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Fine European Sculpture and Works of Art



attributed to Giuseppe Sanmartino (1720 - 1793)

Vase

Terracotta, with glazed interior.

Height 21 cm.

The vase has a round body with a flat base and two handles. A core of deep red clay is covered with a layer of finer, light red slip, which is easier to model and allows for more finely rendered details. The inner lip of the neck has been glazed, and a thin line of glaze runs along one side of the base.

Extensive surface decoration of acanthus leaves covers the neck, handles and body, and two winged figures are on either side of the body. One figure has straight hair and a squarish face. The other figure has curlier hair and a rounder face. Both figures have small noses and incised eyes, with partly opened mouths showing small teeth.

On either side of the head of the figure with straight hair, [fig. 1] the letters "I" and "S" incised in the wet clay, most likely represent the signature of Giuseppe Sanmartino, (1720-1793) who was known to sign the Latin version of his name, "Ioseph," as in his Veiled Christ, of the Sansevero Chapel in Naples. Sanmartino is well known for his many religious and tomb sculptures that remain in situ in the churches of Naples, as well as for his crèche figures. This vase is a unique survival among his oeuvre.

It may have been intended as a modello to be made perhaps on a larger scale in silver, marble or stucco. The curly-haired figure and its numerous acanthus leaves that cover its body are more highly worked and tightly composed than the straight-haired figure. The latter's chest and navel are apparent, although presented as if under a thin layer of feathers and vegetation. Each figure has two vegetal forms that scroll upwards as if replacing its legs, but those of the more highly-worked figure are harder to discern beneath its more plentiful acanthus leaves. Such differences in form and conception might suggest that the work was to be presented as a model as such works were very often more highly finished on one side than the other. There was an active silver industry in Naples in the Eighteenth Century, and Sanmartino was known to have collaborated with the silversmiths Giuseppe and Gennaro

del Giudice in the 1780s on religious sculptures.

Other models by Sanmartino have survived, and the combination of a curly-haired putto/angel with a straight-haired companion is also found on the terracotta model (now Paris, Louvre, h. 32 cm) for a marble torchère by Sanmartino made originally for the high altar of the church of Divine Love in Naples. The angels have similar chins to those on the vase, but it must be noted that the facial features are quite different, as is the treatment of the wings. In the model for the torchère the feathers of the right wing of the standing putto are deeply incised down the centre and have rounded edges while those of the figures on the vase are much more loosely worked.

Due to these differences, it is possible that this vase was modelled by an assistant in Sanmartino's shop, and the signature "I.S." is meant to express the master's approval or design of the vase rather than his direct handiwork. It survives as an intriguing example of Neapolitan decorative arts of the 1750s – whether as a model for something on a larger scale or in a grander material, or as the type of vase used in still-lives of the period or simply to hold flowers in the home.

Provenance:

Private collection, London

Artist description:

Born in Naples, Sanmartino may have trained with Matteo or Felice Bottigliero.

His earliest known work is the signed and dated (1753) Veiled Christ in the Capella Sansevero, Naples. This was soon followed by a commission (for eight groups of putti) for the Chiesa della Certosa di S. Martino and in the 1760s he was working for King Carlo di Borbone. Collaborating with the architects Luigi Vanvitelli and Fuga, Sanmartino executed many major statues and decorative elements for the Churches of Naples during the 1770s and 80s. A considerable part of his oeuvre is still to be found in situ, although some pieces have been removed to the Museo Nazionale di San Martino. In addition to his large scale works Sanmartino made models for the silversmiths Giuseppe and Gennaro del Giudice and Biagio Giordano. He is also well known for his numerous presepio figures, which made up the Nativity scenes for which Naples was (and continues to be) famous.