

## ARTS

**A peek into 2,000-year-old houses at the Chazen***Madison museum moments**Kenneth Burns on Friday 03/23/2007 02:03:42.*

Aug. 24, 79 -- as in A.D. 79 -- was an unhappy one for anyone in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius. That's when the notorious volcano near modern Naples, Italy erupted and destroyed human settlements for miles around. The day turned out to be a good one for modern archaeologists, though. The tons of ash that buried the area also preserved the now-celebrated cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and what remains of them reveals much about everyday Roman life at the beginning of the millennium.

Less famous are the ruins of the villas at Stabiae, a handful of country homes that were inundated along with Pompeii and Herculaneum. The houses are the subject of the [traveling exhibit](#) "In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite," which [opened](#) March 17 at the Chazen Museum of Art.

The exhibit gathers artifacts from five villas, with particular emphasis on fresco murals. The most impressive frescoes here are the ones that adorned the walls of the dining room, or triclinium, of Villa Cormiano. A placard notes that Villa Cormiano was modest, by Stabiae standards, but these murals are breathtaking -- presented, as they are, more or less intact, and in place.

They are displayed as a room within the gallery space, and standing amid the triclinium frescoes, visitors can savor the intimacy and good humor of decorative Roman painting. In two corners, painted "windows" seem to look out onto the surrounding countryside, and the walls feature vignettes from mythology. In one, the agriculture goddess Ceres and the wine god Bacchus, looking slightly dazed, are carried at sea by a hippocamp, the mythical beast that is part horse, part fish.

Elsewhere in the exhibit are smaller frescoes from nearby villas: Villa San Marco, Villa del Pastore, Villa Arianna, Villa Petraro. Perhaps the loveliest of these paintings, from Villa Arianna, shows a young woman -- possibly Flora, goddess of blossoming plants -- as she walks and delicately picks flowers, her face all but turned away from the viewer. Elsewhere, frescoes depict the mask of tragedy, the goddess Minerva and, wryly, a street scene in which a vendor sells caged Cupids.

The exhibit also gathers stucco decorations, some handsome sculpture and a collection of household items (bronze pots, a cosmetic jar). These everyday domestic objects prompt the question: Would you be proud for museum patrons 2,000 years hence to be looking at the stuff that's in your house? Perhaps it's time for a trip to the Pottery Barn -- for posterity's sake, if nothing else.

"In Stabiano" will be [on display](#) until June 3. A gallery of the transport and unpacking of the exhibit on Mar. 1 and Mar. 8 is available above.

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