

BRONZE MIRROR WITH HELEN AND PARIS

Greek, Late 4th century B.C.

Bronze

Diameter: 15.5 cm

Reference: 10003



This magnificent mirror, worked in extremely high relief, is among the finest known examples of Hellenistic metalwork. It is a box mirror ; a hand mirror consisting of two fitted bronze discs, one serving as the reflective surface, the other as a protective cover. The top part of the cover features repoussé decoration and the inside cover displays an engraved scene, while the mirror's bottom is decoratively molded in a series of concentric circles. A hinge joined the two discs, and a suspension ring attached to the hinge would have allowed the closed mirror to be hung while not in use, transforming it into a piece of decorative sculpture to adorn the walls of private living quarters. When vertically mounted, the object would also have taken full advantage of the play of light and shadow, showing off the relief work to great effect.

On the cover, a border of incised concentric circles frames one of the most famous subjects in all mythology ; the romance between Paris and Helen, which sparked the beginning of the Trojan War and thus the birth of Homeric poetry.

Both seated on boulders, Paris and Helen face each other. As is typical of fourth century B.C. portrayals of the Trojan prince, Paris is depicted as a shepherd, indicated by the presence of the mournful-looking dog lying at his feet. Seated to the left while leaning back on his right arm and resting his left arm lightly on his thigh, Paris is fully clothed as an Eastern foreigner in a short tunic and long leggings. He wears short boots and sports a Phrygian cap set rakishly over his prettily curled, shoulder-length hair. His costume clings to his body in the Hellenistic sculptural tradition of «wet» drapery, and the slightly effeminate impression typical of Greek stereotypes of the East is further reinforced by the delicate rosettes that cover his clothing.

Paris looks to the right toward Helen, who is seated before him, balancing the composition. She is dressed in an elaborately pleated

and draped floor-length tunic, or chiton, gathered at the shoulders, and a cloak covers her legs and back. The masterful handling of the fabric is apparent in the tissue-like cloth of the chiton that seems to cling to her form, as opposed to the heavier, crisper draping of the cloak. She rests her weight on her left arm and holds up a corner of the cloak in her right hand, catching Paris's eye in a typical erotic gesture that coyly suggests both exposure and concealment. The couple is accompanied by a pudgy Eros, whose wings are spread to symbolize their union. He stands in the center and turns toward Paris, touching him on the shoulder with an outstretched arm as if in reassurance.

The interior of the lid is adorned with an equally intricate, incised scene that undoubtedly takes its origin from comedy or satire, theatrical genres that were popular in the fourth century B.C. The image represents a small sanctuary situated in a grotto framed by numerous stacked rocks and boulders. A similar treatment of a cave appears on the interior cover of a box mirror in Berlin where the stacked rocks simultaneously form a stage and a frame (Berlin 8148).

On the left, a satyr wearing a loose apron and an ivy garland is about to place a small platter of food offerings (perhaps a cake, a loaf of bread, and an egg) on a wreathed altar. Kneeling on a rock behind him is another ithyphallic satyr, nude but for tall boots, with a sack hanging from his shoulder. Thanksgiving offerings, including crowns, garlands, small pictures, and votive tablets known as pinakes are suspended from the branches in front of him and lay on the ground below. Both satyrs are quite hirsute, with numerous short, incised lines indicating the hair on their chests, arms, and stomachs. The standing satyr's legs are completely covered in hair as if he were wearing pants made of fur, but he has short boots on his feet, indicating that the hairiness is part of a theatrical costume. The figures' mouths are open as if they are singing or reciting lines.

Box mirrors were first produced during the second half of the fifth century B.C. The second half of the fourth century saw their rise in popularity and the beginning of a richer treatment of the lid, including the presence of an engraved interior scene, a detail that the earliest examples lack. This interior scene is often silvered, as it is here, to help accentuate the delicate and highly detailed composition.

These mirrors represent some of the finest examples of Hellenistic bronze work, both for the masterful draftsmanship exhibited by the engraving and the repoussé lids, which were hammered and chased separately, then attached to the cover by means of solder. Most engraved box mirrors emerged from workshops in Corinth ; their marriage of repoussé technique and incised decoration united the prominent tradition of Corinthian bronze work with that of painting from the neighboring city of Sikyon.

PROVENANCE

Ex Private Collection, South Germany, collected in the 1970s. With Phoenix Ancient Art, Geneva and New York, 1998. Private Collection, Switzerland, 2006. Published: CRYSTAL 1, Phoenix Ancient Art, 2006, No. 10

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For reliefs in bronze, see:

C.ROLLEY, Les Bronzes grecs, 1983, p. 162-176; p. 239, no 283.

For mythology in general, see:

LIMC I, ALEXANDROS; LIMC IV, HELENE; LIMC VII, PARIS IUDICIUM