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The Twelve Caesars

By Mary Beard

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Reviewed by George Puckering, Bacchus
Marsh Grammar

Erudite and cultivated through a lifetime of work, Professor Mary Beard takes readers through the many differing, and at times haphazard, artistic representations of the Twelve Emperors of Suetonius, as well as a few other minor characters that made up much of the story of the early Roman Empire and beyond it.

While the title is an interesting tour of the many lenses through which societies in the ancient and modern world viewed their Roman emperors, it is exactly that—a tour.

Beard spends much of her time on the point that one can never know with certainty whether a certain piece is real or not. Instead of interpretation, Beard focuses on representation.

This book would not offer much but for the most interested secondary student, as Beard assumes readers will come to the table with a rudimentary understanding of both art and history. However, the teacher with a fundamental knowledge of source analysis may wish to use this piece as a secondary resource of their own, as a way to illustrate to students that much of what we know of the Romans is through art, and much of that art is in itself constantly up for the debate.

Beard begins her journey through the many (mis)representations of the Caesars depicted in art with a story of Jesse Elliott, who believed he had found a sarcophagus thought to have contained the emperor Alexander Severus (222–235 CE) in Beirut in 1837, but was subsequently denied as a final resting place by US President Andrew Jackson on the grounds that '[his] republican feelings and principles forbid it—the simplicity of our system forbids it'. It has never been fully agreed upon by the learned community whether the coffin actually held Alexander.

And so begins our journey through the twelve Caesars as depicted in the sometimes varied and often alien values of the many cultures who have tried to instil the immortality of Roman principles into their lives.

We are taken through the many facets of the Roman world as seen through even more lenses, from portraits to sculpture, to coins and jewellery. Beard dives into what it means that much of the study of the art, as well as of the subjects themselves, was based solely on the two-dimensional side of a coin, and whether these representations truly said something about those who came before us. She goes into depth when looking at sculptures, both legitimate and

'pastiche', attempting to reconcile the conservative practice of interpreting art as a window to meaning with the contemporary practice of interpreting art as a means of truth-telling. The title is not all a discussion of whether this or that sculpture or painting is an imitation or the 'real deal', as some of the best moments of the title come when Beard examines the use of satire throughout the ages as gentle critique of modern rulers through the assassination of Julius Caesar, whose representations have in turn been the source of much to strive for and much to avoid for various leaders of state.

With her quick, clear and often charming writing, Beard's *Twelve Caesars* will give readers a thorough foundation of the compelling arguments surrounding many of the most storied illustrations and pieces representing some of history's greatest leaders.