CHECKLIST

Roman, Egyptian
Fayum portraits, 2nd century CE, encaustic/tempera paint on wood
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of the Associates in Fine Arts; 1939.263–264

Roman
Portrait of a man, possibly reworked from a portrait of Nero, original ca. 59–64 CE, recut ca. 117–138 CE, marble
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896; 1961.30

Roman
Portrait of a man, 3rd century CE, marble
Yale University Art Gallery: Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund; 1999.59.1

Roman
Portrait head of a young boy, ca. 20 BCE–60 CE, marble
Gift of Mrs. William Dexter; S.965.90.14

Roman, Cypriot (?)
Portrait head of a bearded male, 2nd century CE, marble
Gift of Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H; S.966.138

Roman
Denarius of Julius Caesar, 44 BCE, silver
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund and through gifts by exchange; 2010.2

Roman
Denarius of Octavian, 28–27 BCE, silver
Yale University Art Gallery: Numismatic Collection Transfer, 2001; 2001.87.885

Roman
Cistophor of Hadrian, 128 CE, silver
Yale University Art Gallery: Ruth Elizabeth White Fund with the Assistance of Ines Lee Damsky; 2009.110.14

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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A SPACE FOR DIALOGUE 64

Faces of Antiquity: Portraiture of the Roman Empire

Portraits, or visual representations of specific individuals, became exceptionally prominent during the Roman Empire. This installation presents some of the most widespread variations of these personal depictions, including funerary painting, sculptural busts, and coinage. Though we now view these objects primarily as works of art, they also fulfilled important political and commemorative functions, both privately and publicly, for Romans.

An inclination toward realism, with particular attention to an individual's facial features, began to emerge in Roman portraiture in the first century BCE. This interest in verity had its origins in the Roman practice of creating and displaying wax death masks of deceased family members, which, by the nature of their production, relayed detail with remarkable fidelity. These waxen masks, called imagines, served to advertise the memory of someone who had dishonored the state. As a result, all portraits that have been altered from an original bust of the Emperor Nero (54–68 CE) present some of the most widespread variations of these personal depictions, including funerary painting, sculptural busts, and coinage.

Imperial sculptural portraits also included these same features causing Hadrian's image to be remarkably consistent throughout the empire. With imperial portraiture so successfully circulated in numismatic and public contexts, painting was a popular medium for private portraiture in the Roman world. Unfortunately, for the most part Roman painting survives only fragmentarily with the exception of works produced and preserved in the aridity of the Egyptian climate. The tradition of encaustic, or wax, painting, as seen in the mummy portrait of a youth, emerges in Egypt following its imperial conquest by Augustus in 30 BCE. This young man is depicted with a high degree of realism—the strong gaze, as well, conveys a palpable sense of the deceased individual. These portrait paintings would have been placed on the exterior of a mummy and held in place by the wrapped bandages, according to traditional Egyptian burial practice. The incorporation of these Roman-style portraits into Egyptian funerary customs reflects the strength of the Roman influence upon personal representation throughout the empire.

Ancient Romans placed great emphasis on the accurate depiction of the individual in both public and private spheres. As we look into the eyes of the men in these various portraits, we cannot help but feel a deep connection to the ancient world in which they lived and were honored.

Kasia Vincunas, Mellon Special Project Curatorial Intern

Some objects in this installation are on loan from the Yale University Art Gallery as part of their innovative Collection-Sharing Initiative, which has been made possible by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.