

HEAD OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

GREEK, HELLENISTIC, 3RD-2ND CENTURY BC
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 21 CM.

WIDTH: 20 CM.

DEPTH: 17 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMERLY IN THE PRIVATE
COLLECTION OF MR. MIKAS, FRENCH
ART DEALER, 7TH ARRONDISSEMENT,
PARIS.*

*SOLD TO MR. CLARAC, 79 RUE DES
PLANTES, 14TH ARRONDISSEMENT, PARIS
ON MAY 1935.*



This head, carved in the round, depicts an idealised young man. The face, tilted slightly to the right, is almost perfectly oval in shape, its harmonious proportions reflecting the pursuit of an ideal of beauty characteristic of Hellenistic Greek sculpture. The fairly broad forehead sits above subtly modelled brow ridges that frame two wide-open almond-

shaped eyes. The upper eyelids, thick and delicately arched, cast a slight shadow over the eyeballs, which are depicted without incisions for the irises or pupils, in keeping with the conventions of Hellenistic Greek sculpture. The gaze, calm and steady, contributes to the sense of serenity that characterises the face as a whole. The nose is now missing. The cheeks, full and harmoniously shaped, still convey the figure's youth. They lead to a small mouth with closed, full lips, whilst the chin, short and slightly rounded, serves to emphasise and complete the oval shape of the face. As for the hair, it is arranged in thick, wavy strands that frame the face on either side of the temples. Styled in broad, supple sections rather than individual curls, these strands completely cover the ears and lend the whole style a sense of volume. The back reveals the construction of this hairstyle, which was likely held in place by a ribbon that has since disappeared. The hair is gathered at the nape of the neck to form a substantial mass, carefully sculpted into rounded contours, the shaping of which remains particularly well preserved. The top of the skull features a small circular opening which may correspond to the position of an attached element, such as a crown or some other accessory that has since been lost.

Preserved down to the neck, this head originally belonged to a larger statue. Despite surface damage caused by erosion, the work retains a remarkable quality of modelling, as well as an ochre patina attesting to its age.



The identification of this head as Alexander the Great, identified with Helios, is based on a set of stylistic characteristics inherited from the official portrait of the Macedonian ruler, which was widely circulated throughout the Hellenistic world after his death. Although wear and tear affecting the top of the skull means that the famous *anastolè*—the raised forelock that constitutes one of Alexander's principal iconographic attributes—can no longer be observed with certainty, the idealised rendering of the face, the youthfulness of the figure, his physical features and his abundant hair arranged in broad, wavy locks are fully in keeping with the Alexandrian tradition.



Alexander III of Macedon, born in Pella in 356 BC, was the son of Philip II, King of Macedon, and Olympias. Educated by Aristotle, he succeeded his father in 336 BC and immediately embarked upon the conquest of the Persian Empire. In less than thirteen years, he established the largest empire the ancient world had yet known, extending from Greece to the banks of the Indus. His campaigns profoundly shaped the

history of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East, encouraging the spread of the Greek language, Hellenic institutions, and a shared culture that gave rise to the Hellenistic Age. Following his premature death at Babylon in 323 BC, Alexander became far more than a mere conqueror.



His image was progressively transformed into that of both hero and divinity. The rulers who emerged from the partition of his empire—most notably the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Syria, and the Antigonids in Macedon—claimed his political legacy and employed his likeness as a powerful instrument of dynastic legitimacy. His portrait consequently became one of the most widely disseminated images of the ancient world.

The association of Alexander with Helios, the Greek sun god, developed within this context of royal glorification. In Greek thought, Helios embodied celestial light, universal sovereignty, cosmic order, and victory. To assimilate Alexander with the solar deity was to present the conqueror as a

ruler whose authority symbolically extended across the entire *oikoumene*—the inhabited world—just as the rays of the sun illuminate the whole earth. This association also found its origins in Alexander's own political programme. During his visit to the sanctuary of Zeus-Ammon at the Oasis of Siwa, the oracle acknowledged him as the son of the god, thereby reinforcing the concept of his divine parentage.



This iconography assumed several forms in ancient art. Some representations depict Alexander explicitly wearing the radiate crown of Helios, particularly on coinage, engraved gems, reliefs, and small sculptures, where the radiate crown became the principal attribute of the solar deity. Other, more subtle works express this assimilation through the idealisation of his features: his youth, his abundant flowing hair, and the nobility of his gaze. The present head appears to belong to this latter tradition. Nevertheless, the small perforation at the crown of the head may once have served to secure an applied attribute—possibly a crown—now lost. This interpretation is

supported by several comparable works. A silver and gold medallion depicting Alexander-Helios, dated to the late 4th century BC and sold at Christie's New York (ill. 1), explicitly identifies the ruler with the solar god. Closer in character to the present sculpture is the small marble head in the Musée du Louvre (ill. 2), dated to the 3rd-2nd century BC, whose youthful features and closely related modelling remain striking despite its fragmentary condition. A terracotta head preserved in Cinquantenaire Museum, Brussels (ill. 3), likewise identified as Alexander-Helios, wears a crescent-shaped crown. The Hellenistic portrait in the Archaeological Museum of Pella (ill. 4), Alexander's birthplace, displays the same idealised facial treatment and similarly arranged broad, wavy locks of hair. During the Roman period, this artistic tradition continued through numerous copies of Hellenistic originals. Among these are the head of Alexander in the British Museum (ill. 5), whose modelling of the facial features closely recalls the present example, and the small bronze statuette in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (ill. 6), in which Alexander is represented wearing a radiate crown. The Capitoline Museums also preserve a celebrated monumental head (ill. 7), a Roman copy after a Hellenistic original, while the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, houses a small bronze head (ill. 8) likewise depicting Alexander crowned with the rays of Helios.

The present sculpture formerly belonged to the Galerie Mikas, located in Paris's 7th arrondissement during the first half of the twentieth century. Active in the trade of Classical antiquities, the gallery played an important role in the dissemination of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian works of art, at a time when Paris was one of Europe's principal centres for the antiquities market. The present head was acquired on 15 May 1935 by M. Clarac, residing at 79 Rue des Plantes, Paris, Paris 14th as recorded on the surviving

purchase invoice (ill. 9). This documentation provides valuable evidence of the sculpture's presence on the French art market for more than ninety-one years.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Coin depicting Alexander-Helios, Greek, late 4th century BC, silver and gold. Private collection sold at Christie's New York.



Ill. 2. Head of Alexander, Greek, Hellenistic, 3rd–2nd century BC, marble, H.: 8 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. no. MND 750.



Ill. 3. Head of Alexander Helios, Greek, Hellenistic, 3rd–2nd century BC, terracotta. Cinquantenaire Museum, Brussels.



Ill. 4. Portrait of Alexander the Great, Greek, Hellenistic, 3rd century BC, marble. Archaeological Museum of Pella.



Ill. 5. Head of Alexander the Great, Roman, 1st century AD, marble. British Museum, London, inv. no. Arachne 1070519.



Ill. 6. Statue of Alexander, Roman, 1st century AD, bronze, H.: 9 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, inv. no. 54.2290.

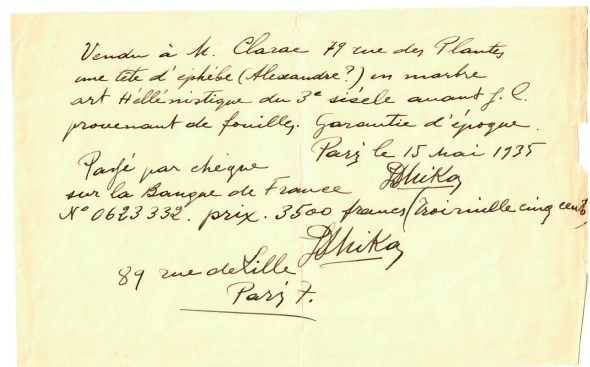


Ill. 7. Head of Alexander Helios, Roman, 1st-2nd century AD, after a Hellenistic original from the 3rd-2nd century BC, marble, H.: 58 cm. Capitoline Museums, Rome.



Ill. 8. Head of Alexander Helios, Roman, 2nd-3rd century AD, bronze, H.: 7.5 cm. MFA Boston, Inv. No. 64.316.

Provenance:



Ill. 9. Purchase invoice from the Mikas Gallery to Mr Clarac, 15 May 1935.