Decorative Collar with Busts of Celestial Deities

Roman, 2nd-3rd century CE

Silver, gilding

Anonymous gift. 2003.23.8

This object may be a decorative attachment for the shaft of a ceremonial scepter or perhaps a military standard. The exterior is decorated with six separately cast busts: three facing lion heads terminating in acanthus foliage, alternating with three facing busts of celestial deities. First, the moon goddess Luna wearing a chiton and veil over her shoulder, with her hair pulled back and a crescent moon above her brow. Next, a bearded and veiled Saturn. The head of the third bust is missing, but may represent Sol. He wears a cloak (*chlamys*) fastened at his shoulder. The imagery implies a connection to the cult of Mithras, an eastern religion that quickly spread across the Roman Empire in part due to its popularity with soldiers attracted by the promise of life after death.

The entire outer surface of the collar is mercury gilded. To mercury gild a metal object, the craftsman first makes an amalgam of gold and mercury and paints it onto the surface of the object. The object is then fired at a relatively low temperature, below the melting point of the silver, which drives a great deal of the mercury away and bonds the gold to the metal below. This layer of gold is incredibly thin, about 2–20 microns, and can contain 8-25% mercury. Because this layer is so thin, tarnish of the silver below can form on top of the gilding.

A chemical compound suspended in a gel system was used to dissolve the silver sulfide. This gel allowed for a controlled application of the compound at the surface of the gilding.

This chemical compound is a toxic carcinogen, so personal protection like gloves, a respirator, and protective were necessary.

*Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Kaitlyn Wright working on the collar in the fume hood*

*Before Treatment*