

# A colour-coated Hunt Cup in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

By Alison Harle Easson

An outstanding colour-coated hunt cup of the late 2nd or early 3rd century A.D. was presented to the Royal Ontario Museum in 1920 by Sir Robert Mond of London. Professor J.M.C. Toynbee has called it 'the most elaborate surviving instance of a *venatio* rendered *en barbotine*. The large beaker was found in 1841 in a cremation burial at Bedford Purlieus near Wansford, north of the River Nene. It is in Nene Valley colour-coated ware.

It measures 28 centimetres in height with a maximum belly diameter, excluding the figures, of 21.4 centimetres. Its height exceeds that of most known hunt cups: an example in the Guildhall Museum is 22.8 centimetres tall while the Colchester Vase measures 21.6 centimetres.

Two *venatores* (huntsmen) are represented: one is about to spear a stag; the other, armed with a whip, baits a bear. Rows of beading border the frieze above and below and diagonally frame each figure. Two narrow rouletted bands encircle the beaker below the decoration.

The cup was wheel-made with applied decoration and the human figures are in quite high relief. They appear to have been moulded in negative stamps, then applied to the pot and the faces subsequently tooled. Dots of clay form the hair and eyes, a technique also used for the head of Hercules on a fragment of Castor ware from Welney, Norfolk. Details of the costumes and equipment were added *en barbotine* as were the ground-lines and simple foliate scrolls. The animals may have been created with the same mixture of techniques as the *venatores*.

In 1963, the hunt cup was exhibited at the Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, in conjunction with the Eighth Wedgwood International Seminar. At that time, it was considered to have been mould-made in two sections joined horizontally. However, regular wheel marks on the interior do not substantiate this belief.

The paste of the beaker is creamy buff with a moderately shiny black colour-coat on the interior and exterior. This has worn off the high points of the relief so that the decoration now is accented by the light colour of the paste.

The cup was reassembled from large fragments and sections of the rim and body are restorations painted black. Except for small parts of the figures'

legs, no attempt has been made to reconstruct missing elements of the decoration.

*Venatio* scenes depicting combat between men and animals appear on many hunt cups. A notable example, the Colchester Vase, shows both bear-baiting and gladiatorial combat. On the Toronto hunt cup, however, the action is on a single plane and restricted to two pairs of figures. The only filler decoration is the foliate scrolls; the ground-lines are an essential part of the composition.

The *venator* baiting the bear wears ankle-guards and a padded protector on his left forearm. On the Colchester Vase, the bear-baiter is similarly equipped and wears a lighter guard on his right arm holding the whip. The right arm is missing on the Toronto hunt cup, but probably also was protected.

He is enraging the bear with a 'tease' probably of leather. It served the same purpose as the matador's cape in modern bull-fighting; that is to draw the bear's attention away from the man's body to his heavily protected arm. A similar 'tease' appears in a bear-baiting scene on the tomb of Scaurus at Pompeii.

The *venatores'* brief, tight-fitting, two-piece costume has the appearance of leather decorated with slash-work, ornamental studs and trimmed with fringe. The high-cut shorts have decoration and fringe similar to *subligacula* worn by gladiators. The costume may be the uniform of a troupe of *venatores*.

Other grave goods found with the hunt cup included fragments of glass and pottery, three of which were samian dishes stamped by the 2nd century Central Gaulish potters Avitus, Mettius and Ruffus. There also were two stone torsos believed to have formed part of the funeral monument for the burial. They became part of the Duke of Bedford's collection.

Prior to Sir Robert Mond's donation of the hunt cup to the Royal Ontario Museum, it was owned by the late Bennett Goldney of Canterbury.

The technical and artistic merit of the hunt cup, with its fluid yet vigorous composition, makes it the most prominent object in the Romano-British collection of the Royal Ontario Museum.



**Fig 16** The colour-coated Hunt Cup in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Found at Bedford Purlieus, Northamptonshire.