

HEAD OF HERMES, OF THE ANDROS-FARNESE TYPE

ROMAN, 2ND CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 38 CM.

WIDTH: 21.5 CM.

DEPTH: 25 CM.

PROVENANCE:
IN A EUROPEAN PRIVATE COLLECTION
FROM THE 18TH OR 19TH CENTURY, JUDGING
BY THE RESTORATION TECHNIQUES.
THEN IN A PRIVATE COLLECTION, AT A
STORAGE SITE IN NEW YORK IN 1950.
IN THE SAME AMERICAN PRIVATE
COLLECTION UNTIL ITS SALE AT
SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK
IN JANUARY 2015 AS LOT 291.

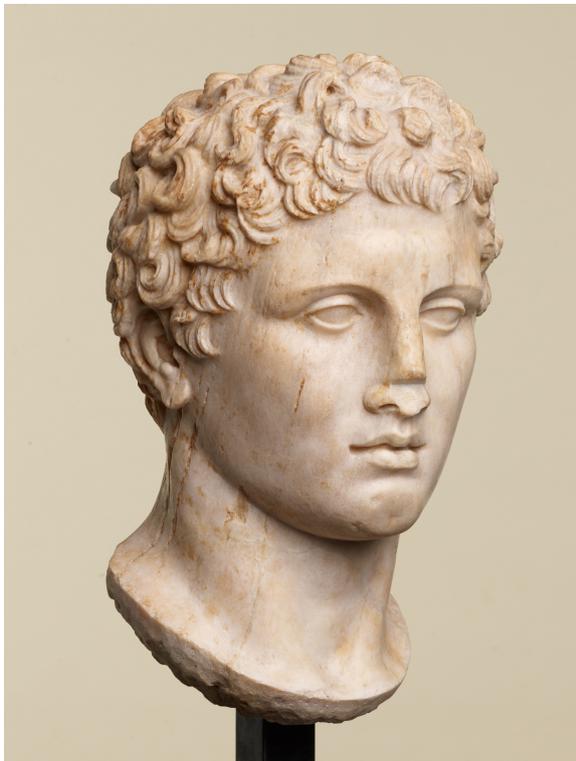


This magnificent Roman head from the 2nd century AD represents a young Hermes. It was probably based on a Greek original from the 4th century BC attributed to an emulator of Praxiteles, one of the greatest sculptors in antiquity, who preferred, above all, to represent male and divine adolescence. The young god is portrayed with short hair

and deeply carved, irregular curls. Some short locks fall over his forehead in an orderly fashion, while others brush his ears without concealing them. His forehead is rounded and crossed by a horizontal furrow that reproduces the forehead structure specific to Praxiteles and his school. That specificity can also be found on a statue currently preserved at the Archaeological Museum of Olympia, which represents Hermes carrying the child Dionysus (ill. 1). Our figure exhibits very pronounced brow ridges, particularly at his temples and over his eyelids. The hooded quality of the latter seems to soften the transition between brow and eyelid. These high-relief features create a shadowed area that makes his gaze appear downcast, in accordance with the slight inclination of his face, despite the fact the pupils were not incised. The lines of his brows are prolonged by the sides of his nose, which is straight – despite a discreet bump – and mostly complete, only the tip being fragmentary. His full, supple lips are parted, while his chin, flat and compact, softens the triangular shape of his face. His neck is visible, extending from beneath his defined jaw. The Roman sculptor who created this work was able to impress a carnal materiality upon the divine face and imbue it with a sensual grace, combining both refinement and vigour. His hair, particularly elaborate, is imposingly voluminous. It showcases the considerable talent of the artist, as it was shaped lock by lock, each one differentiated from the others. Within the locks, the strands are individually incised. The locks form twirling spirals, in such a way his hair appears to be moving, and



partly cover his ears. Over his forehead, five parallel curved locks form a kind of fork, while a curly lock in the opposite direction forms a pincer motif, well known in Roman art, particularly in portraits of Augustus. That artfully messy hair effect was not, however, a novelty specific to the Romans, as it appears in several examples of Greek statues. On the top of the head, there is a cowlick formed by locks twisting around a central point, attesting to the sculptor's observation skills and excellent command of naturalism. Some locks are also cut out, demonstrating the sculptor's masterful use of a chisel.



The stylistic characteristics of this head recall the art of the Greek sculptor from the 4th century BC, Praxiteles. His beauty canons strayed from the heroic ideal to establish an aesthetic founded on softness, elegance and natural harmony. The faces he depicted have a delicate, balanced oval shape and supple contours, with no underlying tension. The forehead is generally low and smooth, enhancing the serenity of the expression. The heavily lidded,

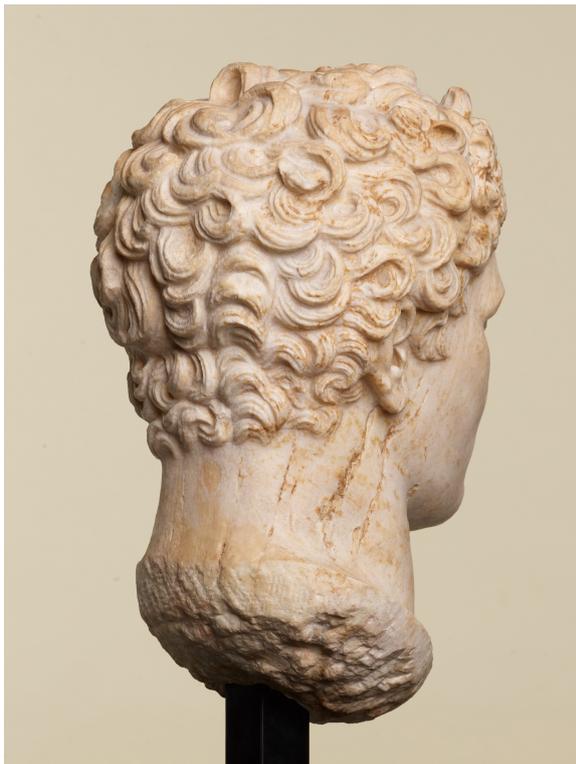
almond-shaped eyes of his faces are animated by profound, slightly melancholic gazes, sometimes imbued with reverie. The mouth, with full, delicately parted lips, adds to the impression of moderate sensuality.



These characteristics combine to portray a beauty that, while idealised, is intimately human, in which the divine draws close to the material, making Praxiteles one of the greatest sculptors of grace and emotion in Greek art. Our head thus adopts the codes of harmony and idealisation of the face unique to that sculptor. Hermes' parted lips thus suggest an action, perhaps a murmur, while his gentle, distant gaze allows a hint of emotion to shine through.

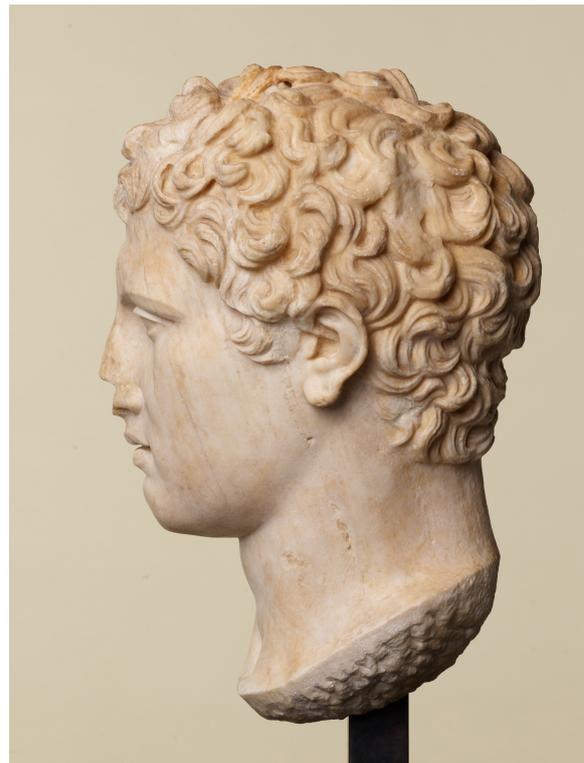
Although it is devoid of attributes, our head can be identified as that of Hermes and, more precisely, as a psychopomp figure of Hermes. His discreet almost secretive expression and the downward cast of his gaze correspond to representations of the god accompanying the souls of the dead. Hermes, or Mercury for the Romans, was the son of Zeus and the nymph Maia and had multiple functions: the

messenger of the gods of Olympus, the protector of roads and travellers, the god of trade and thieves and the guide of the deceased journeying to the afterlife. In his role of guide, when he conveyed the shades of mortals towards the Styx before they were ferried across by Charon, he is known as a “psychopomp”. In such representations, he appears calm and attentive, wearing a travel cloak thrown over his shoulder. Recognisable by his winged sandals, petasos and caduceus, Hermes is often represented in motion, the symbol of swiftness. As an ambivalent and subtle figure, simultaneously the god of exchanges, trickery and invention, he held an important place in ancient mythology, inspiring artists by his youthful beauty and his role as intermediary between the divine and human worlds.



The iconography of this head is known to us through several Roman copies, divided into different types according to the original Greek tradition. Regarding psychopomp Hermes, there are two main types. The head under study falls under the Andros-Farnese type, which originated with a model by the

school of Praxiteles. The type is represented by the statue of Hermes preserved at the British Museum (ill. 2), from the prestigious Farnese collection, by the Hermes discovered in the agora of Andros in the 1950s (ill. 3) and by the Museo Pio-Clementino’s example, once identified as Antinous (ill. 4).



Although fragmentary, those three works have enough elements that it is possible to imagine the god’s general demeanour: a nude body, a simple chlamys thrown over the left shoulder and twined around the arm, the right hand resting upon the hip and a sinuously weighted body. The god was certainly holding a caduceus in his left hand and wearing winged sandals. The second known type stems from a model by the school of Lysippus, but does not correspond to the style of our head, similarly to the Atalante Hermes and the Hermes of Aegium (ill. 5).

Our sublime head, sculpted from Greek marble, distinguishes itself first by its prodigious technical quality. The sculptor

perfectly commanded their medium: the modelling is remarkably fine, each shape transitions softly into the next and the surface, exceptionally pure, reveals the suppleness of the sculpted marble. The even, nuanced patina, a delicate bronze in colour, further heightens the impression of harmony and attests to the object's long history. Our head is in a remarkable state of preservation, apart for the slight cracks in the veins of the marble on the neck. In fact, it is probably one of the loveliest examples of the Andros-Farnese type. Its rareness on the art market, as well as its quality – museum-worthy – make it a truly exceptional work.

There is a lead seal – or at least, the remnants of one – subtly affixed to top of the head, concealed between voluminous locks of hair. The seal indicates that the work was probably part of a European collection in the 18th or 19th century.

Lead seals were affixed to certain ancient statues in accordance with collection management and regulation practices in force in Europe from the 18th century. They mainly served to identify works, mark their belonging to an institution or prestigious collection and attest to their recording or official recognition. In some contexts, seals also contributed to regulating the circulation and trade of antiquities. After all trace of it had been lost and it had gone unidentified for a long time, our head was deposited in a vast art collection in the 1950s, then reappeared on the market in January 2015 at a Sotheby's sale, where it was presented as a head of Antinous – the deified favourite of the Emperor Hadrian, around whom the latter centred a cult in the wake of his death. One of the reasons for which it was not identified as a head of Hermes is that the head was separated from the body at some ancient date.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Hermes of Olympia attributed to Praxiteles, Parian marble, 4th century BC, H.: 212 cm. Archaeological Museum of Olympia.



Ill. 2. The Farnese Hermes, after an original by Praxiteles, marble, 1st century AD, H.: 201 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1864,1021.1.



Ill. 3. Hermes of Andros, after an original by Praxiteles, marble, 1st century AD, H.: 219 cm. Archaeological Museum of Andros.



Ill. 4. Hermes of the Andros-Farnese type, Roman copy from the time of Hadrian (1st half of the 2nd century AD), after a bronze Greek original from the 4th century BC), marble, H.: 195 cm. Museo Pio-Clementino, Rome, inv. no. MV.907.0.0.



Ill. 5. Hermes of Aegium, after an original by Lysippus, marble, 1st century BC-1st century AD, H.: 171 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 241.