



Grave Relief of Publius Curtilius Agatus, Silversmith, Roman

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Roman, A.D. 1–25

Marble

31 7/16 x 23 1/16 x 12 1/2 in.

96.AA.40

Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the work of art. What do you see?

What details do you notice? What can you tell about this person by looking at the details of the artwork? What else?

Look closely at his hands. The family of the person in this portrait worked with the sculptor to create this object. Why would you want a portrait of a family member holding something specific in his or her hands?

The individual is holding a tool and silver cup. What do these objects tell us about this man? (*He is a silversmith.*)



What is he wearing? (*He is wearing a toga and ring. Note that the ring is visible as a slight protrusion on the ring finger of the subject's left hand.*)

What can clothing and accessories tell us about someone? (*Clothing and accessories could indicate an individual's personal taste and social or economic class.*)

Portraits like this would have been placed in the façades of family tombs, advertising the social and professional status of the deceased to all who passed by. How does this sculpture compare or contrast with objects you would have seen in cemeteries?

This freed slave is shown with a hairstyle similar to Emperor Augustus, who brought peace and stability to Rome during his reign. Why would this man want to be depicted with an Augustan hairstyle? (*The Augustan hairstyle would show his devotion to the emperor and new status, after being freed, as a Roman citizen.*)

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Background Information

"Publius Curtilius Agatus, freedman of Publius, and silversmith" reads the inscription on this Roman funerary relief. Portraits such as this one were placed in the façades of family tombs lining the roads out of Rome, advertising the social and professional status of the deceased to all who passed by. The portrait's format and style are typical of the funerary reliefs commissioned by freed slaves. Beginning in the 100s B.C., slaves were brought to Rome in large numbers. Like Publius Curtilius Agatus, many slaves were skilled professionals; he appears here in his role as a silversmith, making a small cup. Portraits of freed slaves in this period often show a combination of styles. The face of Publius Curtilius Agatus—with hollow cheeks, furrowed brow, and deep folds running from each side of the nose to the corners of the mouth—harks back to a "warts and all" style of portraiture favored by nobles in the Roman Republic. The hair, however, is an up-to-date Augustan court style. In portraits like this one, freed slaves used an aristocratic but old-fashioned visual vocabulary to express their new status as Romans.