

**WHAT'S IN A FACE? REFRAMING THE EXPRESSIVE PORTRAITURE OF
THIRD-CENTURY ROMAN EMPERORS**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reexamines the expressive portraiture of third-century Roman emperors through the lens of memory—both cultural and cognitive. Traditionally interpreted as visualizations of military severity, personal cruelty, or psychological instability, these emotive images—marked by furrowed brows, tensed musculature, and averted gazes—have often been read reductively as reflections of individual character or crisis. By contrast, this study argues that such portraits functioned as deliberate instruments of memory-making, shaped by evolving artistic practices and intellectual currents in the Roman world.

Beginning with the portraits of Caracalla, the dissertation identifies a significant shift in imperial visual language: the emergence of dynamic, emotionally charged physiognomies that departed from the calm idealization of earlier imperial imagery. This expressive turn, I argue, was not an aesthetic anomaly nor a symptom of political decline, but a strategic development in the visual culture of Roman power. These images were designed to resonate affectively with viewers, engaging cognitive mechanisms that enhance attention, emotional response, and memory formation.

Drawing on literary sources such as Philostratus's *Eikones* and Plotinus's *Enneads*, alongside recent findings in cognitive neuroscience, the project situates imperial portraiture within broader Roman practices of commemoration and perception. It explores how expressive features activated memory in viewers—through emotional salience, visual vividness (*energeia*), and repetition across public and domestic spaces. The study integrates neuroaesthetic theory and memory studies to argue that these portraits were not passive representations but active agents in the cultural and cognitive life of the empire.

Across three chapters, the dissertation examines the formal evolution of third-century imperial portraiture, its cultural and philosophical context, and its mnemonic function. An appendix with two case studies grounds these analyses in archaeological context, illustrating how expressive portraiture operated across the Roman provinces. Ultimately, this project reframes third-century portraiture not as a reflection of crisis, but as a response to it—an effort to secure imperial presence, legitimacy, and legacy through the sculpted face. In doing so, it proposes a new methodological model for understanding Roman portraiture as a medium of memory, emotion, and embodied ideology.