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ART



The lost world

'In Stabiano' unearths ancient Roman treasures

By Jennifer A. Smith

From *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* to *Cribs* and *Architectural Digest*, we've long been fascinated by how the other half lives (well, make that the other two percent). In the first centuries B.C. and A.D., the powerful of the Roman Empire spent their summers near the Bay of Naples, in places like Stabiae, Herculaneum and Pompeii. The violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 doomed those communities but also preserved them well for archeologists, as they were buried by a fast-moving mixture of gas, ash and rock.

A traveling exhibition now on view at the Chazen Museum explores ancient Stabiae, as well as current plans for an archeological park at the site, in the modern-day southern Italian city of Castellammare di Stabia. "In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite" is a fascinating document of a vanished world.

In Stabiano:
Exploring the
Ancient Seaside
Villas of the
Roman Elite
Chazen Museum
of Art, through
June 3

Of at least six to eight villas in ancient Stabiae, five are covered in this exhibition. (Excavation of the site is not yet complete.) While the villas were essentially lavish entertainment complexes for hosting friends and political allies, some were also agricultural in nature (*villa rustica*), such as the wine-producing Villa Carmiano represented here with a re-created dining room.

The show mixes richly colored, fanciful frescoes and stucco reliefs of mythological figures with more mundane, utilitarian objects like pots and pans, oil lamps and even a pair of tweezers. The most impressive frescoes are in the first room of the exhibition and set against walls painted a rich red for this exhibition. Given that pleasure was a main reason for the existence of these villas, Bacchic subjects were popular — both the god of wine himself and his devotees. For example, a fresco from the Villa Arianna depicts a reclining Silenus, a drunken old satyr (part man, part goat), extending his cup for more wine.

Location photographs, a model and two videos help viewers make sense of how these works of art were part of a living, unified environment. The videos are particularly helpful, with computer simulations of how the site would have looked in its heyday. Unfortunately, the videos are placed much too closely so that you have to mentally blot out the sound from one while watching the other.

Organized by the Restoring Ancient Stabiae Foundation and the Superintendency of Archaeology of Pompeii, the show made its first stop at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and has toured cities like San Diego and Atlanta. Madisonians are lucky to get this alluring glimpse into classical antiquity without leaving home. ♦