HEAD OF A HORSE

GREEK, TARENTINE

CLASSICAL PERIOD,
CIRCA FOURTH CENTURY BC

Terracotta
Dimensions: 9.9 cm High

Provenance:
Leo Mildenberg (1913-2001), Zurich, acquired by 1981.
Sold, Christie's, London, *A Peaceable Kingdom: The Leo Mildenberg Collection of Ancient Animals*, 26-27 October 2004, lot 73.
Private collection, acquired at the above sale.

Published:
A.P. Kozloff, ed., *Animals in Ancient Art from the Leo Mildenberg Collection* (Cleveland, 1981), no. 135.

P.E. Mottahedeh, ed., *Out of Noah's Ark, Animals in Ancient Art from the Leo Mildenberg Collection* (Jerusalem, 1997), no. 106.

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Exhibited:
The Cleveland Museum of Art, *Animals in Ancient Art from the Leo Mildenberg Collection*, 21 October-29 November 1981.
Munich, Prähistorische Staatssammlung; Mannheim, Reiss-Museum; Jerusalem, Bible Lands Museum; Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum; Stendal, Winckelmann-Museum, *Out of Noah's Ark: Animals in Ancient Art from the Leo Mildenberg Collection*, 11 October 1996-28 June 1999.

Comparative Literature:

W. Ridgway, *The Origin and Influence of the Thoroughbred Horse* (Cambridge, 1905), p. 82 ff., and on Tarentine horses in particular, p. 282 ff.

For a terracotta horse head now in Naples, inv. no. 140987, A. Levi, *Le terrecotte figurate del Museo Nazionale de Napoli (*Florence, 1926), p. 35, fig. 36.

On the artistic production of the South Italian cities, E. Langlotz and M. Hirmer, *The Art of Magna Graecia* (London, 1965).

For a Tarentine bronze horse head of similar character, D.G. Mitten and S.F. Doeringer, *Master Bronzes from the Classical World*, exhibition catalogue (Cambridge, MA, 1967), p.104, no. 102.

On the preeminence of Tarentine coroplasts, B.M. Kingsley, *The Terracottas of the Tarentine Greeks* (Malibu, 1976), especially no. 32 for a horse-head mould.

On Tarentine cavalry and horses, T. Donaghy, *Horse Breeds and Breeding in the Greco-Persian World: 1st and 2nd Millennium BC*, (Newcastle, 2014), p. 116-130.

The Tarentine practice of dedicating bronze horse figurines at Delphi is mentioned by Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10.10.6 and 10.13.10.

"Indeed, a prancing horse is a thing so beautiful, awe-inspiring, and wonderful that it rivets the gaze of all beholders, young and old alike. At all events, no one leaves him or is tired of gazing at him so long as he shows off his brilliance."
- Xenophon, *On the Art of Horsemanship*, 11.9

The ancient Greeks' great admiration for the horse is pertinently expressed by the fourth century philosopher Xenophon, a sentiment no less powerfully conveyed in this spirited and sensitive portrayal of the noble equine subject. Expressively modelled in supple buff-coloured clay, the present work belongs to the rich terracotta sculptural tradition of the Greek colonists of Taras, known as Tarentum to the Romans (modern-day Taranto), long considered preeminent among the western Greek cities in the production of figurines in this medium. Whilst a few parallels are known (*see, Fig. 1*), none seem to capture quite so effortlessly the dynamism and beauty of the subject as the present. Worked in exquisite brilliance to encapsulate the subject's essential character, this engaging head captures in charming scale all the characteristics one would expect to find in a life-sized work.

Fig. 1: South Italian Head of a Horse, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 10.210.83.

Figural works in clay were central to the artistic repertoire of the cities of Magna Graecia from the archaic period to the Roman period. On account of its fine details and similarity to other notable examples, the present work can be attributed to the coroplasts of Taras, whose works in clay are distinguished from those of neighbouring cities for their unusually high degree of technical and artistic refinement. Indeed, the fourth century, from which period the present work dates, is considered the peak of artistic achievement in the coroplast's art in Taras. Advantageously located on the heel of Italy, with an excellent harbour, Taras' strategic position afforded it status as a commercial centre, and it became one of the most prosperous and important of the Greek cities of South Italy, controlling the Italiote League from the fifth century onwards.

This dynamic representation of the horse depicts the subject engaged in vigorous movement; the rush of the wind is felt in the artist's rendering of the abundant mane, and the animal's open mouth, revealing teeth within, suggests agitation or excitement as it gallops along. The alert eyes, fixed gaze, subtle but powerfully modelled musculature in the face, and flaring nostrils further convey the horse's energetic pursuits. Whilst the head itself is mould-made, it is likely that the flowing mane was added separately, each fluid strand executed by hand. It is in these charming details that the beauty of the medium reveals itself; terracotta is a fabric that permits greater freedom of application for the artist, being easier to model than marble, for example, and thereby encouraging personal flourishes. Directly modelled by the artist's hands, as opposed to with a chisel, this immediacy allows for

Fig. 2: Tarentine Prancing Horse, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 2000.659.

individualistic touches to shine through – in this instance, we even witness the artist's thumbprint on the animal's mane. The horse wears no bridle, but this detail could well have been applied with paint. Indeed, the surface does retain traces of the original white slip in places. The horse head most likely originally belonged to a full figure of a prancing horse (*see, fig. 2*), perhaps as part of a Dioscuri group (the Dioscuri being venerated particularly at Taras). However, the less finely worked right side, together with what appears to be an attachment hole just below the right ear, suggests that the work was not intended to be viewed from the right and, thus, that it may have been affixed to another element. Such a sculptural group could have been enjoyed either in a private home or deposited as a votive offering in a sanctuary.

Whilst revered throughout the Greek world, the horse was of particular significance to the Tarentines. Their preeminent reputation and sway over the other cities of Magna Graecia was, in large part, due to their famous cavalry; they gave their name to the so-called 'Tarentine' cavalry, who fought only with javelins and a shield, and sometimes a helmet. The skill of these horseman was considered unrivalled. No other Greek cavalry at this time used shields while mounted and the Tarentines are generally credited with the dissemination of the shield to other Hellenistic armies. The Tarentines' pride in, and reliance on, their horsemen for maintaining power is demonstrated by their dedication of bronze horses at their treasury in Delphi following victorious battles. That the horse was of special local importance is also overwhelmingly attested by Tarentine coinage; almost all didrachms struck from 425 to 209 BC depict a horseman on the obverse, and, in some instances, a horse's head similar in character to the present.

In their quality and expressiveness, Tarentine terracottas can be compared with other exceptional Greek works of bronze and marble sculpture of similar style. The present head shares close affinities with the spirited horses from the Parthenon frieze (*see, fig. 3*), also bringing to mind the head of Selene's horse from the east pediment. Articulate, moving, and unmatched among known examples, this enchanting work still has the power to stir the soul of the viewer, some two thousand years after its creation. It is a truly intimate portrayal of this majestic creature, an animal so integral to the culture of the ancient Greeks.

Fig. 3: Parthenon Relief, West Frieze, Block II, British Museum, 1816,0610.47