

# Ancient Roman Art – More Than Just Imitation!

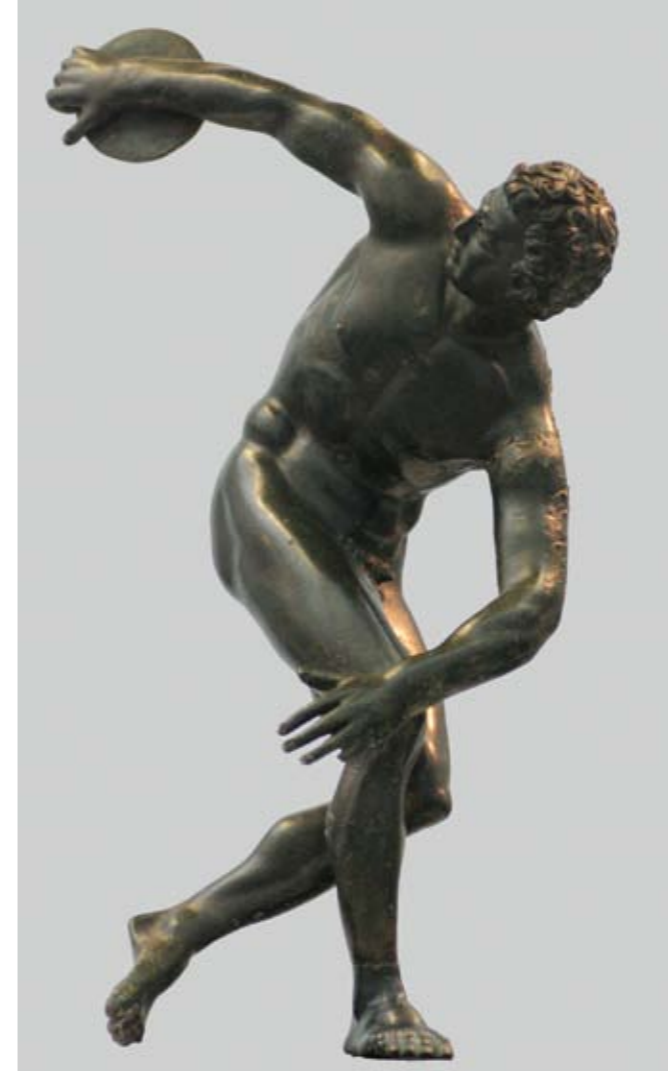
Although borrowing ideas from their neighbours, the art of the Ancient Romans shows a diverse and practical style.

By Robyn Collis and Belinda Hogan.

The Roman era is broken into two main time periods, the first being the Republican era from 753BC to 27BC; the second period the well-known Roman Empire from 27BC to AD 476. The Romans made many inventions and innovations from this time, from new building materials such as concrete, civil engineering of roads and bridges, town planning of urban environments and the organization of a vast army and empire which all left

a permanent legacy. But it was Roman art which provides us with a record of everyday life in this fascinating time. The Etruscan civilization, from the region around modern day Tuscany and beyond, gives us our first glimpse of life in ancient Italy. The Etruscans were a sophisticated and wealthy trading people who lived in hilltop towns which exist today buried deep beneath towns like Orvieto and Perugia. The Etruscans traded with both the Greeks and the

Egyptians and their burial mounds have many echoes of ancient Egyptian tombs, with their colourful walls showing scenes of feasting and hunting. Grave goods found in the burial mounds include ordinary household objects such as sieves and frying pans, mirrors and combs, and also fabulous golden brooches, earrings, bracelets and pendants made with an exquisite granulating technique which was lost for centuries. Images of the deceased which adorned the terracotta



coffins bear a direct likeness to the archaic Greek style of statue, although they were dressed in the Etruscan toga. Etruscan statues though were made of terracotta not marble or granite. The Greek and Egyptian materials of choice were unavailable to the Etruscans in this early period, and the rise of the Roman tribes saw the gradual overwhelming and eventual disappearance of the Etruscan civilization.

The Roman republican period placed a strong emphasis on personal loyalty, family ties and community bonds. Each home reinforced traditional values by building a small shrine at which statues of ancestors were honoured. A Roman man might commission a head and shoulder likeness, or bust, or a full size likeness which depicted him “warts and all”, that is with balding head, deeply lined face and sagging skin. Romans believed that such statues showed that a man had “gravitas” or seriousness and had worked hard and taken his role in society seriously. A male statue would be shown wearing

the purple edged toga which indicated his rank in society. Statues of rulers were not popular at this time because the Romans had a deep fear of any individual who gained too much power.

A change came about in Roman art with the establishment of the Roman Empire by Augustus in AD27. After a damaging period of external and internal wars which ended the republic, it became important for the emperor to communicate his power and authority to his subjects. He did this mainly through art; through sculptural depictions of himself in various powerful poses; through coinage and through great monuments and building projects. These expressed the wealth and authority of the emperor or the power of a god. A famous example of such a statue is the Augustus of Prima Porta in which Augustus is depicted in full military regalia with symbolic gods and goddesses on his breastplate and a miniature god at his feet. Other depictions of

Augustus have him as youthful and handsome with a full head of hair – very unlike the balding, sickly and unattractive man that he was. This was a departure from the earlier, warts and all or veristic style of depiction.

In the earlier centuries of the Roman Empire wealth became more widespread throughout the upper classes and more and more people wanted to decorate their houses and their gardens to suit their high incomes. Copying of Greek classical and Hellenistic statues became popular and many of well known Greek statues in our museums, The Discus Thrower, for example come down to us as a Roman copy.

Opposite page: Fresco of an Etruscan tomb showing a symposium scene.

Above left: Roman Bronze Reduction of Myron’s Discobolos  
Above right: Statue of the Emperor Augustus in Museo Chiaramonti, Vatican, Rome.





Another art form which the Romans popularised as a result of their rule over Syria and the Near East was glass making. In the 1st Century AD during the age of Augustus, glass became a fashionable commodity, especially in manufacturing cameos out of different layers of coloured glass and carving into them mythological scenes. Glass was more popular than shell or gemstone for cameo making at the time as the quality and the colour of glass could be manipulated more successfully for artistic effect, as seen in the Portland Vase. The decorative possibilities were endless but, unfortunately very little of this art form survives for us to see today with the exception of the many mosaic works which survive in fragments throughout Italy and the rest of the Roman Empire.

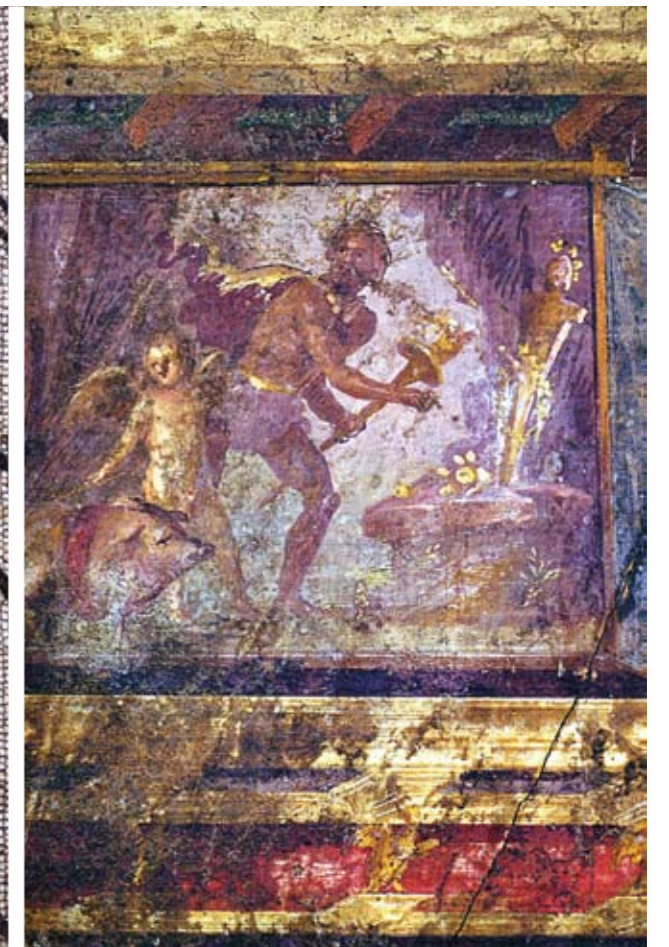
The eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD79 provides us with a wealth of information about Roman art and Roman life with the burial of Pompeii and Herculaneum under metres of volcanic ash. The cities remained hidden for over 1700 years until their accidental rediscovery in 1749. Subsequent excavation revealed vibrant and luxurious villas adorned with beautiful frescoes, mosaic floors of extreme delicacy and gardens adorned with fountains and exquisite bronze figures. The absence of windows to the outside as a security feature of Roman houses provided a vast expanses of interior wall which gave rise to a type of painting known as trompe l'oeil ('trick of the eye') in which vistas painted on the interior walls gave the illusion of an outside view. The presence of these decorative elements in almost every dwelling indicated that they were typical features of domestic architecture.

By the 4th Century AD the Romans found it increasingly difficult to control and secure their empire. They turned to the newer Christian religion, hoping that the Christian God would do what the pagan gods could not, namely, protect the people of the Empire from warring and rebellious tribes of Europe. Constantine, the emperor, converted to Christianity and made it the religion of the empire. Soon the art of this period

Top left: Famous "bikini girls" mosaic (found by archeological excavation of the ancient Roman villa near Piazza Armerina in Sicily), showing women exercising, running, or receiving the palm of victory and crown (for winning an athletic competition). Left: Interior of San Clemente



Opposite page:  
 Top left: Watchdog at open door (with labrys). Roman mosaic from the Casa di Paquius Proculus in Pompeii.  
 Top right: Man suffering from impotence is about to sacrifice a pig to Priapus. Ca. 40 BC. Roman fresco from the eastern wall of room 4 in the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii.  
 Bottom: Paris seeking refuge on the altar is recognized by Hector and Cassandra who threatened it. Etruscan box mirror, bronze, 3rd century BC.



began to adapt to the new faith. Many of the early figures of Christ and the Apostles seem to be poor imitations of Greek and Roman art, which might be explained by a loss of artistic continuity or a lack of money. Once again art became a means of communicating ideas to the masses throughout the empire, this time religious ideas. Many new churches were commissioned which used the artistic forms of the empire such as columns, mosaics and frescoes to illustrate the stories of the Christian tradition.

The Roman civilization is thought to be the longest and most successful empire in world history. In its art it has preserved and adapted the sculpture of Greece, the painting of the Egyptians and the Etruscans, the glass making of the Syrian and Phoenicians and passed it down through time. The Romans have a reputation for being more practical than creative, although considering the range of artistic expression in which they excelled this is not a reputation which is deserved. ■

