The Vesuvian Cities' Role in the Neoclassical Interior and Archaeological Enquiry

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The Neoclassical style was propelled into popular taste as early archaeological excavation took place in the Vesuvian cities. Eighteenth century society was enamoured with the aesthetically pleasing objects, wall paintings and architecture unearthed in the buried cities and this enamourment led to both improper excavation and a narrow approach to studying the ancient past. While the rediscovery was beneficial through the renewal of curiosity in the ancient world, the aesthetics from the Vesuvian cities were essentially appropriated to fit the ideology of elite eighteenth century society. These reproduced aesthetics have become more of a reflection on the Neoclassical period than the genuine Classical past.

During the time of the Bourbon Kingdom in Naples a significant rediscovery was made: that of the buried city of Pompeii and other Vesuvian towns. Although Pompeii was never truly lost, the site was rediscovered as interest in the Classical past was renewed during the eighteenth century.[1] In a society enamoured with niceties and antiquities, this excavation acted as a catalyst for even more interest in the ancient world and its aesthetics. This obsession with ancient visual culture and the lavish materials from Pompeii led to improper excavation and gives us a less complete understanding of the city itself. In many ways the eighteenth century context of such works of art and artifacts in the houses of European aristocrats is just as important

[1] Between 1594 and 1600, architect Domenico Fontana discovered the Pompeian ruins while constructing an underground channel in the region. While Fontana found two inscriptions, there was no further interest to excavate the city. Excavation would not take place until the mid-18th century under Don Carlos, King of Naples.

as their ancient context. The manner of their display shows the influence of the artifacts in broader society. By the eighteenth century, these collections of curiosities became precursors to museums as we understand them today.[2]

As the primary excavator of Herculaneum, Rocque Joaquin de Alcubierre spent his forty years of employment more concerned with finding antiquities for the King rather than using a systematic approach to excavation. A quote by historian Marcel Brion sums up the excavation process employed early on, claiming that "frescoes were torn from the walls that they adorned, weapons, vases and coins were swept up, all removed without any question of the state or place in which they had been found."[3] William Mead, writing in the early twentieth century, affirms this by claiming "the main purpose of the eighteenth century excavation was not to study the conditions of ancient life, but to discover curiosities, art treasures, and other valuables."[4] These systems of pilfering led to complications but nonetheless demonstrate the selective interest in antiquity that had grown at this time.

This paper explores the stylistic influences of wall paintings and other antiquities from the Vesuvian cities on Neoclassical interiors of the eighteenth century. The establishment of Neoclassicism is rooted within the dissemination of archaeological discoveries from the ancient world. This essay will first analyze various methods of dissemination such as the Grand Tour and plate publications of the excavation, and secondly will take a closer look at a couple

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[2] "History of Museums | Museum," Encyclopedia Britannica Online, http://www.britannica.com/topic/history-398827.
[3] Marcel Brion, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: The Glory and the Grief* (London: Crown Publishers, 1960), 35.
[4] William Edward Mead, *The grand tour in the eighteenth century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 329.

examples of wall paintings to denote the stylistic influence in decorative art. The adaptation of classical motifs in later centuries is significant to art history, demonstrates the evolution of classical civilization into an idealized symbol of refinement, and also had an important role in the promotion of archaeological enquiry,[5] which is perhaps its greatest significance of all.

The Grand Tour was perhaps one of the most direct ways in which people in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries engaged with the ancient world. The Grand Tour was a trip through Europe (and many other places that were home to ancient ruins) made primarily by men of elite classes as a way to enhance formal education and to have firsthand experience viewing the "art and architecture of classic lands."[6] The Grand Tour was the climax of a classical education.[7] While certain men went on lengthy tours for their own scholarly endeavours (such as German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann) many others would embark for shorter periods of time and have the accompaniment of a docent or teacher.[8] Visiting the ruins in Rome and the surrounding areas was one of the most significant parts of the trip. Many elites visiting the excavation sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum purchased artifacts for their collections, separating the artifacts from their original contexts. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) once proclaimed that "the man who has not been to Italy is always conscious of an inferiority

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[5] Glenn Most and Salvatore Settis, *The Classical Tradition (*Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 406.
[6] Brian M. Ambroziak, *Michael Graves Images of a Grand Tour* (Princeton Architectural Press: New York, New York. 2005), 6.
[7]Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition*, 405.
[8] "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Grand Tour," Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified October 1, 2003. Accessed November 17, 2015.; A docent is a tour guide.

from his not having seen what is expected a man to see." [9] With the encouragement of various forerunners in the Neoclassical movement, Neoclassicism emerged out of this first-hand observation of antiquities, which led to a desire to reproduce them.[10] Winckelmann who, as mentioned, went on a lengthy tour himself, proclaimed that "the only way for us to become great, and indeed, if this is possible, inimitable, is by imitating the ancients."[11] Plates bearing Pompeian antiquities were disseminated more broadly, while early Herculaneum publications were jealously withheld.[12]

Karl Weber, an assistant to Alcubierre, was unexceptional in his approach to archaeology yet innovative at the same time. One of Weber's boldest proposals relates to the publication of antiquities from Herculaneum,[13] when he recommended that historical and archaeological documentation should be provided alongside illustrations of antiquities. Again, the love for the aesthetic of the art itself was greater than that of the historical context of the ancient world and the idea was not taken seriously.[14] The first engravings of wall paintings from the Vesuvian region were found in *Te Antichita di Ercolano Esposte*,

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[9] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 742.

[10] Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition,* 406: "The Grand Tour lead to the formation of important collections, the design of country houses and their park lands."

[11] H.B. Nisbet, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goether* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), 33.

[12] Christopher Charles Parslow *Rediscovering Antiquity: Karl Weber and the Excavation of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.; These publications were withheld in order to limit accessibility to the site and its goods.

[13] Parslow, *Rediscovering Antiquity*, 6.

[14] Ibid.; Weber would later be the first to identify "spatial configurations of domestic interiors with reference to terminology employed by the Augustan architectural writer Vitruvius."

published between 1759-1779.[15] Other authors published more elaborate collections such as Pierre-François Hugues d'Hancarville's four-volume *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities* which boasted the first color plates featured in a book on the history of art.[16] Publications of this nature were continually produced and Pompeii's influence emerged in later centuries with more historical accuracy.[17] One of the greater influences in Neoclassicism came from James Stuart, whose Spencer House design will serve as an example of the classical revival, but who also published *Antiquities of Athens*, a comprehensive three volumes of illustrations. The publication of Giovanni Battista Piranesi was perhaps the most influential in respect to the enquiry into archaeology. *Veduti di Roma* was issued in 1748 and brought the engineering achievements of the ancient world to the forefront of contemporary thinking.[18] *Veduti di Roma* included aerial views of the colosseum, transforming the conventional view of engravings and giving way to topographical interests that in turn intensified archaeological enquiry.[19] While the Grand Tour and the various illustrated

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[15] Hetty Joyce, "The Ancient Frescoes from the Villa Negroni and Their Influence in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." The Art Bulletin 65, no. 3 (1983): 33.

[16] Paul, Carole. *Naples and Vesuvius on the Grand Tour* (review) Eighteenth-Century Studies 2002. 36 (1): 86-92.

[17] Roberto Cassanelli, *Houses and Monuments of Pompeii: The Works of Fausto and Felice Niccolini* (Los Angeles, California: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002); In the 19th century, brothers Fausto and Felice Niccolini would have an important role in the dissemination of imagery and text from Pompeii. This consideration for historical context likely rose from Felice Niccolini's involvement at the Naples museum and Fausto Niccolini's relationship with famed Pompeiian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli. This greatly influenced the historical accuracy presented in their publication.

[18] Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition*, 731.

[19] Ibid.; This new way of seeing the ruins brought up questions about the architectural development of a city over time, its geography, and enquiry into the various functional areas within a cityspace.

publications that arose from it greatly contributed to Pompeii's influence beyond elite households, it was within these households that we see the most direct evidence of Neoclassicism deriving specifically from Pompeii.

The Painted Room in the Spencer House (London, England) features many stylistic parallels to wall paintings found in Pompeii. Designed by a passionate advocate and forerunner of Neoclassicism, James 'Athenian' Stuart, the room boasts decoration deriving from and inspired by various ancient sources. Stuart had just returned to London after months of traveling the route of the Grand Tour and, consequently, his design for the Spencer House was the first Neoclassical interior to be debuted in Europe.[20] Being one of Stuart's most elaborate surviving interiors, the walls imitate various features such as grotesques found primarily in third style wall paintings from Pompeii and the surrounding areas.[21] Categorized by German archaeologist August Mau, the Third Style is also called the "Ornate Style."[22] Mau further describes the Third Style's distinguishing qualities, most prominently in terms of the dissipation of realistic architectural elements. He states that, "the architectural design has now lost all semblance of real construction. Columns, entablatures, and other members are treated conventionally, as

[20] Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition,* 405.
[21] "Grotesque | Ornamentation," Encyclopedia Britannica Online, last modified March 2, 2015. http://www.britannica.com/art/grotesque-ornamentation.; "The term 'Grotesque' in architecture and decorative art is a fanciful mural or sculptural decoration involving mixed animal, human, and plant forms. The word is derived from the Italian *grotteschi,* referring to the grottoes in which these decorations were found *c.* 1500 during the excavation of Roman houses such as the Golden House of Nero. Grotesque decoration was common on 17th-century English and American case furniture."
[22] August Mau and Francis W. Kelsey, *Pompeii: Its Life and Art* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1902), 43. The name Ornate Style refers to this style's "free use of ornament."

subordinate parts of a decorative scheme […]"[23] These elements are echoed in Stuart's interpretation of the classical. His intricate designs are upon a monochromatic background with highlights of Pompeian red. Swags of laurel float decoratively around contemporary eighteenth century paintings of various personages including the owners of the household. Acanthus leaves also frame various sculptures painted within the floating scenes; it is truly a combination of many styles and time periods of the past. The most obvious allusions are the windows in to scenes of Cupids, reminiscent of those found in the House of the Vettii.[24] Also notable is a painted chimney-piece in the room with a frieze of the "Aldobrandini Wedding," an ancient Roman wall painting, though not from Pompeii.[25] This is a more direct reproduction of antiquity compared to the borrowing of motifs. The patron for these designs (and owner of the house), John Spencer,[26] was a member of the Society of Dilettanti,[27] demonstrating the role of elitism in Neoclassicism and its ties to those promoting archaeological studies. Stuart went on to design many other country houses, furnishings and even medals.[28] His experience in publishing book plates after embarking on the Grand Tour facilitated his own adaptations of classical motifs.

Robert Adam was a Scottish Neoclassicist and consequently a rival of James Stuart. Adam was perhaps more diverse in his inspirations from antiquity, though much of his

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Mau and Kelsey, *Pompeii,* 332-338.; Found in the triclinium of the house.
[25] David Watkin, *Athenian Stuart: Pioneer of the Greek Revival* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 36-37.
[26] Watkin, *Athenian Stuart*, 35; b. 1734-d.1783 "1st Baron and Viscount Spencer in 1761 and 1st Earl Spencer in 1765."
[27] Ibid; The Society of Dilettanti were scholars and nobleman invested in the study of ancient Greek and Roman art and supporters of projects revitalizing these aesthetics.
[28] "James Athenian Stuart," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed November 17, 2015. http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/james-athenian-stuart/.

work was inspired by the Vesuvian towns and the discovery of the genuine classical interior.[29] One of his greatest examples is that of the Etruscan Room in Osterley Park of Middlesex, England. Designed in 1775, the Etruscan Room was one of the first in Europe to employ the classical style to all aspects in the room: walls, ceilings, floors, window fittings and furniture.[30] Adam had extensive experience with ancient ruins and even mapped those of Diocletian's palace, serving as later inspiration in his work.[31] Like Stuart, Adam's first-hand experience with classical motifs allowed him to create his own adaptations that would ultimately be unique to the "Adam style." This style was then disseminated through texts such as *Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, which spread quickly throughout Europe.[32] The Etruscan room, like the Painted Room of the Spencer house, bears many similarities to the Mau-classified Third Style or Ornate Style. Spindly architecture repeats itself throughout the design, significant in the ornamentation of the walls but not architecturally functional in reality. Arabesque vine scrolls dominate many of the flat grotesque panels, all characteristic to Adam's style as well as the third Pompeian style classification. Medallions featuring dancing figures are also painted throughout the composition similar to the many isolated, floating scenes seen in Third Style painting. These motifs are seen in every aspect of the room; even the panels of the door maintain the style and colour scheme.

The rooms of Stuart and Adam demonstrate the full adaptation of classicism into elite households and many others were making use of these motifs in various media. However, the underlying idea behind classicism is the idealization of classical

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[29] Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition*, 7.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 844.
[32] Ibid., 7.

aesthetics. American classicist Glen Most states that these archaeological discoveries brought "classically educated Europe into vital contact with its cultural heritage."[33] Therefore, Pompeii is essentially our closest insight to everyday life in the ancient Roman world. One early Grand Tourist wrote that "[Pompeii is] a whole Roman town, with all its edifices remaining underground."[34] The dissemination of imagery from these archaeological sites was a catalyst in changing the contemporary styles at the time of their discovery.[35] Alan Hess wrote the following about the architecture of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, but it is nonetheless applicable to "authentic" Neoclassicism as well: "The artists used enough of the vocabulary of classicism to make the images recognizable then stretched that vocabulary to serve a new cultural context."[36] The famed Neoclassicists of the eighteenth century, including James Stuart and Robert Adam, were inspired by ancient motifs found in Pompeii and other sites of the Grand Tour, but still came from a different cultural context than that of the ancient world. For that reason these adaptations are not entirely representative of the ancient world itself. While these adaptations in elite households revitalized the interest in antiquity and helped establish archaeology,[37] they are still representative of their own time. For some time, *real* ancient art, the only monuments and paintings deemed worthy of studying, was the art of the elite. Ancient Greek and Roman society was appropriated to fit contemporary ideals and, in the eighteenth

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[33] Ibid., 763.
[34] Silvestra Bietoletti, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism 1770-1840* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), 10.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Alan Hess, *Viva Las Vegas: After Hours Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 86.
[37] When Pompeii was first rediscovered in the late 16th-century there was very little interest in excavating the site. The interest in these sites grew as the desire to form private collections grew.

century, knowledge of antiquity was indicative of education, superiority and power.[38] The long tradition in western art history to focus on a privileged category of artworks is reflected in the placement of these Neoclassical interiors. Many of the elaborately decorated Neoclassical rooms, and the acquisition of artifacts from Vesuvian archaeological sites, were statements of eighteenth century perceptions of the ancient world. A strict view through the lens of elitism dismisses art's function in ancient society for the general population, and the Pompeian wall paintings that so fascinated eighteenth century excavators were indeed present within classical non-elite spaces as well.[39]

Artistically, the adopted motifs that captured the classical world led the way to more imaginative, individualized interpretations during the Romantic period. Stylistic ideals changed, and the Neoclassical movement developed archaeology and shifted perspectives making antiquity something worth studying—even though these studies had a narrow focus until more recent years. From an ancient perspective, the excavation of Pompeii has proven to be fruitful in our understanding of the past, although "fiction and film have elaborated the mystique of the destroyed city."[40] In a way, the present influences the past just as much as the past inspires the present. The act of imposing eighteenth century aristocratic values on the Roman house continues to shape our modern perception of the ancient world. Neoclassicism informed understanding of the past and in turn produced a particular image of the past. While these understandings continue to develop today, the rediscovery of the Vesuvian sites in the eighteenth century and the subsequent

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[38] John R. Clark, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 1.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Most and Settis, *Classical Tradition*, 763.

emergence of the Neoclassical style hold an important place within this history. Overall, the "imitative design and interior decoration"[41] deriving from the Pompeian discovery have preserved our interest in ancient society and at the time of their discovery drove even more interest in unearthing further lavish artifacts and architecture. With the excavation and dissemination of imagery came the broader interest in antiquity and the much needed scholarship that helps us understand past societies and our relationship to them. Analyzing the Neoclassical period, a time when the ancient world was being replicated aesthetically to promote contemporary ideas, tells us less about the ancient Roman world itself, and more about humanity's strategies to understand the past.

[41] Ibid.

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