HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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# ROMAN ART

**Greek influence**   The visual arts, of ancient Rome, tend at their most characteristic to mass, weight—the Romans used concrete to good use, forming strong and lasting structures with it—and an impression of power. This, of course, is the broad sense left by Roman architecture and sculpture, the two Roman areas of decisive achievement, though of course Roman art was highly developed in other areas as well, like painting. Superficially resembling the Greeks in artistic expression, and during the early period avid for Greek sculptors, copyists, and models drawn from Greek art, the Romans slowly developed art styles that were distinctively their own.

**Temples**   From the outset, temple structures were the most conspicuous expressions of Roman culture. The temple was a place of worship, a communal gathering space, and a public art-space in which the finest of architects could go on display. Display themselves they did, in  splendid circular Etruscan-influenced structures like the Temple of Vesta in Roma (80 B.C.E.) or the F*ortuna Virilis* Temple from second century B.C.E. Rome, with its combination of Greek and Etruscan styles. The most elegant achievement of Roman temple architecture lay ahead, in the Pantheon (118-125 C.E.), a circular temple with a broad pediment and with a startlingly ample *oculus*, or skylight, that flooded the interior with daylight.

**Monuments**   Monumental structures of many varieties abound today in the still well preserved vestiges of ancient Rome. The *Coliseum* (80 C.E.) dominates the center of the old city, with its three stories of varying arch styles, and its amphitheatrical prospect over the city. Lengthy, and stylish aqueducts testify throughout ancient Italy to the Roman gift for practical infrastructure artistically blended with active urban settings. Structures like the Column of Trajan (106-113 C.E.) soar up from the city floor with their patriotic vertical (125 feet tall) history.

**Sculpture**   Free standing sculpture (so often of Emperors or military luminaries), as well as relief sculpture, brought to its perfection the Roman skill at carving, and digging under the stone for its most expressive qualities. The marble Augustus of Primaporta (20 B.C.E.) is a slightly more than life-sized self-commissioned impression of the Emperor, as a figure of dignity and withdrawal. His toga is imperial but noble, and his breastplate is decorated with emblems of pastoral peace, the condition he believed himself godsent to promote. He was following and establishing what was to be a Roman  tradition of imperial portrait sculptures, designed to magnify the required traits. The portrait sculpture of the Emperor Constantine (325 C.E.) glistens with the far away spiritual look of the first Christian Emperor.

**Painting**   Upper class Romans who could afford it decorated the walls of their summer villas, especially at the soon doomed cities of Pompei and Herculaneum, with brilliant paintings of land and nature scapes, and though much of this splendid work was destroyed by volcanic explosions the sumptuous achievement leaves us with a sense of the passionate sensibility that underlay much of the Roman achievement in art.

**Readings**

Henig, Martin, *A Handbook of Roman Art*, New York, l983.
Strong, Donald, et. al., *Roman Art*, New Haven, l995.

**Discussion questions**
The Romans are often characterized as a practical people, and contrasted in that with their more imaginative Greek predecessors. Does the Roman use of marble statuary and sculpture seem to you to reflect a practical spirit? How?

Many of the interior wall paintings from Pompeii are *trompe l'oeil* work, simulations (for example) of in depth rural scenes, which are actually painted on flat walls. Does this taste for artifice  suggest an aesthetic sensibility which is far from 'practical'?

Does Greek art seem to have dominated the whole extent of Roman art? Does there come a point, in the development of Roman art, when it appears to have broken loose from its Greek forefathers, and to have discovered its own idiom?