

A Pair of Italian Grand Tour Siena marble oval portrait reliefs of the Roman Emperors Vespasian and Domitian set on a Rosso Antico ground, inscribed T VESP. AUG and DOMIT. AUG in bronze moulded frames with the suspension loops

Rome, second half of the 18th century.

Height: 4 ¾ in. (12 cm)
Weight: 3,3 in. (8,5 cm)



The present pair of marble medallions were in all likelihood made in Rome to cater to Grand Tourists. They represent two Roman Emperors in profile and are made with marble alluding to the material, other than iconographic, repertoire of classical antiquity – with the characteristic taste for rare coloured oriental marble characterizing the artistic and architectural production in Rome under the Empire (from Augustus onwards).

The Grand Tour was a journey through continental Europe undertaken by wealthy North-European aristocrats in order to perfect their knowledge of art, antiquity and court life, which normally started and ended in the same city. Although there are some early – and spectacular – accounts of such journeys undertaken already in the early 17th century, this cultural phenomenon had its peak in the 18th century.

Depending on the wealth of each individual, the Grand Tour could last from just a few weeks to entire years, and the Italian peninsula was normally the highlight: not only for its wealth of classical monuments, churches, and aristocratic collections, but also for the presence of many, more or less small kingdoms and principates, where young aristocrats could get familiar with court etiquette.

During the Grand Tour, travellers spent their time sightseeing, studying, fostering social networks and – most notably – shopping.

"Grand Tour objects" included souvenirs of genuine, high-quality works of art, such as bronze sculptures of ancient statues, vases, and lamps, which travelers purchased in order to document their educational journey and carry with them their memories back home, where they thus became status symbol other than evidence of distinguished taste.

In Italy in particular, travelers could purchase miniature models of famous monuments or architecture to retain a tangible memory of the places they visited – objects imbued with the lure of antiquity.

These marble portraits are emblematic of this kind of production for their combination of exquisite execution, informed use of material, and classicizing iconography.