



Portrait of a Roman Matron

Date

late 2nd to early 3rd century

Primary Maker

Artist Unknown

Medium

marble

Description

This fine, realistically rendered portrait represents a middle-aged Roman woman. Uncompromising realism is a Roman invention in the figurative arts. At its roots was a societal value that human life was noble, that the way a man or woman looked was good, regardless of aging, weathering, or accidents over time. In other words, the Romans believed that one wore one's experience; one was responsible for one's face. On the other hand, the calculated expression of this figure projects sobriety and pronounced seriousness, symbolizing the matron's ideal

state of social virtue; that is, to be an unyieldingly dutiful wife, mother, and citizen. The real and the ideal are thus combined in the Roman portrait. The individual finds meaning through willfully subjecting himself or, in this case, herself to the changeless values and expectations of the family, the town, the state. The slightly undersized scale of the portrait combined with the large hole in the middle of the back of the head suggest that this figure may have been designed for a funerary niche in a columbarium, a subterranean, typically rectangular, space excavated to hold cinerary urns and boxes and portrait busts of a noble Roman family and its freed servants. The hole probably held a metal bar affixed to the wall of the presentation niche. The transformation of marble into "flesh and bone" is particularly convincing in this sculpture, whose delicacy of appearance is largely a result of shallow carving and grooving of the surface together with the compact contours of the elaborate coiffure and the sides of the head.

Dimensions

Overall: 11 1/4 x 7 1/2 x 8 1/4 in. (28.6 x 19.1 x 21 cm)