



Up Pompeii!

Whisper it, but we may finally have reached an era when sexual art can be exhibited to the public without apologies – or blushes

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Priapus is weighing his appendage in the hall, a randy satyr is wrestling a hermaphrodite on the veranda and in the bedroom, well, this never has been a house for sleeping.

They certainly knew how to have a good time in Pompeii. In the days before Vesuvius erupted and buried much of the Bay of Naples in ash, life was one big banquet of *carpe diem*. A new exhibition mounted at the archaeological site leads you through a typical ancient villa, almost every crevice of which contains something eyebrow-raising. If the bedroom frescoes don't do it for you, there are risqué wine jars and oil lamps – and a newly discovered wedding chariot – with scenes to prompt much head-tilting and bemusement.

Whisper it, but we may finally have reached the stage where sexual art can be exhibited without apologies and without blushes. Objects that were once consigned to storage cupboards for fear of corrupting public morals are displayed prominently in museums and galleries across the world.

It has only taken 2,000 years. Ever since Pompeii and Herculaneum were first excavated in the mid-18th century, erotic items have been lifted from the ground only to be covered again as quickly as possible. One prominent art historian was so perturbed by the discovery of an “obscene” sculpture that he had it wrapped in paper and sent to the royal court at Naples with instructions that no member of the public should ever see it.

A sculpture of the goatish god Pan penetrating a she-goat was too disgusting to describe. The Victorians, seldom averse to a bit of hanky-panky on the sly, wrongly supposed that ancient erotica belonged solely in brothels.

The latest display is delightfully, unapologetically frank. There is even a guidebook for children themed around a centaur's quest for a girlfriend. No trigger warnings here. It's a promising sign that the days when shame directed the cover-up of perfectly good works of art are over. Sex has been put back in every room, including the kitchen, where the sight of an engorged phallus was once considered far from unedifying.

For museum curators in the past, the rule has been that if it features gen-

italia or, hush, copulation, then off to storage with it. Pan and his nanny love was among the many pieces squirrelled away in a gallery constructed especially for such monstrosities in 1819.

The so-called Gabinetto Segreto (“secret cabinet”) still exists at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. Historically it was deemed so outrageous that, as a guidebook explained: “Admission, forbidden to women and children, is only granted to men of mature age by means of special permission from the minister of the king's household.”

One of the spicier wall frescoes housed there features a woman lowering herself onto her excited partner. Needless to say Picasso put in a request and was soon filling his sketchbooks with “Pompeian drawings, which are a bit improper”. It was only in 2000 that the secret collection was opened to the general public. The words Gabinetto Segreto still hover over the doorway to the wing.

The British, unsurprisingly, have been even more prudish than the Italians, and created a private cabinet of their own. The Secretum – a room so shady that it was named in Latin – was established at the British Museum in the 19th century after the acquisition of a peculiar quantity of phallic objects.

George Witt, a collector, doctor, town mayor and banker, was as promiscuous in his taste for penises as he was in his choice of career. He amassed hundreds of the things, from neck charms and amulets to saucy Greek vases and broken-off bits of Roman statues. Not a fig leaf in sight.

Witt's Sunday morning lectures offered quite the alternative to church. Presumably the trustees of the British Museum had not attended them because, having agreed to accept Witt's collection, they got the vapours and retreated. Witt's prized objets were unceremoniously secreted into the cupboard with works from Pompeii and beyond. Like its Italian predecessor, the Secretum was available to view only on application. Even when Witt's objects were exhibited in 1991, the press were prohibited from taking photographs.

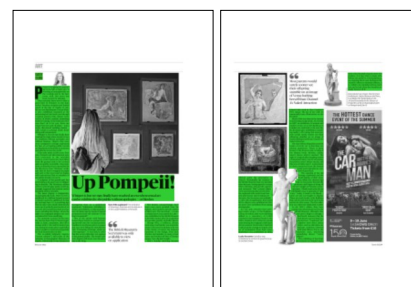
It's not only artworks that were kept under wraps. At the Bodleian Library in Oxford, titles were still being

added to a repository of 3,000 restricted (read naughty) books in the 1990s. Students who wished to consult items bearing the enigmatic shelf mark phi (an ancient Greek letter) had first to pluck up the courage to request a letter of permission from their tutor. Madonna's *Sex*, published in 1992, joined titles such as Alex Comfort's 1972 classic *The Joy of Sex* with its memorably hairy illustrations on the Phi shelf.

Much of this was done in the interest of protecting young minds. As recently as 2007 an exhibition of ancient and modern erotic art at the Barbican in London was restricted to the over-18s. By all means give exhibitions containing nudity a PG rating, but most parents would surely sooner see their offspring stumble on an image of Venus bathing herself than Channel 4's *Naked Attraction*.

The marvellous thing about ancient works of erotic art is that they are seldom gratuitous. There is great beauty in the frescoes and carvings of the human body. Besides, nudity wasn't always what it seemed. The sight of a large phallus dangling outside a Pompeian bakery may be surprising, but penises aren't always sexual, and this one certainly wasn't. A great many of those preserved from the Roman world were intended as symbols of good luck.

The opening of the old storage cupboards and the bold display of their treasures offers the clearest sign that we have gone beyond idle prurience and begun to shrug off the last vestiges of Victorian censoriousness. If books and artworks are still hidden away on grounds of “delicacy” today, it tends to be literal – some are just too fragile to display. There are erotic books at the Bodleian that can be read only in the rare books section for this reason. The Phi collection was otherwise disbanded in 2010.



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As for Witt's willies, they have mainly been disseminated across the British Museum, although a few are said to linger in storage. I had heard rumours that the final pieces can be found in a mysterious "Cupboard 55" together with other choice items, such as ultra-fine animal-gut condoms fastened with pink ribbon. Not so, the museum says, muttering something about "votive objects".

The exhibition of the friskiest treasures at Pompeii represents a final triumph of good sense over prudery. At a time when so many exhibitions are spoilt by overexplanatory, joy-zapping labels and dampened by curators' efforts to minimise offence, it is a relief to be reminded of how much fun can be had when the shackles are finally thrown off. ■