

# Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples



## A Guide for Latin Classes

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
October 19, 2008–March 22, 2009

## SALVE—and welcome to *Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples.*

The Bay of Naples is a beautiful place. Its rocky coast drops dramatically into dazzling blue waters. The land is fertile, terraced with vines and fruit trees. Cool breezes temper the heat of sunny days. The seafood is unsurpassed. No wonder the area attracted the imperial family and Rome's wealthiest citizens, who left the capital each spring and summer for lavish villas. An ideal spot for *otium*, the bay was a place to enjoy many pleasures—invigorating exercise in parklike surroundings; the best food and drink; the most refined décor; the newest entertainments; and the solitude to read, write, and think. The region was also home to thriving towns, places of *negotium*. In bustling commercial centers such as Pompeii, townspeople copied the lifestyle of the villa owners to the extent their means allowed, and many locals were very rich themselves. It was a climate in which the arts could prosper—as you'll discover as you explore the exhibition. We owe this remarkably detailed look at the past to the destruction brought about by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. But here you'll see how life—the good life even—was enjoyed around the Bay of Naples.

**Use this guide as you tour the exhibition. The questions draw on what you know of Roman culture—and there's a little LATIN, too! Ponder them, talk them over, and share your ideas. Some questions are quite a REACH, a challenge for advanced classes. Learn more about Roman art by reading the ART NOTES and—more importantly—by looking closely.**

## SIC INFIT

# 1 Portraits and the Julio-Claudians

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Look in the first two galleries of the exhibition to see portraits of some of the people who had villas or homes around the bay. Most are members of the imperial family, for whom images that resembled those of Augustus were important tools of propaganda.



## Augustus (image 1)

While this bust depicts Augustus as a young man, it might have been made much later in his life. Why do you think Augustus—or any other leader—would want to focus on youth? What qualities of character does this portrait suggest?

**REACH:** Augustus chose a calm, classical style for his official portraiture, consciously harking back to Athens' golden age under Perikles in the fifth century BC. What does that suggest about Augustus' public persona? About his political and social aims?

## Augustus, Julius Caesar, Drusus Major, Gaius (Caligula), Nero (images 1–5)

What facial similarities do you see in these busts? Why have sculptors worked to make physical connections in these likenesses even though the men were not all related by blood?

**REACH:** Can you describe the relationships between these men—as uncles, nephews, grandsons, etc.? Create a family tree if you can.

### **The empress Livia and her son Tiberius (?) (image 6)**

Compare the dark stone bust of Livia (not illustrated here) with her small cameo portrait in a case in the next room. What sort of character do these two images project? How do they differ?

**REACH:** Scholars have suggested that Livia is looking at a memorial bust of Augustus or Drusus, or a portrait of a young Tiberius. How would these different identifications affect your interpretation of the cameo? Livia's slipping drapery evokes Venus. Why might she want to make such a connection?

#### *IN GENERAL*

What elements of these imperial personalities do the sculptors accentuate? What do they tell us about the characteristics Romans might have valued in a leader or appreciated in the individual careers of these imperial figures?

#### **ART NOTE Roman portraiture**

**The Romans adopted many of their styles of art and architecture from Greece. But in one way they were unique: they had a taste for "facts," for real events and real people.**

**Early in Rome's history, the veneration of ancestors became a key part of family identity and religious obligation. Wax masks of dead family members, kept in the atrium, were carried in processions—a practice that probably contributed to the development and importance of portraiture. Like Etruscan portraits before them, portraits of the Republican period were highly individualized, realistic, and almost brutally honest. Men like Gaius Cornelius Rufus and even Julius Caesar proudly bore crinkles and bags as emblems of wisdom and experience. The more idealized look favored by Augustus created an image of serene confidence. Over the course of Roman history, portrait styles would shift along with political goals.**

**Gaius Cornelius Rufus (image 7)**

A pillar with a head on top is called a herm. What, besides the herm treatment, makes this portrait different from those you have just seen? Consider such things as expression, age, and hairstyle.

**REACH:** This man was a member of the plebeian Cornelius family, as was the mother of two great social reformers of the second century BC. Do you know who they were?

**LATIN:** What in the inscription—C CORNELIO RVFO—tells you that the herm did not simply depict, but was also dedicated to, Cornelius?

## 2 Objects in the Home

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**These questions all pertain to everyday—but very expensive!—objects that you’ll see before you go upstairs.**



### **Skyphos with the Labors of Hercules (image 8)**

Identify which of the twelve labors of Hercules you can see depicted on the cup. Name some of the others that you can't see. Considering the story behind Hercules' labors, why might they be appropriate for a drinking cup?

### **Still life with writing implements (image 9)**

**LATIN:** The wall labels identify these objects. Can you give the Latin names for any of them?

### **Ornaments from a dining couch in the form of mules' heads (image 10)**

Mules, especially wild ones, were associated with Dionysos (Bacchus). Why were these appropriate ornaments for a couch set in a triclinium?

### **Frolicking centaurs (image 11)**

Centaur were known as vicious drunks and playful pranksters. But they were also mentors to such famous heroes as Achilles, and some centaurs were female. What do these figures have in common? What activities are suggested by their poses and the objects they carry?

### **Dionysos (image 12)**

Name three things in this bronze that identify the figure as Dionysos (Bacchus).

### **Chain with figurine of Isis–Fortuna (image 13)**

The small figure on this chain is Isis-Fortuna, who was a blend of an old Roman deity and a popular Egyptian goddess. What attributes identify them?

The temple of Isis is the best preserved of the Pompeian sanctuaries. Name some other exotic eastern religions that were beginning to make headway in Rome and Italy in the first century AD. Why do you think these religions had such great appeal? Do you think Pompeii's coastal location and trade made an impact?

**LATIN:** Roman homes typically had a shrine that held small figures of household gods. What was it called? Where does this name come from?

### **Serpent bracelet (image 14)**

**LATIN:** Snakes were considered good luck. They guarded springs and homes and were popular decorations for bracelets. Roman children were protected by a specific sort of jewelry. What was it called?

### **Skyphos with inlaid Egyptian figures (image 15)**

The Egyptian references on this cup are inaccurate and indicate its craftsman had a limited understanding of Egyptian religion and culture. Can you give examples from our own time of artists who show well-meaning but bumbling respect for other civilizations?

#### *IN GENERAL*

**LATIN:** It is easy to see that all these objects are “luxurious.” What is the Latin root of this English word? (Hint: it is not “lux.”) What does this etymology suggest about Roman attitudes toward luxury?

# 3 In the Garden and Dining Room

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**After you have gone upstairs, you will look across a garden to the red-painted walls of a triclinium. Enjoyments of different sorts await.**



## **Panel with a Dionysiac procession (image 16)**

There are many representations of Dionysos (Bacchus) in this garden area. Name as many elements as you can that associate the figures on this relief with the god. What makes him a “natural” inhabitant of the garden?

### **ART NOTE Painting marble sculpture**

**When imagining a work of ancient sculpture, most people envision pure white marble. But, as you may already know, most marble sculpture from Greece and Rome was painted. So was the carved decoration on buildings. Hair and eyes were colored, as were parts of the figures’ clothing. Sandal straps were often not carved at all but instead indicated only by paint. Many traces of paint remain, as you can see in this relief. What does the paint on the tambourine suggest? The red paint in the hair of some figures may have been an undercoat for gilding. You’ll get a better idea of marble sculptures’ original appearance by looking at depictions of it in the garden frescoes in this room.**

### **Plato's Academy (image 17)**

Gardens also offered quiet spots for reading and discussing philosophy. Perhaps you do not think of philosophy as a form of enjoyment, but prosperous Romans did! Most scholars think this mosaic illustrates Plato's famous Athenian school, called the Academy, which was set in a sacred olive grove. Can you identify objects that would be found in an ancient school? Can you think of any Roman authors or public figures who were interested in Greek philosophy?

What do you think the hill in the background (at right) might be?

### **ART NOTE Mosaic**

**Early Greek mosaics from the fifth century BC had been made with simple river pebbles. But artisans soon started to use colored marbles and glass, which greatly expanded the range of colors. These materials were cut into smaller and more regular pieces called tesserae, which permitted greater detail as well as subtle effects of light and shade.**

**Most mosaics in Pompeian homes were on the floor. Reproductions in this exhibition give a sense of what it would have been like to walk on them. Often, when mosaics were removed by early excavators, only the central scenes—*emblemata*—were preserved, without the surrounding borders that typically framed them. Archaeologists think that many of the finest mosaic *emblemata* from Roman Italy copied older Greek paintings on wood panels, which have long since vanished.**

### **Victorious youth (image 18)**

The Olympic Games began in 776 BC and continued until AD 393, when the emperor Theodosius put an end to them. Nero himself was a contestant (and although he fell from his ten-horse chariot, he was, amazingly, deemed victorious). Winners were celebrated in verse and in sculpture. This bronze (with original inset eyes) represents a *victorious* athlete—how do you know he was a victor?

What did Olympic victors in the 2008 summer games receive? Where have their portraits appeared?

**REACH:** To what god were the Olympic Games dedicated? Can you name other ancient games?

### **Apollo with muses Clio and Euterpe (image 19)**

In a Roman triclinium, food was just one of the available entertainments. The walls of this triclinium are decorated with Apollo and the muses. Why would they be appropriate in setting the tone of a Roman dinner party, where poetry and music were performed?

**REACH:** Some scholars think this particular Apollo may also be a portrait of the emperor Nero. From what you know of Nero's life, what makes an identification with Apollo plausible?

### **ART NOTE Roman wall painting**

**The very richest people could afford to face their walls with expensive and exotic marbles. But the most common type of decoration—found in almost every house in Pompeii—was wall painting. Even the bedrooms of slaves were given a stripe or two.**

**The paintings from Pompeii date from about 200 BC, and are divided by archaeologists into four "styles." In the First Style, wall plaster was molded to look like masonry and painted to resemble veined marble or other stones. Beginning in the early first century BC, the Second Style featured all-over illusionistic vistas onto elaborate architecture. Late in the same century, Third-Style artists used flat color over most of the surface; delicate frames seem to divide the wall into panels and enclose small sketchy vignettes that appear to float within them. In the Fourth Style, beginning in the early first century AD, larger figures or mythological scenes (often looking like panel paintings "hung" on the wall) were framed within fantastical architecture. Like mosaic *emblemata*, they sometimes copied celebrated Greek paintings.**

Which style do you think best characterizes the walls of the triclinium? (Hint: Remember, some archeologists think Nero is depicted as Apollo. )

*IN GENERAL*

**LATIN:** You may have heard the term “Pompeian red”—it’s a favorite with decorators even today. Red and yellow are the most common wall colors in Pompeii (some yellow walls turned red due to heat), but green and blue are also found. As does English, Latin has many different color names. How many can you think of for the reds, yellows, blues, and greens of Pompeian walls?

# 4 Greek Legacies

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**These next objects are found in the galleries past the video\* and point to ways in which the Roman world adopted the arts and culture of Greece. Rome's initial contact with the Greek world occurred in southern Italy and Sicily, where Greek colonists had established cities like Syracuse and Neapolis (Naples). Later, as Rome expanded militarily across the Mediterranean, this contact extended to Greece proper. Roman conquest of Greece was complete in 146 BC, but as late as 86 BC Athens was sacked.**

**See how many Greek gods, philosophers, generals, and poets you can find. Keep a list here:**



## **Homer and Menander (images 20 and 21)**

What qualities did the sculptor attempt to express in this imaginary portrait of Homer? Compare it to the nearby bust of New Comedy playwright Menander. What different qualities are being emphasized in these works?

**REACH:** Which Latin playwrights are noted for comedies inspired by those of Menander?

### **Thracian gladiator's helmet (image 22)**

What characters and episodes can you identify from the night of Troy's destruction? How might this theme have been considered appropriate on a gladiator's parade helmet?

**LATIN:** Where does the word "gladiator" come from? What do you think the gladiators called *retiarii* used as weapons? Do you know the Latin word for helmet, or for other weapons?

Would you say that the person who wrote the graffito below, found on a wall in Pompeii, was a partisan of Pompeii? Or did he root for the nearby towns of Puteoli and Nuceria? (Hint: *uncus*, *ī*, *m.*, a hook.)

*Puteolanis feliciter omnibus Nucerinis felicia et uncu(m) Pompeianis*

### **ART NOTE Roman taste and Greek art**

**To many Romans, the appreciation of Greek culture and art became something of a status symbol. When Roman armies captured Greek cities in the second century BC, many of the greatest works of Greek art became spoils of war. Hundreds of bronze and marble statues, paintings, and mosaics were shipped back to Rome. Wealthy Romans—like Cicero—became avid collectors. In addition to these "antique" Greek objects that were imported (or looted), copies were made of the most famous statues. Also, completely new creations were made in earlier Greek styles. That is the case with the next two goddesses.**

### **Artemis (Diana) and Aphrodite (images 23 and 24)**

The label gives the Roman name for the goddess Artemis. What was the Roman name for Aphrodite? Without the labels, what attributes would indicate their identities?

### **ART NOTE Archaic and classical styles**

**Artemis copies the look of Greek sculpture made in the sixth century BC, called the archaic period. Archaic works emphasized stylized, decorative patterns. Notice how:**

- her fixed smile mirrors curves in her brows and almond eyes
- the curls of her hair, shaped like little snails, make a regular pattern
- she looks lively and energetic, but a little stiff
- her dress fans out in regular folds—and they seem unaffected by gravity!

**Aphrodite was carved in the classical style of sculpture made in Athens in the late fifth century BC. Notice how:**

- her face is calm and serene, but with little expression or individuality
- she distributes her weight in a believable way
- drapery, seemingly transparent, both conceals and reveals her body

### **Torso from a statue of a woman (image 25)**

What can we tell about how this statue was assembled? Would you say its style is archaic or classical?

Despite the more sensual aspects of this torso, this is the representation of a married Roman woman. How can we tell?

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\* If you don't have time to see the video now (or in the East Building Small Auditorium where it is shown most days between noon and 3:00), tell your teacher that it can be borrowed, free of charge, from the National Gallery's department of education resources: [www.nga.gov/education](http://www.nga.gov/education).

# 5 Rediscovery

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The final section of the exhibition looks at the rediscovery of Pompeii and the other towns buried by Vesuvius as well as the enormous impact the finds had on the tastes of later times. Sites around the Bay of Naples became important stops on the Grand Tour—that long travel-adventure that completed the education of any cultivated person in the eighteenth century. Neoclassical fashions found their way into dress, jewelry, and even tableware. The designs of Pompeian painting appeared in homes and public buildings—you can see them today in both the U.S. Capitol and Washington’s Union Station! Novels about the disaster, like *The Last Days of Pompeii*, became popular reading; artists also re-created this rediscovered world in prints and sculptures.



## Valenciennes, Eruption of Vesuvius (image 26)

We have an eyewitness account of the disaster of AD 79. When the volcano erupted, Pliny the Younger (age 17) was staying with his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who was the author of *Naturalis Historia* and commander of the fleet in nearby Misenum. Pliny the Elder sailed toward the eruption to evacuate people and get a firsthand look. You could say he was killed by curiosity—overcome by gases, he died on the beach at Stabiae. Many years later Pliny the Younger wrote an account of the disaster in letters (*Epistles*) to his friend, the historian Tacitus. Here are a few excerpts.

*On [the day], at about the seventh hour my mother pointed out to him [the elder Pliny] a cloud that had just appeared. This cloud was unusual in appearance and exceptionally large.... The general appearance and shape of the cloud were those of an umbrella pine.*

*My uncle wondered briefly whether he should turn back, but when the helmsman advised him to do so, he replied "No! Fortune favors the bold. Head toward the Pompeians."*

*My uncle lay down on a cloth that had been spread on the ground, and asked for and drained several drinks of cold water. Then the flames and the smell of sulphur that had preceded them made the others decide to flee and woke up my uncle. Leaning on two slaves, he got up, and straight away he collapsed....When the light of day returned, his body was found untouched, apparently unharmed and still dressed the way he had been. His body looked more like that of a man asleep than one who had died.*

*We experienced many amazing and terrifying things. For the carts...were being carried off in different directions, even though the ground was level, and they didn't stay in the same place even when they had been wedged with stones. Also we saw the sea dragged back into itself and then apparently driven back by the shaking of the earth...many sea creatures were stranded on the dry sand. In the other direction a terrible black cloud, split by jagged and quivering bursts of fiery air, gaped open to reveal tall columns of flame. They were like lightning bolts, but even bigger.*

*Some prayed for death because they were afraid of dying. Many of them raised their hands to the gods in supplication, but even more took this disaster as a sign that the gods were no more and the worlds had been overtaken by an endless night.—Pliny the Younger, Epistles*

Valenciennes almost certainly read Pliny's account. Which specific elements of his scene do you think were based on Pliny's letters?

**LATIN:** Pliny's letter indicated the date when the eruption began. Although manuscript versions vary, the most commonly cited day is August 24. What would be the Latin form of this date? When would the "seventh hour" be?

Without literary evidence to give us the date on which Vesuvius erupted, what types of evidence could archeologists use to tell us at least the season in which the eruption occurred?

### **Bazzani, A Pompeian Interior (image 27)**

This painting is a nineteenth-century artist's imaginary view of a room in a Pompeian house. Which room is shown? How do you know?

Can you name other rooms in a "typical" Roman house? List them here and indicate what they were used for, then name the rooms in **your** house where those activities take place.

From what you have seen in the exhibition, how do you rate the accuracy of this scene? Is anything illustrated here that you would not have seen in a Pompeian house?

### **Alma-Tadema, A Sculpture Gallery (image 28)**

Spend some time looking at this painting made in 1874—its precise style depicts a Roman store full of objects, including some you have seen. You can peel away its different layers of "reality"—ancient objects, objects inspired by ancient objects, objects that combine ancient and modern parts, etc.

Imagine that two thousand years from now an artist were to paint a shop-scene set in our times. What objects and styles would immediately convey to some future art lover that this picture is set in the early twenty-first century?

### ***IN GENERAL***

Archaeology in Pompeii and the other areas around the Bay of Naples continues today. Consider some of the ethical issues facing archaeologists and discuss with your classmates:

Should the available funds go toward unearthing more of Pompeii, or should those resources go into protecting, studying, and making accessible what has already been excavated?

Should more of Herculaneum be excavated even though it lies under the present-day city of Ercolano?

Should excavators work only on uncovering Pompeii as it was in AD 79? Or should some parts of the city be dug down to lower levels so we can learn more about the older town that lies below?

The only library from antiquity that has ever been found is in the Villa of the Papyri—the bronze bust of the victorious athlete we looked at came from there. The sprawling structure is only partially excavated, and more scrolls are surely still buried there. It is possible that an entire Latin library (typically libraries were divided into Greek and Latin, and the texts found so far are Greek) may await. Classicists are eager to look for these texts—imagine finding new works by Virgil!—but archaeologists and conservators are more cautious. Officials have an obligation to preserve the areas uncovered, and the site is waterlogged—only pumps keep it dry. They urge a go-slow approach. What do you think?

## Captions

The works of art from Italian collections were lent to the exhibition under the authorization of the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.

### 1 *Augustus*

early 1st century AD  
marble  
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

### 2 *Julius Caesar*

probably mid-1st century BC  
marble  
Lent by the Toledo Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

### 3 *Drusus Major*

probably last quarter of 1st century BC  
bronze  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 4 *Gaius (Caligula)*

1st century AD  
Parian (?) marble  
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia

### 5 *Nero*

1st century AD  
marble  
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

### 6 *The Empress Livia and her son Tiberius(?)*

early 1st century AD  
turquoise  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund

### 7 *Gaius Cornelius Rufus*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
marble  
Ufficio Scavi, Pompei

### 8 *Skyphos with the Labors of Hercules*

probably 2nd half of 1st century BC  
silver  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 9 *Still life with writing implements (detail)*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
fresco  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 10 *Ornaments from a dining couch in the form of mules' heads*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
bronze, silver, and copper  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 11 *Frolicking centaur (detail)*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
fresco  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 12 *Dionysos*

probably 1st century AD  
bronze  
Ufficio Scavi, Pompei

### 13 *Chain with figurine of Isis-Fortuna*

probably 1st century AD  
gold  
Ufficio Scavi, Pompei

### 14 *Serpent bracelet*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
gold  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 15 *Skyphos with inlaid Egyptian figures*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
obsidian with coral, lapis lazuli, jasper, carnelian, malachite, and gold inlay  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 16 *Panel with a Dionysiac procession*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
marble  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 17 *Plato's Academy*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
mosaic  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 18 *Victorious youth*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
bronze  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

### 19 *Apollo with muses Clio and Euterpe*

1st century AD  
fresco  
Ufficio Scavi, Pompei

### 20 *Homer*

1st century BC-1st century AD  
marble  
On loan from The British Museum

21 *Menander*  
1st century BC–1st century AD  
marble  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Catharine Page Perkins  
Fund

22 *Thracian gladiator's helmet*  
1st century BC–1st century AD  
bronze  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

23 *Artemis (Diana)*  
1st century BC–1st century AD  
Pentelic marble  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

24 *Aphrodite*  
probably early 1st century AD  
Pentelic marble  
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia

25 *Torso from a statue of a woman*  
1st century AD  
marble  
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia

26 Pierre–Henri de Valenciennes  
French, 1750–1819  
*Eruption of Vesuvius*  
1813  
oil on canvas  
Musée des Augustins, Toulouse

27 Luigi Bazzani  
Italian, 1836–1927  
*A Pompeian Interior*  
1882  
oil on panel  
Dahesh Museum of Art

28 Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema  
British, 1836–1912  
*A Sculpture Gallery*  
1874  
oil on canvas  
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover,  
New Hampshire. Gift of Arthur M. Loew, Class of  
1921A

*cover Two seaside villas (detail)*  
1st century BC–1st century AD  
fresco  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

***Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples* is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with the cooperation of the Direzione Regionale per i Beni Culturali e Paesaggistici della Campania and the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.**

**The exhibition in Washington is made possible by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.**

**It is also made possible by Mr. and Mrs. Joe L. Allbritton.**

**Bank of America is proud to be the national sponsor.**

**The exhibition in Washington is also supported by The Charles Engelhard Foundation and by Mary and Michael Jaharis.**

**Additional funding in Washington is provided by Robert and Arlene Kogod, the John J. Medveckis Foundation, and the Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation.**

**The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.**

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**Sincere thanks to Jeff Streed, Latin and Greek teacher at Episcopal High School, who inspired and developed many of these questions. Thanks also to Jane Brinley at Saint Anselm's Abbey School, Sally Rieger at National Cathedral School, and exhibition curator Carol Mattusch who all offered thoughtful suggestions and review.**