

# ARCHAISTIC HEAD OF A GIRL

ROMAN, 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BC – 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AD  
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 15 CM.

WIDTH: 13.5 CM.

DEPTH: 13.5 CM.

*PROVENANCE:*  
*SOLD BY SOTHEBY'S LONDON*  
*"ANTIQUITIES", 9 DECEMBER 1974 – LOT*  
*181.*  
*PURCHASED BY DELPLACE, THEN*  
*JOINED A BELGIAN PRIVATE*  
*COLLECTION AND WAS*  
*PASSED DOWN WITHIN THE SAME*  
*FAMILY UNTIL 2025.*



Sculpted from marble, this head of a young girl is striking in its marvellous execution, which perfectly manages to capture the very essence of youth. All that is left of this work is a head, that of a young girl, whose oval-shaped face is gracefully tilted, gaze downcast. Her smooth, serene forehead surmounts perfectly sculpted brow ridges

and a nose the elegance of which remains intact, despite the fact it is chipped. Her eyes, rimmed with salient eyelids, are almond-shaped and cast a mysterious gaze.



The lower part of her face confronts that perfect geometry, as it is more lifelike and thus all the more charming. Above her rounded chin, a thin, delicate mouth forms a pout, or perhaps a sweet smile. The mischievous dimple that creases her left cheek would seem to support the latter hypothesis. The delicate, light modelling of the flesh breathes life into the marble and its fresh appearance wonderfully conveys the youth of the model. Depending on the angle, the young girl appears sulky or impish, mocking or angelic, thereby embodying the



multiple facets of adolescence. Yet, the crowning achievement of this *puella* is her hair. Girded with a herringbone ribbon, it falls upon her forehead in regular ringlets, forming little bouquets of curls on either side of her face and concealing her ears. Her hair is gathered at the back of her head and tied in a refined knot.



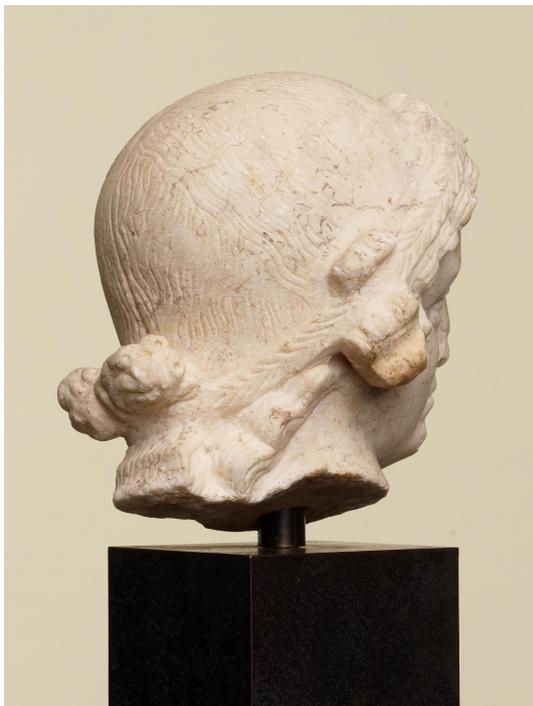
Sculpting this hairstyle enabled the sculptor to exercise the full range of their technical skill by using effect after effect. On the top of her head, the hair is simply engraved with crisscrossing locks, then it is sculpted in slight waves framing her face and, finally, a chisel was used to form the deepest curls. At the top of her forehead, one lock has escaped her ribbon, genuinely appearing to be compressed by it, which attests to the talent of the sculptor, who was able to imbue the marble with the suppleness of hair. The hectic appearance of the hair, its vigorous treatment and the resulting play of light and shadow frame the face and enhance its plastic beauty. The sculpting of the marble, the brilliance of the contrasts and the delicacy of the expression reveal the exceptional mastery of the artist who created this work. Past centuries have left their mark on the face of

this eternal young girl. Some chips thus attest to that material history. Its burial left a web of maculae on the white surface of the marble – the wrinkles, who slumbered underground for over a millennium and is now awake before our eyes. That patina further enriches the perception of our work and imbues it with a distinct melancholy, which resonates with her enigmatic gaze.



Cult object, familial portrait, object of private devotion or deity, the precise function of such a sculpture is difficult to gauge, defies categorical interpretation and seems to escape us, all the more so as that sculpture is fragmentary. Its middling dimensions suggest a domestic work. More interesting still is its archaistic treatment. The rendering of the hair is inspired by Greek statuary from the archaic period of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, especially the back of the head with its etched locks, identical to that of a bust currently preserved at the Altes Museum (ill. 1) and that of another from the Cavendish collection in Chatsworth (ill. 2). Her smile recalls that of the *korai*, joyful works created to please the gods, which the ancients called *agalмата*. Yet, our head is far from being the slavish copy of a work from the

6<sup>th</sup> century BC – the sculptor was able to combine Roman tastes with that archaic inspiration. The use of a chisel for the most deeply carved curls, the animation of the face, its great expressiveness and the not quite - frontal aspect all attest to its hybrid nature. The archaistic style was a common practice among Roman sculptors, “very popular in the art of the imperial period until the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century”<sup>1</sup> and “above all as an ornamental art, yet without needing to be stripped of all religiosity”<sup>2</sup>.



The subtle expression of our head makes it unique in the limited corpus of heads of young girls. That preserved at the Louvre (ill. 3) is far more morose, while that of the British Museum (ill. 4) is unequivocally smiling. The hairstyle in our sculpture is almost identical to that in one of the most famous portraits of ancient Rome (ill. 5), with a single exception: the hair is held back by a metallic hairnet, not a ribbon. Astonishingly, the direction of the face, the twist of the neck

<sup>1</sup> Mary-Anne Zagdoun, *La sculpture archaïsante dans l'art hellénistique et dans l'art romain du Haut-Empire*, Athens, École Française d'Athènes,

and even the half-smile almost immediately conjure up the memory of *The Smiling Angel* (ill. 6) of Reims cathedral, which demonstrates how ancient sculpture remained a model for the artists of subsequent centuries.

This work was part of an Anglo-Saxon private collection until it was sold at Sotheby's London in 1974 (ill. 7.1 and 7.2). Purchased by Delplace, it then joined a Belgian private collection and was passed down within the same family until 2025.

### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Archaistic head of a woman, Roman, AD 41-54, marble, H.: 29 cm. Altes Museum, Berlin, inv. no. Sk 604.



Ill. 2. Archaistic bust of a woman, Roman, marble, H.: 56.1 cm. Cavendish collection, Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, England.

1989, p. 33. Translated from the French, for the purpose of this text, by K. Manson.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 224. Translated from the French, for the purpose of this text, by K. Manson.



Ill. 3. Statue of a young girl, Roman, 25 BC-AD 25, marble, H.: 144 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MR 203.



Ill. 4. Portrait bust of a young girl, Roman, AD 210-230, marble, H.: 69 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1879,0712.13.

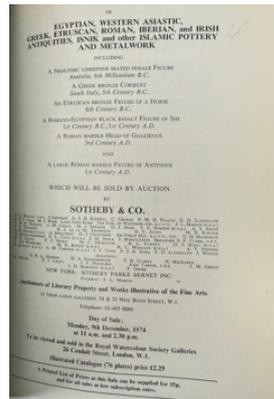


Ill. 5. *Woman with wax tablets and stylus*, Roman, AD 55-79, Pompeii, fresco on gesso, H.: 37 cm. Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli, inv. no. 9084.



Ill. 6. *The Smiling Angel*, circa 1240, Reims, limestone, Reims cathedral.

## Provenance:



Ill. 7.1. Sotheby's catalogue, sale of Monday 9 December 1974, London.

Ill. 7.2 Sotheby's catalogue, sale of Monday 9 December 1974, London, lot 181, p. 109.

