

## Rich life of ancient Rome

By Tahree Lane, Blade Staff Writer | November 18, 2006

The ancient Romans who summered in magnificent villas overlooking the gorgeous Bay of Naples accrued their riches by controlling trade and taxes throughout the vast empire.

Their wealth allowed them to indulge their appetites for the finest servants, chefs, and resident philosophers, food and wine, home libraries, jewelry, entertainers, and bathing pools. And they were willing to pay for beauty, such as architecture, often derived from structures in Greece or other countries they ruled. Dining rooms, especially, were constructed to have stunning views, sometimes of both the Mediterranean and the mountains. They adorned glorious gardens with marble sculptures and fountains, and had walls painted with charming tableaux from myth and theater. The paint itself could cost a small fortune: some pigments were derived from semi-precious stones ground into a powder.



Sandra E. Knudsen, Toledo Museum of Art associate curator of ancient art, views Bacchus and Ceres, first half of the 1st century A.D.

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We get a glimpse at these sumptuous lives through the lens of visual aesthetics at the Toledo Museum of Art's show *In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite*, through Jan. 28. ("In Stabiano" means in the region of Stabiae, the town where the villas were located.)

The exhibit displays about 75 objects, including 26 frescoes and 11 reliefs from the walls of five partly excavated villas, rarely seen outside of Italy. They're on a four-year loan from Italy to nine U.S. museums, the result of a 2001 agreement in which the United States promised to help return treasures looted from Italy, and Italy would loan more of its art.

Another 60 pieces from roughly the same period - glass cups and vials, a sculpture, a painting - have been pulled from the museum's own collection.

A compact show, it's as much about society as art.

Perched on cliffs, the lavish estates were constructed beginning about 100 B.C. and expanded and improved in subsequent decades. In addition to being a family escape from Rome's summer heat, business and political plans were strategized and deals were hammered out in the villas' large public rooms. Romans oversaw grain, wine, olive oil, fish sauce, marble, and perfume in a territory that spanned Britain to North Africa and Serbia to Syria.

But *la dolce vita* was finito on Aug. 24 in the year 79 when the vineyard-clad Mt. Vesuvius blew its top, erupting for 20 hours while nonstop earthquakes rattled the ground. Ten feet of pumice

and ash covered Stabiae and nearby towns, including Herculneum and Pompeii, were buried even deeper and frozen in time for 17 centuries.

The traveling exhibit has been displayed differently in each of the nine museums. Sandra Knudsen, the Toledo museum's associate curator of ancient art, organized items into six types of rooms that would have made up a villa, beginning with an entrance intended to impart the feel of gliding up to the mansion on a boat.

Greeting visitors upon entering the Canaday Gallery are frescoes that were originally on the walls and ceiling of a portico in Villa San Marco. Fragmented and mounted on light-weight panels, they suggest good times: Hermes holds a wine jug, a winged female beauty bears a harp, and reddish-haired Minerva adjusts a plume on her helmet.

To the left is a huge panoramic photograph of the town today, called Castellammare di Stabia, showing the crevice that was once the cliffs at water's edge. The city extends onto a mile of new land that displaced the Mediterranean as a result of Vesuvian spew.

Decorating homes, Roman artists often worked in teams. They created frescoes by painting on walls made from concrete and rubble. They applied layers of plaster, and when the smooth, topmost layer was still wet, it was painted with raw pigments. Days or weeks later, the pigments bonded with the layers of plaster and the happy result was sheen and durability.

The centerpiece of the show, as was the centerpiece of many villas, is a dining room (triclinium) with four complete walls. It was reassembled from Villa Carmiano, which was not situated on the sea, but was one of many charming country homes just inland from the mansions and possibly owned by the same family.

The red brushed on its walls was made from expensive ground cinnabar. Large panels bear scenes rooted in Greek mythology: In one, a pair of youthful deities ride a seahorse; in another, brown-skinned Neptune embraces a white-skinned Amymone. The artwork and proportionality are sophisticated, as are the techniques such as trump l'oeil windows in the corners and delicate floral vines. Three benches in a "U"-shape represent three couches that would furnish a triclinium. Here, the dinner party would lounge three to a couch, propped up on their left elbows and reaching their right arms for delicacies set on small tables in front of them. Multiple-course dinners, partaken by both women and men, lasted for hours.

The most prestigious guest was seated next to the host, where he could enjoy the best views of the bay, gardens, or mountains. Another room is set up like an office, and includes an inkwell, a stylus, and letters written on papyrus.

In an area reminiscent of a woman's room hangs four images of graceful mythological figures: Flora, Diana, Medea, and Leda, painted against backgrounds of green (pigments were ground from malachite) and blue (from crushed lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan). A glass case holds a hair comb, perfumes and makeup, a tweezer, and even a compact mirror.

The sole painting to show a commoner is The Cupid Vendor, in which a woman pulls a cupid, representing sexual favors, out of a cage like a chicken, hoping to make a sale to a wealthy matron.

The museum purchased dozens of tall marble-look columns, made of resin, which are placed at entrances to various rooms.

Short videos show current excavations underway at the Villa San Marco; the making of a fresco, and what life might have been like the night before Mt. Vesuvius exploded. And several panels of information explain restoration work at Stabiae and plans for an archaeological park.

"In Stabiano" continues through Jan. 28 at the Toledo Museum of Art. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$5 for seniors and students. No charge for museum members. Fridays, students with identification are admitted free. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday, and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday and major holidays. The museum is at 2445 Monroe St. Information: 419-255-8000 or [www.toledomuseum.org](http://www.toledomuseum.org).

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