Mythical beast

On display

Title/Description: Mythical beast

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Earthenware, Pigment

Measurements: h. 437 mm

Accession Number: 1157

Historic Period: Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220)

Production Place: Asia, China

This sturdy animal is one of a pair of almost matching figures (see also 1149), powerfully modelled leaning forward on clawed feet, with a ridged back arched above swirling haunches, and with a long snout pulled to an aggressive snarl beneath bulging eyebrows. The nose of this animal is squarer in shape than that of the very similar figure (1149) and the ears are longer, more pointed, and stick upwards from the head, in contrast to the other animal. Both figures have a square hole modelled at the back of the neck, which may have held an accessory previously.

Though both acquired in 1998, the two figures came from separate provenances. This figure was sourced from Asian art dealers, Andrew Kahane Ltd. in New York, whereas the other figure (1149) was purchased at sale from Christies auction house.

The Christies catalogue entry described the very similar animal figure (1149) as ‘a fine and very rare painted pottery mythical beast’ [1] and included reference to Ann Paludan’s publication *The Chinese Spirit Road* in its description of the work [2]: ‘There is an interesting distinction in Han funerary ceramic sculpture between those everyday animals that are usually portrayed in a simple, realistic manner and those which are mythological and, while naturalistic in pose and demeanour, are clearly in some way magical. This creature falls into the latter category for, although it has a head representing a tapir, it has the paws of a lion. More importantly it has strongly modelled wings like those on Gao Yi’s stone felines at Ya’an in Sichuan province. In addition, the animal has retained much of its cold-painted detail and red-outlined scales can be seen on its throat and breast. Its flaring nostrils and mouth are also painted red, and a red pattern has been painted on its horse-like mane.’

Katharine Malcolm, November 2022

[1] Description taken from Christies sale catalogue, 1998 – a copy of which is held in the Sainsbury Centre curatorial records – the sale through which the almost matching figure (1149) was purchased and acquired.

[2] Information sourced from Ann Paludan, *The Chinese Spirit Road* (Yale University, 1991), p.39, pl. 33, as referenced in the Christies sale catalogue (see above).