

# Pompeii and the Roman Villa

## ART AND CULTURE AROUND THE BAY OF NAPLES

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THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHER EPICURUS STATED: "PLEASURE IS THE BEGINNING and end of living happily." This statement rang true for prominent Romans who spent their leisure time in luxurious villas and houses in the towns of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other ancient Roman towns that were centers of activity along the Bay of Naples in the first century BC and the first century AD. Epicurus's philosophy appealed to many Romans who retreated to their country homes in the spring and summer months to enjoy a respite from their working lives in Rome.

Pompeii, in the region of Campania, retained its Greek culture and character after becoming a Roman colony in 80 BC. The Romans considered Greece a source of culture, beauty, and wisdom, and knowledge of Greek culture was a status symbol that signaled refinement and education. Greek influence pervaded the decor of Roman residences around the Bay of Naples and was reflected in the works of art both acquired and emulated by Roman patrons. Some Romans, when on vacation, even wore Greek dress—such as a chiton for men or a peplos for women—rather than the standard toga of the day.

These curriculum materials explore the cultural and artistic life in Pompeii and other towns around the Bay of Naples in the centuries leading up to the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79. Two works of art, the mosaic *Plato's Academy* (1st century BC–1st century AD) and the fresco *Garden Scene* (1st century BC–1st century AD), are examples of the embellishments applied to the gardens and interiors of Pompeian villas. A marble sculpture of the goddess Aphrodite from the early first century reflects the Roman interest in Greek mythology, art forms, and styles. And a painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Sculpture Gallery* (1874), depicts the artist and his family as Roman patrons of the arts. When considered together, the four works of art provide insight into the ways early Roman life was infused with Greek art and culture, and how the popular imagination in the nineteenth century was captivated by the rediscovery and excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

## The Legacy of Greece

The rise of Pompeii as a center of artistic and cultural activity is tied to the expansion of Roman authority in the region of Campania. The Greeks colonized the Bay of Naples and founded Neapolis, modern-day Naples, around 600 BC. The Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC spurred an interest in the country's past, including its mythology and its artistic traditions. When Rome's rule of law expanded to Pompeii in 80 BC, the region had strong ties to Greek art and culture. Rome's reverence for Greece reached its pinnacle under the leadership of the Roman emperor Augustus (reigned 27 BC–AD 14).

- *In what ways are contemporary society influenced by ancient Greece and Rome?*

## Roman Homes and Seaside Villas

Before the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79, Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other towns around the Bay of Naples thrived as centers of trade in wine, olive oil, and seafood. They produced abundant harvests of fruits and vegetables, and served as entry points for shipments of grain from the then Roman province of Egypt. Many vacationing Romans were attracted to the area for its temperate climate, natural beauty, hot springs, and Greek heritage.

Around the second century BC, Roman aristocrats began building houses and larger villas in the region. Over the next two centuries, ruling families also constructed estates there, and the influx of prominent residents brought incredible wealth to the area. Julius Caesar, Tiberius, and Nero were among the rulers who had residences on the bay. Augustus also built a grand villa on the nearby Isle of Capri.

The home played an important role in Roman social rituals; it was the center of business and entertainment. In most Roman houses and larger villas, the main entry led to an atrium that opened to the sky to bring light into the interior rooms and allow rain water to collect in an *impluvium*, a square basin set below floor level. Water from the *impluvium* was channeled into an underground cistern for everyday use. Other rooms opened off of the atrium, including the kitchen, the *triclinium* or dining room, and the *tablinum*, which served as both a place to showcase family archives and as a home office in which to conduct business.

- *How does the Roman house compare to houses today?*

For the wealthy owners of large villas, enjoying leisure was a primary motivation for living around the Bay of Naples. The facades of many villas were lined with colonnaded walkways with sweeping views of the sea and terraces that connected to private harbors for pleasure boats. Villa interiors were decorated with colorful frescoes and mosaics, whose images often represented mythological scenes, and still lifes celebrating local delicacies, such as shrimp, octopus, and conch. Others, such as the *Garden Scene* fresco, featured lush landscapes that visually expanded interior spaces.

Garden design was an important part of this elegant lifestyle. Villas' interior and exterior gardens were embellished with aviaries, fountains, and watercourses, as well as marble and bronze sculptures. These lavish spaces, and the villas that housed them, brought pleasure to guests and residents and were also conspicuous displays of the social status and authority of the villa owners.

- *In what ways do we incorporate nature into our interior spaces today? How do we use gardens and outdoor spaces?*

## Reviving the Golden Age of Greece

Romans held Greek civilization in high regard and, like us, considered fifth-century-BC Greece to be the region's golden age, a time characterized by refined artistic and cultural production, scholarship, and military strength. During his reign five hundred years later, Augustus sought to align his rule with this era and promote a rebirth of the golden age of Greece in Rome. Augustus's interest in Greek art and culture strengthened Roman reverence for classical Greek art, philosophy, and intellectual life. Knowledge of Greek culture became a mark of refinement and a symbol of an individual's social status. The works of art collected by prominent Romans further reflected their familiarity with Greek history, art, and literature.

After the conquest of Greece, many Roman generals brought works by Greek masters back to Italy. Many of these works of art were incorporated into the collections of wealthy patrons of the arts. As Pompeii and other towns around Naples developed into leisure destinations, local artists began to produce works of art in the Greek style to meet the demand for busts, statues, and paintings to decorate Roman homes. The naturally draping fabric and

realistic posture of the sculpture of the goddess included in these materials references classical Greek statuary and exemplifies the Roman taste for Greek antiquities. Around the early first century BC, when this sculpture most likely was made, many Roman art collections were a combination of Greek originals, or works thought to be Greek originals, and works made by local artists to emulate or copy Greek masterpieces.

Villa owners often installed in their gardens bronze and marble sculptures that recalled Greek myths and famous Greek writers or philosophers. The garden was viewed as a place of learning in the tradition of the pastoral setting of Plato's Academy. Founded in the fourth century BC in Athens, the Academy was dedicated to scholarly and intellectual pursuits. The hallowed location of the Academy is represented in the mosaic *Plato's Academy* (1st century BC—1st century AD) included in these materials.

- *If you could select an image from any time in history to decorate a wall in your home, what would it be? What does your selection say about you?*

## **Destruction and Discovery**

When Mount Vesuvius erupted in the year 79, Herculaneum and all but the highest points of Pompeii were completely buried under tons of ash and other volcanic matter. In the aftermath of the eruption, Greek historian and biographer Plutarch wrote: "Those who went there by daylight felt ignorance and uncertainty as to where Pompeii and Herculaneum had been situated." Cities located farther from Vesuvius were largely unaffected, although many towns and villas in close proximity to the mountain were abandoned and mostly forgotten until their rediscovery in the eighteenth century.

Twenty-five years later, in 104, Roman magistrate and author Pliny the Younger wrote two letters to his friend Tacitus, a Roman historian, describing the eruption of Vesuvius. He had witnessed the eruption from his uncle's villa in Misenum on the northern tip of the bay. In the letters, he compares the cloud of debris that rose over the mountain to an umbrella pine that "rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches...." He continued with descriptions

of the massive amounts of ash and pumice that descended on the area: "Ashes began to fall again, this time in heavy showers. We rose from time to time and shook them off, otherwise we should have been buried and crushed beneath their weight." Pliny also described the landscape after the eruption ended: "Finally a genuine daylight came; the sun shone, but pallidly as in an eclipse. And then, before our terror-stricken gaze, everything appeared changed—covered by a thick layer of ashes like an abundant snowfall."

Systematic excavations began at Herculaneum in 1738 and ten years later at Pompeii. In subsequent years, archaeologists found villas and homes with furnishings and works of art preserved in the volcanic ash. The Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum was found buried with more than eighty statues and about a thousand ancient papyri (scrolls) inscribed with Greek texts. Modern knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman culture is largely based on what was unearthed in excavations at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the other sites around the Bay of Naples.

News of the excavations spread quickly throughout Europe and sparked the public's fascination with ancient Greek and Roman culture. Numerous poets and writers drafted imagined stories about life in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The narratives they created often were characterized by romantic descriptions of Pompeii in the days before the eruption or by melancholy reflections on what remained. English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) provides a quixotic remembrance of a visit to the ancient sites in his *Ode to Naples*, which begins:

*I stood within the City disinterred;  
And heard of the autumnal leaves like light footfalls  
Of spirits passing through the streets; and heard  
The Mountain's slumberous voice at intervals  
Thrill through those roofless halls...*

Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum fueled the public's interest in antique styles and reproductions of antiquities, which continued throughout the nineteenth century. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and other artists were inspired to create paintings that re-created life and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Alma-Tadema made many works of art, including *A Sculpture Gallery* (1874), in which Pompeian antiquities and architectural details are reproduced in exacting detail, and his own family is dressed in period clothing.

# Plato's Academy

1ST CENTURY BC—1ST CENTURY AD

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**I**N THIS MOSAIC, A GROUP OF SEVEN BEARDED MEN ARE gathered beneath an olive tree. A sundial rests on a column behind them. Five of the men are focused on a globe located near the lower center of the image, while a pair of men on the right gesture to each other and appear to be in discussion about a scroll; two men on the far right also are holding scrolls. The central image is framed by a lush border of pomegranates, apples, berries, leaves, and ribbons punctuated by eight male and female comic masks. See images of similar masks of Silenos, a satyr associated with drunkenness, and a maenad on the enclosed CD.

The scene in the foreground is set against the walls of the Acropolis in Athens, which is represented in the upper right of the mosaic. The men shown in the foreground are seated in the great Academy, or gymnasium of ancient Athens, located in a grove of olive trees that was sacred to the goddess Athena. The grove consisted of twelve olive trees grown from cuttings of Athena's olive tree on the Acropolis. Plato founded the Academy in the first quarter of the fourth century BC for teaching, debating, and conducting research. Scholars studied in this location for nine hundred years, until the year 529, when the Byzantine emperor Justinian (ruled 527–565) forbade non-Christians to teach philosophy in Athens.

- *This mosaic was made from hundreds of tiny stone tiles called tesserae. Mosaics also can be made from tesserae of glass or shell. Take a close look at the images represented in Plato's Academy. Estimate how many different colored stones the artist used to create this image. How did the artist use the multicolored tesserae to suggest dimension and space? Compare the mosaic to the painting A Sculpture Gallery by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. How do the artists' approaches to suggesting space and dimension differ?*

Historians agree that Plato is the man sitting in the middle of the scene, beneath one of the sacred olive trees. He sits with bare feet and points to something on the globe. The identities of Plato's companions are less certain. They may be individuals named by the ancient Roman historian Vitruvius as the great ancient astronomers, including Pythagoras of Samos who is best known for developing the Pythagorean Theorem. Or they may be, as identified by the Romans who owned the mosaic, the Seven Sages of ancient Greece, men revered for their knowledge and wisdom but whose exact identities were disputed. A similar mosaic was found at an ancient site in Umbria, Italy, in the eighteenth century, suggesting that this subject was not new and may have been based on an earlier painting.

An individual's scholarship and knowledge, especially as related to the philosophy and intellectual life of ancient Greece, was of primary importance in ancient Roman society. Roman houses often were built and decorated to enhance the social status and prominence of the owner. Images of Greek scholars and philosophers, such as in *Plato's Academy*, often were incorporated into the embellishment of Roman homes in order to align the owners with Greek cultural and intellectual traditions. Mosaics often were placed on floors, ceilings, and walls.

- *Many ancient Romans decorated their homes with objects and images that reminded them of Greek scholarship, philosophy, and art. What does your home say about you? How do you select the objects you live with? What makes them special?*



PLATO'S ACADEMY  
1st century BC–1st century AD  
Pompeii, Villa of Titus Siminius Stephanus,  
in suburbs north of Vesuvian Gate, excavated between 1897 and 1900  
Mosaic, 33<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in.  
Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici de Napoli e Pompei  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli  
Photo © Luciano Pedicini

# Garden Scene

1ST CENTURY BC—1ST CENTURY AD

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A PROFUSION OF PLANTS AGAINST A BRIGHT BLUE sky greets viewers of this fresco that was excavated from the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii. The house was a multilevel residence located in Pompeii that contained three similar frescoes in the living room and the *triclinium* or dining room. A fresco is a type of painting made on either wet or dry plaster. Three living room frescoes faced an outdoor garden that once contained a fountain, a pool, and a pergola. The *triclinium* was also decorated with verdant garden scenes and opened onto the “real” exterior garden.

A scalloped birdbath in the center of this fresco complemented the outdoor water features in the garden just beyond the living room. Herm posts (statues in the form of square stone pillars surmounted by a bust or head) stand on each side of the birdbath—one with the head of a satyr and the other with what may be the head of a maenad or a child. Each herm is also adorned by plaques with reliefs of sleeping women. Theatrical masks hang along the top of the fresco. The masks and other sculptures are all brightly painted, supporting research into ancient Greek and Roman sculpture that reveals that classical sculpture was originally embellished with multiple colors. Take a closer look at a pair of similar masks on the enclosed CD.

This fresco and the others it was found with faced an actual garden and served to open up the walls of the living room to create the illusion of a greater expanse of garden. The birds and plants depicted were characteristic of ancient Roman gardens. And in this garden, there are perpetually blooming flowers, singing birds, and blue skies.

Flowers and vegetation appear throughout ancient Greek and Roman mythology and scholarship. Water and plants were thought to foreshadow the beauties of paradise promised to the followers of Bacchus the god of wine and theater, and the Roman poet Virgil praised flowers and plants for their beauty

in his writings. The garden also was seen as a place for learning, an idea rooted in the pastoral setting of Plato’s Academy and referenced in the mosaic highlighted on the previous page. Gardening and the incorporation of nature into urban spaces played important roles in Roman life. The size of gardens varied based on space constraints, and they commonly ranged from small kitchen gardens to lush, large, elaborately designed private meccas.

- *In what ways are gardens, parks, and other open spaces incorporated into the communities in which we live? What role do these areas play in daily life? Consider home gardens and yards, public gardens, town squares, and national parks.*

The Aqua Augusta, an aqueduct built by Octavian (63 BC–AD 14; later known as Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire), was completed in the late first century BC and provided an uninterrupted supply of pressurized water to eight towns around the bay, including Pompeii. The arrival of a constant source of running water in these cities allowed residents to design and grow more elaborate gardens. Gardeners were able to accentuate their landscape designs with springs, water courses, pools, and fountains modeled after Greek statuary. Residents also cultivated crops, and some large gardens included orchards. Pomegranates, figs, chestnuts, and pears were commonly grown, as were violets, roses, and hyacinths. Other plants and flowers common to ancient Roman gardens are documented in this fresco. Familiar plants such as laurel, oleander, sycamore, roses, daisies, chamomile, and poppies are represented. A variety of birds also can be identified. From left to right, they are a barn swallow, a rock dove, a turtledove, a black-billed magpie, a wood pigeon, two house sparrows, a golden oriole, a blue rock thrush, and another wood pigeon.



GARDEN SCENE

1st century BC—1st century AD

Pompeii, House of the Golden Bracelet

Room 32, left wall, excavated between 1978 and 1983

Fresco, Second Style, 78 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 140 $\frac{5}{8}$  in.

Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici de Napoli e Pompei, Ufficio Scavi, Pompei

Photo © Luciano Pedicini

# Aphrodite/Venus

PROBABLY EARLY 1ST CENTURY

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**A**PHRODITE, GODDESS OF LOVE AND BEAUTY, WHO is also known by her Roman name, Venus, is shown here wearing a thin chiton or tunic under a heavy mantle. The chiton has slipped to reveal her right shoulder; the fabric of her clothing drapes, folds, and clings to reveal the shape of her body. Her wavy hair is held down by a diadem and is fastened in a bun at the base of her neck. The representation of the fabric and the human form beneath, as well as the natural posture of the figure, suggest the artist's knowledge of classical Greek statuary of the second half of the fifth century BC.

The fifth century BC is known as the golden age of ancient Greece. Greek art from this time is characterized by a realistic rendering of human anatomy and the movement of the body through space. Many variations of this type of statue were made, but some scholars associate this sculpture with the work of the Greek artist Agorakritos. He was an Athenian artist of the fifth century BC and a student of the renowned ancient Greek artist Pheidias.

Around the first century BC and the first century AD, there was great demand for works of art to decorate the villas and houses of wealthy Romans. Artists from Rome and Greece relocated to Pompeii and other cities around the Bay of Naples to take advantage of the increasing patronage. Works of art recovered from these residences suggest that collectors at this time shared artistic preferences, particularly a taste for the art of classical Greece. Many Romans prized copies of or adaptations of works by Greek "old masters" and took pride in owning works of art that referenced the famous artists of ancient Greece.

Works of art inspired by ancient Greek sculpture often took on new forms and meanings in the Roman home. In Greece, monumental statues of gods and goddesses were placed in sanctuaries and public spaces, but in villas and houses around the Bay of Naples, formerly public art became private and, often, decorative and functional pieces. For example, a sculpture of Apollo, the god of learning and music, was made to hold a tray and placed in a Pompeian home. Smaller sculptures and figurines of gods and heroes adorned tables, and well-known scenes from Greek mythology were used to ornament drinking cups and bowls.

Roman patrons imported valuable and exotic materials to be carved into sculptures, vases, cups, and other domestic furnishings. This *Aphrodite* was carved from Pentellic marble imported from Athens; other sources were Parian marble from the island of Paros and black basanite imported from Egypt.

- *Ancient Greek and Roman mythology tell stories about the relationships between humans and the gods. The goddess Aphrodite (Venus) is one of a pantheon of gods and goddesses the ancient Greeks and Romans endowed with unique powers and characteristics. Myths about gods, heroes, and heroines often explain something about the order of the universe or the relationships between the gods and man. Make a list of mythological and legendary heroes and heroines. What makes these figures memorable? Select a hero or heroine from the list who holds special importance for you. Write a description of that figure. From which culture does he or she originate? In what ways is the hero or heroine important to your life?*





APHRODITE/VENUS  
(Syon House/Munich type)  
Probably early 1st century  
Rione Terra at Puteoli (Pozzuoli)  
Pentelic marble from near Athens, 80¼ in.  
Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei  
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia  
Photo © Mimmo Jodice/Contrasto

## *A Sculpture Gallery*, 1874

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**S**IR LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA DEPICTS HIMSELF AND HIS family as Roman art collectors in his painting *A Sculpture Gallery* (1874). Alma-Tadema, with red hair and beard, sits near the left edge of the image between Ellen Gosse, his sister-in-law, and her husband, Edmund Gosse. Alma-Tadema's wife, Laura, stands with their daughters, Anna and Laurence. The works of art shown in the gallery are a collection of well-known Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and eighteenth-century works. The variety of objects references the types of prized souvenirs that eighteenth-century travelers may have brought home from their Grand Tour through Europe.

A Roman slave, identified by the tablet he wears around his neck, shows the family a basin with a base made in the form of the sea monster Scylla. The basin in the painting references an ancient basin (*labrum*) that was mounted onto a modern base similar to the one in the painting. Alma-Tadema included detailed references to Greek and Roman antiquities in many of his works of art. His paintings of domestic life set in ancient Rome appealed to the nineteenth-century public's infatuation with Greek and Roman culture that was fueled by the rediscovery and excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

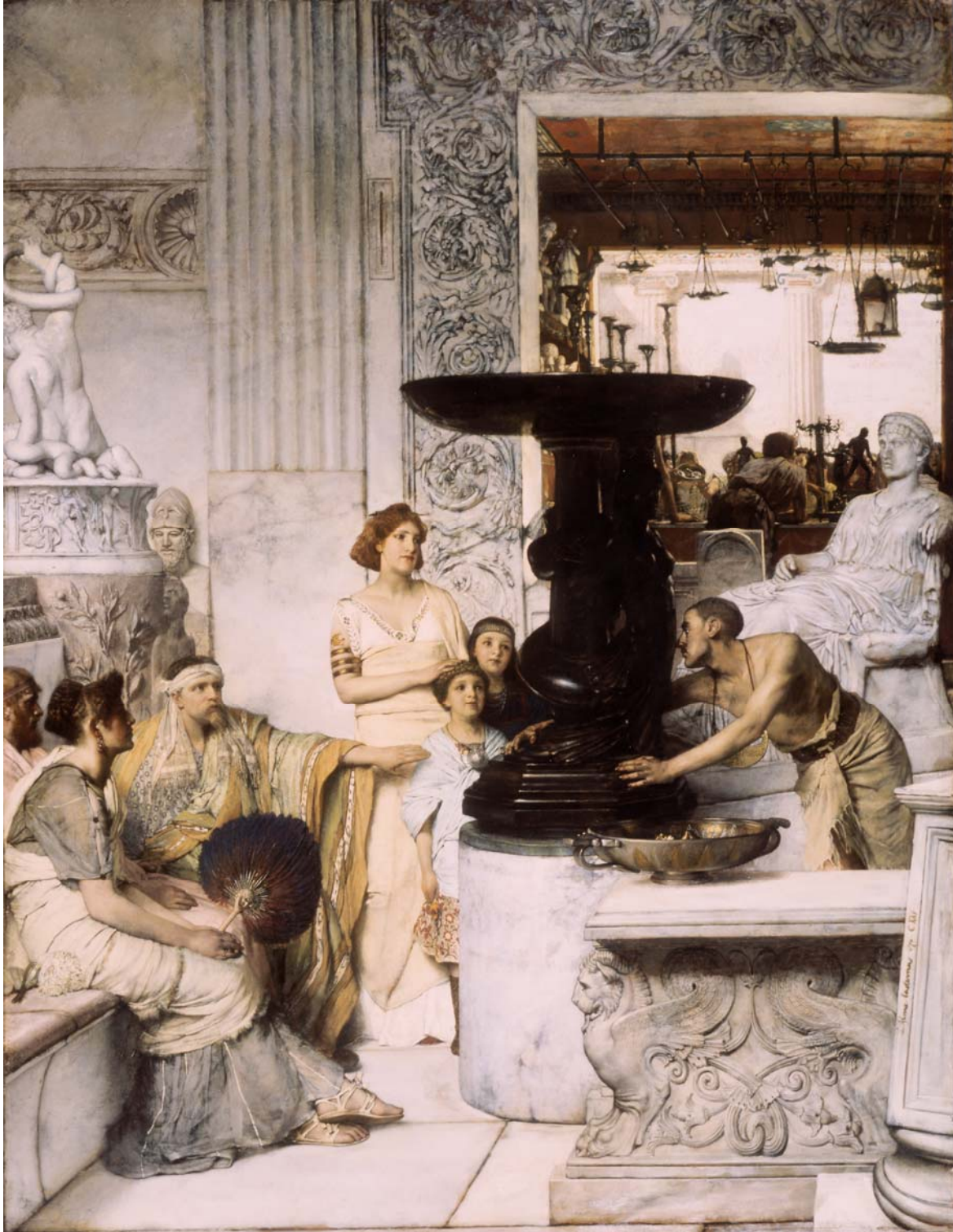
Alma-Tadema made many trips to the excavation sites to satisfy his curiosity and to do research for his work. In 1883, during one trip to Pompeii, he wrote: "Pompeii is still the great attraction. We go there daily, I study it thoroughly. It is so quaint, so interesting, so sad, so terrible, so poetical, so bewitching, that really I dread to come to an end with it. Every day one loves the place better, as every day one knows a little more of it." He conducted extensive research into the art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome and compiled an archive of photographs, prints, and drawings, as well as a library of thousands of books on the subject. His knowledge enabled him to include accurate references to antiquity in his imagined representations of domestic life in ancient Pompeii.

In *A Sculpture Gallery*, Alma-Tadema included multiple works of art that were excavated from around the Bay of Naples, including the sculpture, *Young Hercules Strangling a Serpent*, located in the painting's upper left, and the statue, the *Agrippina Farnese*, located to the right of the basin. He also included a set

of table supports in the lower right that were carved to resemble those found in the Pompeian house of Gaius Cornelius Rufus. An image of the table supports are included on the enclosed CD. Smaller details, such as the Roman child's locket that Alma-Tadema's youngest daughter wears and the comic mask on Ellen Gosse's fan, point to the artist's research into the possessions, furnishings, and works of art that characterized daily Roman life.

When the ancient Roman sites were rediscovered in the eighteenth century, a vast array of objects was unearthed that provided detailed information about Roman life and art. News of the discoveries traveled fast, and soon a visit to Naples and the excavation sites became the southernmost stop on the Grand Tour of the Continent, an extended journey through Europe taken by wealthy young intellectuals. Tourists also were intrigued by the periodic bursts of activity from Mount Vesuvius, which erupted on a smaller scale several times in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Popular souvenirs of visits to the Bay of Naples were paintings of the eruptions and views of the ruins, as well as jewelry carved from lava. Publications illustrating the excavated objects were widely circulated and further spread the rage for antique styles and reproductions of antiquities. The rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum affected the art, design, and culture of Europe and eventually North America for centuries.

- *The United States Capitol Building is filled with symbols and architectural details that reference ancient Greek and Roman art and architecture. Italian artist Constantino Brumidi (1805–1880) created a series of murals, based on his study of Pompeian frescoes, for the Naval Affairs Committee Room (now the Senate Appropriations Conference Room) in the Capitol. For information, visit [www.gpo.gov/congress/senate/brumidi](http://www.gpo.gov/congress/senate/brumidi). Look at the Maenad fresco on the enclosed CD. This image inspired some of Brumidi's work. In what ways do the Pompeian images included in these materials compare to Brumidi's images? What are reasons for referencing classical Greece and Rome in the design and decoration of United States government buildings?*



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema  
(The Netherlands, 1836–1912, active England)  
A SCULPTURE GALLERY  
1874, Oil on canvas, 86½ x 67½ in.  
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire  
Gift of Arthur M. Loew, Class of 1921A

These curriculum materials were prepared by Elizabeth Mackey and Rachel Bernstein and designed by Jenifer Shell.  
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