

## ARCHAIC BRONZE CARYATID MIRROR

Greek-Archaic, late 6th century B.C. (ca. 520-500 B.C.)

Bronze

H: 32 cm

Reference: 15182



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Typologically, this statuette representing a young woman belongs to the category of Archaic korai. She is standing upright with her left leg forward and places her bare feet directly on the square surface of the base. Her right arm is bent at a right angle and, in her hand, she holds a pointed flower clutched between her forefinger and thumb. The left arm is down alongside the body, while being slightly bent: at hip level, the left hand raises both the fabric of the chiton and of the himation.

The face, which still has a slight Archaic smile, is oval and well proportioned. Despite the delicate features and the well modeled shapes, the bone structure of the head is clearly visible, mostly on the cheekbones and the prominent chin.

Like other contemporary korai-mirror carriers, this figurine is dressed in the Ionian style: the long chiton, fastened on the shoulders, reaches down to her heels. Above this tunic, she wears a cloak (himation) draped from her right shoulder, which crosses her chest diagonally and then passes under her left armpit; supported by a thick and even border, the himation fabric falls onto her chest and back, where it cascades in symmetrical triangular folds. Despite the condition of the surface, it is still possible to admire the richly elaborate rendering of the fabric: the fine modeling of the large circular folds on the legs and the vertical incisions and series of triangles for the himation.

The young woman has very long hair; on the forehead, it forms triangular bangs composed of small curls; on the breast, three braids are arranged on each side of the neck; on the back, the locks are gathered into a rectangular mass which covers the upper back. Her forehead is encircled with a diadem decorated with triangular lines; a necklace with a heart-shaped pendant completes the adornment of the

kore. The two lions are represented in a similar attitude: their vertical position with the head entirely turned backwards is comparable to that of the cats that decorated contemporary large bronze tripods. Though small, they feature countless finely incised details that the superficial bronze corrosion could not erase: lined muzzle, furred mane, leg muscles and claws.

The mirror is composed of a thick bronze disk; its edge is highlighted by a beaded fillet in low relief. The disk is soldered to an arch-shaped element, with two small volutes at both ends, and supported by a cylindrical tenon placed directly on the head of the maiden. A figurine of a standing bird, its head turned backwards, crowns the disk; the wings and tail feathers are indicated by linear or half-moon shaped incisions. Roosters, and occasionally pigeons, are the birds that regularly adorn this kind of mirror, but in this case, the very long legs and the absence of a crest prevent us from identifying this bird as a rooster and rather suggesting the anatomy of a peacock. Three types of bronze mirrors are documented in Greek civilization: simple handled mirrors, lidded box mirrors and figurative handle mirrors, where in rare circumstances, a young nude man, a kouros, replaces the female statuette. The last group (to which our mirror belongs) is different from the others due to the vertical position of the object, made possible by its base. The presence of two figures alongside the kore is another characteristic of these mirrors: erotes or, more rarely, sphinxes, griffins or nikai. The two lions, which are exceptional, are attested in a work in Cincinnati.

Even if it is commonly admitted that these objects are mirrors, their exact purpose is still unknown: some examples certainly come from necropoleis, others have been found in sanctuaries. Their relative rarity and their consistently remarkable artistic quality suggest luxury wares that only the wealthiest women could afford. It can reasonably be supposed that caryatid mirrors are the original toiletry wares and that,

because of their value or meaning, they could be given to a deity or placed in the tomb. Many elements indicate that the caryatid can be interpreted as an image of Aphrodite: the fact that mirrors belong to the female sphere (women are often depicted with mirrors, perfume vases or other toiletry wares), the attributes carried by these korai (a pigeon, a flower, a bud, a pomegranate) and the presence of erotes. Caryatid mirrors were produced in several regions and cities of ancient Greece: Eastern Greece, the Peloponnese, Aegina, Athens, Western Greek colonies, etc. Although the style of this statuette recalls the Attic and Ionian korai, the proportions of the maiden's head and body, which are not very slender, and especially the highly precise, linear and symmetric structure of the folds of the himation rather look like the figures on mirrors of the Doric school (Aegina, Corinth, Argos, Northern Greece, etc.).

## CONDITION

The mirror is complete, but the disk was reglued: some cracks appeared in places, particularly on the disk. The condition of the surface is precarious due to a layer of thick, granular green oxidation. Despite this fragility, a careful visual examination reveals the excellent artistic and technical qualities of the work: especially the delicate face, the precise details of the maiden's clothing, the suppleness of the lions and the very natural rendering of the bird's posture. It is composed of a number of parts assembled and completed with elaborate cold-work (incisions, engravings, soldering, etc.): a) the handle-statuettes (caryatid) was probably cast in a single piece with the semi-circular frame that supports the disk: it was attached to the base with a circular tenon still visible in the hollow of the base; b) the lion figurines have been cast and affixed to the kore's shoulders and the mirror support; c) the disk and the bird soldered to the top were made separately.

## PROVENANCE

Ex-European private collection; acquired from M. H. Korban, London, 1997.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

On mirrors of this type, see in particular:

Keene Congdon, L. O., *Caryatid Mirrors of Ancient Greece*, Mainz/Rhine, 1981, n. 16, p. 138, pl.11; n. 18, p. 139, pl. 15; n. 19, p. 140, pl. 16; and n. 116, p. 211, pl. 95 (Cincinnati, with lions).

On Korai of the late 6th century, see:

Boardman, J., *Athenian Red Figure Vases, The Archaic Period*, London, 1975 (for example fig. 33-34).

Karakasi, K., *Archaischen Koren*, Munich, 2001.

Richter, G. M. A., *Korai, Archaic Greek Maiden*, London, 1968.