Torill Christine Lindstrøm

Facial Expressions (and non-Expressions) in Roman Faces

Faces in art as representations of the self - and "the other"

Faces depicted in art are major sources of information about people from pre-photographic times. They tell us something about how people looked and looked upon themselves and others. Depicted faces give us information about how people wanted to be seen, their self-representation; but also give information about their views of "the other" (people from different genders, classes, occupations, ethnic groups, etc.) shown in the ways in which *they* were depicted. Depicted faces in archaeological material are sometimes portraits[1], or, as in more "primitive" art, at least attempts towards representing facial likeness[2]. Depiction of faces also often followed traditional conventions and could be ideologically influenced[3].

Depicted faces, facial expressions and the FACS

Faces are expressive. More than anything faces express emotions. Even "expression-less" faces may express something, namely, the motive *not* to reveal emotions. Theoretically, there is an ongoing discussion as to whether facial expressions show persons' spontaneous inner states, or culturally-learned display behaviours[4], or both. Also the cross-cultural and trans-historical uniformity of particular prototypical emotional expressions/displays is disputed[5]. Irrespective of these controversies, facial emotional expressions/facial emotional displays can be studied systematically. A widely used method for studying emotional expressions in faces is the Facial Action Coding System (FACS)[6]. FACS is based on facial anatomy and assesses the movements of each muscular unit of the face, termed Action Units (AU), 24 in all. They are numbered from AU1 to AU28 (minus the numbers 3, 8, 19, 21). The FACS assesses clusters of muscular units, 19 in all, numbered AU19, AU21, AU29-AU46 (minus number 40). All emotional expressions consist of patterns of contractions in different muscles, and there are considerable cross-cultural similarities in the expressions[7], (although the *reasons* for expressing the particular emotions may be different in different cultural contexts). When a face is analysed, contractions in AUs are registered, and the AUs may also be scored

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[1] BEARD, HENDERSON 2001, 232–38; MUSGRAVE, NEAVE, PRAG 1995; PRAG, NEAVE 1997, 192–200.

[2] HAMBLIN 1975, 27, 76, 81; MUSKETT 2007, 26–33.

[3] BEARD, HENDERSON 2001, 176, 235–238; BRILLIANT 1991; DANBOLT, MEYER 1988, 70–5; MARINATOS 1984, 33.

[4] FRIEDLUND 1994.

[5] FERNÁNDEZ-DOLS, CARRERA, CASADO 2001.

[6] EKMAN, FRIESEN 1978.

[7] EKMAN, FRIESEN 1971, 1; EKMAN, KELTNER 1997.

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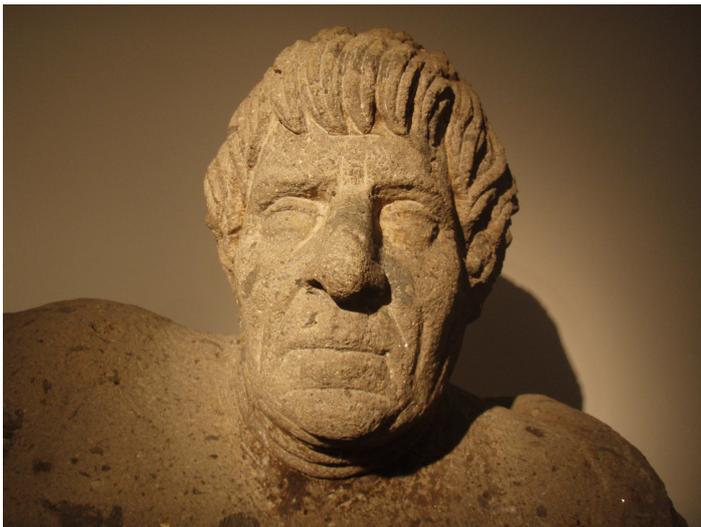
Fig. 1 - Etruscan man, on sarcophagus. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).
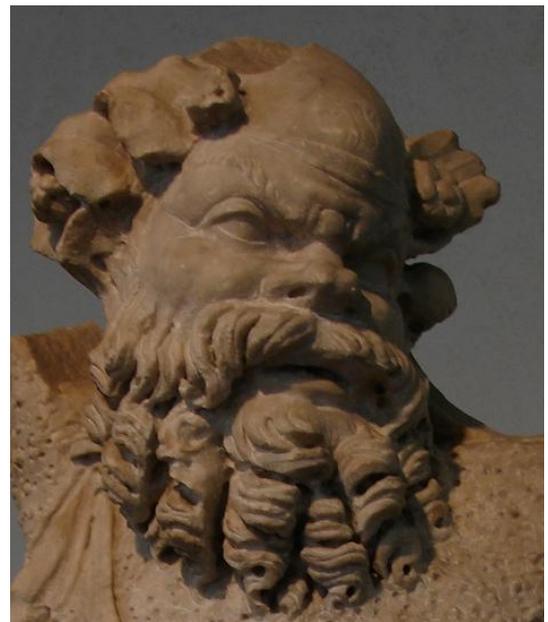

Fig. 2 - Hellenistic face. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

(on a scale from 1 to 5) as a measure of the intensity of the contraction. FACS has high validity and reliability, also cross-culturally, but works best in a western context[8]. FACS is primarily used in psychological research, but has also been used in studies on art[9].

The background of faces in roman art: vivacious etruscan, naturalistic greek, and expressionistic hellenistic art

Roman art (primarily paintings, sculptures, and mosaics) rested heavily on Etruscan, Greek, and Hellenistic art[10]. Etruscan art was perhaps its main predecessor. It was early influenced by Greek art and later by Hellenism[11], but had its unique and original features. Etruscan art offers some of the most vivid paintings and sculptures from ancient times[12], (fig. 1). Moving bodies are depicted with plastic three-dimensional representations of muscles, and some paintings are characterized as portraits[13]. Reconstructions of faces on skulls from some of the Etruscan tombs have also shown that some of the sculptured faces on the sarcophagi were actually portraits[14]. Other Etruscan sculptures also produced amazingly realistic countenances, even showing directly ugly features[15]. Roman art was also directly influenced by Greek art with its naturalism, and by Hellenistic art with its sometimes "baroque" emotional expressiveness[16], (fig. 2). The result being that a rude naturalism and realism, also called verism, was typical for Roman art. This is shown in what is supposed to be exact facial likeness in much of the Roman portraiture, because even less attractive features such as wrinkles and warts were displayed[17]. Signs of old age may, however, also be understood as a kind of idealization, or idealizing realism, as signs of seniority were

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[8] EKMAN, ROSENBERG 1997.

[9] FERNÁNDEZ-DOLS, CARRERA, CASADO 2001; LINDSTRØM 1999; LINDSTRØM, in prep.

[10] BEARD, HENDERSON 2001, 21–29; BIEBER 1981; LING 1991; MIELSCH 2001.

[11] BRENDEL 1995, 409–32; BRILLIANT 1974.

[12] BLOCH 1966; BRENDEL 1995, 337–52.

[13] BRENDEL 1995, 103–10.

[14] BRENDEL 1995, 387–402; PRAG, NEAVE 1997, 192–200.

[15] PRAG, NEAVE 1997, 193.

[16] HUYGHE 1962, 315.

[17] BRECKENRIDGE 1968, 144; BRILLIANT 1974, 165–187.

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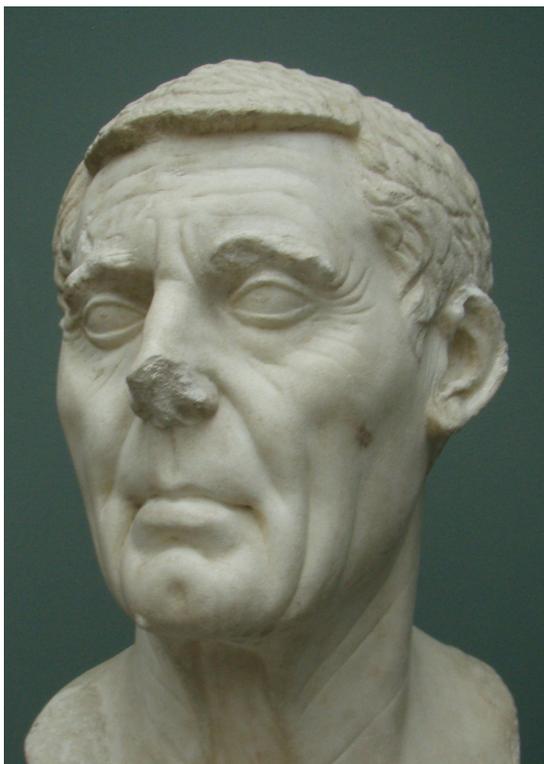
Fig. 3 - Elderly Roman man. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

Fig. 4 - Theatrical mask. Villa of the Mysteries. Pompeii. Room of the Great Fresco. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

regarded as honourable, (fig. 3). Also facial depictions that were not portraits were characterized by naturalism and realism[18].

Roman art and emotional expressions

But strangely enough, the emotional expressiveness, so distinct and prominent in Etruscan, some Greek, and particularly in Hellenistic art, seems almost to be lost in Roman art. (Striking exceptions are depictions of theatrical masks. The masks show intense emotional expressions, so evidently Roman artists *could* paint emotional expressions if they wanted), (fig. 4). In practically all kinds of Roman art, human faces seem to be almost without emotional expressions. When I have done FACS-analyses of depicted Roman faces (in paintings), my analyses resulted in rather meagre protocols. I registered mainly low intensity scores and of only a limited number of AUs, usually: (AU1 (inner brow raiser), AU2 (outer brow raiser), AU4 (brow lowerer), AU5 (upper lid raiser), AU7 (lid tightener), AU15 (lip corner depressor), AU17 (chin raiser), AU23 (lip tightener), AU25 (lips part). The emotional expressions I found were: mainly smiles, and expressions of fear and surprise, but in general, the emotional expressions were few and vague. There also seemed to be variations due to divisions of gender, social status, and species. The Roman men were the most severe and expressionless. I suggest that the variation of facial emotional expressions in Roman art tell us something. They primarily tell us something about the Roman men's conception of themselves and others, how they wanted to be seen, and their stereotypical views of other categories of people.

Roman men did not express emotions, they displayed feelings

A proper "Roman" was a freeborn man with Roman citizenship. The society of the Roman state, in particular the Republic, was patriarchal[19]. A true Roman, among other virtues, was expected to display the personality qualities befitting the patriarchal gender role of the *pater familias*, such as *severitas* (severity, sternness, strictness),

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[18] RAMAGE, RAMAGE 1995.
[19] DUPONT 1989, 103–8; HÖLKESKAMP 2004, 113.

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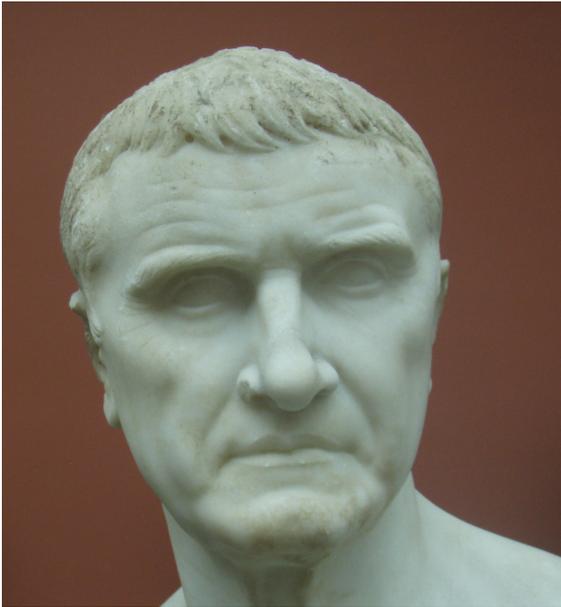
Fig. 5 - Roman man. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.
(Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

Fig. 6 - Roman woman. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.
(Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

gravitas (graveness, seriousness), *dignitas* (dignity, merit, excellence), *auctoritas* (authority, power, reputation, importance, credibility), and *honor* (honour, dignity)[20]. Although public display of emotionality could be the correct behaviour in particular cere-monial or political situations[21], the ideal regarding behaviour for Roman men was more in the direction of self-composure, self-control, and serenity, in short: controlled and dignified behaviour[22]. I therefore suggest that when a Roman was depicted, he would want his face to express these qualities. He was therefore depicted as serene and emotionally neutral (fig. 5). However, it is my personal conviction that, in real life, the Roman male citizens were probably far more emotional and expressive than their idealized faces in Roman art show us. Both the stern father and the caring, even indulgent father were ideal types[23]. And, men were far more relaxed and emotional in private contexts[24]. In fact, their ideals of self-control would hardly have been "ideals" if they came naturally.

Fig. 7 - Roman woman. "The horrorstruck woman". Villa of the Mysteries. Pompeii. Room of the Great Fresco.
(Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

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[20] DUPONT 1989, 11; HÖLKESKAMP 2004, 114–115; VEYNE 1987, 101–2.

[21] DUPONT 1989, 28.

[22] DUPONT 1989, 112–14; EDWARDS 1997, 68; GIARDINA 1993, 7.

[23] HÖLKESKAMP 2004, 129.

[24] VEYNE 1987, 174–5.

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Fig. 8 - Roman child. Printed with permission from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

Roman women, an ambiguous category

Roman freeborn women represented a middle category between Roman men and non-Romans. These women were regarded as "Roman" citizens[25], but were not allowed to vote, and were, like slaves, not regarded as altogether trustworthy witnesses in court[26]. Women could be dangerous (they could be dominating and were traditionally suspected to kill unwanted husbands by poison)[27]. Women were regarded as being considerably influenced, if not governed, by their emotions and therefore not quite rational or reliable[28]. However, they were necessary for the reproduction of Roman citizens, and were expected to conduct themselves accordingly, with dignity, thereby expressing *pudicitia* (modesty, chastity, purity) and *fides* (loyalty to their husband). These ambiguous gender-role expectations of Roman women, as being both unreliable females and trusted matrons, I suggest are shown in the mixture of emotionally non-expressive and expressive depictions of their faces, (figs. 6, 7). They are serious when depicted together with their husband, reasonably enough. Children of freeborn Romans also had this ambiguous role of being "Roman", yet were still childish: emotional, immature, and unreliable. Their faces are also depicted varyingly: mostly emotionally non-expressive, but sometimes quite expressive, (fig. 8).
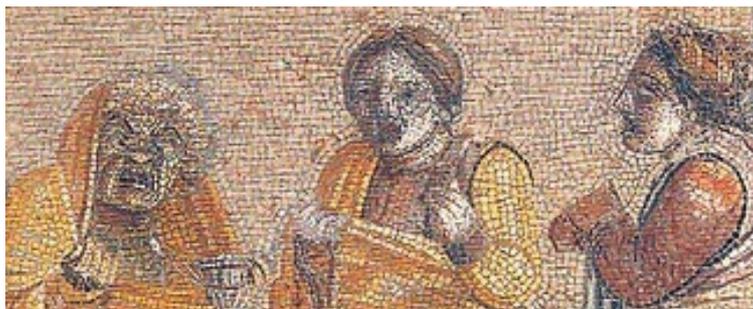

Fig. 9 - Actors. Mosaic. Cicero's Villa, Pompeii V. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, (inventory number 9987). (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

Cultural context: contrasting characteristics

Self-definitions, whether as individuals, groups, or social categories, are often made by contrasting one's own characteristics to the characteristics of "the other". Such contrasts are often conceptualized in some kind of "labelling" which refer to real or alleged differences between "the self" and "the other(s)". "The other" is also attributed with characteristics which serve to justify this difference. Thus, labelling-theory[29], and in particular, attribution-theory[30] may serve to explain the Romans' way of making a distinction between "the self" (the proper Roman) and "the other(s)". "Self" and "Other" were attributed with contrasting characteristics pertaining to their personality and their behaviour. Whereas the proper Romans were attributed with positive characteristics "the other(s)" were attributed with negative, stigmatizing properties and propensities. Such attribution of contrasting behavioural inclinations serves the social and psychological functions of

[25] CULHAM 2004, 141.
[26] CULHAM 2004, 142.
[27] DUPONT 1989, 115–16.
[28] CULHAM, 2004, 149, 151.
[29] BECKER 1963.
[30] HEIDER 1958.

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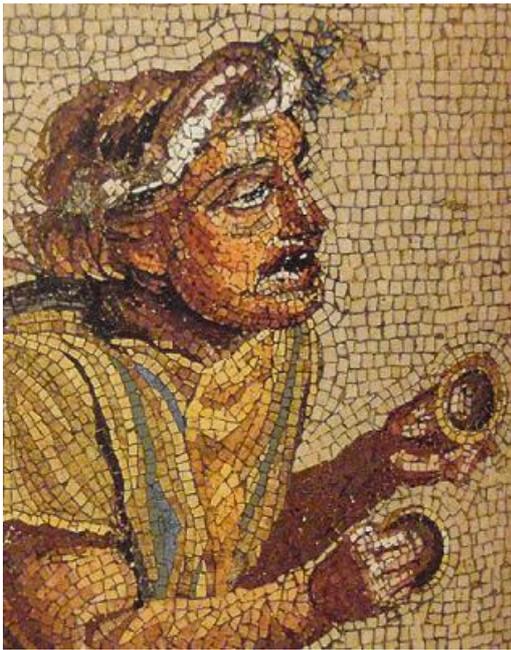
Fig. 10 - Musician. Mosaic. Cicero's Villa, Pompeii, Region V. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, (inventary number 9985). (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

"upholstering" the identity of one's own group, "the self".

In the visual culture, such as art, these contrasts between "the self" versus "the other" would be made explicit, and visible to all. I therefore suggest that both the non-expressiveness in Roman men and the expressiveness of other social categories in Roman art can be understood as "two sides of the same coin": the Romans' (particularly Roman freeborn men's) views of themselves, and their views of "the other(s)".

The Roman self-definition and self-understanding rested heavily on the distinction between animality and rationality. The Romans regarded animality as the very opposite of rationality. To be a Roman person proper, a man (*vir*), one's *humanitas* ("humanity", human character) had to be, and should be, cultivated. This implied to develop rationality and control over mind and body, both with regard to inner states and outer appearance[31]. All kinds of "softness" had to be avoided, including passions and giving in to emotions[32]. Passions and emotions belonged to one's animal nature and should be controlled. If not, they could enslave a man. Love would enslave and bind, whereas friendship meant freedom[33]. In particular, love for a woman was dangerous as one could be dominated by her, a most shameful thing[34]. A man in love was ridiculous[35]. A man lost his human dignity (*humanitas*) and honour (*honor*) if he was governed by his passions and emotions, and particularly if he went as far as *expressing* them. The Romans were extremely concerned about shame and honour, and the merciless public censure regarding their behaviour[36]. A Roman man was expected not to express emotions, but *display feelings* in social, political, and public situations where display of such sentiments were demanded and indeed expected (for instance in funerals, after defeats in battles, during lawsuits, etc.)[37].

Who would, could, and did, show emotional expressions?

I therefore suggest that emotional expressivity, both in real life and in art, was primarily regarded as a behaviour typical of what the Romans regarded as unreliable, undignified, irresponsible, impulsive, immoral, and immature creatures[38]; those who were governed primarily by their unsophisticated and uncontrolled animal nature. Their expressed emotionality was regarded as expressions of this lower nature contrasting the Romans' ideals of rationality, control, and self-composure. For instance, whereas we regard a smiling face as attractive and pleasing, for the Romans it was often the sign of inferiority, inebriety, imbecility, and effeminacy, - perhaps even all these characteristics at the same time! Individuals, (or rather "creatures"), who were driven by their emotional states and freely expressing them were, as mentioned

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[31] Dupont 1989, 247–249; Veyne 1993, 343.

[32] Veyne 1987, 178–9.

[33] Dupont 1989, 241–44; Veyne 1987, 185.

[34] Veyne 1987, 204–5.

[35] Dupont 1989, 113–14.

[36] Dupont 1989, 10–12, 248; Veyne 1987, 171–4.

[37] Dupont 1989, 28, 241; Rawson 2005, 348; Veyne 1987, 174–5.

[38] Edwards 1997, 66–76; Thébert 1993, 166.

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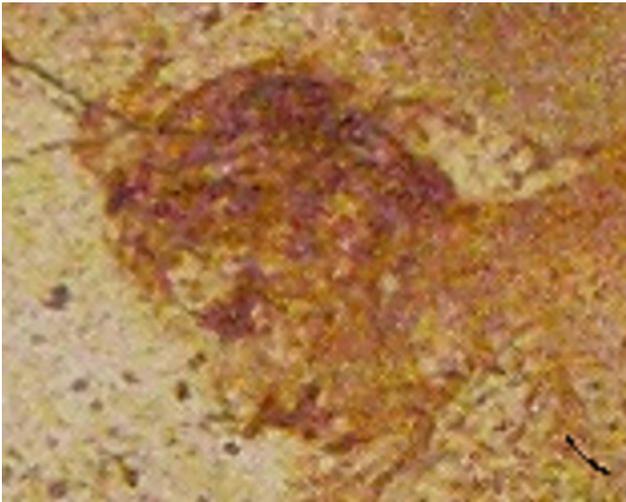
Fig. 11 - Prostitute. Lupanaria. Pompeii, Region VII, 7.12.18. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

Fig. 12 - Dog. "Cave canem". Mosaic. Casa del Poeta Tragico, Pompeii, Region VI.8.3/5. (Photo: T. C. Lindstrøm).

above, women and children, but primarily those whose bodies were in the service of, or used by, others: slaves, actors (fig. 9), musicians (fig. 10), prostitutes (fig. 11), and animals (fig. 12). Actors, musicians, and prostitutes were in fact, often slaves or freedmen/freedwomen. – According to Roman ideology: as passions enslaved, slaves were driven by passions[39].

Therefore, I claim that the most vivacious (and often quite charming) emotional facial expressions in Roman art can be found in the depicted faces of these individuals, humans and animals alike. In art, their facial expressions often are confirmed and amplified by corresponding expressive body language, in both movements and postures. One could argue that these individuals were depicted in situations in which emotional expressions were more likely to occur. However, it is still enigmatic that Romans proper (Roman freeborn men) would never let themselves be depicted in similar situations.

Conclusion

Understanding emotional expressions in faces in ancient art (as in modern faces), must always take the values of the cultural context into consideration. The cultural and social categorization of people in Roman society implied definite, and different, attributions and expectations connected to personality and behaviours, including emotional expressivity. Conversely, the level of emotional expressivity was interpreted as indicating personality characteristics. The Romans had views of emotionality and expressivity that were connected to their philosophical, ideological, and normative standards. Emotionality contrasted with rationality, as animality contrasted with *humanitas*, a cultivated personality. Accordingly, emotion-driven versus rationality-governed behaviours characterized different categories of people.

I suggest that emotional expressions in faces in Roman art must be understood in this light, with different amounts of expressiveness connected to different groups of individuals in art: Roman men showing little facial expression, Roman woman and Roman children showing somewhat more facial expression, and slaves, actors, musicians, prostitutes, and animals showing most facial expression. - A precaution however: this conclusion is not absolute. There are variations. By a somewhat rough and intuitive estimate, I would say that the connection between type of person and expressed emotionality accounts for approximately 20-30% of the variation (statistically speaking) of emotional expressivity in Roman art. The residual variance

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[39] VEYNE 1987, 58–9.

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could be attributable to various factors such as the artists' personal inclinations and artistic conventions, but in particular contextual factors, both contexts *of* the art, such as ideology and location, and thematic contexts *within* the works of art themselves.

Methodological problems connected to this research

The findings presented here must be regarded as findings from a pilot project, and the explanations given and conclusions drawn, must be regarded as tentative and hypothetical, because there are several problems connected to this research. First, the data material, in particular paintings, may suffer from various stages of deterioration and restoration. Yes, restorations have been more or less successful, and may have made subtle changes to the facial expressions. However, when the materials are reasonably intact, the FACS seems to be a useful instrument for studying emotional expressiveness in art, although it can only be applied with some adjustments, such as only analysing "still-pictures". Finally, ideally, in a project on emotional expressivity in Roman art, samples of depictions should be numerically representative and balanced in the sense that: a) an equal number of painted, sculptured, and mosaic faces should be analyzed; b) an equal number of men, women, slaves, actors, prostitutes, children, and animals should be analyzed; and c) a balanced frequency of depictions in different kinds of contexts should be covered, and finally, d) all different periods in the history of Roman art should be represented. Unfortunately, these ideal requirements from quantitative research are very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil. Some reasonably good sampling can be done, but one will always encounter problems connected to: identifying individuals of the different categories of persons, the fact that children, slaves, actors, and prostitutes were seldom depicted, and that these groups of people were not depicted in the same media and in the same situations as free Roman men and women would be, complicating comparisons. Because of these problems, sampling methods called strategic, probabilistic, and convenient sampling which are used in qualitative research may be employed to get reasonable balanced samples for analyses[40].

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[40] MALTERUD 2001; 2003; SANDELOWSKI 2000, 2007.

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