

## Week seven: Art and women in the ancient world



Women are well represented in the material culture of the Ancient world. However, there were important parameters controlling how women could be represented and in which contexts. These parameters were often not prescribed by formal rulings but were instead reflective of unofficial socially defined norms and values. These varied greatly across time, geographic region and in accordance with the status of the woman commemorated. For example, in the Roman imperial period, Plancia Magna, who came from a powerful family and was an important benefactress in Perga, was awarded great honours and accordingly commemorated, along with her family, in public civic contexts. However, in more traditional parts of empire such as Greece proper women were generally commemorated only in the private and religious spheres. Furthermore, the portraits of Imperial women transcended many of these parameters and could be set up in grand, public, traditionally 'male' spaces. How women were commemorated, in what contexts and the manner of their portrayal can consequently tell us a great deal about their status in Greek and Roman society and the rhetoric of feminine virtue in these eras.

### Questions to think about:

In which contexts could women be commemorated in the ancient world? How did this differ according to geographic location and status?

To what extent can depictions of women in the material record tell us about the lives of 'real' women?

What virtues were women celebrated for in art? How did these virtues relate to those of their male counterparts?

To what extent can women in Greek/Roman art be understood as passive objects of the male gaze?

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