

# Writer's Choice: Roman fresco exhibit displays source of modern culture

By Barbara Wolff

bjwolff@wisc.edu

**A**ncient Stabiae was the Newport of its day. In summer, the seaside town on the Bay of Naples became the de facto capital of the Roman Empire as the rich and powerful gathered there to refresh themselves. They also used their summer retreats to consolidate or to improve their social and political standing.

A conspicuous display of grandeur didn't hurt those efforts one bit, and remnants of the villas and artifacts of that magnificent lost world still exist. Twenty-six fresco wall paintings and 11 wall reliefs from five mansions will make their first appearance in the United States as part of a four-year tour that includes the Chazen Museum of Art.

William Aylward, associate professor of classics, can hardly wait. An archaeologist who has worked extensively across the Mediterranean region, Aylward knows a great deal about the Roman villas of the ancient world.

"The building boom of luxury villas and retreats on the bay of Naples was founded on loot brought to Rome over centuries of conquest," he says, adding that once they collected their caches, the Romans had no interest in keeping quiet about their hauls.

"Rome flaunted its newfound power at home over wines from Gaul, Greece and Asia Minor. These beverages were imbibed in spacious halls clad in marble and granite from Anatolia and North Africa. The wall paintings featured in the exhibition belong to this era, to which we also owe the arena, the steam bath and Virgil's 'Aeneid,'" he says.

This is the sumptuous world that Chazen visitors will enter through the exhibition.

"It really does have something for everyone — it involves not only art and archeology but also interior design, landscape architecture and the management of cultural heritage," he says. This particular exhibition also is notable for re-creating the villas' original context so that gallery-goers actually feel as though they are stepping back into time, Aylward says.

"Loss of context is a pervasive problem for the excavation of murals for museum display. This exhibition endeavors to re-create the original context for viewers by



**Fresco, first half of the 1st century A.D. This famous image of a graceful girl filling a kalathos (conical basket) with flowers has often been identified as Flora, goddess of blossoming plants.**

including original furnishings that will complete the picture of Roman interior design. There also is meticulous signage, which anticipates questions that museum audiences may have about the nuances of Roman culture."

The glory that was the Roman Empire began with the ambition of a small group of ruling families claiming descent from Venus and Mars.

"They transformed a small village on the Tiber River into the largest empire the Mediterranean world has ever seen. By the time of the seaside villas at Stabiae, a Roman economy based on land ownership, military service, adoption, inheritance and indentured servitude consumed people and resources from the Thames to the Euphrates," Aylward says.

The culture that was Rome has packed an impressive wallop across the centuries. Aylward says that vestiges of

it can be seen everywhere in today's society.

"The names of the months on our calendars, the symbolism on our currency — even monuments on campus like the Camp Randall Memorial Arch or the Lincoln bronze statue on Bascom Hill — all are based in the ancient Roman repertoire of public commemoration," he says.

On the other hand, Aylward also notes some pronounced lifestyle differences. The murals themselves are among the most obvious, he says.

"We prefer a flat coat of white on the walls of our homes. Not so in ancient Rome — the walls of houses were adorned with murals of landscapes and narratives from floor to ceiling. To our eyes it's like the Paul Bunyan murals in the Memorial Union on the walls of a modern living room," he says.

However, prosperous Romans used their over-the-top interiors for a very practical — if bourgeois — reason.

"For Romans, this often ostentatious decor was designed to impress and delight guests and clients with metaphors about the hosts' pedigree, virtue, knowledge, ambition, heavenly auspices or worldly ambition. The Stabiae exhibition features themes best-loved by owners of the seaside villas in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius," says Aylward.

The artifacts also illustrate the need for continuing research and preservation efforts, Aylward says.

"This site was excavated in fits and starts since Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples, took an interest in the 1740s," he says. "Systematic excavation ended in 1962. This exhibition is a call for renewed work at the site, and for the creation of an archaeological park." Indeed, the Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation, one of this tour's organizers, would like to transform the site into one of the largest archaeological parks in Europe.

Meanwhile, the exhibit will be on view at the Chazen from Saturday, March 17-Sunday, June 3. A reception at 6 p.m. on Friday, March 23, will welcome the exhibition; the event is free for museum members. The cost for non-members is \$8, \$5 for UW-Madison students with identification. RAS' Thomas Noble Howe will discuss the site at 7 p.m. on Thursday, March 22, in L160 Chazen.

For more, visit <http://www.chazen.wisc.edu>.