



ROME

CITY AND EMPIRE

Cover:

Statue head of Augustus (Rome, Italy), ca. 30 BCE. Marble, 14 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 8 5/8 in. The British Museum, 1888,1210.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum

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Figure 1

The art of ancient Rome, celebrated for its beauty, technical sophistication, and enduring power, provides insights into many aspects of this immensely influential culture. *Rome: City and Empire* tells how the city grew from a cluster of villages on the Tiber River into the seat of a mighty empire that at its height covered nearly two million square miles and encompassed a diverse population of around one hundred million people. The exhibition contains exemplary works drawn from the vast holdings of the British Museum, including portraits of emperors, military leaders, citizens, and mythological figures, as well as stunning examples of pottery, paintings, jewelry, coins, and ritual objects.

Rome: City and Empire opens with works that illustrate four themes central to Roman culture: social structures, military forces, devotion to the gods, and the role of the emperor. Dominating this section is a full-length sculpture of a magistrate (fig. 1), showing the complex role of politics and law in maintaining the stability of the city and its spreading empire. He holds a scroll, emphasizing how language shaped Roman society.

Once visitors are introduced to these overriding principles, they travel back in time to see objects related to the city's founding around 753 BCE, its transition from kingdom to republic, and finally the rise of imperial rule. A charming statuette of Romulus—Rome's legendary first king—and his twin brother Remus being nursed by a she-wolf alludes to the origin myth that, with its fratricidal content, anticipates Rome's many civil conflicts in the centuries that followed (fig. 2). The kingdom eventually developed into a republic, in which the Senate, a powerful body of wealthy landowners and elders, controlled finances, administration, and foreign policy under the leadership of two elected consuls. The republic ended after a series of civil wars that culminated in the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE by political foes, setting the stage for governance by an emperor, a system that lasted from 27 BCE until the fall of Rome some four centuries later.



Figure 2

We see power embodied in the idealized portrait bust of the first emperor, Augustus Caesar (cover). Ruling from 27 BCE until 14 CE, Augustus ushered in an era of relative stability in Rome and unparalleled expansion of the empire through military conquest.

At its height, Rome's control extended throughout the Mediterranean world, North Africa, and the Middle East, into Europe as far north as Britain and Germany. A section of the exhibition is devoted to the army, with weapons, helmets, a military diploma, and other artifacts giving a taste of life as a legionary. While the soldiers' prowess and tactical sophistication made them the pride of Rome, the greatest acclaim was reserved for victorious emperors, whose conquests were commemorated with monumental sculptures such as Trajan's Column, a towering structure that depicted in low relief Emperor Trajan's victory over the Dacians of eastern Europe. An eighteenth-century CE print of the column, placed next to a sculpture of a captured enemy soldier from the first century CE (fig. 3), conveys the importance of Rome's military campaigns and its treatment of the people it conquered. In addition to fighting and maintaining order, Roman armies across the empire controlled activities such as road-building, governmental administration, and tax-collecting.

The largest section of the exhibition, "Eternal City," shows Rome as it was architecturally transformed by various emperors, with the construction of projects such as the Colosseum, the Pantheon, temples, baths, aqueducts, triumphal arches, and palaces. As manifestations of Roman ambition and ideals, the objects in the exhibition corresponding to these structural marvels are presented alongside representations of the gods with whom the elite sought to identify. A dramatic highlight of this section is a sculpture—at once graceful and violent—that portrays the Persian god Mithras slaying a bull (fig. 4), showing the Roman willingness to absorb religious beliefs from other cultures.



Figure 4



Figure 3

Paralleling these grand expressions of power and faith are more intimate works that chronicle the texture of everyday life for privileged Romans. These include a marble carving of female toiletries, delicate and ornate jewelry and tableware, and objects that celebrate the joys of alcohol, from elegant amphoras to paintings and reliefs that portray the role of wine in society (fig. 5). "Eternal City" concludes with household items, coins, and sculptures that document the rise and spread of Christianity from Rome to provinces as far away as Egypt and Britain.



Figure 5

The section of the exhibition that perhaps most directly reflects the distinctive nature of Roman imperialism, "Peoples of the Empire," supplies visual clues to Rome's interactions with its provinces. Although they were initially thought of as barbarians, people far and wide were expected to follow Roman laws and administrative and tax policies. While they often adopted various aspects of Roman culture, provincial subjects could retain their own ethnic identity, formed around language and dialect, local customs, and cultural expressions. Artworks in this section underscore the reciprocal nature of the exchange between Rome and the lands it ruled, as seen in the naturalistic style, typical of Roman statuary, with which the falcon-headed Egyptian god Horus is represented (fig. 6).



Figure 6

The exhibition concludes with a dramatic presentation of art that commemorates the dead. Memorials such as burial chests, sarcophagi, and tombstones indicate how people across the empire wanted their leaders and loved ones to be remembered, in death as in life (fig. 7).

Mark Scala, chief curator



Figure 7

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Statue of Roman magistrate (Italy), head 70–90 CE, body early 2nd century CE. Marble, 88 5/8 x 35 3/8 x 26 in. The British Museum, 1973,0302.9. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 2. Statuette of a she-wolf and twins (probably Italy), 1st century BCE–1st century CE. Bronze, 1 3/4 x 2 1/4 x 1 1/4 in. The British Museum, 1772,0302.134. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 3. Statue fragment showing a captive “barbarian” (Ramleh, Egypt), ca. 160–70 CE. Marble, 41 x 27 1/2 x 22 in. The British Museum, 1973,0330.5. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 4. Statue of Mithras slaying a bull (Italy), 2nd century CE. Marble, 31 1/2 x 43 1/4 x 14 5/8 in. The British Museum, 1805,0703.270. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 5. Fragment of a wall painting of a man drinking (Pompeii, Italy), 50–79 CE. Painted plaster, 5 3/4 x 8 1/2 x 1 1/8 in. The British Museum, 1856,1226.1623. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 6. Statue of a seated Horus (Egypt), 1st–3rd century CE. Limestone, 21 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 10 1/8 in. The British Museum, 1912,0608.109. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 7. Mummy portrait of a woman (Rubaiyat, Egypt), 160–70 CE. Encaustic on limewood. 17 1/2 x 6 1/4 x 2 1/4 in. The British Museum, 1939,0324.211. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Right

Coins from the Hoxne Hoard (Hoxne, England), 4th–5th century CE. Gold and silver, 3/4 in. diameter each. The British Museum, 1994,0401.46.1–10; 1994,0401.299.1–20. © The Trustees of the British Museum



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The British Museum

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