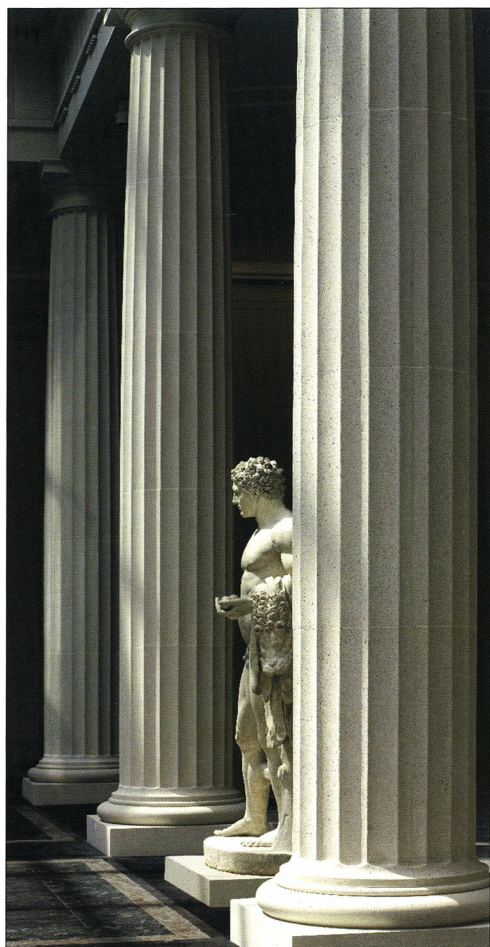


In the Light of the Past

THE MET'S NEW CLASSICAL GALLERIES

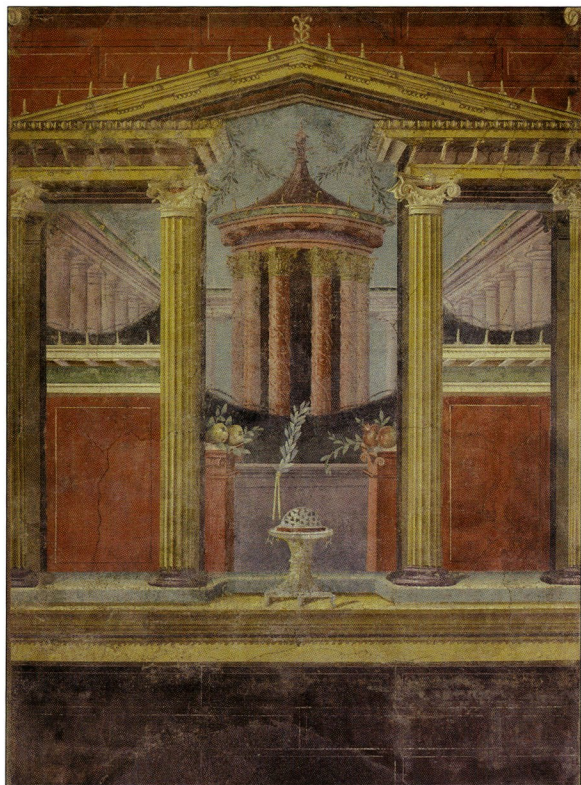
by Gail Leggio

In the first volume of *America's Rome*, a magisterial overview of the Eternal City's sway over New World imaginations, William Vance writes: "The function of a museum of art, not as a school for the artist but as a special place set apart for the experience and worship of Beauty by the ordinary man or woman, is something that could be realized by Americans in the nineteenth century only through their visits to London, Paris, Munich, Florence, Naples and—especially—Rome."¹ Generations of travelers have tried to describe how art, architecture and ambiance come together in, for example, Rome's Capitoline Museums, especially in the room where two touchstone sculptures are displayed—the *Dying Gaul* (a marble Roman copy of a Pergamon bronze) and the *Satyr Resting* (a replica of an original by Praxiteles and the inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun*, published in 1860). In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) Henry James places his heroine in that room, surrounded by statues: "The Roman air is an exquisite medium...The golden sunshine mingles with them, the deep stillness of the past, so vivid yet...seems to throw a solemn spell....The dark red walls of the room threw them into relief; the polished marble floor reflected their beauty."² The Metropolitan Museum was born of that era and the American yearning for culture. Now New York



View of the Leon Levy and
Shelby White Court, with marble
statue of Hercules, Roman, 69–98 A.D.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
OF ART, NEW YORK CITY



Fresco from a cubiculum nocturnum (bedroom), Roman, c. 50–40 B.C. From the villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, near Pompeii. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY

has its own magical space for the contemplation of antiquities, with the long-awaited completion of the galleries for classical art. The heart of the new Roman galleries is the Leon Levy and Shelby White Court, a barrel-vaulted central atrium flooded with natural light that seems able to absorb multitudes of

tourists, school groups, sketchers and city dwellers with unforced grace. There is, above all, a sense of continuity: in the flow of the architectural spaces, in the historical clarity with which the perennial relevance of the classical heritage is maintained, in the way the now-completed southernmost wing fulfills the teleology of the museum.

The saga of the classical wing's completion is outlined in the introductory chapter to the new catalogue of the collection, illustrated with period photographs of earlier installations, written by the Curator in Charge, Carlos A. Picón.³ It's a tangled tale of changing fashions in architecture and scholarship, civic-mindedness and, occasionally, disreputable dealing, a subject that has generated much controversy of late.⁴ The current triumph, designed by Kevin Roche, who has been a Met architect for four decades, builds on the vision of McKim, Mead & White's 1926 single-story peristyle atrium, meant to suggest the garden of a Roman villa. In a bizarre turn of events, the space was converted into a restaurant, decorated by Dorothy Draper, and offices in 1954. Thousands of objects went into storage. Roche has doubled the height of the atrium; Etruscan artifacts and a study collection are arranged on the mezzanine. Visitors can look down from the mezzanine's multiple vantage points over the sculpture displayed in the court, which is surrounded by Ionic columns and rises from a geometric, colored marble floor that alludes to the Pantheon. The

black-and-white mosaic tile border is original McKim, Mead & White. Roche also consulted a number of Roman models, including the Theater of Marcellus and the Villa Giulia, a sixteenth-century building by Vignola. A low, round black marble fountain, an elegantly simple basin nine feet across, adds a murmur of living water to the busy but surprisingly serene space. What everyone involved in this fifteen-year, \$220 million project seems to have intuitively grasped is that the physical context—the architectural elements, the spatial flow, the light—is as vital a part of the experience as the art itself.

Nowhere is this principle more cogently expressed than in the new installation of the Met's suites of wall paintings from Roman villas near Pompeii, lavish retreats around the Bay of Naples which were buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. A villa at Boscoreale (50–40 B.C.) was excavated around 1900, and artifacts were auctioned off in Paris, with elements going to the Metropolitan, the Louvre and the Archaeological Museum in Naples. The bedroom (*cubiculum nocturnum*) is one of the Met's treasures. Long awkwardly placed off the main lobby and sometimes mistaken for a coat check room, it is now invitingly open. The *trompe l'oeil* painting is extraordinary: red columns decorated with jeweled floral motifs frame a rocky landscape with naturalistic ivy and birds; there is a round temple made of colored marbles and a pile-up of illusionistically convincing architecture. The real window in the ensemble, complete with the original metal bars warped by heat, catches light from the Manhattan street outside. The Romans, praised for their monumental building projects, also understood the dynamics of domestic space. That acumen is reflected both in the layout of their houses and in their décor, especially their wall paintings. Jás Elsner remarks that "wall-painting is playing with exactly the same issues as is architecture—one of the marks of an atrium or peristyle... is that it is always a space that allows the viewer to glimpse other spaces, to see more of the house."⁵ That openness is the signature of the Met's Roman galleries: the mezzanine not only overlooks the atrium but Central Park and Fifth Avenue as well, and the skylight elevates the spirit. Elsner characterizes the porousness of the Roman house this way: "If, in visual terms, 'outside' means under the sky as well as outside the house, then some of the house's most internal rooms are 'outside' because they are open to the air."⁶ One of the loveliest examples of inside-outside illusionism is the summer triclinium from Livia's villa (20–10 B.C.), installed at the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome. The *trompe l'oeil* paintings surround you with identifiable trees, fruits and birds, which seem to press up against the painted architectural elements, a low marble parapet and a cane fence.

The Met has other fine paintings from Boscoreale, all from the villa of P. Farnius Synistor: frescoes with swagged fruit garlands, masks and a serpent in a basket (Dionysian symbols); figures related to dynastic marriage, including an enthroned couple and a richly dressed woman with a lyre. There is more stylistic variety in the paintings from the villa of Agrippa Postumus in

Boscotrecase (last decade of first century B.C.). The Mythological Room features scenes—Odysseus, Polyphemus and Galatea, Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a sea beast—set in rocky shorescapes that could be from a Romantic-era European painting. The artist combines different stories and different chapters of stories in a continuous green-toned space, and the brushwork is fluid. Other panels from the same room are more decorative, with Egyptian-style sirens neatly placed in cartouches. The Black Room, another cubiculum nocturnum the visitor can step into, is a wonderfully severe example of geometric classicism, with a delicate framework of niches and spindly candelabra picked out against the smoky background. At one unhappy phase of their installation history at the Met, panels were individually mounted on clunky wooden boxes that resembled stereo speakers. Now they lie flat against the walls, and restorers have painted in the surrounding space to create a convincing environment.

A museum's mission is reflected in its installations as well as its collections. The Met's presentation of the classical world implicitly acknowledges the claims of beauty and instruction—*dolce et utile*, in the familiar aesthetic motto. It could be argued that the museum sensibility itself is a Roman idea. The Romans began collecting—in a combination of booty-taking and connoisseurship—Greek art as early as the third century B.C. They made superb copies of Greek bronze masterpieces in marble (this is how we know the majority of ancient Greek works); they reused old statues, repaired and restored them. Individuals built up collections of art works and manuscripts in a way that seems to set a pattern for the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library. The Met's new central court can be enjoyed simply as a sculpture garden, but the arrangement illustrates both important aspects of Roman art and the history of the collection. (Labels are uniformly informative and unobtrusive.) The first object to enter the Met's collection, in 1870, was the *Marble Garland Sarcophagus* (Roman c. 200–25 A.D.), found at Tarsus, in southern Turkey, in 1863. The story of its transport is recounted in the catalogue, along with a photograph of it fitted out with a coin slot as a collection box.⁷ The *Badminton Sarcophagus* (260–70 A.D.) is a much more ornate affair. Carved in high relief from a single block of marble, it depicts Dionysus riding a panther and attended by satyrs, maenads, Pan and youths personifying the Seasons. This rush-hour crowd of libidinous celebrants—there are forty human and animal figures—was purchased from the collection of the dukes of Beaufort in 1955; the sarcophagus still rests on the base designed by the early eighteenth-century English architect William Kent. Another example of the British mania for antiquities, which spawned the fine neoclassicism of architect Robert Adams, draftsman John Flaxman and potter Josiah Wedgwood, among others, is the *Hope Dionysus* (27 B.C.–68 A.D.). The name by which the work is known refers to the collector Thomas Hope, who acquired it in 1796, but it also neatly alludes to the archaic female figure of Spes (Hope) who supports the god's arm. As was

the usual practice, replacements for missing parts of the original were fabricated; here the additions are by the eighteenth-century restorer Vincenzo Pacetti. The label at the Met shows an outline with shading for restorations, a format I first noted at the Palazzo Altemps in Rome, where some of the antique statues feature restorations by Bernini.

The *Hope Dionysus* is a Roman copy of a Greek original. Other sculptures, while adapted from a Greek type, have a Roman meatiness, including two statues of Hercules from 69–98 A.D. Over life-size, one youthful and one bearded with a superbly carved lion skin, they were probably part of a public bath. The portrait head was a Roman invention. While the Greeks sought the ideal in the human face and form, the Romans liked to investigate the psychology of the individual. The Met has a solid collection, supplemented with a few excellent loans. The emperor Caracalla looks tough in marble and bronze heads from 212–17 A.D., with his military-style short-cropped hair, stubble beard and knitted brows above glaring eyes. His predecessor Lucius Verus, co-emperor with Marcus Aurelius, had a reputation for idleness and dissolution. The large fragment of a marble head, c. 161–69 A.D., is flattering enough but does not suggest a strong character. The richly curling hair and beard are the result of accomplished drill work, and the engraved eyes are effective. A marble portrait head of Constantine (c. 325–70 A.D.), of monumental size, leaves us on the cusp of a revolution. The catalogue cites Constantine's conscious emulation of his predecessors' images,⁸ but the first Christian emperor seems to train his stare on another reality. His eyes are fixed on something other than politics, like the watchers in W.B. Yeats's "The Magi": "pale unsatisfied ones...with all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones."

The Metropolitan collection, while fine, cannot equal that of the Archaeological Museum in Naples or the Roman museums. In addition to the

Statue of Eros sleeping,
Greek or Roman,
Hellenistic or Augustan
period, 3rd century B.C.–
early 1st century A.D.

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Funerary relief with woman and warrior, Greek, South Italian, Tarentine, Hellenistic, c. 325–300 B.C.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK CITY

rich holdings of the Vatican (made less enjoyable by a bureaucratic attitude about ticketing and itineraries), there are well-arranged caches of antiquities in galleries and palazzi across the

city, even a breathtaking and persuasive installation in an art deco turbine plant, the Centrale Montemartini. But the Met curators have been canny in displaying what they have in a way that illuminates the ancient world. Everything—from a very handsome bronze portrait statue of an aristocratic box (27 B.C.–14 A.D.) to a couch and footstool with bone carvings and glass inlays (second century A.D.), a gift from J. Pierpont Morgan, to an exquisite ivory sandaled foot (31 B.C.–14 A.D.), glass and silver vessels and cool, sensuous, deftly carved cameos—is given an aesthetically pleasing presentation. One of the collection's unquestioned masterpieces is the Monteleone chariot (second quarter of the sixth century B.C.), the star of the Etruscan gallery on the mezzanine. While around 300 ancient chariots survive, only six are close to being complete. Purchased by the Met's first director, General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, in 1903, this spectacular ceremonial chariot has been reconfigured in light of recent scholarship. The boar head at the joining of car and pole has been fitted with his original ivory tusks, and the repoussé bronze panels are much easier to read. The panels present scenes from the career of Achilles—receiving armor from his mother, Thetis, fighting the Trojan Memnon, mounting to heaven in a chariot drawn by winged horses. Rams, panthers, birds of prey and an apotropaic Gorgon complete the heroic decorative program. The rest of the display rounds out our picture of the Etruscans, those mysterious pre-Romans who have captivated imaginations for millennia, down to D.H. Lawrence and Giacometti. The jewelry and ornamental bronzes are both sumptuous and witty.

The attention to scale throughout the galleries is noteworthy, as seen, for example, in works from the Hellenistic period, usually dated from the death of Alexander in 323 B.C. to Octavian's victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.

The Hellenistic Treasury is an intimate space reserved for small-scale luxury goods, including a pair of gold serpentine armbands (Greek, c. 200 B.C.), with male and female tritons, and a magnificent bronze statuette of a veiled and masked dancer (third–second century B.C.). Only 8½ inches high, the figure is encased in fabric, yet the dynamic movement of the body is perfectly expressed. The marble Sardis Column, in contrast, is on a grand scale. Originally fifty-eight feet high, it was part of the Temple of Artemis (third century B.C.) at Sardis in what is now Turkey. Most of the shaft has been removed, but the fluted Ionic column still stands twelve feet high at the Met, from its foliate capital to its scale-patterned base. For decades it languished at the edge of the restaurant, and tourists intent on lunch or browsing at the adjacent mini-shop rarely gave it more than a cursory look. Now it is sited at the crossing from Greece and Rome, and it looks magnificent. The demarcation line between Greece and Rome is actually quite fluid. The appealing life-size *Eros Sleeping* (third century B.C.–first century A.D.) could be Hellenistic or Augustan. One of the few bronzes to have survived from antiquity, this plump baby god has convincing weight, and the detail of tousled curls and feathery wings is refined. (The naturalistic stone support is modern but replicates a typical ancient base.)

The physical space implicitly acknowledges the continuity of the classical experience while guiding visitors to consider different eras and aspects of the ancient world. In the progress of the master plan, the Prehistoric and Early Greek galleries opened in 1998, the Archaic and Classical Greek galleries—installed in an exhilarating, sky-lit space—in 1999. The Cypriote galleries, which opened in 2000, are on the second floor, close to the Near Eastern collection, reflecting Cyprus’s history as a crossroads between East and West. The Cypriot antiquities are a crucial part of the Met’s collecting history. Assembled by Cesnola, who would become the museum’s first director, the collection of several thousand pieces was installed in the Met’s first structure in Central Park, designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould and completed in 1880. Another body of work from that era, however, has been dispersed. Between 1883 and 1895, the Met built up a large collection of plaster casts (2,607 items are listed in a 1908 catalogue), inspired by a belief in their instructional value and intimidated by the superiority of European museums. As the Met acquired more original works and fashions in pedagogy changed, the casts were jettisoned, a decision that has been sometimes questioned, especially by those in the academic art revival.

Still, it would be difficult to challenge the thinking behind the current incarnation of this glorious project. We have been living with the Greek galleries for nearly a decade now, and the day-to-day revelations continue to delight. Among my favorites are two grave steles in marble: one depicting a youth and a little girl, topped with a sphinx (c. 530 B.C.); the other, exquisite as a cameo, showing a little girl fondling doves (c. 450–440 B.C.). A marvelous

relief of a dancing maenad holding a thyrsis, drapery swirling around her ankles, is a Roman copy (27 B.C.–14 A.D.) of a fifth-century B.C. Greek original. The Greek vases, which were once segregated from the rest of the collection, crammed uncomfortably into drab cases, are now placed in context. An Attic black-figure panathenaic prize amphora (c. 530 B.C.), showing a footrace, now shares a room with a bronze statue of an athlete. A red-figure pelike (jar) with Apollo and Artemis pouring libations (mid-fifth century B.C.) can be seen alongside examples of libation vessels themselves. Some works give us visual correlates for epic literature. A Greek funerary relief from southern Italy (c. 325–300 B.C.), depicting a woman and a warrior in choreographed gestures of mourning, has been interpreted as Elektra and Orestes at the tomb of Agamemnon.

Museums often depend on blockbuster exhibitions to create buzz, and bringing together works from many collections can be illuminating. But one of the pleasures of civilization is the opportunity to become intimately, even casually familiar with great art in a great space. The Met's new galleries make the classical world seem like part of the air we breathe.

NOTES

1. William L. Vance, *America's Rome*, Volume One, Classical Rome (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 363.
2. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 368.
3. Carlos A. Picón, "A History of the Department of Greek and Roman Art," *Art of the Classical World in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Greece, Cyprus, Etruria, Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum, 2007). The 508-page catalogue, featuring 500 works from the collection and handsome installation photographs, is \$75 hardcover and \$45 paperback.
4. Challenges to American museums from the Italian government, particularly difficult for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, have been tactfully handled by Met Director Philippe de Montebello. For Picón's strong opinions and a fascinating overview of the installation process, see Rebecca Mead, "Den of Antiquity: The Met Defends Its Treasures," *The New Yorker* (April 9, 2007), pp. 52–61.
5. Jás Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
7. *Art of the Classical World in the Metropolitan*, p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 498.