

ROMAN MARBLE HEAD OF BACCHUS

Roman, 1st century B.C. - 1st century A.D.

Marble

Height: 21.5 cm

Reference: 28522



Dionysus, or Bacchus in Roman culture, the god of wine, is represented in this head in the Archaistic style which intended to show his image as antique. Indeed, when the cult of Dionysus was introduced in Attica and the images of the god appeared in the Greek Archaic art, mostly on the black-figure vases of the 6th century B.C., Dionysus was represented as an old big man whose full body was covered with an ample mantle and whose head with the long hair and the long beard was crowned by the ivy wreath. Gradually the iconography of Dionysus has been changed, and already the Parthenon pedimental sculpture shows the god as a beautiful and athletic youth. From the Classical time onward the image of the youthful god prevailed until the Late Hellenistic period which has introduced the revival of the Archaic style representation.

The Archaistic style did not copy faithfully the archaic images, but blended their features with those from the Severe style in the Early Classical Greek art, and employed a specific approach in decorative rendering the details. Indeed, this marble head preserves the long hair and the beard of an old man appearance, but in fact, he is not really old. The rendering of the corners of the lips, slightly turned up in the Archaic art, gave the impression of the smile while here the full lips are shown as widening in a more realistic attitude. The narrow and almost slanted almond-shaped eyes with heavy lids, the clear surfaces of the high cheekbones and the forehead remind the heads of the Severe style. The rendering of the wavy hair above the forehead and especially the symmetrical pattern of the long and corkscrew curls descending at each ear and those of the beard along with the scrolls of the mostaches introduce a highly decorative motive. It is supported by the geometric lines made with the help of the chisel and the occasional drillings on the ends of the locks. The head is surmounted by a tall and a narrow crown (polos) embellished with rosettes. The manner of rendering of the head is somewhat dry but it is smoothed by the ornamental quality of the details.

The Archaistic style was well accepted in the Roman sculpture in the round and in the reliefs designed not only for the temples but also for the private house shrines and the house or villa gardens. The under-life size of the head shows that it belonged to a statuette suggesting the private setting. The type of the figure may be recognized in the god's statuette from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum in which Dionysus wears a long chiton with several folds and a panther skin, with a goat at his feet used as the figure's support. Also one can not escape from the impression that instead of the living head both the Getty statuette and our head rather represent a theatre mask. Masks of Dionysus in the Archaistic style became especially popular among the marble rectangular reliefs (pinakes) installed on the pillars in the gardens and the round reliefs (oscilla) suspended in the inter-space of the columns.

CONDITION

Good state of preservation, most of the piece is intact except for some chips on the point of the nose, the beard and the top of the crown. The surface is still covered with concretion which is scratched in some areas and with cream-colored patina.

PROVENANCE

Ex-property of the late Brigadier and Mrs. Wearne, Australia. Ex, 1974.
Ex private collection, Sydney, 1975.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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