

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART | OCTOBER 19, 2008 – MARCH 22, 2009

# Pompeii and the Roman Villa

ART AND CULTURE AROUND THE BAY OF NAPLES

BEFORE MOUNT VESUVIUS ERUPTED IN AD 79, the region of Campania around the Bay of Naples was an artistic center of great sophistication. Archaeological excavations have uncovered not only Pompeii (fig. 1), Herculaneum, and other towns near Vesuvius, but also the remains of luxurious seaside villas built for prominent Romans (fig. 2). They were drawn to the bay by its beauty and thermal baths—a legacy of its volcanic geology—as well as the lingering Greek culture around Naples, a former Greek colony. The bay’s popularity as a resort for vacationing Romans brought extraordinary wealth to the area. Adding to its economic well-being was the emperor Augustus’ designation of the port of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli, north of Naples) as the Italian entry point for the enormous shipments of grain from the province of Egypt. The wealth, coupled with the great demand for works of art to adorn the interior spaces and gardens of the vast maritime villas, attracted artists from far and wide. Many of them would also have found clients among the well-to-do townspeople of Pompeii and Herculaneum who emulated the lifestyles of the powerful elite. The art collections of both villa owners and residents of the nearby towns demonstrate their shared artistic tastes and cultural ideals, particularly a reverence for classical Greece, which was seen as a Golden Age.

Cover: *Garden scene*,  
Pompeii, House of the  
Golden Bracelet, fresco,  
1st century BC–1st cen-  
tury AD, Ufficio Scavi,  
Pompei (detail, no. 65)

I. Christen Købke, *The  
Forum at Pompeii with  
Vesuvius in the Background*,  
1841, oil on canvas, The  
J. Paul Getty Museum,  
Los Angeles (no. 150)



2. Two seaside villas,  
Pompeii, 1st century BC–  
1st century AD, fresco,  
Museo Archeologico  
Nazionale di Napoli (no. 2)



## VILLAS, HOUSES, AND GARDENS

Roman aristocrats began constructing villas on the bay in the second century BC. They retreated to these country estates, especially in spring and summer, to enjoy their leisure (*otium*) and escape from the pressures of business (*negotium*) in Rome. Over the course of the next two centuries ruling families arrived as well. Julius Caesar, the first emperor Augustus, and the emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero all had residences on the bay. The presence of the imperial families led to increasing numbers of villas for Romans eager to further their careers through access to the political elite in more relaxed social circumstances than was possible in Rome. So many villas were built along the bay that the ancient historian Strabo said they looked like “one continuous city.”

The sumptuous villas had extensive gardens and elegant interior courtyards, some large enough to enclose a swimming pool. Their façades were lined with colonnaded walkways that offered the owners sweeping vistas of the sea, reached by terraces leading down to private harbors for pleasure boats. The houses forming the dense city blocks of Pompeii and Herculaneum turned a blank wall to the busy streets but nonetheless shared certain features with the seaside villas. In both, rooms were arranged around an atrium, which opened to the sky to bring light to the interior and allow rainwater to collect in a square basin (*impluvium*) set into the floor. Some townspeople emulated features of villa architecture on a smaller scale, adding colonnaded (*peristyle*) courtyards, baths, and interior gardens to their houses. According to Vitruvius, writing in the first century AD, the residences of “men of rank who, from holding offices and magistracies, have social obligations to their fellow citizens, [need] lofty entrance courts . . . and most spacious atriums and peristyles . . . The rules on these points will hold not only for houses in

3. *Two table supports, Pompeii, House of Gaius Cornelius Rufus, 1st century AD, marble, Ufficio Scavi, Pompei (no. 15)*

4. *Kantharos entwined with olive branches, Pompeii, House of the Menander, 1st century BC, silver, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 29)*



town, but also for those in the country. . .” (*On Architecture* 6.5.2–3).

The interiors of the villas and many Pompeian houses were lavishly decorated, their walls sheathed with colorful frescoes representing mythological scenes, landscapes with views of the

bay and the villas lining its shores, and still lifes celebrating local delicacies from the sea and the land made fertile by its rich volcanic soil. Furnishings included marble tables (fig. 3) and bronze lampstands, some even in the form of statues. In the grander houses, diners drank wine from silver cups decorated with olives (fig. 4), vine leaves, or famous episodes from familiar myths. Sculpted portraits of family members or ancestors, set up in reception areas, would have reminded guests of the lineage of their hosts.

Gardens in and around the villas were accented with aviaries, fountains, and marble or bronze figurines that spurted water into pools and watercourses. Houses in Pompeii were generally much smaller, but townspeople shared the villa owners’ love of gardens. Even in modest houses, a little garden might be tucked into the courtyard and embellished with sculpture. If the spaces were too tight for actual gardens, plants could be painted on the walls. The painted

gardens visually expanded small ones, as in the so-called House of the Golden Bracelet where frescoes of flowering shrubs, birds, and fountains adjoined the real garden behind the house (cover).

Garden sculpture often represents rustic subjects, including wild animals, or Dionysos, god of wine, with his rowdy entourage of satyrs and maenads. Such works suggest the wilder side of nature while taming it for the owners' pleasure. Portraits of Greek thinkers and writers were also set up in gardens, which, like libraries, were places for contemplation and learning—echoes of the pastoral setting of Plato's Academy, depicted in a mosaic from a house in Pompeii that shows Plato surrounded by philosophers at his school in a grove outside Athens (fig. 5).

#### LEGACY OF GREECE

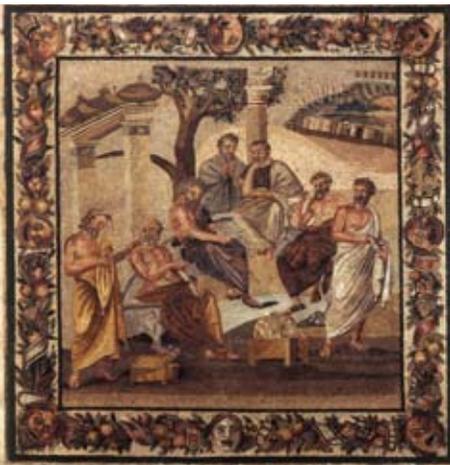
The region around the Bay of Naples had been colonized by Greeks as early as the eighth century BC. The city of Neapolis (modern Naples) was founded around 600 BC and did not become a Roman municipality until 89 BC. Like other cities around the bay, it still retained its Greek character after being absorbed into the Roman sphere. The Greek flavor was evident even in the streets where some Romans sported Greek dress rather than the togas worn in Rome.

The Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC spurred a fascination with the country's illustrious past as well as the looting of masterpieces of Greek art, which victorious Roman generals brought back to Italy to adorn public and private spaces at home. The reverence for Greece, viewed as the

repository of culture, beauty, and wisdom, culminated in the emperor Augustus' intent to revive during his reign (27 BC–AD 14) the glories of ancient Athens under the leadership of Pericles in the fifth century BC. In the words of the poet Horace, "Captive Greece took captive her savage conqueror and brought civilization to the rustic Latins."

Greek influence pervaded the decor of the villas around the Bay of Naples and the houses of the elite in

5. *Plato's Academy*, Pompeii, Villa of T. Siminius Stephanus, 1st century BC–1st century AD, mosaic, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 95)



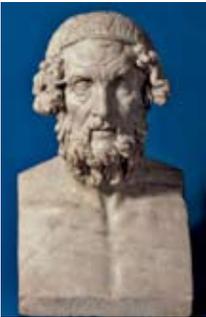
Pompeii and Herculaneum. For their owners, knowledge of Greek culture was a status symbol and mark of refinement that was reflected in the works of art they acquired. A portrait of Homer (fig. 6) or reliefs depicting episodes from the Trojan War conveyed their appreciation of Greek history. Busts of the fourth-century BC playwright Menander suggested their enthusiasm for Athenian theater; and likenesses of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who believed that pleasure is inherently good and leads to happiness, attested to their familiarity with his hedonistic teachings.

Dining rooms or triclinia—so called because they contained three couches on which diners reclined while eating—were often painted with scenes from Greek mythology. Excavations at the site of Moregine, south of Pompeii, have uncovered an intriguing building complex, perhaps a villa, perhaps an inn or the headquarters of a business. Frescoed on the walls of one of its dining rooms are images of the god Apollo, patron of the liberal arts, flanked by the muses (fig. 7). Their presence would have reminded guests of the pleasures of intellectual and creative conversation, the ideal at any Roman banquet.

Many Romans living near the Bay of Naples were avid art collectors who prized copies after Greek “old masters.” So many versions of *The Three Graces* (no. 110) survive that they must stem from a famous prototype, now lost. The portrait of an athlete from the Villa dei Papiri near Herculaneum (fig. 8) echoes a fourth-century BC sculpture by Lysippos, while the statue of a youth from a Pompeian house (no. 104) harks back to Polykleitos’ *Doryphoros* (Spearbearer)

6. *Homer*, Baiae, 1st century BC–1st century AD, marble, On Loan from the British Museum, London (no. 92)

7. *Apollo and the muse Clio*, Moregine, Triclinium A, 1st century AD, fresco, Ufficio Scavi, Pompei (detail, no. 111)



8. *Victorious athlete*, Herculaneum, Villa dei Papiri, 1st century BC–1st century AD, bronze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 114)

9. *Aphrodite*, Rione Terra at Puteoli, probably early 1st century AD, marble, Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei (no. 106)

10. *Torso from a statue of a woman*, Rione Terra at Puteoli, 1st century AD, marble, Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia (no. 12)

of c. 440 BC. The owners of such works must have taken pride in possessing sculptures that recall two of the most renowned artists of ancient Greece.



Some of the finest works of art were carved in imported Greek marble; others were ordered from Greece or created by Greek artists who had moved to the Bay of Naples, attracted by the opportunities afforded by the wealthy patrons there. But most collectors would have relied on local artists familiar with Greek models. The works of art they commissioned between the first century BC and the first century AD, either for their own collections or for public display, were made in styles from various periods. A statue of Aphrodite from Puteoli reflects the influence of classical Greek art of the later fifth century BC in her remote expression and the virtuoso handling of her garment, which falls in delicate, rippling folds (fig. 9). Like the marble female torso from the same site (fig. 10), the figure's transparent drapery clings to her body, revealing a clear understanding of human anatomy. A more severe bronze statue of a young woman from the Villa dei Papiri,



## FILM PROGRAMS

East Building Auditorium

October 25, 2:00 pm

*The Last Days of Pompeii: Lecture and Films*  
Martin M. Winkler, professor of classics, department of modern and classical languages, George Mason University

See the Calendar of Events and the Film Calendar for further details, or go to [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov).

## EXHIBITION FILM

Narrated by Sir Derek Jacobi, this 30-minute film examines the explosion of artistic activity on the Bay of Naples that began in the first century BC.

East Building Small Auditorium  
Monday to Friday, noon to 3:00 pm  
Weekends, noon to close  
(with minor exceptions)

East Building Auditorium  
Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday,  
11:30 am (with minor exceptions)

This film was made possible by  
the HRH Foundation

## CONCERT

October 15

East Building Auditorium  
Michele Campanella, pianist

Concerts at the National Gallery of Art are open to the public free of charge, first-come, first-seated.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm, Sunday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). For information about accessibility, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services, inquire at the Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

## MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDIO WORKSHOPS

Studio Workshops include an in-depth examination and discussion of works of art in the galleries, followed by a related, one-hour studio project. Offered from 10:00 am to 12:30 pm on the following dates:

Middle School Students  
November 6, 7, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21  
December 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

High School Students  
January 20, 21, 22, 23  
February 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27  
March 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 17, 18, 19, 20

To register, e-mail your chosen date and your name, the name and address of your school, and the school telephone number to [highschoolstudioworkshops@nga.gov](mailto:highschoolstudioworkshops@nga.gov).

## TEACHER WORKSHOPS

February 4 and 11, 4:00 pm  
Workshops include a tour of the exhibition, a discussion of teaching applications, and light refreshments. Registration required. For details, visit <http://www.nga.gov/education/teacher.htm> or call 202.842.6276.

*Introductory Slide Overviews / Adult Tours*  
Please consult the Calendar of Events or [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov) for full schedule and program information.

## AUDIO GUIDE

Narrated by National Gallery director Earl A. Powell III, this tour includes commentary by guest curator Carol Mattusch, George Mason University; Mary Beard, University of Cambridge; and Kenneth Lapatin, The J. Paul Getty Museum. The tour is available for rental at the entrance of the exhibition for \$5.

To reserve audio tours for groups, call 202.842.6592.

## SUNDAY LECTURES

East Building Auditorium

October 19, 2:00 pm

*Finding Ancient Rome on the Bay of Naples: An Introduction to Pompeii and the Roman Villa*  
Carol Mattusch, Mathy Professor of Art History, George Mason University

November 9, 2:00 pm

The Sydney J. Freedberg Lecture in Italian Art  
*To Live with Myths in Pompeii and Beyond*  
Paul Zanker, professor of art history, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

March 1, 2:00 pm

*Is Anything New under the Sun? Environmental Quality around the Bay of Naples in AD 79 and the Present Day*  
Mark Walters, environmental consultant and writer

March 8, 2:00 pm

The Society of Dilettanti: *Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit*  
Bruce Redford, professor of art history and English, Boston University  
Book signing of *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* to follow

## PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM

Roman Art and Culture on the Bay of Naples

March 20, 11:00–5:00 pm

March 21, 1:00–5:00 pm

East Building Auditorium  
Illustrated lectures by noted scholars, including John Bodel, Lucilla Burn, Faya Causey, John R. Clarke, Bjoern Ewald, Nathalie Kampen, Barbara Kellum, Miranda Marvin, Rebecca Molholt, John Pollini, and Hérica Valladares

## CATALOGUE

The fully illustrated, 383-page catalogue, *Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples*, is published by the National Gallery of Art in association with Thames and Hudson. Hardcover \$60.00, soft-cover \$40.00.

## ON THE WEB

<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/pompeiiinfo.shtm>

11. *Girl fastening her peplos*, Herculaneum, Villa dei Papiri, 1st century BC–1st century AD, bronze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 103)

12. *Tray-bearing youth or Apollo*, Pompeii, House of Gaius Julius Polybius, 1st century BC–1st century AD, bronze, Ufficio Scavi, Pompei (no. 48)

with heavy drapery hanging in broad vertical folds, takes inspiration from an earlier phase in the development of the classical style (fig. 11).

Several works of sculpture found in villas or houses around the Bay of Naples recall the even earlier archaic style current in Greece in the sixth century BC. The bronze statue of a youth from the House of Julius Polybius in Pompeii echoes the archaic style in its stiff frontal pose and stylized hair arranged in tight curls resembling corkscrews or snail shells (fig. 12). Did Roman collectors think that such works were actual Greek statues from the sixth century BC or did they know that they were buying contemporary versions of antiques? Probably most were content with modern adaptations, but an archaistic bust of a youth suggests that some buyers might have been fooled (fig. 13). Found in the Villa dei Papiri, the sculpture may be a forgery, cleverly designed with





13. *Bust of a youth or Apollo*, Herculaneum, Villa dei Papiri, 1st century BC, bronze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 101)

14. *Alexander the Great on horseback*, Herculaneum, 1st century BC–1st century AD, bronze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (no. 116)



an irregularly shaped lower edge to give the impression that the bust is a fragment broken off from a full-length ancient Greek statue. Regardless of whether collectors believed such works to be ancient or modern, their collections reveal that the Roman reverence for the Greek past led them to acquire works representing the art of Greece in all its variety as they adopted Greek culture as their own.

The Greek-inspired works of art displayed in the villas and town houses around the bay took on new meanings in their Roman context. Monumental images of gods, goddesses, or heroes such as Alexander the Great were scaled down to become tabletop ornaments (fig. 14). A statue evoking Apollo transformed the god of learning and the arts into a lampstand (no. 44), shedding light, both literal and figurative, on Roman gatherings. In Greece statues of gods and goddesses were set up in sanctuaries and public places, but in Pompeii a sculpture of Artemis (no. 102), goddess of the hunt, was installed in a colonnade around a domestic garden; formerly public art became private.

#### DESTRUCTION AND DISCOVERY

The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 brought nearly all this to an end. From a villa at Misenum at the northern tip of the bay, Pliny the Younger saw the cloud rising from Vesuvius and, soon after, wrote two letters recording the event, “Its general appearance can best be expressed as being like a pine tree, for

it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches. I imagine . . . it was thrust upwards by the first blast . . . broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points . . . The buildings were now shaking with violent shocks and seemed to be swaying to and fro as if they were torn from their foundations.” In the second letter he wrote, “Soon afterwards the cloud sank down to earth and covered the sea . . . We were terrified to see everything changed, buried deep in ashes like snowdrifts” (Ep. 6.16, 6.20). When it was over, Herculaneum and all but the highest parts of Pompeii lay beneath tons of volcanic debris. Cities farther away were largely unaffected; the discovery of the monumental Aphrodite at Capua (no. 107) shows that artistic patronage continued at a very high level in parts of the region well after the eruption. But the towns and villas in the shadow of Vesuvius were abandoned and mostly forgotten until their discovery in the eighteenth century.

Systematic excavations began at Herculaneum in 1738 and ten years later at Pompeii. In the following decades, archaeologists tunneling through solidified mud at Herculaneum found the Villa dei Papiri and brought to light more than eighty statues and about one thousand ancient papyri inscribed with Greek texts. News of the discovery of the ancient cities spread throughout Europe. Curious tourists flocked to the Bay of Naples, attracted also by bursts of volcanic activity from Vesuvius (fig. 15). Illustrated publications

15. Joseph Wright, *Vesuvius from Portici*, c. 1774–1776, oil on canvas, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens; Acquired with funds from the Frances Crandall Dyke Bequest (no. 122)



16. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Sculpture Gallery*, 1874, oil on canvas, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. Gift of Arthur M. Loew, Class of 1912A (no. 143)

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documenting the finds spawned a rage for antique styles, and reproductions of antiquities became a major industry that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and other artists specialized in paintings such as *A Sculpture Gallery*, 1874, in which Pompeian antiquities are illustrated in exacting detail (fig. 16). The ancient works of art excavated (and still being found) at the buried cities and villas along the Bay of Naples affected the art, design, and culture of Europe and eventually North America, where even rooms in the United States Capitol were decorated in the Pompeian style.

This brochure was written by Susan M. Arensberg with Rebecca Molholt, department of exhibition programs, and produced by the publishing office, National Gallery of Art. Copyright © 2008 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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