

## Hadrianic art and the Hellenisation of Rome

Hadrian (Roman emperor from 117 – 138 CE), and the art and initiatives associated with him, are regularly described as “philhellenic”, and seen as a response to and further stimulus of the increased value of Greek culture within Roman society in the second century. In this way, unprecedented visual phenomena (e.g. that he is the first Roman emperor to be represented with a full beard and the only one to foster a cult of his young, male lover) are sanitised as “manifestations of this Hellenism”. These images, and Art History, are rendered descriptive, rather than explanatory.

As Latour has stressed, it is the social itself that needs explanation. So, we might ask: why then in particular? What does “Hellenism” look like ? And what about the place of the person, or the “local” ? The ways in which images contain information about society can make the *status quo* seem natural. This paper will certainly argue for the agency of the imagery of Hadrian and his lover, Antinous. But it won’t stop there. To suggest that the reading of art makes society and not the other way round is still woefully uni-directional.

Rather, I will draw on the recent exhibition of portraits of Antinous, which I curated at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds to expose the kinds of physical and erotic engagement that his image gave rise to. In so doing, this paper emphasises subjectivity and interplay over context and meaning, and pairs “the period eye” with something rather more trans-historical. It also asks to put Beauty back into the equation. This is not a question of “art for art’s sake” but of understanding the fundamental need for art by society.

Dr Caroline Vout