

# Roman Clothing Project

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Second edition in 2024 updated by Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

Students learn the significance of clothing and accessories in communicating social status, roles, and gender in early Imperial Roman society and dress a cloth figure appropriately. It is useful for every student to learn a few sewing basics, but gluing onto cutout cardboard figures is also an option. Patterns, background information, and instructions make the project easy for the teacher.

## Overview

For this project students will learn about Roman clothing of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Italy and sew small-scale versions for cloth figures, teddy bears, or cardboard figures, adding appropriate accessories. One of the goals is for students to learn sewing basics, but the teacher can reduce the complexity of the lesson or even just teach about clothing (also see *Roman Clothing Project: Roman Clothing in Ancient Art*). The project is especially suited to a Latin or History class. A follow-up exercise using the figures might include composing dialogues in Latin or English and performing scenes of Roman daily life using the dressed figures as puppets.

## Goals

Students learn about Roman dress and understand the relationship between clothing, gender, and status in the early Roman Imperial period. They select clothing and accessories suited to citizens and their families of different ranks in Italy and gain hands-on experience sewing *tunicae*, *togae*, *pallae*, and *stolae* as well as designing accessories and *soleae* for their figures. The characters can be expanded to include soldiers (see D'Amato 2016).

*At the end of this project, students will know:*

- the basic components of male and female Roman costume for children and adults.
- the major social ranks of Imperial Rome and the dress reserved for gender and rank.

*Students will be able to:*

- sew a simple running stitch.
- make a *tunica*, *toga*, *stola* and *palla*.
- gauge social status by analyzing items of clothing and accessories.

## Grade levels and possible modifications

This activity was originally carried out with a class of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 12-13) but it can be adjusted for younger students if simplified, or for older ones by increasing students' responsibility for research, raising the standards for costumes, or requiring a follow-up

project with Latin dialogue. The teacher might build “cleaning up” into a student’s grade. That helps ensure that the class learns about clothing, simple sewing, and how to manage materials responsibly.

A reasonable timeline is important. It may be difficult for all students to be at the same stage in the process, and those who are absent from class will fall behind. Try to arrange for students to catch up outside of the regular class period if they miss more than one class.

### Time needed

For 10 students, creating the costumes and dressing the figures can take four hours, but the time this project requires depends heavily on the number of students in the class, the number of teachers or teaching assistants working with the class, and any research component.

### Background on Roman status and clothing

This lengthy summary is intended to help the teacher gain needed information without having to do a great deal of research. Also see *Roman Clothing Project: Roman Clothing in Ancient Art* (associated with this lesson) for more information and images.

Both literary sources and artistic representations provide evidence for Roman clothing during the late Republic and Empire. Visual sources include three-dimensional and relief sculpture, sculpted portraits, wall paintings from houses in towns such as Pompeii and Herculaneum, and mosaics such as those from the Roman Villa of Casale in Piazza Armerina. Many authors, including Ovid, Cicero, and Livy, describe customs of dress and decoration in their poems, speeches, and histories. Some textile remains still exist, and they include rags, blanket scraps, and tunic remnants. These come mainly from the Roman provinces rather than Italy itself.

Clothing was an indicator of status, gender, and age in highly stratified Roman society. True Romans were male citizens and their families (women were not citizens). Foreigners and enslaved people were outside the status hierarchy. Some foreigners had legal protections, but the enslaved were property and laws protected owners. This project does not include the enslaved or freed members of a Roman urban household. Their dress could resemble that of poor working people or reflect a family’s high status.

Birth and wealth both played a part in status, and the history of the social classes is complicated, especially as the emperor’s control became increasingly absolute. This lesson simplifies the clothing options and assumes a time frame in the early Imperial period.

**Roughly put, male citizens fall into four categories. The clothing of wives and children is related to the status of the male head of household.** Almost everyone wore a wool tunic, for men generally reaching to the knee or calf and for women to the ankles or feet. The tunics and togas of formally dressed men signaled levels of importance through purple color woven into the wool in stripes or borders. The clothing of women signaled marital status and wealth.

## Male citizens

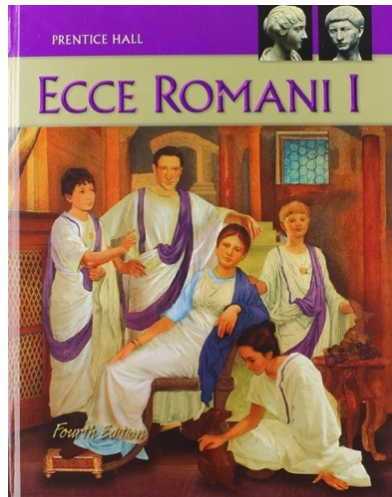
- 1) The patricians or *nobiles* (or the “**senatorial class**”) were the aristocrats and politicians of the social order, the landowners, and those highest in government because of a mixture of birth and income. These men could become senators and hold high political office.

They wore knee-length natural (pale) wool tunics with **wide**, vertical purple stripes (*clavi lati*), one running down from the shoulder on each side, and a pale wool toga, a *toga pura*. This natural wool toga was the symbol of Roman citizenship.

The most elite men holding very high office, for example a consulship, could wear a toga with a purple border, a *toga praetexta*.

- 2) The *equites* (equestrians), sometimes called “knights” in English, originally were able to afford horses and serve in the cavalry, and they eventually came to hold certain state offices related to business. They wore natural wool **tunics** with **narrow**, vertical purple stripes (*clavi angusti*), one on each side, and natural wool togas.

The **underage sons** of patricians and equestrians had tunics with **narrow** purple stripes (*clavi angusti*), and they could wear the *toga praetexta* before coming of age between about 14 and 17 years old.



An elite Roman family on the cover of the 2009 *Ecce Romani I* textbook. The father is wearing a tunic with *clavi lati* while his sons' tunics bear *clavi angusti*. Father and sons wear a *toga praetexta*. The mother wears a *tunica exterior* (in a Greek chiton style) and a matron's *stola*. Her *palla* is dark blue.

Burns, James MacGregor, J. W. Peltason, Thomas E. Cronin. 2009. *Ecce Romani I: A Latin Reading Program* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education.

- 3) The **general** population of average citizens (**plebeians**) had less political and civic power. Their income determined the clothing they could afford. Ordinary working men wore a wool **tunic**, a natural color, or sometimes dyed (which helped disguise stains).

Citizen men wore the *toga pura* on public and formal occasions, symbolizing their status as Romans. In the early Imperial period, it could sometimes reach up to 18 feet long. Wool togas developed “pills” and were hard to keep looking elegant. Once their togas became worn, sometimes high-status men gave them to their lower-status followers.

**Working men** of lower-status had a rough tunic with sleeves, belted to be adjustable in length, or a nicer tunic for indoor work. The tunic of a shopkeeper might be longer than that of a laborer. Some professions allowed for baring one shoulder. Some citizen men might only own a rectangular cloak and could not afford a toga or keep one clean. Without a toga they would not have had access to certain places.

**Freed people** could become citizens with limited rights and then wear a toga. Their children could be full citizens.



Reproduction of tavern art. Working men have thigh-length tunics and a barmaid wears an ankle-length tunic. Drawing of a tavern scene from the Caupona of Salvius, Pompeii VI.14.35. Geremia Discanno, In Emil Presuhn, 1882. *Pompeji, Die Neuesten Ausgrabungen von 1874 bis 1881*. Public domain.

### Women

Women could not become citizens, but they fell into the same status categories as men by virtue of their association with their fathers or husbands.

Elite women (or wives of wealthy non-elite citizens) and young girls might wear two or even three tunics, including an under-tunic (**tunica interior**) below a nicer tunic for outer wear (**tunica exterior**) made of traditional natural wool or dyed fabrics including linen and even silk.

Women were expected to dress modestly, and a **tunica exterior** reached their ankles or feet. It could be sleeveless or sleeved, and it took many forms. Women's tunics allowed for some creativity and personal taste and were often belted and bloused. (The patterns here do not include all the options for female dress.)

A citizen's wife (**matron**) was encouraged to wear a special sleeveless tunic of undyed wool called a **stola** on top of her **tunica**. This was an important symbol of womanhood and marriage, just as the **toga** was for manhood and citizenship. Not every married woman wore one. It was attached by a single closure on either shoulder.

Despite these layers of tunics, when going out in public respectable adult women also wrapped a long rectangular cloak called a **palla** around themselves for modesty. It could be made from a variety of fabrics and colors, although natural wool was traditional.

Girls before marriage tended to dress like their mothers, but they were less likely to wear colors and put their hair up in elaborate ways, at least not until they approached the age of marriage.

As a status distinction, like boys, elite girls could wear a toga with a purple border (**toga praetexta**). Since this was only allowed for children and high-level male magistrates, the purple seems to have had a protective function.

**Working women and girls**, like working men and boys, likely wore just one calf-length (sometimes ankle-length) tunic in warmer weather, and a rectangular wool cloak for warmth. They dressed inexpensively without considering fashion. A working woman might be a citizen's wife who participated in staffing or overseeing a small business. A belt could

allow adjustments of length as needed. Since garments for women needed to be modest, knee-length clothing was not feasible.

### Material needed

Most supplies can be purchased at a good fabric store. A store that carries both sewing and craft supplies is ideal, and some materials can be ordered online or be donated by parents. With larger numbers of students (20+) and elaborate costumes, costs can rise to several hundred dollars, but many items can also be reused another year. Needles and glue guns, carefully hoarded, can last many years. Because the project involves different types of clothing, the materials should be organized so students can work as independently as possible.

**Human figures:** When cloth or cardboard figures are all the same size, only one pattern is needed (no distinction is made for size differences based on age or gender).



Cloth figure wearing an equestrian tunic

- Small muslin cloth figures often called “dolls” are available from several companies, including online, in several sizes (12” is recommended since the clothing for smaller ones is more difficult to sew). In 2024 these could still be found for under \$6. Joann’s Fabrics ([www.joann.com](http://www.joann.com)) and other online sources sell blank muslin figures (flatter than fully in the round), in white and brown cotton.
- Teddy bears bought in bulk from a craft store are an alternative, and they come in similar sizes. They need jointed limbs, or their clothes will tend to fall off.
- Flat cardboard human figures in different skin tones are available online from many sources. They are usually smaller than 12”, and the teacher will need to help students re-scale the patterns and make fabric less bulky to suit completely flat bodies.

**Glue guns, needles, and pins:** Students should be of an appropriate age and of course should be monitored when working with stick pins, needles, and scissors. Glue guns offer a break from sewing and speed accessory production. Tacky **fabric glue** is less efficient. **Low temperature** glue guns are as effective as the high temperature ones and are safer. Set aside a large surface for working with glue and line it with newsprint. **Glue gun stands** are helpful.



**Sewing supplies** include needles, straight pins, safety pins, thread (white and colors to match fabrics), tape measures, pincushions, scissors, fabric scissors, pencils, and rulers.

- Reserve some scissors for “**fabric only.**” Trying to cut fabric with scissors dulled by paper cutting can be very frustrating.
- *Sewing boxes:* The organization of supplies is important. A series of open plastic trays or removable plastic drawers for different fabric, threads, and equipment works well.

*Fabric and decorative elements*

- Plain paper for patterns
- Homespun (rough weave) unbleached muslin for under-tunics or working tunics
- Lighter unbleached muslin for elite men and women’s tunics
- Soft white cotton for togas
- Thin polyester (silky feeling) in appropriate colors for *stolae* and *pallae*
- Ribbon: Purple satin in 1/8” and 1/4” for tunics and togas
- Ribbon, gold braid, and other decorations, optional, for hair pieces
- Cording, string, or twine for belts
- Yarn in black, brown, blonde, and auburn for hair
- Craft foam sheets or felt in tan, black, and brown or scrap leather for sandals
- Beads and buttons for jewelry, and small brass buttons for bullae and signet rings
- Fine- and wide-tip markers in a variety of colors for drawing faces

*Other craft supplies (limited only by the imagination of teacher and students)*

- Beans, grain
- Twigs, wooden sticks
- Aluminum foil
- Burlap and other fabrics
- Tiny baskets, fake leaves, grapes, other fruit
- Corks or cork sheets

**Introduce the project**

The teacher introduces the project goals and discusses Roman dress and social status using the background information and the descriptions below. After they learn about clothing and Roman social status, students receive a cloth (or other) figure and select a Roman character (the teacher can change/add options):

- Young girl (daughter of a senator or of a shopkeeper)
- Equestrian boy (14 or under)
- Married woman (can be an ordinary citizen’s wife, or a woman of higher status)
- Adult male citizen
- Senator holding the office of a high magistrate

**Draw a face** on the cloth figure with colored markers (eyes and eyebrows, nose, mouth).

- Students will need to practice drawing faces on paper or fabric scraps, since mistakes cannot be erased. Fine or extra fine markers work best for lips and eyes.

### Make undergarments

Students may if desired make a loincloth or “underwear” from a strip of cloth wrapped around the waist and through the legs and sewn with a few stitches, and a chest band for women.

### Make a *tunica* for men and women, boys and girls

To save time, each figure can be dressed in just one tunic, as long as students understand that layering would have been likely for the elite. Fabric and style can distinguish status.

### Create a pattern for a *tunica* and cut the fabric

Use *Roman Clothing Project Patterns*. Students choose one of two *tunica* patterns (the shape is either a rectangle or a T-shaped rectangle).

*Rectangles and T-shapes:* A rectangle and a T-shaped rectangle, folded in half, create easy sleeves. These were patterns common for both elite men and women and working people.

*Tubes:* An elegant *tunica* for women can be made from two rectangles of fabric sewn to form a tube fastened on either side of the neck. The wider the tube, the more fabric is left hanging down from the shoulders. As presented here the two pieces for a tube are for a woman.

- Elegant **women** pin the top fabric of the tube with small brooches or button them at intervals, offering glimpses of skin. The *tunica* is then belted below the breasts, and the extra fabric under the arms forms a droopy sleeve (a Greek *chiton* style).
- The pattern here is for a sleeveless style that also makes a *stola* if the shoulder fabric is gathered into just one closure on each side.

**Female patterns:** Tunic patterns include a long rectangle and a long T-shaped rectangle, both with sleeves, and two separate rectangles on the sleeveless tunic and *stola* page. A 12” cloth figure is a 6’ person, so the scale is 2” = 1’. The *tunica* pattern (under-tunic or only tunic) is roughly 8” x 20” before being folded and cut, leaving room to hem or belt and blouse, and the *palla* is roughly 10” x 20” and will be wrapped around the body (a bit like a toga).

**Male patterns:** The two male tunic patterns are like the women’s sleeved tunics: a long rectangle and long T-shape, both of which make sleeves. Men will not wear a sleeveless tunic. The rectangle will be roughly 8” x 15” and be too long. A belted tunic needs to reach the knees or lower, so it must be cut longer than knee-length. The rectangular toga pattern of about 22” x 36” can be cut into a hexagon as shown or carefully cut into a gentle semicircle if the student has the skill to cut curves. See the *togas in Clothing in Roman Art*.

As a first step, students use the template to create a tunic pattern of the right size, short or long, and then cut the tunic from cloth and the correct purple **clavi** if they will be needed.

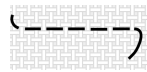
- *Math connections:* students should ideally do the calculations on their own to create patterns and create decorations to scale if the figure is not 12" high. A 12" doll or teddy bear is assumed, equivalent to a 6' person, so the scale is 2" = 1'.

Students should consider how short to cut the tunic if they want to hem it or to belt it to make it shorter. The tunic will likely be belted and "bloused" over the belt, which is why it starts out long. It can be shortened it once students see the garment on the figure.

- Remind everyone that they will be working inside out. They start by sewing the inside side-seams from the bottom of the garment up, stopping at the armholes.

### Sew the tunic

Use a simple **running stitch**. Students may try to use an overhand stitch, which will not look as good once the garment is right side-out.



Running stitch. PKM, Public domain

- The width of a pinky finger (approx. ¼ - ½ inch) from the side edge of the *tunica* is a good measure for the **side hem**.
- A maximum width of two to three fingers (approx. 1 - 1½ inch) is a good measure for the **armhole**. Students should start out with small armholes, try them on the figures, and increase the size of the cut as needed.

### Cut a neck hole

The neck hole can be cut by folding the garment in half lengthwise to find the center and snipping off a small triangle of fabric from the top of the center fold.

- Both a shallow "v" or semi-circular shape work for the neck hole.
- Remind students that is easy to cut the neck hole too big!

### Watch out for *clavi* and hems

Tunic stripes should be added before sewing the shoulders closed. Hemming can be optional to save time. It comes after the side seams are finished and after any tunic stripes are added. All hems -- sleeves, neck, and armholes -- are sewn inside out using a simple running stitch.

### Dress the Roman person in the tunic and continue with accessories

Students put the completed tunic on the cloth figure and tie it with thin cord or rope if appropriate to their character's status. If the tunic is an undergarment for people of higher status or wealth it will not need to be belted.

At this point, the teacher can group students according to their Roman figures. This will make adding clothing and accessories easier, and students can help one another. They can sew exterior garments, try the glue gun, choose craft supplies, and use their imaginations.



**Sandals (*soleae*) and Shoes (*calcei*):** Men's and women's street shoes were made of leather and covered the toes. Romans wore sturdy shoes and boots as needed. Women's city shoes were like men's, but more elegant. At home most Romans wore sandals. Men's sandals, shoes, or boots were of a style and quality suited to their status and profession. Senators wore red/crimson shoes out of doors. Wealthy women's sandals and shoes could be soft and dyed non-neon colors, and they were sometimes decorated with cutouts or attachments.

**Hair:** Yarn of different colors and thicknesses works well for hair. **Men's hair:** During the late Republic and into the early Empire, Roman men and boys wore their hair short and were clean-shaven. **Women's hair:** Married woman generally wore their hair up in carefully arranged and braided styles that were literally sewn together using needles and thread and partly held with hairpins. Hair could be braided and curled up into a bun decorated with ribbon or braid. Some women used false hairpieces to make their hair seem thicker or longer.

- While having their hair up was a sign of modest married status, sometimes women left ringlets curling down. Roman girls' hair copied their mothers', but they were more likely to leave more of their hair hanging free and to avoid elaborate styles.

**Cosmetics:** Chalk powder, charcoal, saffron, alkanet (a root) and even white lead were used as cosmetics. Women used charcoal and kohl to darken brows and eyelashes.

**Elite accessories:** A male citizen might wear an iron signet ring for stamping documents sealed with wax. He might accessorize according to his daily duties. An equestrian or senator might wear a gold signet ring. An *eques* might carry a tablet for recording-keeping (it looks like a wooden "book" that opens to reveal a wax surface that he writes on with a pointed stylus). A senator might carry a scroll and have a ring with a carved gem.

A woman might also have a wax tablet as for managing the household, or a mirror for her morning dressing rituals.

A boy might have a box for carrying scrolls or tablets to school. A girl might have a doll or sewing or spinning tools. Boys and girls played games using bone and ivory dice.

**Protective jewelry:** A boy's special protective locket, a **bullula**, was a flattened sphere or tube, or a thick disk, usually of gold. It served to protect against the evil eye, bad luck, and ill health, and he wore it until the day he became a citizen, when it was put aside and saved.

If a girl wore an amulet, it might be a crescent moon-shaped **lunula**, and she wore it until her marriage, when it was set aside with childhood toys.

### Working people

Costuming working people is made interesting by planning the accessories signaling their role or profession, such as, for women: seamstress, weaver, tavern server, shoemaker's wife (and so on), and for men: gardener, construction worker, mosaic craftsman, farmer, porter, door greeter, tavern or shop owner (butcher, baker), marble or gem carver, vineyard overseer, and more. Children might carry or wear amulets of less expensive materials.

**After figures are completed (optional)**

Latin teachers may want to follow up by using the figures as puppets or as performers in plays written by the students. Glue dowels (3/8 to 1/2-inch in diameter and 2 inches long) with hot glue onto the back of the figure, underneath the clothing. For display purposes the students can pin the figures to bulletin boards and write conversational Latin phrases to mount in speech balloons or descriptive placards like this one to accompany the figures.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (Latin name of character), and I am a \_\_\_\_\_ (role such as senator, citizen, matron, young girl, young boy) in 25 CE. I am wearing \_\_\_\_\_ (list garments and accessories). I was created by \_\_\_\_\_ (student's name).



The young son of a working family and the older son of an elite family wearing a tunic with purple stripes and a toga praetexta.

**Sample Assessment criteria** (phase one on research can be omitted)**PHASE I (50 points)**

Information is complete and detailed \_\_\_\_\_ /20 points

Conclusions are written clearly \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

Sources of information are cited \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

Citations follow guidelines \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

**TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_ /50 points**

**PHASE II (50 points)**

You followed instructions \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

Your figure's clothing accurately represents your Roman person \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

You added relevant accessories and shoes \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

Accessories align with the person's profession/social status \_\_\_\_\_ / 10 points

You helped clean up \_\_\_\_\_ /10 points

**TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_ /50 points**

**TOTAL GRADE \_\_\_\_\_ /100**

**Comments**

## Resources

## Books

Croom, Alexandra. 2010. *Roman Clothing and Fashion*. Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing.

D'Amato, Raffaele (author) and R. Ruggeri (illustrator). 2016. *Roman Army Units in the Western Provinces (1), 31 BC-AD 195*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing (Bloomsbury). (This could be useful for a student who wants to expand the project to include military equipment).

Lee, Mireille M. 2015. *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*. New York: Cambridge University. (See her diagrams of tunic types in chap. 4, "Garments.")

Olson, Kelly. 2008. *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self Preservation and Society*. Routledge.

Olson, Kelly. 2017. *Masculinity and Dress in roman Antiquity*. Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies.

Sebesta, Judith Lynn and Larissa Bonfante, eds. 2001. *The World of Roman Costume*. Madison, University of Wisconsin. (See p. 223, figs. 13.11 and 13.12 for male togas and female tunics.)

Tierney, Tom. 2013. *Greek and Roman Fashions Coloring Book*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publishing.

## Online resources

Harlow, Mary and Larsson Lovén, Lena. 2024. "Young Romans: Status, Dress, and Gender." In *Textile Crossroads: Exploring European Clothing, Identity, and Culture across Millennia 14*: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/texroads/14>

**Makeup:** Rebecca Butterworth recreates the makeup of a Roman-Egyptian woman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toInJIUrYnc>

**Hair:** Janet Stephens recreates a Roman hairstyle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1ZRgz-Pdh4&list=PLhacomyGRF2PBSm-ByuuNup6TGB3B8aAI>

**Clothing:** These aging pages have images that are failing, but the descriptions are still useful: McManus, Barbara F. The College of New Rochelle. *Roman Clothing Part I: Overview of Roman clothing*: <https://vroma.org/vromans/bmcmanus/clothing.html>  
*Roman Clothing Part II: Women*: <https://vroma.org/vromans/bmcmanus/clothing2.html>

Companion to *The Worlds of Roman Women* in texts and images: <https://feminaeromanae.org/worlds.html>

*Working women*: <https://feminaeromanae.org/work.html>

*Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors*: The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty: [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jucl/hd\\_jucl.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jucl/hd_jucl.htm)

## More Images of student work

(Some figures were pinned to a board; ignore tacks!)



Students making *tunicae* for 12" cloth figures



Equestrian boy in a *tunica* with *clavi angusti* and a matron in a *tunica exterior* (not visible), dyed *stola*, and *palla*, carrying a *peacock fan*.



Teddy *togatus*



Senator/magistrate wearing a *tunica* with *clavi lati* and a *toga praetexta*, and a young working girl before marriage.