



Berlin, 25 October 2017

EXHIBITION PREVIEW

Museumsinsel Berlin, Bode-Museum

Am Kupfergraben, 10117 Berlin

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 10 am–6 pm, Thu 10 am–8 pm

The Human Image.

The Portrait's Evolution from Antiquity to the Present

24 November 2017 – 7 October 2018

A special exhibition by the Münzkabinett – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Opening: Thursday, 23 November 2017, 6 pm

The Münzkabinett (Numismatic Collection) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is dedicating a new special exhibition to one of art's central themes: the human image, expressed in portraits on coins and medallions from antiquity to the present. The show exclusively presents objects that have not previously been displayed in the Münzkabinett's permanent exhibition.

Portraits can be accurate to the last detail, display status, be staged, or stylized. They bear messages controlled by those who commission and create them. At the same time they carry out specific functions toward their intended viewers. Portraits can therefore be understood as direct means of communication transcending regional, temporal, societal, and civic boundaries. They can provide objective information, but they can also cleverly manipulate the recipient's perception and opinion.

In every era, depicting the human face has formed a central aspect of artistic creation and has been subject to various pressures, many of them political. Portraiture begins with the depiction of gods in human form. When the Persians encountered the Greeks in the 5th c. BCE they presented their Great Kings on coins as de-individualised, inaccessible rulers. This emphasized their function as monarchs, not their individuality, which is almost completely ignored in these portraits. The ruler portrait first begins to reflect the actual appearance of a specific person in the Hellenistic period. Here, carefully selected attributes elevating the rulers into the godly sphere create the necessary distance from the viewer. The exhibition also examines the 'VIPs' of ancient Greek and Roman society: magistrates and civil servants, provincial rulers and important office-holders whose names and images were publicized using coinage. Cultural heroes of the past, famous philosophers and intellectual giants, also appear on city coinage, and these images also follow specific conventions of representation.

Fictional depictions, for example Roman ancestor portraits, form an interesting variant of the genre. The purposes and functions underlying the design of human images become particularly apparent in these examples. Seemingly individual features such as beard style or facial wrinkles are combined with features that are essentially ciphers for particular traits or virtues.

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The exhibition also examines shifting trends in portraiture specific to individual regions or time periods, which alternate between veristic representations and 'folkish' or 'period' portraits. It traces the arc from the various aspects of emperors' portraits and private portraits from the Roman period into late antiquity, on to Byzantium and then the visible stylistic break in portraiture in the Middle Ages, when schematic and formulaic images created distance between subject and audience.

The Renaissance portrait revolutionized the genre, providing a prime example of the ways in which human images mirror social and cultural upheaval. The individual again took centre stage, reflected, for example, in the appearance in this period of private medallions, works created for private individuals rather than rulers. The new human image and self-perception of individuals achieved unique expression in the portraiture of this time. Finally, from the modern period to the present we can trace multiple trends in the development of portraiture, but all of these remain tied to the norms of the ruler portraits that precede them. In the early 20th century the concepts of portraiture were questioned and sparked exciting discussion, yet the elements of typological schemata, authenticity, and individuality maintained their importance. Conventional, state, or bourgeois perspectives slowly began to break down.

The medal remained a conservative medium for a long time, since public or private patrons of such works usually conformed to established concepts of portraiture. A paradigm shift only began to appear in the second half of the 20th century, brought about by a stronger emphasis on artistic independence leading to a previously unknown level of artistic variety in the creation of medals.

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