

ADORNMENT OF A HELLENISTIC MAENAD: A GOLD HAIRNET IN CONTEXT

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An ornate goldwork hairnet from the Hellenistic period that is currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art has not been the primary subject of any published research prior. This paper intends to analyze the stylistic elements of the hairnet, and how these attributes reflect the many cultural changes occurring in the time that the jewellery piece was produced. The hairnet's possible artistic links to the influence of the Ptolemaic dynasty as well as the growing public fascination with the mystery cult of Dionysus are explored. Developments in the domestic and public roles of women, including those within the religious sphere are of particular interest.

The conquests of Alexander the Great expanded the Greek world by claiming new land from his victory over the Persian empire and establishing settlements throughout the Mediterranean and in territories beyond such as the Middle East and Central Asia. The period of cultural interaction which commenced from these conquests made the Hellenistic world far more interconnected and cosmopolitan than the world that had existed prior. People travelled within this expansive new empire spreading the customs and religion of their own culture, and the exchange of artistic conventions was facilitated by the establishment of new trade routes. Greek art and architecture adopted elements from foreign cultures which often resulted in the eventual syncretisation of traditions. These cultures also became Hellenized through prolonged exposure, as regions that had come under the direct influence of Greece began to synthesize aspects of Greek culture with local traditions. The process of Hellenization is especially prominent in Egypt following the foundation of the Ptolemaic dynasty, where the new Greek settlers of the area replaced the previous native Egyptian aristocracy despite representing a minority in the population. It was under these circumstances that an impressive piece of material culture was produced.



Figure 1: Gold openwork hairnet with medallion. ca. 200 – 150 BCE
Currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession 1987.220.¹

The piece known as “gold openwork hairnet with medallion” is currently kept at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and its elaborate metalwork is suggestive of a variety of different cultural shifts that contributed to changes in the traditional roles and statuses of women during the Hellenistic period (see Figure 1).² The hairnet is dated to the Ptolemaic period, ca. 200-150 BCE, although this is an approximate time, likely based entirely on the comparison of artistic trends that are not always consistent across geographical locations or restricted to any specific period. This approach however is necessary, given that the hairnet was donated to the museum by Norman Schimmel, a prominent collector of Mediterranean antiquities.³ For this

¹ “Gold openwork hairnet with medallion,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

reason, where the object was discovered and at what point in time is not indicated by the museum and is likely not known. Unfortunate predicaments such as these are common with antiquities, especially with those that hold substantial economic value. Though critical archaeological information on this object has been regrettably lost, the decorative aspects and iconography of this piece can still be analyzed to provide thematic insight on the social developments of the Hellenistic world, especially those that concern women.

The most pronounced aspect of the hairnet is the medallion that presents a portrait in high relief framed by intricate filigree. High relief is identifiable due to the sculptural form protruding forth from the medallion's base to a significant degree, as opposed to being rendered by means of shallow indentations, which is categorized as low relief (see Figure 2 for side profile of portrait). Medallions of this type are an innovation of the Hellenistic period with known examples having been dated to the second century BCE onwards.⁴ The portrait is thought to represent a maenad, one of the "raving" female followers of the god Dionysus, because of the surrounding use of Dionysian motifs. The figure's face is youthful and round, while the projection of the cheek bones emphasizes a sense of depth that is characteristic of Hellenistic portraiture. The serene facial expression echoes Classical art traditions while the large and wide-set eyes along with the small mouth and prominent chin reflect artistic conventions of the Greek world.

The portrait itself is achieved by repoussé, which generally entails hammering a relief into the reverse side of a metal sheet.⁵ To keep the thickness of the metal uniform in high relief work, it became necessary to work both sides of the metal.⁶ Similar to other examples of Hellenistic goldwork medallions, this example appears to consist of two individual pieces of metal, given that the relief needed to first be "worked on a separate disc of sheet gold" that was then applied "to the centre of the medallion" and subsequently bound together.⁷ The hairnet's finish appears nearly "satin-like" which is a feature of much Hellenistic jewellery. This finish is due to the goldsmith's repeated processes of burnishing and heating which effectively assists in preserving the original appearance of the goldwork, and thereby minimizes the need for significant conservational efforts to be taken with these pieces.⁸

⁴ R.A. Higgins, *Greek and Roman Jewellery* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1961), 156.

⁵ Herbert Hoffman, and Patricia F. Davidson. *Greek Gold Jewelry from the Age of Alexander* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1965), 234.

⁶ Higgins, 10.

⁷ Hoffman and Davidson, 223.

⁸ *Ibid*, 48.



Figure 2: Gold openwork hairnet with medallion. ca. 200 – 150 BCE
Currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession 1987.220.⁹

Since the face of the subject is fairly androgynous, and considering Dionysus is frequently depicted with more delicate or “feminine” features, it is difficult to conclude with any certainty whether the medallion depicts a worshipper or the god himself. Distinguishing mortal from divine in art often poses difficulties, because devotees are commonly depicted with the same motifs as those that are employed to signify the god they serve.¹⁰ In Hellenistic art, attempts to make these differentiations definitive are further complicated due to the emergence of ruler cults that utilized sacred imagery to equate kingship with divinity.¹¹ This correlation of the ruling class to divine authority was already an established custom in areas such as Persia and Egypt, and was a practice adopted by Alexander the Great during his lifetime. In the case of this object, the medallion’s figure has presumably been identified as a maenad, rather than Dionysus, simply because the hairnet itself is something that would have been worn by a woman. However, this alone does not decisively exclude the possibility of the portrait being of the god, given that the gender of the owner is unlikely to always be synonymous with the gender of the artistic subject matter of an object.

⁹ “Gold openwork hairnet with medallion,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁰ Joan Breton Connelly. *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*. (Princeton University Press, 2007), 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The figure wears a wreath of vines and bunches of grapes over their ears, indicative of the production and consumption of wine. As one of Dionysus' predominant domains, wine would induce his worshippers to experience either a pleasant alleviation of anxieties or a state of madness through intoxication. The Greeks credited Dionysus with teaching humans the cultivation of the vine and as such, grape harvest and winemaking were indicators of culture and civilized behaviour. Wine was as a substance as multifaceted as the god himself; it was what the Greeks used to distinguish themselves from the non-wine drinking barbarians and it was the inciter of the untamed states of ecstasy that are most associated with maenads. Dionysus was a chthonic deity with a connection to the cyclicity of nature as observable through the death and rebirth of vegetation that he embodied. As such, the use of ivy leaves in association with Dionysus were a symbol of the "protection of the deceased" signifying the assurance of "a happy life after death" from the god.¹² Other examples of Hellenistic jewellery, such as necklaces and earrings that use similar imagery of vine wreaths, seem to confirm an artistic popularity of maenads as a reflection of the widespread fascination with the mystery rites of Dionysus during this time.¹³

A crisis of succession followed the death of Alexander the Great. Conflicts amongst his generals and relatives, otherwise known as the Wars of the Diadochi, were a source of political unrest and uncertainty as many fought to gain control of the empire that Alexander abruptly left behind. These disputes influenced those who claimed to be a successor of Alexander to connect themselves to him visually as a way of legitimizing their claims to authority.¹⁴ Examples of this custom survive in Hellenistic coinage which depict potential successors with the inclusion of features that imitate the most prominent characteristics of Alexander, such as his easily recognizable hairstyle. For this reason, Ptolemy I, who had acquired control over Egypt after Alexander's death, formed his own connection to Dionysus as a means of further affirming his association with Alexander, who also promoted himself as a descendent of Dionysus.¹⁵ The Ptolemies avid propagation of the cult of Dionysus for political purposes was partially responsible for its growing prominence under the influence of their dynasty, contributing to a socio-cultural atmosphere in which such an accessory would be crafted.

Festivals held for Dionysus became exceedingly extravagant with the encouragement of the Hellenistic monarchs that gave occasion for displaying the

¹² Dorota Gorzelany, "The Symbolism of the Architectural Forms, Painted Decoration and Furnishings of Tombs in Macedonia." Oxford: Archaeopres (2019), 146.

¹³ Hoffman and Davidson, 12.

¹⁴ Jordi Pàmias, "Dionysus and Donkeys on the Streets of Alexandria: Eratosthenes' Criticism of Ptolemaic Ideology." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 102 (2004), 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

wealth and prosperity of their kingdom.¹⁶ Rituals for Dionysus retained the pre-Hellenistic era theatrical essence, and the processions dedicated to him were grand events that included hired musicians as well as actors that would use costumes to embody figures of significance in connection to Dionysus.¹⁷ Many roles in these processions were open to women, who could have had a part as a maenad, while men would impersonate satyrs to formally represent the mythological retinue of Dionysus.¹⁸ Ritual re-enactments of mythical narratives are thought to have been a vital aspect of the Mystery cults that would assist in creating a perceived bond between worshipers and their god.

Mystery cults, such as that of Dionysus, also gained popularity from people of varying social statuses. Participation in mystery religions required initiation and additionally, the promise of maintaining the secrecy surrounding their sacred rites, making reliable information on these practices incredibly scarce. Contrary to state-sanctioned religions, involvement in mystery cults was not a mandatory civic duty but an individual choice. People sought a close spiritual connection with the deities they worshipped, and gradually became more inclined to favour gods that seemed more suited to offer fulfilment for their own personal needs. Appeasing the gods and placating their anger for the sake of the state had previously been of primary significance within Greek religious structure.¹⁹ Dionysus was uniquely enticing in this regard because he brought relief from the mundanity of daily life's tiresome responsibilities through his festivities. Initiates of his cult were also drawn to Dionysus' perceived role as a provider of a better afterlife that countered the eternal state of dread and despair that would await them in the Underworld otherwise. This aspect of the cult of Dionysus, and of mystery religions in general, was crucial to its appeal because the promise of salvation in the afterlife was a concept that was largely absent from Greek religious belief.

As this hairnet is a clear indicator of wealth and status, it is worth examining the contexts under which such jewellery might have been worn along with the societal shifts that would have sanctioned women to present themselves in this manner. Interestingly, owning such a luxury object of adornment arguably lacks the idealized Greek conception of female modesty. The increasing demand for women's luxury items during the Hellenistic era may be partially attributed to the diminishment of pre-existing legal restrictions of the Greek world concerning women's inability to have access to or sole control over their wealth.²⁰ Thus, this development allowed women of the upper-class some liberties that enabled them to

¹⁶ Glenn R. Bugh, *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211.

¹⁷ Connelly, 107.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bugh, 211.

²⁰ Jane Rowlandson, Editor. *Women & Society in Greek & Roman Egypt*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35-36.

spend without the supervision of a husband or male relative.²¹ This was especially the case for the queens and princesses of the Ptolemaic dynasty who followed the conventions of Macedonian royalty, which permitted women to own and manage their own property.²² These social developments created an increase in opportunities for women to make contributions in their name for the benefit of religion which could garner them recognition and even acclaim as the benefactresses of specific cults or sanctuaries.²³

Women had always held vital roles in traditional Greco-Macedonian worship in which their participation within the religious sphere demonstrated their contributions to their state and the overall welfare of society, generally through their association with fertility in conjunction with their reproductive capacities. However, during the Hellenistic period, the roles of a priestess increasingly became a means for women to obtain public honour by occupying a position of communal prestige.²⁴ Therefore in certain circumstances, women's involvement in the religious realm became less anonymous and more worthy of individual praise. However, the "glory and civic honour" awarded to women who acted as patrons to their communities "also extended to their entire family line" and as a result, benefitted their husband and male relatives.²⁵

Positions of authority within a religious context were still predominantly limited to women who came from prominent or affluent families.²⁶ Competition between noble families for jurisdiction over priesthoods was not unusual, but elite women with sufficient financial resources at their disposal could independently secure and manage priesthoods.²⁷ Other specific requirements often needed to be met by those seeking to purchase a priesthood, such as being of able-body which was regarded as a perceivable signifier that an individual had not been "cursed" by the gods.²⁸ Such requirements are indicated by "inscriptions that advertise the sale of priesthoods" from the Hellenistic period.²⁹ It gradually became more commonplace for women to hold roles of religious influence and by the late Hellenistic period, men frequently held office in conjunction with their wives.³⁰

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sharon L. James, and Sheila Dillon, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 247.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Connelly, 44.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 45.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 42.

The majority of recorded Hellenistic jewellery has been found in tombs dated to the “late fourth or early third century” BCE, coinciding with the abundant quantities of gold in Greece at this time.³¹ As such, one of the most consistent functions of jewellery is as an assertion of familial wealth and status made by the surviving relatives of a deceased individual. The lavishness of grave gifts from burials of women from across the Hellenized world, that include, amongst other items of religious significance, jewellery. Such surviving examples of jewellery present iconography that is connotative of service to a specific god, and have consequently been speculated by scholars to represent the owner’s former “priestly status” in life.³² Deeds of civic benevolence could qualify a woman to be commemorated after her death in the form of a costly burial, or in some exceptional cases, a public burial ceremony.³³ Public burial for women in the Greek world was a tremendously rare event, as it was one of the “greatest civic honours” achievable, even for men who had more public presence and political influence in every sense.³⁴ In the Hellenistic period these mortuary rituals were most commonly held for women who had been civic office holders, patrons, or priestesses.³⁵

The gold openwork hairnet at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a reminder that Hellenistic jewellery is never purely ornamental, as its uses of religious imagery and the quality of its workmanship can be placed within the context of historical developments to interpret the ways in which these drastic changes impacted the lives of individuals. The gold hairnet provides a glimpse at how adornment was used to communicate the worth and virtues of women, as well as their religious piety. The motifs employed by jewellery have intention beyond decoration, which are often deliberately suggestive of the values of the wearer and of her family, and could therefore be an indicator of wealth and status for the living as well as the deceased.

³¹ Higgins, 157.

³² Connelly, 226.

³³ Connelly, 224.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

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