

The Colossus of Constantine

Since the end of the 15th century, the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori has housed nine Parian marble fragments of one of ancient Rome's most impressive statues, the Colossus of Constantine (306-337 AD), the emperor who is credited with initiatives that would profoundly alter the Roman empire: the official recognition of the Christian religion (313 AD) and the transfer of the capital from Rome to Constantinople (326 AD).

The portrait remained without a certain identity until the late 19th century, when it was correctly identified as Emperor Constantine. Subsequent studies made it possible to recognize sure signs of rework, especially at the chin and chin strap, indicating that the person originally depicted had a beard.

The Colossus is thus the result of the reworking of an older statue. According to a recent working hypothesis, it could be the cult statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, placed inside the temple dedicated to him on the Capitoline Hill, the most important in Roman times. At any rate, this statue, known from several replicas or imitations, must have been the model for the creation of the Colossus of Constantine. One of its most faithful reproductions, in reduced size, dating to the Flavian period (69-96 AD), is the one preserved today in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The statue is an acrolith, with the naked parts made of marble, mounted on a supporting structure covered with draperies of gilded bronze or precious colored marble. The god, seated on a throne, is wrapped in a cloak that leaves his torso, arms, and knee uncovered. The latter is an iconographic motif of the Homeric tradition associated almost exclusively with the image of Jupiter and later of the emperors, which is inspired by it as a sign of the devotion paid to them by their subjects. With his bare knee, Jupiter is shown on coins and medallions from the immediately pre-Constantinian era, with dedication to Iuppiter Conservator.

In 312 AD, after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine became the absolute master of the western part of the empire and of Rome. To these first years of his reign would date the making of the Colossus, which, in its hieratic fixity, constitutes one of the most impressive manifestations of Constantinian art. The celebration of the emperor thus takes place through the reuse of an existing colossal statue depicting an emperor or deity, such as Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Through it Constantine shows himself as comes (companion) of the gods and the very nature of his power is manifested as divine.