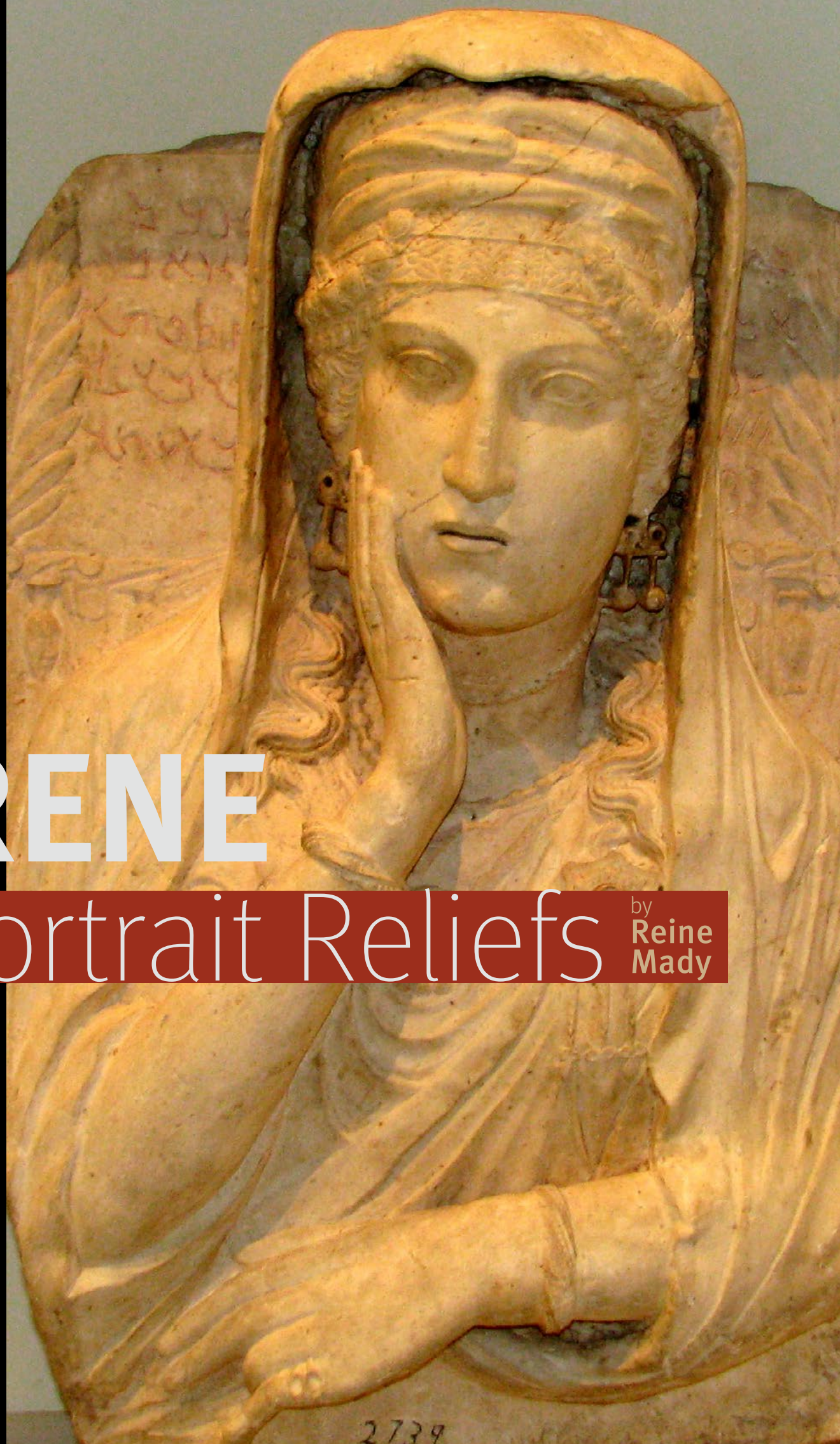


The hidden stories
of the **ARCHAEOLOGICAL**
Museum



PALMYRENE

Funerary Portrait Reliefs

by
Reine
Mady



They say every picture tells a story. So too each of the 24 busts in the AUB Museum Palmyrene Funerary Art Collection, the “portraits” of choice among the affluent Palmyrene elite in the first three centuries AD.

Strategically located in the middle of the Syrian Desert, the Palmyra Oasis thrived as an important stop along the lucrative caravan route connecting the Roman and Parthian Empires. As commerce flourished Palmyra evolved from small settlement with a cluster of tribes into a prosperous community where the elite flaunted their wealth – in life and in death.

In their funerary art, a synthesis of traditional modes and new trends unique to Palmyra, the affluent commemorated themselves with portraits of how they wished to be remembered. Their busts have come to represent the epitome of Palmyrene art, which in turn gives us insight into the formation of social identity during the Roman period.

Hundreds of these funerary busts depicting gender, profession and family connections, the hallmark of Palmyrene status, are now found in museums and collections across the world.

1/ Palmyra alcove at the AUB Archaeological Museum

AUB Museum boasts a cross section of the bust reliefs acquired by the museum's curators between 1904-51: representing 16 males, six females, a couple, and a boy and his sister. The portraits are carved in high relief on rectangular limestone slabs that were used to seal the burial niches (loculi) where the mummified dead were placed inside the tombs. In AUB Museum they are displayed in the manner of a Palmyrene tomb (1).

But what, you may wonder, makes these busts so interesting and unique? Who was in the portraits? Are they "true to life"?

Like everybody else, the Palmyrenes were keen to have flattering images of themselves. But unlike the Romans, for example, they were more concerned with conveying social and political status rather than physiognomy. Without the accompanying inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic, giving name and genealogy, it would be hard to identify who is who, except in terms of wealth and social standing.

*2/ Bust of a man
(Inv.# 31.3) ca. 50 – 150 AD*



Let's start with the young man depicted in the first sculpture: funerary male bust (2) dating back to the 1st c. AD. His short hair, combed Emperor Augustus style may have been the height of fashion in Palmyra at that time. Though he has no beard, his wide-eyed stare seems designed to depict wisdom beyond his years. His tunic and cloak reflect contemporary Greco-Roman fashion with his cloak draped like a sling on his right arm. His name and genealogy are traced in red Palmyrene Aramaic.

The second male bust (3) appears older thanks to the wrinkles on his forehead. His eyebrows are carved with a new technique making them appear more pronounced and realistic. He too is clean-shaven and wears his tunic with a coat; He clutches a scroll as a symbol of status. His name is inscribed on the stone.

*3/ Bust of a man
(Inv.# 32.56) ca. 50 – 150 AD*

The style of female bust (4) was popular during the Greco-Roman period. The woman is lavishly clothed in traditional Palmyrene garments including a tunic, veil and himation placed around her shoulders. Oriental influences can be detected in the headband and turban covering part of her hair. Wisps of hair falling on either side of her forehead enhance her majestic appearance. The wrinkles on her forehead suggest she is a wise, older woman. Her earrings, shaped like clusters of grapes, have a Hellenistic touch while her coat is embellished with a typical Palmyrene trapezoidal shaped brooch with a key. She holds a spindle and distaff in her left hand, while her right hand is raised.

4/Bust of a woman
(Inv.# 2740)ca. 134- 135 AD



Oriental influences can be detected in the headband and turban covering part of her hair



During the 2nd c. AD, changes in representation were introduced. The monotony of the flat image was enhanced with sculpted hand gestures or an extended arm. In female portraits the motion of lifting the veil was interpreted as a sign of respect in the mourning ritual as illustrated in portrait (5). Attributes like the distaff and spindle remain but new accessories, reflecting the deceased's possessions are now included.

*5/ Bust of a woman
(Inv.# 2734) ca. 150 AD*



*6/ Bust of a woman
(Inv.# 2739) ca. 161 AD*

In sculpture (6) situated in the AUB Palmyrene alcove, a beautiful woman stares death in the face. She has a dreamy, slightly melancholy look. Her mouth is depicted as half open, as if taking in breath, which is rare. One palm rests on her cheek in a gesture adopted by the Romans from the Greeks. Her status and wealth are conveyed through her fashionable, elegant attire and lavish jewelry.

By the 2nd half of the 2nd C. AD, male beards had become fashionable. The man on funerary bust (7) also has a mustache. The way the strands of his hair end in the form of shells is peculiar to the Parthian Empire during the Roman period. He is holding a sword in front of a tent that is knotted with nails in the shape of rosettes, indicating that he is the dead.

The woman beside him with her arm around him, assumes attributes of a mourner. Her tunic, attached with a circular fibula, is worn at an angle. Her long hair hangs loose reaching her shoulders. She is holding a bowl called skyphos, which contained food eaten on the occasion of a funeral. This composition indicates that this man was well honored after his death.

*7/ Busts of a man and a woman
(Inv.# 33.12) ca. 150 AD*





In funerary bust (8) of a woman and child the fact that the child is holding a bird – symbol of a dead soul – indicates that it is he who has departed. The woman wears an Empress Faustina hairstyle of from the 2nd c. AD. Her elaborated headdress is called a rope of melon. The way she is pouting implies sorrow. Unlike the depictions of lavish jewelry in other busts this woman is only wearing traditional Roman earrings and a simple pearl necklace.

8/ Busts of a woman and a child
(Inv.# 2753) ca. 2nd – 3rd c. AD



9/ Bust of a priest
(Inv.# 25.1) ca. 200 AD

Bust (9) is that of a priest recognizable by his Greek modius, a type of cylindrical headgear indicating the deceased's function as a pious person. These are often decorated with a wreath and a central medallion. As shown here the priest is always beardless as a symbol of purity in Semitic belief. But what is intriguing is that while a notable man could serve as a priest, his inscriptions do not indicate that.

These eight busts provide a snapshot of the entire collection which has been analyzed using 3-D technology and studied further to consider the how and where of their placement, their history and the hidden stories they tell.



Front



iso-metric



left



right

10/ 3D image of a bust of a woman
(Inv.# 2739)
Image taken by Dr. Kiyohide Saito
on 2015 (Archaeological Institute of
Kashihara, Nara Prefecture).

References

Badre, L. (2020). *AUB Museum 150 years : Collections with and without Provenance*. In : Ali, M. Badre, L. *From Collection to Museum. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the AUB Museum, June 2018* (pp. 99-119), the American University of Beirut Archaeological Museum.

Baramki, D. C. (1967). *The Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut*. Beirut: The American University of Beirut.

Dagmara, W.-R. (2016). *Orient et Occident unis par enchantement dans la pierre sculptée, la sculpture figurative de Palmyre*. In : Al-Maqdissi, M. *La Syrie et le désastre archéologique du Proche-Orient « Palmyre cité martyre »* (pp. 66-82). Beyrouth.

Heyn, M. (2010). "Gesture and Identity in the Funerary Art of Palmyra", *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, No. 4, Archaeological Institute of America.

Ingholt, H. (1928). *Studier Over Palmyrensk Skulptur*. Kobenhavn: C.A. Reitzel.

Ingholt, H. (1934). *Palmyrene Sculptures in Beirut*. Berytus 1:32-43.

Krag, S. (2018). *Funerary Representations of Palmyrene Women. From the First Century BC to the Third Century AD*. Brepols.

Kropp, A.,J.M., Raja R. (2014). "The Palmyra Portrait Project", *Syria* 91, IFPO Press.

Mackey, D. (1951). *A Guide to the Archaeological Collections in the University Museum (American University of Beirut)*. Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique.

Woolley, C. L. (1921). *Guide to the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut*. Beirut: The American University of Beirut.

Photos copyrights

1/ ©AUB Museum

2/ ©AUB Museum

3/ ©AUB Museum

4/ ©AUB Museum

5/ ©AUB Museum

6/ ©AUB Museum

7/ ©AUB Museum

8/ ©AUB Museum

9/ ©AUB Museum

10/ ©AUB Museum

