

01.10.2026 - 29.03.2027

THE
Power
OF
Fashion
IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

For visitors who are deaf or hard of
hearing, transcripts of the audio
stories are available here.

Gossip

FROM ROME

The exhibition's audio track draws on written sources from antiquity. While the sculptures present ideals, the audio track offers more blunt perspectives on the clothing and consumption of the ruling elite. The sharp, biting—and, not infrequently, misogynistic and homophobic — ‘fashion criticism’ of the day, delivered by male writers, typically sought to question the morality and subvert the authority of those in power.

GALLERY 6



EMPEROR CALIGULA

ROME, ITALY

37–41 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1896

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 1453



SUETONIUS

C. 69–130 CE

THE LIVES OF THE TWELVE CAESARS,
CALIGULA 52

TRANSLATION

BY J.C. ROLFE, 1914

Commentator: In the glow of an oil lamp a caustic smile steals across the face of Suetonius, former secretary to Emperor Hadrian. He’s writing about the deplorable, even blasphemous emperor Caligula. Everyone in Rome agrees that Caligula was capricious, sadistic, an outright psychopath – anything but the manly warrior that the bust before you makes him out to be.

Suetonius: “In his clothing, his shoes, and the rest of his attire he did not follow the usage of his country and his fellow-citizens; not always even that of his sex; or in fact, that of an ordinary mortal...”

Commentator: Huge Roman faux pas. A proper leader wears a toga!

Suetonius: “He often appeared in public in embroidered cloaks covered with precious stones, with a long-sleeved tunic and bracelets; sometimes in silk and in a woman’s robe...”

Commentator: A woman’s robe? What effeminate preening. Put on a toga like a decent human being!!

Suetonius: “... now in slippers or buskins, again in boots, such as the emperor’s body-guard wear, and at times in the low shoes which are used by females.”

Commentator: He can’t even put on the right shoes!

Suetonius: “But oftentimes he exhibited himself with a golden beard...”

Commentator: TACKY!

Suetonius: “... holding in his hand a thunderbolt, a trident, or a caduceus, emblems of the gods.”

Commentator: Look at Caligula, acting out, pretending to be a god – Jupiter with his thunderbolt, Neptune with his trident or Mercury with his herald’s staff. Blasphemous, cheesy cosplay! Suetonius is writing what every self-respecting aristocrat thinks: Caligula is out of control, heedless of convention, insane, vulgar!

GALLERY 6



A YOUNG EMPEROR NERO

ROME, ITALY

C. 50 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1892

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 750



SUETONIUS

C. 69–130 CE

THE LIVES OF THE TWELVE CAESARS,
NERO 51.1

TRANSLATION

BY J.C. ROLFE, 1914

Commentator: A shaft of sunlight illuminates the dust motes swirling around Suetonius’s study at the imperial palace. He likes to listen to the sounds from the street below, as he jots down moralising reflections and stories about everything from loose women to past emperors of Rome. Today he is slamming that “nitwit” emperor Nero.

Suetonius: “He was about average height, his body marked with spots and malodorous, his hair light blond, his features regular rather than attractive, his eyes blue and somewhat weak, his neck over thick, his belly prominent, and his legs very slender.”

Commentator: Not exactly the delicate youth portrayed

in the bust before you. More like your average couch potato.

Suetonius: “His health was good, for though indulging in every kind of riotous excess, he was ill but three times in all during the fourteen years of his reign, and even then not enough to give up his wine or any of his usual habits.”

Commentator: Nothing like getting a buzz on, on a sunny day in old Rome.

Suetonius: “He was utterly shameless in the care of his person and in his dress, always having his hair arranged in tiers of curls, and during the trip to Greece also letting it grow long and hang down behind.”

Commentator: Long hair is for women and Greeks. Get outa here! Such nonsense doesn’t fly in Rome.

Suetonius: “He often appeared in public in a dining-robe, with a handkerchief bound about his neck, ungirt and unshod.”

Commentator: That’s like today’s royals showing up in sweats. Suetonius – no surprise – is deeply conservative, like most of the Roman elite around year 100. No one likes a slob, especially not a slob who’s emperor.

GALLERY 6



EMPEROR COMMODUS

CENTRAL ITALY

191–192 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1906

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 2013



CASSIUS DIO

C. 160–235 CE
ROMAN HISTORY 73.17.3–4

TRANSLATION
BY E. CARY, 1927

Commentator: Life is sweet on the Bay of Naples. A fragrant breeze from the turquoise sea caresses the staunchly conservative senator Cassius Dio. But when his thoughts turn to Emperor Commodus, his blood pressure rises out of sheer contempt. Take a good look at the portrait before you. It shows a fine-looking, even dignified man. Now listen to what Cassius Dio has to say about the emperor.

Cassius Dio: “Before entering the amphitheatre he would put on a long-sleeved tunic of silk, white interwoven with gold...”

Commentator: Such poor taste it’s almost unbearable.

Cassius Dio: “... thus arrayed he would receive our greetings; but when he was about to go inside, he put on a robe

of pure purple with gold spangles, donning also after the Greek fashion a chlamys of the same colour...”

Commentator: A short, purple Greek robe, that is.

Cassius Dio: “... a crown made of gems from India and of gold, and he carried a herald’s staff like that of Mercury.”

Commentator: What does he think this is, Halloween? You’re the emperor, not a Greek king!

Cassius Dio: “As for the lion-skin and club, in the street they were carried before him, and in the amphitheatres they were placed in a gilded chair, whether he was present or not.”

Commentator: Preening around like a blasphemously simpering Hercules.

Cassius Dio: “He himself would enter the arena in the garb of Mercury, and casting aside all his other garments, would begin his exhibition wearing only a tunic and unshod.”

Commentator: Imagine, an emperor playacting before his subjects! How low can you go?! This isn’t made up out of whole cloth, either. Cassius Dio’s take-down of Commodus as an out-there eccentric reflects the view of leading intellectuals at the time.

GALLERY 6



EMPEROR ELAGABALUS

ROME, ITALY?

218–222 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1906

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 2073



CASSIUS DIO

C. 160–235 CE

ROMAN HISTORY 80.14.3-4

TRANSLATION

BY E. CARY, 1927

Commentator: A gentle breeze hits Senator Cassius Dio as he looks out over the Bay of Naples. The world, as he sees it, is all screwed up with Emperor Elagabalus at the helm. The bust before you shows a serious, young emperor wearing a military cloak. But according to Cassius Dio, a wimpier, more unmanly diletante would be hard to find. It pains the conservative senator to witness Elagabalus's antics.

Cassius Dio: “When trying someone in the court he really had more or less the appearance of a man, but everywhere else he showed affectations in his actions, in the quality of his voice. For instance, he used to dance, not only in the orchestra, but also, in a way, even while walking, performing sacrifices, receiving salutations, or delivering a speech.”

Commentator: A statesman doesn't prance around. Get a grip!

Cassius Dio: "He was bestowed in marriage and was termed wife, mistress, and queen."

Commentator: Bloody hell! Behaving like a woman? THIS IS ROME!

Cassius Dio: "He worked with wool..."

Commentator: That's not a job for a man, much less an emperor!

Cassius Dio: "... sometimes he wore a hair-net, and painted his eyes, daubing them with white lead and alkanet. Once, indeed, he shaved his chin and held a festival to mark the event; but after that he had the hairs plucked out, so as to look more like a woman."

Commentator: Cassius Dio fumes at the thought of an emperor mincing around, pretending to be a woman. Femininity is nothing to aspire to here. Au contraire! Women should stay at home and look after the children.

GALLERY 6



EMPEROR AUGUSTUS

FAYUM, EGYPT

C. 4–14 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1896

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 1443



SUETONIUS

C. 69–130 CE

THE LIVES OF TWELVE CAESARS,
AUGUSTUS 73

TRANSLATION

BY J.C. ROLFE, 1914

Commentator: The historian Suetonius blows the dust off one of the countless scrolls in the imperial library in Rome. Phrases of praise dance in his head as he thinks about Emperor Augustus, the founder of the Roman empire – that’s his bust before you. Putting stylus to papyrus, Suetonius pours out his admiration for Augustus:

Suetonius: “Except on special occasions he...”

Commentator: Augustus, that is.

Suetonius: “... wore common clothes for the house, made by his sister, wife, daughter or granddaughters.”

Commentator: Augustus had his house in order – like

a good, solid, conservative Roman!

Suetonius: “His togas were neither close nor full, his purple stripe neither narrow nor broad...”

Commentator: Rocking the classic toga – he knows how important that is. Down to the last detail, everything shows good taste. The stripes are JUST SO. Never too much, but always just right. Just like his morals!

Suetonius: “... and his shoes somewhat high-soled, to make them look taller than he really was.”

Commentator: Okay, well, that’s a bit weird. But Augustus knows that appearances matter – and EVERYTHING is in the best of taste.

Suetonius: “He always kept shoes and clothing to wear in public ready in his room for sudden and unexpected occasions.”

Commentator: Always ready to roll. A statesman to the bone! Suetonius smiles as he reads his own words. Now, THAT’S an accolade! Augustus dresses like he rules – restrained, dignified, always steering a course between extremes.

GALLERY 6



EMPEROR HADRIAN

ROME, ITALY

125–138 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1899

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 777



CASSIUS DIO

C. 160–235 CE
ROMAN HISTORY 69.10.3

TRANSLATION
BY E. CARY, 1927

Commentator: Posh-boy senator Cassius Dio picks up his stylus in his villa on the Bay of Naples. Fortified by a glass of good wine, he is ready to lavish praise on Emperor Hadrian. Hadrian might not have got everything right during his reign, but he was a hell of a ruler. And as you can see from his bust, he knew how to dress to code.

Cassius Dio: “It is not strange, then, that upon the death of Plotina, the woman through whom he had secured the imperial office because of her love for him, he honoured her exceedingly, wearing black for nine days...”

Commentator: So fitting a period of mourning!

Cassius Dio: “... erecting a temple to her...”

Commentator: So generous a tribute!

Cassius Dio: “... and composing some hymns in her memory.”

Commentator: As Cassius Dio points out, Hadrian wore black to show his loyalty and respect for his deceased Empress Plotina. Hadrian nails the dress code for bereavement in the Roman Empire. In doing so, he shows pietas – a sincere expression of devotion and loyalty. To Cassius Dio, this highlights the emperor’s decency and moral excellence.

GALLERY 8



ROMAN WOMAN

CRETE, GREECE

160–170 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1892

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 791



HORACE

65–8 BCE

SATIRES 1.2.96-134

TRANSLATION

BY J. SVARLIEN, 2012

Commentator: Horace, Rome’s celebrated satirist chuckles to himself as he reads the pieces he just wrote about two different types of women. Now THAT’S classic Roman humour! Today he’s mocking women, including the archetype seen in the bust before you: the buttoned-up matron. But the scantily clad woman does not escape his lash, either.

Horace: “Surrounded by defensive walls – the harder it is, the crazier you are – so much will block your progress: bodyguards, her litter, the stylists curling her hair, the sycophants...”

Commentator: The married, impeccably respectable woman, she’s completely hidden away!

Horace: “... her ankle-touching dress and heavy cloak.”

Commentator: Covered from head to toe in a dress and cloak, no skin to be seen. Loosen up! Why so prim and proper? You’re a laughingstock!

Horace: “The other route is clear and unobstructed...”

Commentator: He’s talking about the promiscuous woman here.

Horace: “... diaphanous chemise of Coan silk can’t hide uncomely legs or ugly feet.”

Commentator: Dressing in extravagant, SEE-THROUGH silk? That’s just over-the-top, slutty and tasteless. Have you no self-respect!? In a nutshell, as Horace sees it, a woman should be natural and simple — not prudish and covered up, but not slutty and extravagant, either. A sense of style means striking the right balance, finding that golden mean. But how much is too much? And how little is too little? For a woman in the Roman Empire, dressing is a delicate balancing act.

GALLERY 8



FUNDILIUS DOCTUS

NEMI, ITALY

41–54 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1891

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 707



PETRONIUS

C. 20–66 CE
SATYRICON 32

TRANSLATION
BY J.P. SULLIVAN, 1968

Commentator: We’re looking in on Petronius, the Roman Hugh Hefner. A denizen of the court of Emperor Nero. He travels exclusively in the upper echelons of society. If there’s one thing he can’t stand, it’s bad taste and people who don’t get the social codes. The nouveaux riches. Freed slaves who have come into money are the worst. Sure, a few of them know how to do style right – like elegant Fundilius before you – but most make a complete mess of it.

In his novel *The Satyricon*, Petronius paints a vicious portrait of the kind of character he hates more than anything. The wealthy freed slave, Trimalchio is throwing a dinner party, and **NOTHING** is done right.

Petronius: “We were in the middle of these elegant dishes

when Trimalchio himself was carried in to the sound of music and set down on a pile of tightly stuffed cushions. The sight of him drew an astonished laugh from the guests. His cropped head stuck out from the scarlet coat.”

Commentator: You shave your head like a slave, but you dress like an emperor?

Petronius: “His neck was well muffled up and he had put round it a napkin with a broad purple stripe...”

Commentator: A colour reserved for the nobility – on a napkin, at that! Give me a break!

Petronius: “... and tassels dangling here and there.”

Commentator: Is this a soiree at an upstart tech billionaire’s Dubai mansion?

Petronius: “On the little finger of his left hand he wore a heavy gilt ring and a smaller one on the last joint of the next finger. This I thought to be of solid gold, but actually it was studded with little iron stars.”

Commentator: A freed slave can’t wear a gold ring. Nice try, but you’re not fooling anyone!

Petronius: “And off to show even more of his jewellery, he

had his right arm bare and set off by a gold armlet and an ivory circlet fastened with a gleaming metal plate.”

Commentator: Money just can't buy you good taste. No matter how hard Trimalchio tries, he'll always be an uncouth former slave who'll never belong in high society.

GALLERY 9



KNEELING MAN FROM THE PARTHIAN EMPIRE

LAZIO, ITALY
ROMAN PERIOD
MARBLE (GIALLO ANTICO)
ACQUIRED IN 1894

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK
IN 1183



PLUTARCH

C. 45–120 CE

LIFE OF CRASSUS 24

TRANSLATION

BY B. PERRIN, 1916

Commentator: The statue before you depicts an arch-enemy of Rome: a Parthian kneeling humbly before his Roman vanquisher. But that’s not how the historian Plutarch portrays the Parthian general Surena. Surena is legendary in Roman history for smashing – even massacring – a vastly superior Roman army in a famous battle in 53 BCE.

Plutarch: “Surena himself...”

Commentator: the enemy commander, that is.

Plutarch: “... was the tallest and fairest of them all, although his effeminate beauty did not well correspond to his reputation for valour, but he was dressed more in the Median fashion...”

Commentator: An enemy dressed in strange, exotic clothes. What's that they're wearing, trousers?

Plutarch: "... with painted face and parted hair..."

Commentator: WHAT?!? A killing machine with rouge and slicked-up hair?

Plutarch: "... while the rest of the Parthians still wore their hair long and bunched over their foreheads, in Scythian fashion..."

Commentator: an even ghastlier tribe of barbarians.

Plutarch: "... to make themselves look formidable..."

Commentator: A real nasty hairdo! Plutarch makes a paradox of Surena: a warrior in makeup who fiercely defies Rome. Surena is a brutal warrior, so formidable that even the Romans regard him – and all of the Parthian Empire – as a worthy adversary, no matter what he looks like.

GALLERY 10



ROMAN WOMAN

CENTRAL ITALY
LATE 1.ST CENT. CE
MARBLE
ACQUIRED IN 1955

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK
IN 3164



OVID

43 BCE–18 CE

AMORES 1.14

TRANSLATION

BY J. SVARLIEN, 2000

Commentator: The celebrated poet Ovid chuckles to himself as he looks up from the scroll. He’s composing one of his famous, wry love poems, and congratulates himself for nailing how Roman women do their hair. As you can tell from this bust, women’s hairstyles were a huge element of Roman fashion, including when it came to attracting men.

Ovid: “How many times did I tell you, ‘Stop dyeing your hair!’ Now there’s nothing left to colour!”

Commentator: His mistress has dyed her hair so many times that it finally fell out!

Some dark dyes are made from leeches left to rot in red wine for 40 days – hardly a recipe for luscious locks.

Ovid: “If you’d only left it alone. No one had hair like yours. [...] you’ll wear braids captured in Germany [...] Now the spoils of our triumphant armies will save you.”

Commentator: Ovid’s bald-headed lady has to wear a wig! Roman wigs were usually made from real hair cut from the heads of some of the many foreign slaves.

Ovid: “But you’ll blush every time someone raves about your new look. ‘I’m upstaged by a wig!’ you’ll cry. ‘It’s some Sygambrian woman he’s praising.’”

Commentator: A woman from the Germanic tribe near the Rhine, that is.

Ovid: “I remember when those compliments were truly mine.”

Commentator: Clearly, this woman is the victim of her own vanity. She has ruined her beautiful, natural hair and has to resort to trickery – trickery shorn from captured Germanic women, whose fair hair was highly prized in Rome.

GALLERY 10



ROMAN WOMAN

ROME, ITALY

14–54 CE

MARBLE

ACQUIRED IN 1887

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK

IN 74I



MARTIAL

C. 40–104 CE

EPIGRAMS 9.37

TRANSLATION

BY G. NISBET, 2015

Please note: Contains explicit language.

Commentator: In an apartment building in Rome around year 100, Martial is sitting at his desk as the noise from the crowded street below fills his study. Martial is a satirist. His caustic verses sell like hotcakes. Today, Martial is roasting a particular type of woman personified in the character of Galla. That could be her in front of you.

Martial: “You may be at home, Galla, but your hair is out – out being done in the heart of Subura.”

Commentator: Galla’s bald?! And her wig is being spruced up in the shadiest part of town?!

Martial: “You put away your teeth at night, same as you

do your imported silks, and you lie tucked away in a hundred little jars.”

Commentator: So, Galla wears false teeth and packs away her prosthetic features at night?!

Martial: “Your face doesn’t share your bed. That eyebrow you bat, they delivered this morning...”

Commentator: Fake, all of it. Everything about this woman is distasteful and ugly and unpleasant.

Martial: “... and you feel no reverence for your grey-haired cunt, which you really could count among your ancestors by now.”

Commentator: Snap! In Rome, an old lady like Galla gets no respect.

Martial: “Then again, you’re promising me a fortune. . . But my cock is deaf. It may be one-eyed, but it can still see you.”

Commentator: Martial wouldn’t go near this woman for all the money in Rome. She’s old, and everything about her is fake: wig, teeth, eyelashes – the whole shebang.

GALLERY 10



ROMAN WOMAN

ROM, ITALIEN
CA. 30–50 E.V.T.
MARMOR
ERHVERVET I 1887

NY CARLSBERG GLYPTOTEK
IN 751



MARTIAL

C. 40–104 CE

EPIGRAMS 6.93

TRANSLATION BY

D.R. SHACKLETON BAILEY, 1993

Commentator: Martial the satirist sits in his study in central Rome. Skewering Romans in ironic and disparaging epigrams is his game. They are not for the faint of heart. Here, Martial is roasting the fictional character of Thais. That could be her right in front of you.

Martial: “Thais smells worse than the veteran crock of a stingy fuller, recently broken in the middle of the road...”

Commentator: Rotten piss – ooh...

Martial: “... or a billy goat straight from his amours, or in a lion’s mouth, or a hide from behind Tiber torn from a dog, or a chicken rotting in an aborted egg, or a jar polluted with putrid garum.”

Commentator: Men probably didn't smell much better, but a woman should smell good, forsooth!

Martial: "In order to exchange this stench for a different odor, whenever she takes off her clothes to get into the bath, the crafty lady is green with depilatory or lurks under a lining of chalk and vinegar or is coated with three or four layers of thick bean meal. A thousand tricks, and she thinks she's safe. But when it's all done, Thais smells of Thais."