

A pilgrim's flask made from a gourd initialed F.G. and dated 1690 on the underside

Sold



Description

This flask was probably the property of a pilgrim whose initials were F.G. as these appeared inscribed in the bottle. The pilgrim would have used it to carry drinking water during a pilgrimage to one or several religious sites around 1690, the date that appears inscribed at the bottom of the flask. Because of the style and the decorative elements on the flask, it is believed that the object and /or its original owner came from Central Europe, probably from Hungary.

This is a very rare piece that combines a small object of day-to-day life, a flask made from a modest material, a dried gourd, with an extraordinary wealth of decorative motifs and vignettes that virtually cover its entire surface and provides us with a unique insight into the visual culture of late 17th century central Europe.

Objects such as this one rarely survive to our days, which makes this flask an even more unusual find. This object has an remarkable patina and one can see from the slightly discoloured top part that its owner would have used it and drunk from it. Its survival may be explained by the symbolic and emotional attachment of the original owner to this object who is likely to have commissioned this object for very personal reasons, judging from its very unusual decorations, executed with great skill.

The object's provenance from a deceased estate in France could indicate that the object was held in great esteem not just by its original owner but also by later generations who regarded it as a family heirloom. Emigration from central Europe, in particular Poland and Hungary, to France is not a rare phenomenon, due to close cultural and economic connections, and the number of Hungarian emigres increases in particular after the Hungarian independence forces were defeated by the Austrian army in 1849. It is therefore not impossible that the object may have entered France as a result of emigration.

Pilgrim flasks from late antiquity to the 18th and 19th centuries are found in museums such as the V&A or the British Museum but rarely do we find such level of decoration. Older items are typically made in earthenware or stoneware whilst in later periods, more durable materials such as metals are used. From late medieval times, pilgrim flasks are made in maiolica, ceramic as well as glass. When new materials are used, the shape of the flasks continues to echo the original shape of a gourd, the hard rimmed fruit that grows in Africa, Asia and the Middle East primarily.

The particular significance of this flask that it is still made from a dried gourd in the late 17th century but the very detailed decoration applied seems to indicate that great care was taken in the conception as well as the execution of the design with a burin. A flask made from a gourd appears frequently in medieval and early modern imagery as part of the usual attire of a pilgrim but as practical objects without practically any adornment.

The belly of the flask is decorated with three vignettes where a tale seems to be personified by three strange figures resembling large anthropomorphic cats. Two of these 'cats' appear to perform a medical or perhaps magical procedure to one of the cats whose softer features indicate it may be a female. Whi...