

PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN ARSINOE II

Greek-Hellenistic, 3rd century B.C.

Marble

Height: 35.5 cm (14 in)

Reference: 19519



The features reflected in the modeling of this marble head are undoubtedly individual and suggest a portrait; all characteristics lead to conclude that this is most probably the image of the Ptolemaic queen, Arsinoe II. Daughter of the first kings of the Hellenistic Egypt, Ptolemy I and Berenice I, she got married Lysimachus, one of the successors of Alexander the Great, and became queen of Thrace, Asia Minor and Macedonia. After his death, she arrived in Alexandria and married her own brother Ptolemy II, a customary practice in Egypt; both were given the epithet Philadelphoi (sibling-loving). She acted alongside her brother in public and ritual life; she contributed significantly to foreign policy.

Her portraits are testified, first of all, in coinage and also in the relief ceramic and works of glyptic. Several marble heads have been attributed as Arsinoe's images, some shaped in the apparent Egyptian or Greek Classicizing style; however, none is so close to the queen's established iconography as this present one. Although it could be a posthumous image (slightly idealized and rejuvenated), it reproduces precisely her large, wide-open eyes outlined by low eyebrows, a long nose making line with her forehead in characteristic oblong contour; full and slightly parted lips, a firm chin, and Venus rings on the neck.

Her hairstyle is arranged in several coiled braids (the so-called Melonenfrisur). Above the forehead there is a diadem of intricate design. It is a sign of royal distinction and an exquisite piece of jewelry which would combined gold and precious stones, most probably garnet cabochons. Highly stylized in the marble carving, the diadem consists of a Herakles knot of interlocking loops, pilaster capitals with volutes, all separated by the horizontal links, and woven gold braids on both sides.

As typical for many marble works produced in Alexandria and Hellenistic Egypt, only the front half of the head was carved from the

exported, and expensive, white marble; the back side usually covered by a veil in the female representations was modeled in painted plaster, wood or limestone. Another feature is typical for the assembling of large-scale statues, when the head with the neck carved from a separate block of marble was inserted into a special cavity on the top of the figure (sometimes made from a different kind of marble which produced a coloristic effect of the entire sculpture).

Images of Arsinoe II appear on the series of relief faience vessels, specifically on the oinochoai made as libation jugs associated with the royal cult, the Arsinoeia (testified by the inscribed dedications). The figure of the queen is shown standing frontally, wearing Greek dress (chiton, himation), holding a cornucopia in one hand and pouring a libation from a phiale in another hand; the arm is extended toward a sacrificial altar. Because of such a composition, the head is turned to the side following the direction of the arm with the bowl. It could be that the present head belonged to the statue of similar composition (as the position of the head and the neck demonstrates the turn of the head toward figure's right) and design, and could represent Arsinoe-Isis or Arsinoe-Tyche.

The right ear was not carved from the same block of marble (if shown, it could be made in plaster along with the veil) while the left is prominently modeled. The latter has a hole in the lobe made for the placement of an earring of gold or gild bronze. There are also two holes below the ear on the neck, apparently made to affix an attribute. Following the unique iconography of the queen, this could be a small horn which appears below her ear on coinage (gold octadrachms and silver decadrachms). They were issued in the name of his sister and wife by Ptolemy II Philadelphos shortly after Arsinoe's death, probably in 268 B.C. The queen wears stephane; the veil covers her head and the neck leaving the horn at the ear clearly visible, which is thought to be the sign of the queen's association with the Egyptian powerful god

Amun or Khnum. This was also a political reference to the Ptolemies' succession of Alexander the Great and his deification. Alexander was greeted as a son of the syncretic god Zeus-Amun at the oracle of Zeus Amun in Siwa. His image as Amun with horns appears on the coins minted by Lysimachus, the first husband of Arsinoe.

As Arsinoe was deified during her lifetime, her honorific statues were erected in Egypt and many places throughout the Hellenistic world. She was worshipped as Isis, Tyche, goddess of good fortune and fate, Artemis, and Aphrodite.

CONDITION

Complete; surface weathered with yellowish-grey patina; some encrustation on the right side of face and back of the head with a few fresh chips; an iron dowel in the middle of the back, probably for the connection with separately made back part with the veil; an old chip on the bottom left side of the bust; a hole for the earring in the earlobe; two drilled holes below, probably for the attachment of an attribute.

PROVENANCE

Ex- Dr. Heinz Hoek private collection, Basel, Switzerland, 1960-1970 (an Etruscan lidded amphora and an Attic plate from his collection were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.).

EXHIBITED

TEFAF New York, Spring 2018

Seattle Art Fair, 2019

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