

In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite

A Special Exhibition Review by Gail S. Myhre

The United States tour of the exhibition *In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite* began at the National Museum of Natural History, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. All of the materials on exhibition date to the period of reconstruction between the sacking of Stabiae by the Roman general Sulla in 89 B.C. and the Vesuvian eruption of A.D. 79 which also destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum. I glimpsed this exhibition briefly during a visit to the National Museum of Natural History in 2004, and was delighted by this opportunity to review the exhibition in its entirety at the Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Michael C. Carlos Museum is affiliated with and located on the campus of Emory University. Its permanent collections are well endowed for a museum of its size, and this special exhibition is a fine addition to the well-curated portion which treats classical Greek and Roman art.

Entering the exhibition in this venue one came immediately upon the full reconstruction of the *triclinium* or dining room from the Villa Carmiano. Looking into the room, the beautifully preserved Fourth Style frescoes on these walls featured Bacchus and Ceres to the left, the Triumph of Dionysus facing, and Neptune and Amymone to the right. The triclinium would have opened out onto a view, probably facing the sea. It was traditional that the room's middle couch was that on which the host and the favored guests rested, giving them the best vantage. And indeed, from the interior of this installation was visible on the opposite wall a photographic mural showing a lovely view of the nighttime lights of contemporary Stabiano with Vesuvius silhouetted in the background.

Bacchus was prominently featured in much of the art of ancient Stabiae, and similarly in that of Pompeii and Herculaneum, for one main reason: these towns, lying as they did on the fertile volcanic soil of Vesuvius, were very wine-rich communities. The depiction of the rescue of Amymone by Neptune is of course an allegory of the sea, the other significant geographic feature and source of pleasure of this wealthy leisure community. At the bottom of the frescoes, between the faux mouldings of the painted wainscoting, pictures of naturalistic and mythological marine life including seahorses and ducks were included, further emphasizing Stabiae's intimate connection with the sea.



Western Wall, Neptune and Amymone

First half of the first century A.D. (Flavian Age)

Fresco

Fourth Style

264 cm x 425 cm

Gragnano, Villa Carniano, site (6)

Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

On the floor directly in front of the frescoes was placed a collection of bronze pots and frying pans that were used to cook and serve some of the meals eaten in Stabiae. The paintings themselves include the *trompe l'oeil* effect of which Romans were so fond, in this case the imitation of wainscoting. Above this treatment, the mythical scenes depicted were intended not merely to enlighten, amuse, or instruct, but were also meant as a starting point for conversation.

Continuing through the exhibition, I found a small fragment of a fresco depicting Psyche holding a *thyrsus* (the pine cone tipped staff of Bacchus), followed by an identically sized fragment depicting Cupid holding the same object and a casket. These were symbols of Bacchic worship, again emphasizing the importance of wine in this community. Further along were two more small fragments: Cupid holding *oinochoes* and *pateras* (wine jugs and shallow drinking bowls) and two additional pieces depicting fairy-like women identified simply as "flying figures," holding baskets of fruit and flowers respectively. These female figures were neither human nor divine, but according to the captioning were symbolic of a "dreamlike fantasy world of abundance and good living." Placed on the wall opposite above a case containing several terracotta and bronze objects of daily use was a small fresco fragment depicting a griffin with a decorative *rondel* or circular design, a further elaboration on the fantastic theme.

The arrangement of the exhibition's galleries as presented in this venue was slightly different from the way it was envisioned by its designers. As originally conceived, one was meant to wander through individual halls which would showcase objects from single rooms and villas as if strolling through a "virtual city." Here, pieces were kept together as planned, but space constraints required certain adjustments, so that the concept of the "virtual city" was somewhat obscured. However, the thematic grouping of the objects was expository, and lent itself to the highly informative captioning that provided excellent illustration of the history of the site and the uses to which the many decorative objects were put.

It was within this context of geographically themed arrangement that we found in a room to the side a group of frescoes and statuary that were recovered from the Villa San Marco on the Varano hill. Of the frescoes found here, one fragment depicted a *planisphere*, a map of the heavens. This was showcased on the ceiling of the villa's portico, suggesting an idealized sky over the room. Another fragment depicted Mercury holding his *cadeuceus* and *oinochoe*, enthroned between two draped female figures tentatively identified in the captioning as Muses. One of these carried a lyre, possibly identifying her as Erato or Terpsichore. The other, having no definitive attribute but a pensive expression, was possibly Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred poetry. According to the captioning, "Although Apollo is the god of the Muses, they sometimes appear with Mercury and Bacchus. The latter is also known as their leader, and it is his wine jug that Mercury carries." Again one noted the importance in the community of Bacchus, his worship, and his wine.

The third large fragmentary fresco of this group depicted Minerva, goddess of wisdom, wearing a helmet, preceded by Victory who carried a spear and shield and a palm branch. At the opposite side of the room, another small fragment depicted a lovely villa shaded by pine and cypress trees. This fragment was recovered from the *cubiculum* (a room off the atrium) near the entrance of the Villa San Marco. Centered in this room stood a wonderful white marble *calyx* (chalice) crater of monumental size which was recovered from the southern end of the swimming pool at the Villa San Marco. The piece was large, 63 cm high with a rim just over 32 cm in diameter, and originally stood on a short marble pillar. Calyxes were primarily made of bronze, and this oversized interpretation as garden sculpture was decorated with raised outlines of scalloped tongues on the lower body which artistically allude to metalwork.



Crater

Roman, Imperial, late First Century B.C. to

Early First Century A.D.

Alabastrine marble

63 x 32.5 cm

Castellammare di Stabia, Varano hill,

Villa San Marco, Site (15)

Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

At the back of this room in a freestanding case sat an architectural reconstruction of the Villa San Marco showing its extensive gardens, colonnaded walks, and the reflecting pool in its atrium which would have been so inviting to guests. At the rear was mounted an inlaid floor panel recovered from the Villa San Marco's triclinium. It was made of highly colored marble which, according to the captioning, would have been one index of "the elite's self-promotion." At the side in a case away from the wall was a terracotta *antefix*, an architectural ornament placed at the eaves of roofs both as decoration and to prevent tiles from lifting away in high winds. This antefix was primarily decorative and depicted a palmette enclosing a female head.

At this point in the galleries one came to a small theater that showcased the documentary *In Stabiano*, made for this exhibition. This movie presentation included both live action footage of the ruins with explanatory narration, and CGI reconstruction of how the buildings would have looked originally. The presentation was lengthy compared to other similar reconstructions, as this movie was produced to be merchandised in DVD format in connection with the exhibition. Other such, shorter productions were intended to be shown only within the confines of exhibitions. In any case, the movie has much to recommend it, and the scenes of the actual ruins of Stabiae *in situ* are worth viewing in themselves.

The next hall contained stucco plasterwork recovered from the Villa Petrarò. A quote from the captioning informed us that "the sketchiness of some of these, particularly the winged creatures, suggests that the workmen at the Villa Petrarò were forced by the eruption of Vesuvius to abandon an unfinished project."

The first stucco panel showed a candelabrum highly exaggerated in size and form, as was sometimes done in the decorative depiction of household objects. The next pair, apparently only partly finished, depicted two boxers preparing for their match, with griffins beneath them. The griffin was a popular motif in the arts of the period, being a favorite animal of the Emperor Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) and thought to be a guardian of treasure. These panels decorated the shutters of the access doors to the southern niche of the *calidarium* or hot bath of the Villa Petrarò.

At the rear wall stood another partly finished stucco, this time depicting Narcissus gazing into his pool, accompanied by Cupid. Facing this on another wall, a map illustrated the geography and sites where the relics were found, and captioning gave a brief history and timeline of the Vesuvius eruption.



Narcissus

Roman, Imperial, ca. 79 A.D.

Stucco

95 x 95 cm

S. Maria la Carità, Villa Petrarò, Site (17)

Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

Continuing to additional stuccos, more obviously etched and therefore perhaps more finished, there was a panel depicting a Satyr riding a goat and carrying a basket of food. Masks at the corners of the panel had Bacchic overtones, and the panel as a whole was indicative of general festivity and plenty. Another panel showed Psyche, identifiable again by her butterfly wings. These last pieces were curved vertically, and were recovered from the ceiling of the abovementioned calidarium.

In a central case were displayed similarly curved stuccoes, including one that showed a satyr holding a *rhyton* or drinking horn which was also recovered from the ceiling of the calidarium of the Villa Petrarò. Another, apparently unfinished, displayed a pair of winged creatures and was recovered from the *frigidarium* or cold bath of the same villa. There was an additional unfinished panel that displayed Cupid holding a wicker basket symbolic of plenty.

To one side of this hall stood a case containing glass tableware including bottles, bowls and wine cups. Again the captioning proved informative, telling us that "(a)t Stabiae, little silverware has been found, perhaps because the residents had time to evacuate their more precious belongings." Another freestanding case nearby contained, among other objects, a glass incense holder remarkably intact within its original brass shell. This piece was designed with hanging chains and a loop to be hung over a fire, thus warming the incense within.

A small anteroom away from the main flow of traffic offered photographs, architectural renderings and captioning describing the present state of Stabiano. This muted display showcased the plans for the proposed archaeological park and restoration of the site, which this exhibition was meant, at least to some extent, to publicize and popularize. Its placement in this

tucked-away room ensured that the material did not intrude upon nor detract from the visitor's enjoyment of the classic art being exhibited. Nevertheless, it provided a sufficiently interesting glimpse of the future site to excite in the casual viewer a desire for further inquiry.

The final room in this exhibition was designed to resemble a colonnaded atrium, and contained objects recovered from the Villa Arianna at Varano, beginning with a fragment of possibly the most charming fresco yet displayed, *The Cupid Vendor*. Painted in the Third Style, it depicted a seated matron, to whom an elderly courtesan seated opposite proffers a winged Cupid, lifted from a birdcage by the wings as if it were a hen being sold for dinner. Third Style fresco was often narrative in nature, though the significance and story of many of these scenes, as with this one, are now unfortunately obscured by time.



The Cupid Vendor

Roman, Imperial, Mid-First Century A.D.

Fresco

Third Style

22.5 x 28.5 cm

Castellammare di Stabia, Varano hill,

Villa Arianna, Cubicle (W25)

Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

Some of the most famous frescoes of the exhibition were included in this hall. Along the right wall were the four lovely fragments found in a cubiculum of the Villa Arianna which depict mythological women, namely: Flora, who gathers flowers in a basket; Medea, who with lowered head grips an undrawn sword while she contemplates her revenge; Diana, protectress of women, childbirth and fecundity as well as being the huntress, nocking an arrow to her bow; and Leda, cradling the swan-shaped Zeus by whom she was seduced. These paintings are typical of a Third Style taste in which classical themes were adopted into early Imperial art using the artistic forms peculiar to the original Greek interpretations. Of these charming fragments, two had green backgrounds, two blue, and all were connected by idealized concepts of the more mysterious and intimate aspects of femininity – unsurprising, since they were recovered from a cubiculum

located in what was probably the women's quarters of the Villa. All four were embellishments in the center of middle-wall panels of a Third Style fresco.



Diana
Roman, Imperial,
First half of the first century A.D.
Fresco
Third Style
37 cm x 27 cm
Castellammare di Stabia, Varano hill,
Villa Arianna, Cubicle (W26)
Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

Slightly to one side of the center of this hall was placed the marble statue of *The Aged Shepherd*, found beside the pool at the Villa del Pastore. As with most Roman portrait sculpture, this piece would originally have been painted, and traces of the polychrome used are still to be found in the white marble.

As I circled the perimeter of this colonnaded room, I came upon the fresco fragment titled *Flying Figures*. This particular fresco depicted a satyr and a maenad, figures common to Bacchus' retinue, painted on a black background – an interesting choice which highlights the colors used. From the captioning, "This group, similar to others in the main reception room of the same Villa Arianna, formed part of an airborne procession in honor of Bacchus."

The next piece seen was a barrel vaulted fresco depicting a figure identified possibly as Bacchus, though the age of the figure would seem to suggest Silenus, reclining in a triclinium. This particular fresco had had three-dimensional stucco applied to it, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect which Romans particularly enjoyed.

Following this was a fragmentary fresco with a theatrical depiction of Pylades, recovered from the triclinium of the Villa Arianna and which illustrates the myth of Iphigenias. After this, a fragment displaying the *Mask of Tragedy* was one of the more well-known pieces from this exhibition. The captioning informed us that "masks appear frequently on wall paintings, especially in corners, in part perhaps because the more prominent mythological tableaux treated the same subjects as the tragedians, and in part because theater was sacred to Bacchus." Continuing this theme of theatric mythology, we came to the very dramatic picture of Hyppolytus, also recovered from the triclinium. The dramatic moral theme of this fresco would have been another obvious conversation piece, as seen above in the frescoes found in the triclinium of the Villa Carmiano.



Mask of Tragedy (fragment)
Roman, Imperial, First Century A.D.
Fresco
Fourth Style
33 x 31cm
Castellammare di Stabia, Varano hill,
Villa Arianna
Photograph provided by Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation

In the center of this hall stood a large two-handled ornamental *labrum* or basin made of white Parian marble which was found in the garden of the Villa del Pastore. This dated to the first half of the first century A.D. and is attributed to a Roman workshop of the Julio-Claudian age (27 B.C. to A.D. 68). This piece, like the crater illustrated above, imitated metal prototypes of classical Greek origin produced during the first centuries B.C. and A.D. Acanthus decorations at the bottom are particularly Hellenistic in flavor. This piece compares well with a similar *labrum* found in Pompeii and functioned in its original setting as a fountain. Its inclusion here completed the illusion of a garden atrium suggested by the colonnades along the sides of the room.

To one side in this colonnaded room a small screen was inset into the wall, and it also played the movie being shown in the small theater mentioned above. Volume was kept reasonably low, and

its presence was not too intrusive here.

Captioning of the pieces in the hall was highly informative, and included pictures of objects which remain on site at the Villas Arianna and De La Pastore, as well as a very adequate description of the Four Styles of Roman fresco. Indeed, captioning throughout the exhibition was thorough and explained the rooms and the objects shown therein very well. The objects on exhibit were shown in good historical and artistic context, and the political and social uses of the villas at Stabiae as well as Pompeii and Herculaneum were explored, including the display of wealth inherent in the ownership of such villas and the political implications of that display.

Lighting was more than adequate, and foot traffic through the exhibition, while of course slightly different in each venue in which it is shown, followed an easy and natural flow. Frescoes were mounted at eye level or above, and there were no barriers preventing their closer viewing. Small objects in cases were shown at approximately table level, as they would have been used.

Having mentioned earlier that the DVD recording made for this exhibition is worth purchasing, I must now emphatically recommend the catalogue as well. Marvelously illustrated, it is sufficiently accessible to the layman and exhaustive enough to satisfy the art historian, and details the history of the site and several excavations from its rediscovery into the present. The book contains a full inventory of the pieces on exhibit, and these are more extensively captioned, including dimensions, provenance, and editorial notations, than is possible in a museum setting. The text treats each villa individually, paralleling what has been done with the layout of the exhibition, and as the exhibition was designed to be essentially the same in every venue in which it is shown, there are no confusing discrepancies between the pieces depicted therein and the ones you will see in person. Moreover, it is modestly priced by comparison with other exhibition catalogues of similar size and quality.

This exhibition is absolutely worth visiting, full of treasures that easily rival earlier Pompeian exhibitions, and its extensive itinerary through the U.S. ensures that it should reach a wide and appreciative audience.

Special thanks to Allison G. Dixon, coordinator of Public Relations and Marketing, Michael C. Carlos Museum.

The Michael C. Carlos Museum is located at 571 South Kilgo St., Atlanta, Georgia. (404) 7274282; www.carlos.emory.edu. Admission is free to Carlos Museum members and Emory University students, faculty and staff; non-members are asked to pay a donation of \$7. Free docent-led tours depart from the Rotunda every Saturday at 2:30 p.m. during the academic year. An MP3 audio tour of the museum's permanent collection is available at the reception desk for a fee of \$3 for non-members, or free to members. Museum hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.; Sunday, 12 P.M. to 5 P.M. Closed Monday and university holidays; see web site for details. Parking is available at the B. Jones visitor lot on campus.

"In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite" closed at the Michael C. Carlos Museum on October 22, 2006. It traveled next to the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio from November 20, 2006 through February 12, 2007.

The scheduled itinerary for the rest of the exhibition's tour is as follows:

March 17-June 3, 2007: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

July 9-October 11, 2007: Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas

November 7, 2007-February 3, 2008: The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida

From your Guide: [Gail S. Myhre](#), Correspondent for Museums and Special Exhibitions, is a specialist in Roman art and history who also appreciates a wide variety of Modernist movements. You may read all of her [Special Exhibition Reviews here](#).