

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. LVI



HELSINKI 2022

ARCTOS – ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

Arctos has been published since 1954, annually from vol. 8 (1974). The Editorial Board of *Arctos* welcomes submissions dealing with any aspect of classical antiquity, and the reception of ancient cultures in mediaeval times and beyond. *Arctos* presents research articles and short notes in the fields of Greek and Latin languages, literatures, ancient history, philosophy, religions, archaeology, art, and society. Each volume also contains reviews of recent books. The website is at journal.fi/arctos.

Publisher:

Klassillis-filologinen yhdistys – Klassisk-filologiska föreningen (The Classical Association of Finland), c/o House of Science and Letters, Kirkkokatu 6, FI – 00170 Helsinki, Finland.

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ISSN 0570–734X (print)

ISSN 2814-855X (online)

Layout by Vesa Vahtikari

Printed by Grano Oy, Vaasa

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A NOTE ON A HELMETED MARBLE HEAD IN A FINNISH ART MUSEUM

LEENA PIETILÄ-CASTRÉN

In the late 1920s, Onni Okkonen (1886–1962), professor of art history at the University of Helsinki, purchased a helmeted marble head. This seems to have been the beginning of his dedicated collection, which in the end comprised not only Classical antiquities but also Finnish, Byzantine, Renaissance, and Oriental art – all of them harmoniously displayed in his spacious private residence. Okkonen himself never made notes about or catalogued his large collections, apparently being too busy, as besides his university duties with numerous cultural associations he also published books on art in Finnish, wrote art critiques in newspapers, and finally was a member of the Finnish Academy (Fig. 1). After his death the whole Okkonen Collection, along with his personal archives, was donated in two stages to his old school town Joensuu and its newly established Art Museum in Northern Karelia, and by 1972 the antiquities were accompanied by a list of the respective titles of the art works. Some further information on the places and dates of the



Fig. 1.

acquisitions was later added, allegedly based on the reminiscences of his widow. This is how the information on the acquisition place and date of the marble head in question was established: *i.e.* Helsinki in the late 1920s. Being one of the first objects in Okkonen's antiquities collection and therefore certainly memorable, this information seems plausible. It is my belief that the marble head was acquired to commemorate his attaining the chair of art history at the University of Helsinki in 1927, as well as the family's move to a new home in 1928.

Description

After Okkonen's death, his "home gallery", along with some of the antiquities and other works of art, were first published in the Finnish magazine *Taide* (Art) in 1963. The accompanying text was written by his close colleague and co-author Jaakko Puokka, who must have had many opportunities to discuss this particular sculpture, and who identified it as an archaistic Greek head. A photo of ancient objects on top of the fireplace in Okkonen's dining room shows the marble head centrally positioned (Fig. 2).¹ The head made its next appearance three years later in the posthumous exhibition of Okkonen's collections, organized by the association Finlandia-Italia in the Amos Anderson Art Museum in Helsinki in 1966. The attached information described the head as a Greek male head from the fourth century BC.² In the early inventory of the Joensuu Art Museum the helmeted head was described as a Greek head of stone, a copy of archaic Greek workmanship from around 400 BC,³ and as a head of a youth from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD in another undated museum file.⁴ Consequently, we can see a consensus of opinion that the head depicted a male, when any such identification was given, and that it was a copy of an archaic Greek original, *i.e.* archaistic, with a date ranging from ca. 400 BC to the Early Imperial period. After the reorganization of the antiquities collection in 2022, the current museum tag provides the following information: "Head of a Youth, Roman copy, undated".

¹ Puokka 1963, 117–118.

² Amos Andersonin taidemuseo, sculpture no 1.

³ JTM, Onni Okkonen Archives, Inventory list, Ancient art/ Sculpture no. 65

⁴ Now with the inv. no. JTM-594.



Fig. 2.

The head is approximately two-thirds life-size, with a height of 28.9 cm (Fig. 3A–B). The neck is chipped in front and a piece is broken on the left; the face is a slightly elongated oval with an angular chin, and the fully modelled mouth with plumpish lower lip curves slightly upwards at the corners, giving the face a subtly diverted expression. The tip of the nose is broken, its outlines are sharp, and the arching eyebrows are clearly cut. The eyes are missing, and may have been inlaid with glass paste, as was the usual custom. The eyelids are clearly marked, with overlapping folds. The hair is schematically rendered on the forehead in a row of tight wavy curls without a partition, and with the loops of hair by the ears. The Attic type helmet is embellished with a diadem of two bands instead of a visor; the lower one consists of small scale-like elements bordering nine rosettes, and bunches of a few petals with pearls in between the rosettes, while the upper band is frill-like. The helmet is strengthened at the back with a neck guard, and a subtle ridge divides the helmet into two halves, suggesting an original model in bronze, and on top there is a quadrangular, shallow dowel hole (ca. 3 x 3 x 3 cm) for a crest.



Fig. 3A–B.

The white fine-grained marble is visible only in places, and overall the sculpture's surface is of yellowish-ochre tint with many darkish spots and sandy speckles of encrustation. The conspicuous color is the erstwhile outcome of a surface treatment. In ancient times a mixture of beeswax and linseed oil was often used; this gradually formed an oxalate skin on the marble, which is impossible to remove later.⁵ During the analyses made on the marble head in the conservation laboratory of the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in 2016,⁶ no traces of lipids or wax were, however, discovered. In addition to ferrous pigments and

⁵ Victoria and Albert Museum. Horie 2010, 260.

⁶ X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and fourier transform infrared (FTIR) analyses were undertaken.

sand, traces of cellulose nitrate (CN) were found, instead.⁷ This compound was commercially introduced in the 1870s and has been widely used, among other applications, as a surface coating and adhesive. It has, in a similar manner to the beeswax and linseed oil mixture, a tendency to eventually turn yellow.⁸ Whether this treatment with cellulose nitrate was carried out before Okkonen acquired the piece, or as an act of maintenance when already in his ownership, is not known due to the lack of documentation. The marble head has thus to speak for itself, but by chance there are some similar pieces that can help in reconstructing its provenience.

The Iconographic Parallels

Some replicas similar to our piece made their appearance in museums and private collections in the early decades of the 20th century, with alleged connections to Rome,⁹ the center of classical collecting and a thriving antiquarian trade. In the latter half of the 19th century extensive new residential quarters were built in Rome and large public works were undertaken, *e.g.* for the Tiber embankments, and consequently many ancient houses, villas, and gardens were discovered. Most of the recovered sculptures ended up in the State and municipal museums of Rome, but there were finds enough to feed private collections as well, despite the regulations and vigilance of the authorities.¹⁰ Female heads were the most desired by collectors and sold without problems.¹¹

⁷ Lehtinen 2016, 4.

⁸ Selwitz 1988, 11, 22, 55. Horie 2010, 8.

⁹ The list by F. Canciani, *LIMC* 2, 1984, 1079, *s.v.* Minerva, provides some parallels, which are not considered in this connection. The marble head in the Museo Barracco in Rome has entirely lost its helmet and visor made of bronze; G. Barracco, *Catalogo del Museo di scultura antica*, 26–27, inv. 90. Roma 1910. The marble head from the necropolis of Isola Sacra, for its part, has kept the diadem-like visor, but due to the date of the excavations from the late 1920s and 1930s, this head does not coincide with the timeline of the Joensuu-head; G. Calza, *La necropoli del Porto di Roma nell'Isola Sacra*, 241–242, no. 32, fig. 139. Roma 1940.

¹⁰ Moatti 1993, 122–124. Pollak 1994, 196. Petruccioli 2022, 8, 13–15. – The ancient demand for sculptures to decorate both public and private places in the imperial city of Rome was immense; the number needed has been estimated in the hundreds of thousands, Pfanter 2015, 104.

¹¹ Jandolo 1938, 12.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York there is a helmeted marble head (Acc. no. 12.157) of 23.8 cm height (Fig. 4A–B), acquired in 1912 in Rome from Ettore Jandolo, a member of a Roman family of well-known antiquarians active over three generations since the unification of Italy.¹² In 1913 it was published in the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* and identified as an archaic head of Athena from the first century AD, and praised as “a most attractive example of its class, wrought with great delicacy in the modeling of the face, and with the utmost elaboration in the treatment of the hair and the ornaments



Fig. 4A–B.

upon the front of the helmet. In the mouth, perhaps, the sculptor chiefly betrays his late origin, while he has given it the characteristic archaic smile, it is modeled with greater mobility than an early sculptor would have been able to give it”.¹³ Another feature, “the upper lid [...] made to pass over the lower at the outer corner” was later pointed out by Gisela Richter as a deviation from Greek archaic practice and characteristic of Roman sculptures of archaic style. She also believed that as the head was acquired in Italy, it probably was also found there.¹⁴ The antiquities sold by the Jandolo family allegedly came from Tarquinia, Viterbo, the River Tiber, auctions of private collections, or directly from landlords’

¹² Iasiello 2017, 377–378; nine members of the family are shown in the photo p. 377. About the activities of the different family members, see Petruccioli 2022b, 171–176.

¹³ Robinson 1913, 52.

¹⁴ Richter 1954, 19, no. 23.

excavations in Campania,¹⁵ when not from the excavations in Rome.¹⁶ This archaistic head of Athena/Minerva is dated to ca. 50 AD.¹⁷

The New York head is generally considered as the model for the helmeted head in Barcelona in the Museo Marès (Fig. 5A–B), founded by sculptor Frederic Marès (1893–1991). He started collecting in 1911, initially in the auctions in Paris, and his namesake museum was officially inaugurated in 1948.¹⁸ In the first catalogue published in 1958 the helmeted marble head, 23 cm in height, was identified as an archaic Greek head from the 6th or 5th century BC and originating in Ampurias;¹⁹ the



Fig. 5A–B.

provenance, however, was disputed, as perhaps reflecting an antique dealer's arbitrary attribution.²⁰ The museum catalogue from 2010 follows the analyses published in the 1960s and presents the Marès-head as an archaistic head of Athena from the first century AD.²¹ It has been considered of lesser quality and a locally made imitation of the Metropolitan-head, a type created in the city of

¹⁵ Iasiello 2017, 378, 381. Petruccioli 2022b, 166.

¹⁶ Pollak 1994, 132, 138.

¹⁷ Picón 2007, 354, 486, no. 408. Zanker 2020, 170, no. 65.

¹⁸ Vélez 2010, 13. *MFM*.

¹⁹ *Catálogo del Museo Marès* 34, no. 10.

²⁰ Balil 1961, 189, no. 2.

²¹ Balil 1961, 189–190. Herdejürgen 1968, 214, 229, no. 80. Rodà 2010, 59, no. 1.

Rome.²² The backs of both the heads (helmets) are slightly flattened, perhaps to give extra space for the original J-hooked crest.

How do these two heads relate to the one in Finland? All three have closely matching dimensions – the height of the Metropolitan-head is 23.8 cm,²³ the Marès-head is 23 x 16 x 18 cm with an almost non-existent neck, and the Joensuu-head 28.9 x 15.7 x 20.0 cm, with the longest neck. The Joensuu-head certainly parallels the two former heads in its basic likeness, even if the general impression is less delicate and the shape of the head is more oblong; not to omit the conspicuous color. The floral decoration of the diadem was executed with care, even though the decorative elements in between the rosettes were shaped differently into bunches of petals instead of scrolls. Further, the upper part of the diadem rather resembles a ruffle or ornamental frill, instead of the rising club-like elements of the Metropolitan and Barcelona heads, perhaps difficult to understand as holes and slits for lost metal ornaments for a sculptor less conversant with all the details of female decoration in the Archaic period.²⁴

To establish the date of the Joensuu-head, one more replica is worth examining. It was part of the collection of Wladimir de Grüneisen (1868–after 1932), an art historian and collector of Baltic-German origin. He was educated in Saint Petersburg and lived in Rome from 1904, preparing his publication of the frescoes of the Santa Maria Antiqua (1911). From 1912 he promoted museum and academic activities in Russia, emigrating after 1917 to Italy, and finally in the mid-1920s to Paris.²⁵ His antique collection was allegedly acquired from antique dealers in Rome and Florence, and was published in 1923 and 1925,²⁶ but was considered for the most part as consisting of forgeries.²⁷ The Grüneisen-head

²² Herdejürgen 1968, 214. Zanker 2020, 171. About the methods of copying with casts and measuring points, see Balil 1961, 190. Pfanner 2015, 102–104. – The terms ‘serial production’ and ‘emulation’ in connection with ancient sculpture is widely discussed in K. Gazda (ed.), *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity* (SupplMAAR 1), Ann Arbor MI 2002, and in S. Settis – A. Anguissola – D. Gasparotto (eds.), *Serial/Portable Classic: The Greek Canon and its Mutations*, Milan 2015.

²³ Other measurements were not given.

²⁴ For comparison, the diadem of the enthroned Berlin goddess from Taranto (Altes Museum, inv. Sk 1761, ca. 475–450 BC) has similar decoration.

²⁵ Dennert 2012, 618–620.

²⁶ de Grüneisen 1923, 210–203. de Grüneisen 1925, VII, 8–9, pls. V–VI.

²⁷ Türr 1983, 248.

(Fig. 6A–B), whose height is similar to the three other examples – from chin to the top 24.3, and 29 cm in all – is generally dismissed as a modern forgery of the head in New York, not least revealed by its short hair, having thus lost the idea of it representing the goddess Athena.²⁸ Our head in Joensuu does not display even a short hair under the neck guard, making the identification as a male in the earlier Finnish comments understandable. Another feature shared with the Grüneisen-head is the similar ornamental frill of the diadem.²⁹

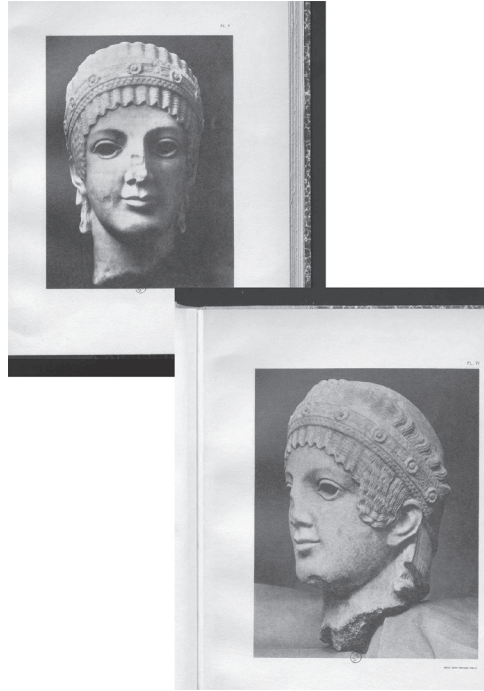


Fig. 6A–B.

The Journey to Finland

Where and when was the Joensuu-head sculpted, how did it find its way to Finland, and further, who was the dealer in Helsinki? It was most likely made in Rome, was perhaps modelled after the Metropolitan-head, and was furthermore possibly linked to Alceo Dossena (1878–1937), one of the most famous sculptor/restorer/forgers of the early twentieth century.³⁰ He was known to have worked for two antique dealers, Alfredo Fasoli and Alessandro Jandolo, a member of

²⁸ Richter 1950, 185, fig. 533: “A modern expression of alertness has crept into the latter which stamps it as false. Incidentally the hair has been cut short and does not continue to the break as it does in the New York original”. Richter 1954, 19, no 23. Herdejürgen 1968, 215. About the Grüneisen collection, Türr 1984, 248.

²⁹ The photos at my disposal do not provide a profile view of the head (helmet); whether it was flattened or curving thus remains unknown.

³⁰ Arnau 1959, 242–243. About the life of Dossena, M. Horak, *Alceo Dossena fra mito e realtà: vita e opera di un genio*, Piacenza 2016.

the aforementioned prosperous family of antique dealers. Dossena's creations were not shown in Rome, but sent to Florence, Bologna, and Venice,³¹ and then certainly spreading from those cities even further afield. He was known to have worked in marble in the archaic style, and to have developed a technique of aging by heating and immersing his products in chemical baths, the components of which are not known.³² His secret aging method, however, could be an explanation for the yellowish-ochre color of our head, thus adding a third criterion pointing to its late origin.

When sketching the marble head's later journey to Helsinki, there are two alternatives – that it came directly from an auction or a dealer in Central Europe, or after an escapade via Russia. Whichever the case, Walter Sjöberg (1864–1937) is of interest. He was originally a gardener by profession, but became a successful antique dealer in the early 1900s through self-learning and visiting museums abroad, where he also made frequent trips to obtain stock.³³ Over time his merchandise came to derive directly from the Bolsheviks, as he personally knew V. I. Lenin,³⁴ if not from the European auctions put on by the Russian Antiquariat willing to remove duplicates and ingenuine pieces from confiscated collections.³⁵ The antiquities collections of the Russian aristocracy are known to have comprised both genuine and less genuine items, as the compatibility of the collected items sometimes overshadowed questions of their authenticity.³⁶ In this period of a Europe-wide flow of heterogeneous antiquities after the First World War, in a time when Rome was losing its status as the center of such trade, one marble head ended up in Helsinki. It is my belief that the memorable marble head was both sold and purchased in good faith as an authentic, archaistic piece

³¹ Pollak 1994, 41. Sox 1987, 5.

³² Arnau 1959, 246. Türr 1984, 220. Pollak 1994, 44. – Besides indicating aging, the yellow color may have been intended to give an impression of gilded marble, thus reflecting a bronze original, while the darkish spots and sandy speckles, for their part, might have mimicked a recent emergence from the soil.

³³ In the early years of his career, he purchased material in Germany and perhaps also in Italy, according to the provenances of the antiquarian collection of the regional Porvoo Museum.

³⁴ Gestrin-Hagren 2009. Pietilä-Castrén 2010, 151.

³⁵ *i.e.* the Central Office for State Trading of the USSR for the Purchase and Sale of Antique Objects, Norman 1997, 181–182, 185–186, 188–189. Pietilä-Castrén 2010, 153.

³⁶ Trofimova 2000, 88.

of ancient sculpture, something we can also deduce from the early Finnish comments. It is almost certainly a Roman product, as the current museum tag in Joensuu does suggest – albeit made in the early twentieth century. As a very late imitation of a helmeted head of Athena/Minerva, even without her characteristic long hair, it is now a piece of cultural history and a document of divergent attitudes to classical antiquities.

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Illustrations

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