

Roman Clothing Project: Clothing in Roman Art

by Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

These images and text help explain Roman clothing and the wrapping of a simple toga. They are intended to support the teacher preparing to carry out AIA's *Roman Clothing Project*.

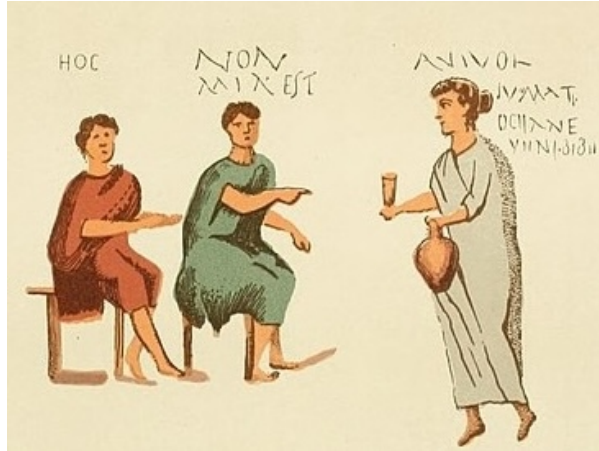
Tunics were the primary Roman garment, short for men, longer for women. In this fanciful fresco from a private Roman home, left, the long, sleeveless *tunica* of a young attendant of Venus stands out below her pale *palla* (a large rectangular cloth). Since her *tunica* is fastened with one closure at the shoulder, it looks like a *stola*, a special woman's tunic that symbolized her status as a married **matron**. But an ideal *stola* was a natural wool color and it was worn over a modest sleeved *tunica*. Elite Roman women are generally shown in art with a *palla* wrapped all around them to show modesty. Here the fabric is sheer, and one shoulder is bare.



Left: Image of a lesser goddess leading Cupid to Aphrodite to be punished. Fresco from the House of the Punished Eros, Pompeii VII.2.23, 1st c CE. National Archaeological Museum, Naples. ArchaiOptix, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. **Right:** Marble cult scene, 1st c CE. Munich Glyptothek, Bibi Saint-Paul, Public domain.

In the marble relief above right, three figures wear the dress of daily Roman life. A woman (priestess?) stands next to a cult container on three legs. She is dressed in a long *tunica* and has modestly wrapped her shoulders and head in a *palla*. Opposite her, a man in a sleeved calf-length *tunica* and rectangular cloak or short *toga* stands in front of an incense burner. He is accompanied by a small (probably enslaved) attendant in a short, belted *tunica* with sleeves.

Scenes in informal art, such as paintings on tavern walls, reveal variety in clothing shapes and styles. In the tavern scene below, two seated men in colorful mid-calf *tunicae* argue about who will get wine first from a server. A woman wearing a plain *tunica* to her ankles is carrying a jug and single wine cup to them. On the right, a woman in a fresco (likely from a private home) looks out from a balcony, holding a jug and cup. Her inelegant, belted *tunica* is drooping.



Left: Drawing of a tavern scene from the Caupona of Salvius, Pompeii VI.14.35. Geremia Discanno, In Emil Presuhn, 1882. *Pompeii, Die Neuesten Ausgrabungen von 1874 bis 1881*. Public domain.

Right: Woman on a balcony, fragment of a Roman fresco, 1st c CE. J. Paul Getty Museum, Public domain.

A pale wool *tunica* (*toga pura* or *toga virilis*) with narrow stripes (*clavi angusti*) showed a man's equestrian status, while wide stripes (*clavi lati*) revealed that the wearer was a senator or high magistrate. Elite children also wore *tunicae* with *clavi angusti*. Below left in a clothing reconstruction, a man wears a sleeved *tunica* with equestrian *clavi*. Over the *tunica* is a citizen's plain *toga pura*.



Left: Man in a *tunica* and a *toga* with a center "pocket." *Tout l'univers*, *Encyclopédie Hebdomadaire en Couleurs* #319, Dec. 6-13, 1967. Dennis Hidalgo, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

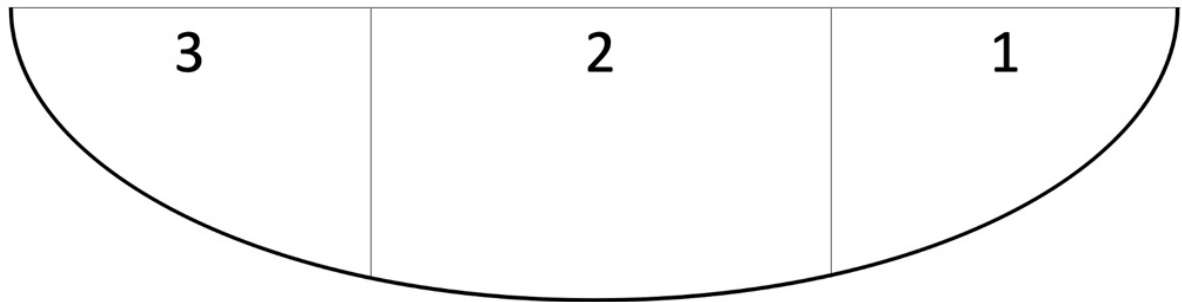
Right: Close up of Genius and Lares in a painting on the Lararium from the House of the Vettii, Pompeii. Patricio Lorente, CC BY-SA 2.5, via Wikimedia Commons.

On the painted shrine above from Pompeii, the central figure, a “Genius,” is a symbol of the head of household. He wears a tunic with *clavi lati* (wide purple stripes) and a *toga praetexta* with a purple border. On either side, Lares, guardian beings, have purple stripes on their tunics and are wrapped with additional purple fabric. Confusingly, the narrow stripes worn in art by elites and their children sometimes varied in width and changed through time. The stripes could also be worn by non-elites and enslaved people associated with an elite family.

togae: These long versions of cloaks, rounded at the bottom, were worn by male citizens on formal occasions. A man wearing a *toga* is a *togatus*, which came to be a word for a Roman citizen. Togas depicted in art can be quite difficult to deconstruct, because the complex folds are indicated in an elegant, idealized way and often include arm slings and pockets in front.

The size of togas and details of the way they were worn changed through time, and they were not all draped the same way even in one period. By the early Imperial period (early first century CE) a toga’s length had increased from about 12 to up to 18 feet and it probably required two people to wrap it. For those who could commission a toga (or whose wives wove it), it was likely designed to fit the wearer perfectly. It was essentially a semi-oval wool blanket, doubled over. (The Clothing Project *toga* pattern is a hexagon that can be rounded as desired).

Wrapping a toga: We can picture two people, an expert toga wrapper and a helper (likely both enslaved members of the household), standing behind the man to be dressed in the toga, who is facing us. The man holds his arms out to the sides. The helpers stretch the toga out behind him the long way, folded lengthwise. The doubled fabric hangs down in a rough curve. Think of wrapping the toga in **three parts**. This (roughly!) is the folded toga to wrap in stages 1/2/3.



Stage 1, end #1: Helper 1 drapes end #1 of the toga over the man’s left shoulder and upper arm, leaving a long section hanging down his left front side. He arranges careful folds so that the bottom falls nicely down toward the front left foot. The fabric ends in a bit of a point near the ground, and that point is sometimes reinforced with a small weight.

- Although the toga in elegant art often falls to the feet or even drags a bit on the ground, it was undoubtedly not meant to drag in real life.

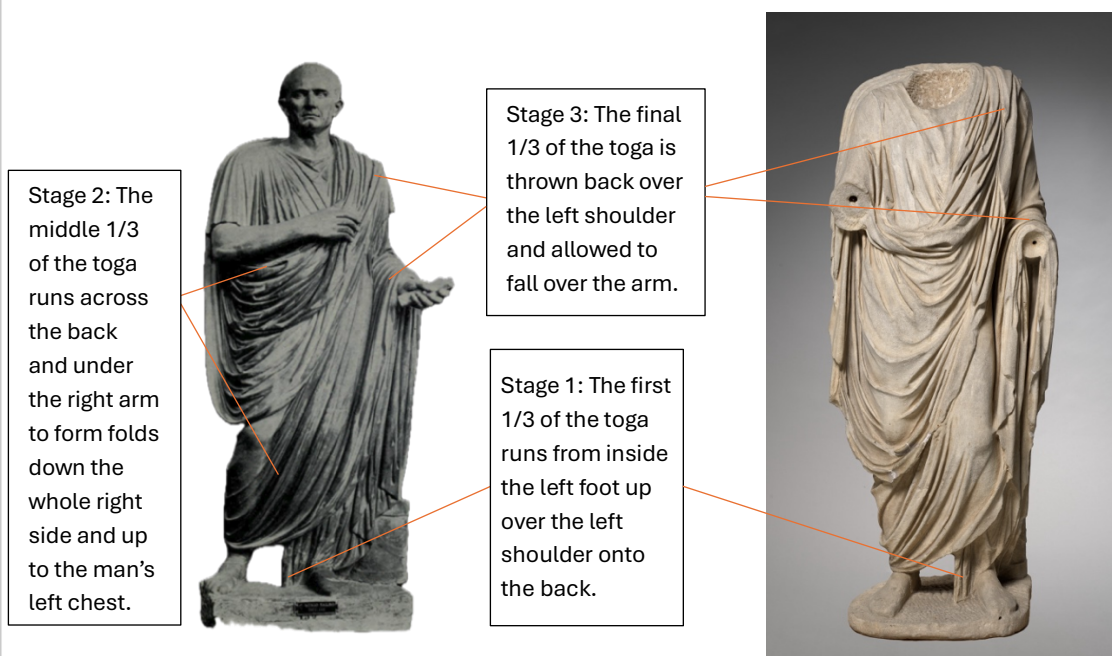
Stage 2, center #2: Helper 2, standing behind the man on his right side (our left), then pulls the center fabric of the toga around the man's back and under his right arm. Both helpers then create folds of fabric over the man's lower right chest and down his calf as they move to the man's front left side and prepare to complete stage 3.

Stage 3, end #3: The helpers carefully throw the remaining end of the toga from the front back over the man's left shoulder and upper arm. Helper 1 goes behind the *togatus* to create elegant, pleated folds and pull the end of the toga down behind the calf.

- Since the toga was folded lengthwise to begin with, the *togatus* now has four layers of wool covering his left side, with folds adding to the thickness. No wonder Romans complained about having to wear togas, especially in summer.

The old black and white **photograph of Marcus Nonnius Balbus** of Herculaneum below shows the stark broad curves and straight lines of a relatively simple toga. Marcus wears a tunic with sleeves. His left shoulder and arm bear most of the toga's weight and cannot move freely, while the right arm is free. On his right side the toga-drapers created one set of sweeping folds under the arm, and another set of longer folds to the feet. This was made possible by the two layers of folded wool, and it is difficult to replicate.

The **Cleveland *Togatus*** statue on the right originally had a head and arms inserted into the marble clothing. Part of the fabric on his right side seems pulled up over his arm, which is common, although usually it is draped to form a sling for the arm. See the *Ara Pacis Togati*.



Left: Marble statue of Marcus Nonnius Balbus of Herculaneum, 1st c CE. Original B&W photo by G. Bregi. In Ethel Ross Barker. 1908. *Buried Herculaneum*. Public domain.

Right: *Togatus*, Roman, 1-200 CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, Public domain.

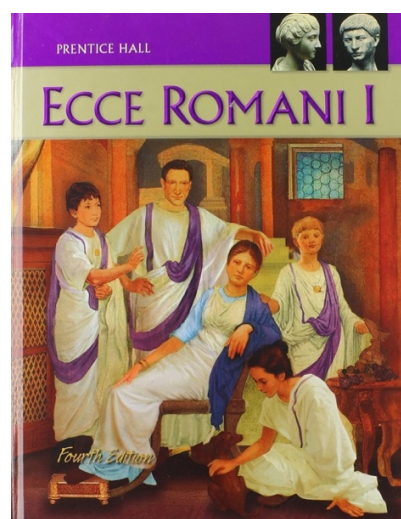
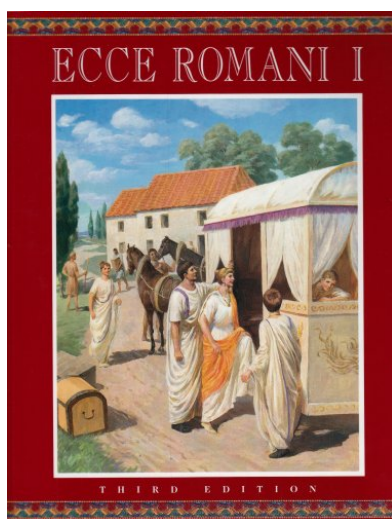
Togati on the Ara Pacis (Altar of Peace) of Augustus: It is easy to see the pointed tip of the stage 1 end of the toga (with a small weight attached) hanging down by each *togatus's* left foot. On his right side, curving folds hang down below the elbow toward his right foot. The four men in the middle wrap the toga around their right shoulder or whole arm.



Plaster cast of a relief from the Ara Pacis of Augustus, carved from 13-9 BCE.
The Uffizi, Florence. Yair Haklai, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The *Ecce Romani* Latin textbooks

These books generally have good illustrations of a Roman family's clothing. Older versions show the father's toga as a *toga pura*, not a *toga praetexta*. Later editions, as below right, give him the purple toga border as he gains higher status. His sons wear tunics with narrow *clavi* and a *toga praetexta* suited to elite childhood, along with a protective *bullae*. His daughter also wears a *toga praetexta*, although it is unclear why her toga's border is narrower. She does not wear an amulet, although many girls did. His wife is wearing a Greek-style *chiton* as her *tunica exterior*, over which she is dressed in the traditional *stola* of a Roman matron.



Left: Lawall, Gilbert, Peter C. Brush, Sally Davis, Pauline Demetri, and Jane Hall. 2004. *Ecce Romani I: A Latin Reading Program* (3rd ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall. **Right:** Burns, James MacGregor, J. W. Peltason, Thomas E. Cronin. 2009. *Ecce Romani I: A Latin Reading Program* (4th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education.