

# HELMETED ATHENA

ROMAN, 1<sup>ST</sup> – 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY AD  
MARBLE

18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RESTORATIONS, INCLUDING THE CREST, THE BUST AND THE PEDESTAL

HEIGHT: 77 CM.

WIDTH: 21.5 CM.

DEPTH: 29 CM.

*PROVENANCE:  
IN A EUROPEAN COLLECTION IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup>  
CENTURY, JUDGING BY THE  
RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.  
THEN IN THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF  
THE FRENCH PAINTER ALBERT ZAVARO,  
FROM HIS ESTATE AND ACQUIRED IN THE  
1970S OR 1980S.*



This impressive marble head represents the Greek goddess Athena, identifiable by her helmet, the emblematic attribute of the warrior deity and protector of Athens. Represented frontally, with a downcast gaze, Athena adopts a solemn attitude, which emphasises her majestic, distant demeanour. Her face is very finely sculpted. Her almond-shaped eyes lie under distinct, finely incised eyelids, in turn dominated by

prominent brow ridges, which give the goddess an extremely intense gaze. Her straight, slightly pointed nose lends her an air of strength and resolve. Her slightly hollowed cheeks contrast with the full lips of her small mouth, which are delicately outlined and slightly parted. Her round, full chin is accentuated by a soft line starting at her jaw and defining the oval shape of her face. That line, rounded and delicately sculpted, seems to evoke the wisdom, gentleness and power of Athena. Her ears are very precisely sculpted, although they are partly concealed by her wavy hair, which frames her face and is gathered at the back of her head in a low queue that falls along the nape of her neck. Her hair is thick and carefully wrought: the locks, crafted with a chisel, are deeply carved and individualised, giving an effect of relief and movement. As a finishing touch, a Corinthian-style helmet, which the goddess is wearing tipped upward on the top of her head, sinks delicately into her hair, creating an impression of depth. The helmet has a particularly detailed crest and two almond-shaped openings for the eyes, while the nose guard is sculpted in slight relief. The lateral leather lappets also show meticulous detail, reflecting the curve and volume of Athena's hair. Such helmets originated in the Greek city of Corinth in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and rapidly became an essential part of Greek soldiers' equipment. Extremely durable due to the bronze from which they were made, they attested to the technical advancements made in metal casting in ancient Greece. Over time, the Corinthian helmet became one of the emblematic attributes of warrior deities such



as Ares and, as in our example, Athena. The severity and smoothness of the helmet contrast with the delicate features of the goddess' face and the dynamism of her hair, lending the sculpture a strong sense of presence and a unique solemnity, characteristic of representations of one of the most popular goddesses of the Greek and then Roman pantheons. Finally, her neck, thick and powerful, further adds to the impression of solidity and stability that the figure emanates. The upper part of her torso is adorned with the aegis - Athena's characteristic garment, a goatskin cuirass bordered with snakes. Here, one snake can be seen on either side of the bust, joining to form an oval. Athena's head and neck were fitted onto the cuirass. The ancient head was originally made to be fitted onto a body, the entirety of which would have been larger than life.



The quality of the marble, fine-grained and particularly homogeneous, associated with the delicacy of the polish and its brown patina, makes this work rather exceptional. The sculptor's choice of such marble as a medium enabled them to precisely render shapes and details, showcasing their

considerable technical skill, particularly in their treatment of the surfaces. Some later restorations can, however, be noted, particularly for the crest of the helmet, both lateral lappets among the hair covering the ears and a more discreet intervention for the low queue. The bust and pedestal that support the head are also later restorations.



Despite these interventions, the sculpture still has an undeniably iconic force. The image is immediately recognisable and emblematic of ancient art, inspiring numerous painters and sculptors from the Renaissance until the present. While there are many representations of Athena, reflecting the importance of her cult in antiquity, very few models achieve such a level of quality and preservation. Most comparable examples are currently preserved in the collections of museums. This one, however, is altogether exceptional, both in its dimensions and in its state of preservation.

Athena, or Minerva for the Romans, was the goddess of wisdom and military strategy, known for her valour. She was undoubtedly the most resourceful of the Olympian gods. From her very birth, her destiny as a warrior

was evident. She was the daughter of Zeus and the Oceanid Metis. It was predicted that one of Zeus' sons would seize his throne, so the god tricked Metis, who was pregnant with Athena, into turning herself into a fly and swallowed her. A few months later, beset by a terrible headache, he demanded that Hephaestus, the god of the forge, split open his skull to relieve his pain. Athena then leapt from her father's head, fully armed, helmeted and uttering a war cry. As an adult, she took part in the storied Trojan War and became the protector of many heroes including Diomedes, Ulysses and Telemachus. Her divine functions made her the tutelary deity of Athens, the city that bears her name. After having led the Greek cities to victory against Persian invaders in 490 and 480 BC, Athens experienced an unprecedented cultural boom. The city then honoured its virgin goddess with countless statues and festivals and, naturally, dedicated the main temple of its Acropolis to her: the Parthenon, the name of which is derived from Athena's epithet *parthenos* ("virgin").



From an iconographic perspective, Athena is generally represented armed, helmeted and wearing the aegis. The goddess' popularity

and importance in Greek and then Roman mythology are reflected in the myriad of representations created first by Greek artists and then taken up and disseminated by Roman sculptors. Several iconographic types developed in this manner, illustrating Athena's different facets. The most famous type is that of Athena Parthenos, in which the goddess appears peaceful, while still bearing her warrior's attributes. An example of that iconography is the statue known as the Varvakeion Athena (ill. 1). Our sculpture more closely resembles the Athena with *cista* type, currently at the Louvre (ill. 2).



Discovered in Selino, Crete, the sculpture is a marble statue in the round dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The goddess is represented wearing a *peplos*, crowned with a Corinthian helmet and holding a *cista* (or basket), from which the snake Erichthonius emerges. It is possible the work is a replica of the statue of Athena Hephaistia sculpted by Alcamenes for the temple of Hephaestus in Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. However, our sculpture is also similar to the Athena of Velletri model, known through several Roman copies derived from a classical Greek original dated to 430 BC. The type also associates an

idealised, youthful face with a downcast gaze and Corinthian helmet tilted upwards on the top of the head.



The most complete model of the Velletri type is the monumental statue discovered in Velletri and now preserved at the Louvre (ill. 3). More than 3 metres high, the work makes it possible to imagine the scale of the Greek original, which must have been about 3,50 metres high and which was classified as a colossal statue. The sculpture is the main reference by which the Velletri type is defined. However, other examples can be given, such as the bust of Athena at the Altes Museum in Berlin (ill. 4) and the bust preserved at the Glyptothek in Munich (ill. 5), which follow the same iconographic scheme. Further examples are the head of Athena at the British Museum (ill. 6), which illustrates the dissemination and lasting popularity of the type in the Roman world, and the head of Athena preserved at the Antikenmuseum Basel (ill. 7). The latter, sculpted from Thasian marble and dating back to the Roman Empire, is described as the smaller copy of an Athenian bronze statue, crafted in about 430 BC. The quality of the sculpting, the gentleness of the face

and the harmonious integration of the Corinthian helmet with the general contour of the head are very much in line with our sculpture.

Our work is from the private collection of the French painter Albert Zavarro (1925–2022). Born in Constantinople, he worked as a fine arts professor in France. From the 1950s and 1960s, he showed a keen interest in archaeology and the arts of antiquity. Alongside his wife, he accumulated, over several decades – from the fifties or sixties until the beginning of the 2000s – a vast collection of antiques. His affinity for antiquity stemmed from the teachings of Maurice Brianchon (1899–1979), who played a decisive role in guiding his artistic vision and choices as a collector. The work, probably acquired by Albert Zavarro in the 1970s or 1980s, is from his estate. Photographic documents attest to the sculpture's presence in his private collection (ill. 8).

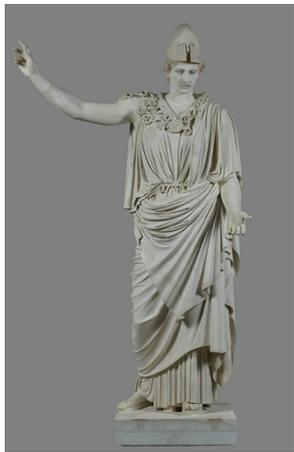
#### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Athena Parthenos, known as the Varvakeion Athena, Roman, 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 104 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 129.



Ill. 2. Athena with *cista*, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 140 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MNB 2031.



Ill. 3. Athena of Velletri, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD after a Greek original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, marble, H.: 305 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. MR 281.



Ill. 4. Bust of Athena, Velletri type, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD after a Greek original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, marble, H.: 79 cm. Altes Museum, Berlin, inv. no. Sk 79.



Ill. 5. Bust of Athena, Velletri type, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD after a Greek original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, marble. Glyptothek, Munich.

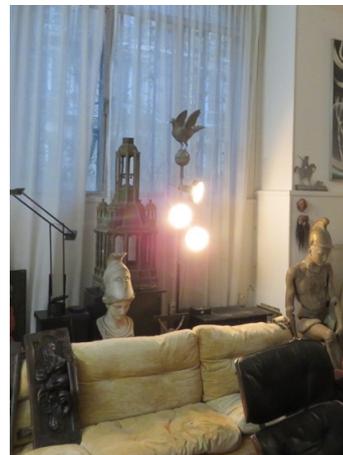


Ill. 6. Head of Athena, Velletri type, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD after a Greek original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, marble, H.: 73 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1805,0703.242.



Ill. 7. Head of Athena, Velletri type, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD after a Greek original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Thasian marble, H.: 55 cm. Antikenmuseum Basel, inv. no. Lu 231.

### Provenance:



Ill. 8. Photograph of an interior in the house of Albert Zavaró (1925–2022).