

BAS-RELIEF FRAGMENT DEPICTING A GORGON

ROMAN, 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 50 CM.

WIDTH: 51 CM.

PROVENANCE:
SOLD BY SOTHEBY'S LONDON ON
14 DECEMBER 1981, LOT 352.
AUSTRALIAN PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
PETER AND JOCELYN MITCHELL,
ACQUIRED AT THE
AFOREMENTIONED SALE.
IN THAT SAME COLLECTION UNTIL THE
PRESENT DAY.



This monumental bas-relief fragment, sculpted from gorgeous white marble,

depicts an expressive gorgon head, very likely that of Medusa. It stands out in deeply carved relief. Her round face, with its smooth skin, contrasts with the extremely detailed serpentine hair that surrounds it. It radiates from her head and is gathered in a knot under her chin. Her hair seems to be flying up, giving us the impression that the sculpture is traversed by an agitated gust of wind. Her slightly open mouth is deeply carved, as are her nostrils, while her large nose is framed by two furrows marking her cheeks. Her big, bulging eyes stand out beneath thick, drooping eyelids and give her face a theatrical, almost terrible appearance. Her pupils are deeply chiselled, while her lower eyelids hood her eyes and lend them great expressiveness. Through this sculptural work, all contrast and relief, with features and details that are deeply carved in the marble, light catches on the relief and creates a striking play of shadow and light, accentuating the expressiveness of Medusa's face.

In Graeco Roman mythology, Medusa was one of the three gorgons and the only mortal. As an extremely beautiful young woman, she was turned into a monster by Athena to punish her for her pride. Her hair became snakes, her eyes dilated and, from then on, her gaze turned anyone who encountered her to stone. The hero Perseus, however,



managed to defeat her and cut off her head. He then gave it to Athena, who used it to decorate the aegis, her divine armour. Medusa's decapitated head is called the *gorgoneion*.



The *gorgoneion* is a ubiquitous motif in antique art. Medusa is almost always represented from the front and can be recognised by her serpentine hair and bulging eyes. It can be found in representations of Athena, adorning her aegis, but also on shields or everyday objects such as ceramics, coins and jewellery serving as lucky charms. In Rome, it was frequently displayed on monuments: in sculpted architectural reliefs, door ornamentation and mosaics. It has an apotropaic dimension, serving to protect from the evil eye. In ancient Greek, the name Medusa means “the protector”.



Medusa's lively, expressive face embodies all the stylistic characteristics of the Pergamene baroque. The pathos, the exaggerated facial expression, the exuberance of her features, the gust sweeping through her hair... All these elements are present in the sculpture crafted in the city of Pergamum in Aeolis (Asia Minor) from the second half of the 3rd century BC. One of the emblematic works in this style is the Great Altar of Pergamum, exhibiting a gigantomachy on its monumental friezes, the faces of which can be stylistically likened to ours (Ill. 1). Also worthy of mention is the face of Laocoön in a Roman sculpture based on a Greek bronze original created by the Pergamene school (Ill. 2). The flesh weighing heavily on the forehead, cheeks and corners of the eyes, the wrinkles of expression and the drooping eyelids are markers of the style, which remained widely in vogue in the Asian

provinces of the Roman Empire until the 3rd century AD. Different representations of the gorgoneion similar to ours were also found in Aphrodisias (Ill. 3), Didyma (Ill. 4) and Leptis Magna in the African provinces of the Roman Empire (Ill. 5).



Our relief of Medusa was most likely part of the decoration enhancing a building, as attested by the remnant of a frieze that remains on the left side. Again in deeply carved relief, the frieze is made up of alternating open and closed palmettes. A second set of decoration presents a succession of round and oval pearls. These decorative elements are also typical of the Roman monuments of Asia Minor in the regions of Aeolis, Lydia, Lycia, Ionia and Caria. Some comparatives are the architectural blocks found in the theatre at Xanthos, Lycia (Ill. 6), and the temple of

Aphrodite in Aphrodisias, Caria (Ill. 7). All these clues lead us to believe that our relief featuring Medusa is also from one of the Roman cities of Asia Minor.

This splendid relief was part of an English private collection before being sold by Sotheby's London on 14 December 1981 (Ill. 8). It was then acquired by a couple of Australian collectors, Peter and Jocelyn Mitchell, for Mawalok House, their homestead in the state of Victoria, acquired in 1980 (Ill. 9). Peter Mitchell was a great lover of antiquities and collected art from Rome, Greece and Egypt. As for his wife Jocelyn, she was passionate about art and design and tastefully planned the interiors of their homestead, amplifying their collection.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Great Altar of Pergamon, Gigantomachy frieze: Athena and Nike against Aeyone, details: face of Aeyone and face of Gaia emerging from the earth. Berlin, Pergamonmuseum, Antikensammlung (Collection of Classical Antiquities).



Ill. 2: Laocoön, Roman, ca. 40-30 BC, marble, based on a bronze Hellenistic original ca. 200 BC. Found in 1506 in the Baths of Trajan. Vatican Museums, Vatican, Rome, inv. no. 1059.



Ill. 3: Architectural blocks representing Medusa, marble, Aphrodisias, Caria (present day Turkey).



Ill. 4: Fragment of a frieze representing Medusa, marble, 116 cm. Temple of Apollo, Didyma, Ionia (present day Turkey).



Ill. 5: Architectural blocks representing Medusa, marble, portico of the Severan Forum of Leptis Magna, Tripolitania (present day Libya).

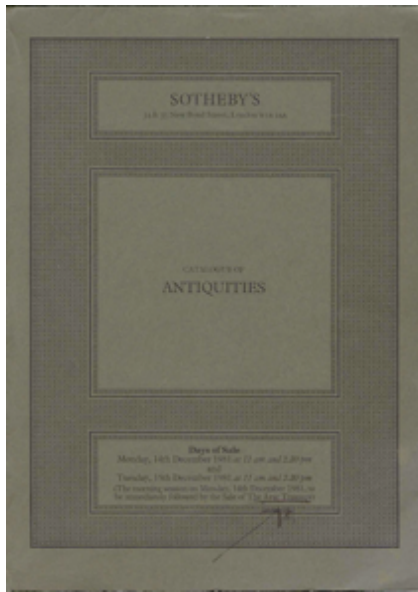


Ill. 6: Architectural marble fragments, theatre at Xanthos, Lycia (present day Turkey). As described by Laurence Cavalier, *Architecture romaine d'Asie Mineure : les monuments de Xanthos et leur ornementation* ("Roman architecture of Asia Minor: the monuments of Xanthos and their ornamentation"), ed. Ausonius, coll. Scripta Antiqua, Pessac, 2005.



Ill. 7: Architectural marble fragments, temple of Aphrodite, Aphrodisias, Caria (present day Turkey).

Provenance:



352 A Roman marble Fragment, from a relief, carved with a Medusa head, 16½in. (41.3cm.) by 18in. (48.3cm.), circa 3rd Century A.D.

Ill. 8: Sotheby's London sales catalogue, Antiquities, 14 December 1981, lot 352.



Ill. 9: Mawallok House, Western Districts, Victoria, Australia.