

RARE AND EXCEPTIONAL BASIN

ATTRIBUTED TO GIOVANNI FANCELLI

(ACTIVE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 16TH CENTURY IN FLORENCE)



WHITE MARBLE

ITALY, ROME, DATED 1561

MARKED AND DATED ON THE BASE « *IN ROMA FECIT MDLXI* »

DIMENSIONS : H. 76 CM L. 150 CM P. 76 CM

H. 29^{7/8} IN W. 59 IN D. 29^{7/8} IN

27, Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris

The monumental basin that we propose is made of an overflow bath placed on two lion's feet and supported on each side by winding handles coming to end under the rim. A belt encases the lower part of the basin. In the center, and on each side of the basin, a lion's head is placed, presenting the muzzle and the mane of the animal. Carved in a single block of white marble, probably from Carrara, this basin rests on a molded oval base. At the back, its edge in line allowed it to be part of a wall decor, certainly like the one we describe below for the *Grotta di Madama*. The base has the inscription "IN ROMA FECIT MDLXI".

Grotta di Madama (1553-1555) in the Boboli Gardens, Palazzo Pitti

Our basin, with its exceptional dimensions, the quality of its sculpture and the variety of marble used, is completely similar to the one in the *Grotta di Madama* in the **Boboli Gardens at the Pitti Palace in Florence**. With the exception of the lion's muzzle, replaced by putti, the shape of the feet of the lions, their furs, their positioning, the windings and the base are identical to ours. According to the archives of the Pitti Museum, **Giovanni di Paolo Fancelli** is the author of the *Grotta di Madama* basin.

It seems obvious that the attribution of our basin to **Giovanni di Paolo Fancelli** does not pose any doubt. It is interesting to note that some of the animals in the back of the basin at the bottom of the cave are also of the same sculptor. The pair of goats on the right and on the left and the ram's head are carved by **Giovanni di Paolo Fancelli**. On the other hand, the goat in the center is the work of the famous sculptor **Baccio Bandinelli**.

The Renaissance palace, which today is the Pitti Museum, dates from 1458 and was originally the residence of **Luca Pitti**, an ambitious Florentine banker. The palace was bought in 1549 by the **Medici family** and became the main residence of the ruling families of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Over time, it turns into a treasure chest, successive generations collecting paintings, goldsmiths, jewelry and other prestigious pieces of art.

The gardens of Boboli, built on a hill around the Pitti Palace, were created around 1550. Famous for the beauty of their landscape, they have an inestimable historical value thanks to the collections of Roman and Florentine sculptures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that they possess.

Cosimo I de Medici has built these gardens for his wife **Eleanor of Toledo**. The architects **Niccolo Tribolo**, then **Bartolomé Ammanati** are the designers. The famous **Giorgio Vasari** intervenes in his turn and designs the caves in the gardens of Boboli. Located between the garden of fruit trees of **Cosimo I of Medici**, between 1553 and 1555 was built the *Grotta di Madama*. The project was led by **Davide Fortini**, **Niccolo Tribolo's** son-in-law.



The oval basin (copy of 1696) in the Grotta di Madama, Boboli gardens, Palazzo Pitti



Grotta di Madama, Boboli gardens, Palazzo Pitti

The decoration of these caves, centered on the symbolic theme of the fusion of nature and artifice, is based on the principle of transforming the environment into a space that artificially imitates nature with the help of rustic materials, water games, trompe l'oeil stalactites, mosaics of pebbles and shells. Sculptures representing animals, stucco, polychrome stone or bronze complete the set.

The Grotta di Madama will host the basin created by **Giovanni di Paolo Fancelli**. In 1696, it will be replaced by a copy. The original basin moved to the exterior facade of **Palazzo Pitti**. It is now situated to the left of the entrance, under a lion's head.



The oval basin (original piece of 1553) today kept On the exterior facade of Palazzo Pitti

Giovanni Fancelli the Medicis sculptor

Giovanni di Paolo Fancelli is the principal artist of *Grotta di Madama*. He is the author of the oval basin but also animals on the back of the cave.

Giovanni Fancelli (born in Sattignano in the early sixteenth century) became a member of the **Compagnia di S. Luca** in 1538. Fancelli did most of his work under the patronage of the Medici family alongside the greatest talents of his time, such as **Giorgio Vasari**, **Niccolo Tribolo** and **Baccio Bandinelli**.

He is also the author of the famous **Medici Lion** which is today at **Loggia des Lanzi** in Florence (photo opposite).



*Inspired by la Grotta di Madama
Grotta degli Animali à la Villa Medicea Castello*

The Grotta di Madama project has undoubtedly inspired other caves, including the famous grotto commissioned by the **Medici family** 10 kilometers from the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. The **Grotta degli Animali** (The Animal Cave) is located in **Villa Castello**, whose garden was also designed by **Noccolo Tribolo** (photos below).



The hypothesis that the cave evokes the myth of Orpheus comes up against the absence of the protagonist. The legend, known since the Greek, would refer to the return of the golden age with the government of **Cosimo I** and would be related to the function of the cave in the garden of Castello.