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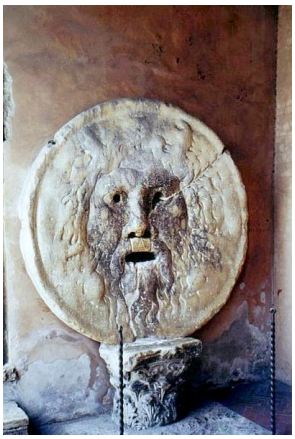

In popular Roman legends, “talking statues” held a particular role : revealing the truth. These anthropomorphique stone figures were used by Romans to post satyrical remarks namely against their government. This image of the Mouth of Truth deserves a special mention : although considered a talking statue, it had a very specific function. It was believed that the Mouth was a lie detector, that if one told a lie with one’s hand in it, it would bite it off. But in accordance to Roman legend, the Mouth has never said a word, a testimony to Roman scepticism.
Historically, the sculpture dates back to the 1st century AD and is thought to have originally been an ancient Roman fountain or an impluvium cover. It is 69” across, has a man-like face with a beard, its eyes, nose and mouth carved out as holes. The Mouth of Truth or « Bocca della Verità » was set into a wall of the pronaos of the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome, Italy, then brought out under the portico during the restorations ordered by Pope Urban VII Barberini in 1632.
The mask of the Mouth of Truth, a celebrated legend for many years, still attracts crowds. A German text from the 12th century decribes how through the Mouth, the Devil - identified as Mercury, protector of trade, profit and thieves - held on to the hand of Emperor Julian the Apostate (he had cheated a woman and had to swear before this idole his good faith) promising him soul redemption and a large fortune if he revived the traditionnal Roman pagan divinities. In reality, Julian the Apostate attempted to restore the Pagan religion although he had been raised a Christian. In the 15th century Italian and German travellers remarked this stone “is called the stone of truth and was thought to have the virtue of revealing when a woman had dishonored her husband.” As early as 1485, the Mouth of Truth was constantly refered to as a Roman wonder and often reproduced in drawings and sculptures. The French sculptor Jules Blanchard (1832-1916) produced his version of the “bocca della Verità” in 1871, set in the Luxembourg gardens. The legend was also a source of inspiration for many other artists.

- Photo 1 : The Mouth of Truth at the Curch of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome.
- Photo 2 : « La Bocca della Verità », Jules Blanchard, marble, 1871, Luxembourg gardens, Paris.