Artist: Portrait Head of a Ptolemaic Queen

Geography: Hellenistic

Date: 3rd-2nd Century BC

Culture: Greek

Medium: Marble (Pentelikon)

Credit Line: Ex Brummer Collection, donated by the Brummer-Laszlo Family

Dimensions: 12 1/4 in. (31.1 cm)

Object number: 1998.013.001

Label Text: When first carved, this portrait depicted a woman with wavy hair that was centrally parted and formed into rolls on either side of her head to be gathered in a bun on the nape of the neck. This hairstyle, which derived from representations of goddesses, was adopted during the Hellenistic period for portraits of the female rulers of Egypt’s Ptolemaic dynasty. Together with the idealized facial features, this suggests that the head may originally have depicted either Arsinoe II Philadelphos (316-269 BC), wife of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, or Arsinoe III (ca. 325-203 BC), wife of Ptolemy IV Philopator. At some point in antiquity, however, the head was modified to accommodate a headdress. The hair was reduced in volume and flattened in a band around the top of the head. Deep holes were also drilled above each ear, at the back and on each side of the top of the head to support what was probably a large metal crown; small holes around the center of the flattened section perhaps also helped secure the headdress. The combination of centrally parted hair with either a crown or a broad flat diadem is a feature of portraits of later Ptolemaic queens including Cleopatra I (ca. 215-176 BC) and Cleopatra VII (ca. 69-30 BC). The practice of reworking royal portraits, in part driven by a lack of local Egyptian marble, may also have evoked politically advantageous associations with respected ancestors.
