

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Roman, 1st Century AD

Candelabrum

130.5 x 23.5 cm

This bronze candelabrum was a stand for an oil lamp, made of either bronze or terracotta, which would have stood on the bell-shaped top. Such an arrangement exemplifies the elegant customary practice for providing artificial lighting in the main rooms of a Roman villa.

The candelabrum stands on a tripod foot, its shaft is modelled as a branch with lopped shoots and the crater-shaped top is decorated with incised leaves. A tray made for supporting the oil lamp might be missing. An almost identical lampstand is in the collection of the British Museum.[1] While the design differs slightly with regards to the decoration on the crater, the dimensions are an exact match; as such it is conceivable that they formed a pair. Furthermore, on both examples, the tripod foot was certainly cast as one piece with the shaft, while the top was cast separately.

The British Museum candelabrum, bequeathed in 1856 to the museum by Sir William Temple, British ambassador to Naples (1832-1856), is well documented. It was discovered in Torre Annunziata, the antique Oplontis near Pompei, buried in A.D. 79 by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The first excavation of the site, led by Francesco La Vega, began at the end of the 18th century but this was interrupted because of the mephitic air. A new excavation campaign (sponsored by the restored Bourbon monarchy) was undertaken by Michele Rusca in 1839-40, at a time when Sir Temple was in his post in Naples, but it too was suspended a year later due to a lack of money.[2] It is plausible that our candelabrum was discovered in the region during one of these campaigns.

The present candelabrum, like most other floral stem lampstands found in the neighbourhood of Pompei, was probably produced in Italy (maybe in Campania itself) in the 1st century AD, before the eruption of the Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Floral stem lampstands usually have a flat top and only a few, very rare exemplars have a bell-shaped top[3]: one similar, with a crater-shaped top (unknown dimensions), was found in Pompei and has a lamp soldered on top of it[4]; another one is conserved in the Museum of Ontario.[5] Two other lampstands in the British Museum collection, which are smaller and with a flat top, can also be compared to our exemplar.[6]

[1] London, British Museum, 1856,1226.999; Height: 130 cm, Width: 23.5 cm. See Catalogue of the bronzes, Greek, Roman, and Etruscan, in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum, 1899, no. 2547, p. 329; Raffaele Gargiulio, Catalogo delle diverse collezione di oggetti di Sue Eccellenza il Cavaliere Temple ministro plenipotenziario di Sua Maestà Britannica presso la Real Corte del Regno delle Due Sicilie, ms. London, British Museum, Greek and Roman Department, no. 382; Donald M. Bailey, A catalogue of the lamps in the British Museum, op. cit., 1996, no. Q3897, p. 96, pl. 114-115

[2] About Oplontis excavation in the 18th and 19th century, see Vincenzo Marasco, "A Historical Account of Archaeological Discoveries in the Region of Torre Annunziata", in Oplontis: Villa A ("of Poppaea") at Torre Annunziata, Italy: the Ancient Setting and Modern Rediscovery. Vol. I, ed. John R. Clarke and Nayla K. Muntasser, New York, 2014, pp. 215-221.

[3] Cfr. Donald M. Bailey, A catalogue of the lamps in the British Museum, op. cit., p. 94.□

[4] Marisa Conticello De Spagnolis and Ernesto De Carolis, Ministero per i Beni culturali ed ambientali soprintendenza archeologica di Pompei. Cataloghi Il Le lucerne di bronzo di Ercolano e Pompei,

Rome, "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1988, p. 34.

[5] John W. Hayes, Greek, Roman, and Related Metalware in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 1984, cat. 231.

[6] London, British Museum, 1772,0304.44 and 1867,0508.833; Donald M. Bailey, A catalogue of the lamps in the British Museum, op. cit., no. Q3896 and Q3898, p. 96, pl. 114-115.

Literature:

Comparative literature:

Donald M. Bailey, A catalogue of the lamps in the British Museum. IV Lamps of metal and stone, and lampstands, London, 1996, n. Q3897, p. 96, pl. 114-115