

FACE TO FACE

PORTRAITS OF THE DIVINE
IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

ROBIN MARGARET JENSEN

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Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity

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About the cover art: Left: Detail of Jesus enthroned, ca. 400 C.E. Church of Santa Pudenziana, Rome. Middle: Detail of Dome mosaic, early 6th cen. C.E., Arian Baptistery, Ravenna. Right: Detail of Medallion portrait of Christ from arch of presbyterium, San Vitale, Ravenna. All photos are by Robin Margaret Jensen.

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To the memory of my parents,
ROBERT AND MARGARET JENSEN,
with confidence that they will one day
see God "face to face"

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Image and Portrait in Roman Culture and Religion

PLOTINUS objected to having his portrait painted because he distinguished between an individual's character and mere external appearance. The outward form and, even more, the representation of that form made by an artist using pigments on wood was, to his mind, an illusion. A painted portrait had no life, depth, or meaning beyond recording the transitory and superficial aspect of the model, and, if it pretended to show any more than that, it was a fraud. Plotinus, like Plato, not only regarded artistic images as inferior copies but also as deceptive snares that would lure the eye and turn the mind away from contemplation of reality. Plotinus was wary of the material world and of seductive physical delights that entrapped the soul in base pursuits and pleasures, keeping it from ascending to more lofty truth.

Whether or not this philosophical critique was heeded, the ancient monuments that fill today's museums show that the production of portrait images was widespread in the ancient world and no less in the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. The disapproval of intellectuals does not appear to have affected the population's desire for artistic representations of family members, great heroes, rulers, statesmen, and the gods. However, the question of what constituted a worthy portrait—or likeness—is complex. Although the ancient Egyptians may have been the first to have fashioned portrait-like art works, art historians (like many ancient philosophers) generally credit Greek sculptors with the first recognizable artistic likenesses, a development that characterized the transition from the archaic to the classical period, reflecting an increased emphasis on individuality and naturalism over standardized types or forms. From that time on, classical portrait images ranged back and forth on a spectrum between realistic and idealized representation—the matter of what constituted a portrait dependent on how the concept itself was understood.

For example, Pliny the Elder (ca. 24–79 C.E.) devoted nearly an entire volume of his *Natural History* to the painting of portraits. Here he laments the lack of taste motivated by the scramble for status symbols among the upwardly mobile middle classes of his time. In his view, a portrait's most important function was to foster memory and respect for family and tradition. However, Pliny complains, the defining characteristic of a portrait (its physical likeness to its model) was less valued than the costliness of the object, the quantity of items in a collection deemed more important than their quality, and the quality rated on the pretentiousness of the workmanship. Sounding very much like an old-fashioned member of the older generation lamenting the crass values of the younger, he decries the deterioration of tradition and style, the loss of respect for time-honored customs, and the deplorable habit of popping a new portrait head upon an older torso just to save money or time. Finally, he contends that, since the individual's mind cannot be visually portrayed, at least a decent likeness should be sought:

The painting of portraits, used to transmit through the ages extremely correct likeness of persons, has entirely gone out. Bronze shields are now set up as monuments with a design in silver, with only a faint difference between the figures; heads of statues are exchanged for others, about which before now actually sarcastic epigrams have been current; so universally is a display of material preferred to a recognizable likeness of one's own self. And in the midst of all this, people tapestry the walls of their picture-galleries with old pictures, and they prize likenesses of strangers, while as for themselves they imagine that the honor only consists in the price. . . . Consequently, nobody's likeness lives, and they leave behind them portraits that represent only their money not themselves. . . . That is exactly how they are; indolence has destroyed the arts, and since our minds cannot be portrayed, our bodily features are also neglected. In the halls of our ancestors it was otherwise; portraits were the objects displayed to be looked at . . . wax models were set out, each on a separate side board, to furnish likenesses to be carried in procession at a funeral in the clan, and always when some member of it passed away the entire company of his house that had ever existed was present.¹

However, the question of what constituted a true likeness, even a physical likeness, was debatable. Despite Pliny's assertion that "minds" could not be portrayed, he also recognized that the elements that made an external portrait true or false were deeper than mere outward appearance. The expression of some element of the soul, or at least the character, of the model was necessary. Pliny criticized the custom of placing portrait busts of great poets and authors in libraries where their works were kept, and he commented that many of these images were wholly invented, since no one knew what certain individuals looked like (such as Homer or Socrates). For Pliny, the creators of true portraits were actually the biographers who recounted the qualities of an individ-

ual character, or even bibliophiles (like himself) who preserved and edited the works of others—creating libraries to house the thoughts and writings of great thinkers, rather than merely showcasing their imaginary and ephemeral exterior likenesses.²

By Pliny's criteria, Plutarch (ca. 50–120 C.E.), the writer of biographies, was a true portrait painter. As Plutarch himself explains, genuine biographers care less about the great deeds of their subjects than they do about the content of their character or the state of their soul. However, he too believed that a gifted visual artist should be less concerned with external appearance and more with conveying the intangible aspects of the personality, perhaps through the expression of the face and the eyes. In describing his life's work, writing the lives of famous men, Plutarch asserts that an individual's great deeds or acts are far less revealing of character than the subtler ways that a person's nature may be delineated:

For it is not histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay a slight thing like a phrase of a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.³

Plutarch's protest only highlights one of the main functions of visual commemorative portraits, however. Visual images, like rhetorical or documentary portraits, were intended to honor an individual because of his or her deeds or actions. Although countless portraits of now nameless individuals have been found whose accomplishments we cannot know, nevertheless, having been the subject of a portrait suggests achievement, even perhaps fame. At least it warded off oblivion and fostered some posthumous respect. Naturally, portraits that merited prominent and public locations within the city, or that were of the highest quality work, signaled the political status, wealth, success, or even vanity of the model, then as well as now.

Idealization versus Realism in Roman Portraiture

When Pliny remonstrated about the lost values of earlier generations, he may have had in mind the lifelike Roman portraits made from living models (neither posthumous images nor death masks) that were popular during the Republican era, particularly around the mid-first century B.C.E.⁴ Art historians have found that this period provided some of the best examples of “realistic” portraits, many of them copied in early



Fig. 15. Bust of Lucius Cecilius Iocundus, Pompeian banker, 1st cen. C.E. from Pompeii, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

imperial times. Although this era was known for its emphasis on realism, there was also a continued tradition of idealized heroic representations based on earlier Hellenistic models. Scholars have noted that late Republican-era realistic portraits focused more on the expression of individual personality through certain unique facial features, depicting their subjects “warts and all.” Possibly based on the practice of making death masks for funerary purposes (see discussion below), this shift also seemed to capture the Republican values of practicality, frankness, and unsentimentality. One particularly vivid example of this, now in the National Museum of Naples but originally from Pompeii, is the bust of the Augustan-era banker and businessman Lucius Cecilius Iocundus (fig. 15).⁵ The literalism of this portrayal, with its wart and protruding ears, suggests that the aim was to create a particularly detailed and recognizable (and not noticeably beautified) likeness of its model.

During the early imperial era, the classical heroic or idealized portrayal became more popular, although somewhat influenced by the earlier tendency toward realism.⁶ The tendency to vacillate between the classicist or idealizing mode and the realistic one sometimes produced

odd combinations of realistically executed heads on heroically posed bodies (see fig. 18). Good examples of idealized portraits are the representations of Augustus, who is usually shown as a youthful and heroic figure (fig. 16). The next generations of the Julio-Claudian family generally kept up the idealizing tradition, especially in posthumous portraits of the deified ruler, although occasional reappearances of older Roman realism sometimes reappear in certain instances, such as the almost comical portrait of Claudius in the guise of Jupiter, now in the Vatican Museum (fig. 17). At the end of the first century, the portraits of Vespasian (69–79 c.e.) are also quite realistic, perhaps meant to associate this middle-class emperor with old Republican values. But even Vespasian could be represented as having a realistic visage on an idealized body (fig. 18). Although we



Fig. 16. Augustus from Primaporta, 14–29 c.e., Vatican Museum, Rome (Photo: Author)



Fig. 17 (left). Claudius as Jupiter ca. 50 C.E., Vatican Museum, Rome (Photo: Author)



Fig. 18 (right). Vespasian, mid 1st cen. C.E., from the Shrine of the Augustales, Misenum, Castello di Baia (Photo: Author).

cannot make clear judgments about exact likeness, the works suggest an apparent effort on the part of artisans to achieve realism while still flattering their subjects and showing them at their best. The women of the Flavian court, for example, affected elaborate hairstyles on their official portraits and sometimes had themselves appear with the figure and posture of Venus. At the same time, women of this and the next dynasty were also shown as aging, with wrinkled foreheads, bags under their eyes, and sagging cheeks (fig. 19).⁷

Art historians note a pronounced return to ideal types during the era of Emperor Hadrian, when certain facial features clearly were intended to suggest aspects of the model's character or virtues. Hadrian, however, was the first emperor to show himself with a full beard, in the style of the Greek philosophers, a trend that caught on for male portraiture, since it seemed to emphasize the gravitas of the model. Hadrian's lover Antinous, on the other hand, was shown in the form of a young Greek god, with a beardless face, curling hair, and a sensuous, even feminine body type. The bearded emperor types (with luxuriant and curly hair) were still in vogue toward the end of the second century, especially for the portraits of Antoninus Pius and his successors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, who wished to be regarded as intellectual rulers (fig. 20). Marcus Aurelius's portraits are especially

Fig. 19 (below). Portrait of a woman, Imperial Roman Period, Trajanic or Hadrianic, 100–125 C.E. Place of manufacture: Greece (possibly). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Photograph ©2004 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).



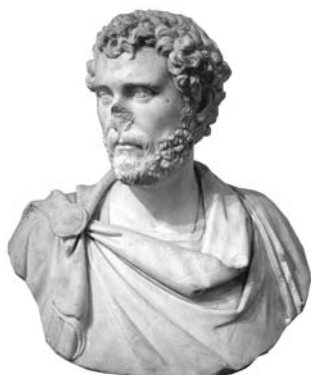


Fig. 20. Bust of Antoninus Pius, ca. 138–40 C.E., Museo Palatino, Rome (Photo: Author).



Fig. 21. Septimius Severus, ca. 200–210 C.E., Louvre Museum, Paris (Photo: Author).



Fig. 22. Bust of Caracalla, ca. 214 C.E., Museo Nazionale Romano (Palazzo Massimo all Terme), Rome (Photo: Author).

interesting, however, since they show a progression from attractive youth (beardless), through vigorous middle age (bearded), and finally to a wise and somewhat world-weary old man. The same pattern describes the portraits of his wife, Faustina, who also moved from youthful beauty to middle-aged matron and finally showed the dignity and wisdom of age.⁸

At the beginning of the third century, the Severan emperors were likewise portrayed with long curly hair and forked beards (fig. 21). Caracalla however, favored a more clipped beard and hairstyle (fig. 22).⁹ Verisimilitude came back into style beginning in the 230s for portraits of the soldier-emperors Maximinus Thrax and Balbinus. In order to express the personality of the model and to achieve a realistic likeness, artists employed rough and even impressionistic modeling. The results produced an appearance of severity and implied strength of character. H. P. L'Orange has analyzed this shift in style as the attainment of “psychological” imagery. Musing on one example of this type, the bust of Emperor Philip the Arab (244–249 C.E.), L'Orange writes:

With a great simplifying touch the artist has managed to concentrate physiognomic life in one characteristic sweep. The central motif is the threatening lowering of the brows, corresponding to convulsions of the forehead muscles and responding to nervous contractions of the muscles of the mouth. The psychological picture achieves an almost uncanny intensity. Behind the nervous quivering features the expression itself seems to change and move, flashing like a glimmering flame over the face.¹⁰

The “man of action” type disappeared again as portraits of Gallienus (253–268) returned to the idealized types. Shown with a short beard, this ruler’s smoothly modeled and almost delicately rendered portraits present him as a sensitive person, and his upturned eyes give him the look of spiritual or intellectual aspirations, even though he was an active soldier-emperor in the style of his father, Valerian. Possibly intended to remind the viewer of youthful depictions of Augustus, Gallienus’s image also bears some resemblance to a contemporary portrait found in Ostia and identified by some art historians as a portrait (finally achieved) of the philosopher Plotinus.¹¹

The intellectual image was dislodged again, however, at the end of the third century, as the Tetrarchs (Diocletian, Maximian, Constantius, and Galerius) wished to have themselves portrayed as strong and decisive types, like the soldier-emperors of the mid-third century. The style was more abstract than realistic, however, and likeness appears to have been less important than a kind of conventional frontality and symmetry. In place of smooth modeling, sharp lines and geometric shapes predominate. Facial features are stylized, with the wide-open and staring eyes that make these subjects look, in Diana Kleiner’s phrase, like “bearded