DEATH and the AFTERLIFE:
HIGH and LATE ROMAN ART
(Funerary Roman Art)
ROMAN FUNERARY ART

Online Links:

Roman Funerary Art - Metropolitan Museum of Art

Funeral Portrait of a Woman from Faiyum

Cleveland Museum of Art - Roman Sarcophagus depicting Orestes and the Furies

Funerary Art – Wikipedia

Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus – Smarthistory

Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus – Smarthistory

Petra - Smarthistory
Roman artwork from the 1st century BCE imitating the Greek classical style of the 5th century BCE, Rhodes, marble

This stele depicts a warrior with a cuirass and helmet leaning on his spear in front of a funerary stele; the snake symbolizes the soul of the dead.

The original Roman custom was cremation, after which the burnt remains were kept in a pot, ash-chest or urn, often in a **columbarium**; pre-Roman burials around Rome often used hut-urns—little pottery houses. From about the 2nd century CE, **inhumation** (burial of unburnt remains) in sarcophagi, often elaborately carved, became more fashionable for those who could afford it.

Greek-style medallion portrait sculptures on a **stela**, or small mausoleum for the rich, housing either an urn or sarcophagus, were often placed in a location such as a roadside, where it would be very visible to the living and perpetuate the memory of the dead.
In later periods, life-size sculptures of the deceased reclining as though at a meal or social gathering are found, a common Etruscan style. Family tombs for the grandest late Roman families, like the Tomb of the Scipios (seen here), were large mausoleums with facilities for visits by the living, including kitchens and bedrooms.
Patrician carrying busts, late first century BCE, marble

Ancestor portraits, usually in the form of wax masks, were kept in the home, apparently often in little cupboards, although grand patrician families kept theirs on display in the **atrium**. They were worn in the funeral processions of members of the family by persons wearing appropriate costume for the figure represented, as described by Pliny the Elder and Polybius. Pliny also describes the custom of having a bust-portrait of an ancestor painted on a round bronze shield (clipeus), and having it hung in a temple or other public place. No examples of either type have survived.
By the late Republic there was considerable competition among wealthy Romans for the best locations for tombs, which lined all the approach roads to the city up to the walls, and a variety of exotic and unusual designs sought to catch the attention of the passer-by and so perpetuate the memory of the deceased and increase the prestige of their family.
Funerary relief of a vegetable vendor, from Ostia, 2nd half of 2nd century, painted terracotta

Terracotta plaques illustrating the activities of middle-class merchants frequently adorned Ostian tomb facades. In this relief of a vegetable seller, the artist tilted the counter to display the produce clearly. The artist had little interest in the Classical revival style the emperors favored.
In Italy, sarcophagi were mostly intended to be set against the wall of the tomb, and only decorated on three sides, in contrast to the free-standing styles of Greece and the Eastern Empire. The relief scenes of Hellenistic art became even more densely crowded in later Roman sarcophagi, as for example in the 2nd-century Portonaccio sarcophagus.
This sarcophagus was used for the burial of a Roman general involved in the campaigns of Marcus Aurelius and shows influences similar to those of the Column of Marcus Aurelius. The sarcophagus is one of a group of about twenty-five late Roman battle sarcophagi, with one exception all apparently dating to 170-210, made in Rome or in some cases Athens. These derive from Hellenistic monuments from Pergamon in Asia Minor showing Pergamene victories over the Gauls, and were all presumably commissioned for military commanders.
The face of the general is unfinished, either because the sculptors awaited a model to work from, or they had produced the work speculatively with no specific commission. The general and his wife are also each shown twice on the lid frieze, together holding each other's hands at the center, and singly at the ends, again with unfinished faces. Pairs of figures of an older man and a woman stand beneath trophies at either end of the main face, uninvolved in the battle. These are at the same scale as the general, and all other the battling figures are smaller; indeed, in defiance of any attempt at perspective, the soldiers and horses at the "front" of the scene in the lower part are somewhat smaller than their equivalents at the "back" in the upper part.
Sarcophagus with the myth of Orestes, c. 140-150 CE, marble

The front of this sarcophagus, or coffin, is decorated with a series of scenes about the mythical Greek hero Orestes, shown three times wielding a short sword. In the center he stands over the body of his mother Clytemnestra, and at the left over the body of her lover Aegisthus. Orestes has murdered both of them to avenge the death of his father Agamemnon, king of the Greeks, who had left home many years earlier to fight in the Trojan War. Upon returning to his kingdom, he found his unfaithful wife with her lover Aegisthus. These two then killed Agamemnon and Orestes vowed that when he became a man he would seek revenge.
At the far left is Agamemnon's tomb with Greek Furies (avenging spirits) resting upon it. At the far right, Orestes visits the shrine of Apollo at Delphi (marked by the tripod and rock) to atone for the murders. The front of the lid is decorated with four reclining women who symbolize the seasons. From left to right they are: Autumn, Summer, Spring, and Winter. On the short sides are winged, bearded griffins (half-lion and half-eagle). The sarcophagus was probably made for an upper-class tomb outside Rome.
Mummy portraits (Faiyum), c. 160-170 CE, encaustic on wood
Cross fertilization in the visual arts can be seen in a group of paintings produced in Egypt under the Roman Empire. These works differ considerably from Roman murals, and reflect a revival of vivid illusionism. They are believed to have been related to Hellenistic portraiture, of which no examples survive. Most come from the district of Faiyum, an area about 60 miles south of Cairo in the Nile Valley. The earliest date to the first decades of the first century AD, but the majority are from the second and third centuries. Egypt had continued the practice of mummification, but the masks which had previously been placed over the mummy cases were replaced by portraits painted in encaustic on wood, and later by tempera on wood.

The board was placed on the mummy and wrapped in the linen cloth that encircled the body in such a way as to leave the painted face showing.
Al-Khazneh (Treasury), Petra, Jordan, second century CE
Petra was the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom for most of its history until the Roman Emperor Trajan created the province of Arabia in 106 C.E., annexed the Nabataean kingdom, and moved the capital of this new province to Bosra (also spelt Bostra) in what is today modern southern Syria.

The ancient sources inform us that the Nabataeans were great traders, who controlled the luxury trade in incense during the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. The Hellenistic period stretches from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. to 31 B.C.E. when the Roman Empire emerged. Most of Petra’s great tombs and buildings were built before the Roman annexation in 106 C.E.
The rock-cut facades are the iconic monuments of Petra. Of these, the most famous is the so-called Treasury, or Khazneh. The prominence of the tombs in the landscape led many early explorers and scholars to see Petra as a large necropolis; however, archaeology has shown that Petra was a well-developed metropolis with all of the trappings of a Hellenistic city.

The tomb facades draw upon a rich array of Hellenistic and Near Eastern architecture and, in this sense, their architecture reflects the diverse and different cultures with which the Nabateans traded, interacted, and even intermarried (King Aretas IV’s daughter was married to Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, whose mother was also Nabataean). Many of the tombs contain niches or small chambers for burials, cut into the stone walls. No human remains have ever been found in any of the tombs, and the exact funerary practices of the Nabataeans remain unknown.
The Treasury’s façade most clearly embodies the Hellenistic style and reflects the influence of Alexandria, the greatest city in the Eastern Mediterranean at this time. Its architecture features a broken pediment and central tholos (a circular building) on the upper level; this architectural composition originated in Alexandria. Ornate Corinthian columns are used throughout. Above the broken pediments, the bases of two obelisks appear and stretch upwards into the rock.

The sculptural decoration also underscores a connection to the Hellenistic world. On the upper level, Amazons (bare-breasted) and Victories stand, flanking a central female figure (on the tholos), who is probably Isis-Tyche, a combination of the Egyptian Goddess, Isis, and Tyche, the Greek Goddess of good fortune.
The lower level features the Greek twin gods, **Castor and Pollux**, the Dioscuri, who protected travelers and the dead on their journeys. There are other details from the artistic traditions of the Hellenistic world, including eagles, the symbols of royal Ptolemies; vines; vegetation; kantharoi (vase with large handles); and acroteria (architectural ornaments on a pediment). However, the tomb also features rosettes, a design originally associated with the ancient Near Eastern.
Considering that it was located at the most important entrance to Petra through the Siq, it was probably a tomb for one of the Nabataean Kings. Aretas IV (reigned, 9 B.C.E. – 40 C.E.) is the most likely candidate, because he was the Nabataeans’ most successful ruler, and many buildings were erected in Petra during his reign.

The rock-cut tomb is a prime example of Roman “baroque” architecture in that the designer used Greek architectural elements in a purely ornamental fashion and with a studied disregard for Classical rules.
Tombs at Petra

It is a popular misconception that all of the rock-cut monuments, which number over 3,000, were all tombs. In fact, many of the other rock-cut monuments were living quarters or monumental dining rooms with interior benches.
Of these, the Monastery (also known as ed-Deir) is most the famous (shown above). Much like the Treasury, ed-Deir was not a monastery, but rather behind its façade was a monumental cella (the inner chamber of a temple) with a large area for dining with a cultic podium at the back. While no traces of decoration remain today, the room would have been plastered and painted. The façade again features a broken pediment around a central tholos, but its decoration is more abstract and less figurative than that of the Treasury.
Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus (Rome), 250-260 CE, marble
Ever since the mid-second century, inhumation of the dead in elaborately carved stone sarcophagi had been growing in popularity, at the expense of the more traditional custom of cremation. Figural subjects of many kinds were popular on sarcophagi, especially Dionysiac scenes and generalized battles. In spite of the variety of subject there is a unity of purpose in the search for salvation. These themes suggest the triumph over death or offer access to a life hereafter.

On the forehead of the central figure is carved the emblem of Mithras, the Persian god of light, truth, victory over death, many of whose shrines have been found at Rome and Ostia.
In the later Zoroastrian theology Mithras was the son of Ahura-Mazda, the God of Light. He, too, was the god of light, of truth, purity, and honor; sometimes he was identified with the sun and led the cosmic war against the powers of darkness, always he mediated between his father and his followers, protecting and encouraging them in life’s struggle with evil, lies, uncleanness, and the other works of Ahriman, Prince of Darkness. When Pompey’s soldiers brought this religion from Cappadocia to Europe a Greek artist pictured Mithras as kneeling on the back of a bull and plunging a poniard into its neck; this representation became the universal symbol of the faith.
Mithras and the Sacrifice of the Bull
The central hero rises out of the mass of figures below him, but seems to have nothing to do with them; he looks off into the distance, and makes a grandiose gesture that does not apparently relate to the suffering portrayed everywhere else. (Several scholars believe to have identified him as one of the sons of Trajan Decius.) All around him the battle rages, and two men, one near each of the upper corners, accompany the noises of battle with sounds of the trumpet.
Dan Witz. *Mosh Pit*, 1998, oil and mixed media on canvas
Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (Rome), c. 359
Junius Bassus was a Roman official who, as an inscription here tells us, died on August 25, 359, at the age of forty-two. On the top level, the columns are surmounted by an entablature incised with the inscription in Roman capital letters. On the bottom register, they support alternating triangular and arched roof gables resembling little houses. Each stage, with the exception of one in the lower register containing the nude figures of Adam and Eve, is filled by toga-clad figures with short legs, long bodies, and large heads.
The scenes illustrate events in both the Old and New Testaments arranged in symbolic rather than narrative order. On the top left, Abraham, the first Hebrew patriarch, learns that he has passed the test of faith and need not sacrifice his son Isaac. Christians saw in this story a prophetic sign of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. In the next frame to the right, the apostle Peter has just been arrested for preaching after the death of Jesus.
Jesus himself appears in the center frame as a teacher-philosopher flanked by Saints Peter and Paul. In a reference to the pagan past, Christ in this scene rests his feet on the head of Aeolus, the god of the winds in classical mythology, shown with a veil billowing behind him. To Christians he personified the skies, so that Christ is meant to be seen as seated above, in heaven, where he is giving the Christian Law to his disciples, imitating the Hebrew Scriptures’ account of God dispensing the Law to Moses.

On the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Christ is dressed not in a Roman toga but the Greek pallium, which in Italy had come to be associated with philosophers and teachers.
He is not, however, bearded like a philosopher but has a fresh adolescent face. The sculptor seems to have taken a youthful Apollo as his model. This image of eternal youth recurs in Early Christian art, but gradually takes on a more ritualistic cast.

Also found on the sarcophagus are small babies that later became known as putti (Italian for ‘little boys’). They are located on the sides of the sarcophagus harvesting grapes and on the columns framing the top central panel. Putti are “chubby little boys distinguished from cherubim by their lack of wings. They derive from the classical Erotes and Genii found on Early Christian sarcophagi.
Next are two scenes from Christ’s Passion, his arrest (second from right) and his appearance before Pontius Pilate (far right).

When compared with the frieze on the Arch of Constantine, carved almost half a century before, the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus retains a veneer of classicism. The figures in their deep niches recall the statuesque dignity of the Greek and Roman tradition. Yet beneath this classicism we sense a kinship to the Constantinian style in the doll-like bodies, the large heads, and the passive air of scenes that would seem to call for dramatic action. The events and figures are no longer intended to tell their own story but to call to mind a symbolic meaning that unites them.
The frame on the bottom left shows the Old Testament story of Job, whose trials provided a model for the sufferings of Christian martyrs. Next on the right is the Fall of Adam and Eve. At the bottom center, Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This scene derives in part from portrayals of Roman emperors entering cities on horseback, but Christ’s steed and the absence of imperial attributes contrast sharply with the imperial models the sculptor used as compositional sources.
The next frame to the right shows Daniel in the lions’ den, and the frame on the bottom right shows Saint Paul being led to his martyrdom. These exemplars of Old and New Testament faith and acceptance of divine will merge here with the theme of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Though he probably never met Jesus, Paul became a passionate convert to the teachers of the preacher from Nazareth. Paul is generally believed to have written ten to fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the Christian Scriptures or “New Testament.” Paul’s most important contributions lie in his having universalized and systematically explained Jesus’ message. While Jesus preached only to the Jews, Paul spread the message of Jesus in the non-Jewish communities of Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome, thus earning the title “Apostle to the Gentiles.”
What matters here is the complex interplay of different times. These “pasts” are further complicated by the somewhat syncretistic imagery on the sarcophagus’ two ends which depict the seasons, and the fragmentary scene on the lid which appears to show a refrigerium, or funerary meal, for the dead in the manner of second-century Roman grave monuments.

In addition, there are six somewhat damaged scenes in the spandrels of the arches of the lower register which appear to represent Old and New Testament themes with lambs in the place of the persons. In effect, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, admittedly the masterpiece of its genre, offers us a vision of the whole Christian world-view which incorporates and transforms certain elements from earlier antiquity.
DEATH, WAR, or VIOLENCE:

ROMAN ART

(Funerary Roman Art)
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

How do these works relate to funerary practices in the locale in which they were created? Analyze ways in which these works demonstrate BOTH the influence of Roman imperial rule and local cultural traditions.
What religious beliefs or traditions do each of these funerary works subscribe to? Compare and contrast stylistic features of these two works that contribute to expressed religious views regarding death and the afterlife.
Based on careful observation, for what type of patron would you guess this funerary relief was created for? Justify your answer.
Which of these funerary works is Greek? Which is Etruscan? Which is Roman? Justify your answer.