Statue - The Fall of Phaeton

Object: Statue

Place of origin: France (made)

Date: ca. 1700 - ca. 1711 (made)

Artist/Maker: Lefèvre, Dominique (sculptor)

Materials and Techniques: Carved white marble

Museum number: A.4-1958

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 5, The Friends of the V&A Gallery, case PL4

Public access description

In his narrative mythological poem The Metamorphoses, the Roman poet Ovid describes how Phaeton ascended into heaven, the home of his suspected father the Sun (aka Phoebus or Helios). Helios swore by the river Styx to give Phaeton anything he should ask for in order to prove his divine paternity. In response, Phaeton asked to drive his father's chariot (the sun) for a day. Helios tried to talk him out of it, but Phaeton was adamant. When the day came, Phaeton was unable to control the fierce horses that drew the chariot. He got so close to the Earth that it was scorched. Zeus (Jupiter) intervened and struck Phaeton off the chariot with a thunderbolt. Phaeton fell to the ground.

It is this dramatic moment that Lefèvre has chosen to depict, with Phaeton falling headfirst, his body arching up and backwards. The composition is derived from a known Roman sarcophagus depicting the same subject. Showing a single figure in an extreme pose was a convention for ‘morceaux de reception’ or ‘reception pieces’ demanded of artists before they were allowed to become members of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Royal Academy) and so be able to receive royal commissions, so this may have been a similar academic exercise. Certainly we know that Lefèvre was active between 1698 and 1709 working for the King, Louis XIV, producing sculpture for the gardens at Trianon, the park at Marly, and the chapel at Versailles.

Descriptive line

Statue, marble, the Fall of Phaeton, by Dominique Lefèvre, France, ca. 1700 - 1711

Physical description

This marble group represents Phaeton at the moment when he has just been hurled by Jupiter's thunderbolt from the chariot of the sun. He has fallen headfirst and his arms are outstretched either side of his head. His body is arched upwards and backwards, clad only in some drapery over his left leg which is bent and stretches out to one side. His bent right knee is the highest point of the composition. The chariot, behind and under him, is shown entering the clouds that are strewn with stars and with the signs of the Zodiac.

Dimensions

Height: 54.6 cm, Length: 85.7 cm, Width: 41.9 cm

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Object history note

Signed pieces by Dominique Lefèvre are extremely rare and this is a very accomplished work by a little-known sculptor.

Historical context note

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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O199074/the-fall-of-phaeton-statue-lefevre-dominique/