

ROMAN MARBLE BUST OF A MATRON

Roman, third quarter of the 3rd century A.D.

Marble

H: 49.5 cm (19.48 in)

Reference: 22517



The bust of a woman on a circular base was originally carved from a single block of marble. The mantle is wrapped around the shoulders of a young woman dressed in a tunic which leaves the neck and part of her chest open. The head is slightly turned to her left. The oval face presents regular features. The glance is directed upward. The iris is incised, and the pupil made by the drill has a crescent form. The well-outlined mouth is slightly opened. It has a thin upper lip. The lower lip which is more voluminous forms a dimple on the chin. The light, bitter furrows mark the corners of the mouth. The young woman has a hairstyle typical for the period preceding the tetrarchy. The hair divided into the undulate rays forms the melon shape at the front and at the back of head. The undulate masses of hair are put behind the ears and set into the large tress, which passes from the nape and raises to the top of the crane forming a triangle. The tress is rolled and fixed in that way to create an additional ornamental application to the hairstyle.

The hairstyle is the most important feature to classify this art work. It is in the third century when the Roman ladies started to be combed like this, with just one tress at the beginning, and then, toward the middle of the century, with the larger and more flat mass of hair which was lifted toward the occiput and even the crown of head.

The study of coins of the same period shows that this hairstyle became fashionable first with the emperors' wives; the first empress to have such a hairstyle was Furia Sabina Tranquillina, wife of Gordian III (238-244 A.D.), followed by Octacilia (Philip the Arab, 244-249 A.D.), and Salonina (Gallienus, 253-268 A.D.) The fashion to lift the braided hair continued into the next century with the scheme becoming more elaborate, with the braids put in circle (as for example the head of Saint Helena, wife of Constantine I, dated to the early 4th century, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen).

There is no individual or stylistic element to help the precise

identification of the person. This portrait of a "bourgeoise" proves that the hairstyle was also adopted in the second half of the century by women certainly belonging to the contemporary Roman aristocracy.

CONDITION: The head reattached to the bust; the nose, top of the hair, folds on the proper left side restored; a few chips.

PROVENANCE

Ex- French private collection, Lyon, collected in early 20th century.

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