

Portrait Bust of a Man
Roman

1st to 2nd Century A.D.

Marble

49 x 33 cm (19 $^{1}/_{4}$ x 13 inches)

Most likely depicting a well-to-do private individual, as someone who could afford such a high-quality portrait, this seems to be a youthful ‘foreign’ man, possibly from the Arabian Peninsula, as suggested by his facial characteristics. Although his hair is coiled with tight curls, this may not be an indicator of race, but more of the styling choices from the period of creation. The locks further back on the right side and at the lower back of the head have been more summarily carved, since these areas of the head were not as visible when this sculpture was set near a wall or in a niche.

His hairline is rather unique, with a large widow’s peak; his imposing face is somewhat serious and severe, with creases above his brow and downturned lips. It was during the Antonine period that this veristic posing became widely used: expressionless, placid and smooth-skinned faces became replaced by physiognomies lined with age, showing emotion and expression. His facial hair is subtly rendered with curled stubble around the jaw line and the suggestion of a moustache, very similar to styling of the 2nd-century depiction of the Roman Emperor Commodus now kept at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

He is draped in a thick fabric exomis or chiton, his chest left bare, another feature of the period. The subtle contouring of his sternum giving a particularly lifelike quality. This sculpture is very well preserved, with a pink-beige coloured patina and some mottling of the surface. There are only two small naturally occurring interstices under the inner corner of the left eye and to the right under the outside corner of the same eye. These interstices would have been filled in with marble-dust stucco and smoothed over. The entire head would then have been painted, as was the norm for sculpture in antiquity.

Literature:

"The Acquisitive Eye", House & Garden, March 1985, p104.

John Richardson: at Home, Rizzoli, New York, 2019, p106. (photographed)