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Art History 1

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Portrait of Marcus Aurelius (A.D.121-180)

Yale University Art Gallery

A.D. 147-149

Marble

15 3/8 x 9 1/2 x 9 5/16 in

2010.40.1

Portrait of Marcus Aurelius

I'm not much of an "artsy" person, so I sometimes have a rough time seeing the value in a lot of what is generally defined as art. I do really enjoy history, though, and because art has taught us so much about our predecessors and still continues to do so, I have an appreciation for it. While art isn't my greatest passion, I do know whether I like something or not when I see it, so I thought selecting a piece to write about would be fairly simple. It wasn't.

As I wandered through the Yale University Art Gallery, I expected to stumble upon a piece aesthetically pleasing to me; one that would just speak to me, and I would know it the moment I saw it. So, I searched. There were a few pieces I could relate to, but where was that wow factor I was expecting? After much over-thinking, I cleared my

head. In that moment, I realized there was a piece that spoke to me. It wasn't screaming at me like I expected; it was more of a whisper, a slight nudge in the back of my mind. A simple and elegant bust that told a story of a time I wish I could have experienced. The piece that has managed to captivate me is the portrait of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121 – 180).

I find this piece extremely interesting. It is a sculpture in the round, made from marble, and has been dated to somewhere around 147 – 149 A.D. It is a bust sculpture that stands just over a foot tall. It has a width of around nine and a half inches and a similar depth. It showcases the subject's face, hair, and neck. The hair has some considerable detail in it; several voluminous curls cover the scalp, every inch showing the same care and detailed execution, aside from some wear and tear. The subject's eyebrows, thin mustache, and groomed beard seem to have less detail put in to them, but they are just as important to the aesthetic of the sculpture, giving it a sort of informal balance and creating an all around cohesive look. The ears can be easily missed when looking at this sculpture from the front, due to the fact that they start to disappear underneath the hair. The skin is quite smooth, and this, along with the fact that the facial hair is fairly short and well-groomed, suggests that this is a representation of Marcus Aurelius in his relatively younger years. The subject also has heavy-lidded eyes that seem to be looking upward, as the pupils are half concealed underneath the upper eyelid. Due to damage to the piece, the nose is almost non-existent, save for the bridge and the right nostril. While the subject's mouth is devoid of emotion, it really adds to the overall power of this piece. I feel like this work sets a very distinct tone. Marcus Aurelius's expression is somewhat

grave, but regal. This sculpture commands attention without overpowering the viewer.

I have an affinity for this piece for several reasons. First and foremost, it has immense historical value. Marcus Aurelius was considered a great philosopher king, and he played an important role in the future of his people. Many of the sources detailing the life and rule of Marcus Aurelius are inconsistent and patchy, but this piece can aid in giving us something the annals of history cannot. It lends us another connection to the past. It tells so many stories at the same time, and though I cannot be so lucky to have known him, I feel like it is an accurate representation of who Marcus Aurelius was. Another reason I adore this piece is that it raises questions. Aside from this piece, most sculptures from this time period do not have much, if any, detail in the eyes, so that they are smooth and lacking any indication of irises or pupils. The artist obviously wanted to communicate the idea of Marcus Aurelius not looking straightforward. What is he looking at? Is he looking at something in particular? Then, there is the matter of his expression as a whole. His look is a stern and somber one...was he lost in thought? Was he in the middle of making an important decision? Or was he just bored? There are several scenarios that come to mind when looking at this piece. I also admire this piece for the fact that it looks so human. I don't mean this in the sense that it's unbelievably realistic, but in the sense that it's a realistic representation of its subject. While it's not overly obvious, the face is not quite symmetrical. This sculpture is not in any way idealistic; it shows a young man with insecurities and flaws while managing to maintain confidence.

Of all of the works of art housed in the Ancient Art section of the Yale University

Art Gallery, I feel like this one stands out. It is surrounded by busts created through the same medium and from the same period of time, but this one is truly eye-catching. At first glance, I thought that the way the eyes were made to look up was almost awkward. I felt that it made the subject look bored, annoyed, or maybe even drunk. I also think that is why I paid a little more attention to this piece than any of the others near it. This piece doesn't quite follow the uniformed quality the others possess. As I looked past the incompetent demeanor that the eyes seemingly portray, I realized this is why I liked this piece so much. It really makes you think. It begs you to recognize that we all start from somewhere, and we were all young once. It implores you to understand that we're all only human; we're imperfect, no matter how we or anyone else views us. Greatness doesn't come from be a modern-day Adonis, it comes from being confident in yourself and finding a way to illustrate that to others. This sculpture just speaks volumes to me.

I have enjoyed my trips to the Yale University Art Gallery, but even more so that I discovered this work that just resonated with me. I'm actually quite pleased I took the time to write about this work of art, because I think I would not have been able to connect with it on quite the same level. I feel that were I not required to sit in front of this sculpture and really study it, I definitely would not be able to fully appreciate it. I most likely would have glanced at it a few times, made a mental note, and continued on to the next piece, only to let it slip my mind later. I was able to come back to it with a curiosity and actually see the true beauty in it. I could vividly imagine the artist creating it while Marcus Aurelius modeled for it, and envision all the different environments and situations that led to the production of this piece. It allowed me to think about the past

and believe that despite time periods and cultural differences, we as a people are not quite as different as we think. I believe that the Portrait of Marcus Aurelius is a piece that requires more than just a glimpse and is a must-see for anyone who has an appreciation for history as well as art.