How to Read a Roman Portrait

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Beginning in the first century B.C., Roman artists invented a new kind of portraiture, as unlike that of the great tradition of Greek Hellenistic art (whence the Romans had ultimately derived the idea of portraiture itself and a highly developed vocabulary of formal devices for its realization) as it was unlike that of their own previous Italo-Hellenistic local tradition. This new conception, conferring upon the portrait an unprecedented capacity to articulate and project the interior processes of human experience, made possible the achievement in the ensuing six centuries of what is surely the most extraordinary body of portrait art ever created, and forms the indispensable basis for the whole of the later European portrait tradition, from its rebirth in the 13th and 14th centuries to its virtual extinction in the 20th. No clear account of the nature of this reformulation of the structure of representation or of its historical significance has so far been given.

That the portraiture which it engendered is strikingly "realistic" in the sense of evoking the presence of an astonishingly concrete and specific individuality, to a degree previously unknown and rarely equaled since, has been the universal experience of every observer. But this question-begging term (first used to characterize Roman portraiture, in opposition to the "idealism" imputed to the Greeks, three quarters of a century ago by Franz Wickhoff, at the inception of modern critical studies of Roman art and not yet effectively superseded in modern scholarship) tells us nothing of the specific nature of the innovations responsible for this effect. Indeed, aside from the inadequacy in principle of such a term as applied to works of art, it seems particularly inappropriate to a form of portraiture such as the Roman, in which, as can easily be shown, abstract and conventional elements play so large a part.

In some important respects Roman portraiture, like Roman art in general, can fairly be described as a system of signs. Both the idea of deliberate address to the spectator with the aim of arresting his attention, and the intent to convey a message, a meaning, are contained in the Latin word signum, one of the commonest terms used to designate an iconic statue. The will to reach out actively into the world of on-going life and to accomplish specific purposes within it through psychological modifications imposed upon the observer is the central organizational principle of Roman art, notable, for example, in the condensed and forceful propagandistic language of the imperial reliefs and in the elaborate manipulation of the spectator's movements through spatial pressures in architecture.

Since the dominant function of the monumental portrait in Roman antiquity was the public commemoration of civic distinction, it is natural to search the realm of contemporaneous political and social ideas for themes which may enter into the context of particular portrait modes. These are regularly to be found. In this regard it is instructive to consider the so-called "veristic" portraiture of the first century B.C., in which, in fact, the new portrait conception makes its premier appearance, and which is usually considered both quintessentially Roman as a social expression and as the example par excellence of Roman "realism" [Figure 4]. This class consists exclusively of portraits of men in later life, often balding and toothless, upon whose faces the creases, wrinkles and blemishes inflicted by life upon aging flesh are prominently and harshly displayed with a kind of clinical exactitude which has aptly been called "cartographic." The insistent presentation of unflattering physiognomic irregularities, apparently, from their diversity, highly individualized, extends also to the representation of emotional states: the expressions of these faces are without exception grim, haggard and ungenerous, twisted by fixed muscular contractions. The emphasis accorded these contingencies of physiognomy and the resolute refusal of any concession to our—or, so it would appear, antiquity's—ideas of desirable physical appearance lead one easily to the conclusion that these portraits are uncompromising attempts to transcribe into plastic form the reality of what is seen, innocent of any "idealization" or programmatic bias. These are the portraits of the conservative nobility (and of their middle-class emulators) during the death-agonies of the Roman republic. There is no need to doubt that much of their character refers to quite real qualities of their subjects. These are men in later life because the carefully prescribed ladder of public office normally allowed those who followed it to attain only gradually and after many years to such eminence as would allow the signal honor of a public statue. One may well suppose that these hard-bitten and rather unimaginative faces closely reflect the prevailing temperament of the class and society to which they belong and the twisted and pained expressions surely testify in similar fashion to the terrible emotional strains of a society torn apart in the chaos of civil war.

Nevertheless, a moment's reflection upon veristic portraits as a class reveals such an insistent pattern of recurrence in the selection and handling of particular physical and characterological traits that all these apparently so
individualized portraits finally look very much alike, and it becomes clear that we are dealing with a conventional type, whose properties are dictated by ideological motives and—given the political function of the portrait statue—by the intent to convey a clearly drawn and forceful polemical content.

The nature of this content becomes clear as soon as the context of meanings available in the wider range of contemporary portraiture is examined. Through emphasis on the marks of age, these men call attention to their long service to the state and their faithfulness to constitutional procedures, in intended contrast to the meteoric careers and dubious methods of the individualistic faction-leaders—men like Marius and Sulla, Pompey and Caesar, later Antony and Octavian—whose ambitions and rivalries in the quest for personal power were rending the fabric of the republic. The portraits of these duces, when we can identify them, betray rather different tendencies than do those of the veristic group, drawing heavily upon Hellenistic elements for the dramatization of their personalities and the suggestion of a godlike superiority to circumstance. The seeming frankness and air of indifference with which the subjects of the veristic portraiture acknowledge—or, rather, proclaim—their physical ugliness is surely a defiant and formalized response to the propagandistic glamorization of physiognomy and character in the portraits of the quarrelling war-lords whose aspiration toward personalized, tyrannical power and brutal disregard of traditional constraints were scandalous affronts to inherited values. Against the portraits of the duces, the verist portrait asserts a self-conscious pride in down-to-earth pragmatism, an absence of illusions, a contempt for vanity and pretense. The grim restraint which twists these features and the harsh suppression of feeling stand in programmatic contrast to the emotional pathos, the exaltation of spontaneity which had illuminated Hellenistic royal portraiture and which the duces had in modified form incorporated into their own images. It is not individuality, imagination and daring which are celebrated here but stern self-discipline, shrewd calculation, unbending resolution, unquestioning acceptance of social bonds, painstaking conformity to those ancestrally sanctioned rules of conduct which the Romans called the mos maiorum.

The binding durability of this catalogue of old-Roman virtues of gravitas, dignitas, fides, which were the pride of the conservative aristocracy, may be read already, though without the defiant exaggeration of last-ditch resistance of a century later, in the stern features of one of the few surviving portraits of a Roman nobleman of an earlier age, the famed bronze of the second century B.C. known as the Capitoline Brutis. In the light of a work such as this, the "realism" of the veristic portrait is revealed for what it is: a set of conventions dictated by ideological motives—a highly selective assemblage of abstractions from suitable aspects of human appearance and character into an interpretative ideogram.

In the veristic portraiture of the first century B.C. the new image-structure which will determine the operations of the Roman portrait as a mode of
communication and which will be immensely enriched and developed over several centuries, is clearly evident. Such an image is not an indissoluble nexus of mutually referential properties conceived on the model of a natural organism and presenting itself as a self-contained and self-justifying totality, as had been the images of the Greeks. Rather it is a system of formalized conventional references whose specific content and polemical point are defined positively by the evocation of desired associations, and negatively by implied contrast with other image bearing an opposed content. Since the Roman viewer had necessarily, if perhaps only half-consciously, to recognize these references as such, their mutual independence as preconceived units of meaning had to be at least subliminally discernible within the overall context of the image, whose show of organic coherence after the Greek model could only be a superficial one and which effectively resembled more closely a collage, or better (in Eisenstein’s sense) a montage.

Condensed into the image of a human face, these components are so fused as to be isolatable by the modern spectator only with a certain analytical effort. But an identical system of construction out of pre-existent and independently meaningful parts can be more easily seen in complete figures, such as the well-known statue of Augustus from Prima Porta [Figure 5]. A body-type derived from the Doryphoros of Polykleitos and exploiting rhetorically the noble equilibration of its pose is juxtaposed to a right arm quite independently conceived, whose gesture of address, possessed of a well-established meaning in Roman society, is lent a compelling emphasis through its abrupt breakage of the overall rhythm of the stance. The military costume, specifying the role of Augustus as imperator or commander and implicitly invoking the charisma of his martial successes as justification of his authority, is itself formalized into a separable unit of meaning rather than conceived as a simple fact, being, as it is, qualified or relativized by the noticeable omission of the boots which would normally complete it. The bare feet, forced to our attention by what would in a real-life context be their incongruity, are here a clear reference to the ideal nudity of heroic statues, and they inform us that the event represented takes place on a higher-than-mundane plane. The motives for this quasi-divinization are explained to us: first, in the reliefs which ornament the breastplate, illustrating against a cosmic panorama what Augustus sought to advertise as the crowning political success of his career, the return of the standards from Parthia (emblematically representing both a restoration of the natural order of things after the chaos of the civil wars and the elevation of Rome to a position of universal sovereignty); and second, by the little figure of a dolphin-riding Cupid, serving as a support beside the right leg, which reminds the viewer of Augustus’ divine descent from Venus through Aeneas and hence of his inborn claim to rule over Aeneas’ posterity, the Roman people.

At the magnified scale of this statue, both the conceptual independence of the components and their encoding through calculated juxtapositions and superimpositions into a single system of meaning are obvious enough. Such

Figure 5. Augustus of Prima Porta, 15 CE Vatican Museums, Rome. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.
an image manifestly exists not for itself, but for the spectator whose active intellectual cooperation is demanded and in whose synthetic mental act the image attains its unity and significance. Its status among other images, like that of its components among one another, is not so much inherent as positional—in a wider range of reference like individual words within a semantic field.

In Augustus' portrait head itself—as we see it in the Prima Porta statue—the iconographic system already posited in veristic portraiture reaches an astonishing richness and complexity of meaning. The godlike youthfulness of the face (as Caesar's heir, Augustus had seized a position at the center of Rome's political life, in defiance of the usual norms, at the age of 18, but his portraits retain youthful features through the rest of his long life) stands in deliberate and striking contrast to the tired and wizened faces of the old-school politicians whom the veristic style represents for us. Those exhausted faces, whose muscular spasms reflect the tangle of encumbering circumstances in which they were enmeshed, convey only hopelessness; by contrast, the new image of Augustus offers the freshness and boundless possibilities of youth, the freedom to make the world anew. Against their gazes blank with despair or sunken in bitter defiance, that of Augustus is brilliant and piercing, full of intellectual power; far-seeing, his face comprehends and dominates the orbis terrarum and the vast horizons of time and history. His electrical gaze, through which the force of the personality is poured out, is a device borrowed from Hellenistic royal portraiture where it had denoted the heroized, superhuman stature of the kings. But Augustus was too astute to attempt (as his unsuccessful predecessors, the would-be dynasts of the late republic, had to some degree done) to impose the formulae of Hellenistic portraiture with its emotional pathos, its exaltation of individual personality and will, upon a Roman public which reacted to such associations with deep resentment and distrust. Instead, the dominating gaze is incorporated into a facial mimetics which reflects—in the same traditional way as that of the Capitoline Brutus—the old-Roman virtues of rigorous self control and implicit acceptance of the binding force of social order. (When Greek sculptors in the East had occasion to copy Augustus' portrait, they rarely failed to restore to it, in conformity with their concept of royal representation, the dramatic emotionalism which he had so carefully purged.) Integrating all is the neo-classic style of the head, with its broad, clear planes and severely contrasted verticals and horizontals, whose harmony, balance and Apollonian intellectual order proclaim the animating principles of the new universal order which Augustus has miraculously brought to a tormented world. Here style, too, is reified into a separable meaning-unit (for it is not of course the style of the Classical age in its integral reality but a calculated reminiscence of it superimposed upon an underlying and profoundly different contemporary formal structure) which is invoked not only for its inherent expressive content but also for its associative value as emblematic of what was now revered as a past golden age—that of the Athens of Pericles—whose luster might appropriately be borrowed to clothe the new.

The extraordinary synthesis of meanings accomplished in the portrait of Augustus, precisely calculated with reference to the play of contemporary hopes, passions and exigencies, made this work a political icon of matchless cogency and density of content...

**Political Images: Public Relations, Advertising, and Propaganda**

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The nation that expects to be ignorant and free expects what never can and never will be.

—Thomas Jefferson

Perhaps no single group has been more involved with image at all of its levels of signification than politicians—from the public conception of who the person is and what he or she "stands for," to the carefully constructed images disseminated to the media as "news," to the archetypal and nationalistic imagery used in political ads. Political imagery, in fact, cuts horizontally across the vertical currents of public relations, advertising, and propaganda. Nowhere