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Elie Nadelman

(Warsaw 1882 – 1946 New York)

*Classical Head - Serenity*

c. 1917

white marble head, on a square pink  
marble base

white marble head:

height: 39 cm.; 15 3/8 in.

pink marble base:

13 x 18 x 17.5 cm.; 5 1/8 x 7 1/8 x 6 7/8 in.

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## Provenance

Estate of Elie Nadelman, New York;

Philip Sills, New York, since 1961 (when purchased directly from the artist's wife, Viola Nadelman);

By whom sold, New York, Sotheby's, 2 December 1993, lot no. 134;

With Galerie Piltzer, Paris, until the Biennale des Antiquaires, 1996, when sold to:

Karl Lagerfeld, Paris,<sup>1</sup> until 2021, when acquired by the present owner.

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## Literature

C. Nadelman, 'A Modernist at Home: Elie Nadelman', *Over the Top*, 2003, p. 85 (where described as presiding in Karl Lagerfeld's bathroom);

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J. B. Rafferty, 'Living Lagerfeld', *Art + Auction*, September 2008 (as 'my favourite statue, *Serenity*, by Elie Nadelman').

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The Polish sculptor Elie Nadelman arrived in Paris from Warsaw in 1904 at the age of twenty-two; the young artist immersed himself in the study of the works of Rodin, and in the study of sculptures from Antiquity. He later moved to New York where he quickly came under the spell of the city's dance halls, circuses, and vaudeville acts, and where his later work came to marry the influence of folk art with that of the classical form. Helena Rubinstein, the Polish-American art collector, philanthropist and cosmetics entrepreneur said of his works that '[...] he expressed in his art what I was trying to say in my advertising to women all over the world. To me, Nadelman's purity of line and his feeling for form say 'beauty' better than all the fancy words coined for the beauty industry by Madison Avenue.'<sup>2</sup>

Nadelman had studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and travelled to Munich before settling in Paris. The works he created there, inspired by Antiquity and Hellenistic sculpture, aroused the interest of the Nathanson brothers who introduced him to André Gide and Octave Mirbeau. Eugène Druet organized in his gallery his first exhibition in Paris in 1909. It was in Paris that he met the Steins and although Gertrude herself did not usually enjoy sculpture very much, she made an exception for Nadelman whom she supported very early on.<sup>3</sup> She introduced him to Picasso<sup>4</sup> and he mixed with the Parisian avant-garde circles gravitating around the Steins. It seems that he was less admired by Matisse, whose resentment went so far as to put up a sign reading 'No talking about Nadelman here' at the entrance to his studio.<sup>5</sup>

His early attachment to the sculpture of Praxiteles, the famous ancient Greek sculptor, earned him the nickname "Eliasz Praksytelman" from his fellow Polish artists in Paris.<sup>6</sup> In 1911, the Paterson's Gallery in London organised an exhibition of his Classical Heads – most of which were in polished white marble, with an austere expression and imbued with archaism (fig. 1), and many of the titles of these Heads - *Nocturne*, *Dawn*, *La Mystérieuse*, *Grace* - referred to a Symbolist tradition. Helena Rubinstein, the Polish-born businesswoman who would later make her fortune in cosmetics, visited the exhibition and bought ten of the Classical Heads on display (fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> She became the most significant patron of the sculptor<sup>8</sup> and commissioned numerous works for her apartment. In 1914, upon the outbreak of the

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First World War, Rubinstein helped him to emigrate to the United States, where she had settled.

Our sculpture *Serenity* may not have been part of this 1911<sup>9</sup> exhibition and may be dated from around 1917, but it retains the antique spirit that Helena Rubinstein enjoyed so much, while showing a certain modernity in the refinement of the features. The unfinished aspect of the headband (where traces of the trefoil remain) still shows the waves motif or stylised hair strands adorning her headdress which ends in a knot at the nape of the neck, forming a bulge that is also visible in a Classical Head in wood (fig. 3). Her smiling face, whose eyes are treated in an almost arcane way, is less severe than the first Classical Heads exhibited in 1911. Marble *Serenity*, whilst probably completed in New York around 1916-17, embodies a style that Nadelman had begun to develop at the end of his time in Paris<sup>10</sup> when he freed himself from his earlier Hellenistic style. It can be seen in other Heads from this period, for example that in the Max Palevsky collection (fig. 4) with the wave pattern headband, and another at the Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, with a comparable face (fig. 5). A photograph dated around 1917 shows Elie Nadelman in his studio with Helena Rubinstein's two children, and in the background, still in progress, a head in profile similar to the Colnaghi Head (fig. 6).

Over the years, Nadelman and Rubinstein shared the same vision of beauty through a common language, and his Heads were part of Rubinstein's advertising strategy for the sale of her cosmetics: they were exhibited in her beauty salons in New York (fig. 7) and starred in advertising campaigns (fig. 8).<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the 1920s, following the crash of 1929, the sculptor withdrew from the art world, only occasionally fulfilling portrait commissions. On many occasions (including in 1922 in a letter to the art historian Kineton Parkes) Nadelman tried to have his early contribution to Cubism acknowledged; he insisted that he worked within that movement as early as 1905, even before Picasso's 1909 *Tête de Fernande*.<sup>12</sup> Most of his work is in public or private American collections, and whilst Nadelman remains an important name in any

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discourse around the sculpture of the first half of the twentieth century, his role as a true innovator of the avant-garde has yet to be truly appreciated in the History of Art.

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**Figure 1.** Catalogue (incomplete) of the exhibition of sculpture by Elie Nadelman at Paterson's Gallery, London, 1911. *Nocturne Head* is the only one reproduced.



**Figure 2.** Patrick O'Higgins, *Helena Rubinstein with sculptures by Elie Nadelman from her collection*. New York, 1962 © Paris, Archives Helena Rubinstein - L'Oréal

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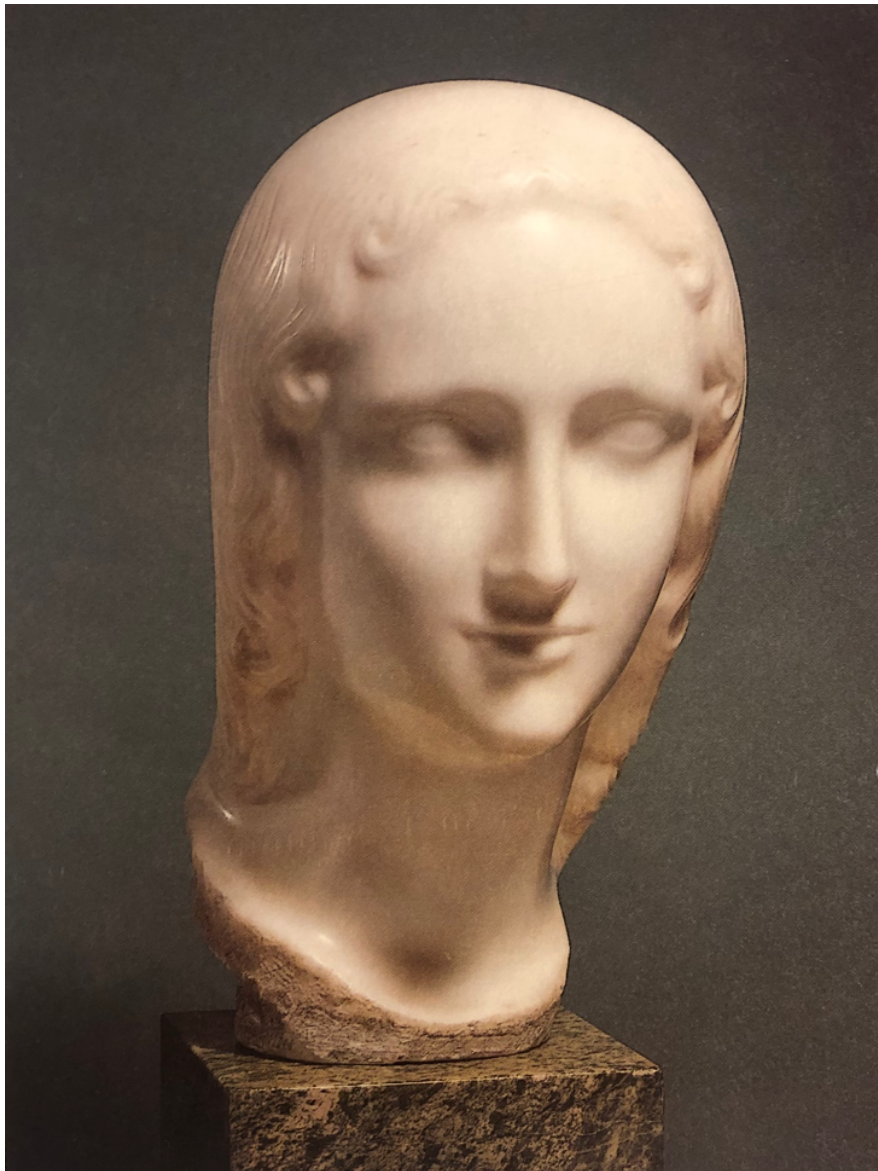
**Figure 3.** Elie Nadelman, *Classical Head*, c. 1911 (?)  
Wood, 16 in. Nadelman Estate (repr. A. T. Spear, 1971, fig. 20, p. 221.)



**Figure 4.** Elie Nadelman, *Early Ideal Head*, 1916-1917.  
Marble, 17 in. Collection Max Palevsky (repr. Haskell, 2003, p. 92, fig. 106.)

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**Figure 5.** Elie Nadelman, *Ideal Head of a Girl with Long Hair*, 1916-1917.  
Marble, 14.3 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts.  
(Repr. Haskell, 2003, p. 91, fig. 104.)

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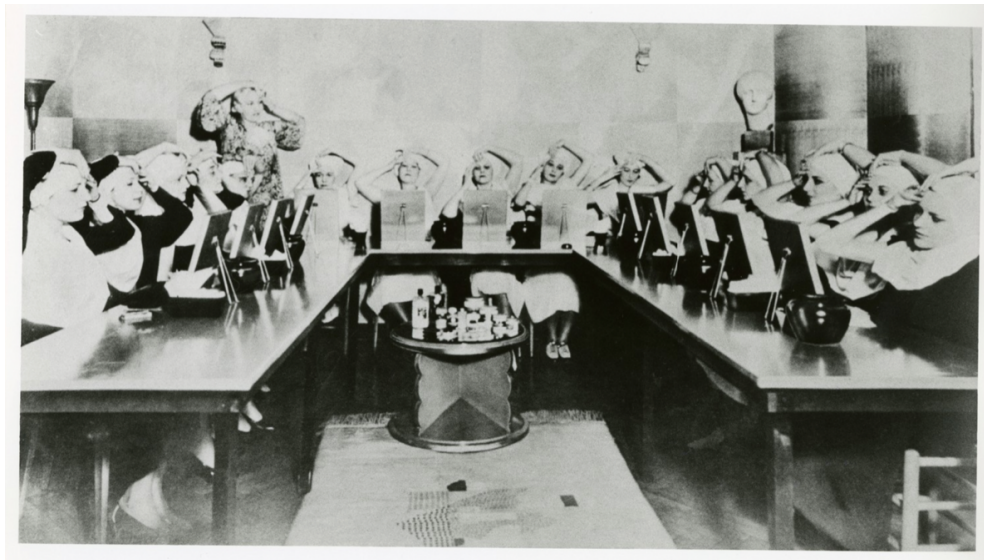
**Figure 6.** Anonymous, *Elie Nadelman in his studio with the sons of Helena Rubinstein and Edward Titus (her first husband), Horace (left) and Roy (right).*

The photograph would have been taken *circa* 1917, few years after Nadelman settled in New York thanks to Helena Rubinstein, according to Cynthia Nedelman ('A modernist at home: Elie Nadelman', in *Slesin*, 2003, p. 84.)

At the back of the studio there is a head being executed, similar to ours.

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**Figure 7.** Anonymous, *Beauty school class performing eye exercises.*  
A Nadelman head can be seen in the background on the right.

© Helena Rubinstein Collection, SPARC Digital



**Figure 8.** Anonymous, *Helena Rubinstein in a floral garment with a Nadelman sculpture,* 1955. This photo of Helena Rubinstein in profile with a sculpture by Elie Nadleman was used for an advertising campaign in 1955. © Helena Rubinstein collection, SPARC Digital

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## Bibliography

- L. Kirstein, *The sculpture of Elie Nadelman*, exh. cat., New York 1948;  
H. Rubinstein, *My Life For Beauty*, New York 1966;  
A. T. Spear, 'Elie Nadelman's Early Heads (1905-1911)', in *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, vol. 28, 3, Spring 1971, pp. 201-222;  
L. Kirstein, *Elie Nadelman*, New York 1973;  
P. Keobandith, *Elie Nadelman: les années parisiennes, 1904-1914*, Paris 1998;  
B. Haskell, *Elie Nadelman: sculptor of modern life*, exh. cat., New York 2003;  
S. Slesin, *Helena Rubinstein: Over The Top: extraordinary style: beauty, art, fashion, design*, New York 2003.  
C. Chevillot, *La sculpture à Paris: 1905-1914, le moment de tous les possibles*, Paris 2017.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Cynthia Nadelman published a text about her grandfather in which she wrote that the head Lagerfeld owned was placed in his bathroom: 'A style merchant of more recent vintage, Karl Lagerfeld, chose a different, though perhaps related, place of honour for his Nadelman marble head: it presided over his lavishly appointed bathroom. No doubt Rubinstein was nodding in approval', ('A modernist at home: Elie Nadelman', in *Slesin*, 2003, p. 85). In 2012, Lagerfeld referred to it as his 'favourite statue, *Serenity*, by Elie Nadelman' in an interview in English with Jean Bond Rafferty, published in *Art and Auction* in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Rubinstein 1966, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Chevillot 2017, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Chevillot 2017, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Chevillot 2017, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Kirstein 1948, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> The exact number of Classical Heads exhibited at Paterson's Gallery in London in 1911 is not known, as the catalogue contains only one reproduction of a Classical Head - *Nocturne* - and is probably incomplete. According to Kirstein, there were fifteen Classical Heads in this exhibition, all of which were purchased by Rubinstein (Kirstein 1973, p. 193), while Haskell suggests that there were ten Classical Heads exhibited, all of which were purchased by Rubinstein, presumably on the basis of the Rubinstein sale catalogue of 1966 (Haskell 2003, p. 40). Indeed, ten Classical Heads are listed (and reproduced) in the 1966 sale catalogue of the Helena Rubinstein collection, lots 17, 18, 20, 611, 612, 613, 614, 619, 620 and 621 (Parke-Bernet Galleries, *Modern Painting & Sculpture Parts 1 and 2*, April 1966), but we know that at least one Classical Head (*Nocturne*, the only one reproduced in the 1911 exhibition catalogue) exhibited at Paterson's Gallery in London in 1911 does not appear in the 1966 Rubinstein sale catalogue. It therefore seems highly likely that more Classical Heads, other than the ten purchased by Rubinstein, were exhibited in London at Paterson's Gallery in 1911.

<sup>8</sup> An exhibition at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme in Paris in 2019 was dedicated to Helena Rubinstein and showed the links between Rubinstein and the artists of her time, as well as her strong support of Nadelman's career.

<sup>9</sup> The description of our Head in the Sotheby's catalogue of the sale on 2<sup>nd</sup> December states that *Serenity* (reproduced as *Classical Head*, lot 134) was exhibited at the Paterson's Gallery exhibition in 1911 in London and dates it to c. 1910. This information is incomplete, since the 1911 London exhibition's summary catalogue is limited to the titles of ten works without any associated description, and does not allow us to fully identify the Classical Heads exhibited. Helena Rubinstein acquired ten Classical Heads exhibited in 1911, but *Serenity* was not included in the catalogue of her 1966 sale. Phillip Sills acquired many of Nadelman's sculptures from the sculptor's wife, Viola Nadelman, in 1961, one of which fits the description of *Serenity* (information confirmed by Cynthia Nadelman). Thus it seems that *Serenity* stayed in the Nadelman family until 1961.

<sup>10</sup> Spear 1971, p. 220.

<sup>11</sup> Rubinstein 1966, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Keobandith 1998, p. 11.