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ROMAN

HERCULES TORSO

2ND TO 3RD CENTURY AD

Marble
Height: 12.5 cm

Provenance:
Private Collection, Salisbury, U.K., 18th century
With Bruce Mc Alpine, London, 1994
Bill Blass (1922-2002) collection, New-York
The Bill Blass Collection, Sotheby's, New-York, 21-23 October 2003, lot 467
Property from the Estate of Erwin Harris

Comparative literature:

S. Howard, *The Lansdowne Herakles* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 1978).
D.E.E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven and London, 1992).
H. Bowden and L. Rawlings, *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity* (Wales, 2005).

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A.M. McCann, *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (Metropolitan museum of Art, 1978) especially pp. 70-73.
For the Sarcophagus in Mantua, see R. Brilliant, *Roman Art* (Oxford, 1974), p. 166, fig. II. 2

The present torso, sculpted in high relief, presents Hercules as the epitome of his ancient conception, the hero's hero. His finely-articulated muscles convey a sense of his innate, superhuman strength and the manner in which the hero's body twists, as well as the position of his arms, indicate that he is very likely undertaking one of his labours. From the size of the figure and its rendering in such high relief, it is possible that it originally belonged to a sarcophagus decorated with the twelve labours of Hercules, a subject that became especially popular during the second half of the second century AD. The raised areas on his pectorals may be the remnants of the Nemean lion skin, which is characteristically slung around his shoulders in many depictions. The slaying of the Nemean lion, a monstrous animal with an impenetrable hide, that was terrorizing the inhabitants of the town of Nemea in the Peloponnese, was Hercules' first labour, and he assumed its skin as a symbol of his strength.

These raised areas may also represent the loose strands of the hero's fillet, a type of diadem frequently worn by athletes, that also connoted royalty and divinity. Comparisons may be drawn between this figure and a sarcophagus panel depicting ten of Hercules' labours from the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, dating to circa 170 AD (see image below). The pose that most closely mirrors the present piece is that of the first Hercules in the sequence, on the far left of the panel. His body and legs are angled to the left, but his upper body twists slightly, like ours, as he turns his head to the right, a position that also results in the neck appearing 'off centre', as in ours. The trailing strands of his fillet are clearly visible on his shoulders and upper pectorals. In his proper left hand, he dangles by its right hind leg the Nemean lion, which has been reduced to the size of a domestic cat, to emphasize the superhuman strength of its opponent. He probably held his famous club in his raised right hand. Being the first of the labours depicted, the figure is necessarily at the edge of the panel. Similarly, the area of space to the left of the torso on our fragment, together with what appears to be a straight edge and the remnants of decorative molding, perhaps a palmette, suggests that our figure was also originally at the edge of such a panel, and so also in the throes of his first labour. The significance of our torso is therefore informed through reconstruction of its possible original setting in a narrative panel. However, in isolation, it also takes on a new significance; the embodiment of the young, virile, enthusiastic hero, full of energy at the start of his journey. On its own, it becomes a tribute to the excitement, beauty – and fleetingness – of life.

Sarcophagus depicting ten of Hercules' Labours, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, circa 170 AD.

This elaborate decoration of expensive sarcophagi, particularly with episodes from Greek mythology, featuring recurring narrative scenes, represents a fundamentally Roman treatment of commemorative art, that goes beyond the cult of the hero and the projection of wealth and status. The sarcophagus, originally used in Greece and Asia Minor in the sixth and fifth centuries BC experienced an extraordinarily sudden revival in the second century AD in the west. Scholars have attributed this to various religious, social and economic factors, including a surge in popularity inspired by imperial taste – Hadrian, emperor at this time, was known for his interest in classical forms – as well as an increased interest in more elaborate personal memorials, prompted by a deepening belief in the immortality of the soul.

The present fragment belongs to a group of sarcophagi that illustrate the labours of Hercules, either in the form of a continuous frieze, as typical of western exempla, or set in intercolumnar niches, a design favoured by the workshops of Asia Minor, and many exhibit striking compositional similarities. Such consistency of form is naturally connected with the technicalities of representing a narrative story in this medium, on an object with limited space, as well as the sculptor's need to depict the primary episodes of the story. However, it also reveals a very Roman approach to commemorative relief sculpture. Firstly, that compositional and iconographical designs were largely conventional and formed part of a complex context of allusions shared by the viewer and maker. Through mythological allegory, these scenes were intended to evoke specific themes, messages and emotions, that were instantly recognizable to the viewer. Secondly, these creations were primarily designed to serve the needs of the patrons, rather than to express any artistic temperament. It was the choice of scene, then, rather than the artist's treatment of it, that was especially important as a means of personal expression.

The Hercules myth in particular represented a potent means of expression for the patron. As the son of Zeus and a mortal, Hercules possessed an unusual demi-god status, bridging the gap between humans and the divine. His achievement of immortality through completion of his labours, through hard work, bravery and commitment, perhaps served as an expression of the patron's own successful career and desires for immortality. So too, the narrative nature of the Hercules myth, that is, the chronological depiction of each labour, documenting Hercules' development from youth to bearded man, is also an overt allusion to the cycle of human life. Despite the multiple scenes, the overall impression would have been one of visual unity and harmony, simultaneously emphasizing and combining past, present and future events. The adoption of the Hercules myth for Roman commemorative art is testament to the continuing power of that myth, which assumed a new and personal meaning for the Roman patron and provided him with the assurance of immortality through the guise of society's greatest hero.

The recent collecting history of the torso is noteworthy and pays homage to the Roman patron's taste for eclecticism. It formed part of the collection of Bill Blass (1922-2002), an American fashion designer, born in Indiana. Blass received countless awards for his work and became one of the most successful and iconic names in the industry. He was both a collector

and connoisseur of art, especially ancient art; he was often advised on purchases by Dr Carlos Picon, Head Curator of the Greek and Roman departments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and subsequently bequeathed half his estate and several important ancient sculptures to that institution's collection. He amassed works from around the world, and was known for his keen eye for curating, carefully choosing the individual elements and constantly editing his collection. A quotation from his book, *Bare Blass*, aptly captures his approach to collecting: "to me, one of the most critical aspects of judging a room is whether it belongs to the person in it. There has to be a connection between the choices and the personality of the owner." This sentiment also effectively recalls the Roman patron's approach to commissioning works of art of deeply personal significance.