

9-17-2012

Portrait of Agrippina the Younger

RISD Museum

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Recommended Citation

RISD Museum; Kampen, Natalie; and Anderson, Lisa, "Portrait of Agrippina the Younger" (2012). *Channel*. 21.
https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/21

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My name is Natalie Kampen. I am a retired professor of art history.

I'm sitting in front of a portrait labeled *Portrait of Agrippina the Younger*.

The face I think is an astonishing tour de force of sculpture.

The hair style is pretty typical of women of the court at that time, and it combines very thick almost Marcel Waves with dense sort of undergrowth of little snail curls, which have been pierced by a drill so that the whole effect of the hair is incredibly colorful, even though it's white marble.

By comparison, the face is extraordinarily smooth. However, it's not really that smooth. What we get are some big, clear planes. We get surfaces that don't have marks in them, but what they have got is really great bone underneath.

All across the top of the cheek bone is bright light. Underneath because of the indentation, a kind of 'C' is created in shadow on each side of her face. But then notice her jaw line. That's a powerful jaw. That's a big, heavy bone, and we see it again because of the way that striking highlight hits it against the shadow, beginning as a thin line near her ear and broadening out until it comes to the pointy chin with its little cleft.

Almost all the statue bases we know from this period have inscriptions on them that say who was represented. Ordinary people didn't have to guess in Roman times if this was Agrippina the Younger. It would've said so. It might have even given her lineage and named her husband, and his titles. Sometimes the bases were two to four feet high, or even higher. The result of that high base is that the face would've been far above us. Then you'd really see the effect of the light and shadow. You really see the dense complexity of the hair. You really see how complicated that jaw is.

Our portrait is in some ways a thing of beauty and a joy just because it's such a dynamite piece of sculpture, but it's also inscrutable in some level. We don't know what the inscription would've said. We can't even be absolutely sure that it was Agrippina the Younger.

I'm Lisa Anderson. I'm a recent Ph.D. in Classical Archaeology from Brown University. And I worked as an intern at RISD Museum for seven years, in the Ancient Art department.

This is the portrait of Agrippina the Younger, who is one of the most central characters – and I do mean character – in early Roman Imperial history. She is the great-granddaughter of Augustus, the daughter of Germanicus, who was supposed to be an emperor, but then he died. She ended up married to the emperor Claudius, who was her uncle, and her son was the emperor Nero. So, she's very central in the events that are going on in the early first century of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty.

What we have here is a portrait that's made up of different parts. So, only the head that you see is ancient. The bust itself, with the beautifully colored marble, is a later addition, probably from the 18th century. It was not uncommon in the 18th century to add pieces to portraits and statues, to sort of throw them out, to make them more aesthetically pleasing. What's particularly helpful about this one is that it brings color to the image. And these would originally have been painted. So, this actually alludes to what it would have looked like before. Her hair would have been painted. Her eyes would have been painted with an iris and a pupil, probably, maybe, a little bit of makeup showing on the face, possibly, and her clothes probably would have been painted, too. So, we get used to the idea of sculptures as being blank and white, when originally they were very colorful. And so, we get this hint here, which was probably not their intention. They probably didn't know that when they made the bust.

It's also interesting to look at the life history of an object. This was first used in its imperial setting and looked different from this. Then, we don't know what happened to it, if it was buried, who found it. But it got put into this bust. And when it was first set up, it was an image of power. It's an image of a very important woman that people in the Roman Empire would have known about. They would have known who she was, her life story. When it was found in the 1800s, it's much less likely that they would have known who she was. But an image of a Roman woman done in this very nice style also has a certain power to it. They know that it comes from the Roman Empire. And trying to reference that type of empire, that type of power, is what they were getting at, really, when they put it into this bust. So, the person who owned it got a certain cachet from it, a certain status from having this high-status object. And whoever owned it in antiquity probably would have had the same sort of status/cachet from having it. And so, we here at RISD have something similar today, where this is a very important rare portrait of an imperial woman, one of the finest in the country, really. And so, we get a certain amount of status from having it.