Augustus, born Gaius Octavius Thurinus in 63 BCE, was the first emperor of the Roman Empire. In this text, Julia Troche discusses some of the statues of him that have survived over time. As you read, take notes on how Augustus is depicted in the sculptures.

Visual imagery — including statues, inscriptions, and paintings — carried deep meaning for the ancient Romans. In essence, it was a powerful and lasting way of communicating with the masses. Rulers of Rome often used art to make clear their authority to their subjects and to express political and religious beliefs and practices. Just as Augustus started a new political tradition when he became Rome's first emperor, so he also re-imagined Roman art.

**Augustus as High Priest**

The new artistic style is perhaps best seen in his unique statuary, specifically sculptural portraits. Sculptors carved likenesses of him that emphasized his different religious and political roles, as is seen in the statue of Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. This piece shows Augustus not only as the emperor of Rome, but also as the Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of Rome. The hooded toga[1] that he wears is a special outfit worn only during religious rituals and thus identifies him as a priest.

Augustus’ statues were inspired by early Classical Greek sculptures, which were highly idealized and youthful. So, no matter what his age was or how he looked at the time the sculptor created the statue, Augustus was always depicted as a young man. The statue portraying him as Pontifex Maximus, for example, was most likely made when Augustus was nearly 50 years old. Yet, the statue shows him as a youth, with no wrinkles or other markers of age. This is vastly different from the portraiture that came before his reign, the period known as the Roman Republic, when portraits of the leaders depicted them with wrinkles. The intent was to show their age and wisdom, not conceal it, since age and wisdom were celebrated virtues[2] at the time.

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1. a loose flowing garment that covers the whole body except for the right arm
2. **Virtue (noun)**: a quality considered good or desirable in a person
Forever Young

Augustus' youth is also on display in the marble head of him at the Louvre. The C-shaped locks of hair that rest on his forehead are typical of Augustan portraiture. The idealism in his sculptures was meant to communicate to viewers his desire to establish a “Golden Age” in Rome.

Portraiture in Bronze

While many of Augustus' statues were carved from marble, there were a good number fashioned from bronze. Unfortunately, very few of these have survived. The head of Augustus, now housed in the British Museum, is the only example to survive with the inlaid eyes intact. Just the head, however, is preserved, as it was broken off the body in antiquity. As with the marble sculpture at the Louvre, the bronze head of Augustus depicts him with his typical locks of hair. Other common Augustan features include a long nose and pursed (pressed together), thin lips that sit above a narrow chin. All of these facial characteristics are common across Augustus’ statuary and are present in the best-known statue of him, the Prima Porta.

Real or Ideal?

Despite the consistency in the faces, we still do not know for certain if these depictions accurately portray Augustus. All of his statues were idealized, fashioned to reflect the perfect vision of how Augustus wanted to be seen by the people of Rome. This image was, in turn, influenced by the political and religious principles that he sought to promote.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
   A. Augustus used his sculptures to convey what he wanted for Rome, which was ageless perfection.
   B. Artists created inaccurate sculptures and portraits of Augustus because they didn't want to upset him.
   C. Historians can't learn anything from the sculptures or portraits of Augustus because of their inaccurate nature.
   D. The Ancient Romans didn't respect Augustus because he didn't portray himself as old and wise.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “The hooded toga that he wears is a special outfit worn only during religious rituals and thus identifies him as a priest.” (Paragraph 2)
   B. “This is vastly different from the portraiture that came before his reign, the period known as the Roman Republic, when portraits of the leaders depicted them with wrinkles.” (Paragraph 3)
   C. “The idealism in his sculptures was meant to communicate to viewers his desire to establish a ‘Golden Age’ in Rome.” (Paragraph 4)
   D. “Despite the consistency in the faces, we still do not know for certain if these depictions accurately portray Augustus.” (Paragraph 6)

3. How do paragraphs 5-6 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
   A. They show how much more valuable the bronze statues of Augustus are.
   B. They highlight how the bronze statues of Augustus differ from the marble statues.
   C. They point out how the appearances of Augustus' statues differed and changed over time.
   D. They describe the statues' features and possible inaccuracies, showing how Augustus manipulated art for political reasons.

4. Which of the following describes how the author develops her analysis of Augustus' sculptures in the text?
   A. She discusses how Augustus' sculptures changed over time, depending on Rome's political climate.
   B. She describes different sculptures of Augustus and the common traits shared among these statues.
   C. She discusses statues of leaders that came after Augustus to show how his statues influenced them.
   D. She describes the large number of sculptures that still exist, proving how well-respected Augustus was.
5. According to the text, what is the relationship between how leaders portray themselves in art and what they want to convey to their people?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In this text, the author discusses how leaders chose to be depicted in art. If an artist made a sculpture of you at some point in your life, what messages would you want that sculpture to communicate? What traits would you want the artist to feature? Why?

2. Before Augustus, leaders depicted themselves as old. How have the desirable qualities or traits of a leader changed over time? How are leaders typically portrayed in art today?

3. What can experts learn from studying sculptures of leaders from the past? Can you think of other sculptures or works of art that inform us about historical figures or people who lived in the past? If so, describe them.