

HEAD OF ISIS

ROMAN, PROBABLY FROM EGYPT, 2ND CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 29 CM.

WIDTH: 21 CM.

DEPTH: 26 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMER COLLECTION GEORGE HOLDEN
TINKHAM (1870-1956), BOSTON AND
CRAMERTON, NORTH CAROLINA.
SOLD AT SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK,
"ANTIQUITIES AND ISLAMIC ART",
18 JUNE 1991, LOT 98.*

*FORMER AMERICAN PRIVATE COLLECTION.
SOLD AT SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK,
"ANTIQUITIES", 6 JUNE 2006, LOT 30.
PROPERTY FROM THE ESTATE OF LOUIS
MAURY, SWITZERLAND, ACQUIRED AT THE
ABOVE SALE.*



This elegant marble head represents the goddess Isis. It is very slightly turned to the right, displaying a roundish face with full

cheeks. Her lips are subtly parted, the corner quirked as though she is about to smile. Her straight nose is framed by two almond shaped eyes with fine eyelids, surmounted by a prominent brow line. Her soft gaze and wide eyes give our goddess a very soothing appearance. Her elegance is also visible in her magnificent hairstyle. A central parting divides the front locks, which are held back by a thin band. Slightly wavy, each lock is individually sculpted, making her hair appear voluminous. It is thick and hides the ears of our Isis almost entirely. The locks are held back and gathered in a low chignon from which other big, regular curls escape, spilling down her neck. Distinctly shaped, these are commonly known as Libyan curls and are one of the features specific to portraits of the goddess Isis, as well as those of Ptolemaic queens depicted as Isis. Finally, on top of the head, there is a rectangular mortise that would have received the goddess' crown, generally a lotus flower. Our sculpture is carved from white, large grain marble. Its patina lends it hues that are now golden, symbolizing the mark of time on the stone. This particular marble was widely used in oriental sculptures, especially towards Alexandria.

This portrait thus depicts Isis, Egyptian goddess, wife of Osiris and mother of Horus. Considered the protector of the dead, she was also seen as a model for women, as a



devoted mother and wife. In Ancient Egypt, the goddess was generally represented as tall and slender, wearing a sheath dress and a crown that was initially shaped like a throne and then a solar disc framed by two horns (ill. 1).



Already very popular in Egypt, the cult of the goddess would extend beyond the borders to encompass the whole of the Mediterranean, mainly through the conquests of Alexander the Great in 332 BC. With the arrival of the Greeks in Egypt, the pre-established religions would not disappear, but be adopted and sometimes fused with the religions that were imported. This would be visible in the representation of the deities, with the Egyptian gods lending their features and attributes to the Greek and then Roman deities. Serapis is thus a deity born from the fusion of Osiris-Apis and Hades. Like Serapis, Isis was first associated with the Greek goddess Demeter, then with the Roman goddesses Fortuna and Venus (ill. 2-3). A symbol of prosperity, linked to life and

death, she was also associated with healing and fertility. Her cult was then disseminated by means of trading routes and the temples that were beginning to appear in Greek cities. One of the most important was built on the island of Delos in the 2nd century BC. In Delos, an important centre for maritime and terrestrial trade, Isis was worshipped as a personification of luck, offering protection to merchants during their journeys. Those same merchants would then disseminate her cult on a wide scale in Naples, Campania and even Rome. In the 1st century BC, the cult of Isis thus became very predominant, particularly in the form of a mystery cult, or, in other words, a cult that developed alongside official rites, accessible only to initiates. Under the Roman Empire, the cult reached its height in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, with, for example, the construction of an important temple devoted to the goddess near the Campus Martius. Her cult then spread on an even wider scale and would reach even Great Britain in the North and Asia in the East.



Among the Egyptian deities, Isis was thus one of the most worshipped in the Roman Empire. Taking on many functions, the goddess had a universal aspect that caused her to be called “Isis of the Ten Thousand Names”. In his *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius thus described her as “the supreme deity, queen of the manes, first among the inhabitants of the sky, universal form of gods and goddesses, [...] unique power worshipped under as many guises, faces, cults and names as there are peoples on the surface of the Earth”.



In terms of iconography, the representations of the goddess evolved. During the Roman period, the goddess took on typically Roman traits, while keeping some attributes inherited from Ancient Egypt. As for our head, Isis’ hair is generally styled in Libyan curls, a hairstyle typical of the Ptolemaic period, but which persisted in Roman sculptures. In some works, she also still has

her Egyptian crown, a sistrum or uraeus, which all hark back to her Egyptian origins. Magnificent examples are currently in international museums (ill. 4-7).

Our sculpture was in the collection of George Holden Tinkham (1870-1956), member of the US House of Representatives from Massachusetts. Originally from Boston, he travelled widely around Europe, Asia and Africa over the course of his lifetime. He thus gleaned many works of art over the years, a considerable number of which were given to the MFA in Boston (ill. 8). The sculpture went up for sale for a first time at Sotheby’s in 1991 and was added to an American private collection, then for a second time in 2006, when it was included in the Swiss collection of Louis Maury (ill. 9-10).

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Bust of Isis, Roman, 2nd century AD, 117 - 138, bronze, H.: 11.4 cm. Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, inv. no. MH 1965.10. C.G.

Ill. 2. Isis Fortuna, Roman, 1st century BC - 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 35.5 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York, inv. no. 62.45.



Ill. 3. Figure of Isis-Aphrodite, Egyptian, 2nd century AD, painted terracotta, H.: 49.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1991.76.

Ill. 4. Isis, Egyptian, 1st century AD, basalt, H.: 97.8 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York, inv. no. 74.220.

Ill. 5. Isis, Roman, 100 - 150 AD, marble, H.: 43 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. N 1089.



Ill. 6. The Goddess Isis and her Son, Egyptian, 332-30 BC, faience, H.: 17 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 55.121.5.

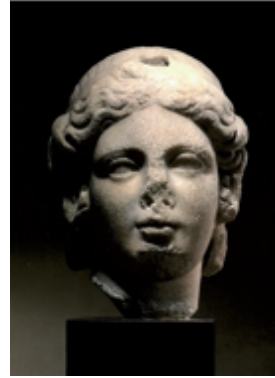
Ill. 7. Statue of Isis, Roman, 117-138 AD, marble, H.: 179.5 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome, inv. no. MC0744.



Ill. 8. George Holden Tinkham (1870-1956).

Publications:

- Sotheby's New York, Antiquities and Islamic Art, 18 June 1991, lot 98.



□ 98
A Roman Marble Head of the Goddess Isis, 2nd Century A.D., probably from Egypt, her head turned slightly to her right, with parted lips, almond-shaped eyes each with incised line on the lower lid, and smooth brow, her deeply drilled hair bound in a chignon and diadem, with long tresses escaping over the ears, a square mortise above the forehead for insertion of her crown. Height 11 1/8 in. (28.3 cm.)

Provenance:
George Holden Tinkham, Boston and Cranston, North Carolina, Representative from Boston to the U.S. Congress, 1913-1943 (see note to lot 146)
Cf. Vermeule, *Sculpture in America*, no. 185, the head of Isis-Tetis in The Brooklyn Museum.

- Sotheby's New York, Antiquities, 6 June 2006, lot 30.



Property from an American Private collection
A MARBLE HEAD OF THE GODDESS ISIS, ROMAN IMPERIAL, 2ND CENTURY A.D., PROBABLY FROM EGYPT
turned slightly to her right, with parted lips, almond-shaped eyes each with incised line on the lower lid, and smooth brow, her deeply drilled hair bound in a chignon and diadem, long tresses escaping over the ears, a square mortise above the forehead for insertion of the crown of the goddess.
Height 11 1/8 in. 28.3 cm.

PROVENANCE
George Holden Tinkham, Boston and Cranston, North Carolina, representative from Boston to the U.S. Congress, 1913-1943