Equestrian Statue Marcus Aurelius

Bronze, c175 CE, 4.24m tall, Capitoline Museums, Rome

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It is very difficult to annotate works of art from photographs; this is especially true of three-dimensional forms such as this statue. I have tried to find as many photographs as I can, taken from different angles, to inform this annotation.

A bearded figure, with tightly packed curls to his hair and beard, looks forward as he rides his horse. His right arm reaches out, his left upper arm is held to his side while his left hand forms a delicate pose, perhaps he was originally holding the reins of the horse. The rider seems calm and solid and the rendering of his face seems highly skilled. The clothes of the rider are very well portrayed with many folds in his tunic and cape flowing behind him. It is not clear what the gesture with the right arm represents – is the rider gesturing to someone, or was he originally holding something – a spear or a sword perhaps – although the grip of the hand seems too loose for this. I think the most likely explanation is that it is a hand gesture, perhaps to a bystander or to a crowd.

The horse is full of energy and power, its flared nostrils and wide eyes suggest a wild animal skilfully controlled by the imposing figure of its rider. To me the size of the horse’s head seems slightly out of proportion to its very broad chest. The details of the horse’s features and bridle are conveyed well. The pose of the horse, one hoof raised, rear hooves slightly apart conveys a sense of action, of movement and power. Yet the rider still only needs one hand to control it, perhaps indicating his skill in doing so.

The details of both horse and rider have all been finely rendered, down to the sandals worn by Marcus Aurelius, the pattern on the saddle cloth and the detail of the horse’s bridle. The statue is a bright bronze colour with a greenish patina, which I assume has resulted from the passing of time.

The statue seems to have a couple of contradictions to me:

- The size of the rider is out of proportion to the size of his horse. One would perhaps expect to see an emperor astride a large horse, emphasising his position and power.
- The energy, action and movement of the horse compared to the calm, solid, almost stationary pose of the rider.

The overall impression is one of a rider in complete control of his mount (and therefore of his world?).

On the Khan Academy website Becker (ND) describes “A gilded bronze statue, the piece was originally cast using the lost-wax technique, with horse and rider cast in multiple pieces and then soldered together after casting”. It also considers that “The emperor’s horse is a magnificent example of dynamism captured in the sculptural medium”.

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Honour & Fleming (2009) note the discrepancy in scale between the rider and mount and also note that they were cast separately, they suggest, as a reason for the different proportions, that “they may well have been intended originally for different monuments”. Their description of the impression given by the statue is one of “Calm authority and magnanimity”. They suggest that this impression may have been reinforced originally “when the figure of a captive barbarian chief (now lost) cowered beneath the horse’s raised hoof”. The presence of such a captive figure would certainly have changed the dynamic of the statue as well as the interpretation of it.

Sullivan (ND) also comments that “Scholars have speculated that a barbarian enemy was once cowering beneath the horse’s raised foreleg suing for mercy. Thus the raised right arm, in addition to being a greeting, could also signify the emperor’s clemency.” She also notes that although Marcus Aurelius is wearing military uniform he is not wearing armour and is not carrying a weapon. She further comments that “In addition to being a successful military commander, Marcus Aurelius was also a philosopher, indicated by his full beard (a fashion inaugurated by Hadrian to signify intellect) and his curly hair”.

Continuing this observation on dress Becker (ND) quotes Richard Brilliant as having noted that “since the emperor appears in civic garb as opposed to the general’s armour, the overall impression of the statue is one of peace rather than of the immediate post-war celebration of military victory”.

Hower (ND) considers that “The horse, indicative of military prowess, and the raising of the right hand in a pacifist and almost oratory manner are appropriate for Marcus Aurelius, who is remembered for both his political skills and his military ones”.

The website of the American Historical Association (AHA Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius) sums up the overall theme of the statue as “one of power and divine grandeur”.

Sullivan (ND) considers the legacy of the statue commenting that it “was influential on later artists, including the first in a long line – Donatello and Verrochio.”

Bibliography


All photographs were taken from: https://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/italy/rome/marcusaurelius/marcusaurelius.html [Accessed 19/01/2016]