

A Roman in #####: An Investigation of an Unidentified Portrait at ##### College

A portrait of unknown provenance was gifted to the college art collection by an alumnus. The portrait, although showing an even break at the neck and suffering some damage at the nose, mouth and ears, is generally well-preserved. It remained unstudied until 2015 when Professor Andrew Stewart from the University of California-Berkeley examined it and concluded that it was both Roman and authentic. In this paper, I intend to elaborate upon Stewart's assessment and provide some information for the identity, date and function of the portrait through the methodology of stylistic analysis. I will argue that the portrait is a private Roman portrait of a child and possibly a marble fragment of a funerary sculpture which can be dated with confidence to ca. 225-300 C.E and more tentatively to ca. 270-280 C.E.

Indeed, as scholars point out, stylistic analysis is a problematic methodology: it is highly subjective and of limited use for dating (Feijfer 2008; Wood 2015). For the past thirty years, increasing emphasis has been placed upon context, and new approaches that combine the analysis of style and context are employed to study Roman portraiture. However, because of the lack of context in the case of this portrait, stylistic analysis is the only methodology available for an interpretation.

Despite its limitations, stylistic analysis is still able to shed light on the portrait. When the portrait is studied as a whole, some meaningful conclusions can be reached. The contour of the face, the hairstyle and facial features suggest that the portrait is a third-century private Roman portrait of a child and possibly a marble fragment of a funerary sculpture. Yet when the focus is turned to the analysis of the style of individual features, the conclusions

drawn can only be speculative. The hair and eyes, the diagnostic features for dating (Goldscheider 1940), when examined separately, lead to varied dates. While the stippled hair and the combination of enlarged eyes framed by heavy eyelids and eyebags point to a dating of ca. 225-300 C.E, the drilled round pupils suggest the second half of the third century (Graindor 1915). In an attempt to determine a still more precise date, I pinpoint stylistic parallels for the portrait. The portrait of Probus (276-282 C.E) in *Musei Capitolini* (inv. MC493) shows individual features of hair which closely resemble those of the portrait: stippled locks, the almost rectilinear hairline, and the part in the small locks over the forehead may date the portrait to ca. 270–280 C.E.

In addition, three child portraits, the portrait of the boy on the Acilia Sarcophagus in *Palazzo Massimo alle Terme* (inv. 126372), a portrait of a boy in the *Museo Profano Lateranense* (inv. 592) and the portrait of the deceased boy on a sarcophagus in *Cortile Ottagono* (inv. 879), have stippled hair, enlarged eyes, heavy eyelids and eyebags and drilled pupils, and seem to be very close parallels for the portrait. They are all, however, quite controversial in dating, but their suggested dates all fall within the range, ca.225-300 C.E. Furthermore, among them, the portrait of the deceased boy on a sarcophagus in *Cortile Ottagono*, which has been recently dated to ca. 270 C.E. through stylistic analysis of both its sculpted motifs and the portrait (Kranz 1984), supports the dating of the portrait to ca. 270-280 C.E. However, the dating of the sarcophagus, based as it is on stylistic analysis, can only be tentative, and is suggestive for the dating of the portrait, but no more.

The portrait exemplifies the difficulties and challenges in studying portraits without a context as well as the limitations of an exclusively stylistic analysis in the study of Roman

portraits. Although the narrower date range—270–80 C.E.—is speculative at best, the broader date range 225–300 C.E. is a reasonable starting point from which more may be learned as more discoveries are made and research is conducted which might improve our knowledge of third-century Roman portraiture.

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