Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome
with Karen Moore

Outline:

"Verism is essentially a grave realism, or perhaps better stated, a realism with gravitas that portrays the subject as he or she really appears in that moment, particular to their age and stage of life."

Introduction

In this lesson, Karen Moore explores how Romans used portrait sculpture to convey their virtue and ambition, blending realism with idealism to create powerful representations of their leaders and nobility.

Introduction to Roman Portraits
- Focus on Roman portraits and their comparison to idealized Greek sculptures.
- Introduction of Roman Verism:
    - Grave realism or realism with gravitas.
    - Portrays subjects with real physical details (wrinkles, warts, hairlines).
    - Possible origins in Etruscan realistic portraits on urns and sarcophagi.
    - Use of wax images (*imagines*) or death masks in early Roman times for display in the atrium of the home or carried in funeral processions.
    - Influence of Greek artists after the conquest of Greece (3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.)
        - These artists were trained in the realism of Classical and Hellenistic style of Greek sculpture.
- What was the *signum* of this new veristic style and why was it in demand in Rome?

Roman Verism in Sculpture

- Definition and Origin:
  - Verism focuses on realistic representation, especially of age and experience.
  - Early examples from the first century B.C. portray conservative nobility and lesser classes who wish to imitate their style.
- Key Features:
  - Realistic depiction of physical details.
  - Often portrays older nobility who followed *cursus honorum* (course of honors) of progressive offices of public service.
  - Emphasis on signs of aging to signify wisdom and experience.

Examples of Veristic Portraits

- The Capitoline Brutus:
  - Ancient bronze bust as early as the fourth century B.C.
  - Possibly the work of an Etruscan sculptor influenced by Greek styles.
  - Named after Lucius Junius Brutus who expelled the last Roman king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, in 509 B.C.
  - Shows a wrinkled brow, sagging eyes, and intense gaze.
  - Renaissance addition of toga shoulders to accentuate facial nobility.
- Busts from the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) and [San Antonio Museum of Art:](#)
  - Two examples of aged men with balding heads, wrinkled brows, and sagging cheeks.
  - Depict concern and the weight of responsibility.
- Busts from the San Antonio Museum of Art
  - Female veristic portraits show different hairstyles and softer signs of aging.
- Emphasis on aging indicates years of faithful service to Rome as compared to young "hot shots";
  - Age as a badge of honor.
  - Prov. 16:31: *Gray hair is a crown of glory, attained by living a godly life.*
  - Veristic portraits assert a long life well-lived with virtue: *gravitas, dignitas, fides, virtus.*

Transition to Idealized Portraits During the Age of the Caesars

- Change in Style:
  - End of the Roman Republic saw a softening of verism.

- - Retained real wrinkles but with a handsome appeal.
- Notable Figures:
  - Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Gnaeus Pompey (the Great).
  - Softer lines, maturing (not sagging) eyes, and distinct hairstyles.
    - A bust formerly believed to be Pompey the Great was later identified as his son, Sextus Pompey, due to a variation in the hairstyle.
    - See this article for the fascinating full story!

The Imperial Images of the Caesars
- Bust of Julius Caesar shows a fringe of bangs over his forehead with a slight part on the right.
- Portraiture of Augustus is similar to his adoptive father's:
  - Verism has significantly retreated.
  - Youthful appearance maintained throughout his reign.
- Augusta Prima Porta
  - Recovered from the villa of Augustus' wife Livia at Prima Porta and now housed at the Vatican Museum.
  - This statue and similar copies emphasize his youthfulness, military power, and secular authority.
  - His military costume depicts the famous scene of the Roman standards recovered from Parthia.
  - Use of symbolism, such as Cupid and dolphin, to convey divine lineage of the Julian clan (via Aeneas and Venus).
  - Bare feet suggest the ideal man in the spirit of the Doryphorus, as does the *cuirass* (breastplate) showing the ideal musculature.
  - Statues originally painted in bright colors to highlight details.
  - Compare the Augusta Prima Porta to the Etruscan Orator (1st c. B.C.) to reveal different signa: idealized form of a general vs. consular authority of the old Republic.
- Quote from the *Aeneid* 1.148-153):

  - *Ac veluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est seditio, saevitque animis ignobile volgus, iamque faces et saxa volant– furor arma ministrat; tum, pietate gravem ac meritis si forte virum quem conspexere, silent, arrectisque auribus adstant; ille regit dictis animos, et pectora mulcet.*

  - Translation: Then, if by some chance they catch sign of a man distinguished in piety and merits, they are silent, and they stand

with ears pricked up. That man, he rules their minds with words, and he softens their hearts.

Later Emperors and the Combination of Verism and Idealism
- Julio-Claudine Clan tended to imitate Augustus in youthful portrait busts.
  - Exception: Claudius.
- Year of Four Emperors (69 A.D.)
  - Four emperors ruled in a single year.
  - Nero lost respect, committed suicide.
  - Power grab among generals until Vespasian comes out on top.
- Vespasian (69-79 A.D.)
  - Had a long and distinguished career as a general.
  - Known for the conquest of Judea and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.
  - Adopted a veristic style in portraits reflecting age and experience.
    - Possibly a signal to return to the values of the Old Republic.
    - Wrinkled brow, lines around nose and cheeks, look of gravitas.
- Titus (79-81 A.D.)
  - Followed Vespasian's veristic style.
  - Died young.
  - Statues show a wrinkled brow and a sense of maturity and gravitas.
  - Full face, rounded lips, wavy hair.
- Trajan (98-117 A.D.)
  - Combination of idealized Greek body with a veristic Roman head.
  - Hair imitates the style of Julius and Augustus Caesar.
  - Face is characteristic of Trajan and shows signs of age.
  - Body defies aging, modeled after Polykleitos' Doryphoros.
  - Represents Greek idealism and Roman realism.

Conclusion
- Romans used portrait sculpture to convey virtue and ambition.
- Next lesson: Exploration of mythologically based sculpture groups and their historical, literary, and political contexts.