



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Chapter 8

Etruscan and Roman Art: It's All Greek to Me!

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out why the Etruscans smiled at death
- ▶ Analyzing Roman realism

- ▶ Interpreting propaganda art
- ▶ Touring Roman ruins

The amazing culture of the Greeks had a profound influence on their neighbors. The Etruscans and Romans, in particular, borrowed liberally from Greek culture. However, both peoples took Greek art in new directions that reflect their own unique civilizations.

The Mysterious Etruscans

The Etruscans appeared in central Italy in the 8th century B.C., about the same time that the Greeks founded colonies in southern Italy and Sicily. Because they didn't have their own script, the Etruscans adopted and

adapted the Greek alphabet. They also borrowed Greek art styles and techniques and incorporated a handful of Greek gods into their religion. Like the Greeks, the Etruscans were a confederation of city-states; they never united into a nation or empire. Nevertheless, by the 6th century B.C., they dominated most of Italy and even ruled Rome from 616 B.C. to 509 B.C. In that year, Brutus (possibly an ancestor of the Brutus who helped murder Julius Caesar 450 years later) and others overthrew Rome's last king, the Etruscan Tarquinius Superbus, and set up a republic.

Temple to tomb: Greek influence

Almost nothing remains of Etruscan architecture. But the 1st century B.C. Roman architect and writer Vitruvius, who saw some of it firsthand, describes Etruscan temples.



According to Vitruvius, they were almost square, with an equal amount of space between the porch and the interior of the temple. Built of mud bricks, these Etruscan temples featured simple columns, topped with an entablature and pediment similar to Greek Doric temples. (See Chapter 7 for more detail on entablatures and pediments.) Another difference between Etruscan and Greek temples is that Etruscan temples have a main entrance in the front (instead of having all-around access like Greek temples) and their proportions are squatty, with heavier rooflines than their Greek neighbors.

Smiles in stone: The eternally happy Etruscans

Not much is known about the Etruscans because, beginning in the late 5th century B.C.,

the Romans conquered Etruria city by city, erasing their aboveground culture. By the 1st century B.C., all that was left were their tombs. So to decipher Etruscan life, you have to go inside the houses of their dead, which were often built like houses for the living. In fact, some Etruscan cemeteries were designed like underground towns and even had streets connecting the tombs, presumably so the dead could visit each other.

The Etruscans were the first ancient civilization to look death in the eye with a smile — at least their tomb statues smile. That’s no surprise because early Etruscan tomb decoration didn’t feature death’s dark side (whatever that may be), but echoed life’s joys. Birds flit across tomb walls, dolphins swim through painted seas, half-naked dancers gyrate joyously and erotically, banqueters feast, fishermen fish, and hunters pursue their prey. The early Etruscans seemed to view death as part picnic, part safari, and part all-night party. No wonder the statues are smiling: They’re surrounded by a panorama of



life's pleasures.

Most scholars believe that the early Etruscans viewed death as a continuation of life. Another reason Etruscan statues smile is because Greek archaic statues (*kouros* and *kore*; see Chapter 7) usually smile, and the Etruscans copied them. The Archaic smile on Greek statues had a smile-for-the-camera appeal. There never seems to be a reason for the smile; it was just a convention, like saying "cheese" for a photographer.

But in later Etruscan tombs, death is less attractive. The tombs are grim and some of the murals feature demons. Clearly, the Greeks infected the later Etruscans with their dark view of death in Hades, which the Greek poet Homer called the "joyless kingdom of the dead" (*The Odyssey*, Book 11). One late Etruscan tomb mural includes an image of the three-headed Greek hell hound Cerberus, who stands sentinel at the gates of Hades, making sure no one ever leaves.

Romping through the Roman Republic

Rome began as a city-state ruled by kings in the 7th century B.C. After the overthrow of King Tarquinius in 509 B.C., the Romans instituted a republic, which was governed by two consuls, the senate, two assemblies, and later a group of ten tribunes. The consuls were elected annually and served one-year terms. The Roman Senate was made up of wealthy, upper-class Romans (similar to the British House of Lords) who were known as *patricians*. The two assemblies, the *comitia curiata* and the *comitia centuriata*, consisted of *plebeians* (commoners) — *plebes* for short.

In practice, patricians controlled both assemblies. In fact, they pretty much ran the show in the early republic. Why? For one reason,



republican Rome didn't pay its elected officials, so only the rich could afford to serve. Of the republic's 108 consuls, 100 came from the patrician class. This imbalance provoked several civil wars, which were usually followed by bloody "reigns of terror" called *proscriptions*. In a proscription, the winners of the civil war murdered their political enemies by the hundreds and even thousands. Many committed suicide to avoid being butchered.

After each civil war, power was redistributed a little more fairly, but never enough to satisfy the plebeians. In 494 B.C., the government invented another class of government officials called *tribunes* to appease the plebes. The tribunes were elected to promote plebeian interests and had extraordinary veto powers, but in practice they were often manipulated by wealthy patricians.

Later, ambitious men like Julius Caesar used the power struggles to leverage themselves to the top of Roman political life. Such op-

portunism and the upper class's refusal to share power with the plebes weakened the government, and after centuries of conquest, perhaps greater Rome (which included North Africa, Spain, and Gaul) had grown too large for republican rule. Civil wars and bloody proscriptions stained the last century of the republic. And even before Augustus Caesar founded the empire in 27 B.C., Rome flirted twice with one-man rule:

✓ In 82 B.C., the Roman Senate appointed the celebrity General Lucius Cornelius Sulla as dictator for life. After strengthening the conservative Senate and weakening the power of the tribunes, Sulla resigned in 80 B.C.

✓ In 48 B.C., after Julius Caesar defeated Pompey the Great in a civil war, the Senate elevated Caesar to dictator for life. Caesar was the only winner of a Roman civil war who didn't proscribe or massacre his political enemies after



the war. He forgave them and offered many of them, including Brutus and Cassius, posts in his government. Four years later, in 44 B.C., Brutus, Cassius, and other pro-republic conspirators assassinated Caesar on the Ides of March (March 15).

The two civil wars that followed Caesar's murder ended the Republic forever. The victor, Caesar's heir and grand-nephew Octavian (later called Augustus), became Rome's first emperor.

At its largest, the Roman Empire included most of Western Europe (all the territory around the Mediterranean), modern-day Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Romania, North Africa, as well as much of modern Great Britain. The Romans planted monuments and built towns, roads, aqueducts, and baths across these diverse lands. They left their mark everywhere — but was it their mark?

In most cases, early Roman artists and architects weren't Roman. They were Greek or Hellenized Etruscans. So early Roman art looked like Greek or Etruscan art. Unfortunately, little of it survives.

During the late Republic and the Imperial period, "Roman" master artists were still mostly Greek. No wonder many people have called Rome a copycat culture. Yet Rome was more than that. The Romans added on to their Greek and Etruscan cultural foundation. Perhaps their greatest contribution was an in-your-face realism in portraiture and mural painting and their massive and sometimes majestic architecture, much of it still standing.

Roots of realism: A family affair

The Romans practiced *ancestor worship*, praying to the spirits of their forefathers and foremothers, which were known as



manes (good ghosts). Wax versions of ancestors, called *lares*, stood guard over the family hearth. On feast days, the *lares* got to wear garlands. On the holiday *Parentales* (ancestors days held from February 13 through February 21), family members wore wax or terracotta masks (*imagines*) of their dead relatives in memorial processions. Gradually these masks became more and more realistic, paving the way for Roman realism in sculptural portraiture, which sprang up suddenly around 100 B.C. Roman realism is called the *veristic* (truth) style.

Art as mirror: Roman realism and republican sculptural por-

traits

The Romans were practical people; they looked life squarely in the eye. In art, their pragmatism translated into unflinching realism. When viewing their sculptural portraits (busts and statues), you feel as though you're face to face with real Romans. The artists showed their wrinkles, receding hairlines, sagging jowls, and paunches — and they usually captured the disposition of the model.

When Julius Caesar's great-nephew Octavian took over the government, not everyone was ready for one-man rule. So Octavian eased them into it. After two civil wars in a row, the Senate was docile and content to simply pretend to be a republic. They did what Octavian said, granting him even more power than they'd yielded to Julius Caesar, while preserving the forms of republican government. Augustus refused to call himself king or emperor — it was bad PR. But he did al-

low the senate to grant him the title *princeps*, or “first citizen,” and to give him a new name, Augustus (which means “venerable”).

Roman realism took an idealistic turn when Augustus Caesar launched the Roman Empire in 27 B.C. The new “emperor” had to train the Romans to accept one-man rule; so he spruced up his image and idealized it, making himself appear godlike and super-worthy of his job.



TIP Idealism in Roman art is a kind of red flag — it usually means that the art is propaganda.

The statue *Augustus of Prima Porta* (shown in Figure 8-1) depicts the youthful Augustus as a general of generals, pointing the way to Rome’s imperial future. Specifically, the statue celebrates Augustus’s recovery of Roman military standards lost to the Parthians (early Iranians) in 53 B.C. when they defeated the legions of Crassus (a member of the first Triumvirate with Julius Caesar and Pompey

the Great). The Parthians were Rome’s most resilient enemy. The fact that Augustus could beat them elevated his status as commander-in-chief enormously.

Figure 8-1: *Augustus of Prima Porta* is the most copied statue of Augustus Caesar (a.k.a. Octavian), Rome’s first emperor.



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The contrast between the statue’s metal breastplate and the crumpled toga around

his waist has at least two purposes:

- ✓ The softness of the fabric underscores the hardness of the armor and vice versa.
- ✓ Augustus's outfit shows his dual nature: The armor represents his military side as a great general, the toga his administrative side as the first citizen, or *princeps*, of Rome.

Augustus of Prima Porta is the embodiment of Roman virtues: youthful vigor, moral rectitude, and unflappable confidence. It also expresses Rome's and Augustus's imperial dignity. Even the boy-god Cupid, straddling a dolphin at Augustus's side, looks up in awe at the godlike Augustus. Cupid's presence is also an allusion to the Caesar clan's supposed descent from the goddess Venus (Cupid's mom). Julius Caesar often claimed descent from Venus — that's how he justified his political dominance of Rome.

Augustus's propaganda was a big hit. The statue was so popular that it was copied at least 148 times.



Though this form of propagandistic idealism is very Roman, the sculptor modeled *Augustus of Prima Porta* on two famous Greek statues. The pose is almost identical to Polykleitos's *Doryphoros* (see Chapter 7). Compare the stances and the position of the feet and left arms. But instead of throwing a spear, Augustus hurls his imperial message. He also looks straight ahead, boldly confronting the world, while *Doryphoros* turns his head to the right. The pose of the mini-Cupid beside Augustus is modeled on that of the infant Bacchus in Praxiteles's *Hermes and Bacchus*. In a way, *Augustus of Prima Porta* is a Greek statue inside a Roman one.

But most Roman statues and busts, even of



emperors, are not idealized. We see only naked realism in the bust of Vespasian, the ninth Roman emperor and builder of the Colosseum. Vespasian was no country-club king. He was a tough, blunt, down-to-earth general who fought his way to the top. He never pretended to be a god. In fact, he shocked Rome by dressing himself, putting on his own shoes, and deflating show-offs. According to Suetonius, a Roman historian, “when a young man, reeking of perfume, came to thank him for a commission . . . he’d obtained, Vespasian turned his head away in disgust,” cancelled the guy’s commission, and said he would have preferred that the man stunk of garlic.



Vespasian mocked the Roman tradition of deifying dead emperors. On his deathbed, the emperor, who was known for his locker-room sense of humor, cracked his last joke: “Dear me, it seems I am about to become a god.”

Roman reliefs are more worldly than their Greek counterparts, whose scenes were often set in the clouds of Olympus. Some Roman reliefs were more or less newspaper stories carved in stone. They recounted current events that the emperors didn’t want the world to forget. Many of these news reports were carved into Roman triumphal arches, to broadcast the irresistible might of Rome.

After winning wars, the Senate usually permitted Roman generals to build triumphal arches and other monuments to commemorate their victories. One of the most famous is Trajan’s Column (see Figure 8-2), a 98-foot-high commemoration of the Emperor Trajan’s conquest of Dacia (modern Romania). Trajan defeated the Dacians in a two-part war; the first phase was from A.D. 101 to A.D. 102, the second from A.D. 105 to A.D. 106.

Figure 8-2:
Trajan’s Col-

umn recounts the two-part Dacian War fought at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D.



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The sculptor recounts the marches and battles on a scroll that winds around the column like a filmstrip. (Of course, no one — except the gods — can read the episodes at the top without binoculars.) The first campaign is told on the lower half of the column, the second campaign on the upper half. The sculptor crunches in as many details as he can, often sacrificing aesthetics and creating mixed-up perspectives — you can see a march or battle from above, below, left, or right as if viewing

it through multiple camera lenses, which isn't necessarily bad. The column scenes tell a great deal about Roman weapons and war craft.

Realism in painting

Roman mural painting, which appeared suddenly in the second half of the first century B.C., surpassed all earlier painting in depicting life realistically. Because virtually no earlier Roman paintings have survived, historians don't know how the tradition evolved. It seems to have simply appeared as a fully mature style — which is impossible, because every style starts from somewhere and evolves. Undoubtedly the Romans learned how to paint realistically from Hellenistic models, but almost none of the Hellenistic models have survived either, so historians can't be sure.

The Romans, like the Greeks, used intuitive

perspective to create the illusion of three-dimensionality on flat surfaces. They didn't have a system for creating perspective — they simply had a feel for it. (Compare intuitive perspective to scientific perspective, discussed in Chapter 12.)



Roman murals sometimes depict Roman versions of Greek myths, like the fresco of the *Marriage of Venus and Mars* (see Figure 8-3) found in the House of Fronto in Pompeii. Compare the use of perspective in this fresco to flat Greek vase painting (see the color section). The Romans took realism to a much higher level. Notice the three-dimensionality of the furniture (viewer's left) and the shading in Venus's face (viewer's left). Also notice that the head of the woman standing in the doorway is slightly smaller than the other heads (the figures appear to shrink in the distance).

Figure 8-3: The *Marriage of Venus and Mars* illustrates Roman artists' use of intuitive perspective.



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The *Flora* fresco (see the color section) from ancient Stabiae, 4 1/2 miles south of Pompeii, is perhaps the most poetic of all Roman paintings. Because Flora, the goddess of flowers, gently turns her face from the viewer, you can only imagine her beauty or feel it reflected in the landscape that she beautifies. Flora is credited with bringing color into the world by planting flowers everywhere.

The Roman poet Ovid says Flora “warns us to use life’s beauty as it blooms” — to pluck it, just as she picks fresh flowers in the fres-

co and collects them in her basket. Little happens in this poetic painting; little *needs* to happen. The soft, caressing beauty of the landscape, the hinted-at loveliness of the barefoot goddess in her windswept gown, and her delicate gesture are enough. The fresco is as beautiful and moving today as it ever was, even in its damaged condition. For all its might and imperial majesty, Rome definitely had a soft side.

Roman mosaics

When Roman artists wanted an image to last, they used mosaics. Roman mosaics are made with small colored stones, pebbles, or pieces of glass cemented together to form highly realistic pictures like the *Scene from New Comedy* from Pompeii. Notice the comic facial expressions and the realistically ruffled fabrics of the actors in the mosaic. The figures even cast shadows! All this was achieved with tiny pieces of colored stone.

The small town of Vienne, France, which the Roman historian Tacitus described as an “historic and imposing city,” has more than 250 superbly preserved floor and wall mosaics. The *Hylas Mosaic* (see Figure 8-4) from Vienne shows the mythical hero Hylas being seduced by two nymphs while he tries to fill his water pitcher at a spring. The decorative border frames the central scene with simple but stylishly effective shell and floral patterns.

Figure 8-4:

The *Hylas Mosaic* illustrates the brief but often-represented myth of Hylas and the nymphs. Hylas, who was Hercules’s lover, disappeared after trekking to a spring to



fetch water.

Gloria Wilder

After the fall of the Western Empire in A.D. 476, the mosaic tradition continued to flourish in the Eastern Empire and in the Italian city-state of Ravenna (see Chapter 9).

Roman architecture: A marriage of Greek and Etruscan styles

Architecture, like the Ionic Temple of Apollo in Pompeii, built in about 120 B.C., is the best-preserved art form of the republican period. This temple is so Greek in style that it looks like it was shipped from Greece piece by piece.

Temple of Portunus

Later temples, like the Temple of Portunus, built in the 1st century B.C., look a little more homegrown. Although at first glance the structure (also known as the Temple of Fortune Virilis) appears to be a miniature Greek temple with graceful Ionic columns and an unadorned entablature and pediments, there are some subtle differences. Instead of the all-around three-step platform used in Greek temples as a base for the columns and a staircase (see the Parthenon in Chapter 7), the Romans added a flight of steps in front of the temple. In other words, they built a main entrance. (Greek temples can be entered from all sides.)

Also, while Greek temples are oriented toward the rising and setting sun for religious reasons, Roman temples can face any direction. Their position was determined by practical rather than religious reasons: the proximity of other buildings and Roman laws, which ensured that each building and house had its daily quota of sun rays. Solar heating was mandated by law in ancient Rome. No

one was allowed to erect a new building that blocked an older building's access to the sun. The Roman architect Vitruvius made sun-facing windows part of his housing designs.

Maison Carrée

About a century after the Temple of Portunus was built, a similar but larger temple called the Maison Carrée ("Square House"; see Figure 8-5) was erected in Nimes, a wealthy Roman city in Gaul. Whereas the older Temple of Portunus uses the simpler Ionic columns, the larger and more elaborate Maison Carrée employs Corinthian columns. The Maison Carrée is the best-preserved Roman temple in the world.

Roman aqueducts

A few miles from Nimes stands one of the most famous Roman structures, the Pont du Gard, a sprawling 900-foot-long aqueduct. Pont du Gard was once part of a 31-mile

aqueduct that carried 44 million gallons of water a day from the Eure River in Uzès to Nimes. The Pont du Gard was built in the middle of the 1st century A.D., probably by Augustus Caesar's son-in-law Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.

Figure 8-5: The Maison Carrée, in Nimes, France — which was erected around 19 B.C. to 16 B.C. and dedicated to heirs of Augustus — inspired the Virginia state capitol designed by Thomas Jefferson and completed in 1788.



Gloria Wilder

Roman engineering skills were unsurpassed in the ancient world. Although some of the aqueduct's limestone blocks weigh up to 6 tons, no mortar was used to hold them together. Yet the structure has held together for 2,000 years. How? Roman engineers linked the stones with sturdy iron clamps that are still holding today.

Is the Roman arch Roman?

Whereas most Roman temples look Greek or Greek-like, many other Roman structures actually look Roman. Majestic triumphal arches; massive, sprawling aqueducts; and the Colosseum have a distinctly Roman appearance. All these structures have rounded arches — in fact, the arch is their main architectural feature.

Roman triumphal arches appear throughout the former empire. The Triumphal Arch of Orange (see the nearby figure) was built by Julius Caesar in 49 B.C. in Orange, France, to commemorate his first victories over the Celts of Gaul. A Roman arch is part gateway — a road usually passes through an arch — and part memorial. The first arches were built of brick and stone. Later architects employed marble to make the memorials endure. Some triumphal arches have ornamental columns and most are decorated with commemorative reliefs that recount military victories.



Gloria Wilder

The Colosseum

Rome's showcase building is the Colosseum, a 6-acre sports arena where gladiators fought each other to the death. The Colosseum also featured fierce wild-animal hunts, mock naval battles (for which the bottom of the Colosseum was flooded), and public executions in which starved, man-eating animals mauled criminals tied to stakes. The arena also had warm-up circus acts like wrestling alligators, tight-rope-walking elephants (as

well as an elephant that could write in Latin with his trunk!), and human acrobats. On several occasions, Roman emperors fought in the arena (but these battles were rigged to guarantee the emperor's safety, unlike the duel between the Emperor Commodus and General Maximus in the Russell Crowe film *The Gladiator*).

The Emperor Vespasian began building the Colosseum in A.D. 72. His son Titus completed the amphitheater in A.D. 80 and inaugurated it with 100 days of games one year later.

The Colosseum design was based on linking two theaters together, which is why the structure is called an *amphitheater* (literally, "round theater"). Seventy-six entrance gates and barrel-vaulted corridors efficiently lead to three levels of tiered stone seats, allowing crowds of more than 50,000 people to enter and exit easily. The Colosseum also had a system of canvas awnings that was so complex that an entire naval unit was needed to



operate it.

The Romans didn't try to disguise the structural features of the Colosseum. Instead, they gave them a pleasing appearance. The three-level, circular arcade of arches looks like windows inviting passersby into the arena. The faux columns between the arches are basic Doric on the first level, Ionic on the second, and Corinthian on the third. As your eye travels up the building, the orders of architecture (style of columns and *capitals*, or column tops — see Chapter 7) become more elegant and refined.

The Pantheon

The Pantheon (see Figure 8-6), the temple of all the Roman gods, is Rome's most perfect building. It is topped by a gloriously constructed dome with a 143-foot diameter. The distance from the dome's peak to the floor is also 143 feet. When you enter the Pantheon, you have the sense of being inside a globe under the dome of an Olympian sky. The 29-

foot-wide *oculus* (opening) at the top enhances this feeling, allowing natural light to stream into the temple during the day and the stars and moon to peer through in the night.

Figure 8-6: The Pantheon, built between A.D. 125 and A.D. 128, is Rome's supreme architectural structure, a wonder of the Roman world.



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In the Pantheon, aesthetic considerations have priority over practical ones. A mask of marble hides the massive supporting brick arches and concrete walls. A spacious, circular colonnade of graceful Corinthian columns appears to support the dome effortlessly.



Everything in the temple rises toward the oculus, making visitors feel as though they're transcending gravity and floating into the company of the gods.

Rome's fall

Why did Rome fall? Maybe the empire got too big for its britches and had too much frontier to defend. In the late 3rd century A.D., the Emperor Diocletian decided that the empire was too vast for one man to rule, so he split it into two halves, each with its own emperor and sub-emperor. This form of government is called a *tetrarchy* (rule by four leaders). Maybe Christianity, which became the state religion in A.D. 380. during the reign of Theodosius I, gradually changed the fabric of Roman society and the empire model no longer fit.

Some have accused 4th- and 5th-century

Romans of getting lazy and soft. They hired mercenaries — Vandals, Huns, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Burgundians — to fight for them and allowed these tribes to settle in Roman provinces as *federates*. By the middle of the 5th century A.D., the Visigoths and Burgundians occupied most of southern Gaul. Many of the federates frequently turned on Rome. In A.D. 476, a coalition of Germanic tribes overran the city of Rome and ejected Romulus Augustus, the last Roman emperor, replacing him with their leader, Odoacer.

With the fall of Rome, culture declined, too. Government commissions to construct new buildings and design reliefs, statues, and mosaics dropped off. Art and culture retreated to Christian monasteries. Many of the techniques of making art were forgotten or lost. Besides, a Christianized Europe rejected or transformed the pagan, worldly art of the Roman Em-

pire. They preferred art that turned man's gaze to heaven or art that terrified him into behaving.

But only half of the Roman Empire fell in A.D. 476. The Eastern or Byzantine Empire, the capital of which was Constantinople (named after Constantine the Great), endured for another thousand years, though often on shaky legs. The Byzantine Empire preserved Roman art traditions, in a modified form. Oriental influences from Byzantium's neighbors mingled with traditional Roman art styles to create a uniquely Byzantine style (see Chapter 9).

Part III

**Art after
the Fall of
Rome:
A.D.
500–A.D.
1760**

