



Head of Emperor Caligula, Roman

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Unknown artist
Roman, about A.D. 40
16 15/16 in.
72.AA.155



Questions for Teaching

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What do you notice about this sculpture?

What do you notice about the facial expression of the sitter?

Official portraits of emperors such as this would have been displayed throughout the empire. What would this portrait communicate to the people of ancient Rome? (*The portrait could assert Caligula's power and authority.*)

How is Suetonius's description of Caligula's physical appearance similar to or different from the portrait? What are some reasons for the differences? (*Caligula probably wanted his portraits to convey his power and right to rule, whereas Suetonius may have wanted to express a negative opinion of Caligula.*)

Caligula's hairstyle copies that of the emperor Augustus. What do you know of Augustus? Why would Caligula choose to be portrayed with Augustus's hairstyle? (*Copying Augustus's hairstyle makes a deliberate allusion to Caligula's dynastic connection and his right to rule.*)

How does this portrait of an emperor compare or contrast to portraits of rulers today?

Background Information

The Roman emperor Gaius, more commonly known by his nickname **Caligula**, ruled from A.D. 37 to 41. While Caligula was initially popular with the Roman public, he proved to be unpredictable and tyrannical, and he extravagantly spent funds from Rome's treasury. He became extremely unpopular among the elite and was assassinated by his advisors. After he was murdered, many **portraits** of him were destroyed.

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The Romans had a long tradition of portraiture, but portraits of emperors had a specific **propaganda** function beyond that of ordinary portraits. The actual appearance of the individual was combined with the political message that the portrait was meant to convey. Portraits of Caligula show a young man with a high forehead, small mouth, and thin lips. He is identifiable as an individual, yet his hairstyle copies that of a previous emperor, **Augustus**, making a deliberate allusion to Caligula's dynastic connection and his right to rule.

The depictions of Caligula in these official portraits bear no resemblance to the unpleasant descriptions of him provided by Roman writers such as **Suetonius**:

Height: tall — Complexion: pallid — Body: hairy and badly built — Neck: thin — Legs: spindling — Eyes: sunken — Temples: hollow — Forehead: broad and forbidding — Scalp: almost hairless, especially on top. Because of his baldness and hairiness he announced that it was a capital offense either for anyone to look down on him as he passed or to mention goats in any context.