

HEAD OF DIONYSUS

ROMAN, 2ND - 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 20 CM.

WIDTH: 15 CM.

DEPTH: 15 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMER FRENCH PRIVATE COLLECTION
OF A FAMILY IN ÎLE-DE-FRANCE FROM AT
LEAST THE 1960S.*



This delicate marble head offers us a vibrant, expressive portrait of the young god Dionysus. God of the vine, inebriation and wild nature, Dionysus, or Bacchus for the Latins, is identifiable by the crown of vine branches circling his forehead.

His finely wrought hairstyle is animated by the waves rippling through the locks of his

hair, among which vine leaves stand out. His locks delicately meet at the back of his head and fall onto the nape of his neck in a small chignon. The plays of shadow and light created by the relief of his hairstyle contrast with the smooth, soft flesh of his face. His high forehead is adorned with a band seamlessly joining his luxuriant hair and his face.



The very regular ovalness of his chin and his full, hairless cheeks give his face a childlike roundness. His eyes are sculpted very realistically, standing out from his strongly



marked eyelids. His irises and pupils are rendered by very fine, carved lines and his gaze is directed to a point high up to his right. This direction is accentuated by a slight twist in his neck. The movement suggested by the sculpture could indicate that it was part of a statuary group made up of several conversing figures. Moreover, his full, round lips are parted, as though he is about to speak.



Representations of Dionysus as a teenager were common in the Graeco Roman world. While, in the Archaic period, the god Dionysus was represented in the guise of a great, majestic priest with a long beard, cloaked in a long mantle, distinguishable from Zeus only by his attributes, from the 5th century BC, his representation evolved to a beardless, naked young man with soft, sensual skin and curly hair. A bronze statue

conserved at the Louvre is said to be one of the first known testaments of these representations of a young Dionysus, holding the fragment of a goblet in his right hand (Ill. 1). In the 4th century, texts mention a bronze representing the teenage god holding a goblet in his hands by the famous sculptor Praxiteles. Another bronze conserved at the Louvre, the features of which are similar to those of our sculpture, supposedly echoes that sculpture (Ill. 2). Two Roman marble copies conserved at the Museo del Prado reflect this type and, again, resemble this head (Ill. 3 and 4).



This head of Dionysus is thus striking in the life and movement that seem to animate it. The marks of time visible on the surface of the marble as well as the traces of oxidation on the back of the hair attest to the sculpture's long, rich history. The chignon at



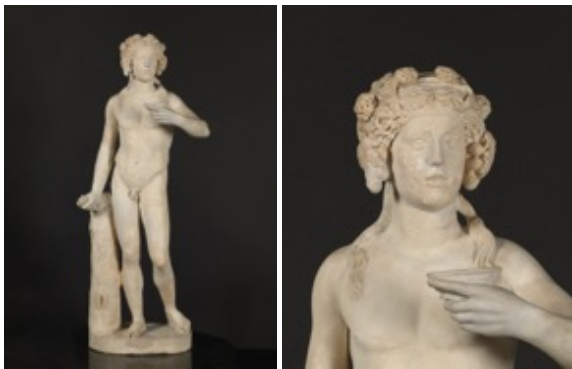
the back of the head is polished and dotted with mortise holes, which were later sealed up. This tells us that the head was restored after its discovery, probably in the 18th or 19th century. In the same way, the smooth finish of the nose attests to an old restoration that is now lost.

Comparatives:

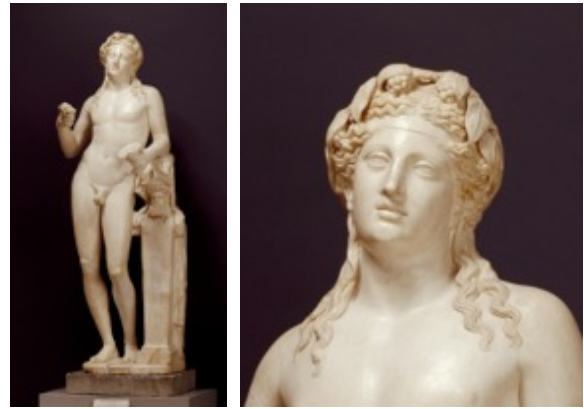


Ill. 1. Dionysus, ca. 460 BC, Argive style, bronze, H.: 23,5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Br 154.

Ill. 2. Dionysus, 2nd century AD, discovered in the Acropolis of Athens, bronze, H.: 24,5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Br 189.



Ill. 3. Dionysus, ca. AD 190-210, marble, H.: 117 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. E000136.



Ill. 4. Dionysus leaning on a herm, Roman copy ca. 150, based on a Greek original from the 4th century BC, H.: 173 cm, marble, Museo del Prado, inv. no. E00087.

