

THE HOUSE OF THE VETTII

**reopens to the public after 20 years: stunning beauty and crude reality
in the iconic house of Pompeii**



The House of the Vettii, the iconic house of Pompeii, is reopening. It is always included in guides to the UNESCO World Heritage site and books on ancient art as a result of its extraordinary frescoes and the sculptures that adorned the large garden.

After a period of closure lasting twenty years with a partial reopening in 2016 – confined to the entrance of the atrium and surrounding areas – visitors will finally be able to admire the House of the Vettii in all its architectural complexity as a result of recent restoration work.

The new restoration project, which began in 2016 under the direction of Massimo Osanna, has involved a wide range of professionals including archaeologists, architects, restorers, engineers, structural engineers and experts on gardening.

It stands out as one of the most complex archaeological heritage restoration projects of the last few decades. It has proved particularly difficult to remove the layers of wax applied to the frescoes in the past with the intention of protecting and enhancing them. Unfortunately, this restoration method has proved to be extremely harmful and has obscured many of the details of the elegant paintings, with depictions of fantastic architecture and mythological scenes.

The House of the Vettii has been closed to visitors for 20 years, with a brief interruption restricted to the entrance hall and the atrium in 2016, although this area was subsequently closed off again to enable the completion of the restoration work. It will now take its place once again as one of the highlights of a visit to Pompeii. The house has been included in the list of buildings that will remain open on a permanent basis to visitors in 2023.

The garden of the peristyle (colonnaded garden), which had a complex system of water channels and small fountains, has been restored with the inclusion of copies of the original statues, including a unique statue of its kind depicting Priapus, the god of fertility. The statues are kept in the display areas of the Archaeological Park. The garden also has ancient species of plants cultivated in the nursery within the Park as a part of a more wide-ranging project designed to enhance historic

gardens and the cultivation of green areas of the ancient city through partnerships with local farmers and plant growers.

Excavated between 1894 and 1896, the House of the Vettii belonged to *Aulus Vettius Conviva* and *Aulus Vettius Restitutus*, probably two freedmen brothers who had become rich through commerce in wine. The magnificent paintings and sculptures in the house also reflect the wealth of the territory of Pompeii, where wine was produced for export throughout the Mediterranean, and social mobility which enabled two former slaves to reach the upper echelons of local society.

There are various traces of the life of the poor, in particular a room adjoining the kitchen in the slaves' quarters which is decorated with small erotic paintings. The room was originally fitted with an iron door to ensure that access was restricted only to adult men. The barrier was removed only a few days prior to the re-opening of the house. It has been suggested that the room was used for prostitution, a hypothesis that appears to be confirmed by the discovery of an inscription on the left wall of the *vestibulum* (entrance hall). The inscription refers to a woman named *Eutychis*, "a Greek woman of pleasant manners", who was offered for two asses (copper coins) (*Eutychis Graeca a(ssibus) II moribus bellis*). Besides the beauty of ancient art and architecture, this find offers an extraordinary insight into ancient society, its stratification and customs.

"This highly significant re-opening marks the end of a lengthy period of problematic restoration which in recent years has benefited from the successful model of the Large-scale European Project, both in terms of the management of funding and human resources, but with the difference that in this case everything has been run by the Park's own staff, from the planning stage to the interventions," stated the Director General of Museums, Massimo Osanna. "It is a crucial step that confirms the autonomy and success of the day-to-day management of Pompeii, a model that has gained international recognition"

"The House of the Vettii represents the story of the Roman world encapsulated in a single house, the 'house/ museum' of the 'Roman spirit': it contains mythological frescoes and sculptures made of bronze and marble of exceptional artistic quality which reflect the complex relationship between Greek models and Roman copies, as well as the economic and social life of the city. The owners, who were freedmen and thus former slaves, testify to a level of social mobility which would have been unthinkable two centuries previously. Their wealth stemmed from commerce in agricultural produce from the territory around Pompeii, but it would appear that prostitution was also practised in their house by a Greek slave woman who belonged to the most deprived groups of society," emphasises Gabriel Zuchtriegel, Director of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

RESTORATION INTERVENTIONS

The restoration of the *domus* took place in various phases. The building had undergone partial reconstruction of the roofing using elements that were clearly distinguishable from the original parts and were, as far as possible, reversible and non-invasive, undertaken as part of the collaboration between the Archaeological Superintendency of Pompeii (now the Archaeological Park of Pompeii) and the *Istituto Centrale per il Restauro* (now the *Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro*). After a lengthy period of closure and initial structural tests, the *atrium* of the house was re-opened to visitors in 2016 before being closed again to enable further restoration work to be carried out.

The complex intervention that began in 2020 and has just been completed has systematically rearranged the pre-existing parts with newly planned work designed to complete the roofing of the house so that it is now fully covered using modern techniques and materials which are consistent with interventions carried out in recent years.

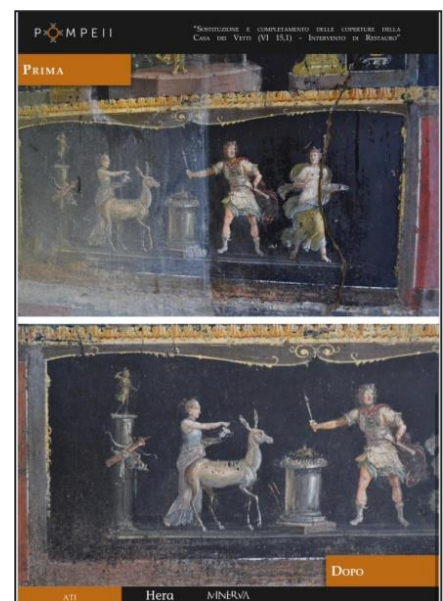


More specifically, the restoration work and structural consolidation consisted of the following interventions: the existing roofing in the peristyle made of reinforced concrete, which was in a state of total disrepair, was replaced with a new pitched roof made of laminated timber and tiles, using well-established construction techniques for the philological renovation of ancient roofs; the construction of new flat roofing using a steel structure and innovative systems designed to lighten the loads and provide waterproofing to protect the slaves' quarters and the *gynaecium* (women's quarters) with an outer layer in a copper coloured finish; the restoration of all wall and floor decoration including the original garden furnishings.

The extraordinary richness of the decoration and the garden furnishings made it necessary to undertake meticulous conservation work which involved cleaning, stucco work and the addition of missing elements designed to reveal each single detail as well as the original colours.

The intervention took place in a series of phases, based on appropriate restoration methodologies, selecting techniques and materials deemed suitable for each single problem that arose.

One of the most complex phases of the intervention undoubtedly involved the removal of the layers of wax that had been applied during previous restoration work in order to revive the brightness of the colours.



LIGHTING, SAFETY & SECURITY



The lighting project made use of newly devised LEDs (Light Emitting Diodes) which make it possible to emit light with a spectrum extremely similar to that of the Sun: a clean, natural light devoid of components of infrared and ultraviolet radiation and, above all, without the presence of the peak emission in the blue spectral range (c. 400 nanometres, which represents the spectral component of visible light endowed with elevated energy, and thus an elevated capacity for deterioration regarding materials exposed to radiation for a long time, or with elevated intensity of this chromatic component). The LEDs used here are

marked by an extremely high level of transparency of lenses and by electronics of a specially designed quality which, besides providing significant energy savings, ensure an excellent result in terms of visual comfort and the visibility of details and colours, simultaneously preventing the degradation and damage of the works and the frescoes due to a phenomenon known as 'blue hazard' by the EU.

In order to ensure that the frescoes receive the natural day/night light cycle to which they had been originally exposed, specific lighting cycles were designed that follow the opening of the *domus* to the public, ensuring the absence of light at night and, therefore, the absence of exposure to light radiation of the extraordinary works inside it.

Photovoltaic roof tiles

In order to ensure the fullest amount of energy autonomy, using renewable energy sources and without absorbing energy from the external grid, it was decided that use should be made of specially designed photovoltaic roof tiles of reduced weight. Round and flat tiles were produced with a mixture of plastic materials containing photovoltaic modules which are not visible from the outside.

LEDs for illuminating the buildings and Safety & Security

Thanks to LED sources, it will also be possible to implement a Li-Fi (*Light-Fidelity*) system that represents a modern, innovative communication system capable of transmitting data and information using wireless technology (without the need for cables of any kind) through light modulation.

The same Li-Fi technology will be used to transmit data from safety & security systems such as video surveillance and access control.

THE HOUSE

The Priapus of the *vestibulum*

Beside the right doorjamb, towards the *atrium*, there is a depiction of the figure of Priapus who, besides his huge member, was supposed to indicate the prosperity and wealth of the inhabitants of the house. The figure weighs his member on a plate of weighing scales, while a bag full of coins acts as a counterweight.



Room of the cupids



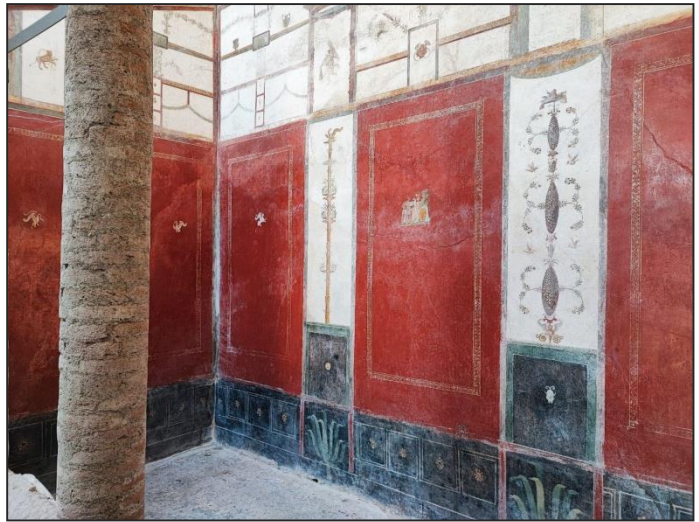
The most famous painting complex in the house is situated in the *oecus* (reception room) which opens onto the northern portico of the peristyle. In the upper zone of the sumptuously decorated walls, poets are surrounded by muses, maenads and satyrs playing musical instruments; in the middle zone, gold candelabras and tripods divide panels decorated with pairs of flying figures. The base is decorated with priestesses, amazons, maenads and satyrs above which there are small paintings with scenes of sacrifice to Diana and *psychai* (souls or shades) picking flowers.

However, the most unusual scenes, which give the room its name, are those with a painted frieze above the base. A long series of cupids are engaged in a wide range of activities and crafts: sellers of flowers and wreaths, perfume producers and traders, goldsmiths and engravers, laundry-workers, bakers and grape-harvesters, the latter providing the prelude to the triumph of Dionysus. The atmosphere is playful and the cupids are often depicted taking part in amusing competitions.

The *gynaecium*

This name was coined by Amedeo Maiuri, since its isolated position reminded him of the *gynaecium* (women's quarters) in ancient Greek houses.

The small quarters consist of two finely decorated rooms which open onto a colonnaded garden with a pool. In particular, the *triclinium* contains the scene in which Auge, the priestess of Athena, who is washing the sacred *peplos* robe of the goddess, is taken by surprise and seduced by Heracles in a state of drunkenness. Their union would lead to the birth of Telephos.



Room of Ixion

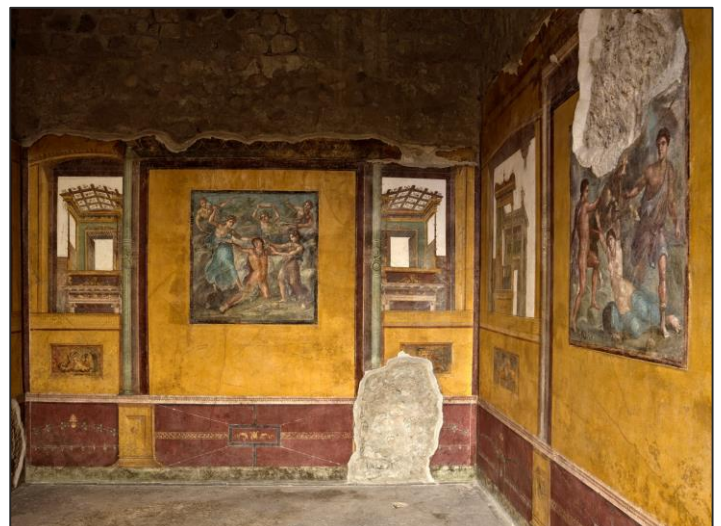


The room of Ixion opens on to the garden and acts as a pendant to the room of Pentheus. It is a *triclinium* which, like the *oecus* of Pentheus, was devised as a picture gallery. In the background, King Ixion is depicted opposite the enthroned Hera who watches the scene indicated to her by Isis: Hephaestus is focused on activating the wheel to which, at the hands of Hermes and at the behest of Zeus, Ixion will be attached using serpents. The Thessalian king, guilty of trying to offend Hera, was condemned to be bound for eternity to a wheel that kept spinning in the sky. Ixion's tragic fate is counterbalanced

on the right wall by a depiction of an episode with a happy ending in which Dionysus unveils the sleeping Ariadne while Theseus escapes on board his ship. On the left wall, Daedalus is depicted presenting to Pasiphaë, wife of Minos, King of Crete, a hollow wooden cow which would become the disguise by which she could mate with the bull and give birth to the Minotaur.

Room of Pentheus

The *oecus* in the Fourth Style is decorated with large paintings dominated by three main scenes: the one on the right wall shows Dirce being tortured by Zethus and Amphion, the sons of Zeus and Antiope; the scene on the left wall shows the infant Hercules strangling the serpents sent to kill him by Juno. The scene on the panel on the back wall shows Pentheus, King of Thebes, being torn limb from limb by maenads for offending Dionysus.



Behind him, a maenad delivers the final blow by hurling a large boulder at his head.

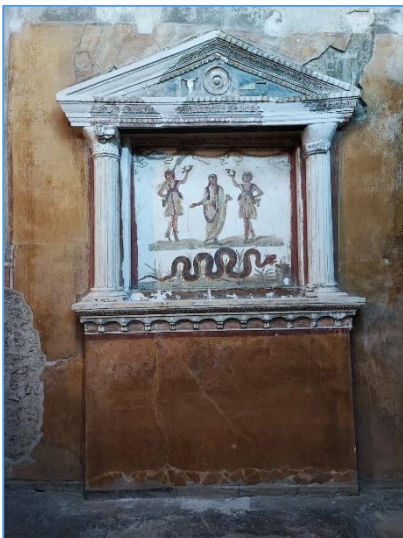
The Peristyle

The peristyle with eighteen columns surrounded the garden adorned with sculptures that were also designed to be fountains, creating an impressive system of water features. The subjects depicted in the garden allude to Dionysus and his entourage: satyrs, cherubs and children refer to the fertility of nature following the iconographic models in the Hellenistic tradition. Along the portico and between the columns, there are sculptures of Dionysus, a satyr with a wineskin, two bronze cherubs holding ducks, two *erotes* with their hands tied together, an infant seated on the ground with a rabbit, and a satyr with an amphora. Lastly, a figure of Pan and a figure of Priapus, which had fallen into disuse because they had been damaged, were crammed into the kitchen. They must have been arranged along the east portico. The lavishly adorned garden was completed by tables, small tables and marble pools as



well as two small pilasters with double herms: Dionysus and Ariadne are depicted on one herm while a Silenus and a maenad are depicted on the other. In order to preserve all the sculptures that were discovered, copies were made which are now arranged along the sides of the portico.

The servants' quarters and the painted *lararium*



In the servants' quarters, there is a *lararium* on one of the walls with paintings of the *Lares*, the tutelary deities of the household.

Room with erotic paintings

Next to the room with the *lararium*, there is a room with small erotic paintings.

It has been suggested that the room was used for prostitution, a hypothesis that appears to be confirmed by the discovery of an inscription on the left wall of the *vestibulum* (entrance hall). The description refers to a woman named *Eutythis*, “a Greek woman of pleasant manners”, who was offered for two *asses* (copper coins) (*Eutythis Graeca a(ssibus) Il moribus bellis*). Besides the beauty of ancient art and architecture, the inscription offers an extraordinary insight into ancient society, its stratification and customs.



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LIGHTING PROJECT OF THE DOMUS OF THE VETTII

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