

# The Etruscans

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Etruscan art has many unique characteristics. It is influenced by, and greatly influences, artwork during other periods of time. In this lesson, you will learn about:

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2. [Etruscan Temple](#)
3. [Reclining Couple](#)
4. [Tomb of the Leopards](#)
5. [Tomb of the Reliefs](#)
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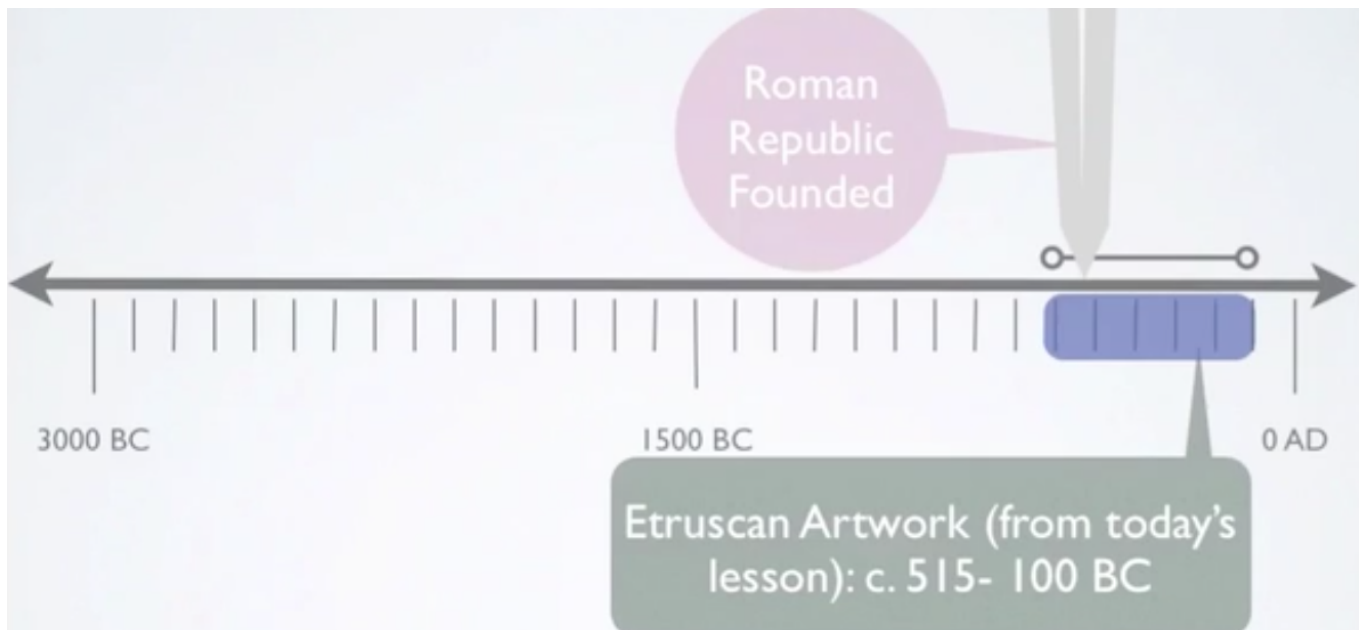
## BIG IDEA

The Etruscans were a distinct culture with highly accomplished artists, and influenced the culture, art, and architecture of ancient Rome.

## 1. Period and Location: The Etruscans

In this lesson, you will explore the years from 515 BCE to the 1st century BCE. It's important to note that the Etruscan artwork covered in this lesson comes from these years. The Roman Republic was founded in 509 BCE.

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson:



Below is a map highlighting the Italian peninsula, the geographic region that is the focus of this lesson. Note that the blue oval encompasses the Etruscan civilization.



## 2. Etruscan Temple

Etruscan temple architecture closely resembled that of the Greek temples, with some crucial differences. One of the main differences is a **ridgepole**, or a ridged element at the top of Etruscan temples, which was often decorated with sculpture. Also, Etruscan temples were built on a **podium**, which is an elevated platform. This was not used very much in Greek temples, but Romans used it in their temples.



Model of an Etruscan temple



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Ridgepole

The ridged element at the top of Etruscan temples.

##### Podium

An elevated platform.

## 3. Reclining Couple

The Etruscan civilization, or Etruria, was located between the Tiber and Arno Rivers right next to where the Roman civilization developed. Eventually they were conquered by the Romans, but the civilization wasn't destroyed. The Etruscans were very accomplished artists and shared stylistic characteristics with the Greeks.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Etruscan civilization wasn't eliminated after they were conquered, but rather was absorbed into the Roman civilization.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is a terracotta **sarcophagus** of a man and woman from 520 BCE. The first thing that stands out is their relaxed and informal pose and the use of the **archaic smile**, just like we see in the archaic sculpture of ancient Greece.



Reclining couple on a sarcophagus

520 BCE

Terracotta

The depiction of the man and woman together supports the Etruscan notion of women being more equal with men as opposed to the relegation of women to second class individuals within Greek society.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Etruscan women could attend public events, such as symposia, or ancient events where people got together and lounged, chatted, or gathered. They could also attend sporting events. Greek women were not allowed to attend such events.

Now, the happy depiction on sarcophagi didn't last. In fact, after the conquest by the Romans, there are examples such as the Sarcophagus of Lars Pulena, which shows an interesting juxtaposition of a single reclining figure on the lid—just a man, no wife—with side reliefs showing him being attacked by demons. Scholars have suggested this may reflect the politics of the time and the unhappiness with the decline of Etruscan civilization, which is an interesting comparison to the happy couple we see above.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Archaic Smile**



The stiff, unnaturalistic facial expression seen in many archaic Kouros and Kore figures.

### Sarcophagus

A stone coffin, often decorated with sculpture.

## 4. Tomb of the Leopards

The Etruscans did not limit themselves to sculpture. They were accomplished painters as well.

Take a look at this fresco from the Tomb of the Leopards:



Tomb of the Leopards

480–470 BCE

Fresco

This recalls the stylistic conventions of ancient Egypt, such as the flat, two-dimensional images and the combination of perspectives, as well as the side view for the body and frontal view for the eye, which is all very similar to what we saw in Egyptian depictions of people.

## 5. Tomb of the Reliefs

The Etruscan tombs may suggest an idea of the afterlife similar to that of the Egyptian religion, where the dead were entombed with the comforts of the living to ensure a pleasurable afterlife. Like the Egyptians, the Etruscans created necropolises, or cities of the dead. They consisted of burial mounds, or tumuli, with a tomb underneath. On the walls of the tomb were painted relief sculptures of all of the tools and implements that one would need to survive in the afterlife. Some scholars believe that Egyptian art may have been one of the biggest influences on Etruscan art, at least what we know of it.

In this image below of the Tomb of the Reliefs, the actual objects are carved in **stucco** and rendered in **low relief**.



Tomb of the Reliefs

Cerveteri, Italy

3rd century BCE





**Stucco**

A plaster used for coating wall surfaces.

**Low Relief**

A type of relief sculpture in which the three-dimensional element only extends from the wall surface a little bit.

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## 6. Capitoline Wolf

The Etruscans were also masters in bronze work, an example of which is shown here:



Capitoline Wolf (twins were added during Renaissance)

500 BCE

Bronze

The image above is the Capitoline Wolf from about 500 BCE. It is one of the most famous examples of bronze work from this time period.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Originally, the Capitoline Wolf would have been only a wolf, as the wolf was thought to have held some symbolic importance among the Etruscans. The twin babies, Romulus and Remus, the founder twins of Rome, were added during the Renaissance and recall the legend of their birth and rearing by a mother wolf.

## 7. Chimera

The Chimera below is another great example of the skill that Etruscan artists possessed. Sometimes this broken sculpture is referred to as the Wounded Chimera, and it is from 4th century BCE.



Chimera (also known as Wounded Chimera)

4th century BCE

Bronze



The above depiction of the mythical chimera shows it with a serpent's tail, body of a lion, and a goat head emerging from its back. It is an interesting blend of realism and stylized elements. There are several characteristics that are naturalistic:

- The musculature
- The pose
- The suggestion of ribs beneath the skin

There are also several highly stylized characteristics:

- The mane
- The whiskers on its muzzle
- Hair along the spine

It is a beautiful rendition of what appears to be a wounded animal flinching back in fear and preparing to pounce in defense.

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## 8. Aule Metele

Below is the Aule Metele, known as The Orator, from 1st century BCE, and it is in bronze also.



**Aule Metele (also known as The Orator)**

Early 1st century BCE

Bronze

This is one of the latest samples of Etruscan artwork. It clearly shows the influence that the Romans had on the Etruscan civilization, which was fully absorbed by the Romans at this point.

Distinct Roman stylistic elements can be seen in the Aule Metele:

- The dress or the clothing
- The pose
- The physical features, such as the close-cropped hair



#### DID YOU KNOW

The only thing truly Etruscan in the Aule Metele is the name. In a way, it's sort of symbolic of the way in which the Etruscan civilization dissolved into and melded with the Roman civilization. It's almost as if the figure is waving goodbye.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of the Etruscans**. While doing so, you examined **Etruscan temple** architecture, noting that it closely resembled that of the Greek temples, with some crucial differences, such as the Etruscan use of a ridgepole and the elevation of the temples onto a podium.

You also explored artworks from this period, such as **Reclining Couple, Tomb of the Leopards, Tomb of the Reliefs, Capitoline Wolf, Chimera, and Aule Metele**. The Etruscans were very accomplished artists and shared stylistic characteristics with the Greeks. Not only did you look at sculptures, but you also examined paintings and artworks made out of bronze.

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#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Archaic Smile

The stiff, unnaturalistic facial expression seen in many archaic Kouros and Kore figures.

##### Low Relief

A type of relief sculpture in which the three-dimensional element only extends from the wall surface a little bit.



**Podium**

An elevated platform.

**Ridgepole**

The ridged element at the top of Etruscan temples.

**Sarcophagus**

A stone coffin, often decorated with sculpture.

**Stucco**

A plaster used for coating wall surfaces.