

# Pompeii and the Historical Imagination

by Gail Leggio

When we think about the ancient world, how do we visualize it? Written accounts—those that have come down to us from antiquity and those produced by generations of later historians—lay a foundation for understanding. Physical evidence gives us a more concrete sense of life in the past, of the ancients' high aspirations, seen in the artworks we find in museums, and of their civic experience, glimpsed in the artifacts and layouts of archaeological sites. But turning data into history inevitably entails interpretation, and historical interpretation, while it must be based in fact, also requires imagination. Here another category comes into play: historical fictions. At their most vivid, these re-creations—paintings, novels and movies—shape how we picture the past in persuasive and powerful ways. The posthumous life of antiquity in works of the imagination is a rich subject, which the Getty Villa, in Malibu, California, is exploring in “The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection” (September 12, 2012–January 7, 2013). Co-organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art, in association with the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the exhibition traces the influence of Pompeii on artists from Giovanni Battista and Francesco Piranesi to Andy Warhol.

Pompeii was a thriving cosmopolitan Roman enclave when it was destroyed, along with Herculaneum and a few other fashionable resort towns around the Bay of Naples, by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Its reemergence in the early decades of the eighteenth century caused a sensation. Three centuries later, the resurrected cities continue to attract archaeologists and scholars,<sup>1</sup> and to loom large in popular culture. The Getty curators call Pompeii a modern obsession. The catalogue essays range across subjects as varied as technology, installation history, erotic art and fantasy, and the Pompeian legacy in fiction and cinema.<sup>2</sup>

The timing of the rediscovery was fortuitous, playing into and crystallizing contemporary trends. The unearthing was a catalyst for the fledgling discipline of archaeology. Architects and designers—Piranesi, Robert Adam, Josiah Wedgwood—built up a repertoire of neoclassical motifs based on the excavated artifacts, which were quickly documented by illustrators such as William Gell (1777–1836). His *Pompeiana: The Topography of Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii* (1817–18, with an 1832 edition updated to include the latest excavations) had enormous influence. Gell knew Lord Byron well and escorted Sir Walter Scott around the excavation sites. Pompeii took its place in the itinerary of the Grand Tour—a magnet for artists, writers and collectors—and later became an important destination for less-august travelers. Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* gives us a heady drama based in the Neapolitan



Sebastian Pether, *Eruption of Vesuvius with Destruction of a Roman City*, 1824  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

milieu of wealthy foreign visitors. Her protagonist, the Cavaliere, is a lightly fictionalized version of Sir William Hamilton, a noted connoisseur of—and occasionally less-than-reputable dealer in—antiquities, eventually undone by the waves of revolution sweeping Europe and the notorious affair of his wife, Emma, with Admiral Horatio Nelson. Sontag’s thought-provoking romance blends elements of the historical novel with revisionist criticism.

“Living abroad facilitates treating life as a spectacle,” Sontag writes.<sup>3</sup> The great spectacle of the Bay of Naples included not only the ancient cities and the illustrious visitors that flocked there, but also Vesuvius itself. The volcano was often active in the era of Pompeian rediscovery, and modern observers testified to the aptness of the ancient description of an ash cloud like a huge umbrella pine. The Roman admiral and naturalist Pliny the Elder was the most famous person to perish in the 79 AD disaster, which his nephew, Pliny the Younger, described in detail. Latter-day naturalists and scientists were curious about the still-active volcano.

Landscape painters were drawn to Vesuvius as the embodiment of Sublime Nature at its most terrible. Joseph Wright of Derby brought scientific analysis, as well as an artist’s eye, to the pyrotechnics in his *Vesuvius from Portici* (1774–76). Like Wright, Sebastian Pether belonged to a school of painters who specialized in nocturnal effects, often juxtaposing moonlight with some lurid conflagration—an iron foundry, a burning ship, a volcano. Pether came from a



family of artists who experimented with telescopes and electricity. His *Eruption of Vesuvius with Destruction of a Roman City* (1824) contrasts the Bay of Naples, shimmering in silvery moonlight, with the fiery clouds swirling around the volcano and the vermilion rivulets cascading toward the ancient town at its base. The tiny cluster of buildings is an anachronistic capriccio, complete with post-antique cupola. James Hamilton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1864) takes similar architectural liberties, with an infernal maelstrom menacing an impossibly scaled giant column. Through all the clear-eyed observation and wild-eyed fantasy, the volcanic cone persists as an iconic shape. The exhibition adds to the mix Warhol's silkscreen *Vesuvius* (1985), a Pop-bright lavender, yellow and aqua celebration of explosive energy.

In the nineteenth century, the scene of eruption was often framed as a *paysage moralisé*, with the volcano providing a tragic *coup de théâtre* or act of divine retribution. John Martin's *Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1821) is in the same apocalyptic mode as his *Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852). The doomed Pompeians are overwhelmed by vortexes of fire, smoke, ash and lightning in a proto-Hollywood spectacle, but the figures are too insubstantial to engage us as potential characters in a narrative. The Russian painter Karl

Randolph Rogers  
*Nydia, the Blind Flower  
 Girl of Pompeii*  
 1853–59

THE METROPOLITAN  
 MUSEUM OF ART,  
 NEW YORK CITY



Briullov suggested a more accessibly human drama in his epic-scale canvas *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1830–33), exhibited to great acclaim in Rome and at the Louvre. Alexander Pushkin composed a poem about it. Briullov was inspired by his 1821 visit to the site and, very probably, by Giovanni Pacini's opera *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei*, which premiered at Teatro San Carlo in 1825. Pacini's fanciful plot—doomed lovers, a fictitious Christian enclave—offered a palatable storyline for contemporary audiences.

Jon L. Seydl writes in the Getty catalogue: “Pompeii uniquely provides opportunities to resurrect and recast the classical past” because of the inherent “tension” between the two impulses of “documentation and restaging.”<sup>4</sup> Pompeii was a richly detailed stage set, lacking only a cast of characters. Edward Bulwer-Lytton came up with a best-selling scenario in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), the novel that gives the Getty exhibition its title. Bulwer-Lytton's potboiler was both a symptom and an expression of the Pompeii craze, a compendium of contemporary attitudes and interests. The author dedicates the work to Gell, praising *Pompeiana* as a sourcebook. Meticulous descriptions of the layout and décor of the Roman house lend an air of authenticity. While somewhat pedantic—Latin terminology is copiously deployed—this archaeological fidelity has aged better than the banal characters and awkward dialogue. In the Preface, Bulwer-Lytton announces his desire “to people once again these deserted streets, to repair those graceful ruins...to wake to a second existence—the City of the Dead!”<sup>5</sup>

Bulwer-Lytton's attempts to people the streets included a brief portrait of an armored Roman sentry, based on remains found in Pompeii. Edward John Poynter painted *Faithful unto Death* (1865) on the subject, showing the soldier, standing tall and calm at his post while, in the background, disheveled citizens flee in desperation. But the novelist's most popular character was an invention, Nydia, a young blind girl in the sentimental Victorian mode. Nydia, who has an adolescent crush on Glaucus, the hero, leads him and his beloved, Ione, to safety, then drowns herself out of unrequited love. Artists usually portrayed her alone, as American sculptor Randolph Rogers did in *Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii* (1853–59). His white marble image of her—clinging to her staff, head cocked to listen, “accustomed, through a perpetual night, to thread the windings of the city,”<sup>6</sup> in Bulwer-Lytton's words—was a great success; there are examples at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The steadfast sentry and the blind girl—whom Bulwer-Lytton compared to Psyche, Hope and “the soul itself, lone but undaunted amidst the dangers and the snares of life”<sup>7</sup>—were exemplars of heroism, but they were not great historical figures. For centuries, artists and writers had been finding subjects in the great events and myths of antiquity, and the monuments of Rome were a constant presence in the mind of the West. But Pompeii was a special kind of time machine: you could imagine the lives of everyday people, usually pushed



to the margins by historians chronicling the exalted careers of emperors and generals, but now paradoxically rescued from oblivion by the disaster that overwhelmed their city.

Visitors have often shown particular interest in the remains of the dead, a phenomenon that Mary Beard describes as a mix of “voyeurism, pathos and ghoulish prurience,” leavened with a deeper “sense of immediate contact with the ancient world” and “the human narratives they allow us to reconstruct.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Twain, in his generally irreverent account of Continental tourism, *Innocents Abroad* (1867), finds poignant drama in Pompeii—a man clutching gold coins, a woman wearing a necklace engraved with her name, a trapped family: “The woman had her hands spread wide apart, as if in a mortal terror, and I imagined I could still trace upon her shapeless face something of the expression of wild despair that distorted it when the heavens rained fire in these streets, so many ages ago. The girls and the man lay with their faces upon their arms, as if they had tried to shield them from the enveloping cinders.” Twain refers to the “skeletons” of the dead, but the skeletal remains were negligible, most bone as well as flesh having been consumed in the inferno. Yet we know how some of the citizens looked as they fell because, in 1863, Giuseppe Fiorelli, the man in charge of the excavations, invented a method of plaster-casting that gave sculptural form to the hollowed-out spaces. One of the best-known of these casts was that of a dog, chained and frantically struggling to escape. The exhibition includes a photograph, *Cast of a Dog Killed by the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius* (c. 1874), by Giorgio Sommer, as well as Allan McCollum’s *Dog from Pompeii* (1991), an installation of multiple copies. Conjured, literally, out of empty space, the rough-hewn casts have taken on a modern, anticlassical sculptural presence, Seydl suggests.

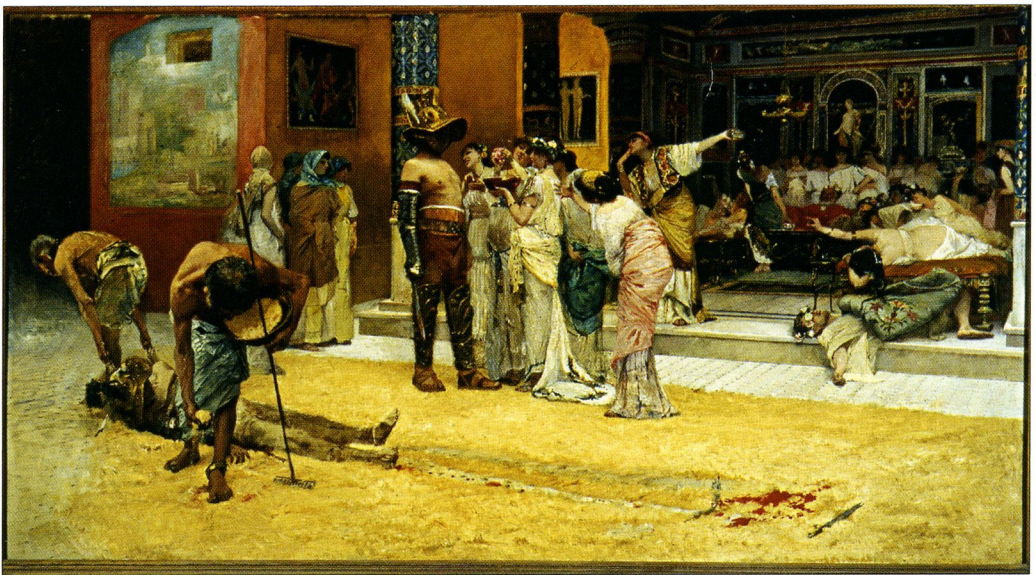
The multidisciplinary enterprise of the Pompeian Revival aimed to imaginatively reconstruct not only the spectacular deaths of the ancient citizens but also their enviably elegant lives. Maria Wyke writes: “Both the historical novel and the classical revival in European painting shared a scenographic exactitude of interest in the domestic architecture, furnishings, costume and daily life of Pompeii.”<sup>9</sup> As Wyke documents in her lively book *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, historical novels and paintings had a long afterlife in the popular imagination because they provided visual data and themes that were perpetuated in movies. The mania for archaeological detail grounded fictional re-creations and helped establish a plausible ancient world while, at the same time, holding a mirror up to contemporary society.

Nineteenth-century artists used the Pompeian style-book in various ways. Théodore Chassériau’s *Tepidarium* (1853) carries the explanatory subtitle “Where the Women of Pompeii Came to Relax and Dry Themselves after Bathing.” Chassériau first visited the ruins in 1840, and he faithfully reproduces decorative motifs on chairs and braziers, as well as the chamber’s barrel vault with its bas-reliefs and oculus. The two dozen beauties, in vari-

ous stages of undress, lounging in the chamber represent a number of ethnic types—perhaps a reference to the cosmopolitan mix of the Roman Empire, but just as likely an homage to the art of Chassériau’s contemporaries Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix, champions of classicism and Romanticism, respectively, and famous for their seraglio scenes.

Jean-Léon Gérôme found inspiration for his Colosseum images in gladiatorial armor found at Pompeii, as did the Italian painter Francesco Netti, in his *Gladiator Fight during a Meal at Pompeii* (1880). The tableau is a mix of archaeological fact—carefully recreated wall decorations and architectural elements, a gladiator’s helmet—and fiction. Gladiators fought in the arena, not at private banquets. Netti amps up the debauchery, showing aristocratic women plying the victor with wine as the loser’s body is dragged off in full view of the revelers. Over-the-top Roman banquets and orgies have long been de rigueur set pieces in paintings, novels and movies—from Cecil B. DeMille’s old Hollywood epics to *Fellini Satyricon* (1970).

In *Pompeii* (2003), one of the best historical novels of recent decades, Robert Harris includes a fine example of the Roman decadence trope. The immensely wealthy former slave Numerius Popidius Ampliatus punishes a slave by having him thrown into a tank of vicious eels. (The biggest eel has a gold ring in its fin and was a favorite of Nero’s.) The ensuing banquet features, among other delicacies, mice rolled in honey and poppy seeds and roast wild boar filled with live thrushes. The guests—mostly old-family aristocrats in hock to the



Francesco Netti, *Gladiator Fight during a Meal at Pompeii*, 1880  
MUSEO DI CAPODIMONTE, NAPLES



parvenu—roll their eyes and whisper about Trimalchio, alluding to Petronius' satire. It's a clever way for Harris to signal that the scene, however rooted in some sort of fact, was a cliché among the Romans themselves.

The Roman decadence was handled more genteelly in most late-nineteenth-century paintings. Netti belonged to a school of neopompeian artists who combined a studied verisimilitude, based on ancient artifacts, with fantasies of elegant living. The already vigorous trade in museum reproductions made it possible for Victorian conspicuous consumers to own not only a painting of a Roman villa but also a replica of some object from antiquity. The neopompeians usually avoided direct depictions of the cataclysm, or even more-everyday violence. The past, in general, was a very attractive place. The best-known proponent of domesticated antiquity was Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The Dutch-born British painter first visited Pompeii on his honeymoon in 1863 and, over the years, conducted a prodigious amount of research. He owned a reference collection of about 4,000 photographs, as well as scholarly books.<sup>10</sup> His tightly rendered, smoothly executed tableaux featured realistic objects, but he placed them in invented contexts. The semi-circular marble bench in *The Exedra Seat* (1869) and other paintings was based on the tomb of the Mamia on the Via dei Sepulcri in Pompeii. Alma-Tadema used it as a setting for flirtatious couples and proper families, surrounding it with improbable varieties of flowers or perching it at the top of a cliff, poised between blue sky and bluer Mediterranean. The neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David deliberately dressed his pared-down stage sets with a few antique-style objects; he wanted nothing to distract his audience from the heroic stoicism of his actors. In contrast, Alma-Tadema was a sensuous materialist, mesmerized by his own décor, admired for his textures—fur, flesh, flowers and, above all, marble. His figures—“Victorians in togas,” pretty girls with British complexions—are characters of light romance. This is historicism grounded in connoisseurship and subordinated to anecdotal charm.

Pompeii kept generating fresh modes of storytelling: stories of how the ancient city died, historical and imaginative reconstructions of how the Pompeians lived, stories that grew out of the archaeological process itself. Édouard Sain's *Fouilles à Pompéi* (1865) gives an excavation the look of a pastoral idyll. With Vesuvius quietly looming in the background, bare-chested diggers strike heroic poses while lovely peasant girls hoist baskets of fragments or pose in their picturesque garb. Paul Alfred de Curzon's *Un Rêve dans les Ruines de Pompéi* (1866) is an oneiric fantasy: revenants of the ancient citizenry wander through a vista of ruins, peacocks perch on the walls, and Vesuvius sends up a delicate yet ominous plume. The transition from nineteenth-century Romanticism to twentieth-century Surrealism seems particularly fluid when the subject is Pompeii. In Théophile Gautier's 1852 novella *Aria Marcella: A Souvenir of Pompeii*, a young man visits a museum in Naples and becomes so obsessed with the impression of a girl's breast that he conjures her up.

His Pompeian innamorata joins the fin-de-siècle sisterhood of vampires and other amorous ghosts. In William Jensen's *Gradiva: A Pompeian Fancy* (1903), the protagonist is an archaeologist who purchases an antique bas-relief of a woman walking from a dealer in Rome. The artifact has no direct connection to Pompeii, yet Jensen sets the archaeologist's fantasy romance with his dream woman there. Sigmund Freud owned a copy of the relief and treated the story as a psychoanalytic case study. In *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva* (1907), Freud equated "the burial of Pompeii—the disappearance of the past combined with its preservation—and repression."<sup>11</sup> The paintings of the Surrealists Paul Delvaux and Giorgio de Chirico were haunted by somnambulists from the classical past, escapees from the subconscious—echoes of the long-buried citizens of Pompeii.

Archaeologists and researchers continue to work on the sites around the Bay of Naples, studying the topography and urban infrastructure, helping us understand how the ancient Romans navigated their world. Imaginative reconstructions continue to bring the past alive and to reflect, through a contemporary lens, perennial human problems. In *Pompeii*, for example, Harris uses volcanology texts for his chapter epigrams, and his hero, Marcus Attilus Primus, is a troubleshooting "aquarius," a specialist in aqueducts. The choice of protagonist plays to the twenty-first-century admiration for Roman engineering prowess, and the fast-paced story unfolds as, among other things, a scientific thriller. Marcus lays out the clues: "Vapor that jerked like a fishing line. Springs that ran backward. An aquarius who vanished into the hot air. ... an entire pool of red mullet had died in Misenum, in the space of a single afternoon, of no apparent cause."<sup>12</sup> When the aquarius—his investigation blocked by local authorities—appeals to Pliny the Elder, who calls an earthquake "a thunderbolt hurled from the interior of the world,"<sup>13</sup> the meeting of minds illuminates the ancient quest for knowledge. The cinematic possibilities of Harris's novel are obvious.

"The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection" opens up a world of ideas about the classical past and its multifarious later manifestations. The exhibition is on view September 12, 2012–January 7, 2013, at the Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades, California 90272. [getty.edu](http://getty.edu). It travels to the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, February 24–May 19, 2013.

#### NOTES

1. For an overview of Pompeii's sister city, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Herculaneum: Past and Future* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, in association with the Packard Humanities Institute, 2011), a scholarly, readable and visually stunning book.
2. *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*, with essays by Jon L. Seydl, Kenneth Lapatin, Victoria C. Gardner Coates, William St. Clair and Annika Bautz, Mary Beard and Adrian Stähli (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2012).



3. Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p. 21.
4. *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*, pp. 16, 17.
5. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Boston and New York: University Company, 1850), Preface.
6. *Ibid.*, Book V, Chapter VII.
7. *Ibid.*, Book V, Chapter IX.
8. Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 7.
9. Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 155.
10. The exhibition "Alma-Tadema e la nostalgia dell'antico," at the National Archaeological Museum, Naples (October 2007–March 2008), juxtaposed fourteen paintings by Alma-Tadema with museum artifacts and work by thirty other neopompeians.
11. Cited, Victoria C. Gardner Coates, "Pompeii on the Couch: The Modern Fantasy of 'Gradiwa,'" *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*, p. 72.
12. Robert Harris, *Pompeii* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 49. A film version was announced in 2007, with Roman Polanski as director, but later abandoned. The project may be revived in some form. Harris is also the author of a trilogy-in-progress on the career of Cicero. The two volumes that have appeared, *Imperium* (2006) and *Conspirata* (2009), are excellent.

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