



Silver Ram-Headed Libation Vessel

Mesopotamian or Levantine

C. 3rd Millennium B.C.,

Silver

L: 18cm

A magnificent silver libation vessel, formed of hammered sheet into an expressive ram's head. The animal has tapering, underslung horns which project either side of its head, curving outwards at their tips and embellished along their lengths with an incised herringbone pattern. Above the horns are small, concave ears. Protruding, almond-shaped eyes are finely detailed with contoured lids and irises which are differentiated by metal inlays. The muzzle terminates in grooved nostrils and an indented, horizontal mouth. Extending from the cap is a long trough spout which is hollow and open, into which liquid would have been poured.

No exact parallel exist, emphasising the uniqueness of this object, but libation vessels with similar trough spouts have been found, in various materials (see Weber and Zettler, eds., *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*, for a gold conical bowl with a trough spout, pl. 96; two from re-purposed conch shells, pl. 117, a silver and two copper alloy examples that resemble conch shells, pls. 111 and 112, and a lapis lazuli cup with a trough spout, no. 120), with animal adjuncts. See also a proto-Elamite kneeling silver bull holding a spouted libation vessel, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Similar animal studies in silver are known, including one of a lion and one of a bull, which originally

served as decorative ornaments attached either to a lyre or furniture (see nos. 64-64 in Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities, The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*). As D. P. Hansen remarks (p. 44 in Zettler and Horne, eds., *op. cit.*), Sumerian artists had a “particular adeptness in depicting fauna, whether these creatures be of the tame domestic type, the beasts of the wild, or those imaginative, evocative creations of composite human and animal.”

While on loan at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2003, it was displayed in the permanent galleries to coincide with the *Art of the First Cities* exhibition.

Exhibitions

The Brooklyn Museum, 24th January 1984 – 24th January 1986 (Loan no. TL1984.2.17).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 23rd June 1999 – 12th December 2002 (Loan no. L.1999.67.4) and 2nd May – 22nd December 2003 (Loan no. L.2003.28.4).

Literature:

Antiquities, Christie's, New York, 12th October 2021, Lot 94, Unsold.

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