

BUSTE OF A MATRON

Roman, Early 2nd century A.D.

Marble

Height: 44.5 cm

Reference: 19990



The bust, carved from a beautiful white marble with a polished surface, is whole and in a remarkable state of preservation, though re-glued with a few repairs on the posterior pillar; the tip of the nose is restored. It is mounted on a small square plinth supported by a base in the shape of a molded capital; on the back, the hollow structure with the central support pillar repeats a distinctive scheme with this kind of sculpture.

The figure depicts a middle-aged woman, characterized by a severe expression and a face with clearly personalized features. She is dressed in a tunic forming thick triangular folds that fall from the neckline to the chest and in a cloak that covers her shoulders. Her head is slightly turned to the left, but her gaze is straight and full of dignity. Her neck, long and thin, is marked by several rings of Venus. Her face is an even and precise oval, framed by thick hair that forms a sort of half circle on her forehead.

The features are rendered through superficial, though clearly perceptible and realistic, modeling although both halves of the face are very different. These delicate plastic volumes enliven the large surfaces of the cheeks, of the forehead and of the eyes and area of the nose; the chin is pointed, but not too pronounced.

The hair, rendered in a detailed and elaborate manner, is composed of two distinct parts. At the front of the head, there are some small wavy locks descending loosely to the left and right of the central part (melon hairstyle), but they leave the ears uncovered. At the nape, the hair is gathered into a braid (in reality, it was probably a hair extension) pulled up atop the head and wrapped so as to form a sort of thick annular skullcap held in place by fasteners, probably in metal, that the sculptor clearly indicated. Behind the neck and in front of the ears, a small unbound tuft of hair is sculpted in a small round curl at the temples whose center is pierced with a drill. Roman portraits of such a high artistic quality are not common: it is worth noting the great skill of

the sculptor in the overall harmony of the work as well as in the attention given to details (rendering of the facial muscles, complexity of the hair, etc.). Like many other female portraits, the hair is the most significant feature for the classification of this head. It is from the very late 1st century and the early 2nd century that Roman women started to style their hair this way, with different variations (more or less large chignon, fixed to the crown or atop the head, one or more braids, etc.); later, during the time of Hadrian (see in particular the hairstyle on the portraits of Sabina, wife of the Emperor) the chignon becomes increasingly more impressive in height and width. One can therefore date this bust to the first two decades of the 2nd century A.D.

PROVENANCE

Ex-Jean Audy collection (1906-1962), France.

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