherhoods. Two inscriptions mention mysts “in hairy outfit”¹⁹; an honorary relief even shows a dancing man holding the thyrsus and wearing this hairy bodysuit, very close to our Silenus²⁰ (fig. 6). These costumes were thus also used in brotherhoods of initiates to dress up as Silenoi and play his part in their worship of Dionysus.

¹⁶ GRIFFITH, “Satyr play and Tragedy”, p. 62.

¹⁷ Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 81673, H3240; MANNACK, “A Description”, in TAPLIN, WYLES, *The Pronomos Vase*, p. 5-13, notably p. 7.

¹⁸ London, British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.345, from Capua, 350 BC; SIMON, “Silenoi”, no. 107 a.

¹⁹ JACCOTTET, *Choisir Dionysos*, II, p. 240-242 no. 142 (Ephesus, reign of Commodus, late 2nd century AD) and 143.

²⁰ JACCOTTET, *Choisir Dionysos*, II, p. 203-204, no. 113 (2nd century AD).



In the present case, we are probably dealing with Silenus, but seen through the lens of theatre: this Silenus was the one found in *Cyclops*. An appearance which was meant to provoke mirth...

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Fig. 2 : © Fondation Gandur pour l'art. Photographe : André Longchamp



Fig. 3 : Metropolitan Museum, inv. 25.78.66



Fig. 4 : © CoinArchives.



Fig. 5 : British Museum, inv. 1873,0820.345 © The Trustees of the British Museum

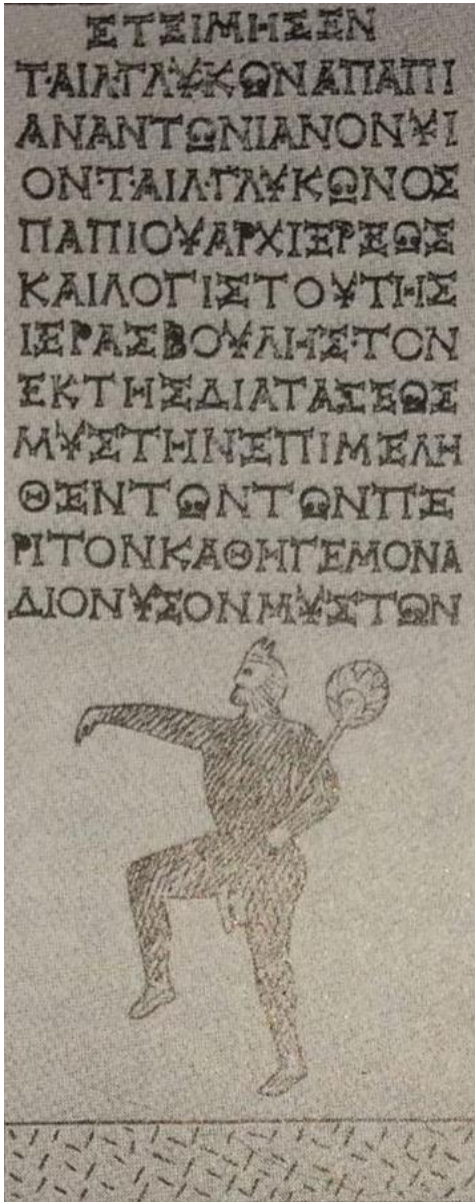


Fig. 6 : D'après JACCOTTET, Anne-Françoise, *Choisir Dionysos*, n° 113.