Conical Cup

Greek, late 2nd century BCE

Silver

Gift of the 2014 Visiting Board. 2014.36.1

Typically referred to as *mastoi* (singular, *mastos*) due to the breast-like form, cups of this shape made from precious metal, ceramic, and glass were popular in the Hellenistic period, especially in the eastern Mediterranean. This example has been raised from a single sheet of silver and is decorated on the interior with a turned rim. Versions made from silver such as this represented costly luxuries and would have been used at elite banquets as a form of status display. Some were then buried in tombs or dedicated in temples.

The before treatment image of the cup is an excellent example of the wide array of interference colors silver sulfide can produce – blue, yellow, purple, green. Because of this obscuring dark layer, the object was carefully examined under the microscope prior to treatment to ensure there was no mercury gilding present. Mechanical reduction with a polishing compound is only appropriate for objects with robust surfaces that can handle such a treatment, and is therefore not appropriate for thin, damaged mercury gilded surfaces.

This object has multiple inscriptions in Greek script, including the name, “SOSYLOU” (“Of Sosylos”), and a number, “ND” (“54 [drachmas]”). Inscribed silver is rare, but a few examples of similar vessels with comparable inscriptions survive from Hellenized Near Eastern kingdoms. The first inscription gives the name of the presumed owner, Sosylos. The second numerical inscription gives the cup’s weight in units of currency, 54 drachmas. This indicates that the cup was weighed using the Parthian weight standard, implying a Near Eastern context. In the RTI image, the guidelines that were scratched into the surface before the final punching of the owner’s name are visible.

*Use your finger to manipulate the angle of the light on the inscription*

*The mastos cup before treatment*

*Still image from RTI of the Parthian weight standard*