

SILVIO CALCI, KNOWN AS SILVIO CALICE (ATTRIBUTED TO)

VASE WITH COVER OR “NAVETTE” IN BLACK GRANITE OF EGYPT



ROME

MIDDLE OF THE 17TH CENTURY, CIRCA 1640-1660

DIMENSIONS: HEIGHT: 9 ¹³/₁₆ IN – WIDTH: 22 ¹³/₁₆ IN – DEPTH: 14 ¹⁴/₁₆ IN

PROVENANCE: PRIVATE COLLECTION

CERTIFICATE: ANNAMARIA GIUSTI, CURATOR AT ACADEMIA GALLERY, FLORENCE,
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« (Serpentin antique) N°13. Un vase, couvert, forme oblongue à panse unie, le culot à côtés en relief, avec pied et plinthe pris dans le bloc, sur socle de bronze doré, hauteur 15 pouces, diamètre 6 pouces 6 lignes. Ce vase, d'espèce nommée serpentín noir et tacheté de blanc, réunit au mérite de sa matière très extraordinaire une forme simple dans le genre étrusque qui lui donne un double avantage ».

This laudatory description is taken from the sale catalogue of the famous collection of the Duc d'Aumont that was auctioned in Paris in 1782. We see that the expert places particular emphasis on the shape of the piece and the material used. After a ferocious bidding war the vase fetched a price of 980 livres to the king Louis XVI. The quotation captures perfectly the glory of an object that through its accomplished shape and design, and its rare stone, is of quite exceptional quality.

The vase curves inwards towards the ends, lending the piece a certain baroque feel. A wide, over-hanging lip encircles the piece and it stands on a circular pedestal of rounded mouldings carved from the same piece of stone. In fine accordance with the sweeping elegance of the main body of the composition the cover of the vase is of a particularly flattened form; again carved from one piece of marble the cover is shaped as a series of rings that culminates in a central button shape. With its perfect shine and its flawless proportions it was created in a lapidary workshop in Rome in the middle of the 17th Century. It was hewn, sculpted and polished from a spectacular block of black granite probably resulting from a small circular column, on which the artist would to work all the length. This must be considered to be one of the finest examples of this navette style vase known today, combining as it does a glorious form with rare stone.

Indeed, the lapidary material used to realise this vase is black granite of Egypt, an Egyptian diorite belonging to the mineralogical category of the "Granodiorites". It is a siliceous stone with black background on which are detached from the components of white colors, red and dew, whose career was at Gebel Nagug close to Assuan (cf Lorenzo Lazzarini, *Pietre e marmi antichi: natura, caratterizzazione, origine, storia d'uso, diffusione, collezionismo*, Padova, 2004, p.78, fig. 5).

In the rather extended and varied family of granites of Egypt, the rare black granite is distinguished to be only in which we find white traces, alternating with other colours more or less intensely rosy, like those present in our vase. In the ancient civilization of Egypt, the black granite was used for the statuary as well as the steles and the sarcophagi.

The Romans used this lapidary material more for the vases, the plates of facing, the columns and the statuary but also for works of furniture like encrusted tables, making evolve their creation according to the taste of the collectors of the time.

Therefore the person who ordered this piece, much like the Duc d'Aumont in the second half of the 18th century, was undoubtedly one of a select number of great collectors from the mid 17th century.

By way of an example one of the finest collections of lapidary vases belonged to Louis XIV. This came about because of the efforts of the well-known collector of sculptures and objets d'art, Cardinal Jules de Mazarin (1602-1661). He had in turn charged the Francophile l'abbé Elpidio Benedetti (1610-1690) with tracking down the finest pieces in the city of Rome. After the death of the Cardinal, l'abbé became the direct agent to both Louis XIV and to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Surintendant des Bâtiments and Contrôleur des finances.

The significance of Benedetti in the development of the major French collections of porphyry is under-lined by the sketches of available pieces that he was in the habit of sending to his patrons. One of these is called "Desseins de sept vases de porphyre de differents formes de l'abbé Benedetti" and includes a navette vase of a similar style to that presented here which would appear to correspond to the piece now conserved in the Musée National du Château de Versailles (kept in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, illustrated in Philippe Malgouyres, *Porphyre, Lapiere pourpre des Ptolémées aux Bonaparte*, p.138). This rather compact piece however has little in common with the curved and lengthened shape of the work here.

By the ultra refined simplicity of its form, deprived of ornaments in relief whose the vases baroques are often avoided, our vase recalls creations of Silvio Calci, or Calice de Velletri, working in Rome around 1650. Silvio Calci delivered several vases in 1646 to the collection Doria Pamphili, of which a porphyry navette vase, which to him is attributed (cf. A.A.V.V. *Antichità di Villa Doria Pamphili*, Roma, 1977, fig. 427). Our black granite vase like the porphyry navette vase, although of different form, bases its elegance on the fluid line of modelled and the development of the lid by its sensual dissolve with the body of the vase.

Exceptional fact, we know that l'abbé Benedetti privileged for his purchases the workshop of Silvio Calci.

By the preciousity of material, the so accomplished line and the technique of execution, the vase in black granite of Egypt, which we present, must be recognized like an good example of the work of the Roman workshops concise around 1650.