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Roman portraiture: reflections on the question of context

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M. ANDERSON AND L. NISTA, *ROMAN PORTRAITS IN CONTEXT: IMPERIAL AND PRIVATE LIKENESSES FROM THE MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO*. Emory University Museum of Art and Archaeology, Atlanta, Georgia, July 14, 1988 - January 3, 1989 (Roma 1988). Pp.96, 90 b&w ills., 22 color pls. ISBN 88-7813-138-5 \$15.00.

N. BONACASA AND G. RIZZA (eds.), *RITRATTO UFFICIALE E RITRATTO PRIVATO: ATTI DEL II CONFERENZA INTERNAZIONALE SUL RITRATTO ROMANO*. Rome, September 26-30, 1984 [Quaderni de 'la ricerca scientifica' 116] (Rome 1988). Pp.588, 475 b&w ills. ISSN 0556-9664 (paper) Lit.40,000.

The two books under review here, an exhibition catalogue and a collection of papers from an academic congress, share a desire, in the words of their respective editors, "to give more dimension to the objects and their function in Roman society," (Anderson and Nista p.61) and to understand the portrait "as a significant phenomenon of Roman society" (*Ritratto* p.14). Statements like these are welcome signs of growing interest in examining Roman portraiture in more comprehensive terms than traditional studies of style, chronology, and iconographic typology have ordinarily encompassed. In a field that has recently been criticized as "stagnant", "fossilized", and tradition-bound, a broad outlook that considers the social context and function of portraits must be applauded.¹ In this review, we intend to discuss the books in terms of their authors' conception and application of a contextual approach, then reflect on some of the issues contextual research raises, the potential it offers the field of Roman portrait studies, and the pitfalls it presents at a time when the disciplines of classical archaeology and art history are debating the value of new theoretical perspectives and advancing in new directions.

The exhibition catalogue *Roman portraits in context*

Roman portraits in context presents 22 portrait sculptures from the Museo Nazionale Romano selected for an exhibition held in 1988-89 at the Emory University Museum of Art and Archaeology. As a collaborative effort between the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and the Emory University Museum International Loan Project, the project is laudable in concept, its purpose being "to encourage substantive cooperative efforts between archaeological museums and sites in this country [i.e., the United States] and abroad. With a view to the future, when acquisitions of antiquities will become increasingly difficult for American museums owing to financial and ethical considerations...." (p.7), this model offers a practical way to augment collections for a defined period of time without engaging in the art trade. International cooperation of this kind should indeed be encouraged not only for the practical reasons cited but also for the opportunities it provides for invigorating intellectual exchange and growth. Happily, following this inaugural endeavor, Emory has continued its program with exhibitions from a number of other Italian superintendencies and museums.

Because the exhibition catalogue claims to depart from traditional concerns of typology and chronology, and promises a fresh view of the subject of Roman portraiture through the lens of context, an introduction that sets the authors' approach into historiographic and methodological perspective would have been helpful. Instead, the co-authors Maxwell Anderson, Director of the Emory Museum, and Leila Nista, Inspector at the Museo Nazionale Romano, go their separate ways in exploring the topic, each of them providing 11 catalogue entries and an essay on one aspect of the context of Roman portraits. Only in his concluding remarks does Anderson briefly allude to the historiographic and underlying theoretical issues (p.68).

1 B. S. Ridgway, "The state of research on ancient art," *ArtB* 68 (1986) 13 and 22. Her view is discussed p.300 below.