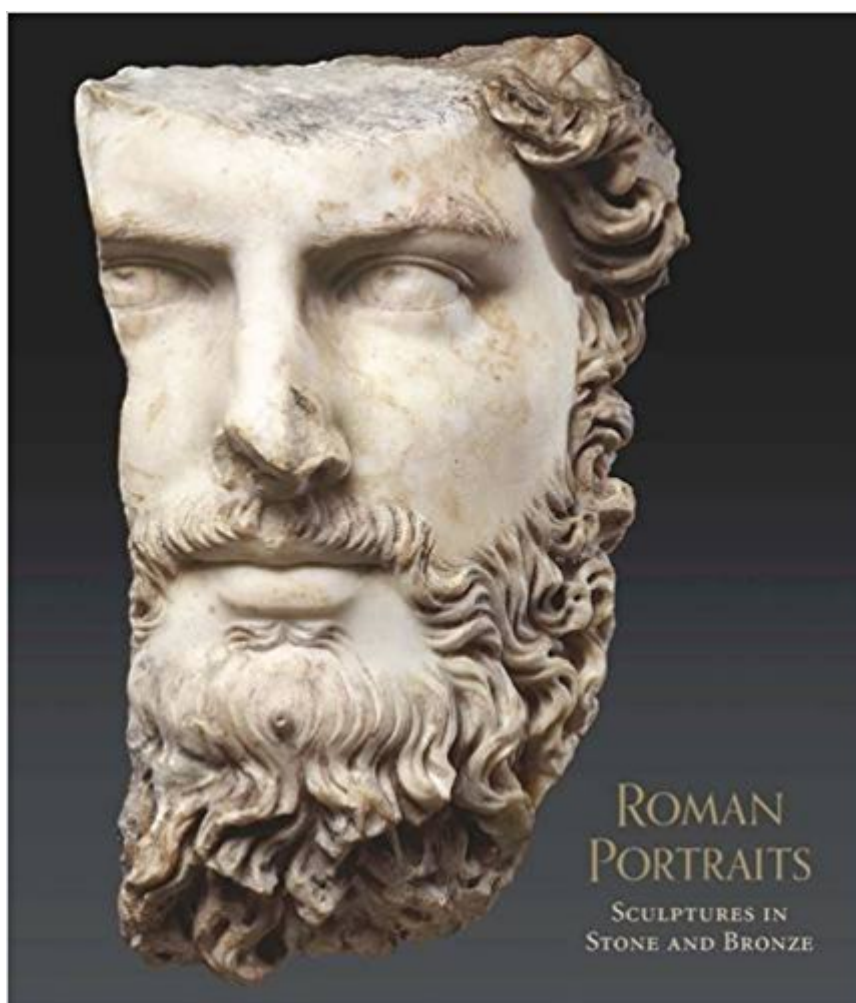The book was found

Roman Portraits: Sculptures In Stone And Bronze In The Collection Of The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

Synopsis

Portraits are among the most compelling artistic records of Greek and Roman culture. In this richly illustrated book featuring all new photography, the 60 portrait heads from the Metropolitan Museum¢â ¬â„¢s renowned collection are fully described, and placed in their historical and cultural contexts. Roman Portraits presents a thorough and multifaceted survey of Roman stone and bronze portraiture as well as a brief overview of the history of ancient portraiture. Unearthing the evolution of this art from its origins in Greece through the Roman Empire, Paul Zanker, the foremost authority on Roman art today, brings these imposing, timeless renderings to life.

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Customer Reviews

Ancient Greek and Roman portrait sculptures in the Metropolitan MuseumÃ¢â ¬â„¢s superb collection are fully illustrated and described by the worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s foremost authority on the subject.

Paul Zanker is visiting professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York.Ã Â

The first comprehensive overview of the Metropolitan Museum of Art 's Roman portrait collection has just been released and I was unexpectedly thrilled to receive a review copy! Entitled "Roman Portraits: Sculpture in Stone and Bronze", the text is written by Roman classicist Paul Zanker and not only presents an analysis of style, condition, post-ancient modifications and even controversial aspects of each piece but defines the historical and social circumstances surrounding their creation

and how these unique contexts influenced their individual qualities."The political self-image of individual rulers was all-important to in the creation of emperor's portraits," Zanker explains, "The emperor himself or his advisor dictated to the sculptor who created the prototype how he wished to be seen by his subjects - as detached , close to the people, energetic, or determined and assertive."But images of emperors and empresses share space with those of less exalted citizens, too, even children as young as a few months old. The text is also lavishly illustrated and includes beautifully illuminated photographs, often from multiple angles, allowing the reader to examine even minute details of each work.As I have photographed the ancient collections of museums around the world I have often wondered how different sculptures are attributed to different dynasties when epigraphic evidence is lacking. By reading the often abbreviated identification information displayed with each portrait I learned that often a piece is said to be Augustan, Flavian, Trajanic or Antonine based on the subject's hairstyle, beard (or lack thereof) or some perceived stylized aspect of the face, the pose, or objects included in the work. Zanker provides in-depth discussions of these attributes and how comparative analysis with other known works is often vital to making such determinations.I've always preferred the more realistic portraits of Hellenistic Greeks and Romans to the heavily stylized statues of ancient Egypt. But I learned that even the Romans incorporated certain stylistic aspects to their portraits and, at times, their physical appearance may not have actually resembled the official portraits displayed in public spaces.Recently, there was a discussion of the new Netflix series "Roman Empire: Reign of Blood" in our Roman History Reading group on Facebook and several people protested the representations of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus as unrealistic because the actors were not sporting luxuriant curly hair and beards as portrayed on the official portrait statues that have come down to us from antiquity.Zanker explains, "In contrast to Hadrian's elegant self-presentation, the portraits of the Antonine emperors make their subjects seem benevolent but also always remote. Beginning with the portraits of the emperor Antoninus Pius and continuing with those of Lucius Verus, Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, and down to Septimius Severus, all the emperors are depicted with abundant, splendidly curly hair and beards that gradually become ever more luxuriant. Presumably, these hairdos were meant to recall the great Greeks from the past, but unlike the Greeks, the Romans favored elaborate forms that were artful creations."Zanker says a newly developed technique allowed sculptors to "loosen up the hair in such a way as to produce a lively interplay of light and shadow." So these fanciful portraits were the result of a combination of a desire to project a particular image and the technology to enhance the effect.Zanker points out, however, that Marcus Aurelius himself, in his philosophical treatise Meditations, alludes to this public deception."...the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius presents some

idea of the man behind the portrait, indicating that the official image he chose accorded little with his personal state and how he sought to master his existential problems with the guidance of the Stoic philosopher."I also learned how some portraits have been recarved in relatively recent times to mask damage or imperfections (to make the pieces more marketable perhaps?). Aggressive cleaning applied when a sculpture has been retrieved from underwater also removes some distinctive aspects that could be used to date or identify a work. These modifications are often brought to light through extensive comparisons with other existing portraits of the suspected individual but they can produce confusion about the identity of certain portraits or engender doubts about ancient authenticity altogether. Hopefully, such comparative studies should be facilitated now that more and more collections worldwide are brought online.Zanker admits, though, that Roman society's practice of emulating the hairstyles of the Imperial family may cause identification problems as well, especially if a portrait represents a child or young adult. Portraits identified as Augustus' adopted grandson, Gaius Caesar, have been questioned when other portraits representing an individual of similar age with a similar hairstyle have been found in contexts inconsistent with Imperial statuary.Apparently, epigraphic evidence found in the same context as a fragmentary statue can be problematic as well. The Metropolitan Museum's collection includes a bronze head of a man found not far from the Arch of Augustus in Susa (northern Italy at the foot of the Cottian Alps). Nearby, a fragmentary inscription was found stating that a statue was donated for Agrippa by a member of the Cotti family. But the portrait does not resemble other portraits identified as Agrippa so scholars are left puzzling whether the statue actually represented Agrippa or one of the Cotti or the inscription fragment was referring to another statue entirely.Zanker explains, "The head has been associated repeatedly with Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, doubtless owing to the inscription found at the same time. But it must be noted that no connection can possibly be made with Agrippa's familiar portrait type. Not only is the stylization of the hair above the forehead completely different, but so are the shape of the head and the facial expression. The Museum's portrait must therefore represent some other high-ranking Roman who was active in the Alpes Cottiae and to whom the son of the last king, Marcus Julius Cottius, felt indebted. The latter had been named praefectus civitatium (high magistrate) by the Romans. However, it is also possible that this is a portrait of Cottius himself, as Federico Barello suspects. The Celtic prince would thus have presented himself, in the cut and style of his hair, as fully 'Roman'."Zanker also notes that portraits produced in the provinces by less skilled sculptors frequently deviated from Imperial commissioned originals. I can't help but wonder, though, if the sculptors were less skilled or if provincial portraits may have been less stylized than those produced in Rome under the nose of the emperor? I've

seen a portrait of Agrippa at The Louvre and I agree that the bronze head found near Susa does not resemble Agrippa at all. But, a case could be made for the identification as Augustus. Not only was the head found near the Arch of Augustus but it would be more in keeping with Agrippa's reticence to glorify himself to approve a statue of Augustus, his emperor and best friend. However, based on what I have learned in this book I would have to admit the hair style is missing the "tongs" of the classic Prima Porta portrayal of the emperor, the jaw and chin are structurally wider and the mouth is distinctly more pronounced and downturned at the corners. Furthermore, the expression is more severe than other portraits of Augustus I have seen, too, where the emperor appears more "ethereal" and aloof from daily cares. There are certainly other portrait heads identified as Augustus, though, that resemble him less than this bronze head. In fact, there are several included in the book identified as Augustus that gave me pause. You can easily see how challenging such identification can be!As you can probably tell by now, I found this text to be a fascinating read and welcome it as an invaluable reference work that I will use in the future to enrich my understanding of other Roman portraits I encounter in my travels!

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