

# Pompeii from the Real to the Ideal: The Reception of Pompeii

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**Abstract** *In recent years, important discoveries have been made at archaeological sites in the Bay of Naples, and scholars have used new approaches such as gender studies and material agency to explore both familiar and less familiar aspects of Pompeii and the surrounding areas. The current special issue of CLARA: Pompeii from the Real to the Ideal focuses on the presentation and interpretation of the archaeological evidence from Pompeii and its impact on later art and culture.*

Keywords: archaeology, Pompeii, neo-Pompeiana, reception studies

Few ancient sites have the charismatic allure of Pompeii. Since its rediscovery in 1748, hundreds of antiquarians and millions of tourists have visited the ruins and more than 300 exhibitions have been arranged in various parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> The ancient town is no less popular today, the year 2022 seeing national and international exhibitions such as *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* at the Parco Archeologico in Pompeii, *I pittori di Pompei: la grande mostra* in Bologna, and *Pompeii in Color: The Life of Roman Painting* at the Institute of the Study of the Ancient World at New York University.<sup>2</sup>

The archaeological investigations in the Bay of Naples uncovered material that provided food for the imagination and came to influence architects, designers, painters, photographers and filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> Pompeian art gave rise to the Neoclassical style, in which opulent interiors were decorated with paintings, furniture and porcelain in Pompeian fashion. This style can be found in Spain and Germany, in English country houses, and, for instance, in the royal palace in Oslo.<sup>4</sup> Female figures in wall paintings similarly influenced the Neoclassical clothing style of white and pastel-coloured chemise dresses.<sup>5</sup> Some artists drew their inspiration from the decorative elements of Pompeian paintings in general, others turned to specific panels; some were still in situ, but many of the smaller panels had been brutally cut

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<sup>1</sup> For a full list of exhibitions from 1749 to 2013, see Coates *et al.* 2012, 242-250.

<sup>2</sup> Pompeii: Catoni & Zuchriegel 2022; Lundgren 2022; Bologna: Grimaldi 2022; New York: Rumora 2022. From 2010 onwards some five exhibitions have been held in the USA.

<sup>3</sup> Mori 2003; Hales & Paul 2011; Coates *et al.* 2012, with excellent colour illustrations; Barrow 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Ramage 2013; Hales & Touati 2016; Ciardiello 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Rauser 2015.

out of the walls and were housed in the royal palace of Portici. One of the earliest paintings to attract attention was the *Cupid Seller* from Villa Arianna at Stabiae (MAN 9180).<sup>6</sup> This became a favourite subject, especially through Joseph-Marie Vien's version from 1763 (Chateau Fontainebleau).<sup>7</sup> Vien had not seen the original, but based his work on an engraving from the newly published multi-volume *Le pitture antiche d'Ercolano* (1762). He reversed the image, changed the colours dramatically and adapted the scene to a more fitting Neoclassical interior. The small mural had now been turned into a large-size painting.

While Vien took his inspiration from a published engraving, other artists made direct copies, thus in 1840 the Danish painter Christen Købke copied the so-called *Conversation of women*, from Herculaneum (MAN 9387).<sup>8</sup> This image of three women could be seen in an earlier volume of the *Pitture antiche d'Ercolano* (vol. 2, 1760, p. 71), but Købke, who travelled extensively in Greece and Italy, and painted local topography, including a view of the Forum at Pompeii, had studied the painting by autopsy. Since the panel now has faded somewhat, his copy provides evidence for the original colours. Incidentally, the painting was for sale on the art market in 2021, but failing to find a buyer, it was subsequently withdrawn and its present whereabouts are uncertain.<sup>9</sup> Although this is one of the less famous paintings from Herculaneum, its composition has also influenced artists in more recent years (see below).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the very excavation process captured the interest of artists, dirt archaeology being presented on canvas in a romanticised fashion. Filippo Palizzi, one of three painter brothers, made near identical images of a young woman contemplating the painted walls she apparently has just been uncovering (*Fig. 1*).<sup>10</sup> The early version from 1865 renders blue areas, as one finds it, for instance, in the Casa della Caccia Antica (VII.4.48), while the second from 1870 displays a prevalence of Pompeian red – the girl, however, has remained identical, standing in the exact same position since posing for his painting of Philomela in 1864. Thus, the purported realism of the excavation paintings leaves something to be desired. Still, by varying a theme, it was possible for skilled artists to produce paintings in a shorter time, and as the excavations progressed and still more astounding finds surfaced, the demand for Neo-Pompeiana increased. Ettore Forti, who was active in Rome in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, was particularly prolific in churning out Neo-Pompeian paintings that depicted imaginary

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<sup>6</sup> *Pitture antiche d'Ercolano* (8 vols), vol. 3, 1762, 41; Bragantini & Sampaolo 2009, 68-73; Coates 2012, 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> Coates 2012, 92-95.

<sup>8</sup> Nava 2007, 139; Købke: Nørregård-Nielsen 1996, III, 62. The ancient painting was first interpreted as Juno and Pallas visiting Venus to persuade her to induce Medea to fall in love with Jason.

<sup>9</sup> Købke's painting, Brunn-Rasmussen's auctioneers, Copenhagen, 21 December 2021. For further discussion of the *Cupid Seller* and the *Conversation*, see Küllerich 2023, present volume.

<sup>10</sup> Linoncelli 1928 (not available).



Fig. 1 Filippo Palizzi, *Young Woman in the Pompeii Excavations (red wall)*, 1870.  
 Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

visions of daily life in the ancient town. A favoured theme was that of craftsmen offering merchandise to finely dressed ladies. At least six variations on carpet sellers are preserved – the Oriental carpets are obviously anachronistic (*Fig. 2*). The compositions are not identical, but like those of Palizzi, they are built around a general topic, with only colours, settings and accessories differing.<sup>11</sup> The visual phantasies about life in the ancient town bring the ancient buildings to life, recreate their interiors and repopulate them with beautiful people in picture-perfect style.

The impact of Pompeii was especially strong in the paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, who first visited Pompeii on his honeymoon in 1863/4.<sup>12</sup> Alma-Tadema studied the ruins carefully, took notes, made sketches and bought photographs. In his recreations of portrait galleries and sculpture collections he inserted copies and variations of real pictures, e.g. *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*; sometimes he rendered the paintings faithfully, at other times he varied them regarding colour or material, for example by turning a marble statue into a bronze. One gains the impression that Alma-Tadema knows exactly what he is doing, playing with the

<sup>11</sup> A google image search on Ettore Forti provides an overview of his large pictorial output.

<sup>12</sup> Barrow 2002, esp. 28-41, 77-80, 158-163; Querci 2007; Barrow 2015, 591-593. An exhibition *Alma-Tadema e la nostalgia dell'antico* was held in 2007 at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples.



Fig. 2 Ettore Forti, *Carpet seller*, ca 1900. Wall paintings based on finds from Casa dei Vettii, excavated in 1894-1895. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

objects to suit his own fancy. In a sort of cut and paste technique, the artist reassembles ancient parts into new wholes. The Boscoreale silver krater is one object that reappears as a hallmark in several of his paintings. An excellent technique, a meticulous painting style and a playful approach to antiquity made Alma-Tadema's small-scale paintings extremely popular in Victorian London. Over the years the crowded antiquarian interiors of his 'museum-paintings'— *A Sculpture Gallery*, *A Collector of Pictures* — gave way to simpler compositions, mainly dainty nymphs in conversation on marble benches set off against a backdrop of the blue Mediterranean, the sunny and light-hearted atmosphere forming a welcome contrast to London.

Alma-Tadema's pupil John William Godward went to Pompeii in late 1904 and the year after presented *Outside the Gate of Pompeii*. His primary interest, however, was neither to recreate daily life nor to stage impressive scenography.<sup>13</sup> He might throw in a marble bench and some oleanders for good measure, but his main focus was on the ideal perfection of young Roman women in elegant pseudo-antique silk garments. Alma-Tadema had made some intriguing dress designs based on Pompeian paintings, but he made deliberately anachronistic designs, in one instance including a Byzantine textile with roundels.<sup>14</sup> Godward explored the sensual textures of thin fabric, making repeated portrayals of dreamy dark-haired beauties dressed in

<sup>13</sup> Swanson 2018.

<sup>14</sup> *The Kiss*, 1891, Barrow 2003, fig. 142. Alma-Tadema's paintings have been used on the covers of books on Roman dress, Cleland 2007; Olson 2008.





Fig. 3 John Godward, *Golden Hours*, 1913. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

various colour combinations, the palla draped around the hips contrasting with the semi-transparent gap-sleeved tunic (Fig. 3). Despite the undeniable aesthetically pleasing qualities, by 1920 the paintings had become outdated. A disheartened Godward committed suicide in 1922.

### **Pompeii in modern and contemporary art**

Modernism inevitably changed artists' attitude to Pompeii. John Godward is said to have claimed that there was not room for both him and Picasso. The latter visited Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1917 in connection with art work for Satie and Stravinsky ballets. The exhibition *Picasso and Naples: Parade*, together with *Pablo Picasso at Pompeii: Two Ballets from the Roman Theatre of Pompeii* with costumes and set design by the artist celebrated the centenary of his visit. Picasso drew on Pompeian imagery in various ways. An explicit borrowing is the hand to chin posture taken from the seated Arcadia in the painting of *Hercules and Telephos* from the Augusteum at

Herculaneum.<sup>15</sup> Picasso used this pose for several female figures in his classical period. Given that Picasso combined different sources into a new whole which he then reworked and varied, it is oftentimes difficult to spot the precise origin of a motif. Despite the obvious differences, the *Conversation of Women*, the painting that Købke copied, is a possible source of inspiration for Picasso's sketches that led to the painting of *Three Woman at a Spring* (1921).<sup>16</sup>

*Conversation of Women* turned up again in 1983, when the American painter David Ligare, who is known for his serene mythological landscapes, presented his version as *Three Grecian Women*.<sup>17</sup> The composition and the women's postures reproduce the Herculaneum *Conversation of Women* faithfully, only now the women are dressed in white as in Picasso's painting. This indicates a double source of inspiration: one ancient, the other modern. Also in the 1980s, the popular image of the *Cupid Seller* resurfaced in a cibachrome photograph by the American photographer Dianne Blell. She adapted the original painting to a stylised grey interior and dressed the women in different, if still classicising, garb. *Selling Cupids* was part of her series *Pursuit of love* from 1985, which comprised themes like Cupid and Psyche, and the Origin of Painting, all rendered in a subdued palette in an abstracted classicising setting.<sup>18</sup>

Another American photographer, Eleanor Antin, re-imagines the past by creating new 'ancient' milieus. *The Last Days of Pompeii* series (2001) recreates Pompeii at La Jolla in California (coincidentally, where Dianne Blell grew up).<sup>19</sup> The title is from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's influential novel from 1834, which subsequently was reprinted in countless editions. A couple of short films from 1900 and 1908 based on his novel were followed by a full-length silent movie from 1913, all of course in black & white.<sup>20</sup> Antin's still pictures consist of twelve large-scale colour photographs. To a certain extent, they can be viewed as a twenty-first-century counterpart to Alma-Tadema's Pompeian scenarios, although Antin depicts a less romanticised picture. As a common trait, both artists stage their contemporaries, friends and colleagues in pseudo-ancient settings. But, while Alma-Tadema includes faithful archaeological detailing, Antin presents her scenarios in a deliberate 'un-antique' manner (the inclusion of Oriental carpets brings to mind Ettore Forti's carpet sellers). In bold colours, she fashions a decadent banquet scene (with a mock gladiator fight as in Francesco Netti's *Gladiator fight during a dinner party at Pompeii*,

<sup>15</sup> Guidobaldi & Esposito 2013, 337, pl. 285; close-up 344, pl. 290 (inv. MAN 9008). For Picasso and the classical, Cowling & Mundy (eds) 1990, 200-223, 301-304; Green & Daehner 2011, 125-151; Prettejohn 2012, 225-245.

<sup>16</sup> Prettejohn 2012, 237-238 points to the Parthenon sculpture as the source of inspiration.

<sup>17</sup> Shields *et al.* 2015.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.dianne.blell.com/pursuit-of-love-1985>; Segal 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Bloom 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Bridges 2011; Harrison 2011; St Clair & Bautz 2012. The long list of films that have subsequently set the action in Pompeii includes what is (probably) the latest: *Pompeii: Sin City* from 2021.

1880).<sup>21</sup> Other shots show wrestling, men and woman enjoying a hot afternoon, the slave trade, an artist's studio, a conversation, a sacrifice, the death of Petronius and Golden death. The latter references Alma-Tadema's *Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888), the petals being substituted with golden coins: both images are suggestive of death from asphyxiation.<sup>22</sup> In *The Last Day*, finally, the colours are muted, and the background a gloomy dark grey; some figures have fallen to the ground, which is strewn with broken pots and marble fragments; a woman cuddles a baby. Like Alma-Tadema, Antin creates Pompeian scenarios, and yet these images disclose as much, and perhaps even more, about their own time period than about Roman antiquity. The concept of 'Pompeii' functions as a symbol of ignorant bliss and carefree living.

### Art meets archaeology

Interactions of Pompeii and contemporary culture have taken place both offsite and within the town. On rare occasions, Pompeii has been the venue for outdoor rock performances: Pink Floyd played without an audience at the amphitheatre in 1972.<sup>23</sup> Band member David Gilmour returned to Pompeii in 2016 to record *Live at Pompeii*, this time with an audience.<sup>24</sup> In 2018, another British band, King Crimson, performed at the amphitheatre, while the Great Theatre was the venue for Patti Smith's appearance in July 2022.<sup>25</sup> There may have been other events. But, it is especially in the integration of ancient and contemporary visual culture that Pompeii makes its mark: from 2016 to 2017, the streets, the Forum and the amphitheatre of Pompeii served as exhibition spaces for Igor Mitoraj's large bronze statues of mythological figures, such as Dedalo, Ikaro and Tindaro (*Fig. 4*). The exhibition had been planned prior to the artist's death in 2014, and Mitoraj had himself suggested where each of the thirty works should be displayed. Made as partial figures, armless bodies, torsos and heads, the sculptures' intentionally fragmented nature resounded well with the ancient ruins.<sup>26</sup> Seen from a distance, visitors might even take some of the bronzes to be ancient. As a gift from the Ministry of Culture to the town, the statue of Daedalus (2010) remains in Pompeii, overlooking the ruins of the Temple of Venus. Missing most of its arms and the legs from knees down, the gigantic athletic figure of the legendary artist and inventor becomes a potent symbol of the detriments of time and the fragmentariness of the past.

In 2019, the amphitheatre was the venue of a pyrotechnic installation by Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. On a long stretch of canvas he placed copies of marble, glass and ceramics and then created an intentional explosion. The damaged

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<sup>21</sup> Netti: Coates 2012, 106-108.

<sup>22</sup> Heliogabalus: Barrow 2003, 132-133, fig. 131.

<sup>23</sup> <https://youtube.com/watch?v=dwgirj9ECFA> Pink Floyd live in Pompeii counts some 140 million views.

<sup>24</sup> <https://youtube.com/watch?v=LTseTg48568>

<sup>25</sup> [https://youtube.com/watch?v=B3P\\_qBjg034](https://youtube.com/watch?v=B3P_qBjg034)

<sup>26</sup> Schmidt & Cork 2017; Zucca 2019.



Fig. 4 Igor Mitoraj, *Tindaro*, 1997. Exhibited at Pompeii 2016-2017.  
Photograph: Bernard Blanc, flickr Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

works were subsequently exhibited in the Museo Nazionale Archeologico of Naples, a blackened Hercules Farnese and a burnt Venus Kallipygos joining force with their ancient counterparts.<sup>27</sup> The destructive act, which involved blowing up a large number of clay amphorae, parallels metonymically the disaster of AD 79. The erupting volcano, which has erupted again several times in more recent years, has been a major subject from the countless Romantic paintings by European artists to Andy Warhol's series of colourful pop art prints depicting *Vesuvius* (1985).<sup>28</sup> Warhol's work turns the volcano into a harmless decoration, in contrast to the earlier paintings that endeavoured to catch the sublimity of disaster when experienced from a safe distance. The thrill of disaster, which has given rise to the current concept of dark tourism, is yet another aspect of the allure of Pompeii.<sup>29</sup>

The exhibition *Pompei@Madre: Materia archeologica*, which was held at the Museo d'arte contemporanea Donna Regina, in Naples in 2017-2018, established a dialogue between archaeology and contemporary art. Artefacts from Pompeii were juxtaposed with art works by a score of Italian and foreign artists, each in their designated exhibition space: Daniel Buren's striped design formed the entrance; the Neapolitan Francesco Clemente's site-specific murals featured a Pompeian dining-room; while still other spaces showcased different ways of engaging with the past through

<sup>27</sup> Neutres 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Warhol 1985; Coates *et al.* 2012, 176-179.

<sup>29</sup> On dark tourism, see Skinner 2018, especially 126-134.





Fig. 5 Poudre Pompéia, by L. T. Piver, Paris, ca 1910.

excavation diaries and tools, and even organic material like seeds, fruit, shells and bread.<sup>30</sup> Thus, even if somewhat artificially staged, the continual impact of Pompeii is undeniable. To expand the interaction of past and present, the ongoing art programme *Pompeii Commitment: Materie archeologiche*, which was launched in 2020, aims for fruitful dialogues between the ancient site, its multi-layered legacy and modern creativity.<sup>31</sup> The programme invites artists to reflect on the archaeological material from Pompeii, offering annual digital fellowships to contemporary artists. Giulio Paolini, in 2020, produced works based on photographs of the Forum and other archaeological hallmarks combined with his own design layers: Pompeii seen through the eyes of a contemporary Italian artist. Participating artists come from all over the world: one of the 2022 recipients is the Norwegian Sissel Tolås, known for her experiments with smell – whether this will be part of her Pompeian project is uncertain.

On the subject of scent, Pompeii entered product advertising at least as early as 1901, when Fred Stecher started the Pompeian Manufacturing Company and registered the name Pompeian Massage Cream. This substance was intended to be used after shaving, but the brand came to comprise day cream and night cream, cosmetics and perfumes. In 1907, the French firm L.T. Piver launched *Parfum*

<sup>30</sup> Osanna & Viliani 2017.

<sup>31</sup> <https://pompeiicommitment.org> A book illustrating the art of more than 60 contemporary artists has been announced as forthcoming in 2023 from Silvana Editoriale.

*Pompeia*, with a range of products in slightly different Pompeian designs and packaging, some of which have now become collectors' items (Fig. 5). This was followed by another French company, Rancé, who in 1910 presented a Pompeian red *Sublime* perfume tin decorated with putti scenes from the House of the Vettii, an appropriate subject given that the putti are engaged in making perfume.<sup>32</sup> Although some of these brands still exist, they now use other marketing strategies instead of nostalgic Pompeian imagery. Pompeii, however, continues to inspire contemporary fashion in various ways, as a setting for photography shoots and as an inspiration for new design. As part of Gucci's 'commitment to promote artistic and cultural heritage' (as their homepage states), the American filmmaker Harmony Korine photographed models for Gucci's Pre-Fall 2019 collection with Pompeian and Herculaneum walls as the backdrop.<sup>33</sup> The Lebanese designer Hass Idris called his Spring-Summer 2019 collection 'Ashes', the long trailing gowns displaying volcanic colours ranging from white and grey to flaming blue and orange.<sup>34</sup> The 'Pompeii' menswear collection of Palomo Spain for Spring-Summer 2020 showed genderless garb intended to project the past into the future.<sup>35</sup> In the same year, the Chinese Uma Wang similarly titled her minimalistic dresses 'Pompeii'.<sup>36</sup> While the various designs do not immediately bring to mind Roman clothes as depicted in the wall paintings, the evocation of the ancient town by designers from different parts of the world proves its continual impact on contemporary life. Indeed, the UNESCO heritage site of Pompeii unites ancient and contemporary culture in numerous ways.

In view of the enormous quantity of publications on all aspects of Pompeii and its environment, the present special issue of *CLARA* is but a drop in the Mediterranean ocean, yet — although almost every stone has been turned and every image scrutinized — both the real and the ideal Pompeii still contain material for study. The papers that we aim to publish in *CLARA* on an incremental basis vary in terms of nature, scope and methodology. As editors and authors we hope that these contributions are eye-opening and offer something of interest to students and researchers within ancient art and its reception.

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<sup>32</sup> Monteix 2016, 206-207.

<sup>33</sup> Korine 2019.

<sup>34</sup> <https://hassidris.com/ss19-ashes>

<sup>35</sup> <https://vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2020-menswear/palomo-spain>

<sup>36</sup> <https://wwd.com/runway/spring-ready-to-wear-2020/paris/uma-wang/review>

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