



Naples National Archaeological Museum

The Cupid Vendor was uncovered during the first round of excavations in Stabiae in the 18th century.

OPULENCE

ON THE

EVE OF DESTRUCTION

ART REVIEW: 'Vesuvius' show at DMA freezes Roman elites in time

By **CHARLES DEE MITCHELL**
Special Contributor

Mount Vesuvius, the volcano overlooking Naples in southern Italy, blows itself apart every 2,000 years or so. The eruption we know the most about occurred in 79 A.D. and buried the city of Pompeii. "From the Ashes of Vesuvius, In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite" at the Dallas Museum of Art examines some of the collateral damage of that cataclysm.

Stabiae, with its spectacular views of the Bay of Naples and moderate climate, was one of the gold coasts of the ancient world. Wealthy Romans established country homes there the way Americans populated Newport in the 19th century or the Hamptons today.

Representatives of the elites who had ruled Rome for centuries built villas, but a rising class of wealthy merchants and even freedmen also established residences that reflected their pow-



A marble statue of Marcus Holconius Rufus

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mopolitan tastes.

The DMA exhibition contains about 70 artifacts from five villas that ranged in size from a modest 65,000 square feet to a mind-boggling 140,000. Granted these figures take in the garden areas, but they also reflect only the footprint of structures that had multiple floors. These were buildings that conflated the meaning of public and private space, just as the individuals who lived in them moved constantly between spheres of politics and family life.

One gallery at the museum uses three walls of frescoes to recreate the dining room from Villa Carniano, and it seems like a surprisingly modest structure given the enormousness of the building itself. But the principal dining room of the villa was always designed to seat, or rather to incline, only nine guests. Oth-

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Slide show: See more of the

Artifacts of the good life

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er and less important guests would be scattered on couches throughout the villa, where they would probably receive an inferior menu compared with those visitors seated with the host.

The frescoes in the dining room are sophisticated mythological scenes designed to both entertain and display the erudition of the host. Like every other aspect of the villa, the artworks broadcast a message about just who these people saw themselves to be.

Decorations in the villas had to be of the finest quality, and the fragments of frescoes and terra-cotta bas-reliefs at the DMA are elegant and intriguing glimpses into the aesthetics of the time.

The Cupid Vendor is an established masterpiece of ancient painting that was uncovered during the first round of excavations in Stabiae in the 18th century. Not much larger than 10 by 12 inches, it shows a saleswoman offering a Roman matron living cupids the way one might offer puppies or kittens.

One stands by the matron's side, eager to be chosen. The vendor lifts another by his wings and dangles it before her potential client. A third cupid sits in a cage. The painting is a sophisticated and cynical vision of love for sale, intended for a sophisticated and probably cynical clientele.

Cupids and things with wings seem to have been a common motif in wall decorations. One gallery features, along with cupids, winged women and griffins. What is striking about these fantastical creations is the realism artists brought to their depiction.

Romans admired realism. Two



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A picture of Diana, goddess of the hunt

of the terra-cotta bas-reliefs intended for private baths represent professional boxers with impressive masculine physiques, stripped down to nothing but the iron gloves designed to both protect them and deliver deadly blows to an opponent.

Realism takes a gentler turn in an exquisite marble sculpture of an elderly shepherd carrying a young kid draped across his shoulders. He and the animal lean their heads affectionately toward one another, and the artist carefully conveys the weight of the shepherd's rough woolen garment, the fruit in his basket and the rabbit he holds in his other hand. This sculpture, originally a garden ornament, seems worlds away from the cupid vendor and the gladiatorial boxers, but it is a reminder that these villas and the society they supported had roots not only in Rome but in the countryside as well.

Cicero, one of the finest commentators on the late Roman Republic, described life in these sea-

Plan your life

"From the Ashes of Vesuvius, In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite" continues through Oct. 7 in the J.E.R. Chilton Galleries at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood at Ross. Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays through Sundays and 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays. \$10; discounts for students and seniors. Free every Thursday after 5 p.m. and on the first Tuesday of every month. 214-922-1200, www.dallasmuseumofart.org.

side villas as a mundane, luxurious existence, punctuated by "lust, romance, adultery, *dolce vita*, banquets, songs, music, boat rides." That makes Stabiae seem more and more like the Hamptons. But it was also a place where both strivers and those who had already made it could get close to the ruling class. So maybe it was a more fun version of Kennebunkport or even Camp David.

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