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Torso of a Youth

Roman, Imperial Period, 1st – 2nd Century A.D.

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ROMAN

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TORSO OF A YOUTH

Marble

H: 34.5 cm (without base), 45 cm (with base);
13 9/16 in, 17 3/4 in.

Provenance

In a European collection since the 19th century, based on the mounting technique;
Formerly in a French aristocratic collection;
Private collection, Belgium.

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This under-life-size marble preserves the nude torso of a youth, intact from the shoulders to the upper thighs, the head, arms and legs now lost. The body is modelled with the soft, unforced musculature of adolescence, the chest and abdomen gently defined rather than sharply cut, the flesh smooth and rounded, and set in a quiet contrapposto, the weight shifted so that the hips and torso turn in a subtle sinuous line. Over the figure's left shoulder falls a mass of carved drapery, gathered and looped, the remains of a chlamys or mantle worn across the otherwise naked body. The surface is weathered to a warm, softly encrusted tone, and the figure is now raised on an Ionic capital, its paired volutes serving as a display base. The quality of the carving remains evident in the assured transitions of the modelling and the easy naturalism of the pose.

Such youthful nudes belong to one of the central traditions of Greek and Roman art, in which the idealised male body, slender and poised, served as the vehicle for gods, heroes, athletes and epebes alike, and where nudity itself functioned as a kind of heroic or divine costume. The relaxed stance descends ultimately from the fourth-century manner of Praxiteles and his followers, whose youthful figures leant languidly upon supports (fig. 1); and the chlamys drawn across one shoulder is a standard motif of the repertoire, recurring in celebrated types such as the Hermes of the Richelieu and Farnese variety (fig. 2) and, clasped at the shoulder, in the Apollo Belvedere (fig. 3). On the present torso, with the head and attributes gone, no determinate identification can be pressed, but the soft, boyish forms together with the shoulder-drapery place it securely within this family, most plausibly a youthful divinity of the Hermes, Apollo or Dionysos type, or an idealised mortal youth conceived in their image.

Statuettes of this kind, reduced well below life size, were produced in quantity for the Roman market, where marble offered an affordable and durable alternative to bronze. Adapting admired Greek prototypes to a domestic scale, they adorned the houses, villas and gardens of the Roman world, bringing the presence of the gods and the prestige of Hellenic art into private settings. The present figure, refined in handling and intimate in scale, belongs squarely to this accomplished tradition of Roman decorative sculpture.

The Ionic capital on which the torso now stands is likely a later adaptation, an architectural element pressed into service as a plinth rather than an original part of the composition. On the evidence of its type and workmanship the figure itself may be dated to the first or second century A.D., the high Imperial period. Even reduced to a torso, it preserves the essential grace of its subject, the serene, weight-shifted ease of the youthful body that the sculptors of antiquity frequently returned to.

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Fig. 1: Torso of a Youth, Roman, 1st Century – 200 A.D., Marble, 66.2 x 38.7 x 24 cm (25 1/2 x 15 1/4 x 9 1/2 in.), Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, inv. 1926.441

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Fig. 2: The Farnese Hermes, Roman, 1st Century A.D., Marble, H: 201 cm (79 1/8 in.), The British Museum, London, inv. 1864,1021.1

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Fig. 3: The Apolo Belvedere, Roman, 2nd Century A.D., Marble, Pio Clementino Museum, The Vatican, inv. 1015

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