



19th Century Antique

An elegant, early 19th century Italian marble chimneypiece, exquisitely carved with classical and floral motifs, that reference ancient Roman architecture, circa 1830. This reflects the style that prevailed across Europe during the era of the Grand Tour, when Italian marble carvers - especially in Rome - reached extraordinary skill in their craft, responding to demand from aristocratic families across Europe and the British Isles.

Dimensions

Height 45½in (115.5cm) width 59½in (151cm)

Internal height 37in (94cm) width 42¾in (107.5cm)

Depth 9⅝in (24.5cm)

Reference

I246

Further Details

The central tablet, representing in relief 'The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche', a composition made famous by the so-called 'Marlborough Gem'. Flanking the central tablet are the classical bucrania that adorn the frieze, the winged heads of Mercury serve as corner blocks above the jambs.

The tablet's composition depicts five winged putti participating in a ritual that blends the ancient iconographies of marriage and of initiation into the Dionysian mysteries. The bridegroom, Cupid, has his head covered, a typical practice for those undergoing initiation. The bride, draped in heavy robes and a veil, is identified as Psyche (representing the Soul) by her butterfly wings. The child on the left carries a liknon, a ritual basket symbolizing fertility, above the couple's heads. Another winged putto leads the married pair with a ribbon and holds a torch - an object traditionally associated with weddings, as marriage processions often occurred at night. The figure on the right side of the relief gestures toward the marriage bed, welcoming the couple.

The finest chimneypieces were often the work of professional sculptors, such as Vincenzo Pacetti (1746-1820), whose involvement in the realisation of highly ornate marble chimneypieces is testified today by examples in Villa Borghese and Palazzo Altieri in Rome. An Italian chimneypiece closely comparable to the present one, also dated to c. 1800-30, can be found today in The Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Carved in onyx and dated to the 1st century BC, this cameo was discovered in Sentinum, an ancient Roman town located about a kilometre south of the present-day town of Sassoferrato in the Marche region of Italy. By 1622, it belonged to the celebrated painter Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), who gave it as a gift to his patron Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel (1585-1646), through whose descendants it came in the possession of George Spencer (1789-1817), 4th Duke of Marlborough, of Blenheim Palace, from whom it takes its name. Signed by the Greek artist Tryphon, this rare onyx cameo was arguably the most famous of the Marlborough gems, its popularity attested by the number of copies and derivative compositions in different media that it generated, including exemplars such as the present chimneypiece tablet.