LOT 72
CIRCLE OF NICCOLÒ DELL’ARCA (CIRCA. 1435-1494)
ITALIAN, BOLOGNA, SECOND HALF 15TH CENTURY

PAIR OF MOURNING ANGELS
white marble
108cm., 42½in. and 104cm., 41in.

ESTIMATE £150,000-250,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 182,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
with Morandotti, Milan, 1949
Carlo Momigliano, Rome
and thence by descent to the present owner
LITERATURE

CATALOGUE NOTE
These beautiful marbles are closely related to a pair of angels carved by Niccolò dell’Arca in the 1470’s, which surmount the Arca di S. Domenico in the church of S. Domenico in Bologna. Their emotionally charged facial expressions and the remarkable sense of movement created as they rush forwards, drapery flying behind them, is paralleled in 15th-century Italian sculpture only by dell’Arca’s angels and by his famous Lamentation group in the church of S. Maria della Vita in the same city. The correspondences, which are not merely stylistic, but also technical, are such that an attribution to an artist working within the circle of Niccolò dell’Arca can be confidently proposed.

Of the two figures from the Arca, the running angel on the left side of the sarcophagus is most similar to the present pair. This is partly due to her movement: she, like the present angels, rushes forwards in reaction to an event. Note, in particular, the close correspondences between the drapery worn by the present angels and dell’Arca’s figure. Each wears the same v-shaped chemise, whilst their drapes are held together with pins at the thigh. Dell’Arca’s angel’s drapes fly behind her in defined arched curves, which are exactly paralleled in the present marbles (notably between the figures’ legs). Characteristic of dell’Arca’s angel are her thick wavy strands of hair, which rise high above her head as she propels forwards. Similar thick locks are seen again forming the present angels’ coiffures: the right figure’s hair is particularly close, as it similarly lifts upwards and flies backwards.

One of the techniques used by Niccolò dell’Arca in his work on the Arca was that of drilling into crevices, leaving a seemingly regular series of drill holes. This technique is particularly apparent in the hair and on the wings of his angel from the right side of the Arca. The technique has likewise been employed by the carver of the present sculpture, and can be seen in the hair and between some of the folds of drapes (thought admittedly not to the virtuoso effect achieved on the Arca). Observe also dell’Arca’s angels’ weighty wings, which are heavily feathered at the top. The wings of the present angels similarly follow this same formular, with particular attention paid to the spines of each of the feathers.

It is interesting to note the relationship between the present marbles and the work of another important 15th-century sculptor active in Bologna, Jacopo della Quercia (c. 1374-1438), an artist who is understood to have influenced the young Niccolò dell’Arca. The dynamic sense of movement, craning necks and the delicate fingers holding elaborate trailing scrolls in the present marbles, find parallels in della Quercia’s oeuvre. Della Quercia’s most notable project in Bologna was the Main Portal of the cathedral of S. Pietro. One of the key motifs of his sculptural programme are the long curling scrolls held by each of his figures, which are very similar to those held by the present angels. Note in particular prophet 7 from the Main Portal: the neck angled to the left, windswept hair and thin dextrous fingers holding a curling scroll and drapes compare closely with the present angels (see Beck, op. cit., p. 304, fig. 123).

Despite having been associated with della Arca by Cesare Gnudi in verbal conversations with their then proprietor Carlo Momigliano, the marbles were dismissed as fakes by Otto Kurtz in 1958, though with the explicit caveat that the author had only viewed them from photographs. Inspection of the marbles in the flesh confirms that Kurtz was mistaken and that they do, indeed, date to the 15th century. They exhibit patches of water damage which can only have been caused over decades, possibly centuries.

Very few works by Niccolò dell’Arca exist today. The present, serenely beautiful, marbles therefore provide the rare opportunity of acquiring two works which are closely related to one of the more original sculptors of the Italian Renaissance, an artist who created some of the most emotionally charged and affecting sculptures ever made and
who stands within a category apart from his contemporaries.

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