

Name _____ Date _____

Objective

In this lesson, you will identify the principal characteristics of Roman art.

Links

mysterious Fayum portraits

<http://redirect.platoweb.com/337564>

Julius Caesar's bust

<http://redirect.platoweb.com/337565>

Introduction

The Roman Empire, which lasted for hundreds of years, was one of the greatest and strongest forces in the Western world. It originated in 510 B.C. in Rome, which was then a small city-state on the banks of the Tiber River. At its peak, the Empire included North Africa (Egypt), Western Europe, and countries along the Mediterranean.



The art of the Roman Empire was influenced by these lands and their diverse cultures and religions. Roman art reflects characteristics of each land, but the greatest influence by far was Greece. The Romans studied with Greek art teachers and even hired Greek artists. They then adapted Greek art to develop their own distinct artistic style. The Romans produced some of the greatest sculptures, paintings, and monuments of all time. In fact, surviving Roman art impacts design even today.

Section 1: Roman Paintings and Sculptures

Much of what we know about Roman art today comes from artifacts found in Pompeii. Pompeii was a city south of Rome that was completely buried in volcanic lava and ash in A.D. 79 when Mount Vesuvius erupted. As a result, the city's buildings and everything inside them were

protected from the decay time and nature would have otherwise caused. When first excavated in 1748, archeologists found well-preserved frescoes, murals, and statues. Let's look at some examples of Roman painting and sculpture.



Fresco, Via dell'Abbondanza, Pompeii, Italy

Mural Paintings, or Frescoes

The Romans decorated their homes with colorful wall paintings in the form of frescoes, or murals. Common subjects were landscapes, intimate scenes, ceremonies such as weddings, mythological figures, and scenes from daily life. They were painted with lively brushstrokes and set in panels of matte, or flat, color. The wall painting shown here is a Lararium fresco from the atrium of an inn on the Via dell'Abbondanza, Pompeii's main road.

Mosaics

A common decoration for walls and floors, Roman mosaics were made of small pieces of marble set in mortar. Many mosaics depicted battle and hunting scenes. Many mosaics show exotic birds and animals from faraway places. One striking mosaic is of the River Nile in Egypt with crocodiles, lotus buds, and a hippopotamus.

Did you know?

Every Roman house had a Lararium. It was a shrine dedicated to the guardian spirits of that house, where each day, its inhabitants would perform a protection ritual.

Portrait Painting

The best examples of Roman portrait painting are funeral portraits from the Fayum district in Egypt. When a person there died, a colorful portrait of the deceased was painted on a thin wood panel and placed on his or her face. The painting was made using the *encaustic* technique, which used a mixture of pigment and hot wax. Also called the Fayum portraits, they were remarkably lifelike. Take a look at some of these [mysterious Fayum portraits](#), including the famous Artemidorus mummy.

Sculpture

The Romans worshipped a number of gods and goddesses, which were often the subjects of their sculptures and other works of art. Every temple had a sculpture of a god or goddess. Public places, such as bathhouses, and even private homes contained statues. The Romans also celebrated their emperors in sculpture. Important civic places usually displayed a statue of the ruling emperor.



Ancient Roman Portrait Busts

The sculptures of mortals, also known as portrait sculptures, were of two types. Some were small busts showing only the head and shoulders. Others were huge full-scale statues. A fine example of Roman portrait sculpture is the *Colossal Head of Constantine*, the only remaining part of a mighty 30-foot marble statue that once stood in the Basilica of Constantine. Take a look at the impassive, mask-like face shown at left. We can see the face shows no emotion or human weakness. The statue was a symbol of Constantine's absolute authority and the belief that he is God's earthly ruler.



Colossal Head of Constantine, Rome

The Romans typically built ornate triumphal arches in lands they conquered. They were symbols of triumph and victory to the Romans. They also served to constantly remind the conquered people of Roman might and glory. Even today, the remains of triumphal arches such as the *Arch of Tiberius* in Pompeii convey the power of the Roman Empire. Built in A.D. 25, the *Arch of Tiberius* is covered with representations of military trophies, defeated and bound captives, fighting Romans, and captured arms and armor.



Arch of Tiberius, Pompeii



**The Four Tetrarchs
Basilica di San Marco, Venice**

The Romans erected triumphal arches to represent the glory of the Roman Empire. They also represented the decline of the empire. *The Four Tetrarchs*, a portrait sculpture in the Basilica di San Marco in Venice, Italy, is an example. It shows four rulers toward the end of the Empire's power. They appear tense and are huddled against the onslaught of barbarian invaders.

Directions

Answer the following question.

In the Colossal Head of Constantine, why did the sculptor make the face appear emotionless and mask-like?

- to represent him as God's earthly ruler
- to portray him as a powerful dictator
- to make him appear mysterious

Section 2: Roman, Egyptian, and Greek Art: Similarities and Differences

You have seen that the Greeks and Egyptians influenced Roman art. How did it happen? These cultures became intertwined over several centuries.

In 323 B.C., the Greek ruler Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. For the next 300 years, Egypt was ruled by the Greeks. The Greek population in Egypt continued to use their language but adopted the Egyptian religion. The cultures were mixed further when Rome took Egypt from the Greeks in 31 B.C. And so, three diverse cultures blended to form new customs and rituals. The *Fayum portraits* you read about above are just one example.

In Egypt under Roman rule, Greek remained the main official language, but Egyptians started to imitate Roman customs and fashions. The Romans were fascinated by the Egyptian culture; so much so that after Rome's conquest of Egypt, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis became widespread in the Roman Empire.

Let's look at how these Greek and Egyptian influences shaped Roman art, as well as how Roman art differs from them.

Tempera Paintings

One of the earliest painting mediums, tempera was commonly used in Roman, Greek, and Egyptian art. Tempera paints combine pigment with egg yolk. Tempera paintings have a luminous, slightly matte quality.

Sculpture

The Greeks regarded humankind as the highest creation of nature—almost perfect in physical form. They also highly respected humankind's intelligence and power of reason. They wanted to glorify the human body. Because of this high regard, artists sculpted the human figure in natural poses with detailed anatomy. They also portrayed the human figure as perfectly as possible, without imperfection.

The Romans adopted the depiction of natural human poses and detailed anatomy. But unlike Greek sculpture, Roman statues portrayed humans more realistically. You will read more about this in the next section.

The Romans also borrowed many elements from Greek religion and copied the Greek statues of their gods and goddesses. Most Greek sculpture is from the classical era, which was characterized by simplicity and restraint. The statue of *Aphrodite de Milos* (above) is an example of classical art, and the refinement and calmness in her features is typical of Greek art. In contrast, the Roman Empire flourished in the Hellenistic era, when the restraint seen in classical works gave way to dynamic poses and strong emotions.



The Romans were also very interested in Egyptian art and sent many Egyptian statues to Rome. Roman artists started working in the Egyptian style to satisfy a new craze among the Roman people for Egyptian art.

Bronze as a Medium

The metal bronze was used by Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans alike to produce various works of art, both practical and aesthetic.

The Egyptians were the first people to use armor for protection during battle. They made their armor from bronze scales, or plates. The Greeks also used bronze armor, and the helmets worn by their warriors are characteristic of Greek weaponry. The Greeks made many statues in bronze as well and were the first to attempt life-size bronze sculptures. Most of these have been lost but marble copies made by the Romans still survive.



The Romans continued the Greek trend of making bronze statues, many of which survived in places such as Pompeii.

Greek bronze helmet

Mummy Cases

Romans living in Egypt started burying their dead according to Egyptian custom, wrapped in sheets of linen and buried inside ornate mummy cases. However, the practice of covering the top of the mummy case with a funeral portrait of the deceased was unique to Romans.



Activity A: Comparing Roman Art with Greek and Egyptian Art

Directions

Answer the following questions.

1. Which of the many cultures in the Roman Empire influenced Roman art the most? In what works of art is the influence most apparent?

- Describe how Roman mummy cases differed from Egyptian mummy cases.

- How did the art of the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians come to share certain characteristics, despite the differences in their cultures?

Section 3: Theology, Culture, and the Human Form in Art

The Romans worshipped many gods and goddesses. Many deities represented various aspects of life; Neptune, the god of war; Juno, the goddess of femininity and fertility and Minerva, the goddess of learning; are but a few examples. The Romans believed the gods had human form. This belief greatly influenced how they represented the human body in their art.

Like the Greeks, the Romans sought to glorify human body through their art. Their sculptures show a freedom of expression and a more natural representation of the human form than art from earlier times. The Romans adopted the Greek style of detailed human anatomy and correct proportion. This representation of the human body continues to influence art even today. A fine example of the human body in a natural, active pose is the statue of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius riding a horse.



**Statue of Marcus Aurelius
Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome**

It's true the Romans were influenced by and adopted the Greek practice of celebrating the human body through their art. But their approach was significantly different. The Greeks believed in idealizing the human body, seeking to represent it as near perfect. On the other hand, the Romans believed in a more realistic representation of the human form. Many Roman statues show a wart, a crooked nose, or other slight imperfection. The Romans believed these imperfections showed character.

Take a look at this marble sculpture of a woman's face. This is a realistic likeness. In typical Roman fashion, the artist did not ignore the imperfections in the woman's features. Such statues give us viewers a chance to see what a normal, mortal human being living thousands of years ago looked like.



Roman marble sculpture

Activity B: Analyze the Ancient Bust of Caesar Found in a French River

Directions

In 2007, archaeologists found an ancient bust of the powerful Roman ruler Julius Caesar at the bottom of the Rhone River in France. From 46 B.C., it is believed to be the oldest sculpture of Caesar. Read this news article describing the find of [Julius Caesar's bust](#). Take a careful look at the picture of the bust. Then answer the questions below.

1. Think about the sculpture's human form. Does Caesar look old or young? What is the first thing that strikes you about this representation of Julius Caesar?

2. Look carefully at the facial features. How has the artist tried to make Caesar look realistic and relatable?

3. Think about what this sculpture says about the characteristics of Roman art. Now imagine that you know nothing about Roman art. Based only on this sculpture, what assumptions could you make about Roman art?

Summary

Because the Roman Empire ruled so many different cultures, a great exchange of ideas and styles shaped the art of that period. This mix of art forms and styles that define Roman art has influenced art for centuries and still does today. For example, the graceful and powerful statue of Marcus Aurelius on his horse has been the model for many modern-day monuments dedicated to the leaders of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and other conflicts in our history.

The ancient art form of mosaics, which was widely used by the Romans, continues as an art form today. Glass and stone mosaics are found in churches and temples. Even the glass and tile mosaics you might see in a kitchen or bathroom have evolved from Roman mosaics.

Tempera paints, which are used in many art classrooms, are a refined, modernized version of the early tempera paints used by the ancient Romans.