THE ANCIENTS: NOW AVAILABLE IN COLOUR



John Hooper in the Guardian reviews the “Colours of White” exhibition at the Vatican museums, Rome (until January 31) – Guardian Unlimited | Arts features | The ancients: now available in colour.

For hundreds of years, Caligula’s handsome, marble face has stared out at a fascinated world. Now situated at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek museum in Copenhagen, the celebrated first-century bust of this cruel young Roman emperor is made repellent, yet intriguing, not so much by his petulantly downturned mouth as by the blank, staring eyes chiselled from marble by an unknown

sculptor.

It comes as a shock to be confronted with an exact replica with unthreatening hazel eyes. Add garish pink skin and glossy brown hair, and the new painted version of Caligula’s bust looks as if it might once have been used to model hats in thewindow of a men’s outfitters.

It is always worth reminding ourselves that the pale marble image of the ancient world is entirely false and comes from the kind of Classical aestheticism we find in the likes of Winckelmann’s art criticism (or rather adulation of Greek form). And it is still rife.



Robert Cook’s painted plaster cast of the Peplos Kore (Museum of Classical Archaeology, Cambridge)