

# PTOLEMAIC QUEEN

EGYPTIAN, PTOLEMAIC PERIOD, 2<sup>ND</sup> – 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BC  
BASALT

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HEIGHT: 23 CM.

WIDTH: 17 CM.

DEPTH: 16 CM.

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*PROVENANCE:*  
*FORMER COLLECTION OF*  
*SIR JACOB EPSTEIN (1880-1959),*  
*PIONEER OF MODERN SCULPTURE,*  
*NEW YORK AND LONDON.*  
*FORMER COLLECTION OF*  
*BRUCE MCALPINE, LONDON.*  
*FORMER JAMES AND MARILYNN ALSDORF*  
*COLLECTION, ACQUIRED FROM THE ABOVE*  
*IN 1974.*



This mysterious portrait sculpted from gorgeous dark basalt is a precious example of the art of Alexandria during the Hellenistic period. It shows us the face of a young

woman looking straight ahead, head high and expression gentle. Her cheeks and chin are round and her small mouth with its full, geometric lips is open in a slight pout. Her neck is etched with two light folds formed by thin, regular lines. Her eyebrows are sculpted in two symmetrical arcs, which dovetail with her straight, slightly flat nose, currently incomplete. They surmount her eyes, which are exaggeratedly big and empty, making this head altogether striking. They were initially filled in with another material, very likely marble or glass, adding polychromy and realism to the portrait. Her hair is represented with wavy locks, flattened on either side of a central parting at the top of her head. It falls in large, regular curls, known as Libyan curls, to her neck. All these features tie in with the Ptolemaic portraits created in Alexandria in the Hellenistic period.

The city of Alexandria, in the Nile Delta in Egypt, was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. When he died, General Ptolemy inherited the Kingdom of Egypt and founded the Ptolemaic dynasty, which reigned until 31 BC. Ptolemaic Egypt was considered the richest and most powerful of the Hellenistic kingdoms and reached its height during the reign of Ptolemy III (246-222 BC). Alexandria was then the largest city in the Greek world, a multicultural metropolis of half a million inhabitants, which Strabo called the “trading post of the



world". In Ptolemaic Egypt, two worlds coexisted: the indigenous Egyptians and pharaonic tradition on one hand and the Greco-Macedonian immigrants who had followed Alexander on the other. The Ptolemaic sovereigns had to contend with both sides of their kingdom and invented a very particular art that borrowed from both traditions. This beautiful portrait is a perfect illustration of that syncretism.



The use of basalt, stone of a beautiful deep black with warm brown hues, is traditionally Egyptian. Several deposits were mined in the Nile Delta during the Ptolemaic period and Ptolemaic sovereigns widely used the stone for the official art of the court, thus aligning themselves with pharaonic tradition (ill. 1). This volcanic rock is very dense, which explains the graphic appearance of the details of the hair and accentuates the hieratic nature

of the figure. The frontal aspect of the work also stems from Egyptian pictorial tradition. The hardness of the stone would have required great skill on the sculptor's part, particularly visible in the softness of the contours of the face, which is more in line with the Greek tradition. Libryan curls, heavy braids that resemble ringlets, originated in Cyrenaica (present day Libya).



They were adopted by the Ptolemies in representations of the goddess Isis (Ill. 2), then in those of Ptolemaic queens assimilated to Isis. They can be found both in portraits rooted in Greek tradition such as those of Cleopatra II conserved in Paris (ill. 3) and Berenice II in Cairo (ill. 4) and in more Egyptian ones such as the statue of a Ptolemaic queen in New York (ill. 5). These enable us to identify our portrait as that of a princess or a queen. The large eyes of a

polychrome material are also characteristic of Ptolemaic royal portraits, symbolising the divine nature of the sovereign (ill. 6). All these characteristics can be found in several diorite portraits – another Egyptian stone that is similar to basalt – conserved in Copenhagen (ill. 7-9), all dated to between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC.



This beautiful head belonged to the collection of the modernist sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959, ill. 10). Originally from New York, he moved to Paris in 1902, and then to London. In 1911, he was tasked with executing Oscar Wilde's tomb in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. During that trip, he associated with Picasso, Brancusi and Modigliani. Very early on, he discovered and began to collect African art, but his impressive collection also included antique Greco-Roman and Egyptian works, which surrounded him in his home in London (ill. 11). Following his death in 1959, his collection

was exhibited at the Arts Council of Great Britain in London in 1960. It was then sold by Christie's in 1961.

Following the sale, our sculpture was put on the art market in London in the 1960s, with the Sphinx Gallery in London (ill. 12) and then the Bruce McAlpine gallery. The latter sold it to James and Marilyn Alsdorf in 1974 (ill. 13). As collectors and aesthetes from Chicago, during the 1950s, the Alsdorfs accumulated a considerable collection of artworks - classical, Asian and contemporary - over the course of their travels. They also patronised museums and cultural institutions in Chicago, and in that capacity, they were involved in founding the Museum of Contemporary Art.

#### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Head of a Ptolemaic King, 2nd century BC, basalt, H.: 40.6 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York, inv. no. 53.75.

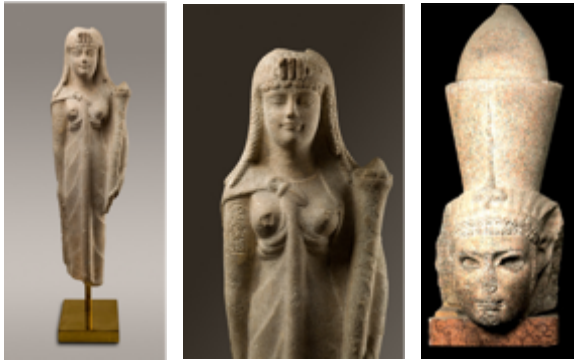


Ill. 2. Isis, coin struck by Ptolemy IV (221-203 BC).



Ill. 3. Portrait of Cleopatra II or Cleopatra III, 2nd half of the 2nd century BC, marble, H.: 37 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 3546.

Ill. 4. Berenice II in Isis, late 3rd century - early 2nd century BC, marble, H.: 19 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, inv. no. JE39517.



Ill. 5. Statue of a Ptolemaic Queen, maybe Cleopatra VII, ca. 200-30 BC, limestone, H.: 62,5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 89.2.660.

Ill. 6. Head of Ptolemy IV, 222-205 BC, pink granite, H.: 150 cm. Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria, inv. no. 3364.



Ill. 7. Portrait of Ptolemy, 3rd century BC, diorite, H.: 47 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Denmark, inv. no. IN 933.

Ill. 8. Portrait of Ptolemy, 1st century AD, diorite, H.: 29 cm. Carlsberg Glyptothek, Denmark, inv. no. IN 294.

Ill. 9. Portrait of Ptolemy, maybe the queen Arsinoë III, ca. 222-205 BC, diorite. Carlsberg Glyptothek, Denmark, inv. no. IN 586.

## Provenance:



Ill. 10. Jacob Epstein in his workshop.

Ill. 11. View of the collection of Jacob Epstein.



Ill. 12. Advertisement for the Sphinx Gallery showing our head, Apollo, ca. 1967-1969.

BRUCE McALPINE	
114 CRAWFORD STREET - NEW BOND STREET - LONDON W.1. TELEPHONE: 01-734 480	
NAME: Mr. James V. Alsdorf	DATE: 15 July 74
ADDRESS: 301 Woodley Road Croydon Surrey - S.W.4.	INVOICE: S 0073
QTY:	DESCRIPTION:
1	Black basalt portrait head of a young lady. Ptolemaic. Stone 220/200 B.C. Height 39 cm. Formerly in the late Sir Jacob Epstein collection.
	£ 5000
TOTAL (Tax Inclusive) £ 5000	
Black Basalt Head of a Woman	
Originally in the collection of the late Sir Jacob Epstein. This head has been dated to the late second Century B.C. by Mr. Bernard Bothmer of The Brooklyn Museum. Additionally, Mr. Richard Nicholls of The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, has identified her as being a member of the royal house, possibly the Princess Berenice.	

Ill. 13. Invoice from Bruce McAlpine from 15 July 1974 for James Alsdorf, and description of the head.