

HEAD OF ATHENA

ROMAN, 1ST CENTURY BC – 1ST CENTURY AD

MARBLE

RESTORATIONS FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

HEIGHT: 31 CM.

WIDTH: 20 CM.

DEPTH: 18 CM.

*PROVENANCE:
IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION FROM THE
18TH CENTURY, BASED ON THE
RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.
THEN IN AN ENGLISH PRIVATE
COLLECTION FROM THE 1970S OR 1980S.
BY DESCENT IN THE SAME FAMILY.*



This delicate marble head depicts the Greek goddess Athena, known to the Romans as Minerva. Represented frontally, her face is round with full cheeks characterised by high, subtly visible cheekbones. Her large eyes are almond-shaped and deeply carved, while her eyelids are thin and enhanced with slight incisions in the marble. Her pupils were originally hollowed out and then inlaid with

marble, probably at a later date, giving the gaze of our goddess a certain depth and intensity. Her eyes are surmounted with discreet brow ridges, which dovetail with a straight nose. Her small mouth is formed by two full lips with quite deeply carved corners and a small dimple above her upper lip, giving our goddess a subtle smile. Finally, her chin is round and slightly upturned, continuing into a wide neck and giving our portrait a very carnal appearance.



Her face is framed by an archaistic hairstyle divided in several parts. Two large sections of hair with faintly incised locks partly cover her cheeks, while a thin row of ringlets



decorates the top of her forehead. At the back, a section of hair is gathered along her nape. It, too, is adorned with delicately incised waves. Finally, two or three individually sculpted curls that have escaped her hairstyle cascade over our goddess' shoulders, leaving her ears uncovered. These are also sculpted in a very lifelike manner, each anatomic element being individually etched, showing the dexterity of Roman sculptors.



A richly decorated Attic helmet is set delicately on the head of our goddess. The visor, the upper border of which forms a point in the middle, is adorned with bas-relief motifs representing two dogs with long, thin bodies. Their narrow-muzzled heads are turned towards the centre, on either side of a feature that is now missing, but which was probably a palmette or other ornamental motif that commonly featured in the bas-reliefs of the time. The bodies of the two canids seem to stretch and wind outwards to

form simple abstract motifs. The visor ends in two large volutes above her ears.

The rest of the helmet also displays rich decoration sculpted in bas-relief. On the sides, two magnificent griffins, winged mythological creatures depicted with the bodies of lions and the heads of eagles, seem to be walking, one foreleg raised and the other extended, wings outstretched. Each feather was individually sculpted, which gives the whole piece a singular elegance. Plant scrolls unfurl all around the creatures, branches forming delicate volutes across the entire surface of the helmet. Finally, the part protecting the nape is adorned with a magnificent palmette.



Our head, sculpted from white marble with a delicate brown patina, is mounted on a bust from the 18th century adorned with the aegis, a mythical breastplate and the goddess' main attribute. It is made up of individually sculpted reptile scales that cover the top of her chest. The whole thing is delimited by a

small border that is devoid of any ornamentation. Finally, small locks of hair curled delicately at the ends are also represented, tumbling down her neck.



Athena was the goddess of wisdom and military strategy, known for being courageous and undoubtedly the most resourceful of the gods on Mount Olympus. She was destined to be a warrior from birth. Athena was the daughter of Zeus and the Oceanid Metis. Zeus, having heard a prediction that one of his sons would seize his throne, decided to swallow Metis, who was then pregnant with the goddess. A few months later, suffering from a terrible headache, Zeus asked Hephaestus, the smithing god, to split his skull open to relieve him of the pain. Athena then sprang from her father's head fully armed, helmeted and bellowing a war cry. As an adult, she participated in the storied Trojan War and was the protector of many heroes including Diomedes, Ulysses and Telemachus. In

iconographic terms, the goddess is generally represented armed, helmeted and wearing the aegis, as in our sculpture.



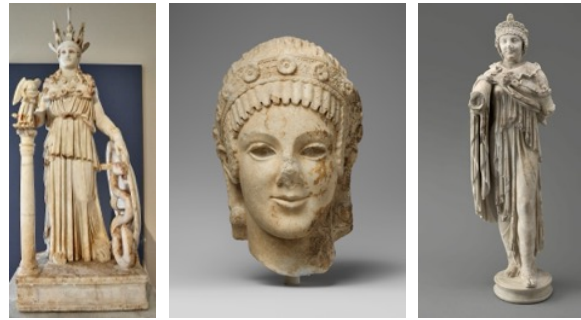
Athena's popularity and importance in mythology led to a great number of representations, first by Greek artists and then by Roman sculptors. Various types thus emerged, depicting the goddess in her different guises. The best known is the Athena Parthenos type, which represents her in a peaceful attitude, although still wearing her warrior's attributes (ill. 1). However, the traits of our goddess reveal our head as a variant, aligning it with sculptures known as 'archaistic'. In the Roman period, artists played with artistic styles and appropriated some of the characteristics of the Greek art from the 8th to the 5th century BC, creating a blend between archaic and uniquely Roman traits. This particularity, perfectly exemplified by our sculpture, is also very finely illustrated by heads of the goddess conserved in New York and Paris (ill. 2-3).

Our work, specifically, can be compared with the statue of Athena that is currently conserved in Poitiers, France (ill. 4). The hairstyle, features and smile thus attest to the Romans' appropriation of the archaic style.

Our sculpture was in an English private collection from the 1970s or 1980s and passed down within the family until the present. The owner, a restorer of artworks, was in contact with a number of traders throughout his career, which enabled him to develop an expert eye. He thus acquired various works over the years, following his instincts and taste. Our head of Athena was then passed down to his daughter and joined her collection.



Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Athena Parthenos, also known as the Varvakeion Athena, Roman, 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 104 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 129.

Ill. 2. Head of Athena in an archaistic style, Roman, 1st century BC - 1st century AD, marble, H.: 24 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 12.157.

Ill. 3 Statue of Athena in an archaistic style, Roman, 1st - 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 92 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MR 288.



Ill. 4. Athena of Poitiers, Roman, circa 100 BC, marble, H.: 152 cm. Musée Sainte-Croix, Poitiers, inv. no. 902.1.1.