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Portrait of Hadrian

RISD Museum

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Stephen Shaheen

My name is Stephen Shaheen. I am an artist who specializes in stone sculpture and I'm going to be looking at the *Portrait of Hadrian*.

Many Roman portraits I've seen are kind of stiff, oftentimes, and austere. And something that strikes me about this one is its softness, and just a nice suggestion of gesture.

It's really lively looking at tool marks that still exist. And sort of the unfinished nature of this allows me to look at it as a carver and really appreciate how certain areas, for example the hair, were conceived of and modeled in as forms before further articulation to the areas that ring the portrait. For example, further back on the head, you can see the hair is conceived of as ridges that were carved with a flat chisel, in undulations, first as groupings, and then those would have been separated out into sort of sub-groups.

Another area, where it's still unfinished and being resolved, is on the eye. Actually, you can see on the figure's right side, the viewer's left, that the eye, the curvature of the orb of the ball of the eye, is pretty much complete, whereas on the sculpture's left side, there's still some marble remaining in the lateral corner, almost like a layer that still needs to be peeled back to sort of make that complete.

If you notice, there becomes a certain point where all details become lost, and it suggests that this might have had a final placement from a higher location. Also, all this being just kind of finely articulated, everything kind of makes sense when viewed from a lower angle, because all of this stuff that's inchoate still just disappears from view. On the other hand, looking at the eye and seeing how that little detail there was left incomplete, it also could be that this was just simply not finished for whatever reason.