

# ROMAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

## 500 BCE - 400 CE

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 6-12



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National Center for  
History in the Schools  
UCLA



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The electronic version of this teaching unit is available at



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# Introduction

## I. WHY THIS UNIT?

All complex societies have created art as an expression of their experience. Yet works of art, examined as historical artifacts and primary sources, can tell us a much larger story about the history of the people who created them.

For historians, art has left behind important artifacts that help us draw conclusions about the history of human identity. Art helps us understand humans and their ideas. A single work of art can act as “snapshot” of a society at a particular time and place. Art can show us what people looked like, what they worshiped, the ideas they valued, and what they considered beautiful. Art is also a way in which people can convey political messages and persuade others through propaganda.

Art may also depict the story of how humans have formed and used networks of trade and exchange. The exchange of cultural ideas has been crucial to human development. Roman art would have been much less rich if not for the cultural diffusion of art and artists from the peoples they interacted with and those they conquered. Roman art tells us a story of how societies borrow and build off the ideas of other societies. Roman art is, to a large extent, a culmination of ideas borrowed, built off, and “stolen” from other societies, particularly the Greeks.

## II. UNIT OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this unit, students will be able to:

1. Explain how the Romans copied and borrowed styles in art and architecture from other societies, particularly the Greeks.
2. Explain how ancient Romans contributed to art and architecture.
3. Describe Roman achievements in art, including realistic portraits, coinage, glassware, cameos, mummy paintings, and mosaics.
4. Describe Roman achievements in architecture including public baths, the Colosseum, and the Pantheon.
5. Explain how art can be used as a tool of political propaganda.
6. Compare and contrast Roman with Greek art and architecture.

7. Analyze how the classical style of Greek and Roman art and architecture has influenced modern art and architecture.

### III. TIME AND MATERIALS

This unit is designed both for teachers who would like to cover the topic in depth and for those preferring more limited classroom investigation. Teachers are encouraged to pick and choose what best fits their schedules. Teachers may devote classroom time ranging from three to seven periods.

Materials required for teachers include an LCD projector for showing the PowerPoint presentation associated with this unit (Classical Connections: From Roman Art and Architecture to Today). Those who do not have an LCD projector may print out the presentation for overhead presentation.

Materials required for students include a pen or pencil and a history notebook. Students may need one or all of the following to complete the assessment projects at the end of the unit: construction paper, colored pencils and/or markers, glue, scissors, a digital camera, and access to a computer and the internet.

### IV. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

Era 3: Classical Traditions, Major Religions, and Giant Empires, 1000 BCE – 300 CE.  
3A: Evaluate the major legal, artistic, architectural, technological, and literary achievements of the Romans and the influence of Hellenistic cultural traditions on Roman Europe.

### V. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

#### The Power of Rome

In 509 BCE the Roman republic was founded. Over a period of four centuries, the Roman empire expanded until it conquered the entire Mediterranean basin. The unifying of the empire included the conquest of Etruscans, Greeks, Egyptians, Berbers, Gauls, and Syrians, among others. At its height, around 100 CE, the empire covered a land area of approximately 1,698,400 square miles. Its peak of prosperity during the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, extended well into the third century CE.

For a long time, the city of Rome was the empire's most powerful city as well as the capital. In terms of art and architecture, the city was not only the largest site of art production, but for centuries it received a constant stream of the spoils of war from all over the Mediterranean region.

### **Art as War Plunder**

The plunder of Greek artworks by the Romans is a fact of history. During the late third century BCE, Roman conquest brought in the spoils of war by the shipload and cartload. Artworks were brought into the empire as a result of pillaging, tribute collecting, purchase, and commission. Victory parades of Roman generals included, among other things, Greek art. Perhaps one of the best known conquests and looting of art was the triumph of L. Aemilius Paullus, who defeated the last ruler of Macedon in 168 BCE. Returning to Rome with one of the largest collections of booty ever gathered, he led a public parade of statues, paintings, and colossal images loaded on 250 wagons. Still another military campaign led to the looting of the entire city of Corinth in Greece. Everything of value was carted off and taken to Rome. This pattern of pillage was repeated, almost annually, as the empire expanded.

Archeological evidence of the movement of art from Greece to Rome has been provided by a number of ancient shipwrecks. One such find was the shipwreck discovered in 1901 under sixty meters of water at the southern tip of the Peloponnese in mainland Greece. The ship was carrying such artwork as pottery, glass, amphoras, gold bars, and almost a hundred sculptures in bronze and marble.

### **Patrons of the Arts**

The patrons of Roman art were numerous: they included emperors, private citizens, and those who traded with Rome. Many art pieces came to adorn public or state buildings, baths, porticoes, and temples. The display of public art around Rome also functioned as political propaganda. Statues of the emperor would serve as constant reminders of the emperor's power and authority. Other artworks were sold off at public auction to decorate the houses of the rich and powerful. Perhaps the most famous and well-documented collections of Roman art owned by private citizens are the artworks of affluent families found in the villas of the seaside communities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The modern excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were buried after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE, have provided historians with some of the best examples of art from both Roman and Greek antiquity.

Additionally, Roman collectors provided an eager market for sculptors, artisans, and dealers in the eastern empire. The imitation and copies of Greek works proliferated. Rome became a major hub of trade, connecting people of lands from across large areas of Afro-Eurasia. Consumers, patrons, and artists had an array of choices in artwork.

### **Cultural Borrowing and Cultural Expansion**

Roman expansion affected not only the conquered societies but also the Romans. The Romans borrowed ideas from the Etruscans, who had distinctive artistic styles, religious rituals, deities, and the technology of arch and aqueduct building. Arguably, the most famous contribution of the Etruscans to the Romans was the weight-bearing arch. The Etruscans, in turn, borrowed the idea of the arch from countries to the east of the Roman empire. Its use in ancient Assyria in Southwest Asia was evident in doorways, gateways, drains, and palaces.

Greek influences on Rome were even greater. Rome's elite landowners were influenced by Hellenistic art, architecture, philosophy, medicine, and religion. Rome later became the center from where Hellenistic culture diffused across the western Mediterranean and Europe. Cities in Gaul, Iberia, North Africa, and other lands arose as miniature "Romes," with temples, amphitheatres, baths, and arenas for gladiatorial combats. Thus, ultimately, the Roman empire's political expansion in all directions became a cultural expansion as well.

# Lesson 1

## *An Overview of Roman Art and Architecture*

### **I. PREPARATION**

Teachers should make a class set of copies of Student Handouts 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 to complete this lesson. Students should have some background knowledge on the civilizations of Greece and Rome to be able to better interpret the topics they will study in this unit. It is suggested that this unit be taught towards the middle or end of a unit on Rome to maximize student understanding.

### **II. INTRODUCTION**

This first lesson on Roman art and architecture will provide students with a brief survey of the topic. During this lesson, prior knowledge students may already have on the topic will be shared. The teacher will also extend upon this by building background knowledge for more in-depth readings on Roman art and architecture that will be covered in Lesson 2.

### **III. ACTIVITIES**

#### **Building on Prior Knowledge**

Before beginning the lessons in this unit, find out what students already know about the topic of art and architecture in general. Possible questions to ask students for discussion or as a warm-up activity might include:

- What is art? What is architecture?
- Why do you think people create art?
- What do you already know about art in ancient times?
- What can historians learn about different societies by examining their art?

#### **Overview of Roman Art and Architecture**

Next, read Student Handout 1.1 (*An Overview of Roman Art and Architecture*). The handout could be read aloud as a class. Students may answer the discussion questions at the end of the reading in their history notebook on their own, or the teacher may call on participants to go over the answers and use them as a basis for further discussion.



## **Vocabulary Development**

As with each topic studied in world history, there are a number of specialized vocabulary terms students need to be familiar with to understand the topic of Roman art and architecture. Student Handout 1.2 (Terms to Know for Roman Art and Architecture) gives a listing of terms and definitions most pertinent to the topic. Teachers may wish to modify this list based on the background knowledge and reading levels of the students. Student Handout 1.3 may be used as a basic template for students to put the definitions for this topic into their own words, as well as to create a visual clue for each word. Teachers may make multiple copies of this template for each student depending on the number of terms assigned.

## *An Overview of Roman Art and Architecture*

### **The Greek Influence on Rome**

During the Republic, Romans founded a new empire on the ruins of Hellenistic kingdoms. It was during this time that stolen statues and other works of art came to Rome from Greece. Roman patrons of the arts brought Greek artists to create new items modeled after Greek styles. Rome soon became a center for wealthy collectors of Greek art.

### **Other Influences on Roman Art and Architecture**

Some scholars have suggested that Roman art was merely a copy of Greek art forms, but Roman art is actually the product of a variety of cultural influences. As the Romans conquered other lands, they were influenced by the artwork of those who fell under their rule. The Etruscans, the forerunners of the founders of Rome, inspired Roman artists. Ancient Egypt and other complex societies that the Roman empire bordered influenced art styles as well. Greek artists originally borrowed many of their styles from the Egyptians. Thus Roman art was also influenced indirectly by the work of Egyptians.

### **The Significance of Pompeii and Herculaneum**

Some of the most famous artifacts of Roman artwork come to us via the collections of wealthy families who lived in the seaside communities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In 79 CE, a violent volcanic eruption occurred at Mt. Vesuvius. It covered these two cities completely in volcanic ash, and almost everyone was killed by the eruption. Centuries later, archaeologists excavated many artifacts of Roman art and architecture. Several houses and villas in these towns had wall paintings and floor mosaics. The excavations have provided historians with some of the best examples of art and a wealth of knowledge about the creation of artwork from Greece and Rome.

### **The Significance of Art and Architecture**

Art may tell us much about the lives of the people who created it. We can learn about the values, culture, and history of a people by examining their art. The Romans used art to honor the gods, celebrate events, and show the power of the emperor and Rome. Moreover, Roman art was used as a tool of propaganda and persuasion. Emperors, for instance, put statues of themselves in public places for everyone to see and admire as well as to show their political power to both citizens and visitors. Public buildings were also used as propaganda to increase the popularity of the emperors who built them. By having a uniform style of architecture in domes, arches, columns, and aqueducts in different lands throughout the empire, people were reminded that the Romans were in charge.

## The Roman Contribution to Art and Architecture

Were the Romans merely thieves of the art of the Greeks and others? Or did they add original innovations to the art and architecture they created? There are several original contributions the Romans made by borrowing and building on styles of those who influenced them. The Romans created a type of portraiture known as realistic. The features on realistic portraits, however, were also ideal, and included both abstract and conventional elements. The Romans put portraits of influential people, such as emperors, on their coins. They discovered how to make cameos in the form of reliefs carved into glass that featured an image of an individual's head. The Roman technique of glassblowing to make glassware is still used today.

The Romans created architectural masterpieces, many of which still stand today. Roads, aqueducts, public baths, and arches can still be visited throughout what was once the Roman empire. Both the Colosseum and the Pantheon are landmarks in monumental architecture and are still popular tourist attractions today.

The Romans contributed much to our knowledge of Greek art history because of the preservation of the styles of the Greeks. Many surviving monuments of Greek sculpture are Roman copies of lost or destroyed Greek bronze originals. Most of the knowledge we have of Greek painting comes from later Roman versions. The classical world of Greece and Rome ended almost 1,500 years ago, yet the classical style lives on. By looking at many of the architectural features of our national government buildings in Washington, D.C., the impact of classical art becomes evident. Our nation's Capitol, as well as presidential memorials, has been influenced by Roman architecture, thus why its style is called Neo-Classicism.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. How did Greek art come to Rome?
2. Besides the Greeks, what other cultural traditions influenced Roman art and architecture?
3. Why are Pompeii and Herculaneum important to historians studying Roman art?
4. How and why did the Romans use art as propaganda?
5. What original contributions did the Romans make to art and architecture?
6. What knowledge did Romans contribute to the production of art?
7. Why do you think that some public architecture in Washington, D.C., is modeled after Roman architecture?

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*Terms to Know for Roman Art and Architecture*

<b>Amphitheater</b>	An open theater that hosts entertainment performances.
<b>Aqueduct</b>	A pipe or channel that transports water either above or below ground.
<b>Architecture</b>	The art of designing and constructing buildings.
<b>Art</b>	Any object subject to aesthetic criteria, such as paintings, sculptures, or drawings.
<b>Artist</b>	A person who is hired to create and produce art.
<b>Bath</b>	A public meeting place for Romans with pools of hot and cold water. Baths were a form of recreation where people could socialize , exercise, and relax.
<b>Cameo</b>	A relief carving in glass that often depicts the profile of a person or a landscape.
<b>Casting</b>	Producing a sculpture or glasswork into a particular shape by pouring it into a mold and letting it harden.
<b>Classical</b>	The name given to the style of architecture made or inspired by the ancient Greeks or Romans.
<b>Coinage</b>	The art of minting (making) coins out of bronze, silver, or gold and designing them with portraits or other images.
<b>Decoration</b>	The act or process of adorning, embellishing, or ornamentation.
<b>Dome</b>	A type of vaulted ceiling that rises up from a round base and is usually shaped like one half of a hollow ball.

<b>Glassware</b>	Objects made out of glass and used for tableware, perfume containers, funerary urns, transport vessels, and <i>tesseræ</i> , that is, pieces of glass for mosaics.
<b>Hellenistic</b>	From the Hellenic, referring to that which is Greek. Cultural styles influenced by ancient Greek architecture and art. The start of the Hellenistic era is associated with the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE.
<b>Realistic</b>	A kind of portraiture created by the Romans that depicts the subject in a recognizable likeness.
<b>Idealized</b>	To represent something in an ideal or perfect form.
<b>Mosaic</b>	A picture or design made up of small pieces of colored stone, glass, tile, or brick called <i>tesseræ</i> .
<b>Patron</b>	One who buys, acquires, or sponsors the creation or production of artwork.
<b>Portrait</b>	A picture or sculpture of a person or group of people.
<b>Propaganda</b>	The spreading of ideas to influence or persuade people.
<b>Sculpture</b>	The art of shaping figures or designs in the round or in relief by chiseling marble, modeling clay, or casting a metal.
<b>Subject</b>	The central person or image in an artwork.

*Terms to Know for Roman Art and Architecture*

<b>Word</b>	<b>Summarize the definition in your own words</b>	<b>Draw a picture that symbolizes this word</b>

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