

# Ideal Beauty and Adornment: A Roman Portrait of a Young Woman

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EVE D'AMBRA  
*Vassar College*  
[\*evdambra@vassar.edu\*](mailto:evdambra@vassar.edu)

A marble portrait head of a young woman in the Metropolitan Museum of Art appears striking with large regular features and primed hair rising over the brow in double crescents (fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. This head of an unknown maiden merits study not only for its graceful visage and superior craftsmanship, but also because it is one of many portraits of unknown subjects that are often ignored because they cannot be identified. Another problem arises from its physical condition as a fragment, a head and neck that formed part of a statue, now only glimpsed through the edge of garment carved on the side of the neck<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the head is said to have come from Roman Greece, but lacks any evidence of an archaeological context or findspot<sup>3</sup>. The public spaces of the cities of the Roman Empire, along with the tombs on the periphery, were filled with busts and statues, once easily identified by inscriptions on their

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1 — Zanker 2016, 206-207; Richter 1948, no. and fig. 68; Kleiner and Matheson 1996, 172, fig. 126 (P. Davies).

2 — Zanker 2016, 207.

3 — Zanker 2016, 207: "said to be from Greece", by the art dealer who, although based in Athens and Paris, may not have been reliable; *infra* n. 14.

bases. Portrait heads surmounted full-length statues, differentiated by pose, gesture, and dress, which may have been just as or more significant to the ancient viewer than facial features<sup>4</sup>. How do we approach a sculpture about which so much cannot be known? In the following we begin with a visual comparison of sculptural heads with similar features, then move to a discussion of select epitaphs, literary accounts and artefacts that suggest how girls or young women were commemorated and, thus, valued by their parents and society. At what point in their lives (or deaths) did maidens become visible and which features in particular conveyed youth and beauty?

The marble head (at 37.5 cm) in the Metropolitan Museum presents an oval face with an extreme clarity of line, sleek modeling, and regular, symmetrical features. Large almond-shaped eyes with heavy but crisply-carved lids, both upper and lower, dominate. The brows are equally finely-cut. High cheekbones contour the cheeks, adding volume to the otherwise smooth, unmarked surface. Along the lower face, the pert lips are full, shapely, and bowed in form. A long neck enhances a sense of grace or poise. The delicacy of carving stands out, particularly in the marble passages of the lower face that suggest firm flesh stretching between the nostrils and mouth, and forming slight dimples at the corner of the mouth. In terms of age, the face appears youthful and pristine as a portrait; amidst the immortals enshrined in classicizing statuary, ageless. Assigning age to the subjects of Roman portraits is fraught since portraits with epitaphs that include ages of the deceased often do not correspond, so we may hazard a guess that the subject of the portrait ranged from her teens through early twenties<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the polished surface and highly refined looks, the face is individualized by its nose with a strong, hooked profile (fig. 2). The profile of the nose flares out beneath the bridge with volume, but its scope is reduced by damage and the loss of its full extent. The Metropolitan Museum head is not alone among portraits of the Trajanic period that balance distinct or striking features (noses, jaws) with otherwise idealized or abstract forms. For example, the portraits of the Trajanic imperial women (Plotina, Marciana, Matidia) tend to offer a minimum of physiognomic detail or individualized traits in favor of smooth planes, underworked surfaces, and a suppression of distinct features; some discreet lines of age or padding

4 — Trimble 2011, 104-149.

5 — Kleiner (1987, 119-121, no. 15, pl. 10.3-4) for a funerary altar that depicts two relief portraits of a girl, Julia Victorina, and a woman (the latter perhaps representing the girl had she lived to reach adulthood, A.D. 60-70); and (29, 197-198, no. 70, pls. 40.3, 41.1) for the funerary altar of Julia Synegoris commemorating a young woman dead at age nineteen, who appears middle-aged in her relief portrait (A.D. 110-115).

are found under the chins<sup>6</sup>. Thus a Trajanic date (overlapping with the beginning of Hadrian's reign) is given for the Metropolitan Museum head of about 100-120 C.E.<sup>7</sup>. Also gracing the head is a conventional feature of female portraiture: a pair of concentric lines on the neck are thought to connote desirability and, perhaps, fertility (and are designated as Venus rings), so are especially appropriate for a maiden or young matron<sup>8</sup>.

Of course, the outstanding element of the portrait is the hairstyle. Tiers of crescent-shaped locks arch over the head in coiffures of the Trajanic period. Yet the hair of the Metropolitan Museum's portrait diverges from the period style, including the coiffures worn by the imperial women<sup>9</sup>. Here the tiers form thick rolls of hair, extending over the ears towards the nest of braids in the back (figure 2). This coiffure is exceptional and unparalleled<sup>10</sup>. Clearly the adornment is significant, and will be explored in depth, after a look at a couple of related portraits of maidens.

### *Related Works*

Among the heads that compare to the Metropolitan Museum head is a marble portrait bust in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (fig. 3)<sup>11</sup>. Its facial features are large, regular, and symmetrical in form. The marble skin is smooth, highly polished, and devoid of most of the imperfections of human faces. Both portraits feature defined cheekbones that punctuate the smooth planes and give the faces structure. The eyes of the Nelson-Atkins head, though not as large as those of the Metropolitan Museum head, share similar crisply-contoured lids under defined brows. Carved irises are thought to have been a Hadrianic innovation, although our knowledge of the development of sculptural techniques is far from complete<sup>12</sup>. The Nelson-Atkins portrait bust is given a date in the late Trajanic or early-mid Hadrianic periods, c. 115-130 C.E.<sup>13</sup>.

Other features that share similarities in carving among the pair are the nose and lips. The angular nose is sharply-cut with flaring nostrils. Although smaller than that of the Metropolitan Museum head, it is equally as severe. The mouth is exceptionally modeled with fully roun-

6 — Wegner 1956, 74-91, 118-131; Fittschen-Zanker 1983, nos. 6-8, 7-10, pls. 6-8; Fejfer 2008, 351-359.

7 — Zanker 2016, 207.

8 — Zanker 2016, 207.

9 — Fejfer (2008, 356-357) on the variation found in private portraits.

10 — Zanker (2016, 207) notes one comparable hairstyle on a portrait head in the Prado, but this coiffure is simple in structure in comparison to the Metropolitan Museum head; see *infra* n. 45.

11 — Buccino 2017, 24, fig. 38; Kleiner and Matheson 1996, 169, fig. 124 (P. Davies); Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, William Rockhill Nelson Fund, 48-9, ht. 63.5 cm.

12 — Jucker 1961, 83-84 no. 26.

13 — <https://www.nelson-atkins.org/collection/ancient/>

ded lips forming a double curve above, and protruding below. The steep incline of the nose and the swelling of the lips make the chin appear to recede below (and the cheekbones are less high and the lower face less broad than those of the Metropolitan Museum head). The Nelson-Atkins bust is said to be from Alexandria, but the portrait is not different from examples found in Rome and throughout the empire in the early second century C.E., as we see here in the comparison with the Metropolitan Museum head (also said to come from an eastern province)<sup>14</sup>.

These features, the heavy-lidded almond-shaped eyes, the finely chiseled noses, delicately-curved lips, and willowy necks appear in their purest form in the head known as the Fonseca Bust in the Capitoline Museum in Rome (fig. 4)<sup>15</sup>. Often cited as the ideal Roman beauty, this head depicts the same formula with a few variations: larger eyes, brows detailed with individual hairs, a high-bridged nose, and a heart-shaped face, somewhat broader at the jaw, but with a tapering chin. These few criteria would hardly serve to identify someone in any security check or criminal investigation today. In the Roman empire in the early second century C.E. the extreme symmetry and graceful simplicity of the large, clear features on the smooth youthful faces indicated an idealized portrait type. Since the Roman portrait has been so closely associated with individual likeness, portraits that submerge or dilute particular features in an abstract or ideal format have tended to attract less scholarly attention (except for the Fonseca bust, however)<sup>16</sup>.

Ideal portraits, though, pose problems in a field focused on identifying individuals through likeness. Portraits with idealizing features are less likely to be recognized as such without a period hairstyle or an accompanying inscription. Furthermore, why would individuality be suppressed in favor of identifying with a higher entity, an abstract concept or affiliation? Often deemed bland, the less individualized heads have been passed over by scholars intent on finding likeness to subjects, especially historical personages. The relative sameness or homogeneity of the ideal portraits was not as enticing to scholars as the range of differences of realistic portraits. Note that the subject of the Fonseca bust is "unknown". The most

14 — The differences attributed to provincial workshops by earlier generations of archaeologists may result from their narrow definition of metropolitan styles; in recent years, the wide variations in portrait styles and adornment in Rome have been more widely acknowledged, along with the striking similarity among some provincial and metropolitan heads; in fact, the Nelson-Atkins head has been identified as appearing Nubian due to the *alleged* Alexandrian provenance (Jucker 1961, 84), although there is no basis for this. The head, however, was purchased in Cairo. The Metropolitan Museum head was purchased in Paris, but *said to* have come from Athens (supra n. 3).

15 — Buccino 2017, 20-23, figs. 35-37; D'Ambra 2014, 165-169, figs. 4.6; Fittschen-Zanker 1983, no. 69, 53-54, pls. 86-87 (with previous literature), ht. 47.5 cm.

16 — Fejfer (2008, 351-352) on the suppression of female personal identity in portraiture; Nodelman (1993, 10-26) on Republican verism as expressive of social identity and, therefore, a type.

well-known and frequently illustrated Roman female portrait depicts an unidentifiable figure, so either a private portrait of an anonymous woman or an unrecognized member of the imperial household. The youthful elegance and *soigné* appearance, along with the exquisite carving and finesse with detail has suggested an imperial commission to some scholars who would have identified the bust as depicting female relatives of the Flavians or Trajan's niece<sup>17</sup>. The quality of the portrait suggests that its subject was a woman of means and, possibly, prominence, which is not to say that the subject is one of these women – but, perhaps, wished to project this image.

The Fonseca bust was thought to have been produced in the 90s because of its hairstyle (known as the Flavian *toupet*)<sup>18</sup>. In more recent years, however, scholars have acknowledged that the hairstyle with the high wreath of ringlets remained current in the early second century C.E., and the Fonseca bust has been redated to about 115-125 C.E., also due to aspects of the carving and style<sup>19</sup>. Both this head and the others depicting ideal beauty are dominated by their coiffures that appear in the late first and early second centuries C.E., a period of intense creativity and experimentation with sophisticated, complex hairstyling. It is also worth noting that elaborate coiffures appear on the sculpted heads of women without high status, and that the imperial women (relatives of the emperor) appeared to follow stylistic trends, rather than to establish them<sup>20</sup>. Note that the Nelson-Atkins and the Fonseca bust share the same coiffure, with differences in style and carving: the tightly-wound ringlets of the Nelson-Atkins bust are neatly aligned in rows with unspooled curls hanging lower at the sides, while the loose, springy coils of curls in the Fonseca bust were more deeply undercut and hollowed by a drill (the rest of the hair was wound in a knot in the back in both examples). These variations have been attributed to provincial production (the Nelson-Atkins bust in Alexandria, perhaps) or dating (both, though, developing slightly later in the Hadrianic period), but the styles are very similar to that of heads carved in Rome in the early second century C.E. with a profusion of flamboyant adornment<sup>21</sup>.

17 — Fittschen-Zanker 1983, no. 69, 53-54 (P. Zanker).

18 — Marlowe (2013, 15-27) expressing caution about the authenticity of the Fonseca bust due to its lack of a documented findspot, among other concerns.

19 — Zanker (Fittschen-Zanker 1983, no. 69, 53) dates the Fonseca bust to the late Trajanic-early Hadrianic periods.

20 — Fejfer 2008, 356-357; D'Ambra 2013, 511-525.

21 — Buccino (2017, 20-24) on the dating and metropolitan (that is, deriving from the Roman cities of Italy and vicinity) characteristics of the hairstyle of the Fonseca bust and the Nelson-Atkins bust.

### *Funerary Altars and Epitaphs*

In the corpus of Roman portraits, it is more usual for the heads beneath the mounds of curls to be middle-aged and stern-looking. The elaborate adornment of the three heads under consideration poses another question: does the abstract and pristine beauty provide a neutral ground for the alluring hair? That is, if individual facial features are less striking ("dimmer" in the language of perception), then do we notice the adornment above the brow more (which then appears "brighter", more noticeable, for the observer)<sup>22</sup>? This can be tested by looking at another similar image with a simple manner of dressing the hair. The altar of Minucia Suavis, dating to c. 50-75 C.E. (Museo Nazionale Romano), portrays the deceased in relief with overly large eyes set far apart and framed by heavy, crisply carved lids (fig. 5)<sup>23</sup>. The wide face, defined by prominent cheekbones, a delicately chiseled nose (damaged at the tip), and bow-shaped lips, appears attractive in a broad sense and conveys the sweetness of girls. Here this is especially appropriate for one whose *cognomen* (Suavis) means sweet or pleasant. Styled in thick regular waves framing the face, the hair is not provocative nor eye-catching. The look seems modest and prim.

The altar's epitaph (*CIL* 6.22560) states that Minucia Suavis died at the age of fourteen years, eight months and twenty-three days<sup>24</sup>. Here we have confirmation of the early age of marriage for girls in the city of Rome. Yet the precise enumeration of her age, counted down to the days she spent on earth, should give us pause. Ages that are counted out to the termination of a year (or close, as we have here) were less likely to record exact lengths of time, but, rather, were for poetic and rhetorical effects<sup>25</sup>. As fourteen was seen as the attainment of puberty for most girls, Minucia Suavis had become a bride, but not yet a mother, we assume (the inscription does not mention this). The age at death inflated to the cusp of the next year makes the loss all the more poignant. Yet, even with this poetic evocation of a maiden taken before her time, the compression between the ages of adolescence and maturity, of the *puella* and *matrona*, is apparent.

The altar's inscription also states that Minucia Suavis was married to P. Sextilius Campanus, yet the altar was erected by her father, T. Claudius Suavis. Usually the husband would have dedicated the altar to his wife; was Sextilius Campanus away from Rome or financially unable to do so?

22 — Gombrich (1972, 1-46) on perceptions of likeness.

23 — D'Ambra 2009, 24-27, fig. 5; Kleiner 1987, no. 14, 117-119, pls. 10.1-2.

24 — Kleiner 1987, no. 14, 117-118.

25 — Bodel 1995, 456-459.

As no children are mentioned in the epitaph, the wedding may have been recent. Financial constraints may also have affected the situation since the family was not of elite status. The parents of Minucia Suavis were most likely enslaved or freed (based on the names), and her milieu was in the working quarters of Rome with its shopkeepers, artisans, and urban professionals<sup>26</sup>. As a *matrona* at the tender age of fourteen, Minucia Suavis may very well have worked in the family business, either that of her father or of her husband.

Minucia Suavis is commemorated with an ideal portrait. The features denoting youthful beauty are the same as above. Minor differences appear in the smaller, gently sloping nose, even larger eyes, and more delicately-turned lips with deeper dimples. Even the hairstyle with waves evokes tradition, at the same time that it corresponds to a style, a default mode, also worn by both women and girls in the mid-first through early second century C.E.<sup>27</sup>. With the low-lying plain hairstyle, the smooth rounded features appear all the more prominent. The glossy, ageless look appears rather more pristine and, therefore, appropriate for the almost fifteen-year-old wife.

A note about how Romans viewed the ages of girls and women provides context. Roman girls married early: early or mid-teens for elites, and later teens for others (in the city of Rome the age of marriage was generally lower than that in the provinces)<sup>28</sup>. As marriage provided the culminating rite of passage for girls in ancient Rome, married women acquired social presence at the very least in lower social levels, and respectability and dignity in the upper ranks. Since teens and young women straddled the categories of girls, *puellae*, and wives, *matronae*, in the Roman Empire, the period of adolescence brought striking or abrupt transitions to adulthood<sup>29</sup>. How to depict this? Marble portraits, in the round or in relief on funerary monuments, tend to lack the clinical detail to indicate age, and if a funerary relief is accompanied by an epitaph, the deceased girl often looks older than the years lived<sup>30</sup>. Roman girls and young women are documented in the archaeological record when they die: typically only funerary monuments commemorating premature death are all that remains of lives lived so briefly. Given the grief brought on by daughters dying before their time, parents sought to depict them as

26 — Kleiner (1987, no.14) on the likelihood that the father was enslaved.

27 — Kleiner (1987, no.14, 118) on comparisons for the hairstyle in Flavian and early Trajanic portraits, although the waves emanating from a central part appear to have been a default style, relatively unchanging in its simplicity; however, there does not appear to be a central part in Minucia Suavis' coiffure.

28 — Caldwell 2015, 125-133; Saller and Shaw 1984, 124-156; Shaw 1987, 30-46.

29 — Caldwell 2015, 134.

30 — Kleiner 1987, 29, 87-88.

fully-formed women appearing as if they had lived to wed and have children. Commemorating the death of a youth posed problems because the funerary elegy or monument were developed to honor public careers and records of achievement in the upper social echelons or, at least, lives fully lived in the urban working neighborhoods of the cities of the empire.

### *Dying Before their Time*

Literary accounts demonstrate an ideal girlhood was recounted as the precocious exhibition of the adult virtues of restraint, resolve, and even resignation to fate. In 105-06 C.E. the younger Pliny writes of the death of his friend's daughter, Minicia Marcella, who "was just under fourteen but was as wise as an old woman and as sedate as a matron without losing her girlish sweet and virginal modesty" (*Ep.* 5.16)<sup>31</sup>. This portrait of her character blends traits usually acquired with age, discernment and composure, with those of adolescence. In her activities, Minicia Marcella favored more serious pursuits, her studies, to games: "How studiously and intelligently she read, and how sparingly she played!" (*Ep.* 5.16.). The maiden is recast as the matron she would have become had not death intervened. About to be wed, Minicia Marcella died, leaving her father to exchange her bridal trousseau for the incense and ointments of the funeral. This motif of the maiden exchanging marriage for death was common in antiquity to heighten the tragedy of the loss and increase the poignancy of a maiden taken before her time of glory as a bride<sup>32</sup>. Beyond the familiar trope, Pliny's description gives full measure to the Roman tendency to view childhood primarily in terms of its development of adult traits and attributes, that is, the childish trifles cast aside were less interesting than the emergence of grown-up habits.

Furthermore, Pliny considers Minicia Marcella to have been her father's "living image in every way" (*Ep.* 5.16). As nothing further is said about her physical appearance, we are left to view the girl through the lenses of her father and his friend. This is most likely to be true for many sculptural portraits of girls or young women produced to commemorate their brief lives. For the point of view of the girls themselves, the extant sources remain silent except, perhaps, for artifacts from their daily lives, such as grooming utensils or playthings, such as dolls. The evidence from the wider scope of material culture is consulted for its relationship to its owners, that is, the girls themselves. A comparison of the artifacts of everyday life and monumental commemorative sculpture tests the boundaries between the private lives and public faces of girls, and may offer a

31 — Bodel 1995, 453-460.

32 — Bodel 1995, 456.



sense of the range of imagery available to them. Is it possible to consider how girls or young women viewed the portraits and their adornment? Did the highly-styled looks and hair communicate values and ideals among girls and young women in ancient Rome<sup>33</sup>?

### *Dolls*

As a bride, Minucia Suavis would have given up her childish playthings, her dolls. Yet we turn to an ivory doll so finely-carved as a work of sculpture that it offers a view of feminine beauty, perhaps, from a young woman's perspective (fig. 6). This doll was not abandoned by her owner, Crepereia Tryphaena, but was laid to rest with her in a sarcophagus in Rome in the mid-second century C.E.<sup>34</sup>. The skeletal remains of Crepereia Tryphaena indicate that she died in her mid-teens, the array of jewelry and utensils buried with her suggest that she died unwed<sup>35</sup>. Although the doll's hairstyle was popular in the Antonine period (and similar to that of elder Faustina), it is not a replica of an imperial portrait nor is it a portrait in the sense of an individual likeness<sup>36</sup>. The face is wide with large eyes set far apart, a small clipped nose and pursed mouth with the chin tapering to a point. The eyes are also emphasized by ridges on the lids, perhaps to suggest cosmetics or merely to emphasize their shape and size. The simplified features of the heart-shaped face represent a standardized and generic type of youthful beauty. The ideal portrait appears here nearly a century later than the Altar of Minucia Suavis, yet differs only in an increased emphasis on the eyes and the fullness of the cheeks.

Other dolls were neither so finely crafted nor possessed such ideal looks. Rag dolls, the most popular as they were least costly to produce, presented faces marked by minimal features<sup>37</sup>. We imagine that rag dolls were baby dolls to be held fast, but neither necessarily groomed nor dressed as the adult fashion doll of Crepereia Tryphaena. This doll's kit included tiny ivory combs and silver mirrors to play dress up and, perhaps, experiment in acquiring and maintaining beauty. It has been said that "the doll is like a tiny mirror that reflects the world at large", that is, the games played trained the girl for womanhood and its requirements<sup>38</sup>. Yet, the doll brought the ideal form of statuary down from its pedestal, that is, scaled it down as a miniature. The doll's jointed limbs moved in the girl's hands as the doll came to life in play. Although we

33 — Hebdige 1979, 100-117.

34 — D'Ambra 2014, 155-161, 175-180 (with previous literature).

35 — Martin-Kilcher 2000, 63-77.

36 — *Contra* Dolansky 2012, 256-292.

37 — Janssen 1996, 234-239.

38 — Bettini 1999, 217.

cannot know what transpired between the girl and the doll (besides dressing up, we assume), here the doll's generic looks were put into Crepereia Tryphaena's hands. Although she may have already internalized ideals of beauty, Crepereia Tryphaena also had the opportunity to adapt her doll's appearance through her accessories or play. It is impossible to gauge the girl's reaction to her doll, but the pair were certainly familiar, if not closer, in their relationship<sup>39</sup>. Crepereia Tryphaena (although not elite) was privileged to have such an exquisite doll, yet we may imagine that other girls came into close contact with this type of conventional beauty.

### *Highly-Styled Hair*

Roman sculptors adapted the ideal portrait type so that the sweet youth of Minucia Suavis appears attractive and alluring with wide eyes and a full face, while the face of the Metropolitan Museum head looks bland, distant or detached. Precision of form and symmetry, along with omission of most physiognomic detail, give the face an abstract air, removed from life. Without an inscription, the subject of the Metropolitan Museum portrait remains anonymous. The circumstances of the commission of the portrait (its donor or dedicant, the motive or occasion) are unknown to us, as is the social status of the subject and her family. The formulaic head of the Metropolitan Museum, though, bears a highly distinctive coiffure (figs. 1 and 2). An analysis of the hairstyle, its process of styling, and patterns of adornment suggests the standards of beauty for maidens. A careful consideration of the style in context may also indicate what it signified to those who lived under these coiffures, and the values or ideals that the elaborate styles communicated.

The hairstyle conforms to the structure of the so-called crest and nest coiffure, popular in early second-century C.E. Rome and the provinces<sup>40</sup>. The hair is styled upward in tiers over the forehead, and gathered in braids that are wound in a nest in the back. More usually the crest forms an apex over the crown. The Trajanic imperial women wear versions of this coiffure: Plotina's hair was extended by being brought forward in a queue that fanned upward as a dome in a style rather more restrained than those of other women (fig. 7)<sup>41</sup>; Marciana's and Matidia's styles featured multi-tiered crests with scalloped curls standing upright or, for the latter, with curved crests set at angles (fig. 8). These hairstyles possess sharply divided

39 — Caldwell (2015, 101-102) on the doll's mature figure, which was to teach a girl about her changing body; yet we can also imagine that the dolls' faces and hair were significant due to the tiny mirror and combs; see also, Newby 2019, 77-102.

40 — Herrmann 1991, 39-50.

41 — Wegner 1956, 74-76, pls. 32-34; Fittschen-Zanker 1983, nos. 6-7, 7-9; pls. 7-9; Reggiani 2004, 86 (M. Mattei).

fore and aft sections, along with more steeply vertical extensions crowning the facade<sup>42</sup>. Though, it is important to note that the emperor's female relatives were not in the vanguard of fashion. Rather the most complex and spectacular hairstyles are found on portraits of private women (non-imperial, mostly anonymous – or merely unrecognized – subjects), as we have already witnessed in the Fonseca and the Nelson-Atkins busts.

Many of the crests have flat bands at the lowest level hugging the forehead that serve as a base for the tiers stacked above (figs. 7 and 8). Such bands are incised with comma-shaped lines to suggest curls that curve in opposing directions from a central part. The bands forming the crest's vertical extension would seem to require support, perhaps from other materials, such as false hairpieces with leather backings. More recently, Janet Stephens has recreated this style by cutting a fringe of locks around the face, and setting them in pin curls; the tube curl produced is then held in place by a thread that presses it flat<sup>43</sup>. The ringlet of hair escaping near each ear (in the Metropolitan Museum head, and others with this style) may also be evidence for the fringe of hair curled into a rolling wave: although the multi-storied façade often takes the form of a tiara in the standard crest and nest coiffure, the stray curls suggest that the fringe is fashioned from hair, rather than any extraneous material.

The fringe of ringlets in schematic form was intended to depict adornment styled from the subjects' own hair. This provided a base for more complex styling above (as in the coiffures of Plotina, Marciana or Matidia, along with those of private women). The rows of fringes also were stacked to create height over the forehead. Portraits demonstrate multi-tiered crests composed of super-imposed fringes of locks with more complex adornment above: the Capitoline Museum portrait boasts an impressive peaked facade interrupted by a shock of exuberant snail-shell ringlets (fig. 9)<sup>44</sup>.

Framing the face of the Metropolitan Museum head are two tiers incised with the curving edges of compressed ringlets (fig. 1). Yet the tiers are not flat bands as in the other heads, rather, their forms are fully rounded. They rise from the head in thick rolls or waves, dipping down

42 — Wegner 1956, 77-83, pls. 35-40; Fittschen-Zanker 1983, no. 8, 9-10, pl. 10; Alexandridis 2004, 21, 178, 308, n. 164, pls. 33.2; 62. 3-4; Reggiani 2004, 88-93 (C. Valeri, E. Talamo); Sinn 2010) 149-213.

43 — Although art historians have suggested that the bands could have been made of leather and covered with hair or other materials, Janet Stephens has demonstrated that the subjects' own hair may have formed the fringe framing the forehead. By cutting a section of short locks along the hairline and setting it in pin-curls fixed with small sticks and acacia gum, a series of tight ringlets emerged: Janet Stephens, *The Hairstyle of Empress Plotina*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BMEoxT5YVk>

44 — Fittschen-Zanker (1983, no. 67, 52, pls. 84-85) for a date of around 110-120 C.E., along with a portrait with a similar hairstyle in Aquileia.

in gullies in between. These rolls are also more emphatically arched in shape hugging the upper profile of the face like a halo. In profile (fig. 2), the third wave, forming a flap or ledge-like shape extends over the upper ears to the braided nest in back. The crimped waves in profile create an accordion-like effect. Note that the gradually elevated tiered structure of other Trajanic coiffures is here distributed three-dimensionally across the head. The row of ringlets at the forehead does not provide merely a base for the superstructure as seen in the examples above, the rolls of tightly wound curls form the coiffure itself.

In a period with an intense interest in grooming and diverse manners of hairdressing, the coiffure of the Metropolitan Museum head is singular. A comparison has been sought in the hairstyle of a private portrait in the Prado, in which the crest consists of a simpler, thicker ruff crimped to display two “s”-shaped waves<sup>45</sup>. The effect, though, is heavy and leaden. The semi-spherical shape of the Metropolitan Museum coiffure merits comparison to the domical capping of the head in Plotina's signature coiffure, although the women of Rome and the empire did not emulate this style (fig. 7). It is only in profile view that Plotina's bubble of upswept hair bears some semblance to the waves of the Metropolitan Museum head. Another head in the Capitoline Museums, sometimes identified as Plotina but whose subject is unknown, displays a provocative coiffure that does not echo that of the Metropolitan Museum head as much as it redeploys the wave motif in a different direction (figs. 10)<sup>46</sup>. The Capitoline Museum head bears the standard Trajanic fringe of ringlets over the brow, and above this are two rows of snail-shell curls. The spirals, though, continue the fringe's pattern of abstract, linear forms as the snail-shell curls appear as two-dimensional appliqués supported by a tiara or headband above the hairline. The spirals' flatness, their independence from the scalp and their upright angle are striking; if produced from hair, the locks would have had to be hardened with beeswax or other fixative. The spiraling locks create a series of rhythmic, cresting waves that form a façade.

In the coiffure of the Metropolitan Museum head, the rolling rhythm is from front to back as it extends to the nest of braids behind and seems to be anchored there. The hairstyle appears unique because it adapts traditional elements and combines them in a novel way. The simple crimped waves of previous styles now barely register a central part, and are fused from the forehead fringe to ripple off the face. Taller, deeper, and closer

45 — Zanker 2016, 207; Schröder 1993, 176; the “ruff” here is displaced to the top of the head.

46 — Fittschen-Zanker 1983, no. 6, 7-8, pls. 7-8; as there are replicas of this portrait in Newby Hall and Munich (Fittschen-Zanker, pls. 8a-b, 7a-d), it is thought that this must depict an imperial woman (either Plotina, Marciana or Matidia).

set than the waves in the plainer default style, those on the Metropolitan Museum head are reduced in number to three, with the middle one as the highest in crescendo. In their origins as the forehead fringe or band of curls, the waves create a more dynamic design: tightly coiled across the forehead and crown, they also are compressed to spring in the other direction from the front to the back of the head<sup>47</sup>. Although simple in design, this hairstyle would have been complex to execute due to the waves bending in two directions with the appropriate amount of tension applied to hold them in place.

Architecture is evoked by the radial structure of the waves as arches, here framing the face, and the waves' similarity to ribs of vaults, which also serve to keep pressure in tension. In the structure built up of gossamer strands or tresses, the tiers are no longer crests achieving height over the crown as in the more typical Trajanic style, but frame the head in a series of concentric arches. Compared to the loose waves on Minucia Suavis' head, this coiffure covers the head more substantially. The arches form a roof that gracefully encloses, shelters, encases the head. In fact, the pleated, accordion-like waves, one behind the other, may seem to impart strength or fortify the head in the manner of a series of walls around a city<sup>48</sup>. Rather than simply providing scenery for the head, the styled hair imparts a sense of dignity and discipline to the maiden. It also demonstrates that her alluring locks do not solicit unwarranted attention, but are so highly processed to create the opposite effect of providing cover<sup>49</sup>. The striking hairstyle thus preserved the subject's modesty at the same time that it increased her visibility and her social presence. As the crest and nest style was worn by both matrons and some maidens, it was appropriate for both groups. The dismantling of the crest and its transformation into the rolling waves on the Metropolitan Museum's head, that is, the taking apart of the familiar upswept style and its reconstitution as a new look, seems to have come from the initiative of those without high status although affluent<sup>50</sup>. Parents commissioned funerary monuments, as well as portraits<sup>51</sup>. Would the subject represented by the portrait been responsible

47 — Personal communication with Janet Stephens, 8/10/20, who surmises that shaped padding stabilized the three waved ridges from beneath, along with string ties or ribbons and bodkins; ample hair with a proclivity to curl would help, although there is the possibility that hairpieces could aid; see also D'Ambra 2014, 164.

48 — Varro (*De Lingua Latina* 5.130) on the *tutulus*, hair piled up and bound in a cone-shape, in early Rome; it provided protection, "...that which is highest in the city, the citadel, is called the safest".

49 — Bartman (2001, 5) on the erotic allure of female hair and the need to maintain social control.

50 — Hebdige 1979, 102-112.

51 — Husbands also commemorated their wives, and women dedicated monuments to their family; see Kleiner 1987, 45-59.

for her rearranged hair? This is impossible to know, but the coiffure elevates the subject. Consider the stately poise such a coiffure demanded of its wearer, as well as the prodigious labor of household slaves to achieve these effects<sup>52</sup>.

Although it is impossible to identify the subject of the portrait, it is likely that the maiden and her family were urbane and well-established in their social cohort<sup>53</sup>. They were prosperous enough to have commissioned a portrait of high quality, but need not have been of the highest social echelons, as we have seen from the relief portrait of Minucia Suavis, among others. The subject's family may have been artisans, merchants, professionals or bureaucrats or they may have been those with wealth and influence, the local notables of Roman cities in the provinces, perhaps in the Greek East<sup>54</sup>. Although the latter might be thought to prefer the ideal portrait type, the doll of Crepereia Tryphaena suggests that those without elite status, including freedmen and freedwomen, lived with luxurious, well-crafted objects<sup>55</sup>. What is striking, however, is the lack of individualized features in the Metropolitan Museum's portrait (besides the nose and hairstyle, of course) and, instead, a depiction of a face with a striking clarity of form and perfection of features. In the Greek East of the empire the ideal portrait complemented the predominance of family ties and collective values over female individuality<sup>56</sup>. Throughout the empire the ideal portrait was modified to admit some specific features to indicate likeness. Hairstyles, however, seem to show infinite variation, and here the coiffure is unparalleled (even if some of its elements are familiar from the period style). In particular, the invention of new forms and styles from the conversion and reassembly of the more mainstream versions tends to appear in private portraits of anonymous subjects<sup>57</sup>. Although the glossy arcades aloft the marble head appear to be individualized, their significance is relevant for Roman women at large: hair that literally extends the head, stands over it in symmetrical and geometric precision, guards the head and the body beneath<sup>58</sup>.

52 — D'Ambra 2014, 173.

53 — Zanker (2016, 207) for the provenance as being "said to be from Greece", which appears to have come from the dealer from whom the museum acquired the head (supra n. 3).

54 — See, for example, Smith 2006, 207-211, pls. 69-71 (S. Dillon), for public statues of women of prominent families, local elites, in the Greek East, Aphrodisias; Meyers 2012, 453-466.

55 — Martin-Kilcher (2000, 69-70) on freed status suggested by the *cognomen* Tryphaena, although the location of the burial in the *Horti Domitiae* suggests "direct connections with the imperial court".

56 — Dillon 2010, 161-167.

57 — D'Ambra 2014, 161-162.

58 — Ryle (2000, 19) on the generative vitality and cosmological significance of hair in traditional African cultures.

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1. : Portrait of a Woman, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Fletcher Fund 1927  
(27.122.4) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250953>



2. : Portrait of a Woman, profile view



3. : Funerary Portrait of a Woman, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, William Rockhill Nelson Fund, 48-9. Photo: Jamison Miller



4. : Fonseca Bust, Roma, Musei Capitolini, inv. 434  
(copyright: Roma, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali)





5. : Funerary Altar of Minucia Suavis,  
Museo Nazionale delle Terme, inv. 30  
(su concessione del Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali  
per il turismo – Museo Nazionale Romano)



6. : Doll of Crepereia Tryphaena, Roma, Musei Capitolini  
(copyright: Roma, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali)



7. : Portrait of Plotina, Roma, Musei Capitolini, inv. 439  
(copyright: Roma, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali)

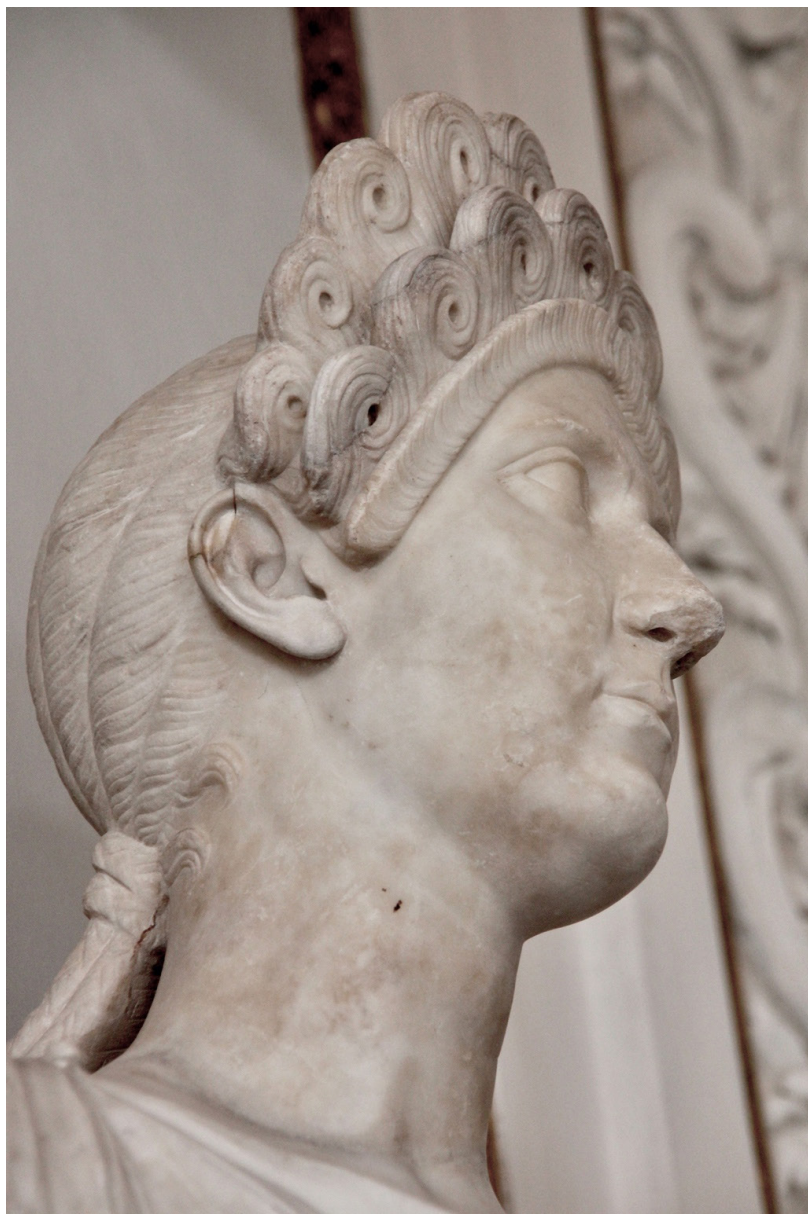


8. : Portrait of Marciana, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Rogers Fund 1920  
(20.200) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250953>





9. : Portrait of a Woman, Roma, Musei Capitolini, inv. 441  
(copyright: Roma, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali)



10. : Portrait of a Woman (Plotina?), Roma,  
Musei Capitolini, inv. 440  
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