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Augustus’s Portrait Archetype:
The Role of the Visual Arts in the Transition from Republic to Empire

by

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I. Introduction

The assassination of Julius Caesar changed the course of Roman history. Augustus Octavian, then only nineteen years old, had to simultaneously confront the death of his adoptive father and the fate of the Republic. He dealt with the chaotic aftermath of Julius Caesar’s regime that created civil unrest and a mistrust of the government. Rome needed a strong leader to stabilize the nation, but the people did not want another dictator. Augustus understood this, but knew that the Senate could not alleviate Rome’s instability. He had to gain power subtly and strategically to maintain the trust of the people and prove that his actions benefitted the state above all else. Augustus’s aspirations to restore Rome as a nation of prosperity, peace, and stability needed to be at the forefront of his political career for his leadership to attain acceptance. 1 To convey these objectives, Augustus attempted to reinvent the public perception of his character. Augustus knew that transforming his public image furthered his goal of unifying Rome under his control.

The importance and assortment of visual imagery already present in Roman culture provided Augustus with an extensive means for conveying his authority while maintaining the façade of a democracy. Upholding the civic expectations for a Republic was essential to earn the support of the people and sustain a stable government. 2 This study will show the important role that Augustus’s visual imagery played in maintaining his control over Rome through the analysis three objects: the Augustus of Prima Porta, Via Labicana Augustus, and the processional panels from the Ara Pacis Augustae (Fig. 1-

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Each of these sculptural works displays characteristics of the pictorial Augustan archetype meant to embody the admirable qualities and qualifications of Rome’s new leader. The objects respectively address three major aspects of Roman life: military, religion, and familial relationships. Augustus’s dominant presence in these areas helped to solidify his position in the government, allowing for the Principate Period to emerge from the uncertainty of the Late Republic. Augustus’s exploitation of the visual arts facilitated the political transition from Republic to Empire.

Augustus took control of civic art production in Rome in order to promote the benefits of his reign to his citizens. After the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, portraits of Augustus became idealized to exemplify his political ideology; Post-Actium representations of Augustus do not coincide with any of the textual descriptions of him. He shaped his new form by altering the artistic standards for portraying his physical likeness, limiting the symbolic imagery associated with him, commissioning a massive amount of these depictions, and making it impossible for any other official to earn monumental or commemorative artwork. The prevalence of these effigies made it so that citizens were confronted with images of Augustus on a daily basis. Repetition and accessibility of the archetype’s symbolism were crucial for articulating the desired ideals to all Romans, regardless of social status or education. By utilizing both explicit and

3. This sculpture has several titles: Via Labicana Augustus, Augustus as Priest, and Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. I have chosen to address it as the Via Labicana Augustus due to the specificity of this name.
subliminal persuasion techniques, Augustus’s administrative program gained acceptance in the once Republican Rome.

II. Historical Background

The future stability of Roman civilization depended on the acceptance or rejection of Augustus. Before discussing the impact of the visual arts during the Principate Period, it is necessary to understand the condition of Rome in the years preceding it. The chaotic political environment that Augustus was confronted with determined the beginnings of his career. To gain the trust of the people of Rome, Augustus needed to prove that he could govern them successfully and liberate them from the mistakes of those who came before him.8

Augustus (born Gaius Octavius but referred to as Octavian until after the events of 31BCE) was the adoptive son and chosen heir of Julius Caesar. Caesar’s intentions were clear—by naming a successor he meant to continue the autocratic regime he had created—but his untimely death halted the possibility. The assassination of Julius Caesar launched Rome into a period of turmoil. Octavian, Mark Antony, and Marcus Lepidus together formed the Second Triumvirate to solidify governmental strength, though it was generally unsuccessful in doing so. This oligarchy existed from 43 BCE to 33 BCE; a ten-year period wrought with deception, jealousy, and battle for dominance among the three rulers that would ultimately spark Rome’s bloodiest civil wars. The numerous battles disbanded the Second Triumvirate, resulting in the exile of Lepidus and Octavian’s victory over Mark Antony at Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian was rewarded

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8 Southern, 71.
consulships by the Senate which, in combination with his military rank, inadvertently made him the highest-ranking official in the Roman Republic.⁹

Despite his victory, the shift of power from the Second Triumvirate to Octavian was not direct. Octavian did not assume the role of tyrant like his late adoptive father, but he also did not step down and return total control to the Senate. Some supported the prospect of a monarch, but majority opposed it, making it impractical for Octavian to keep too much authority outright. He formally handed Rome back to the Senate in 27 BCE, but retained unmatched prestige regardless of his “official” title as a consul. Octavian was fashioning a new form of administration from within the pre-existing Republic; he acquired enough social, political, and military positions to hold supremacy over the Senate, yet refused any titles that would name him as dictator.¹⁰ He was also careful to remove himself from any political relationships that had potential to bring his authority into question.¹¹ The most problematic association at the beginning of his career was with his connection to Mark Antony.

Any similarity to Mark Antony was countered with starkly opposing values exhibited by Augustus. The unstable relationship between Rome and its colonies during the civil wars threatened the nation with a loss of cultural identity. Antony’s ties to the East aggravated the situation. He was accused of being concerned with affairs of the East to the point of ignoring his homeland. Octavian, on the other hand, was brazenly Roman, demonstrating virtue, nationalism, and Romanitas.¹² Octavian’s victory over Mark

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⁹ Eck, “Senatorial Self-Representation: Developments…”, 131-138; Zanker, 90-93, 125.
¹⁰ Southern, 125-128; Walker and Burnett, 1; Zanker, 90-93, 125.
¹¹ Southern, 76-78.
¹² David Castriota, The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Imagery of Abundance in Later Greek and Early Roman Imperial Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 146-151; Levick, 115, 148-150. Romanitas is an ancient Roman concept that emphasizes the importance of “Romanness”. Romanitas combines nationalism with personal virtue and was particularly admired in Roman men.
Antony functioned symbolically for the fundamental purpose of his reign—that the unwavering might of Rome should triumph over all.

The defeat of Mark Antony was a historic turning point for Rome as a government, but the true pivotal moment was when Octavian became Augustus. His public reinvention of character began in 28 BCE when he was given the title of *princeps senatus*. Octavian received the honorific *princeps senatus* when he publicly refused to be called an emperor. Octavian shortened the phrase to Princeps, changing the meaning slightly to emphasize that he was “first among equals.” This conveyed Octavian’s humility through his rejection of imperial titles while permitting him to retain authority over all others without naming him as a sovereign; Octavian became emperor without ever explicitly assuming the role. This intentional display of public humility occurred again in 27 BCE when Octavian relinquished his remaining triumvirate power and returned governance of Rome to the Senate. Dio recorded Octavian’s speech as proclaiming:

> I am aware, fathers, that to some of you I will appear to have made an incredible choice…I shall lead you no longer and no one will say that all my earlier conduct was in order to achieve absolute power. In fact I resign my power completely and restore absolutely everything to you…so you can ascertain from these actions themselves that from the very beginning I desired no domination, but in truth wanted to avenge my cruelly murdered father and rescue the city from serious and unending crises.

This gracious return of power appeased many in the Senate and working-class alike, so much so that the Senate bestowed the name “Augustus” upon Octavian. “Augustus” had

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14 Levick, 72-73; Zanker, 98-99. As this title served a very specific purpose for Augustus’s political intentions, I will be referring to Augustus as Princeps instead of Emperor for the duration of this paper.

never been used as an honorific, but was packed with symbolism that gave it multiple meanings and greatly influenced how the community perceived the recipient of the title. It is associated with reverence and alludes to the verb *august* (“increase”) and the priestly order of the *augur*, referring to one who mediated between the gods and the people and interpreted supernatural omens. This designation signified the divine power that Augustus could not explicitly state to the citizens and proved that he was a man worthy to lead them. Restoring control to the Senate and the change of name was a monumental statement for the Princeps; Octavian was a dominating ruler driven by revenge, but Augustus was a humble messenger of the gods whose actions benefitted the nation. It was the name of a leader who would renew the prosperity of Rome.

### III. Pre-Actium Portraiture

The imagery of Octavian before the Battle of Actium is not discussed enough when explaining the development of his visual archetype. This is likely a result from the lack of extant examples of this type of portrait, but textual sources provide enough information to discuss these works. Just as with noting the state of Rome’s former political environment, observing the differences in Octavian’s portraiture before Actium is crucial to understand the shift from depictions of Octavian to depictions of Augustus.

Augustus needed to craft an image that would fit his redesigned persona and embody his political ideology. To accentuate the shift, the visual prototype had to be noticeably different than depictions of himself as Octavian. Augustus remained

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18 Walker and Burnett, 18.
recognizable even though this new representation greatly deviated from textual
descriptions of him. Portraits of a disheveled, arrogant youth gave way to the modest,
idealized savior of Rome who encompassed all that the Late Republic valued:
nationalism, morality, and divine connection.19

Surviving images of Octavian from after Caesar’s death in 44 BCE until after the
Battle of Actium in 33 BCE consists mostly of coinage (Fig. 4-5).20 The portrait type
exhibited in these objects displays a younger man with slightly unkempt hair, a large
forehead with an even larger nose, a small mouth, irregular and bony facial proportions,
and a firm expression. He is youthful and idealized, but to a limited extent—the features
are still his own, just modified to fit a general visual aesthetic. Textual descriptions from
Suetonius describe Octavian as such:

He did not dress extravagantly and cared so little about his hair that several
barbers worked furiously on it at the same time. His beard was either trimmed or
shaved while he continued reading or writing. He had clear bright eyes...few
teeth, which were small and dirty...his hair was yellowish and slightly curly, his
eyebrows met and his nose jutted out and then turned inwards. He was neither
dark nor fair, and was rather short, but with well-proportioned limbs. On his body
were spots, birthmarks and callouses caused by excessive use of the strigil. He
sometimes limped and suffered generally from a weak constitution.21

This account of Octavian is so different from how he is portrayed after the Battle of
Actium that it is hard to believe the same person is being described.22 There were only
minimal changes in Octavian’s sculpted appearance up until Caesar’s assassination.

Caesar’s death initiated a time of mourning for Octavian that was customary in
Roman culture during this period. Octavian grew a beard as a sign of grief over the loss

19 Pollini, 74-75; Walker and Burnett, 1; Levick, 148-150.
20 For ancient examples or contemporary renderings of coins with this portrait type, see Southern, 174, 176;
Walker-Burnett, 1; Zanker, 42, 54-56.
21 Suetonius as cited in Walker and Burnett, 1.
22 Pollini, 174-175.
of his parent (or adoptive parent, as with Octavian’s situation), as per Roman tradition. The physical attributes of his representations morphed slightly from those from before Caesar’s death. Octavian still appeared youthful, but took on a stern demeanor that conveyed the determination of a man out to avenge his father’s death. As powers clashed during the Second Triumvirate, Octavian found favor with the people by presenting himself as the son of Julius Caesar. Seeking justice for his murdered father validated his pursuit of authority over the other two Triumvirs. Once Octavian fulfilled these tasks and acquired supremacy, being Caesar’s heir was no longer a sufficient reason to remain in control of Rome.23

IV. Post-Actium Portraiture: Augustus of Prima Porta

Augustus of Prima Porta became the standard for depicting Augustus during the Principate. The statue dates from 20 BCE, but displays the portrait type that was developed at the beginning of the Principate in 27 BCE.24 As such, it demonstrates one of the earliest and most comprehensive examples of the Augustan visual archetype. This archetype, which is commonly referred to as the “Prima Porta type”, became the standard for depicting Augustus because of its powerful symbolism.25 Augustus of Prima Porta embodies Classical principles and divine favor, devotion to Roman Peace, and the prosperity of Augustus’s actions.

23 Walker and Burnett, 18; Zanker, 98-100.
24 There is debate on whether or not the Augustus of Prima Porta is an original marble statue or a copy from an original bronze. There is no definitive proof for either claim yet. For more information, see Louise Adams Holland, “Aeneas-Augustus of Prima Porta.” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 78 (1947): 283; Pollini, 187; Walker and Burnett, 22; Zanker, 185-189.
The Prima Porta was created to celebrate the reclamation of military standards from the Parthians in 20 BCE. The standards were lost at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE, making it a point of frustration in Roman history for over thirty years. The Roman people wanted a spectacular victory to wipe out the indignity of those years and believed the Princeps could give it to them, which was a reasonable notion considering Augustus’s many achievements as imperator. They anticipated a campaign that would yield not only the lost standards, but foreign treasures and prisoners of war to satisfy a thirty-three-year-long desire for revenge. Augustus’s victory was drastically different. He negotiated peace without any combat and there were no spoils of war. The Parthians simply returned the standards that were Rome’s in the first place. Augustus’s nonviolent tactics were completely intentional. He chose to act contrary to what was expected of him to emphasize that the values of Augustus were different than those of Octavian—Octavian focused on the power of dominance and war, Augustus was dedicated to bringing peace.

Much of the ideology of the Principate Period harkened back to the values of the Late Republic. Late Republican culture was heavily influenced by the Classical and Hellenistic periods of Greece. The refined, politically stable culture that stressed religious devotion, morality, and heroism appealed to the Romans after the militant Second Triumvirate. Augustus capitalized on the Roman admiration of Greek cultural values from the start of his campaign. He understood that relating himself directly to these values brought him favor with his citizens. He conveyed this relationship by adopting

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26 Imperator refers to the commander of the entire Roman militia. Augustus held this title during the Second Triumvirate and retained the position in the Principate Period. Levick, 5, 234.
27 Holland, 277-278; Zanker, 185-188.
28 Pollini, 178-80, 186-87; Southern, 127; Zanker, 183-186.
29 Castriota, 146-152.
Greek artistic conventions and symbolism in portrayals of himself. *Augustus of Prima Porta* echoes one of the most famous Classical sculptures: Polykleitos’s *Doryphoros* (Fig. 6). *Doryphoros* was a familiar cultural icon to the ancient Romans. It embodied the Classical principles of harmony, heroism, and piety that Augustus desired to associate with himself and his political program. Augustus knew that using well-known visual imagery in his portraiture meant that its meaning could be understood by all classes regardless of their educational level. The *Prima Porta*’s visual connection to *Doryphoros* was immediate, as were the themes it communicated about Augustus.

The sculptor Polykleitos expressed harmony and perfection in the bodily proportions and physical styling of the *Doryphoros*. The Romans valued how it combined mathematical principles and Greek artistic conventions to create a visual canon of the ideal human body. The sculptors of *Augustus of Prima Porta* followed the Polykleitan canon of proportions almost exactly, which is most apparent when comparing the respective facial structures and stances. The *contrapposto* weight shift and positioning of the legs are exactly the same (if not exact replicas). The head of the *Prima Porta* follows the facial symmetry of the *Doryphoros* using idealized versions of Augustus’s physical traits to distinguish the Princeps from the nonspecific models of classical male beauty (Fig. 7-8). Augustus’s expression conveys dignity and determination without being intimidating. The front locks of hair—one of the most iconic features of Augustan portraiture—mimic the geometric regularity of the hair of the *Doryphoros*. The sculptors specifically crafted each component of the head of the *Prima Porta* to create the ideal

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31 Pollini, 175; Walker and Burnett, 19; Zanker, 98-99, 125, 197.
32 Fisher, “Augustus of Prima Porta”; Pollini, 188; Walker and Burnett, 20; Zanker, 98-100, 188-189.
face of Augustus because every detail significantly contributed to the overall portrait type. For example, the bridge of the nose, size of the ears, cheekbone definition, hair on the nape of the neck, and jawline are standardized in all sculptures that follow the Prima Porta type.

The visual accessibility of these sculptural conventions provided a means of representation of Augustus’s desired characteristics, without him having to explicitly state them. Roman citizens accepted their own praise for the Princeps, but Augustus’s own promotion would have marked him as an arrogant, power-hungry sovereign unconcerned with the well-being of Rome. To avoid these accusations, Augustus strategically relied on his visual representations to craft an identity and send the political messages he needed to convey. Indirect association provided an ideal way for Augustus to relate himself to gods or past rulers without receiving retaliation from the public.33

The figures of Cupid and the dolphin and the cuirass relief sculptures on the Augustus of Prima Porta imply the Princeps’s connection to divinity (Fig. 9). The central figures on the breastplate illustrate the reclamation of the military standards from the Parthians in 20 BCE (Fig. 10). The Parthian soldier returns the military standards to the personification of the Roman army or a representation of Mars.34 Representing this victory instead of a more dramatic triumph—such as the Battle of Actium—was a calculated maneuver meant to further emphasize Augustus’s desire for Roman peace. As imperator, Octavian’s authority was unambiguously derived from his military prestige. Augustus, in keeping with his agenda of Roman peace, was careful not to overemphasize

33 Pollini, 69-70, 74-76; Zanker, 125.
34 Pollini, 187. The former of the two personifications is more likely, as it would be uncommon to depict Mars in the context of this historical event.
his military status.\textsuperscript{35} The Princeps relied on the support of the people; inspiring fear in his subjects with the army would result in a militant dictatorship. This is not to say that Romans did not value military leadership, but just as with other aspects of his public image, Augustus knew where to draw the line. The Parthian victory was the ideal scene for the \textit{Prima Porta} because it demonstrated that even though Augustus could have ultimately destroyed the Parthians, he instead used diplomatic means to achieve peace.\textsuperscript{36}

To the people of Rome, Augustus’s successful military record was evidence that he possessed divine favor.\textsuperscript{37} This cultural concept permitted the representations of various gods on the \textit{Augustus of Prima Porta}. The figures surrounding the central area of the cuirass reliefs are gods, allusions to conquered foreign lands, and personifications of Roman cultural values. Apollo, Diana, and Mother Earth are present as well as both males and females that reference foreign lands conquered by Augustus.\textsuperscript{38}

Furthermore, the Cupid and figure of the dolphin on the \textit{Augustus of Prima Porta} are used to symbolically establish the Princeps’s divine lineage. The pair had been used in Julian imagery for decades before the Principate to trace Caesar back to Venus through her son (who would be Caesar’s brother/cousin). As heir to the Julian line, Augustus shared this affiliation.\textsuperscript{39} The two figures reference the divine source of Augustus’s power using the persuasion technique of symbolic implication. Another association that comes specifically from the dolphin is Augustus’s victory at Actium. The dolphin became a famous symbol for the naval battle. Therefore, by having Cupid riding the dolphin,

\textsuperscript{35} Eck, “Senatorial Self-Representation: Developments…”, 138.
\textsuperscript{36} Pollini, 174, 178-182, 187; Southern, 127.
\textsuperscript{37} Eck, “Senatorial Self-Representation: Developments…”, 138; Pollini, 182, 206; Zanker, 184.
Augustus gave credit to the gods for his successful mission.\textsuperscript{40} By including these figures, Augustus simultaneously honored the gods who granted him victory and alluded to his divine connection.

*Augustus of Prima Porta* exemplifies the messages of the early years of the Principate. It describes Augustus with all the essential qualities that the Romans respected in a political leader. Once this visual canon of Augustan characteristics was established, the Prima Porta type was applied to other forms of art in different contexts to suit Augustus’s political needs.\textsuperscript{41}

**V. Via Labicana Augustus**

As the paradigm for depicting Augustus, *Augustus of Prima Porta* needed to be a comprehensive display of his virtues. No singular attribute is prioritized; traits that exemplify the Roman, classical, victorious, and divine are harmoniously woven together to characterize Augustus as a well-rounded leader. *Via Labicana Augustus* is an example of the Prima Porta type applied to a different form of Augustan portraiture to emphasize a particular virtue.\textsuperscript{42} All the underlying characteristics of the Prima Porta type remain present in the *Via Labicana*, but piety is emphasized. The vague connection to the gods and religion made in *Augustus of Prima Porta* is developed in *Via Labicana Augustus*.

Augustus understood that the political stability of Rome relied on both cultural and governmental unity. His objective to create a solidified government meant he needed to acquire religious influence. This influence had to develop gradually to avoid breaking

\textsuperscript{40} Fisher, “Augustus of Prima Porta.”; Zanker, 189.
\textsuperscript{41} Levick, 148-150.
\textsuperscript{42} Zanker, 127.
traditions, such as those broken by Julius Caesar.\textsuperscript{43} Caesar took over the different orders of priests with the sole purpose of establishing sects to worship him as a deity. His exploitation of religion disrupted daily rituals and centuries-old Roman traditions. By the Second Triumvirate and the resulting civil wars, Roman religion was in a state of decay. Civil war brought destruction to temples, monuments, and statuary and without the proper places or objects of worship, religious ceremonies were neglected. Augustus’s restoration of Roman government was not possible without also reestablishing its religion.\textsuperscript{44}

The sculpted face of \textit{Via Labicana} best exhibits the Prima Porta type (Fig. 11). Augustus’s iconic hairstyle, nose, cheekbones, and ears are unmistakably carved to mimic the Prima Porta type. When applied to \textit{Via Labicana}, the idealized physical traits and distinguished expression convey Augustus’s grace and piety. Augustan depictions in the style of \textit{Via Labicana} simultaneously exhibit devout piety and the Princeps’s unique divine power. Zanker addresses this dichotomy in his discussion of the portrayal of Augustus in the sculpture, he writes, “His piety was put on display for every Roman to see, making it clear that he considered the performance of his religious duties his greatest responsibility and highest honor… [but] the humble image of Augustus… does nothing to conceal the notion that he enjoyed divine powers.”\textsuperscript{45} This dichotomy was an accessible concept to the Romans because it was personified through the ceremonial role of the \textit{augur}.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Southern, 93-94.  
\textsuperscript{45} Zanker, 127-128.  
\textsuperscript{46} Pollini, 75.
The *Via Labicana Augustus* is not a definitive representation of Augustus as an *augur*. The sculpture identifies Augustus in a priestly role, but there are no explicit indications that he is an *augur*. It is plausible that whatever the statue was holding (if anything) could have alluded to a specific religious order, but since the forearms have not survived this is only speculation. Augustus’s augural role would have been understood by connecting his religious involvement to augury and to the name “Augustus.” This aligns with other forms of indirect association utilized in Augustan imagery.

This statue is also thought to be portraying Augustus as *pontifex maximus* and that it could have been commissioned after the title was bestowed on him. The *pontifex maximus* was the title granted to the head of the College of Pontiffs and designated the recipient as the most influential religious authority in Rome. Marcus Lepidus held the position during the Second Triumvirate and kept it even after his exile following the civil wars. Augustus could have killed Lepidus and taken the title for himself, but he instead exiled Lepidus in order to illustrate his mercy and humility; executing a prominent religious figure and assuming the role himself (whether it was justified or not) communicated that Augustus’s power was achieved through force and not through the approval of the public. Augustus considered that exiling Lepidus did not remove his status as *pontifex maximus* and adapted his religious governing procedures to remove the need for Lepidus’s approval. The only factor Augustus did not anticipate was how long Lepidus would live after being exiled; Lepidus died in 13 BCE, over fifteen years after

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47 Pollini, 75. The connection between the name “Augustus” and augur has also been addressed earlier in this study under the section titled “Pre-Actium Portraiture.”

48 This speculation is based on the approximate dating of the statue to 12 BCE, which is when Augustus assumed the position after the death of the previous *pontifex maximus*, Marcus Lepidus.

the start of the Principate Period. To acquire religious influence while Lepidus was still alive, Augustus became the first Roman in history to hold membership in all four divisions of the chief priesthhoods. This was only a temporary solution because without the title of pontifex maximus he did not have complete religious control.50

Augustus’s involvement in religious affairs was more than just a ploy to acquire a title. The people equated divine favor with effective leadership. Any positive occurrences during Augustus’s reign—military accomplishment, abundant harvests, public health, etc.—were explained as gifts from the gods.51 It was a cycle of status increase; each public achievement was a testament to Augustus’s divine favor, but achievements were only possible because of this favor. As long as this relationship was maintained in the public eye, Augustus’s power was divinely justified.

The Via Labicana Augustus embodies not only the relationship between Augustus and the gods, but Augustus and the Roman people. Publicly displaying his daily worship rituals brought the Princeps down to the level of the common man.52 Another way the average citizen could relate to the statue was through its sculptural style. The sculptural style of Via Labicana was based in the Republican tradition of ancestor portraits. An ancestor portrait provided a physical entity of a deceased family member that was revered in all Roman households regardless of occupation or status (Fig. 12). Because this style of portraiture was in constant demand, nonspecific togate bodies were mass-produced in workshops and individual heads were sculpted separately. This sculptural convention is notably different from the highly individualized Augustus of Prima Porta. By

50 Pollini, 220; Scheid, 180, 188-189; Zanker, 126.
51 Levick, 203; Scheid, 187; Zanker, 185.
52 Pollini, 75; Onians, 168.
representing himself in the same tradition as the common citizen, Augustus emphasized that he was just another Roman—not an emperor, but “the first among equals.”

Although the togate body was a generalized design, the garment had a specific meaning. Augustus’s revival of the toga symbolized a revival of Republican Roman values. Citizens dressed in the clothing of their forefathers as a way to honor the past through imitation. Republican-era togas mimicked the cut and style of the Greeks, but Augustus refashioned the garment to be more grandiose and give the wearer a feeling of importance and nationalism. The simpler Greek design was replaced with a billowing multilayered arrangement of drapery that was more symbolic than functional. Despite public reluctance to adopt the complex attire, Augustus repeatedly advocated for the toga because of its symbolic value. To persuade the masses, Augustus made certain he was publicly seen wearing a toga to avoid being labeled as a hypocrite.

Because Augustus wore the same style of toga as his people, the garment provided Romans a way to imitate not only their ancestors, but the Princeps himself. This implicit relationship with the Roman people conveyed by Via Labicana Augustus was one of the reasons he was portrayed as a devout, morally-upstanding individual. Using the Prima Porta type for these humble representations of Augustus added another characteristic the overall prototype. Each new trait added to the Prima Porta type increased its applicability to future Augustan sculpture—it expanded to fit the needs of Augustus’s political career.

53 Pollini, 75.
54 Suetonius as cited in Zanker, 163.
55 Zanker, 159-164.
VI. *Ara Pacis Augustae*: Processional Friezes

The *Ara Pacis Augustae*—the Altar of Augustan Peace—is a testament to the effective influence of the Augustan archetype on the public’s acceptance of the Principate. Every facet of Roman culture is addressed through the sculptural imagery and contextual symbolism of this monument. Although the Prima Porta type is employed on the *Ara Pacis*, it is done differently than in either the *Augustus of Prima Porta* or *Via Labicana Augustus*. *Via Labicana* has the most narrowly-focused symbolism of the three objects. *Augustus of Prima Porta* and the *Ara Pacis* have a similar range of symbolism, but the sculptors of the *Ara Pacis* utilized the canon of imagery with expanded meaning that reflected the specific political circumstances surrounding their respective creation. The evolution of Augustan portraiture from the *Augustus of Prima Porta* to the *Ara Pacis* parallels the progression of Roman government during the Principate.

The *Ara Pacis* functions as more of a public homage than the *Prima Porta* or *Via Labicana*. The Senate commissioned the sacrificial altar in 13 BCE to celebrate Augustus’ safe return from conquests in Spain and Gaul, but the symbolism of the *Ara Pacis* extends beyond a singular event. Augustus’ homecoming provided an acceptable reason to construct such an elaborate public work.

The Senate designed the monument, and Augustus (or his advisors) approved it before construction began. The interior and exterior of the four walls are divided into two registers of relief sculpture. The interior space contains the physical altar area where blood sacrifice took place. The altar structure was sculpted using a combination of high and low relief that resulted in extravagantly detailed forms, most of which have not survived. The upper register of the exterior depicts religious sacrifice, various deities, and
other prominent historical figures while the lower frieze is overflowing with botanical
motifs. All imagery was deliberately chosen to contribute to the overall message of the
Ara Pacis—even the botanical reliefs that seem purely ornamental distinctly symbolize the
beauty, abundance, and growth that existed during Augustus’s reign.\(^\text{56}\) For the sake of
precision and brevity, only the processional relief panels on the north and south outer
walls will be discussed in this study (Fig. 13-14).

The processional panels offer significant insight into the Senate’s—and ultimately
Augustus’s—motives for selecting the unique imagery of the Ara Pacis. A sacrificial
procession with a group of individuals (other than the Princeps) depicted on a public
monument was particularly rare because it deviated from the official canon of Augustan
symbolism. During the Principate Period, Roman law dictated that artists could only use
imagery applicable to the ideology of the state. Depictions of figures, historical events,
and artistic conventions had to be officially sanctioned by the Princeps or his advisors.\(^\text{57}\)
This restriction forced artists to repeat imagery, which resulted in a unified, pervasive
visual campaign that was comprehensible to all; repetition of symbolic images
standardized their intended meaning.\(^\text{58}\)

The limitations of the Augustan visual canon make the Ara Pacis processional
panels important for understanding the evolution of the Principate—the slight departure
from standard imagery reflects a change in Augustan political ideology. In earlier
Augustan representations, artists used imagery that focused exclusively on the favorable

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\(^{58}\) Zanker, 110-114, 123-125.
characteristics of Augustus’s leadership as a way to justify his authority. Once his power became more solidified and the people experienced the benefits of his control firsthand, Augustus did not need to constantly promote himself. Truly being perceived as “the first among equals” allowed Augustus to shift his political intentions to creating a stable future for Rome. The *Ara Pacis* processional panels exemplify this change. Unlike any other public work made during the Principate, the *Ara Pacis* emphasized Roman culture as a whole more than one man’s effect on that culture. Maintaining *Pax Augusta* (Augustan peace) required the active involvement of all Romans.\(^59\) Portraying a sacrificial procession—an event that all Roman citizens would participate in—demonstrated Augustus’s desire to show that the common people were just as important as the governing body. The processional panels displayed how the present relationship between Augustus and his people determined the future of Roman civilization.\(^60\)

The procession depicted coincided with the annual sacrifice to honor *Pax Augusta* that was established upon the completion of the *Ara Pacis* in 9 BCE. Augustus’s push for cultural unity is seen in the *Pax Augusta* ceremony—instead of a single order of priests leading the ritual for the Roman elite, all priesthoods participated and every Roman citizen was required to attend.\(^61\) This explains why the majority of the surviving figures on both the north and south wall panels are from various religious orders. The individual sects are not immediately distinct because of the crowded composition and areas of loss on the friezes, but scholars have generally agreed that the priesthoods represented were

\(^{59}\) Levick, 148-149; Pollini, 240; Southern, 71.
\(^{60}\) Becker, “Ara Pacis.”; Conlin, 41; Levick, 214; Zanker, 123.
\(^{61}\) Augustus as cited in Becker “Ara Pacis”; Levick, 214; Zanker, 120-122.
the *flamines*, *quindicemviri*, *septemviri*, and *augurs*. The artists sculpted the priests with ceremonial objects—rods, leather caps, incense boxes, laurel wreaths—and varied togate attire to set them apart from the mass of other figures. The veiled priests indicate the start of the sacrifice. Augustus, decorated with both a veil and laurel wreath, acts as an *augur* among the participating priests. His presence among the priests, not above them or isolated from them as a god or monarch would have been, emphasized his modest existence in Roman society.

The first portion of the south frieze is almost entirely lost, but Augustus has been identified despite the significant damage (Fig. 15). His identification is possible because the remnants of the head adhere to the visual characteristics of the Prima Porta type. The famed locks of hair on his forehead remain, as well as the solemn, classicizing facial structure. In addition to the hair and face, the remnants of the ears and nose (had they remained intact) would support the notion that Augustus’s likeness on the *Ara Pacis* strictly follows the visual canon of the Prima Porta type. Looking at this portrait, Romans were reminded of the victorious *Augustus of Prima Porta* and the devout *Via Labicana Augustus*. Utilizing the repetitive portrait type forced the audience to associate the *Ara*
Pacis with the rest of Augustus’s achievements and, consequently, the other facets of his power.

Another innovative convention of the *Ara Pacis* was the sculptors’ inclusion of the *familia augusti* (Fig. 16). Regardless of class, women and children would not normally have been incorporated into traditional public Roman art, let alone as part of the strict visual canon of the Principate. The newly established celebration of *Pax Augusta* was meant for all citizens, including women and children. Illustrating the *Pax Augusta* sacrificial procession on the *Ara Pacis* provided Augustus with an excuse to display his family to the public.

The sculptors of the *Ara Pacis* used the same stylistic features of Augustus’s portrait type for depicting his family. Because most of Augustus’s family was adopted, distantly related, or brought in through marriage, they did not all resemble each other. Augustus needed to solidify his familial relations by manipulating how they were represented in public art. Artists were required to utilize the idealized features, proportionality, and dignified expressions present in Augustus’s portraiture for his family. Portraits of every male in the family adopted a variation of Augustus’s trademark hairstyle regardless of if they actually had it or not. Female members of the family imitated the facial features and hairstyles of Augustus’s wife Livia. Because the family portraiture conformed to a general type, it is challenging for modern scholars to determine the exact identities of the figures in the processional panels. They would be generally recognizable to Romans at the time of their creation, but it was not important to Augustus that each person be precisely identified. He sacrificed individual portraiture to

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65 It is important to distinguish that women and children were not portrayed in public Roman art because they could appear in strictly domestic artwork or on memorial objects, such as a grave stele.

66 Simon, 22.
emphasize the image of a unified family. But why, after more than a decade since the creation of the Principate, did Augustus suddenly add his family to the visual canon? As previously indicated, a shift in Augustan imagery reflected a shift in political objectives.

The familial imagery of the *Ara Pacis* marks a turning point in the Principate when Augustus shifted the focus of his administration from renewing the stability of Rome to maintaining peace for the future. Augustus spent over twenty years from the time of Caesar’s death stabilizing all aspects of Roman civilization, so it comes as no surprise that he wanted to make certain the culture could be maintained past his lifetime. As with his other cultural endeavors, Augustus modified traditional imagery and concepts to fit his contemporary needs so that the people would be more receptive to his ideas.

The Romans placed value on lineage, especially if it could be traced back to a divinity or important historical figure, as previously exhibited with *Augustus of Prima Porta*. For the *Ara Pacis* and subsequent works, Augustus took this concept and reversed it. Instead of fixating on his ancestry, he was concerned with his progeny, who held the future of Rome in their hands.

The left portion of both the north and south friezes depict the *familia augusti*, but there are problems aside from the generalized portrait type that prevent exact identification of the figures. The familial section of the north frieze suffered damage from over the course of centuries as well as heavy restoration in the modern era. It is not

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67 Pollini, 228; Conlin, 80. Conlin argues that the generalized portrait type of the imperial family resulted from the involvement of multiple sculptural workshops with varied stylistic training. There is not sufficient evidence to support her claim and it is conceptually inaccurate. Her theory discounts any stylistic conventions and symbolic meaning present in the representations, which would eliminate the Augustan archetype from the processional panels. Augustus deliberately chose the characteristics of his portrait type, so it does not make sense to think that he would refrain from defining the parameters for portraits of his family with an equal degree of specificity.

68 Kleiner, 202-203, 221-224; Pollini, 228; Simon, 22.

69 Levick, 115, 148-150.

70 Kleiner, 212, 219-225; Simon, 22; Zanker, 156-159.
sensible to identify any of the figures since hardly any features are original. The south frieze, although much more intact than the north, does not have enough extant facial detail for many of the figures for scholars to agree on all of their identities. Those that are certainly or generally agreed upon are Augustus, his chief advisor Marcus Agrippa, his wife Livia, Antonia Minor, and Livia’s second son Drusus. Augustus’s daughter Julia and adopted son Tiberius have also been suggested as two of the figures, but there is no sound attribution. Even the children in the foreground, who most obviously represent the inheritors of Rome, cannot be definitively identified because of their generalized features.

The main purpose for including the *familia augusti* sections of the processional friezes was so Augustus could acquaint the public with his successors and connect them with existing visual symbolism. Pollini has termed this type of visual association as a “dynastic narrative.” A “dynastic narrative” connects a group of people and their achievements to specific symbols and virtues to convey an underlying message. In the case of the processional panels, the “dynastic narrative” generated evidence that Rome would continue to thrive after Augustus because his family was just as capable to lead as he was. The *familia augusti* needed to become standard imagery because, as with all aspects of his authority, Augustus had to convince the people that his decisions were for the greater good of Rome. The intense symbolism of the *Ara Pacis* persuaded the

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71 Simon, 20-22.
73 Becker, “Ara Pacis”; Kleiner, 212, 216-217; Pollini, 228; Simon, 17-20; Zanker, 121-122, 158-159. There is extensive debate on all the identities, even those that are generally agreed upon, and new theories are consistently emerging within the scholarship on the *Ara Pacis*. Some of the children depicted in the foreground are even thought to be Gauls or other non-Roman children. See Becker, “Ara Pacis.”
74 Pollini, 208.
75 Pollini, 74-76; Zanker, 125.
Romans that they needed a dynasty to uphold peace even though they originally intended to return to the structure of the Late Republic.

**VII. Conclusion**

Augustus’s exploitation of visual imagery made him one of the most successful leaders in the history of Rome. His reign initiated an era of peace that lasted over two-hundred years. Despite this circumstance, his political term is frequently interpreted as driven by the actions of a deceitful, egocentric autocratic ruler. Scholars sometimes negatively refer to Augustan art as “propaganda,” emphasizing its manipulative aspects and implying underhanded intentions, but that was not its purpose. The visual arts provided Augustus with a non-aggressive method to persuade the people to accept his authority. He relied on the visual arts as a means of gaining trust during his campaign to rebuild the nation.

This is not to say that Augustan imagery was not manipulative, because its persuasive nature is what convinced the Romans to accept Augustus, but his motivation was not self-indulgent. Augustus truly desired to restore Rome to its former glory. He resorted to subtle persuasion techniques because it was the most effective way to make changes happen without using force. Forcing changes—even if they were for the greater good—in such an unstable political environment risked a total political and cultural collapse. The revival of Rome depended on establishing consistency.

Augustus deliberately refashioned his image to become a source of stability for Rome. The gesture of changing his name from Octavian to Augustus clearly defined his

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76 Hammond, 139-140.
character and set expectations for him to act in a dignified, yet humble manner. His portrait archetype became a visual constant that applied to all facets of Roman culture. The unchanging physical type and repetitive symbolism laid a foundation of stable values upon which the Romans could rely. If the political climate seemed uncertain, they could always turn to the unwavering image of Augustus for reassurance. The symbolism asserted that through any crisis, whether corrupt government, warfare, collapsing religious tradition, or the like, Augustus stood by Rome.

*Augustus of Prima Porta* embodied Augustus’s military strength, classical beauty, and divine connection that appealed to the Romans after a period of civil wars. Applying the portrait type to *Via Labicana Augustus* emphasized Augustus’s desire to solidify religious tradition. The *Ara Pacis Augustae* exhibited the most extensive application of the visual archetype and demonstrated Augustus’s concern for the future of Rome.

Augustus utilized the visual arts solely not as a method of self-glorification, but also as a means of returning Rome to its former glory after decades of uncertainty. The most efficient, least forceful means of reestablishing the political and cultural consistency needed to rebuild Rome was through visual symbolism. Through his strategic use of the visual arts, Augustus transformed the ruins of the Republic into the foundations of the Roman Empire.

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77 Pollini, *From Republic to Empire*..., 74-75.
Image List:

**Figure 1:**
*Augustus of Prima Porta*
20 BCE
Marble
2.03 meters high
Vatican Museums

**Figure 2:**
*Via Labicana Augustus*
12 BCE
Marble
2.06 meters high
Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome

**Figure 3:**
*Ara Pacis Augustae*
13-9 BCE
Carrara marble
11.65 x 10.62 x 4.60 meters
Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome

**Figure 4:**
*Denarius* (obv.: head of bearded Octavian)
38 BCE

**Figure 5:**
*Sestertius* (obv.: head of Octavian)
40-38 BCE

**Figure 6:**
Polykleitos
*Doryphoros*
Roman marble copy of Greek original from 440 BCE
Museo Nazionale di Napoli

**Figure 7:**
Polykleitos
*Doryphoros: detail, head*
Roman marble copy of Greek original from 440 BCE
Museo Nazionale di Napoli

**Figure 8:**
*Augustus of Prima Porta: detail, head*
20 BCE
Marble
Vatican Museums

Figure 9:
*Augustus of Prima Porta*: detail, Cupid and dolphin
20 BCE
Marble
Vatican Museums

Figure 10:
*Augustus of Prima Porta*: detail, breastplate
20 BCE
Marble
Vatican Museums

Figure 11:
*Via Labicana Augustus*: detail, face
12 BCE
Marble
Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome

Figure 12:
*Togate Barberini (Man with Portrait Busts of His Ancestors)*
Marble
5 feet 5 inches high
Musei Capitolini, Rome

Figure 13:
*Ara Pacis*: detail, north frieze
13-9 BCE
Carrara marble
Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome

Figure 14:
*Ara Pacis*: detail, south frieze
13-9 BCE
Carrara marble
Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome

Figure 15:
*Ara Pacis*: detail, Augustus
13-9 BCE
Carrara marble
Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome

Figure 16:
*Ara Pacis*: detail, imperial family (south frieze)
13-9 BCE
Carrara marble
Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome
Figure 1
Figure 4
Figure 5
Figure 6
Figure 7
Bibliography


