

# Portraiture, Republic to Flavians

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

The two main types of Roman portraiture, veristic and idealizing, had a large role in the lives of the Romans from the Republic to the Flavians. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. [Period and Location: Portraiture, Republic to Flavians](#)
2. [Roman Portraiture](#)
3. [Portrait of Augustus](#)
4. [Portrait of Hadrian](#)
5. [Portrait of Livia](#)
6. [Portrait of Vespasian](#)
7. [Portrait of Young Flavian Woman](#)



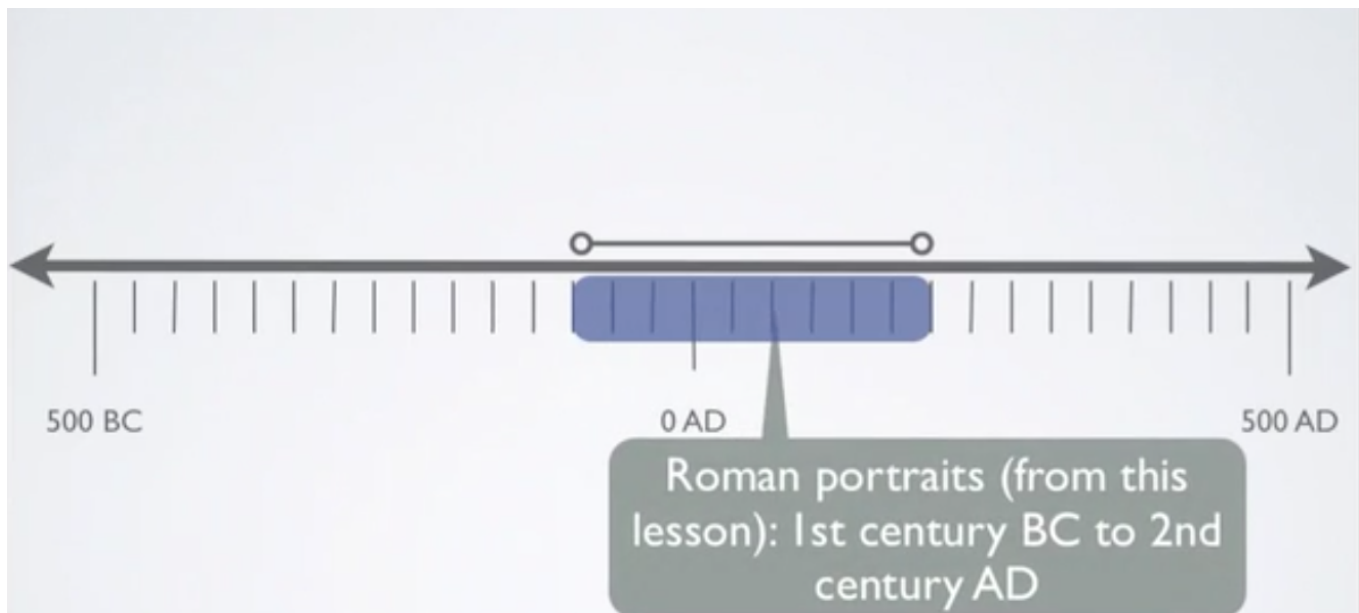
## BIG IDEA

The Roman portrait was an important object of religious devotion and legacy. The Romans believed that a person's personality was present in their head and face, and the prevalence of portrait busts supports this. Portrait busts preserved common family traits, such as a distinctive hairstyle or nose shape, and reinforced the idea of belonging to a certain family lineage.

## 1. Period and Location: Portraiture, Republic to Flavians

The time in history covered in this lesson ranges from first century BCE to the second century CE. The geographical location covered in this lesson is the Italian peninsula, around the city of Rome.

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson. Notice 0 CE is in the middle of the timeline. This has changed from previous lessons.



## 2. Roman Portraiture

The Roman **portrait** is an important type of Roman sculpture. The **bust**, which is the sculpture of just the shoulders and head, didn't exist in Greece. It was, however, common in the Etruscan art that preceded ancient Rome. The busts themselves became important memory objects among the Romans and were considered an important part of ancestral connection among families. These portrait busts were very important to the people, and they were kept at home in shrines and pulled out from time to time for the ancestors.



### DID YOU KNOW

Ancestors were actually deified among their family members, which reflects the deification that the empire bestowed upon its emperors, an action called **apotheosis**.

**Veristic** and **idealistic** are the two types of portraiture. The forms are still **individualized** in both of these types, unlike what we saw in many examples of Greek sculpture where the idealized forms tended to border on the generic. This individualization was important because these busts were made as a form of physical memory. Ancestral lineage was important for the Romans, and being able to trace individual characteristics that were passed down through generations could be reflected in a portrait.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Portrait

An image of an individual person.

#### Bust

An image of a person that consists of the head and upper torso.

#### Veristic Style

A style of ancient Roman portraiture that emphasized a person's age and physical imperfections as a reference to wisdom and experience.

**Idealistic Style**

A style of portraiture that reduces a person's physical imperfections, giving an appearance of youth and athleticism.

**Individualism**

In art and portraiture, the emphasis placed on a person's unique physical characteristics.

**Apotheosis**

The elevation of a person to the status of a god, often seen in ancient Rome in portraits of emperors and busts of deceased family members.

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## 3. Portrait of Augustus

Below is a great example of a monumental portrait that combines idealization with individualism.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This is a portrait of the first emperor, Augustus Caesar, called the Portrait of Augustus at Prima porta.





Portrait of Augustus at Prima Porta

Early 1st century CE

Marble (6'8")

The Portrait of Augustus at Prima Porta was a commemorative sculpture of Augustus addressing his troops. Interestingly, it draws formal posing similarities to Polykleitos's Doryphoros, The Spear Bearer.

This portrait is idealistic in its youthful depiction of the emperor, yet it still retains the physical idiosyncrasies that allowed one to identify it as Augustus. Augustus, even in his old age, always was portrayed as youthful in his portraits. The hairstyle that came to be known as the Caesar haircut references the famous portrait of Alexander the Great, with his flowing curls and cowlick. In doing so, this work of art is basically saying that Augustus belongs to the same family of rulers as Alexander. Other emperors that followed Augustus continued the tradition of the Caesar haircut and youthful, idealized appearance.

Portraiture as propaganda is also present in this work of art. The inclusion of a dolphin references Augustus's naval victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra, while the cupid is a reference to the fact that the family of Julius Caesar was said to have been descended from Venus. This, combined with the youthful appearance of Augustus, depicts him as a god. The military victory on the breastplate reinforces the idea of Augustus as a military leader and the person who ushered in the Pax Romana, or 200-year period of peace.

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## 4. Portrait of Hadrian

This idea of idealized individualism, if you can call it that, is also apparent in this image of the emperor Hadrian, from the second century CE: Hadrian's portrait emphasizes his beard, which might be a reference to Pericles, since Hadrian was known for his love of Greek culture.





Portrait bust of the emperor Hadrian

2nd century CE

Marble

Hadrian ruled many years after Augustus. Notice that it is youthfully rendered but still distinguishable.

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## 5. Portrait of Livia

Portraiture was not just limited to men, however.

➞ EXAMPLE Take, for example, this bust of the third wife of Augustus, Livia Drusilla:





**Portrait bust of Livia Drusilla**

**Empress of Rome (third wife of the first emperor, Augustus) and mother of the emperor Tiberius**

**Late 1st century BCE–early 1st century CE**

**Marble**

This bust is another example of an idealized youthful form with enough distinguishing characteristics that you can still tell who it's representing. In terms of idealization, the influence of Greek conventions is very apparent. Livia somewhat resembles an archaic Greek kore, with a combination of youthful and individualized traits.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Livia Drusilla was the Empress of Rome, as she was the third wife of the first emperor, Augustus. She didn't rule in her own right. She's the mother of the eventual emperor, Tiberius. And this marble portrait is from either late first century BCE or early first century CE, sometime during her lifetime.

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## 6. Portrait of Vespasian

The Flavian dynasty of emperors began with the emperor Vespasian. He wanted to distance himself from Nero, who was his despotic predecessor, so his portraits returned to the veristic style, emphasizing his age and experience.

➞ EXAMPLE Vespasian is pictured below.



Portrait bust of the emperor Vespasian

1st century CE

Marble

You can see a sharp departure from the idealized form of Augustus. This is an example of veristic portraiture, where the intent is to show a very realistic representation of the subject.

Age was associated with wisdom and experience. These are admirable qualities in an individual. It's easy to see the passage of time rendered in Vespasian's image. The artist didn't hold back at all. Notice the following attributes of age in the image above:

- Wrinkles from the furrowed brow
- The loss of hair
- Jowls

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## 7. Portrait of Young Flavian Woman

During this time, the aristocratic and very elaborate women's hairstyles reached their peak. Attention to detail and dedication in portraying the subject as an individual were essential. This is very different from the generalizing of individual traits that we see in Greek portraiture that preceded it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a young Flavian woman called, appropriately enough, the Young Flavian Woman. It dates from about 90 CE.





**Young Flavian Woman**

**90 CE**

**Marble**

Two things stand out in this image. First, the individual characteristics of this woman are apparent in features such as the nose, which has a slight bump in the middle. This is something that you wouldn't see in ancient Greek sculpture. Another thing that stands out is the hair. Notice the impressive height and imagine the time it must have taken to sculpt the individual curls in high relief. It must have been exhausting.



## SUMMARY

Veristic and idealistic styles are the two main types of Roman portraiture, and they had a large role in the lives of the Romans from the Republic to the Flavians. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of portraiture, from the Republic to the Flavians**.

**Roman portraiture** was covered in this lesson. The Roman portrait is an important type of Roman sculpture.

Finally, you explored some examples of portraits:

- **Portrait of Augustus**
- **Portrait of Hadrian**
- **Portrait of Livia**
- **Portrait of Vespasian**
- **Portrait of Young Flavian Woman**

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Apotheosis**

The elevation of a person to the status of a god, often seen in ancient Rome in portraits of emperors and busts of deceased family members.

### **Bust**

An image of a person that consists of the head and upper torso.

### **Idealism**

A style of portraiture that reduces a person's physical imperfections, giving an appearance of youth and athleticism.

### **Individualism**

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### **Portrait**

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