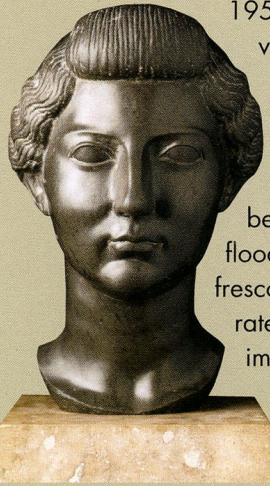


## POMPEII AND THE ROMAN VILLA

"Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples," at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., testifies to the ongoing influence of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the other lavish resort towns around Vesuvius. Caught like flies in amber by the volcanic eruption of 79 A.D., the villas of the Roman elite were unearthed in the eighteenth century. Guest curator Carol Mattusch, Professor of Art History at George Mason University, emphasizes the continuity of classical art and links the neoclassical revival of the eighteenth century to the rediscovery of the buried cities.

Excavations continue, with often spectacular results. Among the highlights of this 150-work exhibition is a dining room from Moregine, just south of Pompeii, discovered in



Portrait of Livia, late Republican or Augustan  
MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS

1959 and excavated in 1999–2001, when the walls were removed because of flooding. The frescoes are decorated with images of Apollo and the Muses.

Two other fresco fragments, both from Pompeii, suggest the rich variety of Roman wall painting. An image of a female panel-painter, palette in hand (first century B.C.–first century A.D.), has a sketchy naturalism (see page 33). The seated painter and her two female companions occupy a convincing interior space, with pilasters framing an exterior, but the figures are essentially shorthand depictions. Another fragment from the same era, showing a peacock on a garden fence, has a richer presence. While the illusionistic space is kept shallow, the wicker fence, a dove perched on a theatrical mask and a dense mass of foliage—including recognizable plants such as chamomile—are captured with remarkable realism. Roman painting is characterized by both mimetic skill and conceptual sophistication, combining realistic still lifes, mythological subjects and decorative elements that integrate actual architectural elements with *trompe l'oeil* counterparts.

One section of the exhibition and catalogue focuses on the far-reaching impact of discovery, leading to, among other things, a vogue for "Pompeii red" as an interior wall color in the nineteenth century. Constantino Brumidi's 1856 designs for Senate chambers in the United States Capitol were clearly based on recently published images of Pompeii



frescoes, complete with floating maenads, sea gods and decorative grotesques. Also included in the exhibition are documentary paintings—some imaginative recreations of the past, others depicting sites as rediscovered. Danish artist Josef Theodore Hansen's *Interior at Pompeii (House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, View from the Atrium)*, from 1905, is particularly handsome. With a convincing sense of interior space, the painting depicts evocatively worn black and red frescoes in the minimal grotesque manner, with a bit of blue sky above and a view to sunlit ruins and distant hills. Danish painter

Christen Købke was among the many artists drawn to the beauty of the site itself. *The Forum at Pompeii with Vesuvius in the Background* (1841) is a layered meditation on the glory and vulnerability of human history. Beneath the broken yet imposing colonnade in full sunlight lies a shadowy waste of weeds and fragments. The volcano in the distance is deceptively placid.

Far more portable, sculpture, jewelry and luxury decorative arts discovered at the sites made their way into various public and private collections, and had a lasting effect on taste across Europe and America.



Josef Theodore Hansen, *Interior at Pompeii (House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, View from the Atrium)*, 1905 PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF ROBILANT + VOENA, LONDON



The Romans themselves were connoisseurs and art collectors, filling their villas with Greek works, as well as specimens from more exotic locales such as Egypt and India. Their copies and reinterpretations of Greek originals were often distinctive creations in their own right, as Mary Beard points out in her catalogue essay. Roman sculpture had its own earthy virtues, as we see in a torso from a statue of a woman (first century A.D.) from Pozzuli. The arms, legs and lower body would have been attached with dowels, but even as it is, this is a splendid work of art. The sculptor has effectively used two kinds of marble to mold the heavy, clinging fabric over the voluptuous body. The superb drapery has a proto-Baroque vivacity.

The Romans had a special talent for capturing the personality of an individual. A portrait statue of a daughter of Marcus Nonius Balbus (first century A.D.), from Herculaneum, is graceful and lively, with hand gestures that make it look as if she were about to speak. The white marble has been underpainted to give it a rosy glow, especially noticeable in the girl's reddish, wavy hair. Her sandals retain traces of

gold paint. A portrait bust of a young woman (first century A.D.), her coiffeur of tight pincurls a deeper shade of red, was found in the 8,800-square-foot House of the Citharist in Pompeii. The elite often included portraits of rulers as well as family members in their décor. Here, the Emperor Augustus is represented by a marble bust and an exquisite onyx-and-sardonyx cameo (both first century B.C.—first century A.D.). His brilliant, dangerous wife Livia appears in an Augustan era black basanite head and, with a child (perhaps Tiberius), in a turquoise cameo (early first century A.D.).

The catalogue, by Mattusch, includes lively essays by an international group of scholars, who explore how these sites and their sumptuous artifacts continue to illuminate life in the ancient world. "Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples" is on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., through March 22, 2009. The exhibition, which travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (May 3–October 4, 2009), is part of the United States-Italy Bilateral Agreement on Archeology.

— Gail Leggio