

BUST OF A WOMAN

ROMAN, CIRCA 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE AND ONYX
RESTORATIONS FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

HEIGHT: 53 CM.

WIDTH: 30 CM.

DEPTH: 17 CM.

PROVENANCE:
IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION SINCE THE
18TH CENTURY BASED ON THE
RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.
FORMER COLLECTION OF ROBERT
BERKELEY (1794-1874), SPETCHLEY PARK,
WORCESTER, UNITED KINGDOM,
ACQUIRED IN ROME IN 1851.
THEN PASSED DOWN
WITHIN THE SAME FAMILY.



This elegant marble and onyx bust represents a young woman with a high standing in Roman society.

She has a delicate, oval face with features that are accentuated by plump cheeks and deeply

chiselled almond shaped eyes. Her pupils are finely carved and framed with thick eyelids, giving her a serene gaze. The brows over her large eyes are close together, each hair individually carved on the surface of the marble, attesting to the artist's meticulous work. Her nose is prettily carved and comes to a fine point. It was restored in the 18th century, as attested by the incision that starts at the bridge of her nose and runs down on either side of her nostrils. Her small mouth is formed by thin, gracefully contoured lips, which accentuate the thoughtful expression that gives this portrait its unique character, while her subtly rounded chin structures her rather recessed jaw. Her slender neck is distinguished by a slight incision that starts at the end of her chin and goes down her neck to her nape. Her hair is delicately pulled back and loosely tied in a large, flattened chignon. Wavy locks, parted down the middle, trace the contour of her tender face and completely cover her ears. Her impressive chignon is very accurately depicted through six marked incisions that spiral in towards the centre, representing the twist of her hair. Finally, a few individual locks are sculpted in the marble, giving her abundant, wavy and textured hair a certain realism.

The young woman's narrowed shoulders are shaped from ancient onyx and display a magnificent yellow patina, creating a



sophisticated aura and highlighting her elegance. Judging from the restoration techniques, the onyx shoulders are ancient, but were most likely joined to our head in the 18th century. She is enveloped in damp looking fabric, her stola, a dress traditionally worn by women with a cinched waist and clasps at the shoulders. Refined folds come loose at her shoulders and emphasise her bosom. On each of her shoulders, three small buttons are carved in the stone. The stitches securing them to the fabric are visible, and the folds radiate from the buttons.



This is an exquisite and fantastically subtle detail that attests to the mastery of the artist. Beneath the splendid stola, her arms are crossed over her chest, which gives the impression she is drawing the excess fabric in around her body. Due to the sculptor's impressive dexterity, the drapery looks both lifelike and sensual. The back is carved with two large cavities that reveal the raw onyx. In the centre is an additional support made of

stucco, from a subsequent restoration. The last restoration was completed by a small base made of *rosso antico*, a red coloured marble accentuated by deep maroon tints and white veins, thus showcasing this bust of a young woman in the most elegant fashion.

This marble portrait of a young woman is carefully adorned with a luminous patina, attesting to the passing of time. Moreover, light traces of brown and yellow tints decorate her face and emphasise her chin. Her onyx shoulders, with yellow, brown and white veins, are sublimed by an ancient patina, which lies in the indentations of the stone created by the buttons of her stola, on each shoulder. The range of colours in the polished onyx offers captivating hues full of movement and dimension.



This magnificent bust was created in around the 3rd century AD, under the Severan dynasty (AD 193-235). This dynasty was marked by the reign of five emperors:

Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), Caracalla (AD 211-217), Macrinus (AD 217-218), Elagabalas (AD 218-222) and Alexander Severus (AD 222-235). Throughout the dynasty, in which short reigns succeeded one another, the wives of the emperors wielded considerable influence not only over their families, but also over the politics of the Roman Empire. Thus, due to their important contributions, many illustrations of them were made, both in marble and on coins.



An aureus minted under the reign of Septimius Severus thus displays the profile portrait of the empress Julia Domna (ill. 1). There are many representations of Severan empresses, all adorned with the imposing flattened chignon at the back of the head, a hairstyle characteristic of their period and also present in our bust of a young woman (ill. 2-4). Two other similar busts of women, again with that elegant chignon in the Severan style, are displayed at the Vatican

and in Nîmes (ill. 5-6). Another magnificent bust of a woman dating back to the Severan dynasty is conserved in the United Kingdom, as well as yet another in New York (ill. 7-8). Our extremely refined portrait of a young woman also displays similarities with other empresses, such as a bust from the Antonine period representing Crispina or Didia Clara (ill. 9).



This graceful bust of a young woman was purchased by Robert Berkeley (1794-1874). The Berkeley family is an ancient English noble family and the owners of Spetchley Park in Worcestershire (ill. 10). This feminine bust was purchased in Italy for “50 scudi” in 1851 (ill. 11), along with other artworks, as indicated by the inventory entitled Inventory of Furniture, [...] on the Premises Spetchley Park, Worcester, drawn up in 1893. This bust is registered as “Julia, daughter of Augustus, on a scagliola pedestal, in the inner room”. The bust was again mentioned in 1949 as “[one of the pair]

A pair of alabaster busts sculpted on (restored) round marble columns in the main hall”.



The noble property was first acquired by Rowland Berkeley in 1605, but burned down during the Battle of Worcester in 1651. The residence as we know it today, with its Ionic portico, was built in 1881 by one of the descendants of the Berkeley family. The extravagant estate, turned into a sanctuary as per the family’s wishes, houses their impressive collection of artworks, which includes portraits of ancestors and sculptures. They were probably acquired during a ‘Grand Tour’ – an expedition with artistic and cultural aims that led artists and collectors to travel around Europe from the 18th century – along with other pieces such as furniture, wallpaper from China and ancient sculptures. Thus, Robert Berkeley and his son, Robert Martin Berkeley, as the art loving owners of that vast collection, established their own private museum in the

1840s. Finally, the admirable collection was further enriched through the contributions of Rose and Robert Valentine Berkeley and John Berkeley (ill. 12-13). Our feminine bust thus resided within that magnificent collection until the present day.

Comparatives:



- Ill. 1. Gold aureus with a bust of Julia Domna, Roman, Severan dynasty, AD 193-196, gold, diam.: 2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no.99.35.218.
 Ill. 2. Bust of Julia Domna, Roman, Severan dynasty, 1st quarter of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 71 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MA 1055.



- Ill. 3. Portrait of Julia Domna, Roman, 1st quarter of the 3rd century AD (after 202), marble, H.: 36 cm, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. MND 2163, Ma 4523.
 Ill. 4. Portrait of a woman or empress, Roman, Severan dynasty, 2nd-3rd century AD, grey marble, H.: 27.7 cm, Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse, inv. no. 75.30132.



- Ill. 5. Portrait of a woman, Roman, Severan dynasty, 1st quarter of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 59 cm, Vatican Museums, Vatican, inv. no. 668.
 Ill. 6. Bust of a Woman, Roman, Severan dynasty, circa 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 25 cm, Musée des Antiques, Nîmes.



Ill. 7. Portrait of a woman, Roman, Severan dynasty, beginning of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 71.6 cm, Petworth House, United Kingdom.

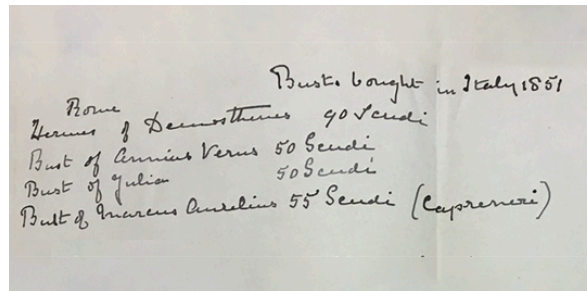


Ill. 8. Portrait of a woman, Roman, Severan dynasty, 1st quarter of the 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 28 cm, Sofer Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Ill. 9. Bust of a woman from the Antonine period (Crispina or Didia Clara), Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 75 cm, Galleria Spada, Rome, inv. no. 329.



Ill. 10. Spetchley Park, Worcester, United Kingdom.



Ill. 11. Inventory mentioning the purchase of our bust in Rome in 1851 for 50 scudi.



Ill. 12. Workshop in the entry hall, Spetchley Park, 8 July 1916, Vol. XL, no. 1018, p. 45-46.

Ill. 13. Cabinet of curiosities, Spetchley Park.