

A touching taste of Roman life

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ART REVIEW

If you go

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

When: Through June 3, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays to Fridays and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Closed Mondays.

Where: Chazen Museum of Art, 800 University Ave.

Admission: Free

Information: www.chazen.wisc.edu

When something suddenly dies, it moves outside time and does not grow old. Destruction and preservation are intertwined, and while this fact makes archaeology possible, it also infuses it with a sentimental sadness.

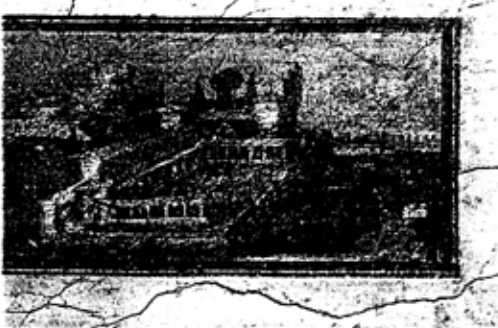
In 79 A.D., after 800 years of dormancy, Mt. Vesuvius suddenly erupted. The entire region was pummeled with rock and buried in ash. The people of Pompeii were transformed into terrifying statuary. Entire towns, Herculaneum and Stabiae, simply vanished.

Years of careful excavation have uncovered

some of what was buried in that ancient disaster, and fragments of those long lost lives are on display at the Chazen Museum of Art.

"In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite," is a touring exhibit that is part of the outreach associated with an ambitious archaeological endeavor to uncover and re-shape Stabiae. The exhibit presents fragments of frescoes, stuccos, marble sculptures and household objects recovered from three massive seaside villas.

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CHAZEN MUSEUM OF ART

... exhibit presents fragments of marble sculptures and other objects from seaside villas lost when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D.



Chazen Museum of Art

Stabiano

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In itself, the pieces are lovely and mysterious, and represent a highly developed, opulent style. The colors are surprisingly deep, the detailing is delicate, and almost no surface went undecorated.

Many familiar figures from mythology appear and reappear throughout the show, in the frescoes and in the especially moving pale stuccos, that must have felt gently imposing, even then. You get the sense that these images, decorating wealthy homes, represented an ancient consensus on what once constituted good taste.

Central to the exhibit is a recreation of a triclinium (a dining room) from the Villa Carmiano. It features large panels swathed in mottled red ochre, the backdrop for small, floating, wind-swept women. These panels alternate with fully fleshed mythological scenes with a decidedly mari-

time or gastronomical bent — Neptune spirited Amymone away, or Bacchus reveling with Ceres.

The whole is constantly interesting, and you feel cradled in decoration and not completely distracted by it. This dining room would have once opened out to a view of the sea.

For those of us not trained in the minutia of daily life two millennia ago, archaeological presentations require strong guidance and informative annotation. You are there to look at the fragments, but what you want is for your imagination to piece those fragments into a meaningful whole that has some of the flavor of an ancient time and place.

In this show, the presentation of the artifacts succeeds admirably. The signage is informative and interesting, without intimidating viewers with layers of imposing academia.

The exhibit strives to imply living spaces, and to present the artifacts through the lens of the people who lived their lives among them.

Special attention is given to frescos and stuccos that were in progress when the town died. They give a sense of the immediacy of lives in progress, and insight into the craft and artistry of the time.

There are also computer-generated recreations of the town, and a video of a guided tour through the site itself, that describes what it might have been like to live there.

By all accounts, Stabiae was a boisterous place. As a stomping ground and showcase for the Roman elite, it was vibrant with the twin excesses of wealth and power, and constantly bustling with slaves and supplicants. But that was a long time ago. The fragments that survived the explosions speak

