

# THEATRICAL MASK

HELLENISTIC, CA 3<sup>RD</sup> - 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY BC  
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 23 CM.

WIDTH: 20 CM.

DEPTH: 9 CM.

*PROVENANCE:*

*FORMERLY IN THE COLLECTION OF  
THEODOROS A. ZOUMBOULAKIS,  
ATHENS.*

*ACQUIRED BY PATRICK A. DOHENY  
(1923 - 2014), BEVERLY HILLS, IN 1961.  
PASSED DOWN AS AN HEIRLOOM  
THEREAFTER.*



This face, which immediately strikes the viewer by its expressiveness, is a magnificent example of a Greek theatrical mask. The character looks surly and determined, almost scary. All his features are exaggerated and caricatural and his skin

is excessively stretched. His wide-open mouth reveals finely detailed teeth. It is framed by a full moustache and a now fragmentary beard, which probably ended in a point, similarly to other models (Ill. 1). His nose is flat, as are his prominent brows, which droop comically over his eyes, accentuating his gaze. The eyelids are also prominent, while the irises are deeply carved, giving him a very expressive look.



His forehead is lined with deep wrinkles, which, with the full beard, suggest an advanced age. His hair forms a smooth, simple hairstyle, which covers part of his



forehead and bares the character's temples, following the shape of his face.

This sculpture, with its undeniably grotesque and comical aspect, represents a comic mask. In ancient Greece, theatrical actors wore masks so that their characters could be recognised as soon as they stepped onto the stage, even by the spectators who were the furthest from the *orchestra*. They were made of perishable materials such as wood, wax, bark and leather, so none have made their way to us directly. However, we have many representations through the artistic creations inspired by the theatrical world: terracotta figurines, painted vases and sculptures such as this one.



The typology of masks differed according to the theatrical genre: tragedy, satirical drama or comedy. Julius Pollux, Alexandrian author who lived in the

2<sup>nd</sup> century, gives a detailed list of 44 different types of mask for the New Comedy genre alone in Volume IV of his *Onomasticon*. The genre developed in Athens in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, particularly with plays by Menander, then flourished in the Hellenistic period.



We have only a very fragmentary corpus of these plays, but it shows the progressive elaboration of stock characters and the increasing attention paid to social status, character traits and the expression of individual feelings. The author Platonios described Menander's masks as having eyebrows and mouths that were so deformed, they no longer resembled human faces. Our mask, with its traits that are exaggerated to incite laughter, perfectly fits this description. We can thus align it with the New Comedy genre and date it to the

Hellenistic period, similarly to other examples conserved in Athens and the Vatican (Ill. 2 and 3). Comparing it to the different types of masks, ours seems to represent an elderly slave. The features are similar to those of various terracotta figurines also representing slaves in New Comedy (Ill. 4-7). It is thus a perfect example of the search for characters stereotyped according to their social status that defined this theatrical genre.



Theatre was very important in the Graeco-Roman world. All cities of a large enough size had a theatre, often open-air, arranged in such a way that it afforded a view of the surrounding landscape. Citizens would thus gather to see the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander. Such popularity explains the vast success of the theatrical mask motif in the decorative and

statuary arts. They were not only given as *ex-voto* offerings in sanctuaries, but also used as ornaments for monuments, sarcophagi and Hellenistic and Roman villas. Our mask is a gorgeous, rare example of an in-the-round sculpture following this trend.

Its fragmentary aspect, the slightly yellow patina of the marble and the archaeological concretions dotting it recall its rich history, dating back to the Hellenistic period. It was part of the collection of Theodoros A. Zoumboulakis, art collector and antiquarian, who opened a shop specialising in artworks and antiquities in Edward Law street in the centre of Athens in 1912. Carried on by his children, the Zoumboulakis gallery became very important for modern art in the 1960s and exhibited works by Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Pablo Picasso and even Giorgio de Chirico (Ill. 8). In 1961, our mask was acquired by the American Patrick A. Doheny (1923-2014, Ill. 9), a businessman who worked in the oil sector, and was housed in his home in Beverly Hills. It has remained in his family until the present day.

## Comparatives:



Ill. 1: Statuette of a standing actor, Greek, Sterea Hellas, Evia, Attic, terracotta, H.: 13 cm. Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, inv. no. Oppermann.tc.151.

Ill. 2: New Comedy theatrical mask, representing the head slave, Greek, Athens, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Pentelic marble. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 3373.



Ill. 3: Fragment of a New Comedy theatrical mask representing a slave, Greek, marble, H.: 15.4 cm. Gregoriano Profano Museum, Vatican Museums, inv. no. 7081.

Ill. 4: Actor with a basket, Greek, Athens, 400–330 BC, terracotta, H.: 10 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. S 1682.



Ill. 5: Comic mask of a slave, Greek, Smyrna, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC–1<sup>st</sup> century AD, terracotta, H.: 11 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. CA 747.



Ill. 6: Slave actor sitting on an altar, Greek, Myrina, late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, terracotta, H.: 12 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Myr 671.

Ill. 7: Actor with a dulcimer, Greek, Boeotia, ca. 350 BC, terracotta, H.: 12 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. CA 540.

## Provenance:



Ill. 8: Theodoros A. Zoumboulakis, sitting on the right, surrounded by family members; Giorgio de Chirico in the background.



Ill. 9: Patrick A. Doheny during his military service.