

Chazen Museum brings Ancient Rome to UW

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The story of Pompeii is commonly known. It is one that tells of the prospering Roman city near the Bay of Naples, which was tragically buried under volcanic ash and pumice with the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Less known is the similar story of Stabiae, a lavish resort community a couple of miles from Pompeii, also preserved through the ages under volcanic debris. Now, in a rare exhibition, the frescoes and artifacts recovered from five partially excavated villas in Stabiae are making a four-year tour in the United States and are visiting the Chazen Museum of Art from March 17 through June 3.

The exhibition, "In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite," is comprised of more than 70 works of art and artifacts, including 26 fresco wall paintings and 11 wall reliefs made of stucco. The exhibit also presents objects of Roman daily life, such as cooking utensils, glassware and even a pair of bronze tweezers.

Museum Director Russell Panczenko said of the exhibit, "This is something special. Here are frescoes that decorated someone's home a couple thousand years ago, and the home was destroyed by a volcano. But here they are; they've survived, and it brings you closer to the times and the people when these works were created."

The Chazen has gone to great lengths to recreate the setting in which these artworks would have been viewed in ancient times. "In Stabiano" is on display in the Brittingham Galleries VI of the Chazen Museum, and the gallery walls themselves have been painted in the very colors common to those of old Roman villas. Upon entering the gallery, one is confronted with the bold red, blue and sandy yellow tones of the walls, accented with the colors of the frescoes and sculpture. Visitors will also notice a handful of columns decorating the rooms, which add to the effect of a Roman-styled ambiance.

Also unique to the exhibit is the construction of a triclinium, a three-couch dining room, which sat up to nine people around a small table. Although the couches and table are absent from the exhibit, the tall frescoes are remarkably preserved.

"In the triclinium," Panczenko said, "you are actually standing in the room and can look from one wall to the next and have the same experience as the Romans had in that room."

The frescoes in this area show scenes of the gods, such as Dionysus, god of wine, and Neptune with a lover.

Other exhibit features include two videos, one teaching about Roman fresco techniques, the other, titled "Stabiae: The Last Night," is a computerized look at how the villas may have looked on the eve of Mt. Vesuvius' eruption.

Similarly, a reconstruction model of one of the villas shows the architecture and design of these lavish homes. Other posters describe the various excavation phases at Stabiae, and the planning of an enormous archaeological park at Castellammare di Stabia (ancient Stabiae), which will be the largest of its kind in Europe.

These tidbits add to the importance of the objects on display.

"When you come, you will see the frescoes that [can be] seen in books of Roman wall paintings. There is nothing like a direct experience of art," Panczenko said.

Although "In Stabiano" is not a particularly large exhibition, it is perfect for a venue of this size, and the efforts on the Chazen's part to display the works of art in such an embellished setting makes for a unique museum-going experience.

To commemorate the opening of the exhibit, the museum has organized a ceremony March 23, complete with theater students adorned in Roman soldier costumes and Roman dancers. The charge is \$8 for the general public and \$5 for students, though usually there is no fee.

"The main purpose of the museum is to provide both the students and the community with a direct access to art, and this is such a rare opportunity. Looking at art in a book is very different from seeing it in actuality," Panczenko said.

Given that the Chazen is centrally located on campus, and that, with the exception of Friday's ceremony, the museum offers free admission, it is a highly convenient chance to see these 2,000-year-old works of Classical Roman art first hand.