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The *Augustus of Prima Porta*: A Message of Imperial Divinity

The *Augustus of Prima Porta* is a freestanding marble sculpture in the round. The sculpture is a larger than life 6' 8" tall and is an example of early Roman imperial portrait sculpture. This sculpture is currently displayed in the Braccio Nuovo of the Vatican Museums in Rome, Italy. This marble portrait of the first Roman emperor, Augustus, is a very naturalistic statue. Although the sculpture was carved in the early first century, at the time of the Roman empire, Augustus stands in a Classical Greek contrapposto pose. While the sculptor of this piece is unknown, we do know that he or she followed the canon of the High Classical Greek sculptor named Polykleitos in pose, idealization, and proportion (Stokstad, Cothren 174). The *Augustus of Prima Porta* statue sends not only a message of the Emperor Augustus as an accomplished military leader, but also clearly suggests that the emperor is a divine being.

The *Augustus of Prima Porta* is a three-dimensional sculpture. The statue actually occupies space; therefore there is no need to use illusion to create suggested space. However, the statue does use space, both negative and positive, to influence the viewer. The negative space between Augustus's calves forms an implied triangle, or arrow, directing the viewer's gaze upward toward the center focal point of the piece, while the positive space of the emperor's raised and pointed right arm forcefully pierces the space surrounding the piece.

The *Augustus of Prima Porta* contains both implied and rendered lines. The implied lines of the contrapposto pose in which the *Augustus of Prima Porta* stands convey both a dynamic

forward movement and a naturally balanced stance. Augustus stands with his weight supported by his tense right leg, while his left knee bends in a relaxed position. His hipline and his shoulder line are affected by this weight shift and are in opposition to one another. His left shoulder is higher than his right shoulder and his hipline slants downward on his left side suggesting a very life-like and balanced pose. His head is turned to his right and tilts very slightly toward his right shoulder. The contrapposto pose that he stands in forms an implied zigzag of both horizontal and diagonal lines coming upward from his raised left foot and forms an “S” curve through his body. This series of both diagonal and horizontal lines simultaneously expresses both energy and calmness; a tense but still moment just before action. The position of Augustus’s arms creates more implied lines. His left arm is bent and supports the folds of fluidly gathered fabric that cross his hips. His right arm is extended upward in the *ad locutio* gesture, conveying oration. His serene expression faces outward to a distant point beyond his outstretched right arm. Both Augustus’s gaze and his pointing right hand also imply lines that stretch outward toward infinity. The many carved diagonal and horizontal lines in the large drape of fabric that the emperor holds at his hips are rendered lines that swing the viewer’s eyes up to rest on the focal point of the sculpture—the cuirass (torso armor) at the center of the piece. The cuirass is carved intricately with many low relief figural images composed of countless complexly rendered lines that help to create a very lively narrative scene across the emperor’s chest (Stokstad, Cothren 174).

The scale of the sculpture is slightly larger than life sized at 6’ 8” tall, and the statue stands on a large stepped base forcing the viewer to look up at the already imposing image. Scale is used effectively to express the emperor’s authority over the viewer.

The texture of the *Augustus of Prima Porta* is polished and slick. The surface quality consists of large expanses of smooth skin combined with rhythmically chunky colon shaped

clumps of hair on his head, and fluidly carved fabric at his hips. The cuirass is carved to represent the sinewy bare chest of a warrior with a tactile pattern of low relief sculptured figures atop. (Stokstad, Cothren 174)

The current color of the statue is a warm and very pale brown. The statue was originally painted, and tiny “traces of red, blue, yellow, green, and pink” are left in the statues crevices (Ramage, Ramage 111). It is of common belief that the statue was originally painted in predominately blues and reds that traditionally symbolized high status and wealth.

The *Augustus of Prima Porta* wears a cuirass, or torso armor, that is the focal point of the sculpture. The overall composition of the cuirass is well balanced and symmetrical from side to side, as well as from top to bottom. It is adorned with many low relief sculptural figures that form several narrative scenes across the emperor’s chest. Each scene faces a similarly composed and weighted scene on its opposing side. On Augustus’s upper right torso is a charioteer commanding three horses in a very dynamic and forceful pose, his fabric robe is flowing with movement and the three horses are frozen mid gallop. Directly across from this image, on the upper left chest, appear two humanistic female figures— one with large outstretched wings holding a jug, the other behind and above her holding a large flaming torch. These two images, the charioteer and the pair of women, are balanced with each other and face each other; they balance the composition from side to side. Centered at the top of the cuirass, above these two scenes, a bearded man overlooks with outstretched arms and appears to raise a fabric canopy above all of the scenes. Centered at the bottom of the cuirass, a robed woman is seated and “holds an overflowing cornucopia” (Stokstad, Cothren 175). These two images balance the composition from top to bottom.

Positioned at the very center of the cuirass, at the emperor's mid-torso, are two men. These two men are of similar scale, face each other, and stand at the center and focal point of the cuirass. The placement of these two men would suggest their exchange holds a very important meaning intended for the viewer, as they are centrally located within the focal point of the sculpture. The man positioned on Augustus's right side is clean-shaven and appears to be dressed as a Roman general with his right hand outstretched to the man on Augustus's left. The man positioned on Augustus's left side is bearded and wearing a more fluid and simple costume; he is raising a large scepter that is topped by a bird. It is believed this exchange communicates Augustus's victory over the Parthians. The Roman agent on the right is accepting the Roman legionary eagle attached to a battle standard from the Parthian king. This would have been a monumental event because many of the Roman legionary standards had been in Parthian hands since the humiliating Roman defeat at the battle of Carrhae, which took place when Augustus was merely a child (Everitt 22-23). Receiving the once lost legionary standards from this very humbling past loss would clearly declare Augustus's position as a victorious general.

Surrounding the triumphant historical scene of the Parthian king relinquishing a legionary standard are several gods and goddesses. All of them are realistically carved, well proportioned, and full of energy that conveys movement. Apollo and Diana flank the cuirass on either side, facing the center scene. Each rides a spirited animal—Apollo a griffin, Diana a stag. Above Apollo, on the cuirass' upper right, the sun god Sol commands a chariot drawn by three galloping horses. Across from Sol, on the cuirass's upper left, the goddesses Luna and Dawn are depicted. Luna is pictured holding a torch, while the winged Dawn partially overlaps her and carries a jug. Centered above and at the peak of the cuirass is the sky god Caelus, he makes his approval of the whole scene unmistakable by spreading "out the canopy of the heavens" (Zanker

191) above them with open arms. Centered below, at the base of the cuirass, is the Mother Earth, possibly a mixture of the goddesses Terra (Earth), Pax (peace), and Ceres (grain). She holds an overflowing cornucopia signifying the prosperity and abundance that the victory over the Parthians has brought. The presence of the gods and goddesses signifies not only their role in the victory of Augustus, but of their approval and blessing. Because the emphasized scene tells the story of the real Roman victory over the Parthians, while images of gods and goddesses frame it, the historical event is strongly associated with not only military might, but also divinity. This would help to establish the impression of the emperor's role as an agent of the gods. As Paul Zanker states in his book *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, "The princeps who wears this new image of victory on his breastplate becomes the representative of divine providence and the will of the gods"(Zanker 192).

Another aspect of the emperor's costume that evokes both divinity and strength is the emperor's footwear, or lack thereof. While the emperor is shown wearing a general's cuirass and appears to be dressed for battle, his feet are curiously shown barefooted. At the time of this sculpture, only gods were depicted as battling barefooted. "His footwear, deliberately not that of a mortal, recalls the imagery of gods and heroes" (Zanker 189). This is an unmistakable message of divinity, as no mere mortal would attempt to battle without shoes. However, images of Mars, the god of war, are almost always shown barefooted while wearing a cuirass. The emperor's cuirass tells a narrative of a victorious battle, while the wearing of the cuirass while barefooted sends an iconic message of divinity. It is intriguing that Mars, the god of war and vengeance, whom the Romans identified as aiding them in avenging them against the Parthians, is missing from the narrative of the cuirass retelling that event. Perhaps the barefooted and cuirassed emperor is Mar's stead in this sculpture. Under Augustus's rule, depictions of Venus were

always placed alongside depictions of Mars. Mars signified victory while Venus signified “fertility and prosperity”(Zanker 195). These two ideas, peace through victory, and prosperity through fertility, were central to Augustus’s Rome. If the emperor is representing Mars in this statue, it would follow that Venus should be represented at his side.

Beside Augustus’s right calf a small naked and winged male child sits on the back of a downward diving dolphin. The child is very small in comparison to Augustus in both scale and proportion. Rounded and chubby with a gentle expression on his face; he is believed to represent the god Cupid. Cupid is the son of Venus, and the dolphin is Venus’s patron animal. We know that Augustus’s uncle and predecessor Julius Caesar attempted to gain divine status during his own lifetime and had declared his family the descendants of the goddess Venus. Therefore, it can be assumed that the placement of Cupid with a dolphin at Augustus’s feet is signally Augustus’s divine lineage. Conceivably, it could be interpreted that if Cupid and the dolphin symbolically represent Venus that the emperor himself could symbolically represent Mars at her side.

Regardless of this possible interpretation, Augustus’s lineage is clearly being indicated by the addition of the Cupid and dolphin. Paul Zanker writes that, in regard to Augustus, “The harmony between the state and the gods is embodied in him by virtue of his divine ancestors” (Zanker 192). Augustus would obviously have much to gain from exploiting this divine lineage; it could help him to convey that he was directly responsible for the peace and prosperity in Rome, not merely by his political deeds, but by keeping the gods happy through his divine birthright.

This portrait statue of the emperor Augustus is both a veristic and an idealized representation of Augustus. The statue is veristic because it realistically represents known identifying facial features of the emperor Augustus, while it is idealized because it softens any possible imperfections or asymmetry the emperor may have actually had. Despite the fact that

this statue is believed to have been carved anywhere from when the emperor was middle aged to after his death, Augustus is eternally frozen in time as youthfully smooth and vigorous. The emperor's cuirass is carved in such a way as to express an overt masculinity and sheer brawn. Carved under the narrative scene are well-defined chest and abdominal muscles. The emperor's arms and legs are also well developed with the appearance of a trained athlete, not a middle aged politician. The youthful and athletic idealization coupled with the contrapposto pose that the emperor stands in are representative of the Greek Classical period and specifically to the canon of Polykleitos. Romans felt the Greeks were superior to them artistically and idealized the Greek culture. The Greek canon of Polykleitos was a series of rules and ratios used to create human figures that were aesthetically perfect in every way, and consequently were so visually pleasing as to suggest that they were "god-like" (Kleiner 63). When representing males, these sculptures also portrayed the brut power of a vigorous young athlete. Using this canon for Augustus's portrait announces that the emperor possesses physical power and youthful beauty, but also implies that he is indeed perfect and immortal—a god.

Roman imperial statues were similar to today's political commercials or billboards. Although this statue was found in Augustus's family's private garden, there were many copies of this statue found all over Rome. The *Augustus of Prima Porta's* function was to transmit an important imperial message to the viewer, and the message of this statue is that the Emperor Augustus is a strong and victorious warrior and a god. Many aspects of this statue communicate both his military accomplishments and his divinity simultaneously. The lively narrative carved across Augustus's cuirass depicts a long awaited vengeance that Augustus was responsible for, while gods and goddesses approve. Augustus's overtly muscular build coupled with his highly idealized youthful features, and resemblance to Greek ideals of immortal perfection. Augustus's

larger than life size and his barefooted battle costume. Augustus's implied relation to the goddess Venus through Cupid and a dolphin at his feet while he wears Mars's battle uniform, these all point to the emperor as a physically powerful protector and a god aligned with the heavens.

According to R.M. Ogilvie in the book titled *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus*, "A god was someone who bestowed blessings, who made things work smoothly and well. If *you* could do this, you must be a god" (Ogilvie 119). As the instigator of over 200 years of Roman peace and prosperity, Augustus could have been viewed as an extremely powerful and divine being.



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