

On Body and Soul: Portraits of Roman Women from the Age of Crisis

Roman portraiture underwent a profound change under Severan rule. Honorific funerary portraits produced between the end of the second and the beginning of the third century C.E. were characterized by a more realistic style, showing signs of aging and harsh expressions, which communicate a sense of anxiety. Art historians have associated this rise of realistic style in portrait sculptures with their contemporary social, political, and military instabilities across the Roman Empire (Weitzmann, 1977). However, scholarship on this topic has traditionally focused on male portraits, especially those of the emperors. Less attention has been given to female portraiture from this period beyond the study of chronological evolution of elements, such as hairstyles, and visual descriptions of facial features.

My project investigates the use of realistic style in female portraits dated to the late second to the third century, focusing on the implication of this new stylistic interest on the conceptualization of female identity from this period. The main purpose of this contribution is not only to fill in the gap of existing studies of third century portraiture, but also to provide a new insight into the socio-cultural context and issues of female gender and sexuality in this period of crisis. Through quantitative and visual analysis, and intense focus on the historical context, I explore the possibly impacts of socio-political changes, religion, and Neo-platonic philosophy on the artistic representation of women.

My research focuses primarily on female portrait busts, statues, and sarcophagi with portrait-reliefs of women dated to the years ranging from the Severan Dynasty to the reign of Diocletian (193-305 CE), covering the geographical area of Rome and central Italy. Most of these artworks are located in major antique collections in Rome, including the Vatican Museum, Centrale Montemartini, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, and the Capitoline

Museum. Regarding the nature of the medium of marble sculptures, the main subjects of my focus, therefore, are imperial and aristocratic women, since the media of commemoration were rather limited to the upper class. Moreover, the city of Rome and central Italy provide an ideal context to study Roman women in this historical period: the cultural atmosphere of the Empire's capital become more diverse under the Severans, especially within the imperial court.

Meanwhile, the city was also an intellectual center of Hellenistic culture with the academy of Plotinus. Despite the ongoing political instability, the power of empire's capital and Roman tradition persisted. Since it is reasonable to suggest that the close relationship of the senatorial class with the imperial family might facilitate the dissemination of new cultural trends within the elite circle, women from the aristocratic class in Rome provides a unique spectrum for us to examine the change and continuity in a traditional Roman community. Therefore, through studying the artistic representation of these women, we can question to what degree feminine ideals in Roman tradition were maintained or altered.

The methodology of my project is built upon a socio-historical approach, analyzing each sculptured based on its type, format, and artistic style while relating it to its context of display and intended message (Gazda & Haeckl, 1993). I also apply the models of gender theory to examine the relation between artistic expression and the dynamic of female power in Roman tradition (Kampen, 1996).

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