Greek and Roman Art

Classical Greek Art

The Greeks were superior. The rest of mankind, including the highly civilised Egyptians, were just barbarians; their speech made up of unintelligible grunts, "bar-bar-bar" (not far removed from our blah-blah-blah). Romans accepted that superiority, deciding that art should aspire to the standard set by Greeks.

Aspects of Greek life explain the prevalence of the nude youth in sculpture.

> In contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Greeks did not distinguish between the physical features of men and gods. Gods enjoyed for eternity the first bloom of youthfulness which humans enjoy only briefly, and that was the way they should be depicted (no matter what Ruben later thought).

> Games at Olympia and elsewhere were religious festivals, and athletes competed naked. The athletes were soldiers, who came from the upper ranks of society and who protected Greek city-states. Competing was also propaganda: "look how well we are defended".

> The Greeks believed men were superior to women in beauty as well as strength.

Archaic Greek sculptures (*kouroi)* were symmetrical and their anatomy was not accurate. The fifth-century Athenian sculptor ***Kritios*** produced a more natural form.
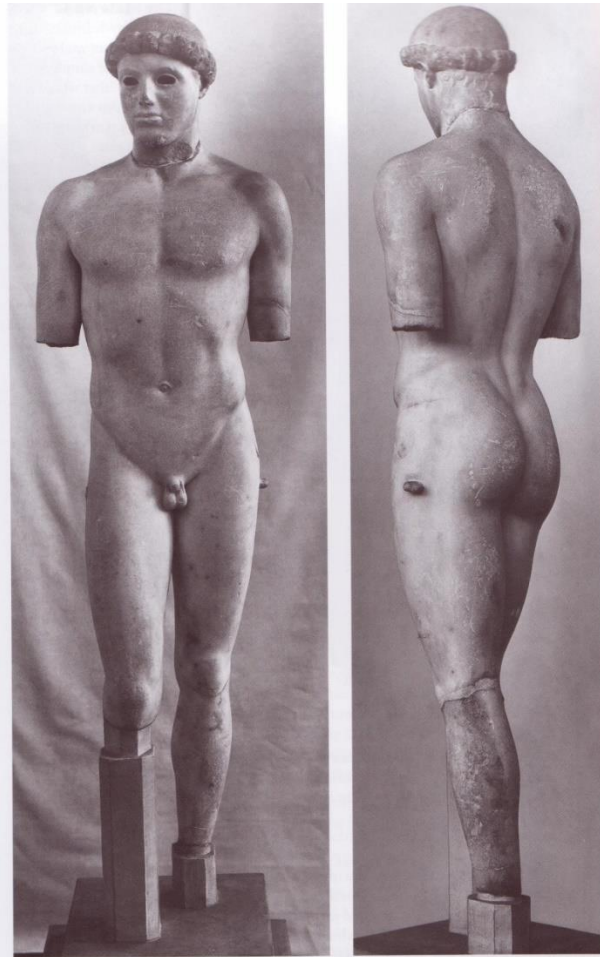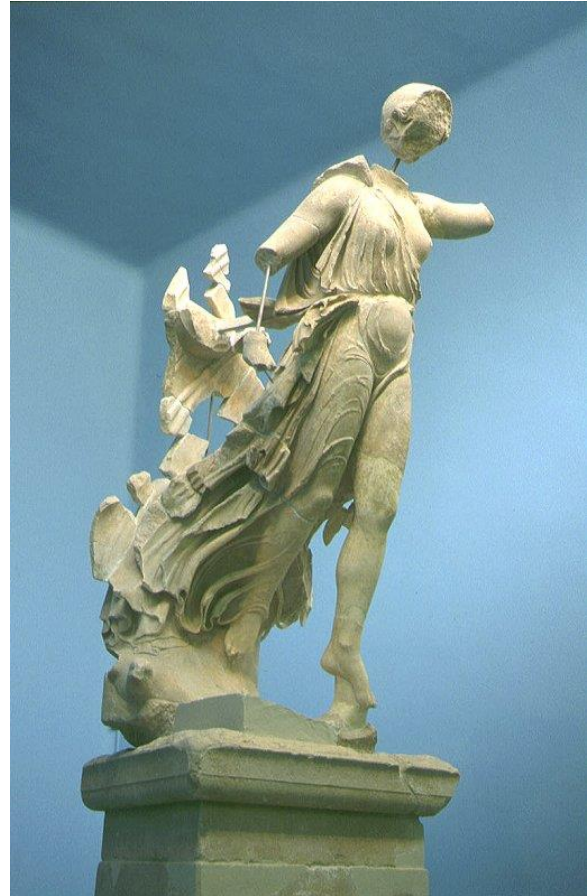

Kritios Boy c 480 BC

The Classical period of Greek civilisation followed victories over the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC, at sea in the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC and a year later on land at Plataea. The Greeks emerged with their superiority underlined. One of the finest classical Greek statues is the bronze *Charioteer*, cast to celebrate a victory at the Pythian Games at Delphi in honour of Apollo. '*Nothing in Excess'* and *'Know thyself'* are inscriptions at Delphi. The *Charioteer* is a subtle ideal of moderation. Animation is achieved by slight variations, in the folds of the lower tunic, the slight turn of the head to the right and the angled feet. Drapery is used to catch the light which adds vitality.

Charioteer, from the Sanctuary of Apollo, Delphi   Paeonius of Mende, *Nike* from Olympia c 420 BC
478 or 474 BC

Sculptors discovered that drapery could indicate movement as well as form. *Nike* is one of the best examples; her dress swirling out behind her. *Nike* is the only surviving work by a named sculptor from this period. Pieces by other sculptors were copied by Romans, usually in marble rather than the original bronze.
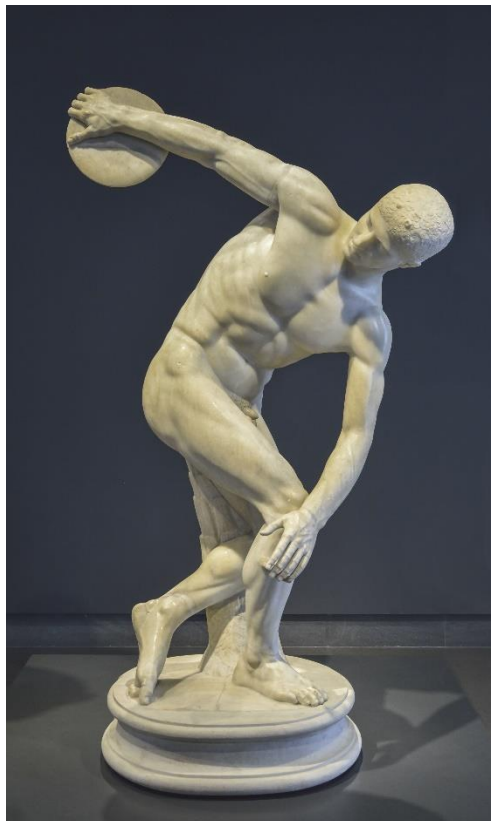
Myron of Eleutherae, *Discobolus* (later Roman copy)

Myron's original bronze work would not have needed the tree-stump for support. The Greeks considered his work the epitome of *rhythmos* – a body in equilibrium, with limbs balancing each other. The winding of the body, the tension and limbs convey a sense of movement.

Greek artists strived for the Ideal image. Xenophon recounts that Socrates told the painter Parrhasius how to do this; *"as it isn't easy to come across one single model who is beyond criticism in every detail, you combine the best features of every one of a number of models and so convey the appearance of entirely beautiful bodies".* Cicero and Pliny tell how the painter Zeuxis used five different women for the image of Helen of Troy (the fairest woman on earth). This was depicted by many artists later.

Francois-Andre Vincent, *Zeuxis Choosing his Models for the Image of Helen from among the Girls of Croton*, 1789

The quest for the Ideal in art was started by Plato who argued that all perceptible objects were imperfect copies of Ideas, which could only be apprehended by reason. Thus, the more painting and sculpture imitated visual appearance the more corrupt and deceptive they were. All imitative art was banned from his *Republic*.   Plato's theory forced artists to attempt the Ideal, a concept which would have a lasting influence on European art theory.

Yet, this urge to idealise was checked by the need for verisimilitude which would also affect European art. Zeuxis and Parrhasius were celebrated for the realism of their paintings. Pliny the Elder tells the story of a painting competition between them. Zeuxis produced a painting with grapes which were so realistic birds flew up to eat them. Parrhasius then painted such a realistic image of a curtain that Zeuxis asked for it to be drawn back so he could see the picture behind. When he realised his mistake Zeuxis conceded the prize explaining that he had deceived only birds while Parrhasius had deceived an artist.

Parrhasius was prolific but arrogant, styling himself 'Prince of Painters'. Pliny did not agree and sniffed; *"Parrhasius also painted some smaller pictures of an immodest nature, taking his recreation in this sort of wanton amusement."* Zeuxis later painted a boy holding grapes, which again attracted birds. However, he was dismayed thinking it meant the child was not realistic; *"I have painted the grapes better than I have painted the child. If I had been as successful with the child, he would have frightened the birds off."* Zeuxis is a little hard on himself, forgetting that birds are scared by movement. A mural in the Hermitage depicts the scene.

Zeuxis painting a Boy with Grapes, (mural) Gallery of the History of Ancient Painting, State Hermitage, St Petersburg

The Ideal could not simply be constructed by assembling the best features of models. Proportional relationships were important. Polyclitus wrote a treatise on the subject and illustrated it with a statue – known only from later copies.


According to the canon of proportion, beauty or perfection of a human figure *"arises in the commensurability of the parts such as that of finger to finger, and of all fingers to the palm and wrist, and of those to the forearm, and of the forearm to the upper arm, and, in fact, of everything to everything else."*

To show this perfection, a statue had to be nude. The idealised statues of Greece, copied by the Romans and rediscovered in 15th century Italy, became part of the Western artistic canon and established a criterion of human beauty.

The balance between idealization and naturalism shifted. *Doryphorus* is an ideal figure. The *Warrior*, looks more natural, despite a very similar pose.

Despite so many male nudes, naked females were not sculpted to begin with. When the Greeks adopted the naked Syrian fertility goddess Astarte and renamed her Aphrodite, they immediately clothed her. Prostitutes were depicted naked in seductive poses in brothels, so a naked female among male athletes in sanctuaries or temples would have been extremely odd.

Polyclitus, *Doryphorus* (Imperial Roman copy)
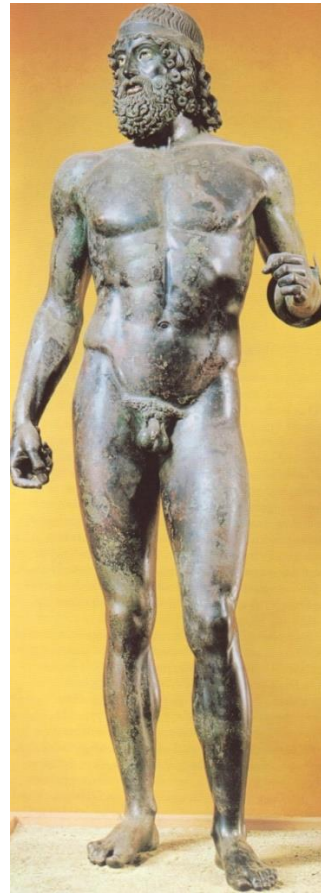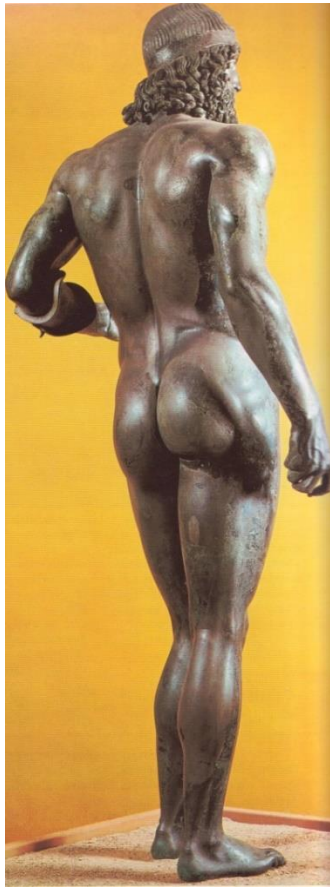
Warrior from Riace, 5th century BC
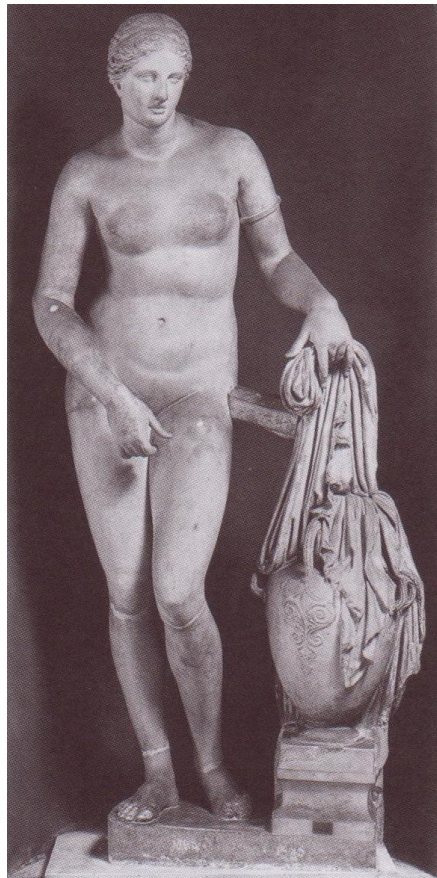
Praxiteles *Aphrodite of Cnidus* (Roman copy) and *Capitoline Aphrodite* (Roman copy)

Aphrodite of Cnidus is the first completely nude female statue in ancient Greek sculpture. Praxiteles virtually created the classical Western art image of the female nude. The stance he adopted was changed later (around 300 BC); one arm being lifted in front of the breasts, producing the model used repeatedly in European art for the Venus of modesty.

Roman Art

The Hellenistic period is roughly the three centuries following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. Alexander's conquests are celebrated on his sarcophagus.   Decorated sarcophagi were found in the Orient, ancient Egypt and with the Etruscans. They were shaped like a house and intended to be a dwelling place for the deceased. They became common in Western art, especially for popes.

Alexander Sarcophagus, c 310 BC

Portraiture was rarely practised by Greeks, who sought the divine or idealised form. But sarcophagi carried images of the deceased. Alexander, portrayed with the lion-skin of Hercules and the horn of the Egyptian ram god Amun, became the first in a long line of European monarchs deified and worshipped in a way the Greeks had preserved only for their gods. He is seen on the left.
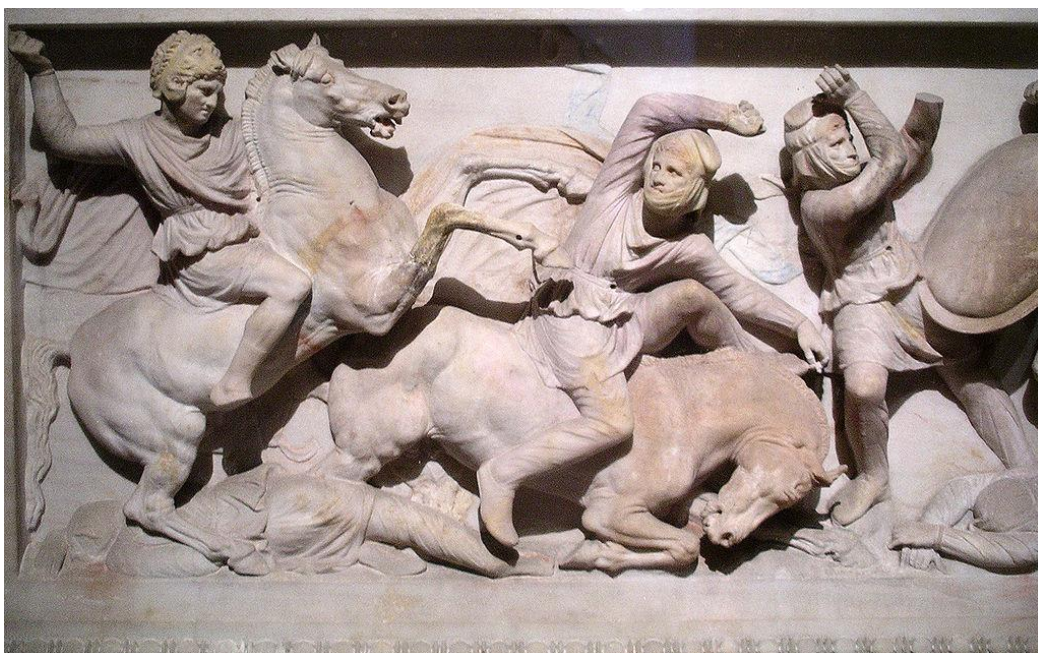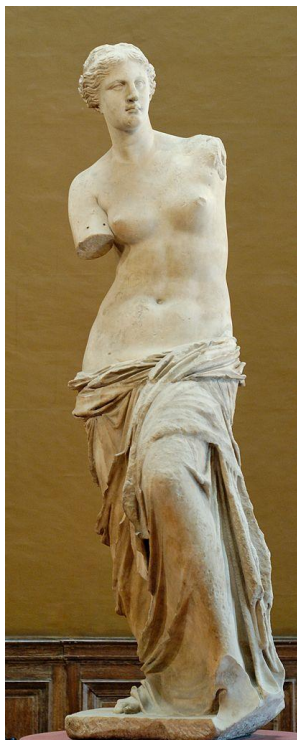

Alexander Sarcophagus (View of Alexander)

Romans admired and collected Greek sculptures, and the most popular were less idealized than Classical examples.

Medici Venus (1st Century AD copy)

Venus de Milo c 150 BC

Apollo Belvedere (2nd Century AD copy)

The *Medici Venus* is similar to the *Capitoline Aphrodite,* but she is no longer shy. Her body is more upright so she is not attempting to hide or appear ashamed; her head is lifted and turned away in a coquettish way. *Venus de Milo* is even more assertive.   The original *Apollo Belvedere* was cast in bronze in the late 4th century, and is softer and more elegant than his Greek prototypes; his face is stunningly beautiful too. *Venus de Milo* and *Apollo* show Hellenistic changes to sculpture – soft, warm flesh, worldly elegance and self-awareness. They seem to have caressed out of marble. These forms of Venus and Apollo would have to wait a millennium to become famous in art. The coquettish Venus was damned as Christianity spread over Europe. She was seen as the incarnation of sinful lust and depravity. Sandro Botticelli brought her back to life in the 1480s.

Giambattista Tiepolo, *Alexander the Great and Campaspe in the Studio of Apelles*, 1740

The Hellenistic period saw the first histories of art and from these, Romans believed that art had continuously improved to a high point in their own time (this idea of progress would feature prominently in later art theory). Alexander's artists, Praxiteles and Lysippus, were thought to have excelled all their predecessors. His court painter Apelles was said by Pliny to have, *"surpassed all those who were born before him and all those who came later."* Alexander got Apelles to paint the portrait of his favourite mistress, Campaspe, in the nude. The scene was painted later by Tiepolo.

Apelles put his finished works in a gallery so they could be seen by passers-by. He stood out of sight and listened to comments; *"thinking the public a more observant critic than himself."* A shoemaker pointed out that a sandal had been painted with too few loops. The next day the painting had been amended by Apelles and was once more on display. So proud was the shoemaker he then found fault with the leg, whereupon Apelles stepped out and rebuked the shoemaker not to go beyond the sandal: *"Let a shoemaker stick to his last".*

Apelles was a close friend of Alexander the Great – no other artist was allowed to paint the king. Alexander visited Apelles' studio often and talked a great deal about painting *"without any real knowledge of it, and Apelles would politely advise him to drop the subject, saying that the boys grinding the colours were laughing at him: so much power did his authority exercise over a King who was otherwise of an irascible temper (Pliny)."* While painting her portrait, Apelles fell in love with Campaspe. Alexander, finding out, presented Campaspe to Apelles, despite his love for her and her distress at being demoted from mistress to the king to mistress to a mere artist. The generous gesture was painted by Meynier.

Charles Meynier, *Apelles and Campaspe*, 1822

Alexander was evidently in thrall to his artist, who was evidently a very confident man. Apelles once entered a competition to paint a horse. On the day all the paintings were displayed, he noticed that his competitors seemed to be spending all their time with the judges. Fearing bribery, Pliny relates; *"Apelles had some horses brought and showed them the pictures one by one; and the horses only began to neigh when they saw the horse painted by Apelles; and this always happened, showing it to be a sound test of artistic skill."*

Hellenistic writers found themselves in a muddle. Art followed Plato's goal of attaining an Ideal standard. But if that standard had been attained, how was art to proceed and improve? Plato's theory was attacked by Aristotle. Aristotle argued that the form an object took depended not on a fixed "Ideal" but on who made the object, what it was made of, and what its purpose was.

Aristotle's arguments are terribly important to art. He opened the way to expressiveness - the cultivation of the artist's individuality – but also the idea that a certain style might be appropriate for some circumstances but not for others (which would lead to Renaissance idea of *decorum*). Aristotle's ideas meant that statues and paintings were no longer uniform Ideals, but were creations of individual artists working for a particular patron.

One of the finest examples of this shift in art is the statuette of a *Dancer*. Her body and her movement under the clothing are wonderfully natural – seemingly only attained by close observation of a real model. The complicated changes of direction are beautifully balanced, her lifted toes wonderfully conceived.

Dancer c 225-175 BC (The Met, New York)

She is a statuette used for decoration. Statuettes of much less attractive subjects were also sculpted: grimacing dwarfs, emaciated youths and beggars. This was another change in art attributable to Aristotle who maintained that an imitation was in itself pleasurable, and what might repel in everyday life may please in art. This was exactly opposite to Plato's view that all imitations are not just false, but morally harmful. It clashed too with long-standing Greek thought that considered *good* and *beautiful* as inextricably linked. Almost no distinction was made between physical and moral beauty; Homer's heroes were handsome and his villains ugly and deformed (an idea adopted by mainstream Hollywood films for a long time).

Socrates, who was snub-nosed and short, evolved a different view of outer and inner man. Nobility of soul might be harboured by an unprepossessing exterior. This was another change to have enormous consequences for art. The contrast between the weakness of body and strength of mind is clear in the statue of *Demosthenes* – an opponent of Philip of Macedon and Alexander. His frail body is complemented by the fierce spirit radiating from his face.

Demosthenes, (Roman copy of original, probably by Polyeuctes c 250 BC)

Hermarchus, late 1st century BC

Hermarchus, the chief follower of Epicurus, is shown with loose flesh and a pot belly, but the old philosopher looks endearing. The beauty of the inner man chimed with the introspection of the two main Hellenistic philosophies: Stoicism (virtue being its own reward) and Epicureanism (virtue being the prerequisite of happiness). This new emphasis on inner life generated the new art form of Allegory.

Sleeping Eros c 250-150 BC

By the second century BC, Greek gods were no longer credible as super-beings influencing the life of mankind. In Hellenistic art, gods increasingly become personifications: of love, death, wisdom, courage. This naturalistic sculpture of a child asleep is marvellous, but the wings suggest he is Eros, god of love. Gods are usually shown as being active. He may be asleep because he has found the tranquillity attained, according to Stoics, when desires are laid to rest. He might also be one of the brothers Hypnos or Thanatos – sleep and death – who were visualised as winged children. Such uncertainties can arise in allegory. Opportunity, luck, strife and forgetfulness were also depicted through the form of gods. The Greek sculpture of Nike (above) was a homage to the god. The *Nike of Samothrace*, on the other hand, was an allegory of Victory.

Victory of Samothrace c 190 BC

Hellenistic Ruler c 150-140 BC

The folk of the small island of Samothrace commissioned the statue, 2.5 metres tall, to commemorate a famous naval victory just off their coast. In the original sculpture Nike was shown touching down on a prow of a ship set in a fountain with boulders rising from the water. Nike's landing on a ship during the battle turned the tide. The sculpture was found in pieces on the island in the 19th century by a French archaeologist. The headless figure was taken to the Louvre.

Public art like this was on a different scale. Lysippus revised the canon of proportions for over-life sized figures, reducing the size of the head and making the bodies slender to produce a taller and more elegant appearance (the Mannerists in the 16th century would follow suit). When the painter Eupompus asked him which of the older sculptors he took as a model, Lysippus *"pointed to a crowd of people and said that it was Nature herself, not an artist, whom one ought to imitate."* The observation of nature and ideal form were married in the new vogue for "Ruler Portraits" – an accurate depiction of head with physical perfection, considered then to be an attribute of a good king.

The defeat of the invading Gauls which brought Rome to dominance was celebrated by a series of statues. None survive, but the most famous is the *Dying Gaul*, an image destined to be used repeatedly in art. Hellenistic philosophy of the dignity of the inner man is represented in a figure, whose spirit persists as life slowly drains from his body.

Dying Gaul, Roman copy of bronze original of c 230-220 BC

Wall-paintings and floor mosaics followed Greek art. The most impressive mosaic, *Battle of Issus*, copies a Greek painting, perhaps by Philoxenus of Eretria whom Pliny credits with a painting of the scene. The Roman mosaic is in the same limited range of colours (white, yellow ochres, red and black) which Greek painters used. Alexander, coming from the left (we see his upper body and attractive youthful face) faces the Persian King of Kings Darius (in golden head-dress). Darius looks helpless as his charioteer whips the horses into retreat. The mosaic shows the painting's original treatment of figures; shading gives them weight; shadows are cast on the ground. Light is treated as in no other surviving work, reflections and highlights glittering off weapons; a face reflected in a shield. Foreshortening of the bolting horses and people shown in a variety of attitudes and from different viewpoints give the feel of action. All these artistic techniques originating in the 4th century BC with the Greeks, would be lost to art for centuries as the Dark Ages descended on Europe. The *Battle of Issus*, mosaic copy and original painting are stunning works.

Battle of Issus, (2nd to 1st century BC mosaic copy of original painting) (National Archaeological Museum, Naples)

As the empire expanded, the Roman upper class revelled in luxury and wanted their homes decorated lavishly. In the end that decadence would cost. Cato remarked: *"the state suffers from two diverse vices, avarice and luxury, those pests which have overturned all great empires."* Pliny the Elder reckoned Roman victories over Hellenistic kingdoms had done less harm to the defeated than to the victors, who *"learned not just to admire foreign opulence but actually to love it … [they became] not only mad for silver in great quantity, but perhaps even crazier for it in the form of works of art."* Syrian glass-blowers were brought to Rome, and the *Portland Vase* is the best example of their art, the decoration is exquisite.

Portland Vase c 27 BC – 14 AD (British Museum, London)

The affluence and hedonism of the Roman upper class might have dismayed Cato and Pliny but they brought innovations which, once revived in the Renaissance, would have long and vibrant lives. Wall-painting included make-believe windows through which could be seen vistas stretching into the far distance, the perspective from theatrical flats. These eye-deceiving works (or *trompe l'oeil*) became elaborate. Deception in art was considered by Philostratus the Younger in about 300 BC; "*since no harm can come of it, a suitable and irreproachable means of providing entertainment*"

Landscapes were also painted on walls. Vitruvius Pollio, an architect who served Julius Caesar and Augustus saw, *"harbours, promontories, coastlines, rivers, springs, straits, sanctuaries, groves, mountains, flocks and shepherds".* Some, he noted, were episodes from mythology.

Ixion Room, House of Vettii, Pompeii, 1st century AD

Ulysses in the Land of Lestrygonians, late 1st century AD, wall-painting from house in Rome

Portraits also became popular as wall-paintings and not just with the upper class and nobility, as the wedding picture of the *Baker* shows. He may be a student from the script he holds and his wife, with stylus and writing tablet, has literary interests and social ambitions. Portraits of the rich were made in busts. The form had been introduced by Romans for propaganda and control. Busts of the emperor were displayed in public places. Roman citizens had to burn incense in front them as a token of loyalty and allegiance. The persecution of Christians began when they refused to do this.

Baker and his Wife, from Pompeii (wall-painting) 1st century AD

Power could not be expressed very well with just the head. Adding the torso gave the artist freedom to show movement. The brutal Caracalla, emperor from 211 to 217 AD, is shown making an abrupt turn to the left, the sweeping draperies help emphasise the arrogance and cold indifference. Bernini would revive these lessons.
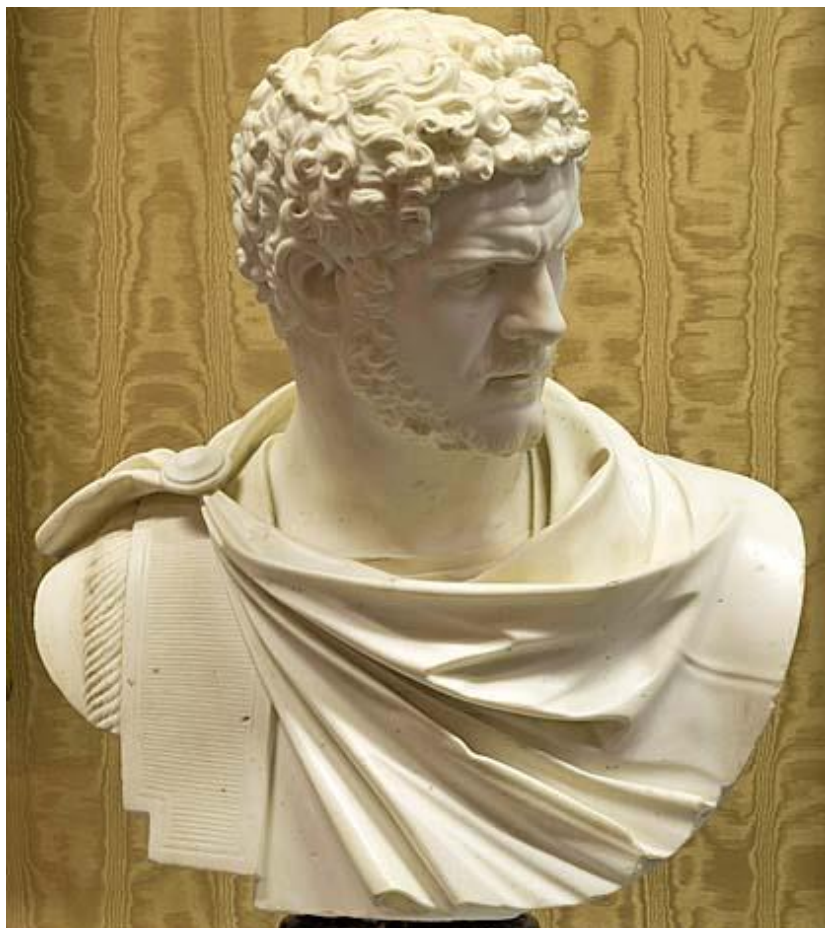
Portrait bust of Caracalla, copy of original c AD 215

Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum show that by 79 AD every type of painting was being practised and patronised; history-painting, figure-painting, portraiture, landscape and still-life. Despite this variety, towards the end of the first century Pliny the Elder thought painting a "dying art" and Petronius, arbiter of elegance for Emperor Nero, thought it was "completely dead".

The demand for portraiture led to the bodies of Greek sculpture being copied by artisans, leaving a socket in the neck, by which a portrait head could be attached. These craftsmen had a low reputation. The writer Lucian described a sculptor as; *"no more than a workman, doing hard physical labour … obscure, earning a small wage, a man of low esteem, classed as worthless."*

Nevertheless, the theories, artistic techniques and media of Greece and Rome underpinned Western art. They had to be re-discovered over a millennium later. For now, Europe slipped into the dark.

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