With great pleasure I dedicate this article about an enigmatic Egyptian head to Jack Josephson, a scholar, a friend, and an extraordinary human being. Like a teacher, he has challenged our assumptions, guided us in looking at Egyptian sculpture, and set a standard for connoisseurship that extends well beyond the Egyptological sphere. I thought long and hard about what would constitute a suitable contribution to a man of Jack’s interests and stature. In the end, I chose something that I believe is rare or even perhaps unique in Egyptian art, just as Jack’s combination of expertise, warmth, and drive sets him apart from others.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1980.29 is a gneissose diorite head, measuring about half life-size (figs. 1-4). Only its right ear is exposed, while the left remains covered by the wig, a most unusual feature, given the strong preference for symmetrical compositions throughout the dynasties. Clearly the deliberate exposing of just one ear was done with a purpose in mind. In this paper, I will explore its possible meanings and attempt to reconstruct the rest of the statue.

In view of the lack of inscription, findspot, or other identifying information, only art-historical analysis can shed more light on the head. The subject wears a wig parted in the center and decorated with vertical incised wavy lines and broader horizontal grooves imitating natural curls and waves. At the back and sides, the wig ends at the nape of the neck, where several narrowly spaced incised lines merge, creating the appearance of thick, tight curls (figs. 3-4). Had the wig been cut straight, one would expect to see the same thicker curls in the front, since the neck break is approximately even. Instead, the thinly spaced lines continue on the front, suggesting that the hair was longer on the chest. There is no trace of a back pillar.

The face of the one-earred individual is round and, except for the area around the eye, smooth and devoid of modeling. The forehead is low, particularly on the proper-left side, where the wig dips slightly more than on the right. This small naturalistic detail, a response to the way hair unobstructed by an ear would normally fall, bears testimony to the artist’s keen observation. The brows arch slightly over small, broadly spaced, and naturally rendered three-dimensional eyes, whose almond shape is enhanced by an incised line. Heavy upper eyelids make the eyes appear to glance downward.

From the midpoint of the nose to the chin, the features are damaged. The blow that caused this must have been administered from right to left (and by a right-handed person), based on the angle of the break. As a result, the left nostril and the left corner of the mouth may still be seen. What appears to have been straight lips end in a small circular depression. The underside of the chin on the right side has also sustained damage. The ear is naturally carved and has a shallow, diagonally oriented, oval nick on the lobe (fig. 2), suggestive of a pierced ear.

The details described above offer clues to the gender and date of the anonymous head, as well as the type of sculpture from which it came. Vertically incised and horizontally modeled wigs are found in both sculpture and relief beginning at the end of the 18th Dynasty, but are particularly common in the Ramesside Period. Although both men and women wore similarly curled wigs in the 19th Dynasty, only masculine wigs ended at neck level in the back but were longer in the front.

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Fig. 1. Head of a man, frontal view. Egyptian, New Kingdom, Dynasty 19, 1295-1186 BC, Granodiorite, Height: 16 cm (5 5/16 in.) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum Special Purchase Fund, Photograph ©2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1980.29.

Fig. 2. Head of a man, three-quarters view. Photograph ©2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1980.29.

Fig. 3. Head of a man, proper-right view. Photograph ©2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1980.29.

Fig. 4. Head of man, back view. Photograph ©2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1980.29.