

THE LAST DAYS OF
POMPEII
DECADENCE • APOCALYPSE • RESURRECTION

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**GETTY VILLA EXHIBITION EXPLORES
CONTINUING FASCINATION WITH POMPEII**

A critical look at an ancient catastrophe through the work of four centuries of prominent artists including Piranesi, Fragonard, Dalí, Rothko, and Warhol



Eruption of Vesuvius with Destruction of a Roman City, 1824. Sebastian Pether (English, 1790–1844). Oil on canvas; frame with wood; attachments imitating lava. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Grant Walker Fund.



Mount Vesuvius, 1985. Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987). Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Founding Collection. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Villa

September 12, 2012–January 7, 2013

LOS ANGELES—Destroyed yet preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, Pompeii and its neighboring cities provide a vivid glimpse into the daily lives of ancient Romans. Exhibitions about the archaeology of Pompeii have been numerous and popular but never before has an exhibition explored the influence of this ancient disaster on the modern imagination. Since the rediscovery of the site in the early 1700s, four centuries of leading artists—from Piranesi, Fragonard, Ingres, and Alma-Tadema to Duchamp, Dalí, Rothko, Warhol, and Gormley —have been inspired to re-imagine it in diverse media, including paintings, prints, sculpture, photographs, and film.

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On view September 12, 2012–January 7, 2013, *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection* presents Pompeii and the other Vesuvian sites as a modern fascination rather than focusing on their historical past. Organized around three themes—decadence, apocalypse, and resurrection—this exhibition addresses the potent and continuing legacy of Pompeii in the modern imagination.

The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection is co-organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The presentation at the Getty Villa is curated by Kenneth Lapatin, associate curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

"The variety of objects on display underscores our preoccupation with this major historical event," explains Lapatin. "We continually reshape the past to suit the needs of the present, and the Getty Villa itself is the perfect space for this exhibition, because the site is a re-imagined example of a building destroyed by Vesuvius."

The only surviving eye-witness accounts of the catastrophe are two letters by Pliny the Younger to the historian Tacitus, but these were written approximately twenty-five years after the event and are highly conscious literary compositions. Pliny the Younger nonetheless vividly conveys the terror of the eruption and the ensuing chaos, while describing the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who set out to rescue friends but did not survive. This heroic tale captured the imagination of generations of artists, who frequently included the two Plinys in their recreations of the disaster.

However, it was Edward Bulwer-Lytton's melodramatic historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, first published in 1834 and arguably the most popular literary work of the nineteenth century, which inspired the greatest number of paintings, sculpture, and theatrical, musical, film, and television adaptations. The book was presented as archaeologically accurate, but Bulwer-Lytton's description of Pompeian life immediately before the eruption of Vesuvius presented Roman society as brutal, corrupt, luxurious, and immoral, casting the destruction of the city as divine punishment. The novel transformed contemporary ideas about Pompeii and inspired generations of tourists to visit the site and seek out the homes of its fictional characters, which were sometimes even identified in guidebooks.

The destruction of Pompeii also inspired a variety of mass entertainments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to film, the spectacular pyrotechnic shows produced by the British fireworks entrepreneur James Pain strung together athletic, musical, and dance elements over a simple Vesuvian narrative familiar to all audiences. The exhibition includes an early photograph capturing part of a performance as well as a libretto.

In each section, a compilation of film and television clips, from early silent shorts to epic features and more recent cartoons, will be shown to demonstrate how our perception of Pompeii today has been shaped by the moving image.

The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection begins with modern representations of Pompeian decadence. The prevailing idea that the cataclysmic eruption that destroyed the Vesuvian cities in A.D. 79 was a justly deserved punishment for sins has pervaded popular consciousness through art and literature up to the present day. This notion has inspired artists and provided a vehicle to present sensual scenes or subversive themes in an acceptable setting. A highlight of this section is Francesco Netti's most famous work, *Gladiator Fight during a Meal at Pompeii* (1880, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte), which depicts the aftermath of a mortal combat held at a Pompeian banquet for the entertainment of dissolute, drunken Romans, while ladies swoon after the victor. But despite its seeming accuracy, achieved through the precise depiction of archaeological artifacts, this scene has little basis in ancient practice. Roman gladiators generally performed in public arenas and rarely fought to the death. The painting, rather, can be viewed as a contemporary critique of mid-nineteenth-century Italian aristocrats.

Also on display are photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden and Guglielmo Plüschow, some from Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's personal archive, which record some of the best-known monuments at Pompeii populated by local youths staged in various states of undress. These photographs perpetuate a long-standing notion that Pompeii was a place of desire and erotic indulgence.

The second section examines the well-known apocalyptic event. Pompeii's catastrophic demise has become the archetype for all subsequent disasters, whether natural or man-made. While eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists often celebrated the terrifying yet beautiful power of nature, more recent artists have used the event to explore such issues as the aftermath of World War II and the angst of the Atomic Age.

Sebastian William Thomas Pether's *Eruption of Vesuvius with Destruction of a Roman City* (1824, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) dramatically shows the volcano spewing lava onto the ancient city, but his depiction of Roman architecture and figures in early-nineteenth century dress cross temporal boundaries. Also, embedded in the gilt frame are pieces of what appears to be lava, but is actually trimmed wood burl. Thus, what was intended to add authenticity to the imaginary scene is itself false. Alternatively, Andy Warhol's *Mount Vesuvius* (1985, Pittsburg, Warhol Museum), with its vibrant palette and cartoonish effects,

demonstrates that serial reproductions and kitsch are not just hallmarks of Pop Art, but also relate to the proliferation of images of the famous volcano.

The exhibition also explores the famous body casts of Vesuvius's victims. Since the invention of the plaster casting technique in 1863, body casts of victims have captured the imagination of the public through photographs of such artists as Giorgio Sommer, whose image on view of the famous cast of a dog found in the House of Vesonius Primus at Pompeii has served as an iconic representation of the suffering of the victims. Widely reproduced, it has been featured in numerous modern and contemporary works of art including Robert Rauschenberg's *Small Rebus* (1956, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art) and Allan McCollum's sculpture *The Dog from Pompeii* (1991, New York, Artist/Friedrich Petzel Gallery), which appear in the exhibition. The body casts on display in the exhibition are modern works, made from the now lost voids of disappeared bodies. Although we react to them emotionally, they are far removed from Vesuvius's ancient victims.

Another myth about Pompeii is its state of preservation. Few people realize that during World War II, the archaeological site was badly damaged by bombing carried out by American and British fighters seeking to disrupt German resupply routes nearby. After the war, many of the damaged structures were quickly rebuilt. Included in the exhibition are items from the Getty Research Institute's special collections, which record the destruction caused by the bombing and detail the locations of the strikes.

The exhibition concludes with an examination of archaeological fantasy and the attempts of artists to resurrect the ancient city. For over three hundred years, buildings and artifacts excavated at Vesuvian sites have advanced scientific reconstructions of daily life in the classical world. Simultaneously, they have underpinned more fanciful reincarnations, as artists have superimposed their contemporary values and ideas on antiquity with a variety of motivations, from the light-hearted to the serious.

Inspired by a famous ancient figure of a dancing faun found in Pompeii, Hippolyte Alexandre Julien Moulin's large bronze, *A Lucky Find at Pompeii* (1863, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), playfully depicts a nude Neapolitan youth rejoicing in the discovery of a fragmentary statuette of the hero Hercules, which he holds up in his right hand. The boy's pleasure at his Pompeian find embodies the nineteenth-century European enthusiasm for both the artworks newly unearthed at Vesuvian sites and the process of their recovery, however idealized. The sculpture was much celebrated, winning a medal at the Paris Salon of 1864.

From the Vatican Museums comes an extraordinary loan of a cabinet containing objects excavated at Pompeii during the 1849 site visit by Pope Pius IX. There is much doubt

about the extent to which these excavations were staged and whether artifacts were planted, since the objects found are strikingly diverse in type and material, including items of marble, glass, bronze, terracotta, local stone and lava, perhaps chosen in advance to emphasize the quality and variety of finds.

Following its showing at the Getty, the exhibition will be on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from February 24–May 19, 2013.

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