

Roman Portraits



In our modern world, we have televisions and printed media which allow us to visualize our world leaders. But before these modern conveniences, as in the time of the ancient Romans, no such means of physically seeing leaders existed. Consequently, the Romans got to know their rulers through portraits in two forms: minted coins and sculptures of marble or bronze. The use of three-dimensional portraits, in particular, allowed realistic artistic copies to be displayed throughout the ruler's lands.

It might be difficult to imagine, but hundreds of portraits were created for each ruler. These remarkable sculptures were then placed in public squares, courts, theaters, public baths, libraries, markets, and temples; often, one might find the portraits standing in on behalf of the actual person they depicted.

Roman portraits were unique because they were often purposely created so as to resemble the ruler as closely as possible. That meant that the carved figures were both *realistic* and *naturalistic*. An emperor's sculpted face was created with the emperor's real features in mind. The realistic depiction of the ruler allowed for an emphasis on human individuality. In their time, the Roman portraits were also painted to make them even more lifelike. While we cannot see these painted surfaces today, we can still see the portraits' natural human structure.

On one final (but very important) note, it was also common to find some sculptures with *idealized* features, the opposite of realistic and naturalistic ones. Portraits of the Emperor Caligula, above, for instance, depict him with features that convey a calm, cool, and confident leader, often at the expense of a true realistic style.

