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Roman Portraits of Women from Flavian through Hadrianic

The Roman Empire is full of twisted and confusing imperial rulers that there are many portraits of, though there were also female portraits being done as well. Keep in mind all of these female portraits were created within a period in Roman history called "The Five Good Emperors", a time where there was great expansion of the Roman Empire. The portraits being looked at in this essay will show that the fashion trends of Roman women are iconically elaborated and artifice (Herrmann, 35). To understand or grasp the reasoning behind these elaborate hairstyles, we must understand the societal context and times they would have been viewed within. Before doing a visual analysis of a portrait bust there will be a summary of the ruler and their values before it, to give us the context to view it in.

The Flavian dynasty was a time of successful wars, impressive buildings, and events of catastrophe. Vespasian Titus and Domitian were the rulers of the Flavian dynasty. During their period, Mount Vesuvius buried the city of Pompeii alive in the wake of its eruption along with a handful of other small cities on Naples Bay. The famous *Colosseum* also known as the *Flavian Amphitheater* was built as a gift to the people of Rome. Titus, one of the Flavian rulers, also crushed the Jewish rebellion in battle. To commemorate him and his victory, the Arch of Titus was constructed and still stands in Rome today. The achievement of the Flavian dynasty was the restoration of confidence in Rome, and the securing of the succession helped to fulfill that restoration (Weinstein, 97).

This portrait is the *Fonseca Bust*, it is also fondly called the *Flavian Woman*. The first thing any viewer would be drawn to is her incredibly detailed hairstyle. The front section of her hair is pulled forward and full of pin curls creating a crown of hair. The back section of her hair is pulled backward into sleek braids that are then twisted round and up into a bun. Now, it is interesting that such a detailed or lavish hairstyle was going on in the Flavian dynasty. The Flavians and the Trajans to follow were embracing a down to earth type of image of themselves in the wake of the Julio-Claudians (Bartman, 8). Due to the Julio-Claudians highly favoring excess and the flamboyant lifestyle. These hairstyles would have been worn by ladies of the court, such as wives or daughters, which are presumed to have been the example of the contemporary fashion of appearance (Bartman, 10). It is likely that this portrait was completed within the late Trajanic or early Hadrianic periods, though it is still using a Flavian hairstyle. This goes to show the longevity of some of these hairstyles for Roman women (Bartman, 19).

The Five Good Emperors are what comes after the Flavians reign, and are called so because they ruled with restraint and acted justly. These men also chose their successor and could base it off of who they thought not only best suited the position, but would follow their example as well. Previously, the throne was either inherited or taken by rebellion. Nerva was the first of these five emperors, and he was one of the first emperors who had a simple transition of ruling following his death; by adopting his “son” Trajan as heir. Trajan was one of the first emperors to be “chosen”, along with the fact he was the first emperor to not be born in Italy. For the next three emperors to follow

Trajan’s goal as emperor was to expand the Roman Empire to the Eastern region, as well as taking on ambitious building projects. Not only did he have Trajan’s Column built, showing his victories of the Dacian wars. Though he was also in power while Trajan’s Forum and

Markets were built. This building was very much public outreach focused, with fora as the singular root of the word forum which means a public place of civic business. This is also in contrast to the earlier Julio-Claudian rule, where the emperors in power spent excess funds on themselves. Trajan, and Nerva before him, started a small chain reaction of being more grounded and engaged with the public.

On that note, there is a portrait of Trajan's wife we can examine. The *Bust of Pompeia Plotina, Wife of Trajan*, at first glance the "popular" hairstyle of Rome has been simplified in some way. It is still the hair divided into two sections, half pulled back into a generous braided bun. While in comparison to the Flavian Woman portrait, this bust does not have a crown of pin curls towering above her forehead. Instead she has separate tiers of curls, the first like a modest headband and the second an enlarged version, this could be seen as another type of "crown" utilizing the full volume of curling the hair back rather than the mini pin curls forward. This bust in particular is emphasizing her luxurious role as a leader. Though Plotina herself was super concerned with the social condition of the city, even with her elevated and contemporary style she was viewed well with the public.

Lastly taking a look into the third of the five emperors, Hadrian also funded multiple public building projects. As well as Hadrian's Wall that created a physical border for Northern Britain. Hadrian was fascinated by Greek culture, resulting from time he had spent in Athens. He aimed to present himself like one of the great philosophers from Greece, by depicting himself with a beard. He was one of the first emperors to be sculpted with facial hair, and for many years afterward emperors would be sculpted in the likeness of philosophers like Hadrian.

This portrait of Hadrian's wife is depicting her as the Greek goddess of the harvest called

Ceres also known as Demeter. Not only is it relating Sabina as a Greek goddess of the harvest, but with Demeter's story of searching for her daughters this strengthens the symbolism portraying Hadrian's wife as a mother. There is no elaborate hairstyle of the time, it is simply pulled back into a veil. There is also an apparent presence of Hellenistic influence with the fabric draped on Sabina, though it doesn't go as far as the wet drapery look. There is still detail in the texture of the hair nearest to her forehead, though not near as much as the Flavian Woman.

Much like the times today, there are ways one can present themselves that tell the viewer something about them. Though unlike ancient Rome, it typically is not shown through hairstyles these days. At first glance in a museum a viewer probably won't know that the *Flavian Woman* hairstyle was actually toned down from those before it. Or that Sabina was portrayed as the goddess Demeter. Without the modes of personal expression we have today, it was a piece of a woman's identity when it came to hairstyle (Bartman, 22). When viewing these portraits in the contexts of the imperial rule they were under, it is a bit easier to establish those identities.

Works Cited

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Portrait Bust of a Flavian lady, Rome. Musei Capitolini, Rome.



Copy of Roman Portrait Bust of Pompeia Plotina, Wife of Trajan.

The Columbia Museum of Art.



Sabina as Ceres, from the Palaestra of the Baths of Neptune, Antica, Italy.