

# HEAD OF AN EMPEROR

ROMAN, ANTONINE DYNASTY, AD 96-192  
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 34 CM.

WIDTH: 24.5 CM.

DEPTH: 22 CM.

*PROVENANCE:*  
*IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION FROM THE*  
*18<sup>TH</sup> OR 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY,*  
*BASED ON THE OLD RESTORATION*  
*TECHNIQUES.*  
*IN A FRENCH COLLECTION FROM THE*  
*BEGINNING OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY,*  
*JUDGING BY THE BASING TECHNIQUE.*  
*THEN IN A FRENCH PRIVATE*  
*COLLECTION IN A RESIDENCE IN*  
*VAUCLUSE, FRANCE.*



This sumptuous sculpted portrait represents a Roman emperor. His fine featured face is finished off with thick hair and facial hair. His extremely smoothly shaped forehead contrasts with his large, deeply carved eyes.

His very thick lower and upper eyelids frame his almond-shaped eyes, which have incised irises etched in their centres and drilled pupils. They are surmounted by a fine, discreet brow line and very thin eyebrows that start at the bridge of his nose and extend almost to his temples. Beneath his eyes, there are hollows at the junctures of his cheekbones, accentuated by his very thick lower eyelids. His nose, now broken, was probably narrow and well proportioned. It dovetails with a rather big mouth, although the lips are thin and partly concealed by his moustache, which joins a thick beard covering the entire lower part of his face. His very discreet cheekbones, too, are partly hidden by his beard, which starts at the middle of his cheeks and gets thicker as it goes, covering his chin and the top of his neck. The strands are almost individually shaped, reflecting a deep desire for realism, and they are grouped here and there, representing wavy locks. His neck is thick and muscled, as wide as his face with slight bulges that correspond to the different muscles, showcasing a certain physical strength.

Thick, curly hair puts the finishing touch to the portrait. It is made up of individualised locks that are messily tangled, giving our portrait a striking realism and appearance of life. The considerable volume of the hair is due to the way the groups of locks were separately shaped, and especially the use of a drill, which makes it possible to carve down into the marble, simultaneously creating



plays of shadow and light. The importance given to the hair indicates that it is a key element in deciphering this portrait. The ears are clearly visible, as only their tips are hidden by his hair. Perfectly proportioned, these, too, attest to the attention to realism that guided the sculptor in their creation.

On the back of the head, there are traces of old restoration work. The technique is characteristic of the European craftsmen of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We can thus infer that this magnificent portrait was in a European collection at that time. It would then have belonged to a French collection at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, judging by the rather particular basing technique.



This portrait is admirable on more than one level. More than its aesthetic qualities, the model appears to have been a relatively young man who was portrayed with physical

characteristics generally reserved for more mature men, following the iconographic traditions of ancient Roman art. In ancient Rome, beards were worn by young adults, then shaved and offered to the gods from the age of 24.



While the tradition of Roman portraits was very codified from its inception, it is still possible to see an evolution, particularly with Emperor Hadrian's assumption of power in AD 117. He was the first to grow a beard, following the trend of the philosophers, which then became the fashion at court. Four years after being named emperor, Hadrian was named *eponymous archon*, or, in other words, supreme magistrate of the city of Athens, the reason for his particular taste for Greek culture. When he rose to power in Rome, he was soon nicknamed *greculus*, "the little Greek", by his peers. In his portraits, his

beard thus has a moral connotation recalling Greek identity. The tradition of bearded portraits swiftly spread through the Empire and was no longer limited to philhellenes. The circulation of many portraits and coins bearing Hadrian's effigy was unquestionably behind the new style of representation, which was adopted by all of Hadrian's successors in the Antonine dynasty: Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius (who was, incidentally, the first to grow a long beard) and Commodus. The major novelty in these portraits, besides the beard, is the more detailed, carved shaping of the hair and eyes. Representing the pupils with carved circles was also a novelty that commenced under Hadrian's reign.

Finally, the detailed locks of hair coupled with the use of a drill indicate that this portrait was the work of a Roman craftsman.



Our magnificent bearded head, idealised and noble, thus represents an emperor from that dynasty whose identity cannot be pinpointed. If we compare it with very fine examples such as the two portraits of Hadrian conserved in Athens (ill. 1-2), those of Antoninus Pius in New York and Berlin (ill. 3-4), those of Marcus Aurelius in London and Paris (ill. 5-6) and those of Commodus in Copenhagen and London (ill. 7-8), we can easily glimpse many similarities in the facial features and the way the hair and beard are represented. This luxurious portrait, a similar example of which was sold at Sotheby's in 2021 (ill. 9), is sculpted from particularly fine grained marble, allowing for an absolutely perfect polishing. The practically immaculate white stone has a few concretions and a very slight patina, which only add to its elegance.

#### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Portrait bust of the emperor Hadrian, Roman, Athens, *ca.* AD 130, marble. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Ill. 2. Colossal portrait of the emperor Hadrian, Roman, AD 130-138, marble, H.: 55 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



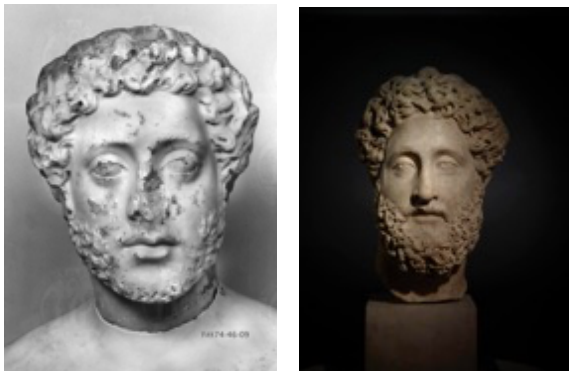
Ill. 3. Marble portrait of the emperor Antoninus Pius, Roman, ca. AD 138-161, marble, H.: 40 cm. The MET, New York, inv. no. 33.11.3.

Ill. 4. Portrait of the emperor Antoninus Pius, Roman, mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.



Ill. 5. Portrait bust of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, Roman, ancient Libya, ca. AD 160-170, H.: 73.5 cm. The British Museum, London, inv. no. 1861.1127.15.

Ill. 6. Portrait of Marcus Aurelius, Roman, Asia Minor, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (after 161), marble, H.: 27 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. inv. no. Ma 4884.



Ill. 7. Portrait of Commodus, Roman, late 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 26 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Ill. 8. Portrait of Commodus, Roman, ca. AD 185-190, marble, H.: 38 cm. The British Museum, London, inv. no. 1864.1021.9.



Ill. 9. Masculine portrait, Roman, reign of Antoninus Pius, mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 29 cm. Private collection.