

ART ANCIENT



EROTIC DRINKING CUP

Archaic Greece, c.530 B.C.
Black-figure pottery
29cm wide

PROVENANCE

Private collection

A Fine Collection of Classical Antiquities, Part I, Christie's, London, 10 July 1974, Lot 106 (pl.31)

Collection of Stanley J. Seeger (1930-2011), acquired at the above sale

Subsequently by descent

A rare, erotic cup exemplifying the revelry and humour of ancient Greek culture, particularly within the context of symposia - the social drinking parties of the elite. This wine cup features two large eyes on the exterior, which, when tilted up to drink, humorously superimpose themselves onto the drinker's face. At the same time, the act of drinking reveals the cup's indecent imagery, perhaps adding an element of playful surprise.

The front of the cup decorated with a squatting figure of a grotesque satyr, his head turned to the left, the reverse with a satyr committing an act of bestiality with a doe, the animal with its head turned back with a look of surprise, with a large eye to either side of each group and a sphinx seated below each handle, with incised, white and purple-painted details.





The Wine Cup

The present piece is a wide-bowled drinking cup known as a kylix - one of the most popular forms of pottery from the Mycenaean times (1600-1100 B.C.) through to the classical period (c.510-323 B.C.). It dates to an important moment in the development of Greek ceramics, just as the black-figure technique was being perfected by Athenian painters. Painted in black slip with details incised on top, kylixes usually had a frieze around the outside of the bowl as well as another scene on the tondo of the inside. These scenes would have been gradually revealed as the user lifted the cup to his face, or drained the wine from within the bowl, adding an element of surprise.

Explicit sexual representations were common on Athenian black-figure pottery of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. But far from being objects of curiosity or scandal, they represent the revelry and openness of Greek society, and often depict heterosexual, homosexual, pederasty and even bestial relationships. However, they were also intended as satire, as seen in the depiction of large penises, which were associated with the vices of lustfulness and foolishness.

This wine cup also has four large eyes painted on the exterior, which, when tilted up to drink, humorously superimpose themselves onto the drinker's face. A common symbol on Greek drinking vessels from the 6th century B.C., these eyes also had another meaning. As apotropaic, or 'Evil', eyes, they were believed to ward off dangerous spirits and prevent them from entering the mouth as the user drank the wine. When combined with phallic imagery - itself a good luck charm - the Evil Eye is doubly powerful.

1 Attic red-figure psykter (wine cooler) showing a satyr balancing a drinking cup on his penis. Signed by Douris (ca. 500-490 BCE). British Museum, London, UK, acc. no. 1868,0606.7

'Let's have a drink!'
Plato, *Symposium*

2 Red Figure Kylix depicting a Symposium, the man in the centre holding out his kylix to be refilled by the slave boy, c.480 B.C. painted by Douris. The British Museum, Acc. no. 1843,1103.15.



Drinking, Debauchery and Dionysus

The present kylix would once have been the essential paraphernalia for attending the symposia - the social gatherings and drinking parties of the elite - with its erotic decoration adding a sensual and playful dimension to the gathering.

The symposium was a central institution in Greek society, providing a forum to debate and discuss philosophy or politics, as well as to drink wine and celebrate victories. Bedecked in garlands, participants reclined on couches, surrounded with cushions and low tables, displaying an abundance of food. The gathering would also include entertainment, as well as music and dancing. With drinking popular at these events, in the sixth century, an established repertoire of symposium vessels became commonplace for such occasions. Mixing vessels, wine coolers, jugs, and various drinking cups, foremost among them the kylix, were produced to feed the increasing demand. Many were decorated with scenes of the parties themselves, or of Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry, to mimic the convivial atmosphere. Water was mixed with wine in a large central krater by the symposiarch - the master of ceremonies - and slave boys would pour the drink into each participant's cup.

The most famous symposium of all was hosted by the poet Agathon to celebrate winning a prize at the Athenian festival, the Lenaia, in 416 B.C.. Described in Plato's *Symposium*, the celebration turned into a wine-fuelled debate about the form of true love, before being upstaged by the unexpected entrance of the drunk and naked statesman Alcibiades.

Once frequenting ancient Greek parties and social functions, the present kylix is a powerful symbol of the revelry and openness of ancient Greek culture.



3 Anselm Feuerbach, *Plato's Symposium*, 1869. Oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe.



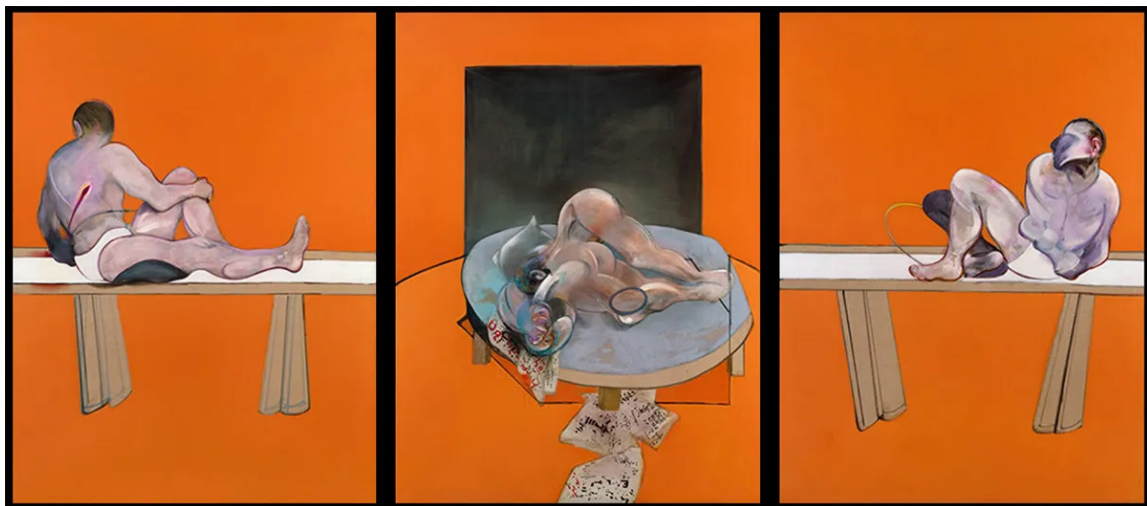
Stanley J. Seeger (1930-2011)

The present kylix once formed part of the collection of American-born collector Stanley J. Seeger. While studying music and architecture at Princeton University, Seeger's year in Florence inspired him to move to Europe in the 1960s. Spending time in Greece, he discovered his appreciation for ancient wonders, spurring the foundation of a Centre for Hellenic Studies at his alma mater. Heir to an oil and timber fortune, Seeger was also a very impressive, but rare kind of collector. Over his lifetime, he assembled many artworks and objects that fascinated him, curating multiple mini-collections which, when considered complete, he then parted with in order to begin a new project.

The title of the recent sale of his collection at Sotheby's in 2014, 'One Thousand Ways of Seeing' sums up his diverse and eclectic tastes. Throughout his life, and supported by his partner Christopher Cone, he bought and sold a vast array of artworks, as well as objects of social and cultural importance: from 88 works by Picasso and pieces by Auguste Rodin and Joan Miró, to Lord Nelson's teapot and a silver jug once owned by Al Capone, in which Seeger and Cone used to mix their Bloody Marys. In 1980, Seeger famously bought the British property, Sutton Place, from J. Paul Getty. Making his mark on the Tudor house and creating some unexpected juxtapositions between old and new, he controversially hung Francis Bacon's triptych, *Studies of the Human Body* (1979) in the Great Hall. While to critics this was a 'scandal', Bacon - an artist notoriously hard to please - 'loved' the placement of his piece, visiting it in person.

While Seeger's collecting style is known for the milestones it generated in the saleroom, he in fact had no interest in the investing potential of art. He was a very private man, who liked the anonymity of buying at auction. He had 'a good eye and a good intellect, and he knew a lot about what he was doing', but he had 'no interest in social promotion.' He collected pieces he was fascinated with, and then parted with them in order to acquire more. According to Cone, 'what Stanley was doing in his collecting life was creating little episodes, like little nests. It was his way of keeping the outside world at bay.' While throughout his lifetime, Seeger's parted ways with many works of art, he kept the present kylix for over thirty years, until his death in 2011.

4 Stanley J. Seeger (1930-2011)



5 Sutton Place, Surrey, England, in 1974. Stanley J. Seeger purchased it six years later.

6 Francis Bacon, *Studies from the Human Body: A Triptych*, 1979.