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Lion Incense Burner

11th to 12th century A.D

Central Asia

Bronze

H. 15cm

Cast in a zoomorphic feline shape, the head hinged to the chest would have once been part of a standing cat. The face has several striking details including bared fangs, chased whiskers, a ridged nose, hollow almond-shaped eyes, and curved ears with rounded ends, the mane and neck decorated with an openwork band of knotwork and floral designs.

Zoomorphic openwork bronze incense burners are perhaps among the most iconic metalwork creations of the Seljuk period in Iran. Each element of these figurines used to be cast individually and then attached with solder; only the head remained removable so that incense could be inserted and lit, perfuming the air through the holes on the body (Francesca Leoni in *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2011, p. 129). In the 11th and 12th centuries, felines like lions and sphinxes appear to have been the most popular subjects, but birds of prey were also common (please see *Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuqs*, 2016, cat. 34, p. 105). These incense burners were technically accomplished and well-executed works often presenting an elaborate decorative program combining openwork patterns and epigraphic bands in Kufic. They not only showcase the genius and talent of Seljuk blacksmiths but also cast light on domestic practices in the most affluent households of Seljuk society. In fact, their zoomorphic attributes made them unsuitable in a religious context provoking controversy and disrespect to the iconic proscription mentioned in the

religious corpus of the hadiths.

Some of these lion-shaped incense burners feature dates and signatures of their makers. The earliest known example was excavated at the site of Khul'buk in Tajikistan in an 11th-century level. Several other examples are now part of renowned international museum collections like the Cleveland Museum of Art (no. 1948.308.a), the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (no. IR-1565), the David Collection in Copenhagen (no. 48/1981), the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (no. 1951.51.56), and the Louvre Museum in Paris (no. 1933, AA.19). The MET incense burner is the largest of the group (85.1cm x 22.9cm) and is inscribed with the date 577 AH (1181 - 1182) and the signature of its maker, Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali. The Hermitage 11th-century example is also signed by an artist named 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Taji. Similarly to the present lot and to the Louvre 11th-century burner, the Hermitage lion's paws have been shaped as flattened horses' hooves; the legs are slightly bent in a pouncing mode; and the body presents dense scrollwork throughout the chest and on the rear and front legs. The Louvre example is the only one in the above-mentioned group presenting turquoise opaque glass-inlaid eyes, leading to suggest a place of origin near one of the glass production centres in Iran like Nishapur (Annabelle Collinet in *Islamic Art at the Musée du Louvre*, 2012, p. 111).