Monumental Head of King Nectanebo II

Reign of Nectanebo II, 30th Dynasty, 360 - 342 B.C.

Granite

H:39.4cm

Weight: 43kg

A monumental head of Nectanebo II, last native ruler of Egypt prior to the Achaemenid conquest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Carved from highly variegated red marble and of impressive size, it would have once stood as part of a full statue of the king, who is depicted wearing a striped nemes-headdress once fronted by a now-missing uraeus cobra. The modelling of the face and the treatment of the eyes, nose and lips bear the stylistic hallmarks associated with Royal sculpture of the 30th Dynasty, features which continue into the early Ptolemaic Period.

Since there are very few firmly dated portraits of Nectanebo I and II, the issue of identification is difficult, but some conclusions are possible. A comparison might be made with the head now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, attributed to Nectanebo II, (accession no. 2000.637 and op. cit., pl. 10c), which features sensitive modelling of the face. As in the case with our head, the eyes are delicately rendered, and the eyebrows are naturalistic and do not feature plastic outlines. A particularly important comparison is the quartzite portrait in the University of Pennsylvania Museum (accession no. E14303, op. cit., pl. 10a), also ascribed to Nectanebo II. Here we see many similar features, including the shape of the eyebrows, the tilt and modelling of the eyes, the spread of the nose, and the deeply-drilled corners of the mouth, with its slight smile.

Once owned by Thomas Herbert, 8th Earl of Pembroke, this head was kept in his Salisbury home, Wilton House, from around the late 17th Century. He wrongly identified the head as ‘Sesostris’ and displayed it in the Stone Hall, together with a portrait of ‘Domitian’, and the supposed likenesses of several Roman empresses or female members of the Imperial family. In the c.1730 manuscript entitled "A Copy of ye Book of Antiquities at Wilton" it is described as "Sesostris; The Head is of red Egyptian Granite; The Bust Part is of the white Egyptian Granite of the very old Termini manner; The Head is adorn'd with a Tiara peculiar from any other, as Egyptian; and it has a peculiar Liveliness from any other Sculpture– it was found amongst the Pyramids." In Cowdry's 1751 description of Wilton's art collections the head is mentioned as being located in the Stone Hall on a bust made of "white Egyptian granite" itself resting "upon a very antient altar of Bacchus;" this cylindrical Neo-Attic marble altar with Dionysiac relief decoration is still at Wilton (inv. no. 1963,10) and is now located in the Cloisters, where Michaelis already saw it in 1873 and 1877 (op. cit., p. 672, no. 1).

In Kennedy's 1769 description the same bust is said to be still in the Stone Hall but resting on a Roman marble sarcophagus with portrait medallion in front (Michaelis, op. cit., p. 702, no. 143), also still at Wilton and now in the Inner Courtyard (inv. no. 1963,26.2). He describes it as “as great a rarity, as is anywhere to be found.”

In 1816 Spiker saw the head displayed on yet another type of support: "A colossal head of Sesostris, in the style of the Egyptian idols, the pedestal highly singular, in the form of a right angled triangle" (probably the marble pedestal of triangular section partially illustrated in the 1961 sale catalogue plate). When Michaelis visited Wilton, the head had already been moved to the Cloisters at Wilton with most of the other antiquities.

An early 19th century poem, which satirizes King George III's visit to Wilton House, mentions the head as the object of a comical misunderstanding:

From Salisbury Church to Wilton House, so grand,

Return'd the mighty Ruler of the Land. "

My Lord, you've got fine Statues," said the King. — "

A few, beneath your Royal notice, Sir,"

Replied Lord Pembroke. — " Stir, my Lord, stir, stir ;

Let's see them all, all, all, all, every thing. "

Who's this ? who's this ? who's this fine fellow here?"— "

Sesostris," bowing low, replied the Peer. — "

Sir Sostris, hey ? Sir Sostris ? 'pon my word !

Knight or a Baronet, my Lord ?

One of my making? what, my Lord? my making?" —

This, with a vengeance, was mistaking! " –

Sesostris, Sire," so soft, the Peer replied ; "

A famous King of Egypt, Sir, of old." — "

Poh, poh ! " th' instructed Monarch snappish cried, "

I need not that, I need not that, be told. "

- John Wolcot, The Works of Peter Pindar, vol. II, London, 1812, p. 483

This head then passed down the lineage of the Earl and remained at Wilton House until the mid-20th century.

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