

HEAD OF HERCULES

ROMAN, 2ND CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 30 CM.

WIDTH: 20 CM.

DEPTH: 15 CM.

PROVENANCE:
FRENCH PRIVATE COLLECTION,
REPUTEDLY DISCOVERED IN CARTHAGE
IN THE 1930S.
THEN, BY INHERITANCE, IN A FRENCH
PRIVATE COLLECTION IN NICE IN THE
1950S.



This magnificent head, striking in its great expressiveness, represents the demigod Hercules. He is depicted as a bearded, middle aged man. He has an oval shaped face and high cheekbones, while his small mouth

is formed by thin lips. His prominent brow line and dented forehead accentuate his gaze, rendered by small, slightly almond shaped eyes and exquisitely sculpted eyelids. He seems to be looking discreetly down to the right. His angular face is framed by thick hair and a full beard. Both are shaped by small, delicate curls that reveal small ears. The demigod is wearing a crown of silver poplar leaves. Sculpted in white marble, our head presents traces of concretions, giving it an ochre brown hued patina and attesting to the passing of time.



This head of Hercules is a reduced but extremely well executed version of the resting Hercules, the most famous example of which is the Farnese Hercules, a statuary type originally attributed to the Greek sculptor Lysippus (Ill. 1). Hercules was the son of Zeus and his lover Alcmena. Endowed with “Herculean” strength, from his birth, he drew the jealousy of Zeus’ wife, Hera. Driven insane by her, he killed his wife and sons. To atone, and by Pythia’s order, Hercules put himself under the command of his enemy Eurystheus, who entrusted him with the very well-known twelve labours. The Hercules resting type represents the moment when the demigod granted himself a moment’s respite after having achieved his labours. He is generally represented standing, leaning against a tree trunk, holding different attributes linked to the labours such as the Nemean lion skin or the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides.



This iconography has featured in many sculptures over the centuries, sometimes with a few variants. Our head can be likened to the Caserta type, a derivative of the Farnese Hercules, which presents a few variants in terms of the position of the arms and legs and the arrangement of the demigod’s hair. Similarly to our head, Hercules could sometimes be crowned with poplar leaves. According to a Roman legend, the demigod wore the crown to protect himself when he descended to the Underworld to complete the last of the twelve labours: capturing Cerberus, the three headed dog and guardian of the doors to the Underworld. Another legend says that Hercules imported the silver poplar from north western Greece and used its wood to make equipment for the Olympic Games, as he is known as their founder.

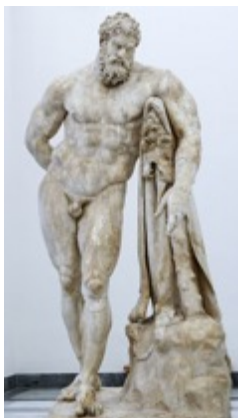
Gorgeous examples of this iconographic variant are currently conserved in Afyon and

Tunis (Ill. 2-3). Likewise, a full statue of a crowned Hercules is today conserved at the J. Paul Getty Museum (Ill. 4).

This type of iconography strongly inspired the artists of the following centuries, particularly those of the baroque movement. The Hellenistic period bore witness to the development of the Hellenistic baroque, a style that privileged the representation of theatrical scenes in which the violence of actions and feelings is exacerbated. Under Alexander the Great, Lysippus' portraits, which inspired our Roman copy, emphasised facial features, which were more intense and expressive like those of our Hercules. The movement's influence can also be seen in his hair and full beard, which, again, accentuate the heroic side of the portrait.

Our head was reputedly discovered in Carthage while the house of its previous owner was being built in the 1930s. It was then conserved in the family's collections and hung on the wall of their residence in the south of France in Nice (Ill. 5).

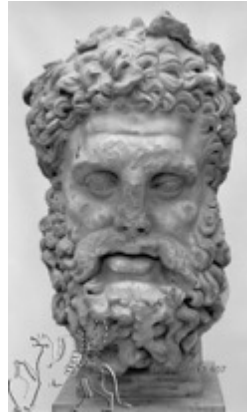
Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Farnese Hercules, imperial period, marble, H.: 317 cm. National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv. no. 6001.



Ill. 2. Hercules, Roman, marble. Afyonkarasihar Archaeological Museum, Turkey.



Ill. 3. Crowned head of Hercules, Roman, based on a Greek original, marble, H.: 58 cm. National Bardo Museum, Tunisia, inv. no. C1033.

Ill. 4. (Detail) Statue of Hercules, Roman, marble, H.: 116.8 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. no. 73.AA.43.1.

Provenance:



Ill. 5. Our head at the residence of its previous owners, 1970s.