

Head Of Dionysus Crowned With Ivy Wreath

1st - 2nd Century A.D

Marble

H: 33cm

The fine-grained marble head depicts Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine, theatre, and ecstatic revelry, who is represented absently gazing down, three-quarters to its proper right side. The oval visage with crisply delineated large eyes and arched brows has a long straight nose and small, parted mouth with fleshy lower lip. The centrally-parted voluminous coiffure is crowned by an ivy wreath with 22 heart-shaped leaves, two corymb berry clusters on top (one missing), and two more on the sides, closer to the ears, which are one quarter covered by backswept, thick locks of wavy hair. Behind, the strands are all gathered in a krobylos, where all the hair is looped from the nape up and from the front through a single or double fillet, taenia. This forms a distinctively shaped chignon that is often seen on Dionysus. In this case, one single corkscrew curl cascades down the length of the long neck on each side. The symmetrical features are emphasized by the central hair part and the resulting, perfectly V-shaped forehead. The eyelids are slightly asymmetric to compensate for the three-quarter viewing angle from the front, where the spectator would be. Throughout, the modelling is sensual and nuanced, with contrasting rhythms of serpentine hair and smooth, godly flesh. This sumptuous Dionysus head was carved for insertion into a separate body, which must have been clothed, sporting a chlamys or a V-neck garment that would allow for the seam. Since very little of the chest is included, a rather fully-clothed statue is to be presumed for the Greek archetype that engendered our piece. The best candidate is reflected in a 2nd century AD Roman statue of Dionysus in the Hermitage museum (??-3004), Russia, which presents the god in majesty - dressed in a short tunic and animal skin, holding a bunch of grapes in the elevated left hand and a pine-cone in the lowered right. He stands in heroic contrapposto next to an archaizing Kore caryatid figure. The Parthenon style, deeply carved drapery folds, frontal Polykleitan stance, crisp eyes and brows, and hairstyle all suggest a date very early in the 4th century BC for the Greek original, when images of the god were just switching from bearded to unbearded, a development linked to his portrayal in the play The Bacchae. Of special interest to us are the corkscrew curls. Subsequent derivatives of the type display half-uncurled strands, as in the statue in Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Inv. No.: 2025, and fully uncurled without a chignon in the so-called Hope Dionysus in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Acc. No. 1990.247. The corkscrew curls and the structured chignon in both the Hermitage and our piece are most faithful to the early 4th century BC

original. They were leftover pictorial devices from the earlier Classical and Archaic periods which quickly vanished thereafter - the looser, often undone coiffure expressing the wild spirit of the rejuvenated god. A Hadrianic date in first half of the 2nd century AD seems most probable for our head. After Hadrian's favourite, Antinous, mysteriously drowned in the Nile in AD 130, he was deified and became strongly associated with Osiris, the Egyptian god of resurrection and the afterlife, who in turn was associated with the Greek god Dionysus. The result was a proliferation of Antinous statues in the guise of the god, often colossal and sporting majestic ivy wreaths with corymbs in the same arrangement as in our piece. These statues referenced the styles of classical Greece, which Hadrian – the Greekling – so dearly favoured. The portraiture of empress Sabina also supports a Hadrianic date for our sculpture. Often depicted idealized with crisp eyes and centrally-parted hair, virtually identical to our Dionysos' in the front, images of Sabina were undoubtedly some of the most imposing and widely disseminated throughout the empire. Their influence, along with that of the Dionysian statues, must have peaked between Antinous' death in AD 130 and Hadrian's in AD 138. The empress' portraiture likely feminized the already feminine god even further, prompting Kalebdjian in 1923 to misidentify the head as that of a Bacchante. Bacchantes or maenads, the unhinged women-followers of Dionysus, normally do not display berry clusters in their ivy wreaths and their demeanour is wild. In antiquity, they were often represented with their heads thrown back in primal abandon. Ancient bacchantes are also not usually depicted with complex, delicate chignons, which would not hold up during their Dionysiac frenzies. Kalebdjian's claim to a Cappadocia, Turkey, findspot is supported by the extra popularity of the subject in the region – the birthplace of Antinous and where Dionysus spent a long sojourn before returning to Thebes and Mount Olympus. Our head of Dionysus was probably commissioned for a cult statue that stood in majesty in a public or private temple, such as the ones in Hadrian's villa at Tivoli. The fine-grained marble and the quality of the carving convey the importance of this masterpiece commission, which celebrates the beauty and grace of Classical Greek art in Roman times. Works such as these would inspire another wave of Greek classicism in the 18th and 19th centuries in the art of Antonio Canova and his Neoclassical contemporaries.

Literature:

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