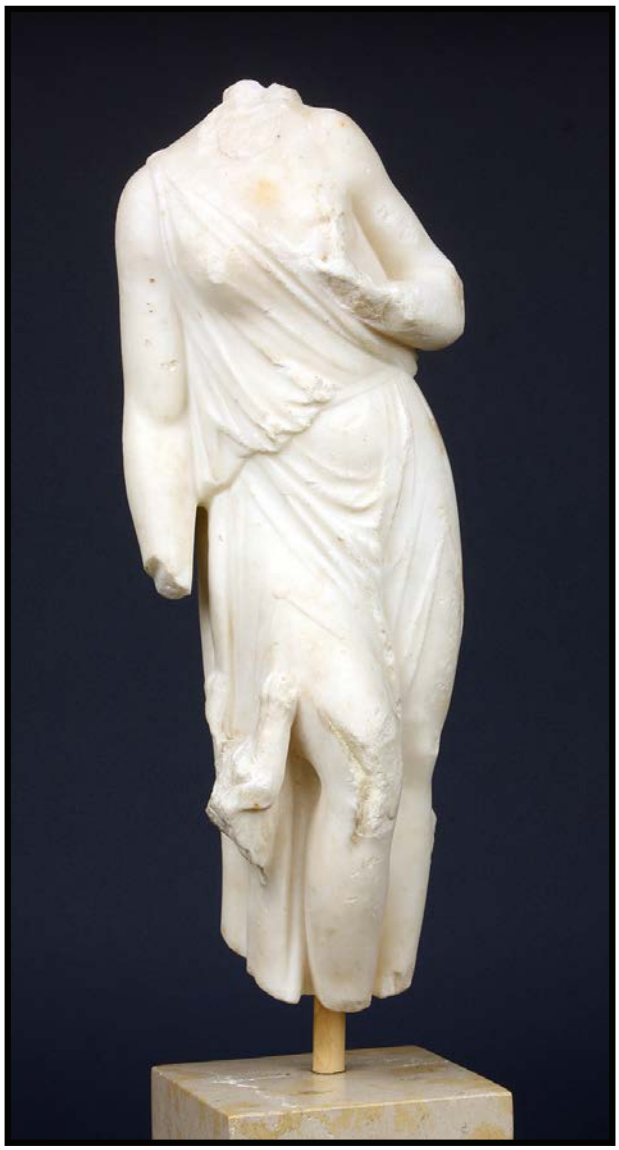
White Marbles Addendum

A "Maenad" with a Mystery

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Acquired on the art market in 1961, a figurine labeled a "maenad" has long been somewhat of a conundrum among the Museum's antiquities. It is a sizeable figure (nearly 17"), crafted from white marble, and said to be from the area of Lake Ohrid (Republic of North Macedonia). None of the Museum's patrons will have seen the figurine anytime recently, however. It was removed from display in the 1980s after a visiting scholar pointed out that a "button" on the tunic was problematic, perhaps indicating that the figurine was a forgery. Today the figurine is labeled a "fake" in the Museum's records. But is it really?

The fragmentary state of the figure makes the subject matter unclear but we can extrapolate meaning from the pose, clothing, and the remains of an animal at the lower left. The twisting, active pose is one that became popular in the Hellenistic period (ca. 300–30 BCE), but the leg exposed through the split in the tunic, to which we return below, probably indicates a date during the Roman Empire (if the work is genuine). The presence of the animal suggests one of two identities: the goddess Artemis or a maenad, the latter being the term applied to some women who participated in the rites of the god Dionysus.* As a goddess of the wilderness and the hunt, Artemis was often posed in art with animals, typically a stag or a hunting dog. We can easily eliminate the stag, given the appearance of the forelegs of the animal on the figurine. A dog might be a possibility, but representations of the various hounds used for hunting in antiquity do not seem a match to the remains on the figurine



Figurine of a Maenad
Roman, 1st century BCE–2nd century CE or later forgery
Carrara marble
Chorn Memorial Fund (61.2)

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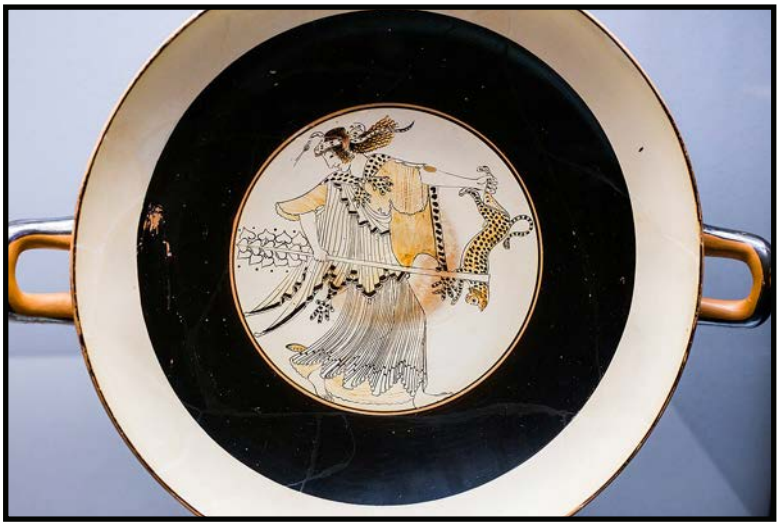
either. Additionally, Artemis was typically shown dressed in a knee-length hunting tunic necessary for mobility. There are exceptions to that representation but the short tunic is by far more common for the goddess. Maenads, on the other hand, are depicted wearing the *chiton*, a full-length tubular garment belted at the waist. The word "maenad" (Gr: *mainas*) is from the Greek verb *mainomai*, which refers to a raging madness that possessed the women as they became one with Dionysus. Based on related images, the active pose of the Museum's figurine probably suggests a maenad engaged in Dionysiac ritual, though some maenads are far more dramatically posed than this one.



Kylix Showing a Maenad Holding a Panther
Greek, ca. 480 BCE
Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich
Photo: ArchaiOptix; no changes were made to this image

Dionysiac ritual sometimes took place in wooded areas, and thus maenads in Greek art are frequently shown interacting with animals such as wild felines or snakes. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, maenads even suckle fawns and wolf cubs. Given that the Museum's figurine clearly had one hand positioned at her bare breast, can we conclude that the expectant animal with outstretched paws is waiting to be suckled? If not a dog, is it some kind of feline? One of the most recognizable symbols of the god Dionysus was the panther, on which he was often shown riding. Can the remaining shaggy fur on the Museum's figurine possibly belong to a panther? Not likely, but inaccuracies in representing animals are not unusual in Greek art, including depictions of the panther. Likewise, the animal's size is wrong, but animals were often disproportionately scaled to human beings, in both Greek sculpture and vase painting.

Detail of (61.2)

Another argument for identifying the Museum's figurine as a maenad is the alleged findspot in the Republic of North Macedonia. The worship of Dionysus was strong in ancient Macedonia, and though today's North Macedonia is no longer Greek territory, at least one ancient Greek town, Lychnidos (or Lychnis), was located on the shores of Lake Ohrid. The town is mentioned by ancient historians and ultimately fell to the Romans. Excavations of Lychnidos have revealed strong connections to Dionysus in the form of a Greek theater (the god's sacred precinct) from which at least

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two reliefs with Dionysiac scenes were recovered (one example: http://muzejohrid.mk/en/gallery/41).

Regarding the maenad's dress, Classical Greek depictions of maenads generally show them wearing the long *chiton* with their bodies mostly covered. There are exceptions such as a famous maenad depiction by the sculptor Skopas (b. 395 BCE), whose figure wears a puzzling garment open all the way up one side of the body, but with both breasts covered. Roman depictions, however, often show the maenad with one bared breast and a split in the *chiton* that exposes one leg (more rarely with two splits and both legs exposed). Does the Roman version reflect actual changes in maenad garments or is it a misunderstanding of the Classical Greek *chiton*? Was it an attempt to eroticize the women?

Statue of a Maenad with Panther
Roman, 2nd century CE
(with heavy 18th century restorations)

Statuette of an Amazon(?)
Hellenistic or Roman
Excavated from the Gardens of Sallust, Rome, 1908
whereabouts unknown

It is difficult to make a definitive conclusion, but the Museum's figurine is depicted in the manner more typical for Roman representations of maenads with one exception: a "button" at the top of the split. Even labeling the object a button is problematic since it does not seem to function as a closure device for the split, but rather as a decorative ornament. Regardless of what we label it, this object is very unusual and led to the conclusion that the figurine was not genuine. We can, however, offer one unique parallel: a peculiar marble statuette (H:1m) was excavated from the Gardens of Sallust in Rome in 1908, showing a female subject wearing a garment with two splits in her skirt, both with button closures. A publication of the same year identified the figure as an Amazon. The statuette's whereabouts are unknown today.

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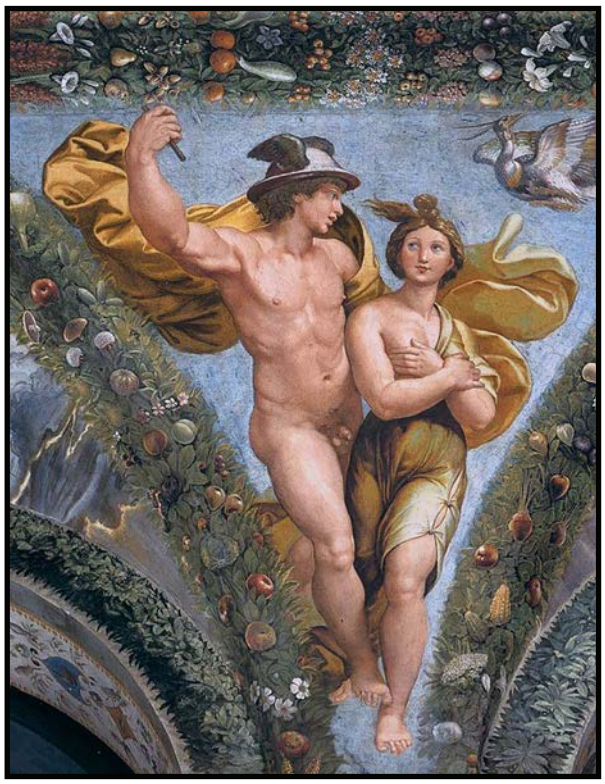
A final point to consider is the figurine's marble. Recent isotopic analysis proved the marble to be Carrara, the fine white Italian marble quarried from a spur of the Alps in northwest Tuscany. This could present a problem for the figurine's authenticity, given its alleged origin from Lake Ohrid. That region is known for its valued Sivec marble, and thus local stone was closer at hand. On the other hand, Cararra marble was exported, but its continuous availability since antiquity also makes it the most likely choice for an antique forgery. Unfortunately, we do not have all the answers regarding this unusual figurine, but we might conclude
with a couple of questions. If the damage was created by a forger, why remove so much that the identity of the piece is ambiguous? Perhaps more importantly, why give a forgery a highly unusual trait that would arouse suspicion about it? Was this merely ignorance based on later imagery that showed antique female subjects with buttons on the legs of their garments (see Raphael, right)? ■



Mercury Bringing Psyche to Olympus
Raphael (Italian, 1483–1520)
Villa Farnesina, Rome, 1517–1518
Photo: Web Gallery of Art {{PD-1996}}

*See Friday Feature *The Maddening Sting of Dionysus*.