A GREEK TERRACOTTA HEAD
OF THE LATE ARCHAIC PERIOD

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When we think of Greek sculpture we are apt to recall marble and perhaps bronze works. This picture is not a true one, but is merely due to the accident of survival and may change as new evidence comes in. For one of the attractions of archaeology is that our knowledge is not static but is continually growing. As new discoveries are made our data are corrected and enlarged and our visualization of the ancient world becomes gradually more precise.

It used to be thought, for instance, that, though Greece had abundant supplies of excellent clay and artists constantly used this material for statuettes and pottery during all periods, they rarely employed it for large sculptures, whereas in Italy, especially in Etruria, terracotta was a favorite material for monumental sculpture also. The reason adduced was that Greece had easy access to marble quarries and Italy had not—until Roman times when the quarries of Carrara began to be systematically worked. Enough largish terracotta sculptures, however, from all over Greece (Olympia, Thebes, Halai, Athens, Delphi, Corinth, Kallidon, Thermon), are now known to make us realize that terracotta was also used in Greece for major works. Many of these sculptures are architectural, parts of antefixes or akroteria or pediments of buildings. But not all. Some must have been dedications set up in sanctuaries or cult statues placed in temples. They endorse the testimony of Pausanias, who in his Description of Greece, written in the second century A.D., mentions terracotta statues of heroes and deities inside buildings and does not imply that they were rarities (cf. I. 2.5—3.1 and VII. 22.9).

A life-size terracotta head recently acquired by the Museum from the Brummer collection enables us to study an outstanding example of this type of sculpture in detail. The condition may be seen in the illustrations. Only a few parts are missing. The three-quarters view shows the right eye, the left side of the nose, the right side of the lips, and the right side of the front hair restored from the corresponding extant parts.

The head belongs to the late archaic period and has the subtle charm and delicacy of that time. The beautifully stylized hair, the protruding eyeballs, the heavy lids, the incipient smile are all in accordance with the old conventions. But there is a new quality—a self-contained dignity that heralds the early classical epoch with its new interest in the emotional life of the individual. This mingling of conventions and naturalism, of stylized and realistic form, is one of the great achievements of Greek art.

Let us first examine how the head was made, for large terracotta sculpture requires special handling. The fracture at the bottom shows that it was worked hollow with very thick walls (see ill. above). It was apparently part of a figure which was built from the bottom up in layers of coarse red clay (i.e., plastic clay mixed with sand and bits of fired clay to increase its porosity, prevent excessive shrinkage, and avoid dis-
tortion during firing). This core of coarse clay was then covered with a somewhat finer and lighter red clay for surface modeling, and finally with a yellowish white slip (i.e., liquid clay) applied with a brush (the brush marks are still visible). The resultant smooth, whitish surface approximated women’s flesh and made a good base for the application of color; for this piece, like all Greek sculpture, was polychrome. The colors have survived in part—ocher red, now for the most part purplish, on the iris, the earrings, and the diadem; black on the hair, the eyebrows, the edges of the eyelids (to suggest lashes), for a ring round the iris and for modeling lines on ears and earrings. Doubtless there was once also black on the pupils of the eyes and red on the lips. The headdress is decorated on its lower band with a white meander (not continued at the back); the flaring upper part (now mostly missing) was presumably ornamented with a lotus pattern—to judge by similar examples.

The firing probably took place when the work was completed, with the colors applied. As in Greek pottery, we may predicate a single firing. Nothing would be gained by incurring
the risks involved more than once.

Since the head is life size it probably was not part of the akroterion of a temple (unless the latter was exceptionally large) but belonged to a statue—of a woman, or goddess, or sphinx. The back is not worked out in detail, indicating that it was not intended to be seen.

The style of the head places it at the end of the archaic period. The rendering of the hair in a series of sharply defined zigzag ridges, the treatment of the eyes, the strongly curving lips, the subtly modeled cheeks, the long oval face with the rather heavy lower part recall, for instance, the marble maidens from the Akropolis of Athens, nos. 674, 684, 685, 696. Our head has the same quiet dignity and distinguished bearing. We may therefore date it around 500-490 B.C., with a leeway of a few years.

Whether the head was a product of Athens, or Corinth, or of some other Greek city, it is impossible to say. The technique was canonical at the time. As it comes from a private source its history is difficult to verify. It is said to have been found near Olympia, many years ago. If
by chance this is true, it nevertheless does not help in attributing the head to a specific city. Olympia was an “international” sanctuary where sculptors and dedicators from all over Greece congregated. We must be content, therefore, to call our head typically Greek, a rare and beautiful example of late archaic art, skilfully produced in a difficult technique.

The accession number of the head is 47.100.3. Its height is 8½ inches. A thick lime incrustation which covered parts of the surface has been removed in places but remains here and there, especially on the top. I am indebted to Maude Robinson for several important observations concerning the technique.

The most recent discussions of Greek terracotta sculptures are by the late Humfray Payne in Necro-corinthia, 1931, pp. 232 ff., and by Emil Kunze “Terrakottaplastik” in Olympia Bericht, iii, 1941, pp. 119 ff. I plan to discuss the question of a Corinthian center of terracotta sculpture there predicated in a future article in the American Journal of Archaeology.