

ROMAN MARBLE PORTRAIT OF THE EMPRESS JULIA DOMNA

Ro-Late, late 2nd-early 3rd century A.D.

Marble

H: 26.6 cm

Reference: 4382



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The model is a woman, still young as evidenced by the full cheeks, the dimples at the corners of the lips, and the rounded chin as well as the smooth neck. The fleshy and faintly soft nature of this face betrays a non-Italian facial origin, but rather an Eastern one; the thick eyebrows, which tend to join above the nose, support this hypothesis. Seen in profile, the head looks almost flat. Nevertheless, what first catches one's attention on this figure, which one must obviously consider a portrait, is the hairstyle, that wraps the skull and the ears like a helmet. The hair, very thick, descends low on each side and is brought back up again on the nape, where it forms a flat and braided bun. The regular ridges, arranged through the coiffure, were probably obtained using a curling iron. It is worth noting that what adds to the complexity of the hairdressing are the braids going up to the temples: a deep and precise groove distinguishes them from the cheeks. Semicircular locks are sculpted at the level of the ears. Such a sophisticated hairstyle is a decisive element for the identification of the woman represented here: she could be Julia Domna who, as seen on the coins bearing her portrait, set the fashion trend of hairstyles composed of locks and braids forming a plait gathered atop of the head.

Julia Domna was the daughter of the high priest of Baal in Emesa, Syria. It is in that region that Septimius Severus, the future emperor, first noticed her and married her, his second marriage. As beautiful as she was clever and ambitious, she encouraged him in his career. She gave him two sons, Caracalla, born in Lyon on April 4, 188, and Geta, born in Rome or Milan on May 27 of the following year. Associated with power through her husband, she accompanied him on his campaigns, hence her nickname of "Mother of the Camps". Very cultured, she used to surround herself with intellectuals, adding splendor to the Roman Imperial court.

She survived her husband and her two sons; but the emperor Macrinus, successor of Caracalla (whose murder he organized), sent her back to

her hometown, where she mournfully died in 217 A.D. Should we see in this portrait Julia Domna herself or an aristocratic woman who aimed to look like her? It is difficult to decide, although the first interpretation seems the most plausible given the young age, the beauty and above all, the Orientalizing facial features of the model that one can discern.

CONDITION

Head carved in a fine-grained, almost translucent, high-quality marble; the yellowish patina is reminiscent of ivory. Notwithstanding the loss of the nose and the clean break at the nape of the neck, the state of preservation is remarkable. The pupils and the irises are carved. The back part of the stone is roughly squared.

PROVENANCE

Sotheby's London, June 6, 1994, Lot 74.

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