

Introduction

The Wilcox has a set of portrait busts of Roman emperors and one empress. Our portraits include famous individuals, such as **Augustus**, the first emperor (represented by two portraits), and **Nero**, famous for singing while Rome burned in AD 64. They were followed by **Trajan** and **Hadrian**, two of the "good emperors" of the 2nd c., under whose rule the empire reached its largest territorial extent and peak of prosperity. The names of two later 2nd c. emperors, **Marcus Aurelius** and his son, **Commodus**, will be especially familiar to those who have seen the recent movie *Gladiator* (which takes great liberties with Roman history). **Septimius Severus** followed, ruling at the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 3rd c., declaring himself legitimate by "autoadopting" himself to Marcus Aurelius - a political fiction. **Faustina**, our one portrait of an empress, is shown with the calm and dignified that emphasizes her dynastic role as imperial wife and mother.

Manufacture and Use of Portraits

In an age long before newspapers, photography, and the electronic exchange of information, Roman citizens had two main ways of knowing what their rulers looked

like: coins and three-dimensional portraits. Even earlier, noble Roman families kept wax masks (*imagines*) of illustrious ancestors and displayed these at home or in processions at funerals. From the first c. B.C. on, however, profile portraits of some living individuals were represented on coins, which were disseminated throughout the Mediterranean world, stamped with mottos to publicize certain messages or themes. For three-dimensional images, however, the Romans depended on portrait sculpture in the form of busts and full figures, which could be of various scales: miniature, life-sized, or colossal. We are most familiar with marble images, but in antiquity portraits of bronze or even silver and gold were common: unfortunately, most were melted down in later periods for the value of the metal. Some unusual images were made of exotic materials like glass, ivory, or colored stone. Individual emperors would commission a prototype, generally in Rome itself, which could be made available to copyists or workshops; from there, more or less exact replicas could be sent all over the empire. One of the most important clues for differentiating among portraits was hairstyles: Augustus had a claw-shaped lock over the center of his forehead; Nero a fringe of "comma-locks" over his forehead, and Hadrian reintroduced the beard to popularity

in the 2nd c. Consideration was given occasionally to where the portrait would be set up, in a temple, public building, or private house. (Today, many public buildings and even private homes in England have a portrait of the queen). Over time, some emperors would request a new series of portraits, but generally the images are somewhat youthful and idealized - but not always. In fact, many portraits seem to reflect the inner personality of the ruler. Evidence of reworking or recutting usually occurred when an individual suffered *damnatio memoriae* (official government condemnation): the unpopular Caligula and Nero had many of their images recut after they died. Since women could not rule in their own right. Nevertheless, history records a number of strong individuals who wielded influence behind the scenes, such as Livia (the wife of Augustus) and Agrippina Minor (sister of Caligula, wife of Claudius, and mother of Nero). They too, were given portraits. Since related family members of a ruling dynasty like the Julio-Claudians generally tend to resemble one another, minor details of hairstyle become important clues for identifying individuals. Often, a realistic portrait head was given a heroic or even divine body type, either clothed or nude. Sometimes the results seem rather incongruous to modern eyes!

Major Roman Emperors
(dates of their reigns in parentheses)

Julio-Claudians

Augustus (30 B.C.-A.D. 14)
Tiberius (AD 14-37)
Caligula (37-41)
Claudius (41-54)
Nero (54-68)

Year of the 4 Emperors (68)

Galba (68)
Otho (68)
Vitellius (68)

Flavians

Vespasian (69-79)
Titus (79-81)
Domitian (81-96)
Nerva (96-98) **[the "good"**
Trajan (98-117) **emperors]**
Hadrian (117-138)

Antonines

Antoninus Pius (138-161)
Lucius Verus (161-169)
Marcus Aurelius (161-180)
Commodus (180-198)

Severans

Septimius Severus (198-211)
Caracalla (211-217)
Macrinus (217)
Elegabalus (218-22)
Alexander Severus (222-235)

Various military emperors, 235-284

Tetrachy

Diocletian (284-305)
Maximian (286-306)
Constantius Chlorus (305-6)
Galerius (305-11)
Licinius (308-24)
Maxentius (306-12)

Constantine (306-337), founder
of Constantinople, and 1st
Christian emperor

Select Modern Bibliography

Boschung, D. 1993. "Die Bildnistypen der iulisch-claudischen Kaiserfamilie," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6: 39-79.
Das römische Herrscherbild (series on individual rulers and imperial women).
Kleiner, D. 1992. *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven). [with more bibliography]
Smith, R.R.R. 1996. "Typology and Diversity in the Portraits of Augustus," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 9: 30-47.
Varner, E. (ed). 2000. *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* (Atlanta). [with biblio.]
Woods, S. 1999. *Imperial Women. A Study in Public Images 40 B.C.-A.D. 68* (Leiden)
Zanker, P. 1987. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor).

For more information...

You can learn more about Roman emperors and empresses in **CLSX 240: ROMAN CIVILIZATION** and **CLSX/HA 527&537: ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART.**

For more information about the Wilcox Collection and Department of Classics, please visit our websites:
<http://www.wilcox.ku.edu>
<http://www.classics.ku.edu>

**WILCOX
COLLECTION
of
Classical
Antiquities**

**Department of Classics
University of Kansas**

Study Pamphlet #9

**casts:
ROMAN PORTRAITS**

© Paul Rehak
January 2004
rev. 10.2016