

Head of Marcus Aurelius, veiled

Cast based on original in the British Museum, London. Marcus Aurelius, one of ancient Rome's most notable emperors, was born in 121. Marcus was introduced to politics at an early age, with his grandfather serving as consul for the third time in 126. His family was also close to the emperor Hadrian, and Marcus was known as one of Hadrian's favorites. These valuable connections to the imperial family paid off when Marcus became quaestor in 139, and finally consul in both 140 and 145. His reign as emperor did not begin until 161, and lasted eighteen years (co-ruled with Lucius Verus 161-169, sole ruler until his death in 180 CE). Although the empire was not at peace during most of his reign, (there were problems in Britain, Upper Germany, and other places throughout the region), Marcus was not remembered for his military accomplishments. Instead he is better known for his philosophical musings, especially in a work entitled "Meditations," a journal in which, "he recorded (in Greek) his own reflections on human life and the ways of the gods," (Hornblower and Spawforth 220).

The portraiture of Marcus Aurelius differs from that of preceding emperors, in that it not only shows his physical characteristics at each stage in his life, but also attempts to reflect the emperor's psychological state. As a teenager, Marcus' youthful facial features included "oval-shaped eyes, a strong nose, highly arched brows, and a beautiful rounded mouth" (Kleiner 270). His tousled hair, smooth skin, and half-closed eyelids are also trademarks of his portraiture. Over time however, Marcus is depicted with a moustache and beard and, near the end of his career he wears a, "long and full beard that is divided in the center and arranged in individual parallel locks" (Kleiner 273). In this particular bust at the Wilcox collection, Marcus is depicted as approximately forty-years-old with droopy eyes, a full beard and moustache, and scattered lines upon his forehead. The original marble head comes from an over-lifesize statue of the emperor, who is shown veiled and wearing a wreath of corn. Possibly a depiction of Marcus as a member of the college of the Arval Brethren, who honored and worshiped Dea Dia, goddess of the harvest.