

ARTE e SENSUALITÀ nelle case di POMPEII



ART AND SENSUALITY IN THE HOUSES OF POMPEII
An exhibition to recount the centrality of sensual and erotic images in the *domus* of Pompeii

LARGE PALAESTRA
FROM 21st APRIL 2022 TO 15th JANUARY 2023



Amazement, curiosity and embarrassment are among the emotions experienced by archaeologists and visitors when confronted by paintings and sculptures of Pompeii and the other Vesuvian sites, ever since the first discoveries in the 18th century. As the excavations progressed, it became increasingly apparent that images of a sensual and erotic nature, often far from a classicist vision of the ancient world, characterised practically all areas of the city, from private houses to bath complexes, from inns to seedy taverns and public spaces. More recent discoveries which have aroused great interest include the House of Leda and the Swan, and the ceremonial chariot with erotic decorations from Civita Giuliana.

With a widely diverse audience originating from all over the world, which in recent months has been returning to Pompeii, **the question of how to explain the extent of sensuality in the imagery of Pompeii is more apposite than ever.**

It is this didactic need which has inspired the new exhibition organised by the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, entitled '**Art and sensuality in the houses of Pompeii**', **which will be inaugurated on the 21st April in the Large Palaestra of the archaeological site, and may be visited until the 15th January 2023.**

Curated by **Director Gabriel Zuchtriegel** and archaeologist **Maria Luisa Catoni**, professor at the IMT School for Advanced Studies, Lucca, **the exhibition aims to be a 'key to understanding' to help the public better appreciate what they will see on the site.**

In fact the exhibition project incorporates, in addition to the exhibition at the Large Palaestra, an itinerary to discover various buildings on the site which are characterised by frescoes and references to the theme, accessible with the assistance of the My Pompeii App, which includes a dedicated section.

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Among the display of 70 works from the storerooms of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, the visitor will also find **two bronze medallions with erotic scenes from the Civita Giuliana ceremonial chariot**; the **elegant ceiling of the *cubiculum*** (bedroom) **from the House of Leda and the Swan** which was found collapsed on the floor, before being reassembled and restored, and the three **walls from the *cubiculum* of the Villa of Gragnano in the Carmiano area**, which has been reconstructed following a recent restoration.

The exhibition thereby highlights the recent discoveries in the context of the Great Pompeii Project and the new investigations conducted under the direction of **Massimo Osanna, now Director General of Museums and author, along with Luana Toniolo, of the essay 'The hidden world of Pompeii: the wedding chariot, the room of the slaves and recent discoveries', published by Rizzoli.**

In addition, **'The Centaurs of Pompeii', a children's guide written by the Director and illustrated by Daniela Pergreffi**, seeks to explain a 'difficult' subject to younger visitors, by following the footsteps of the centaur Mares in his search for a centauress. As well as enjoying the exhibition, by following the story, younger and older readers will encounter a series of figures central to ancient mythology, from Narcissus to Dionysus and Ariadne.

The exhibition is sponsored by American Express and by Caruso, A Belmond Hotel, Ravello, on the Amalfi Coast.

American Express is a leader in the payments sector and is the largest credit card company by purchase volume.

Caruso, A Belmond Hotel, Ravello, on the Amalfi Coast, which overlooks the divinely beautiful coast, has for over 46 years been part of Belmond, the pioneer brand in the sector of exceptional luxury travel thanks to the breadth of its offer of unique experiences.

*"In these times of pandemic emergency and war, this exhibition seeks to be an ode to the resilience of beauty - declares **Director of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, Gabriel Zuchtriegel** - but from a historical perspective, which helps us to understand that even in the past, art and the imagination were interwoven with social, cultural and political relationships and hierarchies. That we today may admire in Pompeii an ancient city with frescoes, statues and furnishings in the very positions in which they were buried by the eruption of AD 79, is a wondrous gift of history that we must preserve and pass on to future generations. The exhibition, which serves as a kind of introduction to the site visit, seeks to contribute to this, also highlighting many works previously in storage which in some cases have been restored and subjected to new studies prior to being displayed to the public."*

*"This exhibition belongs to the category of research exhibitions, aimed at valorising both the cultural asset and the site but also the multiple relationships, the collaboration between differing research methodologies and the responsibilities of protection and management" - adds **Maria Luisa Catoni** - "It allows the visitor to establish a physical relationship between what is on display and other objects and locations in the site, including several new discoveries only recently brought to light. The visitor thus enters an exhibition in which he can see not only objects of great interest and beauty but also use them as 'pointers' to different contexts: the context of Pompeii and the archaeological site, the context of the Villas, for example those of Stabiae and Oplontis, the context of the Greco-Roman cultural exchange over the course of the 1st century AD, the context of the codification and tradition of erotic and sensual images, and the context of the functions and uses of such images in the areas they decorated and so on. In few other places in the world is it possible to offer a visitor such a complex and interactive journey. At Pompeii this is made possible as a result of the extraordinary commitment made by the site over several years to the fields of research and the communication of research, as well as by the opening of the site to researchers from all over the world".*

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The exhibition area, which occupies the western portico of the Large Palaestra, will lead the visitor through an ideal Pompeian house, with scans of its various rooms, in which the works are displayed: the *atrium*, the *cubiculum* (bedroom), the *triclinium* (dining room) and the peristyle (internal colonnaded garden).

THE SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

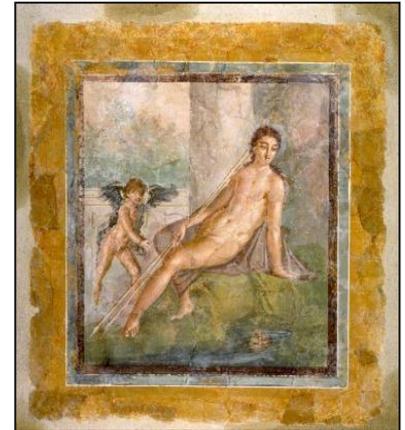
ATRIUM

One enters the *atrium*



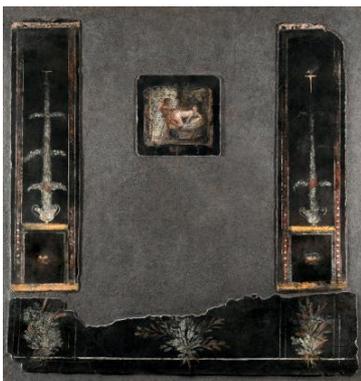
On entering a Roman house, one finds oneself in the *atrium*, a combination of a courtyard and a large reception room. This was the traditional part of the house, not merely because its shape was ancient in origin (6th-5th centuries BC), but also because it was a place of ancestral worship. The altar of the family *Lares*, or protector deities of the family, was often located here. Even in AD 79, when Pompeii was destroyed, in many *atria* we still find many examples of traditional Roman art, which express the social and religious values of the time. At the same time, however, the *atrium* also became a place to display works drawing inspiration from Greece, and characterised by a new sensuality, such as for example in the depiction of Narcissus,

the young man who fell in love with his own image, or that of Priapus, the god of bounty and fertility of Greco-Eastern origin who often watched over entrances and gardens.



CUBICULUM

The *cubiculum*: much more than a 'bedroom'



Around the *atrium* were the 'bedrooms' (*cubicula*) which were not, however, exclusively used for sleeping. Here the owner might study, attend to their toilette, withdraw for intimate conversation or romantic encounters, or else to discuss delicate matters. The position of the bed was often indicated by an alcove in the wall and by the design of the flooring. In less affluent families, two or more people might sleep in one room. The paintings which decorated the *cubiculum* often reflected the atmosphere of intimacy, both through idyllic subjects and openly erotic scenes, such as in the case of the Villa of Carmiano.

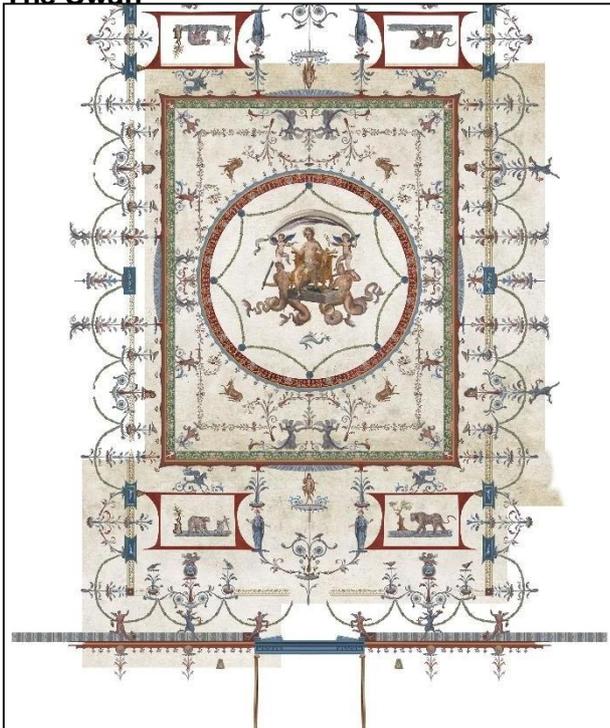
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Explicit images, not just in the Lupanar

Images of couples engaging in sexual intercourse are often associated with prostitution, such as in the case of the Lupanar at Pompeii. Yet they can also be found in more private areas. Such is the case in a villa in the Carmiano area between Pompeii and Stabiae. One of the rooms contained a cycle of erotic images. We know of the existence of erotic and sexual literature which spread in the Greek world from the 3rd century BC and which must have been known in Pompeii too. The images, rather than reflecting the everyday use of the room, could have served to inspire more or less cultured references to such a genre of literature.



The Ceiling of Leda and The Swan



One example of a highly refined bedroom ceiling is that which was found collapsed on the floor of the House of Leda and the Swan, and later reassembled and restored, that was uncovered during recent excavations along Via Vesuvio at Pompeii.

Restitution de la fresque du plafond de la chambre de Léda et le cygne: Aristeas - Editions Honoré Clair/Hubert Naudeix

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TRICLINIUM

Leaving the 'official' part of the house, centred around the *atrium*, we come to the more intimate area of the peristyle, which evokes Greek culture in various ways, beginning with its defining element - the quadriporticus, which indeed originated in Greece and spread across the Roman world only in the last centuries BC. In the *triclinium*, which often opens onto the peristyle, those who could afford to do so could enjoy luxurious banquets. Yet unlike in Classical Greek culture, where the banquet was reserved for male citizens and for musicians, dancers and prostitutes who were hired for the occasion, in the Roman world eroticism was more virtual than real: images of beautiful boys and girls alluded to hetero- and homosexual interactions, which served as a background to conversations and debates between women and men participating in the banquet.

On the matter of 'winter *triclinia*', the ancient writer and architect Vitruvius suggested the use of panels with a black background, to help conceal the smoke from oil lamps and candelabra. In fact, we must also imagine the banqueting halls with artificial light. The epebe *lampadophore* ('He who bears the lamp') had the dual function of contributing to the illumination while serving as a veiled reference to Greek homoeroticism during the symposium. On other occasions, oil lamps were used which were at times decorated with erotic scenes similar to those found in wall paintings.



PERISTYLE

In the midst of the residential districts of Pompeii, the peristyles found in the houses of the wealthy served as virtual spaces which invoked a world different to that of everyday life - bucolic landscapes of an idealised Greece. Images, but also plants and architectural shapes transformed by the Greek world created an area detached from the traditional forms of living, but also something of an island, where the traditional boundaries between genders or between humans and animals were blurred. As a result, these open-air spaces became a particular place for the display of Greek or Greek-inspired works, including sculptures of hermaphrodites and centaurs, themselves hybrid beings from Greek mythology.



Oplontis: Satyr and Hermaphrodite; the Centaurs

Villa A of Oplontis, with its paintings, gardens and sculptures, is an expression of aristocratic luxury

inspired by the great Imperial villas. The villa in fact belonged to Poppaea, the second wife of the Emperor Nero. The sculptural group with a Satyr and Hermaphrodite, which adorned one side of the large swimming pool, is a sensual intertwining of bodies which recall struggle and erotic intercourse. Amongst paths, flower beds and plane trees, two pairs of centaurs and centaresses form the spectacular decoration of a fountain. The club, wild boar and krater borne by the centaurs, as well as the fawn, the lyre and the plectrum of the centaresses alludes to their fascinating and dual nature: both wild for the hunt and civilised by music and the banquet.



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The House of Loreius Tiburtinus, as a 'miniature villa in the city'

One of the most interesting gardens of Pompeii is that of the House of Loreius Tiburtinus, which featured a grotto for nymphs, a *triclinium* and a summer *biclinium*, upon whose beds one could dine outdoors, serenaded by the sound of water flowing into basins (*euripi*). The upper channel was decorated with statuettes alluding to Egypt and the repertoire of characters of the Dionysiac world and wild beasts. Standing against a perimeter wall of the garden, the statue of Hermaphroditus emerged from the greenery of the flowerbeds, in unexpected sensuality. All are typical elements of the large and luxurious suburban villas, here enclosed in miniature, in the small area of a city house of the upper middle class.

THE CEREMONIAL CHARIOT OF CIVITA GIULIANA



North of the walls of Pompeii, in a suburban villa in Civita Giuliana, parts of a ceremonial chariot were found in 2020, during the course of excavation campaigns initiated in 2017 by the Archaeological Park of Pompeii in collaboration with the Prosecutor of Torre Annunziata, in order to combat illegal activities. The chariot, unique in the Roman world, is a *pilentum* with four wheels, which would have been used during ceremonies by women holding important religious offices, such as priestesses and vestals, or by high-ranking matrons, and for weddings by young women. It is a type of carriage with a seat, equipped with armrests and backrest, and a wooden chest covered in bronze, richly decorated in an erotic theme.

Bronze, tin and silver

Pompeii, from Civita Giuliana, suburban villa 1st century AD.

The medallions of the chariot feature erotic images with satyrs cavorting with maenads or nymphs, according to an iconographic tradition very common in Roman times both for frescoes and for mosaics, sarcophagi and artefacts. Images of satyrs, maenads and characters from the Dionysian world, as well as *erotes* associated with Venus, are found on household walls, and in particular in bedrooms (*cubicula*), as well as in objects associated with banquets. Their highly visible presence on the rear of the chariot would seem to serve as an explicit message to Eros, thus becoming a matrimonial metaphor, for the assimilation of the nymphs with brides.

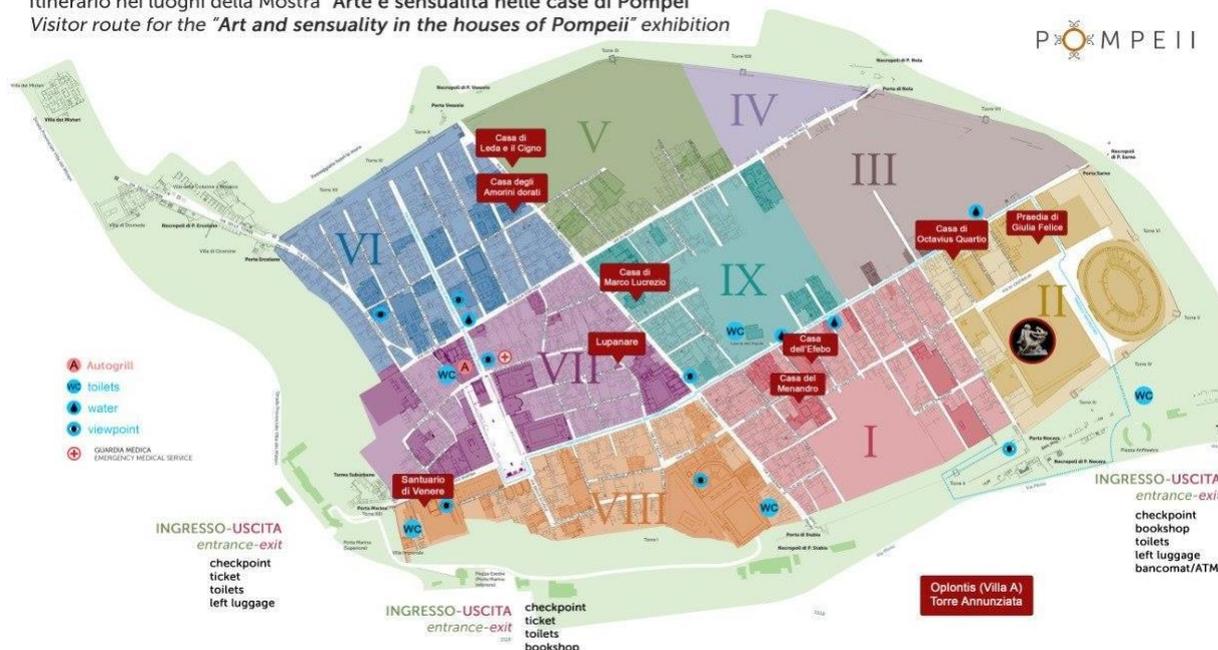


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THE EXHIBITION CONCLUDES WITH A SITE VISIT TO CERTAIN BUILDINGS AND HOUSES WITH FRESCOES AND REFERENCES TO THE THEME.

Itinerario nei luoghi della Mostra "Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei"
Visitor route for the "Art and sensuality in the houses of Pompeii" exhibition



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