Drinking Cup (Skyphos)

Roman, late 1st century BCE-early 1st century CE

Silver

Anonymous loan. L2017.23.1

Ornately decorated silver drinking vessels, typically made in pairs, were highly prized luxuries in Roman antiquity and would have been used at elite banquets to display the owner’s wealth and status. Roman authors such as Vergil and Petronius note that these cups also prompted diners to demonstrate their cultured education by discussing the mythological and philosophical imagery that decorated them.

This double-walled cup has repoussé and chased decoration on the exterior with an undecorated inner liner. Repoussé and chasing are techniques used together for shaping metal, where the sheet is hammered on the back to create a design (repoussé) and then worked on the front to further define the shape (chasing). This cup is decorated with spiraling acanthus tendrils interspersed with birds. These motifs are typical of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian periods and evoke a world of natural abundance and prosperity that helped create an atmosphere of luxurious leisure-time for its wealthy viewer.

The cup was lightly, selectively polished under magnification. While polishing, remnants of mercury gilding were observed on areas of raised decoration. Age, archaeological context, and previous campaigns of cleaning have caused the gilded surface to abrade away over time.

This object has two inscriptions in Greek script. The owner’s name, Menekrates, is lightly scratched into the surface, making it an idealcandidate for surface enhancement with RTI. While cleaning under the microscope, another inscription was found: a letter that was likely used to mark the position of one of these now-lost vertical ring handles with horizontal thumb-rests The granular surface obscuring the upper half of the letter is likely a weld spot that was used to join the handles to the body of the cup.

*Before Treatment*

*Remnants of mercury under magnification*

*Inscribed letter for handle placement*

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