

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-5b The Arts
Book Title: World Civilizations
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10-5b The Arts

Roman artforms varied sharply in development and imagination. The Latin language evolved rapidly as the republic expanded its contacts with others. Roman literature began in the third century B.C.E., when poetry of some excellence, historiography of a rather inferior sort, and drama modeled on that of the Greeks began to appear. During the republic's last century, Cicero, Julius Caesar, Terence, Polybius, Cato, and Lucretius were major contributors. The best days of Roman literature, however, were still ahead, in the early imperial epoch, when a brilliant constellation around the emperors Augustus and Tiberius created a memorable body of poetry and prose. Virgil's *Aeneid* (ah-NEE-id) became the official version of the founding of Rome by refugees from the burning Troy; Ovid, Horace, and Catullus established Latin poetry equal to yet different from its Greek models. In the hands of prose masters such as the historian Tacitus, the satirist Juvenal, and the storytellers Pliny, Petronius, and Suetonius, the Latin language became an extraordinary instrument capable of extreme directness and concision.

In the pictorial and plastic (three-dimensional) arts, the early Roman sculptors and architects worked from both Etruscan and Greek models without much elaboration of their own. With few exceptions, the "Greek" statues in the world's fine arts museums are Roman copies of originals that have long since disappeared. By the end of the Republican era, this was changing, and a specifically native style was emerging. One of its greatest strengths was portrait sculpture, especially the busts that were produced in large numbers. These are amazingly realistic and seem modern in a way that other ancient art generally does not.

The architectural style favored in the republic was strongly reminiscent of the Greek temple, but it also incorporated Hellenistic arches and circles—as in the frequent cupola roofs and semicircular altars—to a much greater degree. Roman skill in masonry work and affinity for the grand style combined to give magnificent expression to public works and buildings throughout the empire. The Forum and the Coliseum still stand in modern Rome, witnesses to the exceptional quality of Roman stonework.

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