

HEAD OF A QUEEN OR A GODDESS

Hellenistic, 3rd century B.C.

Marble

H: 34.2 cm (13.46 in)

Reference: 28521



A harmonious classical appearance and excellent workman-ship define this head. It obviously belonged to a statue slightly larger than life-size. It is not clear, however, whether the lower part of the veil, locks and neck, now fragmentary, constituted the shape prepared to socket into the cavity on the upper part of the figure carved separately and, probably, from a different kind of marble (similar, for instance, to the Demeter statue from Knidos, ca. 350 B.C., housed in the British Museum), or whether the head and the figure were carved from a single block of marble. The head faces slightly downward and to the side, which may correspond to either a seated or a standing figure.

The iconographic exploration of the piece is both intriguing and instructive. The wavy hair parts in the middle and is dressed over the temples, a typical Praxitelean hairstyle, as indicated by the details of the "Knidian coiffure": thin locks arranged in multiple shallow or deep grooves and forming the triangular shape of the forehead. The long spiral locks fall behind the ears and over the long neck. At the top of the forehead, the hair is encircled by a fillet. Such long wavy hair with spiral locks is a characteristic of both female and male hair-styles in the representations of the deities, kings and queens in Late Classical Greek art and early Hellenism. The young Apollo and Dionysus are depicted in this effeminate style in vase painting and in sculpture. The fillet was often used in a man's hair. Dionysus is known wearing a narrow headband, called mitra, which crosses his forehead below the hairline. The fillet could be the badge of victory worn by an athlete (cf. statue of Diadumenos, athlete tying a ribbon around his head, created by Polykleitos, ca. 440 B.C.) or by a warrior (cf. one of the two famous Riace Warriors). Or it could be a royal diadem; Alexander the Great wore a diadem consisting of a white ribbon (Lucian, Dialogues of the Dead, 13.4).

The young face is narrow, with a prominent chin, a high forehead, large eyes, a broad nasal bridge, a straight nose and full lips, features that are found in both female and male sculptural representations of the

Classical and Late Classical periods. The head with long hair of the figure of Dionysus from the west pediment of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, ca. 335-327 B.C. (Delphi Archaeological Museum), and the head of Dionysus said to have been found near the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens, ca. 325 B.C. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), both look feminine; their features are similar to the present head. Here, there is one specific trait of the anatomy, the so-called Venus rings on the long and plump neck, which must be recognized; along with the veil, this makes the definition of the head as female unquestionable.

The veil in a Greek woman's dress was appropriate for a matron; it became a symbol of her chastity and modesty. Appearance in public required the long cloak (himation) to be pulled up to cover the back of her head. The representation of the bowed, veiled head and the hand holding the edge of the cloak on a marble grave stele is perceived as a sign of grief and mourning. It might seem that the full lips slightly parted and the large eyes deeply set create a somewhat sorrowful expression here; however, this may not be part of the initial concept. The eyes are deeply set at their inner canthi, while the mid-section of each eye globe is wide and flat, as if prepared for painted irises and pupils; in this case, the glance would be more directed, and thus the external expression would be less solemn, and more calm and pleasant. If the marble was indeed painted, which is true for many sculptures of this period, the headband was decorated as well; the plain middle surface would be decorated with flowers, leaves and tendrils. It would be interesting to explore whether the shape of the band with convex upper and lower edges was intended to reproduce either the fabric fillet with stitching and embroidery or rather a metal circlet made in repoussé (edges) and openwork (decoration). The Hellenistic epigram To Aphrodite (Nossis, Greek Anthology, 6.275) refers to such beautiful and attractive things: "I think that Aphrodite will be happy to receive as an offering this band from Simaetha's hair, since it is intricate and smells sweetly of the nectar that Aphrodite herself uses to anoint fair Adonis."

The interpretation of this work remains open. Given its artistic qualities and its larger than life size, this head certainly represented a towering figure and would no doubt have belonged to an important sculptural group (cult statuary, commemorative or funerary monument). She was either a goddess (Demeter, Hera, Aphrodite or one of the Horae, the personifications of the seasons, who each appear in a veil) or a queen or a princess of one of the Hellenistic kingdoms of the early 3rd century B.C.

The comparison with the portraits of queens and princess-es of the Greco-Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty (the family that ruled Egypt after the death of Alexander, until the arrival of the Romans) seems very relevant. The heads of the two most influential women of this dynasty (Arsinoe II and Berenice II) have much in common, typologically and stylistically, with our example.

CONDITION

Surface slightly damaged: tip of the nose, part of the left eyelid, some of the hair above the ears; minor chips on the veil and face (right eyelid, cheeks, lower lip, chin).

PROVENANCE

Ex – South American private collection, 1961.

EXHIBITED

GSTAAD, 2015

BRAFA, 2015

BIENNALE, 2014

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RIDGWAY B.S., *Hellenistic Sculpture: I, The Styles of ca. 331-200 B.C.*, Madison, 1990, p.21, pl. 3 (head of Dionysus from Delphi); p. 332, pl. 172 (head of "Ariadne" from Athens).

On diadems and headbands, see:

SMITH R.R.R., *Hellenistic Royal Portraits*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 34-38.

On portraits of the princesses of the Lagides, see:

KYRIELEIS H., *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, Berlin, 1975, pp. 78-93.

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